
Some rules for chanting sutras

By Antoine Charlot

For us Westerners, chanting the *sutras* in Japanese is not easy, because it does not correspond to our culture and we don't know the language. Here are some rules to help us chant the *sutras*.

To progress in chanting the *sutras*, there are two methods:

Repeating the *sutras*: we can listen to audio files or CDs of *sutras* chanted in Japanese temples and try to reproduce their way of chanting as well as possible.

Or we can study the correct way to chant. If we take as starting point some basic understanding of how the Japanese language works, we can understand more clearly how to recite the *sutras*, both in terms of rhythm and pronunciation.

It is this second approach that is discussed here.

The Japanese language has five vowels:

A - I - U (pronounced "oo" [as in "cooking"]) - **E** (pronounced "a" [as in "base"]) and the vowel **O**.

These vowels are then declined by adding consonants:

KA - KI - KU - KE - KO ;

SA - SHI - SU - SE - SO ;

TA - TCHI - TSU - TE - TO, etc...

The *sutras* we chant are therefore composed of these different particles, transcribed in our alphabet, each corresponding to a unit of time, called "more" [linguistic: = an "elementary sound emitted during phonation, different from the syllable"].

Two types of *sutras* can be distinguished: In the *Hannya Shingyo* or the *Dai Shin Darani*, the isolated syllables are chanted on one beat, while the syllables linked together are each chanted on half a beat. For example: *Kan ji zai bo satsu gyo*. *Kan, ji, zai, bo* and *gyo* are sung on one beat, *sat/su* on two half beats.

In most other *sutras* (*Sandokai, Hokyo Zanmai, Fukanzazengi, the Meal Sutra, the eko of the Patriarchs...*), some syllables are underlined or accented, which means that they are so-called long syllables, supposed to be sung on two beats. This rule can be explained.

Short syllables and long syllables

We speak of short and long syllables, but in the Japanese language the so-called long syllables are in fact an assembly of two particles, hence the recitation on two beats. This approach has more than a purely linguistic interest: it allows a better understanding of the structure of the *sutras* and finally allows a more homogeneous chanting.

Syllables in AI - EI - OI - UI

These syllables are composed of a first particle (**A - E - O** or **U**) and of a second particle **I**, which justifies the recitation on two beats. For a syllable in **AI**, the Japanese language does not apply the "y" pronunciation [as in "guy"], but implies to pronounce successively each particle.

For example: *Chikudo dai*. **DAI** is composed of the particle **DA** and the particle **I** which are pronounced successively. We can consider them as two short syllables that follow each other.

Moreover, in the text of the *Fukanzazengi* distributed a few years ago at La Gendronnière, the syllables in AI, EI, OI or UI were not underlined, which implied that each of the particles was pronounced independently.

Syllables in N

Here again, **N**-syllables are pronounced on two beats, as they are composed of two particles. For example: *Chikudo daisen no shin*. Here, **SHIN** is composed of the particle **SHI** and the particle **ん**, which is difficult to pronounce for Westerners, but is similar to "n" or "m" ("m" when the particle precedes a *b*, *m* or *p*: *sampai*, *sambo fushite*). The **ん** particle is not a simple consonant completing a syllable, but is pronounced in its own right, hence the successive recitation of the two particles on one beat each.

Syllables ending by a double consonant

Two cases:

The syllable precedes a double **N**: here, the rule stated above is repeated, except that the following particle is an N particle (NA - NI - NU - NE - NO).

For example: *Innen jisetsu jakunen*. *Innen* consists here of the particles **I**, **ん**, **NE** and again **ん**, pronounced one after another.

"Burst" particles: When two consonants follow each other, the first particle is pronounced including the first double consonant and on two beats.

In Japanese writing, this type of syllable is written with two particles, hence their singing on two beats.

For example: *Hi wa neshi kaze wa dōyō*. *Neshi* is pronounced **NESH** on two beats, then **SHI**.
For example: *ansō o motte*. *Motte* is pronounced **MOT** on two beats, then **TE**.

Long vowels

The Japanese language includes long vowels that are impossible to identify by Westerners, hence the underlining of the particles concerned (long vowels are very often accented, for example "tô"). In writing, these long vowels are composed of the particle followed by a second particle, which means that they are pronounced on two beats.

For example: *Chikudo daisen no shin tôzai*. **Tô** is pronounced "tô" on two beats.

Caution: syllables of type GYA, GYO, KYO, HYA...

These syllables are composed of a first particle and another one written in small letters, but they are pronounced on one beat.

For example, **GYO** consists of the particle **GI** followed by the particle small **YO**. Here, the second particle does not imply that the syllable is sung on more than one beat.

Rhythm

Understanding the syllable structure allows us to give the *sutras* the appropriate rhythm.

The relativization of short and long syllables

We have seen that short syllables are recited on one beat. Long syllables in the Japanese language are recited on maximum two beats (in reality, the length of long syllables is between 1 ½ beat and 2 beats). However, once we know how syllables work, the distinction between short and long syllables can be put into perspective. Finally, in order to understand the rhythm that should be respected, we can say that - apart from the long vowels - the chant is only a

succession of short syllables. The underlining and accentuation mentioned in the *sutra's* texts help us to identify when there are two particles.

Chikudo daisen no shin tôzai mitsu ni aifu is sung:

Tchi - ku - do - da - i - se - n - no - shi - n - tô - sa - i - mi - tsu - ni - a - i - fu.

A continuous way of chanting

The chanting of the *sutras* follows a continuous rhythm, without any breaks. The long syllables identified should not be taken as pauses with a slowing down of the rhythm. The particles are sung in equal succession, even if one syllable is accented or underlined.

Breathing

In terms of breathing, this also implies that we do not necessarily catch our breath on long syllables, which could contribute to emphasizing them too much and cause a break in the rhythm. We should take our breath naturally, at the end of our exhalation, whether on long or short syllables.

The way to chant

The choice of key

At the beginning of the *sutra*, each person chooses a note on which to sing, either the starting note given by the *ino*, or a note that suits better the tessiture of his own voice. This note is kept throughout the *sutra*. It is essential to avoid changing the key of the chanting, and particularly to avoid falling into lower and lower notes, which would make the chant considerably “heavier”. Three tips:

We must therefore be careful to keep the same note, especially when we take a breath. When we stop chanting to catch our breath, we should avoid being influenced by the chanting of other practitioners.

We should also always keep the energy in the chanting: chanting with energy helps us to maintain our concentration and stabilize our voice more easily.

Linked chanting.

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Linking the chanting consists of not creating any breaks between the syllables that we sing. The chosen starting note is kept continuously and the syllables are placed on this note without creating any saccade or heaviness. This helps to maintain a better concentration and prevents the chanting from losing its energy.

Listening to others

We should strive to listen to others while singing, which ultimately leads us to sing “as one voice”. Through this listening, we should feel the chanting of the others flowing through us when we add our voice to their singing.

Pronunciation

Knowing some particularities of Japanese pronunciation can also help us to find a better harmony in singing.

G - J

Particles in **G** are systematically pronounced "g" [as in "guy"], even for the particles **GE** (as in "gay") and **GI** (as in "begin"). For example: *Tettsû Gikai daioshô* is pronounced: **tet tsû gi ka i da i o shô**.

J particles are always pronounced like the French "j", and never "i". They are pronounced in a "pizzicato" way and can even tend towards "dj". For example: *Mo ko o ja ho ro mi - ja* is pronounced "ja" and not "ia". Also, in *Jo rai maka hannya haramita - jo* is pronounced "jo" and not "io".

S - Z

S particles - SA, SU, SE, SO, are always pronounced "s" and never "z". For example: *Mokudo taisen - taisen* is pronounced "taissen" and not "taizen".

SH - CH

SH particles are pronounced like the French "ch". For example: *shin* is pronounced as in "China" and *sho* as in "Shogun".

CH particles are pronounced "tch". For example: *Chôryô seiryô daioshô - Chôryô* is pronounced "tchô-ryô".

R

R particles (RA - RI - RU - RE - RO) are not pronounced "r", but are closer to "l". For example: *Arido ni nan - Arido* is pronounced "alido". Here again, the particles are recited in a "pizzicato" manner, which means that they are between the "r" and the "l". Moreover, these particles are not rolled as in Italian or Spanish.

H

H particles (HA - HI - HU - HE - HO) are pronounced with an aspirated "h", but not the vowels (A - I - U - E - O). For example *Eihei Dogen daioshô* - the first particle **ei** is pronounced "a" [as in "base"] while **hei** is pronounced with an aspirated "h".