



## PRACTICE

# WORDING THE DHARMA

Choose a word. Now get to work.

By Lama Karma Yeshe Chödrön

**T**HE UNIFYING THREAD OF MY DIVERSE LIFE experiences is the use of language to ferry meaning from the abstract to the accessible. From a young age I translated for my parents, exiles who fled Cuba to the United States with little to no English. As a graduate student, I teased out meaning for biology undergraduates lost in a sea of jargon. Later, I parsed legalese for my litigation clients.

Nowadays, buddhadharma flows into me in Tibetan and pours from me in English into ears more finely attuned to Mandarin or Spanish, French, Danish, German, Russian, Polish, Italian.

Surely there is a currency less volatile than words? Some service less treacherous than translation?

Don't get me wrong. I love words. I revel in their depth, complexity, and malleability,

their silky roll off the tongue. Yet, however expedient they are for communication, words have limits.

Misunderstandings, minor and otherwise, abound in everyday life. We each shade words with meaning shaped by our individual identities, personal history, and cultural influences. Employing words to explain spiritual subtleties—beyond conceptuality and extending across time, space, and culture—amps up the complexity further still.

### What to do?

*Wording the dharma*, as I have come to call it, is a practice of enlisting language to evoke experiences that words fail to describe.

The best of dharma translations and teachings do this with apparent effortless-ness, going beyond dry words that may or may not successfully transmit meaning.

### You can do this too.

Being multilingual is not necessary, though that skill lends range and flexibility to our “wording.” It also helps us to avoid the main pitfall of being monolingual: assuming we understand the meaning of a specific teaching because we are familiar with the words.

The practice of wording the dharma takes some effort at first. Requiring discipline and an open mind, it yields rewards such as joy, understanding, and a light heart.

### Here's one approach:

**1. Choose a word.** This can be a dharma term that has grabbed you and held you spellbound—one that inspires and moves you, or one that confounds and nags you. Words that are seminal to understanding the dharma are especially worthwhile: *impermanence, suffering, nonself, Craving, Ignorance, Samsara, Awakening.*

**Practice now.** I will use the word *renunciation* for this exercise.

**2. Unlearn the English.** Or whatever language offered up your word, wrapped in sheep's clothing. Disrobe it. Face the wolf beneath the fleece.

Unpack the associations your word carries in your language. Does it elicit a tangible response in your body? If so, where? The connotations may be positive, negative, or worse (because less notice-

able), neutral. Release any reactivity and peel back the layers of connotations. You will learn from whatever you encounter.

**Free-associate.** Flesh out all the nuances the word holds for you. Use a dictionary to explore its range of meaning and etymology.

**Practice now.** The English word *renunciation* can carry a sense of loss, austerity, deprivation, or forced sacrifice. I feel the weight of it on my shoulders, hunching me over, confining my heart.

**3. Uplift the voice of the source language.** Buddhadharma remains a relatively new phenomenon outside of Asian culture. Some of us receive dharma teachings in a language other than our own. Even when we hear the dharma in our native language, the words are often more restricted in meaning than they are in source languages of Buddhist heritage, such as Gandhari, Pali, Sanskrit, Sinhalese, Burmese, Thai, Vietnamese, Chinese, Japanese, and Tibetan.

Find the source word in at least two heritage languages: one closest to your Buddhist heritage, and one based in the Indian subcontinent—cradle of the Buddha, dharma, and sangha. Many resources for exploring words in these languages exist: your dharma center, a spiritual mentor or *kalyanamitra* (spiritual friend), dictionaries, books.

Chew on these words, exploring their meaning. What experience do they evoke? Identify the physical sensations and connotations as in step 2.

**Practice now.** The Tibetan *nges par byung ba* means “definite emergence,” and is usually translated into English as *renunciation*. *Nges 'byung* renders the Sanskrit *nibhsarana* and *niriyana*, related to the Pali *nissarana* and *niyyana*. These terms carry a range of meanings such as “departure, escape, being freed, going forth.” The Pali canon denotes “renunciation” as *nekkhama* (often Sanskritized as *naishkranya*), which adds “giving up mundane things and leading a holy life” as well as the pleasure that comes of prioritizing what serves us in this way. These are literal meanings.

The English term *renunciation* is a throwback to 19th-century European

translators who met classical dharma teachings with religious and cultural perspectives distinct from those of the texts’ Asian heritage and superimposed their notions onto their translations. In the case of *renunciation*, the result contrasts sharply with the elevating tone of these source terms.

Fabulous! This is a semantic understanding of your word in context.

**4. Play.** Digest the semantic understanding you’ve developed. Dig into the heritage teachings that explain the literal meaning in context, refining your understanding. Rouse your inner poet. What words in your language reflect the semantic understanding of your chosen word in its source language?

Let the range of source meanings circumscribe a fluid, multidimensional space for your word to inhabit—roomy, but not amorphous. Roam widely within this arena.

Sketch, collage, or describe any images that come to mind, or journal about your experience of the words through your fresh, wide-angle lens. Write a poem, story, or song. Discuss the words with dharma teachers and friends. Or debate, maintaining the quality of fun.

Look at your cloud of words spread out on a page or across your heart. Does one move you and at the same time—this is key—convey the meaning of the source language word? Be mindful not to graft biases onto the source-language word or appropriate it to serve a personal agenda.

Find the English word that sings so clearly that others hearing it can connect with the experiences the source meanings evoke in you. The word may elicit a eureka moment, a sense of discovery.

**Practice now.** Above all, the source-language terms have a quality of freshness for me, like a springtime opening into new life, green and vibrant. I feel this quality in the solar plexus, like a leap of the heart. There is a sense of rebirth—the darling buds of May opening to the morning breeze. Renaissance. Perhaps the revolution of understanding that accompanies scales falling from our eyes. Lightness, fresh perspective, sunflowers turning to face the sun. A chick hatching from a pastel egg.

**Lovely.** This is an intellectual understanding of the meaning of your word in its living context.

**5. Absorb.** Whatever you do, do not stop now! Intellectual understanding,





particularly of a seminal yet previously incompletely understood word or concept, can feel great, even liberating. Still, the understanding that contemplation generates is confined to the intellect. Listen for the curiosity enticing you onward.

Now, take up the word you've unveiled and lure it from head to heart in meditative inquiry, a practice that combines resting meditation and experiential analysis.

Begin with any awareness practice that you find familiar. For example, settle the mind for a time in *shamatha*, or tranquility meditation, using the breath as a support. Use awareness of the breath as it enters, fills, then leaves the body to sustain a mental balance poised between the intrinsic lucidity and stillness of mind.

If your mind wanders, shift toward stillness to regain equilibrium. Should your mind become dull, recalibrate by leaning into lucidity. Tricky to describe; physical examples of this inward calibration include the active yet subtle adjustments that keep a hatha yogin upright in "tree pose," or those that spin the dial on an analog radio to locate a station. In each case, our immediate experience signals if we are toppling or tense,

staticky or silent, mentally dull or agitated. Sustained refinement tunes us into the stance, the music, or the equipoise.

From this equipoise, analyze experientially rather than abstractly. Revisit your intellectual understanding to invoke the experience your word elicits. Feel your way to the visceral clarity of releasing misconceptions about the word as received in your language. It is as though something slips into place, like a camera lens coming into focus.

This is experiential understanding, often accompanied by a felt sense in the body, neither entirely somatic nor emotional in character. This may be a subtle inner shift, a gentle shudder, fluttering belly, the shock of surprise, or the like. It is a present-moment experience of knowing, rather than a memory.

When experiential understanding arises, release all words and concepts. Rest mind within that experience, like resting mind on the breath in *shamatha*. This is akin to mind marinating in the experience, drinking it in. When the experience fades, return to inquiry. Should experiential understanding not occur, pause periodically and rest in *shamatha*. Alternate between resting and experiential analysis for the duration of your session.

When finished, summarize how your word reflects the meaning and evokes the experience of its source languages.

**Practice now.** My meditative inquiry offers "reorientation." Mind turns toward something with lightness and an irresistible impulse to move forward. I experience an opening and quickening of the heart concurrent with a sense of freedom, enthusiasm, and purpose. It is the dawn of a distinctively new perspective.

Delicious, this experiential understanding of the word.

**6. Integrate.** Repeat the process with as many words as you wish. You will find that, in practice, the steps are not linear. Allow yourself to spiral among them. Revisit each word frequently in formal meditation to dwell in the experience it evokes. This stabilizes and deepens experiential understanding until it becomes second nature.

Many words in translation—*renunciation* being one example—are ingrained in the modern language of buddhadharma despite evident incongruities in the source languages. They are not likely to disappear any time soon.

Wording the dharma yields an integrated understanding that naturally envelops *renunciation*, for example, in *nibbsarana*, *nissarana*, *nges par 'byung ba*, and provides reorientation.

Now when we hear the word in question we need not grimace, turn away, or place it on a pedestal. There is no need to argue, grandstand, or proselytize. Nor do we have to enshrine our preexisting beliefs, decking them out in dharma clothing.

Be wary, too, of reifying your word. Do not cling to its novelty. Wording the dharma cups words softly to let them fly as our experience evolves. Eventually this practice will help us transcend language's limitations altogether, in direct realization. **1**

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