“Signless” Meditations in Pāli Buddhism, by Peter Harvey

The Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies, Vol. 9, No. 1 1986
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The animitta or "signless," is a relatively unexplored region of Buddhist doctrine; unlike, for example, the system of jhānas, it seems to be in some need of clarification and systematisation. This is suggested by the great variety of states said to be “animitta” in the Pāli material, in which there is reference to animitta-samādhi (or ceto-samādhi), ceto-vimutti, vimokkha, vimokkhamukha, vihāra, samāpatti, vihāra-samāpatti, phassa and dhatu.

This variety also applies to the closely related suññatā (void) and appanihita (desireless) states that, with the animitta, play an important role in the path to nibbāna.

This paper aims to differentiate the variety of animitta states, and to gain some understanding of their nature, drawing on the Pāli suttas, Abhidhamma, and commentaries.

A convenient place to begin is with the overview of animitta states at MA.II 355:

"Thirteen dhammas are named ‘animitta-ceto-vimutti’: vipassanā, the 4 formless states, the four paths and the four fruitions. In this connection, ‘vipassanā removes the sign of permanence (nicca-nimittam), the sign of happiness (sukha-), the sign of self (atta-),’ so it is known as animitta. The four formless states are known as animitta due to the non-existence of the sign of form (rūpa-) (in them). The paths and fruitions are animitta due to the non-existence of defilements that make signs (nimitta-kārākanam) [in them.] Nibbāna is just animitta. But that is not a ceto-vimutti, so it is not taken [here as a fourteenth]."

This statement seems quite well founded in the Tipiṭaka. The highest level animitta-ceto-vimutti is suggested by a verse at
Thag.92 and Dhp.92, which says that an arahant’s “field of action (gocaro) is void and signless liberation (suññato animitto ca vimokkho).” That there are lower-level animitta states is indicated by A.III.397, which says that a monk may attain animitta-ceto-samādhi, but later return to lay life, due to keeping too much company. Similarly, at A.IV.78–9, Brahmā-gods say of someone who abides in animitta-ceto-samādhi that, if he practices further, he will attain the goal of the holy life, and describe him as still having a remainder of grasping (sa-upādisese).

I. The Formless States as Animitta

Some support is given to this notion in the Tipitaka. Firstly, it should be noted that animitta-samādhi is listed after,¹² or said to be entered after,¹³ the four formless states,¹⁴ and that the animitta (and void and desireless) stimulations (phassas) are said to impinge on a person emerging from the cessation-of-perception-and-feeling, which is entered from the fourth formless state (M.I. 302). There is, therefore, a clear affinity between animitta-samādhi and the formless states. That the formless states are themselves animitta, in a certain sense, is indicated by Ps.II.36, which describes the four formless attainments as “liberation as emergence [from the object] externally (bahiddhāvutṭhāno vimokkho),” for nimittas are often said to be “external”;¹⁵ indeed, p. 35 goes on to say that each of the four paths “emerges externally from all signs (sabbanimittehi).”

An interesting passage linking the formless states to animitta ones, and also indicating something of the nature of animitta states, is at A.IV.426–8. Here Ānanda describes:

“the attainment of a chance over the crowding obstacle [i.e., the five kāmagunas] awakened to by the Exalted One . . . for the bringing to an end of dukkha.”¹⁶

He explains this thus:

“There will be just the eye, but one will not experience those visible shapes and that sense-sphere (te rūpā tañ’ cāyatanam no paṭisamvedissati); . . . there will be just the body, but one will not experience those touchables and that sense-sphere.”
In answer to a question, he explains that a person in such a state is conscious (saññī), not unconscious, and that he is either in one of the first three formless states, or in a samādhi which he had previously described thus:

“Sister, this samādhi which is neither inclined towards (abhinato), nor inclined away (apanato), in which the restraint is not controlled by conscious effort (sasaṅkhāra-), but has the habit of self-denial, which from its release is steadfast (vimuttattā ḥīto), from its steadfastness is content, from its contentment is not troubled—this samādhi, Sister, is said by the Exalted One to have gnosis as fruition (aṅṇāphalo).”

The description of this samādhi matches that of one at S.I.28, which very probably describes animitta-samādhi. There the Buddha is in much pain from an injury to his foot. As he bears it mindfully, gods come to praise him, one saying, “See how his citta is well-practiced in samādhi and released. It is not inclined towards . . . (etc.) . . . self-denial.” Now as D.II.100 describes the dying Buddha as entering animitta-samādhi to attain ease from his pains, such a pain-transcending samādhi is very likely to be animitta-samādhi too. This is confirmed by a passage at M.III.108, which says of a person in animitta-ceto-samādhi:

“He comprehends, ‘This perceiving is empty of the plane of no-thing . . . of the plane of neither-perception-nor-non-perception. And there is only this that is not void (asvaṅñatam), that is to say, the six sensory spheres (the sense-organs) that, conditioned by life (jīvita-), are grounded on the body itself.”

Such a description would be applicable to the state at A.IV.426–8, “There will be just the eye . . .,” which is thus confirmed as an animitta state.

We see, therefore, that animitta-samādhi is closely associated with the formless states, and that the latter are animitta in the sense of having transcended external sensory “signs.” In both the formless states and in animitta-samādhi, a person is not hemmed in by the kāma-gunas, the strands of sensual-pleasure, but is in a state where he is fully conscious (except in the fourth formless state), with sense-organs operative, yet without experiencing any of the five sense-objects. In the animitta-samādhi,
however, the mind also transcends the (mental) objects of the formless states, and is in a state that results in gnosis, or arahantship.

II. Vipassanā as Animitta

This is probably described at S.IV.269, where Moggallāna describes how the Buddha had helped him with his training:

“So I, friend, paying no attention to any sign (sabbanimittānam amanasikārā), entered on and dwelt in animitta-ceto-samādhi; but dwelling in that dwelling, my consciousness was following after signs (nimittānusari-viññānam).”

This clearly refers to a relatively weak form of animitta-ceto-samādhi, for D.III.249 says that it is impossible for one who has developed animitta-ceto-vimutti to have a consciousness that “follows after signs,” for this ceto-vimutti is the “escape” (nissarānam) from all signs. The animitta-ceto-samādhi of S.IV.269, then, is not fully developed: indeed the Buddha is said to come to Moggallāna to urge him to make his cittā steadfast, one-pointed, and composed in the ceto-samādhi. Moggallāna’s state is probably a form of vipassanā-samādhi, as the commentary, SA.III.90, states.

Ps.II.63, describing the vipassanā stage of “understanding of appearance as terror,” says, “When he gives attention [to phenomena] as impermanent, the sign appears to him as terror (bhayato),” while Ps.I.91 clearly seems to see this as the animitta dwelling (vihāra; as at S.IV.269, above):

Contemplating the sign as terror, from being resolved on the animitta, he sees decay (vayaṁ) each time he applies his contemplation; this is the animitta dwelling.19

“Animitta-ceto-samādhi” and “animitta vihāra,” then, seem to be terms used in the Tipiṭaka for certain states involving vipassanā into impermanence. The state that exists at the interface of the development of vipassanā and the occurrence of the path (and assigned to neither) is also an animitta state. This is “change of lineage” (gotrabhū), or “understanding of emergence and turn-
When he gives attention as impermanent, his citta emerges from the sign; his citta enters into (pakkhandati) the animitta.\textsuperscript{20}

Ps.I.66 adds that it “overcomes,” for example, “the sign,” and also “the sign of all formations externally” (bahiddhāsaṅkhāra-nimittam), so as to “enter into,” respectively, the animitta, and “stopping (nirodho), nibbāna.”

\textit{III. The Paths (Maggas) and Fruitions (Phalas) as Animitta}

That animitta states play an important role in the path to nibbāna is clearly seen at S.IV.360:

“And what, monks, is the path which goes to the unconditioned? Void samādhi, animitta-samādhi, desireless samādhi.”

Indeed, we have seen above that a samādhi identifiable as animitta is said to have “gnosis as fruition.”\textsuperscript{21} Ps.II.63–4, after discussing the animitta states “understanding appearance as terror,” and “change of lineage” (as above), says of path-knowledge, “When he gives attention as impermanent, he is freed (vimuccati) by the animitta liberation (vimokkhena) . . . .” That is, states of path-consciousness are animitta, and at this level (upwards), animitta states are forms of “liberation.” It is probably at this stage, too (or at “change of lineage”), that an animitta state becomes known as a “gateway to liberation (vimokkha-mukha),” where citta “enters into (-sampakkhandatāya) the animitta state (dhātu)” (Ps.II.48).\textsuperscript{22}

As regards the fruitions, Ps.II.42 says that the “desireless” liberation is the four paths, four fruitions and nibbāna. As the “desireless” is otherwise treated parallel to the animitta, this implies that the same can be said of the animitta. A passage at Ps.I.91 probably describes an animitta fruition:

When he contemplates the signs as terror by treating [their] occurrence with equanimity, and adverting to stopping, nibbāna, as animitta, and enters upon attainment because he is resolved
upon the animitta, this is animitta attainment (samąpatti).

Indeed, the commentary on this sees such an animitta “attainment” as the “attainment of fruition.”

The Abhidhamma treats the paths and fruitions in a slightly different way. The Dhammasaṅgani describes the first path as:

i) any of the four (or five) supramundane jhānas (§277 and 343),

ii) any of the four (or five) supramundane jhānas that are void (§344–5), or

iii) that are desireless (§351–2).

No mention is made of any animitta supramundane jhāna as path. On the fruitions, however, it is said that for any of the above three types of first path, their fruits will be a supramundane jhāna that is void, animitta, or desireless (§505–22).

IV. Is There an Animitta Path?

The above conflict between the Abhidhamma and the suttas (Ps.) as to whether there is an animitta path is taken up in the commentarial literature. An examination of this discussion gives an insight into some of the reasons why animitta states are known as “animitta.” Asl.221 and Vism.668 discuss this and say that a path can be known as “void,” “animitta” or “desireless” for three reasons:

i) “From (way of) arrival (āgamanato)”: e.g., a path will be “void” if the vipassanā that leads to it is “void”; the vipassanā will be “void” if its dominant feature is insight into anattā, seeing formations (saṅkhāras) as void (suñña).

ii) “From its own special qualities (saguṇato)”: it is “void” as it is empty of attachment, hatred and delusion; it is “animitta” due to the absence of the “signs” of sense-objects, or the “signs” of attachment, etc.; it is “desireless” due to the absence of desire as attachment, etc.

iii) “From its object (ārammaṇato)”: a path takes nibbāna as its object, and this is void (as void of attachment, etc.) animitta and desireless.

Asl.221 explains that the method of the suttas gives a name to a path by methods ii) and iii), but the Abhidhamma only does so
by method i), and animitta-vipassanā cannot give its name to the path it arrives at, for vipassanā knowledge is “not literally (nip-pariyāyato) animitta” (Vism.659). This is because, while it severs “signs” of permanence, happiness and self, so as to be to some extent “signless,” still it “frequents (carati) sign-dhammas” (Asl.223); “it is not opposed to the discernment of impermanence which has the signs of formations as its object” (Asl.224), and “there is no abandoning the sign of formations” (Vism.659). That is, inasmuch as vipassanā is taken up with the “sign” of conditioned phenomena, it can never be wholly “signless,” and so cannot give its name to a “signless” path, in the Abhidhamma method. Nevertheless, there can still be animitta fruitions by this method, as we have seen.

V. The Meaning of Nimitta

Having mapped out the range of states known as “animitta,” we can now investigate the nature and range of “nimittas,” before going on to examine the method of practice that leads beyond them, and the nature of the animitta states to which such practices lead.

While nimitta has been translated as “sign” so far, we can see its range of meaning, in general usage, as being:

i) A deliberately made sign, or “hint,” as when the Buddha made a broad nimitta about the possibility of his living on for the rest of the aeon.

ii) A natural sign or indication, not deliberately made as a sign. At S.V.150, for example, in not noting what his master says he likes, and reaches out for, etc., an inexperienced cook is said not to take proper note of his master’s nimitta. One who reads the mind of another, without going off what anyone says, and without using the power of meditation for direct thought-reading, is said to do so by means of a nimitta, i.e., a behavioural sign. Earthquakes are said to be the nimittas, or signs, of the four main events in a buddha’s life, while ageing, sickness, death, and an ascetic are the four nimittas, or “indications” of the nature of life, leading to a bodhisatta’s renunciation.

iii) A specific type of natural sign—a sign of what is to come,
portent. Thus, “diviners of nimittas” examined the 32 marks on the body of the newborn bodhisatta, taking three of them as the nimitta, or “sign” of longevity. Similarly, we read that “that is a prior sign (pubbe nimittam) of the manifestation of Brahmā, when the light arises, and the glory shines.”

iv) A marker, as when hillsides and rocks, etc. are taken as nimittas showing the boundaries of a monastic residence.

v) A (male or female) sexual organ (Vin.III.28, and 21) or sexual characteristic (Dhs.§633, 644).

vi) Characteristic, as in bālanimitāni, “the characteristics of a fool” (M.III.163), and as implied in “But you, householder, have all the characteristic marks and signs (ākārā te līngā te nimittā) of a householder,” and in the phrase “face-nimitta,” which is what is said to be seen to be seen and pondered in a mirror (M.I.100).

vii) General appearance, or gestalt, as in the common passage, “Having seen a visible shape with the eye, he does not seize on the general appearance (nimittaggāhi), he does not seize on the detail (anubyañjanaggāhi) . . .”

viii) Ground, reason or cause, as when the Buddha says that he does not behold the nimitta on which anyone could reproach him for having āsavas not yet destroyed. Similarly, at M.III.157, a monk says that he does not know nimitta, the reason, why, in his attempts to see gods, their light and visible form come to disappear.

ix) Aim, as when an archer “takes a straight aim (nimittam ujum karoti)” (Miln.418).

x) The object of concentration in samatha meditation: this is well attested in the commentarial literature, e.g., at Vism.125–6: in concentrating on an external device, such as a clay disc, the device itself is the “preliminary” nimitta; by concentrating on it, the meditator comes to see a mental image of it, even with closed eyes—this is the “learning” nimitta: by his concentrating on this, it appears in a purified, abstracted form, the “counterpart” nimitta. In the latter two cases, the nimitta can be seen as a “reflex image,” which is both a “sign” that the meditation is proceeding well and the “target” of concentration (cf. sense ix, above). Such samādhi-nimittas are also alluded to in the suttas. The “pre-
A "liminary" sign is alluded to at Ps.II.38, which says, "Here, someone gives attention to the nimitta of blue-black internally in himself," the commentary explaining this to mean a person's hair. A reflex-image nimitta is referred to, e.g., at A.IV.418, on a monk who is unskilled at entering on and dwelling in the first jhāna:” he does not pursue, nor develop, nor cultivate that nimitta.”

We see then that, in general usage, nimitta means a sign or indication, which may be a hint, or an indication of contemporary or future thoughts, desires, events or features of life, or a (boundary) marker, sexual or other characteristic, general appearance, ground or reason, aim, or a meditation object that is either physical or a mental reflex image. It is a delimited object of attention, that may, or should be taken as indicating something beyond itself or the general features of that to which it belongs.

VI. Types of “Signs”

To investigate the range of “signs,” a useful passage is that at S.I.188 (and Thag.224–6) where Ānanda gives advice to a monk affected by attachment (rāga):

"i) Your citta is on fire because of a perversion of perception (saññāya vipariyesā);
ii) Avoid [any] pleasant (subham) nimitta, connected to attachment;
iii) Look on formations as other, as dukkha, not as self,
iv) Quench this great attachment, do not burn again and again.
v) Develop the citta, one-pointed and well-concentrated, to the [contemplation of] the unpleasant (asubhaya),
vi) Let your mindfulness be concerned with the body, be full of disenchantment (nibbidā-)
vii) And develop the animitta, cast out the latent tendency to conceit (mānānusayam);
viii) Then by the full understanding of conceit, you will wander calm."

Firstly, this passage sees the mind as “burning” with attachment due to a “perversion of perception” that focusses on attach-
ment-linked “pleasant-nimittas.” A.II.52 sees such “perversions” (vipallāsā) of perception (and of citta and view) as being seeing permanence in the impermanent, dukkha in the not-dukkha, attā in the anattā, and the pleasant in the unpleasant. This implies that “pleasant-nimittas” are deceptive in their nature.

Secondly, the passage shows that “pleasant-nimittas” are clearly an important type of nimitta. We see, for example, at A.I.3, that it is lack of systematic attention to a pleasant-nimitta that leads to the arising and strengthening of sensual-desire (kāma-cāhando), and lack of systematic attention to the repulsive (paṭigha)-nimitta that leads to malevolence. Key forms of pleasant nimittas must be sexual ones, and indeed, “nimitta” can itself mean a male or female sexual organ or characteristic, as seen above. Related to the pleasant-nimitta is the dear-nimitta, referred to at S.IV.73 and Thag.98:

“Seeing a visible object, his mindfulness is confused, attending to a sign of what is dear (piyanimittam).
With an attached (sāratto-) citta he experiences (it), and stays clinging to it”
(this is then repeated for the other five sense-channels).

Attending to “signs” in things, and seeing them as pleasant or dear, leads to an attached state of mind that clings to such signs. Such attachment is broken, at S.I.188, above, by a process involving insight into the three marks, contemplation of the “unpleasant,” and developing the animitta state.

Not only does attention to certain nimittas lead to attachment, but we also find that the commentaries see attachment, etc., as themselves being nimittas. In discussing what nimittas are absent in an animitta state, including nibbāna, they refer to attachment-, hatred- and delusion-nimittas.

M.I.297 also says that attachment, etc., produce nimittas, which MA.II.355 explains thus:

Just so, when a person’s attachment does not arise, then one is not able to know [him as] “ariyan” or “worlding.” But when attachment arises, it arises as if making a nimitta for perceiving “this person, indeed, is one with attachment”—just as a brand identifies a calf as belonging to a certain herd.
That is, attachment, etc., betray what kind of a person someone is.

Another type of nimitta consists simply of sense-objects. This is the meaning in the common phrase “this consciousness-informed (sensitive) body and all external (bahiddhā) nimittas” (e.g., M.III.18), meaning the sentient organism and all it can perceive. This meaning is also found at S.III.10, where venerable Kaccāna says:

“And how is one a token-follower (niketasāri)? One who is in bondage of token-following to the nimitta of visible shapes (rūpa-nimitta), is called a ‘token follower’” (parallel passages follow on the other five sense-objects).

Commentarial passages on nimittas that are absent in animitta states also refer to rūpa-nimitta, etc. MA.II.352, commenting on the “all nimittas” that one in animitta-ceto-samādhi does not attend to (M.I.296–7), says, “all objects (ārammanas), visual shape etc.,” though p. 353 qualifies this by saying that a person has nibbāna as object.

Another type of nimitta said by the commentaries to be absent in animitta states comprises permanence-, happiness-, and self-nimittas.

A final type of nimitta is formations-nimitta: we have seen that vipassanā still frequents saṅkhāra-nimitta (p. 31), and that “change of lineage” overcomes “the sign of all formations externally” (sec. II). As to what the “nimittas of formations” are, this is suggested by the Abhidharmakośa, which says that nirvāṇa, object of animitta-samādhi, lacks various nimittas, including “the three samskṛtalakṣaṇas: birth, duration-change and death.” This alludes to a passage found at A.I.152, which describes the “three constructed characteristics of the constructed” (saṅkhata-saṅkhata-lakkhaṇāni) as those of “arising” (uppādo), “decay” (vayo), and “becoming otherwise of what persists” (thitassa anāñathattam).

Several of these senses of nimitta are included in a passage at Ps.II.68, which says:

What is the animitta liberation? Knowledge of contemplation of impermanence is animitta liberation, since it liberates from the nimitta as permanent.
This formula is then repeated, replacing “impermanence” and “as permanent,” respectively, by: “dukkha” and “as happy”; “anattā” and “as self”; “disenchantment” and “as delight” (nandidyā); “detachment” (virāgā) and “as attachment”; “stopping” and “as origin” (samudayato); “relinquishment” and “as grasping”; “the animitta” and “all nimittas”; “the desireless” and “as desire” (paññādiyā); “the void” and “as misinterpretation” (abhinivesato).

We have seen above that nimittas may be delusive: this would apply to pleasant-, dear-, permanence-, happiness- and self-nimittas. These indicate to the mind features of the world that, on examination, are seen to be empty. Attachment-, hatred- and delusion nimittas would be nimittas in the sense of being “characteristics,” though we have also seen that they themselves produce nimittas, i.e., give indications of the nature of a person. Sense-object nimittas would be nimittas due to being the target of perceptions, and are taken to indicate particular features of the world. Certain such object-nimittas are those selected as samādhi-nimittas in the jhānas, which are finally transcended in the formless attainments, said to be animitta because they are not tied down or limited by any sensory object. Formation-nimittas would be the “characteristics” that indicate the nature of formations.

VII. Escape from the Bondage of Nimittas

The state of being entranced by nimittas is clearly portrayed, in the suttas, as one full of danger. A graphic passage at S.IV.168 ironically asserts:

“It would be a good thing, monks, if the organ of sight were seared with a red-hot iron pin, on fire, all ablaze, a glowing mass of flames. Then there would be no seizing of the general appearance (nimitta) or details of visible shapes discernible by the eye. Monks, consciousness, persisting, might persist in being tied by the satisfaction in the general appearance or details.”

To die in such a state, or in one where one is taken up with objects of the other five senses, is said to lead to rebirth in hell
The idea that entrancement by sense-object nimittas brings a state of bondage and limitation is emphasised at M.III.225, where Venerable Kaccāna (cf. sec. VI) says:

“If, your reverences, after a monk has seen a visual shape with the eye, his consciousness runs after visual-shape-signs (ṛūpa-nimittānusāri), is tied by satisfaction in visual-shape-signs, is bound to satisfaction in visual-shape-signs, is fettered by the fetter of satisfaction in visual-shape-signs, then the consciousness of what is external (bahiddhā viññānam) is said ‘to be confused and distracted’ (and so on for the other five sense-channels).

To escape such bondage, the practitioner begins by “guarding the senses.” Rather than seizing on the general appearance or details of a sense-object, it is said:

“If he dwells with the organ of sight uncontrolled, covetousness and dejection, evil unskilled states of mind, might predominate. So he fares along controlling it; he guards the organ of sight” (and so on for the other five sense channels).

Vism.20 classifies this practice under sīla, and explains it thus:

“He does not seize on the general appearance”—he does not seize on the sign of a woman or a man, or any sign that is a basis for defilement such as the sign of the pleasant, etc.; he stops at what is merely seen. “He does not seize on the details of it”—he does not seize on any aspect classed as hand, foot, smile, laughter, talk, looking ahead, looking aside, etc., . . . But he seizes only on that which is really there.

In such a practice, the mind does not proliferate the mere objects of the senses into “indications” of entrancing phenomena. Buddhaghosa’s illustration here is that of a laughing woman who ran past a monk: the monk saw no “woman,” but, from noticing the teeth, perceived only a collection of bones (and attained arahantship). Buddhaghosa’s explanation is reminiscent of a passage at S.IV.72–3 (cf. Ud.8). There the Buddha gives a “teaching in brief” to the ageing Mālunyaputta, apparently so as to rid him of all desire, attachment and fondness for sense-objects, which lead to an attached mind clinging to a sign of what
is dear (see sec. VI, above). The teaching is:

"... in the seen, there will be just the seen; in the heard, there will be just the heard; in the sensed (mute), there will be just the sensed; in the discerned (viññāte), there will be just the discerned."

SA.II.383 comments here:

Visual consciousness sees in a visual shape merely a visual shape, it does not see the own-nature (sabhāva) of permanence, etc. . . . When a visual shape comes within range of visual consciousness, one does not become attached, hate, or become deluded.

The S.IV.72–3 teaching continues:

"From that (tato), you, Mālunkyaputta, will not be by that (na tena); as (yato) you will not be by that, hence (tato) you will not be there (na tattha); as you, Mālunkyaputta, will not be there, hence you will not be here (-idha), beyond (huram), nor in between (-antarena) the two. This is the end of dukkha."

The meaning of this mysterious passage will be discussed below, but here we may note that keeping what is seen to the merely-seen, etc., clearly involves more than sīla. Part of sīla, however, would be controlling unskilful thoughts arising from attention to certain nimittas. In doing this, a monk should attend, instead, to another nimitta associated with what is skilled (M.I.119). This leads on to the practice of samādhi, where the mind turns inward, away from "external" nimittas and toward the skilful samādhi-nimitta. Finally, the practice of vipassanā starts to cut away all attachment to nimittas. S.IV.170, in a continuation of the S.IV.168 passage quoted above, says:

"Let alone searing the faculty of sight with a red-hot iron pin . . . what if I attend thus: impermanent is the eye, impermanent are visual shapes, impermanent is visual consciousness, impermanent is visual stimulation, impermanent are pleasant, unpleasant and neutral feelings arising from visual stimulation" (etc., for the other five sense-channels).

Such a practice is said to lead to being disenchanted (nibbindati)
with the eye, etc., so as to be detached (virājji) and freed, attaining arahantship.

**VIII. The Nature of the Animitta**

The last quoted passage shows the connection of insight into impermanence with overcoming attachment to nimittas. A similar passage, at S.IV.50, describes a monk who sees "all nimittas"—i.e., all the phenomena mentioned in S.IV.170, above—as "becoming other" (aññato), such that he abandons avijjā. This is significant, as Nettipakarana.119 sees the āsava of avijjā as abandoned by the animitta liberation. As we have already seen (p. 29), the *Patisambhidamagga* links insight into impermanence with the animitta dwelling. On the three liberations, it says:

When one who has great resolution gives attention as impermanent, he acquires animitta liberation. When one who has great tranquility gives attention as dukkha, he acquires desireless liberation. When one who has great wisdom gives attention as anattā, he acquires void liberation (Ps.II.58).

Attention to phenomena as impermanent is said to have the following effect:

When he gives attention as impermanent, he knows and sees the nimitta as it really is. Hence "right seeing" is said. Thus, by inference from that, all formations are seen as impermanent. Herein, doubt is abandoned.

The nature of this seeing of the nimitta as it really is is amplified by Ps.II.48:

Now there are three gateways to liberation which lead to outlet from the world: i) to the contemplation of all formations as limited and circumscribed (pariccheda-parivattumato) and to the entering of citta into the animitta dhātu (nibbāna).

Vism.657 comments here, "both as limited by rise and fall and as circumscribed by them." Vism.668 adds to this by saying:
When the path is arrived at by abandoning the signs of permanence, lastingness and eternalness, by effecting the resolution of the compact (ghana-vininbhogam katvā) of formations through the means of contemplation of impermanence, then it is called animitta [by the sutta method].

Insight into impermanence, then, leads to animitta states by resolving the “solid,” “lasting” signs presented by the senses into a complex of components that have weak sign-value to the grasping mind and that themselves come and go so fast as to be insignificant and unworthy of attention. As Ps.II.36 says, in the animitta liberation, one “construes” (karoti) no sign in what one contemplates. In such a state, the mind can easily turn towards that which is beyond all signs, nibbāna. As M.I.296 says:

“There are two conditions, your reverence, for the attainment of the animitta-ceto-vimutti: paying no attention to any nimitta, and paying attention to the animitta dhātu.”

In the Nissāya-vagga of the Aṅguttara Nikāya, A.V.318–26, there are several passages that give us a further insight into animitta states. A number of descriptions of samādhis are given, such that the samādhis seem to be identical, and to be animitta states. The commentary sees them as “attainment of fruition” (phala-samāpatti), but as the fruitions are, in one aspect, animitta, this allows that the samādhis are animitta in nature. At A.V.321–2, Ānanda asks the Buddha:

“May it be, venerable sir, that a monk’s acquiring of samādhi may be of such a sort that, though he does not attend to eye or visible shapes . . . to body or touchables, though he does not attend to solidity (pathavim), cohesion, heat or motion; to the sphere of infinite space, or of infinite consciousness, or of nothingness, or of neither-perception-nor-non-perception; though he does not attend to this world, or a world beyond; though whatever is seen, heard, sensed, discerned, attained, sought after, thought round by mind (manasā)—to (all) that he does not attend, and yet he does attend?”

To this, the Buddha replies (p. 322) that there is such a samādhi, as follows:
Ananda, a monk attends thus: this is the real, this is the excellent, that is to say, the calming of all formations, the renunciation of all substrate, the destruction of craving, detachment (virāgo), stopping (niruddho), nibbāna.

This description seems a perfect match to the M.I.296 description of animitta-ceto-vimutti: not attending to a variety of worldly nimittas, and attending to nibbāna, the animitta. It also tallies with the Ps.I.66 description (above, p. 29) of “change of lineage,” which is said to overcome “the sign of formations externally,” and to “enter into stopping, nibbāna.”

The attention to “... detachment, stopping, nibbāna” is an interesting feature of the above passage. At A.V.110, one who contemplates “This is the real ... detachment, nibbāna,” is said to have virāga-saṇṇā, and one who contemplates “This is the real ... stopping, nibbāna,” is said to have nirodha-saṇṇā. The first of these perceptions is among five perceptions that “bring vimutti to maturity” (D.III.243), and both are among six perceptions that are “part of knowledge” (vijjā-bhāgiya) (A.III.334). Likewise, at S.V.129–34, they are among a variety of perceptions that, if “developed and made much of,” lead to one of the two fruits: the gnosis of the arahant, or the state of non-returning.

Such perceptions are also alluded to in the Ps.II.68 description of animitta liberation (p. 29, above). There, “knowledge of contemplation of stopping is animitta liberation, since it liberates from the sign as origin (samudayato)” and “knowledge of contemplation of detachment is animitta liberation, since it liberates from the sign as attachment (rāgato).” These passages suggest that insight into impermanence and into the constant cessation of specific phenomena undermine perceiving the sign of the arising of phenomena, to which the mind is usually attached, and open out into the perception of the cessation of the rise and fall of phenomena, nibbāna.

The series of objects not attended to at A.V.321–2 corresponds to that at M.III.104 ff., where a monk is said to be progressively “attending to the perception” of human beings, a village, the forest, earth, each of the four formless states, and animitta-samādhi, with each of the perceptions being “empty” (suṇño) of the previous ones. Human beings, a village, and the forest correspond to the five sense-objects and senses, at
A.V.321–2; earth, very probably as a meditation “device,” corresponds to the first of the four elements; the four formless states are found in both passages, and the *animitta-samādhi* stands out beyond all these. Both passages seem to describe the *animitta* state as one reached by means of a progressive emptying, in which the signs of both gross and subtle phenomena are transcended.

Another *Nissāya-vagga* passage, at A.V.318–9 (cf. p.7–8), reinforces this impression. Here, Ananda asks the Buddha:

> “May it be, venerable sir, that a monk’s acquiring of samādhi is of such a sort that in solidity he is not percipient of solidity (*pathaviyam pathavi-saññi*) . . . [this formula is then repeated for each of the items following solidity at A.V.321–2] . . . and yet he is percipient (*saññi*)?”

The Buddha replies that there is such a samādhi, where a monk is “percipient thus (*evam-saññi*): this is the real . . . detachment, stopping, nibbāna.” Such a samādhi must surely be the same as that at A.V.321–2, and is also reminiscent of the samādhi at A.IV.426–8, which we have argued (p. 26) to be an *animitta* samādhi. The description of the samādhi is indeed paradoxical. It is not so much that a person just does not attend to solidity, etc., but that in solidity, no solidity is perceived, as AA.V.2 says (on A.V.7–8), “having made solidity his object (*ārammanam*), he would not be percipient with the arisen perception ‘solidity.’” Solidity is perceived, as it were, as being empty of “solidity”: *saññā*—“perception,” “cognition,” “recognition,” or “interpretation,” that which classifies or labels experience (correctly or incorrectly)—does not latch onto a “sign” as a basis for seeing solidity as solidity. Rather, the mind attends to or perceives nibbāna, the signless; not attending to signs of solidity etc., it “sees through” solidity, etc., and focusses on that which is signless.

Another *Nissāya-vagga* passage illustrates this process. At A.V.324–6, the Buddha describes a monk who “meditates” (*jhāyati*) in such a way that his meditation is not dependent (*nissāya*) on any of the phenomena listed at p. 318–9, and yet he *does* meditate. The parallel between the passages suggests we are again dealing with *animitta-samādhi*. At the passage in question, however, the Buddha explains (p. 325–6) the type of meditation by saying:
... for the goodly thoroughbred of men, in solidity, the perception of solidity is vibhūtā."⁵⁸

"Vibhūta" can mean "made clear" or "destroyed," with AA.V.80 preferring the former:

arisen perception of four-fold or five-fold jhāna, with solidity as object, is vibhūta, unconcealed (pākatā) ... here it is born vibhūta from the state of being seen as anicca-dukkha-anattā by means of vipassanā.

The samādhi, however, is not seen only as vipassanā, which has formations as object, but as going further, too:

he meditates on what is made clear (vibhūtām), he meditates with fruition-attainment with nibbāna as object.

The nature of the animitta apprehension of nibbāna is suggested by a passage at A.V.8–9. Here, Ānanda asks Sāriputta the same question as he puts to the Buddha at p. 318–19 (above). In reply, Sāriputta says that he had previously attained such a samādhi, in which he was still percipient:

"'the stopping of becoming (bhava-nirodho) [is] nibbāna, the stopping of becoming [is] nibbāna,' indeed to me, your reverence, one perception arose, and another ceased (nirujhati). Just as, your reverence, from a burning splinter fire, one spark arises, another spark ceases . . ."⁵⁹

That is, in animitta-samādhi, brought about by insight into impermanence, as we have seen, even the perception of impermanence and of nibbāna as the stopping of the impermanent flow of phenomena (becoming)⁶⁰ is experienced as impermanent.

When the mind thoroughly contemplates any item of becoming, such as solidity, as impermanent, it overcomes the sign of permanence, etc., so as to perceive merely a stream of changing sense-objects not "indicative" of anything but themselves. This is the stage of vipassanā, which still has the sign of formations, of visible objects, etc., as its object. In the paths and fruitions, however, the mind does not even perceive the sign of sense-objects. It no longer registers what has been the object of
contemplation—it sees “through” these, for it has so developed
the perception of perpetual (arising and) cessation, that it natu-
really turns towards nibbāna, the cessation of the very process of
arising and ceasing. The perception of phenomena as imperma-
nent, liable to cessation (nirodha-dhammas; M.III.108), leads on
to the perception of nibbāna: the stopping (niruddha) of such a
cessation-prone flux.

The animitta-samādhi, as comprised of a flux of perceptions
(A.V.8–9), is clearly itself impermanent. As M.III.108 says, it is
known:

“as constructed (abhisamkhato) and thought out ... (it is) im-
permanent and liable to cessation.”

One who knows this goes beyond animitta-samādhi and attains
arahantship. For reasons that cannot be gone into here, I would
argue, on the basis of the early Pāli texts (e.g., the four Nikāyas),
that the experience of arahantship transcends other animitta
states, as it has no object, not even the animitta nibbāna. Rather,
it is nibbāna, in the form of an objectless (anārammaṇa), unsup-
ported (appatiṭṭhita), non-manifestive (anidassana), infinite
(ananta), unconstructed (asaṅkhata) and stopped (niruddha) con-
sciousness. In the timeless experience of arahantship, viññāna,
schooled so as not to be taken in by nimittas and worldly objects,
does not even take nibbāna as object, but, objectless, transcends
conditions and is the unconditioned.61

IX. The Animitta and Conceit

S.I.188, quoted above, shows an association between the
animitta and the destruction of conceit: “... and develop the
animitta, cast out the latent tendency to conceit.” This is due to
the fact that the animitta-samādhi grows out of strong insight
into impermanence, and:

“the perception of impermanence is to be developed for the
uprooting of the ‘I am’ conceit (asmimāno). Meghiya, of one who
is percipient of impermanence, the perception of anattā endures;
one who is percipient of anattā wins the uprooting of the ‘I am’
conceit, nibbāna, even in this life.”62
Insight into impermanence must undermine the ability to “conceive” of things in relation to ego-ideas, using them as ego-related “signs”:

By whatever they conceive it, it becomes otherwise from that; and that becomes false (musā) for him, a peurile, delusive (mosa-) dhamma. Nibbāna is the undelusive dhamma . . . (Sn.757–8).63

Knowing the swiftly changing nature of all nimiittas, one conceives nothing on them, and turns from them as false, to nibbāna as the real. S.IV.72–3, quoted above, sec. VII, describes the state of one who does not conceive of phenomena as “this thing” or “that thing” in relation to one’s “self.” SA.II.384 comments:

“by that” . . . you will not be impassioned by that (tena) attachment . . . “you will not be there” . . . in the seen, heard, sensed or discerned, you will not be bound, adhering and fixed.

As Ud.A.92 adds, on a parallel passage:

you will not be adhering or fixed in the seen, heard, sensed or discerned by craving, conceit and views, “this is mine, this I am, this is my self.”

X. The Animitta, Void, and Desireless Liberations

The connection of the animitta to the uprooting of conceit and the understanding of anattā shows that the animitta state is closely associated with the “void” state, which comes from insight into phenomena as void of “self” (e.g., M.I.297). We see at Ps.II.59, indeed:

When one who has great resolution gives attention as impermanent, the animitta liberation is dominant in him. In development, two liberations (the void and desireless) follow upon it, are connascent conditions . . . .

At any one time, only one of the three liberations is dominant (Ps.II.65), but the others are there in a secondary sense for, in the animitta liberation for example, one has no desire for the
signs one has been liberated from, and is void of such desire (Ps.II.66). Indeed, we have seen how one in animitta-samādhi perceives sense-objects as being “empty” of themselves. M.I.297–8 also explains that while the void and signless ceto-vimuttis are in one sense different—as reflection on phenomena as void of self, and as not attending to any signs—in another sense they are the same. This is because attachment, hatred and delusion are each “productive of signs,”64 and an arahant has destroyed these three, so that:

“To the extent that ceto-vimuttis are animitta, unshakeable (akūppā) ceto-vimutti is shown to be their chief, for that unshakeable ceto-vimutti is void (suññā) of attachment, hatred and delusion.”

This implies that “unshakeable ceto-vimutti”—described at M.I.204–5 as the goal of the holy life, and at MA.II.354 as arahatta-phala-ceto-vimutti— is both the highest void ceto-vimutti and the highest animitta-ceto-vimutti.

XI. Conclusion

In conclusion, let us draw together the strands of this survey. In a person’s normal state, it is often the case that consciousness runs after, follows, clings to and is tied to “signs,” that is, to “external” sensory objects that are taken as more than simple phenomena, but as indicating “people” and “things” in the world that are experienced as entrancing. The mind experiences them as “signs” with pleasant, sensuous, annoying, or dear associations. It also misperceives them so as to see permanence, happiness and I-ness where there is none. In this way, the “signs” or characteristics of attachment, hatred and delusion arise in the mind, and these “signs” give rise to more visible behavioural “signs” indicating the nature of the person.

The way beyond this trapped state of consciousness involves the practice of “guarding the senses”: of mindfully monitoring the input of the senses so that there is no seizing on such misleading troublesome sensory indications, but a viewing of sense-objects as simply sense-objects. On the other hand, there may be the development of awareness of more salutory “signs,” such
as that of the unpleasant, and usually ignored aspects of bodily existence. The development of inward states of calm concentration are also important. These turn the mind away from the distraction of “external” signs and focus on some chosen salutary “sign,” which might concern some aspect of the foulness of the body, as referred to above, or one of the many other objects of samatha meditation, such as the breath. In such meditations, the mind gets taken-up with a single, simple “sign,” using it as a vehicle for developing profound levels of calm and purity, the four jhānas. From the fourth jhāna, a meditator can refine the process even further, by entering the four formless attainments. These go beyond any external sensory “sign” and, in this respect, are “signless.” While they are still concerned with mental “signs,” they transcend the five sense-objects and so provide the mind with no such “sign” to latch on to, not even the subtle “sign” used in the jhānas. Beyond the fourth formless state, moreover, lie states that are “signless” in a fuller sense, but cannot be entered unless vipassanā, or insight meditation, has been developed.

Insight into impermanence is the basis for a series of “signless” samādhis, insight into suffering is the basis of a series of “desireless” samādhis, and insight into non-self is the basis for a series of “void” samādhis. Any level of insight into impermanence is known as “signless,” as it undermines or removes the misperception that seizes on delusive “signs” of permanence; the corresponding insights into suffering and non-self also remove the “signs” of happiness and self. Insight is not considered “signless” according to the Abhidhamma method, however, as it still contemplates the signs of sensory objects and of conditioned phenomena in general; it is aware of such phenomena and of their rise and fall. As insight reaches a high pitch, “change of lineage” occurs, which turns the mind away from conditioned phenomena towards the unconditioned, the signless nibbāna. The first apprehension of this, in the path-moment of stream-entry, is known as a “signless liberation” if it is attained on the basis of strong insight into impermanence. Indeed, any of the four paths and fruitions may be characterised as “signless” states on this basis (though the Abhidhamma has some terminological reservations, as we have seen). All such paths and fruitions are free of the signs of sense-objects or of conditioned phenomena,
and are free of the "signs" of attachment, hatred and delusion, and the behavioural signs these produce.

Insight into impermanence leads to such signless liberations in the following way. As is well known, in insight meditation the practitioner first contemplates the rising and falling of phenomena, and then focusses simply on their falling away, or cessation: "he sees decay each time he applies his contemplation" (p. 28, above). This leads to the "right seeing" of signs, so that the perception of them is "made clear" (p. 43). This is because he is aware of the limited, circumscribed nature of fleeting sensory phenomena; because he does not see compacted "things" and "people," but only such ephemeral phenomena. In this way, the mind comes to see such phenomena as wholly insignificant; it construes no "signs" in them. Sanñā, perception, does not latch on to any "sign" such as that of "solidity"; in solidity, no "solidity" is perceived. The ephemeral nature of conditioned phenomena means that the mind progressively becomes empty of any perception of them: all, even "solidity," are seen as empty of any solid reality. In such a state, the mind can pass beyond its previous terror at constant decay, to have total equanimity at conditioned phenomena; it is "neither inclined towards nor inclined away" (p. 27, above). Setting aside ignorance (ignorance), it can "see through" conditioned phenomena so as to attend to the unconditioned: the signless nibbāna, which is devoid of graspable "signs." In the four paths and the first three fruition, consciousness takes signless nibbāna as its object, while in the fruition of arahantship, I contend, consciousness (viññāna) has no object, not even a signless one, but is nibbāna.

By their insight into impermanence, the signless liberations not only undermine ignorance, but also conceit, for they dissolve away any apparently solid basis for I-ness into an insignificant, ephemeral flux, "beyond" which lies the unconditioned, which offers no "signs" as a basis for I-ness. The signless liberations are also closely related to the "void" and "desireless" ones, for they perceive phenomena as empty of themselves, are empty of attachment, etc., and also undercut desire for signs.
NOTES

* Given at the tenth Symposium on Indian Religions, Oxford, April 1984.

1. But see, e.g., Ps.II.35 ff., Vism.657–9, 668–9, Asl.221–4; E. Conze
Buddhist Thought in India, London, 1962, p. 61–7; P. Vajiranana Mahāthera,
Buddhist Meditation in Theory and Practice, Buddhist Missionary Society, Kuala
Lumpur, 1975, ch. 29.


3. E.g., M.I.297 ff., D.III.249.

4. E.g., Vin.III.92–3, Ps.II.35 ff., Thag.92 (=Dhp.92).

5. Ps.II.48 ff. and 69.

6. Ps.I.91 and 65.


8. Ps.I.91.


10. Ps.II.48.


12. E.g., S.V.269.


14. The “sphere of infinite space,” the “sphere of infinite consciousness,”
the “sphere of nothingness,” and the “sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-
perception.” These are 4 mystical states entered after the four jhānas, or
tranquil meditations. All eight states are part of the path of samatha, or “calm”
meditation. “Calm” meditation on its own cannot lead to nirvāṇa, for which
vipassanā, or “insight” meditation is also needed.

15. E.g., M.III.225, M.III.18, and cf. Ps.II.64 and 66.

16. That the “crowding obstacle” is the five kāmagunas, or “strands of
sensual pleasure,” can be seen from A.IV.449 and from the commentary on
this A.IV.426–8 passage.

17. In answer to the question “kimphalo.” AA.IV.198 seems to construe
“ānāphalo” as “is the fruition of ānā,” for it sees the samādhi itself as a phala,
explaining it as arahatta-phala-samādhi, the samādhi that is the fruition of
arahantship. The Critical Pali Dictionary, however, takes “ānāphalo” here as
meaning “resulting in perfect knowledge,” seeing “phalo” as an adjective.

18. “When he gives attention [to phenomena] as suffering, occurrence
(pavattam) appears to him as terror. When he gives attention [to phenomena]
as non-self, the sign and occurrence appear to him as terror.”

19. Parallel passages are then given with “desire” (panidhim), then “mis-
interpretation” (abhiniuresam), for “sign,” and with “the desireless,” then “the
void,” for “the animitta.”

20. And giving attention as suffering and non-self are said, respectively,
to lead to citta emerging from “occurrence” (pavattā), and “the sign and occu-
rence,” so as to enter, respectively, into “non-occurrence” and nirodha-nibbāna-
dhātu.

21. And cf. S.III.93, which states “animitta-samādhi, developed and made
much of, is of great fruit (mahāphhalo).”
22. Cf. *L'Abhidharmakośa*, transl. L. de La Vallée Poussin, V.186–7 (ch.VIII, 25 a–b), which sees the *animitta-samādhi* (and the desireless and void ones) as being either pure and mundane, or immaculate, without cankers (*anāśrava*) and supramundane, a *vinokṣamukha*.

23. It may be, then, that an “*animitta*-attainment” is always at the level of fruition, though Miln. 333 lists *animitta-phala-samāpatti* (and the attainments of the desireless and void fruitions) separately from the fruitions of stream-entry, once-returning, non-returning and arahantship. Moreover, Ps.I.91 not only describes the *animitta* (and the desireless and void) “dwelling” (see above), and “attainment,” but also the *animitta* (and desireless and void) “dwelling-attainment,” described by combining the descriptions of the *animitta* “dwelling” and “attainment.” It is hard to say what this is, though it may possibly be what Ps.I.65 refers to when it lists the four paths and four fruitions in ascending order of spiritual development, and then lists “void-dwelling” and “*animitta*-dwelling” (but not “desireless-dwelling,” cf. Thag.92, above, p.25).

24. Asl.214 sees such *jhānas* as “of one momentary flash of consciousness.”

25. The other three paths have a more compressed treatment (§ 362–4), but the implication is that they are to be dealt with in a parallel way.

26. The other three fruitions have a more compressed treatment (§ 553), but the implication is that they are to be treated in a parallel way.


29. Bv.8, v.36.


32. D.III.151, and cf. Sn.575: “life” (*jīvita*) is *animitta*—without a sign as to its length.


34. Vin.I.106; cf. A.III.110.


36. E.g., M.I.180, D.I.70.

37. M.I.72; cf. A.II.9 and A.IV.83.

38. And at A.I.82, *nimitta* is used as if it were parallel in meaning to *nīdāna*, *hetu* and *paccaya*.


40. Lines ii. and v. are found at Sn.341; lines vii.–viii. are found at Sn.342 and Thig.21; line v. is the second half of Thig.20; line vi. is similar to the first half of Thig.20; lines vii. and v. are reminiscent of Thig.105; and line ii. is reminiscent of M.I.26.

41. Cf. the “crowding obstacle” of the strands of sensual pleasure, note 16.

42. DA.1036, AA.III.347, Vism.668 (see above p. 30); on nibbāna—MA.II.367, Dhp.A.172 (on Dhp.92).

43. DA.1036, AA.III.347, Vism.668 (see above p. 30), and cf. *L'Abhidharma-kośa* V.185 (ch. VIII, 24a).
44. AA.III.347, MA.II.355, As.I.223 (see above, p. 31).
45. L’Abhidharmakośa V.185 (ch. VIII, 24a).
46. In the case of the mental “sense-channel,” there is no talk in terms of nimittas.
47. E.g., M.I.180, D.I.70.
48. At Ud.8, the recipient of this teaching, Bāhiya, soon reaches arahantship by its practice.
49. Cf. Thag.1105 and S.V.156.
50. The “influxes” (āsavā) of sensual desire (kāma) and becoming (bhava) are seen as abandoned by the “desireless” liberation, and that of views (diṭṭhi) by the “void” liberation.
51. ii) and iii) deal with how citta enters into the “desireless” dhātu, and the “void” dhātu.
52. MA.II.352 explains the animitta-dhātu as nibbāna.
53. AA.V.80 (on A.V.325–6), and cf. AA.V.2–3 (on A.V.7–9).
54. Cf. L’Abhidharmakośa V.185 (ch. VIII, 24a), which describes the animitta-samādhī as “the contemplation in which the ascetic considers nirodha.”
56. The rest of the items at A.V.321–2 seem to be of a summarising nature.
57. See, e.g., S.III.87, D.I.93, As.I.110 and Vism.462.
58. At A.I.287–91, and A.IV.400, an arahant is said to be a “goodly thoroughbred of men,” and at A.I.77 and A.II.114–5, “goodly thoroughbred” horses are likened to arahants. But at A.I.244–6, such a horse is compared to any ariyan person, such as a stream-enterer. Note that at S.I.28, the Buddha is said to be a thoroughbred because he mindfully endures pain—cf. p. 27.
59. Cf. at S.II.119, the non-arahant Nārada reports that he has seen, as it really is, by wisdom: “the stopping of becoming (is) nibbāna.”
60. “Becoming” is clearly a term used to cover “solidity,” etc.—all condition phenomena. This is illustrated by S.IV.23–4, on one who “conceives” (maññati) of the eighteen dhātus and related forms of stimulation and feeling: he is said to “delight in becoming.”
61. The arahant’s consciousness cannot be in this state all the time. For arguments to back up this set of contentions, see my Ph.D. thesis, “The Concept of the Person in Pāli Buddhist Literature,” Lancaster, 1981, chs. 10–11. See also my “Consciousness and Nibbāna in the Pāli Suttas,” Journal of Studies in Mysticism (now incorporated in Religious Traditions), La Trobe University, Vol. 2, no. 2, Spring 1979, p. 70–85. In this article, I made a preliminary investigation of the Nissaya-vagga passages; not realizing that the samādhi referred to must be animitta-samādhi, I suggested that it was itself objectless, and comprised the “perception” of nibbāna simply in the sense of the “seeing-through” of empty conditioned phenomena. This misconception is also implicit in my paper, “The Nature of the Taghāgata,” in Buddhist Studies—Ancient and Modern, ed. P. Denwood and A. Piatigorsky, Curzon Press, London, 1983. A revised version of the former article is to be published, as “Consciousness Mysticism in Early Buddhism,” in The Mystic and the Symbol—Studies in Indian and Comparative Religious Thought, ed. Karel Werner.
63. Cf. S.IV.170, p. 39: all nimitas are “becoming other.”
64. See above, p. 34.

Abbreviations (all references are to Pali Text Society editions)

A. = Anguttara-nikāya
AA. = Anguttara-nikāya-āṭṭhakathā
Asl. = Atthasālinī
D. = Dīgha-nikāya
DA. = Dīgha-nikāya-āṭṭhakathā
Dhp. = Dhammapada
Dhp.A. = Dhammapada-āṭṭhakathā
Dhs. = Dhammasaṅgani
M. = Majjhima-nikāya
MA. = Majjhima-nikāya-āṭṭhakathā
Miln. = Milindapañha
Ps. = Paṭisambhidāmagga
S. = Samyutta-nikāya
SA. = Samyutta-nikāya-āṭṭhakathā
Thag. = Theragāthā
Thig. = Therīgāthā
Ud. = Udāna
Ud.A. = Udāna-āṭṭhakathā
Vibh. = Vibhaṅga
Vin. = Vinaya
Vism. = Visuddhimagga