

# AN INFLUENCE OF CONCEIT (MĀNA) ON INDIVIDUALS AND THE WAY TO OVERCOME IT



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## ABSTRACT

This paper aims to present the meaning of conceit (*māna*), how it can have influence on the normal and noble persons, and how to overcome conceit from the Theravāda Buddhist point of view. According to Theravāda Buddhism, man is composed of mind and matter (*nāma and rūpa*). In terms of mind (*nāma*), it has two parts: consciousness (*citta*) and mental factors (*cetasika*). The characteristic of consciousness has only “knowing the objects” and it does not have any ability to create actions. However, when the mental factors arise with consciousness, they can make good or bad actions: bodily action, verbal action and mental action. Interestingly, conceit which is characterized as ‘haughtiness’, that being the quality that normal persons try to maintain, is the delicate Dhamma the noble persons try to give up.

*Keywords:* Conceit, māna, Individuals, Noble persons, ariya puggala.

## INTRODUCTION

Conceit or *māna*, which plays very important role in Theravāda Buddhism, is referred to in a variety of different names. Such as, mental factor (*cetasika*), defilement (*kilesa*), fetter (*saṃyojana*), latent tendency (*anusaya*) and mental proliferation (*papañca*). However, the different names are not of importance in the Dhamma; all the teaching of the Buddha are focused on removing all mental defilements or hindrances. According to the Theravāda Buddhist perspective, all beings are composed of five aggregates: the aggregates of feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), mental properties (*sankhāra*) and consciousness (*viññāna*). These four mental states form the mind and the last aggregate, *rūpa* or matter forms the body. Man is, therefore, a combination of mind and matter. Mind in man is like a driver in a car, the car itself is like the matter.

The power of mind has no comparison with anything known by us, but we may compare it with colossal energy inherent in electricity, or perhaps, with atomic power. The electrical power could be utilized for different purposes, for good or bad or indifferent, and so does our mind. The atomic power now utilized for human destruction could be utilized for the alleviation of human suffering as well. Mind may be said to be like pure, transparent water which can be mixed with anything. When it is mixed with mud, it becomes thick and defiled and you cannot see through it.. In the same way, this supreme, incomparable energy known as mind, which is by nature clear, bright and transparent, becomes dirty, defiled and poisonous by ill use.<sup>1</sup> Here in, this paper would like to address the concept of the unwholesome mental factor of known as conceit (*māna*) in accordance with Theravāda Buddhism.

## MĀNA

An etymological explanation finds that the term *māna* has two meanings: the first meaning signifies “highly thinking of oneself”. According to this, *māna* is derived from the root  $\sqrt{man+aṇa}$  (*māneti*). The second meaning refers to “measurement”, which stems from the root  $\sqrt{mi}$  or  $mī+ṇā$  (*mināti*).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Sayadaw U Thittila, **Essential Themes of Buddhist Lectures**, (Yangon: Department of Religious Affairs, 2000), p. 255.

<sup>2</sup>Rhys Davids and W. Stede, **Pāli-English Dictionary**, (London: PTS), p. 539.

In the *Vibhaṅga*, *māna* is defined as ‘conception’, ‘the state of conception’, ‘haughtiness’, ‘loftiness’, ‘mark’, ‘assumption’, or ‘the desire of prominence’.

There is conceit or pride when we consider ourselves important. Because of conceit we may compare ourselves with others. There can be conceit when we think ourselves better, equal or less than someone else. We may believe that there can be conceit only when we think ourselves better than someone else, but this is not so. There can be a kind of upholding of ourselves, of making ourselves important, while we compare ourselves with someone else, no matter in what way, and that is conceit.<sup>3</sup>

Besides, *māna* can be identified as:

One of the fourteen unwholesome mental factors in Theravada Abhidhamma teachings.

One of the ten fetters in the Theravada tradition.

One of the latent tendencies under the title of *anusaya*.

One of the proliferations under the name of *papañca*.<sup>4</sup>

There are three roots of the unwholesome: greed, hatred and delusion; and three roots of the wholesome mental states: non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion. These two types of mental states which consist of three roots of unwholesome and wholesome volitional are acted through deeds, words or thoughts. The terms ‘wholesome’ and ‘unwholesome’ comprise all volitional actions that bind living beings to the round of rebirth and suffering.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, all actions spring from these roots, which are called ‘*kusalakamma*’ (wholesome action) or ‘*akusalakamma*’ (unwholesome). The Pāli word ‘*hetu*’ ordinarily means ‘a condition’, ‘a reason’, or ‘a cause’. In Abhidhamma, ‘*hetu*’ has a more specific meaning. Here *hetu* refers to six types of leader *cetasikas* which are compared to a root. When having roots, a tree is firm stable, and strong. If a tree has no roots, it will be weak, unstable, and fall very easily.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, when an action is formed through the wholesome mental roots, the results of such actions are good, while an action formed with the unwholesome mental factors, the results of such actions are bad. Good result or bad results of the actions are due to characteristics of these mental roots.

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<sup>3</sup> *ibid* p. 543.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid* p. 355.

<sup>5</sup> Gorkom, Nina va, *Cetasika*, (London: Zalog, 2010), p. 125.

<sup>6</sup> I. B. Horner, O. B. E (tr.), *The Middle Length Sayings*, (London: PTS), p. 141.

*Māna* (conceit) can be found in the four types of consciousness dissociated with wrong view (*diṭṭhi*). The origination of *māna* is connected with each individual. It is rooted in consciousness associated with greed (*lobha*). *Māna* and *diṭṭhi* or conceit and wrong view never arise simultaneously in one particular consciousness. The commentaries have given an example of these two mental states by comparing them to two fearless lions that cannot live in one den.

In fact, there are three main types of conceit that we can find in the canonical texts. For instance, “I am superior (*seyya*),” “I am equal (*sadisa*),” and “I am inferior (*hīna*),”. Three types of persons are ranked according to the social status: superior, equal, and inferior. These results are varied in nine possible arrangements and each type of person can potentially have all three types of conceit. The nine possible arrangements are as follows:

1. *Seyyassa seyyohamasmīti māno* = This of one who is better is called the conceit thus, “I am better”.
2. *Seyyassa sadisohamasmīti māno* = This of one who is better is called the conceit thus, “I am equal”.
3. *Seyyassa hīnohamasmīti māno* = This of one who is better is called the conceit thus, “I am inferior”.
4. *Sadisassa seyyohamasmīti māno* = This of one who is equal is called the conceit thus, “I am better”.
5. *Sadisassa sadisohamasmīti māno* = This of one who is equal is called the conceit thus, “I am equal”.
6. *Sadisassa hīnohamasmīti māno* = This of one who is equal is called the conceit thus, “I am inferior”.
7. *Hīnassa seyyohamasmīti māno* = This of one who is inferior is called the conceit thus, “I am better”.
8. *Hīnassa sadisohamasmīti māno* = This of one who is inferior is called the conceit thus, “I am equal”.
9. *Hīnassa hānohamasmīti māno* = This of one who is inferior is called the conceit thus, “I am inferior”.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Vibh. P. 363.

## NOBLE PERSONS AND ORDINARY PERSONS

There are four pairs of stages that are enlightenment, or the stages of realizing *Nibbāna*. These consist of the four paths (*magga*) and the four fruits (*phala*):

The path and fruit of stream-entry (*sotāpatti-magga* and *sotāpatti-phala*).

The path and fruit of once-returning (*sakadāgāmi-magga* and *sakadāgāmi-phala*).

The path and fruit of non-returning (*anāgāmi-magga* and *anāgāmi-phala*).

The path and fruit of arahantship (*arahatta-magga* and *arahatta-phala*).

An ordinary person who reaches one of these stages of enlightenments is called a real disciple of the Buddha, a so called *ariya puggala* or ‘noble persons.’

The first path of stream-entry is also known as ‘vision’ (*dassana*), because it refers to the first glimpse of *nibbāna*. The following three “path” of once-returning, non-returning, and arahantship are collectively known as ‘cultivation’ (*bhavanā*), since they involve a development in the truth (*dhamma*) initially realized at the moment of stream-entry.<sup>8</sup>

*Ariya* is generally translated as ‘cultivated’, ‘noble’, or ‘far from the foe or far from mental defilements’, while ‘*puggala*’ means ‘person’. The Buddha referred to people who are at one of these four stages as noble people (*ariya puggala*) and the community of such persons as the noble saṅgha (*ariya saṅgha*).

In contrast, an ordinary person is a general translation of the pāli word ‘*puthujana*’. In accordance with etymological explanation, *puthujana* means ‘one who can arise various or many defilements’. An ordinary person is trapped in an endless cycle of *samsāra*. An ordinary person born, lives and dies in this endless cycle of rebirth, either as a deity, human, animal, male, female, neuter, ghost, or various other kinds of different existences.

## INFLUENCE OF CONCEIT (*MĀNA*) ON ORDINARY PERSON

We usually see people with pride as a having large egos. One who is proud and conceited is difficult to get along with and not easy to be associated with. Another apparent characteristic of conceited person is not being open-minded. They are not willing to learn from others, as they think they already know everything. Practically, one who is conceited

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<sup>8</sup>Bhikkhu Nānamoli (tr.) , **The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)**, (Kandy: BPS, 1956-2010), p. 697.

does not have many friends and nobody wants to be associated with him or her. Therefore, the impact of conceit on an ordinary person is being ‘lonely’.

On the other hand, if the person is conceited and arrogant, he or she sees himself or herself as being great. His or her heart’s eye will be too blind to see the faults and shortcomings. In this case, if that person wants to show someone their qualities, demonstrating a greatness of status, he or she will then be afflicted by the dangerous ailment of pride.

Nevertheless, some kinds of pride or conceit should be cultivated in order to lead a good life, but too much leads to suffering. For instance, when there is a competition in a classroom, one should develop some *māna* in order to get higher marks in the lecture. If not, they cannot get such high marks. When we see a person working steadily, we should have some *māna*, we can do our best and we can work steadily as well.

## INFLUENCE OF CONCEIT (*MĀNA*) ON NOBLE PERSON

According to the Theravāda Buddhist perspectives, there are four pairs of noble persons, which are called *ariya puggala* in Pāli term. Of them, the Stream-enter eradicates only the first three fetters: (1) belief in self (*sakkāya-diṭṭhi*), (2) skeptical doubt (*vicikicchā*) and (3) attachment to mere rites and rituals (*sīlabbata-parāmāsa*).

The once-returner (*sakadāgāmi-puggala*) develops some control over the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> fetters: (4) sensuous craving (*kāma-rāga*), and (5) ill-will (*paṭigha*).

The non-returner becomes fully free from the above mentioned five lower fetters. Therefore, these three noble persons still have conceit in their latent tendency. However, these types of conceit found in the noble persons cannot lead to birth in the stage of lower state. The conceit in their heart can lead to the advanced the stage of an Arahantship.

The *arahanta* is one who is totally free from the five higher fetters, those being: (6) craving for fine material existence (*rūpa-rāga*), (7) craving for immaterial existence. (*arūpa-rāga*), (8) conceit (*māna*), (9) restlessness (*uddhacca*), and (10) ignorance (*avijjā*). The holiest person completely destroys conceit and all defilements just like a dirty white cloth become clean when washed in water. There is no impact of conceit in such a person.

Noble persons who are not yet Arahants can still have conceit, although they have no wrong view of self and may be inclined to compare themselves with others. When somebody thinks he is better than, equal to or less than someone else, it is conceit, even if it is true. In truth, there is no reason to compare ourselves with others.

## THE WAY TO OVERCOME CONCEIT (*MĀNA*) IN THERAVĀDA BUDDHISM

Out of the defilements, conceit (*māna*) is one of the *anusaya kilesa*, which lies dormant in the life-continuum as a latent tendency of mental defilements. The English saying, ‘Silence is Golden’ is not always right, but we can say that silence is less dangerous than a big noise. One who wants to uproot conceit (*māna*) must be practiced in insight meditation, or *vipassanā* meditation, because conceit lies down in the root of the mind. There are three levels of defilements; likewise, the abandoning of defilements has three stages. The Visuddhimagga states the differentiation of the three levels of abandoning of defilements as follows:

1. *tadaṅga-pahāna*: Overcoming by the opposite. Here, it refers to the overcoming of the wrong transgressions (*vītikkaṃma-kilesa*) by good morality. This removal or overcoming is only temporary, just by substitution. The defilements may take place after a while. That means one abandons the unwholesome mental states by substituting them with the wholesome mental states. When there is wholesome mental state, there cannot be any unwholesome mental state. That is called abandonment by substitution or momentary.

2. *vikkhambhana-pahāna*: Overcoming by repression. It refers to the subduing of the defilements (*variyuṭṭhāna-kilesa*) by suppression, by preventing by means of concentration of the degree of access concentration and attainment concentration (*jhāna*).

3. *samuccheda-pahāna*: Overcoming by destruction. It refers to the abandoning of all the defilements which originate in the core of someone’s minds and who develops the Path and which are completely eradicated by the four supra-mundane Paths so that they cannot arise anymore.<sup>9</sup>

By way of developing one’s insight and wisdom, one is able to dispel the first stage of defilements (*anusaya-kilesa*). It is like cutting a tree by the root so that it will never grow again. If defilements are cut by means of wisdom, such defilements will never rise again.

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<sup>9</sup>Bhikkhu Ñāṇmoli (tr.), **The Path of Purification, (Visuddhimagga)**, (Kandy: BPS, 1991), p. 9.

This is called *samuccheda-pahāna*.<sup>10</sup> In order to understand clearly, each factor within the three stages of trainings is explained. These three stages are interdependent and interrelated; *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā* should be practiced at the same time and not separately.

## MEDITATIONS SUBJECTS AND TEMPERAMENTS

Pertaining to Visuddhimagga, there are forty types of meditations. They can be listed into seven categories and run as follows:

- (i) Ten kinds of Devise (*kasiṇa*)
- (ii) Ten kinds of Foulness (*asubha*)
- (iii) Ten kinds of Recollection (*anussati*)
- (iv) Four Divine Abidings (*brahmavihāra*)
- (v) Four Immaterial States (*arūpa-jhāna*)
- (vi) One Perception (*saññā*)
- (vii) One Defining: (*catudhātu-vavatthāna*).<sup>11</sup>

*Carita* (temperament) signifies the intrinsic nature of a person which is revealed when one is in normal state without being preoccupied with anything. The temperaments of people differ owing to the diversity of their actions or *kamma*. Habitual actions tend to form particular temperaments.

In this connection, six temperaments have been mentioned in the Visuddhimagga: greed (*rāga*), hate (*dosa*), delusion (*moha*), faith (*saddhā*), intelligence (*buddhi*), and speculation (*vitakka*).

The ten kind of foulness, and mindfulness of the body are intended to diminish sensual desire and are suitable for those of the temperament of greed.

Eight subjects—the four divine abiding and four colour *kasiṇas*—are appropriate for the temperament of hate.

<sup>10</sup> Sayadaw, U. Thittila, **Essential Themes of Buddhist Lecture**, (Yangon, Myanmar: Department of Religious Affairs), p. 169.

<sup>11</sup> Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli (tr.), **The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)**, (Kandy: BPS, 1987), p. 112.



Mindfulness of breathing is suitable for those of temperament of delusion and speculation.

The first six recollections are appropriate for the temperament of faith.

Four subjects—mindfulness of death, the recollection of peace, the defining of the four elements, and the perception of the repulsiveness in nutriment—are especially effective for the temperament of intelligence.

The remaining six *kaṣiṇas* and the immaterial states are suitable for all temperaments. However, the *kaṣiṇas* should be limited in size for one of speculative temperament and large in size for one of deluded temperament.<sup>12</sup>

## THE WAY TO KNOW ONE'S OWN TEMPERAMENT

The specific temperament of an individual can be ascertained by the following five points which are described in the *Visuddhimagga*:

- (i) Posture (*iriyāyāpatha*).
- (ii) Action (*kiṅka*).
- (iii) Food (*bhojana*).
- (iv) Seeing, etc. (*dassanādito*).
- (v) Occurrence of mental states (*dhammappavatti*).
- (a) The greed temperament is frequently influenced by the following mental states: deceitfulness, fraud, pride, evil desires, ambition, discontent, self-aggrandizement, and vanity.
- (b) The hatred temperament is frequently influenced by the following mental states: anger, enmity, disparaging, domineering, envy and avarice.
- (c) The delusion temperament is frequently influenced by the following mental states: stiffness, torpor, agitation, worry, uncertainty, and holding fast to a certain view.
- (d) The faith temperament is frequently influenced by the following states: generosity, desire to see noble ones, desire to listen to religious discourses, joy, ingenuousness, honesty, and trust in things that inspire trust.

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<sup>12</sup>Henepola Gunaratana, *The Path of Serenity and Insight: An Explanation of the Buddhist Jhānas*, (Kandy: BPS, 1988), p. 53

- (e) The intelligence temperament is frequented by the following states: readiness to be spoken to, possession of good friends, moderation in eating, mindfulness, full awareness, wakefulness, urge for religious life, and exertion.
- (f) The speculation temperament is frequented by the following states: talkativeness, sociability, not talking interest in good works, failure to finish undertakings, making plans at night and executing them at day time, and mentally roaming about.<sup>13</sup>

### **SUITABLE MEDITATION SUBJECT FOR REMOVING OF CONCEIT**

Having investigated the forty meditation subjects and six basic types of temperament, one cannot find clear instruction for those who display the mental unwholesome quality of conceit. In this connection, conceit is most relevant to a greedy person, because it is attachment to one's own aggregates. It should be noted that those who are influenced by conceit should practice the ten kind of foulness and mindfulness of the body, such as the 32 parts of the body.

The Buddha taught venerable Meghiya to give special attention to the four conditions: in order to abandon lust he must dwell on the impurity of the body; in order to forsake malice he must dwell on kindness; with a view to the excision of evil thoughts he must practice meditation by counting inhalations and exhalations; and for the removal of pride which says 'I am', he must exercise himself in the consciousness of impermanency. In doing this, consciousness of non-egoity is established and he who is conscious of non-egoity succeeds in the removal of the notion 'I am' and in this very existence attains *nibbāna*.<sup>14</sup>

The essence of insight meditation is to see things as they really are and understand the three universal characteristics: impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*) and non-self (*anatta*). Among these three characteristics, focus on the perception of impermanence is very important for a meditator who wishes to dispel conceit.

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<sup>13</sup> U Dhammaratana, **Guide Through The Visuddhimagga**, (Kandy: BPS, 2011), p. 31

<sup>14</sup> Ud.4.1; Major General B.C, D.M. Strong (tr.), **The Udāna: The Solemn Uttrances of the Buddha**, (London: Lzac publication, 1902), p. 51.

In the Saṃyuttanikāya, the Buddha explains how consistent and deep knowledge of impermanence (*anicca*) in insight meditation can lead all the way to Arahatsip:

“Bhikkhus, when the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated, it eliminates all sensual lust, it eliminates all lust for existence, it eliminates all ignorance, it uproots all conceit ‘I am’.”<sup>15</sup>

Insight into impermanence leads to elimination of conceit (*māna*) because of the transience of everything we habitually cling to as “I” and “Me” is clearly and repeatedly understood, the non-existence of the supposed “Self” becomes perfectly apparent. That is why fully developed insight into impermanence brings the great benefit of understanding the essence of egolessness. Full comprehension of the nature of impermanence can eliminate conceit and bring liberation.

## HOW TO DEFEAT CONCEIT IN OUR DAILY LIFE

Human beings are not able to live alone by their own nature. So, one should not be proud of himself for having good statuses of family, wealth, beauty, education, etc. We should bear in our mind that even if we are extremely beautiful, we cannot seduce death. Even if we are very powerful, we cannot hope to influence death. Even the incredible wealth cannot buy a few minutes more life. Death is as certain for us as for someone stabbed through their heart by a knife. Reflecting upon this is a good way to defeat conceit in our daily life.

The teachings of the Buddha are relevant to all circumstances. A good conduct was praised by the Buddha, not ignored by him. The opposite of *māna* in Buddhism is ‘respectful’ (*gārava*) and ‘humbleness’ (*nivāta*). Being respectful and humble are the enemies of conceit and pride. Thus, one should respect other beings and bear humbleness onto oneself. This is the best way to defeat conceit in our daily life.

Among the various meritorious actions, reverence (*apacāyana*) for elder and holy persons is the most suitable action to defeat conceit in our daily life. Beside, a Buddha-image should be treated respectfully and it is a good way of training oneself to treat the

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<sup>15</sup> Bhikkhu Bodhi (tr.), *The Connected Discourse of the Buddha: Saṃyutta Nikāya*, (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), p. 961

Buddha-image as the one who were the Buddha himself. Reverence is a part of the Dhamma which should not be neglected for it helps in the overcoming of conceit. All Buddhist traditions have shrines with images, paintings, stūpas and so on, because reverence is an essential part of Buddhist training. By practicing reverence, one can possess humility in oneself and harmonious relationships with others. The Buddha taught us in the Dhammapada thus: “If a person is in the habit of constantly honoring and respecting those who are developed and mature, their lives improve in four ways. Their life span soon increases. Their complexion becomes clearer. Their good health and comfort will improve. Their vigour and stamina too will increase.” (*abhivādanasīlissa niccaṃ vaddhāpacāyino cattārodhammā vaḍḍhanti: āyu vaṇṇo sukhaṃ balaṃ*).<sup>16</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Conceit is related with self-attachment, which can be called in Pāli, “*lobha*”. Normally, we may think that conceit is related with anger, “*dosa*”, because we can see in our daily life that someone who has a conceited face is usually stiff and hard. In reality, conceit is similar to narcissism. The narcissistic person is proud of his own body and attempts to fix his identity by transient identifications such as social status, wealth, with fads and fashions, ideas and ideologies, and so on.

Similarly, according to the Theravāda Buddhist perspective, conceit has two functions: first of all, conceit comes from self-attachment; second, to compare oneself to others.

In conclusion, conceit can cause someone to lose great opportunities for his own life. Because of conceit, someone may destroy himself for the benefit of this present life. Conceit can influence both normal and noble persons, except those who achieved Arahantship. Conceit can bring a normal person into hell and can cause more rebirths within the endless cycle of death. However, for a noble person, it can help one achieve the higher stages of enlightenment.

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<sup>16</sup> Dhp. p. 109.

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