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# “Signless” Meditations in Pāli Buddhism\*

by Peter Harvey

The *animitta* or “signless,” is a relatively unexplored region of Buddhist doctrine;<sup>1</sup> 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*),<sup>2</sup> *ceto-vimutti*,<sup>3</sup> *vimokkha*,<sup>4</sup> *vimokkha-mukha*,<sup>5</sup> *vihāra*,<sup>6</sup> *samāpatti*,<sup>7</sup> *vihāra-samāpatti*,<sup>8</sup> *phassa*<sup>9</sup> and *dhātu*.<sup>10</sup> This variety also applies to the closely related *suññatā* (void) and *appañihita* (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<sup>11</sup>:

“Thirteen *dharmas* 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 *Tiṭṭaka*. 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-samādhī*, 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-samādhī* 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 *Tipiṭaka*. Firstly, it should be noted that *animitta-samādhī* is listed after,<sup>12</sup> or said to be entered after,<sup>13</sup> the four formless states,<sup>14</sup> 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-samādhī* 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 (*bahiddhāvutthāno vimokkho*)," for *nimittas* are often said to be "external";<sup>15</sup> 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 *kāmaguṇas*] awakened to by the Exalted One . . . for the bringing to an end of *dukkha*."<sup>16</sup>

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' cāyatanaṃ no paṭisaṃvedissati*); . . . 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 ṭhito*), 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 (*aññāphalo*).”<sup>17</sup>

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 (*asuññatam*), 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-guṇas*, 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-viññāṇam*).”

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” (*nissaraṇam*) 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 *citta* 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*),”<sup>18</sup> 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 (*vayam*) each time he applies his contemplation; this is the *animitta* dwelling.<sup>19</sup>

“*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-

ing away from the external,” of which Ps.II.64 says:

When he gives attention as impermanent, his *citta* emerges from the sign; his *citta* enters into (*pakkhandati*) the *animitta*.<sup>20</sup>

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

### 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.”<sup>21</sup> 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).<sup>22</sup>

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 (*samāpatti*).

Indeed, the commentary on this sees such an *animitta* “attainment” as the “attainment of fruition.”<sup>23</sup>

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),<sup>24</sup> or

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

iii) that are desireless (§351–2).<sup>25</sup>

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).<sup>26</sup>

#### 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-*dharmas*” (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.<sup>27</sup>
- 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.<sup>28</sup> Earthquakes are said to be the *nimittas*, or signs, of the four main events in a buddha’s life,<sup>29</sup> while ageing, sickness, death, and an ascetic are the four *nimittas*, or “indications” of the nature of life, leading to a *bodhisatta*’s renunciation.<sup>30</sup>
- iii) A specific type of natural sign—a sign of what is to come, a

portent. Thus, “diviners of *nimittas*” examined the 32 marks on the body of the newborn *bodhisatta*,<sup>31</sup> taking three of them as the *nimitta*, or “sign” of longevity.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, we read that “that is a prior sign (*pubbe nimittam*) of the manifestation of Brahmā, when the light arises, and the glory shines.”<sup>33</sup>

- iv) A marker, as when hillsides and rocks, etc. are taken as *nimittas* showing the boundaries of a monastic residence.<sup>34</sup>
- v) A (male or female) sexual organ (Vin.III.28, and 21) or sexual characteristic (Dhs. §633, 644).
- vi) Characteristic, as in *bālanimittāni*, “the characteristics of a fool” (M.III.163), and as implied in “But you, householder, have all the characteristic marks and signs (*ākārā te līṅgā te nimittā*) of a householder,”<sup>35</sup> 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 (*nimittaggāhī*), he does not seize on the detail (*anubyañjanaggāhī*) . . . .”<sup>36</sup>
- viii) Ground, reason or cause, as when the Buddha says that he does not behold the *nimitta* on which anyone could reprove him for having *āsavas* not yet destroyed.<sup>37</sup> 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.<sup>38</sup>
- 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-

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*.”<sup>39</sup>

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 (*asubhāya*),
- 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.”<sup>40</sup>

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-cchando*),<sup>41</sup> 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*.<sup>42</sup>

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 (*niketasārī*)? 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.<sup>43</sup> 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 (*ārammaṇas*), 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*.<sup>44</sup>

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.”<sup>45</sup> This alludes to a passage found at A.I.152, which describes the “three constructed characteristics of the constructed” (*saṅkhatassa saṅkhata-lakkhaṇāni*) as those of “arising” (*uppādo*), “decay” (*vayo*), and “becoming otherwise of what persists” (*thitassa aññathattam*).

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” (*nandiyā*); “detachment” (*virāgā*) and “as attachment”; “stopping” and “as origin” (*samudayato*); “relinquishment” and “as grasping”; “the *animitta*” and “all *nimittas*”; “the desireless” and “as desire” (*pañidhiyā*); “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 *samādhī-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

or as an animal.<sup>46</sup> 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 (*rūpa-nimittānusārī*), 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 viññāṇam*) 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).<sup>47</sup>

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 Mālunkyaputta, 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 tāttha*); as you, Mālunkyaputta, will not be there, hence you will not be here (*-idha*), beyond (*hūram*), 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*.<sup>48</sup> 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*.<sup>49</sup> 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 (*virajjati*) 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 *Nettipakarāṇa*.119 sees the *āsava* of *avijjā* as abandoned by the *animitta* liberation.<sup>50</sup> As we have already seen (p. 29), the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* 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*).<sup>51</sup>

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-vinibbhogam 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*.”<sup>52</sup>

In the *Nissāya-vagga* of the *Āṅguttara 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.<sup>53</sup>

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 (*paṭhavim*), 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:

“Herein, Ānanda, 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 (*nirodho*), 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.”<sup>54</sup>

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-saññā*, and one who contemplates “This is the real . . . stopping, nibbāna,” is said to have *nirodha-saññā*. 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-bhāgiyā*) (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.<sup>55</sup> 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” (*suñño*) 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.<sup>56</sup> 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, Ānanda 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 (*paṭhaviyaṃ paṭhavī-saññī*) . . . [this formula is then repeated for each of the items following solidity at A.V.321–2] . . . and yet he is percipient (*saññī*)?”

The Buddha replies that there is such a samādhi, where a monk is “percipient thus (*evaṃ-saññī*): 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 (*ārammaṇam*), 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)<sup>57</sup>—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 *vibhūta*.”<sup>58</sup>

“*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 (*pākaṭā*) . . . 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 (*vibhūtam*), 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 (*nirujjhati*). Just as, your reverence, from a burning splinter fire, one spark arises, another spark ceases . . . .”<sup>59</sup>

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)<sup>60</sup> 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 naturally turns towards nibbāna, the cessation of the very process of arising and ceasing. The perception of phenomena as impermanent, liable to cessation (*nīrodha-dhammas*; M.III.108), leads on to the perception of nibbāna: the stopping (*nīrodha*) 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) impermanent 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*), unsupported (*appatitṭhita*), non-manifestive (*anidassana*), infinite (*ananta*), unconstructed (*asamkhata*) and stopped (*niruddha*) consciousness. In the timeless experience of arahantship, *vinñāna*, schooled so as not to be taken in by *nimittas* and wordly objects, does not even take nibbāna as object, but, objectless, transcends conditions and is the unconditioned.<sup>61</sup>

### 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.”<sup>62</sup>

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).<sup>68</sup>

Knowing the swiftly changing nature of all *nimittas*, 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 co-nascent 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-samādhī* 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,”<sup>64</sup> and an arahant has destroyed these three, so that:

“To the extent that *ceto-vimuttis* are *animitta*, unshakeable (*akuppā*) *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 salutary “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. *Saññā*, 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 fruitions, 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.

2. E.g., Vin.III.92–3, A.III.397, S.IV.360.

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.

7. Vin.III.92–3, Ps.I.91.

8. Ps.I.91.

9. M.I.302.

10. Ps.II.48.

11. Commentary on M.I.296 ff.

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

13. M.III.105–8.

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 *kāmaguṇas*, 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 “*aññāphalo*” as “is the fruition of *aññā*,” 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 “*aññāphalo*” here as meaning “resulting in perfect knowledge,” seeing “*phalo*” as an adjective.

18. “When he gives attention [to phenomena] as suffering, occurrence (*ḥavattam*) 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” (*paṇidhī*), then “mis-interpretation” (*abhinivesam*), 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” (*ḥavattā*), and “the sign and occurrence,” 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 (*mahāpphalo*).”

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 (*anāsrava*) and supramundane, a *vimokṣamukha*.

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.

27. Vin.II.289, D.II.103, S.V.259, A.IV.309, Ud.62, and cf. Vibh.352–3 definition of “signifying” (*nemittakatā*).

28. A.I.170–1; cf. D.III.103–4 and Ps.II.227.

29. Bv.8, v.36.

30. Bv.18, v.28.

31. D.III.158 and 171, cf. D.I.9.

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

33. D.I.220; cf. D.I.209 and 225.

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

35. M.I.360; cf. D.II.62.

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 *nidāna*, *hetu* and *paccaya*.

39. And cf. Vibh.193, Ps.I.164; M.III.161; A.III.422; A.I.256, A.III.319 and S.V.278.

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, Dh.p.A.172 (on Dh.p.92).

43. DA.1036, AA.III.347, Vism.668 (see above p. 30), and cf. *L'Abhidharmakośa* V.185 (ch. VIII, 24a).

44. AA.III.347, MA.II.355, Asl.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 (*ditṭhi*) 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-samādhi* as "the contemplation in which the ascetic considers *nirodha*."
55. Cf. M.I.435–6.
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, Asl.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 *Nissāya-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.

62. A.IV.358, cf. S.II.155.  
 63. Cf. S.IV.170, p. 39: all *nimittas* are "becoming other."  
 64. See above, p. 34.

*Abbreviations* (all references are to Pali Text Society editions)

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