

Asavas

The *asavas* are cankers of:

- sense-pleasure (*kāmāsava*)
- existence [becoming] (*bhavāsava*)
- false views (*diṭṭhāsava*)
- ignorance (*avijjāsava*)

Description

The word 'canker' suggests something that corrodes or corrupts slowly. These two figurative meanings attempt to describe facets of the concept of *āsava*: such as being kept long in storage; oozing out; or taint, corroding (Padmasiri De Silva, *An Introduction to Buddhist Psychology*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2000).

In other words, the term *āsava* can be described as mental effluent, pollutant, or fermentation. It comprises four qualities – sensuality, views, becoming, and ignorance – that "flow out" of the mind and create the flood of the round of death and rebirth – that is, these mental biases or cankers keep one bound to the world of *samsāra* (*A Glossary of Pali and Buddhist Terms* found at <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/glossary.html>).

Furthermore, *asava* is a malignant defilement of the mind that arrests its spiritual progress towards complete liberation. It oozes out, like water oozing out from tiny holes in a pot of water, through the unlocked doors of the six senses. Like a person, who under the influence of liquor, loses their normal sense and commits various offences against society, even so under the influence of this poisonous drug, a person loses all sense of shame and fear, and acts in a manner detrimental to their own welfare as well as the welfare of others. As mentioned earlier, it lengthens *samsaric* existence with all the suffering inherent in it. The destruction of the cankers has to be done by one's own efforts. The Buddha has shown the way to do it. Mere belief in a supernatural being, and the false sense of security and salvation in that belief, will never help; nor will matted hair or a tiger's skin dress. The Blessed One pithily puts it at verse 394 of the *Dhammapada*: "What avails thee of thy matted hair, O fool? What of the dress of tiger's skin? Within thee is full of defilements, why cleanest thou the outside?" (T.H. Perera, *The Four Cankers (Asava)*, Buddhist Publication Society, 1967).

Perera further describes the *asavas* as follows:

Sensuality

This means the desire for sensual pleasures. Sensuality is twofold: the desire to enjoy the delightful and pleasurable things found in the sentient sphere of existence, and the objects that induce sensual enjoyment, namely: the desire for sights, the desire for sounds, the desire for smell, the desire for taste, and the desire for tangibles. Beings intoxicated with the enjoyment of these sense objects, lose all sense of proportion and behave like lunatics, and chase after these sense objects to enjoy them *ad libitum*. Insatiate are their desires, now here, now there, seeking after more pleasures in pastures new. At the moment of death, their minds, stupefied with sense-desires, provide these sense-indulgers with a new mind-form in one of the less than desirable planes of existence.

Existence

This is the desire for continued or eternal existence, either in the form-world or formless world. This is the so-called eternity belief of the theists who hold the belief in an eternal soul. In contradistinction to the eternity belief is the belief in self-annihilation in which the soul is annihilated at death, and as a result there is no life after death. This is the doctrine maintained by the materialists. The Buddha rejected both these beliefs and taught the Middle Way, based on the natural law of cause and effect, or *kamma*, action-reaction. It must be clearly understood that *kamma* is the volitional act and its result or reaction (*vipāka*) follows the act. The principle involved is good begets good; bad or evil begets bad or evil.

False View

The *Brahmajāla Sutta* or the Discourse on the Supreme Net (*Dīgha Nikāya Sutta 1*) gives us a list of 62 beliefs current in the time of the Buddha. These beliefs are compared to a net in which beings are caught and made to run hither and thither and from which no escape is possible. Such is the fate of all mortals who are infected with the canker of false beliefs. For example, the "spirit of God", this Soul, this Ego, this Divine Spark, this Eternal Entity forms the central core of all theistic faiths. It is chiefly because of this belief that the Buddha calls the third impediment to Sainthood the canker of false beliefs, upon which clings the eternity belief and the belief in annihilation.

Ignorance

The conspicuous characteristic of a taint is to corrupt or to infect or to eat into an object, be it physical or mental. In this sense the canker of ignorance eats into man's moral fibre and debilitates his mind to such an extent as to make him consider evil as good; the unpleasant as pleasant; the impermanent as permanent; the unreal as real; soullessness as the soul and so forth, and thereby he succumbs to acts of cruelty, killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, etc., which, at death, condition a woeful existence.

Conclusion

The entirety of the Buddha-Dhamma is devoted to the task of eliminating ignorance (*avijjā*) or darkness and enthroning knowledge (*vijjā*) or light. We have been, and are being, chained to the Wheel of Life (*samsara*) because of ignorance or darkness; until that glorious awakening when we, in the full glow of knowledge or light, shall penetrate the Four Noble Truths: this is Suffering; this is the Origin of Suffering; this is the Cessation of Suffering; this is the Path leading to the Cessation of Suffering, and thus put an end for ever to this sorrow-fraught process of being born, decaying and dying. Then, and only then, shall we make our final bow, our final farewell to *samsaric* existence or becoming.

Compiled by Alexander Peck (based on sources mentioned in article)