

# A Textbook of Tibetan Language

By Lama Choedak Rinpoche

## Introduction

Tibetan is spoken by approximately ten million people in more than a half a dozen of countries in the Asian subcontinent including Tibet, Bhutan, Nepal, Sikkim, India and South West China. It is understood by Mongolians who have had traditional monastic education. Tibetan is a member of the Tibeto-Burman group of languages, but has no great association with Chinese, so it is a mistake to coin the term 'Sino-Tibetan language family'. Tibetan language with its separate alphabet is a powerful expression of Tibet's independence. Its written language was based on the 7th century Gupta script of India and its logical grammar is easy to follow in spite of its close association with Sanskrit.

After studying Indian linguistics including Panini, Kalapa and Candra Sanskrit grammars under eminent linguists, the Brahmin Lipikara and Devavidyasinha, Thonmi Sambota, the intelligent minister of the famous Tibetan king Songtsen Gampo (srong btsan sgam po) invented the written Tibetan in early 7th century. He was first sent to India with fifteen other Tibetan youths for the sole purpose of mastering Indian languages so that a suitable written language is invented to translate the entire Buddhist teachings into Tibetan.. After returning from India, Thonmi together with the king Songtsen Gampo went into retreat in the temple of Maru..Palace in Lhasa to finalise his works which he had already began in India. He decided to have four vowels i, u, e and o instead of sixteen vowels which existed in Sanskrit. Of the thirty consonants, twenty four consonants were based on the Sanskrit alphabet while six consonants were created according to the need of Tibetan speaking tongue which did not exist even in the Sanskrit alphabet. Six reversed consonants were later added to facilitate the standard transliteration of Sanskrit into Tibetan. Of his eight great grammatical treatises only two, namely sum cupa and rtags kyi jug pa are extant today. Sum cupa primarily deals with the eight fold case system and the use of the various dependent and independent particles. Rtags kyi jug pa discusses the unique consonantal gender system which determines the phonological and morphological relationship between consonants in order to systematize the rules of spelling in relation to the three tenses and imperative mood.

Within several decades, many Buddhist scriptures were translated into Tibetan from Sanskrit by Kawa Paltsek, Chokro Lui Gyaltsen and Shang Na-namde, who all belonged to the old Tibetan translation school. Those who have the opportunity to read any Tibetan translation will frequently see these three names in the colophons. During the reign of Trisong Deutsen (khri srong lde'u btsan), Tibetan language received an extensive revision. In spite of the dark era caused by the prosecution of Buddhism by Lang Darma, it gave a much needed motivation amongst the Tibetans to send more Tibetans to study Buddhadharma in India. As a result, in 10th century galaxies of eminent Tibetan translators emerged including Lochren Rinchen Sangpo, Drogmi Lotsawa Shakya Yeshe, Ngok Lotsawa Lodhen Sherab and others.

They were responsible for the revival of Buddhism in Tibet and standardisation of the complex Tibetan Buddhist terminology. The entire Tibetan Buddhist canon were compiled under the supervision of Buton Rinpoche and were printed in wooden xylographs.

The firm re-establishment of Dharma in Tibet through the dedication of countless scholars became instrumental in subduing the ruthless Mongols and the nation building of Tibet. Since Tibet came under the one united Dharma rule of the great Sakyapas who allowed all traditions to prosper in harmony, Tibet had some of the biggest monasteries in the world attracting hundreds of students from many neighbouring countries. From mid 11th century Tibetans could learn Sanskrit grammar through Tibetan without having to use the Sanskrit alphabet as the written Tibetan was so meticulously invented that every Sanskrit syllable can be transliterated into Tibetan. Modern Buddhist scholars who have done comparative study on the translations in several Buddhist languages all agree that there is no translation which can match the consistency and accurateness of Tibetan translations of the Buddhist canon. Since most Sanskrit Buddhist literature are not extant, Tibetan Buddhist canon is amongst the best translations to further the study and practice of Buddhism.

The communist invasion of Tibet can never be forgiven and is a great threat to the survival of traditional culture. Maoist anarchists from China has tried to destroy Tibet's cultural and our national heritage. The study of the unique Tibetan language was prohibited and 6000 monasteries and educational institutions in Tibet were destroyed. In spite of all the catastrophic destruction of the Tibetan culture, religion and language, Tibetans have managed to preserve their language and culture in exile under the leadership of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. In exile many Tibetans schools were opened and monasteries were rebuilt. Hundreds of refugees are continuing to escape from Tibet with their young children in hope of giving them proper Tibetan language training in India and Nepal. I can recall learning how to read and write Tibetan under a tree in a refugee camp in Pokhara, Nepal. There were no classes, all the children sat together under a tree learning how to pronounce the alphabet. The first thing we memorized were Sum cu pa by Thonmi Sambhota. After finishing my high school, I was fortunate enough to thoroughly study amongst other things, the two grammatical works under His Eminence Chogyé Trichen Rinpoche in Lumbini, the birth-place of the Buddha. His Eminence is one of the most remarkable Tibetan poets alive today. Having served as his secretary and personal assistant for some six years, my Tibetan education was fulfilled beyond my expectation. Subsequently I was fortunate to discuss some of the more finer elements of Tibetan grammar and poetry in relation to Sanskrit and Prakrit with the eminent linguist late Khunu Lama Tenzin Gyaltzen when he came and stay at my monastery a year before he died.

The first interest of the study of Tibetan language in the West was perhaps motivated by Christian missionaries. Some took crash courses in Tibetan and translated the Bible with the help of some Tibetan scholars and wrote Tibetan grammar in English giving most of the examples from the translation of the Bible. The first Tibetan printing press in Kalimpong was primarily run and owned by Khunu Tharchin, a Tibetan speaking Christian from Spiti in Jammu. Some hastily compiled Tibetan English dictionaries appeared as early as mid

nineteen century. I recall reading pamphlets entitled "God Will Save You" during my school days but I did not know they were talking about Christianity. I used to think they were badly written religious ideas by some foreigners who did not know the Tibetan language properly.

Times have changed since as the written language is enthusiastically studied in many countries and more recently number of universities have introduced Tibetan studies programmes. Hundreds of Tibetan Buddhist centres around the world have generated much needed interest in the Tibetan studies. Only recently some fifty young boys from the central Asian Republics have been sent to India to study Tibetan in Tibetan monasteries. Every three years some two hundred Tibetologists attend international conference on Tibetan studies as well as many regional conferences and seminars. Due to its important place in the Buddhist literature, students in Buddhist studies have realized the significance of the Tibetan language. There are already a handful of non-Tibetan scholars who are teaching the language in the West and translating important Tibetan works into English and other important languages. Number of scholars have studied this relatively easy language in less than six months and have remarked how easy it is if one is prepared to put a steady effort over a period of a year or less with a competent Tibetan language teacher.

In spite of many books written on Tibet during the last three decades, texts translated faithfully from the Tibetan is miserably few. There is a great need for more foreigners learning Tibetan and engaging in the collaboration of translation works. The prestige of ancient Tibetan translators are forgotten and very little attention has been given to maintain this important aspect of Buddhist scholarship. Tibetan Buddhist centres bring out young Tibetan monks to work as translators for little or no payment, thus disregarding the important role of the translators. Very few translators are able to stay on the job due to lack of incentive and prospect for their future. In the old days a pair of a qualified Lotsawa (Translator) and Pandita (lo-pan) received equal respect and honour. Lotsawa should not be regarded as someone who can merely speak two languages, but someone who is equally qualified as a teacher on his /her own right with special expertise in another language. Training of translators should be high on the agenda before opening centres and sending resident teachers.

As more material progress is made without obtaining any lasting happiness from wealth, fame and relationships, the interest of Dharma in the West will continue to grow. However if Westerners do not master the language in which the Dharma is preserved and dedicate time to work seriously on the translation of important texts into English, they will be unable to help their future generation with Dharma. Tibetan, written by Thonmi Sambhota, who is indisputably regarded as an emanation of Manjushri, is one of the easiest language in the world. The energy a person devotes for the study of Tibetan can be extremely beneficial for one's spiritual progress and may help to speed the flourish of Dharma in all corners of the world if done with the right motivation. I hope that this manual will be of good use to many students of Buddhism and the Tibetan language.

*“Even if one is to die tomorrow, one should study knowledge;  
For it is like claiming one's own entrusted possessions in future rebirths”*

by Sakya Pandita

In paying my tribute to Thonmi Sambhota and all the Tibetan Lotsawas who unselfishly gave their lives for the benefit of others, may the fortunate people of this generation do not forget their compassionate deeds and try to emulate their examples by studying and practising with diligence and patience.

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