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Āvaraṇa Nīvaraṇa Sutta

The Discourse on Obstructions and Hindrances | S 46.38 [S:B 46.37+38]

Nīvaraṇ'āvaraṇa Sutta The Discourse on Obstructions and Hindrances

Theme: What stalls and what expedites our spiritual cultivation

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2013

Introduction

1.1 THE ĀVARAṆA NĪVARAṆA SUTTA (S 46.38) is a straightforward discourse in two related parts: (A) the 5 mental hindrances prevents the arising of the 7 awakening-factors [§§2-7], and (B) the absence of the mental hindrances and the arising of the 7 awakening-factors [§§8-12]. Nothing more is stated, as these two topics are well known and well discussed elsewhere, and serve as a refresher in our survey of the suttas.¹

Although the title is translated as “the *Discourse* on Obstructions and Hindrances,” we can alternatively, also use the name “the *Discourses* on Obstructions and Hindrances,” if we take the Sutta as comprising two suttas, that is, the Āvaraṇa Sutta (S 46.38A) and the Nīvaraṇa Sutta (S 46.38B). To disambiguate them (make them unique), we can call them the (Bojjhaṅga) Āvaraṇa Sutta, “the Discourse on the Obstructions (and the Awakening-factors)” and the (Bojjhaṅga) Nīvaraṇa Sutta, “the Discourse on the Hindrances (and the Awakening-factors,” respectively.

1.2 SUTTA VERSIONS. The Burmese and Siamese² manuscripts take S 46.38 as a single sutta. The Sinhala manuscript, however, take it to be two separate suttas: (A) **the Āvaraṇa Sutta** [§§2-7]³ and (B) **the Nīvaraṇa Sutta** [§§8-12].⁴ This is actually unnecessary, because the two texts are intimately connected: they both deal with the 5 mental hindrances and the 7 awakening-factors (first negatively, then positively).⁵ In fact, they should be studied as an integral sutta or as a set of teachings (in the Sinhala edition), especially if our purpose is a spiritual exercise or a sutta reflection in preparation for meditation.

1.3 ANCIENT MANUSCRIPTS. This sutta, or these suttas, are interesting and valuable as a small but clear window into one of the problems of ancient Buddhist manuscripts and how they are edited. While in the Dīgha Nikāya and the Majjhima Nikāya, the suttas are clearly demarcated by their title and opening, “Thus have I heard” (*evam me sutam*), and ending, in **the Saṃyutta Nikāya**, such an opening marker usually appears only at the beginning of each *saṃyutta*, and any clear ending is only denoted by a colophon (*uddāna*) of mnemonics of sutta titles at the end of each chapter (*vagga*) or 10 or so suttas.⁶

The Bojjhaṅga Vagga (S 5/5:1) (where our sutta is found) simply opens with saying, “Originating at Sāvattihī” (*sāvattihī, nidānam*) (S 5:63) for its first two suttas. Such location markers appear only sporadically in the rest of the Vagga. The subchapter on “Hindrances” (*nīvaraṇa vagga*) has no location marker, although the preceding (that last sutta of the “Udāyī” subchapter is located in Sumbha country (S 5:89). Hence, it is possible that our Sutta is delivered there (as are probably the other suttas in the whole of the Nīvaraṇa Vagga).

¹ On the 5 mental hindrances, see **Nīvaraṇa**, SD 32.1; on the 7 awakening-factors, see **(Bojjhaṅga) Sīla S** (S 46.3/5:67-70), SD 10.15.

² Curiously, Bodhi, in all his translations, completely omits any reference to the Siamese Tipiṭaka, which understandably affects the quality of his otherwise valuable works.

³ S:B 46.37/5:94 f.

⁴ S:B 46.38/5:95 f.

⁵ Bodhi curiously thinks otherwise (that this Sutta should be split into two, as in the Sinhale ed), saying that “their themes are completely distinct” (S:B 1906 n80).

⁶ Technically, this is a sub-chapter,” as *vagga* also appears earlier, eg as *mahā vagga* (“the great chapter”) here: see the page header on the even page here.

The point here is that, in the ancient manuscript (and oral tradition), the materials of the Nīvaraṇa Vagga effectively form a single sequence of teachings. Such a sequence is recited in full to the monastic audience and anyone else assembled. The reciter may or may not mark the end of each “sutta” by a pause, or some kind of intonation to mark it. Otherwise, it is up to the listener to decide where one sutta ends, and the next one begins. The important point, however, remains that the listener has a good idea of what is being recited, and what he is expected to know or reflect on.

1.4 MODERN EDITING ISSUES. We have two general categories of modern Pali sutta manuscripts or Tipiṭaka editions: the Asian versions and the European versions. The Asian versions comprise those of the Sinhala, the Burmese (Myanmar), the Siamese (Thai), the Khmer, the Laotian, and the Indian. The best known and easily available are the first three. These Asian versions follow a traditional referencing system. **The Āvaraṇa Nīvaraṇa Sutta**, for example, is “**S 5.2.4.8**,” that is, “Saṃyutta Nikāya 5, Mahā Vagga 2, Bojjh’āṅga Saṃyutta 4, Nīvaraṇa Vagga 8,” meaning Saṃyutta Nikāya 5th *vagga* (chapter), that is, the Mahā Vagga, *saṃyutta* 2, that is, the Bojjh’āṅga Saṃyutta, *vagga* (subchapter) 4, that is, Nīvaraṇa Vagga, sutta 8. Such a numbering is not always easy to remember!

The European editions are mostly done by the Pali Text Society in the UK, using roman letters. The Asian versions, too, are now available in roman letters, and, as such, facilitate easy comparison. The key problem with the PTS (or Ee = European) editions is that, as a rule, they do not have paragraph numbers which facilitate easy referencing, which helps us to quickly and accurately locate a phrase, a sentence or a passage, that is, for a helpful referencing of passages. Where such editions (or modern translations) do give paragraph numbering, they tend to be too long (sometimes covering over a page, or even pages!) and often arbitrarily placed (suggesting a lack of awareness of or disregard for the textual content).

In **the SD series**, we have tried to number the passages by *topic* or *idea*, often breaking up long Pali sentences into manageable phrases, which are numbered. Not to break from the “official” numbering, we have, as a rule, followed them but added decimals to them (such as 1.1, 1.2 etc). The early western editors were language experts, but were mostly neither Buddhists nor familiar with the sutta teachings (at least at the time of editing the texts). They were scholars, mostly philologists, working as pioneers in a new field of study. Any paragraph or internal numbering is mostly done at the editor’s discretion. Hence, the lack of facility and uniformity in the paragraph numbering in the modern European editions of the Pali texts. Perhaps we need a totally new edition of the Pali Tipiṭaka, especially a digital one, with a systematic paragraph numbering.

1.5 RELATED SUTTAS. For an important contrast in terms of meditation emphasis, **the Āvaraṇa Nīvaraṇa Sutta** should be studied with **the (Satipaṭṭhāna) Nīvaraṇa Sutta** (A 9.64). While the former shows how “the 7 awakening-factors...are *not* obstruction, *not* hindrances, *not* mental impurities, which when cultivated, grown, bring about the realization of knowledge and liberation” [5], the (Satipaṭṭhāna) Nīvaraṇa Sutta state that “the 4 focuses of mindfulness are to be cultivated for the abandoning of these 5 mental hindrances.”⁷

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*),⁸ 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.

⁷ A 9.64,3/4:457, SD 41.13.

⁸ 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.

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 insight wisdom (*vipassanā*) or mental calm (*samatha*), depending on our ability and choice during the cultivation of satipatthana. In fact, properly cultivated, satipatthana can bring us to nirvana itself.⁹

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The Discourse on Obstructions and Hindrances

S 46.38

(A) Āvaraṇa Sutta, The Discourse on Obstructions

or, **(Bojjhaṅga) Āvaraṇa Sutta**, “The Discourse on the Obstructions (and the Awakening-factors)

2 Bhikshus, there are these 5 obstructions, hindrances, mental impurities, that which weaken wisdom.¹⁰ What are the five?

The 5 mental hindrances¹¹

- 3 (1) Sensual desire,
bhikshus, is an obstruction, a hindrance, a mental impurity that weakens wisdom.
 - (2) Ill will,
bhikshus, is an obstruction, a hindrance, a mental impurity that weakens wisdom.
 - (3) Sloth and torpor,
bhikshus, are an obstruction, a hindrance, a mental impurity that weakens wisdom.
 - (4) Restlessness and worry,
bhikshus, are an obstruction, a hindrance, a mental impurity that weakens wisdom.
 - (5) Doubt,
bhikshus, are an obstruction, a hindrance, a mental impurity that weakens wisdom.
- 4 These, bhikshus, are the 5 obstructions, hindrances, mental impurities that weaken wisdom.

The 7 awakening-factors

5 There are these 7 awakening-factors, bhikshus, that are *not* obstruction, *not* hindrances, *not* mental impurities, which when cultivated, grown, bring about the realization of knowledge and liberation.¹²

What are the seven?

- 6 (1) The awakening-factor of mindfulness, *sati sambojjhaṅga*
when cultivated, often developed,
brings about the realization of knowledge and liberation
- (2) The awakening-factor of mental investigation *dhamma, vicaya sambojjhaṅga*

⁹ See **Samatha and vipassana**, SD 41.11 (6.3.4).

¹⁰ *Bhikkhave āvaraṇā nīvaraṇā cetaso upakkilesā paññāya dubbalī, karaṇā.*

¹¹ On the mental hindrances, see **Nīvaraṇa**, SD 32.1

¹² *Satt’ime bhikkhave bojjhaṅgā anāvaraṇā anīvaraṇā cetaso anupakkilesā bhāvitā bahulī, katā vijjā, vimutti, phala, sacchikiriyāya samvattanti.*

- when cultivated, grown,
brings about the realization of knowledge and liberation
- (3) The awakening-factor of effort *virīya sambojjhaṅga*
when cultivated, grown,
brings about the realization of knowledge and liberation
- (4) The awakening-factor of zest *pīti sambojjhaṅga*
when cultivated, grown,
brings about the realization of knowledge and liberation
- (5) The awakening-factor of tranquillity *passaddhi sambojjhaṅga*
when cultivated, grown,
brings about the realization of knowledge and liberation
- (6) The awakening-factor of concentration *samādhi sambojjhaṅga*
when cultivated, grown,
brings about the realization of knowledge and liberation
- (7) The awakening-factor of equanimity *upekkhā sambojjhaṅga*
when cultivated, grown,
brings about the realization of knowledge and liberation. [96]

7 These, bhikshus, are *not* obstruction, *not* hindrances, *not* mental impurities, which when cultivated, grown, bring about the realization of knowledge and liberation.

(B) Nīvaraṇa Sutta The Discourse on Hindrances¹³

or, (Bojjhaṅga) Nīvaraṇa Sutta, “The Discourse on the Hindrances (and the Awakening-factors)

The 5 mental hindrances¹⁴

8 Bhikshus, when a noble disciple listens to the Dharma, giving it attention with resolve, directing his whole mind to it, open-eared,¹⁵ then the 5 mental hindrances are not present in him.

At that time, the 7 awakening factors are developed to perfection.

9 And what are **the 5 mental hindrances** that are not present at that time?

- (1) The hindrance of sensual desire is not present at that time. *kāma-c, chanda*
(2) The hindrance of ill will is not present at that time. *vyāpāda*
(3) The hindrance of sloth and torpor is not present at that time. *thīna, middha*
(4) The hindrance of restlessness and worry is not present at that time. *uddhacca, kukkuccha*
(5) The hindrance of doubt is not present at that time. *vicikicchā*

These, bhikshus, are the 5 mental hindrances that are not present at that time.

The 7 awakening-factors

10 And what are **the 7 awakening-factors** (*satta bojjhaṅga*) that are brought to fulfillment through cultivation in him?

¹³ This whole section, right to the end, forms a separate sutta in Ce: see **Anīvaraṇa S.** “the Without Hindrances Discourse” (S 46.38b/5:95 f), SD 3.2(5.3).

¹⁴ On the 7 awakening-factors, see SD 10.15.

¹⁵ “Giving it attention with resolve...open-eared,” *aṭṭhi, katvā manasikatvā sabba, cetaso sammannāharitvā ohita, soto.*

- (1) The awakening-factor of mindfulness is brought to fulfillment through cultivation at that time.
- (2) The awakening-factor of mental investigation is brought to fulfillment through cultivation at that time.
- (3) The awakening-factor of effort is brought to fulfillment through cultivation at that time.
- (4) The awakening-factor of zest is brought to fulfillment through cultivation at that time.
- (5) The awakening-factor of tranquillity is brought to fulfillment through cultivation at that time.
- (6) The awakening-factor of concentration is brought to fulfillment through cultivation at that time.
- (7) The awakening-factor of equanimity is brought to fulfillment through cultivation at that time. **[96]**

These, bhikshus, are the 7 awakening-factors that are developed to perfection.

11 Bhikshus, when a noble disciple listens to the Dharma, giving it attention with resolve, directing his whole mind to it, open-eared, then the mental hindrances are not present in him.

12 At that time, these 7 awakening-factors are brought to fulfillment through cultivation.

— evaṃ —

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