

Tibetan terminology transliteration rules

To transliterate Tibetan terms in books and scientific articles we normally apply the system of Wylie transliteration which uses only the letters available on a typical English language typewriter.

The Wylie system is international, generally accepted and generally understood, this standard fully and unambiguously reflects the recording of Tibetan syllables. In addition, this system is used to enter Tibetan text when typing on electronic devices (like the Chinese pinyin system).

There is also another transliteration method developed by B. V. Badaraev, which is based on Cyrillic alphabet and used among Russian speaking tibetologists and Tibetan doctors. This system is a Cyrillic calque of the Wylie system. This system of recording Tibetan words is widely used after the publication of the Russian translation of the root text on Tibetan medicine "Four Tantras" by D. Dashiyev, where this kind of transliteration of Tibetan terms was used.

In order to be able to transliterate Tibetan syllables and words in Latin letters, it is necessary to understand the two-dimensional writing system developed in Tibetan language. This system traces back to the Indian tradition, since its prototype is the Indian writing system Devanagari, which is claimed to be of divine origin. It was believed that the syllable tracing reflects the shape of the configurations of the subtle energy channels in one's body which sound and vibrate corresponding to these syllables.

The basis of the Tibetan letter is an alphabet consisting of 30 letters-syllables.

ཀ	ཁ	ག	ང
<i>ka</i>	<i>kha</i>	<i>ga</i>	<i>nga</i>
ཅ	ཆ	ཇ	ཉ
<i>ca</i>	<i>cha</i>	<i>ja</i>	<i>nya</i>
ཏ	ཐ	ད	ན
<i>ta</i>	<i>tha</i>	<i>da</i>	<i>na</i>
པ	ཕ	བ	མ
<i>pa</i>	<i>pha</i>	<i>ba</i>	<i>ma</i>
ཚ	ཛ	ང	པ
<i>tsa</i>	<i>tsha</i>	<i>dza</i>	<i>wa or va</i>
ཞ	ཟ	ར	ཡ
<i>zha</i>	<i>za</i>	<i>'a</i>	<i>ya</i>
ར	ལ	ཤ	ས
<i>ra</i>	<i>la</i>	<i>sha</i>	<i>sa</i>
ཏ	ཨ		
<i>ha</i>	<i>a</i>		

The table shows the transliteration according to Wylie. It should be borne in mind that the vowel *a* in a syllable (grapheme) is read only if this grapheme is the "root letter" (see below) and does not have other vocalizations *i*, *u*, *e* or *o*. The following table shows Tibetan vowels in their "independent" form (when they are at the beginning of a syllable).

ཨི	ཨུ	ཨེ	ཨོ
<i>i</i>	<i>u</i>	<i>e</i>	<i>o</i>

For example, the syllable *ka* with different vocalizations looks like this:

ཀི	ཀུ	ཀེ	ཀོ
<i>ki</i>	<i>ku</i>	<i>ke</i>	<i>ko</i>

Tibetan syllables consist of letters, the number of which within one syllable can vary from one to seven. The main and only mandatory element of the syllable is the so called “root letter”, which can be any of the thirty root letters of the Tibetan alphabet. To the root letter, if required, other elements of the syllable can be attached on four sides — prefix, superscribed and subscribed letters, suffix and subsuffix, as well as a diacritical vocalization:

	(vocalization)		
prefix	superscribed letter	suffix	subsuffix
	root letter		
	subscribed letter		
	(vocalization)		

For example, elements of the Tibetan syllable *bsgrubs* (བསྐྱུབས) will be arranged as follows:

<i>b</i>	<i>s</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>s</i>
	<i>g</i>		
	<i>r</i>		
	<i>u</i>		

Attention should be paid to the following important points:

1) transliteration of the original Tibetan syllable is always done from left to right and from top to bottom;

2) when using the root letter 'a (ཨ) as a prefix, only an apostrophe (') remains from it, for example, དགའ = *dga'*;

3) the root letter and subscribed letter (if there is one) are always followed by a vocalization or the letter *a*, which can be called the “default vocalization”.

In addition, there are three cases of graphic transformation of root letters in cases when they are used as superscribed and subscribed letters:

1) The letter *va* (or *wa*) when used as a subscribed letter is attached to the root letter from below and takes the form that is clear from the following examples: ཟླ *zva*, དླ *dva*, རླ *rtsva*, etc.

2) The letter *ya* takes the form that is clear from the following examples: གྱ *gya*, བྱ *bya*, etc. If there is a letter *ya*, it should be borne in mind that the previous letter *ga* can act as a prefix (in this case, when transliterating, it is separated by a dot) or as a root letter: གཡ *g.ya* (prefix) and གྱ *gya* (root letter).

3) The letter *ra* as a subscribed letter takes the form that is clear from the following examples: ག *gra*, ད *dra*, བ *bra*, ས *sra*, etc. When used as a superscribed letter, the same letter takes a different form: ར *rka*, རྩ *rma*, etc.

A certain problem for beginners can also be a definition of a root letter in long one-dimensional syllables, that is, in syllables that do not have superscribed and subscribed letters, as well as vocalizations. To do this, one needs to know the elementary rules of the Tibetan grammar — for example, the fact that only one grapheme, namely *sa*, can be the subsuffix (see the table of the syllable structure) at the end of a word. If you use this rule, it is easy to establish the position of the root letter in the following two long one-dimensional syllables: མངས and གངས. In the first case, the root letter is the second letter (ང), since ར cannot be a subsuffix, therefore the answer is *mngar*. In the second syllable, the root letter is the first letter (ག), since there is no combination of the prefix and the root like *g + nga* in Tibetan words, that is, the *ngas* variant is impossible. Therefore, the answer is *gangs*.

If it is necessary to write a transliterated syllable with a capital letter, it is more correct to capitalize the root letter, rather than the first letter — for example, *mNgar* or *bsGrubs*, rather than *Mngar* or *Bsgrubs*.

In Wylie system of transliteration syllables are normally separated with space. But in writing some names or concepts representing a single semantic unit, for the convenience of the reader, a hyphen can be used, for example: *sman-rtsis-khang* (Mentsikhang), *se-'bru-nga* (Pomegranate-5), *mkhan-po tshul-khrims* (khenpo Tsultrim).

As for the phonetic transcription, in questions concerning the romanization of Tibetan writing, tibetologists initially faced a dilemma: transliteration or transcription? Transliterations of Tibetan words quite rarely coincide with their transcriptions. Moreover, the same word can have several transcriptions or pronunciations in different dialects, of which there are at least four in Tibet, and these transcriptions often differ from one another very significantly. On the other hand, it is rather difficult to convey the sound of Tibetan words in Latin characters. Chögyal Namkhai Norbu, a professor at the University of Naples, developed the Tibetan phonetic transcription system (*drajyor*), based on the Chinese pinyin system, which fairly accurately reflects all the peculiarities of Tibetan pronunciation, at least in its most common Lhasa version.

The following table lists all the variants of Tibetan initials (that is, initial consonant sounds of a syllable or initial consonant groups in a syllable), their corresponding transliteration in the Wylie system and their phonetic transcription (approximate sounding written in ordinary Latin letters):

Initial	Wylie	Transcription (approximate sounding)
ཨ	<i>a</i>	a
བ	<i>ba</i>	ba (va)
བཅའ	<i>bca'</i>	cha
བདའ	<i>bda'</i>	da
བགའ	<i>bga'</i>	ga
བག	<i>bgra</i>	dra
བགྱ	<i>bgya</i>	gya (jya)

ବକାଂ	<i>bka'</i>	ka
ବକ୍ରା	<i>bkra</i>	tra
ବକ୍ଯା	<i>bkya</i>	kya
ବଲା	<i>bla</i>	la
ବଲ୍ଦା	<i>blda</i>	da
ବଲ୍ତା	<i>blta</i>	ta
ବ୍ରା	<i>bra</i>	dra
ବର୍ଦା	<i>brda</i>	da
ବର୍ଦ୍ଧା	<i>brdza</i>	dza
ବର୍ଗା	<i>brga</i>	ga
ବର୍ଗ୍ଯା	<i>brgya</i>	gya (jya)
ବର୍ଜା	<i>brja</i>	ja
ବର୍କା	<i>brka</i>	ka
ବର୍କ୍ଯା	<i>brkya</i>	kya
ବର୍ଲା	<i>brla</i>	la
ବର୍ନା	<i>brna</i>	na
ବର୍ନା	<i>brnga</i>	nga
ବର୍ନ୍ଯା	<i>brnya</i>	nya
ବର୍ତା	<i>brra</i>	ta
ବର୍ତ୍ତା	<i>brtsa</i>	tta
ବସାଂ	<i>bsa'</i>	sa
ବସ୍ଦା	<i>bsda</i>	da
ବସ୍ଗା	<i>bsga</i>	ga
ବସ୍ଗ୍ରା	<i>bsgra</i>	dra
ବସ୍ଗ୍ଯା	<i>bsgya</i>	gya (jya)
ବସ୍ହାଂ	<i>bsha'</i>	sha
ବସ୍କା	<i>bska</i>	ka
ବସ୍କ୍ରା	<i>bskra</i>	tra
ବସ୍କ୍ଯା	<i>bskya</i>	kya
ବସ୍ଲା	<i>bsla</i>	la
ବସ୍ନା	<i>bsna</i>	na
ବସ୍ନା	<i>bsnga</i>	nga
ବସ୍ନ୍ଯା	<i>bsnya</i>	nya
ବସ୍ରା	<i>bsra</i>	sa
ବସ୍ତା	<i>bsra</i>	ta
ବସ୍ତା	<i>bsra</i>	tta
ବତାଂ	<i>bta'</i>	ta
ବର୍ତାଂ	<i>btsa'</i>	tta
ବ୍ଯା	<i>bya</i>	ja (chya)

བཟའ	<i>bza'</i>	za
བཞའ	<i>bzha'</i>	zha
བཟླ	<i>bzla</i>	da
ཅ	<i>ca</i>	cha
ཆ	<i>cha</i>	cha
ད	<i>da</i>	da
དབའ	<i>dba'</i>	wa
དབ	<i>dbra</i>	ra
དབྱ	<i>dbya</i>	ya
དགའ	<i>dga'</i>	ga
དག	<i>dgra</i>	dra
དགྱ	<i>dgya</i>	gya (jya)
དཀའ	<i>dka'</i>	ka
དཀ	<i>dkra</i>	tra
དཀྱ	<i>dkya</i>	kya
དམའ	<i>dma'</i>	ma
དམྱ	<i>dmya</i>	nya
དང	<i>dnga</i>	nga
དཔའ	<i>dpa'</i>	pa
དཔ	<i>dpra</i>	tra
དཔྱ	<i>dpya</i>	cha
ད	<i>dra</i>	dra
ཇ	<i>dza</i>	dza
ག	<i>ga</i>	ga
གཅའ	<i>gca'</i>	cha
གདའ	<i>gda'</i>	da
གལ	<i>gla</i>	la
གནའ	<i>gna'</i>	na
གནྱའ	<i>gnya'</i>	nya
ག	<i>gra</i>	dra
གསའ	<i>gsa'</i>	sa
གསྐའ	<i>gsha'</i>	sha
གཏྱའ	<i>gta'</i>	ta
གཅྱའ	<i>gtsa'</i>	tsa
གྱ	<i>gya</i>	gya (jya)
གཡ	<i>g.ya</i>	ya
གཟའ	<i>gza'</i>	za
གཞའ	<i>gzha'</i>	zha
ཧ	<i>ha</i>	ha

ହ	<i>hra</i>	hra (shra)
ଜ	<i>ja</i>	ja
କ	<i>ka</i>	ka
ଖ	<i>kha</i>	kha
ଥ	<i>khra</i>	thra
ଝ	<i>khya</i>	khya
ଲା	<i>kla</i>	la
ଟ୍ରା	<i>kra</i>	tra
କ୍ଯା	<i>kya</i>	kya
ବା	<i>la</i>	la
ଝା	<i>lba</i>	ba
ଚା	<i>lca</i>	cha
ଦା	<i>lda</i>	da
ଗା	<i>lga</i>	ga
ହା	<i>lha</i>	lha (hla)
ଜା	<i>lja</i>	ja
କା	<i>lka</i>	ka
ଙା	<i>lnga</i>	nga
ପା	<i>lpa</i>	pa
ତା	<i>lta</i>	ta
ମା	<i>ma</i>	ma
ଝାଝା	<i>mcha'</i>	cha
ଝାଦା	<i>mda'</i>	da
ଝାଝା	<i>mdza'</i>	dza
ଝାଗା	<i>mga'</i>	ga
ଝାଗ୍ରା	<i>mgra</i>	dra
ଝାଗ୍ରା	<i>mgya</i>	gya (jya)
ଝାଝା	<i>mja'</i>	ja
ଝାଖ	<i>mkha</i>	kha
ଝାଥ	<i>mkhra</i>	thra
ଝାଝା	<i>mkhya</i>	khya
ଝାଝା	<i>mna'</i>	na
ଝାଝା	<i>mnga'</i>	nga
ଝାଝା	<i>mnya'</i>	nya
ଝା	<i>mra</i>	ma
ଝାଝା	<i>mtha'</i>	tha
ଝାଝା	<i>mtsha</i>	ts-ha
ଝା	<i>mya</i>	nya
ନା	<i>na</i>	na

ང	<i>nga</i>	nga
ན	<i>nra</i>	na
ཉ	<i>nya</i>	nya
པ	<i>pa</i>	pa
ཕ	<i>pha</i>	pha
ཐ	<i>phra</i>	thra
ཅ	<i>phya</i>	cha
ཌ	<i>pra</i>	tra
ཌྷ	<i>pya</i>	cha
ར	<i>ra</i>	ra
འ	<i>rba</i>	ba
རྩ	<i>rda</i>	da
རྩམ	<i>rdza</i>	dza
རྒ	<i>rga</i>	ga
རྒྱ	<i>rgya</i>	gya (jya)
རྩམ	<i>rja</i>	ja
རྒྱ	<i>rka</i>	ka
རྒྱལ	<i>rkya</i>	kya
འལ	<i>rla</i>	la
མ	<i>rma</i>	ma
མྱ	<i>rmya</i>	nya
རྩ	<i>rna</i>	na
རྩམ	<i>rnga</i>	nga
རྩམ	<i>rnya</i>	nya
རྩམ	<i>rta</i>	ta
རྩམ	<i>rtsa</i>	tsa
ས	<i>sa</i>	sa
སྐ	<i>sba</i>	ba
སྐྱ	<i>sbra</i>	dra
སྐྱལ	<i>sbya</i>	ja
སྐྱལ	<i>sda</i>	da
སྐྱལ	<i>sga</i>	ga
སྐྱལ	<i>sgra</i>	dra
སྐྱལ	<i>sgya</i>	gya (jya)
ཤ	<i>sha</i>	sha
ཤྱ	<i>shra</i>	sha
སྐྱ	<i>ska</i>	ka
སྐྱལ	<i>skra</i>	tra
སྐྱལ	<i>skya</i>	kya

ଲା	<i>sla</i>	la
ମା	<i>sma</i>	ma
ମ୍ରା	<i>smra</i>	ma
ନ୍ୟା	<i>smya</i>	nya
ନା	<i>sna</i>	na
ଙା	<i>snga</i>	nga
ନ୍ରା	<i>snra</i>	na
ନ୍ୟା	<i>snya</i>	nya
ପା	<i>spa</i>	pa
ତ୍ରା	<i>spra</i>	tra
ଚା	<i>spya</i>	cha
ସା	<i>sra</i>	sa
ତା	<i>sta</i>	ta
ତ୍ସା	<i>stsa</i>	tsa
ତା	<i>ta</i>	ta
ଥା	<i>tha</i>	tha
ଥ୍ରା	<i>thra</i>	thra
ତ୍ରା	<i>tra</i>	tra
ତ୍ସା	<i>tsha</i>	tsa
ତ୍ସା	<i>tsha</i>	ts-ha
ବା	<i>wa</i>	wa
ଯା	<i>ya</i>	ya
ଜା	<i>za</i>	za
ଜା	<i>zha</i>	zha
ଜା	<i>zla</i>	da
ଅ	'	a
ବା	<i>'ba'</i>	ba
ଦ୍ରା	<i>'bra'</i>	dra
ଜା	<i>'bya'</i>	ja
ଚା	<i>'cha'</i>	cha
ଦା	<i>'da'</i>	da
ଦ୍ରା	<i>'dra'</i>	dra
ଦ୍ଜା	<i>'dza'</i>	dza
ଗା	<i>'ga'</i>	ga
ଗ୍ରା	<i>'gra'</i>	dra
ଗ୍ଯା	<i>'gya'</i>	gya (jya)
ଜା	<i>'ja'</i>	ja
କା	<i>'kha'</i>	kha
କ୍ରା	<i>'khra'</i>	thra

କହୁ	<i>'khya</i>	khya
ଫା	<i>'pha'</i>	pha
ଥା	<i>'phra</i>	thra
ଚା	<i>'phya</i>	cha
ତା	<i>'tha'</i>	tha
ଟା	<i>'tsha'</i>	ts-ha

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