

# Āsava: The Root Cause of Saṃsāra

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## *[Abstract]*

Āsava is a key technical term in Buddhist doctrine that can be considered from the standpoint of psychology, metaphor, and philosophy. It literally means ‘outflow’ which leads to the existence of passion and influx. There are several rendering words of āsava such as cankers, taints, fermentation, corruptions, intoxicant biases etc. The aim of this paper is an attempt to analyze the term of āsava from early Buddhist standpoint, and it causes as the root of saṃsāra and it produces unwholesome mental energy which has unwholesome cognitive and emotive aspect of mind. Next, this paper will seek to explain that āsava at the core of Paṭiccasamuppāda; how a being repeatedly comes into existence in this cycle of saṃsāra and how gets mass of suffering. I will focus on the sabbāsavasutta that teaches how āsava leads an ignorant person not to see the real nature of existence and to have ego-illusion i.e., believing in the existence of self (sakkāyadiṭṭhi). This Sutta also teaches the various destructive methods of āsava (āsavakkhaya). To achieve this, I look at its early classification, later development, and how āsava is the root cause of saṃsāra

which brings beings to the transmigration and how one gets rid of āsava and achieves the end of the cycle of birth and death.

**Keywords:** Āsava, Saṃsāra, seed of Paṭiccasamuppāda, Sakkāyadiṭṭhi, Transmigration, and Āsavakkhaya

## Introduction

Āsava is a key technical term in Buddhist doctrine that can be considered from the standpoint of psychology, metaphor, and philosophy. In the Buddhist perspective, Āsava is the root of saṃsāra (the cycle of birth and death) and therefore the cause of transmigration in saṃsāra. There are many discourses, Abhidhamma analyses, and commentaries in which āsava have been discussed in depth. Here, I elaborate on the definition of āsava, what the Buddha said in different discourses, the Abhidhamma analyses and the commentarial remarks on the āsava. To achieve this, I look at its early classification, later development, and how āsava is the root cause of saṃsāra which brings beings to the transmigration and how one gets rid of āsava and achieves the end of the cycle of birth and death.

## The Meaning of Āsava

The word we are considering is Āsava in Pāli and Āsrava in Sanskrit but T.W. Rhys Davids's (279) dictionary, "Pāli-English Dictionary" pointed out that āsrava in Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit is a wrong Sanskritisation of the Pāli āsava. The term 'āsava' is formed with the prefix ā and the verbal root √sru (to flow). It literally means 'that which flows (out or on to)'. According to G.P. Malalasekera's (1966, 202) "Encyclopedia of Buddhism" 'outflow', refers to the existence of 'passion' & 'influx', refers to freedom from passion. Different scholars have given different renderings of the term into English. Some of the renderings are 'cankers', 'taints', 'corruptions', 'intoxicant biases', 'ideas which intoxicate the mind' etc. I prefer myself the translation pollutants, as this semantically identical in meaning. Āsava causes rebirth in the cycle of birth and death which means not finding the way out of Saṃsāra. Āsava binds one to the cycle of experience, and Robert E. Buswell and Donald S Lopez (2014, 213), "The Princeton Dictionary

of Buddhism”, it is also known as ‘floods’ (ogha) and ‘yokes’ (yoga). G.P Malalasekera’s (1966, 202) “Encyclopedia of Buddhism” pointed out the term “āsava” is understood under three terms in Buddhism i.e.

1) ‘Defilement (kleśa)’ as defilement flows out from the six organs of our body to the external world; it is the substance of āsava.

2) The ‘flow’ is named because it is always in the state of motion, i.e. the flowing from the body.

3) Fetters are likewise another name of āsava because they tie one down in saṃsāra and keep us away from enjoying true freedom.

### **The Classification of āsava**

Āsava is mentioned in many discourses in the Pāli canon, where it is classified in different ways. It is frequently mentioned that there are three kinds of āsava, namely; kāmāsava (canker of sense desire), bhavāsava (canker of existence), and avijjāsava (canker of ignorance), see Sabbāsava Sutta (MN 2) for instance. Gethin (cited by Sujato (2012, 105) pointed out that many of the mātikā-s in the Abhidhamma are construed with the Aṅguttara principle. He says Dhammasaṅginī contains the Āsavagocchakaṃ, Saṃyojanagocchakaṃ, Ganthagocchakaṃ, Oghagocchakaṃ, etc. which further elaborates by reference to all taints, knots, and floods. Dhammasaṅginī of the Abhidhammapiṭaka (Dhs VRI 134) says,

“Katamedhammāsavā? Cattāroāsavā-kāmāsavo,  
bhavāsavo, diṭṭhāsavo, avijjāsavo”.

Some scholars believe that the set of three āsava is older than the list of four kinds of āsava. Consequently, it is considered that diṭṭhāsava (canker of the wrong view) is probably a later development. I strongly believe that diṭṭhāsava was developed in the Dhammasaṅginī.

### **Āsava as Root Cause of Saṃsāra**

Āsava is the root cause of holding a being in saṃsāra and the root cause of transmigration through birth and death. Therefore, Āsava is such an important topic in Buddhist doctrine which has been explained in the entire Pāli Canon. In most cases, it is generally discussed as an unwholesome mental factor that pollutes the mind of beings and produces unwholesome

mental energy. Padmasiri De Silva's (1979, 44), "An Introduction to Buddhist Psychology", said that āsava is some kind of unwholesome mental energy in which has the unwholesome cognitive and emotive aspect of mind that exists in the mind of unenlightened men, along with hidden tendencies (anusaya), fetters (saṃyojana) and hindrances (nīvaraṇa). It flows out to the external world through the six sense organs of the body. Thus, it makes people losing the way and falling into the cycle of birth and death.

The Āsava are also at the core of Dependent Origination (paṭiccasamuppāda). It is generally known as the cycle of saṃsāra. Through the working of PS, there is a process of repeated existences in saṃsāra, which is caused by a chain of interconnected links, for instance, Paṭiccasamuppāda Sutta (SN 12.1)

With ignorance as condition the volitional formations arise (avijjāpaccayāsankhārā) and with the volitional formations as condition consciousness arises (sankhārāpaccayāviññānam) ...and with birth as condition, aging and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair arises.

This is the way that has described in PS how a being repeatedly comes into existence in this cycle of saṃsāra and how gets mass of suffering. Now we may have some question about what the arising of ignorance is and how ignorance comes about. According to Sammādiṭṭhi Sutta (MN 9), it explains "Āsava samudayā avijjā samudayo"—it is with the arising of influxes that ignorance arises. This causes confusion in those who examine PS because what proceeds is ignorance. They assume that ignorance has no root cause but is simply present and other factors arise from it. To make clear what the arising of ignorance is and how ignorance comes about, Venerable Sāriputta explains in Sammādiṭṭhi Sutta MN 9 (M i.46),

"Āsava samudayā avijjā samudayo, āsava nirodhā avijjā nirodho"—  
With the arising of influxes ignorance arises, with the cessation of influxes, ignorance ceases.

By that way, Āsava is the root cause of ignorance (avijjā). Thus, it is considered as a seed of Paṭiccasamuppāda.

Āsava is also called ‘outflow’ because it flows out through the six sense organs to the external world and produces unwholesome action. It has been clearly explained in the MadhupiṇḍikaSutta in where says that the mind and matter naturally interact with each other. The six organs come into contact with the six sense objects. When they are interacted with each other and personally put on our ego-consciousness with a judgmental attitude of either liking or disliking (duality). Then it makes continuously get an experience of suffering. This aspect of mind is also called ‘conceptual proliferation (papañca-saññā-saṅkhā)’ which is associated with the proliferation of craving (taṇhā), conceit (māna) and views (diṭṭhi). G.P Malalasekera’s (1966, 202), It makes a being “losing the way and falling into the cycle of birth and death (saṃsāra)” and getting continuously mental and physical experience. Thus, āsava is called the root cause of saṃsāra.

Here I will briefly emphasize the SabbāsavaSutta(MN)hereto make it clear understanding how āsava is the root of saṃsāra; in which the Buddha describes how the āsava can be destroyed. The Buddha preached this Sutta addressing to the numerous monks in the monastery of Anāthapiṇḍika at Jeta’s grove in Sāvatti. It is an important Sutta to understand more clear about how this Sutta shows āsavas can be destroyed by seven methods: by seeing or insight (dassanā), restraining (saṃvarā), practice (paṭisevanā), endurance (adhivāsanā), avoidance (parivajjanā), removal (vinodanā) and cultivation (bhāvanā) and also teaches how āsava is the root cause of saṃsāra which brings beings to the transmigration in the cycle of birth and death. This Sutta describes that one who attends to things unwisely (ayonisomanasikārā) is an untaught ordinary person, who has no regard for the noble ones, unskilled and undisciplined in Dhamma. Such a person is indeed ignorant of the real nature of existences (impermanent, unsatisfactory and non-substantiality). He regards impermanent as permanent, suffering as happiness, non-substantiality as substantiality and impure as pure (See SammādiṭṭhiSutta MN 9 (M i.46). This happens due to the absence of right view (Sammādiṭṭhi) regarding the empirical nature of existences which is to be understood as avijjāsava in this context.

An ignorant person does not have knowledge with regarding the real nature of existence and who believes impermanent as permanent,

non-existence as existence. Such ignorant person has an illusion about the life that believing in the existence of self (sakkāyadiṭṭhi) which has mostly misled and Nyanaponika Thera's (1991, 51), "Buddhist Dictionary: Manual of Buddhist terms and Doctrines" indicates "deluded-mankind is the ego-illusion". However, in the Sabbāsava Sutta, the ego illusion is explained in 16 ways in the mind of beings, for instance, 'was I in the past? Was I not in the past? What was I in the past? How was I in the past? Having been what and what did I become in the past?' etc. see Sabbāsava Sutta (MN). As a result, an ignorant person reflects on the same way with regarding his future and present being. Due to thinking in this way, there arises in him one of following six views, namely;

1. Self-exists for me
2. No self-exists for me
3. I perceive self with self
4. I perceive not-self with self
5. I perceive self as not-self and
6. It is this self of mine that speaks and feels and experiences here and there the result of good and bad actions; but this self of mine is permanent, everlasting, eternal, not subject to change, and it will endure as long as eternity.

As a final point, I want to say that the unarisen āsava arise and arisen of those grow due to unwisely paid attention and all wrong views in the mind of beings. As long as avijjā is not eradicated, one will continue to take birth in saṃsāra and then birth associates with suffering again and again. The Buddha in the Sabbāsava Sutta said that the untaught ordinary beings wander in the saṃsāra, experiencing suffering due to being tied by the fetter of views. Thus, it is clear here that āsava is the root cause of cycling of birth and death, transmigration, and getting the suffering repeatedly.

### **Āsavakkhaya: Freedom from the Cycle of Saṃsāra**

Upanisā Sutta: Upanisā" (SN 12.23), explains that the destruction of cankers (āsavakkhaya) is for him who knows and sees, not for him who does not know and see. One can be destroyed cankers on the state

of Arahantship through the clinging no more and then no more to the birth and death. With the destruction of āsava, all defilements come to an end and liberation from the cycle of samsāra. It breaks the cycle of samsāra and never again to the experience of birth and death. For that reason, āsavakkhayais called the liberation from the cycle of samsāra.

The āsava could be overcome in many ways in accordance with Pāli canon. There are many ways to destroy āsava such as through contemplating on the impermanence and death, following the Noble Eightfold Path, the cultivating five spiritual faculties, cultivating mindfulness of breathing in & out and understanding the four noble truths etc. The āsava could be overcome by following the Noble Eightfold Path, Bhikkhu Nanamoli and Bodhi translates

The way leading to the cessation of all taints is just this Noble Eightfold Path; that is right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. (SammādiṭṭhiSutta, 9).

Therefore, the Buddha said MāgandiyaSutta (75) that the Eightfold Path is the best of paths for it leads safely to the Deathless. By contemplating on Impermanent (Anicca) and Death (Maraṇa), i.e. Contemplating of Death is the reflection on the certainty of death. For that reason, the Buddha said,

“Mindfulness of death, monks, if cultivated and frequently practiced, brings great fruit, great benefit; it merges in the Deathless, ends in the Deathless. Therefore, monks, you should cultivate mindfulness of death.”

(AnguttaraNikaya: The Discourse Collection in Numerical Order)

There are the seven ways of destroying āsava in accordance with SabbāsavaSutta (MN) and Āsava Sutta (AN). Āsava should be abandoned 1) by seeing, 2) by restraining, 3) by proper use, 4) by enduring, 5) by avoiding, 6) by removing and 7) by developing. The destruction of āsava is for him who knows and sees and not for him who does not know and see. Therefore,

seeing is one of the most important ways to destroy the āsava. The Sutta explains that if one attends things with wise attention (yonisomanasikāra), then it is not possible to arise cankers and develop arisen cankers. By this way, we can destroy the āsava and liberate from the cycle of birth & death (saṃsāra).

The cankers could also be got off by the understanding – four noble truths. Through the understanding of Four Noble Truths, one can understand āsava (NibbedhikaSutta: Penetrative" (AN 6.63). It seems to be related with PS that when one can see PS, he can eradicate the cankers through the understanding of four noble truths. The Buddha said in PS,

“One who sees paṭiccasamuppāda, he sees the Dhamma and one who sees Dhamma, he sees the paṭiccasamuppāda.”Yopaticcasamuppa dampassati, so dhammampassati, yodhammampassati, so paticcasamuppadampassati”.

Because avijjā and āsava arise interdependently as the same way, birth and death arises interdependently (Saṃyutta Nikāya, 12). Therefore, one who can stop avijjā and āsava; he can be freed from the cycle of birth (jāti) and death (maraṇa).

### **Conclusion**

Though the above discussion, we come to the conclusion that āsava is the root cause of transmigration and that leads to the continuation of the cycle of birth and death (saṃsāra) i.e. understanding as a swift stream or flood (ogha) in order to carry beings away in the ocean of saṃsāra. We have especially seen that the SabbāsavaSutta, ĀsavaSutta and ĀsavakkhayaSutta very clearly and systematically explained how āsava leads to being the continuation in this saṃsāra and what the ways to overcome āsava and from the cycle of Birth and death. The most important thing that one who wants to stop the kernel of transmigration of birth and death or to obtain absolute of mind (Nibbāna); is to be paid attention wisely (yonisomanasikara) or proper attention.



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