**Glossary for teaching Buddhism**

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Choosing what terms to teach pupils and what language to use is tricky, especially when textbooks use different spellings and often contain mistakes. Here is a short glossary that I use to help me and my students navigate the most important terms.

For more on my thoughts about terminology in the teaching of Buddhism, see my piece in the RE Today magazine in 2024.

Notes

* The glossary is ordered according to the spelling of the first foreign language word, so English terms will not be in the correct alphabetical order. This is so that you can find the meanings of Sanskrit and Pali terms quickly. It should not be taken as implying that I think the Sanskrit/Pali terms take priority for learning – if the English term is there, that’s generally my preference, as it is unhelpful to overload students with lots of foreign terms.
* As a general principle: If there is an English word, use it. If there is not, then choose between Sanskrit and Pali depending on the context: if discussing Theravāda Buddhism specifically then use Pāli, otherwise use Sanskrit.
* This list covers what I consider to be key terms, but you may encounter more, and if you want a reliable source for understanding the meaning and language spellings, try something like the Oxford Dictionary of Buddhism or the Routledge Encyclopedia of Buddhism (though actually Wikipedia generally isn’t bad either!).

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| **English** | **Sanskrit** | **Pali** | **Meaning** |
|  | arhat | arahat | a “worthy one”, in other words someone who has achieved liberation, often used to refer to liberated disciples of the Buddha (though the Buddha himself is also an arhat) |
| not-self | anātman | anattā | the denial of a permanent soul or self; one of the three characteristics of existence/experience |
| impermanent | anitya | anicca | one of the three characteristics of existence/experience, that everything is subject to change and decay |
| monk, nun | bhikṣu, bhikṣuṇī | bhikkhu, bhikkhunī | literally an “almsperson”; there’s little benefit in learning the Sanskrit/Pali terms when “monk” and “nun” are easy translations |
| bodhisattva | bodhisattva | bodhisatta | a being who is destined to become a Buddha |
| four immeasurables / sublime states | brahmavihāra | brahmavihāra | literally the “abodes of Brahma” but better translated as “sublime states” or “immeasurables” as this is how they are explained in the texts – states that are to be cultivated to the greatest possible extent: compassion, loving kindness, sympathetic joy and equanimity. |
| Buddha | Buddha | Buddha | an “awakened one”, referring to a being who realises the Dharma themselves and makes it available to others |
| Teaching/Truth | Dharma | Dhamma | the underlying truth or law of reality, and the teachings of a Buddha, which encapsulate this truth |
| suffering | duḥkha | dukkha | sometimes better rendered “unsatisfactory”; one of the three characteristics of experience, and the first of the four noble truths |
|  | Gautama | Gotama | clan name of the Buddha, more commonly found in Pali texts |
| karma | karman | kamma | literally “action”, referring to the idea that actions have results for the doer, in this or a subsequent lifetime |
| compassion | karuṇā | karuṇā | one of the four immeasurables, hence a virtue valued in all forms of Buddhism; but also a quality particularly associated with the requirements of the Bodhisattva path in Mahāyāna Buddhism |
| Mahayana | Mahāyāna | Mahāyāna | “great vehicle”: the type of Buddhism prevalent in Tibet and East Asia |
| loving kindness | maitrī | mettā | a type of well-wishing that is meant to be extended to all beings; one of the four immeasurable states |
|  | mārga | magga | any “path” or “road” but often referring to the eightfold path to liberation taught by the Buddha |
| sympathetic joy | muditā | muditā | one of the four immeasurables: the ability to rejoice in the success of another |
|  | mudrā |  | a specific gesture, usually of the hands, indicating a particular meaning; Buddha images are usually depicted in one of the standard mudrās: “wheel of teaching” (dharma-cakra), “meditation” (dhyāna), “earth-touching” (bhūmi-sparśa), or “fearlessness” (abhaya). |
| nirvana | nirvāṇa | nibbāna | the “going out” of rebirth, in other words liberation from saṃsāra |
| Pali | Pāli | Pāli | the language of Theravāda scriptures (including the “Pali canon”), believed by some Theravāda Buddhists to be that spoken by the Buddha himself |
| wisdom | prajñā | paññā | sometimes translated “insight”, a form of understanding that goes beyond knowledge |
| worship | pūjā | pūjā | ritual worship or offering or devotion |
|  | Śākyamuni |  | “sage of the Śākyas”, a name used for the Buddha especially in Sanskrit texts |
| samsara | saṃsāra | saṃsāra | the “wandering on” of incessant rebirth and redeath |
|  | Saṅgha | Saṅgha | the “community” of Buddhists, often referring specifically to monks and nuns |
| good conduct | śīla | sīla | virtuous or good behaviour, or obedience to rules of Buddhist conduct such as the five lay precepts or the monastic rules |
| craving | tṛṣṇā | tanhā | the “thirst” or craving that is said to be the cause of suffering |
| Theravada | Theravāda | Theravāda | the “doctrine of the elders” school of Buddhism, now prevalent in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, but tracing its lineage back to the earliest days of Buddhism |
| equanimity | upekṣā | upekkhā | one of the four immeasurables: the ability to remain even-minded and unmoved by external events or emotional turbulence |
|  | Vajrayāna |  | the “diamond/thunderbolt vehicle” sometimes presented as a third type of Buddhism but perhaps best considered a sub-branch of Mahāyāna; prevalent in Tibet |