

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!).

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