



BURMESE

A CULTURAL APPROACH

Ward Keeler and Allen Lyan

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In memory of John Okell, beloved teacher and friend

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A Note on the Authors

Ward Keeler is a cultural anthropologist specializing in Burma and Indonesia who teaches at the University of Texas at Austin. He first met Allen Lyan in Mandalay during a fieldwork stint there in 2011 and 2012, when a mutual friend recommended Allen as a language tutor. Allen had not at that point taught Burmese to foreigners; he was instead a music and English-language teacher to children. However, he proved adept at writing engaging dialogues to use as practice materials. Those dialogues provided the initial impetus for writing an intermediate-level textbook, something that did not exist.

With that purpose in mind, Ward started writing notes explaining grammatical and cultural points as they came up in the dialogues. (He did so after the model of his earlier textbook, *Javanese: A Cultural Approach*.) Allen wrote the dialogues in Part Two and collaborated with Ward in writing drills. Ward eventually decided to complement these intermediate materials with a beginning-level text, one that would avoid all use of romanization in favor of the systematic introduction of all the sounds and symbols of the Burmese writing system.

Allen Lyan lived until the age of about twelve in a village in the Chin Hills, at which point his parents moved the family to Mandalay. He is, as a result, a fluent speaker of both one of the Chin languages and of Burmese. Fortunately, he speaks Burmese clearly—more so than some Burmese-speaking males—to the advantage of his foreign students. Ethnic Burmans will note in the recordings a few traces of his first language in his pronunciation of certain Burmese sounds. Since about one-third of the population of Burma speaks Burmese as their second language, developing some tolerance for variant pronunciations seems only appropriate, just as English speakers must learn to do—even if some people in both Burma and anglophone societies resist the notion.

Introduction

Ward Keeler

This textbook is intended to be useful in three ways.

For people just starting their study of the Burmese language, it presents a rigorous and systematic introduction to the language. Because learning to read and write the Burmese script is essential to making good progress, we use no romanization system (see below). Relying on recordings (and their teachers), students learn to say what they can read and write all at the same time. (They must avoid the temptation to create their own romanization system, invariably a misleading practice that will disadvantage them in the long run.) As they master the script, they also learn basic features of Burmese grammar.

Students who have some knowledge of spoken Burmese but are not familiar with the script can use Part One: Learning to Read and Write, to master the skills of reading and writing that they need in order to make progress to an intermediate level. How rapidly they can move through Part One will depend on how much Burmese they already have acquired. But they must take care to master the script, especially because such mastery is necessary for attaining good control over Burmese pronunciation.

Finally, students who are ready for intermediate materials can proceed directly to Part Two: Dialogues, in which a number of conversations among Burmese speakers illustrate grammatical patterns, characteristic turns of phrase, and typical habits of social interaction. Although the first few lessons are elementary, they soon become more challenging, and so are appropriate for use as intermediate materials. The conversations take place among people of varying ages and social status, and their relationships differ in degrees of familiarity and formality.

Students usually start their study of the Burmese language using a romanized rendering of the words they learn. This is standard practice in the published textbook materials already available for anglophone students. Using romanization enables students to make quick progress initially. But it has unfortunate effects. First, it delays acquisition of the Burmese writing system, a necessary step in any student's learning. Anyone who has become used to a romanization system, furthermore, is likely to have a very hard time dismissing it from their mind in favor of Burmese writing even once they have studied the latter. Finally, learning to pronounce Burmese properly requires knowing how it is written, because the important matter of how initial consonant sounds are pronounced requires such knowledge. For all these reasons, and in order to emphasize the importance of gaining effective command of Burmese as it is spoken and written, this book rigorously avoids romanization.

As in learning to speak any language, whether learning sounds at the most elementary level or learning to reproduce whole utterances, students must constantly work on imitating the speech of native Burmese speakers. To this end, the written materials are complemented by audio materials. Students should make careful and constant use of them.

In notes appended to each dialogue in Part Two, students encounter brief explanations of grammatical matters as they arise. These explanations are fairly minimal. Exhaustive accounts of

grammatical points can lead to confusion, even discouragement, among learners. To obtain more thorough accounts, students are advised to take advantage of other resources addressing in greater detail the complexities of Burmese grammar.

Most notable among these are three: John Okell's *A Reference Grammar of Colloquial Burmese* (Oxford University Press, 1969); John Okell and Anna Allott's *Burmese (Myanmar) Dictionary of Grammatical Forms* (Routledge, 2001); and Mathias Jenny and San San Hnin Tun's *Burmese: A Comprehensive Grammar* (Routledge, 2016).

The most immediately useful for a student learning the language is the second out of the three, Okell and Allott's *Burmese (Myanmar) Dictionary of Grammatical Forms*, since it provides explanations for every important word or particle students are likely to encounter. Also essential for any anglophone student of Burmese is the *Myanmar-English Dictionary*, published by the Department of the Myanmar Language Commission of the Burmese government's Ministry of Education. There is as of this writing no truly adequate English-Burmese dictionary.

Burmese is a diglossic language, meaning that it exhibits both a formal or elevated register and a colloquial one. "Important" speech, as pronounced on formal occasions, as well as almost all written material, use the elevated form, while almost all everyday interaction is conducted in the colloquial form.¹ (Incidentally, the difference between "Burma" and "Myanmar" is the difference between the two English renderings of the colloquial and the elevated forms in Burmese of the name for the ethnic Burmans.) These lessons teach the colloquial, not the elevated, style.

Learning a language, especially one from a society very much unlike one's own, means learning not just a sound system and a set of grammatical rules. It also means learning ways to interact: what to say when, to whom, in what manner. In a place where hierarchical assumptions shape face-to-face encounters as thoroughly as they do in Burma, English speakers must become aware of how speech varies according to the identities and especially the relative status of the parties to any exchange. In studying the dialogues in this book, students learn to imitate conversations among people of many different sorts and stations: for example, a village man visiting Mandalay for the first time, a doctor advising a patient, teenagers going out on the town, and a smoker cajoling a cigar out of a seller. Even if most foreigners in Burma will find themselves engaging primarily in polite and relatively formal encounters, they still need to know the diverse speaking styles people around them are using among themselves.

Learning a foreign language, in sum, is not simply a linguistic exercise. It is also an anthropological endeavor. Learning the "grammar" of interaction in a particular milieu, among real people, at a particular time is what anthropologists do. It is for this reason that these lessons are entitled a *cultural approach*. They are intended to provide students of Burmese the wherewithal to conduct themselves appropriately in a range of contexts while embarking on the difficult but exciting adventure of learning to speak Burmese to Burmese speakers and thereby learning about Burma.

On Tones

Burmese is a tonal language. This means that the same combination of sounds means altogether unrelated things when the pitch at which that combination is pronounced changes. Thus, the pitch of one syllable, relative to that of the syllables that precede and follow it, matters in the same way that consonant and vowel sounds matter in English (as they do, of course, in Burmese as well).

1. English, too, has both formal and informal registers. We tend to use multisyllabic words of Norman French (ultimately Latin) origin in the elevated style (e.g., to regard), and monosyllabic words of Old English (ultimately Germanic) origin in colloquial speech (e.g., to look at). But the distinction is less clear in English than in Burmese. In the latter, basic, high-frequency lexical items differentiate formal and colloquial styles quite starkly.

To an English speaker, changes in pitch seem only marginally significant. We use intonation in order to distinguish a question from a statement, for example, or to signal the emotional tenor of a remark. So intonation communicates connotations—supplementary meanings—without affecting the denotation—the explicit meaning—of the words we use.

In Burmese, however, intonation affects denotation. What a combination of sounds means depends on the pitch at which it is pronounced relative to the pitch of the syllables that precede and follow it. This point may be fairly easy to grasp intellectually but it takes someone who does not speak a tonal language a great deal of effort to master it in practice.

First, a student of Burmese must learn the tone of any given syllable, and make sure to include the right tone as well as the right consonant and vowel sounds in saying it. Furthermore, an English speaker has to learn not to use intonation to try to convey connotations in the way English enables speakers to do.

For example, to emphasize the contrast between two items in a pair, an English speaker will raise the pitch of the second item named. In the phrase, "This shirt is clean; that one isn't," the word "that" will be emphasized by raising the pitch at which it is pronounced. This is what one must *not* do when speaking Burmese.

The reason is that raising the pitch of a word in Burmese makes it mean something completely different. Reading aloud the last sentence in the preceding paragraph, an English speaker will appreciate that the word "not," because it is italicized, must be emphasized—that is, in speaking, its pitch must be raised. But if English were a tonal language, raising the pitch would change "not" from meaning the negation of the verb to something else entirely: let's say, "bucket." So, with its pitch raised, the sentence would mean, "This is what one must bucket do when speaking Burmese." A listener would be hard pressed to guess what the speaker was driving at.

I sometimes feel as though Burmese speakers who fail to understand me because I have made a mistake as to the tone of a word I have used are being unjustifiably, even stubbornly, uncomprehending. But I am failing at such moments to bear in mind how important tone is to the whole sound system of Burmese. By the same token, it is difficult for a speaker of a tonal language to understand why English speakers are so oblivious to this dimension of a word's or a syllable's meaning.

The point is that every language uses a certain number of distinctions among sounds to convey meaning. Native speakers of English know that the first-person pronoun, "I," can be pronounced in a number of ways, depending on the regional and class origins of the speaker, without causing any confusion. In the United States, Northerners find the way that Southerners say "I" curiously close to "Ah," but can still grasp what Southerners are saying without any trouble. If a foreigner pronounced "I" like "Ee," however, an English speaker might well be stumped. The distinction between the sounds "i" and "ee" in English matters too importantly for someone to understand a foreigner who confuses them in speech. Changing the pitch of a syllable in Burmese relative to the syllables that surround it transgresses the distinctions among sounds just as importantly as mixing up "i" and "ee" in English.

A conventional way of mocking East Asians in the United States is to joke about their failure to distinguish between the sounds "l" and "r" when they speak English. That they fail to attend to a distinction English speakers make much of reflects the fact that in such languages as Chinese, Japanese, or Thai the distinction does not matter. To use the vocabulary of linguistics, the difference in sound, a *phonetic* difference, is not a significant one, is not a *phonemic* one. Pitch, in tonal languages, is phonemic: it matters.²

2. Once when I asked a Japanese man whether a mutual friend's name was Mr. Arai or Mr. Alai, he responded "Yes."—Because the phonetic difference I, as an English speaker, thought so important is not a phonemic one in Japanese, so not one *they* think important. For the record, when, a few moments later, Mr. Arai introduced me to his son, Ryuji, everyone had trouble suppressing their laughter at my inability to come anywhere close to pronouncing his name correctly.

Like any other element of a foreign language, gaining mastery of tones requires determined consistent practice. Listening to one's own efforts to imitate the speech of a native speaker can home the difference between correct and incorrect tones. Best of all, if it can be arranged, record one's own efforts and play them immediately alongside recordings of a native speaker saying the same phrase.

Burmese speakers, like speakers of any language, employ phrasal intonation: there is an overall shape to the intonation of utterances, and this too must be imitated by students. However, phrasal intonation is somewhat more restricted in Burmese than in English. Many connotations that English speakers convey by means of intonation are conveyed in Burmese by the use of particles which indicate such information as the speaker's surprise, irritation, and so on.

Repetition eventually makes tones as familiar as other elements of Burmese. At a certain point, having heard and pronounced a word with the correct tone enough times makes it fairly automatic, requiring little conscious attention. To get to that point, a student must simply keep the matter of tones constantly in mind.

Lesson 1: The Syllabary

An essential task for any student of the Burmese language is to learn the Burmese syllabary (leaving aside a few less frequently encountered symbols to be learned later). A syllabary differs from an alphabet in that every symbol in a syllabary represents a combination of both a consonant and at least one vowel sound. Burmese is a tonal language and as a result each symbol of its syllabary represents a combination of a consonant, a vowel sound, and a tone.

The Burmese syllabary contains thirty-three symbols, each of which is called a ဗျည်း.¹ Each ဗျည်း has its own name, just as the letters of the roman alphabet have a name, and each of them implies specific sounds, as does each letter in an alphabet. In some instances, a ဗျည်း implies a number of different possible sounds, as may a letter in an alphabet. But unlike the letters in an alphabet, each ဗျည်း implies not one sound but a set of them, a combination of a consonant sound, a vowel sound, and a tone.

If it stands alone, a ဗျည်း represents the combination of one consonant sound plus the “a” sound as pronounced in the first tone. This short, high tone ends with a slight glottal occlusion—a slight tensing of the larynx—which John Okell calls the “creaked” tone.

The same consonant combines with other vowel sounds and tones (and sometimes other consonants) when diacritical marks are placed before, after, above, and/or below the ဗျည်း. These diacritics will be introduced systematically in the remaining lessons in Part One. This first lesson, however, is devoted to mastering the ဗျည်း alone, with no other diacritics.

It is recommended, although not necessary, for students to learn to repeat the names of the ဗျည်း as accurately as possible, as well as learn to pronounce the sounds of each syllable: in other words, to learn how to spell in Burmese. So, for the first symbol, a student is well advised to learn to say both က ကြီး (the name of the ဗျည်း) and က (the sound it implies). (This is similar to learning the name of the letter “A” in English and the sound “a” as that letter is usually pronounced when it appears in a word.) Learning to write the names of the syllables will come later, once all the diacritics as well as the syllables have been mastered.

Learning to write each ဗျည်း with the correct strokes is essential. Several videos demonstrating the direction of the strokes are available on YouTube. In line with the policy we adopt, scrupulously avoiding all romanization, we recommend the following one:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XqB02frEka>

1. The pronunciation of this word, and other words aside from those included in each lesson that a student learns to read and write, should be learned by imitating one's teacher or by imitating the recording.

Here is the complete Burmese syllabary:

က	ခ	ဂ	ဃ	င
စ	ဆ	ဇ	ဈ	ည
ဋ	ဌ	ဍ	ဎ	ဏ
တ	ထ	ဒ	ဓ	န
ပ	ဖ	ဗ	ဘ	မ
ယ	ရ	လ	ဝ	
သ	ဟ	ဠ	အ	

Learning to recognize, name, and write all of these ဗျည်း is a major undertaking, and it will take some time. It will constitute the content of this entire lesson. Practicing the ဗျည်း will require much more time and attention. Doing this is crucial to all progress in learning Burmese, however, so it is worth putting in the time at the outset. Although it may appear overwhelming at first, practicing by listening to the recording, by repeating what you hear, and by writing the symbols oneself, will gradually imprint all of these symbols on one's memory. Take it in the spirit of a challenge and a game.

A. The first two lines [101.mp3]

In this first section, you must learn to read, write, and pronounce the first two lines of the syllabary:

က	ခ	ဂ	ဃ	င ²
စ	ဆ	ဇ	ဈ	ည

Imitate your teacher, or the recording, to learn the names of these syllables and the sounds they imply.

Notes

Here are some further notes to help you grasp what it is you are working with.

The nature of a syllabary

The Burmese syllabary derives from South Asian syllabaries. Like them, it arranges symbols according to the place of articulation (where in the mouth they are formed). The place of articulation of the consonant sound of each syllable is the same for each line across (except for the last eight symbols, which we will get to in Section C below). So the first line includes all the syllables that start with a velar consonant sound (those that are produced with the tongue pressed against the soft palate); the second line all the sibilant ones; the third and fourth lines the alveolar ones (with the tip of the tongue touching behind the upper front teeth); and the fifth all the labial ones (produced by pressing both lips together). The columns are also arranged systematically: the first column contains syllables starting with unaspirated stops (the larynx is closed until the vowel sound starts); the second column aspirated ones (the larynx is open from the start); the third and fourth start with voiced stops (the larynx vibrates from the start of the sound); and the last column consists of nasals. The last eight symbols, appearing in the sixth and seventh lines, indicate other initial sounds that do not fall into

2. English speakers often have trouble pronouncing this sound in initial position. The key is to pronounce it further forward in the mouth than when pronouncing "ng," as in English "singing."

the above categories, plus at the very end a symbol for syllables starting with vowel sounds, with no initial consonant.

Aspirated and unaspirated stops

The difference between aspirated and unaspirated stops is phonemic in Burmese. This means that a student needs to be able to hear the difference between, and produce, sounds that English does not distinguish. A monolingual speaker of English or German uses aspirated stops almost exclusively; a monolingual speaker of French or Spanish uses unaspirated ones almost exclusively. Aspirated stops are sounds such as "t" or "p" or "k," which are accompanied with a breath of air ("aspiration"); unaspirated stops are the same sounds without any such accompanying breath of air.

To learn to make the difference, put two fingers on your Adam's apple (this is your larynx). Say "uh-oh," and notice how the larynx rises at the end of the first syllable and then relaxes. (You can appreciate what is happening more clearly if you say "uh-" and then pause, keeping the larynx in the same position, high and tensed.) To pronounce an aspirated stop, as in the English "t" sound, keep the larynx in the low, relaxed position as you say "tuh." To pronounce an unaspirated stop, say "uh-" as in "uh-oh," but keep the larynx in the taut, high position, and then say "tuh." This may take a native speaker of English some practice (since English uses only aspirated stops in initial positions), but it will eventually become automatic.

Vocabulary

The vocabulary included in this and later lessons consists only of words that a student who is learning the syllabary can write in light of how many of those symbols he or she has already learned.

က-	to dance
ခ	fee, cost
စ-	to begin
-ဆ	-fold (as in "threefold")
ည	night
-က	topic marker

Spelling practice³

1. ဂ 2. ဆ 3. က 4. ည 5. စ 6. ခ 7. ယ 8. ဈ 9. ဇ

Useful classroom phrases 1

The following phrases are helpful for teachers and students to use in the classroom. Students are not yet in a position to read the phrases in Burmese and should concern themselves at this point only in learning to recognize them aurally.

Listen.	နားထောင်။
Say it.	ပြောပါ။
Write it down.	ရေးပါ။

3. Some teachers and their students may choose to skip over spelling lessons at this point, preferring to focus only on the sounds that all of the symbols indicate. If so, they can ignore the spelling practice contained in each lesson. However, putting in the time to learn to spell early on is rewarded in the long term.

Got it? ရပြီလား။
 Got it. ရပြီ။
 Not yet. မရသေးဘူး။

B. The fourth and fifth lines [102.mp3]

The third line of the syllabary contains letters from the sacred language of Buddhism, Pali. Those letters appear in only a few words in Burmese, so we are skipping over them for now. (We will come back to them in a later lesson.) For the time being, we are going on to the fourth and fifth lines of the syllabary.

တ	ထ	ဒ	ဓ	န
ဠ	ဣ	ဥ	ဣ	မ

Once again, students must learn the names of these syllables, as well as how they sound and how to write them.

Vocabulary

ထ- to stand up, to get up
 မ- to lift

Spelling practice

- | | | | | |
|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| 1. ဈ | 2. တ | 3. ဖ | 4. ဝ | 5. န |
| 6. ခ | 7. ဇ | 8. ဘ | 9. က | 10. ဆ |
| 11. ခ | 12. ည | 13. စ | 14. ထ | 15. မ |
| 16. ဝ | 17. ဃ | 18. ဂ | 19. ဓ | 20. င |

Useful classroom phrases 2

Are you ready? အဆင်သင့် ဖြစ်ပြီလား။
 Yes, (I'm) ready. ဖြစ်ပြီ။
 Are you done? ပြီးပြီလား။
 Yes, I'm done. ပြီးပြီ။
 Good. ကောင်းတယ်။

C. The sixth and seventh lines [103.mp3]

The last two lines of the syllabary do not line up in columns the way the others do. This is because these eight symbols do not constitute "stops." (The columns in the previous lines were all arranged according to the type of stop characteristic of all of that column's constituent members' consonant sounds.) The air is not stopped at any point as one pronounces these sounds. The air flow is simply shaped in one way or another by changes in the way the tongue and lips are positioned.

Lesson 2

ယ	ရ	လ	ဝ
သ	ဟ	ဥ	အ

Vocabulary

ရ	can, may
လ	moon; month
ဝ	to be plump; to be sated with food
ဟ	expression of surprise

Spelling practice

- | | | | | |
|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| 1. ဟ | 2. လ | 3. က | 4. န | 5. ယ |
| 6. ခ | 7. ဖ | 8. သ | 9. ဇ | 10. ဥ |
| 11. ဝ | 12. င | 13. ရ | 14. ဂ | 15. ဖ |
| 16. ဒ | 17. ဝ | 18. သ | 19. ဆ | 20. ဟ |
| 21. ဝ | 22. ဝ | 23. ဖ | 24. အ | 25. ဖ |
| 26. ည | 27. ယ | 28. ခ | | |

D. Numbers 1 to 10

Like the classroom phrases presented in Parts A and B above, numbers are useful words whose writing is beyond what you know at this point. So, they should be learned aurally for now. The way each is spelled will become clear as progress is made through all the diacritics. However, students may want to go ahead and learn how to write Burmese numerals. They and the international forms for writing numerals are both commonplace in Burma today.

Recordings of all the numbers can be found in Appendix II: On Numbers.

- ၁
- ၂
- ၃
- ၄
- ၅
- ၆
- ၇ (see note below)
- ၈
- ၉
- ၁၀

The number seven has two spoken forms, their use dependent on context. The first—a two-syllable form—is used linked to a noun or counter (to be explained later) in a phrase. The second—a monosyllabic form—is used when counting in a series.

The example here is the first form. We use it when counting in a series.

The example here is the second form. We use it when counting in a series.

Lesson 1: Review [104.mp3]

1. Dictation

၁။ ည

၂။ ဝ

၃။ ဖ

၄။ က

၅။ မ

2. Translate the above words into English.

3. Translate the following words into Burmese.

Oh!

month

-fold

to get up

to begin

Lesson 2: Open Vowels

Diacritics are marks placed above, below, before, or following a ဗျည်း in order to alter the vowel, tone, or other sound feature of a syllable. In this lesson diacritics indicating open vowel sounds (linked to three different tones) will be taken up. In Burmese, diacritics are called သင်္ကေတ.

A. -၁ -ါ [1201.mp3]

The first diacritic to learn, -၁, indicates the same vowel sound as in the previous section, but with low tone. "Low tone" must be understood to mean only that the tone is neither raised nor "creaked" (that is, pronounced with a slight glottal occlusion). A better descriptor might be neutral or an unmarked tone. You do not need to drop your voice; you just need to make sure that your pitch is not raised relative to other surrounding syllables that are of similar low (or neutral or unmarked) tone and that your pitch is lower than nearby syllables that are high or creaked.

Compare the two syllables က and ကာ. They differ only in tone—and the difference is crucial.

က ကာ

-၁ -ါ

In the case of certain syllables, the addition of this diacritic in its usual form would lead to confusion. For example, in the case of ခ, adding the ၁ would make it look a lot like ဆ. To avoid confusion, the alternate form ofါ is used.

ခ ခါ

Here follow the ဗျည်း you have learned with this first diacritic, -၁, appended. Note carefully those ဗျည်း—there are six of them—that take the alternate form.

ကာ	ခါ	ဂါ	ဃာ	ငါ
စာ	ဆာ	ဇာ	ဈာ	ညာ
တာ	ထာ	ဒါ	ဓာ	နာ
ပါ	ဖာ	ဗာ	ဘာ	မာ
ယာ	ရာ	လာ	ဝါ	
သာ	ဟာ	ဠာ	အာ	

This alternate form of -၁ is labeled ဖောက်ချ in Burmese. However, few Burmese speakers actually use this term. We do so in the recordings for this text to help students to remember when its use is

needed. But when Burmese spell aloud, they use the label for the more usual form, even when the alternative form is required.

Vocabulary

ငါ	I (familiar, used with intimates and subordinates)
စာ	letter
ဆာ-	to be hungry
ဒါ	that
နာ-	to hurt
ဝါ	a politeness particle
ဝါ-	to be present, to accompany
ဘာ	what?
မာ-	to be hard, tough, firm
လာ-	to come
တာ	thing
ခါ	time, instance

Spelling practice

Listen to your teacher or the recording and write out the syllables as they are spelled. At first, the recording will appear to go quite fast. Practicing the exercises several times over will enable you to increase your fluency, and the speed will become less challenging, although you may still have to push the pause button pretty often as you do the exercise. After you have gone through this exercise a few times, check what you have written against the following key. (You can follow the same procedure for all the spelling practices in the lessons that follow.)

1. ဝါ 2. ဆာ 3. လာ 4. စာ 5. တာ 6. ဘာ 7. ဒါ 8. မာ 9. နာ 10. ဝါ
11. ခါ 12. ကာ

Dictation

The following exercise is intended to enable you to check your ability to distinguish between the two kinds of syllables you have learned so far. Listen to the recording and write the sound you hear. In cases in which the same sound can be written with two different ဗျည်း (e.g., ဝ and ယ), write it both ways. Once you have gone through the recording a few times, check what you have written against the following key.

1. ဝ ယ 2. တာ 3. န 4. ဖ 5. က 6. စာ 7. လာ 8. ဗ ဘ 9. မာ 10. ဆာ
11. ခ 12. ခါ 13. ဒါ စာ 14. ထ 15. နာ 16. ရ ယ 17. ဝါ 18. ည 19. ဖာ 20. က
21. ဇ ဈ 22. င 23. စ 24. စာ 25. တာ 26. ဖ 27. ဝါ 28. ညာ

Numbers 11–21

11. ဘ
12. ဝှ
13. ဝှ

sual form, even when the

14. ခဉ်

15. ခဉ်

16. ခဉ်

17. ခဉ်

18. ခဉ်

19. ခဉ်

20. ခဉ်

21. ခဉ်

In learning these numbers, be careful to note and imitate the way that the first syllable resembles the word for 10 but differs from it in that the tone is raised.

Numbers drill

၁၀ ၅ ၂၀ ၁၃ ၃၀ ၂၄ ၈ ၉ ၁၁ ၁၆

B. -ာ: -ါ: [1202.mp3]

ကာ:

The third tone is higher in pitch than the low tone seen in Section A, above. And unlike the first tone, seen in Lesson 1, it is not creaked. (It does not end in a slight vocal occlusion.) It is often called a "high, falling" tone, although in normal speech syllables are pronounced too quickly to display much of a fall in pitch.

To review the three types of syllables you have learned so far, they are:

က ကာ ကာ:

9. နာ 10. ဝါ

Except for unstressed syllables that include only the shwa sound (similar to "uh" in English), Burmese syllables exhibit one of these three tones or end in a nasal or a glottal stop (to be taken up later). Fortunately, the Burmese writing system usually, although not quite always, indicates the tone of a syllable. (The exceptions are often words of Pali origin.)

Vocabulary

ကာ:	car, bus
ခါး-	bitter
ငါး	fish
စား-	to eat
ဆား	salt
ထား-	to put, place
ဓား	knife, sword
နား	ear
ယား-	to itch
လား	interrogative particle (for yes or no questions)
အား-	to be free, available
သား	son

stinguish between the two
ite the sound you hear. In
၂, ဝ and ဝါ), write it both
t you have written against

၁၀ 9. နာ 10. ဆာ

၁၁ 19. ဖာ 20. က

၁၂

Voicing

In the phrase စားပါ, a student encounters for the first time the issue of voicing, one of the greatest challenges facing any student of Burmese. This refers to the way that many Burmese syllables, when they stand on their own or at the beginning of a phrase, start with an unvoiced consonant sound. These are sounds, such as what in English is represented by the letters p, t, s, and others, in which the larynx does not vibrate when they are produced. In Burmese, when such a syllable follows another syllable that does not end in a glottal stop, its initial sound often changes to its voiced counterpart. Voiced sounds are such as those represented by b, d, and z in English, sounds in which the larynx vibrates as they are produced. So, in this case, the syllables written လာပါ are actually pronounced လာဘာ.

The matter of voicing will come up repeatedly in later lessons. For the time being, students must pay close attention to the sounds of syllables written with unvoiced consonants, as heard on the recordings and as spoken by a teacher, to discern whether they are voiced or unvoiced when spoken in specific contexts.

Spelling practice

Burmese school children learn to spell by shouting out the symbols as they write them and pronouncing what they write every step of the way. This is a good way to memorize all the syllables and diacritics. But it is time-consuming. Students using this text should practice spelling in a shorter format, as is usual among Burmese adults and as is demonstrated on the recordings.

In this and the following lessons, when you practice spelling Burmese words, you will follow the same format as in Section A, above. You will hear the written symbols spelled out, and you will write the corresponding central symbol and diacritic(s).

၁။ ခါ ၂။ စား ၃။ ဓ ၄။ ယား ၅။ လာ ၆။ သား ၇။ နာ ၈။ ဆား ၉။ ကား ၁၀။ မာ
၁၁။ ဘာ ၁၂။ လား ၁၃။ ဖ ၁၄။ ဝ ၁၅။ ဟာ ၁၆။ ဆာ

Forming phrases: Polite imperatives and yes-or-no questions

The two kinds of phrases you are now in a position to formulate are polite imperatives and yes-or-no questions. Polite imperatives are phrases that consist of a verb followed by the polite particle -ပါ. Yes-or-no questions consist of verbs followed by the interrogative particle -လား. (Both kinds of sentences are followed by the punctuation mark ။ in place of the roman period or question mark.) So, for example:

ခါးလား။	Is it bitter?
စားပါ။	Please eat.

Dictation

In the following dictation, you will hear and then write a number of polite imperatives and yes-or-no questions. Listen to your teacher or the recording and write out each phrase. Once you have gone through the drill a number of times, check your spelling against the following key.

၁။ လာပါ။
၂။ စားပါ။
၃။ ဆားလား။
၄။ သား လာသလား။

- ၅။ ယားသလား။
 ၆။ ခါးသလား။
 ၇။ မာသလား။
 ၈။ ငါးစားပါ။
 ၉။ ဒါထားပါ။
 ၁၀။ နာလား။
 ၁၁။ ကလား။

Translation:

1. Please come. 2. Please eat. 3. Is it salt? 4. Is Son coming? 5. Does it itch? 6. Is it bitter? 7. Is it hard? 8. Eat (some) fish. 9. Put that (aside). 10. Does it hurt? 11. Is he dancing?

C. ° ° °: [4203.mp3]

The third set of diacritics to be mastered introduces a different vowel sound, although the series of tones is the same.

ကိ ကီ ကီး

Vowels and diphthongs

Burmese resembles English in that in both languages, vowel sounds rarely appear singly. Unlike the "pure" vowels of French or Italian, Burmese vowel sounds tend to slide—just as many vowels in English do. For example, in English, the word "day" contains the vowel "e" followed by the vowel "i." The two sounds slide together: a speaker's mouth closes slightly as he or she shifts from the more open first sound to the more closed second one. These combined vowel sounds are called diphthongs. They characterize many Burmese vowel sounds, particularly the second (low) and third (high, falling) tones ending in open vowels, as well as syllables ending in nasals and glottal stops. Of course, the diphthongs characteristic of Burmese differ from those characteristic of English. Most vowels in Burmese are pronounced "higher" (with the mouth less open) and further forward in the mouth than is the case in English. Careful imitation of the recordings will enable a student to master these sounds.

Vocabulary

သိ-	to know
စီး-	to ride
ဆီ	oil
ထိ-	to touch
ဒီ	this
မိမိ	oneself
မီး	fire
နာရီ	clock; hour
မီးရထား၊ မီးယာ*ထား၊	train
ညီမ	younger sister

ဝီးဝီ	to have finished (This is a simplified, somewhat substandard spelling.)
ခရီး၊ခ*ယီး၊	a trip
သီး	fruit

Spelling practice

၁။ ထိ ၂။ ခရီး ၃။ ဆီ ၄။ မိမိ ၅။ ဒီ ၆။ နာရီ ၇။ ဝီ

Forming phrases: Aspect and tense

Burmese does not have tenses, as Western language do, but rather aspect. Aspect concerns not the time of actions relative to the present, as tense does, but rather the completed or uncompleted status of actions. The two syllables -ဝီးဝီ follow other verbs to indicate that the action has been completed. Phrases that end in this way can often be translated into English using the present perfect tense. But it is important to keep in mind that Burmese does not really have tense just as English does not have aspect.

စားဝီးဝီလား။ Have you eaten? (Literally: Have you finished eating?)

ကဝီးဝီ။ They have already danced. (They have finished dancing.)

Note that it is not necessary to name the subject in a Burmese sentence. If a subject has already been named, it is not usually repeated in colloquial speech.

Dictation

- ၁။ စားဝီးဝီလား။
- ၂။ ဒီဟာလား။
- ၃။ မီးရထား စီးလား။
- ၄။ ဒီဟာက နာရီလား။
- ၅။ ညီမ စားဝီးဝီလား။
- ၆။ စ ကဝီလား။

Translation

1. Have you already eaten?
2. This thing here? (This one here?)
3. Are you riding the train?
4. Is this a watch?
5. Has (your) younger sister already eaten?
6. Have (they) started to dance?

A useful exercise is to spell out loud the words in the sentences in the above dictation.

D. ့ း ျး [204.mp3]

This diacritic introduces yet another vowel sound in the same series of tones.

ကု ကူ ကူး

Vocabulary

နီ-	young; tender
ပူ-	to be hot
အကူအညီ	help (see note below)
အာလူး	potato
လူ	people
ငါးခု	five items
မိသားစု	family
သူ	he, she
ယူ-	to take
အတူတူ	together
မစားဘူး	not to eat
ထူး-	to be special, unusual

Note on the pronunciation of အ

A great many Burmese nouns, and some other polysyllabic words, begin with the syllable အ. In most cases, it is pronounced with a shwa (here indicated by the symbol *). So, the word for "help" is pronounced အ*ကူ အ*ညီ. Hereafter, this pronunciation for an initial အ should be assumed for all such words, such as in အတူတူ below, and will not be indicated as an irregular pronunciation in the vocabulary lists.

Spelling practice

၁။ နီ ၂။ လူ ၃။ အာလူး ၄။ သူ ၅။ ငါးခု ၆။ မိသားစု ၇။ အတူတူ ၈။ မလာဘူး

Forming phrases: Actual vs. potential action

Consistent with the language's use of aspect rather than tense, Burmese differentiates between two different kinds of statements: ones that refer to action that is ongoing, is habitual, or has been done, on the one hand, or action that either will or might or might have but in any case has not been done, on the other. We will only deal with these matters in yes-or-no questions for the time being.

The difference is marked in such questions by the inclusion of the syllable -သ- (pronounced with a shwa, so -သ*) following the verb for the first type of actions, those that concern what is or has been done. The syllable -မ- (also pronounced with a shwa, so -မ*) is used following the verb in the case of actions that were or remain undone. Here are examples of each type of question:

ပူသလား။	Is it hot?
ပူမလား။	Will it be hot?
ယူမလား။	Will you take (some)?

In the first case, the question concerns a present condition. In the second and third, it concerns a possibility, not an actuality.

Younger speakers often drop -သ- from their speech, so that instead of saying ခါးသလား, they simply say ခါးလား ("Is it bitter?"). Older speakers are less likely to do this. However, -မ- cannot be dropped.

Since there is no verb "to be" in Burmese, a question such as ဆားလား ("Is this salt?") does not take -သ- because there is no verb in the phrase, only an equivalence between "this" (unstated) and "salt." Contrast the following questions:

ငါးလား။	Is this fish?
စားသလား။	Are you eating?
ငါး စားမလား။	Will you have some fish?

The first phrase has no verb and so neither -သ- nor -မ-. The second phrase asks about an ongoing action and therefore includes -သ- (although younger speakers might omit it). The third phrase asks about an action that may, but has not yet, happened, and so it includes -မ-.

Dictation

- ၁။ အာလူး စားမလား။
- ၂။ ညှိမ် စားသလား။
- ၃။ ဒီလူ လာမလား။
- ၄။ သူက ငါး စားလား။
- ၅။ သူ ယူမလား။
- ၆။ အတူတူ လာပါ။
- ၇။ သူ ထမလား။
- ၈။ ဒီနာရီ ယူပါ။

Translation

1. Will you have some potatoes? 2. Is Younger Sister eating? 3. Will this person come? 4. Does he eat fish? 5. Will he take some? 6. Come together. 7. Will he get up? 8. Please take this watch.

E. ဇ - ဇ - ဇ - ဇ : [205.mp3]

Yet another open vowel sound.

ကေ ကော ကေး

The order in which these diacritics are presented here follows the same order of tones (creaked, low, and high falling) as the preceding ones. This is the order in which Burmese school children learn their writing system, and it is the order as Burmese adults are liable to think of it. This is not, however, the order in which words including these diacritics are listed in the Myanmar Language Commission's Myanmar-English Dictionary. See Appendix I: On Using the Dictionary.

Vocabulary

အမေ	mother
အဖေ	father
လေ	wind, air, breath
ဈေး	market
မေ့-	to forget

း ("Is this salt?") does not
ween "this" (unstated) and

and phrase asks about an
; might omit it). The third
it includes -မ-.

လေး	four
လေး-	to be heavy
နေ-	to stay
နေရာ	place
ပေး-	to give
ရေ	water
မေး-	to ask
နေ့	day
အေး-	to be cold
ရေး-	to write
-သေး	still

Spelling practice

၁။ လေ ၂။ မေ ၃။ ပေး ၄။ အဖေ ၅။ လေး ၆။ နေ့ ၇။ မေး ၈။ ရေး

Forming phrases: Word order

Burmese orders the constituent parts of an utterance as follows: S O V, where S refers to the subject, O refers to the object, and V refers to the verb and any other elements of the predicate. This contrasts with the syntax of most Western languages, which are usually instead arranged S V O. For example:

ငါး စားပါ။ Please eat (some) fish.

The object, "fish," is the object of the verb, "to eat," and precedes it in Burmese, whereas it follows the verb in English. The word order of Burmese challenges English speakers but not, incidentally, Japanese speakers, for the simple reason that Japanese also exhibits S O V syntax.

Dictation

- ၁။ လေ ပေးပါ။
- ၂။ အဖေ ရေးက လာမလား။
- ၃။ အဖေ လေးခု ယူမလား။ ငါးခု ယူမလား။
- ၄။ ငါးခု ပေးပါ။
- ၅။ ညီမက ဒီနေ့ ကားစီးမလား။
- ၆။ အဖေ အဖေ လာပါ။

Translation

1. Please pay (my) salary. 2. Will Mother come from the market? 3. Will you take four or five (of them), Sir? 4. Please give me five (of them). 5. Will Younger Sister ride the bus today? 6. Dad, Dad, come here.

F. ၵ်း - ဝ်း ၵ်း [4206.mp3]

Another open vowel:

ကဲ့ ကယ် ကဲ

The way that the low tone version of this vowel is spelled is unusual in that it is an example of a ချည်း becoming "devowelized"—that is, the addition of the diacritic ^{◌်} above a ချည်း is said to "kill" the latter, removing the vowel (the creaked 'a' sound) that would normally accompany the ချည်း when it stands alone. In the case of ဝ်, however, adding the diacritic ^{◌်}, so ဝ် produces the low tone version of the vowel being introduced in this lesson.

Vocabulary

ငယ်-	to be small
ဂ ငယ်	ဂ
န ငယ်	န
ဘဲ	duck
နဲ့	with
မ V နဲ့	a negative imperative ("Don't . . .")
ဘယ်	which, where
ဘယ်သူ	who?
-တယ်	indicative verbal particle
တဆယ်	ten
အမဲသား	beef
ဝယ်-	to buy
-လဲ	interrogative marker
ဆဲ-	to curse
-ရဲ့	particle indicating possessive
ထဲ	inside

Spelling practice

၁။ တဆယ် ၂။ အမဲသား ၃။ ရဲ့ ၄။ ဘယ် ၅။ ဆဲ ၆။ ဂ ငယ် ၇။ ဘဲ ၈။ လေး
၉။ န ၁၀။ ငါး ၁၁။ လေး နဲ့ ငါး

Forming phrases: တယ် and မယ်

It was mentioned in Section D that Burmese contrasts statements that refer to ongoing, habitual, or completed actions, on the one hand, with those that have not yet or did not happen, on the other. In questions, the two are contrasted by the inclusion of -တယ် for the first type of phrase and -မယ် for the second. In affirmative statements, the particle -တယ် is the equivalent of -တယ်, that is, it applies to actual actions. Similarly, in affirmative statements the particle -မယ် is the equivalent to -မယ်, that is, it applies to potential actions. Note that that potential may have been true in the past or may remain in effect, in which case it refers to possible action in the future. Compare:

အာလူး စားတယ်။

He eats potatoes.

အာလူး စားမယ်။

He will eat potatoes.

Since Burmese does not have tense, the two sentences above could, according to context, also mean, respectively, "He ate potatoes" and "He was going to eat potatoes." The important consideration is whether the action actually happens or happened, on the one hand, or may or might have happened, on the other.

Dictation

၁။ အမေနဲ့ အဖေ အတူတူ နေသလား။

၂။ အမေ့သား စားသလား။

၃။ ဒီနေ့ ဘာနဲ့ လာသလဲ။

၄။ ဘိသားနဲ့ အာလူး ဝယ်တယ်။

၅။ မမေ့နဲ့။

၆။ ဘယ် ဟာလဲ။

၇။ အဖေနဲ့ အတူတူ ကားစီးတယ်။

၈။ ဒီနေ့ ဘာနေလဲ။

Translation

1. Do Mother and Father live together? 2. Do you eat beef? 3. How did you come today? 4. He bought duck meat and potatoes. 5. Don't forget. 6. Which one? 7. She came on the bus together with Dad. 8. What day is it today?

G. ဧ - ဘဲ ဧ - ဂ် ဧ - ဘဲ [4207.mp3]

Yet another open vowel.

ကျော့ ကော် ကော

Vocabulary

သော့	key
ပေါ့-	to be light
ခေါ်-	to call
တော	forest
မော-	to be tired, out of breath
စော-	to be early
ဒေါ်ဒေါ်	"Auntie" (term of direct address for an older woman)
ဖော့	cork
ရော-	to mix
ပေါ်-	to appear
တော်တော်	quite

၈။ လေး

after to ongoing, habitual, or not happen, on the other. In the of phrase and -မ- for the of -သ-, that is, it applies to the equivalent to -မ-, that is, in the past or may remain e:

Spelling practice

၁။ တော ၂။ ခေါ် ၃။ ရော ၄။ သော ၅။ ပေါ် ၆။ ဖော ၇။ စော ၈။ ဒေါ် ဒေါ်

Forming phrases: Negating verbs

To negate a verb, two particles are placed before and after it, မ V ဘူး, as in မလာဘူး ("[She] is not coming") or သူ မစားဘူး ("He's not eating").

When two verbs are put together, both acting as principal verbs, they are often split when negated, with the မ— negative particle placed between them. So, for example:

အဖေ လာမခေါ်ဘူး။ Dad isn't coming to get us.

Dictation

- ၁။ မောသလား။
- ၂။ တော်တော် မာပါတယ်။
- ၃။ သော့ ယူပီးပီးလား။
- ၄။ စောသေးလား။
- ၅။ ဖော့က မလေးပါဘူး။
- ၆။ အဖေ လာခေါ်မယ်။
- ၇။ ဆီနဲ့ရေ မရောနဲ့။
- ၈။ သူ ပေါ်မလာဘူး။
- ၉။ ဒေါ် ဒေါ် တော်တော်မောတယ်။
- ၁၀။ ဒီနာရီက တော်တော် ပေါ့တယ်။ မလေးဘူး။

Translation

1. Are you out of breath? 2. It's quite hard. 3. Have you taken the key? 4. Is it still early? 5. Cork isn't heavy. 6. Father will come to get us. 7. Don't mix oil and water. 8. He hasn't shown up. 9. Auntie is rather out of breath. 10. This watch is quite light. It isn't heavy.

H. ◌ ◌ [4208.mp3]

Although this diacritic actually makes a syllable end in a nasal (like sounds we will come to in Lesson 3), it is treated by Burmese linguists as though it were another open vowel. (This point will come up again in Appendix I: On Using the Dictionary.) The reason apparently stems from Sanskrit linguistics but is in the Burmese context completely inscrutable.

A third form, ◌ ◌, is conceivable but is not attested. It does occur, however, in combination with ◌. (See Lesson 3, Section N.)

This dot is placed above a central symbol as follows:

ကံ့ ကံ

Vocabulary

ကံ	karma
ကုံကူ	soapstone
စံစား-	to enjoy, take pleasure in
အလံ	flag
နံ-	to smell bad, to stink
ဆံ-	to have room for, to hold
ဆူညံ-	to be noisy
ညံ့-	to be of inferior quality
ခံ-	to suffer something, to undergo something; to put up with something
အသံ	voice; sound

Spelling practice

၁။	ကုံကူ	၂။	နံ	၃။	ညံ့	၄။	ဆူညံ
၅။	ကံ	၆။	အသံ	၇။	စံစား	၈။	ခံ

Forming phrases: -က as a topic marker

The suffix -က appended to a noun may simply mean "from." But it has another use: as a topic marker. It was mentioned earlier that the grammatical subject of a Burmese utterance may be omitted if it is already clear from the context. However, Burmese can mark the topic of an utterance by appending the syllable -က to it. This may or may not be the grammatical subject of the verb that follows.

အဖေက ကားစီးတယ်။ Dad is riding in a car.

The use of -က is optional. It is especially likely to be used when the topic shifts, such as when shifting attention from one person to another. For example:

အမေ လာတယ်၊ အကိုက မလာဘူး။ Sister is coming. Brother is not.

Dictation

- ၁။ ဒီကားက လူ မဆံ့ဘူး။
- ၂။ ကံ ပါတယ်။
- ၃။ အလံ ယူပီးပီ။
- ၄။ သေးတယ်၊ နံတယ်၊ ဆူညံတယ်။
- ၅။ ကုံကူက မမာဘူး။
- ၆။ ဒီနာရီက ညံ့တယ်။
- ၇။ အအေး မခံဘူး။

Translation

1. This car doesn't fit any people. 2. It's lucky. 3. They've taken the flag. 4. It's small. It stinks. It's noisy. 5. Soapstone is not hard. 6. This watch is of poor quality. 7. He can't tolerate the cold.

I. ဝ ဝ ဝ [209.mp3]

Here is another open vowel.

ကို ကို ကိုး

Vocabulary

အကို	older brother
နိုး-	to steal
သူနိုး၊ သ*နိုး၊	thief
ကိုး	nine
ပို	more
လို-	to need; to be lacking
မိုး	rain
ပိုး	silk
-လို့	because (following a verbal phrase)
တို-	short
ဆို-	to say, state
ဆိုလို-	to mean to say
တိုး-	to poke; to strike; to strike the hour
-တို့	plural marker for people or things

Spelling practice

၁။ ဆို ၂။ နိုး ၃။ တို ၄။ အကို
၅။ လို ၆။ လို့ ၇။ ပို ၈။ ဝိုး

Forming phrases: -လို့ as causative

The particle -လို့ comes at the end of a dependent phrase to name a cause or reason. For example:

ပူလို့ မလာဘူး။	They didn't come because it was hot.
ဆားလိုလို့ ပေါ့တယ်။	It has little taste because it lacks salt.

Forming phrases: -လို့ in negative constructions

In a negative construction, -ဘူး drops out of the phrase ending in -လို့, as follows:

မသိလို့ မစီးဘူး။	He didn't ride (the bus), because he didn't know (about it).
လာမခေါ်လို့ မရဘူး။	Not having come to get (us), he didn't get (any).

Forming phrases: -ကို as object marker

The topic marker -က, discussed in Section H, has a corresponding object marker -ကို, which indicates a direct or indirect object.

စာကို ယူလာတယ်။
အမကို ပေးထားတယ်။

She brought the letter.
He gave it to Older Sister.

Dictation

- ၁။ မခိုးရဘူး။
- ၂။ ကိုးနာရီ ထိုးမယ်။
- ၃။ တိုလို့ မရဘူး။
- ၄။ အကို မပေးလို့ မရဘူး။
- ၅။ ဘာလိုသေးသလဲ။
- ၆။ ပိုပေးပါ။
- ၇။ ဒါ မထိုးနဲ့။
- ၈။ အကို ဘာကို ဆိုလိုသလဲ။

Translation

1. You must not steal. 2. It is going to strike nine o'clock. 3. It's too short to work. 4. You can't because Older Brother won't allow it. 5. What do you still need? 6. Please give (me) more. 7. Don't poke that. 8. What do you mean, Older Brother?

A. -ကို [ə301.mjə]

The first syllable that ends with a short vowel sound.

For example, a -

For example, a -

For example, a -

For example, a -

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