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Thai Language Thai Culture: Thai Buddhist Vocabulary by the Numbers

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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.

NOTE: For those needing transliteration, there's a pdf download at the end of the post.

Buddhism: The basics...

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

Buddha: พระพุทธเจ้า

พระ: venerable (title for a monk or other religions figure, eg. Jesus = พระเยซู)

พุทธ: Buddha

เจ้า: lord

(It can easily be seen how the Thai word พุทธ could be changed to the English "Buddha")

Religion: ศาสนา

Buddhism: พุทธศาสนา or ศาสนาพุทธ

Buddhist image: พระพุทธรูป or simply พระ

Monk: พระ or พระสงฆ์

Monk's bowl (alms bowl): บาตร

Alms round, seeking alms (food): บิณฑบาต

Present food to the monks: ใส่บาตร

Novice: เณร or สามเณร

Nun: นางชี or แม่ชี

Meditate: ทำสมาธิ or นั่งสมาธิ

Chant: บทสวดมนต์

Karma: กรรม

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

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, 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:

1. **Impermanence:** All conditioned things are constantly changing.
2. **Suffering:** All things are subject to dissatisfaction and because of this, suffering.

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

ไตรลักษณ์: The Three Characteristics of Existence

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

ลักษณ์: characteristic

1. อนิจจัง: impermanence
2. ทุกข์ขัง or ทุกข์: suffering
3. อนัตตา: 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:

1. Suffering (is real).
2. Cause of suffering (there is a cause to it).
3. Cessation of suffering (suffering can be ended).
4. Eight-Fold Path (can lead to the cessation of suffering).

อริยสัจสี่: The Four Noble Truths

อริยสัจ: Noble Truth

สี่: four

1. ทุกข์: suffer, ความทุกข์ suffering; hardship
2. สมุทัย: cause, มูลเหตุ the cause
3. นิโรธ: the cessation of, extinction of suffering, การหยุด = cessation; ending

4. มรรค: way; path, ทาง 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:

1. **Right understanding:** Understanding that the Four Noble Truths are noble and true.
2. **Right thought:** Determining and resolving to practice Buddhist faith.
3. **Right speech:** Avoiding slander, gossip, lying, and all forms of untrue and abusive speech.
4. **Right conduct:** Adhering to the idea of nonviolence (ahimsa), as well as refraining from any form of stealing or sexual impropriety.
5. **Right means of making a living:** Not slaughtering animals or working at jobs that force you to violate others.
6. **Right mental attitude or effort:** Avoiding negative thoughts and emotions, such as anger and jealousy.
7. **Right mindfulness:** Having a clear sense of one's mental state and bodily health and feelings.

8. **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: The Noble Eightfold Path

อริยะ: sanctified

มรรค: Buddhist path

แปด: eight

The terms สัมมา before the noun, and ถูกต้อง after the noun mean “correct” or “right”.

1. **สัมมาทิฐิ: Right Understanding**

ความเข้าใจถูกต้อง

ความเข้าใจ: understanding

2. **สัมมาสังกัปปะ: Right Thought**

ความใฝ่ใจถูกต้อง

ความใฝ่ใจ: taking an interest

3. **สัมมาวาจา: Right speech**

การพูดจาถูกต้อง

การพูดจา: speaking

4. **สัมมากัมมันตะ: Right Action**

การกระทำถูกต้อง

การกระทำ: action

5. **สัมมาอาชีวะ: Right livelihood**

การดำรงชีพถูกต้อง

การดำรงชีพ: earning a living

6. **สัมมาวายามะ: Right Effort**

ความพากเพียรถูกต้อง

ความพากเพียร: perseverance

7. **สัมมาสติ: Right mindfulness**

การระลึกประจําใจถูกต้อง

การระลึกประจําใจ: recall

8. สัมมาสมาธิ: Right concentration

การตั้งใจมั่นถูกต้อง

การตั้งใจมั่น: 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.

คิลห้า: The Five Precepts

คิล: precept (moral precepts)

ห้า: five

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

เว้น: abstain

จาก: from

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

1. เว้นจากทำลายชีวิต: Abstain from the destruction of life.
ทำลาย: destroy
ชีวิต: life
2. เว้นจากถือเอาของที่เขามิได้ให้
Abstain from taking things that were not given.
ถือเอา: assume
ของ: things
ที่: that
เขา: he, she, etc.
มิได้: not
ให้: give, offer
3. เว้นจากประพฤตินอกในกาม: Sexual misconduct
ประพฤตินอก: misbehave
ใน: in
กาม: sexual desire
4. เว้นจากพูดเท็จ: Telling a falsehood
พูด: speak
เท็จ: lie, falsehood
5. เว้นจากของเมา
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 “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, “No Problem”.



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Hugh Leong loves explaining things. And during his 40 plus years of trying to learn Thai and its culture, he learned to love the cross-cultural aspect of living in a foreign country and speaking its language. His series, Thai Language Thai Culture, covers various aspects of learning Thai, and how the Thai culture influences how we say things.