

Pride

March 8, 2015

There's a Pali word, *mana*, which means conceit. That's how it's translated in English. But the Thais have taken the word into their own language and they've given it two meanings, a good one and a bad one. The good meaning is determination. To say that you have *mana*—sometimes they'll put it together with the word *mu*: *mumana*—means that you're determined to see things through regardless of what the difficulties are. It's a strength, a strength of character that's admired. Sometimes people will even name their children *Mana* in hopes that the children will have that kind of strength of character.

The bad meaning of *mana*, of course, is stubbornness—not being willing to listen to anybody, having the kind of pride that gets easily offended.

The two meanings of this word reflect the two sides of this quality in the heart, the quality of pride. Pride has its good side and its bad side.

There's a passage where Ananda's teaching a nun and he tells her that, among other things, we practice for the sake of getting past conceit, but we have to use conceit. In his case, "conceit" means the self-esteem and self-confidence: The idea that if other people can practice this path, so can I. Other people have put an end to suffering, so can I. In that sense, pride is a good thing. It gives you the confidence you need in order to stick with the path when it gets difficult. It's one of the last fetters that's abandoned on the path, along with several of the other fetters that arahants have to get rid of after they become non-returners: passion for form, passion for formlessness, restlessness, and ignorance. There's a good side to some of these qualities. You need a passion for form and for the formless, for instance, to really master the jhanas. Even restlessness can have its uses on the path, to keep you active and pushing ahead. Only when these fetters have served their purpose do you let them go. But just because pride is one of the last fetters to be abandoned doesn't mean that you don't have to work on curbing and training it from the very beginning.

Pride is like a fierce dog that you keep in your house to keep people away. But it can also turn on you and attack you, so you have to be careful. You've probably noticed that your pride has enabled you to put up with difficulties and accomplish something even when other people look down on you. In that case, it's a good thing. But then when it forces you to look down on other people, to take offense easily at what they say or do, then it gets in the way.

So this is one of those qualities you have to be very careful with, because if you easily take offense, there are a lot of good lessons you could learn from other people but you won't, because you're looking down on them or you've closed your mind to them because perhaps they may look down on you.

There's a nice story in Ajaan Lee's autobiography from when he was a young monk meditating in the forest. A woman would come through the area every day. One day she was singing a song, and the implication of the song was, "Okay, you may be sitting there meditating like a nice quiet monk, but I know what your mind is going to." And it wasn't to monk-like things. So he took it as a lesson. Instead of getting offended or upset at her, he realized, "Okay, there *is* that aspect to my mind. I've got to work on it." As a result, he said, he turned the whole thing into Dhamma. So learn to let go of your *mana* when it's getting in the way of the practice, but nurture it—your confidence—when you need to be confident that you can practice and to be able to just stick with things, even when other people are falling by the wayside.

Ajaan MahaBoowa talks about this. The beginning of the Rains retreat every year, the monks staying with Ajaan Mun would take different vows as to which of the ascetic practices they would follow. Some of them saw things all the way through and others didn't. They'd fall by the wayside—but Ajaan MahaBoowa was

determined to see his all the way through. In fact, seeing other people fall by the wayside made him even more determined that he wasn't going to be one of them. Of course, there was an element of pride there. Ajaan Mun would try to point that out to him.

One of the practices was not to accept food that you hadn't received in your bowl before you got back to the monastery. Ajaan MahaBoowa was very strict about this, but occasionally some people would come late with food from a faraway place, and Ajaan Mun would put it in Ajaan MahaBoowa's bowl himself. He didn't do it too often, just often enough to remind Ajaan MahaBoowa that you have to watch out. You have to look all around yourself; all around the qualities of your mind, because sometimes the things that are helpful for you, the things that see you through, can also be your downfall.

In ancient Greek literary theory, this is called a tragic flaw. A tragic flaw isn't a weakness or a flaw of character. It's actually your strength of character that turns around and becomes a problem. Sometimes it's pride. Sometimes it's your sense of honor. Sometimes it's the fact that you're really intelligent. These things have their good side, but they also have their bad side. If you're proud of the fact that you're intelligent, okay, watch out—because that kind of pride tends to blind you to the areas where you're not very intelligent. When we're proud, we tend to focus on our strong points, but as for our weak points, we tend to hide them—from others and from ourselves.

There was a student of Ajaan Fuang's who was a little mentally unbalanced. He was very intelligent and very proud of his intelligence, but there were other aspects in his character that were extreme weaknesses. Everyone else around him could see them, but he wouldn't admit to them. This was symbolized by the fact by when he would clean Ajaan Fuang's porch, sweeping up the dust, instead of taking the dust and putting it outside, he'd sweep it under the carpet. Literally. Ajaan Fuang had a little rug under the spot where he would place his feet when he was sitting on a chair. And after a week of this guy's taking care of the porch, there was a pile of dust under Ajaan Fuang's feet. So if pride is your quality, watch out for the dust under the little rug.

Try to open things up. If there are people who may have said something to offend you, who may look down on you, well, see if you can learn something from them. Don't let your pride get in the way. If you're going to be proud of anything, be proud of the fact that you're willing to learn from difficult situations. You're willing to learn in all situations. You're willing to work on your weaknesses. That's a quality where pride is really helpful. But if pride closes things off, closes off your opportunity to learn, that's when it really gets in the way—in which case it's not just a last fetter to be abandoned as you approach the end of the path. It actually gets in the way of the path entirely.

After all, there are so many qualities of the mind that we need to work on. And different people around us may be strong in some areas and weak in others. If you look down on them for their weaknesses or get offended by their behavior, you're not going to be able to learn from their strengths. And that places a limitation on you.

So remember that the dogs you keep to protect yourself from being wounded by other people's poor opinion of you, or wounded by people looking down on you, do have their purposes. They do serve a function. But don't let them bite you. Don't let any element of pride turn around and attack you. Try to step back from your pride. Learn how to see when it's useful, when it's not.

I faced this problem with Ajaan Fuang when I was looking after him when he was sick. There was nothing I could do, it seemed, that would ever be quite right. There was always something wrong with what I'd do or say. And I got really discouraged. I was the kind of person who liked to do the things I was good at and tried to avoid the things I was not good at. This was how I was able to survive in a family in which my older brother was five years older than I was. Anything he was good at, I avoided. I tried to excel in areas where he wasn't good. But then, working with Ajaan Fuang, living with him, being his attendant, there always seemed to be more and more and more to learn and it always seemed like I was not cut out for the job.

But then I realized: The problem was that I wasn't getting my pride massaged. I was actually doing something good. Maybe it wasn't quite good enough, but at least there was nobody else there to do the job. I told myself, "This is the best I've got, so I'll work with this." That was how I learned.

This is how you learn in an apprenticeship. Sometimes the things you didn't expect, the lesson plans that you didn't plan, are the most important lessons to learn.