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# The Pleasure of Not Experiencing Anything: Some Reflections on Consciousness in the Context of the Early Buddhist Nikāyas

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Special Issue

Buddhist Psychology: An Interdisciplinary Exploration of Buddhist Theories of Mind

Edited by  
Prof. Dr. Chien-Te Lin



<https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14111347>

## Article

# The Pleasure of Not Experiencing Anything: Some Reflections on Consciousness in the Context of the Early Buddhist Nikāyas

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**Abstract:** The *Nibbānasukha-sutta* contains Sāriputta's statement that the pleasure (*sukha*) of *nibbāna* lies in the fact that nothing is experienced (*vedayita*). This statement may be seen as complementary to the proclamation in the *Kālāra-sutta* that all that is experienced is unpleasant (*dukkha*). In this paper, I attempt to reconstruct the ideas serving as a philosophical backdrop to these radical and seemingly counterintuitive claims. I use a comparative and interdisciplinary approach, re-examining several key Nikāya passages, as well as drawing on modern cognitive science and philosophy of mind. I suggest that *vedayita* and the closely related concept of the five *khandhas* (and in particular *viññāṇa*) refer to various aspects of the type of consciousness whose content is phenomenal, introspectable, reportable and may be integrated into memory. I suggest that such consciousness is not a constant feature of our being engaged in the world and that its absence does not entail insentience or being incognizant. I hypothesize that a relatively low frequency of occurrences of such consciousness in the states known as absorption or flow contributes to their pleasurable nature and the altered sense of the passage of time and selfhood. I attempt to explain how the presence or absence of such consciousness is related to the states of *dukkha* or *sukha*, with particular focus on the role played by *saṅkhāra*. I also discuss the limits of introspection as a means of understanding what exactly makes experiences pleasurable or painful, and consider the possibility of non-introspectable forms of pleasure. In conclusion, I suggest that psychological transformation in early Buddhism is connected with a radical change of perspective, which involves no longer identifying with one's own consciousness.

**Keywords:** absorption; psychological time; access consciousness; *saṅkhāra*; self-consciousness; the aggregates; pleasure; *dukkha*; identity; global availability



**Citation:** Polak, Grzegorz. 2023. The Pleasure of Not Experiencing Anything: Some Reflections on Consciousness in the Context of the Early Buddhist Nikāyas. *Religions* 14: 1347. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14111347>

Academic Editor: Chien-Te Lin

Received: 18 September 2023

Revised: 11 October 2023

Accepted: 17 October 2023

Published: 25 October 2023



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## 1. Introduction

The study of early Buddhist Nikāya texts sometimes confronts us with passages which are very enigmatic and puzzling. One such a passage from the *Nibbānasukha-sutta* of the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* (AN 9.34/iv.413–418) contains a statement which is attributed to Sāriputta, the Buddha's leading disciple. The passage reads:

Exactly this, friend, is pleasure (*sukhaṃ*) here, that nothing is experienced (*vedayitaṃ*) here.<sup>1</sup>

Sāriputta's paradoxical proclamation and its implications will serve as a point of departure of this paper. Before examining it in greater detail, it is worthwhile explaining the context in which it is delivered. The sutta starts with the following words spoken by Sāriputta:

This *nibbāna*, o friend, is pleasure.<sup>2</sup>

In itself, this claim can hardly be considered controversial. *Nibbāna* is considered the ultimate good in Buddhism, and there are many texts which suggest that it can be attained during life. Therefore, it is not particularly problematic to conceive of someone who has achieved *nibbāna* as enjoying the highest form of pleasure. However, upon hearing Sāriputta's proclamation, his interlocutor, Udāyī, asks:

But friend Sāriputta, what pleasure could be here when nothing is experienced here?<sup>3</sup>

It is in response to this question that Sāriputta makes the already mentioned claim that pleasure lies in the fact that nothing is being experienced. In order to illustrate it, he describes the standard Nikāya list of the nine successive meditative states, starting with the first *jhāna* and ending with the cessation of apperception and experience (*saññāvedayitanirodha*).<sup>4</sup> According to Sāriputta, while being in each of the first eight states, there are apperceptions and acts of attention (*saññāmanasikāra*) connected (*sahagata*) with the gross mental factors of the directly preceding state of consciousness (e.g., with sensuality [*kāma*]) which might assail (*samudācarati*) the meditator and which Sāriputta describes as affliction (*ābādha*). It is only with regard to the final of the nine meditative states, the cessation of apperception and experience, that no mention is made of any danger of this kind anymore. At this stage, the meditator “having seen with understanding (*paññāya*)”, has his effluents (*āśava*) completely exhausted (*parikkhīṇa*),<sup>5</sup> which is tantamount to achieving the final goal of the Buddhist path.

## 2. Aims of This Paper

Let us return to the question of the meaning and implications of Sāriputta’s paradoxical utterance. If we approach it assuming a commonsense understanding of the terms used within it, it must appear inherently incoherent or even absurd. Pleasure is, after all, a form of experience. Therefore, if nothing is experienced, then by the very definition of this word, there cannot be any pleasure in such a state.

Of course, we must be wary of the possibility that Sāriputta’s statement represents a kind of poetic license, and its author may have simply gotten carried away with religious rhetoric without fully realizing its implications. Therefore, one could perhaps claim that it should not be held to any high philosophical standards and that reading too much into it may be a mistake. We also have no way of knowing whether historical Sāriputta is the real author of this statement and if it is even representative of a hypothetical original Buddhist doctrine, or it is perhaps a crude later insertion.

But could it be that it is we who are missing something here? Perhaps, instead of explaining away Sāriputta’s statement as a form of rhetoric, we should consider it as an inspiration to re-examine some of our most basic commonsense beliefs. Therefore, for the purpose of this paper, let us lay aside the questions regarding the historical authenticity of this statement and the real intentions of its author. The philosophical implications of Sāriputta’s claim are interesting enough to consider them seriously. The history of human thought knows of cases in which chronologically later interpretations of older ideas have brought out their revolutionary implications, which may not have been intended or acknowledged by their original authors.

Let us therefore try to take Sāriputta’s statement at face value and consider its radical implications. It may appear absurd to us when we approach it from a commonsense perspective, but perhaps when viewed against a specific philosophical backdrop, it can appear much less paradoxical and more plausible. In this paper, we will attempt to reconstruct such a backdrop. As we shall see, trying to make sense of Sāriputta’s statement will necessitate a re-examination of other enigmatic passages in the Nikāyas and inspire us to rethink several connected issues, including those related to the structure of experience, consciousness, its relation to our identity and the nature of suffering and pleasure. These are philosophical problems of universal relevance, independent of any historical and cultural context, and our considerations may have implications reaching far beyond the early Buddhist context.

## 3. On the Meaning of *vedayita* and *sukha*

The philosophical meaning of Sāriputta’s statement depends on the understanding of the specific concepts it refers to, in particular those of *vedayita* and *sukha*. *Vedayita* is the past participle form of the verb *vedeti* and means “experienced” or “felt” (Rhys Davids and

Stede 2007, p. 648). If we read *vedayita* in the sense of “feeling” and as merely referring to affectively valent aspects of our experiences, which may or may not accompany them, then the absence of *vedayita* could be interpreted as a way of experiencing in a neutral, equanimous way without any emotional reactions, akin to Stoic *apatheia* (ἀπάθεια). However, the Nikāya context in which this term occurs suggests something different. According to a relatively common stock passage (e.g., MN 148/iii.285), that which is experienced/felt (*vedayita*) as either pleasant, painful, or neither pleasant nor painful, arises dependently (*paccaya*) on a contact (*phassa*) of a particular sense (e.g., eye—*cakkhu*), its respective object and consciousness (*viññāṇa*). Therefore, even an affectively neutral (i.e., neither pleasant nor painful) visual experience of an object can be said to be a form of *vedayita*. Let us again emphasize that when Sāriputta elaborates his claim in the *Nibbānasukha-sutta* that *sukha* is synonymous with nothing being experienced (*vedayita*), he presents lower meditative states as endangered by being assailed by various types of apperceptions and acts of attention (*saññāmanasikāra*), which only cease in the state of *saññāvedayitanirodha*. The terms *saññā* and *manasikāra* do not really carry any connotations of affective aspects of experience, and yet for Sāriputta, they are clearly forms of *vedayita*. Therefore, *vedayita* must refer to conscious experience in its entirety, and not merely its affective tone.

One could also consider the possibility that *sukha* does not refer to a momentary form of pleasure, but to happiness in a much more general, lasting and abstract sense, like the Greek philosophical concepts of happiness (εὐδαιμονία) or lasting joy (χαρά), as opposed to momentary pleasure (ἡδονή). In such a case, not experiencing any momentary states could perhaps be interpreted as some abstract, higher form of happiness. However, regardless of whether we translate *sukha* as pleasure (Bodhi 2020, p. 528), wellbeing, happiness, ease, or comfort (Rhys Davids and Stede 2007, p. 716), in the Nikāya context, this term refers to a positive affect (i.e., subjective affective state of positive valence)<sup>6</sup> felt during a particular timeframe and not to some general abstract form of happiness. In other words, one can only meaningfully speak of *sukha* as a state in which a particular person may or may not be at a particular moment. The above considerations show the difficulties associated with translating certain Pali words into English in a way that would perfectly capture their implied meaning in a particular Nikāya passage. This is also the case with the Pali word *dukkha*, which has been varyingly translated as pain, distress or trouble.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, for the sake of clarity, we will be generally referring directly to these Pali terms and not to the English words which correspond to them.

#### 4. *Vedayita*, *dukkha* and the Aggregates

It is noteworthy that the statements of Udāyī and Sāriputta imply some important views that are not explicitly stated within the text itself. Udāyī’s question assumes that he conceives of *nibbāna* as a state in which there is no *vedayita*. The way his question is delivered suggests that, for the author of this text, this seemed to be an uncontroversial truth and as such, it was pretty much taken for granted. It is also clear from Sāriputta’s account of meditative progress through the nine stages that he considered *saññāvedayitanirodha* to be a perfect exemplification of a state in which there is no *vedayita*, and which is thus *sukha*. Sāriputta’s view that perceptions and acts of attention connected with sublime spiritual qualities such as rapture (*pīti*) and equanimity (*upekkhā*), which characterize the states of consciousness preceding cessation (e.g., the fourth *jhāna*), are forms of affliction (*ābādha*) strongly implies that he considered all forms of *vedayita* to be *dukkha*.

This latter view is representative of a much wider trend in the Nikāyas. For example, the *Kālāra-sutta* (SN 12.32/ii.53) contains a claim that “whatever is *vedayita* is [within] *dukkha*.”<sup>8</sup> One often encounters a stock passage (e.g., SN 22.13/iii.21) describing each of the five aggregates as *dukkha*. The famous line in the *Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta*<sup>9</sup> equates the whole set of the five aggregates connected with grasping (*pañcupādānakkhandha*) with *dukkha*. We shall consider the implications of these radical claims in the later part of this paper.

It thus appears that, in the Nikāyas, the denotation of *vedayita* overlaps at least to a certain extent with that of *pañcakkhandha*. The understanding of the latter concept may

therefore shed some light on that of *vedayita* and, by extension, on the understanding of Sāriputta's statement. That the denotation of the concept of *vedayita* overlaps at least to a certain extent with that of the five aggregates is hardly surprising, as the term *vedayita* is etymologically very closely related to *vedanā*, the second of the aggregates.<sup>10</sup>

What are the aggregates then? Recent decades of critical scholarship of early Buddhism have shown that we can no longer take for granted the seemingly obvious, historically dominant Theravādin interpretations of many key early Buddhist concepts, as they are often at odds with the Nikāya sources. While the historically dominant interpretation sees the aggregates as objective constituents of a human being, such a meaning is clearly not intended in the majority of the Nikāya texts. Rather, the *khandhas* denote various aspects and elements of the ordinary conscious experience of the world from the first-person perspective. Here, due to the lack of space, we shall only briefly refer to the already existing results of research, without presenting any detailed arguments in their favor as they have already been offered in other places (e.g., Gethin 1986; Hamilton 2000; Wynne 2010; Davis 2016; Polak 2023b).

Furthermore, there are good reasons to believe that the terms constituting the set of the *khandhas* in the Nikāyas do not refer to phenomena which can be sharply distinguished from one another, either in a temporal or experiential sense.<sup>11</sup> Rather, each of the aggregates refers to the same conscious experience, but with an emphasis on its different but complimentary aspects.<sup>12</sup> Every conscious phenomenal experience has conceptually structured content that is verbally expressible (*saññā*), has an affectively valent tone which may be negative, positive or neutral (*vedanā*), is phenomenally conscious (*viññāṇa*), is both fabricated and fabricating and perfused by the subjective feeling of agency and will (*saṅkhāra*), and is also an embodied experience, not occurring in some vacuum but always in relation to the human body as its central, constant element (*rūpa*).

Thus, the denotations of *vedayita* and *pañcakkhandha* are pretty much the same, as both these terms refer to an ordinary form of conscious experience. The same conscious experience may be referred to by terms such as *saññā*, *viññāṇa*, or *vedayita*, although they will emphasize its difference aspects. The absence of *vedayita* spoken about by Sāriputta would thus probably also be tantamount with the absence of the remaining aggregates, such as *saññā*, *viññāṇa* or even *rūpa*, in the sense of the subjective phenomenal awareness of one's own body.

But how could the absence of experience, understood as being synonymous with the absence of the five aggregates, be considered *sukha*? We tend to understand "experience" in an all-or-nothing sense. According to this understanding, either one experiences something, or one does not experience anything at all. We also tend to identify experiencing with being conscious; if one experiences, then one is also conscious, or it can be said that one has a conscious experience.<sup>13</sup> If, in agreement with commonsense views, experiencing is fully synonymous with being sentient and engaged in the world, then having no experience will inevitably entail a state of blankness, akin to that of inanimate objects. While such a state is certainly without *dukkha*, it can hardly be considered a state of *sukha*, as the latter is, in the Nikāyas, considered a positive quality and not merely understood negatively as *adukkha*—an absence of pain.

## 5. Is *vedayita* the Only Way of Being Sentient, Cognizant and Engaged in the World?

However, contrary to the historically dominant interpretation, the aggregates in the Nikāyas are not considered all that there is to a human being, or even to human cognition. In several Nikāya texts, crucial bodily and cognitive aspects of a human being are not conceptualized in terms of any of the *khandhas*, and sometimes are explicitly juxtaposed to them.<sup>14</sup> Particularly important is the distinction between *citta/cetas* and the aggregates, and especially *viññāṇa*. These terms occur in their own specific contexts and are associated with very different mental functions. Whenever the Nikāya texts speak about engaging the mental capabilities of an individual to perform specific tasks or describe their potency to



do so, they use terms such as *citta* or *ceto/cetas*. On the other hand, when they describe the arising of the first-person phenomenal conscious experience, the term *viññāṇa* is used.

All this has significant implications for understanding Sariputta's statement. The type of experience or consciousness conceptualized in Nikāya texts as the aggregates or *vedayita* does not need to be seen as the only possible way of being sentient, cognizant and engaged in the world, but rather as a specific mode of consciousness. As Jay Garfield (2015, p. 142) aptly notes:

Buddhist psychology recognizes multiple kinds and levels of consciousness including ... sensory and conceptual forms of consciousness; consciousness that is introspectible and consciousness that is too deep for introspection ... In general, the complex set of phenomena is opaque to casual introspection, and are knowable only theoretically or perhaps by highly trained meditators.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, it is possible to conceive of the state of absence of *vedayita* not in terms of the total absence of all forms of cognition and sentience, but only of ordinary consciousness in the sense of globally available content, i.e., the one that can be introspected and reflected upon, expressed in speech or movement, and memorized or recollected.<sup>16</sup> Such consciousness is often labelled as access consciousness, due to the fact that its content is accessible to various cognitive systems.<sup>17</sup> Afterall, we remember our conscious states, can attend to them, introspect them, think or talk about them. Ordinary consciousness is also generally considered to be a phenomenal or qualitative consciousness.<sup>18</sup> In modern cognitive science, there is also a general consensus that phenomenal consciousness correlates with global broadcasting (Carruthers 2015, p. 49). We are leaving aside the question of whether phenomenality may be reduced to global availability, or whether there can be phenomenal consciousness whose content is not globally available. Ordinary consciousness is also a self-consciousness. This need not necessarily be a highly complex type of autobiographical self-consciousness, but may involve something like Damasio's concept of the "core self". The core self is said to be inherent in core consciousness, which "provides the organism with a sense of self about one moment, now, and about one place, here" (Damasio and Meyer 2009, p. 6). Tsakiris (2017, p. 597) speaks about the "body self": the sense of "body ownership that refers to the special perceptual status of one's own body, the feeling that 'my body' belongs to me".

One may ask at this point how the claim of the existence of the "core self" fits with the non-self approach in Buddhism. In response, it may be said that the notion of the core self merely refers to having a sense of being a self, and not to the objective fact of the existence of self. The former is of course merely an evolutionarily adaptive illusion helping the organism to appropriate its own states and conceive of itself as an individual. The fact that ordinary human beings possess a sense of being or having a self is of course not denied by Buddhism, but merely shown to be unfounded in the true state of things.

One encounters an overwhelmingly negative portrayal of the *khandhas* and *vedayita* in the Nikāyas, with the former even being defined as personal identity (*sakkāya*).<sup>19</sup> In the *Ānanda-sutta* (SN 22.21/iii.24–25), each of the aggregates is characterized as *saṅkhata*, which, apart from the notion of being "fabricated", seems to carry connotations of artificiality, being infused with agency, and rooted in ignorance. The *Parileyya-sutta* (SN 22.81/iii.94–99) analyzes different types of regarding (*samanupassati*) the aggregates as self. Every type of such regarding (*samanupassanā*) is described as being a *saṅkhāra* itself.

This calls into question whether it is possible to speak of neutral states of *khandhas* existing prior to them becoming an object of mistaken appropriation or identification. One should rather consider the possibility that these attitudes are themselves states of *khandhas*. In other words, the aggregates are not only mistakenly appropriated and regarded as self, but in themselves already involve an attitude of mistaken appropriation and self-view.<sup>20</sup> It is therefore problematic, if in awakened persons free from grasping and self-view, the aggregates would just continue as before, since their very presence seems to involve some form of cognitive delusion and be connected with maintaining a mistaken attitude.

It is noteworthy that there are no accounts of the hypothetical purified aggregates not connected with grasping (i.e., “*anupādānakkhandas*”) occurring in the arahants. From the fact that the Nikāyas sometimes speak about the five *khandhas* without explicitly qualifying them as *upādānakkhandhas*, it does not automatically follow that they are meant to be *anupādānakkhandas*. It may just mean that these texts decided not to explicitly emphasize the aspect of grasping. According to the *Parivīmamsana-sutta* (SN 12.51/ii.82), a bhikkhu who is free from ignorance does not make up (*abhisankharoti*) *saṅkhāras*, even those meritorious (*puññābhisankhāra*) or imperturbable ones (*āneñjābhisankhāra*). The *Paramatthaka-sutta* (Sn 4.5/156–158) claims that “a brahmin” does not fashion even the slightest *saññās* with regard to the sense data.

It is also noteworthy that the aggregates in the Nikāyas possess some key characteristics of global accessibility. Conscious experience conceptualized in their terms can be attended to (SN 22.89/iii.131), introspected, and expressed in speech (AN 6.63/iii.413). For the sake of the flow of the text, in the remaining part of the paper, I will refer to what, in Pali, is conceptualized in terms of the *khandhas* (in particular, *viññāṇa*) and *vedayita*, as “consciousness” or “conscious experience”, in the ordinary, common-sense meaning of these words. Its features, such as phenomenality and global availability, will be implied, but not mentioned explicitly, unless they are to be specifically emphasized or analyzed in greater detail.

In early Buddhist terms, the absence of such consciousness would correspond to the absence of *vedayita* and the *khandhas*, but not necessarily to the insentience of the sensory faculties (*indriya*) and the inactivity of the mind (*citta/cetas*), connected with the total shutdown of its cognitive potency.

## 6. The Notion of Meditative Cessation of *vedayita*

But do the Nikāya texts actually contain a notion of a state in which the absence of conscious experience would not coincide with total mental and sensory stasis? As we have seen, Sāriputta considered *saññāvedayitanirodha* to be the highest exemplification of a state in which there is no *vedayita* and which is therefore *sukha*. However, according to the historically dominant understanding of *saññāvedayitanirodha* within Theravāda, it is a state akin to a vegetative coma in which all forms of cognition, sentience and engagement with the world are absent (e.g., Vism 2.344–351). If this is what Sāriputta meant when speaking about having nothing to experience, then such a state surely cannot be conceived in any way as connected with *sukha*. But perhaps Sāriputta’s statement implied a different understanding of this concept. As it was the case with the notion of the aggregates, there is ample evidence to the effect that in the Nikāyas, *saññāvedayitanirodha* was understood differently from its later, historically dominant interpretation within Theravāda. Several scholars (e.g., Hamilton 2000, p. 77; Stuart 2013, p. 43; Shulman 2014, pp. 33–34; Polak 2023a) have noted that some elements of the Nikāya account of the attainment of cessation imply that this state was not connected with total insentience and mental stasis, but rather with the receptivity of the sense faculties and potency for cognitive insight and psychological transformation. The faculties (*indriya*) of the meditator in this state are said to be very clear (*parisuddha*), and he is described as “having seen” (*disvā*) by means of understanding (*paññā*). Understood in such a way, *saññāvedayitanirodha* can meet the criteria of a state described by Sāriputta, in which the absence of *vedayita* does not preclude the possibility of some form of *sukha*.

Furthermore, a case can be made that the concept of *saññāvedayitanirodha* was just one of several ways in which the early Buddhist authors attempted to conceptualize a more general notion of an apophatically described state during which even the most basic elements that constitute our ordinary conscious experience cease. *Animitta cetosāmadhi* (featureless unification of the mind) may have been one such term used in this context. In the *Cūlasuññāta-sutta* (MN 121/iii.103–109), it occupies a similar place to *saññāvedayitanirodha*, as the apex of the meditative path, and directly follows the sphere of neither apperception nor non-apperception (*nevasaññānāsaññāyatana*).<sup>21</sup> This type of cessation was, however, not

supposed to occur through the total shutting down of the mind and the senses, resulting in their stasis, but via the suspension of higher-level processes connected with conceptuality and language, which are responsible for several key features of our standard consciousness. Such suspension could coincide with the unimpeded functioning of more basic processes of cognition, in which the senses remain active, but their input is not transformed into ordinary forms of consciousness. Perhaps exactly such an idea is conveyed by the *Mūlapariyāya-sutta* (MN 1/i.1–6), which states that awakened beings do not perceive (*sañjānāti*) reality but directly know it (*abhijānāti*) as it really is. The already mentioned passage of the *Aṭṭhakavagga* (Snp 4.5/156–157) speaks of a direct mode of cognition, where not even a minute *saññā* is fashioned (*pakappita*) with regard to what is seen, heard and sensed. The *Pārāyanavagga* (Snp 5.13/214–215) speaks of a way of practicing mindfulness (*sati*) that leads to a state in which “consciousness stops” (*viññāṇaṃ uparujjhati*). The *Dutiyasikkhattaya-sutta* (AN 3.90/i.235–236) describes the cessation of *viññāṇa* coinciding with the release (*vimutti*) of the mind (*cetas/ceto*).

The notion of the ordinary form of consciousness conceptualized in terms of various *khandhas* or *vedayita* giving way to some purified mode of cognition parallels, to a certain extent, the Yogācāra idea of *āśraya-parāvṛtti* (overturning of the basis). The latter concept refers to a fundamental transformation of cognition resulting from enlightenment. The eight ordinary consciousnesses (*vijñāna*) characterized by dichotomous, bifurcating nature cease and are replaced by enlightened cognitive abilities (*jñāna*), resulting in immediate, non-conceptual knowledge.<sup>22</sup>

## 7. Is Consciousness an Ever-Present Feature of Our Being in the World?

So far, we have only been considering a hypothetical possibility of a dissociation of ordinary conscious experience from other cognitive processes that are not globally available in the sense of being transparent to introspection and reflection. But is such a dissociation possible from the perspective of modern psychology? As we have already noted, it is one of our most intuitive, commonsense tendencies to consider being conscious, in the common sense of this word, as the only way of being cognizant, sensitive, intelligent and engaged in the world.

However, the progress in psychology and cognitive science clearly shows that our commonsense (i.e., folk psychological) views about mental life are often fundamentally mistaken. There now exists overwhelming evidence that the actual processes responsible for our agency, active cognitive processing and creativity occur through multiple parallel unconscious processes that are not phenomenal in nature.<sup>23</sup> What is then the point of being conscious, if even complex cognitive functions are performed unconsciously?

Neuropsychologist Mark Solms<sup>24</sup> suggests that for an organism, consciousness is a sort of an “alarm mechanism” (Solms 2019, p. 13), which arises in response to an unusual situation, when automated and unconscious behavior patterns stored in its memory lead to an error and fail to meet the demands posed by new circumstances (Solms 2021, pp. 220–22). Solms believes that the key adaptive feature of conscious experience is that it involves feelings, which, due to their range of affective valence (which varies between good and bad or pleasant and painful), guide our voluntary choices made in new, uncertain situations as they allow us to “feel” our way through various potential courses of action. Solms’s idea can be seen as complimentary to very influential theories of consciousness, which define it in terms of global availability, global accessibility or global broadcast.<sup>25</sup>

These theories claim that most of our cognitive processes occur in disjoint modules, which do not have access to one another’s output. However, especially when we are faced with a new problem that needs to be solved, it is useful to prioritize, within the cognitive system, the data connected with this problem by holding it in the working memory and therefore making it globally accessible for an extended period of time. Thus, instead of dealing with the situation in an automatic manner, various modules can combine their efforts to tackle the situation, and different potential courses of action may be compared and evaluated. It is especially useful for dealing with cognitive problems. By bringing



conscious attention to the problem, it is presented to various modules, which can from that point work on it and present their initial solutions in a conscious form, sometimes during the unexpected Eureka moments. By becoming conscious and thus globally accessible, these suggestions can then be worked on further, until a satisfying solution is reached. This mechanism is also helpful for making long-term plans and rehearsing potential social interactions. This may have contributed to a particular prominence of this form of consciousness among humans as opposed to other animals.

Additional evolutionary reasons for developing globally accessible and phenomenally conscious mental states are connected with their representational role. An organism is a conglomerate of disjointed self-less processes that are not separated by any rigid borders from the environment. However, it can create a phenomenal model through which it experiences itself as a relatively unified entity, an agent of actions and subject of experiences. Thus, the self-less processes that are just a semi-autonomous part of the environment may appropriate their actions and the biological “hardware”, and conceive of themselves as individuals or persons (Metzinger 2009). This occurs through the process in which the organism “identifies”<sup>26</sup> with its phenomenal model.

The fact that the aggregates are collectively defined as the personal identity (*sakkāya*: SN 22.105/iii.159), and that they have an inherent potential to be misinterpreted as Self, suggests that they may correspond to what Metzinger calls the “phenomenal Self-model”. Therefore, one of the key aspects of seeing aggregates as self consists of a human being mistakenly identifying with one’s own consciousness.<sup>27</sup>

According to Solms’s hypothesis, which combines neuropsychology, thermodynamics and information theory, organisms usually tend to maintain their homeostasis and minimize the so-called free energy and entropy of the system. In terms of information theory, this means minimizing uncertainty and energy-inefficient cognitive processing. This, in turn, entails prioritizing fast and automatic unconscious behavior patterns at the expense of slow and less predictable conscious mechanisms whenever possible. This leads Solms (2021, p. 221) to what may appear to be a shocking conclusion, that “conscious state is undesirable from the viewpoint of a self-organizing system”, and that the ideal state is one “in which our needs are met automatically, we feel nothing”. Feeling nothing does not mean here that the senses and cognitive system fall into a coma-like state, but that there is no globally available experience of feeling accompanying them.

From the above characteristic, it is clear that despite its great importance, access consciousness need not be considered a constant and necessary feature of our engagement in the world. In fact, a case can be made that there are many moments in our lives when such consciousness is not present, but they cannot be integrated into our memory, and thus “we”, in the common sense of this word, cannot even become directly aware of them, though their existence can be inferred by other means.

## 8. Is Consciousness Generated at a Constant Rate? Re-Examining the Nature of Absorption

Some recent developments in cognitive science seem to support the notion of the discontinuity of consciousness. According to Baars and Franklin (2007, p. 959), “conscious cognition occurs as a sequence of discrete, coherent episodes separated by quite short periods of no conscious content”. Dean Buonomano (2017, pp. 216–17) suggests that “while the unconscious brain continuously samples and processes information about events unfolding in time, consciousness itself is generated in a highly discontinuous manner”. Lionel Naccache (2018, p. 7) considers the possibility that, during conscious wakefulness, “a form of high-level filling-in process may join discrete conscious states separated by short periods of unconsciousness into what we subjectively experience as a continuous stream of consciousness”. Therefore, according to Naccache, we would only be phenomenally conscious during “temporal islets interspersed with unconscious states”.

All this implies that there are intervals of objective physical time during which the brain does not generate globally available representations correlated with the occurrence

of ordinary conscious experience.<sup>28</sup> However, merely establishing that consciousness is discontinuous and is not a constant feature of our being in the world does not allow us to make sense of Sāriputta's problematic statement. We have not yet found any psychological correlation between the presence or absence of such consciousness and being in the affectively valent states corresponding to what the Nikāyas label as *dukkha* and *sukha*.

I believe that the evidence of such a correlation may be provided by the study of specific features of the states which have been variously called absorption (Bronkhorst 2012), immersion, "identification with contents" (Paoletti and Ben-Soussan 2020), skilled engagement (Garfield 2015), skillful acting, or the flow experience (Csikszentmihalyi 2013). While these terms are not entirely synonymous, they share certain common aspects which are of interest to us. They refer to the moments of being completely absorbed or immersed in a particular experience or an act, often connected with activities which are performed in a masterful manner and do not require conscious control. For the purpose of this paper, I will be referring to these states simply as "absorption".

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2013, pp. 111–13) has enumerated several characteristics of such states, some of which are of particular importance to us, namely the merging of action with awareness, the distortion of the sense of time and the disappearance of self-consciousness. It is also commonplace that states of absorption are often connected with the feeling of pleasure, satisfaction or happiness (Csikszentmihalyi 1996, p. 123; Bronkhorst 2012, p. 11). An important characteristic of this state is that it is not fully transparent to deliberate acts of introspection, or to put it differently, the very feature of forgetting oneself that characterizes absorption precludes the possibility of deliberately introspecting it. The first-person reports of these states are therefore, to a significant extent, based on their memories.

We shall now consider a tentative hypothesis that these specific features of absorption are correlated with the relative level of absence/presence of access consciousness during a particular interval of physical time. It needs to be emphasized at this point that the Nikāyas do not contain a notion of absorption as a state occurring during non-meditative activities. We will also not find in these texts any discussions of the alteration of the sense of psychological time, which is one of the key features of absorbed states. As we shall see, however, considering the question of the mechanism responsible for these specific features of absorption will prove crucial for understanding the nature of the correlation between the absence of ordinary consciousness and being in the state of *sukha*, which may allow us to make sense of Sāriputta's claim in the *Nibbānasukha-sutta*.

## 9. What Accounts for the Specific Features of Absorbed States?

It is generally recognized that the subjective feeling of the passage of time is not identical to objective, physical time. Csikszentmihalyi (2013, p. 113) has noted that during flow (i.e., absorption):

The sense of time becomes distorted. Generally in flow we forget time, and hours may pass by in what seem like a few minutes.

What mechanism accounts for this phenomenon? Is the relative speed of the passage of time at a particular moment of our conscious experience given to us in an immediate and intuitive manner, and can it be immediately known through some inner sense, just like the instantaneous speed of a car is displayed on the speedometer? The currently dominant models in cognitive science suggest that there is no internal "timer" of psychological time, but that its sense is constructed from processed and stored information (Block and Zakay 1996, p. 189).

In normal conditions, one usually assesses the duration of a particular time interval after it has ended. This corresponds to the so-called retrospective paradigm of psychological timing (Zakay and Block 2004, p. 320), where duration judgement relies on information retrieved from memory. One of the more interesting versions of the latter model has been proposed by Ornstein (1969, pp. 101–5), who has suggested that subjectively perceived duration depends on how much information or mental content connected with the time

interval in question has been stored in memory; in other words, it depends “on a number of occurrences in the interval which reach awareness”. This hypothesis assumes that the two time intervals that last the same amount of physical time may be associated with different quantities of mental content or a different number of “occurrences which reach awareness”, to use Ornstein’s wording. While counterintuitive, this claim agrees well with the notion of the discontinuity of ordinary consciousness that we have considered above. This leads to a further question: what mechanism determines the quantity of mental content and the number of “occurrences which reach awareness” during a particular time interval?

The hypothesis I would like to consider is that the subjective estimate of the duration of psychological time is at least to some extent based on the quantity of moments of ordinary consciousness, or in other words, their “density” during a time interval. We have already mentioned the claims made by [Baars and Franklin \(2007\)](#), [Buonomano \(2017\)](#), [Naccache \(2018\)](#) and [Solms \(2021\)](#) to the effect that ordinary consciousness is not generated constantly and continuously, and does not faithfully keep up with the processing of sensory stimuli occurring in the brain in physical time. We are not aware of any blank moments, because due to a specific way of processing the original sensory input and filling in the gaps, we experience and remember our consciousness as a continuous stream. There seems to exist some structural affinity between ordinary consciousness and memory. The content of consciousness is correlated with the data that are held in working memory,<sup>29</sup> and which eventually may or may not be integrated into long-term memory. I do not claim that this is the only mechanism that accounts for the assessment of the duration of psychological time, but it is bound to influence it in a significant manner.

To sum things up, different experiences, despite spanning the same interval of physical time, may be connected with a different quantity of moments of consciousness that can be integrated into memory. Thus, upon recollecting, these experiences will be evaluated as having a different duration. A fewer number of occurrences of such consciousness during a particular time interval means that we assess them as involving less psychological time. During moments of flow or absorption, the quantity and frequency of the moments that are conscious in the introspectable sense are relatively low compared to an ordinary state. As a result, we associate them with a quicker passage of time, because when comparing them to ordinary experiences occurring in the same timeframe of physical time, we notice that there is less to recollect. This also accounts for a well-known phenomenon of surprise; when after being absorbed one looks at the clock and is surprised to learn how much time has passed, despite subjectively being aware of a relatively lesser amount of psychological time.

On reading this, one may raise a very natural objection, that the very moments of absorption cannot involve the total absence of both phenomenal and access consciousness, as it is possible to recall their “what it is like” phenomenal character or simply to remember them and talk about their quality. One may also vividly remember being self-conscious during at least particular moments of an absorbed state, even though the general degree of self-awareness associated with the whole time interval of absorption may be substantially lessened. One response to that could be to suggest that this is a post hoc result of processing, a sort of a constructed memory or a confabulation.<sup>30</sup> However, I think that the truth is more nuanced. No ordinary experience of absorption involves relatively long, uninterrupted periods of the absence of access consciousness. In other words, even during strong absorption, access consciousness still arises intermittently, though with much lesser frequency than during an ordinary state. Still, the frequency of conscious moments is high enough to prevent us from becoming aware of any discontinuities in our consciousness.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, what one remembers from absorption are just the moments of ordinary access consciousness that intersperse it. It is just that in case of absorption, there is generally less to remember. Absorption proper, in the sense of the absence of access consciousness, cannot be registered by memory.<sup>32</sup> Being able to introspect “what it is like” to be absorbed, i.e., being in a state of access consciousness, implies that one is actually no longer absorbed at that specific moment.<sup>33</sup> [Paoletti and Ben-Soussan \(2020, p. 11\)](#) acknowledge this paradox by stating that, in the moment we voluntarily pay attention to ourselves, we are no longer completely

identified (i.e., absorbed). In cognitive science, the activities of introspecting, thinking about or recollecting our conscious experiences are sometimes labelled as forms of “conscious metacognition”. As Baars et al. (2021) note, absorbed experiences are characterized by an attenuation of such metacognition.

Furthermore, the assessments of the speed of the passage of psychological time or the “what it is like” character of absorption occur not only after the absorbed activity or experience has ended completely, but also during the moments of access consciousness that intermittently arise during it. That is why we have a sense that we can assess, to some extent, the quality of an absorbed experience while being absorbed, and not only after it has completely ended.

The relatively fewer number of occurrences of consciousness during absorption would also account for the sense of attenuation of self-consciousness. As we have suggested, every moment of ordinary access consciousness involves a core sense of self-consciousness.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, upon recollecting an absorbed experience, we may acknowledge that there was “less of us” in it, compared to some ordinary experience occurring within the same interval of physical time.

On this account, the relative strength of absorption could be ultimately explained in terms of a more basic factor, namely the number of occurrences of consciousness with which it would be negatively correlated. This implies that the maximal level of absorption would result in the total absence of conscious experience during the time interval in which such an absorption would take place. Were such an absorption to last long enough, it could not but result in a blank moment or a memory gap.<sup>35</sup>

## 10. What Makes a State Pleasant? Absorption and Pleasure

Another important aspect of the states of absorption is their connection to pleasure and satisfaction. This is especially relevant to our investigation, as it may bring us closer to understanding the nature of the connection between the absence of *vedayita* and the presence of *sukha* proclaimed by Sāriputta, especially as we have already hypothesized that absorption is characterized by a relatively higher degree of absence of an ordinary form of consciousness.

Csikszentmihalyi (1996, p. 123) has observed that:

[W]hen we are in flow, we do not usually feel happy—for the simple reason that in flow we feel only what is relevant to the activity. . . . It is only after we get out of flow, at the end of a session or in moments of distraction within it, that we might indulge in feeling happy.

This appears to be the same type of paradox as the one we have already discussed in connection with the impossibility of being introspectively conscious of the state of absorption in the exact moment in which it occurs. But why would absorption be pleasurable? In a series of valuable contributions, Bronkhorst (2012, 2016, 2019, 2022, 2023) has adapted the theory of absorption to the context of early Buddhist studies. He (Bronkhorst 2012) has hypothesized that pleasure and happiness are directly connected to the states of lowered bodily tension. According to Bronkhorst (2012, pp. 126–27), in normal states of consciousness, there is always a certain degree of tension that is either mobilized in anticipation of future social interaction, or to resist the urges inducing us to actions which may have negative consequences from the perspective of the reality assessment of the “main unit” of our mind. This main unit is the central element of our personality responsible for reality assessment and regulating the fulfilment of our urges. In other words, in normal states of consciousness, we are bound to feel a certain amount of displeasure, as we just cannot be completely free of tension. The idea that the level of bodily tension is negatively correlated to that of pleasure is certainly promising and agrees with some commonly shared human experiences,<sup>36</sup> but is yet scientifically unconfirmed in its entirety.<sup>37</sup> However, let us for the sake of our argument assume that it may be true and see where it leads us.

The question of what exactly makes us consider a particular state pleasant or unpleasant has been the subject of intense academic debate. We experience states connected with

very diverse contents as pleasant, and they include images, sounds, tastes, smells, tactile sensations and thoughts. But what is it exactly that makes us consider them pleasant? What common denominator, if any, do they share? According to the so-called phenomenological theories, what makes us experience something as pleasant, is how it feels. One such theory is the “distinctive feeling theory” which claims that “for an experience to be pleasant (or unpleasant) is just for it to involve or contain a distinctive kind of feeling, one we might call ‘the feeling of pleasure itself’,” (Bramble 2013, p. 202). The same can be said regarding the experience of pain. The problem with phenomenological theories is that despite their appeal to commonsense views, it is very problematic to distinguish any specific, universal phenomenal “feel” present in each pleasant state from its unique, particular content (e.g., a certain combination of images, sounds, or tactile sensations). A different approach is taken by the “attitudinal theories”, which claim that pleasant experiences are those which are liked, wanted, or approved of when they last, while the opposite is true regarding the unpleasant ones. However, such theories only affirm the fact that we want or do not want certain experiences to continue, but do not explain why exactly we do. Therefore, they do not explain the fundamental mechanism responsible for our assessment of certain states as pleasant.

Above, we have hypothesized that the strength of absorption is negatively correlated with the number of occurrences of consciousness within the time interval in which absorption happens. If, in accordance with commonly shared experiences, the pleasant character of absorption is directly correlated with its strength, then it should also be negatively correlated with the “density” of moments of conscious experience. If the level of tension is negatively correlated with the strength of absorption, then this would imply that it is also positively correlated with the frequency of occurrences of access consciousness. It is commonplace that we find tension unpleasant, while relaxation is comfortable. Therefore, the presence of consciousness would be correlated with displeasure and possibly tension, while its absence with pleasure and possibly relaxation. This would explain the fact observed by Csikszentmihalyi, namely, that we cannot directly attend to our happiness while in the state of absorption proper, since according to our hypothesis, the latter is correlated with the absence of access consciousness. This would also perfectly harmonize with Sāriputta’s statement, which suggests that the absence of *vedayita* is *sukha*. But this leads to another question, namely, why would exactly tension be correlated with the presence of consciousness and relaxation with its absence?

## 11. Tension and Self-Consciousness

There have been some attempts in Western psychological thought to show the connection of tension with the sense of agency and selfhood. For example, psychologist Kurt Lewin claimed that when there is a wish or intention (i.e., a form of conscious agency), there arise tensions which strive for a discharge and make us ready to perform an action (Lindorfer 2021). Gestalt psychologist Kurt Koffka believed that the Ego is made up of tension systems which owe their existence to one’s needs and interact with the environment. Upon the satisfaction of these needs, the tensions will be relaxed and redistributed throughout the whole system (Stemberger 2021). In Bronkhorst’s (2012) theory, which heavily draws on Freud, tension is used by what he calls “the main unit”, which “incorporates the reality assessment of the person as a whole” and “directs, and often redirects the majority of that person’s urges” (Bronkhorst 2012, p. 100); it can thus be seen as a sort of a central element of our personality, a type of an acting self. The tension is used to keep in check the urges which originate within parts of our psyche that are not integrated with the main unit and are unwanted from its perspective.

As we have hypothesized, every instant of ordinary conscious experience involves a form of very basic self-consciousness. We have considered Solms’s hypothesis stating that, from an evolutionary standpoint, the generation of consciousness is supposed to be reserved for special conditions in which automatized responses are not sufficient, and that it is actually preferable for the organism to stay in a state of non-conscious automaticity.



Therefore, generating and maintaining consciousness may put some strain on the organism, resulting in displeasure. By that, I do not mean that *dukkha* is precisely the tension that supposedly accompanies every instance of self-consciousness. As I will be trying to show in the following sections, “tension” may not even be the most apt term to describe the fundamental mechanism that is connected with the generation of consciousness. It is safest to speak merely about the correlation of the presence of self-consciousness, *dukkha* and the state of the body, which we have tentatively labelled as “tension”. Just as is the case with pleasure, the actual cause of displeasure may not be available for introspection. Displeasure is an evolutionary signal motivating the organism to do something in order to amend its situation, so that it can return to a comfortable state of homeostasis, in which its needs are taken care of in an automatic way. Thus, the arising of consciousness, the generation of “tension” and the feeling of displeasure are closely correlated aspects of the mechanism that organisms use in order to deal with problematic situations.

However, for ordinary people, self-consciousness seems to be present on an almost constant basis, even during periods of idleness, when they engage in mental monologue or mind wandering. It seems that due to the acquisition of language, and the demands of our complicated social life, it is evolutionarily adaptive to consciously rehearse potential verbal interactions and courses of actions, thus making them globally accessible for various cognitive systems for further evaluation and potential modification. Let us note that such moments seem to be the opposite of absorption in the sense of an enhancement of one’s self-consciousness, the slow passage of psychological time, boredom and mental discomfort. According to our hypothesis, this would be explainable by the higher frequency of the occurrences of moments of consciousness during such a time interval.

Secondly, due to what in Metzinger’s (2009) terms may be conceptualized as the identification of the organism with its own phenomenal self-model, the former considers the latter’s absence to be tantamount to one’s own annihilation. The Ego is the content of the phenomenal self-model (Metzinger 2009, p. 8), and is constituted by bodily sensations, emotional states, perceptions, memories, acts of will and thoughts. The phenomenal self-model pretty much corresponds to the globally available contents of our phenomenal consciousness. Therefore, the organism will keep generating such consciousness to maintain what it mistakenly perceives to be its own existence (i.e., the presence of consciousness), and prevent what it considers to be its annihilation (i.e., absence of consciousness). This idea has a direct parallel in the Nikāya notion of an ordinary person believing oneself to be the aggregates and thus producing them (*abhinibbatteti*: SN 22.100/iii.152), just like a painter paints a faithful but ultimately inanimate effigy of a human being, and to taking up the uncomfortable burden (*bhāra*) of the *khandhas* (SN 22.22/iii.25–26). Of course, on such a reading, this production must not be understood in an ontic sense of generating constituents of the mind-independent reality, but in an epistemic sense of producing a specific form of experience.<sup>38</sup> This process results from cognitive delusion and actually leads to an intensification of discomfort. This explains why instead of falling into a pleasurable state of effortless absorption whenever we are idle, we constantly maintain self-consciousness and thus bring *dukkha* upon ourselves.

According to a very interesting hypothesis by Bronkhorst (2012), our ignorance regarding the real source of pleasure generates the psychological mechanism of craving or desire (*taṇhā*). Due to the fact that memory traces do not record absorption itself, we mistakenly associate pleasure with the objects and situations which once accompanied it, and not with its actual cause, which is the state of the absence of tension. Afterwards, we desire to repeat the experience of these objects and situations, unaware that they were not the actual proximal cause of pleasure. And indeed, it is commonplace that despite trying to repeat certain experiences, we usually fail to find that special quality with which we associate them in our memory. As Bronkhorst (2012, p. 147) aptly points out, this means that most of our life’s pursuits are fundamentally misguided.

Based on our considerations so far, we can suggest one additional aspect of craving. Due to the organism identifying itself with its own consciousness (i.e., believing oneself

to be consciousness inhabiting the body or the conscious self), it also wants to repeat states of pleasure in a self-conscious, introspectable way, in order to fully indulge in experiencing pleasure. However, as we have suggested, introspectability is a feature of access consciousness that is incompatible with full absorption, and is correlated with tension, thus preventing the occurrence of pleasure. Therefore, through much of our lives, we are engaged in a vicious cycle, trying to re-experience in a self-conscious way the states that we remember as pleasant, but in a way that actually prevents them from being such.

## 12. The Limits of Introspection for Self-Understanding

On such an account, both phenomenological as well as attitudinal theories of pleasure would be inadequate, as they would fail to explain the reasons for us feeling pleasure.<sup>39</sup> This would also imply that these reasons are not available to our conscious introspection, and we are unable to pinpoint the exact cause or “feel” which makes us experience a particular state as pleasant. Actually, according to our hypothesis, the very act of consciously attending to pleasure makes it impossible to capture its essence, as it lies exactly in the absence of consciousness.

This suggests that, in general, the fundamental causes of our behavior may not be transparent to our introspection. What happens on the level of introspectable consciousness is merely resultant of some deeper processes, which are not introspectable themselves and cannot become the content of our declarative knowledge. All explanations that attribute direct causal efficacy to what is occurring in our consciousness seem to be wrong. It appears that the causes of our feeling of pleasure do not lie in any phenomenal quality that we may introspect or attend to.

We may also consider the possibility that we are absorbed not because of any act originating from our consciousness, e.g., its supposed successful concentration on an object or an activity. We may actually become absorbed because on a deeper, unconscious level, the organism is “satisfied” with its current state—probably because its needs are efficiently taken care of in an automatic, globally unavailable way. Let us note that this is the case with the states of skillful coping, which are examples of an activity performed in a masterful, i.e., non-conscious, automatized way. In such moments, the organism does not need to generate consciousness, which originally developed as a tool for dealing with novel situations for which the automatic systems are insufficient. Therefore, due to a lesser number of moments of consciousness occurring (or none at all), we find ourselves absorbed and not the other way around.

We can therefore agree with Garfield (2015, p. 170) when he states that “we are not introspectively authoritative regarding the objects and properties to which we are responding” and that “while it appears that we know ourselves and our inner life intimately from a first-person point of view, . . . in fact, we are strangers to ourselves, and what we take to be immediate data may be nothing more than illusion”.

## 13. *Saṅkhāras*, Conscious Exertion and *dukkha*

In the first part of the paper, I have hypothesized that the states conceptualized in terms of the five *khandhas* and *vedayita* may correspond to the notion of ordinary conscious experience, which has a globally available content, i.e., access consciousness. Therefore, the idea that such consciousness is inherently correlated with some form of fundamental discomfort for the organism<sup>40</sup> could be seen as directly paralleling the Nikāya notion that the five *khandhas* or *vedayita* are *dukkha*. Such an understanding would allow us to take this radical claim at face value and see it as an objective, universal truth, and not just a question of subjective assessment dependent on a particular perspective and the emotional makeup of a specific person.<sup>41</sup>

The Nikāya texts seem to be committed to a radical thesis that every instance of conscious experience (i.e., *vedayita*) is inherently dissatisfactory. But this claim is not as unpalatable as it may seem at first. Let us again refer to Solms’s (2021, pp. 221–22) statements that “conscious state is undesirable from the viewpoint of a self-organising system” and

that “consciousness is undesirable in cognition”. Solms (2019, p. 7) suggests that we feel unpleasure when we deviate from homeostasis, and when uncertainty increases. This, of course, is correlated with the necessity of generating consciousness in order for us to amend the situation and return to a state of homeostasis and the certainty characterizing automatic unconscious processes. In the ideal state in which consciousness is not needed, because our needs are taken care of by our automatic and unconscious systems, “we feel nothing”, which Solms (2021, p. 222) describes as “[p]eace at last”. In his article (Solms 2019), he goes as far as to label this state as “Nirvana”, though he uses the term in the general sense adopted in popular culture, without referring to any specific Buddhist understanding of it. However, as Sāriputta’s statement attests, Solms may have in fact unknowingly come very close to at least one of the aspects of *nibbāna* in early Buddhist thought.

On such an account, the notion of *sukha* coinciding with the total absence of *vedayita* does not appear that self-contradictory anymore. Freed from the strain that is correlated with maintaining consciousness, the organism can enjoy deep comfort on a very basic bodily level. However, such a state cannot be consciously acknowledged, incorporated into memory and declarative knowledge, or expressed verbally.

Is the idea of the correlation between tension and the presence of self-consciousness present in the Nikāyas? A somewhat similar meaning may have been conveyed by the term *saṅkhāra*, especially when it was used in a meditative context. By that, I do not claim that this was the main meaning of this term, as from the etymological standpoint, it has no connection with tension whatsoever.<sup>42</sup> Its literal meaning is that of “being made together” and refers to the fabricated and fabricating character of our experience. Many Nikāya texts imply that *saṅkhāras* are involved in the generation of conditioned existence, but whether they are directly causally efficacious, or whether their presence is merely a necessary condition of this process, is an open issue.

However, in some passages, this term is used in a similar sense to *cetana* and refers to conscious intention or volition.<sup>43</sup> As shown by Wegner (2002) and Metzinger (2009), the phenomenon of conscious will allows the organism to develop a sense of agency and appropriate one’s own acts. Therefore, it is constitutive of the very basic sense of self-consciousness. Furthermore, in certain texts, *saṅkhāra* refers to the exertion, striving and deliberate, forceful mental effort involved in meditative concentration. One occasionally encounters the phrase *sasaṅkhāraniggayhavāritagata* (lit: held down by restraint of *saṅkhāras* e.g., AN 3.101/i.254), which refers to a lower stage of meditation, at which it has not yet become fully effortless and spontaneous. Bodhi (2012, p. 336) translates it as “reined in and checked by forcefully suppressing”. The *Sasaṅkhāra-sutta* (AN 4.169/ii.155–156) uses the term *asaṅkhāraparinibbāyī* (one who attains full *nibbāna* without *saṅkhāras*), with reference to a meditator who reaches the final goal through the practice of the four *jhānas*. Bodhi (2012, p. 534) translates the term *asaṅkhāraparinibbāyī* as “[one who] attains *nibbāna* without exertion”. The fourth *jhāna* is sometimes described as a state in which the meditator has tranquilized his bodily *saṅkhāra* (e.g., in AN 10.20/v 31: *passaddhakāyasaṅkhāra*). It is noteworthy that according to Bronkhorst’s (2012) interpretation, the fourth *jhāna* is a state in which bodily tension has become maximally reduced. In the stock account of the mindfulness of breathing (*ānāpānassati*), the calming (*passambhayanta*) of the bodily *saṅkhāra* directly precedes experiencing rapture (*pīti*) and then *sukha*, which implies a possible connection between the lack of forceful exertion and pleasure.<sup>44</sup> While the historically dominant interpretation sees the four *jhānas* as meditative states requiring deliberate mental effort to concentrate on an object, several scholars have suggested that in the Nikāyas, they may have been a type of spontaneous, objectless meditation (e.g., Polak 2011; Bronkhorst 2012; Arbel 2017; Wynne 2018).<sup>45</sup> It seems that the Nikāyas imply the existence of a link between the *jhānas*, *sukha* (which is present in the first three *jhānas*), the absence of *dukkha* and the calming of *saṅkhāras*.

The Nikāyas, therefore, do not explicitly associate *saṅkhāras* with bodily tension per se, but rather with volitional striving, deliberate mental concentration and forceful exertion. Nevertheless, it seems psychologically plausible that when one strives, deliberately concen-

trates on something, or exerts oneself, this also involves a significant amount of tension. However, this tension may just be an outward manifestation of a much more fundamental mechanism connected with striving.

Is this specific meaning of *saṅkhāra* occurring in the meditative context somehow connected with the other, more basic meanings of this term? We have already noted that from the etymological standpoint, this word means making together or being made up together, and conveys the notion of fabrication. Furthermore, according to the scheme of dependent arising, *saṅkhāra* is directly conditioned by ignorance (*avijjā*). *Saṅkhāras* are also described as *dukkha*, both collectively with the other *khandhas*, as well as individually. A famous passage of the *Dhammapada* states that all *saṅkhāras* are *dukkha*.<sup>46</sup> It is noteworthy that, in this context, *saṅkhāra* refers to experience in its totality, while emphasizing its fabricated aspect.

Are these various meanings somehow connected? In the preceding sections of this article, we have hypothesized that from the evolutionary perspective, consciousness was supposed to be generated to deal with situations that challenge the homeostasis of the organism. It might be the case, as Solms has suggested, that the actual cause of displeasure lies in the disturbance of homeostasis, while consciousness and “tension” arise to deal with this situation and their occurrence is merely correlated with more fundamental displeasure, the causes of which are opaque to introspection. But if, as we have suggested, the organism mistakenly believes itself to be a conscious self, then its goals and actions will reflect this cognitive delusion. Instead of just coming to terms with what it really is, i.e., a conglomerate of self-less processes, it will strive to maintain and prolong what it mistakenly believes to be its existence and will pursue the goals reflecting that misconceived sense of identity. It will attempt to do so by continuously generating consciousness, which corresponds to the Nikāya notion of an uninstructed individual producing (*abhihiṇibbatteti*) the aggregates (SN 22.100/iii.152). This, of course, disturbs the state of homeostasis even further, and thus intensifies the fundamental sense of displeasure. The organism will strive to amend this by generating even more consciousness since this is the only tool it instinctively uses in such situations, thus intensifying the vicious cycle of *dukkha*.

What also seems to be implied here is that every instance of ordinary conscious experience is not just a passive awareness of a certain cognitive content, but inherently involves the attitudes of reaching out, striving and trying to become something different from what one really is. The fact that every instance of ordinary consciousness involves the presence of *saṅkhāra* can be also taken to mean that it (i.e., consciousness) is artificially made up, in the sense that its presence is not obligatory and it might have just as well not been generated, were it not for the deeply rooted ignorance (*avijjā*) regarding one’s own identity. Perhaps it is this non-obligatory character of conditioned experience that is referred to by the enigmatic Nikāya line: “it may not be, and it may not be for me”,<sup>47</sup> which will become the subject of our analysis in the next section.

On such a reading, the generation of ordinary conscious experience involves all the aspects of *saṅkhāra* enumerated above: striving and effort, discomfort, fabrication, and ignorance. Since *saṅkhāras* are given such a negative evaluation in the Nikāyas, it is not surprising that a relatively frequent stock passage identifies the stilling (*samatha*) of all *saṅkhāras* with *nibbāna*.<sup>48</sup>

This would imply that *nibbāna* involves the stilling of all forms of volitional, effortful striving (which is correlated with “tension”) and the ending of ordinary conscious experience conceptualized in terms of the *khandhas* or *vedayita*, since *saṅkhāras* cannot be disconnected from the remaining aggregates. Thus, it would be a state in which “nothing is experienced” and, as a result, it would be the opposite of displeasure.

In light of such an understanding, Sāriputta’s proclamation that the essence of the pleasantness of *nibbāna* lies in the fact that nothing is experienced could be considered plausible. Earlier, we suggested that *saññāvedayitanirodha* may have been just one of the terms used to denote an apophatic state of the deconstruction of conscious experience resulting in its absence, and that *animitta cetosamādhī* may have at some time occupied

a similar position as the former state. It is noteworthy that in the famous passage of the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* (DN 16/ii 100), the aged, ailing Buddha claims that it is only in the state of *animitta cetosamādhī* that his body (*kāya*) is more at ease (*phāsutara*).<sup>49</sup> The specific wording, suggesting that it the body which is at ease, and not, say, that the mind is enraptured (*pītimāna*), is in perfect harmony with the notion of deep bodily comfort we are considering.

#### 14. The Terror of Having No Consciousness

The idea that conscious experience is the source of our misfortune is very much at odds with our most basic, commonsense intuitions. Particularly revolting, however, is the perspective of the absence of consciousness as a supposedly desired state of the organism, synonymous with the absence of strain and suffering. As we have noted in the earlier part of the paper, consciousness in the common sense of the word involves a phenomenal, qualitative aspect. Phenomenal consciousness is often conceptualized as a unique, distinct inner space filled with irreducible, qualitative phenomena. Supposedly, were the light of consciousness to go out, the inner space in which phenomenal experience takes place would grow dark. From this perspective, the goal of the absence of conscious experience cannot be seen as anything but tantamount to the annihilation of our innermost essence. As Solms (2021, p. 224) puts it, “we seem to strive for a kind of zombiedom. The ideal form of cognition is automaticity, and so the sooner we can get rid of consciousness, the better”. But why would anyone sane aspire to zombiedom?

The Nikāya authors may have been aware that the perspective of the cessation of consciousness or the absence of conscious experience may appear terrifying. In the preceding section, we have briefly mentioned the statement of the Buddha in the *Udāna-sutta* (SN 22.55/iii 55–58), which is now worth quoting in its entirety. It reads: “It might not be, and it might not be for me; it will not be, [and] it will not be for me”,<sup>50</sup> and is meant to serve as a resolve for severing (*chindati*) the fetters (*saṃyojāna*) of what is lowly (*orambhāgiya*). According to the next part of this text, one realizes this resolve by seeing the aggregates as they really are (i.e., as impermanent, painful and not-self), and by understanding that each of the aggregates “will cease to exist” (*vibhavissati*). Therefore, the first line (*no cassaṃ, no ca me siyā*) seems to refer to the very possibility of the aggregates ceasing for a practitioner, while the second one (*nābhavissa, na me bhavissatīti*) represents a firm resolve to personally realize this goal. Since, as we have suggested, the notion of the aggregates is used to convey various aspects of conscious experience, their non-being (*vibhava*) would be also tantamount to the absence of consciousness. The author of the text acknowledges that this perspective is a terror (*tāsa*) to an unlearned commoner (*assutavant puthujana*), while claiming that in fact this state is not frightening (*atasitāya*) at all.

Of course, the non-being (*vibhava*) mentioned in this terse and enigmatic passage may be interpreted in various ways. It may be read as referring to the final cessation of the aggregates coinciding with the post-mortem state of the final *nibbāna* without any residue remaining (*anupādisesa*). It may also be understood as referring to the momentariness of the aggregates, which constantly rise and fall. *Vibhava* may also be read in the sense of the meditative cessation of ordinary consciousness (as the *khandhas* refer to various aspects of such consciousness) and the resultant transformed state of being, which involves the significant diminishment of occurrences of such consciousness. Regardless of which form of non-being of the aggregates is implied in the text, they must all appear fearsome to an ordinary person who identifies with one’s consciousness and assumes its continuous and constant presence.

Such an attitude is aptly characterized in the passage of the *Mahātāṇhāsāṅkhaya-sutta* (MN 38/i.258), in which the fisherman’s son Sāti proclaims his belief that *viññāṇa* is that which speaks (*vada*), feels (*vedeyya*) and experiences (*paṭisaṃvedeti*) the results of action. In a similar passage of the *Sabbāsava-sutta* (MN 2/i.8), the same characteristics are applied not to *viññāṇa*, but to the self (*attā*), which in addition to other epithets, is described as continuous/constant (*nicca*), stable (*dhuvva*) and eternal (*sassata*). Both accounts complement



each other and provide an apt characteristic of the belief that consciousness is the self. For someone holding such a belief, the prospect of the non-being of consciousness must be indeed terrifying. Despite the fact that Solms repeatedly claims that the organism strives for automaticity, the state of as little consciousness as possible, and “zombiedom”, he writes in the same book that the topic of consciousness has great significance, because “you *are* your consciousness” (Solms 2021, p. 8). In this belief, he is certainly not alone, as it is very intuitive and natural, and lies at the heart of various philosophies, including Cartesianism and Sāṃkhya-Yoga.

### 15. Are We Our Consciousness?

But is this intuitive belief justified? At any moment, there occur within our organism a multitude of parallel activities of registering and processing information. Relatively few of the results of these processes get synthesized into a unified and specifically structured form of data that is then globally broadcast within the whole cognitive system, making it available to various modules in our mind, including those responsible for reality assessment, view formation, action guidance, memory and speech. Are we justified in identifying ourselves with this relatively small, though certainly very important, part of human cognitive architecture, at the expense of its other elements? Can it be said that I am, or we are, this consciousness, and that it is intimately connected to our innermost essence of being? Is the belief “I am consciousness” justified?

From a simple logical standpoint, for this belief or attitude to be correct, its author or the agent maintaining it would actually need to be consciousness. If it is some other faculty or element of our cognitive system that is responsible for the generation of this belief or attitude, then it must be considered mistaken.

Throughout this paper, we have repeatedly stated that consciousness cannot be considered as active and causally efficacious in the direct sense,<sup>51</sup> as it is itself a passive and highly processed end-product of the active but unconscious processes that are the true “cogs and wheels” of our cognition.

That in us, which is responsible for our intelligence, reality assessment, view formation and maintaining certain attitudes, is simply not consciousness.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, the belief “I am consciousness” is not justified, as it simply is not generated and maintained by consciousness, but rather by an element of our cognitive architecture that is unconscious itself. As such, it is a result of its mistaken identification with consciousness, which corresponds to the Nikāya notion of an individual mistakenly considering the aggregates in terms of “I am this” (*esoḥamasmi*).

Likewise, in order for Solms’s commonsense, intuitive statement that “you are your consciousness” to be justified, the element of our cognitive system which registers this statement, analyzes and comprehends it would need to be consciousness. It is not, however. At best, the function of consciousness lies in a particular mode of presenting specifically structured data and making it available throughout the cognitive system. To use a helpful analogy, believing oneself to be consciousness would be tantamount to some AI software running on some hardware producing a statement in response to a question about its identity, to the effect that it is actually a monitor to which it is connected and which displays its output. Were even consciousness able to exist after death in some hypothetical pure form, perhaps being conscious of itself, it would have no significance for us whatsoever. That in us which fears suffering, wants to be liberated and strives for *nibbāna* is simply not our consciousness. It is our identification with consciousness that is actually the source of our misfortune.

All this of course harmonizes with the Nikāya view that *viññāṇa* and other *khandhas* are not self (*attā*). The historically dominant interpretation of the *anattā* teaching emphasizes that although we are ultimately a combination of the five aggregates, there is no stable self among them, and therefore, we are self-less. However, it seems that the original point of the no-self teaching was not just that the *khandhas* are not our “self”, but that they are literally not ourselves, i.e., they are not us, or in other words, we are not the *khandhas*. The

point is therefore not just that *viññāṇa* or the other aggregates are self-less, but that we are not our *viññāṇa*.<sup>53</sup>

## 16. Conclusions: Psychological Transformation as a Radical Change of Perspective

One of the key aspects of the psychological transformation spoken about in the Nikāya texts may thus be conceptualized in terms of a radical change of perspective. An ordinary person identifies himself with his consciousness, which in Nikāya terms corresponds to *viññāṇa*, other *khandhas* and *vedayita*. From this perspective, the prospect of the aggregates undergoing cessation or non-being (*vibhava*), or even of their discontinuity, must be terrifying (*tāsa*), as it seems to be tantamount with the destruction of one's innermost essence. However, an awakened person knows that his being cannot be reduced to his consciousness, as the latter is merely a small subset of data within a much wider framework of processes.

In this way, the processes which constitute us finally come to terms with what they really are and stop functioning under a mistaken assumption that they are consciousness. From that point of view, the perspective of a cessation or the non-being of the aggregates is no longer terrifying, since it only involves a specifically structured form of cognition. That in us which fears this cessation is actually untouched by such a cessation. The absence of conscious experience in the sense discussed in this paper does not mean that one becomes insentient or stops being intelligent, creative and engaged in the world. It does not follow from the fact that no information at a given moment is introspectable, stored in memory or expressible in speech, that a person in such a state is unconscious in the traditional sense of this word. Throughout his book, Garfield (2015) repeatedly emphasizes the limitations of the view of consciousness as the special inner domain that is transparent to introspection and verbal report; "a unitary phenomenon" or "a simple thing or property that one either has or does not" (Garfield 2015, p. 169). Instead, he invites us to consider the view (which he considers essentially Buddhist) that "consciousness is a many-leveled phenomenon", of which only the coarsest levels "are on all accounts introspectible by ordinary agents in ordinary states", while other levels are opaque to introspection and verbal report. For example, one can speak of responsive consciousness as being "responsive to a stimulus, even if that responsiveness is not introspectible and has no phenomenal character" (Garfield 2015, p. 123).

From this perspective, the absence of *vedayita* may be seen as pleasant in the sense of comfort on a deep bodily level, resultant from relaxation and the lack of strain created by the necessity of constantly generating conscious experience. Interestingly, modern cognitive science begins to consider the possibility of "unconscious emotions". Berridge and Winkelman (2003, p. 205) suggest that "there appears to be a subcortical network available to generate core 'liking' reactions to sensory pleasures". They claim that these "'liking' reactions may influence a person's consumption behaviour later, without a person being able to report subjective awareness of the affective reaction at the moment it was caused" (ibid.).<sup>54</sup> Interestingly, they also suggest that this type of core emotion manifests itself in "positive affective facial reactions".

It is noteworthy that the Nikāyas also allude to the possibility of an elevated meditative state of the mind manifesting itself through facial appearance. For example, when the newly awakened Buddha is met by the Ājīvika ascetic Upaka, the latter greets him by commenting that his features (*indriya*) are very clear/calm (*vippasanna*), and that his skin complexion (*chavivaṇṇa*) is very pure and bright (*parisuddha pariyodāta*).<sup>55</sup> What is especially important in the context of our considerations is that clear faculties are also ascribed to a person in the state of *saññāvedayitanirodha*, which may indicate that this state was not a comatose one, but was rather characterized by the presence of cognizance and sentience, or to use Garfield's (2015) term, "responsive consciousness", and perhaps even a form of non-introspectable, deep bodily comfort.

We may expect that the fundamental change in perspective that results from ceasing to identify with one's consciousness would have a very significant influence on everyday

functioning. One can speculate that, for such a person, ordinary access consciousness would return to its original role and be generated only on occasions when the organism would truly need to address a novel challenge. In times of idleness, one would be able to spontaneously return to a state of comfortable absorption and relaxation associated with the absence of introspectable and reportable form of conscious experience. Were we to express this using Nikāya terms, this would be synonymous with the pleasure of not experiencing anything, the casting off (*nikkhepana*) of the burden (*bhāra*) of the aggregates, and the ending of *dukkha*.

**Funding:** This research was funded by the National Science Center (NCN) in Poland, research project number 2018/31/B/HS1/01324. The APC was funded by the National Science Center (NCN) in Poland, research project number 2018/31/B/HS1/01324.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Abbreviations

AN	<i>Āṅguttara Nikāya</i>
Dhp	<i>Dhammapada</i>
DN	<i>Dīgha Nikāya</i>
MN	<i>Majjhima Nikāya</i>
Sn	<i>Suttanipāṭa</i>
SN	<i>Saṃyutta Nikāya</i>
Vism	<i>Visuddhimagga</i>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> AN 9.34/iv.415: *etadeva khvettha, āvuso, sukhaṃ yadettha natthi vedayitaṃ*.

<sup>2</sup> AN 9.34/iv.414: *“sukhamidaṃ, āvuso, nibbānaṃ. sukhamidaṃ, āvuso, nibbānaṃ”ti*.

<sup>3</sup> AN 9.34/iv.415: *kiṃ panettha, āvuso sārīputta, sukhaṃ yadettha natthi vedayitaṃ”ti?*

<sup>4</sup> This term is usually translated as “cessation of perception and feeling” (e.g., Bodhi 2012), though there is nothing in the structure and meaning of the Pali compound itself, which makes such a translation more correct than, say “cessation of apperception and experience” which I have decided to use here. Throughout the paper, I will generally leave the Pali term *saññāvedayitanirodha* untranslated.

<sup>5</sup> AN 9.34/iv.418: *paññāya cassa disvā āsavā parikkhūṇā honti*.

<sup>6</sup> The term “positive affect” is used in psychology and cognitive science (e.g., see Shiota et al. 2021).

<sup>7</sup> Such meanings are given by Cone (2010, pp. 409–12). Rhys Davids and Stede (2007, p. 326) aptly note that “there is no word in English covering the same ground as Dukkha does in Pali. Our modern words are too specialised, too limited, and usually too strong”.

<sup>8</sup> SN 12.32/ii.53: *‘yaṃ kiñci vedayitaṃ taṃ dukkhasmi’ṇ”ti*.

<sup>9</sup> SN 56.11/v.421: *saṃkhiṭṭena pañcupādānakkhandhā dukkhā*.

<sup>10</sup> In the non-standard account of the five aggregates contained in the *Patta-sutta* (SN 4.16/i.112), *vedayita* appears in the place of *vedanā*. It is also noteworthy that instead of *saṅkhāra*, the text mentions *saṅkhata*.

<sup>11</sup> For a more detailed argumentation in favor of this position see Polak (2023b, pp. 679–80).

<sup>12</sup> An important caveat is that this refers to ordinary states of consciousness. There may be a possibility of a meditative dissociation of some of the aggregates, at least to a certain extent. See an enigmatic line in SN 45.8/v.13 which speaks about the presence of some form of experience (*vedayita*) resulting from calming of apperceptions (*saññā*): *saññā ca vūpasantā hoti, tappaccayāpi vedayitaṃ*.

<sup>13</sup> An example of this very prevalent approach may be found in a seminal article by Block (1995, p. 228), who claims that “phenomenal consciousness is experience”. He also uses the term “phenomenally conscious experience”. (Block 2007, p. 484).

<sup>14</sup> Several passages suggest some sort of a distinction between the mind (*citta/cetas*) and the aggregates (e.g., AN 3.90/i.235–236, AN 10.81/v.151–152, MN 64/i.435–437 and AN 9.36/iv.422–426). MN 1/i.1–6 juxtaposes the negatively evaluated mode of cognition connected to *saññākkhandha* with its positive counterpart rendered by the verb *abhijānāti*. Sn 5.13/214–215 contains an account of

a mode of *sati* which causes *viññāṇa* to stop. The simile in MN 32/i.144 implies a distinction between *kāya* (the body) and the *pañcupādānakkhandhas*, including *rūpa*. Several similes (e.g., in SN 22.22/iii.26, SN 22.99–100/iii.149–152, SN 22.83/iii.105–106, SN 23.2/iii.189–190) imply a distinction between the aggregates and an individual who displays varying attitudes towards them.

15 While agreeing with Garfield, I will generally adopt a slightly different terminological convention. I will be trying to reserve the terms “consciousness” or “conscious experience” for ordinary, standard consciousness which he labels as “introspectible”. The other forms of consciousness as distinguished by Garfield (e.g., those that may be described as “non-introspectible” or as “responsive”) will be referred in this paper by the expressions such as “cognizant”, “sentient” or “engaged in the world”. While this is purely conventional, I am in this way following the pattern established in the Nikāyas, where cognition of the world by awakened beings (i.e., arahants and the *Tathāgatas*) is not expressed using the terms *viññāṇa* (consciousness) and *vedayita* (experience), which are often said to undergo cessation (*nirodha*), but in other ways, e.g., as a particular mode of functioning of *citta/cetas* (the mind), such as *vimariyādikata* (unrestricted), *appamāṇa* (measure-less) or by the terms such as *abhiññāti* (lit. completely knows or super-knows). All these problems stem from the fact that the common understanding of the term “consciousness” assumes that consciousness is an all or nothing affair; either one is conscious in the sense of access consciousness, or one is not conscious at all; there seems to be no middle ground. In other words, our language is ill-prepared to deal with this issue. Interestingly, the early Buddhist authors also struggled with this problem, for example by speaking about the mode of cognition where all forms of *saññā* (consciousness in the apperceptive sense) or being *saññī* (conscious in the apperceptive sense) are denied, and yet by insisting at the same time that one is, however, not *asaññī* (non-conscious—e.g., Snp 4.11/170; AN 11.7/v 319).

16 Siderits (2020, p. 199) notes that there is widespread consensus amongst cognitive scientists that global availability is the mark of consciousness.

17 See (Carruthers 2015, p. 48): “The most widely endorsed notion of access-consciousness, by far, asserts that conscious states are ones that are generally, or globally, accessible to an extensive set of other cognitive systems, including those for forming memories, issuing in affective reactions, as well as a variety of systems for inference and decision making”.

18 By making this statement I do not commit myself to a strong view of phenomenal consciousness as a special distinct inner space or to a position that we are only aware of phenomenal qualia or ideas in that inner space. Rather, what is meant here, is that our cognition of the world made possible by our sensory modalities results in consciousness of various unique qualities connected with its objects which are not reducible to one another (e.g., various colours, sounds, tastes etc.). This finds its expression in our verbal statements describing our consciousness of the world in phenomenal, qualitative terms.

19 SN 22.105/iii.159: *katamo ca, bhikkhave, sakkāyo? pañcupādānakkhandhātissa vacanīyam*.

20 This of course has bearing on the interpretation of the already mentioned statement in the *Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta* that the five aggregates connected with grasping are *dukkha*. As rightly pointed out by an anonymous reviewer, it could be taken to mean that the five aggregates in themselves are not *dukkha*, but that *dukkha* is generated by the attitude of grasping/appropriating (*upādāna*) them and seeing them as self. This would imply a possibility of an awakened state in which the *khandhas* continue, but due to the absence of *upādāna*, there is no *dukkha*. While this interpretation works very well in the context of the historically later Buddhist understanding of the aggregates as objective psycho-physical constituents of a human being, it is more problematic in the context of the Nikāya texts we are analyzing. From their perspective, the five aggregates are not a constant and ever-present feature of our existence, but the degree of their presence may vary to the point of them being entirely absent in certain states. Since on this understanding the very acts of grasping the *khandhas* or identifying with them must also be seen as *khandha*-states, the stopping of these attitudes would not mean that the aggregates continue in their neutral form, but rather that the frequency of their occurrence is significantly diminished. It needs to be admitted, though, that the accounts in the Nikāyas are not clear and exhaustive enough about the degree of their presence or absence in awakened persons to reach some definite conclusions regarding this issue.

21 In this text, *animitta cetosāmadhi* is still subject to insight regarding its fabricated and volitioned (*abhisankhata abhisāñcayita*) nature, which is never the case for *saññāvedayitanirodha*.

22 See Lusthaus (2002, pp. 509–11). I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out this interesting parallelism.

23 See Solms (2021, p. 78), who aptly sums up current state of knowledge: “[T]he scientific evidence showing that we are unaware of most of what we perceive and learn is now overwhelming. Perception and memory are not inherently conscious brain functions. In this respect, common sense was wrong. It turns out that everything your mind does (except one thing, as we shall see) can be done pretty well unconsciously”. Also see: (Wegner 2002; Dijksterhuis and Nordgren 2006; Hassin 2013; Carruthers 2015; Oakley and Halligan 2017).

24 The results of Solms’s research have been first adapted to the context of early Buddhist studies by Bronkhorst, whose work (Bronkhorst 2022, 2023) contains a discussion of several of Solms’s claims referred to in my article.

25 For various definitions of global availability/broadcasting see Siderits (2020, pp. 200–1); Baars (1997, pp. 157–64); Carruthers (2015, pp. 2, 46–53).

26 Of course, this identification is understood functionally. From the functional standpoint, identifying with one’s phenomenal model means forming beliefs and acting as if the organism was the model, i.e., a unified entity separated from environment, an

owner of its own actions. Identification in the sense of the presence of any distinct phenomenal feeling of “identifying with”, is entirely irrelevant here.

See (Polak 2023b) for a more detailed elaboration of this claim.

I am deliberately avoiding speaking about the brain generating consciousness, and instead limit myself to merely stating correlation between the fact of the brain generating certain globally available representation and the fact of being conscious of certain content.

See (Carruthers 2015) for a more detailed elaboration of the connection between working memory and consciousness.

See the remarks of Garfield (2015) and Siderits (2020) in the context of the so-called memory argument.

Such gaps could be acknowledged by noticing the abrupt change of external environment between one conscious moment and the next (e.g., by being aware of a beginning of a song, and then immediately afterwards of its ending, or of a different position of the sun on the sky, or simply of a different time as shown by the clock).

Cf. Bronkhorst’s (2012, p. 145) comment that “[a]bsorption does not figure prominently in memory traces”.

This implies that the introspective assessments of the “what it is like” quality of phenomenal conscious experiences fail to reflect this quality in its hypothetical original and neutral form which would not yet be affected by the very act of introspecting. A similar interpretation is offered by (Blackmore 2017, pp. 70–71).

By that, I do not claim that self-consciousness cannot be altered during special experiences, such as religious, meditative, mystical and psychedelic ones. For example, one can have an experience where one’s subjectively experienced boundaries dissolve and one’s sense of self expands encompassing other beings and things. One can be free from the egoistic or conceited sense accompanying experience and feel boundless altruistic feelings. However, the basic sense of selfhood in the sense described earlier seems to be a constitutive feature of conscious experience. The ending of self-consciousness would be thus tantamount to the ending of experience *per se*, at least temporarily.

Interestingly, modern meditation studies contain first person accounts by meditators who report experiencing blank moments or abrupt discontinuities of their conscious experience (e.g., see Laukkonen et al. 2023; Davis and Vago 2013; Warren 2013 and Costines et al. 2021). These meditative cessations are said to sometimes occur spontaneously and unexpectedly. Of course, one should be cautious in drawing too far-reaching conclusions from these accounts, as they cannot be fully verified, rely on relatively unreliable first-person introspective reports, and the special states they describe may occur due to a mechanism which is different from the one we are considering.

It is commonplace that relaxation diminishes pain, while tensing up increases it.

As Bronkhorst (2012, pp. 67–171) himself readily admits.

For a somewhat similar understanding, see Wynne’s (2010, pp. 138–50) remarks on “cognitive conditioning” and Shulman’s (2008, p. 306) comments on the correct understanding of the formula of dependent arising.

The attitudinal theories are particularly at odds with the Buddhist goal of dissociating physical feelings of pleasure and pain from the psychological attitudes of respectively wanting them to continue or to stop. The arahant may feel pleasure but should not want its continuation as it is synonymous with desire.

By this I do not claim that this is the only aspect of what in the Nikāyas is conceptualized as *dukkha*, as the latter is a multifaceted phenomenon.

This would be a somewhat different explanation to that of Bronkhorst (2023), who sees a correlation between a person’s high level of sensitivity and being more conscious in general, which results in feeling simultaneously more needs which is usually tantamount to suffering. However, even this explanation seems to agree with our general principle, since feeling more needs equals more consciousness, which in turn involves more discomfort or suffering.

Were one to look for a more appropriate Pali word to convey the meaning of tension, *vāyāma* (effort, striving, exertion) would be a better choice, as it is etymologically related to the word *āyāma* which means “stretch” or “flex”. Interestingly, certain contextual meanings of *saṅkhāra* connected with effort and striving are very close to those of *vāyāma*.

E.g., see MN 52/i.350: *idampi paṭhamam jhānam abhisankhatam abhisāñcetaṃ*. and DN 9/i.184: *so na ceva ceteti, na ca abhisankharoti*.

E.g., SN 54.1/v 311–312.

Amongst the most notable opponents of such a view we may count Anālayo (2017).

Dhp 40: “*sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā*”ti, *yadā paññāya passati*.

SN 22.55/iii 56: *no cassaṃ, no ca me siyā*.

E.g., MN 64/i.436: “*etaṃ santam etaṃ pañitam yadidaṃ sabbasaṅkhārasamatho sabbūpadhipaṭinissaggo taṇhākkhayo virāgo nirodho nibbānan*”ti.

The state is, however, only described as cessation (*nirodha*) of certain (*ekacca*), and not all feelings (*vedanā*), which may imply its lesser depth compared to *saññāvedayitanirodha*.

SN 22.55/iii 56: “*no cassaṃ, no ca me siyā, nābhavissa, na me bhavissat*”ti. Translation by (Bodhi 2000, p. 892).

See Oakley and Halligan (2017) for a more detailed elaboration of this view. However, even if we understand consciousness as correlated with a globally available subset of data, it is still very much causally efficacious, but in an indirect way. While actions



or decisions are not undertaken by consciousness itself, by the very virtue of conscious data being globally broadcast throughout the system it greatly influences all the activities and decisions undertaken by unconscious modules which have access to it.

<sup>52</sup> Carruthers (2015) argues that beliefs together with desires, decisions and goals belong to the so-called amodal attitudes—which are neither phenomenal nor globally available, but their end-results manifest in consciousness.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. (Shulman 2014, p. 66): “Similarly, the main aim of the *anatta* doctrine is not to advance a general understanding regarding the selflessness of all things—things are not said to lack a self *of their own*—but rather to show that they are selfless in the sense of being ‘not-*my*-self’ or ‘not-I’”. Also see (Polak 2023b). Not being *viññāṇa* automatically entails not being other aggregates, since as we have suggested, they are pretty much inseparable from one another.

<sup>54</sup> Garfield (2015, pp. 125–26) also considers “the possibility of affect that is neither accessible to introspection nor phenomenally present” and questions the view that “all emotion is to some degree accessible”.

<sup>55</sup> MN 26/i 170: *“vipassannāni kho te, āvuso, indriyāni, parisuddho chavivaṇṇo pariyodāto!* Also see AN 3.64/i.181 where this expression is used with respect to the Buddha who is said to dwell in the divine (*dibba*), and hence very pleasurable state.

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