

# NIBBANA IS NOT VIÑÑĀṆA

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Nibbana is not viññāṇa. Really, it just isn't.

Blog post: 13th May 2011

Nibbana is still not viññāṇa.

Blog post: 18th May 2011

## NIBBANA IS NOT VIÑÑĀṆA. REALLY, IT JUST ISN'T.

I've just read yet another assertion that tries to slip a 'cosmic consciousness' Nibbana into the Suttas. In these kinds of arguments the same mistakes are made again and again, and you should beware of them. One popular argument is based on the famous passage:

*viññāṇaṃ anidassanaṃ anantaṃ sabbaṃ pabhaṃ*

*'Consciousness non-manifest, infinte, radiant all around.'*

This is sometimes said to be a term for Nibbana, although since it is an obscure poetic passage of dubious meaning we should not infer any major conclusions from it.

This obscure passage has been often exalted to the revelation of the highest teachings of Nibbana. One of the arguments one hears is that *viññāṇa* normally means 'separative consciousness', and that this has been revalued to refer to an infinite awareness. This argument is wrong.

The etymology of *viññāṇa* is invoked to justify this conclusion. 'Vi', so the story goes, means 'separation', and 'ñāṇa' means 'knowing', so *viññāṇa* means 'separative knowing' (as opposed to the universal cosmic consciousness of Nibbana.)

But you cannot derive the meaning of a word by adding up a root with a prefix. Words derive meaning from context. This is especially true in the case of words in abstract philosophical use.

In any case, the etymology of *viññāṇa* does not mean 'separative consciousness'. The prefix 'vi' has many different meanings, which you can check up on in the Pali Text Society's dictionary. If you don't want to read the entire entry, the applied meanings it gives are four:

1. expansion, spreading out
2. disturbance, separation, mixing up (opp. *sam*)
3. the reverse of the simple verb, or loss, difference, opposite
4. in intensifying sense

Obviously, there is no requirement to read *vi* in its separative sense here.

There are many terms formed from the root ‘*ñā*’ in Pali that all refer to knowing in some way (‘know’ is in fact the English cognate): *aññā*, *ñāṇa*, *pariññā*, *paññā*, *paṭiññā*, *saññā*, and so on. In some cases these words are interchangeable, in some cases usage tells us that they carry different nuances. In no cases can we simply infer the meaning from adding prefix + root.

Given that *vi-* is probably the second most common prefix in Pali, and has an extremely wide variety of implications – including in some cases not affecting the meaning at all – we can’t say anything meaningful from the etymology.

Even if we did look to the etymology, we can come to all sorts of different conclusions. In some cases, *viññāṇa* is clearly a synonym of *paññā*, ‘wisdom’ (e.g. Sutta Nipāta 92-3). Here the implication could be that *vi-* means ‘intensive’, or ‘clear’ (as it does, say, in *vipassanā*).

It is true that the Buddha often presented *viññāṇa* in an analytical way as the consciousness of the six senses. But this tells us nothing about what the word means. He also used plenty of other terms related to the six senses: *vedanā*, *phassa*, or *saññā*, for example. The fact that a word is used in an analytical sense does not mean that the basic meaning of the word is analytical.

On the contrary, what the ‘*viññāṇa* = Nibbana’ school overlook is that *viññāṇa* is in fact used very commonly in the sense, not of ‘separative consciousness’, but of ‘infinite consciousness’. This is, of course, in the standard passage on the formless attainments. This *samadhi* meaning is directly applicable in the case of the so-called ‘Nibbanic consciousness’, as they are both described as ‘infinite’ (*anantaṃ*).

The Buddhist texts strongly suggest that this idea is pre-Buddhist. And we do indeed find the phrase ‘infinite consciousness’ in the pre-Buddhist Upanishads. But more on that later. First let us survey the use of *viññāṇa* briefly in the oldest Upanishad, the Brihadaranyaka. This probably predates the Buddha by a century or so, and many of its ideas and turns of phrase can be felt in the Suttas.

*Viññāṇa* is used in the ordinary sense of ‘sense consciousness’:

*jihvayā hi rasān vijānāti || BrhUp\_3,2.4 ||*

*For one knows tastes through the tongue.*

More commonly it is found as the final of the four terms, ‘seen’, heard’, ‘thought’, ‘cognized’, a set that is frequently found in the Suttas. In this context it is said that ‘how can one cognize the cognizer’, a means of pointing beyond limited sense experience to the true Atman.

*kaṃ vijānīyāt yenedaṃ sarvaṃ vijānāti taṃ kena vijānīyāt sa eṣa  
neti nety ātmā |agrhyo na hi grhyate | aśīryo na hi śīryate |asaṅgo  
na hi sajyate |asito na vyathate na riṣyati |vijñātāram are kena  
vijānīyād ity*

*Through what should one know that owing to which all this is known ? This self is That which has been described as ‘Not this, Not this’. It is imperceptible, for It is never perceived; undecaying, for It never decays; unattached, for It is never attached; unfettered – it never feels pain, and never suffers injury. Through what, O Maitreyi, should one know the Knower?*

*BrhUp\_2,4.14*

*See also BrhUp\_3,4.2, BrhUp\_2,4.5*

The self is defined in terms of *viññāṇa*.

*katama ātmeti — yo ‘yaṃ vijñānamayaḥ prāṇeṣu hṛdy antarjyotiḥ  
puruṣaḥ*

*What is the Self? This very person made of viññāṇa, among the  
breath (life-faculties), the light in the heart.*

*BrhUp\_4,3.7 ||*

*sa vā ayam ātmā brahma vijñānamayo*

*This very Self is Brahma, made of viññāṇa... (a long list of other things of which Brahma is formed follows)*

*BrhUp\_4,4.5*

*yo vijñāne tiṣṭhan vijñānād antaro yaṃ vijñānaṃ na veda yasya vijñānaṃ śarīraṃ yo vijñānam antaro yamayaty eṣa ta ātmāntaryāmy amṛtaḥ || BrhUp\_3,7.22 ||*

*He who inhabits the viññāṇa, but is within it, whom the viññāṇa does not know, whose body is the viññāṇa, and who controls the viññāṇa from within, is the Internal Ruler, your own immortal self.*

As in Buddhism, *viññāṇa* is closely associated with rebirth. In the following passage, the phrase *ekībhavati* refers to the withdrawal of the sense at the time of death – which is interesting since in Buddhism the same term is used to mean *samādhi*. *Viññāṇa* has two meanings here: in the first use it refers to sense-consciousness (because others realize that the dying person no longer hears or responds). Later it refers to the conscious self that takes rebirth.

*ekībhavati na vijānātīty āhuḥ | tasya haitasya hṛdayasyāgraṃ pradyotate | tena pradyotenaiṣa ātmā niṣkrāmati | cakṣuṣṭo vā mūrdhno vānyebhyo vā śarīradeśebhyaḥ | tam utkrāmantaṃ prāṇo 'nūtkrāmati | prāṇam anūtkrāmantaṃ sarve prāṇā anūtkrāmanti | savijñāno bhavati | saṃjānam evānvavakrāmati | taṃ vidyākarmaṇī samanvārabhete pūrvaprajñā ca ||*

*He becomes united; then they say, 'He does not have viññāṇa'. The top of the heart brightens. Through that brightened top the self departs, either through the eye, or through the head, or through any other part of the body. When it departs, the vital force follows; when the vital force departs, all the organs follow. Then the self has viññāṇa, and goes to the body which is related to that consciousness. It is followed by knowledge, kamma and past experience.*

*BrhUp\_4,4.2*

But the most directly applicable passage is the following. Like several of the above it is the teaching of Yājñavalkya, who should be recognized as the father of the teachings of consciousness as the great Brahman. Notice the simile of the lump of salt, also familiar in Buddhism. The passage from which this is taken is full of such parallels, as I discussed in A History of Mindfulness.

*evaṃ vā ara idaṃ mahad bhūtam anantam apāraṃ vijñānaghana  
eva | etebhyo bhūtebhyaḥ samutthāya tāny evānurvinaśyati | na  
pretya sañjñāstīty are bravīmi | iti hovāca yājñavalkyaḥ || BrhUp\_  
2,4.12 ||*

*As a lump of salt dropped into water dissolves with (its component) water, and no one is able to pick it up, but from wheresoever one takes it, it tastes salt, even so, my dear, this great, endless, infinite Reality is but sheer mass of viññāṇa. This comes out from these elements, and is destroyed with them. After this it has no more perception (saññā). This is what I say, my dear. So said Yajnavalkya.*

Compare with the Buddhist line above. Both describe *viññāṇa* as ‘infinite’ (*anantam*). Both use the philosophical term *mahābhūta*, although in different sense: in the Buddhist context it is a word for the four elements which the state of *viññāṇa* described goes beyond, whereas here it is the Great Reality itself. The Upanishadic passage describes the infinite consciousness as having disappeared or become non-manifest like salt dissolved in water, just as the Buddhist passage describes *viññāṇa* as ‘non-manifest’ (*anidassana*). The Buddhist passage speaks of *viññāṇa* as ‘radiant’, just as elsewhere the self that is *viññāṇa* is said to be the ‘light in the heart’.

The parallels are by no means arbitrary. In fact the Buddhist passage appears in a specifically Brahmanical context. The text is the Kevaddha Sutta (Digha Nikaya 11: text here, translation here, parallels here.) A monk wants to find out where the four Great Elements (*mahābhūta*) end, and goes to Brahma for the answer. Brahma, however, doesn’t know, and

he sends the monk back to the Buddha. The Buddha rejects the original question, and tells the monk how it should be reformulated.

The basic idea is clear enough. Brahma's realm extends as far as *jhana*, as Buddhists assume that the Brahmanical philosophy was based on jhanic experience (at best). So Brahma doesn't know what lies beyond this, while the Buddha does.

The problem is that, apparently, what lies beyond is a kind of consciousness. Given the evident connections between this description and the Brahmanical conception of the higher atman as a form of infinite consciousness, the most obvious inference is that it refers to the formless attainments, specifically that of 'infinite consciousness', where the 'four great elements' don't find a footing.

It is in the next lines of the verse, which are usually overlooked by the *viññāṇa* = Nibbana school, that the Buddha's true position is stated. With the cessation of *viññāṇa* all this comes to an end. The 'infinite consciousness' is merely the temporary escape from the oppression of materiality, but true liberation is the ending of all consciousness.

*'Kattha āpo ca pathavi,  
Tejo vāyo na gādhati;  
Kattha dīghañca rassañca,  
Aṇuṃ thūlaṃ subhāsubhaṃ;  
Kattha nāmañca rūpañca,  
Asesaṃ uparujjhati'ti.*

*Where does water and earth  
fire, air not find a footing?  
Where does long and short  
Small, gross, fair and ugly,  
Where does name and form  
Without remainder cease?*

*Tatra veyyākaraṇaṃ bhavati—  
For that the explanation is:*

*Viññāṇaṃ anidassanaṃ,  
Anantaṃ sabbatopabhaṃ;  
Ettha āpo ca pathavī,  
Tejo vāyo na gādhati.*

*Viññāṇa non-manifest  
Infinite, radiant all-round  
There water and earth  
fire, air do not find a footing*

*Ettha dīghaṇṇa rassaṇṇa,  
Aṇuṃ thūlaṃ subhāsubhaṃ;  
Ettha nāmaṇṇa rūpaṇṇa,  
Asesaṃ uparujjhati;  
Viññāṇassa nirodheṇa,  
Etthetaṃ uparujjhati””ti.*

*There does long and short  
Small, gross, fair and ugly,  
There does name and form  
Without remainder cease:  
With the cessation of viññāṇa  
There this ceases.*

The problem is not so much the interpretation of *viññāṇa* as such, but the syntax of the verses – which is one reason why poetry should not decide doctrine. The Buddha rephrases the original question, but his rephrasing has three question words and two verbs. It may be read as a single complex question, but this assumes that the two verbs mean the same thing (which they don't: *na gādhati* means 'does not find a firm footing', like a man crossing a ford, while *uparujjhati* means 'ceases') – and that *viññāṇa* means 'infinite consciousness of Nibbana' in the first occurrence and 'separative sense consciousness' in the second.

It is simpler and more natural to read the verses as asking two questions, with the verb *uparujjhati* (ceases) acting as a 'lamp' to apply to both the



preceding clauses. In that case the syntax of the answer would be expressed thusly:

*Water, earth, fire, air do not find a footing in viññāṇa that is non-manifest, infinite, radiant all-round.*

(i.e., the four material elements cease temporarily in the formless attainments, which is the highest reach of the Brahmanical teachings – even this much Brahma, being a deity of the form realm, did not know.)

*Long and short, small, gross, fair and ugly, name and form cease without remainder with the cessation of viññāṇa. This is where this all ceases.*

(i.e., the Buddha's real teaching is not to temporarily escape materiality, but to reach an ending of suffering. And since all forms of viññāṇa (*yaṃ kiñci viññāṇaṃ...*) are said countless times to be suffering, even the infinite consciousness has to go.)

In this reading, the reason for the Buddha's reformulation of the original question becomes clear. The errant monk had asked where the ending of the four elements was – which is of course the formless attainments. But the Buddha said the question was wrongly put, as this would merely lead beyond the form realm of Brahma to the formless realms. The real question is what lies beyond that, with the cessation of consciousness. It is not enough for matter to be transcended, one must also transcend mind as well. If not, one ends up, apart from all the other philosophical problems, with a mind/body dualism.

And one ends up with a description of the Buddhist goal which is not merely indistinguishable from the Brahmanical Higher Self, but is quite evidently the same thing. A description that was meant to critique the inadequate conception of the Brahmanical goal is turned into a description of the Buddhist goal. Meanwhile, the hundreds of times when the Buddha explicitly and definitively refuted this idea (*viññāṇaṃ aniccaṃ...*) are explained away with a trivial etymological mistake. And so it goes...

## NIBBANA IS STILL NOT VIÑÑĀṆA

Thanks to Sylvester for raising some more issues regarding the ‘non-manifest consciousness.’ In this follow-up post I will address the verse he quotes and a number of other issues. Here is Sylvester’s comment:

SN 1.27:

*“Q1 From where do the streams turn back?*

*Q2 Where does the round no longer revolve?*

*Q3 Where do name-and-form Cease utterly without remainder?”*

*“A: Where water, earth, fire and air,*

*Do not gain a footing:*

*It is from here that the streams turn back (Q1),*

*Here that the round no longer revolves (Q2);*

*Here name-and-form*

*Cease utterly without remainder (Q3).”*

*“Kuto sarā nivattanti,*

*kattha vaṭṭaṃ na vattati;*

*Kattha nāmañca rūpañca,*

*asesaṃ uparujjhati”ti.*

*“Yattha āpo ca pathavī,*

*tejo vāyo na gādhati;*

*Ato sarā nivattanti,*

*ettha vaṭṭaṃ na vattati;*

*Ettha nāmañca rūpañca,*

*asesaṃ uparujjhati”ti.*

*In SN 1.27, the triad of questions is answered with just one reply, ie “Yattha āpo ca pathavī, tejo vāyo na gādhati”, (where water, earth, fire and air do not gain a footing). It should be obvious that the corresponding question “where do water, earth, fire and air not gain a footing” is answered by DN 11’s “viññāṇaṃ anidassanaṃ, anantaṃ sabbatopabhaṃ”. In other words, the answer to the 3 questions in SN 1.27 is also nothing more than “Viññāṇaṃ anidassanaṃ, anantaṃ sabbatopabhaṃ”.*

Sylvester is quite correct in terms of the syntax of the verses. However comparison with the Chinese versions of this text reveal that the inferred connection with the non-manifest consciousness may be an illusion.

The verse you mention has two Chinese cognates. I post very rough translations of the relevant sections here:

*T02n0099\_p0160c24-6*

*Eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, reach that state (?)  
name and form cease without remainder  
streams (text transliterates sara) turn back  
birth death moveable, immoveable, pleasure, pain cease without  
remainder.*

*T02n0100\_p0438a11-14*

*Eye, ear, nose, and tongue, and also the wished-for body  
name and form are completely ended  
like a dried up pond  
finished with all knots, life and death, happiness and sadness  
all this is finished without remainder  
with nothing left to return to.*

With the notable change of the senses for the elements, and allowing for the vagueness of translating Pali verse into Chinese and then into English (by a confirmed amateur!) these verses appear to be similar to the Pali one. None of the three versions refer in any way to a 'non-manifest consciousness', and all of them speak strongly of Nibbana as the ending of everything.

But it is that first change that is the significant one. In both the Chinese translations, the texts clearly refer to the 5 senses (眼耳鼻舌身), not to the four elements. With this stroke, any connection with the *viññāṇa anidassana* verse is cut. Exactly what the textual situation is here would require further consideration, but it is plausible to suggest that the opening couplet here was a later addition in the Pali version. At the very least the situation is textually too confused to make much of.

This conclusion is strengthened when we make the obvious point that the Pali verse is simply wrong. Samsara does not unravel when the mind goes beyond materiality. This is merely a refined state of consciousness (*arūpa*), well understood and incorporated in basic Buddhist cosmology. (It is possible that the Chinese verses make the same mistake, as they also start off referring only to the material; but the syntax is so unclear to me that I cannot say for sure.)

The only other time in the Suttas that the ‘non-manifest consciousness’ is mentioned is in MN49 Brahmanimantanika. There, according to Analayo, the Sri Lankan, Thai, and English editions of the Pali attribute the phrase to Brahma, not the Buddha, while only the Burmese attributes it to the Buddha. (The commentary attributes it to the Buddha and says it refers to Nibbana; Burmese texts are notorious for incorporating ‘corrected’ readings from the commentary.) In the Chinese version it has nothing to do with Nibbana, but is part of Brahma’s claim to omniscience.

In the Kevadda Sutta, both the Pali and Chinese versions attribute the phrase to the Buddha, but the sub-text is of course the Brahmanical context.

It is a similar situation as the one I documented in the context of the *ekāyana magga* in *satipatthana*: the texts imply in bold, underline, and ALL CAPS that this phrase is part of the Brahmanical tradition. The Buddha adopts it when quoting from Brahma himself. The Buddhist tradition, having lost contact with the root Brahmanical texts, interpreted the phrase in their own terms, giving rise to a variety of doctrinal problems, all of which go away if we apply some historical perspective.

And by the way, the phrase *anidassana*, ‘non-manifest’ is usually taken as meaning ‘does not make a showing’, or ‘is not pointed out’. What the precise implications are here is not clear. The word has a variety of meanings in Sanskrit, including: ‘example, simile’; ‘teaching, text, authority’; ‘prognostic sign or omen’. Since the word appears rarely and with uncertain meaning in Pali texts, and with a wide variety of meanings in broader Indic literature, it is premature to conclude that any one meaning applies in this case.

Unlike ‘infinite consciousness’ or *ekāyana*, non-manifest consciousness does not appear to figure in any extant Brahmanical texts. This is unfortunate, but it does not prove that the word was not part of the Brahmanical tradition, of which we only preserve a part.

The notion of ‘manifest’ and ‘non-manifest’ consciousness does rather remind me of the Hindu idea of *Samsara* as a vast ocean of consciousness, from which the cycles of the world arise from time to time like a dream, only to lapse once more into the trackless waters. This idea, however, is not directly attested in the time of the Buddha (although certain Upanishadic precedents are found: *nāmarūpa* is like the rivers with their ‘names’ and ‘shapes’ that all return to the ocean of *viññāṇa*.) Also, I can’t find these terms used in this way in later Hinduism, either.

*Anidassana* as such, however, was not understood by the early Buddhist tradition to definitively mean Nibbana or the unconditioned, since the (proto-Abhidhamma) Sangiti Sutta refers to ‘form that is non-reactive and non-manifest’:

*Tividhena rūpaṅgaho— sanidassanasappaṭiḥhaṃ rūpaṃ,  
anidassanasappaṭiḥhaṃ rūpaṃ, anidassanaappaṭiḥhaṃ rūpaṃ.*

The traditions (e.g. Mahaprajnaparamitasāstra, p. 295; also the commentary to the Sangiti Sutta) take *anidassana* here in the literal sense of ‘invisible’, which makes sense in the context of *rūpa*, not so much for *viññāṇa*.

The Dīgha commentary says nothing meaningful on *anidassana* in the Kevadda Sutta (*tadetaṃ nidassanābhāvato anidassanaṃ*), while the Majjhima commentary says Nibbana is ‘non-manifest’ as it ‘does not come within the range of eye-consciousness’ (*Anidassananti cakkhuvīññāṇassa āpāthaṃ anupagamanato anidassanaṃ nāma*), thus taking *anidassana* in the same sense as the Sangiti Sutta.

The upshot of this is that the Pali tradition does not supply us with any meaningful explanation of what *anidassana* means in this context, yet another hint that we have before us a non-Buddhist term.

Given all these uncertainties, it is not possible to establish one definitive interpretation of the phrase. I have suggested that it is a reference to the formless attainment of infinite consciousness, which is surely the most obvious reading (since it actually says ‘infinite consciousness’!). Bhikkhu Bodhi prefers to read it as a reference to the arahant’s meditative experience of Nibbana; while this is not an unproblematic reading, it is certainly defensible.

The point here is to notice how texts are used in uncritical and dubious ways to find support within Buddhist texts for a doctrine that is denied many hundreds of times in those same texts. The key problem is, of course, eternalism: the ever-present need to conceive of the final spiritual goal in terms of the permanent existence of something or other.

Buddhist traditions have been in a constant dance with this temptation for thousands of years, and many are the pages of debates on the matter. There is something innately appealing about the eternal survival of ‘this’, conceived of as ‘me at my core’. Despite the Buddha’s continual, explicit, and non-negotiable denial of any such survival, the eternalist desire (*bhavataṇhā*) seeks for any crack or crevice to grab hold of, like a bush finding a hold in the crevices in a cliff-face. Getting clear as to what the texts mean does not, in itself, overcome this craving, but it has to be a start, right?

The more subtle matter is how to present a non-eternalist conception of Nibbana in a psychologically appealing light – which I admit in this essay I have not bothered to do. I’ve never had a problem with it, but then I’m a converted annihilationist, rather than a converted eternalist.

Frankly, I think the final goal of spiritual life should be a bit scary. It’s meant to be a revolution, a fundamental overthrow of all values. If not, what are we left with? The popular idea of heaven as a kind of family reunion – Christmas dinner forever? A universal eternal consciousness that is somehow not conscious of anything? Or, quite simply, peace?

Letting go is scary, we all know that. Why shouldn’t the biggest letting go be the scariest of all?