What the Nikāyas Say and Do not Say about Nibbāna

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Short Abstract:

Ajahn Brahmali gives an overview of the usage of the term Nibbāna in the Nikāyas. He argues that, according to the Nikāyas, Nibbāna cannot be regarded as a self; that the Nikāyas do not see Nibbāna as a form of consciousness, including such exceptional kinds of consciousness as anidassana viññāṇa and appatiṭṭhita viññāṇa; nor can Nibbāna be regarded as equivalent to mind, or any particular state of mind. He aims to show that the most reasonable interpretation of the Nikāyas is that final Nibbāna is no more than the cessation of the five khandhas.

Abstract:

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

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Abstract

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Introduction

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

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

Suppose a monk were to say: ‘… this is the dhamma, this is the discipline (vinayo), this is the Master’s teaching’, then, monks, you should neither approve nor disapprove his words. Then, without approving or disapproving, his words and expressions should be carefully noted and compared with the suttas and reviewed in light of the discipline. If they, on such comparison and review, are found not to conform to the suttas or the discipline, the conclusion must be: ‘Assuredly this is not the word of the Buddha, it has been wrongly understood by this monk’, and the matter is to be rejected. But where on such comparison and review they are found to conform to the suttas or the discipline, the conclusion must be: ‘Assuredly this is the word of the Buddha, it has been rightly understood by this monk.3

DN 16:4.8.1–4.8.13

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

1. An Initial Investigation into the Referents of the term Nibbāna

There are three frequently mentioned referents of Nibbāna:

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

I will briefly discuss each one of these in turn.

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

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

It is sometimes argued that this ‘destruction’ only refers to the actual event of becoming an arahant (Harvey 1995, pp.182–185). However, since the destruction is permanent it would seem more likely that Nibbāna here refers to the destruction of lust, hatred and delusion as a general and fundamental characteristic of arahant-ship.6 Moreover, the event of becoming an arahant, that is the final destruction of the defilements, is presumably instantaneous: either one is an arahant or one is not. But the narrow focus on momentary events, usually known as mind moments, is a characteristic of the abhidhamma and later Pali literature, not the suttas. The suttas normally refer to realities that are extended in time. That this is the case also for the Nibbāna attained at arahant-ship is clear from the following passages:

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

AN 3.55:2.2–2.3

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

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

Iti 44:3.1–3.5

Thus I take Nibbāna in the above definition to refer to that unchanging and permanent aspect of the general state of arahant-ship which is the destruction of lust, hatred and delusion.7 In this sense Nibbāna is an everpresent reality for the arahant.8 Moreover, since the destruction of the three root defilements is the standard Nikāya explanation of Nibbāna, it seems reasonable to assume that whenever Nibbāna is used without further qualification it refers to this aspect of the state of arahant-ship. This will be my assumption throughout this paper.

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

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

Iti 44:4.1–4.4

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

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

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

AN 10.7:5.3–5.5

This samādhi is sometimes said to take Nibbāna as its ‘object’,12 i.e. taking the equivalent of final Nibbāna as its object. However, I cannot see how this explanation can be correct. Final Nibbāna by definition is other than saṁsāra, which means it is other than the six sense bases and their six corresponding classes of objects. In the Nikāyas, consciousness is always defined by the object it takes and consequently there are precisely six classes of consciousness. For Nibbāna to be an object of consciousness, an entirely new class of consciousness would be required, going beyond the established Nikāya taxonomy.13

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

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

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

2. Is Final Nibbāna a Permanent Self?

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

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

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

AN 3.136:1.11–1.15

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

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

AN 4.34:3.1–3.2

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

Another way of making the same point is as follows:

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

MN 22:23.1–23.5

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

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

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

AN 5.30:4.12

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

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

MN 22:25.5–25.6

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

SN 22.96:2.1–2.3

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

SN 35.85:1.4

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

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

SN 22.89:9.10–9.14

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

SN 35.248:3.1–7.3

The arahant knows of no permanent attā:

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

SN 22.47:3.3–3.4

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

3. Is Final Nibbāna a Form of Consciousness?

It is sometimes argued that even if there is no attā, the purpose of the Buddhist training is to attain a permanent form of consciousness (viññāṇa).23 But if there were such a thing as a permanent consciousness devoid of suffering, that would be precisely the sort of phenomenon that the Buddha would describe as a self: it is the characteristics of impermanence and suffering that make the description of something as ‘attā’ impossible.24 If this argument is accepted, it follows that the idea of a permanent consciousness that is ‘anattā’ is inherently self-contradictory.25

It might also be noted here that the mere absence of the thought or perception ‘I am’ in certain states of deep samādhi does not mean that by attaining those states one has penetrated the Buddha’s teaching of anattā. When one emerges from these states the notion ‘I am’ will reappear, often taking that very state of samādhi as its object.26 As long as the underlying tendency to the view ‘I am’ has not been abandoned, the perception ‘I am’ will always return in spite of such periods of temporary absence.27

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

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

SN 22.59:6.12–6.18

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

MN 38:7.4

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

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

MN 38:8.1–8.7

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

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

MN 43:4.3–4.6

‘Objectless consciousness’ does not exist:

Feeling, perception and consciousness, friend – these states are conjoined (saṁsaṭṭhā), not disjoined, and it is impossible to separate each of these states from the others in order to describe the difference between them. For what one feels, that one perceives; and what one perceives, that one cognises.29

MN 43:9.4–9.9

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

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

SN 22.94:2.6–2.7

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

SN 22.96:1.8–1.12

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

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

SN 22.57:14.6–14.8

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

SN 22.111:1.4–1.8

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

SN 1.2:5.1–5.5

The body disintegrated, perception ceased,  
All feelings were utterly consumed,  
Mental activities were extinguished  
And consciousness came to an end (attham agamā33).

Ud 8.9:5.1–5.434

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

4. Anidassana viññāṇa, Non-Manifest Consciousness

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

‘Where do earth, water, fire and air no footing find?  
Where are long and short, small and great, fair and foul —  
Where do name-and-form wholly cease?’

And the answer is:

‘Where consciousness is non-manifesting (viññāṇaṁ anidassanaṁ), boundless (anantaṁ), all-luminous (sabbato pabhaṁ38),  
That’s where earth, water, fire and air find no footing,  
There both long and short, small and great, fair and foul —  
There name-and-form wholly cease.  
With the cessation of consciousness this all ceases.’39

DN 11:85.11–85.27

Consciousness non-manifesting (viññāṇaṁ anidassanaṁ), boundless (anantaṁ), all-luminous (sabbato-pabhaṁ).

MN 49:25.1

It has been suggested that anidassana viññāṇa refers to a state of consciousness that is equivalent to final Nibbāna (e.g. Harvey 1995, p.201),40 but in light of the discussion of viññāṇa in the previous section, such an interpretation is untenable. However, to establish the correct interpretation of anidassana viññāṇa is far from easy. Firstly, in the whole Pali Canon the expression anidassana viññāṇa only appears in the above two passages.41 Secondly, Pali verse is notoriously difficult to translate: the correct Pali reading is often difficult to establish and poetic licence etc. can complicate matters further.42 Moreover, as in poetry in general, the exact meaning of Pali verse is often vague as its emphasis is on appealing to emotion and intuition rather than on making precise doctrinal statements.43 Finally, Pali verse often contains rare words and phrases that sometimes occur nowhere else in the tipiṭaka.44

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

The first thing to note is that, due to the qualifiers ananta and pabhā, anidassana viññāṇa is described in a way that resembles the description of certain states of samādhi. Ananta is closely connected to samādhi, and it is specifically used in the standard description of the first two immaterial attainments.45 Equally important is that appamāṇa, ‘immeasurable’, which is semantically very close to ananta,46 is very frequently connected with samādhi. In particular, it is used in the standard passage on the divine abidings (brahma-vihāras; e.g. at MN 7:13.1, 16.1), but it is also employed as a general qualifier of samādhi.47 As for the second qualifier, pabhā, it does not seem to be used elsewhere to directly qualify samādhi. However, the closely related term pabhassara, ‘shining’, is often used to describe the mind without hindrances (nīvaraṇa), the most obvious example of which is the mind in samādhi.48 Thus, given the usage of ananta and pabhā in the above quotes, it seems plausible, perhaps even likely, that anidassana viññāṇa refers to a state of samādhi.

Next, it is necessary to look more carefully at the structure of the above verses. For the present purposes, an important fact which is rarely pointed out is that the first verse (the ‘question verse’) in the above DN 11:85.11–85.27 passage seems to contain two questions rather than one.49 When we turn to the second verse (the ‘answer verse’), it seems that we are again dealing with two separate answers: otherwise there would be a contradiction between the viññāṇa with various attributes described in the first line and the cessation of viññāṇa described in the last line – consciousness cannot be described as anantaṁ sabbato pabhaṁ and at the same time be said to have ceased. It seems reasonable, therefore, to assume that the first line of the question verse is answered by the first two lines of the answer verse, and the last two lines of the question verse are answered by the last three lines of the answer verse.50 If this structural analysis is accepted, then it becomes clear that anidassana viññāṇa is simply a form of consciousness where ‘earth, water, fire and air find no footing’;51 it is not related to the cessation of name-and-form.52

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

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

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

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

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

5. Appatiṭṭhita Viññāṇa, Unestablished Consciousness

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

‘If, bhikkhus, there is no lust for the nutriment edible food, or for the nutriment contact, or for the nutriment mental volition, or for the nutriment consciousness, if there is no delight, if there is no craving, consciousness (viññāṇaṁ) does not become established (appatiṭṭhitaṁ) there and come to growth … Suppose, bhikkhus, there was a house or hall with a peaked roof, with windows on the northern, southern, and eastern sides. When the sun rises and a beam of light enters through a window, where would it become established (patiṭṭhitā)?’ — ‘on the western wall, venerable sir’. — ‘If there were no western wall, where would it become established?’ — ‘on the earth, venerable sir?’ — ‘If there were no earth, where would it become established?’ — ‘on the water, venerable sir’. – ‘If there were no water, where would it become established?’ — ‘It would not become established anywhere (appatiṭṭhitā), venerable sir’. (cf. Harvey 1995, p.202)

SN 12.64:6.1–8.8

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

SN 12.38:3.1–3.5

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

SN 4.23:10.6

In the first quote above (SN 12.64:6.1–8.8), there is no good reason why appatiṭṭhita viññāṇa should be understood as referring to final Nibbāna. Consciousness is said to be unestablished ‘if there is no delight, if there is no craving’. The reference to absence of craving seems to make it fairly straightforward that this concerns the ordinary consciousness of the living arahant.60

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

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

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

When that consciousness is unestablished (apatiṭṭhitaṁ),62 not coming to growth, nongenerative, it is liberated. By being liberated, it is steady; by being steady, it is content; by being content, he is not agitated. Being unagitated, he personally attains Nibbāna.63

SN 22.53:3.8–3.9 & SN 22.54:4.8–4.9

In sum, all the available evidence suggests that appatiṭṭhita viññāṇa is a reference to the ordinary consciousness of the living arahant. Although the suttas do not seem to contain an outright denial that this consciousness applies to final Nibbāna, there is no passage that unambiguously states that it does. In these circumstances, it seems to me little more than speculation to suggest that unestablished consciousness refers to a ‘state’ of final Nibbāna. And given that the existence of a permanent consciousness is explicitly denied elsewhere (see above), it becomes untenable.

6. Could Citta (Mind) be a Referent of Final Nibbāna?

Is it reasonable, as is sometimes done, to use the term citta (mind), or a particular state of citta, as a synonym for Nibbāna?64 There is no clear evidence in the suttas of citta ever being used in this way and, as I shall now try to show, the evidence to the contrary is compelling.

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

‘When that consciousness (viññāṇaṁ) is unestablished, not coming to growth, nongenerative, it is liberated (vimuttaṁ)’.

SN 22.53:3.8 & SN 22.54:4.8

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

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

SN 47.42:1.8–1.9

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

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

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

MN 111:4.1

Elsewhere, citta and viññāṇa are used together to refer to the same thing: ‘When in his mother’s womb the first thought (cittaṁ) has arisen, the first consciousness (viññāṇaṁ) appeared, his birth is (to be reckoned) from that time’ ([Kd 1](https://suttacentral.net/pli-tv-kd1/en/brahmali?layout=sidebyside&reference=main/pts&notes=asterisk&highlight=false&script=latin" \l "75.1.8):75.1.8).68

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

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

MN 43:9.4–9.7

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

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

SN 12.61:2.1

‘But what is called thought (cittaṁ), or mind (mano), or consciousness (viññāṇaṁ)’.71

DN 1:2.13.4

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

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

DN 1:2.13.2–2.13.4

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

It would be better, bhikkhus, for the uninstructed worldling to take as self this body composed of the four great elements rather than the mind (cittaṁ). For what reason? Because this body composed of the four great elements is seen standing for one year, for two years, for three, four, five, or ten years, for twenty, thirty, forty, or fifty years, for a hundred years, or even longer. But that which is called ‘mind’ (cittaṁ) and ‘mentality’ (mano) and ‘consciousness’ (viññāṇaṁ) arises as one thing and ceases as another by day and by night. Just as a monkey roaming through a forest grabs hold of one branch, lets go and grabs another, then lets that go and grabs still another, so too that which is called ‘mind’ and ‘mentality’ and ‘consciousness’ arises as one thing and ceases as another by day and by night.

SN 12.61:2.1–4.3

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

Like the deer roaming at will in the variegated grove,  
having entered the delightful mountain, wreathed in clouds,  
I shall rejoice there on the uncrowded mountain;  
you, mind (citta), will certainly perish (parābhavissasi).73

Thag 19.1:54.1–54.4

You are seen, housebuilder, you will not build a house again.  
All your rafters are broken your gables are torn asunder.  
The mind (cittaṁ), made free of boundaries,  
will blow away (vidhamissatī) in this very existence.74

Thag 2.32:2.1–2.6

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

AN 6.55:17.2, 17.8, 17.20

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

SN 47.42:1.9

7. Pabhassara Citta, the Radiant Mind

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

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

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

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

8. Does the Term Citta Have Two Fundamentally Distinct Referents?

If, as suggested by Harvey 1995, one sees the Nikāyas as including a doctrine of two fundamentally different types of consciousness, i.e. a samsāric consciousness and a timeless Nibbānic consciousness, then, in view of the close relationship between viññāṇa and citta, one would expect the Nikāyas to make a similar distinction between two fundamentally different types of citta. Thus the term citta would sometimes refer to the ordinary citta of the puthujjana and at other times refer to a permanent citta known to the arahant.76 A phrase such as ‘cittaṁ vimuccati’ (e.g. at MN 51:27.2), ‘the mind is liberated’, would then refer to the liberated ‘eternal mind’, or ‘original pure mind’, known to the arahant.77

But there is no evidence to support making this distinction. Nowhere in the suttas do we find that two such different realities could both be referred to as ‘citta’. Considering the centrality of this issue for the proper understanding of the Dhamma, it seems highly unlikely that the Buddha should have used the term citta in such distinct ways without clearly commenting upon it.78

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

9. Citta and Mano (Mind)

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

What is mind (cittaṁ), that is mentality (mano);  
what is mentality (mano), that is mind (cittaṁ). (transl. Brahmāli)

[Bu Pj 3](https://suttacentral.net/pli-tv-bu-vb-pj3/en/brahmali?layout=sidebyside&reference=main/pts&notes=asterisk&highlight=false&script=latin" \l "3.28):3.28

Thus is your mind (mano), and in this way is your mind (mano), and thus is your mind (cittaṁ).81 (transl. Brahmāli)

DN 11:6.3, 6.5, 6.9, 7.4 &  
DN 28:6.4, 6.8, 6.12 &  
AN 3.60:9.3, 10.2, 11.2, 15.2

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

SN 2.17:2.1–2.2

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

The mind (mano) is subject to disintegration (palokadhammo).

SN 35.84:2.7

The mind (mano) is non-self. The cause and condition for the arising of the mind is also non-self. As the mind has originated from what is non-self, how could it be self?

SN 35.142:1.7–1.9

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

MN 148:11.5–11.10

The arahants maintain that when the mind exists (manasmiṁ sati) there is pleasure and pain, and when the mind does not exist (manasmiṁ asati) there is no pleasure and pain.

SN 35.133:6.1–6.3

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

SN 4.19:3.1–3.10

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

SN 48.53:7.1–7.3

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

10. Final Nibbāna

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

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

Sometimes Nibbāna is called Nibbānadhātu, e.g. at SN 45.7:2.4.86 The word dhātu is often translated as ‘element’. Basing one’s understanding on this translation it is natural to conclude that Nibbāna must be ‘something’. However, this would be to ignore the range of meanings of the word dhātu.87 In addition to meaning ‘element’, it also has the sense of ‘property’ (see PED).88 This meaning is prominent in such compounds as nirodha-dhātu (Iti 51:2.3), ‘the property of cessation’, and nekkhamma-dhātu (SN 14.12:7.2), ‘the property of renunciation’.89 Indeed, Nibbānadhātu itself is explained at SN 45.7:2.1–2.6, as nothing other than ‘the removal (vinayo) of lust, the removal of hatred and the removal of delusion’. Here, again, it is the property aspect which is to the fore, and the best translation would perhaps be ‘the property of extinguishment’.90

Another set of suttas, at SN 43.12/SN 43.13/SN 43.14-43, present 32 synonyms for Nibbāna. This could easily be regarded as evidence of final Nibbāna as an existing ‘state’. However, in this case we need to be careful to distinguish between Nibbāna as an aspect of arahant-ship (i.e. the destruction of lust, hatred and delusion) and final Nibbāna. Because all these suttas are about the destruction of the defilements they would seem to concern arahant-ship.

Two suttas relevant to the present discussion are found at [Ud 8](https://suttacentral.net/ud-pataligamiyavagga?view=normal). The first of these reads as follows:

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

Ud 8.1:3.1–3.4

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

The second part of the quote, ‘it is not coming, going or remaining, not passing away or reappearing; it is unestablished, not moving, without basis (neva āgatiṁ … na gatiṁ na ṭhitiṁ na cutiṁ na upapattiṁ, appatiṭṭhitaṁ appavattaṁ anārammaṇamevetaṁ)’, seems to be nothing other than a description of arahant-ship. The initial phrase, ‘no coming … or reappearing’, elsewhere refers to arahant-ship (see Ud 8.4:3.5, MN 144:11.6–11.7 and cf. SN 12.40:1.5–1.6, 2.4–2.5, 3.4–3.5): there is no future coming, going, passing away, or reappearing for the arahant as he has cut these things off. They cease here and now because their cause has been removed.94 That ‘unestablished’, appatiṭṭhita, also refers to arahant-ship, I have already shown in the above section on ‘unestablished consciousness’. ‘Without basis’, anārammaṇa,95 is often found together with ‘unestablished’ (SN 12.38, SN 12.39 & SN 12.40) and would therefore also seem to refer to arahant-ship. ‘Not moving’, appavatta, does not seem to be encountered elsewhere in the Nikāyas, but it appears to be a simple reference to ‘not moving in saṁsāra’, being the opposite of pavatta, ‘moving on’/‘going on’. Again, it seems natural to identify this with arahant-ship.

The final line of the verse, ‘just this is the end of suffering’, would normally refer to the living arahant. ‘Just this is the end of suffering’, or more commonly ‘the end of suffering’, is a standard way of describing the attainment of arahant-ship, e.g. at MN 144:11.3–11.9. In sum, the above passage at Ud 8.1:3.1–3.4 seems to describe something related to both ariya-samādhi and arahant-ship. It seems clear therefore that it must relate to Nibbāna, with final Nibbāna perhaps being the most likely candidate.96 But even if this is the case, the word āyatana, like the word dhātu, is used so broadly in the Nikāyas that this would still not be decisive in showing that final Nibbāna is a ‘state’. At AN 9.36, AN 9.43 and AN 9.44, for example, āyatana is used to describe saññāvedayitanirodha, an attainment where the mental aggregates temporarily cease. Clearly āyatana cannot refer to an ‘existing entity’ in such a context.

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

‘Monks, there is a freedom from what is born, a freedom from what has become, a freedom from what is made, a freedom from what is produced (atthi bhikkhave ajātaṁ abhūtaṁ akataṁ asaṁkhataṁ)’. (transl. Brahmāli)

Ud 8.3:3.1–3.4

What is here rendered as ‘freedom from what is born’, ajātaṁ, is often translated as ‘the unborn’, giving a definite sense that this sutta describes something positively existing.97 However, as Johansson 1969, p.39, p.54) points out, ajātaṁ recurs at MN 26:18.1 where the context requires it to mean ‘freedom from birth’. Having understood that he is subject to birth, the Buddha-to-be seeks the ajātaṁ. If birth is a problem, then surely the natural thing to do is to seek a freedom from birth, not a ‘state’ that is unborn.98 The most reasonable translation of ajātaṁ, therefore, would seem to be ‘freedom from what is born’ or ‘freedom from birth’.99 If this is accepted, it is natural to translate all the initial a’s at Ud 8.3:3.1–3.4 as privatives, that is, as ‘freedom from’. According to this interpretation (see my translation above), what is being described here is not necessarily a ‘state’ at all. In my opinion, all this passage does is to affirm the possibility of ending saṁsāra.100 Indeed, this is precisely the broader context of this extract.101

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

In the end, the passages discussed in this section are not decisive in regard to the ontological status of final Nibbāna.104 This brings us back to the question with which we started the present section: Is final Nibbāna anything at all apart from the cessation of existence?

11. Might Final Nibbāna be an ‘Existing Entity’ Entirely Different from the Five Khandhas?

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

The idea that final Nibbāna is an ‘existing entity’ is usually matched with the idea that this ‘state’ can be experienced while the arahant is still alive.105 In fact, these two ideas of necessity go together: if the final Nibbāna ‘state’ was not experienceable by living arahants, they would not know of its existence and consequently there could be no record of it for posterity. But the idea that final Nibbāna can be experienced by the living arahant is doctrinally problematic. An experience of something — without which one cannot know that it exists — by definition includes consciousness. Thus, an experience of the equivalent of final Nibbāna while alive must involve consciousness. Indeed, this is also the standard explanation for how Nibbāna is said to be experienced: the mind or consciousness takes it as its object.106

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

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

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

Finally, I wish to point out one remaining danger with insisting that final Nibbāna is a ‘state’ of ‘something’. For a puthujjana such a ‘state’ would be quite literally unimaginable.111 In trying to understand it, he would quite naturally employ some version of the five khandhas. Anyone who accepts the Buddha’s teaching that final Nibbāna is the highest happiness would therefore almost unavoidably grasp at or attach to that version of the five khandhas. Because the khandhas can manifest in extremely subtle ways — for instance, for anyone who has not experienced it, it would be virtually impossible to imagine what the experience of the base of nothingness is like — one would quite likely not even be aware of one’s attachment. In this way one ends up grasping the khandhas — that is, grasping what is in reality suffering — thinking it to be final Nibbāna. And instead of reaching final Nibbāna one ends up perpetuating saṁsāra. The view that final Nibbāna is just cessation is thus not only the one that seems most in tune with the Nikāyas but also the one that quite pragmatically is most likely to lead to an exit from saṁsāra.112

12. If Final Nibbāna is Mere Cessation, How is this Different from annihilation?

At AN 10.29, we find the following revealing passage:

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

(Adapted from Ñāṇaponika 1999 p.246)  
AN 10.29:19.1–19.4

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

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

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

[Ven. Yamaka:] ‘Exactly so, friend’.

SN 22.85:3.1–3.3

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

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

SN 22.85:7.1–11.5

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

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

‘If they were to ask me this, friend, I would answer thus: “friend, form is impermanent; what is impermanent is suffering; what is suffering has ceased (niruddhaṁ) and passed away (atthagataṁ). Feeling is impermanent; what is impermanent is suffering; what is suffering has ceased and passed away. Perception is impermanent; what is impermanent is suffering; what is suffering has ceased and passed away. Volitional formations are impermanent; what is impermanent is suffering; what is suffering has ceased and passed away. Consciousness is impermanent; what is impermanent is suffering; what is suffering has ceased and passed away”. Being asked thus, friend, I would answer in such a way’.

SN 22.85:13.1–13.16

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

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

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

MN 59:15.1–15.6 &  
SN 36.19:15.1–15.3

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

[Sāriputta:] ‘Speaking thus: “Friend, with the remainderless fading away and cessation of the six spheres of sense contact, is there anything else? … is there not anything else?”, one proliferates (papañceti) about that which is without proliferation (appapañcaṁ)’. (transl. Brahmāli)

AN 4.173

By asking ‘is there anything else?’ and ‘is there not anything else?’ the questioner reveals his distorted outlook, his preoccupation and concern about the fate of his non-existing self.123 This is why Sāriputta calls the questions papañca, ‘proliferation’, papañca being the distorted thinking process that arises from a distorted perception of reality.124 The puthujjana is trapped by sakkāya-diṭṭhi, by the perception of a permanent core in himself. But from his own point of view, whether he is aware of it or not, he is simply concerned with the destiny of what he sees as his own true essence.125

But if the illusion of personal identity is seen through, if the perceived solid core is seen not to exist, there is nothing to be concerned about anymore.126 When it is seen that all a being is made up of are the ever-impermanent khandhas, utterly tied up with suffering, then cessation becomes the most desirable thing possible. Questions such as ‘is there anything else?’ and ‘is there not anything else?’ are quite simply beside the point.127

In the final analysis, the Buddha’s teachings concern only the ending of suffering. Although it seems clear that ‘mere’ cessation is the correct interpretation of final Nibbāna and although there are obvious dangers in regarding final Nibbāna as ‘something’, ultimately it is irrelevant whether the state that supervenes when the arahant dies is ‘something’ or ‘nothing’. All that matters is that the five khandhas — that is, suffering — cease without remainder. Consider how the Buddha sometimes would summarise his teachings: ‘Good, good, Anurādha. Formerly, Anurādha, and also now, I make known just suffering and the cessation of suffering’ (SN 22.86:13.1–13.2).128 And since suffering is coterminous with saṁsāra, it follows that ‘Nibbāna is the greatest bliss’ (MN 75:21.5 and Dhp 204). What more can you ask for?

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