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Does the not-Self (*anattā*) teaching in the Nikāyas presuppose the existence of a special type of consciousness?*

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ABSTRACT

According to the historically dominant interpretation of the *anattā* teaching, human being is a conglomerate of the five aggregates (*khandha*-s). However, several early Buddhist Nikāya texts seem to suggest that within human being there exists a dichotomy of the aggregates and their counterpart. The latter may cling to the *khandha*-s but also become dissociated from them. In this paper, I critically consider a hypothesis forwarded by several scholars that the early Buddhist texts presuppose the existence of a special type of consciousness (*viññāṇa*) which is not identical with *viññāṇa-khandha,* as the counterpart to the aggregates. According to this interpretation, such consciousness is considered pretty much synonymous with *nibbāna*, the ultimate state of liberation. I argue that despite its value and advantage over the historically dominant interpretation of *anattā* teaching, this hypothesis is nonetheless problematic on many levels. In the first part of the paper, I consider the textual problems of the hypothesis in question. In particular, I focus on the implications of the Kevaṭṭa Sutta and the Dhātuvibhaṅga Sutta as well as on the problematic interrelation of *citta* and *viññāṇa* in the Nikāyas. I also argue that the hypothesis of special consciousness as *nibbāna* is difficult to reconcile with the apophatic approach and strong emphasis on ineffability present in the substantial portion of the Nikāyas. In the final part of the paper, I consider philosophical problems of the theory in question. In particular, I argue that it is difficult to conceive pure transcendental type of consciousness as an agent of attitudes such as clinging or abandoning, thus making it an unlikely candidate for being the counterpart of the aggregates. In order to make better sense of the problems in question, I consider certain parallels of the Nikāya doctrine with modern philosophy of mind as well as with ancient Indian Sāṃkhya doctrine.

KEYWORDS

early Buddhism; *viññāṇa*; the mind; *citta*; the aggregates; *khandha*-s; cognitive science; Sāṃkhya; Āgamas

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According to the historically dominant interpretation of the Buddhist teaching of not-self (*anattā*), a human being is a conglomerate of the five psychophysical components, the so-called aggregates (*khandha*-s), among which no soul or self may be found. Because the doctrine of the aggregates is supposed to provide an exhaustive account of human being, it implies radical philosophical reductionism. Although the proponents of this interpretation considered it to be a faithful reflection of the Buddha's own teachings, it is not without serious problems. Most importantly, some of the earliest formulations of the *khandha* doctrine contained in the Pāli Nikāyas lead to philosophical implications which appear to be at odds with the later, orthodox interpretation.

The most famous of such fragments is contained the Bhāra Sutta (SN 22.22/iii 26), which describes the aggregates as a burden carried by a "person" (*puggalo*). The Bhāra Sutta and its message has become a subject of a heated debate within Buddhist history (Eltschinger, 2014) which needs not be presented in detail here. When interpreted directly, the text leads to consequences which are at odds with the reductionist interpretation. It seems to imply that the aggregates are not the only elements constitutive of a human being and that there exists within an individual some counterpart to them which is rendered by the term "person".

Although the simile of the burden and its bearer contained in the Bhāra Sutta is the most famous one, there are also several other similes used in the *khandha* passages which suggest the existence of a distinction between the aggregates on the one hand and the actual individual who wrongly identifies with them but may also "abandon" them on the other. The Vammika Sutta (MN 23/i 143–145), for example, compares the aggregates to a tortoise to be thrown away from the anthill (symbolizing the body) so that an arahant, symbolized by a *Nāga* serpent, may be revealed. Other suttas convey this dichotomy of the *khandha*-s and their counterpart by the similes of the people carrying sticks, branches and grass (SN 22.33 — 34/iii 34), of a dog and its leash (SN 22.99/iii 150), of an artist and a painting of a human being (SN 22.100/iii 151–152), of a young person and her facial image in the mirror (SN 22.83/iii 105–106), of a blind man and a dirty cloth (MN 75/i 502–513) and finally of a householder and his killer (SN 22.85/iii 110–115).

There are also suttas which emphasize some level of dissociation of a liberated individual from the aggregates. For example, the Vāhana Sutta (AN 10.81/v 151) states that the *Tathāgata* dwells by means of a mind free from boundaries (*vimariyādīkatena cetasā*), released (*nissaṭo*), detached (*visaṃyutto*) and liberated (*vippamutto*) from all the *khandha*-s.

The direct message conveyed by all these texts is not that the human being consists of five aggregates among which no self or soul may be found. Rather, they suggest that there exists within a human being a dichotomy of the aggregates and of their counterpart who mistakenly identifies with them,

taking them to be himself, carries them as a burden, but may also become disenchanted with them and dissociated from them. To use more philosophical terminology, this counterpart could be considered the actual agent of attitudes such as clinging, identifying or abandoning.

This of course leads to the question about the identity of the agent being a counterpart to the *khandha*-s. In this article we shall critically examine a hypothesis which has already been suggested by several scholars of early Buddhism and has gained some prominence. According to this interpretation, the Nikāyas presuppose a sort of a special consciousness (*viññāṇa*) independent of the *khandha*-s, including *viññāṇa-khandha*. Most importantly, however, this consciousness may stand alone and exist in its pure state, dissociated from the aggregates. The notable proponents of various versions of this interpretation include Katakurunde Ñāṇananda, Peter Harvey, Miri Albahari, and Khristos Nizamis. Although their notions of this special type of consciousness differ in some respects, they also share many important elements.

Ñāṇananda, although himself perhaps adopting more of an exegetical than a purely academic text critical approach,[1] has offered a very interesting interpretation of the early Buddhist texts which in many ways challenges the commentarial tradition. The great value of Ñāṇananda's work lies in stressing the apophatic and paradoxical aspects of early Buddhist teachings which have been somewhat neglected during the later development within Theravāda tradition. One of the central points of his theory is the notion of "the luminous mind, the consciousness of the arahant, which is non-manifestative, infinite, and all lustrous" (Ñāṇananda, 2016: 148–149). He contrasts this special consciousness of an arahant with "specifically prepared consciousness" (*abhisaṇkhata viññāṇā*) (Ñāṇananda, 2016: 150). Contrary to the ordinary *viññāṇa*, the arahant's consciousness "of unplumbed depth" does not reflect the name and form (*nāma-rūpa*).

Harvey speaks of the possibility of *nāma-rūpa* dropping away, and of discernment (Harvey's rendition of the Pāli term *viññāṇa*) standing without any object (Harvey, 1995: 207–208). After the stopping of the conditioned personality factors (i.e., the *khandha*-s), *viññāṇa* exists unsupported, unconstructed, infinite and radiant, timelessly beyond any worldly phenomenon (Harvey, 1995: 201–203). This timeless reality can be "participated in" during the life of an arahant. Harvey identifies this objectless *viññāṇa* with *nibbāna*, the final soteriological goal of Buddhism (Harvey, 1995: 207).

Albahari's and Nizamis' interpretations are more philosophical in character and offer a phenomenological reading of early Buddhism which draws heavily from Edmund Husserl's thought. Albahari postulates the existence of an

[1] For an explanation of the important distinction between these two approaches see Wynne, 2018.

"unconditioned witness-consciousness. [...] both grounded in *nibbāna* and central to ordinary conscious states" (Albahari, 2007: 32). She describes this awareness as elusive and unbroken and claims that it "forms a non-illusory 'tier' which, when infused with a 'tier' of mentally constructed input, creates the impression of a bounded self" (Albahari, 2007: 3). This awareness is "a necessary component of phenomenal consciousness" (Albahari, 2007: 160).

Drawing strongly from Husserl, Nizamis claims that "'pure subjectivity' is an inherent and irreducible property of intentional consciousness (i.e., 'consciousnessof'), and thus an essential a priori condition for the actual process of lived conscious experience" (Nizamis, 2012: 177). So far this is to a large extent identical to Husserl's views. However, Nizamis also considers a situation particularly relevant to the early Buddhist context, namely "when everything else has been phenomenologically 'excluded' and 'reduced', 'pure consciousness-of' remains as an absolute 'irreducible principle'; intentionality and subjectivity are 'transcendental' facts" (Nizamis, 2012: 177). Nizamis argues that in the case of the absence of phenomena to be conscious of, this consciousness (which he identifies with the early Buddhist *viññāṇa)* "could be conscious-of nothing but its own (purely non phenomenal) consciousness-of" (Nizamis, 2012: 177). Therefore, he proposes that "*viññāṇa* can ultimately liberate, unbind, release itself, from all that of which it is conscious" (Nizamis, 2012: 228).

The approach of the abovementioned scholars is strongly at odds with the historically dominant interpretation of *anattā* teaching, and some could argue that it actually introduces a sort of a "self" to the Buddhist teaching, a position dangerously close to that of several non-Buddhist schools such as Sāṃkhya or Vedanta (as Albahari herself readily admits; Albahari, 2007: xii, 2, 193). Of course, from the point of view of critical scholarship there would be nothing inherently wrong if the analysis showed early Buddhist position as similar or even identical to those of the non-Buddhists. Afterall, the Buddhist emphasis on the uniqueness of their own doctrine may very well have just been a sort of a religious rhetoric lacking any sufficient ground.

The representatives of this approach are however at pains to deny that their interpretation of early Buddhist teaching is a form of a self doctrine, and avoid using terms such as "self", "soul", "identity" or "essence" with regard to the pure consciousness that they postulate in early Buddhist teachings. For example, Nizamis claims that "pure consciousness-of and its intrinsic subjectivity cannot be constituted as a 'self' of any kind" (Nizamis, 2012: 178) and "that it is quite essentially and fundamentally nonself (*anattā*)" (Nizamis, 2012: 196). Harvey, on the other hand, speaks of this pure, objectless *viññāṇa* as truly "Selfless" (Harvey, 1995: 237).

The proponents of this interpretation base it on some seminal Nikāya fragments which have been somewhat ignored by the later Theravāda tradition, as they did not fit with the dominant interpretation of *anattā* doctrine and were

conveniently neglected. Of particular importance for this interpretation is the passage contained in the Kevaṭṭa Sutta (DN 11/i 211–223) and the Brahmanimantanika Sutta (MN 49/i 326–331) which speaks about the "consciousness which is non-manifesting, boundless and luminous all-round"[2] (*viññāṇaṃ anidassanaṃ anantaṃ sabbato pabhaṃ*)[3].

There are also texts which describe liberation as occurring due to the non-establishment of consciousness. The Godhika Sutta (SN 4.23/i 121–122) and the Vakkali Sutta (SN 22.87/iii 120–124) contain a stock passage describing Māra — the Evil One, looking for a consciousness of a recently deceased bhikkhu but failing to find it. These bhikkhus are then described as having attained complete *nibbāna* (*parinibbuto*) due to consciousness being unestablished (*appatiṭṭhitena viññāṇena*). Harvey interprets this fragment as referring to "unsupported discernment as existing beyond the death of an Arahant, with such a form of discernment being tantamount to attaining *nibbāna*" (Harvey, 1995: 209).

It is worth emphasizing that the works of the abovementioned scholars are a very valuable contribution to early Buddhist studies in that they challenge the historically dominant, reductionist interpretation of the *anattā* teaching and highlight some of its discrepancies with the Nikāya texts and fundamental weaknesses. It is definitely an improvement over the traditional interpretation in that it recognizes and attempts to account for the distinction between the *khandha*-s and their counterpart who takes them to be self but can become liberated from them. It also easily avoids the charge of annihilationism to which the traditional interpretation is particularly prone.

It is not without its problems, however. These problems can be in general described as twofold: textual and philosophical ones. On the textual level, this interpretation has difficulties to account for several Nikāya statements mentioning the soteriological necessity of the cessation of *viññāṇa*. Often this cessation is mentioned as part of the formula of dependent cessation which is the reverse of the more popular formula of dependent origination (e.g. SN 12.10/ii 10–11, 12.67/ii 113–115). Sometimes, the Nikāyas speak about cessation of

[2] The passage in the Kevaṭṭa Sutta has direct parallel in the Āgamas in DĀ 24 at T i 101b14. It also mentions consciousness (*shi* 識) which is non-manifesting (*wuxing* 無形), measureless (*wuliang* 無量) and self-possessed of luminosity (*ziyouguang* 自有光). The final line of the verse mentions cessation of consciousness (*shimie* 識滅). Also, cf. Anālayo, 2011: 296–297, fn. 161, for discussion of the parallels.

[3] The translation of the term *pabhaṃ* as "luminous" is far from certain. For example, Nāṇamoli has translated the phrase *sabbatopabhaṃ* as "Not claiming being with respect to all" (Nāṇamoli & Bodhi, 1995: 1249). As Bhikkhu Bodhi explains, Nāṇamoli "takes *pabhaṁ* to be a negative present participle of *pabhavati* — *apabhaṁ* — the negative-prefix 'a' dropping off in conjunction with *sabbato*" (Nāṇamoli & Bodhi, 1995: 1249). Anālayo (Anālayo, 2017: 12–20) suggests through his analysis of the parallel versions of the Kevaṭṭa Sutta that it is probable that the notion of luminosity may be a later development.

viññāṇa independent of this scheme (e.g. Snp 5.2/198, Snp 5.14/215), suggesting the occurrence of such cessation in a special meditative state.

Whenever this cessation is mentioned, the supporters of the interpretation in question are therefore forced to make a qualification, that the texts must refer to the cessation of ordinary, limited consciousness and not that of "boundless consciousness". The former is one of the five *khandha*-s, and can appear in one of the six forms connected with the respective sense faculty (e.g. eye, ear etc.). The latter (i.e. boundless consciousness) is said to be independent of the *khandha*-s. The problem lies in the fact that the early Buddhist texts themselves are surprisingly quiet about such an essential distinction, even if these supposedly different forms of *viññāṇa* are being mentioned in the same fragment. It would be rather surprising if a matter of such fundamental importance received such a confusing treatment. This is the case with the Kevaṭṭa Sutta, which after describing the non-manifesting, boundless *viññāṇa* immediately speaks about cessation of consciousness (*vinnanassa nirodhena)* as the final stage of liberation. When read directly, there seems to be precious little to justify taking these terms as having different references.

In his internet-only essay, *Nibbāna is not viññāṇa. Really, it just isn't*, Bhikkhu Sujato criticizes the view which sees the infinite consciousness of the Kevaṭṭa Sutta as *nibbāna*. Sujato instead suggests that the term *viññāṇa anidassana* simply refers to the stage of infinite consciousness, a very high, but nonetheless constructed and limited meditative state which is also available to the non-Buddhists. Commenting on a crucial phrase *viññāṇassa nirodhena* (lit. by means of cessation of consciousness), Sujato writes: "the 'infinite consciousness' is merely the temporary escape from the oppression of materiality, but true liberation is the ending of all consciousness" (Sujato, 2011).

Sujato claims that in order to maintain their interpretation, the proponents of what he terms "*viññāṇa = Nibbāna* school", have to resort to claiming that the two different verbs *na gādhati* (meaning "does not find a firm footing" and describing the four elements), and *uparujjhati* (meaning "ceases" and describing name and form) contained in the verse, essentially mean the same thing. The former verb is used with reference to *viññāṇa anidassana*, while the latter to *vinnanassa nirodhena*. In Sujato's interpetation, the first term is used to describe a temporary escape from corporeality in the state of infinite consciousness, and the latter refers to ultimate liberation. Furthermore, the scholars of the "*viññāṇa = Nibbāna* school", have to make a qualification that the very same noun *viññāṇa* "means 'infinite consciousness of *Nibbāna*' in the first occurrence and 'separative sense consciousness' in the second" (Sujato, 2011). Nothing in the text itself seems to substantiate such reading.

Instead, Sujato sees the verse in the Kevaṭṭa Sutta as a discussion of the Upanishadic idea of cosmic-consciousness, with the Buddhist text showing that there is something beyond and unknown to the brahminic sages, namely the cessation

of consciousness. Another possible interpretation can be found in Wynne, namely, that the "Kevaṭṭa Sutta assumes a meditator on the threshold of liberation, a luminous state in which the conditioned realm of *saṃsara* ceases" (Wynne, 2015: 233). One could perhaps argue that the stage of infinite *viññāṇa* represents the penultimate stage of liberation and the last in which any positive verbal descriptions are still possible, while cessation of *viññāṇa* mentioned immediately afterwards represents the final and ultimate apophatic state of emancipation.

It may be argued that a similar understanding of the *viññāṇa*, as a high but nonetheless limited and transitive stage of meditative progress can also be found in the Dhātuvibhaṅga Sutta (MN 140/iii 238–247), which describes the successive stages of insight.[4] The sutta first describes insight into the nature of the great elements of earth, water, fire, air and space which results in the mind (*citta*) becoming disgusted (*nibbindati*) and losing passion (*virājeti*) towards them. At the next stage, it is said that there only remains (*avasissati*) consciousness (*viññāṇa*), purified and bright (*parisuddhaṃ pariyodātaṃ*).[5] As we see, this consciousness is described in relatively similar terms to the *viññāṇa* of the Kevaṭṭa Sutta. The fact that after the insight into the five great elements it is said that "just consciousness remains" (*viññāṇaṃyeva avasissati*) may perhaps be seen as corresponding to the line in the Kevaṭṭa Sutta stating that "water, earth, fire and air do not find footing" (*āpo ca pathavī, tejo vāyo na gādhati)* in the infinite consciousness. According to the Dhātuvibhaṅga Sutta, this consciousness can be conscious of pleasure, pain and of neither pleasure nor pain. The meditator then understands that that such feelings arise based on corresponding contacts, and with their cessation they will also cease. Immediately afterwards the text mentions that there only remains equanimity (*upekkhāyeva avasissati*). What is interesting in our case is that no mention is being made of *viññāṇa* anymore. It is also interesting that this equanimity is described in terms which suggest that it is to a large extent synonymous with the mind (*citta*). The meditator considers focusing this equanimity on the four successive formless (*arūpa*) states, and it is stated that his mind would be developed accordingly (*tadanudhammañca cittaṃ bhāveyyaṃ*). Furthermore, *upekkhā* is described as purified, bright, malleable, wieldy, and radiant (*parisuddhā pariyodātā mudu kammaññā pabhassarā*).[6] The first four of these terms occur in the stock

[4] Anālayo (Anālayo, 2011: 797–802) notes the general agreement of the Pāli version with its Chinese parallels.

[5] The Āgama direct parallel, MĀ 162 at T I 690a–692b also mentions that "there is only consciousness remaining" (*weiyouyushi* 唯有餘識) after the discussion of the five "realms" (*wujie* 五界) which are the same as five great elements. However, no mention is made of consciousness being purified and bright.

[6] MĀ 162 at T I 690a–692b also speaks of only equanimity remaining (*weicunyushe* 唯存於捨) which, unlike consciousness is described as very pure and clean (*qingjing* 清淨) and about the mind being developed accordingly (*xiurushixin* 修如是心).

description of *citta* after the fourth jhāna (e.g. DN 2/i 47–86) while the last one can be found as an epithet of *citta* in the Pabhassara Sutta (AN 1.51-52/i 11.1). Furthermore, several suttas (e.g. DN 2, MN 119/iii 89–99)[7] describe the meditator as pervading his body with the qualities present in the particular jhānas. And thus, in the first and second jhānas, he fills, overflows and pervades the body with rapture and pleasure (*pītisukhena abhisandeti parisandeti paripūreti parippharati*), and only with pleasure in the third. The fourth jhāna is always described as the state of the purity of equanimity (*upekkhāsatipārisuddhiṃ*). Therefore, to follow the pattern of the previous three jhānas one would expect the description of the body being pervaded with equanimity. However, the text instead states that the meditator is seated having pervaded the body with purified and bright mind (*parisuddhena cetasā pariyodātena pharitvā nisinno hoti*). This suggests that the authors of these texts considered *citta/ceto* to be synonymous at least in some respects with *upekkhā*, or that the latter is a purified aspect of the former.

Therefore, the message of the Dhātuvibhaṅga Sutta can be harmonized with that of the Kevaṭṭa Sutta in Sujato's interpretation. The stage of pure, bright and infinite *viññāṇa* represents a refinement over the great elements, which do not find footing in it. The cessation (*nirodha*) of *viññāṇa* in the Kevaṭṭa Sutta would correspond to *viññāṇa* giving way to *upekkhā-citta* in the Dhātuvibhaṅga Sutta.

Similar views, emphasizing the distinction of *viññāṇa* and *citta* may also be found in the Dutiyasikkhattaya Sutta (AN 3.90/i 236). This text contains a line about the cessation of consciousness (*viññāṇassa nirodhena*) identical to the one in the Kevaṭṭa Sutta. However, it follows it by equating this cessation with the liberation of the mind (*vimokkho hoti cetaso*).[8] This implies that for the author of the text, *citta/ceto*[9] and *viññāṇa* could not have exactly the same denotation.

This brings us to another textual problem, namely that of explaining the distinction between *citta* and *viññāṇa* present in the abovementioned texts. The supporters of interpreting special type of consciousness as *nibbāna*, follow the orthodox Theravāda tradition in generally identifying *citta* with *viññāṇa* (Harvey, 2013: 57; Heim, 2013: 385; Vism XIV.82/PTS 452). Apart from the

[7] Āgama parallel of MN 119, MĀ 81 at T i 554c10 also speaks about no place within the body (*shenzhong* 身中) which is not pervaded (*bian* 遍) by the pure bright mind (*qingjingxin* 清淨心).

[8] Quite interestingly, the Āgama parallel SĀ 816 at T ii 210a06 agrees pretty much with the Pāli verse, but does not mention cessation of consciousness. While it speaks about the mind obtaining liberation (*xindejietuo* 心得解脫) it connects it with establishing right mindfulness in an un-forgetful way (*zhengnianbuwangzhu* 正念不忘住) which the Pāli version does not mention. Also, it has a line about breaking up of the body and ending life (*shenhuaiermingzhong* 身壞而命終) before describing nirvana being like an extinguished lamp.

[9] The two words are virtually synonymous and have the same denotation (Rhys Davids & Stede, 2007: 268).

abovementioned fragments, the problem with such interpretation is that these two terms mostly occur in entirely different contexts and are almost never used interchangeably in the Nikāyas. Furthermore, as we have seen, they are sometimes used in the same texts if, but with a different meaning. This seems to imply that at least for the authors of these texts the terms *viññāṇa* and *citta* did not exactly have the same denotation. It might be agreed that *viññāṇa* is open to a phenomenological reading, as something which makes a state phenomenally conscious (Davis & Thompson, 2013). By means of *viññāṇa* one is conscious of pleasure and pain (MN 140/iii 238–247) and of sour, bitter and sweet (SN 22.79/iii 87–91), which are all phenomenal qualities. Such is not the case with *citta* which is always presented in a functional context. One will never find passages describing phenomenal contents of *citta*, describing it as some sort of an "inner space", a quasi "Cartesian theater" of the mind in which qualitative experience takes place. *Citta* is rather described as undertaking particular cognitive tasks which produce certain results. For example in the Sāmaññaphala Sutta (DN 2/i 76) it is said to be directed/"bent" (*abhinīharati abhininnāmeti*) to attain higher knowledges and perform particular functions. To point out yet another difference: the state in which *viññāṇa* is unestablished (*appatiṭṭhitaṃ viññāṇaṃ* — e.g. SN 22.53/iii 54) is considered crucial to liberation, but it is the establishment or stability of *citta* which is said to be a result of its release (*vimuttattā ṭhitaṃ* — e.g. SN 22.45/iii 45).

Thus, there are good reasons to believe that at least in many Nikāya texts *citta* is not entirely synonymous with *viññāṇa*, and that the *viññāṇa* of the Kevaṭṭa Sutta does not refer to *nibbāna*. This, in turn would mean that there is no reason to postulate some special consciousness which could be considered a counterpart to the five aggregates. This does not imply that *citta* and *viññāṇa* are entirely distinct mental faculties, though. It might be that the latter is a product of a specific, conditioned activity of the former which, however, can also operate in a *viññāṇa*-free way.[10] Another problem of the interpretation that we are considering is that it does not agree well with the apophatic approach and strong insistence on ineffability characteristic of much of the Nikāyas. As Wynne points out, in early Buddhism "reality is ultimately ineffable, as is the state of the person who realizes it by escaping his cognitive conditioning" (Wynne, 2010: 157). Meditative states are surprisingly rarely

[10] This also does not imply that the enigmatic counterpart of the aggregates implied by several similes discussed in the first section of the paper should be simply identified with *citta*. The Nikāyas do not present *citta* as a mental faculty which can separate itself from the body or exist after death. It is rather an embodied mind. Therefore, the counterpart to the *khandha*-s should probably be seen as a complete human individual. Such a hypothesis could however only be harmonized with an interpretation of the aggregates not as constituents of a human being, but rather as aspects and elements of its subjective self-representation. The detailed argumentation in favour of this position will need to be presented elsewhere, however.

described in terms of their positive phenomenal contents. The prevailing strategy of description is to use a negative approach, an apophatic strategy putting emphasis on what one is not aware of, or which mode of awareness is absent in the meditator. This is exemplified by many names of the meditative states starting with the negative particle *a-* or *an-* used as a prefix (e.g. *animitta*, *ananta*), the negative particle *na-* (*nevasaññānāsaññā*) or by focusing on cessation (*nirodha*) or emptiness (*suñña*) of certain factors and not on what is actually present. Instead, these states are usually described in functional terms of mental factors describing the quality of the mind, or apophatically by stating which ordinary contents or mental factors are missing or have underwent cessation. There is a great emphasis on the ineffability of higher states of mind, an ineffability that does not even imply that there is some phenomenal state which should not be described, but rather that language simply cannot be used at all beyond the range of common experience. It seems, that at some point one should simply fall silent, and stop both speaking and imagining. It therefore appears that the Buddha's reluctance to discuss such matters was not merely a pragmatic refusal to discuss things unconducive to awakening but stemmed from a specific understanding of the nature of reality and of the limitations of language. What seems to be suggested by some Nikāya fragments is that the notions of existence and non-existence do not possess relevance beyond a particular form of cognitive functioning (Wynne, 2010: 140–142). However, those who postulate special *viññāṇa* as *nibbāna* seem to have little trouble describing it in positive language[11] as existing in an unestablished, pure form, standing alone from all phenomena.

In the sections above we have been discussing whether a notion of special consciousness (*viññāṇa*) which is a counterpart of the *khandha*-s and is ultimately synonymous with nirvana has a strong enough basis in the Nikāya texts. But is this notion philosophically valid in itself? In the section below we shall consider some of the philosophical problems connected with the concept in question. Of course, one could argue that such considerations may have limited value in establishing whether such notion was held by the Nikāya authors or not. Afterall, some authentically early Buddhist ideas could have simply been wrong on a philosophical level. In such case, even proving that the concept in question was not philosophically valid, would not prove its "inauthenticity". Therefore, the discussion of the philosophical problems of the concept of special consciousness which will follow, should be considered partially independent from the textual problems dealt with in the first sections. Nonetheless, some of these philosophical problems are very interesting in their own right,

[11] E.g. Nizamis, 2012: 194: Subjectivity is a transcendental fact, a transcendental structure, a transcendental property intrinsic to the nature of actualized consciousness. Now, there is simply no sense in which one can "point" to a transcendental fact. But one can certainly "express" or "announce" it, so to speak.

deserve consideration, and as we shall see have some bearing on understanding the early Buddhist doctrine.

As we have noted, the *anattā* teaching appears to be addressed to a subject/agent capable of the following cognitive mental operations: it can be deluded, wrongly identify oneself with the *khandha*-s and cling to them; it can however become disenchanted with them and abandon them.

Nizamis (Nizamis, 2012: 206) is very right in claiming that because clinging and abandoning are attitudes directed towards the totality of phenomenal states, they cannot be in themselves phenomenal. They should rather be seen as attitudes of an agent who himself does not belong to the sphere of phenomena. However, Nizamis sees the "subjective transcendental consciousness" as the actual agent/subject of these mental acts. He writes: "identifying with all this, appropriating it and clinging to it not only as one's own (*attaniya*) but as one's self (*attā*) [...] are precisely intentional acts of subjective consciousness" (Nizamis, 2012: 198).[12] In other place, he argues that "craving and clinging are qualitative modes of subjective intentionality: they belong, intrinsically and necessarily, to the nature of subjective-intentional consciousness" (Nizamis, 2012: 206–207).

However, such interpretation is not without its problems. Nizamis' claim that because clinging and abandoning are directed towards phenomenality, they themselves must be acts of a non-phenomenal mental faculty is certainly right. But it is highly questionable, why would this non-phenomenal counterpart of the *khandha*-s need to be conceived as a special, transcendental and pure consciousness. Let us assume for the sake of the argument that the notion of such subjective "consciousness-of" is sound and not ill-conceived.[13] A case could perhaps be made that such consciousness is a sort of a "an inner space", a Cartesian theater, a demarcation line in which non-phenomenal data input gets translated into phenomenal qualitative states endowed with givenness, subjectivity, intentionality, oneness, or "what it is likeness". However, clinging, identifying, becoming disenchanted or abandoning are cognitive acts of a different sort.

Thanks to the progress in cognitive science, we can now create models of most of the abovementioned cognitive acts, as well as study their neural basis. It seems that they have to be based on complex activities of equally complex cognitive systems, composed of multiple modules, so that they can represent in their structure the complex nature of reality they are cognizing and interacting with. These models involve various forms of processing, competition between and cooperation of multiple modules. This can also be modeled to an extent by complex computing systems of artificial intelligence systems. We can also

[12] Also Nizamis, 2012: 206, fn. 95: "when I actually cling to something, that clinging is in itself a genuine intentional act of consciousness".

[13] As it is argued by the representatives of the so-called "illusionism" regarding consciousness (Frankish, 2017).

observe a correlation between the functioning of the physical/biological modules and that of the corresponding mental functions. In case of damage to the modules, an interruption of the correlated mental function is observed. How could these complex acts be the result of be the activity of pure transcendental consciousness which is characterized by unity and which supposedly could stand alone from the body, conscious of just its own consciousness?

Several (Baars, 1997; Metzinger, 2009; Carruthers, 2015) representatives of the contemporary philosophy of mind and cognitive science who adopt a non-phenomenological approach, make a distinction between the phenomenal, globally available consciousness and the non-conscious, or more precisely, globally unavailable processes of cognition. The former is passive and may be considered as sort of a "global workspace" which is available to the modules of introspection, speech and declarative memory. On the other hand, the globally unavailable processes may only be conceived in functional terms, or one can speak about their biological basis. They cannot, however, be described in phenomenal, qualitative terms. If one will try to explain the way we cognize, act, understand, and form our attitudes and decisions including clinging and abandoning simply in terms of the acts of subjective, intentional transcendental consciousness, one will face an important problem. A great many vital elements and stages of our cognition are non-available to our consciousness, or to be more precise are globally unavailable. We can certainly consciously experience the end results of most cognitive acts in the sense of being able to introspect them or report on them, but we do not have conscious access to the actual mechanism of taking them. This counterintuitive aspect of our psychology is strongly emphasized in modern cognitive science which highlights the crucial role of non-conscious information processing. However, the nature of these processes is such, that it requires certain complexity, namely parallel, simultaneous processing in different modules based on operations on complex biological structures.

A much-discussed example of unconscious or globally unavailable process of cognition is the phenomenon of "incubation" or "sleeping on it", when a solution to a problem "emerges fully formed into consciousness without any prior attention to the problem" (Carruthers, 2015: 177). Maria Bagassi and Laura Macchi propose that "during incubation, when an overall spreading activation of implicit, unconscious knowledge is under way, in the absence of any form of conscious control, relevance constraint allows multilayered thinking to discover the solution" (Bagassi & Macchi, 2016: 58). Kenneth Gilhooly argues that "unconscious thinking, or work, in the form of implicit associative processes based on spreading activation [...] is a possible explanation of incubation effects" (Gilhooly, 2016: 310).

But even such seemingly trivial mental events as shifting of our conscious attention to a new stimulus, such as an unexpected sound, are already a result

of evaluation and selection of competing stimuli on a non-conscious level, even though on the conscious level there is no knowledge of real reasons for the shift of attention. As Peter Carruthers (Carruthers, 2015: 237) points out, when a person suddenly becomes conscious of the sound of one's own name in a loud, crowded room it results from non-conscious choice to shift the attention to the sound, but neither the choice nor the causes for why it was made become conscious. The person in question is only conscious of the sudden sound of one's own name.

However, it is the nature of activities such as identifying, clinging or abandoning that is particularly interesting to us, because they are the ones attributed in the Nikāyas to the counterpart of the *khandha*-s. In Carruthers' view, such activities constitute what he labels as "amodal attitudes" (Carruthers, 2015: 8). The word "amodal" means that these attitudes are not modalities of any of the five senses and thus are non-phenomenal in their nature. These attitudes also include belief, desire, goals, judgments, intentions, decisions, suppositions, semantic memories and hopes. Amodal attitudes are therefore unconscious in their character, because we only become conscious of their results. However, these attitudes are the actual active elements of our cognition, as opposed to the phenomenal contents of consciousness. As Carruthers suggests, they "'pull the strings' in the background, selecting, maintaining, and manipulating the sensory-based contents that figure consciously in working memory" while "the conscious mind is much like a marionette that is controlled and made to dance by off-stage actors, who do their work unseen" (Carruthers, 2015: x).

Therefore, even if a special, pure and transcendental consciousness were to exist, it would be very hard to conceive it as an agent of any decision making or acts of desire, clinging or abandoning. To use a computer analogy, such consciousness would be more like a screen on which the digital input from the computer turns into colors and shapes, rather than the processor and memory running on a particular software which would be the actual "agents" of the system.

Secondly, let us assume for the sake of the argument, that this type of special consciousness could indeed become disassociated from anything that it is usually conscious of, and stand alone, being conscious just of itself. However, this would also entail dissociation from the embodied processes of cognition. And it is only possible to conceive activities such as abandoning, identifying or clinging as the results of the activity of relatively complex cognitive systems based upon equally complex physical (in case of AI) or biological structures. It is hard to account for pure transcendental consciousness characterized by fundamental unity performing cognitive functions which require a particular degree of complexity. It is also difficult to see why would intentionality and subjectivity, the supposed inherent qualities of transcendental consciousness, have anything to do with the active and complex cognitive processing and

problem solving. They rather seem to represent entirely different forms or qualities of mental functioning.

Claiming that "amodal attitudes" such as clinging or abandoning are acts of transcendental consciousness, does neither seem well justified, not does it have much explanatory power.[14] Most importantly, this interpretation alters the most basic intuitions connected with the term "consciousness". If something, like Carruthers' amodal attitude, operates outside consciousness and its mechanism is not available to introspection and verbal report, then why call it the activity of consciousness at all? Such consciousness would in itself need to be considered non-phenomenal and noumenal in character. But does it ultimately not go against the very definition of the term "consciousness"? One could perhaps claim that transcendental consciousness, itself non-phenomenal is the noumenal correlate of the complex physical non-conscious cognitive systems which are involved in mental acts and amodal attitudes. However, such claim seems devoid of any supporting evidence, lacks any explanatory power regarding the mechanisms of our mental acts and goes against the intuitive meaning of the term "conscious".

Even if we were to assume that the phenomenal contents of consciousness require a counterpart in a form of a special consciousness which becomes conscious of these contents, such consciousness would need to be passive, and have the nature of seeing or witnessing, and not that of identifying, clinging or abandoning. Such witness-consciousness is of course postulated by the Sāṃkhya school of Indian philosophy. As noted by several scholars (Jakubczak, 2012; Burley, 2012) one can speak of certain parallels between early Buddhism and Sāṃkhya. Considering these parallels may allow us to reach a sharper awareness of certain problems and paradoxes which are relevant for our query, namely those connected with the notions of agency, liberation, the interrelation of transcendental consciousness and of the mind. Sāṃkhya's distinction between active cognizing faculty of *citta* and passive consciousness of *puruṣa*, can perhaps be seen as parallel in some respects to the Nikāya distinction between *citta* and *viññāṇa* we have been trying to reconstruct. Sāṃkhya's *puruṣa* is entirely passive. As Marzenna Jakubczak notes: "all voluntary acts are undertaken by a dynamic and complex mind — *citta*" (Jakubczak, 2015: 31), because "the self can do nothing apart from witnessing what is done for it" (Jakubczak, 2012: 42). As such, it cannot be considered a true agent. Consideration of Sāṃkhya's concept of *puruṣa* allows us also to become sharply aware of certain fundamental paradoxes inherent to any concept of passive witness-consciousness characterized by unity. As Mikel Burley sums up, the common

[14] Cf. Oakley & Hilligan, 2017: 4: "Non-conscious causation provides a more plausible (albeit non-intuitive) basis for explaining both what is conventionally considered to be 'contents of consciousness' and the concurrent 'experience of consciousness'".

assumption is that: "it is *puruṣa* that is one's true identity, and hence liberation, which consists in *realising* one's true identity, must consist in *puruṣa*'s realising its identity as *puruṣa*" (Burley, 2012: 57). However, such an assumption is simply wrong. As Burley (Burley, 2012: 57–58) rightly points out, any notion of enlightenment or liberating insight, would require *puruṣa* undergoing a change from ignorance to awareness of one's true identity, which in turns requires some complexity of cognitive structure. This, however, is at odds with the simplicity and passive nature of such consciousness and its function of witnessing. Therefore, such special witness consciousness can neither be the subject to delusion and enlightenment nor an agent of clinging and abandoning. The identity of the one who suffers, undergoes delusion, strives for liberation, becomes awakened and stops suffering is that of *prakṛti* not *puruṣa*.[15] This raises the surprising problem of the potential redundancy of *puruṣa* in the soteriology of Sāṃkhya. As Jakubczak (Jakubczak, 2012: 42) points out, the Sāṃkhya-yogin who practices properly should not even identify with the ultimate self (i.e. *puruṣa*) because simply he is not that self. Instead of identifying with pure or transcendental consciousness, he should dis-identify with the present phenomenal self. Jakubczak sums up this paradox, describing the perspective of a practitioner:

> In other words, the whole job is done by me, but no virtues or profits are ever enjoyed by myself, since having achieved self-knowledge, which in Samkhyan terms is but negative, namely knowledge of what-I-am-not, or what I am absolutely distinct from, there is no point in continuing my phenomenal existence or expecting any rewards for myself, these being nothing one can identify with (Jakubczak, 2012: 42).

However, why should one practice for the sake of what one is ultimately not (i.e. special consciousness)? That in us which suffers, struggles, yearns for liberation and strives to attain it is simply not some sort of a pure, transcendental consciousness. Therefore, were even any special consciousness to exist in a pure and isolated state after death, its existence would be pretty much irrelevant from our perspective, as there would be nothing in it for us. Actually, it is the belief that deep down we are this special consciousness, which is one of the reasons of our suffering and it is simply wrong. And this is exactly the perspective of the majority of Nikāya texts, which explicitly warn against identification with *viññāṇa*. Motivation for the practice need not be provided by the interest of any special consciousness — the goal of stopping our suffering is sufficient enough. Therefore, Jakubczak is right when she claims that the Buddha's denial of self could be rephrased in Sāṃkhya terms as "as a view expressed from the perspective of nature (*prakṛti*)" (Jakubczak, 2012: 45). However, the view from the perspective of *prakṛti* is actually the only view that can

[15] This paradox is explicitly acknowledged in Sāṃkhyakārikā (SK 62; cf. Burley, 2012: 58).

be formed, expressed in language or is relevant to us who suffer and seek for a liberation. Or to put it in other way: any statement expressing a perspective can only be done from the perspective of *prakṛti*, as *puruṣa* by its very nature is neither able to express any perspective nor to form any view whatsoever.

To summarize, scholars like Harvey, Ñāṇananda, Albahari and Nizamis are certainly very right in their claim that the Nikāyas presuppose a non-phenomenal mental faculty which is not included in the set of the five *khandha*-s but functions as their counterpart. This in itself represents a vast improvement over the historically dominant interpretation of *anattā* teaching which cannot be harmonized with several crucial Nikāya passages and fails to avoid annihilationist consequences. However, as we have seen, associating the notion of this non-phenomenal agent with the Nikāya concept of *viññāṇa* or with a phenomenological idea of a transcendental, subjective "consciousness-of" is problematic and leads to many difficulties. At best, this reading could perhaps be limited to relatively few texts which are open to different interpretations and should not be generalized to the whole Nikāyas.

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Abbreviations:
AN *Aṅguttara Nikāya*
DN *Dīgha Nikāya*
MĀ *Madhyama Āgama*
MN *Majjhima Nikāya*
PTS Pali Text Society
SĀ *Saṁyukta Āgama*
SN *Saṃyutta Nikāya*
Snp *Suttanipāta*
T *Taishō shinshū dai zōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經 (*Taishō Tripiṭaka*)
Vism *Visuddhimagga*

References to the source texts:
Numerical references to Pāli source texts use a twofold system. A reference to the number of a text is given before the slash, while a reference to the page of PTS edition is provided after the slash. Numbering of the suttas used before the slash follows the scheme used at https://suttacentral.net. In case of the Visuddhimagga, the number before the slash corresponds to the numbering used in Ñyāṇamoli's translation.

Numerical references to the *Taishō shinshū dai zōkyō* refer respectively to: the number of the tome, the number of text, the number of page, the letter of the section and the number of verse.

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