

Our 4-in-1 mind

Early Buddhism has a surprisingly wide vocabulary of what we today call “psychological” terms and concepts. A significant part of the Buddha’s teachings deals with mental health and we have a number of remarkable case histories of sufferers who are healed by the Buddha’s teachings. No other religious tradition has come to even half as remarkable in this as early Buddhism.

This also means that we may face some difficulties if we are not familiar with the suttas, or the sutta mind-teachings, such as the 4 key terms relating to the mind— the conscious, the preconscious, the unconscious and the subconscious. These terms, however, become less problematic when we see early Buddhist teachings as “canonical contexts” of these terms, not just as parts of “canonical texts.” Let us examine the 4 key-words in their early Buddhist contexts.

CONSCIOUS¹

By “**conscious**” (first recorded English use, 1664) is meant the basic activities of the sense-faculties, that is, analyzing and categorizing sense-experiences, at their respective sense-doors, that is, the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind. When we are conscious, we are always conscious “of” something. In other words, consciousness never exists in itself. It is nonsensical to speak of a Universal Consciousness: universally being conscious of ... what? It’s even more problematic when we take it as a noun, as something, meaning or suggesting that it is unchanging or eternal.

PRECONSCIOUS²

The “preconscious” (first recorded use, 1860) is so called when we are, in some way, conscious of our motive, but may not be in full control of it. Or that what we have said or done is the fruit of how we have thought. In early Buddhism, we can helpfully apply this term to the way the 3 unwholesome roots and the 3 wholesome roots function.

When we are motivated by one of the unwholesome roots (greed, hate or delusion) or by the bias of fear, we usually notice this first. Then, our action or speech is projected or coloured accordingly. The same applies when we are motivated by the wholesome roots of non-greed, non-hate or non-delusion; or we are inspired by courage.

¹ *Viññāṇa*, SD 17.8a (6.1): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/17.8a-Khandha-5-Vinnana-piya.pdf>.

² See SD 7.10 (3.3): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/7.10-Maha-Tanhasankhaya-S-m38-piya.pdf>.

UNCONSCIOUS³

The notion of **the “unconscious”** (first recorded use, 1712) is as ancient as Buddhism itself, which defines it as the latent tendencies (*anusaya*). I use the term “unconscious” in this sense, referring to the latent tendencies of lust, aversion and ignorance, which manifest themselves as the 3 unwholesome roots—greed, hate, and delusion—or **the preconscious**, motivating negative karmic acts through the body, speech and mind [see above].

SUBCONSCIOUS⁴

The term **“subconscious”** (first recorded use, 1832) is used to refer to the “existential consciousness,” rebirth consciousness or life-continuum (*bhav’anga*). This is what is reborn after a person dies. It is like a mental gene or karmic seed.

Imagine what is stored in a seed turns it into a plant or tree. The seed itself will not work. It depends on a number of other conditions: earth, water, warmth, air, etc (these are, in fact, the 4 primary elements which constitute us and every thing else). The key difference is that the human “seed” also contains the “genes” of consciousness.

The best usage and understanding of these terms in early Buddhism is not to think of them in terms of modern psychology with all its theories and uncertainties. These terms should be taken as they are in the early Buddhist concepts and contexts so that they give us a clearer and helpful appreciation of the historical Buddha’s teaching. We may, of course, when we have some deep understanding of both early Buddhism and modern psychodynamics, compare the two sets of terms and ideas.

³ **The unconscious**, SD 17.8b (1): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/17.8b-The-unconscious.-piya.pdf>.

⁴ **The radiant mind** SD 8.3: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/8.3-Radiant-mind.-piya.pdf>. See also DEB: the subconscious.

THE 4-IN-1
MIND

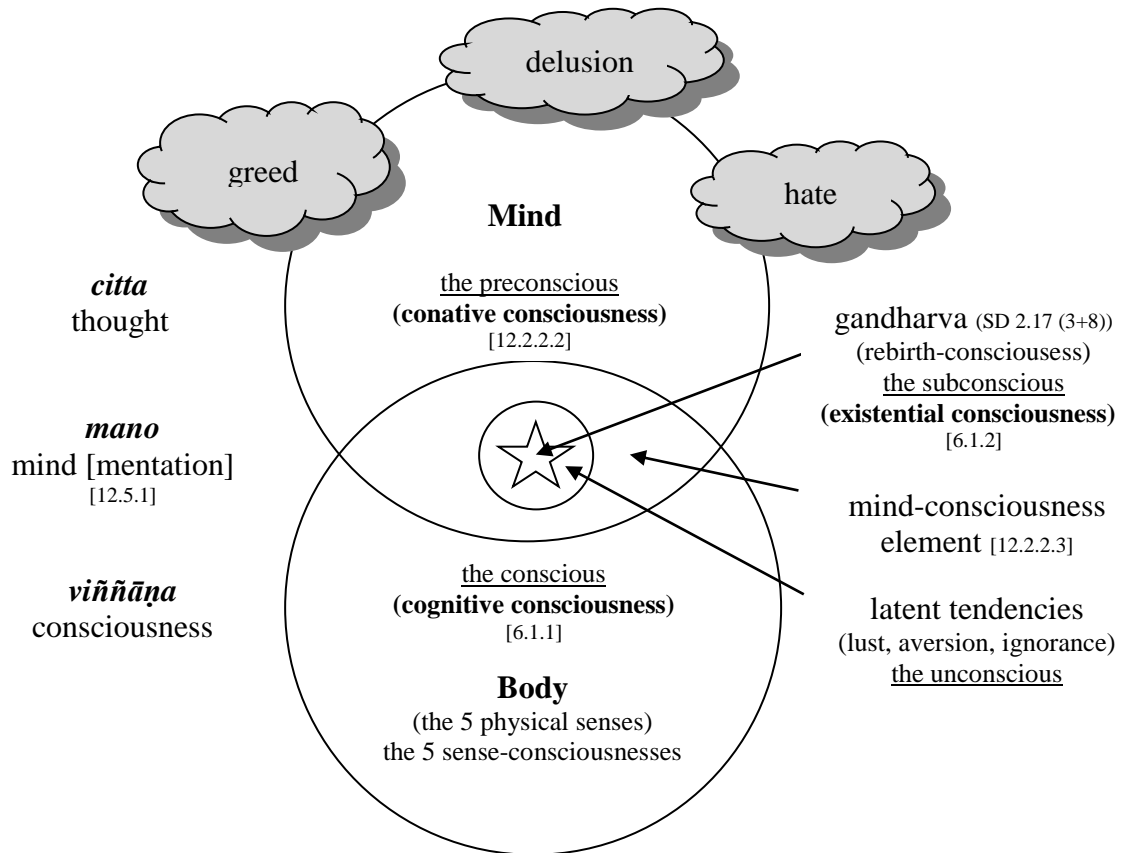


Fig 6.1 The “Eclipse” Mind Diagram

Cf SD 17.8b (Fig 2.2); 12.1.2 & Table 12.5

R515 Revisoning Buddhism 189

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

Copyright by Piya Tan ©2017