

WHAT THE NIKĀYAS SAY
AND DO NOT SAY
ABOUT
NIBBĀNA



BHIKKHU BRAHMĀLI

What the Nikāyas Say and Do not Say about Nibbāna
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*The gift of the Dhamma excels all gifts;
the taste of the Dhamma excels all tastes;
delight in the Dhamma excels all delights.
The eradication of craving overcomes all suffering.*

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ABSTRACT

The only way of moving towards consensus on the controversial subject of the nature of *Nibbāna*¹ is by appealing to the sole source of authority common to practically all Buddhists: the *Nikāyas/Āgamas*. In the present paper I will first give an overview of the usage of the term *Nibbāna* in the *Nikāyas*. I will then argue that, according to the *Nikāyas*, *Nibbāna* cannot be regarded as a self. Next, I will point out that the *Nikāyas* do not see *Nibbāna* as a form of consciousness, including such exceptional kinds of consciousness as *anidassana viññāṇa* and *appatiṭṭhita viññāṇa*. Nor can *Nibbāna* be regarded as equivalent to mind, or any particular state of mind. In the final section I aim to show that the most reasonable interpretation of the *Nikāyas* is that final *Nibbāna* is no more than the cessation of the five *khandhas*.

1 I have benefited from the kindness of Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi and Prof. Peter Harvey who both offered their careful comments and invaluable suggestions on a draft version of the present paper. Despite our disagreement on certain issues, the paper is considerably improved as a result of their generosity. My thanks are also due to a number of monks at Bodhinyana Monastery for their proofreading.

INTRODUCTION

Nibbāna is the goal of Buddhist practice. As such it is only natural that there is great interest in understanding what it might mean to achieve it. At the same time, *Nibbāna* is the most profound of Buddhist concepts. It is perhaps not surprising then that the concept of *Nibbāna* has given rise to a large number of interpretations, some based on meditative experience and others on scriptural study and ‘logical’ deduction, and that many of them are mutually contradictory.²

Given this confusing situation, the purpose of the present paper is to try to pin down what the Buddha himself meant by *Nibbāna*. The only satisfactory way of achieving this is to turn to the *suttas*, for it is the *suttas* that are the final arbiter in any *Dhamma* dispute:

Suppose a monk were to say: ‘... this is the *dhamma*, this is the discipline (*vinayo*), this is the Master’s teaching’, then, monks, you should neither approve nor disapprove his words. Then, without approving or disapproving, his words and expressions should be carefully noted and compared with the *suttas* and reviewed in light of the discipline. If they, on

2 I will provide references for these interpretations during the course of the paper.

such comparison and review, are found not to conform to the *suttas* or the discipline, the conclusion must be: ‘Assuredly this is not the word of the Buddha, it has been wrongly understood by this monk’, and the matter is to be rejected. But where on such comparison and review they are found to conform to the *suttas* or the discipline, the conclusion must be: ‘Assuredly this is the word of the Buddha, it has been rightly understood by this monk.’³

DN 16:4.8.1–4.8.13

In the following discussion on the nature of *Nibbāna* I will therefore base my argument, as far as possible, on the complete contents of the *Nikāyas*.⁴ More specifically, I will inquire into the relationship between *attā*, *viññāṇa* and *citta* on the one hand and *Nibbāna* on the other. An understanding of this relationship, as I intend to show, is critical for a proper understanding of *Nibbāna*. In the final section of this paper, I will discuss *Nibbāna* itself in greater detail. But to prepare the ground for the ensuing discussion, it is necessary first of all to take a preliminary look at how the *suttas* employ the term *Nibbāna*.

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- 3 Most of the quotes found in this paper are taken from existing translations (see the bibliography at the end of this paper). Occasionally, where existing translations did not seem satisfactory, I have supplied my own. I have indicated all such instances. I have sometimes supplied Pali words and phrases for clarification.
 - 4 With the exception of most of the *Khuddaka-Nikāya*. I use the terms *suttas* and *Nikāyas* throughout this paper to refer to the four main *Nikāyas* of the Pali Canon, the *Vinaya-Piṭaka* and some of the works of the *Khuddaka-Nikāya*, specifically the *Udāna*, the *Itivuttaka*, the *Dhammapada* and the *Theragāthā*. I have also occasionally consulted parallel passages in the Chinese Buddhist Canon.

CHAPTER 1
AN INITIAL INVESTIGATION INTO THE
REFERENTS OF THE TERM NIBBĀNA

There are three frequently mentioned referents of *Nibbāna*:

1. *Nibbāna* as the destruction of lust, hatred and delusion upon the attainment of *arahant*-ship;
2. *Nibbāna* as the 'state' that occurs after the death of the *arahant*; and
3. *Nibbāna* as the object of consciousness in a special kind of *samādhi*.

I will briefly discuss each one of these in turn.

1. Whenever *Nibbāna* is defined in the *suttas*, it is always in the same way:

The destruction of lust,
the destruction of hatred,
the destruction of delusion:
this, friend, is called *Nibbāna*'.⁵

It is sometimes argued that this 'destruction' only refers to the actual event of becoming an *arahant* (Harvey 1995, pp.182–185). However, since the destruction is permanent it would seem more likely that *Nibbāna* here refers to the destruction of lust, hatred and delusion as a general and fundamental characteristic of *arahant*-ship.⁶ Moreover, the event of becoming an *arahant*, that is the final destruction of the defilements, is presumably instantaneous: either one is an *arahant* or one is not. But the narrow focus on momentary events, usually known as mind moments, is a characteristic of the *abhidhamma* and later Pali literature, not the *suttas*. The *suttas*

5 See in particular [SN 38.1:2.3–2.4](#) and [SN 39.1-15:2.3–2.4](#), but cf. also [SN 43.12/SN 43.13/SN 43.14-43](#), [SN 45.6](#), [SN 45.36](#) and [AN 3.53/AN 3.54](#).

6 This would thus include the actual event of becoming an *arahant*. As pointed out by Harvey 1995, p.183, at [SN 38.1:2.3–2.4](#) *arahant*-ship is explicitly defined as the destruction of lust, hatred and delusion. This shows the close relationship between *Nibbāna* and *arahant*-ship in general. Harvey tries to show at some length that *Nibbāna* here refers to the event of attaining *arahant*-ship, not an aspect of the general state of *arahant*-ship. His first argument is that the Pali terminology points to an event rather than an ongoing reality. Without going into detail, it seems to me that the terminology is open to either interpretation, but most likely it refers to both. His second and main argument is based on the fact that *Nibbāna* is the end of *dukkha* whereas the *arahant* still has some *dukkha* remaining and thus the general state of *arahant*-ship cannot be called *Nibbāna*. But *Nibbāna* at *arahant*-ship is called *Nibbāna* 'with residue remaining' [Iti 44:3.1–3.5](#), the residue being the experience of 'what is agreeable and disagreeable ... pleasure and pain (*dukkha*)'. It seems clear enough, therefore, that the presence of a residue of suffering does not bar the absence of lust, hatred and delusion in an *arahant* from being called *Nibbāna*.

normally refer to realities that are extended in time. That this is the case also for the *Nibbāna* attained at *arahant*-ship is clear from the following passages:

When lust is abandoned (*rāge pahīne*) ... when hatred is abandoned ... when delusion is abandoned one does not intend for one's own affliction, for the affliction of others, or for the affliction of both and one does not experience mental pain and dejection. It is in this way, brahmin, that *Nibbāna* is visible in this very life.

AN 3.55:2.2–2.3
(*transl. Brahmāli*)

Not intending for one's own or others' affliction, and not experiencing mental pain and dejection, cannot be momentary. Nor can *Nibbāna* be momentary in the following description:

And what, monks, is the *Nibbāna* element with residue remaining? Here, a monk is an *arahant*, one whose taints are destroyed, who has lived the holy life, done what had to be done, laid down the burden, reached his own goal, utterly destroyed the fetters of existence, one completely liberated through final knowledge. However, his five senses remain unimpaired, by which he still experiences what is agreeable and disagreeable, still feels pleasure and pain. It is the destruction of lust, hatred, and delusion in him that is called the *Nibbāna* element with residue remaining.

Iti 44:3.1–3.5

Thus I take *Nibbāna* in the above definition to refer to that unchanging and permanent aspect of the general state of *arahant*-ship which is the destruction of lust, hatred and

delusion.⁷ In this sense *Nibbāna* is an ever-present reality for the *arahant*.⁸ Moreover, since the destruction of the three root defilements is the standard *Nikāya* explanation of *Nibbāna*, it seems reasonable to assume that whenever *Nibbāna* is used without further qualification it refers to this aspect of the state of *arahant*-ship. This will be my assumption throughout this paper.

2. Occasionally *Nibbāna* is used to describe the ‘state’ that occurs after the death of an *arahant*:

And what, monks, is the *Nibbāna* element without residue remaining? Here a monk is an *arahant*, one whose taints are destroyed, who has lived the holy life, done what had to be done, laid down the burden, reached his own goal, utterly destroyed the fetters of existence, one completely liberated through final knowledge. For him, here in this very life, all that is felt, not being delighted in, will become cool right here [i.e. at death]. That, monks,

7 The literal meaning of *Nibbāna* is ‘extinguishment’. (Alternatively, *Nibbāna* could perhaps be translated as ‘extinction’. However, ‘extinction’ has such negative connotations in English — connotations that obviously do not pertain to *Nibbāna* — that ‘extinguishment’ seems more appropriate). *Nibbāna* as the destruction of lust, hatred and delusion is therefore simply the permanent extinguishing of these three defilements. In fact, *Nibbāna* is a relative term in the *suttas*, its precise connotation depending on what is being extinguished. At AN9.47, AN9.48, AN9.49, AN9.50 and AN9.51 each *jhāna* and each immaterial attainment is said to be ‘provisional *Nibbāna* (*nibbānam ... pariyāyena*)’. ‘Non-provisional *Nibbāna*’ is reached at *arahant*-ship, and ‘final *Nibbāna*’ at the death of the *arahant* (see below). In each case something is extinguished (either temporarily or permanently): in first *jhāna* the five hindrances and the five senses are temporarily extinguished, in the second *jhāna* *vitakka-vicāra* etc.. At final *Nibbāna* all five aggregates are permanently extinguished.

8 The *arahant*’s destruction of lust, hatred and delusion is unconditioned, since it is permanent. For this reason *Nibbāna* is also known as *asankhata*, ‘not conditioned’.

is called the *Nibbāna* element without residue remaining.

Iti 44:4.1–4.4

In the following I will refer to this as ‘final *Nibbāna*’.⁹ In the *suttas*, only very rarely does the word *Nibbāna* unambiguously refer to final *Nibbāna*.¹⁰

3. In a few places the *suttas* mention a type of *samādhi* that is attainable only by *ariyas*:¹¹

Just as, friend, in a burning wood-fire, one flame arises and another flame ceases, so too ‘the cessation of existence is *Nibbāna*, the cessation of existence is *Nibbāna* (*bhavanirodho nibbānaṃ, bhavanirodho nibbānan ti*)’, one perception (*saññā*) arose in me, friend, and another perception ceased, ‘the cessation of existence is *Nibbāna*’; and yet, on that occasion I was percipient (*saññī*).

AN 10.7:5.3–5.5
(*transl. Brahmāli*)

This *samādhi* is sometimes said to take *Nibbāna* as its ‘object’,¹²

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- 9 Note that my emphasis in this paper is not on final *Nibbāna* as the event of the death of the *arahant* but on that which happens beyond the *arahant*’s death.
- 10 In fact, it seems difficult to find any unambiguous references apart from the one quoted here.
- 11 That it is attainable by all *ariyas* is the commentarial interpretation. In contrast to this, a verse at AN 3.32 seems to say that this *samādhi* — the perception in this *samādhi* is given as ‘This is peaceful, this is sublime, that is ... *Nibbāna*’, but it seems to be equivalent to the one quoted above — is attainable only by *arahants*, i.e. one who ‘has crossed over birth and old age’, *atāri so jātijaran ti*. Whatever the correct interpretation, the broader argument remains unaffected.
- 12 For instance in the *Paramatthadīpanī-tīkā*: ‘*evaṃ suññatādināmaṃ nibbānaṃ ārammaṇaṃ katvā pavattāni maggaphalānipi ārammaṇavase-napi suññatādināmaṃ labhati*’, ‘Thus having made *Nibbāna*, which is called “emptiness” etc., the object, the resulting path and fruit obtain the

i.e. taking the equivalent of final *Nibbāna* as its object. However, I cannot see how this explanation can be correct. Final *Nibbāna* by definition is other than *samsāra*, which means it is other than the six sense bases and their six corresponding classes of objects. In the *Nikāyas*, consciousness is always defined by the object it takes and consequently there are precisely six classes of consciousness. For *Nibbāna* to be an object of consciousness, an entirely new class of consciousness would be required, going beyond the established *Nikāya* taxonomy.¹³

name “emptiness” etc. on account of the object’. It is noteworthy that this statement is found in a modern (19th century) commentarial work. In his translation and explanation of the *Abhidhammattha Saṅgaha*, in which he refers extensively to the above mentioned *ṭīkā*, Bodhi 1993, p.363 states that: ‘the attainment of fruition (*phalasamāpatti*) is a meditative attainment by which a noble disciple enters into supramundane absorption with *Nibbāna* as object’.

It is difficult to ascertain with any precision when the idea of *Nibbāna* as an object of consciousness first appears in Pali literature. It might be claimed that it appears already in the Canonical *Abhidhamma* where the *asaṅkhatadhātu* is included in the *dhammāyatana* (Vibh PTS vp 72). However, the *asaṅkhatadhātu* is then defined in exactly the same way as in the *suttas*, namely, as the destruction of lust, hatred and delusion (Vibh PTS vp 73). There is no indication that *Nibbāna* is an ‘existing entity’ which is taken as a direct object of consciousness. Exactly how the commentaries understand *Nibbāna* is also a moot point. I am not able to discuss this here, since it would be a major study in itself to trace the historical development of how *Nibbāna* is understood in Pali literature.

- 13 *Nibbāna* cannot simply be classified as a mind object — with the corresponding consciousness being mind-consciousness — since all mind objects and their corresponding objects are said to be impermanent and suffering; see e.g. SN 35.32. Indeed, the *Salāyatana-Saṃyutta* contains a large number of *suttas* that directly state that mental phenomena (*dhammas*) are suffering. These statements often have an almost equational quality. And there is no clear statement anywhere in the *suttas* that there are any exceptions to this. In fact the six senses together with their six objects are called ‘the all’ (SN 35.23), clearly indicating that there are no further senses or sense objects apart from these. These statements taken together make it impossible, to my mind, to accept the idea of *Nibbāna* as a mind object cognized by mind-consciousness. (The post-canonical literature, however, sometimes seems to take a different position, see e.g. the *Milindapañha*, Mil 6.2.5).

Indeed, the above quote contains sufficient pointers to make it unlikely that this is a direct reference to *Nibbāna*. Firstly, perception is specifically said to be present. As in the case of consciousness, perception in the *suttas* is restricted to six classes, all of which are bound up with *samsāra* (SN 22.57:10.1–10.9). There is no room for a direct perception of *Nibbāna* in this system of classification. Secondly, the perceptions are said to arise and cease, one after the other. Arising and ceasing is a characteristic of *samsāra*, not *Nibbāna*: *Nibbāna* is specifically said to be stable (*dhuva*; SN 43.20). One would expect a *samādhi* that takes *Nibbāna* as its object to be stable, much like the stability of perception found in other deep states of *samādhi*.¹⁴

I would therefore propose an alternative interpretation of this passage. It is not *Nibbāna* as such, but a perception that is based on the *ariya*'s direct knowledge of the nature of *Nibbāna*. That is, it is not a perception of *Nibbāna* but a perception about *Nibbāna*.¹⁵ For convenience I will refer to this *samādhi* as *ariya-samādhi* in the remainder of this paper.¹⁶

14 Deep states of *samādhi*, in particular the *jhānas*, consist of completely stable and uninterrupted perceptions, until one emerges.

15 This interpretation hinges on understanding *bhavanīrodho nibbānaṃ* to be an equational sentence: 'the cessation of existence is *Nibbāna*'. On this reading, the expression is clearly an idea about *Nibbāna*, not a direct reference to it. If instead one were to translate this phrase as two words in apposition, 'the cessation of existence, *Nibbāna*', then this would be a direct reference to *Nibbāna* and one would have to conclude that the phrase concerns a direct perception of *Nibbāna*. There are other *suttas* (AN 3.32, AN 10.6, AN 11.7, and AN 11.8), however, that speak of the same sort of *samādhi* but whose interpretation is unambiguous. In these *suttas* the relevant perception is given as 'this is peaceful, this is sublime, that is ... *Nibbāna* (*etaṃ santāṃ, etaṃ paṇītaṃ, yad idaṃ ... nibbānan ti*)'. Here the wording is such — i.e. the verb 'to be' is required — that there can be no doubt that we are dealing with a sentence not just words in apposition. It seems quite clear, therefore, that this concerns a perception of an idea, an idea about *Nibbāna* — i.e. 'this is peaceful, this is sublime' — not a direct experience of *Nibbāna*. From this it is necessary to conclude that the expression *bhavanīrodho nibbānaṃ* should also be understood as a sentence, not just two words in apposition.

Of these three referents of the term *Nibbāna*, the first one is relatively straight-forward: it refers to the *arahant's* state of having extinguished all defilements.¹⁷ In *Nikāya* usage this is the usual meaning of *Nibbāna*. The third referent, *ariya-samādhī*, does not seem to be a direct reference to *Nibbāna* at all, but a particular perception based on the full understanding of what *Nibbāna* is. It is the second referent — that which supervenes at the death of an *arahant* — which is the most profound and most often misunderstood. It is *Nibbāna* in this sense, ‘final *Nibbāna*’, which will be the main focus of this paper.

16 This is equivalent to what the commentaries call *phalasa-māpatti-phalasa-māpatti-samādhī*; see Mp V 2, 23 and Mp V 80, 14.

17 ‘Extinguishment’ being the literal meaning of *Nibbāna* (see footnote 7 above).

CHAPTER 2

IS FINAL NIBBĀNA A PERMANENT SELF?

It is not uncommon to come across attempts to justify the existence of an *attā* (in the sense of a permanent self) using the Buddha's teachings and the claim that the end of the Buddhist path is the freeing of this *attā* from suffering.¹⁸ But the evidence quoted to support such claims is often weak, and it frequently relies on *sutta* quotes whose interpretation is difficult.

So let us go through some of the Buddha's more straightforward statements concerning *attā*:

Whether there is an arising of *Tathāgatas* or no arising of *Tathāgatas*, that element still persists, the stableness of the *Dhamma*, the fixed course of the *Dhamma*, that all formations (*saṅkhārā*) are impermanent ... that all formations are suffering ... that all things (*dhamma*) are non-self.¹⁹

AN 3.136:1.11–1.15

18 See Harvey 1995, pp.17–19 for a short survey of such attempts, followed by a critique of them. Other than Harvey's references, there has also been the suggestion that the *anattā* doctrine is a strategy of spiritual development that is not meant as a metaphysical position on the existence of an *attā* (Ṭhānissaro 1993a).

19 The translation is based on Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation of a similar passage at SN 12.20.

I would suggest that the Buddha uses ‘*dhamma*’ in the last phrase to counter any misunderstanding that there might be an *attā* outside of conditioned phenomena (*saṅkhārā*). In this context consider the following:

Monks, as far as there are things (*dhamma*) conditioned (*saṅkhatā*) or not conditioned (*asaṅkhatā*), dispassion (*virāgo*) is reckoned best of those things, that is to say ... *Nibbāna*.

AN 4.34:3.1–3.2
(*transl. Brahmāli*)

‘*Dhamma*’ is thus a wider term than ‘*saṅkhāra*’. It includes anything that might fall outside of conditioned phenomena, in particular *Nibbāna*.²⁰

Another way of making the same point is as follows:

‘Bhikkhus, you may well cling to that doctrine of self (*attavādupādānaṃ upādiyetha*) that would not arouse sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair in one who clings to it. But do you see any such doctrine of self, bhikkhus?’ — ‘No, venerable sir’. — ‘Good, bhikkhus. I too do not see any doctrine of self that would not arouse sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair in one who clings to it’.

MN 22:23.1–23.5

Clinging causes suffering because the object of clinging sooner or later changes. If there were such a thing as a permanent self, clinging to it would not give rise to suffering, and the Buddha would not have seen any problem with such clinging.²¹

20 See also Norman 1991, p.207 (p.5 in PDF).

21 This does not mean that one may cling to *Nibbāna*. The *puthujjana* by definition knows nothing but the five *khandhas*. Since he does not know what *Nibbāna* is he cannot possibly cling to it. (He could perhaps cling to some idea of *Nibbāna*, but such an idea would still be included within the

But the fact is that the Buddha did not recommend any sort of clinging:

When, Nāgita, one dwells contemplating the rise and fall in regard to the five aggregates affected by clinging, repulsiveness in respect of clinging (*upādāne pāṭikkūlyatā*) is established.

AN 5.30:4.12
(*transl. Brahmāli*)

In fact, the *suttas* do not lack clear denials of final *Nibbāna* being a permanent self:

Bhikkhus, since a self and what belongs to a self are not apprehended as true and established, then this standpoint for views, namely, ‘This is self, this the world; after death I shall be permanent, everlasting, eternal, not subject to change; I shall endure as long as eternity’ — would it not be an utterly and completely foolish teaching?

MN 22:25.5–25.6

Then the Blessed one took up a little lump of cowdung in his hand and said to that bhikkhu: ‘Bhikkhu, there is not even this much individual existence (*attabhāva-paṭilābho*) that is permanent, stable, eternal, not subject to change, and that will remain the same just like eternity itself. If there was this much individual existence that was permanent, stable, eternal, not subject to change, this living of the holy life for the complete cessation of suffering could not be discerned.’²²

SN 22.96:2.1–2.3

five *khandhas*.) Once one becomes a stream-enterer, i.e. once one understands the Dhamma, one knows that the nature of *Nibbāna* is such that it cannot be clung to (see the last section of this paper).

22 There is no reason to see the denial here of ‘individual existence’ as implying the existence of a universal self or any other non-individual permanent entity.

It is, Ānanda, because it is empty (*suññam*) of self and of what belongs to self that it is said, ‘Empty is the world’.

SN 35.85:1.4

There is no permanent *attā* in or outside of the five *khandhas*:

Friends, I do not speak of form as ‘I am’, nor do I speak of ‘I am’ apart from form. I do not speak of feeling as ‘I am’, nor do I speak of ‘I am’ apart from feeling. I do not speak of perception as ‘I am’, nor do I speak of ‘I am’ apart from perception. I do not speak of volitional formations as ‘I am’, nor do I speak of ‘I am’ apart from volitional formations. I do not speak of consciousness as ‘I am’, nor do I speak of ‘I am’ apart from consciousness.

SN 22.89:9.10–9.14

Bhikkhus, ‘I am’ is a conceiving (*maññitam*); ‘I am this’ is a conceiving; ... conceiving is a disease, conceiving is a tumour, conceiving is a dart. Therefore, bhikkhus, you should train yourselves thus: ‘We will dwell with a mind devoid of conceiving’. Bhikkhus, ‘I am’ is a perturbation (*iñjitam*) ... a palpitation (*phanditam*) ... a proliferation (*papañcitam*) ... an involvement with conceit (*mānagatam*) ... ‘We will dwell with a mind in which conceit has been struck down’.

SN 35.248:3.1–7.3

The *arahant* knows of no permanent *attā*:

‘With the fading away of ignorance and the arising of true knowledge, “I am” does not occur to him; “I am this” does not occur to him’.

SN 22.47:3.3–3.4

If *arahants* discovered their true *attā*, would it not occur to them that ‘I am’ and ‘I am this’?

CHAPTER 3

IS FINAL NIBBĀNA

A FORM OF CONSCIOUSNESS?

It is sometimes argued that even if there is no *attā*, the purpose of the Buddhist training is to attain a permanent form of consciousness (*viññāṇa*).²³ But if there were such a thing as a

23 See in particular Harvey 1995, pp.198–214 and Johansson 1969, p.111. Harvey does not in fact use the words ‘permanent consciousness’ in describing final *Nibbāna*. Instead, he says final *Nibbāna* is a ‘stopped discernment’ (Harvey 1995, p.201; ‘discernment’ being Harvey’s translation of *viññāṇa*) or ‘consciousness beyond time’ (208). (He also argues that this ‘timeless’ *Nibbāna* can be periodically experienced by the *arahant* during life, 208). But the idea that *nirodha* can be understood as a ‘stopped state’ rather than just ‘cessation’ is not supported by the use of *nirodha* in the *Nikāyas*. Wherever its meaning is unambiguous it means ‘ending’, ‘cessation’; there is never any sense that it refers to a ‘state’. to make his point Harvey also employs the double meaning in English of the word ‘stopped’. For him a ‘stopped discernment’ is thus a consciousness that stands still, continuing without change, not a consciousness that has ended. In Pali, however, *nirodha/niruddha* has no such double meaning, it only means ‘stopped’ as in ‘ceased’ or ‘ended’.

As for Harvey’s use of the phrase ‘consciousness beyond time’, as opposed to ‘permanent consciousness’, it is difficult to see that it makes any difference. As a general tool of interpretation, it seems clear that the *Nikāyas* cannot possibly refute every single formulation that constitutes a contradiction to their outlook. In many cases, such as the present one, one has to make reasonable assumptions as to the implications of the *suttas*’ statements. As far as I can see, a consciousness beyond time would for all practical purposes be the same as a permanent consciousness,

permanent consciousness devoid of suffering, that would be precisely the sort of phenomenon that the Buddha would describe as a self: it is the characteristics of impermanence and suffering that make the description of something as ‘*attā*’ impossible.²⁴ If this argument is accepted, it follows that the idea of a permanent consciousness that is ‘*anattā*’ is inherently self-contradictory.²⁵

It might also be noted here that the mere absence of the thought or perception ‘I am’ in certain states of deep *samādhi* does not mean that by attaining those states one has penetrated the Buddha’s teaching of *anattā*. When one emerges from these states the notion ‘I am’ will reappear, often taking that very state of *samādhi* as its object.²⁶ As long as the underlying

since it is change that gives rise to a perception of time. Moreover, since *Nibbāna* is specifically said to be *dhuva*, ‘stable’ (SN 43.20), which in the *suttas* is used as a synonym for *nicca*, ‘permanent’, the idea of ‘consciousness beyond time’ as opposed to ‘permanent consciousness’ seems to be a red herring.

- 24 See in particular the *Pañca Sutta* (which is identical to the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta*) at SN 22.59. This does not mean that *Nibbāna* is a permanent self, since *Nibbāna* is not a ‘phenomenon’. See the last section of this paper for why this is so.
- 25 Again, since *Nibbāna* is entirely different from consciousness (or any of the five *khandhas*), this does not mean that *Nibbāna* is not *anattā*.
- 26 Deep states of *samādhi* will be particularly attractive to grasp as a self because of their qualities of peace, stability, contentment, bliss, etc. If one has not heard or properly understood the Buddha’s teachings, it seems there will be an almost irresistible pull towards seeing these states as one’s true *attā*.

An interesting passage in this context is found at DN 15:27.1–32.11. Here the Buddha asks the following semi-rhetorical question: ‘Where nothing at all is felt, could there be any sense of “I am” with reference to that (*tattha*)?’ (DN 15:30.3). From the subsequent conversation it is clear that the correct answer is ‘no’ and therefore that such a ‘state’ cannot be regarded as a self.

Harvey 1995, p.31 seems to interpret this to mean that if there is no experience of ‘I am’ at the time one abides in a particular state, i.e. that there is no self-awareness in that state, then that is sufficient to show that that state cannot be regarded as a permanent self. If this were correct, then any deep state of *samādhi*, during which there is no perception ‘I

tendency to the view ‘I am’ has not been abandoned, the perception ‘I am’ will always return in spite of such periods of temporary absence.²⁷

Let us now turn to what the Buddha said about consciousness:

‘Is consciousness (*viññāṇam*) permanent or impermanent?’ – ‘Impermanent, venerable sir’. – ‘Is what is impermanent suffering or happiness?’ – ‘suffering, venerable sir’. – ‘Is what is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: ‘this is mine, this I am, this is my self?’ – ‘No, venerable sir’.

SN 22.59:6.12–6.18

For in many discourses I have stated consciousness to be dependently arisen (*paṭiccasamuppannam*) since without a condition there is no origination of consciousness.

MN 38:7.4

And what are the conditions for the arising of the various types of consciousness?

am’, could also not be taken as a self. Yet, as I have argued above, it is perfectly possible to regard such states as an *attā* once one emerges from them.

But the passage at DN 15:27.1–32.11 does not have to be interpreted as Harvey does. Its interpretation hinges on the import of the word *tattha*, which Harvey translates as ‘there’. But, as is implied in my translation above, *tattha* frequently has a ‘locative’ sense, meaning ‘in this case’, ‘about this’, ‘with reference to this’. If this is the intended meaning also in the present case, then the passage means there can be no sense of ‘I am’ with reference to that state. In other words, one is incapable of taking that state as a permanent self even after one emerges from it, which is precisely what one would expect of a ‘state’ where nothing at all is felt, where nothing at all is experienced.

27 For ‘the underlying tendency to the view and conceit “I am” (*asmī ti diṭṭhi-mānānusayam*)’, see MN 9.

Bhikkhus, consciousness is reckoned by the particular condition dependent upon which it arises. When consciousness arises dependent on eye and forms, it is reckoned as eye-consciousness; when consciousness arises dependent on ear and sounds, it is reckoned as ear-consciousness; when consciousness arises dependent on nose and odours, it is reckoned as nose-consciousness; when consciousness arises dependent on tongue and flavours, it is reckoned as tongue-consciousness; when consciousness arises dependent on body and tangibles, it is reckoned as body-consciousness; when consciousness arises dependent on mind and mind-objects, it is reckoned as mind-consciousness.

MN 38:8.1–8.7

In fact, by definition, consciousness exists only together with its object of cognition:

‘It cognises, it cognises’ (*viñānāti*), friend; that is why ‘consciousness’ (*viññāṇan*) is said. What does it cognise? It cognises: ‘[this is] pleasant’; it cognises: ‘[this is] painful’; it cognises: ‘[This is] neither-painful-nor-pleasant’. ‘It cognises, it cognises’, friend; that is why ‘consciousness’ is said.²⁸

MN 43:4.3–4.6

‘Objectless consciousness’ does not exist:

Feeling, perception and consciousness, friend — these states are conjoined (*sam̐saṭṭhā*), not disjoined, and it is impossible to separate each of these states from the others in order to describe the

28 This statement seems to be absolute. No allowance is made for a ‘stopped’ consciousness.

difference between them. For what one feels, that one perceives; and what one perceives, that one cognises.²⁹

MN 43:9.4–9.9

Of the five aggregates, it is most commonly *viññāṇa* that is grasped as a self because, although all the other mental factors change continuously, consciousness or awareness can appear to be an independent, unchanging, and ever-present reality. But as we have already seen, the Buddha said that consciousness is impermanent. Indeed, there is no such thing as a permanent consciousness:

Consciousness that is permanent (*niccam*), stable (*dhuvaṃ*)³⁰, eternal (*sassatam*), not subject to change: this the wise in the world agree upon as not existing, and I too say that it does not exist.

SN 22.94:2.6–2.7

There is no consciousness that is permanent, stable, eternal, not subject to change, and that will remain the same just like eternity itself.³¹

SN 22.96:1.8–1.12

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- 29 In other words, at the very least feeling together with some sort of perception, no matter how subtle, would be the object of consciousness. Usually the situation would be much more complex, but feeling and perception would always be present with consciousness. I will discuss passages that may seem to refer to an ‘objectless consciousness’ in the section below on ‘unestablished consciousness’ and in the last part of this paper.
- 30 *Nibbāna* is specifically said to be *dhuva* at SN 43.20, in direct contrast to how *viññāṇa* is described here. This seems to rule out any link between final *Nibbāna* and consciousness.
- 31 It is hard to imagine a statement more explicit and clear than this one that a permanent consciousness does not exist. ‘There is no consciousness that is ... stable (*dhuva*)’ is again in direct contrast to the description of *Nibbāna* at SN 43.20.

Indeed, the eightfold path leads to the ending of consciousness, not to a state of permanent consciousness:

With the cessation of name-and-form there is the cessation of consciousness (*viññāṇa-nirodho*). This noble eightfold path is the way leading to the cessation of consciousness.³²

SN 22.57:14.6–14.8

Bhikkhus, whatever desire there is for consciousness, whatever lust, delight, craving — abandon it. Thus that consciousness will be abandoned, cut off at the root, made like a palm stump, obliterated (*anabhāvaṅkatam*) so that it is no more subject to future arising.

SN 22.111:1.4–1.8

By the utter destruction of
delight in existence,
By the extinction of
perception and consciousness
(*saññā-viññāṇa-saṅkhayā*),
By the cessation and appeasement of feelings:
It is thus, friend, that I know for beings –
Emancipation,
release,
seclusion.

SN 1.2:5.1–5.5

The body disintegrated, perception ceased,
All feelings were utterly consumed,
Mental activities were extinguished

32 Again, pace Harvey, *nirodha* means ‘ceased’ in the *Nikāyas*. There is no place where it unambiguously refers to a (stopped) ‘state’.

And consciousness came to an end
(*attham agamā*).³³

Ud8.9:5.1–5.4³⁴

It seems clear, then, that final *Nibbāna* is not a state of consciousness. But if this is so, how is one to understand some of the ‘exotic’ forms of consciousness sometimes mentioned in the *suttas*, which some commentators take as equivalent to final *Nibbāna*?³⁵

33 Johansson 1969, p.77 suggests ‘gone to rest’ and ‘gone home’ as translations of *attham agamā*. But the only meaning in the *Nikāyas* of *attha-gam* and its cognate forms is ‘come to an end’. See in particular CPD which lists ‘disappear’, ‘cease’, ‘destroyed’, ‘gone out of existence’ and ‘annihilated’ and DP which adds ‘end’. (Though *attha-gam* is also used for the setting of the sun, the sun doesn’t ‘go home’ or ‘go to rest’; but it certainly ‘disappears’, at least temporarily. If there were any other clear cases where such metaphors were used of the sun, then perhaps ‘go home’ could be accepted as a rendering.)

34 This passage describes the final *Nibbāna* of the *arahant* Dabba Mallaputta.

35 See references below.

CHAPTER 4
ANIDASSANA VIÑÑĀṆA,
NON-MANIFEST CONSCIOUSNESS

One often discussed passage – which only occurs twice in the Pali Canon – refers to a form of consciousness known as *anidassana viññāṇa*:^{36 37}

Where do earth, water, fire and air
no footing find?

36 Harvey's translation, 'non-manifestive', by which he means that nothing can 'appear on or in' this consciousness (1995, 206), in my opinion stretches the meaning of *anidassana* beyond what is reasonable. At the very least such a meaning would require a causative construction and probably something more involved (e.g. 'the consciousness with which nothing else manifests'), not just the simple adjective. The straightforward meaning of *anidassana viññāṇa* is that the consciousness itself is non-manifest. Harvey supports his understanding by referring to a passage at MN21:14.8–14.9 where *anidassana*, together with *arūpī*, is used to describe space: no picture can be drawn 'on' space (*ākāsa*) since it is *anidassana* and *arūpī*. But one cannot deduce the exact meaning of *anidassana* simply by giving it the meaning best suited to the simile. If this were possible then *arūpī* would also mean 'non-manifestive' (in Harvey's sense of the word), which it clearly does not. It also seems worth noting that this consciousness must be 'non-manifest' with reference to something; that is, it is a relative non-manifestation, not an absolute one. At the very least it is not non-manifest for the person who experiences it.

37 E.g. in Harvey 1995, pp.199-201; Ñāṇamoli 2001, p.1249; Johansson 1969, p.76.

Where are long and short,
 small and great,
 fair and foul—
 Where do name-and-form wholly cease?’

And the answer is:

‘Where consciousness is
 non-manifesting (*viññāṇam anidassanam*),
 boundless (*anantam*),
 all-luminous (*sabbato pabham*³⁸),

That’s where earth, water, fire and air
 find no footing,

There both long and short,
 small and great,
 fair and foul—
 There name-and-form wholly cease.

With the cessation of consciousness
 this all ceases.’³⁹

DN 11:85.11–85.27

38 Although the PTS version at DN 11:85.11–85.27 has the reading *paham*, I understand the correct reading here to be *pabham*. The reading *paham* seems to be unique to the Sinhalese tradition and is explained by Norman 1992, p.189 as likely ‘to be an error in the Sinhalese scribal tradition, where *ha* and *bha* are very similar and easily confused’. Moreover, the reading *pabham* also seems to be the basis for the Chinese version of this *sutta*, which has a reading meaning ‘shining’ (T I 102c17).

39 *Kattha āpo ca paṭhavī tejo vāyo na gādhati*
Kattha dīghañca rassañca añum thūlam subhāsubham,
Kattha nāmañca rūpañca asesam uparujjhatī ti
Tatra veyyākaraṇam bhavati:
Viññāṇam anidassanam anantam sabbato pabham
Ettha āpo ca paṭhavī tejo vāyo na gādhati,
Ettha dīghañca rassañca añum thūlam subhāsubham
Ettha nāmañca rūpañca asesam uparujjhati,
Viññāṇassa nirodhena etthetam uparujjhatī ti.
 (transl. Brahmāli, based on Walshe 1995).

Consciousness

non-manifesting (*viññāṇam anidassanam*),
 boundless (*anantaṃ*),
 all-luminous (*sabbato-pabham*).

MN 49:25.1

It has been suggested that *anidassana viññāṇa* refers to a state of consciousness that is equivalent to final *Nibbāna* (e.g. Harvey 1995, p.201),⁴⁰ but in light of the discussion of *viññāṇa* in the previous section, such an interpretation is untenable. However, to establish the correct interpretation of *anidassana viññāṇa* is far from easy. Firstly, in the whole Pali Canon the expression *anidassana viññāṇa* only appears in the above two passages.⁴¹ Secondly, Pali verse is notoriously difficult to translate: the correct Pali reading is often difficult to establish and poetic licence etc. can complicate matters further.⁴²

40 Again, Harvey calls it a consciousness ‘beyond time’. However, as I have explained above, I cannot see how this in practice is distinguishable from a permanent consciousness. Moreover, *Nibbāna* is itself called *dhuva*, ‘permanent’. Harvey also argues that this consciousness can be attained by the *arahant* while he is still alive.

41 Only two seemingly identical occurrences in the entire Pali Canon makes *anidassana viññāṇa* a marginal concept. This in itself is a sufficient argument to set this expression aside and not allow it to affect our understanding of the relationship between *viññāṇa* and final *Nibbāna*.

Apart from its use with *viññāṇa*, *anidassana* is also found on its own, specifically at MN 21:14.8, DN 33:1.10.76 and SN 43.22. In the last of these three, *anidassana* is used as a description of *Nibbāna*. But this does not mean that the word *anidassana* is equivalent to *Nibbāna*. Of the altogether 32 synonyms for *Nibbāna* found at SN 43.12, SN 43.13 & SN 43.14-43, a large number are ordinary everyday words which are much more frequently encountered in contexts other than that of *Nibbāna*. In other words, just because *anidassana* is used as a synonym for *Nibbāna* at SN 43.22 does not in any way mean that it is not used with very different connotations elsewhere.

42 See Warder 2001, p.viii and Bodhi 2000, p.13. The following passage in Norman 1996, p.157 commenting on the difficulty in translating Pali verse, is particularly instructive: ‘When John Brough, one of the greatest British Sanskrit scholars of the 20th century, had just spent several years producing his study of the Gāndhārī Dharmapada, and had the whole of

Moreover, as in poetry in general, the exact meaning of Pali verse is often vague as its emphasis is on appealing to emotion and intuition rather than on making precise doctrinal statements.⁴³ Finally, Pali verse often contains rare words and phrases that sometimes occur nowhere else in the *tipiṭaka*.⁴⁴

Nevertheless, for the sake of completeness, and to show that there are other interpretations of *anidassana viññāṇa* that are just as good as or even better than that of a permanent consciousness, I shall put forward an alternative interpretation. To this end, it is necessary to analyse the above quotes in more detail.

The first thing to note is that, due to the qualifiers *ananta* and *pabhā*, *anidassana viññāṇa* is described in a way that resembles the description of certain states of *samādhi*. *Ananta* is closely connected to *samādhi*, and it is specifically used in the standard description of the first two immaterial attainments.⁴⁵

the *Dhammapada*-related literature at his fingertips, he was asked if he would produce a translation of the *Dhammapada* for the Pali text society. He replied: “I cannot. It is too difficult”.

It is not immediately clear whether the second passage quoted above, [MN 49:25.1](#), is verse or prose: Ñāṇamoli 2001 treats it as verse but most Pali versions of the same passage seem to treat it as part of the prose. However, Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi informs me (private communication) that the passage at [MN 49:25.1](#) is in meter and therefore clearly verse.

43 Moreover, both of the above passages are spoken to non-monastics (the householder Kevaddha and Baka the Brahmā), neither of whom seems particularly well-versed in the Buddha’s teachings. Generally, at the time of the Buddha it was the monks and nuns who were the experts on the Buddhist doctrine. Most *suttas* spoken to lay Buddhists are simple and straightforward practical instructions. It seems quite possible, therefore, that the usage here of *anidassana* is simply evocative, not a precise reference to a specific state.

44 i.e. ‘*viññāṇam anidassanam*’ in the present case.

45 The first two immaterial attainments are known respectively as *ākāsānañcāyatana*, ‘the base of unlimited (*ananta*) space’, and *viññāṇaṇcāyatana*, ‘the base of unlimited (*ananta*) consciousness’ (e.g. at [MN 64:13.1](#), [14.1](#), [15.1](#)).

Moreover, it seems that *ananta* is never used with mind or consciousness apart from describing states of *samādhi*. It never seems to be used to

Equally important is that *appamāṇa*, ‘immeasurable’, which is semantically very close to *ananta*,⁴⁶ is very frequently connected with *samādhi*. In particular, it is used in the standard passage on the divine abidings (*brahma-vihāras*; e.g. at [MN7:13.1, 16.1](#)), but it is also employed as a general qualifier of *samādhi*.⁴⁷ As for the second qualifier, *pabhā*, it does not seem to be used elsewhere to directly qualify *samādhi*. However, the closely related term *pabhassara*, ‘shining’, is often used to describe the mind without hindrances (*nīvaraṇa*), the most obvious example of which is the mind in *samādhi*.⁴⁸ Thus, given the usage of *ananta* and *pabhā* in the above quotes, it seems plausible, perhaps even likely, that *anidassana viññāṇa* refers to a state of *samādhi*.

Next, it is necessary to look more carefully at the structure of the above verses. For the present purposes, an important fact which is rarely pointed out is that the first verse (the ‘question verse’) in the above [DN 11:85.11–85.27](#) passage seems to contain two questions rather than one.⁴⁹ When we turn to the

describe the ‘normal’ consciousness of the *arahant*, for example.

- 46 This semantic closeness becomes particularly important with verse. Due to metrical constraints, words which may have slightly different import in prose often become interchangeable in verse.
- 47 E.g. with *kaṣiṇa* meditation at [MN 77:23.5, 23.11, 24.2, 24.11](#), and with *samādhi* more generally at [AN 5.45:2.2–4.1](#).
- 48 Of course, the mind without hindrances could also be a reference to the mind of the *arahant*, but *pabhassara* does not seem to be used in this sense. See for example [SN 46.33](#) and [AN 5.23](#).
- 49 Of the three lines of the first verse, the first and the third line end with present tense indicative verbs. Thus we seem to have two separate sentences, each being a question. Moreover, while the Pali is ambiguous as to whether the response gives one or two answers, the parallel passage in the Chinese Canon (see below) seems to give two.

It might be objected that the lead-up to the verses at [DN 11:85.11–85.27](#) only contains one question. Why would the Buddha reformulate a single question into two? According to [AN 4.42:1.1–1.7](#) there are four ways of answering a question, one of which is using analysis. In the present case, the original question clearly has more than one answer (as will become clear below), and thus the Buddha’s reformulation may simply be a response to this fact.

second verse (the ‘answer verse’), it seems that we are again dealing with two separate answers: otherwise there would be a contradiction between the *viññāṇa* with various attributes described in the first line and the cessation of *viññāṇa* described in the last line – consciousness cannot be described as *anantaṃ sabbato pabhaṃ* and at the same time be said to have ceased. It seems reasonable, therefore, to assume that the first line of the question verse is answered by the first two lines of the answer verse, and the last two lines of the question verse are answered by the last three lines of the answer verse.⁵⁰ If this structural analysis is accepted, then it becomes clear that *anidassana viññāṇa* is simply a form of consciousness where ‘earth, water, fire and air find no footing’;⁵¹ it is not related to the cessation of name-and-form.⁵²

50 Note the ‘this’, *etaṃ*, in the last line of the answer verse. This would seem to refer back to *nāmaṇca rūpaṇca* of the previous line; that is, these lines are connected. Thus the last line cannot simply be regarded as an ‘add-on’ which does not refer to any of the questions in the question verse.

51 Taking this verse in isolation, the most obvious candidate for this would be the immaterial attainments. But the use elsewhere of the phrase ‘where earth, water, fire and air find no footing’ (see in particular [Ud 1.10:14.1–15.4](#) and [SN 1.27](#)) indicates that it refers to something more profound than the immaterial attainments. It is perhaps a poetic way of expressing a full escape from *samsāra*. See also the discussion below.

52 I take ‘long and short, small and great, fair and foul’ to be poetic examples of ‘name-and-form’ and thus to be included within name-and-form. In the *suttas* name-and-form is usually understood to encompass all phenomena apart from consciousness.

It is significant that the Chinese version of these verses (at T I 102c, 14–19) supports the above analysis. The question verse of the Chinese is virtually identical with the question verse of the Pali. (In both versions, this verse is the Buddha’s reformulation of the original single question into two questions.) The answer verse is as follows: ‘one should answer (應答): “Consciousness without form (識無形); infinite, self-illuminating (無量自有光); when this ceases then the four great [elements] cease (此滅四大滅); gross, subtle, beautiful, ugly cease (麤細好醜滅滅); therefore name-and-form cease (於此名色滅); consciousness ceases, remainder also ceases (識滅餘亦滅)”’. Here it is quite clear that we have two answers. The first one is ‘consciousness without form, infinite, self-illuminating’. This would then be the answer to the first question about where the four

At this point we must consider the second passage quoted above (MN 49:25.1). The wider context of this verse makes it clear that *anidassana viññāṇa* is ‘not commensurate with the allness of all’ (*sabbassa sabbattena ananubhūtaṃ*), that is, not the same nature as ‘all’. If ‘all’ here is to be understood as ‘all of *saṃsāra*’, then *anidassana viññāṇa* must be based on an awareness or knowledge of ‘what’ lies beyond *saṃsāra*.⁵³ In other words, *anidassana viññāṇa* must refer to a state of consciousness, perhaps a form of *samādhi*, possessed by a person who has an ‘outsider’s’ perspective on *saṃsāra*, one who has seen the potential for *saṃsāra* to cease.⁵⁴ This potential is only known to the *ariyas*.⁵⁵

elements cease or find no footing. Since the second line begins ‘when this ceases ...’, ‘this’ presumably referring back to the consciousness without form of the previous line (it is difficult to see what else it might refer to), this must be a second answer. This answer would correspond to the second question, concerning where name and form wholly cease. (Admittedly, the Chinese is a bit confusing here, since it starts the second answer with ‘then the four great elements cease’. I take this mention of the four great elements as simply an elaboration on some of the aspects of name-and-form.) Moreover, it is clear in the Chinese that the ‘consciousness without form’ cannot be a reference to *Nibbāna* since it ceases together with all other phenomena.

- 53 If, on the other hand, ‘all’ is not to be regarded as equivalent to *saṃsāra* in its entirety, then *anidassana viññāṇa* potentially becomes correspondingly broader. For example, if ‘all’ here instead only refers to everything within Baka the Brahmā’s knowledge (Baka the Brahmā being the Buddha’s interlocutor in the passage at MN 49:25.1), then *anidassana viññāṇa* could be a reference to the immaterial attainments.
- 54 This does not require this consciousness to exist ‘outside’ of *saṃsāra*, rather, it is a type of consciousness which is based on the full understanding of the *Dhamma*.
- 55 There are, in fact, good reasons for questioning whether this passage should be included in our analysis at all, since the reading in the above MN 49:25.1 quote is very uncertain. According to the Burmese version of this verse, it is the Buddha who speaks it, referring to his own special understanding. However, according to the Sri Lankan, the Thai, and the PTS versions of this verse, it is spoken by Baka the Brahmā, referring to his special understanding (see Anālayo 2011, footnote 162 to MN 49). This is obviously highly significant, because if this refers to Baka the Brahmā’s knowledge, then *anidassana viññāṇa* must refer to a state of conscious-

Given the above analysis, we are now in a position to be quite specific in our understanding of *anidassana viññāṇa*. We have seen that *anidassana viññāṇa* is:

1. a form of *samādhi*; and
2. that it is a type of consciousness accessible only to the *ariyas*.⁵⁶

This description fits well with the type of *samādhi* I have called *ariya-samādhi* in the introduction to this paper.⁵⁷ This then becomes our interpretation of *anidassana viññāṇa*.

In sum, it may never be possible to pin down the exact meaning of *anidassana viññāṇa* with perfect certainty. However, given the broader message of the *suttas* concerning *viññāṇa*, and given that there is at least one solid explanation of *anidassana viññāṇa* which does not contradict this broader message, one is forced to reject the idea that *anidassana viññāṇa* is equivalent to the state of final *Nibbāna* in the form of a permanent (or ‘timeless’) consciousness.⁵⁸

ness that he can access, i.e. most likely a *jhāna* state. This interpretation is further reinforced by the Chinese version of this *sutta*, also according to which it was Brahmā who spoke, see T I 548b, 11. (It is also significant that in the Chinese there is no equivalent of *anidassana*.) Given this uncertainty in the reading, it would be quite reasonable, maybe even preferable, to leave the passage at MN 49:25.1 out of the present discussion. In spite of this, I have decided to incorporate the passage in my argument.

56 This may also explain the usage of the term *anidassana*. According to our analysis, being accessible only to *ariyas*, *anidassana viññāṇa* is ‘non-manifest’ (i.e. inaccessible) to all *puthujjanas*, including the *devas* of the very highest realms.

57 This is the *samādhi* referred to at AN 3.32, AN 10.6, AN 11.7, and AN 11.8.

As mentioned in the introduction, and contrary to the view of some, I do not regard this consciousness as taking *Nibbāna* as its object. Rather, I see this as a *samādhi* gained through a particular perception that is based on the knowledge of what *Nibbāna* is.

58 Nor would it refer to an *ariya*’s direct experience of *Nibbāna* during life: see my discussion of *ariya-samādhi* in the introduction.

CHAPTER 5
APPATITṬHITA VIÑÑĀṆA,
UNESTABLISHED CONSCIOUSNESS

The *sutta* phrase *appatitṭhita viññāṇa*, ‘unestablished consciousness’, is sometimes taken as referring to final *Nibbāna*. In this way final *Nibbāna* is again seen as a ‘state’ of consciousness (see in particular Harvey 1995, pp.201–203).⁵⁹ The following three *sutta* passages are sometimes used to support this assertion:

‘If, bhikkhus, there is no lust for the nutriment edible food, or for the nutriment contact, or for the nutriment mental volition, or for the nutriment consciousness, if there is no delight, if there is no craving, consciousness (*viññāṇam*) does not become established (*appatitṭhitam*) there and come to growth ... Suppose, bhikkhus, there was a house or hall with a peaked roof, with windows on the northern, southern, and eastern sides. When the sun rises and a beam of light enters through a window, where would it become established

⁵⁹ Harvey also sees this state of consciousness as experienceable by *arahants* during life, but different from their ordinary consciousness (1995, 201–203). Here, however, I will focus on the aspect of final *Nibbāna*.

(*patiṭṭhitā*)?’ — ‘on the western wall, venerable sir’ — ‘If there were no western wall, where would it become established?’ — ‘on the earth, venerable sir?’ — ‘If there were no earth, where would it become established?’ — ‘on the water, venerable sir’. — ‘If there were no water, where would it become established?’ — ‘It would not become established anywhere (*appatiṭṭhitā*), venerable sir’. (cf. Harvey 1995, p.202)

SN 12.64:6.1–8.8

But, bhikkhus, when one does not intend, and one does not plan, and one does not have a tendency towards anything, no basis exists for the maintenance of consciousness. When there is no basis, there is no support for the establishing of consciousness. When consciousness is unestablished (*appatiṭṭhitam*) and does not come to growth, there is no descent of name-and-form. With the cessation of name-and-form ... ageing-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair cease. Such is the cessation of this whole mass of suffering. (cf. Harvey 1995, p.202)

SN 12.38:3.1–3.5

Monks, with consciousness unestablished (*appatiṭṭhitena*), the clansman Godhika has attained final *Nibbāna*. (cf. Harvey 1995, pp.209–210)

SN 4.23:10.6

In the first quote above (SN 12.64:6.1–8.8), there is no good reason why *appatiṭṭhita viññāṇa* should be understood as referring to final *Nibbāna*. Consciousness is said to be unestablished ‘if there is no delight, if there is no craving’. The reference to absence of craving seems to make it fairly straight-

forward that this concerns the ordinary consciousness of the living *arahant*.⁶⁰

The second passage (SN 12.38:3.1–3.5) concerns a person who ‘does not intend’, ‘does not plan’, and ‘does not have a tendency towards anything’. His consciousness is then unestablished and ‘there is no descent of name-and-form’. If, as seems likely, descent of name-and-form refers to future rebirth, then the unestablished consciousness must refer to the living *arahant*. Indeed, the *suttas* immediately preceding and following this one, which are direct parallels to it, explicitly mention ‘future rebirth’ (*āyatim punabbhavābhiniḅbatti* and *āyatim jāti* respectively) where the present *sutta* mentions descent of name-and-form. This leaves little doubt that *appatiṭṭhita viññāṇa* also in the present *sutta* refers to the consciousness of the living *arahant*. Moreover, the expression ‘when consciousness is unestablished ... there is no descent of name-and-form’ seems to indicate that this concerns consciousness in general, not a specific state. thus, again, this seems to be a reference to an *arahant*’s general state of consciousness.

The third passage (SN 4.23:10.6) is more ambiguous, but it can easily be understood to mean that Godhika’s consciousness was unestablished at the time of death. In other words, there is no need to bring in any theory of final *Nibbāna* consciousness that, in my opinion, clearly contradicts the *suttas*’ general message on the subject.⁶¹

60 I understand this passage to be another way of saying that consciousness is not attached to anything; it does not grasp at anything or take anything up. Because of being unestablished in this way, it does not get established in, i.e. commence, a new existence. That is, the passage concerns the cessation of the source of consciousness. Upon the attainment of *arahant*-ship, consciousness becomes devoid of the kind of desire that would otherwise have caused the future establishment of consciousness in a new rebirth. for the *arahant*, the source of consciousness has ceased, but consciousness itself only ceases when he dies.

61 See the general discussion on consciousness above.

Finally, there are still other passages in the *suttas* where *appatiṭṭhita viññāṇa* clearly refers to the general consciousness of the living *arahant*:

When that consciousness
is unestablished (*apatiṭṭhitam*)⁶²
not coming to growth,
nongenerative,
it is liberated.

By being liberated,
it is steady;
by being steady, it is content;
by being content,
he is not agitated.

Being unagitated,
he personally attains *Nibbāna*.⁶³

SN 22.53:3.8–3.9
& SN 22.54:4.8–4.9

In sum, all the available evidence suggests that *appatiṭṭhita viññāṇa* is a reference to the ordinary consciousness of the living *arahant*. Although the *suttas* do not seem to contain an outright denial that this consciousness applies to final *Nibbāna*,

62 The spelling *apatiṭṭhitam* seems to be an error for *appatiṭṭhitam*.

63 The expression ‘being unagitated, he personally attains *Nibbāna*’, is a common way in the *suttas* to describe *Nibbāna* in this life, i.e. the attainment of *arahant*-ship as opposed to final *Nibbāna*. See for instance MN 140:22.12, where *Nibbāna* is described in similar terms, but final *Nibbāna* clearly happens later. Also note that in this case consciousness in fact becomes unestablished immediately prior to the attainment of *arahant*-ship. This strengthens the argument further.

Appatiṭṭhita also recurs at Ud 8.1:3.1–3.4 where it seems to qualify a particular ‘state’ (of *samādhi*, perhaps) of the living *arahant*. Since it concerns an *arahant*, his consciousness is by definition *appatiṭṭhita*, ‘unestablished’, as discussed above. For further discussion of Ud 8.1:3.1–3.4 see Chapter 10 on Final *Nibbāna*.

there is no passage that unambiguously states that it does. In these circumstances, it seems to me little more than speculation to suggest that unestablished consciousness refers to a 'state' of final *Nibbāna*. And given that the existence of a permanent consciousness is explicitly denied elsewhere (see above), it becomes untenable.

CHAPTER 6

COULD CITTA (MIND) BE A REFERENT OF FINAL NIBBĀNA?

Is it reasonable, as is sometimes done, to use the term *citta* (mind), or a particular state of *citta*, as a synonym for *Nibbāna*?⁶⁴ There is no clear evidence in the *suttas* of *citta* ever being

64 Johansson 1969, p.131 states that ‘The new, transformed state of *citta* is *Nibbāna* ...’ He then claims that this *citta* continues after the death of the *arahant*: ‘But when an *Arahant* dies ... the “stillness” and “emptiness” of the *citta* makes it survive, free and anonymous ...’ (p.133). Johansson evidently takes a particular state of *citta* as equivalent to final *Nibbāna*.

A similar position seems to be taken in Mahā Boowa 1980, p.23: ‘the *citta* by its very nature is *amataṃ* - Undying ...’; ‘Once *paññā* has totally shattered and cleared the *kilesas* away, the *citta* will be transformed into the state of purity ... How can it vanish? ... this one is the genuine *amataṃ* (the Undying). Immortal by way of purity ... This is the real and true substance or essence which is in the midst of our *khandha*’ (45); ‘The *kilesas* can’t destroy the *citta* ... This nature is unassailable, absolute and permanent. It cannot be annihilated’ (76). It must be kept in mind, however, that the teachings given by Thai meditation teachers are often difficult to interpret. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, the idiom of Thai meditation teachers, particularly those associated with the Thai forest tradition, is notoriously idiosyncratic. They rarely use the expressions and words found in the *Nikāyas*, and if they do, they sometimes give these expressions new meanings. Secondly, the language they use is often not very precise, at least compared with that of the *suttas*, and thus there are significant problems of interpretation. Thus it is possible that Ven. Ajahn Mahā Boowa may be referring to something other than the English translation appears to show. Still, the translation as it stands is

used in this way and, as I shall now try to show, the evidence to the contrary is compelling.

Citta refers to what in English one would understand by ‘mind’. In the *Nikāyas*, *citta* often has a broader scope than *viññāṇa*, sometimes referring to intention for example and at other times to thought.⁶⁵ Despite this distinction between the two terms,⁶⁶ they are nevertheless closely related. In fact, they are often used synonymously. For example, there are several instances in the *suttas* where one term appears where one would normally expect to find the other:

‘When that consciousness (*viññāṇam*) is unestablished, not coming to growth, nongenerative, it is liberated (*vimuttam*)’.

SN 22.53:3.8
& SN 22.54:4.8

Usually it is the *citta* which is said to be liberated. Another example of this is as follows:

‘With the origination of name-and-form (*nāma-rūpa-samudayā*) there is the origination of mind (*cittassa samudayo*). With the cessation of name-and-form there is the passing away of mind’.

SN 47.42:1.8–1.9

It is usually *viññāṇa* which is said to be thus conditioned by name-and-form. But as the context here is the four *satipaṭṭhānas*, the third of which is mind contemplation (*cittānupāsana*), *citta* is used instead.

hard to square with the descriptions of *Nibbāna* and *citta* in the *suttas*.

65 In the *Vinaya-Piṭaka* the Buddha typically asks a monk who thinks he may have committed an offence, *kiṃcitto*, ‘what (was your) intention?’, e.g. at [Bu Pj 2:7.6.8](#). *Citta* seems to mean ‘thought’ in the standard description of thought-reading, e.g. at [DN 11:6.0–7.8](#). For a further sense of the wide use of the term *citta* see PED.)

66 cf. Bodhi 2000, p.769, n.154.

Where the *suttas* analyse the mind into mental factors, *viññāṇa* usually forms part of the list. In the following passage, however, *citta* is used in place of *viññāṇa*:

And the states in the first *jhāna* – the applied thought, the sustained thought, the rapture, the pleasure, and the unification of mind; the contact, feeling, perception, volition, and mind (*cittam*); the zeal, decision, energy, mindfulness, equanimity, and attention ...⁶⁷

MN 111:4.1

Elsewhere, *citta* and *viññāṇa* are used together to refer to the same thing: ‘When in his mother’s womb the first thought (*cittam*) has arisen, the first consciousness (*viññāṇam*) appeared, his birth is (to be reckoned) from that time’ (Kd1:75.1.8).⁶⁸

This interchangeability of *citta* and *viññāṇa* is not surprising when one considers the matter carefully. From the *suttas* it can be seen that, although *viññāṇa* as a ‘technical’ term only refers to consciousness or awareness, *viññāṇa* devoid of other mental factors is merely a theoretical construct which in actual experience does not occur. Thus *citta*, even in its broadest sense, is implied by *viññāṇa*:

Feeling, perception and consciousness, friend – these states are conjoined (*samsatṭhā*), not disjoined, and it is impossible to separate each of these states from the others in order to describe the difference between them. For what one feels, that

67 The use of *citta* here, in place of *viññāṇa*, could perhaps be under the influence of the *abhidhamma*. See Ven. Anālayo’s study of the *Anupada Sutta*, MN 111, in Anālayo 2011.

68 ‘*Citta*’ which is usually translated as ‘mind’ is here translated as ‘thought’ because ‘mind’ does not really fit the context. Perhaps ‘mental state’ would be a better translation.

one perceives; and what one perceives, that one cognises.

MN 43:9.4–9.7

So whenever there is consciousness, the other mental factors will also be present (cf. MN 111), and thus *viññāṇa* is in effect no different from *citta*.⁶⁹ *Citta* in turn cannot exist without *viññāṇa*: mind without consciousness is surely an unintelligible concept. Thus, where there is *citta*, there is also *viññāṇa*; and where there is *viññāṇa*, there is also *citta*. In practice they are inseparable and very closely related:

‘But, bhikkhus, as to that which is called “mind” (*cittam*) and “mentality” (*mano*) and consciousness” (*viññāṇam*);’⁷⁰

SN 12.61:2.1

But what is called thought (*cittam*), or mind (*mano*), or consciousness (*viññāṇam*).⁷¹

DN 1:2.13.4

69 It seems clear that *citta* is often regarded as including other mental factors apart from *viññāṇa*. See discussion above.

70 In both this quote and the one below the singular ‘*yaṃ ca kho etaṃ/idaṃ*’, ‘and that/this which’, is used. Thus ‘*citta*’, ‘*mano*’, and ‘*viññāṇa*’ refer to the same entity. Also note that Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi here has translated ‘*itipi*’ with ‘and’, a translation normally used for ‘ca’. A more literal translation of ‘*itipi*’ might be ‘also’ or ‘too’: ‘But, bhikkhus, as to that which is called mind, also mentality, also consciousness’. It is significant that this phrase is also found in the Chinese and the Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit versions of this *sutta*, cf. respectively T II 81c, 7 and Tripāṭhi 1962, folio 5 V3.

71 Apparently the Tibetan counterpart to this *sutta* has the equivalent phrase; cf. Weller 1934 p.26.

MN 138 provides another striking example of *viññāṇa* and *citta* being used interchangeably. In the summary at the beginning of the *sutta*, at MN 138:3.1, *viññāṇa* is used. Later on in the same *sutta*, in the section explaining this *viññāṇa*, *citta* is used in its place; see MN 138:12.3, 13.2, 14.2, 15.2, 16.3, 17.2, 18.2, 19.2. Further, in the explanation itself, *viññāṇa* and *citta* are used together.

For further references to the interchangeability of *viññāṇa* and *citta* in non-Pali Buddhist texts (i.e. primarily Chinese and Sanskrit sources), see Anālayo 2011, footnote 168 to MN 138.

Therefore, if *viññāṇa* is not permanent and eternal, the same must be true for *citta*:

Here, a certain ascetic or Brahmin is a logician, a reasoner. Hammering it out by reason, following his own line of thought, he argues: ‘Whatever is called eye or ear or nose or tongue or body, that self is impermanent, unstable, non-eternal, liable to change. But what is called thought (*cittam*), or mind (*mano*) or consciousness (*viññāṇam*), that self is permanent, stable, eternal, not subject to change, the same for ever and ever!’⁷²

DN 1:2.13.2–2.13.4

But, bhikkhus, as to that which is called ‘mind’ (*cittam*) and ‘mentality’ (*mano*) and ‘consciousness’ (*viññāṇam*) – the uninstructed worldling is unable to experience revulsion towards it, unable to become dispassionate towards it and be liberated from it. For what reason? Because for a long time this has been held to by him, appropriated, and grasped thus: ‘This is mine, this I am, this is my self’. Therefore the uninstructed worldling is unable to experience revulsion towards it, unable to become dispassionate towards it and be liberated from it.

It would be better, bhikkhus, for the uninstructed worldling to take as self this body composed of the four great elements rather than the mind (*cittam*). For what reason? Because this body composed of the four great elements is seen standing for one year, for two years, for three, four, five, or ten years, for twenty, thirty, forty, or fifty years, for a hundred years, or even longer. But that

72 This passage refers to a wrong view.

which is called ‘mind’ (*cittam*) and ‘mentality’ (*mano*) and ‘consciousness’ (*viññāṇam*) arises as one thing and ceases as another by day and by night. Just as a monkey roaming through a forest grabs hold of one branch, lets go and grabs another, then lets that go and grabs still another, so too that which is called ‘mind’ and ‘mentality’ and ‘consciousness’ arises as one thing and ceases as another by day and by night.

SN 12.61:2.1–4.3

Thus, according to the *suttas*, holding the view that *citta* in some way can be regarded as permanent, is a mistake. Moreover, when one gains the full *ariyan* insight into the impermanent and suffering nature of the mind, one feels revulsion (*nibbidā*) and dispassion (*virāga*) towards it. And when the *arahant* attains final *Nibbāna*, the *citta* comes to an end:

Like the deer roaming at will
in the variegated grove,
having entered the delightful mountain,
wreathed in clouds,

I shall rejoice there
on the uncrowded mountain;
you, mind (*citta*),
will certainly perish (*parābhavissasi*).⁷³

Thag 19.1:54.1–54.4

73 Although I have argued in the above section concerning *anidassana viññāṇa* that the interpretation of verse is often difficult, this becomes particularly relevant if a verse is interpreted in a way that is contrary to what can be established from canonical prose passages alone. In the present case, the verses merely reinforce what can be established elsewhere.

You are seen, housebuilder,
 you will not build a house again.
 All your rafters are broken,
 your gables are torn asunder.

The mind (*cittam*),
 made free of boundaries,
 will blow away (*vidhamissati*)
 in this very existence.⁷⁴

Thag 2.32:2.1–2.6

It [*citta*] remains steady,
 attained to imperturbability,
 and he observes its vanishing
 (*vayañcassānupassati*).

AN 6.55:17.2, 17.8, 17.20

With the cessation of name-and-form
 there is the cessation of mind (*cittassa*).

SN 47.42:1.9

74 The translation is based on the alternative reading ‘*vimariyādikatam*’ in the last line.

Norman’s translation of ‘*vidhamissati*’, ‘will blow away’, can probably be improved upon. other possible translations include: ‘will be demolished’ (cf. Bodhi 2000, p.985), ‘will be ruined’, ‘will fall away’, and ‘will be destroyed’.

CHAPTER 7

PABHASSARA CITTA, THE RADIANT MIND

At [AN 1.49](#) we find the following oft-quoted passage: ‘this mind (*cittam*), bhikkhus, is radiant (*pabhassaram*), but is defiled by defilements which arrive’. Might this *pabhassara citta* be an eternal, radiant, and pure mind? It seems clear from the following that this cannot be the case:

So too, bhikkhus, there are these five corruptions of the mind (*cittassa*), corrupted by which the mind is neither malleable nor wieldy nor radiant (*pabhassaram*) but brittle and not rightly concentrated for the destruction of the taints. What five? Sensual desire ... ill will ... sloth and torpor ... restlessness and remorse ... doubt is a corruption of the mind, corrupted by which the mind is neither malleable nor wieldy nor radiant but brittle and not rightly concentrated for the destruction of the taints.

[SN 46.33:2.1–2.4](#)
& [AN 5.23:2.1–2.4](#)
(cf. [AN 3.102:1.6, 2.5, 3.6](#)
& [MN 140:20.1–20.3](#))

This appears to be the only unambiguous usage of *pabhassara* in the *suttas*. It follows that the only reasonable interpretation of *pabhassara citta* is that it is the mind freed from the five hindrances, the most obvious example of which is the mind in *jhāna*.⁷⁵

75 See also Anālayo 2003, p.191, n.39.

My understanding is that the radiance is always available, it is only matter of overcoming the hindrances. But when the defilements are present the mind is not radiant: otherwise we would be able to observe that radiance, since the mind can only be known through direct experience.

CHAPTER 8

DOES THE TERM CITTA HAVE TWO FUNDAMENTALLY DISTINCT REFERENTS?

If, as suggested by Harvey 1995, one sees the *Nikāyas* as including a doctrine of two fundamentally different types of consciousness, i.e. a *samsāric* consciousness and a timeless *Nibbānic* consciousness, then, in view of the close relationship between *viññāṇa* and *citta*, one would expect the *Nikāyas* to make a similar distinction between two fundamentally different types of *citta*. Thus the term *citta* would sometimes refer to the ordinary *citta* of the *puthujjana* and at other times refer to a permanent *citta* known to the *arahant*.⁷⁶ A phrase such as ‘*cittam vimuccati*’ (e.g. at [MN51:27.2](#)), ‘the mind is liberated’, would then refer to the liberated ‘eternal mind’, or ‘original pure mind’, known to the *arahant*.⁷⁷

But there is no evidence to support making this distinction. Nowhere in the *suttas* do we find that two such different

76 Whether the other *ariyas* would know of such a *citta* seems unclear. See my discussion of *ariya-samādhi* in the introduction.

77 Following Harvey’s approach, one might alternatively call this a ‘timeless (mode of) mind’. I have already discussed why the idea of ‘timelessness’, in my opinion, does not add anything new. See discussion of *viññāṇa* above.

realities could both be referred to as ‘*citta*’. Considering the centrality of this issue for the proper understanding of the *Dhamma*, it seems highly unlikely that the Buddha should have used the term *citta* in such distinct ways without clearly commenting upon it.⁷⁸

In my opinion, the only possible meaning of such phrases as ‘*cittaṃ vimuccati*’ is that the ‘ordinary’ mind is liberated from the defilements (*āsavā*). There is no indication that this mind is somehow permanent. Indeed, one would have expected *citta* to be used synonymously with *Nibbāna* if this thesis were correct. But *citta* is never used in this way in the *suttas*.⁷⁹

78 Moreover, consciousness (*viññāṇa*) is also occasionally said to be ‘freed’; see in particular [SN 22.53:3.8–3.9](#) & [SN 22.54:4.8–4.9](#), above. If ‘mind’ has a distinct meaning in the phrase ‘the mind is liberated’, then the same would have to be true for *viññāṇa* in this parallel construction. But we have already seen that the Buddha rejects the idea of *viññāṇa* as a permanent entity.

79 See for example the *asaṅkhata-samyutta* ([SN 43.12/SN 43.13/SN 43.14–43](#)) where there are 32 synonyms for *Nibbāna*, none of which is *citta* or any particular state of *citta*.

CHAPTER 9 CITTA AND MANO (MIND)

Citta and *mano* are even more closely related than *citta* and *viññāṇa*:⁸⁰

What is mind (*cittaṃ*), that is mentality (*mano*);
what is mentality (*mano*), that is mind (*cittaṃ*).⁸¹

Bu Pj 3:3.28
(*transl. Brahmāli*)

Thus is your mind (*mano*),
and in this way is your mind (*mano*),
and thus is your mind (*cittaṃ*).

DN 11:6.3, 6.5, 6.9, 7.4 &
DN 28:6.4, 6.8, 6.12 &
AN 3.60:9.3, 10.2, 11.2, 15.2
(*transl. Brahmāli*)

80 As with *viññāṇa* and *citta*, *mano* and *citta* have their own more or less distinct spheres of usage in the *suttas*. Sometimes in the analysis of mental processes the Buddha uses *mano* to describe the mind in relation to mind-consciousness but not in relation to the other five types of consciousness. In this analysis, *mano* is the sense through which mind-consciousness arises. *Citta*, on the other hand, apparently encompasses all six types of consciousness. Outside such technical usage, however, *mano* and *citta* seem to be used synonymously.

81 This passage concerns mind reading.

Always frightened is this mind (*cittam*),
the mind (*mano*) is always agitated.⁸²

SN 2.17:2.1–2.2

Given this close relationship, even identity, between *citta* and *mano*, a whole new line of argument against the idea of a permanent *citta* could be developed by showing the impermanent, non-self nature of *mano*. However, as I feel the above arguments are already sufficient, I will just quote a few passages from the *suttas* to illustrate:

The mind (*mano*) is subject to disintegration
(*palokadhhammo*).

SN 35.84:2.7

The mind (*mano*) is non-self. The cause and condition for the arising of the mind is also non-self. As

82 Both *mano* and *citta* are usually translated as ‘mind’. When the words are used together in the *suttas*, translators often seem to struggle to find a second English word that also means ‘mind’ (cf. Bodhi 2000, p.769, n.154).

The following two examples are also instructive of the close relationship between *citta* and *mano*:

‘A mind of ill-will (*byāpannacitto*),
mental intention of hate (*paduṭṭhamanasankappo*)’.

SN 22.80:7.2

(*transl. Brahmāli*)

‘An undaunted mind (*appatiṭṭhitacitto*),
a non-dejected mind (*adinamānaso*),
a mind without ill-will (*abyāpannacetaso*)’.

SN 46.6:3.4, 4.7

(*transl. Brahmāli*)

(cf. Bodhi 2000, 1904, n.69)

In the above *mano* and *citta*, as well as *ceto*, seem to be used as synonyms.

Yet another example of this close relationship is the use of *kāya* (body), *vācā* (speech), and *mano* (mind) to denote the three doors of wholesome and unwholesome actions; occasionally the three doors are denoted as *kāya*, *vācā*, and *citta*; cf. SN 17.9:1.6, SN 20.10:3.1, 3.9 and SN 35.127:5.4, 5.5. See also Dhp 348 where one finds *vimuttamānaso* in place of the standard *cetovimutti*.

the mind has originated from what is non-self, how could it be self?

SN 35.142:1.7–1.9

If anyone says, ‘the mind (*mano*) is self’, that is not tenable. The rise and fall of mind are discerned, and since the rise and fall of mind are discerned it would follow: ‘my self rises and falls’. That is why it is not tenable for anyone to say: ‘the mind is self’. Thus the mind is not self.

MN 148:11.5–11.10

The *arahants* maintain that when the mind exists (*manasmim sati*) there is pleasure and pain, and when the mind does not exist (*mana-smim asati*) there is no pleasure and pain.

SN 35.133:6.1–6.3

The mind (*mano*) is yours, Evil one, mental phenomena are yours, mind-contact and its base of consciousness is yours; but, Evil one, where there is no mind, no mental phenomena, no mind-contact and its base of consciousness (*viññāṇāyatanaṃ*) — there is no place for you there, evil one.

SN 4.19:3.1–3.10

Again, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu who is beyond training (an *arahant*) understands the six faculties – the eye faculty, the ear faculty, the nose faculty, the tongue faculty, the body faculty, the mind (*mano*) faculty. He understands: ‘these six faculties will cease completely and totally without remainder, and no other six faculties will arise anywhere in any way.

SN 48.53:7.1–7.3

As with consciousness, one has to conclude that final *Nibbāna* has nothing to do with mind.

CHAPTER 10

FINAL NIBBĀNA

The discussion so far has emphasized that, according to the *Nikāyas*, final *Nibbāna* cannot be regarded as some sort of permanent or timeless consciousness or mind and that it cannot be regarded as a self (*attā*). But highlighting what final *Nibbāna* is not obviously begs the question: What then is final *Nibbāna*? Indeed, it might be asked, is it anything at all apart from the cessation of existence?⁸³

Before I attempt to answer this question, it is necessary to investigate a number of *sutta* passages that concern *Nibbāna* more directly. These passages are often referred to as evidence that final *Nibbāna* is some sort of ‘state’⁸⁴ (see for instance Bodhi 2005, p.318).⁸⁵ But I would contend that they do not need to be interpreted in this way.

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- 83 That is, the cessation of the five aggregates. This does not imply anything except the cessation of an entirely impersonal process. This is very different from the annihilation of a permanent entity. See discussion below.
- 84 I use quotes here and below to emphasise that such a ‘state’, or ‘existing entity’, would be completely different from anything that can normally be experienced by human beings. Thus the word ‘state’ is only used for lack of suitable terminology.
- 85 Thānissaro Bhikkhu 1993b, Abstract) also seems to support the idea that final *Nibbāna* is more than mere cessation: ‘As for the question of how *nibbana* is experienced after death, the Buddha says that there is no limit in that experience by which it could be described’. Note in particular the words ‘that experience’, referring to *Nibbāna* after the death of the *arahant*.

Sometimes *Nibbāna* is called *Nibbānadhātu*, e.g. at [SN 45.7:2.4](#).⁸⁶ The word *dhātu* is often translated as ‘element’. Basing one’s understanding on this translation it is natural to conclude that *Nibbāna* must be ‘something’. However, this would be to ignore the range of meanings of the word *dhātu*.⁸⁷ In addition to meaning ‘element’, it also has the sense of ‘property’ (see PED).⁸⁸ This meaning is prominent in such compounds as *nirodha-dhātu* ([Iti 51:2.3](#)), ‘the property of cessation’, and *nekkhamma-dhātu* ([SN 14.12:7.2](#)), ‘the property of renunciation’.⁸⁹ Indeed, *Nibbānadhātu* itself is explained at [SN 45.7:2.1–2.6](#), as nothing other than ‘the removal (*vinayo*) of lust, the removal of hatred and the removal of delusion’. Here, again, it is the property aspect which is to the fore, and the best translation would perhaps be ‘the property of extinguishment’.⁹⁰

Another set of *suttas*, at [SN 43.12/SN 43.13/SN 43.14–43](#), present 32 synonyms for *Nibbāna*. This could easily be regarded as evidence of final *Nibbāna* as an existing ‘state’. However, in this case we need to be careful to distinguish between *Nibbāna*

86 Or it may be called *asaṅkhatadhātu*, [MN 115:9.4](#), or *amatadhātu*, see [AN 6.46:6.5](#).

87 It also ignores the distinction between *Nibbāna* and final *Nibbāna*. From the definition of *Nibbāna-dhātu* at [SN 45.7:2.1–2.6](#), see below, it seems clear that it refers to the state of *arahant*-ship, not final *Nibbāna*.

88 That is, property in the sense of quality.

89 The point of these expressions is presumably simply to point out that there are such things as cessation and renunciation.

90 That is, the extinguishment of the defilements of lust, hatred and delusion.

Moreover, *dhātu* is used for *saññāvedayitanirodha*, the cessation of perception and feeling ([SN 14.11:1.4](#)). In this case it can clearly not refer to an element as something existing. Rather, it seems to refer to the existence of the possibility of the cessation of the mental *khandhas*.

The word *pada*, lit. ‘foot’, has a similarly broad application. For example, the expression *amatam padam* (e.g. at [AN 4.48:4.4](#)), which is used as a synonym for *Nibbāna*, might perhaps be rendered ‘the characteristic of freedom from death’; see PED. (See discussion of [Ud 8.3](#) below for why *amatam* is better rendered as ‘freedom from death’ than ‘the deathless’. See also CPD.)

as an aspect of *arahant*-ship (i.e. the destruction of lust, hatred and delusion) and final *Nibbāna*. Because all these *suttas* are about the destruction of the defilements they would seem to concern *arahant*-ship.

Two *suttas* relevant to the present discussion are found at [Ud8](#). The first of these reads as follows:

Monks, there is that base (*āyatana*) where there is no earth, no water, no fire, no air; no base consisting of the infinity of space, no base consisting of the infinity of consciousness, no base consisting of nothingness, no base consisting of neither-perception-nor-non-perception; neither this world nor another world; neither sun nor moon. I say, bhikkhus, it is not coming, going or remaining, not passing away or reappearing. It is unestablished, not moving, without basis. Just this is the end of suffering.⁹¹

[Ud8.1:3.1–3.4](#)

The first part of this quote, ‘where there is no earth ... neither moon nor sun’, is identical to the standard description of what I call ‘*ariya-samādhi*’.⁹² That we are here dealing with a state of *samādhi* would fit well with the use of the word ‘base’, *āyatana*, which is often used of *samādhi* attainments.⁹³

The second part of the quote, ‘it is not coming, going or remaining, not passing away or reappearing; it is unestablished’,

91 My translation, based on Bodhi 2005.

92 See introduction. This *samādhi* is described at [AN10.6](#), [AN10.7](#) and [AN11.7](#), [AN11.8](#). ([AN3.32](#) is also closely related.) The only difference is the absence of ‘neither sun nor moon’ in the AN passages. The sun and moon seem to have been regarded as belonging to ‘another world’ in ancient India (see [DN23:5.10–5.11](#)), and thus the inclusion of this expression does not seem to add anything new. I would regard its addition to [Ud8.1](#) simply as poetic flourish.

93 E.g. the immaterial attainments are all called *āyatana*.

lished, not moving, without basis (*neva āgatim ... na gatim na ñhitim na cutim na upapattim, appatiññhitam appavattam anārammaṇamevetam*)’, seems to be nothing other than a description of *arahant*-ship. The initial phrase, ‘no coming ... or reappearing’, elsewhere refers to *arahant*-ship (see [Ud8.4:3.5](#), [MN144:11.6–11.7](#) and cf. [SN12.40:1.5–1.6, 2.4–2.5, 3.4–3.5](#)): there is no future coming, going, passing away, or reappearing for the *arahant* as he has cut these things off. They cease here and now because their cause has been removed.⁹⁴ That ‘unestablished’, *appatiññhita*, also refers to *arahant*-ship, I have already shown in the above section on ‘unestablished consciousness’. ‘Without basis’, *anārammaṇa*,⁹⁵ is often found together with ‘unestablished’ ([SN12.38](#), [SN12.39](#) & [SN12.40](#)) and would therefore also seem to refer to *arahant*-ship. ‘Not moving’, *appavatta*, does not seem to be encountered elsewhere in the *Nikāyas*, but it appears to be a simple reference to ‘not moving in *samsāra*’, being the opposite of *pavatta*, ‘moving on’/‘going on’. Again, it seems natural to identify this with *arahant*-ship.

The final line of the verse, ‘just this is the end of suffering’, would normally refer to the living *arahant*. ‘Just this is the end of suffering’, or more commonly ‘the end of suffering’, is a standard way of describing the attainment of *arahant*-ship, e.g. at [MN144:11.3–11.9](#). In sum, the above passage at [Ud8.1:3.1–3.4](#) seems to describe something related to both *ariya-samādhi* and *arahant*-ship. It seems clear therefore that it must relate to

94 But note that the [Ud8.1:3.2](#) verse includes the word *ñhitim* which is not found in the parallel passages. It seems likely that this refers to the ‘remaining’ in a particular existence, between one’s arising there and one’s subsequent passing away.

95 Or an equivalent formulation such as *ārammaṇe asati*, e.g. at [SN12.38:3.2](#).

Harvey 1995, p.203 translates *anārammaṇa* as ‘without object’. However, in relation to [SN12.38](#), [SN12.39](#) & [SN12.40](#) the commentary glosses the term with *paccaya*, ‘condition’ or ‘basis’. I cannot see any reason why the commentarial explanation should be rejected. (In the *Abhidhamma*, however, *ārammaṇa-paccaya*, seems to have the sense of object-condition.)

Nibbāna, with final *Nibbāna* perhaps being the most likely candidate.⁹⁶ But even if this is the case, the word *āyatana*, like the word *dhātu*, is used so broadly in the *Nikāyas* that this would still not be decisive in showing that final *Nibbāna* is a ‘state’. At [AN9.36](#), [AN9.43](#) and [AN9.44](#), for example, *āyatana* is used to describe *saññāvedayitanirodha*, an attainment where the mental aggregates temporarily cease. Clearly *āyatana* cannot refer to an ‘existing entity’ in such a context.

The other *sutta* of interest from the *Udāna* reads as follows:

‘Monks, there is a freedom from what is born, a freedom from what has become, a freedom from what is made, a freedom from what is produced (*atthi bhikkhave ajātaṃ abhūtaṃ akataṃ asaṃkhattaṃ*)’.

[Ud8.3:3.1–3.4](#)
(*transl. Brahmāli*)

What is here rendered as ‘freedom from what is born’, *ajātaṃ*, is often translated as ‘the unborn’, giving a definite sense that this *sutta* describes something positively existing.⁹⁷ However, as Johansson 1969, p.39, p.54) points out, *ajātaṃ* recurs at [MN26:18.1](#) where the context requires it to mean ‘freedom from birth’. Having understood that he is subject to birth, the Buddha-to-be seeks the *ajātaṃ*. If birth is a problem, then surely the natural thing to do is to seek a freedom from birth, not a ‘state’ that is unborn.⁹⁸ The most reasonable translation of *ajātaṃ*, therefore, would seem to be ‘freedom from what is

96 Alternatively, or additionally, it might refer to *saññāvedayitanirodha* or perhaps even *ariya-samādhi* itself. This being verse, the ambiguity could be deliberate.

97 It is usually further assumed that this positively existing something is final *Nibbāna*.

98 Moreover, by interpreting the Buddha’s reflection to refer to an ‘unborn state’ one is adding a precondition to the Buddha’s search that reduces the sphere of potential solutions. It seems unlikely that the Buddha-to-be would add a stipulation which might stop him from reaching his goal.

born’ or ‘freedom from birth’.⁹⁹ If this is accepted, it is natural to translate all the initial a’s at [Ud8.3:3.1–3.4](#) as privatives, that is, as ‘freedom from’. According to this interpretation (see my translation above), what is being described here is not necessarily a ‘state’ at all. In my opinion, all this passage does is to affirm the possibility of ending *saṃsāra*.¹⁰⁰ Indeed, this is precisely the broader context of this extract.¹⁰¹

None of the passages discussed in this section need be read as descriptions of final *Nibbāna*, let alone as final *Nibbāna* being ‘something’ in a positive sense. Indeed, it may be that the standard practice of leaving *Nibbāna* untranslated prejudices our perception of this concept, giving it a sense of a real existing entity when in fact this may not be warranted. If instead we were to translate *Nibbāna* in accordance with its meaning, perhaps with ‘extinguishment’,¹⁰² then our perception of *Nibbāna* would probably alter accordingly.¹⁰³

In the end, the passages discussed in this section are not decisive in regard to the ontological status of final *Nibbāna*.¹⁰⁴

99 The same argument would hold true of *amataṃ*, which occurs in the same context at [MN26:18.1](#), and which therefore should be translated as ‘freedom from death’.

100 Either in the sense of attaining arahant-ship or in the sense of final *Nibbāna*.

101 The broader passage reads as follows: ‘If, monks, there were no freedom from what is born ... no freedom from what is produced, no escape would be discerned from what is born ... from what is produced’. In other words, if there were no such thing as the cessation of the *khandhas*, then no escape from suffering would be possible. See discussion below.

102 See discussion in footnote 7 above.

103 In this context it is significant that in the *suttas* one of the most common synonyms for *Nibbāna* is *nirodha*, ‘cessation’.

104 Harvey 1995, pp.201–203 also discusses a number of passages in the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* in support of his interpretation of final *Nibbāna* (as well as *Nibbāna* in life, but here the discussion concerns final *Nibbāna*). All of these *suttas* revolve around the idea of unestablished consciousness, *appatiṭṭhita viññāṇa*, which I have already discussed above. Again, the idea of unestablished consciousness quite clearly refers to the living

This brings us back to the question with which we started the present section: Is final *Nibbāna* anything at all apart from the cessation of existence?

arahant and there seems to be no reason to take it as referring to final *Nibbāna*.

CHAPTER 11
MIGHT FINAL NIBBĀNA BE
AN ‘EXISTING ENTITY’
ENTIRELY DIFFERENT FROM
THE FIVE KHANDHAS?

The reason why the above analysis has not produced any decisive result regarding the nature of final *Nibbāna* is simply that the *suttas* very rarely seem to speak of final *Nibbāna*; their emphasis is on *Nibbāna* during life, the experience of *arahant*-ship. Nevertheless, we have seen that final *Nibbāna* cannot be equated with a form of consciousness or mind. Indeed, it is clear that it must be other than the five *khandhas*. This being the case, could final *Nibbāna* be a ‘state’, some sort of ‘existing entity’, quite separate from the five *khandhas*?

The idea that final *Nibbāna* is an ‘existing entity’ is usually matched with the idea that this ‘state’ can be experienced while the *arahant* is still alive.¹⁰⁵ In fact, these two ideas of necessity go together: if the final *Nibbāna* ‘state’ was not experienceable by living *arahants*, they would not know of its existence and consequently there could be no record of it for posterity. But the idea that final *Nibbāna* can be experienced by the living

105 Or that it can be experienced by any *ariyan*. See for instance Bodhi 2005, p.318 and Harvey 1995, p.210.

arahant is doctrinally problematic. An experience of something — without which one cannot know that it exists — by definition includes consciousness. Thus, an experience of the equivalent of final *Nibbāna* while alive must involve consciousness. Indeed, this is also the standard explanation for how *Nibbāna* is said to be experienced: the mind or consciousness takes it as its object.¹⁰⁶

The problem with this idea is that it does not fit the *Nikāyas'* explanation of consciousness. As I have already pointed out in the introduction to this paper, consciousness is always defined by the object it takes and thus there are precisely six classes of consciousness, one for each of the five senses and one for the mind (e.g. at [SN 22.57:14.1–14.4](#)). There is no indication anywhere of any further classes of consciousness. Yet the idea of final *Nibbāna* as an object of consciousness would require a seventh class of consciousness: it does not fit into any of the six classes mentioned in the *suttas*.¹⁰⁷ Thus, to see consciousness as taking final *Nibbāna* as its object is to go beyond fixed *sutta* categories and therefore a baseless extension of what appears to be a full description of reality in the *Nikāyas*.

More generally, is it sensible to speak of a final *Nibbāna* 'state' that is entirely other than the five *khandhas*? If consciousness ceases once and for all, what could final *Nibbāna* possibly be? It makes no sense to speak of a 'state' which by definition cannot be known. Such a state becomes a mere cipher, something completely devoid of meaning. It is tantamount to not existing at all.

That the idea of final *Nibbāna* being a 'state' is a weak one, is also clear from the principle of Occam's razor. This philosoph-

106 See for instance Bodhi 2005, p.379: '... his mind ... focuses upon the deathless element, *Nibbāna*'. See also footnote 12 above.

107 In the *Nikāyas*, on a large number of occasions, the six senses, their objects, and the six corresponding classes of consciousness are all said to be impermanent and suffering (e.g. at [SN 35.32](#)). No exception is ever explicitly mentioned. clearly *Nibbāna* cannot be part of this scheme.

ical principle states that ‘the fewest possible assumptions are to be made in explaining things’.¹⁰⁸ In the present case, all ideas of final *Nibbāna* being an ‘existing reality’ produce complications — and therefore a need for further assumptions¹⁰⁹ — that make these ideas less compelling according to Occam’s razor. The simplest explanation of what happens at final *Nibbāna* is simply that the five *khandhas* cease. The simplicity and directness of this idea and its fit, as I have tried to show, with all aspects of the teachings found in the *Nikāyas*, makes it by far the strongest candidate for explaining final *Nibbāna*.¹¹⁰

Finally, I wish to point out one remaining danger with insisting that final *Nibbāna* is a ‘state’ of ‘something’. For a *puthujjana* such a ‘state’ would be quite literally unimaginable.¹¹¹ In trying to understand it, he would quite naturally employ some version of the five *khandhas*. Anyone who accepts the Buddha’s teaching that final *Nibbāna* is the highest happiness would therefore almost unavoidably grasp at or attach to that version of the five *khandhas*. Because the *khandhas* can manifest in extremely subtle ways — for instance, for anyone who has not experienced it, it would be virtually impossible to imagine what the experience of the base of nothingness is like — one would quite likely not even be aware of one’s attachment. In this way one ends up grasping the *khandhas* — that is, grasping what is in reality suffering — thinking it to be final *Nibbāna*. And instead of reaching final *Nibbāna* one ends up perpetuating *samsāra*. The view that final *Nibbāna* is just cessation is thus not only the one that seems

108 The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English, 1995, ninth edition.

109 Such as a ‘timeless’ consciousness or a seventh class of consciousness.

110 It might be objected that Occam’s razor is primarily applicable to scientific explanations. But scientific explanations are explanations of real and observable phenomena, and from a Buddhist point of view the extinguishment that happens at final *Nibbāna* is also a real and (in some ways) observable phenomenon.

111 And if, as suggested above, such a ‘state’ of final *Nibbāna* cannot be experienced even by *arahants*, the same would be true of all *ariyas*.

most in tune with the *Nikāyas* but also the one that quite pragmatically is most likely to lead to an exit from *samsāra*.¹¹²

112 Could such a view of final *Nibbāna* lead to *vibhavataṇhā*, a craving for annihilation? Possibly it could. But it seems to me that it is far more common for people to hold an eternalist view than an annihilationist view. Moreover, the Buddha himself considered the annihilationist view superior; see my discussion immediately below. In other words, although ideally one should realize that the Buddha taught neither eternalism nor annihilationism (see next section), it is preferable to err on the side of annihilationism.

CHAPTER 12

IF FINAL NIBBĀNA IS MERE CESSATION, HOW IS THIS DIFFERENT FROM ANNIHILATION?

At [AN 10.29](#), we find the following revealing passage:

Monk, among the views of outsiders, this is the highest: ‘I might not be and it might not be mine; I shall not be and it will not be mine (*no cassam, no ca me siyā, na bhavissāmi, na me bhavissatī ti*)’. For one, monks, who has such a view, it can be expected that he will not feel attracted to existence and will have no aversion to the cessation of existence.

[AN 10.29:19.1–19.4](#)

(Adapted from *Ñāṇaponika 1999 p.246*)

The view mentioned here is identified as annihilationism at [SN 22.81:11.1–11.15](#). Since annihilationism is always contrasted with eternalism in the *Nikāyas*, this *sutta* in effect states that the annihilationist view is superior to the view of eternalism. Again, this undermines any claim that final *Nibbāna* exists in some sense or other.¹¹³

113 Since the idea that final *Nibbāna* is an ‘existing entity’ would seem to be closer to eternalism than annihilationism.

The above quote also makes it clear that the Buddha’s teaching is not annihilationism.¹¹⁴ What then is the distinction between cessation and annihilation? [SN 22.85](#) deals precisely with this question:

[Ven. Sāriputta:] ‘Is it true, friend Yamaka, that such a pernicious view as this has arisen in you: “As I understand the *dhamma* taught by the Blessed one, a bhikkhu whose taints are destroyed is annihilated (*ucchijjati*) and perishes (*vinassati*) with the breakup of the body and does not exist after death (*na hoti param maraṇā*)”?’

[Ven. Yamaka:] ‘Exactly so, friend’.

[SN 22.85:3.1–3.3](#)

Here Yamaka specifically holds the view that an *arahant* is annihilated at death and it is clear from the narrative and Sāriputta’s subsequent questioning of Yamaka that this is contrary to the *Dhamma*. Sāriputta’s questioning of Yamaka establishes that anything one might take a *Tathāgata/arahant* to be¹¹⁵ — that is, anything among the five *khandhas* — is all impermanent and suffering. Thus there is no permanent self and therefore no real person/*arahant/Tathāgata* to be annihilated in the first place:

‘What do think, friend Yamaka, do you regard form ... feeling ... perception ... volitional formations ... consciousness as the *Tathāgata*?’ — ‘No, friend’. — ‘What do think, friend Yamaka, do you regard the *Tathāgata* as in form ... feeling ... perception ... volitional formations ... consciousness’ — ‘No, friend’. — ‘Do you regard the *Tathāgata* as apart from form ... feeling ... perception ... volitional

114 Because annihilationism is ‘the view of outsiders’.

115 The words *arahant* and *Tathāgata* appear to be used synonymously in this *sutta*.

formations ... consciousness?’ — ‘No, friend’. — ‘What do you think, friend Yamaka, do you regard form, feeling, perception, volitional formations, and consciousness [taken together] as the *Tathāgata*?’ — ‘No, friend’. — ‘What do you think, friend Yamaka, do you regard the *Tathāgata* as one who is without form, without feeling, without perception, without volitional formations, without consciousness?’ — ‘No, friend’. — ‘But, friend, when the *Tathāgata* is not apprehended by you as real and actual in this very life (*diṭṭheva dhamme saccato thetato anupalabbhiyamāno*), is it fitting for you to declare: “As I understand the *dhamma* taught by the Blessed one, a bhikkhu whose taints are destroyed is annihilated and perishes with the breakup of the body and does not exist after death”?’

SN 22.85:7.1–11.5

After Yamaka has understood Sāriputta’s teaching,¹¹⁶ we find the following exchange between them:

‘If, friend Yamaka, they were to ask you: “friend Yamaka, when a bhikkhu is an *arahant*, one whose taints are destroyed, what happens to him with the breakup of the body, after death”? — being asked thus, what would you answer?’

‘If they were to ask me this, friend, I would answer thus: “friend, form is impermanent; what is impermanent is suffering; what is suffering has ceased (*niruddham*) and passed away (*atthaṅgataṃ*). Feeling is impermanent; what is impermanent is suffering; what is suffering has ceased and passed away. Perception is impermanent; what is

116 That is, after he has fully penetrated it with insight. He seems to have attained stream-entry while Sāriputta was teaching him.

impermanent is suffering; what is suffering has ceased and passed away. Volitional formations are impermanent; what is impermanent is suffering; what is suffering has ceased and passed away. Consciousness is impermanent; what is impermanent is suffering; what is suffering has ceased and passed away.” Being asked thus, friend, I would answer in such a way’.

SN 22.85:13.1–13.16

This, then, is what really happens at the death of an *arahant*. Because human beings, including *arahants*, are nothing more than an impersonal process (i.e. devoid of a stable self) which is impermanent and suffering, all that happens when an *arahant* dies is that this process comes to an end. From the *arahants’* point of view the *khandhas* have nothing to do with them;¹¹⁷ nor are they anything apart from the *khandhas*, as we have seen in the Yamaka Sutta. Moreover, because the *khandhas* are suffering, their cessation can only be a good thing. The death of an *arahant* is just the end, the cessation, of an unwanted process. Nothing of value is being lost; nothing is being annihilated.¹¹⁸ This is why the death of an *arahant* does not count as annihilation. The reason an *arahant* is not annihilated at death has nothing to do with the nature of final *Nibbāna*.¹¹⁹

117 See for instance SN 22.33, ‘form ... feeling ... perception ... volitional formations ... consciousness is not yours: abandon it. When you have abandoned it that will lead to your welfare and happiness’. The *sutta* then gives the well-known simile of the grass, sticks and leaves in the Jetavana: just as the monks do not identify with those things, so too they should not identify with the five *khandhas*.

118 That is, nothing is annihilated from the *arahant’s* point of view. once *sakkāya-ditṭhi* (seeing a permanent self in the *khandhas*) is abandoned, the perception that an *arahant* can be annihilated is also abandoned. The death of an *arahant* is just the end of suffering. This is the point of the Yamaka Sutta, see above.

119 Harvey 1995, p.240 states that ‘as ... only *dukkha* ends at the death of an

If the cessation of the *khandhas* is the full end of suffering and thus the highest possible happiness, then one would expect the attainment of the ‘cessation of perception and feeling’, *saññāvedayitanirodha*, to be the same. Indeed, this is exactly what one finds:

Should anyone say: ‘that [i.e. the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception] is the utmost pleasure (*sukham*) and joy (*somanassam*) that beings experience’, I would not concede that to him. Why is that? Because there is another kind of pleasure loftier and more sublime than that pleasure. And what is that other kind of pleasure? Here, Ānanda, by completely surmounting the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, a bhikkhu enters upon and abides in the cessation of perception and feeling. This is that other kind of pleasure loftier and more sublime than the previous pleasure.¹²⁰

MN 59:15.1–15.6
& SN 36.19:15.1–15.3

Arahat, the total non-existence of a *Tathāgata* beyond death seems to be ruled out’. But the point of the Yamaka Sutta, and indeed the *suttas* taken more broadly, is that there is nothing but *dukkha* even prior to the death of the *arahant*. This is how the *bhikkhuni* Vajirā expresses this:

This is a heap of sheer formations:
Here no being is found. ...
It’s only suffering that comes to be,
Suffering that stands and falls away.
Nothing but suffering comes to be,
Nothing but suffering ceases.

SN 5.10:4.3–4.4, 6.1–6.4
(see also: SN 12.15:2.6)

If everything experienced by an *arahant*, and indeed all beings, is ultimately *dukkha*, and all *dukkha* ceases when an *arahant* dies, then—even without any further *sutta* evidence—any view of final *Nibbāna* existing in some sense is at the very least superfluous, but more likely misleading.

120 Since this is the culmination of a long list of pleasures, each in turn superior to the preceding one, the implication is that this is the highest.

This means that the full ending of everything is more ‘pleasurable’ and desirable than the blisses of even the most profound states of *samādhi*.¹²¹ In other words, complete cessation is superior and preferable to the highest bliss experienceable by human beings.

121 How the cessation of all feelings can be considered the highest ‘pleasure’ is explained at [AN9.34](#) and elsewhere.

CONCLUSION

The idea that final *Nibbāna* is nothing apart from the cessation of the *khandhas* might seem bleak. If it seems bleak, it is only due to the false sense of having a permanent self, or more precisely, because of the view of personal identity, *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*.¹²² The sense that one has a permanent core — a distortion of perception that is unavoidable for all *puṭhujjanas* — makes cessation appear like annihilation and the successful practice of the path like a form of suicide. If cessation seems undesirable, it is only due to this distorted outlook.

Consider the following discussion between Ven. Sāriputta and Ven. Mahā-Koṭṭhita:

[Mahā-Koṭṭhita:] ‘Friend, with the remainderless fading away and cessation of the six spheres of sense contact (i.e. final *Nibbāna*), is there anything else? ... is there not anything else?’ ...

[Sāriputta:] ‘Speaking thus: “Friend, with the remainderless fading away and cessation of the six spheres of sense contact, is there anything else? ... is there not anything else?”’, one proliferates

¹²² This is implied by the *suttas*, since it is *sakkāya-diṭṭhi* that is responsible for the sense of permanence.

(*papañceti*) about that which is without proliferation (*appapañcamī*).

AN 4.173

(*transl. Brahmāli*)

By asking ‘is there anything else?’ and ‘is there not anything else?’ the questioner reveals his distorted outlook, his preoccupation and concern about the fate of his non-existing self.¹²³ This is why Sāriputta calls the questions *papañca*, ‘proliferation’, *papañca* being the distorted thinking process that arises from a distorted perception of reality.¹²⁴ The *puthujjana* is trapped by

123 It is not clear whether Mahā-Koṭṭhita himself is caught up in *sakkāya-ditṭhi*, whether he is testing Sāriputta or whether he is asking the questions for the benefit of others who are present. (According to the commentary the last of these is the correct explanation).

Concern about the nature of final *Nibbāna* is essentially the same as speculation about the nature of the *Tathāgata* after death. In the following quote it is said that such speculation is a result of *sakkāya-ditṭhi*, the view of personal identity, and that with the abandonment of *sakkāya-ditṭhi* such speculation is also abandoned:

‘What, Master Gotama, is the cause and reason why, when wanderers of other sects are asked such questions, they give such answers as: ... “the *Tathāgata* exists after death” or “the *Tathāgata* does not exist after death” ... And what is the cause and reason why, when Master Gotama is asked such questions, he does not give such answers?’

‘Vaccha, wanderers of other sects regard form as self, or self as possessing form, or form as in self, or self as in form. They regard feeling as self ... perception as self ... volitional formations as self ... consciousness as self, or self as possessing consciousness, or consciousness as in self, or self as in consciousness. Therefore, when the wanderers of other sects are asked such questions, they give such answers as: the *Tathāgata* exists after death” or “the *Tathāgata* does not exist after death” ... But, Vaccha, the *Tathāgata*, the *arahant*, the Perfectly enlightened one, does not regard form as self ... self as in consciousness. therefore, when the *Tathāgata* is asked such questions, he does not give such answers.’

SN 44.8:2.1–3.16

The above taking of a self in relation to the five aggregates is the definition of *sakkāya-ditṭhi*; see MN 44:7.1–7.8.

sakkāya-dit̥ṭhi, by the perception of a permanent core in himself. But from his own point of view, whether he is aware of it or not, he is simply concerned with the destiny of what he sees as his own true essence.¹²⁵

But if the illusion of personal identity is seen through, if the perceived solid core is seen not to exist, there is nothing to be concerned about anymore.¹²⁶ When it is seen that all a being is made up of are the ever-impermanent *khandhas*, utterly tied up with suffering, then cessation becomes the most desirable thing possible. Questions such as ‘is there anything else?’ and ‘is there not anything else?’ are quite simply beside the point.¹²⁷ In the final analysis, the Buddha’s teachings concern only the ending of suffering. Although it seems clear that ‘mere’ cessation is the correct interpretation of final *Nibbāna* and although there are obvious dangers in regarding final *Nibbāna* as ‘something’, ultimately it is irrelevant whether the state that supervenes when the *arahant* dies is ‘something’ or ‘nothing’.

124 This does not mean that one may not have a legitimate discussion on the nature of final *Nibbāna*, only that one has to be very careful not to be ‘taken in’ by *sakkāya-dit̥ṭhi*. Indeed, one should keep in mind that no matter how hard one tries, there will always be a minimum degree of distortion of reality until *sakkāya-dit̥ṭhi* is abandoned.

125 The view of personal identity will tend to give rise either to an eternalist outlook or to an annihilationist one, since these are the two most obvious destinies of a permanent self. In fact, the commentary relates the above questions to eternalism and annihilationism (Mp III 150, 15).

126 When the illusion is seen for what it is, not only does one abandon the idea of a solid core, one also sees that the idea of ownership is an illusion. In this way the entire *samsāra* has lost whatever value it may previously have had.

127 They are beside the point only in so far as it is cessation that is the true goal. A debate about final *Nibbāna* is still useful to the extent that it makes this clear. And, given the discussion so far, it is useful for pointing out that postulating anything additional to mere cessation does not make good sense and for showing that seeing final *Nibbāna* as a ‘state’ may prove obstructive to achieving one’s goal. The concern over ‘is there not anything else?’ relates to annihilationism (again, see Mp III 150, 15), and I have argued that cessation is different from the annihilation of a permanent self.

All that matters is that the five *khandhas* — that is, suffering — cease without remainder. Consider how the Buddha sometimes would summarise his teachings: ‘Good, good, Anurādha. Formerly, Anurādha, and also now, I make known just suffering and the cessation of suffering’ (SN 22.86:13.1–13.2).¹²⁸ And since suffering is coterminous with *saṃsāra*, it follows that ‘*Nibbāna* is the greatest bliss’ (MN 75:21.5 and Dhp 204). What more can you ask for?

128 This passage is almost as explicit as can be that there is nothing apart from *dukkha* and its cessation.

It is sometimes argued that the Buddha never speaks of final *Nibbāna* as just cessation Bodhi 2005, p.319. (Ven. Bodhi in fact uses the word ‘nonexistence’ rather than cessation. Although the term nonexistence is unfortunate since it implies something as existing prior to final *Nibbāna* — see SN 12.15:2.1–2.3 where the ideas of existence and nonexistence, *atthitaṅ* and *natthitaṅ*, are presented as false — it seems to me that Ven. Bodhi actually means nonexistence in the sense of (mere) cessation.) But on a number of occasions the Buddha uses terminology that it seems should be understood in just this way, for instance at MN 140:24.5: ‘on the dissolution of the body, with the ending of life, all that is felt, not being delighted in, will become cool right here’. At the same time it is hardly surprising that the Buddha should not spend too much time proclaiming that the nature of final *Nibbāna* is just cessation. Such statements are bound to be misunderstood by the vast majority of people because of their sense of a permanent self (the Buddha is in fact disparaged as an annihilationist in the *suttas* on a number of occasions, for instance at AN 8.11:6.1 and MN 22:37.2), and thus it would be counterproductive to teach the *Dhamma* in this way. It seems that the relative paucity of statements on the nature of final *Nibbāna* is simply a result of the Buddha being pragmatic as to what teachings would inspire the majority of people who are not *ariyas*, whether monastic or lay.

ABBREVIATIONS

AN	Āṅguttara Nikāya (translation: Ñāṇaponika 1999)
SN	Saṃyutta Nikāya (translation: Bodhi 2000)
CPD	A Critical Pali Dictionary
Dhp	Dhammapada
DN	Dīgha Nikāya (translation: Walshe 1995)
DP	Dictionary of Pali
Iti	Itivuttaka (translation: Bodhi 2005)
MN	Majjhima Nikāya (translation: Ñāṇamoli 2001)
Mp	Manorathapūraṇī, the commentary on AN
PED	Pali English Dictionary
SN	Saṃyutta Nikāya (Bodhi 2000)
T	Taishō (edition of the Chinese Buddhist Canon)
Thag	Theragāthā (Norman 1995)
Ud	Udāna (Ireland 1997)
Vibh	Vibhaṅga
Vin	Vinaya Piṭaka (Horner)

In the main text and notes I have generally used the translations mentioned above in brackets though in some instances no satisfactory translation was available, in particular for the

Aṅguttara Nikāya and Vinaya Piṭaka. In these cases I have translated the passages myself, as indicated in the main text.

References use the SuttaCentral numbering system. The links for sutta citations open the SuttaPlex card at SuttaCentral where you may view other translations and root texts.

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