

Glossary of Buddhist Terms

Buddhism has several canonical languages. The chief ones are Pali (the main language of the Theravada canon) and Sanskrit (the main language of the Mahayana canon).

In cases where more than one choice for a word is available, we tend to favor Pali. Some attempt has been made to indicate equivalent terms in other languages, but this has not been done in all cases. No attempt has been made to preserve diacritical marks.

A

Abhidamma

Often called “the Buddhist psychology”, a systematic approach to perception. Part of the Tipitaka (the Sutta Pitaka, the Vinaya, and the Abhidamma, which together make up the “Pali Canon”).

aggregate

See khandha.

Ajahn

Honorific for a teacher or monk.

Amitabha Buddha (Jananese: Amida butsu)

'Limitless Light.' In Mahayana, the Buddha of the Western Paradise (the Pure Land).

anapanasati

Mindfulness of in-and-out breathing, a key form of meditation described in the Anapansati Sutta.

angst (German)

anguish, fear, anxiety, disquiet, usually without obvious cause.

anatta (Sanskrit: anatman)

No-self. One of the Three Characteristics (q.v.).

anicca (Sanskrit: anitya)

Impermanence. One of the Three Characteristics.

arahant (Sanskrit: arhat)

One who has attained enlightenment.

Avalokiteshvara (Tibetan: Chenrezi, Chinese: Kwan-Yin or Guanyin, Jananese: Kannon)

Mahayana Bodhisattva of Compassion

B

bhikkhu, bhikkhuni (Sanskrit: bhikshu, bhikshuni)

monk, nun

bodhisattva (Pali: bodhisatta)

One who has renounced enlightenment in order to lessen the suffering of other beings. In Vajrayana Buddhism, certain bodhisattvas have magical, intercessionary powers.

brahmaviharas

The four "sublime abidings" (lit. 'abodes of Brahma') that accompany spiritual development, consisting of karuna (compassion), metta (loving kindness), mudita (sympathetic joy for others), and upekkha (equanimity).

Buddha

The Enlightened (or Awakened) One. The First Refuge of the Triple Gem.

C

conditioned phenomena

Phenomena (dhammas) constituted of the five khandas (Sanskrit: skandhas), objects for paticcasamuppada (Sanskrit: pratityasamutpada), subject to arising and passing away. With a handful of exceptions (notably Enlightenment itself), all phenomena fall into this category.

D

daimoku

The practice of chanting "Nam (or Namu) Myoho Renge Kyo" in Japanese Nichiren Buddhism. It means "Hail to the Lotus Sutra".

Dalai Lama

Leader of the Tibetan people in exile. Vajrayana Buddhists regard him as the living embodiment of Avalokiteshvara (q.v.).

dana

The practice of generosity.

defilement

see kilesa

dependent arising, dependent origination

See paticcasamuppada.

deva

Celestial being, diety.

dharma (Pali: dhamma)

When spelled this way (not capitalized), means roughly "phenomenon."

Dharma (Pali: Dhamma)

When spelled this way (capitalized), refers to the Teachings of the Buddha. The Second Refuge of the Triple Gem.

dukkha

Often rendered as "suffering," but can span the whole range from excruciating pain to not-getting-what-I-want. The essentially unsatisfactory quality of existence. One of the Three Characteristics (q.v.).

E

(Noble) Eightfold Path

The Path of the Fourth Noble Truths: Right Understanding, Right Thinking, Right Speech, Right Attitude, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, Right Concentration.

ekaggata

Single-pointedness of mind. Also described as unification of mind. One of the five Jhana factors.

epistemology

In philosophy, the study of the nature and limits of knowledge.

F

fetter

See samyojana.

Five Aggregates

See khandha.

Five Hindrances

The five impediments to the development of concentration and insight: sensual desire, ill will, sloth-and-torpor, restlessness and doubt.

Four Foundations of Mindfulness

Mindfulness of the body, of Vedenas ("pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral"), of the mind, and of the Dhamma in dhammas.

Four Noble Truths

There is suffering (dukkha). Suffering has a cause: craving. Suffering has an end. There is a path that leads to the cessation of suffering: the Eightfold Path.

G

Gautama (alt. Gotama)

Family name of the Buddha.

H

Heart Sutra

The Prajnaparamita Hridaya Sutra, one of several "perfection of wisdom" sutras in the Mahayana scriptures. Calculatedly paradoxical in its language ("there is no suffering, cause, cessation or path"). Central to most Mahayana schools.

hermeneutics

The science of interpretation or exegesis of Scripture.

Hinayana

Lesser Vehicle. This term was originally coined by Mahayana polemicists to distinguish their path (seen as a 'greater vehicle' with room for all) from the path of the other Buddhist schools (seen as a

'lesser vehicles' with room for only one at a time). Many Buddhists prefer the term Theravada, because 'Hinayana' is perceived to have negative connotations.

hindrance
One of five impediments to meditation: greed, aversion, agitation, sloth and torpor, and doubt.

I
insight meditation
See vipassana.

J
jhana
State of deep absorption produced by concentration practice. The Buddha lists four "material" jhanas and four "immaterial" jhanas. Theravada teachers are divided on the importance of jhanas; some treat them as dangerous distractions, others believe that they are essential and must be mastered before even starting vipassana practice.

K
karma (Pali: kamma)
Literally, "action." Often translated "cause and effect."
karuna
Compassion. One of the brahmaviharas.
khandha (Sanskrit: skandha)
An 'aggregate'. The Five Aggregates that underly Clinging are: matter (rupakhandha), sensations (vedanakhanda), perceptions (sannakhanda), mental formations (sankharakhanda), and consciousness (vinnanakhanda). A starting point for Buddhist psychology.
kilesa (Sanskrit: klesha)
one of ten 'defilements' that are to be overcome through training, viz. greed, hate, delusion, conceit, speculative views, skeptical doubt, mental torpor, restlessness, lack of shame, and lack of moral dread.

L
Lotus Sutra
The Saddharmapundarika Sutra, one of the Mahayana scriptures. Lotus Sutra Buddhists sometimes practice recitation of the title of the sutra. See daimoku.

M
Mahayana
Greater Vehicle. The northern branch of Buddhism. Strong focus on alleviation of the suffering of all sentient beings.
metta
Loving kindness. One of the brahmaviharas.
mettabhavana
A meditation practice that develops loving kindness toward all sentient beings.
mindfulness
See sati.
mudita
Sympathetic joy. One of the brahmaviharas.

N
nibbana (Sanskrit: nirvana)
Absolute extinction of suffering and its causes.
Nichiren Buddhism
Founded by Nichiren Daishonin. The core practice is the chanting "Nam Myoho Renge Kyo"; Myoho Renge Kyo is the Lotus Sutra's name in Japanese.
nirvaha
Cessation. (Specifically, the cessation of suffering in the Third Noble Truth.)
nivarana
Singular for hindrance or obstruction. See "Five Hindrances"

O

ontology

In philosophy, the branch of metaphysics that deals with the notion of being or reality.

P

Pali Canon

See "Tipitaka"

Panna

wisdom

papanca

Literally "proliferating", refers to the quality of the mind's thoughts running uncontrolled.

Parami

One of the ten perfections: Dana (generosity), Sila (ethical conduct), Nekkhamma (renunciation), Pañña (wisdom), Viriya (energy), Khanti (patience), Sacca (truthfulness), Adhitthana (determination), Metta (lovingkindness), Upekkha (equanimity)

parinirvana (Pali: parinibbana)

The end of the Buddha's physical existence (i.e., his death).

patīcasamuppāda (Sanskrit: pratīyasamutpāda)

Dependent origination. The twelve links that enforce rebirth, but can also be used to break the rebirth cycle.

Piti

Rapture or joy. One of the five Jhana Factors.

Precepts

A basic set of standards for moral conduct: to refrain from killing, stealing, harmful sexual behavior, lying and the use of intoxicants. These are the five "normal" precepts for the laity; more extensive sets may apply to persons in special circumstances, e.g. the monastic community.

Pure Land

See Amitabha.

S

samadhi

Concentration (as in the 'right concentration' of the Eightfold Path). A state of one-pointedness of mind achievable through certain forms of meditation.

samatha (Sanskrit: shamatha)

Concentration meditation practice, aimed at developing one-pointedness of mind leading to jhana. Cf. samadhi, jhana, and sati.

samsara

(lit. 'wandering together') The wheel of suffering and rebirth.

samyojana

'Fetter'. The Ten Fetters tie beings to the wheel of birth and death. They are: belief in a substantial self, skeptical doubt, clinging to rules and ritual, sensual craving, ill will, craving for fine-material existence, craving for immaterial existence, conceit (mana), restlessness and ignorance. The first five are the 'lower' fetters; the second five are the 'upper' fetters. In the Stream Enterer the first three fetters have been destroyed; in the Once-Returner the next two are weakened, and in the Non-Returner they are destroyed; in the Arahant all fetters have been destroyed.

sangha

The community. This can refer to the monastic community, or to the community of all believers, or to a one specific community. Sangha is part of the Triple Gem.

sati (Sanskrit: smṛti, Jananese: nen)

Mindfulness (as in the 'right mindfulness' of the Eightfold Path). Consciousness of/attention to experience here and now. Cf. vipassana and samadhi.

Satipatthana Sutta

The Discourse on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, a fundamental Theravadan scripture describing methods of meditation.

Sayadaw(Burmese)

Honorific for teacher or abbot.

- sensei
Teacher. Title of respect in Japan.
- Shakyamuni
Sage of the Shakya clan. Common title indicating the historical Buddha.
- sila
Ethical conduct.
- Skandha (Sanskrit)
see khandha.
- Siddhartha (Pali: Siddhatta)
Personal name of the Buddha.
- sukkhā
Happiness or bliss. One of the five Jhāna Factors.
- sutta (sutra in Sanskrit)
In Theravāda, a historical discourse of the Buddha as passed down by oral tradition and ultimately committed to writing (the Suttapitaka, the collection of suttas, was not actually compiled in written form until circa 35 B.C.E., around the same time as the earliest Mahāyāna sūtras were set down in writing). In Mahāyāna, the set of canonical sūtras is enlarged to include some nonhistorical sermons -- the Heart Sūtra, the Lotus Sūtra, etc.
- T**
- tanha
Craving, literally ‘thirst’.
- Tathagata
The Thus-Gone One. An epithet of the Buddha.
- thera, theri
elder monk, elder nun.
- Theravada
The Way of the Elders. The southern branch of Buddhism.
- Thich Nhat Hanh
A contemporary Vietnamese Zen monk and campaigner for peace.
- Three Characteristics
All conditioned phenomena are unsatisfactory (dukkha), impermanent (anicca), and devoid of Self (anatta).
- Three Unwholesome Roots
three conditions that determine the moral quality of unskillful volitional actions, viz. greed (lobha), hate (dosa) and delusion (moha). Sometimes translated in other ways, e.g. lust, ill-will and ignorance. See also kilesa.
- Three Wholesome Roots
three conditions that determine the moral quality of skillful volitional actions, viz. non-greed, non-hate and non-delusion.
- Tipitaka (Sanskrit: Tripitaka)
The “Three Baskets” of Buddhist scripture, comprised of the Sutta Pitaka (the discourses), the Vinaya (rules governing the monastic order) and the Abhidhamma (Buddhist psychology). There are significant differences between the Theravāda and Mahāyāna Abhidhammas. The Theravāda Tipitaka is also called the Pali Canon.
- Triple Gem
The Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha.
- U**
- upekkha
Equanimity. One of the brahmaviharas.
- upandana
Clinging, also ‘fuel’ or ‘nourishment’.
- V**
- Vajrayana
Sometimes translated Thunderbolt Vehicle (or Diamond Vehicle). Vajrayana is the tradition practiced in Tibet and other Himalayan areas.

vicara

Usually translated as “sustained thought”. The ability to sustain the attention on the object selected by vitakka. One of the five Jhana Factors.

vitakka

Usually translated as “applied thought”. The ability to aim the attention. Usually paired with vicara. One of the five Jhana Factors.

vipassana (Sanskrit: vipashyana)

Insight, seeing things as they are. Also used to refer to insight meditation, a technique that develops attention to the arising and passing away of conditioned phenomena (Theravada) or attention to the emptiness of conditioned phenomena (Mahayana).

Z

Zen (Chinese: Ch'an)

A Buddhist tradition founded in China as a result of the teaching of Bodhidharma, circa 475 C.E. Found today mostly in Vietnam, Japan and Korea (and of course various centers in the West).