

LET'S TALK ABOUT GĀTHĀ

The translation of Buddhist scriptures during the Tang dynasty led to the creation of many new terms in Chinese. As Buddhism flourished, many Buddhist expressions were widely adopted in everyday language, and even phrases commonly used today can often be traced back to Buddhist origins. For example, in the Cantonese phrase 傾偈 – *kīng gāi* – meaning “to chat”, the character 偈 (*gāi*) was originally derived from the Sanskrit word *gāthā*, meaning hymns or verses. Many familiar terms thus reflect the deep connection between Buddhist and Chinese culture and daily life.

1. **Chà nà (instant 刹那):** transliterated from the Sanskrit *ksana*, representing a very brief measure of time.
2. **Wú cháng (impermanence 無常):** from the Sanskrit *anitya*, meaning that all things in the world are subject to constant change.
3. **Fán nǎo (affliction 煩惱):** from the Sanskrit *klesa*, referring to troubling or distressing thoughts that weigh on the mind.
4. **Dìng lì (concentration 定力):** from the Sanskrit *samadhi*, meaning meditation, through which you can gain the power to suppress distress and delusions, it also implies a focused and unwavering will.
5. **Yì chén bù rǎn (spotless 一塵不染):** originating from the *Jingde Record of the Transmission of the Lamp*, this phrase originally referred to practitioners who were not corrupted by the six senses (sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and thought), but later came to mean an environment that is extremely clean.
6. **Bú èr fǎ mén (the non-dual path 不二法門):** from the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra*, this term means to understand reality by avoiding extreme or opposing views and thus attaining the truth. It has now come to describe the only method or way for achieving something.
7. **Sān shēng yǒu xìng (fortunate across three lives 三生有幸):** from the *Jingde Record of the Transmission of the Lamp*, this phrase originally referred in Buddhism to past, present, and future lives. It later came to mean extremely fortunate.
8. **Sì dà jiē kōng (the four elements are empty 四大皆空):** in Buddhism, the four elements—earth, water, fire and wind—are the basic components of matter and are believed to originate from the void, signifying that, ultimately, all things are empty or illusory. It is now used to mean having nothing.
9. **Wǔ tǐ tóu dì (prostrate with all five parts of the body 五體投地):** originally referring to the most respectful form of paying homage in ancient India where a person touches the ground with both knees, both elbows and the head, it is now used to express deep admiration.
10. **Liù gēn qīng jìng (the six senses purified 六根清淨):** in the *Lotus Sutra*, the six senses—eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind—must be free of desire and attachment. The phrase now means to become calm and undisturbed.
11. **Bù kě sī yì (inconceivable 不可思議):** in the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra*, this phrase describes the mysterious wisdom and abilities of buddhas and bodhisattvas. Today it means something unimaginable or beyond understanding.
12. **Héng hé shā shù (countless as the sands of the Ganges 恆河沙數):** in the *Diamond Sutra*, this phrase refers to the innumerable grains of sand in the Ganges River as a symbol of something that is so numerous that it cannot be counted.