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(Koṭigāma) Āsava-k,khaya Sutta

The (Koṭigāma) Discourse on the Destruction of the Influxes | S 56.25

Theme: The 4 truths destroy the mental influxes

Translated by Piya Tan ©2018

1 Sutta summary and significance

1.1 SUTTA SUMMARY. The (Koṭigāma) Āsava-k,khaya Sutta, the Koṭigāma discourse on the destruction of the mental influxes (S 56.25), is a short discourse that defines the attaining of **arhat**—that is, the destruction of the mental influxes (*āsava-k,khaya*)—as breakthrough into the 4 noble truths. An arhat, then, is one who has broken through or fully comprehended the 4 noble truths.

1.2 THE 4 NOBLE TRUTHS

1.2.1 These 4 truths are defined in **the (Sacca) Khandha Sutta**, the (truth) discourse on the aggregates (S 56.13), where the 4 truths are defined as follows:

(1) The truth that is suffering	the 5 aggregates	[1.2.2]
(2) The truth that is the arising of suffering	craving (the 3 cravings)	[1.2.3]
(3) The truth that is the ending of suffering	nirvana	[1.2.4]
(4) The truth that is the path to the ending of suffering	the noble eightfold path	[1.2.5]

(S 56.13), SD 53.26

1.2.2 The 1st noble truth is defined as **the 5 aggregates** (*pañca-k,khandha*) are form (*rūpa*), feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), formations (*saṅkhārā*) and consciousness (*viññāṇa*). This is what we really are: the body (form) and mind (the other 4 aggregates). Because of their nature to change and alter, they are said to be “existential suffering.”¹ This definition, on account of its brevity, is probably older than the more comprehensive one given in **the Dhamma,cakka Pavattana Sutta** (S 56.11,5), SD 1.1.

1.2.3 Craving

1.2.3.1 The 2nd noble truth is defined as **craving** (*taṇhā*), that is, the 3 kinds, namely:

(1) sensual craving (<i>kāma,taṇhā</i>),	[1.2.3.2]
(2) the craving for eternal life (<i>bhava,taṇhā</i>) and	[1.2.3.3]
(3) the craving for non-existence (<i>vibhava,taṇhā</i>).	[1.2.3.4]

1.2.3.2 Sensual craving or **craving for sense-pleasures** (*kāma,taṇhā*) refers to lust for the 5 cords of sense-pleasures (*pañca kāma,guṇa*), that is, those arising with the eye, ear, nose, tongue and body. Technically, this refers to sensuality or attachment related to the sense-world, which includes the lower deva realms, the human world and the subhuman realms.²

1.2.3.3 Craving for existence or **craving to be** (*bhava,taṇhā*) is the lust for form-sphere existence or formless-sphere existence, that is, the attachment to dhyana. This is a narrow definition related to those meditators who delight in the bliss of dhyana meditation in both the form bases and the formless bases

¹ For an analysis of these 4 truths, see SD 53.26 (3).

² On craving for sensual pleasures, see *Kāma-c, chanda*, SD 32.2.

through a lack of understanding or acceptance that they are mind-made and impermanent, and still caught up in samsaric life, the cycle of rebirths and redeaths.

As “**the craving to be,**” this is the kind of lust rooted in the eternalist view (*sassata, diṭṭhi*), that is, any notion of continuing one’s existence in some form, especially by way of an abiding soul, an eternal God-idea, eternal heaven or paradise, and ideas related to them. All such ideas are false because they violate the universal characteristic of impermanence: whatever exists must exist in time; whatever exists in time must change: they are impermanent.³

1.2.3.4 Craving for non-existence or craving not to be (*vibhava, taṇhā*) is the lust accompanied by the annihilationist view (*uccheda, diṭṭhi*), from which arises the “craving for annihilation [extermination]” (*vibhava, taṇhā*) (SA 2:264).⁴ This is the desire for a complete end to existence, rooted in the view that such extermination brings an end to one’s life, identity, etc.

1.2.3.5 Although both these extremes of craving can be explained in terms of the eternalist view [1.2.3.3] and the annihilation view [1.2.3.4] respectively, these are actually unconscious cravings or tendencies. In other words, those who hold such a view do not really understand why they are doing so, and may easily rationalize that it is the best view to which they cling with blind faith and which are perpetuated by philosophical or religious dogmas.⁵

1.2.4 Nirvana

1.2.4.1 The 3rd noble truth is defined as **nirvana** (*nibbāna*). Since nirvana is the unconditioned (*asaṅkhata*) we cannot really *define* it, that is to say, it is without attributes and its real nature is beyond words or language. We can, however, describe it, that is, use words that are *meaningful* to us and to negate them so that our wisdom will be able to envision it to some useful extent to inspire us to work towards the path. This kind of language is called **apophasis**, that is, the use of negative language.⁶

1.2.4.2 The most comprehensive sutta description of nirvana is this one given in **the Nibbāna Paṭi-saṃyutta Sutta 1** (U 8.1), thus:

<p><i>a</i> 4 There is, bhikshus, that place where there is</p> <p><i>b</i> no earth, no water, no fire, no wind;</p> <p><i>c</i> no base of boundless space;</p> <p><i>d</i> no base of boundless consciousness;</p> <p><i>e</i> no base of nothingness;</p> <p><i>f</i> no base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception;</p> <p><i>g</i> neither this world nor other worlds;</p> <p><i>h</i> with neither moon nor sun.</p> <p><i>a</i> 5 Therein, bhikshus, I say, there is</p> <p><i>b</i> neither coming nor going nor standing;</p> <p><i>c</i> neither death nor birth;</p> <p><i>d</i> neither the established nor the occurring;</p>	<p>...</p> <p><i>n’eva paṭhavī na āpo na tejo na vāyo</i> <i>na ākāsānañ-c’āyatanam</i> <i>na viññāṇañc’āyatanam</i> <i>na ākiñcaññ’āyatanam</i> <i>na n’eva, saññā, nāsaññ’āyatanam</i> <i>nāyam loko na para, loko</i> <i>na ubho candima, sūriyā</i></p> <p>...</p> <p><i>n’eva āgatiṃ ... na gatiṃ na ṭhitiṃ</i> <i>na cutiṃ na upapattiṃ</i> <i>appatiṭṭham appavattam</i></p>
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³ On the eternalist view, see SD 1.1 (3.1.2).

⁴ On the annihilationist view, see SD 1.1 (3.1.1).

⁵ See SD 49.2 (3.2.2.3); also SD 1.1 (3.1).

⁶ On apophasis, see SD 40a.1 (6.3).

e nor even this sense-object.

6 This, indeed, is the very end of suffering.

anārammaṇam ev'etaṃ—

es'ev'anto dukkhassa

(U 8.1) + SD 50.1 (1.1.0)

1.2.5 The noble eightfold path

1.2.5.1 The 4th noble truth is defined as **the noble eightfold path** (*ariya aṭṭh'āṅgika magga*). A very comprehensive study of it can be found in **SD 10.16**. Here is a schematic diagram giving a summary of the noble eightfold path with its path-factors (*magg'āṅga*) and the path's roles in the 3 trainings:

the noble eightfold path

the 3 trainings

right view	<i>samma diṭṭhi</i>	directly seeing the 4 truths	}	wisdom (<i>paññā</i>)
right intention	<i>sammā saṅkappa</i>	charity lovingkindness compassion		
right speech	<i>sammā vācā</i>	refraining from false speech refraining from divisive speech refraining from harsh (hurting) speech refraining from frivolous talk	}	moral conduct (<i>sīla</i>)
right action	<i>sammā kammantā</i>	refraining from taking life refraining from taking the not-given refraining from sexual misconduct		
right livelihood	<i>sammā ājīva</i>	refraining from wrong speech & wrong action		
right effort	<i>sammā vāyāma</i>	preventing unarisen unwholesome states abandoning arisen unwholesome states cultivating unarisen wholesome states maintaining arisen wholesome states	}	mental concentration (<i>samādhi</i>)
right mindfulness	<i>sammā sati</i>	contemplation of the body contemplation of feeling contemplation of the mind contemplation of dharmas		
right concentration	<i>sammā samādhi</i>	cultivating the 4 dhyanas		

Table 1. The eightfold path and its limbs

1.2.5.2 The noble eightfold path is analysed in a number of suttas, such as these:

Sacca Vibhaṅga Sutta	M 141,23-31	SD 11.11
Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta	D 22,21	SD 13.2
Mahā Cattārīsaka Sutta	M 117	SD 6.10
Magga) Vibhaṅga Sutta	S 45.8	SD 3.3.

2 The mental influxes (*āsava*)

2.1 TRANSLATION AND USAGE

2.1.1 The term *āsava* (literally “canker”), “mental influx” or simply “influx,” comes from *ā-savati*, meaning “flows towards” (that is, either “into” or “out” towards the observer). It has been variously translated as “influx, taint (“deadly taint(s),” Rhys Davids), corruption, intoxicant, bias, depravity, misery, evil (influence)” or simply left untranslated.

The mental influxes are so called because they are defilements that “flow” through our sense-experiences by way of the 5 physical senses and our thoughts into the mind, where they “fester” and “pollute” the mind with ignorance and craving. The result of such an infestation is that we remain caught in *samsara*, the cycle of rebirths and re-deaths.

2.1.2 The earliest mentions of the influxes in the suttas⁷ list only these **3 kinds**:

(1) the mental influx of sensual lust	<i>kām’āsava</i>	being caught up with sense-experiences
(2) the mental influx of existence	<i>bhav’āsava</i>	the lust to be and go on being this or that
(3) the mental influx of ignorance	<i>avijjāsava</i>	a mental blindness dominated by craving

The key influx is **ignorance**, through which craving as sensual lust works so that we are caught up with the notion of wanting to exist in some form of glory, power and eternal life; and while we live, to be this or that, that is, to simply acquire sense-experiences, especially pleasurable ones, rejecting painful ones and ignoring neutral feelings. Furthermore, on account of such defilements, we also form all kinds of views that further worsen the impact of these influxes. Religion is often the sophistication and glorification of such defilements.⁸

2.2 THE ABHIDHAMMA lists 4 kinds of influxes, that is,⁹

(1) the mental influx of sensual lust	<i>kām’āsava</i>
(2) the mental influx of existence	<i>bhav’āsava</i>
(3) the mental influx of views	<i>ditṭh’āsava</i>
(4) the mental influx of ignorance	<i>avijjāsava</i>

These 4 are also known as “floods” (*oghā*) or “yokes” (*yogā*). The list of 3 influxes (omitting the influx of views) is probably older and is found more frequently in the Suttas [2.1.2]. The destruction of these influxes is equivalent to arhathood.¹⁰

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⁷ D 33,1.10(20)/3:216; M 2,99.3 (SD 8.10); M 9,70/1:55 (SD 11.14); M 121,12/3:108 (SD 11.3); A 3.58,5/1:165 (SD 94.5), A 3.59,4/1:167 (SD 80.16), A 6.63,9/3:414 (SD 6.11).

⁸ It would be interesting to get the class to write about or discuss this last point.

⁹ D 16,2.4, Pm 1.442, 561, Dhs §§1096-1100, Vbh §937.

¹⁰ On 3 or 4 influxes? see SD 30.3 (1.3.2). The influxes as floods (*ogha*), see **Ogha Pañha S** (S 38.11), SD 30.3(1.4) + (1.4.2); as yokes (*yoga*), see SD 30.3 (1.4.2 n).

(Koṭi,gāma) Āsava-k,khaya Sutta

The (Koṭi,gāma) Discourse on the Destruction of the Influxes

S 56.25

1 Bhikshus, I say that the destruction of the influxes¹¹ is for one who knows and sees, not for one who knows not and sees not.¹²

2 And what, bhikshus, does one know and see that is the destruction of the influxes?

The 4 noble truths

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|---|---|
| (1) “This is suffering ,” bhikshus, he knows thus: | this is the destruction of the influxes. |
| (2) “This is the arising of suffering,” bhikshus, he knows thus: | <i>this is the destruction of the influxes.</i> |
| (3) “This is the ending of suffering,” bhikshus, he knows thus: | <i>this is the destruction of the influxes.</i> |
| (4) “This is the path leading to the ending of suffering,”
bhikshus, he knows thus: | <i>this is the destruction of the influxes.</i> |

3 Thus, bhikshus, one knows, thus sees the destruction of the influxes.

Reflection on the truths

- 4 Therefore, bhikshus,
You should devote yourself (to the reflection):¹³ “This is suffering.”
You should devote yourself (to the reflection): “This is the arising of suffering.”
You should devote yourself (to the reflection): “This is the ending of suffering.”
You should devote yourself (to the reflection): “This is the path leading to the ending of suffering.”

— evaṃ —

180819 180901 181207 181211

¹¹ “Mental influxes,” *āsava*. See (2).

¹² *Jānato ahaṃ bhikkhave, passato āsavānaṃ khayāṃ vadāmi, no ajānato no apassato* [Be Se *ajānato apassato*]. Elsewhere, this passage applies to the 5 aggregates (*pañc’upādāna*): **Upanisā S** (S 12.23/2:29,24 f), SD 6.12; **Vāsijaṭa S** (S 22.101/3:152,26 f), SD 15.2.

¹³ *Idaṃ dukkhaṃ’ti yogo karaṇīyo*.