Tibetan Calligraphy

How to write the Tibetan dbu-can script

Tibetan dbu-can [pron: "u-chen"] script is traditionally written using a hand-made bamboo or reed pen cut at an angle. A broad steel nibbed italic calligraphy pen may be used instead. Calligraphic pens designed for left-handed writers of Roman script are slanted at a suitable angle for a right-handed person to use when writing Tibetan dbu-chan script.

To produce the proper thickness of horizontal strokes, the width of the pen nib should be about $1/12$ the height of the letter ka.

The pen is held between the thumb and index fingers so that, as you write, the pen may be rotated to obtain the proper thick and thin strokes. The other fingers are drawn up into a fist, though some people extend the little finger to form a surface for the hand to rest on and provide greater stability. Horizontal strokes are written from left to right and vertical strokes from top down.

The top strokes of Tibetan letters should align with each other. This stroke is always drawn first.

In complex "stacks" all elements of the stack are usually adjusted in size and shape. The shape and angle of subscribed gi-gu (vowel sign "u") differs dependent on the letter or combination it occurs with.

There are several styles of dbu-can script which vary slightly - the design of the examples I've made for this page are based on a style from Amdo used for writing religious texts. For combined letters only a few illustrative examples are given.

The Thirty Consonants
or "Tibetan Alphabet"
tsa

tsha

dza

wa

zha

za
The four Vowel signs:

*sa*

*ha*

*a*

The four Vowel signs:

*gi-gu*

*zhabs-kyu*
’greng-bu

na-ro

Subscribed letters (’dogs can):

subscribed ya (ya-btags)

subscribed ra (ra btags)
sub-scribed la (la btags)

wa zur

mgo-can

ra-mgo

la-mgo

sa-mgo
Punctuation

Tibetan letters for transliterating Sanskrit

Related Pages:
- Bhutanese style dbu-can
- Tibetan Writing Course - by Palden Oshoe & Mark Turin, at Cornell University Language Resource Center
- Calligraphie Tibetain
- A Model of the Tibetan gzab Script - with Rules for Calligraphy - T. G. Dhonthog Rinpoche [in Tibetan]
- Elements of the Tibetan Writing System.