

Tone Rules

for Pāli Chanting in the Thai Tradition

The tone rules for Pāli Chanting in the Thai Tradition are based on the Thai alphabet, as it is used to write Pāli. Pāli itself is not a tonal language. However, there are still advantages to learning the system: It helps to distinguish between some consonants that are similar, such as k and kh, t and th, p and ph, etc.; it makes memorization easier; and if you go to Thailand your chanting will fit in with the group.

Pāli has two sorts of vowels, long—ā, e, ī, o, ū, & ay; and short—a, i, & u. Syllables are also either long or short. It's important to remember that long and short vowels are one thing, and long and short syllables are another. Short syllables end in a short vowel (or are just a short vowel, like the first syllable in *u-po-sa-tha*, which consists of just the vowel 'u'). Long syllables end in either a long vowel—ā, ī, ū, o, e, ay—(bha-ga-vā, bud-dho), a consonant (vij-jā, sam-pan-no), including semi-vowels h, y, r, l, and v (dal-ham, sey-yo), or m, the pure nasal, which gets its own category (e-vam, i-mam). This means that a long syllable can have either a short (tam) or a long (te) vowel, but if the vowel is short the syllable will be long only if it ends in a consonant or 'm'.

Long syllables can be either stopped or non-stopped. A syllable is stopped if it ends in one of these consonants: k, c, t, ṭ, p, g, j, d, ḍ, b, or s—i.e., the sound stops. ('s' is included in this list because in Thai a final 's' turns into a 't'.) Otherwise—if the long syllable ends in a vowel or one of the consonants m, n, ñ, ṇ, ñ, y, l, or ṽ—it's unstopped, as the sound doesn't stop. (Syllables never end in v, r, or any of the aspirated consonants dh, bh, etc. Apparently only two words in Pāli have a syllable that ends in h, *brāhmaṇa* and *brahmā*, and because the syllable in both cases begins with a consonant that doesn't carry a tone, the question of whether 'h' is considered a stop is irrelevant.)

Examples

short: a-ra-ham, abhi-vā-de-mi, su-pa-ṭi-pan-no

long, stopped: sam-bud-dho, svāk-khā-to, tas-sa, met-ta

long, unstopped: a-ham, ho-mi, a-ve-ro, dham-mo

Tones in the Thai tradition of Pāli chanting

There are two main styles of chanting in Thailand: Saṃyok (=saṃyoga—connected) and Makhot (=Magadha—the state in ancient India). In the Dhammayut order, most chants are done in the Makhot style (the Jayanto is an exception), while in the Mahānikāya, most chanting is Saṃyok.

Makhot

Makhot has three pitches: the base pitch, which most of the syllables are, a high pitch, usually either a whole step or a minor third above the base, and a low pitch, usually a whole step below the base pitch.

There are four tones, based on these three pitches:

1) Base or middle tone, which is just the base pitch. This is the most common tone and is the default.

2) High or falling tone, which can be either on the high pitch for the duration of the syllable or start high and then drop to the base pitch. Which way to do it is a matter of choice or what sounds natural. This one is predictable and considered necessary, and therefore the important one to understand. The rules for when to use it are explained below.

3) Low tone, which stays on the low pitch. It's use is somewhat arbitrary or traditional, and Ajaan Geoff doesn't recommend using it in the Pāṭimokkha.

4) Low falling, which starts on the base pitch and drops to the low pitch partway through. This one is pretty rare, occurring only on stopped syllables with a long vowel, beginning with certain consonants. So far the only examples I've found are met-ta and vi-mok-kha.

Rules for the high/falling tone

Syllables with the following three characteristics have a high/falling tone:

1) The syllable is long—ending in either a long vowel, ṁ, or a consonant (as explained above).

2) It is not stopped—either ending in a long vowel, ṁ, or the consonants n, ñ, ṇ, ṅ, m, l, ḷ, r, or y.

3) Initial consonant: It begins with one of these consonants: s, h, ch, th, ṭh, kh, or ph. (There is one small complication here: an initial 'm' following a final 's' takes the tonal property of the s,

making the syllable starting with the 'm' high: tas-mā, ā-yas-mā, yas-mim

Examples of the high/falling tone

sam-mā, a-ham, kho, khan-dho, Thā-nis-sa-ro, ya-thā, sey-yo, ho-ti, hon-ti

A long vowel, such as 'o', can still have a consonant following it in the same syllable (as in 'honti'). If a syllable with a long vowel is stopped, then it does *not* have a high tone, as in sot-thi, phot-ṭhab-ba, khet-te, ya-thaj-ja. (Compounds like the second syllable in yathā+ajja>yathājja are easily mistaken for a high tone because we are used to *yathā* having a high tone on the second syllable.)

Also note that *yathā* is ya-thā, not yat-hā. As mentioned in the Chanting Guide, the notations th, ṭh, ph, ch, kh, (also dh...) indicate one sound in Pāḷi, and are represented by one letter in the Thai script. However, the sequences yh, mh, lh, ḷh, vh, nh and ṇh are in almost all cases the end and beginning of two syllables: may-haṁ, am-hehi, daḷ-haṁ, taṇ-hā, etc. This sometimes makes a difference in tone, as in *saṇhāhi vācāhi upavhayantā* (from the Mahā Samaya Sutta): "saṇ(high)-hā(high)-hi", rather than "sa(mid)-ṇhā(high)-hi," This is reflected in the fact that there are no single Thai letters for these combinations. An exception to this rule is the combination 'nh', as in *nhārū* (tendons), *nhāyeyya* (from the Pāṭimokkha). It is a high tone, following the h, and usually comes out as 'na-hā-rū', 'na-hā-yey-ya' anyway.

Optional high tones

Syllables with a short vowel and either no final consonant (making it a short syllable) or a stopped final consonant (making it a long syllable), and beginning with the consonants v, bh, r, n, ṇ, m, y, are sometimes given a high tone:

