

14

Viññāṇa-ṭṭhiti

The stations of consciousness

Theme: The classification of living beings according to consciousness

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1 Classification of beings

1.1 The Sutta Nipāta declares that the Buddha knows “all the stations of (or support for) consciousness” (*viññāṇa-ṭṭhitiyo sabbā abhijānaṃ tathāgato*) (Sn 1114). According to **the Upāya Sutta** (S 22.53), the body or form (*rūpa*), feelings (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*) and mental formations (*saṅkhāra*) are the bases or stations (*ṭhiti*) for consciousness (*viññāṇa*).¹

According to Buddhist psychology, consciousness can exist as *a personal mental process*, or as a realm of being, that is, an actual world inhabited by those whose consciousness conduces (*saṃvattanika*) to that realm.² **The Sutta Nipāta** contains this stanza, whose commentary throws some light on the nature of existential consciousness:

<i>Viññāṇa-ṭṭhitiyo sabbā</i>	All the stations of consciousness
<i>(Posālā ti Bhagavā)</i>	(Posāla, said the Blessed One)
<i>abhijānaṃ Tathāgato</i>	he has directly known, the Tathagata
<i>ṭiṭṭhantam enaṃ jānāti</i>	knows the one who remains (with karma),
<i>vimuttam tapparāyanam</i>	or, the freed, or the one intent on that path. (Sn 1114)

1.2 Consciousness (*viññāṇa*) (which here refers to “life” as we know it), needs at least one of the above four “stations of consciousness”—physical form, feeling, perception or formations—as object and basis, as a place of delight, and it grows and flourishes in each of them.³ In fact, the process of life and rebirth does not exist apart from these four stations of consciousness or a combination of them (as we shall see below).

When the four stations of consciousness are applied to the various realms of being, we have the model of **the 7 stations of consciousness** (*satta viññāṇa-ṭṭhiti*).⁴ These 7 stations are a classification of life (that is, living beings), throughout the universe by way of rebirth-linking (*paṭisandhi*) (DA 2:508-12) and the accumulation of karma leading to rebirth there (DAṬ 2:151).

1.3 The 7 stations of consciousness (*viññāṇa-ṭṭhiti*) are actual states of rebirth as envisaged by the early Buddhists in terms of body (*kāya*) and consciousness (*saññā*).⁵ The “consciousness” (*viññāṇa*) here is also later known by the commentarial phrase, “stations of constructive consciousness” (*abhisāṅkhāra, viññāṇa-ṭṭhiti*, SA 2:259). The Sutta Nipāta Commentary explains that there are two sets of “stations” (*ṭhiti*), namely, four stations “by virtue of constructions” (*abhisāṅkhāra, vasena*) and seven stations “by virtue of rebirth” (*paṭisandhi, vasena*).⁶

1.4 As we have already noted, in **the Upāya Sutta** (S 22.53), the four stations here refers to the other four aggregates (form, feeling, perception and formations), that is, the constituents of a physical being. It is by becoming attached to these four that consciousness “while standing, would stand” (*ṭiṭṭhamānam*

¹ **Upāya S** (S 22.53/3:53 f), SD 29.4, & SA 2:271; **Saṅgīti S** (D 3:228) & DA 3:1021. Cf CAF Rhys Davids *Sakya*, 1928:158 f.

² See **Viññāṇa**, SD 17.8a (11.2) esp (4.4). For an interesting contemporary insight by a Buddhist scientific thinker, see B Alan Wallace 2007:11-24.

³ The 4 stations of consciousness: D 33.1.11(18)/3:228; A 7.41/4:39 (SD 95.6).

⁴ **D 15.33-34/2:68 f**, **33.2.3(10/3:253**, **34.3.2(3)/3:263** (the 9 abodes of beings); **A 7.41/4:38**, **10.27.12/5:53**, **10.-27.14/5:53 f**. On the 9 abodes of beings (*satt’āvāsā*), see (3) below.

⁵ On the use of *saññā* for consciousness, see SD 18.8a (8.1).

⁶ SnA 602; cf Nc 570.

tiṭṭheyya) engaged with form, with feeling, with perception, or with formations.⁷ Earlier on, we saw **the Hāliddakāni Sutta 1** (S 22.3) explain how consciousness makes the other four aggregates its home [2], where its commentary glosses “consciousness” as *abhisankhāra* (construction) or *kamma, viññāṇa* (karmic consciousness)—that is, karma of body, speech and mind (SA 2:259). We see here a close link between consciousness and karma.⁸

2 The home of consciousness⁹

2.1 VIÑÑĀṆA AS KARMIC CONSCIOUSNESS. Like the Upāya Sutta [1], the synopsis (*uddesa*) of **the Hāliddakāni Sutta 1** (S 22.3) states that four aggregates—form, feeling, perception, and formations—are the “home” of consciousness (*viññāṇassa oko*). The teaching of this interesting Sutta is that *the true renunciant is one who has given up the aggregates of clinging*, thus:

The form element,¹⁰ householder, is the home of consciousness.¹¹ One whose consciousness is bound by lust for the form element is called one who wanders about frequenting houses.¹²

The feeling element,

The perception element,

The formations element, householder, is the home of consciousness. one whose consciousness is bound by lust for the formations element is called one who wanders about frequenting houses.¹³

Such, householder, is the one who wanders about frequenting houses.

(S 22.3.4/3:9 f) =, SD 10.12 [1.2(2)]

⁷ **Upāya S** (S 22.53/3:53 f), SD 29.4 & SA 2:271; **Saṅgīti S** (D 3:228) & DA 3:1021.

⁸ For a detailed study on consciousness, see *Viññāṇa*, SD 18.8a. On karma, see **Karma**, SD 18.1.

⁹ See *Viññāṇa*, SD 18.8a (5.2).

¹⁰ “Form element,” *rūpa, dhātu*. “The use of *dhātu* as a syn for *khandha* (aggregate) is unusual; more often the two are treated as headings for different schemes of classification” (S:B 1046 n18). This usage however is found in a number of suttas: **Hāliddakāni S 1** (S 3.9, 10), **Hāliddakāni S 2** (S 3.13), **Anicca S** (S 3:13), **Upāya S** (S 3:53), **Bīja S** (S 3:55), **Udāna S** (S 3:58 *bis*)—all in the Khandha Saṃyutta—and **Mahā Niddesa** (Nm 1:198).

¹¹ SA explains this consciousness (*viññāṇa*) as karmic consciousness (*kamma, viññāṇa*) (SA 2:259). See S:B 1047 n18 quoted below.

“Roams frequenting houses,” *oka, sārati*. According to DP, *oka* means “house, home; resort, refuge” (S 3:9, 5:24 = Dh 87; Dh 91; J 3:430), cf *ukka* (house) (V 1:211); *anoka*, “without a home, independent” (S 1:126; Sn 966), as n “homelessness, independence” (Dh 87); *anoka, sārī* (S 3:10; U 32; Sn 628). For other nn, see DP: *oka* & *ukka*. The first line reads *okam pahāya aniketa, sārī* without mention of *oka, sārī*, “one who wanders about frequenting houses,” nor *anoka, sārī*, “one who wanders about not frequenting houses.” Mahā Kaccāna introduces these terms as implicit in the absolute construction *okam pahāya* (S:B 1046 n18).

¹³ Comy: Why is it not said here, thus, “the consciousness element, householder, (is the home for consciousness)?” For the sake of avoiding confusion; for “home” is here spoken as a condition (*paccaya*). An earlier karmic consciousness is a condition for both a later karmic consciousness and a resultant consciousness, and a resultant consciousness for both a (later) resultant consciousness and a (later) karmic consciousness. Therefore, the confusion could arise, “Which [what kind of] consciousness is meant here?” To avoid this, consciousness is not included, and the teaching expressed without breach. Furthermore, the other four aggregates, as objects (*ārammaṇa, vasena*), are said to be “stations for the karmically generative consciousness” (*abhisankhāra, viññāṇa-ṭṭhitiyo*). As such, consciousness is not mentioned here (*Kasmā pan’ettha “viññāṇa, dhātu kho, gahapaṭi ti na vuttanti? Sammoha, vighāt’attham. “Oko” ti hi atthato paccayo vuccati, purejātañ ca kamma, viññāṇaṃ pacchājātassa kamma, viññāṇassa pi vipāka, viññāṇassa pi vipāka, viññāṇaṃ ca vipāka, viññāṇassa pi kamma, viññāṇassa pi paccayo hoti. Tasmā “katarāṃ nu kho idha viññāṇaṃ?” ti sammoho bhavēyya, tassa vighāt’attham taṃ agahetvā asambhinnā va desanā katā. Api ca ārammaṇa, vasena catasso abhisankhāra, viññāṇa-ṭṭhitiyo vuttā ti tā dassetum pi idha viññāṇaṃ na gahitaṃ*) (SA 2:259).

The Saṃyutta Commentary explains *viññāṇa* here as “karmic consciousness” (*kamma, viññāṇa*) (SA 2:259). This is what sustains us in this life and holds us down in future lives. In his Sutta translation, **Bodhi** reminds us of the interdependence of the aggregates and the impermanence of *viññāṇa*:

The passage confirms the privileged status of consciousness among the five aggregates. While all the aggregates are conditioned phenomena marked by the three characteristics, consciousness serves as a connecting thread of personal continuity through the sequence of rebirths. This ties up with the idea expressed at [Cetanā Suttas 1-3]¹⁴ that consciousness is the persisting element in experience that links together the old experience with the new one. The other four aggregates serve as the “stations for consciousness” (*viññāṇa-t, thitiyo*) [see **Upāya Sutta**¹⁵ and the **Bija Sutta**¹⁶]. Even consciousness, however, is not a self-identical entity but a sequence of dependently arisen occasions of cognizing; see M 1:256-60 [M 38.1-8, **Mahā Taṇhā, saṅkhaya Sutta**].

(S:B 1047 n18)

2.2 VIÑÑĀṆA, THE FIRST AMONGST EQUALS. In other words, of the four mental components of the five aggregates, it is *viññāṇa*, or *citta*, or *mano*, that stands out as the fundamental factor. The other three—feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*) and formations (*saṅkhāra*)—are called *cetasikā* (“pertaining to *citta*”) or “mental concomitants.” The commentator **Dhammapāla**, for example, separates *viññāṇa* (which he equates with *mano*) from the other three aggregates, which he subsumes under the category of *dhammā*,¹⁷ that is, objects of *mano* or *viññāṇa*. He even contrasts the three with *nāma* (“name”), clearly implying that the other three mental aggregates are included in *nāma*.¹⁸

All the four mental aggregates are closely interconnected in their operation. *Viññāṇa* or *citta*, however, is the first amongst equals, forming the basic or predominant factor in the mental process. We should *not* mistake that *viññāṇa* is some sort of “home,” “vehicle,” or “container” for the other three aggregates; rather, if we are to speak of a “support” for conscious, it would be one of the other four aggregates, as stated in **the Hālidakāni Sutta 1** (S 22.3).¹⁹ Dhammapāla reminds us that we simply cannot perceive *citta* (or *viññāṇa*) aside from the other three mental aggregates, just as the waters from several rivers, or various kinds of oil, cannot be discerned once they have been mixed together (Pm 432).

The physical component, *rūpa*, is also sometimes called *kāya* or *sarīra* in the Commentaries. **Kāya** has two important senses: as “locus” or “basis” (*ṭhāna*) and as “body” (in the sense of a collection or corporation). As the former sense, *kāya* is the locus of *citta* (Pm 124), and *citta* is the locus of the other mental factors like *vedanā*, as much as *kāya* is.²⁰ *Kāya*, in other words, is the physical body in which *citta* and the other mental processes occur.

2.3 KĀYA AND SELF. *Kāya* sometimes refers to the whole “body” of psycho-physical factors known as the five aggregates.²¹ Dhammapāla points out that it is this psycho-physical body that is often referred to as the *atta, bhava* (literally, “selfhood”) or the empirical being (ThaA 2:47). “In other words,” con-

¹⁴ S 12.38-40/2:65-68, SD 7.6abc.

¹⁵ S 22.53/3:52-54, SD 29.4.

¹⁶ S 22.54/3:54 f, SD 39.2.

¹⁷ *Mano ti viññāṇa-k, khandho, dhammā ti vedanā, saññā, saṅkhāra-k, khandhā* (NettA 255 = NettA:VRI 306).

¹⁸ *Vijānātī ti viññāṇam... Nāma ti nāman, vedanādi-k, khandha-t, tayan* (UA 41).

¹⁹ It is curious that a contemporary Sinhalese scholar monk has described *viññāṇa* as “the receptacle, so to speak, for all the fifty-two mental concomitants or factors, since without consciousness no mental factors are available” (Piyadassi, *The Buddha’s Ancient Path*, London 1964:48). See also Pieris 1979:13 = 1980:219.

²⁰ *Kāyo cittaṅ ca vedanāya ṭhānam* (ItA 2:22).

²¹ ThaA 3:151; ThīA 86, 239. Sometimes, the mental factors are aggregates are referred to as *nāma, kāya* in contrast to *rūpa, kāya*, the physical body (ThīA 160).

cludes **Pieris**, “the *kāya* which is the locus of *citta* may not denote merely the fifth *khandha* as it often does, but the whole pentad of aggregates, including the *citta*!”²²

The Pali Canon and its Commentaries often take *atta, bhāva* as being somewhat synonymous with *sakkāya* (self-identity).²³ Understandably, Buddhaghosa points out that the *atta, bhāva* is only a concept (*paññatti*), that is, a way of naming or referring to the body.²⁴ Dhammapāla goes further to state that the five aggregates (that is, the body) are called *atta, bhāva* precisely because they have the inherent danger of being misunderstood as being *attā*.²⁵

3 Consciousness in the various planes

3.1 CLASSIFICATION OF BEINGS. The Mahānidāna Sutta (D 15) speaks of “the seven stations of consciousness and two bases” (*satta viññāṇa-t,ṭhitiyo dve āyatanaṇi*),²⁶ which, by way of “delimitation by number” (*ganaṇa, pariccheda*, KhpA 86), are known as **the nine abodes of beings** (*nava satt’āvāsa*).²⁷ This model classifies beings according to the nature of their consciousness, as follows:²⁸

- (1) beings different in body, different in perception (such as humans, the sense-world gods);
- (2) beings different in body, same in perception (that is, the four lower realms);
- (3) beings same in body, different in perception (such as the Ābhassara devas);
- (4) beings same in body, same in perception (such as the Vehapphala devas);
- (5) the base of infinite space;
- (6) the base of infinite consciousness; and
- (7) the base of nothingness.

The two bases (*āyatana*), which are not exactly “stations” for consciousness, are as follows:

- (8) the base of non-percipient beings; and
- (9) the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception.

[Table 3]

These last two are called “bases” (not “stations”) because therein consciousness *totally ceases* (8) in a sort of total hibernation or suspended animation, or that it is *so subtle* (9) that it cannot be said whether it exists or does not. Elsewhere these are called “the nine abodes of beings” (*nava, satt’āvāsa*).²⁹ Here *āyatana* is rendered as “base,”³⁰ referring to a realm or level of meditation, and also where it refers to the senses.”³¹ *Avacara* (lit “down-wandering”) is translated as “sphere,” but sometimes as “realm.”³²

²² Pieris 1979:14 = 1980:220. Dhammapāla compares the *atta, bhāva* to a hut (*kuṭikā*), put together with sticks, etc; so too the *atta, bhāva* is composed of the 5 aggregates. It is also the dwelling (*nivāsa*) or locus of the monkey called *citta*. Here the monkey symbolizes restlessness and impulsiveness of *citta*, and not a self or soul (ThaA 1:29; ItA 1:53, 179); cf *kuṭi, purisa* (Miln 147).

²³ V 2:238,17 = A 4:200,2 = 204, = 207,2; D 3:111,10; M 2:32,8, 181,11; S 5:442,1; A 1:134,20, 279,2; MA 2:88,19; KhA 1:132,10; DhA 1:78,9, 291,23, 316,6, 2:64, 68,13, 3:115,8. See CPD for more refs. See also Vism:Ñ 256 n11.

²⁴ Vism 9.54/310.

²⁵ *Apariññatā, vatthukānam attā ti bhavati ettha abhidhānam cittaṇ cāti, attā, bhāvo sarīram khandha, pañcakam-eva vā*, “Here, the body or the aggregate pentad is taken to be *atta, bhāva* when, on the ground of not comprehending, the expression (*abhidhāna*) and thought (*citta*) of *attā* occurs” (VismṬ 298). On Pieris’ n regarding Ñāṇa-moli’s mistranslation of this passage, see Pieris 1979:15 n56 = 1980:222 n56.

²⁶ D 15.33-34/2:68-70 (SD 5.17); see also D 2:68 f :: DA 2:508 f.

²⁷ D 3:263, 288; A 4:401; Khp 4 :: KhpA 86 ff

²⁸ See **Mahā Nidāna Sutta** (D 15,33-34/2:69 f), SD 5.17. At Sn 1114, the Buddha is said to know “all the stations of consciousness.”

²⁹ D 33.2.2(3)/3:288, 33.3.2(3)/3:263; A 9.24/4:401.

³⁰ Sometimes, *āyatana* is translated as “sphere” when referring to a meditative base.

³¹ On *āyatana*, see **Pañca-t, taya S** (M102) @ SD 40a.12 (3.6).

³² See *Viññāṇa*, SD 17.8a (5.2) & (11.2).

Table 3

The 7 stations for consciousness and the 2 bases³³

Formless realm (*arūpâvacara*)³⁴

(Base only)	(Base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception) ³⁵	
7 th station for consciousness	Base of nothingness	<i>ākiñcaññâyatana</i>
6 th station for consciousness	Base of infinite consciousness	<i>viññāṇaṅcâyātana</i>
5 th station for consciousness	Base of infinite space	<i>ākāsānaṅcâyātana</i>

Form realm (*rūpâvacara*)

[Not stations:	The pure abodes	<i>suddh'āvāsa</i>] ³⁶
(Base only)	(Base of non-percipient beings)	<i>asañña, sattā</i>
4 th station for consciousness: <i>beings same in body, same in perception</i>	Gods of abundant fruit Gods of radiant glory Gods of boundless glory Gods of limited glory	<i>vehapphala</i> <i>subha, kiṇṇa</i> <i>appamāṇa, subha</i> <i>paritta, subha</i>
3 rd station for consciousness: <i>beings same in body, different in perception</i>	Gods of streaming radiance Gods of boundless radiance Gods of limited radiance	<i>ābhassara</i> <i>appamāṇ'ābha</i> <i>paritta, subha</i>
2 nd station for consciousness <i>beings different in body, same in perception</i>	Great Brahmā Brahmā's ministers Brahmā's host	<i>mahā brahmā</i> <i>brahmā, purohitā</i> <i>brahmā, parisajjā</i>

Sense realm (*kāmâvacara*)

1 st station for consciousness: ³⁷ <i>beings different in body, different in perception</i>	Gods who lord over others' creations Gods who delight in creating The contented gods The Yāma gods The gods of the thirty-three The gods of the four great kings Human beings Some beings in the subhuman realms	<i>para, nimmita, vasavattī</i> <i>nimmāṇa, ratī</i> <i>tusita</i> <i>yāma</i> <i>tāvatiṃsa</i> <i>cātum, mahā, rājika</i> <i>manussa, loka</i> <i>āpaya, bhūmi</i> ³⁸
2 nd station for consciousness: <i>beings different in body, same in perception</i> (subhuman realms)	The host of titans [asuras] The realm of the departed [pretas] The animal kingdom The hells	<i>asura, kāya</i> <i>pitti, visaya</i> <i>tiracchāna, yoni</i> <i>niraya</i>

³³ See **Mahā, nidāna S** (D 15,33), SD 5.17, Table 1; **Saṅgīti S** (D 33,2.3(10)). **Satta Viññāṇa-ṭṭhiti S** (A 7.41 = A:B 7.44), SD 96.5, which Comys say are the “grounds for the rebirth-consciousness” (*paṭisandhi, viññāṇassa ṭhānāni*, AA 4:25; NcA 59; PmA 1:111). (**Viññāṇa**) **Bīja S** (S 22.54) says “the 4 stations of consciousness” (*viññāṇa-ṭṭhiti*) should be seen as the earth element (like soil for plants), ie, it has the first 4 aggregates (form, feeling, perception, formations) as its station (*ṭhiti*) (S 22.54,7) n, SD 8.3(9). On the diagram, see **Group karma?** SD 39.1 (1.4).

³⁴ Also called “formless base” (*arūpâyatana*), esp in terms of meditation attainment.

³⁵ *N'eva, saññā, nāsaññâyatana.*

³⁶ The pure abodes (*suddh'āvāsa*), the 5 highest heavens of the form world (*rūpa, loka*), are not listed as “stations for consciousness” because they are inhabited only by non-returners, who assume their last birth to become arhats and attain nirvana. These worlds are Aviha (“non-declining”), Atappa (“untroubled”), Sudassā (“clearly visible”), Sudassī (“clear-visioned”) and Akañiṭṭhā (“peerless”) (D 3:237, M 3:103, Vbh 425, Pug 42-46).

³⁷ The first 6 are the sense-base deva realms, the lowest of the celestial realms.

³⁸ This is the collective term for the foll 4 realms.

3.2 CHARACTERISTICS OF THE BEINGS

3.2.0 Table 3 is a diagram of the 9 abodes of beings (*nava satt'āvāsa*), that is, *the 7 stations of consciousness and the 2 bases*.

3.2.1 Starting from the “bottom” of Buddhist cosmos, we have the sense base, where beings depend on their physical senses and the mind, the 4 lowest realms exist on **the 2nd station for consciousness**, that is, they each have their own bodies (“different bodies”), but they experience the same consciousness (“same in perception”).

These are the hells beings, the animals, ghosts, and the titans (asuras), who basically share the same emotions of their own realm. They all experience profound sufferings. The hell beings all feel violent pains.

The animals' life-cycle is characterized by ignorance, instinct and fear. The pretas or departed ghosts all suffer from insatiable hunger. The asuras or titans are all dominated by jealousy, exploitation and violence. In short, *their lives and character are all very predictable*: they all share basically the same karmic fruit.

The brahmas of the form realm, too, exist on **the 2nd station of consciousness**. They each have their own bodies (“different in body”), but they experience the same consciousness, that of *profound joy* (“same in perception”). They are the brahmas of the first dhyana, all experiencing dhyanic zest and happiness.

3.2.2 The beings who exist on **the 1st station of consciousness**—“different in body and in perception”—are those of the *āpaya* realm (that is, some kinds of lower-realm beings), human beings, and the gods of the sense world. Even in each realm, each individual being have their own form and experience different levels of bliss.

3.2.3 The beings of **the 3rd station of consciousness**, “same in body, different in perception,” are the Ābhassara devas. Their bodies are identical in pervasion, that is, they emit a radiant light that blazes forth and flicker like the torch flames, and their bodies are all of the same size. Their perception, however, is different, in that some have rebirth-linking consciousness without initial application (*vitakka*) but with sustained application (*vicāra*), while some have rebirth-linking without either. For this reason, in **the (Nāna,karaṇa) Puggala Sutta 1** (A 4.123), these beings of the 2nd-dhyana base, are listed under “Ābhassara,” as they are identical in body.³⁹

3.2.4 The gods existing on **the 4th station of consciousness** are “identical in body, identical in perception”—they have same kind in body (great radiance), but have different consciousnesses. The gods of abundant fruit (*veha-p,phala*), for example, experience the equanimous bliss of the 4th dhyana. The abundant-fruit devas are so called because their dhyana practice had been very abundant, bringing fruit that outbliss the lower devas. All the other 4th-station gods live in the bliss of the 3rd dhyana. They all share the same group karmic fruit of great dhyanic bliss. They are of fine radiant form and as such can easily meld into one another, as it were.

The classification of beings according to the 4 stations of consciousness is in terms of their “form” or body, and by the quality or blissfulness of their respective consciousnesses. The other celestial realms — the pure abodes, the base of non-percipient beings and the 4 formless bases—all experience the same kind of consciousness found in their plane of existence.

3.2.5 The pure abodes (*suddh'āvāsa*), the 5 highest heavens of the form world (*rūpa,loka*), however, are *not* listed as “stations for consciousness” because they are inhabited by only non-returners (*anāgāmī*) who live out their last birth to become arhats and attain nirvana. In other words, these state are no more “stations” or karmic support for consciousnesses of the non-returners once they attain arhathood. Even the Bodhisattva (the Buddha-to-be) is not ever reborn here (as he is not yet a non-returner!).

These worlds are Āviha (“non-declining”), Ātappa (“Untroubled”), Sudassā (“clearly beautiful”), Sudassī (“clear-visioned”) and Akaññitthā (“peerless”).⁴⁰ They do not arise when the world is devoid of Buddhas. When there is a Buddha, they arise lasting for 16,000 aeons. These planes are like the “camp-

³⁹ A 4.123.2/2:127 SD 23.8a (3.2.3)

⁴⁰ D 3:237, M 3:103, Vbh 425, Pug 42-46. See Bodhi 1984:48.

ing-ground” (*khandha, vara-t, thāna*) for the Blessed One after he has set in motion the Dharma Wheel. As such, they are not assigned as a station of consciousness nor as a base for beings, that is, as a karmic state for rebirth.⁴¹

3.2.6 The non-percipient beings

3.2.6.1 The non-percipient or non-conscious beings (*asañña, satta*) are those meditators who had cultivated dispassion towards “perception” or consciousness. According to **the Nava Satt’āvāsa Sutta** (A 9.24), they are “beings with neither perception nor feeling” (*sattā asaññino appaṭisaṃvedino*).⁴² They are located in the 4th-dhyana heavens just below the pure abodes (*suddh’āvāsa*). Their life-span is 500 aeons or world-cycles⁴³ (Vbh 1028/425).

3.2.6.2 According to **the Brahma, jāla Sutta** (D 1), “when perception arises in them, they fall from that realm.”⁴⁴ The Sutta adds that after falling that state, such a being is reborn on earth and he renounces the world. Through his meditation, he is able to recall the past, not beyond his previous life. Hence, he thinks that the self and the world have arisen fortuitously (by chance). This, according to the Sutta, is one of the 62 bases for wrong views.⁴⁵

3.2.6.3 **Buddhaghosa**, in his commentary to the Sutta, says that ascetics who, through meditation, attain the 4th dhyana, seeing the disadvantages of consciousness, mistakenly conclude that consciousness must be eliminated if spiritual liberation is to be attained. As a result, they are reborn in a state bereft of consciousness. The commentary adds that their lifespan lasts only as long as their ability to sustain their dhyana. As soon as an idea arises in their minds, they fall from that state and are reborn in a birth in accordance with their karma (DA 1:118).

3.2.6.4 **Dhammapāla**, however, says that they are “long-lived” (*dīgh’āyukā*) and that the elder Sobhita, falling from the realm of the non-percipient beings, was reborn here, and that he was able to recall his previous state (ThaA 2:42).⁴⁶

4 The unestablished consciousness

4.1 The consciousness of an arhat who has passed away is said to be *appatiṭṭha*, which is best translated as “unestablished,” in the sense that it does not arise any more because there is no more “footing” or basis (*patiṭṭha*) for it. The most famous illustration for this is that of the extinguished fire in the Aggi Vaccha, gotta Sutta (M 72), where the brahmin Aggi Vacchagotta asks the Buddha where does the freed mind (*vimutta, citta*), that is, the arhat’s consciousness, arise. The Buddha answers that it is beyond all logical premises for any answer: “arise” does not apply, “does not arise” does not apply, “both arises and does not arise” does not apply, and “neither arises nor not arises,” too, does not apply. Vaccha becomes confused at the reply. The Buddha then gives his famous fire simile:

19a Now, what do you think, Vaccha: suppose there were a fire burning before you, would you know it?”

“Master Gotama, if there were a fire burning before me, I would know it.”

“Suppose, Vaccha, someone were to ask you: ‘This fire that is burning before you, depending on what does it burn?’ What, Vaccha, would be your answer?”

“Master Gotama, on being asked thus, I would answer: ‘This fire burning before me burns depending on grass and wood.’”

19b “Suppose, Vaccha, this fire before you were to go out, would you know it?”

“Master Gotama, if this fire before me were to go out, I would know it.”

⁴¹ DA 2:511; AA 4:28, 190.

⁴² A 9.24/4:401 (SD 67.2).

⁴³ An aeon or world-cycle (*kappa*) is an astronomically long time: see SD 2.19 (9); SD 49.8 (15.2).

⁴⁴ D 1,68/1:28 (SD 25.1).

⁴⁵ D 1,68/1:29 (SD 25.1).

⁴⁶ For further details on the *asañña, satta*, see SD 25.3 (68).

19c “Now suppose, Vaccha, you were asked, ‘When that fire before you went out in which direction has it gone—to the east, or to the west, or to the north, or to the south?’ How would you answer it?”

“It does not apply, master Gotama! The fire had burned depending on grass and wood. When that fuel is used up and it does not receive any more fuel, being without fuel, it would be regarded as quenched.”⁴⁷

20 “In the same way, Vaccha, the Tathāgata has abandoned the form by which you describing him would use. It is cut off at the root, made like a palm-tree stump, done away with so that it is not subject to further growth. (M 72.19-20/1:487) = SD 6.15

There is nothing mystical about the answer that the Buddha has given here: it is simply a linguistic problem. The “taste of freedom” (*vimutti, rasa*) is a direct and personal experience: just as we have to taste salt to know what it is like, even so we have to experience liberation for oneself. No one can save another: we can at best direct the way or stretch a hand in assistance.

4.2 The other point is that the arhat’s consciousness is *unestablished*, for like the extinguished fire, there is no more fuel for it. This point is best explained in connection with the death of the arhat Godhika. While the monk **Godhika** was at Kāla, silā (Black Rock) on the side of Isigili (today, Sona Hill),⁴⁸ he kept falling away from temporary release of mind due to his sickness.⁴⁹ So, when he attained release of mind, he committed suicide to gain liberation.⁵⁰ It is said that Māra the evil one tried to look for his rebirth-consciousness but failed. Godhika passes away with his rebirth-consciousness unestablished (SA 1:184).⁵¹

4.3 The Subcommentary to the Godhika Sutta explains that the consciousness is not subject to arising (*anuppatti, dhammena*); for if there were an arising, consciousness would be said to be “established.” The cause of the non-establishment of consciousness is precisely the cause for his parinirvana (*yad eva tassa viññāṇassa appaṭiṭṭhāna, kāraṇam tad eva parinibbānam, kāraṇam*) (SAṬ:VRI 1:191). In **the Upāya Sutta** (S 22.53), the Buddha declares, “When consciousness is unestablished, not coming to growth, non-generative, it is freed,”⁵² that is, when it no more generates volitional formations (*saṅkhāra*), or, according to the Commentary, it does not bring rebirth (SA 2:271). Only non-arhats have their consciousness “established.”⁵³ As such, in **the Sutta Nipāta**, the Buddha is declared thus:

*Viññāṇa-ṭṭhitiyo sabbā abhijāna tathāgato
ṭṭiṭṭhantaṃ enaṃ janāti vimuttaṃ tap, parāyanam*

The Tathagata directly knows all the stations of consciousness:

He knows those who remain, and those who cross over, freed. (Sn 1114)

⁴⁷ *Tassa ca pariyādānā aññassa ca anupahārā anāhāro nibbuto t’eva saṅkham gacchatī ti*. The fire simile here is balanced by the following great ocean simile. See SD 6.15 (5).

⁴⁸ **Godhika S** (S 4.23/1:120-122). On the location of these places, see S Dhammika, *Middle Land, Middle Way*, 1999:97.

⁴⁹ “Temporary release of mind,” *sāmayika ceto, vimutti*, which SA explains as the mundane meditative attainments (*lokiya samāpatti*), ie the absorptions and formless attainments, so called because at the moment of absorption the mind is freed from the opposing states and is resolved upon its object. He fell away from this liberation on account of illness, being disposed to chronic illness due to (humours of) wind, bile and phlegm (SA 1:183).

⁵⁰ SA 1:183; DhA 1:431-433. A similar case of suicide is recorded of the monk Channa (M 144 = S 35.87), SD 11.12.

⁵¹ A similar case is recorded of Vakkali’s death, also at Isigili (S 22.87), SD 8.8.

⁵² *Appaṭiṭṭhitaṃ viññāṇam avirulham anabhisāṅkhāraṇi ca vimuttaṃ*, S 22.53/3:53 f.

⁵³ Bodhi: “When the monk is said to attain final Nibbāna with consciousness unestablished, this should not be understood to mean that after death consciousness survives in an “unestablished” condition (a thesis argued by Harvey, *The Selfless Mind*, [1995:]208-210); for enough texts make it plain that with the passing away of the arahant consciousness too ceases and no longer exists (see eg [Parivīmaṃsana S] S 12.51).” (S:B 421 n314); see SD 11.5.

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