

A GUIDE TO THE PRONUNCIATION OF PĀḲI

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PāḲi is the beautiful language of the early Buddhist scriptures. It is based on an Indian dialect that was spoken in the area where the Buddha did most of his teaching, and therefore must be very close to the language that the Buddha used during his 45 years of teaching. Without any doubt the Theravāda scriptures, which are preserved in the PāḲi language contain the most faithful record of what the Buddha actually taught, so for those who are earnestly striving to put the Buddha's teaching into practice it is a great advantage to be able to read and understand the language of the text.

PāḲi is notable for both its fluency and its rhythm, and there is no easier or quicker way to become acquainted with the language than through reciting the texts aloud, which will soon familiarize the student with key words and phrases which recur in the text, and at the same time will give a feel for the structure of the language. Below is an introduction to the pronunciation of PāḲi, together with some notes to help clarify some of the difficulties that are encountered by those unfamiliar with Indian languages.

THE ALPHABET:

Vowels:	a	ā	i	ī	u	ū	e	o
Pure nasal:	ṃ							
Consonants:	ka	kha	ga	gha	ṅ(a)			
	ca	cha	ja	jha	ṅa			
	ṭa	ṭha	ḍa	ḍha	ṇa			
	ta	tha	da	dha	na			
	pa	pha	ba	bha	ma			
Semi vowels, sibilant, and aspirate:	ya	ra	la	ḷa	va	sa	ha	

This is the basic pattern of all the Indian alphabets, and as can be seen, they are arranged on a very rational basis. First come the vowels (discussed below), followed by the pure nasal. Next come the definite consonants with their corresponding nasal sounds. These are organised according to their place of articulation, beginning with the gutturals pronounced at the back of the mouth, and ending with those articulated on the lips. Then come the indefinite consonants. There are five main difficulties for those unfamiliar with the Indian languages, which will be dealt with here.

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Unlike English, for instance, the vowel system in Pāḷi is very precise, and the vowels are either short or long, with the latter being exactly twice as long as the former. It is important to distinguish the lengths of the vowels correctly, as *a-*, for example, is a negative prefix; but *ā-* is an intensifier (*ananda* means unhappy; *ānanda* means very happy).

As a guide for the English reader:

a	as in <u>a</u> nother
ā	as in <u>a</u> rt
i	as in <u>i</u> nk
ī	as in <u>ee</u> l
u	as in <u>u</u> nder
ū	as in <u>pru</u> dent
e	as in <u>age</u> (but before a conjunct consonant as in <u>e</u> nd)
o	as in <u>o</u> wn (but before a conjunct consonant as in <u>o</u> range)

Only one letter is used to represent the sounds *e* & *o*, which are normally pronounced long as *ē*, & *ō*. Before a conjunct they are normally pronounced short as *ě*, & *ǒ*, although it appears to be the case that when these vowels appear in *sandhi* before a double consonant, they retain their natural length, and should be pronounced as such, so that in *jarādhmmo 'mhi*, we should read *jarādhmmō 'mhi*.

The second and fourth letters in the consonant section of the alphabet (*kha gha cha jha* etc.), are digraphs representing the aspirate sound of the preceding consonant (*ka ga ca ja* etc.). They are pronounced as the latter, but with a strong breath pulse. Again, these must be distinguished (*kamati*, for example, is not *khamati*). Note that simple *ca* is pronounced as in change, *cha* is the same with a stronger breath pulse.

In Pāḷi *ṭa ṭha ḍa & ḍha* are pronounced with the tongue behind the dental ridge, giving a characteristic hollow sound. The sounds *ta tha da & dha* are pronounced with the tip of the tongue on the teeth. In English *ta & da* etc. are about halfway between the two, so move the tongue back for the first group, and forward for the second. Note that *tha* is never pronounced as in *they* or *their*, but is the aspirate of *ta*.

The nasal sounds are all distinguished according to their place of articulation. This in practice causes few problems when the nasal is in conjunction with one of its corresponding consonants. But some of them (*ṇa ṇa na & ma*) occur by themselves also, so again they must be recognised and pronounced according to their correct position. The sound of each can be found by pronouncing them before a member of their group, e.g. first *ṇ* as in ṇk. The pronunciation of *ṇa* is as in *canyon*, or the Spanish word *señor*. The letter *m̄* represents the pure nasal which is sounded when the air escapes through the nose only.

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Double consonants must be clearly articulated as two sounds, not merged into one, as is the tendency in European languages. When there is a double consonant it may help to imagine a hyphen between the two letters and pronounce accordingly. Therefore *sut-taṃ*, not *sutaṃ* (or *sūtaṃ*); *bhik-khu*, not *bhikhu* (or *bhīkhu*) etc.

To get a feel for the pronunciation and rhythm of the language it is strongly advised that beginners join in group chanting with people who are experienced in the language until they are able to manage the correct pronunciation by themselves. This will also help in familiarising students with certain basic texts.

Below is a guide to the correct pronunciation of the language, summarising the points discussed above, together with some further information regarding articulation.

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a is short as in another, academic
ā is long as in art, father
i is short as in ink, pin
ī is long as in eel, seal
u is short as in utter, under
ū is long as in prudent, do
e is long in open syllables as in age
but before a conjunct consonant it is short as in end
o is long in open syllables as in own
but before a conjunct consonant it is short as in orage

m̐ is the pure nasal sounded through the nose

k as in cat, keen **kh** somewhat as in blackheath
g as in gadfly, gate **gh** somewhat as in log house
ṅ as in bank

c as in change, **ch** somewhat as in witch hazel
church
j as in jet, jaw **jh** somewhat as in sledge hammer
ñ as in canyon,
señor

The following sounds as noted but with the tongue drawn back, thereby producing a hollow sound:

ṭ as in ṭap, ṭick **ṭh** somewhat as in ant hill (never as in they)
ḍ as in ḍid, ḍug **ḍh** somewhat as in red hot
ṇ as in know

The following sounds as noted but with the tongue touching the tip of the teeth:

t as in tub, ten **th** somewhat as in cat house
d as in den, dig **dh** somewhat as in mad house
n as in nip, nose

p as in pat, pinch **ph** somewhat as in top hat (never as in photo)
b as in back, big **bh** somewhat as in abhorrence
m as in men, mice

y as in yes, year **r** as in red, but with a stronger trill
l as in lead, lend **ḷ** as before, but with the tongue drawn back
v at the beginning of a word, as in van, vane
elsewhere it more closely resembles wan, wane
s as in say, send **h** as in hat, height