



Thai Buddhist Vocabulary by the Numbers...

It wasn't until about 300 years after the Buddha's death that his teachings were put down in writing. Before then the teachings were organized in an oral tradition. One of the ways that the early teachers organized complicated ideas was to make lists. So in Buddhism you have The Three..., The Four..., The Five..., The Eight ..., and many more.

Other religions have done similar things. There are the Ten Commandments, even though when we take a closer look at the Bible there are lots more than ten. But ten is a nice round number and easy to remember.

Giving numbers is a great way to teach complex ideas, especially with an illiterate audience as it was in the beginning. The early Buddhists made great use of lists. And those lists have come down to us and are still used today.

Many foreign visitors and residents of Thailand take an interest in Buddhism. We have presented here some vocabulary that might help you understand, discuss, and even ask questions if you are so interested. And because much of the teaching is in list form it makes learning the vocabulary that much easier.

The Buddhism in Thailand is riddled with influences from other belief systems, Animism, Hinduism, and Mysticism. We have concentrated here on very basic Buddhist vocabulary.

This is not a thesis on the Buddhist religion. You'll have to look into that yourself. But it will get you started on the vocabulary of Buddhism. You'll find lots of lists in different books and websites, some will have the original Pali words, others might have Chinese, Japanese, Korean words, or a slightly different Thai Translation. In the spirit of language learning and not religious doctrine, we have tried to stick with the easier to remember vocabulary words.

Buddhism: The basics...

The following are some everyday vocabulary words that one hears often when discussing Buddhism.

Buddha: พระพุทธเจ้า /prá-pút-tá-jâao/

พระ /prá/ – venerable (title for a monk or other religions figure, eg. Jesus = พระเยซู /prá-yay-soo/)

พุทธ /pút/ also /púta/ – Buddha
เจ้า /jâao/ – lord

(It can easily be seen how the Thai word พุทธ /púta/ could be changed to the English “Buddha”)

Religion: ศาสนา /sàat-sà-nǎa/
Buddhism: พุทธศาสนา /pút-tá-sàat-sà-nǎa/ or ศาสนาพุทธ /sàat-sà-nǎa pút/
Buddhist image: พระพุทธรูป /prá-pút-tá-rôop/ or simply พระ /prá/
Monk: พระ /prá/ or พระสงฆ์ /prá sǒng/
Monk’s bowl (alms bowl): บาตร /bàat/
Alms round, seeking alms (food): บิณฑบาต /bin-tá-bàat/
Present food to the monks: ใส่บาตร /sài bàat/
Novice: เณร /nayn/ or สามเณร /sǎam nayn/
Nun: นางชี /naang-chee/ or แม่ชี /mâe-chee/
Meditate: ทำสมาธิ /tam-sà-maa-tí/ or นั่งสมาธิ /nǎng-sà-maa-tí/
Chant: บทสวดมนต์ /bòt-sùat-mon/
Karma: กรรม /gam/

By the way, the classifier for monk and novice is รูป /rôop/ (the same word for “picture”) and sometimes องค์ /ong/, for Buddhist image it is also องค์ /ong/, but for nun it is คน /kon/.

In speaking about Buddhism, there are both specifically religious words and also common Thai words which have the same meaning. The common words are used by most people when talking about Buddhism. I don’t think I have ever heard anyone use the religious words except a monk. So they are here just in case that is someone you find yourself talking to.

We have given the religious words first and below them the common Thai.

Three (The Three Characteristics of Existence)...

Buddhism describes “existence” as having three characteristics. These are characteristics that are shared by all sentient beings

The Three Characteristics of Existence are:

Impermanence: All conditioned things are constantly changing.

Suffering: All things are subject to dissatisfaction and because of this, suffering.

Soullessness or non-self: There is no such thing as a personal self or soul that we alone own.

ไตรลักษณ์ /dtrai lák/ – The Three Characteristics of Existence

ไตร: three (similar and maybe related to the English prefix “tri”)

ลักษณ์: characteristic

อนิจจัง /à-nít-jang/ – impermanence

ทุกข์ขัง /túk kǎng/ or ทุกข์ – suffering

อนัตตา /à-nát-dtaa/ – non-self

อ...: is a prefix meaning “not” (similar and maybe related to the English prefix “a...”)

อัตตา: ego (state of being an individual)

Four (The Four Noble Truths)...

These “truths” contain the heart of Buddhist teaching. By understanding them we will be able to understand what Buddhists believe.

The Four Noble Truths are:

Suffering (is real).

Cause of suffering (there is a cause to it).

Cessation of suffering (suffering can be ended).

Eight-Fold Path (can lead to the cessation of suffering).

อริยสัจสี่ /a-rí-yá-sàt sèe/ – The Four Noble Truths

อริยสัจ: Noble Truth

สี่: four

ทุกข์ /túk/ – suffer, ความทุกข์ /kwaam túk/ suffering; hardship

สมุทัย /sà-mù-tai/ – cause, มูลเหตุ /moon hàyt/ the cause

นิโรธ /ní-rôht/ – the cessation of, extinction of suffering, การหยุด /gaan yùt/ = cessation; ending

มรรค /mák/ – way; path, ทาง /taang/ direction, way or path

Eight (The Noble Eightfold Path)...

This is the fourth of the Four Noble Truths. It is taught that by following this path we can bring about the cessation to suffering.

The following is an English interpretation of the components of the Noble Eightfold Path. Lots of books and websites can be overly philosophical and difficult to read and understand when discussing this concept. Interestingly, Buddhism for Dummies (<http://www.dummies.com/how-to/content/the-eightfold-path-of-buddhism.html>), where this list comes from, has one of the clearest presentations.

The Eightfold Path is:

Right understanding: Understanding that the Four Noble Truths are noble and true.

Right thought: Determining and resolving to practice Buddhist faith.

Right speech: Avoiding slander, gossip, lying, and all forms of untrue and abusive speech.

Right conduct: Adhering to the idea of nonviolence (ahimsa), as well as refraining from any form of stealing or sexual impropriety.

Right means of making a living: Not slaughtering animals or working at jobs that force you to violate others.

Right mental attitude or effort: Avoiding negative thoughts and emotions, such as anger and jealousy.

Right mindfulness: Having a clear sense of one's mental state and bodily health and feelings.

Right concentration: Using meditation to reach the highest level of enlightenment.

And this is how the Noble Eightfold Path is presented in Thai. From the translations we can see why different listings in English of The Eightfold Path can be slightly different.

อริยมรรคแปด /a-rí-yá-mák bpàet/ – The Noble Eightfold Path

อริยะ: sanctified

มรรค: Buddhist path

แปด: eight

The terms สัมมา /sām maa/ before the noun, and ถูกต้อง /tòok dtông/ after the noun mean “correct” or “right”.

สัมมาทิวติ /sām-maa-tít-tì/ – Right Understanding
ความเข้าใจถูกต้อง /kwaam kâo jai tòok dtông/
ความเข้าใจ /kwaam kâo jai/ – understanding
สัมมาสังกัปปะ /sām-maa-säng-gàp-bpà/ – Right Thought
ความใฝ่ใจถูกต้อง /kwaam fài jai took dtông/
ความใฝ่ใจ /kwaam fài jai/ – taking an interest
สัมมาวาจา /sām-maa-waa-jaa/ – Right speech
การพูดจาถูกต้อง /gaan pòot-jaa took dtông/
การพูดจา /gaan pòot-jaa/ – speaking
สัมมากัมมันตะ /sām-maa-gam-man-dtà/ – Right Action
การกระทำถูกต้อง /gaan grà-tam tòok dtông/
การกระทำ /gaan grà-tam/ – action
สัมมาอาชีพะ /sām-maa-aa-chee-wá/ – Right livelihood
การดำรงชีพถูกต้อง /gaan dam-rong chéep tòok dtông/
การดำรงชีพ /gaan dam-rong cheep/ – earning a living
สัมมาพยายามะ /sām-maa-waa-yaa-má/ – Right Effort
ความพากเพียรถูกต้อง /kwaam pâak-pian tòok dtông/
ความพากเพียร /kwaam pâak-pian/ – perseverance
สัมมาสติ /sām-mâat-dti/ – Right mindfulness
การระลึกประจําใจถูกต้อง /gaan rá-léuk bprà-jam jai tòok dtông/
การระลึกประจําใจ /gaan rá-léuk bprà-jam jai/ – recall
สัมมาสมาธิ /sām-mâat-maa-tí/ – Right concentration
การตั้งใจมั่นถูกต้อง /gaan dtâng jai mân tòok dtông/
การตั้งใจมั่น /gaan dtâng jai mân/ – intention

Five (The Five Precepts)...

The Five Precepts are sometimes defined as “commandments” like the “10 Commandments”. But instead of “Thou shalt not ...” these are seen more like something we should strive to abstain or refrain from doing. More like “Thou shalt try not to ...”

Commandments and precepts are different and even though the Thai word for precept is sometimes translated as “commandment” they are quite different in purpose. The breaking of the commandments is a sin, against God. The breaking of a precept will cause you or others suffering, therefore it is something we should avoid doing. So this is a list of things to abstain from in order to limit our own suffering and our possibly causing suffering in others.

The Five Precepts are:

1. Abstain from killing.
2. Abstain from taking what is not given.
3. Avoid sensual misconduct.
4. Abstain from false speech.
5. Abstain from fermented drink that causes heedlessness.

ศีลห้า /sĕen-lá-hâa/ or /sĕen-hâa/ – The Five Precepts

ศีล: precept (moral precepts)

ห้า: five

The term เว้นจาก /wĕn jàak/ is used in front of each of the precepts.

เว้น: abstain

จาก: from

Instead of เว้นจาก we could just as easily said ห้าม /hâam/ (prohibit).

1. เว้นจากทำลายชีวิต /wĕn jàak tam laai chee-wít/ – Abstain from the destruction of life.

ทำลาย: destroy

ชีวิต: life

2. เว้นจากถือเอาของที่เขามิได้ให้ / wĕn jàak tĕu ao kŏng tĕe kăo mí dâai hâi/
Abstain from taking things that were not given.

ถือเอา: assume

ของ: things

ที่: that

เขา: he, she, etc.

มิได้: not

ให้: give, offer

3. เว้นจากประพฤตินิมนต์ในกาม /wĕn jàak bprà-préut pit nai gaam/ – Sexual misconduct

ประพฤตินิมนต์: misbehave

ใน: in

กาม: sexual desire

4. เว้นจากพูดเท็จ /wĕn jàak pŏot tĕt/ – Telling a falsehood

พูด: speak

เท็จ: lie, falsehood

5. เว้นจากของเมา /wĕn jàak kŏng mao/

ของเมา: liquor, that which makes you intoxicated

To finish...

This was a simple vocabulary lesson, not an invitation to become a Buddhist. I believe that we are all ultimately responsible in finding what works for us. The Buddha's last remarks summarize all of his teaching and basically say that it is now all up to you.

“Behold, O monks, this is my advice to you. All component things in the world are changeable. They are not lasting. Work hard to gain your own salvation.”

Reference: I have found that the best on-line dictionary source for Buddhist vocabulary is thai2english.com. Other dictionaries bypass most of the religious words. Someone at thai2english.com must be into this topic. I made liberal use of this dictionary in this post and would like to thank thai2english.com for their hard work.

Post Script: I don't drink alcohol. This is not because of any religious belief. But when I go out with Thai friends and I tell them I don't drink they are usually taken aback. That is until I tell them in Thai ฉันถือศีลห้า /chăn tĕu sĕen-hâa/ “I observe the 5 (Buddhist) precepts”, one of which of course is

abstaining from alcohol. They usually all shake their heads knowingly and say ไม่เป็นไร /mâi-bpen-rai/, “No Problem”.

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