

Thoughts, Thought-Processes And Thought-Moments

Excerpted and explained by David Holmes

Monks who are teachers of monks frequently ask me to explain how to write an essay because it is part of the monks' training to be able answer examination questions in essay form, and I usually give them a book I have written on this topic called *English Composition and Essay Writing*, published by Chulalongkorn University Press (1997).

A much better way to learn essay form, however, is to look at examples in the Pali texts, in which a topic is traditionally brought into focus, narrowed and broken down into its parts and then explained in detail, following a tight progression or process, step by step, in coherent sequence. An example in point would be a section on Thoughts, Thought-Processes And Thought-Moments quoted from an excerpts on Buddhist Psychology as explained in *Rebirth Explained* by V. F. Gunaratna, published by the Buddhist Publication Society in Kandy in 1980 Sri Lanka (The Wheel Publication No. 167/168/169, Pages 26-36.) Let's look at the following excerpt and see, which we shall entitle:

Thoughts, Thought-Processes And Thought-Moments

“What is thought? ... In Buddhist psychology one does not speak of a thought, but of a thought-process, since thought is not a unity. So what is loosely called a thought is really a thought-process ... What is a thought-process? ...

The mind is an endless succession of thoughts, each following the next with such a rapidity of succession as to give it the semblance of something permanent and stable, whereas in reality it is not a unity but a process, with this difference that it is a limited process—a process of 17 thought-moments each following the other.

So that, what we loosely call a thought, is a thought-process. When a man sees a tree and instantly recognizes it as a tree, it means that there arose in him an awareness or consciousness of the tree, but this does not arise by one single mental operation.

Before this awareness or consciousness or thought of the tree completely arose, 17 stages or thought-moments would have occurred. The man may not be conscious of all these 17 stages or

thought-moments, since some of these mental processes, especially the earlier processes occur in the bhavanga or unconscious state of the mind.

Although as many as 17 stages or thought-moments are necessary to conclude and complete one single thought-process, it is wrong to imagine that much time is involved in the process. On the contrary in trying to emphasize the extreme shortness of time taken, commentators resort to a comparison with a flash of lightning or a twinkling of the eye. So infinitesimally, brief is the period of time involved.

What is a thought-moment?

The unit of measure for the duration of a thought-process is a thought-moment (cittakkhaina), which is also an infinitesimally small division of time. All thought-moments rise up in the conscious vithi citta, remain there for just a fleeting moment and then sink down to the unconscious bhavanga citta, just as waves of the ocean rise up, remain there for a fleeting moment and then subside. Thought-moments therefore have the following three stages: (1) The genetic stage or nascent stage (uppada); (2) the continuing stage (tithi) (3) the cessant stage (bhavanga). These three stage also occur within, the shortest possible time. A thought-moment does not persist by itself but runs most rapidly from the first to the second stage and from the second to the third.

Thought-moments and thought-processes

A thought-process is made up of 17 thought-moments, and a thought-moment is made up of 3 stages. 17 thought-moments must arise, remain and pass away to conclude and complete one single thought-process. When the cessant stage of the 17th thought-moment passes away and before the genetic or nascent stage of the first thought-moment in the next thought-process arises, at this particular juncture, since one thought-process has completed itself, the conscious vithi citta subsides and the unconscious bhavanga citta reappears into activity. This unconscious bhavanga citta also does not remain long. It too remains for just a fleeting moment and then subsides to enable the next thought-process to arise in the conscious vithi citta. This too then runs its course of 17 stages or thought-moments, and then the bhavanga citta again appears. In this manner the unending stream of mental processes flows on and on.

It is a mistake to think that these various mental states are joined together like carriages of a train to form a somewhat jagged combination. Each mental stage merges completely into the

next. There are no sharp dividing lines between one mental stage and the next. Hence there is no sharp dividing line between the nascent stage of one thought-moment and its continuing stage or between its continuing stage and its cessant stage. Similarly there is no sharp dividing line between one thought-process and another. Although the bhavanga citta is said to appear when one conscious thought-process is over and before another begins, here too, there is no sharp dividing line since vithi citta merges into the unconscious bhavanga, there being no sharp dividing lines between the two ...

How A Normal Thought-Process Works

... Let us now trace the interesting course of a single normal thought-process through the 17 stages or thought-moments that constitute it, as explained in the commentaries. Here is the order of their occurrence in the normal case.

Order of a Normal Thought-Process

1. Bhavanga atàta (past unconscious)
2. Bhavanga calana (vibration of the bhavanga)
3. . Bhavanga upacoheda (arrest of the bhavanga)
4. Pancadvara avajjana (five-door advertence)
5. Panca viññāóá (fivefold consciousness)
6. Sampapicchana (reception)
7. Santirana (investigation)
8. Votthapana (decision)
- 9 - 15. Javana (thought-impulsions)
- 16 & 17. Tadalambana (registration of the experience)

1st Thought-moment: past unconscious (bhavanga atàta)

We must commence tracing from the stage immediately prior to the running of the conscious process. That is the stage when the conscious *vithi citta* is in abeyance, and the stream of the unconscious *bhavanga citta* is flowing undisturbed. Such a state is present for instance, in a man who is enjoying deep sleep, when the mind does not respond to external objects or stimuli. This then is regarded as the first stage for the purpose of investigation, though actually the process has not yet begun. (This first stage is also present during that brief interval of time when one conscious thought has subsided and before the next arises).

2nd Thought moment: vibration of the *bhavanga* (*bhavanga calana*)

Suppose now an external object or stimulus by way of a sight or sound or other sense-impression (any stimulus that attracts any of the senses) is received by the sleeping man the flow of the unconscious *bhavanga citta* is disturbed. This is the second thought-moment or stage. It can also arise in the waking state after one conscious thought has subsided and before the next arises. The mind is then in the *bhavanga* state for a 'very short' while ("*calana*" means shaking or vibrating).

The *bhavanga* flow now begins to vibrate. This vibration lasts for one thought-moment before it subsides, and is compared by Shwe Zan Aung, the translator of the *Abhidhammattha Sangaha* (in his introduction), to the vibration of a spinning top whose velocity is falling. This is the result of the stimulus or object trying to force its attention on the conscious mind by impeding the flow of the *bhavanga* stream of unconsciousness.

3rd Thought-moment: arrest of the *bhavanga* (*bhavanga upaccheda*).

This is the stage when the stream of the *bhavanga citta* is arrested or cut off ("*upaccheda*" means cutting off). As a result, the *vithi citta* or the conscious process arises and, begins to flow, but this stimulus or object is not yet cognized by it.

4th Thought-moment: five-door apprehending consciousness *pañcadvāra āvajjana*)

This is the stage when a start is made by the conscious *vithi citta* to cognize the object which has arrested the flow of the unconscious *bhavanga*. This stage is called *pañcadvāra, āvajjana* because there is turning round to find out through which of the five sense-doors the stimulus is coming ("*pañcadvāra*" means five doors and "*āvajjana*" means turning towards). There is thus

an adverting towards the stimulus or object through one of the five sense-channels of sight, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching.

At this stage the sleeping man just awakened is turning towards something which calls for attention but knows nothing more about it. This is sometimes compared to the action of the spider to find out the cause that disturbed his web. The smooth flowing of this bhavanga undisturbed by any activity of the vithi citta, is compared to the stillness of the spider resting motionlessly at the centre of his web. When an insect enters the web and is entangled in one of its threads, the web begins to vibrate and thereafter the spider turns to see in which thread something lies entangled. This is exactly the function of this thought moment of pañcadvārāvājjana. The sleeping man just awakened from his sleep is trying to find out through which of the five sense-doors the stimulus came. Is it a sight or sound or other sense-impression? He continues to watch. It is still a dim-awareness of something. If attention is aroused not externally through the five senses but internally through a thought, the stage is known as manodvārāvājjana (mind-door advertence). This is alternative to the five sense-door advertence. The course of such a thought-process is slightly different from the process now described, since the thought-moments 5th to 8th do not occur.

5th Thought moment: five-fold consciousness (pañca viññāóa)

Now follows a consciousness of the kind that apprehends the particular sense-impression caused by the stimulus ("pañca" means five and "viññāóa" means consciousness). If it is a sight it is cakkhu vinnana or visual consciousness that works. If it is a sound it is sota viññāóa or auditory consciousness that works. In this way in respect of every one of the sense-organs there is a particular sense-consciousness and this sense-consciousness begins to work. Yet there is no full comprehension of the stimulus. What appears through one of the sense-doors is merely sensed.

6th Thought moment: reception (sampapicchana)

This is the thought-moment which occurs when the sense-impression caused by the stimulus is properly received. What is sensed is now received. ("sampapicchana" means receiving).

7th Thought-moment: investigation (santirana)

After the function of receiving, there arises the function of investigation. This thought-process performs the function of investigating with discrimination the stimulus or object which caused the sense-impression. What is received is investigated. ("santirana" means investigation).

8th Thought-moment: decision (votthapana)

This is the thought-moment when a decision is made regarding the stimulus which caused the sense-impression ("votthapana" means decision). What is investigated is decided on or determined.

9th to 15th Thought-moments: thought-impulsions (javana)

Now follows the psychologically important stage of javana or apperception or impulsion which lasts for seven thought moments (at the time of death, only five such moments occur). It is a stage of introspection followed by action. The psychological importance of these thoughts cannot be over-emphasized. Javana is derived from the Páli verb javati which means to run, and also to impel or incite. Hence these mental states, unlike the previous mental states, run for several thought moments and their one function is to impel. These are impulsions which flash forth at the climax of a process of consciousness of the vithi citta. Hence one is now fully conscious of the object or stimulus in all its relations, this being the stage of maximum cognition. It is at this stage that kamma begins to operate for good or bad, for this is the stage when the element of free will is present.

All other stages of the vithi process are like reflex actions. They must occur. Javana is the only stage where man is relatively free to think and to decide. There is the element of choice in this important thought moment, and it has the power to affect one's future according to the nature of the volition. If the sense-object that entered the mind had been rightly comprehended (yoniso manasikára), free from the impurities of lust, hatred and delusion, harmonious results will follow. If it had been wrongly comprehended (ayoniso manasikára), disharmonious results will follow. Javana in this context is a difficult word to be rendered into English. Professor Rhys Davids in his Páli Dictionary says that as the 12th stage in the course of an act of the vithi citta, javana means "going" not by way of swiftness but as intellectual movement. It is the stage of full perception or apperception.

Mrs. Rhys Davids refers to javana as "the mental aspect or parallel of that moment in the nerve-process when central function is about to become efferent activity or innervation." Innervation

being a reference to the nervous influences necessary for the maintenance of life and the functions of the various organs, the comparison is not inappropriate. But she herself has stated that she spent hours on this word, and finding no appropriate rendering was content to use the word untranslated.

Shwe Zan Aung's introduction to the *Compendium of Philosophy* refers to the javana stage as follows: "Now intervenes the apperceptive stage of full cognition, wherein the object determined or integrated by the foregoing activity is apperceived or properly cognized. This is held to occupy ordinarily seven thought-moments or none at all, except in cases of death, stupefaction, creation of phenomena, and other special cases when a lesser number of moments than seven obtains. At this stage of apperception, the subject interprets, the sensory, impression and fully appreciates the objective significance of his experience."

16th and 17th Thought-moments: registration of the experience: (tadalambana) ,

These are the two resultant thought-moments following immediately after the javana thought-moments. Their only function is to register the impression made by the javana thought-moments. They are not an integral part of the conscious vithi process. They are merely a recall of an experience that is passing away. If the impression made is not strong, they do not occur at all, "tadalambana," derived from "tadarammana" means "that object." It is so called because it takes the same object as that of the foregoing javana impulses and has been compared in the Visuddhimagga to the current of water that follows for a short while the boat which is going upstream ...

The 17 Thought-moments

In general, it must not be forgotten that these seemingly long 17 thought-moments constitute just one single thought-process, which takes place within an infinitesimally small fraction of time. The progress of this process varies with the intensity of the stimulus. If the intensity is very great (atimahanta), the complete process takes place. If it is great (mahanta), the 16th and 17th moments of registration do not occur. If it is small (paritta) or very small (atiparitta.) the process works functionally only, without full cognition.

The classic simile of a falling mango

These 17 thought-moments are compared by commentators to the 17 stages that occur between a man sleeping and the selfsame man eating a mango that falls by his side. A man is found sleeping soundly at the foot of a mango tree with his head covered. A wind blows and moves the branches of the tree causing a ripe mango to fall by his side. He is aroused from his sleep by this sound. He sees the fallen mango. He picks it up and examines it. Finding it to be desirable fruit he eats it, and after swallowing the last morsels, he replaces his head covering and resumes his sleep.

The sleep of the man represents the unconscious bhavanga stream flowing undisturbed. The striking of the wind against the tree represents atīta bhavanga or past unconscious. The sleeper is not disturbed. The sleep continues. So does the bhavanga. The moving of the branches represents the vibration of the bhavanga. The sleep is disturbed. So is the bhavanga. The falling of the mango represents the arrest of the bhavanga. The awakening of the man represents pancadvaravajjana or the arousing of attention through the five-door channels of sense. The removal of the head covering and the use of his eyes to observe the mango is cakkhu vinnana, or visual consciousness, which is one of the five types of consciousness together known as pañca viññāna. The picking up of the fruit represents sampapicchana or reception, and the examination of it represents santirana or investigation. The finding of the fruit as a desirable mango is votthapana or decision. The eating of the fruit represents the apperceptive acts of the seven javana thought-moments. The swallowing of the last morsels left in the mouth represents tadalambana or registration of the impression. The man's resumption of his sleep after replacing his head covering represents the bhavanga citta resuming to flow smoothly and undisturbed.” (from *Rebirth Explained* 26-36)

This is a technique that was also frequently used by the Buddha and his later followers in the explanation of perception of things, the mental processes, the doors of the mind and the breakdown of consciousness into minute stages which help us understand the arising and becoming and ending of things.

It must be remarked in conclusion, however, that while coherent and unified process analysis and categorization and detailing of things helps explain many of the phenomena and processes in this round of Samsara, and even in the deva realm and the thirty-one planes of existence, it is nothing more than a convention, a useful tool, a recurring form in the structure of language, that cannot be used to explain everything.

Essay form is of no use, for example, in explaining the actual direct of the higher states, the Unborn and the Uncreated. It is just a rhetorical tool used as an expository device in observing, analyzing and explaining phenomena the way they really are. There are indeed, many examples of how Buddhist teachers and scholars use this device, in the texts, in the commentaries and in later scholarship and some are contained in this section of the website, both as examples of how the form is used and the sake of their content.