

## *Nibbāna* and *saññavedayitanirodha*: An Endless Controversy

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According to the Theravāda Buddhist tradition, the enlightened state of consciousness known as *nibbāna* is possessed of a single nature, without division.<sup>1</sup> Thus one must find it odd, if not ironically humorous, to discover the fervent dissension amongst scholars as to the exact nature of this very crucial concept. Some equate *nibbāna* with the state of consciousness attained by Siddhattha Gotama at the age of thirty-five under the Bodhi tree, a state which is also experienced upon attaining arahant hood.<sup>2</sup> Others perceive *nibbāna* as a state that can be achieved only upon death,<sup>3</sup> since *nibbāna* is often described as a condition beyond mind and matter (*nāmarūpa*), thus transcendent of the five aggregates that constitute the amalgam of mind and matter. Yet a third group interprets *nibbāna* as synonymous with the mental state known as *saññavedayitanirodha* (literally “the cessation of recognition and of sensation”). The characteristic of this later condition seems to fall somewhere between the two interpretations of *nibbāna* mentioned above, for it is clearly describes as an experience beyond mind and matter (*nāmarūpa*) wherein the experiencer continues to live after exiting the trance. (It is noteworthy to mention that the experiencer is clinically dead during the trance.)

One celestial being once asked the Buddha: “How can one untangle this mess?”<sup>4</sup> We may transpose this question to our field of inquiry, especially when the tradition itself seems to offer conflicting opinions regarding the true interpretation of *nibbāna*. This article will attempt to clarify the nuances between these *apparently* different states. After examining the distinction between the *nibbāna* that the Buddha attained at the age of thirty-five and the *nibbāna* he entered into at the time of death, we will further our investigation by delving into both the traditional and the modern-academic controversies associated with the state of *saññavedayitanirodha*. This will enable us to circumscribe the traditional interpretation of *saññavedayitanirodha* and to affirm whether consistency runs throughout the tradition.

Most Buddhist scholars hold that the historical Buddha experienced enlightenment under the Bodhi tree at the age of thirty-five and, according to certain scholars,<sup>5</sup> reached *nibbāna* simultaneously. According to others, however, he only entered into *nibbāna* when he passed away at the age of eighty. It is misleading to believe that these two perspectives on *nibbāna* are mutually exclusive. Such a confusion is probably due to an overlooking of the difference between “two types” of *nibbāna*, namely *sopādisesa* (with residue) and *nirupādisesa* or *anupādisesa* (without residue).

According to Pali texts, *nibbāna* has, both strictly speaking (*nippariyato*) and in the ultimate sense (*paramatthato*), a single nature, and is thus without division or distinction. But for the sake of logical treatment, and in order to make known the nature of the attainment of *nibbāna*, the concept can be divided into two categories: *sopādisesa* and *nirupādisesa* (or *anupādisesa*).<sup>6</sup> This nuance is thoroughly explained by Buddhaghosa in the *Visuddhimagga*:

But this [single goal, *nibbāna*] is firstly called with result of past clinging left (*sopādisesa*) since it is made known together with the [aggregates resulting from the past] clinging still remaining [during the Arahant's life], being thus made known in terms of the stilling of defilement and the remaining [results of the past] clinging that are present in one who has reached it by means of development. But [secondly, it is called *without result of past clinging left* (*nirupādisesa*)] since after the last consciousness of the Arahant, who has abandoned arousing [future aggregates] and so prevented *kamma* from giving result in a future [existence], there is no further arising of aggregates of existence, and those already risen have disappeared. So the [result of past] clinging that remained is non-existent; and it is in terms of this non-existence, in the sense that ‘there is no [result of past] clinging here, that the [same goal is called] *without result of past clinging left*.’<sup>7</sup>

The *Itivuttaka* (upon which the previous passage of the *Visuddhimagga* probably bases its interpretation) mentions that one who has attained *sopādisesa nibbāna* continues to possess the five senses and to experience both pleasant and painful sensations,<sup>8</sup> while the attainment of *nirupādisesa nibbāna* is characterized by the eradication of all becoming (*bhava*),<sup>9</sup> implying that no emergence from this state is possible.

On the other hand, the state of *sopādisesa nibbāna*, as the words themselves imply, is “*nibbāna*-with residue” in the sense that subtle *kammas* still remain. These *kammas* are not strong enough to propel the arahant into another rebirth, but merely sufficient to maintain the life process. Liberated persons cease to produce further *kamma*, for the

*kamma*-process (*kammabhava*) has been eradicated. They have eradicated all *kamma*-results (*kammavipāka*) that may lead to another life, but must still reap some subtle *kamma*-results. It is these *kamma*-results that maintain both the regeneration of the five aggregates and the *kamma*-process itself. Therefore, this *sopādisesa nibbāna* could be correlated to a state of mind that alters our perception of the world, or rather, enables us to truly perceive the world as it is (*yathābhūta*). This definition is echoed in Āryadeva's interpretation of the state of *visamyogavimukti-phala*:

*Ce fruit de délivrance [visamyogavimukti-phala], disons nous, n'est pas une certaine entité à part du lien, de ce qui est lié et du moyen. — C'est-à-dire: 1. quand on obtient d'être délivré du lien, on ne réalise pas une certaine délivrance qui soit à part, qui soit extérieure au lien. Ce qui est nommé délivrance, c'est seulement la non-naissance d'un [nouveau] lien en raison d'un certain état qui est la vue des choses telles qu'elles sont (yathābhūtam); 2. de même pour ce qui est lié. Ce qui est nommé délivrance, ce n'est pas une entité (saddharma) à part, mais un certain état d'aise et d'indépendance [dans lequel le lié est] dégagé du lien des passions-erreurs; 3. de même pour le moyen. Ce qui est nommé délivrance, ce n'est pas une entité à part, extérieure au chemin; c'est une certaine efficacité qui dégage des passions erreurs.*<sup>10</sup>

*Nirupādisesa nibbāna*, on the other hand, is "nibbāna-without residue" in the sense that all *kammās* have been completely eradicated and, consequently, no fuel remains to perpetuate life. *Nirupādisesa nibbāna* is usually referred to as *khandhāparinibbāna*, a total extinction of the five aggregates (*khandhā*). This state of *nirupādisesa* is *nibbāna* beyond mind and matter, no different from the state of *nibbāna* that the Buddha attained at the moment of death.

Correlations are often made between the terms *nirupādisesa nibbāna* (without residue) and *parinibbāna*, and between *sopādisesa nibbāna* and "plain" *nibbāna*. However, no sound textual justification is found for such an identification. It seems that in the *sutta* literature the term *parinibbāna* is restricted to the passing away of the *arahant* (i.e. the attainment of *nirupādisesa nibbāna*). Yet the substantive in these particular passages virtually functions as an elegant or polite term for an *arahant's* death rather than entering into *nirupādisesa nibbāna* itself. We often find the verb form *parinibbāyati* being used to mean the attainment of *arahantship* itself without implying the passing away of the *arahant* at that particular moment.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, commentarial literature mentions two kinds of *parinibbānas*: 1) *kilesāparinibbāna*, the extinction of defilements which is equated with *sopādisesa nibbāna*, and 2) *khandhāparinibbāna*, or the extinction of the aggregates, i.e. the

passing away of the *arahant*, *nirupādisesa nibbāna*. As Peter Mansfield pointed out in his article "The Nibbāna-Parinibbāna Controversy";<sup>12</sup> not even the past participle *parinibbuta* refers exclusively to the state of *nirupādisesa nibbāna*.<sup>13</sup> Because of its dubious significance, the term *parinibbāna* is not used in this article. The concepts of *nirupādisesa* and *sopādisesa* are the precise technical terms that refer respectively to the total eradication of the aggregates at the time of the death of the *arahant*, and to the state attained by a living *arahant*.

Although the distinction between these first two kinds of *nibbānas* is clear, the problem associated with the state of *saññavedayitanirodha* is not as simple to tackle! Pāli texts repeatedly refer to a state beyond sensation or, more literally, a state characterized by the eradication of recognition and sensation (*sañña* and *vedanā*; *saññavedayitanirodha*), a state which Buddhaghosa and Dhammapāla have compared to *nibbāna*. In order to better understand this mysterious state, we will now examine pertinent textual evidence, and respond to some modern interpretations.

The life of Siddhattha Gotama just prior to his enlightenment, as portrayed in the *Ariyapariyesanasutta*, offers significant information on numerous "trance-like" states. According to this text, the bodhisattva visited many saints who were engaged in different types of penance, the most eminent being Ālāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta. Gotama first approached Ālāra Kālāma and mastered the stage of *akīñcaññiyātana samādhi* (the third *samāpatti*) which was the highest known to his teacher. When this realization did not correspond to final liberation, he left Ālāra Kālāma and went to study under Uddaka Rāmaputta. With the later, he quickly mastered the *samādhi* of *nevasaññānāsaññā* (the fourth *samāpatti*), similarly the highest he could learn from him. The bodhisattva did not regard this condition as final liberation either and thus left to independently pursue his goal.<sup>14</sup> Only then did he finally experience *nibbāna*<sup>15</sup> and become a *buddha*. This text explicitly states that Gotama had attained all the eight absorptions, i.e. the four *jhānas* and the four *samāpattis*, and that he attained an even higher state: *nibbāna*. In this very same *sutta*, Gotama is portrayed as instructing the monks not only as how to attain each of these eight absorptions, but also how to reach a state higher than these eight. This state is called *saññavedayitanirodha*,<sup>16</sup> the eradication of recognition and sensation, and it seems at first approach to be the same as *nibbāna*. As La Vallée Poussin says:

*Ils [les bouddhistes] pensent que ce neuvième [recueillement] a été découvert par le Bouddha; ils le nomment, non pas recueillement d'inconscience ("sans saṃjñā"), mais recueillement de destruction de la conscience et de la sensation ("saṃjñāveditanirodha") ou, plus*

*simplement, recueillement de la destruction (nirodhasamāpatti); ils lui donnent un caractère nettement bouddhique en le définissant comme une prise de contact avec le Nirvāna (ou avec une entité semblable au Nirvāna).*<sup>17</sup>

However, many modern scholars, such as Rune Johansson, hold that *saññāvedayitanirodha* is different from *nibbāna*:

However, *saññāvedayitanirodha* is not included and it is not identified [in Pāli texts] with *nibbāna*. There are texts that would seem to imply a very close relationship, but they are exceptions. *Nirodha* is frequently mentioned as an aid to the attainment of *nibbāna*; but *nibbāna* can be attained on the other levels just as well, even without meditation [the author probably means the practice of the *jhānas* and *samāpattis*]; what is important is the destruction of the obsessions.<sup>18</sup>

Yet the *Ariyapariyesanasutta* depicts the Buddha teaching his disciples how to successively reach the eight absorptions, the same eight that he himself had attained, and how to experience *saññāvedayitanirodha*. According to this text, the Buddha establishes a parallel between the various attainments his disciples must achieve, and his own. It would therefore be strange rhetoric to find the ninth attainment of the Buddha, i.e. *nibbāna*, radically different from the ninth of his disciples, i.e. *saññāvedayitanirodha*. Theoretically, there should not be any major difference between the two, especially since *saññāvedayitanirodha* is described in the same way that *nibbāna* is often described. Both are described as “crossing over the entanglement of the world”, as being out of reach of the Evil One (Māra).<sup>19</sup>

If the correlation between *saññāvedayitanirodha* and *nibbāna* were based solely on this hypothesis, of course, it would not stand on firm ground. However, this assumption finds firm support in the commentarial literature, texts that Rune Johansson may have overlooked. For example, in a chapter devoted to the discussion of *saññāvedayitanirodha*, the *Visuddhimagga* states that certain monks enter into this “trance” thinking: “Let us dwell in bliss by being without consciousness here and now and reaching the cessation that is *nibbāna*”.<sup>20</sup> A few pages later, the same text reiterates that *saññāvedayitanirodha* is “an attainment which a noble one may cultivate; the peace it gives is reckoned as *nibbāna* here and now”.<sup>21</sup> The commentary of the *Visuddhimagga* goes even further by introducing an equivocal correlation between the term *saññāvedayitanirodha* and “*nibbāna*-without-residue”: *Nibbānam patvā ti anupādisesanibbānam patvā viya*.<sup>22</sup> Noteworthy is the commentator’s introduction of the particle *viya*, which suggests similarity rather than identity. The passage should therefore be translated thus: “[in this

particular context of the *Visuddhimagga*, the expression] ‘attaining *nibbāna*’ means attaining [a state] *similar to nibbāna*-without-residue.” As Dhammapāla established no more than a correlation between *saññāvedayitanirodha* and *anupādisesanibbāna*, we cannot directly equate these two concepts. It can not be overemphasized that the exegete did not establish a one-to-one correlation between the two terms, but only stated that they are “similar”.<sup>23</sup> However, Buddhaghosa mentions that the mind of one who has emerged from *saññāvedayitanirodha* tends towards *nibbāna*.<sup>24</sup> This suggests that the “trance” is a kind of abudration of *nibbāna* that bends the mind towards achieving *nibbāna* itself rather than achieving the state that resembles it.

Nevertheless, although commentarial literature equivocally links *saññāvedayitanirodha* with *nibbāna*-without-residue (*nirupādisesanibbāna*), this equation is often questioned by scholars. For example, David Kalupahana stated that “scholars more conversant [than William James] with the Buddhist tradition go to the extent of equating the state of cessation (*saññāvedayitanirodha*) with freedom (*nibbāna*)”.<sup>25</sup> According to Kalupahana, these two states cannot be equated, in any sense.

There seems to be, however, a flaw in Kalupahana’s argument against correlating *saññāvedayitanirodha* with *nibbāna*. Although he correctly points out that the former ought to be experienced by the body (*kāyena sacchikarāṇīyā*),<sup>26</sup> his preceding remark misleads the reader, for Kalupahana considers that the *Ariyapariyesanasutta*, in which the Buddha refused to equate freedom with the state of cessation, should serve as a corrective to this wrong identification by James and others.<sup>27</sup> A careful reading of the *Ariyapariyesanasutta*, however, shows that the Buddha never refused to equate *nibbāna* with *saññāvedayitanirodha*. What we do find in this particular text is simply a statement that none of the eight absorptions can be equated with *nibbāna*.

This dhamma [the teaching of Ālara Kālāma] does not lead to disregard, nor to dispassion, nor to cessation, nor to tranquillity, nor to super-knowledge, nor to awakening, nor to *nibbāna* but only as far as reaching the plane of “no-thing”.<sup>28</sup>

It seems that, either because *saññāvedayitanirodha* is sometimes described as the ninth absorption<sup>29</sup> or because it is one of the eight deliverances (*vimokkhā*),<sup>30</sup> Kalupahana has mistakenly associated *saññāvedayitanirodha* with the attainments of the eight absorptions (actually the four *jhānas* and the four *samāpattis*). It is important to recall, however, that the eight absorptions are not usually even mentioned along with *saññāvedayitanirodha*, except when the latter is described as higher than any of the former. Moreover, the *Ariyapariyesanasutta* does not mention the attainment of

*saññāvedayitanirodha* in this specific passage,<sup>31</sup> and taking for granted that it is implied is precarious. Therefore, we cannot affirm with certainty that the Buddha refused to equate *saññāvedayitanirodha* with *nibbāna*.

*Saññāvedayitanirodha* is known as a state beyond mind and matter, as is *nirupādisesa nibbāna*. However, one notable difference between the two is that the latter can only be experienced after death, while the former requires that one be alive. Alive, yes, but not in appearance. For all intents and purposes, one dwelling in *saññāvedayitanirodha* exhibits the same features as a deceased person with the slight exception that life (*āyu*) and bodily heat are still present, and that the sense-organs are purified.<sup>32</sup> Thus the experiencer is technically dead.

We saw earlier that *nirupādisesa nibbāna* is sometimes defined as *khandaparinibbāna*, i.e. totally freed from the five aggregates. *Nirupādisesa nibbāna* is also comparable to *saññāvedayitanirodha* in that the five elements are almost completely deactivated and become temporarily latent. As the name *saññāvedayitanirodha* implies, this state is devoid of *saññā* and *vedanā*. Without the existence of these two aggregates, neither of the two remaining mental aggregates (*sankhāra* and *viññāṇa*) can be present in their active form. According to the *paṭīcasamuppāda*, *sankhāra* is the necessary condition for the arising of the *viññāṇa* which can potentially turn into *vedanā*. Thus, if *vedanā* is eradicated, there can be no *sankhāra*, for the three links of the *paṭīcasamuppāda* that follows *vedanā* (*taṇhā*, *upādāna* and *bhava*) are members of the *sankhārakkhandha*.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, without *sankhāra*, *viññāṇa* cannot arise, due to its dependence on *sankhāra*. This argument is implicitly supported by the *Visuddhimagga* in its definition of *saññāvedayitanirodha*: "What is the attainment of cessation [*saññāvedayitanirodha*]? It is the disappearance of consciousness (*citta*) and its mental factors (*cetasikas*) owing to their progressive eradication".<sup>34</sup> Noteworthy is that *abhidhamma* literature synonymously interchanges the terms *citta* and *viññāṇa*,<sup>35</sup> while *cetasika* comprises not only *vedanā* and *saññā*, as we would expect from *saññāvedayitanirodha*, but also the fifty factors that constitute *sankhāra*. It follows that since *saññāvedayitanirodha* is devoid of *citta* and *cetasikas*, it is devoid of *viññāṇa*, *vedanā*, *saññā* and *sankhāra* as well. Only the remaining aggregate, the *rūpakhandha*, must continue to be present, for the body remains alive and must be sustained by the *rūpajīvitindriya* (material faculty of life), one of the twenty-four *upādārūpa*. Therefore, *saññāvedayitanirodha* is not simply a "more radical negation of perceptions [*saññā*]", as Tilmann Vetter suggested,<sup>36</sup> but a radical negation of all four mental aggregates. In this sense, it could neither be equated, as Winston King advanced,<sup>37</sup> with the fruits of the paths, for these are

still characterized by the four mental aggregates, while *saññāvedayitanirodha* is completely devoid of them.

It is said that while dwelling in the state of *saññāvedayitanirodha*, the body is entirely protected from sustaining any type of injury. Pali texts offer us the shocking example of Mahānāga who was dwelling in this trance when the house in which he temporarily dwelt caught fire. The blaze persisted until the villagers put out the fire; Mahānāga remained totally unaware of the event. After all, without the four mental aggregates, one cannot be aware of anything in the mundane world! However, it is said that only the house burned; the monk was left untouched by the flames. It is interesting to note that when describing the villagers attempt to quench the fire with water, Buddhaghosa employed the causative form (*nibbāpetvā*), which shares the same etymology as *nibbāna*. Emerging from *saññāvedayitanirodha*, Mahānāga even jokingly made a pun ("I am discovered!") and then "flew away".<sup>38</sup> While in the trance, Mahānāga's own fire (i.e. his five aggregates) was temporarily quenched; after he emerged from *saññāvedayitanirodha* and realized that the villagers were trying to extinguish the fire, he exclaimed "I (meaning the five aggregates metaphorically associated with the fire) am discovered", thus stressing the crucial polarity between fire and water, the five aggregates and *nibbāna*.

Unfortunately, this sensational (albeit deprived of sensation) state of *saññāvedayitanirodha* is not available to just anyone. According to the *Visuddhimagga*, only the *anāgāmi* and the *arahant* who have successively passed through the eight absorptions can enter it.<sup>39</sup> This point is extremely important, for many scholars argue that equating *saññāvedayitanirodha* with *nibbāna* is impossible since, according to the Theravāda tradition, *nibbāna* can be experienced only by means of wisdom (*paññā*) and discriminative insight (*vipassanā*), while the eight absorptions can be attained simply by practicing concentration (*samatha*). However, the fact that it is compulsory to be either an *anāgāmi* or an *arahant* in order to experience *saññāvedayitanirodha* implicitly demands that a certain amount of wisdom and discriminative insight have been acquired. In fact, only those who have perfected these two qualities would be capable of experiencing the state of *saññāvedayitanirodha*.<sup>40</sup> As Winston L. King emphasizes, "only those who have attained the Path can attain cessation. It cannot be repeated too often that cessation is an integral blending of the two [insight (*vipassanā*) and concentration (*samatha*)]".<sup>41</sup> Therefore, *anāgāmis* and *arahants* who have reached the goal (*sopādhisesanibbāna*) but have not followed the path of the absorptions cannot reach this state.

Not all scholars agree with the above commentary. Paul J. Griffiths, for example, so strongly refutes this view that he devotes an entire book to the subject. According to Griffiths, only the path of



discriminative insight (*vipassanā*) leads to *nibbāna*, and only the paths of concentration (*samatha*) leads to the absorptions and to *saññāvedayitanirodha*. The two are distinct and thus can never be "blended", as suggested by King, in order to attain either goal. Griffiths accuses Buddhaghosa, and other exegetes of wrongly attempting to reconcile these two paths by correlating *saññāvedayitanirodha* with *nibbāna*-without-residue (*nirupādisesanibbāna*), and by further stating that in order to experience cessation, one must have already perfected wisdom through discriminative insight to the level of *anāgāmi*. Griffiths does not agree with Buddhaghosa's reasoning, almost to the degree of charging the commentator with heresy.<sup>42</sup> Griffiths' statement is rather fierce and, as will be shown, I do not feel his arguments bear out the charge.

Griffiths maintains two major arguments against the identification of *saññāvedayitanirodha* and *nibbāna*. The first is based on the following statement from the *Visuddhimagga*: "Why do they attain *nirodha*? [...] they attain it by thinking: 'let us live happily (*sukham*) by being mindless in this very moment and having attained cessation which is *nibbāna*'."<sup>43</sup> According to Griffiths,

it is unclear how a condition in which no mental events occur can possess affective tone as appears to be suggested [by Buddhaghosa]. Presumably it would be more accurate to describe the attainment of cessation as a condition which is free from both happiness and sadness and indeed from all affective tone whatever.<sup>44</sup>

The remark is accurate; since *saññāvedayitanirodha* is a state where none of the mental aggregates function, making it impossible to experience either pleasant or unpleasant sensations. However, Griffiths' reference does not seem to give proper consideration to Dhammapāla's commentary of the *Visuddhimagga*. According to Dhammapāla, the word happiness (*sukham*) in this particular passage simply means the absence of suffering.<sup>45</sup> The commentator believes that this is what Buddhaghosa intended when he said that those wishing to attain cessation do so in order to "live happily". We must understand that the Buddhist noble truth of suffering postulates the universality of suffering. Suffering does not merely result from unpleasant sensations, physical or mental, as Griffiths seems to imply, but is inherent in all compounded phenomena (*sankhāra*), i.e. all psycho-physical phenomena of existence, all the five aggregates. These are characterized by constant change, they arise and pass away; they are transitory (*anicca*). Because of this inherent instability, they are subject to suffering.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, suffering is often directly correlated with the five clinging-aggregates (*sankhittena pañcupādānakhandhā pi dukkhā*). Although

the state of *saññāvedayitanirodha*, being defined as beyond any of the four aggregates, can certainly not be characterized by pleasant and unpleasant sensations, it can be understood as a “pleasant” experience in Dhammapāla’s sense, for it transcends the suffering that is inherent in all types of sensations.

Griffiths’ second argument is that Buddhaghosa’s identification of *nibbāna* with *saññāvedayitanirodha* “seems to approach uneasily close to a standard Buddhist heresy” for it “encourages some version of the annihilation view.”<sup>47</sup> In the Theravāda tradition, the annihilation view (*ucchedadiṭṭhi*) is defined as the belief (held mainly by non-Buddhists, of course) that there is an unchanging self which remains constant throughout life and which, at the time of death, simply disappears. In other words, it is the belief in the existence of an entity which is more or less identical with the five aggregates and which become totally annihilated at the time of death.<sup>48</sup> Of course, Buddhism categorically rejects the view that there is a permanent entity which is identified with the five aggregates.<sup>49</sup> the tradition denies the truth of this presupposition altogether by affirming that there is merely a sequence of events that are causally related, but that this similarity can in no way be perceived as identity. Furthermore, Buddhism also repudiates the view that there is absolutely no existence after death,<sup>50</sup> but rather that there exists a continuum from one life to another, wherein the last consciousness of the present life (*cuticitta*) engenders the first consciousness of the next (*paṭisandhivīññāna*). The only possible way to exit this cycle of birth, death and rebirth is to eradicate all karmic activities (*sankhāras*) during the lifetime and attain *nibbāna*; otherwise the *samsāric* circle is continued as described above. This being standard Buddhist doctrine, we must question how Griffiths can make such a statement as “many Buddhist texts, especially those which discuss the nature of *nibbāna*, do in fact read as though they embrace just this ‘annihilation view’.”<sup>51</sup> It is true that *nibbāna* is most often described in negativistic terms, but reaching the goal is often the result of many lives of practice,<sup>52</sup> this very point indicates that *there is* some sort of continuum from one existence to another, a view that the “annihilists” would reject. “However this may be”, as Griffiths continues, “it certainly seems as though this text of Buddhaghosa’s, identifying the attainment of cessation with *nibbāna*, is one of those that encourages some version of the ‘annihilation view’.”<sup>53</sup> It is mysterious how Griffiths can interpret the words of Buddhaghosa in such a manner, since the passage in question clearly states that the disciple works for the attainment of cessation in order to attain a certain “bliss” (*sukhaṃ*). The very fact that “bliss” (or whatever this might refer to) is present—and experienced indicates that this is not total annihilation. Furthermore, it is not the association of *saññāvedayitanirodha* with *nibbāna* which should be considered in this light, but *nibbāna* per

se, as it is the latter (or at least *nirupādisesanibbāna*) which is described as being beyond the five aggregates<sup>54</sup> — a statement which resembles the annihilistic view in the sense that all constituents of the individual are destroyed, but contradicts it in the sense that there is still something left (perfect bliss; *paramam sukham*), and many lives preceding it.

The Theravāda commentarial tradition has established an equivocal relation between *saññāvedayitanirodha* and *nibbāna*-without-residue, in the sense that in the particular passage of the *Visuddhimagga* referred to earlier, Buddhaghosa does not seem to be making a straightforward doctrinal statement that *saññāvedayitanirodha* is *nibbāna*. He simply states that certain monks enter into this trance thinking: "let us dwell in bliss by being without consciousness here and now and reaching the cessation that is *nibbāna*."<sup>55</sup> Buddhaghosa places this statement in the mouths of others, in what seems to be from the context a loose, metaphorical way of speaking, for such rhetoric is not typical of Buddhaghosa when writing in a strictly analytical manner and when supporting a doctrinal point. Hence the commentator, Dhammapala, rushes in to prevent misunderstanding by explaining that "reaching the cessation that is *nibbāna*" means "as though reaching *nibbāna*-without-residue".

However, according to Pāli sources, there is a major distinction between *saññāvedayitanirodha* and *nibbāna*. On the one hand, *nibbāna* is not particularly a meditative attainment, but rather *asabhāvadhamma*, a reality which exists in the ultimate sense (*paramatthato*). As an ultimate reality, *nibbāna* differs from all other *dhammas* in that it is unconditioned, unborn,<sup>56</sup> undying,<sup>57</sup> etc. It is realized by practitioners when they attain the paths and fruits, but its existence is by no means dependent on anyone's attainment. *Nibbāna* exists and remains as such whether or not it is realized. On the other hand, *saññāvedayitanirodha* is not a *sabhāvadhamma*, it has no individual essence and it is produced (*nipphanna*). For the simple reason that it has no individual essence, according to the *Visuddhimagga*, it is not classifiable as formed or unformed, mundane or supramundane.<sup>58</sup> According to Pāli literature, *nibbāna* is a real *dhamma*, *āyatana*, and *dhātu*, while *saññāvedayitanirodha* is not. The latter is simply the cessation of mental factors reached through the procedure described in the *Visuddhimagga*.<sup>59</sup> In the light of these canonical definitions of *saññāvedayitanirodha* and *nibbāna*, the juxtaposition of these two states as one becomes almost impossible.

We cannot conclude this discussion without mentioning one final hypothesis, put forward by Louis de La Vallée Poussin,<sup>60</sup> regarding *nirodhasamāpatti* and its place within Buddhism. In his article, Le Vallée Poussin explores the debt of Buddhism to the ancient form of *Samkhya* or *yoga* where the practice of complete withdrawal of the

senses was the only means of achieving *cittavṛttinirodha*, which in turn was the only means of attaining *kaivalya* or liberation. He argues that the early Buddhists wanted to show that having incorporated every kind of practice into their system, they had reached an attainment higher than any of those associated with other practices.<sup>61</sup> Therefore integrating *saññāvedayitanirodha* into the Buddhist tradition could be no more than the result of an attempt to make Buddhism appear superior to rival practices.

In conclusion, we must concede that, being mere scholars and with limited resources at our disposition, it is perhaps impossible to determine with one hundred percent certainty whether *nibbāna* and *saññāvedayitanirodha* are truly one and the same; we can be sure of the controversies surrounding the subject! We may now affirm, however, that Pāli texts are not in total accord on this matter: the *sutta* literature does not explicitly equate *saññāvedayitanirodha* with *nibbāna*, the *abhidhamma* seems to stress the difference between these two stages, and the commentarial and sub-commentarial literature implies a similarity between them... Yet, one point seems clear: *nibbāna* and *saññāvedayitanirodha* both share a "blissful feeling",<sup>62</sup> which in itself may again be interpreted in various ways. As mentioned previously, the peace generated by *saññāvedayitanirodha* "is reckoned as *nibbāna* here and now"<sup>63</sup> for it shares *nibbāna*'s peaceful quality. However, *saññāvedayitanirodha* cannot be identical to *nibbāna*, for it has no individual essence (*sabhava*) and it is produced (*nipphanna*). It could simply be some kind of blissful foretaste of the *nibbāna* element without residue, but on this matter as well, the texts remain inscrutable (at least for the moment...).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> AbhS. VI,14.

<sup>2</sup> Th. Stcherbatsky represents the followers of this perspective: "Buddha and *Nirvāṇa* are different names for the same thing". Stcherbatsky, *The Conception of Buddhist Nirvāṇa* (Varanasi: Bharatiya Vidya Prakashan, 1968), p. 79.

<sup>3</sup> As Louis de La Vallée Pouissin stated in one of his lectures at Manchester College: "It may therefore be safely maintained that *Nirvāṇa* is annihilation." *The way to Nirvana: six lectures on ancient Buddhism as a discipline of salvation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979) p. 117.

<sup>4</sup> *Anto jaṭā bahi jaṭā jaṭāya jaṭitā pajā: tam tam Gotama pucchāmi: ko imam vijaṭaye jaṭan ti* S.i,13; 165. Also quoted in Buddhaghosa's introduction to his *Visuddhimagga* (Vsm. p.1).

- <sup>5</sup> "Aussi bien quand le Bouddha est parvenu du même coup à la Clairvoyance et au Nirvāna, c'est un cri de triomphe et d'allégresse qui s'échappe de ses lèvres à l'idée qu'il a enfin brisé les chaînes du Destin et s'est pour toujours libéré de la prison corporelle." A. Foucher, *La Vie du Bouddha d'après les textes et les monuments de l'Inde* (Paris: J. Maisonneuve, 1987) p. 326.
- <sup>6</sup> *Tad etam [nibbānam] sabhāvato ekavidham pi, saupādisesa-nibbānadhātu anupādisesanibbānadhātu ceti duvidham hoti kāraṇapariyāyena.* Abhs VI,14. The text further classifies nibbana into three modes: void, signless, and absolute content. This division, however, does not influence our discussion. See S. Z. Aung's translation of the *Abhidhammatthasangaha* entitled *Compendium of Philosophy* (London P.T.S., 1979), p. 166.
- <sup>7</sup> *The Path of Purification*, p. 580-581. This subject is further elaborated in the Itivuttaka (38, 39, 40, 41) as well as in Kamaleswar Bhattacharya's article "Upadhi, upādi et upādāna dans le canon bouddhique pāli". *Mélanges d'indianisme à la mémoire de Louis Renou* (Paris: Publications de l'institut de civilisation indienne, 1967), pp. 81-97.
- <sup>8</sup> *Tassa tiṭṭhanteva pañcīndriyāni yesam avighātattā manāpāmanāpaṃ paccanubhoti, sukhadukkham paṭisaṃvediyati...saupādisesā nibbānadhātu.* It. 38.
- <sup>9</sup> *Anupādisesā pana samparāyika yamhi nirujjhanti bhavāni sabbaso* It. 38
- <sup>10</sup> Louis de La Vallée Poussin, "Āryadeva et le Nirvāna", *Mélanges Chinois et Bouddhiques*, vol. 1 (Bruxelles: Institut Belge des Hautes Études Chinoises, 1932) p. 132.
- <sup>11</sup> See M. i, 67.
- <sup>12</sup> Peter Masefield, "The Nibbāna-Parinibbāna Controversy", *Religion*, Vol. 9, Autumn 1979 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd.) p. 216.
- <sup>13</sup> The reader may wish to refer to the following two passages. *Sukham vāyadi vā dukkham adukkhamasukham sahā ajjhatañ ca bahiddhā ca yam kiñci atthi veditaṃ etam 'dukkhan' ti ñatvāna mosadhammaṃ palokinam phussa phussa vāyam passam evam tattha virajjati vedanānam khayā bhikkhu nicchāto parinibbuto ti* (Sn. 144[738-9]). *Samāhito sampajāno sato buddhassa sāvako vedanā capajānāti vedanānañca sambhavam. Yattha cetā nirujjhanti maggañca khayagāminam vedanānam khayā bhikkhu nicchāto parinibbuto ti* (S. iv, 204; another similar passage at S. v, 57).
- <sup>14</sup> *Nāyam dhammo nibbidāya, na virāgāya na nirodhāya na abhiññāya na sambodhāya na nibbānāya samvattati* M. i, 165.
- <sup>15</sup> M. i, 167.
- <sup>16</sup> M. i, 174-175.
- <sup>17</sup> Louis de la Vallée Poussin, "Musīla et Nārada; Le chemin du nirvāna", *Mélanges chinois et bouddhiques* (Bruxelles: Institut Belge des Hautes

Études Chinoises, 1937) p. 212.

- <sup>18</sup> Rune E. A. Johanson, *The Psychology of Nirvana* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1969) p. 49-50.
- <sup>19</sup> M. i, 175.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ditth'eva dhamme acittakā hutvā nirodham nibbānam patvā sukham viharissāmā ti samāpajanti* Vsm. p.705; translation from the *Path of Purification*, p. 828.
- <sup>21</sup> *Iti santam samāpattim imam ariyasevitam, ditth'eva dhamme nibbānam iti saṅkham upāgataṃ* Vsm. p.709; translation from the *Path of Purification*, p. 833.
- <sup>22</sup> VsmA. 902.
- <sup>23</sup> Vasubandhu, in his *Abhidharmakośa*, seems to have been as careful as Dhammapāla in his definition of *saññāvedayitanirodha*: he stated only that the latter is similar (*sadrśa*) to *nibbāna*. AbhK. ii, 44.
- <sup>24</sup> *Vuṭṭhitassa kin ninnam cittam hoti ti nibbānaninnam* Vsm.708.
- <sup>25</sup> Kalupahana, *The Principles of Buddhist Psychology* (Albany: State University Press of New York, 1987), p. 76.
- <sup>26</sup> Which is interpreted by the commentator as arising simultaneously with the mental body (*nāma*). *Kāyena ti sahajātā-nāma-kāyena* D.A. iii, 1023.
- <sup>27</sup> Kalupahana, *The Principles of Buddhist Psychology*, p. 94.
- <sup>28</sup> *Nāyam [Ālarakālamassa] dhammo nibbidāya na virāgāya na nirodhāya na abhiññāya na sambhodhāya na nibbānāya saṃvattati, yāvad-eva ākiñcaññāyatanūpapattiyā ti* M. i, 165. Translation inspired from *Middle Length Sayings*, vol. i, p. 209. The same is said about the teaching of Uddaka Rāmaputta with the slight nuance that this latter leads no further than to the state of "neither-perception-nor-non-perception" (see M. i, 166).
- <sup>29</sup> For example, the *Dighanikāya* describes nine successive "cessations", which consist of the four *jhānas*, the four *samāpattis* and *saññāvedayitanirodha*. D. iii, 266.
- <sup>30</sup> A. iv, 306.
- <sup>31</sup> That is M. i, 166-167.
- <sup>32</sup> *Āyu aparikkhīno, usmā avūpasantā, indriyāni vipassannāni* M. i, 269.
- <sup>33</sup> See the author's article on "A Brief Survey of the Relations between the *Paṭiccasamuppāda* and the *Pañcakkhandhā*" (*Contact Between Cultures; South Asia*, edited by K.I. Koppedrayar, Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992; pp. 235-239), p. 237.
- <sup>34</sup> *Tattha kā nirodhasamāpatti ti yā anupubbanirodhavasena cittacetasi kānam dhammānam appavatti* Vsm. 702.
- <sup>35</sup> Nyānātiloka, *Buddhist Dictionary*, p. 37.
- <sup>36</sup> "Probably in a period already dominated by the method of discriminating insight some persons wished to make use of this wasteland and

discovered in the cessation of aperceptions and feelings [*saññāvedayitanirodha*] a state (or rather a name) not yet touched by any criticism. 'Neither apperception nor non-apperception' [the fourth *samāpatti*] now becomes the last but one stage and its description is to be understood as a middle-way formulation allowing for a more radical negations of aperceptions." Tillman Vetter, *The Ideas and Meditative Practices of Early Buddhism* (Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1988) pg.68.

- <sup>37</sup> *Saññāvedayitanirodha* "is the maximum possible temporal extension of those nibbāna realizations contained in Path and fruition awareness as well as the experiential ultimate, nibbāna itself, tasted in one's present existence". King, *Theravāda Meditation: the Buddhist Transformation of Yoga* (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 1980), p. 104.
- <sup>38</sup> Vsm. 706.
- <sup>39</sup> *Ke taṃ samāpajanti, ke na samāpajanti ti sabbe pi puthujjanā sotāpannā sakadāgāmino, sukkhavipassakā ca anāgāmino arahanto na samāpajanti. Attha samāpattilābhino pana anāgāmino khīṇāsavā ca samāpajanti: dvīhi balehi samannāgatattā tayo ca saṅkhārānaṃ paṭippassaddhiyā soḷasahi ñāṇacariyāhi, navahi samādhicariyāhi vasībhāvataṃ paññā nirodhasamāpattiyā ñāṇaṃ ti hi vuttam* Vsm. 702. The reader might want to refer to the section of the *Visuddhimagga* (p. 702-709) which explains how one can enter *saññāvedayitanirodha*, what are the requirements, how does one emerge from that state, etc.
- <sup>40</sup> See A. iii, 192; Vsm. 705.
- <sup>41</sup> King, *Theravāda Meditation*, p. 108.
- <sup>42</sup> Paul J. Griffiths, *On Being Mindless; Buddhist Meditation and the Mind-body Problem* (Illinois: Open Court, 1986) p. 29. See page 11 for Griffiths' charge.
- <sup>43</sup> *Kasmā samāpajanti ti [...] ditth'eva dhamme acittakā hutvā nirodham patvā sukham viharissāma ti samāpajanti* Vsm. 705.
- <sup>44</sup> Griffiths, *On Being Mindless*, p. 29.
- <sup>45</sup> *Sukham ti niddukkham* VsmA. 1673.22.
- <sup>46</sup> As stated in the *Samyuttanikāya*: "What do you think, monks: is *rūpa* permanent or impermanent?" "Impermanent, Sir." "And that which is impermanent, is it suffering or pleasant?" "Suffering, Sir." *Taṃ kiṃ maññatha bhikkhave rūpaṃ niccaṃ vā aniccaṃ vāti. Aniccaṃ bhante* S. iii, 67. The same mode of questioning is used for the four other mental aggregates.
- <sup>47</sup> Griffiths, *On Being Mindless*, p. 29.
- <sup>48</sup> Nyānātiloka, *Buddhist Dictionary*, p. 48.
- <sup>49</sup> *Rūpaṃ vedayitaṃ saññaṃ viññānaṃ yañca saṅkhataṃ n' eso aham asmi*. S. i, 112.
- <sup>50</sup> Such as portrayed in D. i, 55.

- <sup>51</sup> Griffiths, *On Being Mindless*, p. 29
- <sup>52</sup> For example, the *Jataka* offers the biographies of hundreds of the previous lives of the bodhisattva on his way to enlightenment.
- <sup>53</sup> Griffiths, *On Being Mindless*, p. 29.
- <sup>54</sup> “But [secondly, it is called *without result of past clinging left* (*nirupādisesa*)] since after the last consciousness of the Arahant, who has abandoned arousing [future aggregates] and so prevented kamma from giving result in a future [existence], there is no further arising of aggregates of existence, and those already arisen have disappeared. So the [result of past] clinging that remained is non-existent; and it is in terms of this non-existence, in the sense that [sic] there is no [result of past] clinging here, that the [same goal is called] *without result of past clinging left*.” *The Path of Purification*, p. 580-581.
- <sup>55</sup> Vsm. 705.
- <sup>56</sup> Dhs. 2; Sn. 362; It. 87; Ud. 80, etc.
- <sup>57</sup> Vsm. 507.
- <sup>58</sup> *Nirodhasamāpattisankhatā asankhatā ti ādi pucchāyam pana sankhatā ti pi lokiyā ti pi lokuttarā ti pi na vattabbā. Kasmā? Sabhāvato n’ atthitāya* Vsm. 709. A similar statement regarding the mundane and supramundane classification of *saññavedayitanirodha* is found in the *Kathavatthu*, p. 516.
- <sup>59</sup> Vsm. 705 ff.
- <sup>60</sup> Louis de La Vallée Poussin, “Āryadeva et le Nirvāna”.
- <sup>61</sup> This hypothesis of ‘appropriation’ was also advanced by Martin G. Wiltshire regarding other Buddhist doctrines. See *Ascetic Figures Before and In Early Buddhism: the Emergence of Gautama as the Buddha* (New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1990).
- <sup>62</sup> Blissful in the sense that it is devoid of sensation rather than being characterized by a pleasant feeling.
- <sup>63</sup> VsmA. 833.