

Does Buddhism have conscience?¹ (Part 2 of 2)

Conscience, then, became “the moral dimension of human consciousness, the means by which humans modify instinctual drives to conform to laws and moral codes.”² We see here the beginnings of psychology. **Sigmund Freud** (1858-1939) simply rejected religious conscience as being irrelevant and useless. In its place, he synthesized conscience and consciousness, and postulated a metapsychological tripartite psyche comprising the id, the ego and the superego.

The id is basically our “me-first-and-always” pleasure principle that seems to be a world of its own, but surreptitiously asserting itself whenever it can or likes. The ego is the conscious aspects of the mind in touch with reality, and negotiating between the primitive instinctive drives of the id, the internalized social, parental inhibitions and prohibitions of the superego, and the knowledge of reality.³

The superego (like conscience) restrains the pleasure-principled id from the immoral, while the ego, works to do what are considered morally right, under the close supervision of the superego.⁴ The superego, like conscience, suggests that they are conditioned by parents and authority figures, who convey their beliefs and values to the children. They, in turn, internalize these psychological conditionings by way of identification with a parent or authority figure, just as the flock looked up to its Church in the past.

Remarkably, almost all the better key ideas, and even therapies, of western psychology were mostly quite directly pre-empted in early Buddhism. Freud’s notion of the **id** shows close parallels to the early Buddhist notion of latent tendencies (*anusaya*), the raw roots of lust (*rāga*), repulsion (*paṭigha*) and ignorance (*avijjā*), lurking deep in the unconscious.

The latent tendencies can manifest themselves on many levels. As craving (*taṇhā*), conceit (*mana*), and wrong views (*diṭṭhi*), they are known as “grasping” (*gaha*) on account of the self-views of “I,” “me and “mine.” They form the threefold grasplings (*ti,vidha gāha*), as follows:

“Mine”	=	“This is mine”	--	grasping that is craving
“Me”	=	“This I am”	--	grasping that is conceit
“I”	=	“This is my self”	--	grasping that is wrong views

(Anattā,lakkhaṇa Sutta, S 22.59), SD 1.2

These tendencies, according to Freudian lingo, would describe the activities of the primitively self-centred **id**. In Buddhist mental training, we are exhorted to constantly remind ourselves regarding any of the sense-objects as follows: “This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.”⁵

The **ego**, in early Buddhism, is our public face, or rather, mask, we present before others, sometimes consciously, more often unconsciously, but always dictated by the preconscious, rooted

¹ This reflection is an abridgement of [SD 41.6 \(2.3.5\)](#) on the (Dasaka) Cetanā’karaṇīya Sutta (A 10.2).

² *Gale Encyclopedia of Psychology*, 2nd ed 2001: conscience.

³ See A S Reber, *The Penguin Dictionary of Psychology*, 1985: ego.

⁴ Other psychologists have proposed different theories about the development of the conscience. *Gale Encyclopedia of Psychology*, 2nd ed 2001: conscience; also sv Moral development.

⁵ See eg [Alaggadūpama Sutta](#) (M 22,26 f/1:138), [SD 3.12](#).

in the unwholesome roots (*akusala, mūla*) of greed, hate and delusion. However, with training, we are able to act, motivated by their wholesome counterparts of non-greed (charity), non-hate (lovingkindness) and non-delusion (wisdom). This may be said to be our everyday, even moment-to-moment, consciousness.

Freud's **superego** concept is similar to the early Buddhist notion of the preconscious⁶ mind, that can be rooted either in the unwholesome roots (*akusala, mūla*) of greed, hate and delusion, or in the wholesome roots of charity, love and wisdom. With proper self-restraint, wholesome self-regard and some joy, we are in better control of ourself, and when we are motivated to act, we do so with charity, love and wisdom.

Conscience, then, apparently competes with “consciousness.” It could well even mean “the mind” in a vague sense of how we think. It is probably with such notions in mind that Buddhadatta, in his English-Pali Dictionary rendered “conscience” as *mano, viññāṇa* (“mind-consciousness”) and *viveka, buddhi*, which could be mean “solitary intelligence” or “the wisdom of solitude.” Anyway, these are modernisms that should not detain us.

On this mental level, if we direct wise attention (*yoniso manasikāra*), that is, reflecting before acting,⁷ we would be able to prevent our bodily actions or speech to be tainted by any of the unwholesome roots, but be motivated by the wholesome roots, and to cultivate wholesome habits (*nati*).⁸

As such, we are able to keep the moral precepts, but we still need mindfulness and meditation to deal with 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 (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, as a rule, synonymous: that all mean “mind.” In the right contexts, however, they each respectively apply to the mind that is *preconscious, unconscious* and *conscious* (as mentioned above).

On the preconscious level, there is *citta*, “thought,” that decides, as it were, how we should react to our sense-experiences. Colloquially, this is the “knower,” the subject of thinking and feeling, and which needs to be understood, trained and liberated. As such, it is also called “cognitive consciousness.”⁹ It is, in fact, the heart of human experience and our learning process. All this is very similar to what Freud, in his time, called the ego.

On the unconscious level, there are the latent tendencies, fed by karma, especially our habitual conduct. Colloquially, this is the “doer,” the back-seat driver that incessantly tries to dictate the knower. This is the roots of our being human (or not), our emotions. It is the third karmic door

⁶ 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).

⁷ On wise attention, see *Nimitta and anuvyañjana*, [SD 19.14](#).

⁸ This term usu 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](#); U:Be+Ce 81,7 (UA 398,18).

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

and the 6th internal sense-base, the “mind,” through which the latent tendencies, our unconscious, is fed. This is very similar to Freud’s idea of the id.

On the conscious level, there is *viññāṇa*, better known as “consciousness,” particularizing awareness through the sense-faculties, and which constructs human experience. It also functions, in part, as the “existential consciousness,”¹⁰ since it is what keeps us going in this life, and is reborn, that is, the rebirth consciousness. While we live, it is the conscious manifestation of our latent tendencies (the unconscious). This is very much like the Freudian notion of the ego.

This is, of course, not a perfect collation of Buddhist teachings and Freudian psychology, 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, Buddhist meditation therapy is a workable system in itself, that only exhorts us to go with the flow of the inner mind so that we are at least truly at peace with ourself, even awoken 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 “existential consciousness”, see [SD 17.8a](#) (6).

¹¹ On *mano*, *citta*, *viññāṇa*, further see [SD 17.8a](#) (6.1+12). For summary diagram, see [SD 17.8a](#) (Table 12.5).