



Basic Tibetan for Travelers

This is a brief introduction to Tibetan, which is a language spoken in the Tibet region of China. It is spoken by approximately 6 million people across the Tibetan Plateau, and in parts of India, Pakistan, Nepal, and Bhutan. Tibetan is also particularly well known for its use in Buddhist literature.

This introduction contains basic instruction about pronunciation and important words and phrases. When volunteering and traveling in the Tibet region, the ability to communicate in Tibetan will greatly enhance your experience. Even if you do not plan on studying the language in-depth, we strongly suggest learning and using basic greetings and phrases. The locals will greatly appreciate your efforts and will be all the more welcoming to you during your stay. If you would like to complete a beginning course in Tibetan, there are a number of self-study books and tapes. Melvyn C. Goldstein's *English-Tibetan Dictionary of Modern Tibetan* (1984) and Lonely Planet's *Tibetan Phrasebook* (2002) are two books you may find helpful.

Pronunciation

Tibetan is generally written in the Indic script, which is also used to write many other languages, including Dzongkha, Ladakhi, and Balti. It is closely related to the Devanagari script used for Hindi and Bengali. As this is a basic introduction, the written script has not been reproduced here.

There are thirty consonants and five vowels. Each consonant letter includes an inherent a, and the other vowels are indicated by marks surrounding the corresponding consonant.

Although Tibetan has only five vowels, many of the vowels have several sounds. The various sounds are listed below.

a	a as in father	u	oo as in mood
i	i as in it	e	e as in met
iy	ee as in see	ay	ay as in say
â	a as in alone (short a)	ö	er as in her
o	o as in so	ü	ew as in crew
aw	aw as in paw		

The vowels can also be pronounced nasally. In this guide, if a vowel is nasal if it is followed by n, m, or ng. The easiest way to nasalize a vowel is to push your air stream through both your nose and mouth as you pronounce the vowel.

Generally, Tibetan consonants are pronounced the same as in English. However, there are several unique sounds.

k	k as in skip	ny	ny as in canyon
kh	k as in key, breathy	t	t as in star
khy	cu as in cute	th	t as in tent, breathy
gy	gu as in regulate		
ng	ng as in sing		

tsh ts as in Patsy
dz dds as in adds
p p as in priest
ph p as in pat, breathy

lh lh as in cool headed, breathy
thr tr as in triumph, slightly trilled
dr dr as in dragon, slightly trilled

Tibetan is generally not a tonal language, though some dialects have developed slight tonal qualities. Those differences will not be indicated in this guide.

Greetings

Come in.	ya pay
May I come in?	ulay ulay
Good morning.	nga-to delek
Good night.	simja nâng-gaw
Goodbye.	kâliy shu OR kâliy pay
See you later.	jema jay-yong
Nice to meet you.	kayrang jel-pa gawpo chung
How are you?	kayrang kusu debo yimbay?
I'm fine.	nga debo yin

Introductions

My name is...	ngay minglâ ...	ray
What is your name?	kayrang gi minglâ karay	ray?
I am from America.	nga amerika	nay yin
Where are you from?	kayrang lungbâ	kanay yin?
I'm a student.	nga lob-trug	yin

Etiquette

Thank you	thugs rje che
Thanks	tujay-chay
Please	kuchi (informal) OR tujay-sig (formal) ¹
Don't mention it	shu-goyak yaw maray
I'm sorry.	gawn-da
Pardon me.	gawn-da

Relationships/Titles

I/me	nga
You	kayrang
He/him	kho
She/her	mo
We/us	ngânts
They/them	khontso
He/she (polite)	khong
Friend	drogpo (m) OR drogmo (f)
Family	nâng-miy

¹ Generally, Tibetans do not use the word "please." However, it is acceptable to use these phrases if your request is desperate.

Daughter	bumo
Son	bu
Brother	pingya bu
Sister	pingya bumo
Father	papha
Mother	ama
Husband	kyoka
Wife	kyeman
Male, same age	chola
Female, same age	ajala
Male, grandfather's age	pola
Female, grandmother's age	mola
Male, father's age	pala
Female, mother's age	amala
Younger male	bu
Younger female	bumo
Honorific	-la (added to the end of a name)
Teacher	genla
Doctor	âmchi

Food and Drinks

I am hungry.	nga throgaw-tog giy du
I am thirsty.	nga ka kom-giy du
I want...	nga-la ... gaw
Food	kha lag
Bread	bag leb
Meat	sha
Fish	nya-sha
Fruit	shing-tog
Chicken	cha-sha
Flour	thrushi
Noodles	gyâdu
Dumplings	momo
Stir-fry vegetables	tshay
Rice	dray
Corn	ah-shom
Potatoes	shawgaw
Yogurt	sho
Coffee	cha kabi OR cha tsigcha
Tea	cha
Water	chu
Milk	oma
Beer	chang OR piju OR beeyar
This is good.	diy yâgpo du
The meal was delicious.	khala shimbu shedra chung

Important Locations

How do I get to ...	? ...-la ka tési dro gawray?
Where is ... ?	... kâba du?

Market	trom
Mosque	kache lha-khâng
Temple/Church	lha-khâng
Shop	tshong khang
School	slob grwa
Hospital	men-khâng
House	khâng-pa
Home	nâng
Bathroom	trü-khâng
Toilet	sânchö
Shower	thor chu
Kitchen	thab tshang
Garden	dhumra

Cost

How much?	kâtsö?
How much is it?	gong gâtsay ray?
Money	ngü
Price	gong
Expensive	gong chenpo
Cheap	kepo

Time of Day

Morning	shawgay
Afternoon	chito
Evening	gongda
Night	gongda OR tshen-mo

Useful Words and Phrases

Yes	ray, du, yawray, gaw
No	maray, mindu, yaw-mâray, mögaw
Maybe	chig chay-na
Okay	grigs
Now	dânda
Later	phyi ba
What is this called?	diy minglâ? OR karay ray?
How many?	kâtsay?
I am tired.	nga nyi ku giy du OR kâlay ka giy du
I am lost.	ngay tang-ga ha kugiy mindu
I am ill.	nga na-giydu OR nga nâgiy du
I am happy.	nga kyipo du
I don't understand.	ha ko-masong
Could you repeat that?	te yâng-kyar soong rog nâng?
Could you speak more slowly?	tâtung kalay-kalay soong nâng dâng?
How do you say ... ?	... kâday lâb gaw ray?
Do you speak English?	kayrâng injiy-kay shing-giy yawbay?
Help!	rog nâng-da!

Who?	su?
Where?	kâba?
Why?	kâray-chaynay?
What?	kâray?
When?	kâdü?
How?	ga dra zer?

Miscellaneous

Peace	shiy-de
Love	gawpo OR tsewa
Work	layka
Enough	dâng-pa
Beautiful	nying jepo
Slowly	kâlay kâlay
Strength	shugs
Bad	dukcha
Good	yagpo
My condolences	nga lo-phâm yö
Buddha	sangye
Congratulations!	tashidelek!

Numbers

0	laykor	11	chug-chig	22	nyi-shu tsa-nyi
1	chig	12	chu-nyi	30	sumchu
2	nyi	13	chog-sum	40	ship-chu
3	sum	14	chup-shi	50	ngâp-chu
4	shi	15	chö-nga	60	trug-chu
5	nga	16	chu-trug	70	dün-chu
6	trug	17	choop-dün	80	gyây-chu
7	dün	18	chop-gyay	90	gup-chu
8	gyay	19	chu-gu	100	gya
9	gy	20	nyi-shu	1,000	chig-dong
10	chu	21	nyi-shu tsa-chig	10,000	chig tri