

Mind, the three words

Although Indian Buddhism is over 2500 years old, it is keenly aware of the mind and its workings. Not only that, the Buddha, its historical founder, speaks regularly and consistently on how to know the mind, tame it and free it, as he has himself done so. During his 45-year public ministry that covers the central Ganges plain (roughly the area of Singapore and peninsular Malaysia), his teachings and meditations benefit a huge cross-section of society, from the highest (such as kings and ministers) to the lowest (such as road sweepers and outcasts), who become liberated individuals.

The Buddha's meditation methods are still practised today and continue to benefit a growing number amongst us. Over the last half-century or so, his mind teachings and methods have given modern psychology and psychiatry a new boost beyond the classical psychology of Freud and others. The Buddha's meditation methods have also been assimilated by a number of world religions over the decades, thus providing a common avenue for peaceful dialogue of the spirit amongst the peace-loving truth-seekers of all religions and the non-religious.

Early Buddhism has three words for the mind, that is, *citta*, *mano*, and *viññāṇa*, which work as synonyms in many of the Buddha's discourses or suttas. In the two **Assutava Suttas** (S 12.61-62), we find an interesting statement on the mind, along with his famous parable of the monkey:

"Bhikshus [Monks], that which is called 'thought' (*citta*), and 'mind' (*mano*), and 'consciousness' (*viññāṇa*), arises as one and ceases as another, just as night is to day." That is to say, our thought-stream is a series of discrete moments. Something like an endless series of Newton's cradles.¹

The Buddha continues: "Just as a monkey, bhikshus, roaming through the forest and mountain-side takes hold of one branch, letting that go, then grabs another, even so, bhikshus, that which is called 'thought,' and 'mind,' and 'consciousness,' arises, as one and ceases as another, just as night is to day."²

Why does the Buddha use three words for the mind, when one would have sufficed? The point is that these three words each have their own important nuances. Yet, at the same time, the Buddha's language is such that he avoids being technical as much as possible. Moreover, the three words do point to the same thing, that is, the mind. Hence, they are synonyms, as well as denoting their own special meanings. We will now briefly look at the three words in their different senses.

Mano serves as the third of the three doors of action – body, speech and mind; hence, we can translate it as "the mind," in a general sense. It also serves as the sixth sense-faculty or internal sense-base. We have the five physical senses (called "sense-bases" in early Buddhism). As the mind base, it coordinates the data of the other five senses, and also cognizes or "knows" mental phenomena (whatever occurs in our minds). These are its special class of objects. *Citta* refers to the actual thinking process. While *mano* may be said to be generally involuntary, we can, with training, have better control of *citta*, our thinking. *Viññāṇa* refers to our basic conscious process on the level of the "raw" senses, or how our senses work for us.

¹ **Newton's cradle**, named after Sir Isaac Newton, is a device that demonstrates conservation of momentum and energy by way of a series of small swinging spheres. When one on the end is lifted and released, the resulting force travels through the line and pushes the last one upward. The device is also known as "Newton's rocker," "Newton's balls" or "Executive ball clicker." See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Newton's_cradle & <http://science.howstuffworks.com/newtons-cradle.htm>

² **Assutava S 1+2** (S 12.61.7 f/2:95 = S 12.61.7/2:96) = SD 20.2-3: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/20.2-Assutava-S-1-s12.61-piya.pdf> & <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/20.3-Assutava-S-2-s12.62-piya.pdf>

Here are the rules of thumb for understanding how the terms *citta*, *mano*, and *viññāṇa*, are used, by way of their verbs. The verb for ***citta*** is *cinteti*, “he thinks or intends”; hence, *citta* is best translated as “thought.” ***Mano***, perhaps due to its being natural or abstract *mental* process seems to have no direct verb.³ As such, we are left, as it were, with “mind” as the most suitable translation here. ***Viññāṇa*** is clearly a psychological term, as indicated by its verb, *vijānāti*, “to cognize, have discriminative knowledge, be aware of, ascertain,” and technically describes the working of consciousness. However, in the early suttas, it often simply means “to know.”⁴

Let’s talk a bit more about ***mano***, which is of special psychological significance, as it refers to the general workings of the unawakened mind. One key characteristic of such a mind is that it loves to speculate. Speculation might work in philosophy and science for their own purposes. The Buddha, however, simply discourages us from speculating about those things that are not related to the spiritual quest, that is, inner peace and self-liberation. Speculating about what happens after death, or about the creation and destruction of the universe is not helpful for mental calm and clarity.

The Buddha explains the various reasons for our speculating mind.⁵ Firstly, it arises from **craving** (*taṇhā*), a thirst for knowing (through the 5 senses), which is not bad in itself, but the problem is that we do not really know what we are looking for. In fact, the key problem is that, due to our preconceptions (rooted in craving, which entails hate and delusion), we keep asking the wrong questions, such as, “Who created the world?” (instead of “What is ‘world?’”), “Do you believe in *God*?” (instead of asking “Why do we fear?”), and so on.

If we ask the wrong questions, we will never find the right or good answers. We might keep looking for the answers to fit our wrong questions. This is what is meant by **perception** (*saññā*) here. We have some fixed ideas in our heads, and we look around for situations or imaginations that we *recognize* as fitting our preconceptions. This is what most God-believers do -- it is just like belonging to a political party or warring tribe. The dogmas and rituals define the tribe: those who accept the dogmas and perform the rituals are regarded as “good” or “faithful,” and as true members of the tribe.

Next, our **imaginings** (*maññita*) reinforce our beliefs, turning them into dogmas. We create stories to present and dramatize realities as we misunderstand them, and project a world that we have blindly created. In fact, our minds have become so narrowed that it is not difficult to imagine such “truths.”

Often, fear, greed, and power are used to reinforce such ideas and obedience. Unbelievers will go to “hell”; believers will be rewarded; we must obey the holy book or those who know them, and so on. Such beliefs and practices are ritually indoctrinated into us so that we are conditioned to accept them without question. We are overwhelmed by “other thoughts”—this is an example of **mental proliferation** (*papañcita*).

Those who propagate such beliefs and perform their rituals often wear uniforms that conjure up a sense of power and mystique to instill fear and awe in the believers. Then there are the memes⁶ of buildings and bigness: massive or impressive structures to swallow up faithful numbers reinforce the rule and rightness of the few that control the tribe.

³ There are 2 close verbs -- *maneti* and *manteti* -- but not directly related to *mano*. *Māneti*, a causative of √MAN, “to think,” means “to honour, revere, think highly (of).” *Manteti*, amongst others, means “to consider, think over.”

⁴ SD 20.2 (2.4): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/20.2-Assutava-S-1-s12.61-piya.pdf>

⁵ See eg **Avyākata Sutta** (A 7.54.11/4:68 f) & SD 40a.11 (3.2): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/40a.11-Avyakata-Sutta-a7.5-piya.pdf>

⁶ See **Memes** = SD 26.3: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/26.3-Memes-piya.pdf>

Once such mechanisms are in place and kept running, it is easy to hold the flock within the tribal pasture, immunized from the outside world. As we grow conditioned like cattle in a pen and sheep in a pasture, **clinging** (*upādāna*) works naturally within us-- we keep falling back on what we have been taught and trained to think. If we stop thinking, it is not difficult to be euphoric in such a situation, drugged by the words and ways that we are fed with and used to -- this is "conditioning."

And if we should stray from the path -- and, as normal humans, we are wont to -- we would naturally feel guilt or **remorse** (*vippaṭisāra*). For, guilt is a feeling that we have fallen short of the glory of a higher power, we have disobeyed an authority -- we are thinking for ourselves, outside of the box or pen. This guilt can be devastating: it destroys our sanity if we remain overwhelmed by the tribe or crowd. The nail that sticks out is often struck hard by the hammer of tribal truth and power. We simply need to break out of the tribe and tribal thinking.⁷

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⁷ Further see *Viññāṇā* = SD 17.8a (12): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/17.8a-Khandha-5-Vinnana-piya.pdf>