

An Unconventional Glossary of Buddhist Qualities
In English translated from Meditative Experience and Pali*
Or the Meanderings of Nelly Kaufer's mind

Alphabetize: This glossary is “somewhat alphabetical”. It’s like our inner life, for a while we can alphabetize, order, structure and define it. Then we’re accosted by wild, chaotic and creative forces.

Awareness: The great elixir. When awareness (*sati*) combines with gentleness and curiosity, transformation eventually follows. No need to conquer your problems or fix yourself—let awareness be the subtle yet powerful change agent.

Attention: Many people think holding “one pointed attention” on the suggested object of meditation defines meditation. A soldier knows how to come to attention. Attention focuses the mind, though not necessarily on the qualities we want to develop.

Absorbed: “*Intensely engaged: engrossed*” Oxford Dictionary

Absorption: A state of profound concentration or stillness in which the mind becomes fully immersed and absorbed in the object of meditation. (*Jhana*). Teachers and traditions hold varied perspectives about the value and function of meditative absorption. From my view, absorptions settle our mind and shift our perspective, but can also invoke grandiosity and distorted certainty. The Buddha mastered the deepest forms of absorption, they didn’t liberate him, though they were, however, part of his path toward liberation. We each have different tendencies and abilities towards absorption and different paths towards liberation.

Aspiration: It’s good to know what hopes, desires and intentions you bring to meditation. Hopefully, as your meditation and understanding of the teachings develop, your aspirations also mature. I used to believe that I could manipulate my aspirations to turn them into the “right” ones. I no longer believe I have this much control. Instead as I become more aware of my aspirations, they shift and change. **(see Awareness) (see Eightfold Path)**

Broaden: When you broaden your descriptions of what happened in your meditation, you can break through limited perspectives and see more of the conditions that feed experience. That’s part of why we ask for more description of what happened. Yes, it’s challenging to put your experience into words—it’s worth the effort. **(see Awareness)**.

Boredom: Having unlimited stimulation in my pocket gives me the illusion that I’ll never be bored. To keep this going, I end up feeling ragged and overwhelmed. Learning to tolerate boredom in meditation and life might be the needed relief.

Backache: Now that I sit with the support of a chair, I rarely feel back pain while meditating. I used to sit upright, toughing out the pain. I never noticed the grandiosity that was developing. “Look at me sitting so upright on my zafu.” Other times self-criticism flourished. “Keep your

eyes closed, don't look at me squirming and slouching". We're often unaware of what feeds the conceits.

Conceits: Involuntarily comparing ourselves to others, accessing ourselves as "better than", "less than" or "equal to". This tenacious, painful habit is one of the last to fall off before full liberation. It's based on an ignorance of conditionality. **(See Liberation, See Conditionality, See Ignorance)**

Conditionality: "Nothing arises in isolation, everything arises conditioned upon other things". This might be the most important teaching in Buddhism. A deep awareness of the flux and instability in your meditation and life, rather than an abstract understanding of conditionality, is crucial. This matters, in part, because when perceive the myriad conditions at play in any situation, you can no longer wholeheartedly blame yourself or others. **(see Shame) (See Dependent Arising)**

Contact: When your eyes, ears, hands, feet, tongue, nose and mind contact something, experience develops. You might like what you contact or you might find it off-putting. Or you might not care one way or the other. All kinds of actions develop in reaction to this. This is a fundamental teaching in Buddhism.

Calm: Calm states (*samadhi*) naturally develop in meditation. Don't stress about trying to become calm. Instead look at the calm that's developing just under the radar of awareness. Validate myriad ways calm might develop in meditation (e.g. by making a detailed shopping list, seeing swirling visual colors, repeating lyrics of a song) along with the more usual instructions, (e.g. being aware of your breath and body, counting, chanting).

Centered: A state of mind with adequate focus and engagement. Although a common descriptor among meditators, I don't know a specific Pali translation. Having endured a bout of severe vertigo that seemed to have a physical cause, I have a new appreciation of centeredness. Mentally and emotionally I feel very fortunate to be centered on the dharma. The physical, mental and emotional weave together to form the web of experience.

Curiosity: Curiosity is a natural doorway into knowing more about your inner world and the conditions that shape it. This kind of interest enables you to become insightful, understanding and wise.

Cultivate: *"to promote or improve the growth of (a plant, crop, etc.) by labor and attention."* Dictionary.com.

Because he lived in an agrarian culture, Buddha used lots of horticultural metaphors, which are literally "down to earth". Consider how you till, plow, mulch, fertilize the positive qualities that you want to cultivate. How do you relate to your internal "weeds?"

Complex: Our inner worlds are intricately complex. Rather than recoil from this web of complexity, become more interested in it. This leads to a more poignant and rich life. Becoming

too focused, for too long, on an object of meditation, such as the breath or a sound, can divert us from our complex inner life.

Creativity: Meditating in a receptive, open, unstructured way unearths flexible and creative ways to relate to your meditation, your life and your creative projects.

Definition: You might think you can't meditate because you have limited definitions of what meditation is and what meditation isn't. Please hold my definitions, and your definitions, provisionally. **(See Alphabetize)**

Dependent Arising: Conceptually the teaching on Dependent Arising (*paṭicca-samuppāda*) is easy to understand— "everything in our experience arises dependent on other things-- nothing exists in isolation". Though we often get stuck believing things are solid and never changing, notice how things arise together, and differently at different times depending how they combine. The Buddha said to a student, "to understand Dependent Arising is to understand the Dharma" (most of the teachings are conversations between the Buddha his students). **(See Conditionality)**

Dharma: Dharma is a Sanskrit word, though in such common usage, it has entered the English dictionary.

Indian religions define Dharma (*Dhamma*) in different ways. In Buddhism, it refers to the teachings; although a mouthful, Buddhadharma is a clearer designation.

Discernment: (*dhammaviccaya*) Discernment helps us respect nuance and become more aware of conditionality. Everything is not the same--we are not consistent-- we are not One. Can be mistaken for judgmentalness: discerning is most helpful when done with underlying respect. A factor of awakening.

Disciple: In his lifetime, many people became disciples of the Buddha, though he didn't demand this. Instead he encouraged people to contemplate and investigate their experience. He was opposed to blind faith, dogmatism and beliefs spawned from faulty reasoning.

Discipline: 1- "*the practice of training people to obey rules, using punishment to correct disobedience. Synonym: control.* 2- *A branch of knowledge.*" Oxford Dictionary.

Consider that both of these definitions impact you, even though they conflict inside of you. You want knowledge. To what degree do rules provide knowledge? How do you punish yourself when you aren't following the rules? Whose rules anyway?

Distraction: Distraction in meditation might be a label for what you devalue. When you describe what's going on as a distraction, question yourself "a distraction from what?" "might there be value in this?" And "what's really the problem with this experience?"

Down to Earth: Our approach to meditation is "down to earth", though full of depth. I'm interested in the messy life you're living. **(See Transcend)**

Dukkha: Experiences that are “hard to bear”. Commonly translated as suffering—though often more subtle--more like things are not quite right or how you wish they were, like a “wobbly wheel”. *Dukkha* has various translations such as pain, stress and hurt. Rather than concretizing concepts, the Buddha used words differently with different students.

Daydreaming: Being interested in your daydreams can reveal a great deal about your hopes and longing. Or, daydreams might be how your mind relaxes in meditation. Daydreams are often maligned or considered to be useless: I value them like all other meditative experience, worthy of our exploration.

Ethical: Buddhism is fundamentally an ethical path-- learning to hurt yourself and others less. Ethics are complex, what helps and what hurts is rarely clear-cut. As awareness of your experience increases, you'll feel hurt more acutely. Then the only thing that makes sense is to be kinder. Kindness is a value shared with most religions.

Eightfold Path: The path to liberation that combines eight different internal limbs. The first concerns skillful views-- that's why it's essential to know how and what you think. The other seven are the development of aspirations, energy, focus, awareness, speech, actions and livelihood. Training and progress on the eightfold path of liberation is best considered a lifetime undertaking.

Experience: *(the process of getting) knowledge or skill that is obtained from doing, seeing, or feeling things, or something that happens which has an effect on you:* Cambridge Dictionary. Our lives and our sense of self are composed of a series of experiences strung together and organized internally in distinguishing ways. **(see Contact)**

Explorative Dialogue: The conversation with a teacher or mentor after meditation has many useful functions. Please know our intention is to help you gain more awareness of your experiences and to support your unique inclinations in meditation. It is never to improve or shame you. **(see Awareness)**

Extra-special: Believing that meditation is extra-special can get you stuck in all kinds of ways. If you think you're especially good at meditation, you will feel “better than others” and it will grow your grandiosity—that's the opposite of what we're cultivating. If you think others are extra-special meditators you may feel “less than” others which can lead to dehumanizing idealization. **(See Humility)**

Failure: There's no way to fail at meditation. Some meditation instructions and traditions espouse high ideals and although they are inspiring, they can set you up for failure. **(see Humility, See Ideals)**

Forgetting: People new to describing and journaling their experiences in meditation fear that they'll forget what happened. I tell them, “You will forget a lot, but what you remember will be enough”. I am not sure this helps. Our meditations and lives are so complex. Over time you'll remember more—much like keeping a dream journal.

Forgiveness: When you understand the conditions that you and others labor under, you'll naturally become more forgiving about the multitude of ways that each of us miss the mark. **(See Conditionality)**

Friendliness: *metta*. One of the "*brahma viharas*" or the heavenly abodes, commonly translated as the realm of the Gods. Just think how heavenly it feels when you feel genuine friendliness towards yourself. Being gentle and curious about your meditative experiences cultivates this kind of friendliness.

Flame: The Buddha used metaphors of fire since this was an essential part of Brahmanism, the dominant religion of his time. Though he ingeniously turned the metaphor on its head. The Brahmins were Priests entrusted to keeping the ritual fires going. The Buddha defined liberation or *nibbana* as the squelching of the flames of hatred, ignorance and greed.

Gentleness: If you're conditioned to believe that progress comes from hard work, being gentle might seem frivolous. Consider that the developments that come from gentleness are of a different nature. You'll learn to be friendlier to yourself and erode the belief that you're in charge of how you progress. **(See Humility)**

Gratitude: Appreciation. In my morning's meditation, waves of gratitude washed over me-- how fortunate I've been to live in the USA during decades when our government had some stability and integrity. This gratitude welled up on its own, after months of reflection about the current political situation. It was grounded in long-term contemplation. In my experience, this kind of receptive gratitude is more enduring than gratitude generated by intentionally recalling what I am grateful about.

Grounded: Feeling the tactile contact with the ground while meditating can be a perch to support and settle yourself. You need not stay there long--- and can return when you need to feel more grounded.

Group: You might find it easier to meditate in a group with others, much like it can be easier to exercise at the gym. In our groups, we dialogue about meditative experiences—this expands your ideas about what's useful and beneficial in meditation.

Humility: "*The quality or state of not thinking you are better than other people.*" Merriam-Webster Dictionary. Considered a virtue in many religions. Many of us more get caught in the opposite problem—believing we are less than other people. Believing we are "better than" and "less than" others are both harmful states of mind. **(See Conceits)**

Humiliated: "*To make (someone) feel ashamed or foolish by injuring their dignity and self-respect, especially publicly.*" Oxford Dictionary. Sometimes, when speaking openly about our meditative experience, vulnerability turns into humiliation. Please know that this is never our

intention. Let us know if you feel humiliated, so we can talk about the misunderstanding fueling this painful reaction.

Hindrances: Consider what hinders you from meditating. When you can't get yourself to meditate, take some time to reflect or journal about what's getting in the way. After you have a sense of what hinders you, you can look up the five hindrances that are commonly taught in Buddhism.

Ignorance: Having, or coming to conclusions about situations, people or ideas, based only on partial knowledge: we are ignorant primarily because we can't know the many conditions that led to the current situation **(See Conditionality)**

Ideals/ idealization: *"the action of regarding or representing something as perfect or better than reality"* Oxford Dictionary. Meditative and spiritual traditions are bursting with high ideals; meditation teachers and spiritual leaders are fodder for our superhero fantasies. We long for something, someone, someplace that is better than our reality. Sadly, these fantasies can't help but betray us.

Inebriation: Certain meditative states alter consciousness; you feel great. The danger is that this can be confused with "I am great". Otherwise, this kind of inebriation is much healthier than street drugs with a more refined "high". **(See Conceits)**

Improvise: Understanding that experiences are in flux, it serves us well to improvise, that is, to creatively respond to what's in front of us. This is best informed by what we have learned from reflecting on experience. Since the matrix of conditions are never quite the same, this requires flexibility and awareness.

Integrate: As you gain greater awareness of experience, multiple aspects come together or integrate in a way that is healing. For example, my stomach churns, I tremble a bit—then hear the distant sound of a siren. I remember my recent hospitalization. This awareness combines and I feel tender towards myself. Often this process takes place below the threshold of awareness—but somehow I feel better afterwards. It feels like I have digested experience.

Journaling: Why write down your meditation? Isn't "higher truth" deeper than words? Maybe, though writing down your meditation has many benefits. Honor and listen to your experience like a trusted friend and more will be revealed. Your awareness, understanding and caring grows slowly. Your journal chronicles this, along with much else.

Liberation: (*Nibbana*) If you confuse *Nibbana* with heaven and believe it might happen sometime in the future, you might overlook the little liberations that come from meditation and reflection. For example, every other time your spouse said a certain thing about you, you became ragefully irate. This time you listened and considered that point of view. These are steps on the path. **(see Flame)**

Lonely: Sometimes you encounter a barren, destitute internal landscape seemingly only populated by an occasional prickly cactus, which never seems to flower. It's hard to believe that being with this loneliness is better than running from it. **(See Tolerating)**

Longing: A powerful tug demanding our submission, an insatiable hunger. A potent state of mind that can sabotage your ability to think clearly—just when you most need it.

Mentor: I'd rather be your mentor than your meditation teacher. I want to dodge your projections and idealization. Like you, I am trying my best to show up and wake up.

Mindfulness: Paying attention to what is happening in the present moment, being present. A relatively recent (1881AD) translation of *sati*. Hard to believe that when I went to graduate school in counseling psychology in late 1980's, I was "in the closet" about being a mindfulness meditator and teacher. Now it's almost unacceptable to not integrate mindfulness into psychological interventions. **(See Awareness, Recollection).**

Mentalizing: A psychological skill. The ability to reflect upon and discern the impact of different states of mind, reflecting upon the underlying moods, desires, feelings, emotions and bodily experiences that provoke behaviors. Journaling and talking about meditative experience trains you to mentalize experiences that are hard differentiate and put into words. This ability, over time, can lead to more skillful actions. **(See Eightfold Path)**

Open Hearted and Open Minded: We've started to describe the Recollective Awareness approach to meditation as open hearted and open minded. These words inspire; but can be a set-up. What about when your heart is clenched in anger and your thoughts are rigidified in certainty? Might be a good time to learn more about what triggers you emotionally and what stabilizes you conceptually. **(See Tolerating.)**

Onward Leading: What relieves your pain, hurt, and stress? This is tricky because what relieves in the short-run, might lead to greater misery in the long-run. This is how addiction works. To know what is onward leading, you best keep looking inward to discover what reliably sustains you over time.

Permission: You have permission to experiment in meditation, the choice to do any meditation practice you would like. Play with your mind and attentional focus. Like with all experiments, you'll see how it goes and likely adapt in the future.

Questioning: Lots has changed in the last 2500 years, since the time of the Buddha. What's similar is the exposure to an overwhelming number of spiritual teachers, ideals and beliefs. In the Kalama Sutta, one of the most popular Buddhist teachings in the West, the Buddha invites the Kalamas (the folks he was teaching) to question what they were hearing from the many teachers passing through their town. I, too, suggest you question the ideas I write here. See for yourself what lessens or reduces your stress and angst.

Quiet: Meditation quiets stimulation from the outer world to better hear the voices of your inner world. I think meditation is so popular now because it's an antidote to the noisy world we inhabit—where unlimited stimulation is only a mouse-click away.

Receptivity: Befriending experience as it is in meditation, rather than trying to generate a “better” state of mind. We'd like to believe that we are “the boss” of our inner world. It's vulnerable and humbling to know how much we can't control.

Reflection: Reflecting upon your experience is a fundamental aspect of our approach to meditation. Rather than being given a teaching to reflect upon (as is common in spiritual and meditative traditions), you'll find what interests you and dig deeper into that contemplation. **(See Onward Leading)**

Recollection: Using memory to reflect upon experience, a natural mental process. Our approach, often called Recollective Awareness Meditation, strengthens this capacity and infuses it with kindness and curiosity. **(See Awareness)**

Repetition: *Samsara: The cycle of death and rebirth to which life in the material world is bound.* Oxford Dictionary.

We're entrapped by patterns of thought, emotion and behavior that continually get reborn, that repeat and cause on-going difficulty. Consider that many of these patterns can't be changed by replacing them with the repetition of something better, as is suggested by some meditation instructions. These cycles can be transformed through attending to them, rather than running from them.

Reactivity: Your heart pounds. Your breath tightens. You break out in a cold sweat. You say things you wish you hadn't said. You'd like to eliminate reactivity, which some Buddhist teachers consider to be liberation. Be curious about what you react to. Something here really matters to you.

Refuge: *(a place that gives) protection or shelter from danger, trouble, unhappiness, etc.* Cambridge English Dictionary

Buddhists take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. I think of the Buddha as a human being who awakened, not a God. If he found relief this way, it's possible that we can too. When accompanied by an understanding of his teachings (Dharma) and reliable spiritual friends and teachers (Sangha), you'll find refuge from some of your habitual troubles and unhappiness. **(See Sangha)**

Relationship: The Buddha advises us to choose our relationships carefully, that “admirable friendship is actually the whole of the holy life”. Neurobiology reveals that our brains develop and change, impacted by the primary relationships in our life. Everything in our experience arises in relationship to other things. **(See Dependent Arising)**

Respect: I respect the unique ways you, and each meditator, develop in meditation and life. Our groups are founded on a respect for this diversity.

Sangha: A community of meditators, historically monastics, now more commonly householders (those who have not taken monastic vows). In Asia in the past, where you lived determined your sangha. Now there are so many options for finding like-minded communities, including on-line sanghas. **(See Relationship, See Refuge)**

Settled: The ability to sit still in meditation and tolerate your complex and fluctuating inner world develops over time (*passadhi*). It's like physical exercise: if you stick with it over time you'll become stronger and more flexible

Shame: Shame is a view that I am completely responsible and culpable, that whatever happens verifies my horribly flawed "True Nature". This is complete ignorance or amnesia about the myriad other conditions at play. Blame is similar but directed towards someone else. Both shame and blame feel horrible and masquerade as certainty. Might shame be a psychological epidemic of our times? Shame and blame can't get such strangling grip when we see the many other factors that went into the situation. It no longer makes sense to see ourselves as fully responsible and bad at our core. This shift is quite liberating. **(See Dependent Arising)**

Standing: Standing near (experience), a useful translation of sati --which is often translated as mindfulness.

Standing is also one of the four postures in which to develop mindfulness, along with sitting, walking and lying down. Since all bodily positions are some variation of these four postures, you can become more aware in whatever posture you're in—physically, emotionally and mentally.

Structure: Structure grounds us and helps us feel secure. You'll discover the structure(s) that best support your meditation. Maybe you meditate most easily in the morning or mid-day at your lunch break or at the end of the day. Maybe you prefer meditating alone or with others? Like everything else, what works best changes over time.

Suttas: Discourses of the Buddha (sutras in Sanskrit). These were written down and codified over 200 years after the Buddha spoke them. There was no written word at the time of Buddha. That's hard to imagine, I can barely remember what it was like before the internet.

Thoughts: People have an ambivalent relationship with their thoughts while meditating. Common instructions suggest that "it's fine to think" and also "when you find yourself thinking put your attention elsewhere—like on your breath". That's a mixed message and most people come down on the side of believing there something's wrong about thinking during meditation. I'm encouraging you to try it for yourself.

Thoughtful: By welcoming thoughts into your meditation and reflecting upon them -- you'll become more insightful. You'll also become a kinder person since you'll no longer try to avoid thinking, a basic mental function.

Thirst: *Tanha*. It's essential to know what we thirst for--- some of it is good for us and some of it is harmful. We easily get hooked.

Tolerating: Let's face it, some experiences are hard to bear (*dukkha*). By sitting relatively still, being curious and open to what these experiences are showing you—they become more tolerable and so do you. **(See Dukkha)**

Transcend: An enduring and seductive fantasy. If only we found the right meditation technique, spiritual teacher or tradition, we could rise above or transcend all that bothers us. I don't believe this is possible and am satisfied with feeling freer in the life I have, right here, on this earth. Then again, maybe I don't know how to transcend? **(See Down to Earth)**

Vulnerability: Talking honestly about your experiences in meditation can make you feel vulnerable. Though it's counter-intuitive, being more vulnerable makes you less scared. When there's less to hide, you're freer.

Visualize: Vibrant or detailed images can settle and focus attention, regardless of the content. At other times visuals function as a nuanced way of thinking things through. If you're not prone to visualize during meditation, trust that these functions are happening in different ways.

Verbalize: More awareness of experience is developed by verbalizing and describing. When we reflect and journal after meditation, we're articulating our experience to ourselves. During the explorative dialogue, we verbalize our experience to a teacher and others. **(See Journaling, See Explorative Dialogue, See Relationship)**

Zen: Zen Buddhism, a form of Buddhism that developed more than a thousand years after the death of the historical Buddha, was imported from Japan to the US in the 1950's and popularized by beat poets and searchers of that era. There are many different Zen Buddhist traditions, each with its own characteristics and perspective. The word "Zen" is now appropriated to market most anything—from pillows to lip balms, from soup to nuts. I doubt the Buddha would approve.

Zoo: At times our inner world seems like a zoo. Learn to love these wild animals.