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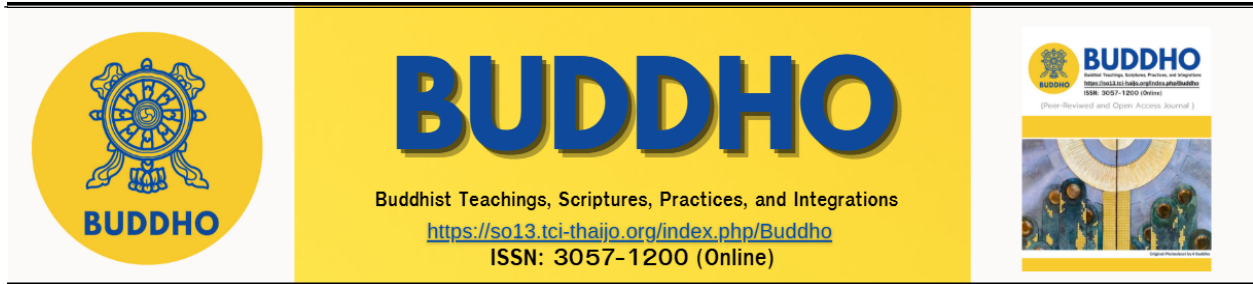
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Buddhist Technical Terms, Lexicography, and Digital Humanities

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Abstract

This article investigates Buddhist technical terminology within the interdisciplinary frameworks of lexicography, philology, and Digital Humanities. It highlights that Buddhist terms such as Dhamma, Saṅkhāra, Kamma, Nibbāna, and Anattā are not merely linguistic expressions but complex doctrinal constructs whose meanings are shaped by canonical usage, commentarial interpretation, historical development, and philosophical context. The study demonstrates that accurate understanding of Buddhist terminology requires an integrated analytical approach combining literal, etymological, doctrinal, and practical dimensions.

The findings reveal that Buddhist lexicography functions as a critical methodological bridge between classical Buddhist texts and contemporary academic interpretation. It establishes a systematic framework grounded in primary sources (Tipiṭaka), secondary exegetical literature (Aṭṭhakathā and Tīkā), and modern scholarly resources, including digital databases and computational tools. Furthermore, the study identifies five historical phases in the evolution of Buddhist terminology: oral transmission, canonical compilation, commentarial expansion, academic lexicography, and Digital Humanities integration. The research contributes to the development of a new model of Buddhist digital lexicon that integrates traditional philological methods with digital technologies such as corpus linguistics, semantic mapping, and AI-assisted analysis. This model enhances accessibility, interpretative accuracy, and global dissemination of Buddhist knowledge while preserving doctrinal authenticity. The study concludes that Buddhist technical terminology serves as a foundational epistemic system for Buddhist Studies and that Digital Humanities significantly expand its analytical and pedagogical potential in contemporary scholarship.

Keywords: Buddhist technical terms, Lexicography, Digital Humanities, Pāli studies, Buddhist philology, Buddhist digital lexicon

Introduction

Buddhist studies require a precise and context-sensitive understanding of specialized terminology, as many doctrinal concepts cannot be adequately translated without interpretative frameworks grounded in linguistic, historical, and philosophical analysis. Key Pāli terms such as Dhamma, Saṅkhāra, Kamma, Nibbāna, Anattā, and Paṭiccasamuppāda represent highly technical constructs developed within the Buddhist intellectual tradition. These concepts are embedded in a complex doctrinal system and therefore require careful examination of their etymological origins, canonical contexts, doctrinal evolution, and later commentarial interpretations to ensure accurate scholarly understanding (Gethin, 1998; Harvey, 2013; Bodhi, 2000). In this regard, technical Buddhist terminology functions not merely as linguistic expressions but as analytical and conceptual tools that structure Buddhist philosophical discourse, ethical reasoning, meditative theory, psychological analysis, and social interpretation. The semantic precision of such terminology is essential for maintaining doctrinal coherence across textual traditions and interpretive schools, particularly within the Theravāda Abhidhamma and Mahāyāna scholastic frameworks (Cox, 1995; Collins, 1998). Furthermore, the translation and interpretation of Buddhist technical vocabulary present persistent challenges in cross-linguistic scholarship, as many terms carry layered semantic fields that resist direct equivalence in Indo-European languages. For instance, Dhamma may signify law, doctrine, phenomenon, or truth depending on context, while Saṅkhāra encompasses volitional formations, conditioned phenomena, and mental constructs. These interpretative complexities necessitate philological rigor and hermeneutical sensitivity in Buddhist textual studies (Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi, 1995; Cone, 2001).

Consequently, Buddhist lexicography has emerged as a significant subfield within Buddhist philology and textual studies, contributing to the systematic analysis of meaning, translation challenges, and conceptual development in Buddhist thought. This discipline plays a critical role in bridging classical canonical languages such as Pāli, Sanskrit, and Classical Chinese with contemporary academic discourse, ensuring both textual fidelity and philosophical clarity.

Meaning of Buddhist Technical Terms

The accurate understanding of Buddhist technical terms constitutes one of the most fundamental requirements for the study of Buddhist scriptures and philosophy. A technical term is generally defined as a word or phrase possessing a specialized meaning within a particular academic, scientific, or professional discipline. Unlike ordinary vocabulary used in everyday communication, technical terms are developed to convey precise concepts that are universally recognized within a specific field of knowledge. In Buddhist studies, technical terminology comprises specialized doctrinal vocabulary that expresses philosophical concepts, ethical principles, psychological processes, meditative practices, and ultimate truths preserved within the Buddhist textual tradition (Crystal, 2008).

In the Theravāda Buddhist tradition, technical terminology is commonly referred to by the Pāli terms *paribhāsā* (technical designation or specialized terminology) and *vohāra* (conventional expression or usage). These terms represent a carefully developed doctrinal language whose meanings are established through canonical authority, linguistic convention, and centuries of scholarly interpretation. Rather than functioning merely as lexical items, Buddhist technical terms serve as conceptual instruments that communicate complex religious and philosophical ideas. Their meanings are therefore inseparable from the historical, doctrinal, and textual contexts in which they appear (Norman, 1997). One of the distinguishing characteristics of Buddhist terminology is its polysemous nature. Unlike ordinary language, where words often possess relatively stable meanings, Buddhist technical terms frequently contain multiple interpretative dimensions that must be understood simultaneously.

These dimensions include:

- Literal meaning, referring to the ordinary lexical definition of the word.
- Etymological meaning, derived from the historical origin and grammatical formation of the Pāli or Sanskrit term.
- Canonical meaning, established through its usage within the Tipiṭaka.
- Commentarial interpretation, developed in the Aṭṭhakathā and Tīkā traditions.
- Philosophical implication, expressing broader doctrinal principles within Buddhist thought.
- Practical application, referring to the role of the concept in ethical conduct, meditation, and spiritual development.

These multiple interpretative levels demonstrate that Buddhist terminology cannot be understood through literal translation alone. Instead, accurate interpretation requires a comprehensive investigation of linguistic structure, textual context, doctrinal purpose, and historical development (von Hinüber, 1996). The term *Dhamma* provides one of the clearest illustrations of the complexity of Buddhist technical terminology. In ordinary translation, *Dhamma* is often rendered simply as "teaching" or "doctrine." However, throughout the Pāli Canon the term possesses a remarkably broad semantic range. Depending upon its textual context, *Dhamma* may refer to the Buddha's teaching, universal natural law, moral truth, mental or physical phenomena, objects of cognition, qualities or characteristics, or even ultimate reality itself (Harvey, 2013). In the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka*, for example, *dhamma* frequently denotes ultimate phenomena (*paramattha dhammas*), whereas in the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* it primarily refers to the liberating teaching proclaimed by the Buddha. Such variation illustrates that the meaning of a Buddhist technical term cannot be determined independently of its literary and doctrinal context. Similarly, numerous foundational Buddhist concepts—including *Kamma* (intentional action), *Saṅkhāra* (conditioned formations), *Anattā* (non-self), *Nibbāna* (liberation), and *Paṭiccasamuppāda* (dependent origination)—possess meanings that have evolved through canonical usage and subsequent scholastic interpretation. Their semantic richness reflects the analytical sophistication of Buddhist philosophy and demonstrates why careful textual study is indispensable for accurate understanding (Gethin, 1998). For this reason, the interpretation of Buddhist technical terminology relies heavily upon philological analysis, textual criticism, and contextual hermeneutics. Philology examines the historical development, grammatical structure,

and linguistic evolution of Buddhist vocabulary, while textual criticism compares variant readings across manuscripts and canonical editions to establish the most reliable textual evidence. Hermeneutical analysis further investigates how terminology functions within particular doctrinal frameworks and literary settings. Together, these approaches enable scholars to reconstruct the intended meanings of Buddhist technical terms while preserving their doctrinal precision and historical authenticity (Norman, 1997). In contemporary Buddhist scholarship, the study of technical terminology has expanded beyond traditional philological research through the application of digital humanities. Electronic editions of the Tipiṭaka, searchable textual corpora, lexical databases, semantic mapping, and artificial intelligence-assisted language analysis now provide researchers with sophisticated tools for examining the occurrence, frequency, contextual variation, and historical development of Buddhist vocabulary. These innovations have transformed Buddhist lexicography by making canonical terminology more accessible while supporting more rigorous and systematic research. Consequently, the study of Buddhist technical terms should not be regarded merely as vocabulary acquisition. Rather, it represents the foundation of Buddhist textual interpretation, doctrinal analysis, philosophical inquiry, and scholarly communication. Mastery of Buddhist terminology enables students to engage critically with primary scriptures, interpret complex doctrinal concepts accurately, conduct research using internationally recognized academic standards, and communicate authentic Buddhist knowledge effectively through both traditional scholarship and modern digital media.

Unlike ordinary language, Buddhist terminology often contains multiple interpretive

levels: Literal meaning, Etymological meaning, Canonical meaning, Commentarial interpretation, Philosophical implication, Practical application

For example, the word *Dhamma* may signify: natural law, the Buddha's teaching, mental phenomena, moral truth, ultimate reality, depending upon textual context (Harvey, 2013).

Buddhist Lexicography

Buddhist lexicography is the systematic and scholarly study of collecting, analyzing, defining, organizing, and publishing the specialized vocabulary used in Buddhist literature. Unlike general lexicography, which focuses on the compilation of dictionaries for everyday language, Buddhist lexicography concentrates on technical terms (Pāli: paribhāsā or vohāra) that convey specific doctrinal, philosophical, ethical, and meditative concepts found in the Tipiṭaka and its related textual traditions. The primary objective of Buddhist lexicography is not merely to provide lexical definitions but also to preserve the doctrinal accuracy, historical development, and contextual meaning of Buddhist terminology across different canonical and commentarial sources (Norman, 1997). The study of Buddhist technical terminology is fundamentally interdisciplinary, integrating philology, linguistics, textual criticism, religious studies, and philosophy. A single Buddhist term often possesses multiple layers of meaning depending on its

grammatical form, textual context, historical period, and doctrinal application. For example, the term Dhamma may denote the Buddha's teachings, universal law, mental phenomena, moral truth, or ultimate reality, depending upon the context in which it appears. Consequently, lexicographers must examine the semantic range of each term through careful comparison of the Pāli Canon, commentaries (Aṭṭhakathā), sub-commentaries (Tīkā), and later scholastic literature to ensure conceptual precision (Harvey, 2013). Historically, Buddhist lexicography originated from the need to preserve the authenticity of the Buddha's teachings after the First Buddhist Council, when the oral transmission of the Dhamma required standardized terminology to prevent doctrinal inconsistency. As Buddhist literature expanded, commentators such as Buddhaghosa (5th century CE) provided comprehensive explanations of canonical vocabulary in works such as the Visuddhimagga, thereby establishing systematic interpretative traditions that continue to influence Buddhist scholarship today (Buddhaghosa, 2010). During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Buddhist lexicography developed into an independent academic discipline through the publication of major reference works, including the Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary by Rhys Davids and Stede (1921–1925) and the Critical Pāli Dictionary, both of which remain indispensable resources for contemporary Buddhist research. Modern Buddhist lexicography has expanded beyond printed dictionaries into the field of Digital Humanities, where computational technologies facilitate the preservation, analysis, and dissemination of Buddhist knowledge. Digital lexical databases, searchable Pāli corpora, electronic concordances, semantic mapping, and artificial intelligence now enable scholars to investigate textual relationships and doctrinal terminology with unprecedented efficiency. Resources such as the Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana Tipiṭaka Database, Digital Pali Reader, and SuttaCentral provide open-access platforms that support advanced textual analysis while making Buddhist knowledge more accessible to scholars and the general public alike (Bodhi, 2000; Gethin, 1998). In this course, Buddhist lexicography is understood as both an academic discipline and a practical research methodology. Students will investigate the meanings, origins, doctrinal functions, and scriptural contexts of major Buddhist technical terms before synthesizing their findings into a research-based Buddhist Digital Lexicon. This project integrates traditional textual scholarship with modern digital communication by presenting accurate Buddhist terminology through websites, educational videos, social media platforms, and AI-assisted learning tools. Such an approach aligns with contemporary trends in Buddhist Studies, where scholarly rigor is combined with public engagement to preserve and disseminate authentic Buddhist knowledge in the digital age. The Critical Pāli Dictionary and the Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary remain among the most influential lexicographical resources available for academic research (Rhys Davids & Stede, 1921–1925).

Within Buddhist studies, lexicography includes: identifying canonical terminology, tracing textual occurrences, explaining doctrinal meanings, comparing interpretations, documenting linguistic development, producing dictionaries and digital databases.

Modern Buddhist lexicography draws information from the Tipiṭaka, Aṭṭhakathā (Commentaries), Ṭīkā (Sub-commentaries), Visuddhimagga, Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha, Milindapañha, Nettippakaraṇa, Contemporary academic scholarship.

Historical Development of Buddhist Technical Terminology

The historical development of Buddhist technical terminology reflects the evolution of Buddhist thought and methods of preserving, interpreting, and disseminating the Buddha's teachings. This development can be divided into five major phases.

The first phase, Oral Transmission, began after the Buddha's Parinibbāna, when teachings were preserved through communal recitation. Standardized terminology ensured doctrinal consistency and accurate transmission.

The second phase, Canonical Compilation, involved the systematic organization of Buddhist teachings into the Vinaya, Sutta, and Abhidhamma Piṭakas. During this period, technical terminology was codified to establish a consistent doctrinal vocabulary.

The third phase, Commentarial Expansion, saw scholars such as Buddhaghosa explain and expand canonical terminology through detailed definitions and philosophical analysis, particularly in the Visuddhimagga.

The fourth phase, Academic Lexicography, emerged during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when scholars compiled dictionaries and concordances that standardized Buddhist terminology and supported international research.

The fifth phase, Digital Humanities, is characterized by searchable databases, digital corpora, AI-assisted lexicons, online dictionaries, and educational platforms, including websites, YouTube channels, podcasts, and social media, which have greatly enhanced the accessibility of Buddhist terminology.

Primary Sources of Buddhist Technical Terms

The study of Buddhist technical terminology relies on three complementary categories of sources: primary canonical texts, secondary exegetical literature, and modern academic resources. Together, they provide the foundation for philological research, semantic analysis, textual criticism, and doctrinal interpretation (Norman, 1997; Gethin, 1998).

1. Primary Canonical Sources the Tipiṭaka (Pāli Canon) is the earliest and most authoritative source of Buddhist terminology in the Theravāda tradition (Harvey, 2013). It comprises three Piṭakas: 1) Vinaya Piṭaka: Contains terminology related to monastic discipline, legal procedures, and ecclesiastical administration (e.g., Pārājika, Saṅghādisesa, Uposatha), providing the basis for institutional and ethical concepts (Horner, 1938–1966). 2) Sutta Piṭaka: The principal source of

doctrinal and philosophical terminology, including key concepts such as Dhamma, Kamma, Nibbāna, Anattā, Anicca, Dukkha, Satipaṭṭhāna, and Paṭiccasamuppāda. Their meanings are determined by canonical context rather than dictionary definitions (Bodhi, 2000; Gethin, 1998). 3) Abhidhamma Piṭaka: Presents the systematic analysis of Buddhist doctrine and introduces specialized terminology relating to consciousness, mental factors, material phenomena, and conditional relations, forming the foundation of Theravāda Buddhist psychology and philosophy (Bodhi, 2000).

2. Secondary Exegetical Sources Because many canonical terms are concise and context-dependent, later commentarial literature clarifies their meanings (von Hinüber, 1996). Major sources include: 1) Aṭṭhakathā (Commentaries): Explain canonical texts through doctrinal, linguistic, and grammatical analysis, especially the works of Buddhaghosa. 2) Tīkā (Sub-commentaries): Expand and refine commentarial interpretations. 3) Visuddhimagga: Buddhaghosa's systematic synthesis of doctrine, ethics, and meditation, widely used for interpreting technical terminology (Buddhaghosa, 2010). 4) Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha: Standardizes Abhidhamma terminology in a concise format. 5) Milindapañha, Nettippakaraṇa, and Peṭakopadesa: Provide philosophical discussions and interpretative methods that contributed to Buddhist hermeneutics and terminology.

3. Modern Academic Resources Modern scholarship enhances Buddhist lexical research through dictionaries and digital tools. Key resources include the Critical Pāli Dictionary and the Pali–English Dictionary (Rhys Davids & Stede, 1921–1925). Digital platforms such as Digital Pali Reader, SuttaCentral, the Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana Tipiṭaka Database, and the Buddhist Digital Resource Center (BDRC) support efficient textual searching, comparative analysis, and digital preservation. Combined with traditional philology, these resources facilitate corpus analysis, semantic mapping, and AI-assisted lexical research.

Summary A comprehensive understanding of Buddhist technical terminology requires integrating primary canonical texts, secondary commentarial literature, and modern scholarly resources. The Tipiṭaka preserves the original doctrinal vocabulary, the commentarial tradition explains and systematizes its meanings, and contemporary dictionaries and digital tools enhance textual analysis and accessibility. Together, these sources provide the essential foundation for Buddhist lexicography, philological research, and the development of evidence-based Buddhist digital lexicons.

1. Primary Sources: Vinaya Piṭaka, Sutta Piṭaka and Abhidhamma Piṭaka

2. Secondary Sources: Aṭṭhakathā, Tīkā, Visuddhimagga, Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha, Milindapañha, Nettippakaraṇa And Peṭakopadesa

3. Modern Academic Sources: Critical Pāli Dictionary, PTS Pali-English Dictionary, Digital Pali Reader, SuttaCentral, Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana Tipiṭaka Database, Buddhist Digital Resource Center

Digital Humanities and Buddhist Studies

Digital Humanities is an interdisciplinary field that integrates computational technologies with traditional humanities research to enhance the preservation, analysis, visualization, and dissemination of cultural and intellectual heritage. By combining digital tools with scholarly methodologies, it enables researchers to examine historical texts, linguistic patterns, and cultural knowledge with greater precision, efficiency, and accessibility. Within Buddhist studies, Digital Humanities has emerged as a transformative approach that broadens research opportunities while preserving the authenticity and integrity of Buddhist textual traditions. The application of Digital Humanities in Buddhist studies encompasses a wide range of innovative methodologies and resources. These include the development of digital editions of the Tipiṭaka, which provide scholars and students with reliable, searchable, and widely accessible versions of the Buddhist canon. Corpus linguistics facilitates the systematic analysis of Buddhist language by examining extensive collections of Pāli texts to identify lexical, grammatical, and stylistic patterns. Semantic mapping and knowledge graph technologies further contribute to the understanding of conceptual relationships among Buddhist doctrines, terminology, historical figures, and canonical sources, thereby revealing connections that may not be readily apparent through conventional textual analysis. Recent advances in artificial intelligence have also introduced AI-assisted translation systems that support multilingual access to Buddhist literature while assisting researchers in managing large volumes of textual data. In addition, digital lexicons and online concordances provide comprehensive reference tools for the study of Pāli vocabulary and scriptural usage, significantly improving the efficiency and accuracy of linguistic and doctrinal research. Educational multimedia resources and digital archives further expand opportunities for preserving, presenting, and disseminating Buddhist knowledge to both academic and public audiences. Collectively, these digital technologies substantially enhance the accessibility, preservation, and scholarly investigation of Buddhist literature while maintaining the authenticity of the original texts. They facilitate interdisciplinary collaboration, promote open access to reliable scholarly resources, and support innovative forms of teaching and learning that extend beyond traditional classroom settings.

In this course, students will apply the principles of Digital Humanities by designing and developing a research-based Buddhist Lexicon. Drawing upon primary and secondary academic sources, students will compile, analyze, and organize Buddhist terminology according to established scholarly standards. The completed lexicon will then be communicated through various digital media platforms, including websites, TikTok, YouTube, podcasts, and AI-assisted educational platforms. By presenting academic knowledge through diverse digital formats, students will develop essential research, digital communication, and public engagement skills. This integrative approach promotes public scholarship, encourages lifelong learning, and demonstrates how contemporary digital technologies can effectively preserve and disseminate Buddhist knowledge for both scholarly communities and the wider public.

Body of Knowledge

This chapter establishes an interdisciplinary body of knowledge integrating Buddhist Studies, philology, lexicography, linguistics, digital humanities, and educational technology for the systematic study and dissemination of Buddhist technical terminology. Its key contributions are:

1. Conceptual Foundation – Buddhist technical terms are specialized doctrinal concepts whose meanings depend on canonical context, historical development, linguistic structure, and philosophical function, requiring more than literal translation.

2. Framework for Buddhist Lexicography – A systematic, evidence-based approach is developed using authoritative sources, including the Tipiṭaka, commentaries, sub-commentaries, classical lexicons, and modern scholarship.

3. Historical Development – Buddhist terminology is traced through five stages: oral transmission, canonical compilation, commentarial expansion, academic lexicography, and digital humanities.

4. Integration of Philology and Digital Humanities – Traditional philological methods are combined with digital tools, such as searchable corpora, digital lexicons, semantic mapping, AI, and online databases, to improve research and interpretation.

5. Research-Based Digital Buddhist Lexicons – A model is proposed for digital lexicons that integrate scriptural evidence, scholarly interpretation, multimedia resources, and AI-assisted learning.

6. Ethical Digital Dissemination – The chapter emphasizes academic integrity, accurate citation, canonical authenticity, responsible AI use, and ethical dissemination of Buddhist knowledge.

Together, these contributions provide a theoretical and methodological foundation for future research in Buddhist lexicography, digital humanities, Buddhist education, and AI-supported Buddhist knowledge management.

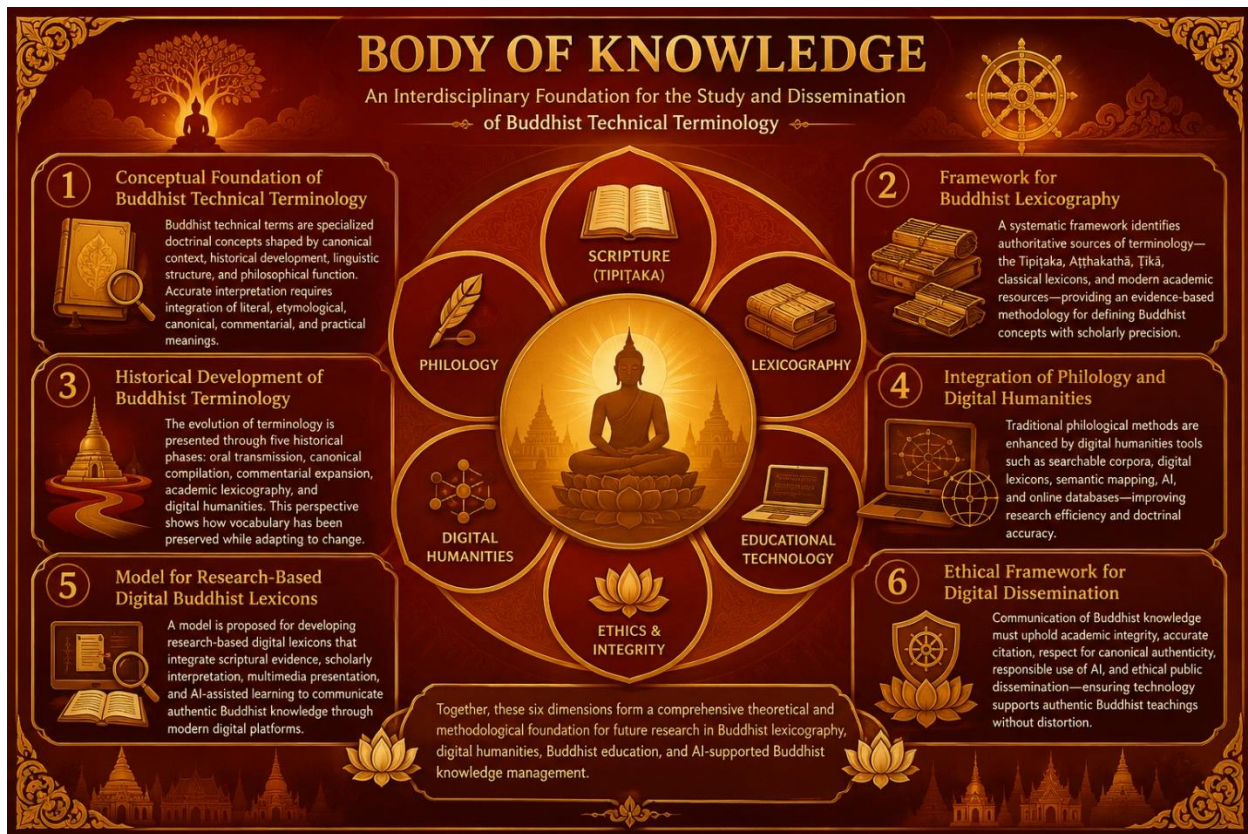


Figure 1 Body of Knowledge

Conclusion

This study achieved its objective of demonstrating the central role of Buddhist technical terminology as the conceptual and methodological foundation of Buddhist studies. The findings indicate that a comprehensive understanding of Buddhist terminology requires an interdisciplinary approach that integrates philology, textual criticism, doctrinal analysis, historical development, and digital scholarship. Such integration enhances the accuracy of interpreting Buddhist texts while supporting consistent scholarly communication across diverse research contexts. Furthermore, the study highlights the significant contribution of lexicography as a bridge between ancient Buddhist scriptures and contemporary academic inquiry. By systematically documenting and analyzing Buddhist technical terms, lexicographical approaches facilitate knowledge preservation, improve accessibility, and promote standardized terminology for future research.

The study also demonstrates the value of Digital Humanities in advancing Buddhist studies through the preservation, organization, and global dissemination of Buddhist terminology. Digital tools and resources provide sustainable platforms for managing and sharing specialized knowledge while maintaining fidelity to the original teachings and linguistic traditions. These findings underscore the practical usefulness of integrating traditional Buddhist scholarship with

digital methodologies, offering a framework that supports future research, cross-disciplinary collaboration, and international academic engagement in Buddhist studies.

Recommendations

Practical Recommendations

Academic institutions, Buddhist organizations, and digital content developers should collaborate in creating standardized digital resources that communicate authentic Buddhist teachings while adhering to principles of research integrity, copyright protection, and responsible artificial intelligence. Such collaboration will contribute to the long-term preservation, accessibility, and global dissemination of reliable Buddhist knowledge in the digital era.

Future research should expand the standardization of Buddhist technical terminology through comparative studies across Pāli, Sanskrit, Chinese, Tibetan, and other Buddhist traditions. Integrating Digital Humanities with philological approaches is recommended to develop interoperable digital lexicons and knowledge databases that enhance the preservation, accessibility, and global dissemination of Buddhist terminology. This interdisciplinary framework provides a foundation for future research in digital lexicography, terminology standardization, and Buddhist knowledge management.

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