

Conscious, preconscious, unconscious, subconscious¹

We should not fear words that can help us see Buddhism more clearly. We should accept the wisdom of ideas that helps us free ourselves from what language limits. “Consciousness,” for example, is a key term in western psychology, but it also serves as a very basic modern term in early Buddhism as the 5th of the 5 aggregates.² Words, after all, are how we use them. This is called the Humpty Dumpty rule.³

If we must live and speak only according to the dictionary, then ours is almost a dead language. Pali is not dead: it is the living language of spirituality, the Buddha’s teaching and awakening experience. It is not the Buddhisms of the scholars (which are often self-defining, and debunked by posterity). The Buddha’s teaching is a path of personal cultivation. It gives us a taste of true freedom.

Buddhism started as a historical event some 2,500 years ago, but continues to be a living experience for those who are able to see beyond its words. Although we do not need to revise sutta teachings or change the Dharma, we are confronted with new situations today and in every new generation. The roots of the suttas are, however, very ancient, going back to the time of the Buddha and his immediate disciples.

The mind scientists of our time are often attracted to early Buddhism and to adapt it for their own purposes because of its wide vocabulary dealing with the mind, its cogent theories about human behaviour, its methods of mind-healing, its interesting human-centred case-studies, and its life-centred mindfulness and meditation. The early Buddhist vision of mind-healing is so spiritual and efficacious that almost every living religion today has naturally adapted it as its own.

The Buddha speaks on the ego in profound terms well before we even invented the term “psychology.” While other religions are still struggling with the guiles of the soul-view and the guilt of the God-idea, the Buddha teaches us to look deep into our inner temple, the mind. The **ego**, we know from early Buddhism, is our public face. But it is really a mask, with which we identify and present before others. This is sometimes done consciously, more often unconsciously. In either case, it is always dictated by the preconscious, rooted in the unwholesome roots (*akusala, mūla*) of greed, hate and delusion.⁴

However, with training, we will be able to act, motivated by the wholesome roots of non-greed (charity), non-hate (lovingkindness) and non-delusion (wisdom). These two aspects of our mind—the wholesome and the unwholesome—are working for our attention in every waking moment, that is, our consciousness, which we shall detail below.

¹ This reflection is based on [SD 17.8a](#) (6.1).

² On the 5 aggregates, see [SD 17](#).

³ This is an allusion to Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* (1871): see *Saññā*, [SD 17.4](#) (2.3).

⁴ On the 3 unwholesome roots, see **Mūla Sutta** (A 3.69), [SD 18.2](#). On their social implications, see **The 3 Roots Inc**, [SD 31.12](#).

Freud's **superego** concept is similar to the early Buddhist notion of the preconscious⁵ mind, rooted in the unwholesome roots. If we wisely train ourself, we can motivate ourself to act with their wholesome counterparts (*kusala, mūla*) of non-greed, non-hate and non-delusion.

The best solutions to problems – personal, social or otherwise – begin in the mind. If we direct wise attention (*yoniso manasikāra*) to the situation, that is, reflecting before acting,⁶ we would be able to prevent our bodily actions or speech from being tainted by any of the unwholesome roots. Instead, we would be motivated by the wholesome roots of generosity, lovingkindness and wisdom.

We need to make a habit (*nati*) of these wholesome ways.⁷ Then, our moral precepts are kept. We, however, need mindfulness, or better, meditation, to deal with any negative mental karma. This is the essence of Buddhist therapy, the theme of numerous suttas on how we can heal ourself of the emotional extremes that our latent tendencies (approximately an equivalent of the modern idea of the id) and the unwholesome roots (the ego) put us through, even when we are conscious.

Early Buddhism has a set of three terms – ***citta, mano and viññāṇa*** – which are often synonymous: they all mean “**mind**.” In some contexts, however, they each respectively apply to the *preconscious*, the *unconscious* and the *conscious*.

On the preconscious level, there is ***citta***, “thought,” that decides how we should react to our sense-experiences. Colloquially, this is the “knower,” the subject of thinking and feeling, and which we need to understand, train and liberate. As such, it is also called “cognitive consciousness.”⁸ It is, in fact, the heart of human experience and our learning process. This is what we often understand as our ego.

On the unconscious level, there are **the latent tendencies** (*anusaya*), rooted in habitual karma and fed by craving. Colloquially, this is the “doer,” the back-seat driver that incessantly tries to dictate the knower. This is the root of our being human (or not), our emotions. It is the third karmic door and the 6th internal sense-base – the “mind” – which, through our physical senses, feeds the latent tendencies, our unconscious, which, in their turn, feeds our senses. And so the snake devours its own tail.

On the conscious level, there is ***viññāṇa***, more commonly known as “consciousness,” particularizing awareness through the sense-faculties, which constructs human experiences. As the subconscious, it functions as “existential consciousness,”⁹ since it is that which keeps us going in

⁵ On Buddhist usages of the terms the conscious, the preconscious, the subconscious and the unconscious, see [SD 17.8a](#) (6.1) & [SD 17.8b](#) (Fig 2.2.3).

⁶ On wise attention, see ***Nimitta and anuvyañjana***, [SD 19.14](#).

⁷ This term usually refers to a negative state, but its sense is not restricted to that. It simply denotes “an inclination, a habit or bias”: ***Dvedhā Vitakka Sutta*** (M 19/1:115,22), SD 61.1; ***Chann’ovāda Sutta*** (M 144,11/3:266,7), [SD 11.12](#); ***Cetanā Sutta 3*** (S 12.40/2:67,4), [SD 7.6c](#).

⁸ On “cognitive consciousness” and “existential consciousness” below, see [SD 17.8a](#) (6).

⁹ On “existential consciousness” and “cognitive consciousness” above, see [SD 17.8a](#) (6).

this life. And when we die, it is reborn; hence, it is also the rebirth consciousness. While we live, it is the conscious manifestation of our latent tendencies (the unconscious).¹⁰

This is, of course, not a perfect collation of Buddhist and Freudian psychology terminologies, nor is it intended to be one. It should sufficiently show some remarkably close connections and resemblances for a deeper study in its own right. Suffice it to say that Buddhist meditation therapy is a workable system in itself – taken wholesale and wholesomely – that only exhorts us to go with the flow of the inner mind so that we are at peace with ourself, if not, to awaken to true wisdom.¹¹

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

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¹⁰ On *mano*, *citta*, *viññāṇa*, further see [SD 17.8a](#) (6.1+12). For summary diagram, see [SD 17.8a](#) (Table 12.5).

¹¹ However, if taken as Buddhist psychotherapy or any kind of Buddhist-based “mindfulness” adaptation, then, it is wise to append it with a good understanding of modern counselling psychology for the early detection of emotional and psychological problems so that they can be properly addressed. On the dangers of some kinds of meditation, see Reflection, [Mad about meditation](#), R192, 2011.