ĀSRAVA : HOW DOES IT FLOW?

Alex Wayman

It is well known that in Jaina texts the term āsrava means an inflow of karma—a kind of material—into the soul. Still a Western translator of Buddhist texts has translated the same term as “out-flow.” Granted that a number of technical terms are employed in varying senses in the different philosophical systems and religions of India. The diametrically opposite rendition of the important term āsrava is certainly striking and warrants investigation, which I shall carry on by way of varieties and the theory of “flowing.”

Varieties and the negative form

A Pāli dictionary explains the term āsrava as meaning “influx” or “outflow” (e.g. discharge from a sore). The Chinese renderings of āsrava are overwhelmingly “flow, flux, leaking.” The Tibetan translation is regularly zag pa, “flow, leaking.” For my own translation projects I adopted a rendition “flux” or in the adjectival case “fluxional.” The Sanskrit form is either āsrava or āśrava.

Three kinds are stated in the Sammādiṭṭhisutta of the Majjhima-Nikāya—kāmāsava, bhavāsava, and avijjāsava. The Abhidhammattha Sāṅgaha of Bhadanta Anuruddhācariya mentions four, which are the foregoing three plus dīṭṭhāsava. To take them individually:

(1) The kāma variety is explained in Saddhmannappakāsini as vatthukāma (desire for given things) and kilesakāma (desire for defilement). This pair agrees with Aśanga’s self-commentary on the Paramārtha-gāthā:

mokṣaṃ dvividham darśayati / klesamokṣaṇaṃ vastumokṣaṃ ca / sarvabijasa-mutsādena klesaparikṣayaḥ klesamokṣaṇaṃ/tatraiva cāpy asaṃkleśād vastumokṣaṃ/ yo bhikṣavaḥ caṃ sūtra / chandarāgas tam praṇahita / evaṃ ca tace caṃ kāṣaḥ prahīnaḥ bhaviṣyatī / sūtrapadanyayena / evaṃ sopadhīṣeṣāṃ mokṣaṃ darśāyīvā nirupadhīṣeṣāṃ darśayati /

That release he shows to be of two kinds: release from defilements and release from given things. There is release from defilements by destroying all seeds through eradication of defilement; and in the same place, as well, there is release from given things through no stain. The śūtra says: “O monks, whatever be the sensuous lust in the eye, abandon that! So also will the eye disappear.” In the manner of that text he thus shows the release with remaining basis and then shows the one without remaining basis.
Āsrava : How does it Flow?

According to this passage, if desire for defilements (kleśakāma) is eliminated, desire for given things (vastukāma) will also leave.

(2) The bhava variety is a passion for gestation (bhava) in the realm of form and the formless realm, according to C. A. F. Rhys Davids’ Compendium.\(^{12}\)

(3) The diṭṭha variety is the sixty-two wrong views (drṣṭi) of the Brahmajālasutta, according to the Compendium.\(^{18}\)

(4) The aviṣṭa variety is ignorance of the four Noble Truths, past and future lives, the formula of dependent origination, and so on, according to the Compendium.\(^{14}\)

The negative form an-āsrava may be employed as an unqualified negation; so the Saddhammappakāsini : anāsavan ‘ti āsavavirahitam.\(^{16}\) Is it so in Vasubandhu’s Abhidharmakośa (I, 4, 5)?\(^{19}\)

sāsravā ‘nāsravā dharmāḥ samāskṛtā mārgavarjitaḥ /
sāsravāḥ āsravās teṣu yasmāt samanuśārate //
anāsravā mārgasatyaṁ trividham cāpy asaṃskṛtam /
ākāśām dvau nirodhau ca tatrākāśām anāvṛtīḥ //

The natures (dharma) are either sāsrava or anāsrava. The constructed ones are sāsrava except on the path, since the āsrava leave their mark in those [= the constructed ones, the five skandha per AK I, 7a-b].

The anāsrava ones are the Truth of Path and the three non-constructed, namely, space and the two cessations. Among them, space is non-obstruction.

Vasubandhu comments on the verb samamūṣerate : anuṣayanirdeśa eva (an indication of ‘trace’, anuṣaya). Here, while the term anāsrava can apply both to the Truth of Path and the three “non-constructed”, it appears to diverge in significance for the two cases. When applying to the “non-constructed” it is an unqualified negation, as in the Saddhammappakāsini comment. But when applying to the path (mārga), it cannot be unqualified, or persons on the path would be entirely free of āsrava while this was supposed to be Arhat attainment at the end of the path for which such a term as kṣiṇāsrava (erased the āsrava) is used.\(^{17}\) For the path, the term anāsrava appears to mean “opposed to āsrava”, i.e. actively opposing, hence reducing āsrava.\(^{18}\) Accordingly, the term sāsrava would mean “promoting āsrava”. Then Vasubandhu clarifies that the role of the āsrava in “constructed” (saṃskṛta) natures—excepting the path—is described by anuṣaya. This term is not connected with “flow” as is āsrava (a + ṣṛu, to flow); rather goes with the root ṣṛū, to lie, referring to its varieties as dormant. The Abhidharmakośa, Chap. V, shows various ways of classifying the anuṣaya. Aṣaṅga; in his Yogācārabhūmi, includes them among increasing enumerations (ekottara) of defilements (kleśa).\(^{19}\) For the number seven he presents seven anuṣaya, each labelled “anuṣaya” : kāmarāga (sensuous lust),
pratigha (hostility), bhavarāga (passion for gestation), māna (pride), avidyā (nescience) drṣṭī (wrong views), vicikitsā (doubt). Reducing kāmarāga and bhavarāga to rāga, one gets his list of six which he does not label anuśaya, but which is the basic list of six anuśaya in AK, Chap. V, 1c-d.20 According to Asaṅga’s list, these defiled traces (anuśaya) are an expansion of the four kinds of āsrava. The renditions of this term āsrava in its Pāli form āsava by translators of scriptures in that language, namely (Mrs. C.A.F. Davids) “intoxicants”, (Miss I. B. Horner) “cankers”, and the like, appear to attribute to the word āsava qualities that go with certain varieties, which prejudges the case.21

The theory of flowing

First, the ancient Buddhist canon, the Saṃyutta-Nikāya I, contains in the Māra Suttas the question by one of Māra’s daughters and the Buddha’s response, about the five streams and the sixth; and the episode is in a Sanskrit version in the Mahāvastu, III23; here the Pāli28:

“kathāṃ viharihabulodha bhikkhu, pañcoghatiṇṇa ataridha chaṭṭhaṃ / kathāṃ jhāyi bahulaṃ kāmasaṅāṇā, paribhāhirā honti aladdhayo tāṃ” ti ///
“passadaddhakaṇyo suvimuttacitto, asaṅkhañāno satimā ano ko / aṇṇāya dhammaṃ avitakkaṁ jhāyi, na kuppati na sarati na thino ///
“evaṃ viharihabulodha bhikkhu, pañcoghatiṇṇa ataridha chaṭṭhaṃ / evaṃ jhāyi bahulaṃ kāmasaṅāṇā, paribhāhirā honti aladdhayo tāṃ” ti ///

For the translation, instead of the Pāli aladdhayo tāṃ we should accept the Sanskrit alabhagāḍhā, supported by the Tibetan version gña’ dag ma thob when the same verses are presented and commented upon by Asaṅga in Cintāmayi bhūmi in the Tibetan canon24:

(Māra’s daughter :) “How should a monk in his numerous states, having crossed the five streams, cross the sixth? How should a meditator who has not attained union (Pāli, *yogam,25 Skt. gāḍhā) expel the abundant ideas of desire?”

(Buddha :) “With body cleansed and mind liberated; without instigation, mindful, and untroubled; knowing the doctrine (dharma) and meditating without constructive thought, passion does not stir, nor is he torpid.
"Thus should the monk in his numerous states, having crossed the five streams, cross the sixth. Thus should the meditator who has not attained union expel the abundant ideas of desire."

According to Asanga, the term “stream” stands for sensory activity; thus, the eye is a stream because viewing forms, and likewise for the remaining five senses; then the sixth stream is the mind (manas) because perceiving mental natures (dharma). The Pali commentator Buddhaghosa has a consistent remark. Furthermore, when the “body is cleansed”—i.e. there is “cathartic of body” (kāya-praśrabdhi), the mind may be “liberated” from lust (rāga), hatred (dveṣa), and delusion (moha). And thus one crosses those streams. As to attaining “union”, as I understand Asanga’s discussion, it is the union of “calming the mind” (śamatha) and “discerning the real” (vipaśyanā, where the verse’s “non-instigation” points to the “calming”, and where the verse’s “mindful” as the four “stations of mindfulness” (samyuktāpāṣṭhāna) points to the “discerning”, with the verse’s remaining words representing further clarifications of this union.

Since Asanga’s Śrāvakabhumi statement about “restraint of sense organs” contains the verb form anusraveyus, it is well to present it now:

indriyasamvarah katamah | sa tam eva śilasamvaram niśrityārakṣitsasmṛtir bhavati | nipaka-smṛtiḥ | smṛtyārakṣitamānasah samāvasthāvacārakah sa cakṣuṣā rūpāni drṣṭvā | na nimittragrahi bhavati nānuvyāñjanagrahi yatodhikaraṇam asya pāpakā akuśalā dharmās cittam anusraveyus teṣām samvarāya pratipadyate rakṣati mana-indriyaṃ sa śrotena śabdān ghrāṇena gandhān jihvāyā rasān kāyena spraṣṭavāyī | manasā ṛṛmān vijnāya na nimittragrahi bhavati nānuvyāñjanagrahi yatodhikaraṇam asya pāpakā akuśalā dharmās cittam anusraveyus teṣām samvarāya pratipadyate rakṣati mana-indriyaṃ | mana-indriyena samvaram āpadyate | ayam ucyata indriyasamvarah /

What is restraint of sense organs? When one has taken recourse to just the restraint of morality, he guards mindfulness. His mindfulness is prudent. His mind is guarded by mindfulness. He has the sphere of the even state. When he sees forms with the eye, he does not take hold of sign-sources or details by reason of which sinful, unvirtuous natures would flow (anusraveyus) after his mind. He acts in each case to restrain those. He guards his mind sense-organ. When he perceives sounds with his ear, odors with his nose, tastes with his tongue, tangibles with his body, natures (dharma) with his mind, he does not take hold of sign-sources or details by reason of which sinful unvirtuous natures would flow after his mind. He acts in each case to restrain those. He guards his mind sense organ. The mind sense-organ exerts the restraint. This is called “restraint of sense organs.”
The Mahāyāna biography of the Buddha called Lalitavistara in its dependent origination (pratītyasamutpāda) verses has this one where “flow” is given by the word salīla:28

skandhā pratītya samudeti hi duḥkham evaṃ
sambhonti trṣṇasalilena vivardhamānā /
mārgeṇa dharmasamatāya vipaśyamānā
atyantakṣiṇa kṣayadharmatāya niruddhāḥ //

The personal aggregates (skandha) arise in dependence—in this way does suffering arise. They swell by the flow of craving. When discerned on the path by sameness of natures (dharma), undergoing extreme depletion, they cease by their underlying nature of destruction.

Edgerton, in his entry on “āśrava”,29 also cites the Lalitavistara (351.1) to show how this “destruction” (kṣaya) takes place: śuṣkā āśravā na puna śravanti (“The fluxes, dried up, flow no more”).

The foregoing investigation presents no suggestion that the word āśrava means out-flow. Indeed, the verbal prefix ā- means here “to, unto”. So Nārada explains the word in his book on the Abhidhammattha Saṅgaha: “They are so called either because they flow up to the topmost plane of existence or because they persist as far as the Gotrabhū consciousness (i.e., the thought-moment that immediately precedes the Path-consciousness of the ‘Stream-Winner’—Sotāpatti). These Āsavas are latent in all worldlings and may rise to the surface in any plane of existence.”30 Notice that the remark “latent in all worldlings” points to the word anuśaya (traces), while “may rise to the surface” is normally expressed by a different term, paryavasthāna (entrapment).

There is also a way of talking about an-āśrava as a kind of “bleeding”. One may refer to the Lankāvatāra-sūtra’s passage on the ānantariya (deadly sins, five in number, bearing immediate retribution), “patricide”, “matricide”, etc., by abhisaqudhī, a deliberate transvaluation of the terms,31 in this case the ānantariya of causing, with evil intention, the Tathāgata to bleed; and the sūtra states32:

svasāmānyabāhaysvacittadṛṣṭyamātrāvabodhakānāṃ mahāmatre aṣṭānāṃ vijñānākāyānāṃ vimokṣatrayāśravadvikalpenātvyantopaghatād vijñānabuddhasya duṣṭacittarudhiropādanaṇā ānantaryakārity ucyate / Mahāmati, when the eight sets of vijñāna which imagine the inherent (sva) and the generalizing (sāmānya) [characters (lakṣāṇa)] to be external while they are merely what is seen by one’s mind, are completely exterminated of their faulty (= evil) constructions by the three liberations and “non-flux”, thus causing a bleeding, with “evil intention”, of the Vijñānabuddha—it is called an “immediacy deed”.


Äsrava: How does it Flow?

Here, the negation an-äsrava has the effect of an opposite movement to äsrava. Whereas äsrava is a flow unto or upto, the an-äsrava is a flow away from or down and out.

I have elsewhere cited another passage about "bleeding"33:

Another Tibetan text mentions omens that the defilement will be purged: Furthermore, there are omens for the purging of sin and defilement, that speaking generally, are superior when concrete, middling when mental, and inferior when in dream; to wit, the good omens that the body emits much filthy matter, or bleeds blood and pus, or that one is bathed and in white clothes.94 And so long as they do not occur one should continually trust (that they will).

So far I have not gone into the matter of the Buddha’s "third watch of the night (of enlightenment)" when according to some Buddhist traditions he knew the eradication of äsrava, that this is included in the supernormal faculties (abhijñā) as the sixth one, or that the Arhat-attainment is especially characterized by äsravakṣaya. Such considerations would not have advanced my purpose of showing the significance of the positive term generally and of the negative form in special circumstances such as the Buddhist path.

Finally, I must applaud the consistency of translators of Jaina scriptures in rendering the term äsrava by "in-flow"). My investigation suggests that everywhere that the term occurs in Buddhist texts and was rendered "out-flow" the context would have been better served by rendering it as "in-flow" or by the more neutral "flux".

Notes

1. A recent work continuing this rendition, in fact "influx", is Padmanabha S. Jaini, The Jaina Path of Purification (Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1979).
2. Edward Conze, Buddhist Thought in India (George Allen & Unwin Ltd., London, 1962), at one spot renders the term "outflows" and at another, "impurities." However, this late Buddhologist, famous for his important works on the Prājnāpāramitā scriptures and whose various works on Buddhism are readily available and influential, adopted the rendition "outflows" for äsrava in his "List of Buddhist Terms" which was duplicated and handed out at places where he would teach.


18. This is a significance of a small group of *ā/-fan- negations, having as well-known example the term *avidyā*, which the commentaries, such as Vasubandhu in the *Abhidharmakośa*, do not accept as just not it or other than *vidyā*, but which actively opposes *vidyā;* cf. AK, III, 28c-d, and Vasubandhu’s comment.


21. Miss C. A. F. Davids attempted to justify her rendition in *Dhamma-Sangani*, p. 291, n. 1, starting with a claim that no adequate English equivalent is available. To this there is response that the English “flux” is just what the Chinese and Tibetan translators adopted in their own languages, while her “intoxicant” is a translation by in place of presumed effect of the āsava. Miss Horner’s “canker(s)” in her translation of Majjhima-Nikāya seems to adopt the medical meaning of a sore that is discharging, which disagrees with the side of āsrava constituted by the latent anuśaya.


25. J. J. Jones, *The Mahāvastu*, Vol. III, p. 271, n. 4, observed that the Pāli -yo tam is a corruption, but did not notice that the reading should be *yogam*, which is partially synonymous with the Sanskrit gāḍhā; while he mistranslated the phrase by assuming Sanskrit gādhā, which is from a different root.


28. I use the edition in Franklin Edgerton, *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Reader*, pp. 24-25; he mentions that this passage, LV 418-22-420.10, immediately follows “The First Sermon”.


31. The word abhisāṃdhi means “deliberate misrepresentation” but in the good sense of being required for circumstances of teaching. Four of them are stated in the texts and listed in the *Mahāvyutpatti*, nos. 1672-1675. Examples are given for the four in a work of an ancient Tibetan translator, Dpal brtsegs, his treatise on Dharma-paryāya in Photo ed. of Tibetan Kanjur-Tanjur, Vol. 145, p. 128-4-6, ff. For the fourth one, pariṇāmābhisāṃdhi, he gives as example this very list of the five deadly sins. Here, pariṇāma means “transvaluation” of term(s) standing for sin(s).


34. One immediately, thinks of the Jaina Śvetāmbara saint.