

Ancient wisdom, modern idiom¹

Early Buddhist texts translated into English should sound and feel as idiomatic as good modern English. It should “sound” and “look” English, and also clearly and beautifully express the original Pali sense. This is, of course, not always easy, as we must know Pali well enough and the Buddhist teachings (at least the related teaching) well enough to bring out the intended sense of the Pali word, expression or passage.

At least where passages on meditation are concerned, we should have been reasonably diligent practitioners ourselves. For effective Buddhist practice, we first need to be **bodily cultivated** (*bhāvita, kāya*) by way of understanding and practising at least the 5 precepts, as the basis for proper mental concentration (*samādhi*).²

Mental training started with the calming and clearing of the mind in the overcoming (at least temporarily) of **the 5 mental hindrances**—sensual desire, ill will, restlessness and remorse, sloth and torpor, and doubt—so that we can attain some significant duration and depth of transcendental bliss and stillness. This keeps us **mentally cultivated** (*bhāvita, citta*).

The cultivated mind is then used as a keen tool for reflecting on our experiences—especially the mind-made episodes, including peace and joy—in the light of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and non-self, that is, **the 3 universal characteristics**.³ Briefly, this forms the bases of the threefold training (*ti, sikkhā* or *sikkha-t, taya*) of a practitioner.⁴

Translating the early Buddhist texts and teaching them—not as an academic subject, but as a living experience—is like loving, learning, playing and teaching beautiful music. We must not only know the *truth* of the Dharma, but also feel its *beauty*. The purpose of the Dharma is for us to walk the path of self-transformation by seeing directly into true reality and, thereby, to better ourselves. This way, we will see what the Buddha himself saw, become spiritually liberated as he was, and help liberate others as he and the early saints did.

The English-speaking world is becoming more familiar with Buddhist texts and teachings. Words like Buddha, Dharma,⁵ sangha,⁶ karma,⁷ dhyana,⁸ bhikshu and nirvana are found in the larger English dictionaries, and are, as such, readily familiar to the English-language readers, students and experts. Such words should be appropriately used in the translation of the Pali texts into English.

Although many such words are originally *Sanskrit* terms, they are now English words. We should not be troubled by the prospect of being “infected” with “later” Buddhist notions or

¹ This reflection forms [SD 26.11](#) (3.3).

² On mental concentration, see *Samādhi*, [SD 33.1a](#).

³ On the 3 universal characteristics, see *Anatta Lakkhaṇa Sutta* (S 22.59,12-16), [SD 1.2](#).

⁴ On the 3 trainings, see *Sīla samādhi paññā*, [SD 21.6](#).

⁵ The Harijan Buddhists of India have good reason to be cautious about using the form “Dharma,” as it reflects the oppression of the dominant Hindu and Hindutva politics. This Harijan sentiment should be respected; perhaps some skillful means can be used to make correct and uplift this sad situation.

⁶ On “sangha” and related words, see [SD 64.17](#) (7.4.3).

⁷ On the anglicized “karma,” see [SD 18.1 \(3.2\)](#).

⁸ On the anglicization of *jhāna* as “dhyana,” see [SD 8.4](#) (1.1.1.2).

“other” religions, as long as we make their usages and contexts clear to our readers and audience. It also helps for us to define, even redefine, such anglicizations. Words are, after all, how we use them.⁹

More importantly, in **the Araṇa Vibhaṅga Sutta** (M 139), for example, the Buddha advises us not to be caught up with “regional language” (*janapada, nirutti*), but to use available words and terms – or “common usage” (*samañña*). In other words, we should, where it is helpful, to naturally adapt such familiar terms to express the Dharma to reach out to others.¹⁰

Many western Buddhist scholars and sympathizers are concerned with the use (or misuse) of English words that are heavily infected with negative meanings and implications (denotations and connotations), of theistic notions, such as sin, evil, soul, and so on. But such words are very few. Of course, we should avoid using such very specific theistic terms when we have the proper Buddhist words for them. After all, words like “sin” is a shibboleth that betrays itself.

But words like “evil”—especially when it has no theistic connotations—is not easy to reject, even when we replace it with “bad.” These are good old clear and simple Anglo-Saxon words that we should use whenever we have them, rather than the unwieldy, pretentious Graeco-Latinisms (although they do, at times, have their uses).

Perhaps, we can and should resurrect Anglo-Saxon words like “bad” in their pre-Christian freshness and directness.¹¹ This will, however, take some time to win familiarity and acceptance by those who use our translations and works.

A word like “soul” may still be used (such as in an essay), when we want to invoke a profound spirit that richly inspires beauty and truth, say, in Buddhist art as expressed by cultures familiar with the non-theistic goodness of the word. Still, we need to define the terms and explain our usages.

A good artist is still able to create beauty despite limitations to his media of expression. Beauty is defined in his work, much less so in the media; or, that the humble is enriched by the genius of the artist.

Now, with the love affair between modern psychology and early Buddhism, especially its meditation tradition, Buddhism is being “psychologized”—some may say, plagiarized or “pirated”—by those engaged in the mind sciences and mind-healing occupations. The sentiments of Buddhist scholars and philosophers of cognitive science and related fields, Jake H Davis and Evan Thompson, gives us a good idea of how early Buddhism can benefit modern psychology, thus:

“The model of attention, consciousness, and mindfulness that we draw from the Nikāya accounts of the five aggregates is of interest to us because it suggests promising new directions for scientific investigations of the mind. Put another way, whatever value our model has lies not in any claim to historical authenticity but, rather, in its claim to being empirically accurate and productive of further research.”¹²

⁹ On the “Humpty Dumpty” rule, see [SD 17.4](#) (2.3).

¹⁰ M 139,13 (6), [SD 7.8](#).

¹¹ On the issues related to the words “evil” and “bad,” see [SD 18.7](#) (3).

¹² J N Davis & E Thompson, “[From the five aggregates to phenomenal consciousness](#),” 2014:585.

Whether Buddhism will become psychologized, or modern psychology buddhized, remains to be seen. It seems, however, whichever way, this emerges, there are broad benefits either way. This meeting of ancient Buddhist wisdom and modern mind science is a quantum leap in the advancement of human learning—indeed, it is surely the highlight of this “millennium of the mind” the future of which is yet to be seen.

Early Buddhism, as we know it, has two vital spiritual strata: the eternal Dharma and its conventional application – the explicit and the implicit teachings.¹³ We must cultivate this vital understanding so that Buddhism grows as a living religion and path to awakening. While the sciences, as a rule, work with a third-person observation, the Buddhist experience must always be a first-hand Dharma-spirited one. This is where early Buddhism provides modern psychology with a valuable new insight that it almost never had before, and with which it will become a most significant human endeavour in understanding of the human mind and living.

By the same token of openness, early Buddhism can learn from the discoveries, insights and language of modern psychology. The early Buddhist vocabulary of human behaviour, the mind and meditation, are filled with technicality that only a Buddhist specialist or a diligent enthusiast may comprehend and appreciate. However, there are many modern psychological terms and ideas that actually describe or allude to what early Buddhism understands and teaches about human behaviour, the mind, meditation and mental health.

The term “**consciousness**” is a staple Buddhist term, and commonly accepted translation of *viññāṇa*. If early Buddhism speaks of the conscious mind, there is surely its **preconscious** dimension, that aspect of the mind that precedes our acts (Dh 1-2), moralizing it with our intention (*cetanā*), making them “karmic formations” (*saṅkhātā*) expressed through the three doors of human experience (body, speech and mind).

What induces us to habitually act in almost predictable ways are our “latent tendencies” (*anusaya*). These are like long-lasting heavy-duty karmic batteries that are recharged every time we act with greed, hate or delusion—which is practically the rule if we are unawakened—and which, in turn, spur us to keep on devouring the tail of our own karmic snake. And we don’t even know this.¹⁴ Hence, we can label it as **the unconscious**.

Even deeper in this unconscious is the very heart of the whole psycho-physical process. This is the livewire that runs throughout our life, even when we are asleep. In our waking moments, our “cognitive consciousness” overwhelms the “life-continuum” (*bhav’āṅga*), so that it sinks into the unconscious, emerging when our cognitive processes are at rest, such as when we are asleep or unconscious. This is the **subconscious**, otherwise known as the “existential consciousness.”¹⁵

Although these terms—consciousness, the preconscious, the unconscious and the subconscious – are intimately shared by early Buddhism and modern psychology, they do not always refer to the same concepts or processes. Indeed, they need not—they work with different paradigms and have different purposes. While modern psychology seeks to understand the nature of the

¹³ See **Neyy’attha Nīta’ttha Sutta** (A 5.2.3.5+6), [SD 2.6b](#).

¹⁴ See eg Reflection, [No views frees](#), R255, 2012.

¹⁵ On “cognitive consciousness” and “existential consciousness,” see SD [SD 17.8a](#) (6), esp Fig 6.1.

mind and work with human behaviour, early Buddhism explains and exemplifies how we can cultivate a healthy body in a healthy mind for the sake of gaining the full freedom of our being.¹⁶

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

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¹⁶ See Reflection, **Conscious preconscious unconscious subconscious**, R459, 2016.