

3

Āvaraṇa Sutta

The Discourse on Coverings | A 5.51

Theme: The 5 mental hindrances are like mountain streams

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2010

1 Uniqueness of the Āvaraṇa Sutta

1.1 SUTTA SUMMARY. The Āvaraṇa Sutta deals with the 5 mental hindrances. The teaching style itself, however, is quite a common one, being addressed to no particular person, but “the monks” as an assembly. The Sutta structure is simple: the thesis is announced by the Buddha [§2a], and then fully defined [§3].

The rest of the Sutta contains two parables: the first, that of the open sluices [§4] is about how the flow of a powerful raging river can significantly be weakened by opening channels on both banks. Like the open channels that weaken the powerful river flow, preventing it from reaching the ocean, the hindrances prevent us from focussing our minds, so that we cannot bring it to focus and attain mental bliss, and liberation in due course.

The closed channels allow the river waters to flow swiftly and completely down into the ocean. Free of mental hindrances, a meditator is able to focus his mind, attain dhyana, and with proper practice, attain liberation. [§5]

1.2 UNIQUE FEATURES. The Āvaraṇa Sutta is unique in a number of small but interesting ways. The Sutta parables mention a *naṅgala,mukha* [§4b] (literally, “plough-mouth”), which is a hapax legomenon (an only occurrence of the word). The Commentary explains them as “sluices for water-courses” or more simply “water-gates” (*māṭikā,mukha*), and that they are so called because they resemble ploughs and are dug up with plough.¹

The following expressions, too, describing the river waters and the mind, are unique to the Āvaraṇa Sutta, namely:

- *vikkhitta viṣaṭa* [§4b] “disturbed and scattered,”²
- *avikkhittam avisaṭam* [§5a] “undistracted and unscattered,”
- *vyādiṇṇa* or *byadiṇṇa* [§4b] “taken apart, or scattered,”
- *avyādiṇṇa* or *abyadiṇṇa* [§5b] “not taken apart, or unscattered.”

2 Dealing with the hindrances

The mental hindrances can only be dealt with when they have arisen; we can only overcome them when we experience them. A vitally important part of meditation for us, especially for the neophyte, is meeting our mental hindrances and in knowing them with lovingkindness, release them, and freeing ourselves of them.³

The Saṃyutta Commentary explains the parable of the flowing stream as follows:

The phrase “Indeed, even so” [§4c] should be understood thus:

Here “insight knowledge” (*vipassanā,ñāṇa*) should be understood as the current (*sota*).

¹ *Naṅgala,mukhānī ti māṭikā,mukhāni. Tāni hi naṅgala,sarikkhakattā naṅgalehi ca khatattā naṅgala,mukhānī ti vuccanti*, AA 3:256

² **M 138.**10/3:225 (the mind is disturbed and scattered externally); **A 4.244.**2:244 (when a lion sees the deer-king). Cf *avikkhitta,citta* (mf), “with undistracted mind,” said of persons. (m) *~o samāno bhabbo ayoniso,manasikāram pahātum*, “being with undistracted mind, one is able to abandon unwise attention” (A 5:149,8); *ek’agga,citto ~o avisāhaṭa,mānaso*, “with unified mind, undistracted, mentally undisturbed” (Nm 501,17 (NmA); UA 17,6, 268,23; PvA 26,28). When the mind is focussed mind, consciousness (*viññāṇa*) is said to be *bahiddhā avikkhittam avisaṭam*, “externally undistracted, unscattered” (ie not under the power of the hindrance of sensual lust). **M 138.**3/-3:223, 10/3:225, etc; **It 3.5.5/94.**

³ See *Nīvaraṇa* = SD 32.1 (5.6).

When the six sense-doors are bereft of restraint, it is as like when both the sluices (*naṅgala, mukha*) are opened.

When we are overwhelmed by the 5 hindrances, it is like when a tree-root covered with straw, grass and clay, is crushed mid-stream, making the water disturbed, dispersed, scattered.

When, having destroyed all wholesomeness gained through insight knowledge, we unable to reach the ocean of nirvana, it is like the water's losing speed on account of dragging along a covering of grass, straw and so on, and is unable to reach the ocean.

On the bright side (*sukka, pakkhe*), the import should be explained in terms of the opposite of what has been said.

It is the cycle of devolution and evolution (*vaṭṭa, vivaṭṭa*) that is spoken of in the Sutta. (AA 3:256)⁴

— — —

The Discourse on Coverings

A 5.51

1 Thus have I heard.

At one time the Blessed One was staying in Anātha, piṇḍika's park in Jeta's grove⁵ near Sāvattihī.⁶

There the Blessed One addressed the monks thus,

“Bhikshus!”

“Bhante!” the monks answered the Blessed One in assent.

The Blessed One said this:

The 5 mental hindrances

2.1 “Bhikshus, there are these 5 coverings,⁷ hindrances, parasites⁸ of the mind, that weaken wisdom.⁹

2.2 What are the five?

3 *Sensual desire*, bhikshus, is a covering, a hindrance, a parasite of the mind, that weakens wisdom.

Ill will, bhikshus, is a covering, a hindrance, a parasite of the mind, that weakens wisdom.

⁴ *Evam eva kho ti ettha sotam viya vipassanā, nāṇam daṭṭhabbam, ubhato naṅgala, mukhānaṃ vivaraṇa, kālo viya chasu dvāresu samvarassa vissaṭṭha, kālo, majjhe, nadiyā rukkhā, pāde koṭṭetvā palāla, tiṇa, mattikāhi āvaraṇe kate udakassa vikkhitta, viṣaṭa, vyādiṇṇa, kālo viya pañcahi nīvaraṇehi pariyaṇaddha, kālo, evam āvaraṇe kate vihata, - vegassa udakassa tiṇa, palāl'ādini parikaḍḍhitvā samuddam pāpuṇitum asamattha, kālo viya vipassanā, nāṇena sabbā, kusale viddhamsetvā nibbāna, sāgaram pāpuṇitum asamattha, kālo veditabbo. Sukka, pakkhe vutta, vipallāsena yojanā kātabbā. Imasmim sutte vaṭṭa, vivaṭṭam kathitam.*

⁵ *Jeta, vana*, so called, says Comy, because it is “grown, maintained and guarded by prince Jeta” (*tañ hi Jetena rāja, kumārena ropitam samvaddhitam paripālitam*) (MA 1:60; KhpA 111; PmA 3:533). As such, it is not an ordinary wild forest, but a cultivated grove.

⁶ On tr *sāvattihīyam* as “near (*samīpe*) Sāvattihī,” rather than “in Sāvattihī,” see Comys, eg SA 1:13; AA 1:15; KhpA 112; UA 57; PmA 3:534.

⁷ *Āvaraṇa* (ts), (adj) covering, obstructing, shutting off; (n): 1 covering, cover, obstruction, bar, shelter, screen, dam, weir, sluice (on a river or tank); encircling wall, rampart; 2 hindrance, obstacle; as an ethical term, synonym of *nīvaraṇa*. In this Sutta, both the idiomatic and metaphorical senses are used.

⁸ *Ajjhāruhā* (cf Amg *ajjhāroha*), more often *ajjhārūha* (m), “which grows in and up over”; (1) parasite (on, with gen, *mahārukkhā...rukkhānaṃ ~ā*, S 5:96,8 (scil *assāttho, nigrodho*, etc ≠ J 3:398,27* f; = *abhiruhanaka*, SA; J 3:-399,14. (2) metaph *āvaraṇā nīvaraṇā cetaso ~ā*, S 5:96,21-97,1 (scil *kāma-c, chando vyāpādo*, etc) = A 3:63,12 (= *cetaso ajjhārūhā*, AA), qu DhsA 382,22.

⁹ *Pañc'ime, bhikkhave, āvaraṇā nīvaraṇā cetaso ajjhāruhā paññāya dubbalī, karaṇā*, S 5:96,21-97,1 (scil *kāma-c, chando vyāpādo*, etc.) = A 3:63,12, qu DhsA 382,22.

Sloth-and-torpor, bhikshus, is a covering, a hindrance, a parasite of the mind, that weakens wisdom.

Restlessness-and-remorse, bhikshus, is a covering, a hindrance, a parasite of the mind, that weakens wisdom.

Doubt, bhikshus, is a covering, a hindrance, a parasite of the mind, that weakens wisdom. These, bhikshus, are the 5 coverings, hindrances, parasites of the mind, that weaken wisdom.

The parable of the open sluices

4.1 Indeed, bhikshus, a monk, without abandoning these 5 coverings, hindrances, parasites of the mind, that weaken wisdom, who is without spiritual strength, with weakened wisdom, would know what is good for himself, or what is good for others, [64] or what is good for both,¹⁰ or, would realize a superhuman state, the distinctive knowledge and vision worthy of the noble ones—this is impossible.¹¹

4.2 Suppose, bhikshus, there is a river, flowing down from the mountains, flowing far, with swift currents, carrying everything with it,¹² and a man were to *open* the sluices¹³ on both sides [banks], so that, bhikshus, the mid-stream current, disturbed, dispersed, diverted, would not flow far, nor its currents swift, nor taking everything with it.¹⁴

4.3 Indeed, even so, bhikshus, a monk, without abandoning these 5 coverings, hindrances, parasites of the mind, that weaken wisdom, who is without strength, with weakened wisdom, would know what is good for himself, or what is good for others, or what is good for both, or, would realize a superhuman state, the distinctive knowledge and vision worthy of the noble ones—this is impossible.

The parable of the closed sluices

5.1 Indeed, bhikshus, a monk, having abandoned these 5 coverings, hindrances, parasites of the mind, that weaken wisdom, who is strong, wise, would know what is good for himself, or what is good for others, or what is good for both, or, would realize a superhuman state, the distinctive knowledge and vision worthy of the noble ones—this is possible.

5.2 Suppose, bhikshus, there is a river, flowing down from the mountains, flowing far, with swift currents, carrying everything with it,¹⁵

and a man were to *close* the sluices on both sides [banks], so that, bhikshus, the mid-stream current, undisturbed, undispersed, undiverted, would flow far, its currents swift, taking everything with it [ravaging].¹⁶

¹⁰ *Att'atthaṃ vā ñassati par'atthaṃ vā ñassati ubhay'atthaṃ vā ñassati.*

¹¹ *Uttari vā manussa,dhammā alam-ariya,ñāṇa,dassana,visesaṃ sacchikarissatī ti n'etaṃ thānaṃ vijjati*, ie, he is unable to attain the distinctive knowledge and vision that is the noble state (*ariya,bhāva*) (ie any of the 4 paths of awakening: streamwinning, once-return, non-return, or arhathood), brought about by the 10 wholesome courses of action (AA 3:256). On the 10 wholesome courses of action (*dasa kusala kamma,patha*), see **Sāleyyaka S** (M 41.11-14/1:287 f) + SD 5.7 (2).

¹² *Seyyathāpi, bhikkhave, nadī pabbateyyā dūraṇ,gamā sīgha,sotā hāra,hārīnī.*

¹³ **Naṅgala,mukha**, see Intro (1.2).

¹⁴ *Tassā puriso ubhato naṅgala,mukhāni vivareyya, evañ hi so, bhikkhave, majjhe nadiyā soto vikkhitto visaṭo vyādiṇṇo n'eva dūraṅgamo assa na sīgha,soto na hāra,hārī.* The agitated mind is often said to be **vikkhitta visaṭa** (“disturbed, scattered”): **M 138.10/3:225** (the mind is disturbed and scattered externally); **A 4.244/2:244** (when a lion sees the deer-king). Apparently, like *avyādiṇṇa*, **vyādiṇṇa** or *byadiṇṇa* (“taken apart, scattered”), too, is only found here (a hapax legomenon). See Intro (1.2).

¹⁵ *Seyyathāpi, bhikkhave, nadī pabbateyyā dūraṇ,gamā sīgha,sotā hāra,hārīnī. Tassā puriso ubhato naṅgala,-mukhāni pidaheyya.*

¹⁶ *Evañ hi so, bhikkhave, majjhe nadiyā soto avikkhitto avisaṭo avyādiṇṇo dūraṇ,gamo c'eva assa sīgha,soto ca hāra,hārī ca.* Cf **avikkhitta,citta** (mfn), “with undistracted mind,” said of persons; (m) ~o *samāno bhabbo ayoniso,-*

5.3 Indeed even so, bhikshus, a monk, having abandoned these 5 coverings, hindrances, parasites of the mind, that weaken wisdom, who is spiritually strong [with spiritual powers], wise, would know what is good for himself, or what is good for others, or what is good for both, or, would realize a superhuman state, the distinctive knowledge and vision worthy of the noble ones—this is possible.

— evaṃ —

100316; 100320; 100409; 100918; 101116; 140208

manasikāraṃ pahātum, “being with undistracted mind, one is able to abandon unwise attention” (A 5:149,8); *ek’agga,citto ~o avisāhaṭṭa,mānaso*, “with unified mind, undistracted, mentally undisturbed” (Nm 501,17 (NmA); UA 17,6, 268,23; PvA 26,28). When the mind is focussed mind, consciousness (*viññāṇa*) is said to be ***bahiddhā avikkhittaṃ avisaṭṭam***, “externally undistracted, unscattered” (ie not under the power of the hindrance of sensual lust): **M 138.3/3:223, 10/3:225, etc; It 3.5.5/94**. Apparently, like *vyādiṇṇa*, ***avyādiṇṇa*** or *abyadiṇṇa* (“not taken apart, unscattered”), too, is only found here (a hapax legomenon). See Intro (1.2).