

# The Function of the Mind

Ted Schmidt

2016-10-02

Source: <http://www.shiningworld.com/site/satsang/read/2951>

**Dennis:** Hello, Ted.

My name is Dennis. I have been studying Vedanta for a few years now, mostly with James, but also reading several books from Swami Paramarthananda and reading your *satsangs*. Thank you so very much for them!

If it is possible, I would like to understand a bit more clearly the term *manas* – mind – and its functions.

It seems to be doing a lot of work, and I actually heard James once saying something like: it has many jobs... but still, it seems to have far too many... which makes me doubt the reason why to draw a map of where so many jobs are included in a single function.

**Ted:** The easiest way to understand the function of *manas* is as non-discriminative thinking. Any thought that doesn't involve decision-making falls under the umbrella of *manas*. As you already know, *manas* perceives sensory data and integrates that data into a coherent multi-sensory experience. Next, it doubts or questions the nature of the data (i.e. whether it is "friend" or "foe," so to speak) and how to react/respond to it. This doubt is not a decision. It is simply a question that is presented to *buddhi*, or the intellect, which is the discriminative faculty of the *antahkarana*, or "inner instrument" that includes *manas*, *buddhi*, *ahamkara* (i.e. ego, or the I-sense) and *chitta*, or memory. When the intellect has deliberated over the data, determined its nature and decided how to respond, it sends the message back to the mind, and the mind sets the active organs into motion. Interestingly, this energy in motion is suggested by the word "emotion." In fact we feel emotion in our body as a result of the thoughts that arise from the combination of perception and discrimination. Even the physical sensations associated with confusion or indetermination are the result of the intellect's as yet unresolved deliberation. So emotions are obviously not chosen by *manas*, but are the result of the intellect's directives, we might say.

Concerning the fourth function that you mention next, it is not really the case that *manas* decides where to place attention. The mind is simply exposed to circumstances by virtue of its association with a particular body-mind-sense complex, and it perceives the sensory data with which it is presented.

**Dennis:** As far as I understand it is:

1. the part that doubts;
2. the part that perceives and put together the five sense organs – integrates the data;
3. the part that decides where attention is going;
4. and the emotions.

But then, when it comes to emotions, that is quite a subject! We have the emotion of hate on the one side, and we have the emotion of pleasure, for example, produced by hearing a Bach sonata. All these range in just one function?

**Ted:** Yes, all are non-discriminative responses set in motion by the intellect's decision concerning how to deal with the perceived data.

**Dennis:** It also says that emotions are always supported by thought. It is clear how the emotion of hatred is based on a thought, but how is the emotion of beauty (like in the example of a Bach sonata) is supported by thought?

**Ted:** Where does our experience of the Bach sonata take place? In the mind. *Manas* perceives the music, *buddhi* determines that it is aesthetically pleasing and sends the message to *manas* to relax and enjoy, and so *manas* activates that physical/emotional response.

**Dennis:** Also, how does it decide about attention? Let's say I am trying to read and suddenly the desire for a chocolate appears. The intellect says that now it is time for reading and not for chocolate. The tongue wants the chocolate (does it or is it the tongue based on past memories or...?). And what does the mind do? What is the mechanism in this example?

**Ted:** The mind doesn't decide where to place its attention. In this case, the focal point of the attention is triggered by a *vasana*. The past impression of chocolate arises in the mind due to any number of factors – perhaps an association with relaxation if you are enjoying what you are reading or an association with mollifying stress or boredom if you are not – and the mind perceives this subtle objective phenomenon.

**Dennis:** In short, if it is possible, could you please give me a clearer picture of the function of *manas*, and in particular, what are emotions and how they function? (If there is something already written that can clear my question, then please simply direct me to it. But from what I have found, all the writings mention the function of *manas* but none of them really describe more in depth how it works...).

I understand the actual function of Vedanta is not to understand the body but to realize who we actually are, and that this question is more of an intellectual doubt and does not directly help in self-enquiry... other than by picturing more clearly what we are not... still, if you have the time, I would like to understand better...

~ Thank you very much, Dennis

**Ted:** Hopefully, the explanation I've provided here is adequate. But I also detail this process in my book *Self-knowledge: The King of Secrets*.

~ All the best, Ted

**Dennis:** By the way, I want to buy your talks of the *Baghavad Gita* in Tiruvannamalai. Is there any reason that it would be better to get the video over the recordings? Like, did you use images or any other thing that will make the video a better option? Thanks.

**Ted:** The only advantage of the video over the audio is in the section on *bhakti*, or devotional worship, where I talk about the symbolism of various Hindu deities. I show images of these deities and point out the symbolic meaning of the features associated with each, such as colors, objects and physicality – that is, how these features represent various aspects of the self, and thus serve as pointers that indicate our true nature.

**Dennis:** Thank you very much for your prompt response. It is very useful.

Two things are still not very clear:

1. You say, “Where does our experience of the Bach sonata take place? In the mind. *Manas* perceives the music, *buddhi* determines that it is aesthetically pleasing...”

In some cases, especially when it comes to some great art that one is not familiar with, the *buddhi* may not perceive it as aesthetically pleasing, but still, if one endures the opposition of the intellect, a profound emotion may emerge. That is why I use the example of the music of Bach. It may also happen with Rembrandt or many great poets. These emotions seem to me not to be originated in the *buddhi*, they seem not to be supported by thought. Are they?

**Ted:** The emotions seem not to be supported by thought, but without a thought about what is experienced, no emotion arises. This does not mean that upon hearing the strains of a Bach sonata, we sit down and hash out whether we like it or not. The music is perceived and almost immediately there is a response concerning whether we like it or not. This response happens in a flash, so we don't think of it as a decision. But the *buddhi* has consulted, as it were, the causal body, which is the storehouse of all past impressions, and found that the music is something that is pleasant or at least non-threatening, and thus sends the message to the mind that it can relax and enjoy the music.

Again, this whole process happens so quickly that it doesn't seem like a decision is being made. Also, the fact is that *manas* (i.e. the mind) and *buddhi* (i.e. the intellect) are not actually separate things. Both are aspects or functions of *antahkarana* (i.e. the “inner instrument”), which is referred to in the West as the mind in general.

*Antahkarana* “houses” four basic functions: *manas*, which is non-discriminative thinking; *buddhi*, which is discriminative thinking (i.e. decision-making); *ahamkara*, which is actually a part of the intellect that constitutes the determination that I am an individual person; and *chitta*, which is actually a part of *manas* that remembers experiences had in the past.

The fundamental distinction between mind and intellect is that the mind is non-discriminative thinking that is essentially perception and emotion, while the intellect is discriminative thinking that involves deliberation, determination and decision.

It may seem like emotions arise spontaneously, but they are based on judgments made by the

intellect. This is where the lines blur a bit, for you might very well question, “Didn’t you just say that emotions are a function of the mind, yet are based on judgments? So which aspect of mind is responsible for emotion?”

To be honest, both aspects of mind are responsible for producing emotion. Emotion itself is not a judgment, but emotions are informed or prompted by judgments and a lightning-quick decision about how to react to a stimulus in terms of a given judgment.

This blurring of the lines between aspects of *antahkarana* also holds true with regard to the intellect. The intellect also perceives sensory data. If it did not perceive, then it would have nothing to deliberate about.

In short, *antahkarana* is divided into four aspects simply for the purposes of gaining a general understanding of its various functions.

**Dennis:** 2. You say, “The mind doesn’t decide where to place its attention. In this case, the focal point of the attention is triggered by a *vasana*. The past impression of chocolate arises in the mind due to any number of factors... and the mind perceives this subtle objective phenomenon.”

And so you mean that the mind is just like a passive observer? The *buddhi* wants to read. The *vasanas* appear. And the mind observes? And how is this situation resolved?

**Ted:** The mind is a passive observer in the sense that it is the mode of thinking through which perception occurs. It doesn’t decide what to observe. The intellect, under the influence of *vasanas* that give rise to likes, dislikes, desires and fears, gives a “command” concerning what to focus on, and the mind simply perceives the sensory data it encounters.

Again, what I am referring to as decisions concerning where to place attention are not conclusions reached after long sessions of contemplative deliberation. Rather they are the consequence of *vasanas*, which in practical terms are our preferences and desires. *Vasanas* are what drive our lives. In fact we only live as long as the body-mind-sense complex is able to express the *vasanas* associated with it and slated, as it were, to find expression through the vehicle of its character and within the context of its circumstances.

The resolution of the situation to which you refer comes as a result of the intellect’s decision concerning how to respond to the prompting of the *vasana* within the present context. So, if the mind wants to read and the mind perceives a book within range or by means of *chitta* knows where desired reading material is, then the intellect will direct the mind to pick up or retrieve the reading material and begin reading.

**Dennis:** I have already ordered your book. It is on its way.

~ Thank you very much, Dennis

**Ted:** My pleasure.

~ All the best, Ted

