

## Conceit (*Māna*)

A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on  
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As we sit on our cushions morning after morning, we are gradually developing the habit of bringing wise and careful attention to our minds and hearts. Not paying simple attention, but attention combined with mindfulness and wise view - remembering to give attention to what is being experienced right now with a focus on seeing it objectively, and meeting it with an understanding of what actions — whether in thought, word or deed— are skillful and what actions are unskillful.

Slowly we begin to generalize this same kind of wise attention to our minds and hearts during the remainder of our daily life. And as this happens we begin to see for ourselves the ways in which craving or hunger for sense desire, or for existence, or even for non-existence, flow through our lives like rivers flowing through a delta. They branch this way and that through the moment-to-moment experiences at the six sense doors, creating a complex web of craving that, nevertheless, keeps flowing on.

Our practice isn't so much to make this craving go away -- after all it doesn't end until the higher stages of awakening. Rather, our practice is to recognize when we are caught in the current of one of these rivers once again, to see clearly that this is what is occurring, so that in this particular situation we have a choice.

We have a choice of seeing that to just go with the flow of this current of craving will inevitably lead us to more suffering in our lives. We have a choice of seeing that we have the capacity to respond differently and that this different way of responding is what will lead to more ease in our lives.

Underlying these currents of craving, particularly the craving for existence or non-existence of the self, is the delusion that in Pāli is referred to as *māna*, translated as "conceit" in English. At the core of conceit is the sense that "I am."

This sense of "I am" is the sense of there being an "I" or "me" that has continuity over time and space, the sense that "I was born on such and such a date in this certain place, and I grew up in this place and went to school here" and so forth. It is the sense that there is a separate, distinct "me" who is present here right now listening to these words. This sense is so strong and so real to us that to suggest that this is delusion actually sounds delusional to most people.

What the Teachings tell us is that this sense "I am" is actually a construction. It is built, moment-by-moment, from a combination of sense experiences, intentions to grasp or identify with these experiences, and laying concepts, images and memories of a felt experience of "I" "me" and "mine" on top of these experiences and intentions. The sense of continuity is built

from failing to pay careful and quite close attention to our experience, especially failing to see the rising and falling of experience from moment-to-moment.

But the inconstancy of experience, the impermanent quality of it, always threatens to break through into awareness. And so this sense of "I am" which on the one hand feels so real, carries with it an uneasiness, a sense of fragility, so that it needs to be constantly reinforced by more experiential constructions that "I am."

One of the ways that this happens is through what is often called "Comparing Mind", which is an aspect of māna or conceit. In English the word "conceit" typically brings to mind the idea of someone who thinks "I am better than" someone else. We typically think that when someone is being "conceited" that they are arrogant and feeling quite self-important. But the Pāli word māna is broader than this, it includes other forms of comparison as well. Conceit, in this sense, also includes thinking that "I am not as good as" and thinking "I am the same as."

This last form really clarifies that conceit is about reinforcing this idea of "I am." Part of the delusion of conceit is the belief that there is actually a self that can be compared.

The point of this is not that we should exchange one belief for another. Although the belief "I am" is wrong view and the understanding "I am' is a construction" is right view. The point is that if we investigate our daily experiences using the framework of the Four Noble Truths, then we can see for ourselves that the belief "I am" arises from failing to pay close and clear attention, wise attention, to our moment-to-moment experience.

If we investigate our experience in this way we can see for ourselves that a sense of unease, of unsatisfactoriness and of suffering arises in our lives when we act on the basis of this belief "I am." And we can see for ourselves that when we're able to just be with our experience as it is from moment to moment, without grasping, pushing away or identification, then we are able to live this up and down life with a quality of ease and intimacy that is quite remarkable.