



Pāli Phonetics and Pronunciation

Pāli is the original scriptural language of Theravāda Buddhism. It was a spoken language, closely related to Sanskrit, with no written script of its own. As written forms have emerged, they have been in the letterings of other languages (Sanskrit, Sinhalese, Burmese, Thai, Roman). Thus the Roman lettering used here is pronounced just as one would expect, with the following clarifications:

Vowels

Vowels are of two types:

Short

a as in *about*

i as in *hit*

u as in *put*

Long

ā as in *father*

ī as in *machine*

ū as in *rule*

e as in *grey*

o as in *more*

Exceptions: *e* and *o* change to short sounds in syllables ending in consonants. They are then pronounced as in *get* and *ox*.

Consonants

Consonants are mostly as one would expect, with a few additional rules:

c as in *ancient* (like *ch*, but unaspirated)

ṃ, ṅ as in *sang*

ṅ as in *canyon*

v rather softer, near *w*

bh, ch, dh, ḍh, gh, jh, kh, ph, th, ṭh

These two-lettered notations with *h* denote an aspirated, airy sound, distinct from the hard, crisp sound of the single consonant. They should be considered as one unit. However, the other combinations with *h*, i.e., **lh, mh, ṅh**, and **vh**, do count as two consonants. For example:

th as in *tongue* (never pronounced as in *the*)

ph as *palate* (never pronounced as in *photo*)

ḍ, ḍh, ḷ, ṇ, ṭ, ṭh

These retroflex consonants have no English equivalents. They are sounded by curling the tip of the tongue back against the palate.

Syllables

Full-length syllables contain long vowels (**ā, ī, ū, e, o**) or end with **ṃ**. Or, having ended in a consonant, they are followed by a syllable beginning with a consonant (e.g., mag•ga, hon•ti, Bud•dha).

Remember that **bh, dh**, etc., count as single consonants. (Therefore am•hā•kaṃ, but sa•dham•maṃ, not sad•ham•maṃ.)

Half-length syllables end in short vowels.

Punctuation and Tonal Marks

(Round brackets) indicate words chanted only by the leader; words in [square brackets] are chanted only by the responder.

As an aid to understanding, some of the longer Pāli words in the text have been hyphenated into the words from which they are compounded. This does not affect the pronunciation in any way.

The triangular tonal marks indicate changes in pitch.

High tone, e.g., nōble

Low tone, e.g., bḷessed



Chanting Technique

Once the system of Pāli pronunciation and rhythm has been grasped, it is possible to chant a text from sight.

BUD • DHO	SU • SUD • DHO	KA • RU • NĀ	MA • HAṆ • NA • VO
1 1	1/2 1 1	1/2 1/2 1	1/2 1 1/2 1

If you find it difficult to understand the practice of chanting (or even if you find it easy), the general rule of thumb is to listen carefully to what the leader and the group are chanting and to follow, keeping the same pitch, tempo, and speed. All voices should blend together as one.

Añjali

Chanting and formal requests are done with the hands in añjali. This is a gesture of respect, made by placing the palms together directly over the heart with the fingers aligned and pointing upwards.