

PĀLI PRONUNCIATION

The Pāli alphabet comprises of 8 vowels, 32 consonants (traditionally) and one pure nasal (*niggahīta*), and these are shown in the table below:

VOWELS									
a	Ā	i	ī	u	ū	e	o		
CONSONANTS									
	unaspirated		aspirated		unaspirated		aspirated		nasals
Gutturals	k		Kh		g		gh		ṅ
Palatals	c		Ch		j		jh		ñ
Cerebrals	ṭ		ṭh		ḍ		ḍh		ṇ
Dentals	t		Th		d		dh		n
Labials	p		Ph		b		Bh		m
Semi-vowels, etc.	y	r	l	ḷ ¹	(ḷh)	v	s	h	m̐ ²

The vowels a, i & u are pronounced (short) as in cut, bit & put respectively; the vowels ā, ī, ū, e & o are pronounced (long) as in father, machine, tool, fair (without the ‘r’ sound) & for (also without the ‘r’ sound) respectively, but if e & o are followed by double or conjunct consonants, as in the word *ettha* (here), they are generally³ pronounced short as in get & got respectively.

The consonants are pronounced as follows: k as in kick; g as in get; ṅ as in sing; c as in check; j as in jack; ñ as in signor (*señor*, i.e. a ‘ny’ sound); ṭ, ḍ & ṇ as in take, drink & net respectively (but the tongue should curl up and go further back in each case); t, d, & n as in tea, do & not respectively (the tongue should go further forward and touch the inside of the top front teeth in each case); p, b & m – as in English; y & r – also as in English; l & ḷ – as in English, but the tongue should go as for t & ṭ respectively; v is pronounced more like w, as in went; s & h – as in English and the *niggahīta* (lit. restrained, but here meaning the pure nasal

¹ Traditionally, this is the last letter in the Pāli alphabet (i.e. after ‘h’), but in dictionaries (Roman script) this letter usually appears as indicated here.

² The *niggahīta* ‘m̐’ usually occurs in dictionaries between the end of the vowels and the beginning of the consonants (i.e. ... e, o, m̐, k, kh ...). It is also written as ‘ṃ’ in some books.

³ There are exceptions though, when they are pronounced long, as when e or o are followed by conjunct consonants because of elision, as for example *kammassako’mhi* (= *kammassako* + *amhi*), or when e and o are the result of the combining of ā + ī and ā + ū respectively (ā = a or ā; ī = i or ī; ū = u or ū), as for example in *ti-vidhottamaṃ* (= *ti-vidha* + *uttamaṃ*). Very occasionally, due to the stress of the metre in verses, e or o may be pronounced short, even though not followed by conjunct consonants, as the ‘o’ in *abhabbo* in the line ‘cha cābhiṭṭhānāni abhabbo kātuṃ.’ (Ratana-Sutta, Kh.6; Sn.2:1).

sound), ṁ, no air is released through the mouth while pronouncing this, and is similar to ṅ (ng) — the difference is that the former is sounded in the nose and the latter in the throat.

In Pāli, double or conjunct consonants are pronounced with a slight stopping effect, as in English when the final sound of a word is the same as the initial of the one immediately following, e.g. black cat, and syllables that end with such consonants are equivalent in length⁴ to a long vowel. The syllables -aṁ, -iṁ & -uṁ are also equivalent in length to a long vowel. Two short syllables are equivalent to one long.

Pronunciation of the aspirates kh, gh, etc. (note these are not conjunct consonants, and so there should be no stopping effect when pronounced) is similar to the non-aspirates k, g, etc., however, there is a much stronger breath pulse used for the aspirates and a difference in sound (as when breathing hard or panting) can be heard. In other scripts that are used for writing Pāli, for example: Sinhala, Devanāgarī (which is used for Sanskrit, Hindi and Nepali), Burmese and Thai the aspirates are written as single letters, with the exception of ḷh (indicated above in brackets) which is written as two letters joined together and thus pronounced as a conjunct. However, in some books it is stated to be an aspirate, and this is confirmed when considering the form of some words in which this letter is preceded by a long vowel like ‘ā’ or ‘ū’, which would normally be found as short vowels if followed by a conjunct or double consonant; further confirmation is found when considering the position where it is found in Pāli verses and the verses’ metres used, since some or all positions are fixed in terms of the length of the syllables. Other cases like, for example, -ñh-, -ṇh-, -mh-, -yh- & -vh- are pronounced as conjunct consonants.

With proper pronunciation, the verses (*gāthās*) that are often recited for devotional and protective purposes will be chanted with the correct rhythm, as defined by the metres used therein. The rhythm comes from the correct pronunciation of the long and short syllables as they are found in the verses and, especially near the end of each line, are not arbitrarily placed. For some verses every syllable of the lines of verse has a set length (or weight). For most verses the total number of syllables is fixed. For the other verses, it is the total count (short syllable = 1, long = 2) for the whole line that is important. Taking this into consideration, an appreciation of the skill that is required to write Pāli verse will also be developed. Also, even more inspiring, is the fact that the verses spoken by the Buddha, some of His disciples, deities and others, who lived at that time, were impromptu!

⁴ Actually, to be strictly correct in the terminology that is in use, vowels are described as short (*rasa*) or long (*dīgha*) and syllables are described in terms of weight, i.e. light (*lahu*) or heavy (*garu*), e.g. the words *karuṇā* (compassion) has two light syllables followed by one heavy and *upekkhā* (equanimity) has one light syllable followed by two heavy syllables, but the vowel ‘e’ is pronounced short (sometimes written as *upekhā*, which also has one light syllable followed by two heavy syllables, but the vowel ‘e’ is pronounced long).