A Pragmatic Buddhist Glossary

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# **Introduction**

There are a lot of unfamiliar words and phrases in Buddhism. Add to this the fact that many of these terms are interpreted differently by different schools of Buddhism – and this is certainly true of Pragmatic Buddhism – and you have a very confusing situation for people just beginning to explore Buddhism. We developed this glossary to try to easily explain how we use these terms in Pragmatic Buddhism.

This text was modelled on the online Glossary of Buddhism that was produced by “Lions Roar” journal, but with additional terms and revisions to reflect the way that Pragmatic Buddhism teaches these concepts.

**What is Pragmatic Buddhism?**

We are part of a movement which is discovering how Buddhist perspectives and practices can apply within our own culture and time. We examine traditional thoughts and practices to see how they might (or might not) be helpful to ourselves and others. We’re open to the insights of science and to other viewpoints.

We’re confident that we have within us the potential for a positive life. Rather than calling upon divine beings or spirits, we cultivate an empowering positivity in our relationships with others and indeed with the universe. Essentially, we learn to abandon anything that is unhelpful and to develop wholesome and fulfilling ways of relating to ourselves and others.

To find out more about Pragmatic Buddhism please visit our website at: [www.pragmaticbuddhism.org](http://www.pragmaticbuddhism.org).

This version of the Glossary was published by the Central Ohio Center for Pragmatic Buddhism in Columbus, OH and is distributed free of charge.

To find out more about this Center please visit our website at: [www.cocpb.com](http://www.cocpb.com).

Glossary

# 3 JEWELS

Buddhists take refuge in the three foundations of Buddhist Teaching – The Buddha, The Dharma and the Sangha. In Pragmatic Buddhism we express these this way:

I take refuge in the Buddha; the consummating personal element, our inborn contentment.

I take refuge in the Dharma; the consummating methods and teachings, our commitment to lifelong learning.

I take refuge in the Sangha; the consummating social element, our family and friends who support us.

# 3 POISONS

The three poisons — *greed, anger, and ignorance* — are three attitudes that keep us mired in dissatisfaction.

# 3 CHARACTERISTICS OF EXISTENCE

*Dukkha, Anatta and Anicca* or Dissatisfaction, Not-Self and Impermanence. These are basic concepts in Buddhist though on the nature of our reality.

# 4 NOBLE TRUTHS

The Four Noble Truths are the Buddha’s basic teaching, encapsulating the entire Buddhist path. Within Pragmatic Buddhism they are expressed like this:

Suffering is to be comprehended.

The arising of suffering is to be let go of.

The cessation of suffering is to be beheld.

The path is to be cultivated.

# 5 PRECEPTS

The five precepts are the five commitments that Buddhists make to living their life by Buddhist ethics. In Pragmatic Buddhism the precepts are:

1 - I undertake the training of loving-kindness; in all possible circumstances, I will abstain from hurting sentient beings.

2 - I undertake the training of generosity; I will abstain from taking that which is not needed for our survival.

3 - I undertake the training of moderation and contentment; I will abstain from sexual misconduct and the abuse of sensory pleasures.

4 - I undertake the training of true speech; I will abstain from false statements.

5 - I undertake the training of wisdom and knowledge of our world; I embrace lifelong learning and the cultivation of selflessness.

Interpretation of the precepts varies widely from person to person and school to school, with some Buddhists adhering literally and others taking the precepts as suggestions.

# 5 SKANDHAS

*Sanskrit* — The five skandhas are the constituent parts that make up living beings. The five skandhas are: form, feeling, perception, formation, mental formation, and consciousness.

# 6 REALMS OF EXISTENCE (or Rebirth)

A carryover from Hinduism, this concepts presents the six realms, or types of beings, into which a person might be reborn. They are: Gods, Demi-gods, Humans, Animals, Hungry Ghosts, Demons or the Hell Realm. In Pragmatic Buddhism we do not view these as actual descriptions of cosmological reality; however, they can serve as examples of the ways in which we approach life from moment to moment.

# ABHIDHARMA

*Sanskrit* — These early philosophical commentaries on the Sutras might be considered early Buddhist teachings on psychology. Seen as the “Third Basket” of Buddhist Scripture along with the Sutras and the Vinaya

# ANATTA

*Pali* – One of the 3 Characteristics of Existence. Often translated as No-Self or Not-Self, this may be one of the more difficult concepts for Westerners to understand. It does not mean that there is no difference between us nor that there is nothing that makes us unique. It does mean that no one is a total individual, unconnected from others and eternal in what they are. In this sense it is closely tied to Anicca or Impermanence.

# ANICCA

*Pali* – Impermanence. Another of the 3 Characteristics of Existence this concept teaches that all compound things – everything that we observe in reality – is impermanent and subject to change and dissolution.

# AVALOKITESHVARA

*Sanskrit* — The very popular bodhisattva of compassion. Also widely known by names such as Chenrezig in Tibet, Kanzeon/Kannon in Japan, Kuan Yin or Guanyin in Chinese Buddhism, and others.

# AWAKENING

We use the term Awakening in Pragmatic Buddhism where some other schools of Buddhism might say Enlightenment. It refers to the event in the life of the historical Buddha when we “awoke” from illusion under the Bodhi Tree; but it also refers to the realization of that same awakening in us.

# BARDO

*Tibetan* — Bardo is the intermediate state or gap we experience between death and our next rebirth. More generally, the word bardo refers to the gap or space we experience between any two states. The lesser-known bardos described in the traditional Buddhist texts include the bardo of dreaming, the bardo of meditating, and even the bardo of this life — which is, after all, the intermediate state between birth and death.

# BODHI

*Sanskrit* – Usually translated as Wisdom, it also refers to the Awakening of the Buddha and indeed to the tree under which he sat when he realized awakening.

# BODHICITTA

*Sanskrit* — “Enlightenment mind”; the state of mind of the bodhisattva, striving toward enlightenment and infused with the compassionate motivation to help others.

# BODHIDHARMA

*Person* - The “Blue-eyed Barbarian”. An Indian monk who came to China around 450-500 CE and taught a form of Buddhism “beyond words” which relied primarily on meditation. This eventually became Chan/Zen Buddhism. He is also traditionally seen to be the founder of the Shaolin monastery and Shaolin Kungfu.

# BODHISATTVA

*Sanskrit* — Literally, “enlightened being.” In Mahayana Buddhism, one who practices with the vow and motivation to put others before oneself, which may include forgoing enlightenment until all others have achieved it. In other Buddhist schools, the term is often used to refer specifically to the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni, before his enlightenment.

In Pragmatic Buddhism we revere the traditional Four Chan Bodhisattvas – Avalokiteshvara, Manjushri, Ksitigarbha and Samantabhadra as the symbolic embodiments of their primary characteristics: Compassion, Wisdom, Great Vows and Meditation Practice.

# BUDDHA

*Sanskrit* — “Buddha” is a title for one who is freed from the fog of illusion in which most people live their lives. It is a Sanskrit word that means “a person who is awake.”

Most of the time, when someone says “the Buddha,” it’s in reference to the historical person who founded Buddhism, Siddhartha Gautama. Mahayana Buddhism – and especially Zen – use the term to refer to anyone who has realized awakening and continues to teach others the way.

# BUDDHANATURE

Depending on who you ask, buddhanature is a kind of seed of buddhahood, or it’s a cause of it, or maybe it’s the foundation on which it all rests. Dogen, the founder of Soto Zen in Japan, wrote at length about how buddhanature is, ultimately, just everything — it’s a synonym for reality itself.

# CHAN

The Chinese transliteration of the Sanskrit term “*dhayana*” or meditation. It has come to refer to the Chinese form of Buddhism founded by Bodhidharma. See also: Zen

# CHENREZIG

See: AVALOKITESHVARA

# DALAI LAMA

*Person* — The Dalai Lama is the spiritual leader and former political leader of Tibet. “Dalai Lama” is a title. The current holder of the title, Tenzin Gyatso, is the fourteenth Dalai Lama. Though the Dalai Lama is the most famous Buddhist figure in the world, he is not the leader of Buddhism. The Dalai Lama’s official role is as a senior monk in the Gelug School of Tibetan Buddhism. The Dalai Lamas are also believed to be manifestations of Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion. The current Dalai Lama has said that the line of Dalai Lamas may end with him.

# DANA

*Pali* — One of the paramitas, or perfections, dana is the virtue of giving or generosity. At Buddhist Sanghas and temples you will often hear the term Dana in reference to donations that help to maintain the community.

# DEVA

*Pali* — Celestial beings or gods whose good fortune also hinders them from perceiving the truth of suffering, and thus, from attaining full spiritual liberation as well.

# DHARANI

*Sanskrit* – A verse or poetic form often chanted in Buddhist services.

# DHARMA

*Sanskrit* — The teachings of Buddhism. Can also refer to non-Buddhist teachings and insights. In Pragmatic Buddhism we use it in both contexts – usually capitalized when referring to Buddhis teachings and not when referring to other teachings.

# DUKKHA

*Sanskrit* - Normally translated as “suffering”, in Pragmatic Buddhism we usually use the term “Unsatisfactoriness” or “Dissatisfaction”. This is the state to which the Buddha referred in the 4 Noble Truths and for the cessation of which he taught. See also: SUFFERING

# EIGHTFOLD PATH

The Eightfold Path is the Buddha’s guide to awakening. It comprises eight steps that can be divided into three types: the development of wisdom, which includes appropriate view and appropriate resolve; ethical conduct, which includes appropriate speech, appropriate action, and appropriate livelihood; and meditation, which includes appropriate effort, appropriate mindfulness, and appropriate concentration.

# EMPATHETIC JOY

Empathetic joy (*Pali: mudita*) is joy for another’s happiness. It is the opposite of jealousy. Empathetic joy is the one of the goals of ethical conduct in Pragmatic Buddhism.

# EMPTINESS

Emptiness is the central insight of Buddhism, and what makes it unique among religions. According to Buddhism, neither we, nor other beings, nor any phenomenon in the universe, has a permanent, separate, and independent core, soul, or identity. In Zen and Pragmatic Buddhism we do not teach that this emptiness is some sort of void or absence, but rather the receptive emptiness of the sky which is may momentarily contain clouds or birds or rain but remains the empty sky.

# ENLIGHTENMENT

Enlightenment (*Sanskrit: nirvana*) is liberation from the cycle of suffering. Some Buddhists also believe that enlightenment is our inherent nature. Nirvana literally means “extinguishment,” and is interpreted as the extinguishment of ego. In Pragmatic Buddhism we prefer the term Awakening. See also: AWAKENING.

# EQUANIMITY

Equanimity (*Pali: upekkha*) is the experience of true neutrality — an evenness of mind undisturbed by negative emotions. Equanimity is the fourth of the four immeasurables.

# GATHA

*Sanskrit, Pali* — A short verse, recited or simply recalled, meant to call us to the present moment and strengthen our intention to practice.

# GUANYIN

See: AVALOKITESHVARA

# GURU

In Vajrayana Buddhism, a guru is a teacher whom students regard as enlightened. This is an advanced form of practice, and it is recommended that students exercise caution before accepting a guru. In principle, gurus are dedicated to helping others and adept at helping their students realize their true nature.

# HARA

*Japanese* — The spiritual center of the body, generally considered to be “located” slightly above the navel. Emphasized in Japanese martial arts, but also referred to in many Zen writings.

# HUNGRY GHOSTS

One of the 6 Realms of Existence, hungry ghosts – or *Preta* - are seen as beings inflected with insatiable hunger and thirst. Like the punishments inflicted in the Circles of Hell from Dante, we see this the metaphorical representation of the karma inherent in greed and acquisitiveness.

# IMPERMANENCE

See: ANICCA

# INSIGHT

Insight (*Pali: vipassana, Sanskrit: vipashyana*) is the direct intuition of the nature of phenomenon. Insight and tranquility are the two qualities of mind that are developed in meditative practice.

# JIZO

See: KSITIGARBHA

# KALAMA SUTTA

One of the more pragmatic discourses in the Sutras, the discourse to the Kalamas discusses how we should decide whether teachings and actions are skillful (leading to the cessation of suffering) or unskillful (leading to the increase of suffering).

# KALPA

*Sanskrit* — An unfathomably long period of time, sometimes defined as 16,000,000 years. This is a carryover from Hindu cosmology and is not something that we teach about within Pragmatic Buddhism.

# KANNON

See: AVALOKITESHVARA

# KARMA

*Sanskrit* - The law and workings of cause and effect. Karma actually translates as “Action” which tells us that it does not refer to some type of payback but rather to the natural consequences of actions themselves. The law of karma says that all things are interconnected, all actions have consequences, and all consequences are the result of past actions.

# KARMAPA LAMA

*Person* – another primary leader of Vajrayana, or Tibetan Buddhism. The current Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje is the 17th Karmapa Lama although there is another claimant to the title recognized by some Tibetan Buddhists. The Karmapa Lama is the head of the Karma Kagyu school of Vajrayana.

# KOAN

*Japanese* — As Bodhin Kjolhede, abbot of Rochester Zen Center, put it in Buddhadharma: The Practitioner’s Quarterly, “the word koan, or gongan in the original Chinese, means a public case or precedent. We look back to the precedent, to the understanding of the masters, as a starting point.” Koans are commonly understood—or rather misunderstood—to be riddles, and as such to be “solved.” But they are not intellectual exercises; they are opportunities to engage in and cultivate non-dualistic thinking.

# KSITIGARBHA

One of the Four Great Bodhisattva of Chan, Ksitigarbha is usually depicted as a Buddhist monk holding his staff. He is seen as the embodiment of the Bodhisattva Vow to save all beings before entering Nirvana himself since he is said to have entered Hell to preach to those confined there. He is also the protector of children – especially dead children – and as such is highly revered in Japan under the name Jizo.

# KUAN YIN

See: AVALOKITESHVARA

# LOJONG

*Tibetan* — Literally, “mind training.” Lojong is a Tibetan Buddhist practice wherein one contemplates a series of 59 slogans designed to help replace negative mental habits with positive ones.

# LOVING-KINDNESS

Loving-kindness (*Sanskrit: maitri, Pali: metta*) is the wish that one finds happiness. Loving-kindness is a popular meditation practice, focused on generating goodwill toward others.

# MAHAMUDRA

*Sanskrit* — A form of meditation taught in the Vajrayana, it begins with shamatha or calm abiding, and in time helps the practitioner develop clarity and insight into emptiness, or shunyata.

# MAHAYANA

*Sanskrit* — A later development in Buddhism that typically emphasizes the ideal of the bodhisattva. In Mahayana Buddhism, often the goal is liberation for all sentient beings, rather than liberation for individuals. Pure Land and Zen are both examples of Mahayana schools.

# MANJUSHRI

The Bodhisattva of Wisdom, Manjushri is usually shown holding the sword which cuts through delusion.

# MANTRA

*Sanskrit* — A series of syllables (often, but not always, Sanskrit) meant to be recalled/recited as part of contemplative practice.

# MEDITATION

Buddhist meditation is the practice of intentionally working with your mind. Basic Buddhist meditation starts with practices to help calm and concentrate the mind. From there, you can begin to investigate the nature of reality and develop insight. The most common form of meditation is breath meditation, in which you rest your attention on your breath. Many schools emphasize other forms of meditation as well as — or instead of — breath meditation, such as chanting, koan practice, and yoga. In Zen and Pragmatic Buddhism the primary form of meditation is Zazen or Shikantaza – “just sitting meditation” – which encompasses sitting in the present moment with no judgement, goals or expectations.

# METTA

See: LOVING-KINDNESS

# MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness (*Pali: sati, Sanskrit: smrti*) is often understood – especially in the West – as the ability to focus on an object. However, when teaching about mindfulness the Buddha primarily emphasized the awareness of the present moment “as it is in and of itself”. Mindfulness is essential to developing wisdom, and “appropriate mindfulness” is one of the components of the Eightfold Path. Mindfulness is closely associated with insight, or vipassana. Sati can also be translated as “awareness.”

# MONKEY MIND

The unsettled and restless nature of mind. In Buddhist philosophy, consciousness is symbolized by a monkey inside a house, with the windows representing the senses.

# MUDITA

See: EMPATHETIC JOY

# NIBBANA

See: ENLIGHTENMENT

# NIRVANA

See: ENLIGHTENMENT

# NOT-SELF/NO-SELF

See: ANATTA

# PARINIRVANA SUTTA

*Sanskrit* — The final teaching, or sutra, of the Buddha, given at his entrance into final nirvana, or death. Highly mythologized, it still contains valuable insights into the Buddha’s last teachings.

# PATICCA-SAMUPPADA

*Pali* — “Dependent origination,” the chain of causation. Also known as interdependent origination.

# PRAGMATISM

A Western philosophical movement which contends that most philosophical topics—such as the nature of knowledge, language, concepts, meaning, belief, and science—are all best viewed in terms of their practical uses and successes.

# REBIRTH / REINCARNATION

Traditionally, Buddhism teaches that beings are reborn after they die. Some schools of Buddhism don’t concern themselves with the idea of rebirth, and some modern analysts argue that the Buddha taught it simply because it was the accepted belief in the India of his time. Zen and Pragmatic Buddhism take these views. Many Buddhists, however, see it as central to the Buddhist teachings. Buddhists generally prefer the term “rebirth” to “reincarnation,” as reincarnation sometimes implies the existence of a soul. Buddhism teaches that there is no soul that is reborn — just the illusion of an individual.

# RYUGEN FISHER SENSEI

*Person* – The founding influence on Pragmatic Buddhism, Ryugen was a teacher in the American Chan tradition. He was ordained by Matsuoka Roshi, one of the great teachers in the Soto Zen tradition, and received dharma transmission from Holmes Welch in the Chan tradition.

# SAMANTABHADRA

One of the Four Great Bodhisattva of Chan, Samantabhadra is viewed as the embodiment of meditative practice and is normally shown seated on an elephant.

# SAMATHA

See: TRANQUILITY

# SAMSARA

*Sanskrit* — The ongoing cycle of life: birth and death and rebirth. Due to our ignorance, we go through this cycle with a sense of suffering and dissatisfaction. Buddhist practice is, to put it very simply, about undoing our ignorance and transcending our traditional relationship to samsara.

# SANGHA

*Sanskrit* — Sangha is a community that practices the dharma together. It’s one of the Three Jewels in which Buddhists take refuge, along with the buddha and the dharma. Some schools of Buddhism see the Sangha as only those who have taken monastic vows. Zen and Pragmatic Buddhism view it as the whole community of those who practice the Dharma.

# SATI

See: MINDFULNESS

# SESSHIN

*Japanese* — A longer (3 days or more) Zen meditation retreat.

# SHUNYATA

See: EMPTINESS

# SIDDHARTHA GAUTAMA

*Person* — Siddhartha Gautama, also known as Shakyamuni Buddha or simply the Buddha, meaning the Awakened One, was a spiritual leader from the Indian subcontinent who lived roughly 2,600 years ago. He is particularly known for teachings on the Middle Way and the Four Noble Truths. Buddhism was founded on his teachings.

# SUFFERING

“Suffering” is the most common translation of the Sanskrit word dukkha, which is also translated as dissatisfaction. Dukkha describes the sense that experience is suffused with unsatisfactoriness — ranging from subtle states like longing and ennui to extreme states like grief and agony.

# SUKHA

*Sanskrit* — Bliss, joy, ease.

# SUTRAS / SUTTAS

*Sanskrit, Pali* — Discourses of the Buddha; that is, oral teachings attributed to him. The Sutras are considered the “First Basket” of Buddhist scriptures.

# TARA

*Sanskrit* — Legendary female bodhisattva known as the “Savioress,” representing the feminine aspect of compassion. Very important in Tibetan Buddhism.

# TATHAGATA

See: BUDDHA

# THERAVADA

*Sanskrit* - The longest-surviving school of Buddhism, with a strong emphasis on preserving the Buddha’s teachings as they are found in the Pali Canon. The principal emphasis in on the “arhat” ideal of one who finds liberation from suffering for themselves.

# TONGLEN

*Tibetan* — Tonglen literally means “giving and taking.” It is a meditative practice of visualizing oneself accepting the suffering of another, transforming that suffering into happiness, and returning that happiness to the other. Tonglen is a technique for developing bodhichitta.

# TRANQUILITY

Tranquility (*Pali: samatha, Sanskrit: shamatha*) refers to the mental peace and stability developed in meditation. Insight and tranquility are the two qualities of mind that are developed in meditative practice.

# UPAYA

*Sanskrit* — Skillful means; to be employed by both the Buddhist practitioner and the Buddhist teacher.

# VAJRAYANA

*Sanskrit* — Literally, “diamond vehicle.” A later-developing tradition of Buddhism, most famously associated with Buddhism in Tibet and the Himalayas, that emphasizes esoteric teachings. Considered a further form of Mahayana, the Himalayan Vajrayana tradition is composed of the Nyingma, Kagyu, Gelug, and Sakya schools.

# VEDANA

*Sanskrit, Pali* — Feeling/sensation.

# VINAYA

The rules for monks and nuns. Regarded as the “2nd Basket” of the Buddhist Scriptures.

# VIPASSANA / VIPASHYANA

See: INSIGHT

# ZABUTON

*Japanese* – Larger, square cushion that normally is placed beneath the Zafu.

# ZAFU

*Japanese* — Meditation cushion.

# ZAZEN

*Japanese* — Zen seated meditation.

# ZEN

*Japanese* — A Mahayana school, originating in China, that emphasizes meditation practice (zazen) and a “direct pointing to the mind” over doctrinal knowledge. Zen is the Japanese term; it is known in China as Chan, Vietnam as Thien, and Korea as Seon.