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 are

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

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) [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 dhyāna).

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 dhyāna for the cultivation of insight (vipassanā, bhāvanā), 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” (aṇñā), that is, liberating wisdom of the arhat, too.

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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.

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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

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(Satipaṭṭhāna) Nīvaraṇa Sutta
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;

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⁶See Samatha and vipassana, SD 41.1 (6.3.4).
⁷Here “a monk” (bhikkhu) may refer to either an ordained monastic or anyone who is meditating (here, doing satipatthana) (DA 3:756; MA 1:241; VbhA 216 f; cf SnA 251). See SD 13.1 (3.1.1).
⁸Ātsīpi sampajāino satimā, vineyya loke abhijjhā, domanassai. 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 kāyānupassi). See SD 13.1 (3.4).
¹⁰Vineyya can mean “should remove” (as pot, like vineyya, Sn 590) or as “having removed” (as ger, like vinaitvī, 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).
¹²“World” (loka). See SD 13.1 (4.2.4).
(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.

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