

GLOSSARY OF BUDDHIST TERMS

Abhidhamma — The third section of the Buddhist canon of scripture (Tripitaka).

Akshobhya. A buddha, often associated with the Pure Land traditions.

Amitabha (Jap: Amida) The Buddha of Infinite Light, worshipped particularly by Pure Land Buddhists.

Amoghasiddi. Another buddha.

anatta. ‘No self’; the doctrine that there is no permanent soul. One of the three Marks of Existence.

anicca. Impermanence. One of the three Marks of Existence.

arhat. One who is enlightened.

Ashoka. Indian emperor (3rd century CE) who granted freedom of religion.

asura. Anti-god — one of the six realms of existence.

Atisha. 11th century CE scholar who established Buddhism in Tibet.

Avalokiteshvara. The bodhisattva of compassion.

bardo. An intermediate state, when one event is complete, but its sequel not yet begun. One important example is the gap between death and one’s next rebirth.

Bardo Thotrol. The Tibetan Book of the Dead, used to guide the spirits of the departed.

bhikkhu. Theravadin monk.

bodhi. Enlightenment.

Bodhidharma. Founder of Zen (Ch’an) in China, c 520 CE.

bodhisattva. Theravada: the one who is destined for enlightenment (usually refers to Shakyamuni Buddha in his pre-enlightened state). Mahayana: One who has gained enlightenment, but who renounces final entry into nirvana in order to help other living beings. (Pali: bodhisatta).

Bon. A religion of Tibet which preceded Buddhism.

brahmin. The top Hindu caste (teacher-priests).

Buddha. One who has gained enlightenment.

Buddhaghosa. 5th century Theravadin scholar.

Ch’an. Chinese word for ‘Zen’.

Chenrezig. Tibetan name of Avalokiteshvara.

Cittamatra. Mere consciousness.

Dalai Lama. The spiritual leader of the Tibetan Buddhists and head of the Gelugpa school.

dependent origination. Also termed *paticcasamuppada* and *niddanas*. The twelve-fold chain of ‘conditioned co-production’: ignorance, karma formations, consciousness, five khandas, six sense fields, feeling, contact, craving, grasping (attachment), becoming, birth, death and decay. Unless the chain is broken, each state will give rise to the subsequent one.

Dhammapada. One of the best known early Buddhist scriptures.

Dharma. The teaching of the Buddha. (Pali: dhamma).

dharmakaya (dhammakaya). The ‘absolute body’ of the Buddha.

dhyana. Meditation.

Digha-Nikaya. Section of Sutta-Pitaka (Buddhist scripture).

Dipankara. The primal buddha.

dukkha. Unsatisfactoriness; one of the three Marks of Existence.

Gautama (Gotama). The historical Buddha (also referred to as Shakyamuni).

Gelugpa. The ‘reformed’ school of Tibetan Buddhism, of which the Dalai Lama is the spiritual head.

gohonzon. The scroll which is the principal object of devotion in the Nichiren sects.

gongyo. A Nichiren ceremony, consisting of chanting before the gohonzon.

‘Hinayana’. Literally ‘Lesser Vehicle’: an abusive term applied to those Buddhists who are not Mahayana.

jatakas. Stories of the previous lives of the Buddha.

Jodo. A form of Pure Land Buddhism, which flourished in China and Japan.

Kanjur. Tibetan scriptures — 108 volumes.

karma. Deeds. The law of karma asserts that everyone will eventually experience the effects of his or her actions.

karuna. Compassion.

khanda. Literally ‘aggregate’ or ‘heap’. According to classical Buddhism the person (illusory self) is made up of five ‘khandas’ — feeling, form, thought, choice, consciousness.

koan. In Zen, a problem which the student is given and to which there is no logical answer.

Kwan Yin (Kannon). The female form of Avalokiteshvara.

Lotus Sutra (Saddharma-pundarika Sutra). A Mahayana scripture, to which Nichiren Buddhists attach particular significance.

Madhyamaka. School of thought founded by Nagarjuna (Mahayana). The ‘middle position’ between complete realism and complete idealism.

Mahasanghika. ‘Greater Sangha Party’ which may have been a precursor of the Mahayana schools.

Mahasthama. A bodhisattva, often portrayed with Avalokiteshvara (Kwan Yin).

Mahayana. Literally ‘Greater Vehicle’; the forms of Buddhism which have dominated in Tibet, China, Korea and Japan.

Maitreya. The buddha of the next aeon.

Manjushri. The bodhisattva of wisdom.

mantra. Sacred words which are chanted and believed to have great power.

Mara. The tempter of the Buddha.

Marks of Existence. Features of everything in the universe, often called ‘Signs of Being’: anicca, anatta, dukkha.

Nam myoho rengo kyo. ‘Homage to the Lotus Sutra’; the mantra which, according to Nichiren Buddhists, encapsulates the whole of that scripture.

nembutsu. Recitation of Amitabha’s name. Japanese name for Pure Land Buddhism.

Nichiren (1222-1282). The founder of the Nichiren school of Buddhism in thirteenth century Japan.

niddanas. See ‘dependent origination’.

nirmanakaya. The ‘illusory’ or ‘conjured up’ body of the Buddha, i.e. his historical-physical body.

nirvana. Enlightenment; the supreme goal of the Buddhist, after attaining which one is no longer reborn. (Pali: nibbana).

Nyingmapa. The ‘unreformed’, traditional school of Tibetan Buddhism.

Padmasambhava. Scholar and magician of 8th century CE Tibet, said to have been responsible for establishing Buddhism there. The founder of the Nyingmapa school.

Pali. Language of the original Theravadin scriptures.

parinirvana. The Buddha’s death after attaining nirvana, after which there would be no rebirth.

paticcasamuppada. Theravadin term for the *niddanas*, the chain of dependent origination.

prajna. Wisdom.

Prajnaparamita. An old Mahayana scripture.

preta. Hungry ghost (one of the six realms of existence).

Pure Land. Devotional schools of Mahayana Buddhism, where followers aimed to be transferred to a buddha’s celestial paradise (sukhavati) to be shown the way to nirvana.

Ratnasambhava. The name of a buddha.

Rinzai. The school of Zen which favours ‘sudden enlightenment’.

roshi. A Zen Master (of either gender).

rupa. Bodily form.

samadhi. ‘Rest’. Refers to the ideal result of meditation, the last step of the Eightfold Path.

samboghakaya. The ‘archetypal’ body of the Buddha.

samsara. The cycle of birth and rebirth.

Sangha. The community of monks. One of the ‘Three Jewels’.

satori. Zen term for ‘enlightenment’.

sesshin. A period of retreat for intensive meditation (Zen tradition).

shakubuku. Literally ‘break and subdue’: the winning of converts in the Soka Gakkai sect.

Shakyamuni. The clan name of Siddhartha Gautama, the historical Buddha.

Shinran (1173-1262). Founder of the Jodo (‘True Pure Land’) school, the only religious practice being the recitation of the mantra ‘Namu Amida Butsu’ (‘Homage to Amida Buddha’). Shinran renounced the monastic life, and married, establishing the Jodo school as a lay movement.

siddha. A religious figure (usually a recluse) who has gained magical powers (Tibetan tradition).

Siddhartha Gautama. The personal name of the historical Buddha.

six realms. Gods, asuras (anti-gods), humans, animals, hungry ghosts, hell beings — the six states in which one can be reborn.

stupa. A monument which usually contains relics and which is an object of devotion.

Sukhavati. The ‘Pure Land’ or celestial paradise of the buddhas.

sunyata. ‘Voidness’, i.e. that which is uncharacterisable by verbal description.

sutra. A scripture recording a sermon preached by the Buddha. (Pali: sutta).

Tanjur. Tibetan scriptures — commentaries: 225 volumes.

tantra. Texts said to have been revealed by the Buddha, with special supernatural powers.

Taho. The second Buddha, mentioned in the Lotus Sutra, who descended in his ‘treasure tower’ to join Gautama.

Tara. A bodhisattva, the mythical daughter of Avalokiteshvara, and sometimes described as the ‘national goddess’ of Tibet.

Tathagata. ‘Thus arrived’ — refers to the Buddha in his enlightened state (Theravada).

Tendai. A form of Buddhism similar to and pre-dating Zen.

Theravada. Literally ‘teaching of the Elders’. The form of ‘Hinayana’ Buddhism which survives in Sri Lanka and South East Asia.

Three Jewels, or Triple Gem. The Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.

Three Refuges. Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.

Tibetan Book of the Dead. See ‘Bardo Thotrol’ (above).

trikaya. ‘Three bodies’ — refers to the Mahayana doctrine that the Buddha has three types of body: nirmanakaya, samboghakaya and dharmakaya.

Tripitaka. Literally ‘triple basket’. The Theravada canon of scripture, containing the Vinaya, the Sutta and the Abhidhamma.

upaya. ‘Skilful means’, i.e. the practice of teaching ‘provisional truth’, attributed in the Mahayana tradition to buddhas.

Vairochana. The name of a buddha.

Vajrayana. The ‘Diamond Vehicle’; the form of Buddhism which flourished in Tibet.

Vajrasattva. The name of a buddha.

vihara. Literally, ‘dwelling place’; a building which houses the Sangha.

Vinaya. Monastic rules, forming the first part of the Tripitaka (Buddhist canon of scripture).

Vipassana. ‘Insight’ meditation.

Wesak. The festival marking the Buddha’s enlightenment.

vidam. An image which one is given to ‘visualise’, particularly in the Vajrayana tradition.

yoga. Spiritual path.

Yogacara. 3rd century CE school of thought, which asserted that consciousness only was real.

yogi. A meditator.

Zen. ‘Ch’an’ of ‘dhyana’ — literally meaning ‘meditation’. The form of Buddhism which drew on Taoist ideas, developing in China and subsequently Japan.

zazen. Meditation in the Zen tradition.

© George Chrystides 1997