

13

(Satipaṭṭhāna) Nīvaraṇa Sutta

The Discourses on the Hindrances (Relating to Satipatthana) | A 9.64

Theme: The 5 hindrances are abandoned by the 4 satipatthanas

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2012

1 Introduction

1.1 THE 5 MENTAL HINDRANCES. This is a short discourse on what prevents meditation (the 5 hindrances) and what meditation is (the 4 satipatthanas). The 5 mental hindrances are¹

(1) sensual desire	<i>kāma-c, chanda</i>
(2) ill will	<i>vyāpāda</i>
(3) sloth-and-torpor	<i>thina, middha</i>
(4) restlessness-and-worry	<i>uddhacca, kukkucca</i>
(5) doubt	<i>vicikicchā</i>

Simply put, the 5 mental hindrances [§2] arise from over-dependence on our senses and its main effect on us is the inability to “see beyond our noses,” so to speak. This is plainly stated in **the Āvaraṇa Nīvaraṇa Sutta** (S 46.38) that these hindrances “weaken wisdom” (*paññāya dubbalī, karaṇā*)² [1.2].

“Wisdom” here refers to how our minds—when left to itself, without the distraction of incessant input of external sense-data through the five physical senses—is able to calm down and feeling profound bliss. This mental bliss has a powerful cleansing effect on the mind, so that it is crystal clear during and after such a deep meditation (usually a dhyana).

Once we are familiar with such a calm and clear mind, we direct it back to the satipatthanas, and cultivate them on ever higher levels, so that we are able to “see” through the surfaces of things *into* their true nature: this is called insight. As these insights become deeper and clearer, our realizations, too, spiral higher on the path to awakening.³

1.2 RELATED SUTTAS. For an important contrast in terms of meditation emphasis, the **(Satipaṭṭhāna) Nīvaraṇa Sutta** (A 9.64) should be studied with **the Āvaraṇa Nīvaraṇa Sutta** (S 46.38). While the former states that “the four focusses of mindfulness are to be cultivated for the abandoning of these five mental hindrances” [§3], that Āvaraṇa Nīvaraṇa Sutta shows how “the seven awakening-factors...are *not* obstruction, *not* hindrances, *not* mental impurities, which when cultivated, often developed, bring about the realization of knowledge and liberation.”⁴

In other words, **the Āvaraṇa Nīvaraṇa Sutta** (S 46.38) teaches the overcoming of the mental hindrances and attaining dhyana for the cultivation of insight (*vipassanā, bhāvanā*),⁵ here called “wisdom” (*vijjā*). However, *vijjā* here has a broader sense than *vipassanā*, whose sense it connotes, but it also refers to the various spiritual knowledges of the different level of sainthood, including “final knowledge” (*aññā*), that is, liberating wisdom of the arhat, too.

The (Satipaṭṭhāna) Nīvaraṇa Sutta (A 9.64), on the other hand, tells us that the practice of the 4 satipatthanas is a way of removing these same 5 mental hindrances. However, the result of satipatthana can also bring about wisdom or mental calm (*samatha*), depending on our ability and choice during the cultivation of satipatthana. In fact, properly cultivate, satipatthana can bring us to nirvana itself.⁶

¹ For details, see *Nīvaraṇa*, SD 32.1.

² S 46.38,9/5:95, SD 41.10.

³ See **Samatha and vipassana**, SD 41.1 (6.3), esp (6.3.6).

⁴ S 46.38,5-7/5:96 f, SD 41.10.

⁵ Note that here, *vipassanā, bhāvanā* means simply “the cultivation of insight,” not “insight *meditation*,” which is a modern invention of Burmese teachers. In other word, it is an integral part of balanced meditation that also involves *samatha* or mental calm. Both samatha and vipassana work together like a flying bird’s wings to help us soar to spiritual liberation. See **Samatha and vipassana**, SD 41.1.

⁶ See **Samatha and vipassana**, SD 41.1 (6.3.4).

The Discourse on the Hindrances

A 9.64

The 5 mental hindrances

- 1 There are, bhikshus, these five mental hindrances. What are the five?
- 2 (1) The mental hindrance that is sensual desire *kāma-c, chanda nīvaraṇa*
 (2) The mental hindrance that is ill will *vyāpāda nīvaraṇa*
 (3) The mental hindrance that is sloth-and-torpor *thina, middha nīvaraṇa* [458]
 (4) The mental hindrance that is restlessness-and-worry *uddhacca, kukkucca nīvaraṇa*
 (5) The mental hindrance that is doubt *vicikicchā nīvaraṇa*

The 4 focusses of mindfulness

3 Bhikshus, the four focusses of mindfulness are to be cultivated for the abandoning of these five mental hindrances.

What are the four?

- 4 (1) Here, bhikshus, a monk⁷ dwells⁸ exertive, clearly aware, mindful,
observing [watching] the body in the body,⁹
 removing¹⁰ covetousness and displeasure [discontent]¹¹ in regard to the world;¹²
 (2) he dwells exertive, clearly aware, mindful,
observing feelings in the feelings,
 removing covetousness and displeasure in regard to the world;
 (3) he dwells exertive, clearly aware, mindful,
observing the mind in the mind,
 removing covetousness and displeasure in regard to the world;
 (4) he dwells exertive, clearly aware, mindful,
observing dharmas in the dharmas,
 removing covetousness and displeasure in regard to the world.

5 These, bhikshus, are the four focusses of mindfulness that are to be cultivated for the abandoning of these five mental hindrances.

— evaṃ —

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⁷ Here “a monk” (*bhikkhu*) may refer to either an ordained monastic or anyone who is meditating (here, doing satipaṭṭhana) (DA 3:756; MA 1:241; VbhA 216 f; cf SnA 251). See SD 13.1 (3.1.1).

⁸ *Ātāpī sampajāno satimā, vineyya loke abhijjhā, domanassaṃ*. Here we find 4 of the 5 spiritual faculties (*pañc’-indriya*) in action: see SD 13.1 (4.2).

⁹ “Observing the body in the body” (*kāye kāyānupassī*). See SD 13.1 (3.4).

¹⁰ *Vineyya* can mean “should remove” (as pot, like *vineyya*, Sn 590) or as “having removed” (as ger, like *vinaitvā*, Pm 1:244), and both senses apply in Satipaṭṭhāna S. U Silananda similarly ends the sentence with “removing covetousness and grief in the world” (1990:177); also 1990:22-25. See SD 13.1 (4.2c).

¹¹ “Covetousness and displeasure,” *abhijjhā, domanassaṃ*, alt trs: “desire and discontent,” “desiring and disliking,” or “longing and loathing.” Walshe (1995:335 & n632) renders it as “hankering and fretting [in regard to the world].” See SD 13.1 (4.2).

¹² “World” (*loka*). See SD 13.1 (4.2.4).