ONCE MORE ON TWO PASSAGES OF THE PĀLI CANON

1. viññāṇaṁ anidassanaṁ anantaṁ sabbatopabham¹, taṁ paṭhavīyā paṭhavatena ananubhūtāṁ, āpassa āpattena ananubhūtāṁ, tejassa tejatena ananubhūtāṁ, vāyassa vāyatena ananubhūtāṁ, bhūtānaṁ bhūtatenā ananubhūtāṁ, devānaṁ devatena ananubhūtāṁ... sabbassa sabbatena ananubhūtāṁ².

2. viññāṇaṁ anidassanaṁ anantaṁ sabbatopabham¹/
ettha āpo ca paṭhavī tejo vāyo na gādhati//
ettha dīghaṁ ca rassaṁ ca anuṁ-thūlaṁ subhāsubham//
ettha nāmaṁ ca rūpaṁ ca asesaṁ uparujjhati//
vīṇāṇassa nirodhenā etth’ etaman uparujjhati³

Some thirty years ago I read a paper on these two passages, and a famous Pāli scholar, after having read the summary, did not come to hear me but went on telling people around him, who knew no Pāli, that I did not understand the Pāli texts. Perhaps he believed that V.

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Trenckner, while editing the first volume of the Majjhima-Nikāya in 1888, was right in attributing the words of the Buddha to his adversary, despite the fact that this attribution has led to the following picture of the Buddha - not too glorious for the Omniscient:

... the Buddha did not attack the concept of viññāna by polemics; he overpowered Brahmā in another way, namely by the use of supernatural powers⁴.

Perhaps he thought, with other scholars, that the word viññāna used twice in the Dīgha-Nikāya passage refers to the same entity. Finally, he thought perhaps that it was not even necessary to relegate these passages - which apparently set forth an Upaniṣadic doctrine - to a “precanonical” or “pre-Hīnayānistic” Buddhism, as St. Schayer did⁵.

Be that as it may, I have written on the subject⁶, and, as could be expected, my work has had no impact at all on later studies. For reasons not quite clear to me, Étienne Lamotte cited the Dīgha-Nikāya passage to explain a passage of the Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra (Upadeśa), which puts forward a view that is attributed to the ekaccasassatikā ekacca-asassatikā in the Brahmajāla-sutta of the Dīgha-Nikāya⁷. More recently, Steven Collins, in his book Selfless persons, has discussed at some length the Kevaddha-sutta passage; and, given the extraordinary character of his observations, I wish to make a comment on them.

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Collins writes:

Although an enlightened man’s consciousness is a karmic result, it
is not limited by usual samsāric constraints. It is ‘indescribable, infinite,
radiant on every side’. We should not misinterpret this kind of conscious-
ness as a ‘cosmic consciousness’, in the manner of the Vedānta picture
of ultimate reality as sat-cit-ānanda, ‘Being-Consciousness-Bliss’.
Rather, like the ‘Widespread, far-reaching, immeasurable’ mind with
which the monk experiencing the Divine Abidings is endowed, and like
the ‘immeasurable mind’ of a monk in the forth meditative stage, and
like the sphere of Infinite Consciousness attained at the seventh stage,
this consciousness will cease, at final nibbāna. When final nibbāna is
attained, everything ceases, even those states and virtues which
Buddhism itself holds dear. The passage I quoted earlier which spoke of
the destruction of construction-consciousness by a stream-winner, says
in the case of the Arhat: ‘through the cessation of the last conscious-
ess of an Arhat who is dying into final nibbāna-without-substrate, wisdom,
mindfulness, and (all) name-and-form cease’. This ‘last consciousness’ is
said to be a constructed-consciousness, and it is through the ‘cessation
by non-arising, in virtue of the non-arising’ of this constructed-con-
ssciousness that nibbāna becomes final...

And in a note he says:

Carimaka-viññāṇaṁ pi abhisamkhāra-viññāṇaṁ pi (DA. II. 393, com-
menting on the ‘indescribable, infinite, radiant consciousness’ of D.I.
223...)⁸.

A similar interpretation was given by O.H. de A. Wijesekera⁹. What is novel here is that Collins appeals to the Tradition to support
his interpretation. But this reposes either on an intentional distortion
or on a misunderstanding of Buddhaghosa’s commentary.

For Buddhaghosa, the first word viññāna in the Dīgha-Nikāya
passage, as the word viññāna in the Majjhima-Nikāya passage, does
not mean “consciousness” at all, “constructed” or not; it is a “name
for nibbāna” (nibbānassa nāmaṁ), in the sense that nibbāna is to be
“preeminently known” or - as the Ṭīkā on the Sumaṅgalavilāsinī puts

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JAOS 84 (1964), p. 258.
it - “known through a preeminent means”\textsuperscript{10}.

And carimaka-viññāṇaṃ pi abhisamkhāra-viññāṇaṃ pi does not gloss the first viññāṇa, but the second viññāṇa. It is when this phenomenal consciousness ceases that all the empirical realities - the four elements, the antinomies, individuality - cease in nibbāna:

...tattha viññātabban ti viññāṇam. nibbānassa taṃ nāmaṃ...
ettha āpo cā, ti ettha nibbāne. idaṃ nibbānaṃ āgamma sabbam etam apo tiādinā nayena vuttaṃ upādinnaka-dhammajātaṃ nirujjhati appa-vattaṃ hoti.
idānī tassa nirujjhantarāṇaṃ dassento viññāṇassa nirodhena etth’ etam uparujjhhatiti āha. tattha viññāṇan ti carimaka-viññāṇam pi abhisamkhāra-viññāṇam pi...\textsuperscript{11}

In his eagerness to isolate Buddhism from the Upaniṣadic tradition, Buddhaghosa explains away viññāṇa in the two passages.

But to the impartial reader it will appear that the doctrine set forth, especially in the Dīgha-Nikāya passage, is the same as that of Yaññavalkya in the Brhadāraṇyaka-Upaniṣad. In the universal and absolute Consciousness, all the empirical realities, including individuality, cease to exist, and they cease when the empirical consciousness has ceased. One may recall the passages of the Brhadāraṇyaka where Yaññavalkya talks about the ātman as a “homogeneous mass of consciousness without inside and outside” (anantarocā yāh kṛtsnah praṣīna[ṇa]ghana [viṣṇa]ṇa[ṇa] eva) and at the same time says that “after Liberation there is no consciousness” (na pretya samājñāti)\textsuperscript{12}.

\textsuperscript{10} Sumanāgalavilāsinī II, p. 393. Cf. Papāṇaśūdanī II, p. 413. - viññātabban ti visiṭṭhena nāṭabban, sabbhiṇṇatamena ariyamaggāṇāṇena paccaakkhato jānitabban ti attho. Dīghanikāyaṭṭhakathāṭṭkā I, p. 512. The Ṭīkā on the Papāṇaśūdanī (edited in Burma and recently in India) is not available to me at this moment.

\textsuperscript{11} Sumanāgalavilāsinī II, p. 393. At the end Buddhaghosa refers to the Mahāniddesa, which may be a mistake for Cullaniddesa: see Collins, op. cit., pp. 206, 207 with the notes 15 and 21 (pp. 295, 296); also my review of Scherrer-Schaub in Journal of Indian Philosophy 22 (1994), p. 392. Note that abhisamkhāra-viññāṇa is not a gloss of carimaka-viññāṇa as Collins thinks, but refers to a different type of consciousness – “constructive-consciousness”.

samjñā here is to be understood, of course, as Śaṅkara makes it clear, višeṣasamjñā or višeṣavijñāna, “particular (individual) consciousness”.

And, so far as I am concerned, I do not see anything in the Pāli Canon that contradicts the doctrine recorded in the two passages.


On pretya here - “after Liberation”, and not “after death” - see L'Ātman-Brahman..., p. 50-51. Also Sureśvara, Brhadāranyakaopanisadvbhāṣyavārttika (Ānandāśrama Sanskrit Series 16, Poona, 1892-94), p. 1106, st. 437; Pārthasārathimiśra on Kumārila’s Ślokavārttika, Ātmavāda 147.