

Interpretation of Two Principal Ethical Terms in Early Buddhism

A close study of the use of terms of moral appraisal is of paramount importance in the study of Buddhist ethics. The terms *puñña* and *kusala* require special mention as terms widely employed in early Buddhism in the appraisal of human beings, their behaviour and mental condition. We confront special problems of translation and interpretation of these terms, as their use in different strata of the Pāli literary tradition is by no means uniform. There is sufficient evidence in the Pāli Nikāyas to conclude that the two terms were used with distinctive meanings. These distinctive meanings seem to have become obscure by the time of the commentarial period, and been entirely overlooked by modern scholarship. There is a tendency on the part of many modern interpreters of Buddhism to render both *puñña* and *kusala* into English as "good" assuming that these terms are equivalent. Although this rendering has generally not been contested, it does not seem, on closer examination, to be quite accurate. Once the possibility of casting serious doubt on this rendering is admitted, one has also to admit the necessary consequence of the possibility of casting doubt on certain conclusions regarding Buddhist ethics which might be based on such a rendering.

The term *kusala* occurs very frequently in the Pāli Nikāyas for the evaluation of mental states and human behaviour. It became in the course of time the standard ethical term in Buddhism. The ethically evaluative sense of the term *kusala* can be exemplified from numerous instances of its use in the Pāli Nikāyas. It is used both as an adjective and as a substantive. As an adjective it qualifies psychological phenomena, and is frequently coupled with *dhammā*, meaning mental states.¹ Also it is used to qualify human behaviour bodily, verbal and mental.² There are numerous instances in which it is used as a substantive.³

The exact etymology of the word *kusala* is uncertain. P. Tedesco gives a derivation of Sanskrit *kusala* by metathesis from *sukṛta*.⁴ According to R. L. Turner this derivation is ingenious but very doubtful.⁵ Another possibility is that it is connected with the term *kuśa*, which means wicked, as suggested with some reservation by Monier Williams.⁶

In this respect the commentarial explanation of the term in the Pāli tradition is not very illuminating. It attempts seemingly etymological analyses, but it is clear that the outcome of such analyses is not strictly etymological although in certain instances some light may be thrown on the etymology of the term. In the *Atthasālinī* where an attempt is made to define the word *kusala*

- 1 *Dīghanikāya* (D.N.) Vol. III, p. 57 ed. by J. E. Carpenter, Pali Text Society (PTS) London 1911; *Majjhimanikāya* (M.N.) Vol. I, p. 40, 100, 185, 270 ed. by V. Trenckner PTS London 1948; *Samyuttanikāya* (S.N.) Vol. V, p. 148 ed. by -M. L. Feer PTS London 1960; *Anguttaranikāya* (A.N.) Vol. V, p. 96 ed. by Prof. E. Hardy PTS London 1958.
- 2 *Akusalam kāyakammam akusalam vacīkammam akusalam manokammam*.—M. N. Vol. II, p. 26, ed. by R. Chalmers PTS London 1951.
- 3 *Idam kusalanti bhagavatā paññattam*—A. N. Vol. V, p. 190. See also M. N. Vol. I, p. 46.
- 4 *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 74, p. 131, ed. by H. M. Hoenigswald, 1954.
- 5 *A Comparative Dictionary of the Indo Aryan Languages*, London. 1966.
- 6 *A Sanskrit English Dictionary* (New Edition), Oxford, 1951.

it says: “*kuśalas* are so called in that they cause contemptible things to tremble to shake, to be disturbed, destroyed. Or, *kusa* are those (vices) which lie in a person under contemptible conditions. And *kuśalas* are so called because they lop off, cut off what are known as immoralities (*akusalas*). Or, knowledge is called *kusa* because of the reduction or eradication of contemptible things, and *kuśala* is so called because things should be taken, grasped, set in motion by that *kusa*. Or just as the *kusa* grass cuts part of the hand with both edges, so also certain things cut off the corrupt part in two portions, either what has arisen, or what has not arisen. Therefore *kuśala* are so called because they cut off the corruptions like the *kusa* grass.”⁷ These comments, however, are not illuminating from an etymological point of view.

The commentator also mentions, with examples, four basic meanings of the word *kuśala*, namely (1) good-health, (2) blameless, (3) skillful and (4) felicitous result.⁸ According to the commentator the meaning of “skillful” is ruled out in moral contexts and the other meanings are admitted. Mrs. Rhys Davids concludes from this: “In so far then as we suffer the Buddhist culture of the 5th century to interpret the canon for us, ‘good’ in the earlier ethics, meant that which ensures soundness, physical and moral, as well as that which is felicitous.”⁹ This shows that Mrs. Rhys Davids favours the rendering of Pāli *kuśala* into English as “good”.

The term *kuśala* used in moral contexts is usually rendered into English by modern scholars as “good”.¹⁰ The Pāli Text Society Dictionary gives the meanings good, right, meritorious, clever, skillful and expert. Miss Horner consistently translates *kuśala* as skill.¹¹ However *kuśala* appears to be used in early Buddhism mostly as a term of moral commendation, although the non-moral sense of skill may have had some bearing on its moral uses. Since in English “skill” is not used as a word of moral commendation it would be misleading to render *kuśala* as skill, specially where the term occurs in moral contexts.

The use of the term *kuśala*, which occurs so frequently in the Pāli Nikāyas does not occur in the Vedas. It occurs in the Brāhmaṇas, but not in any ethical sense. The Aitareya Brāhmaṇa uses it in the sense of right or proper, but

7 *Kucchite pāpadhamme salayanti calayanti kampenti viddhamsentīti kusalā. Kucchitena vā ākārena sayantīti kusā. Te akusalasāṅkhāte kuse lunanti chindantīti kusalā. Kucehitānam vā sātato tanukarānato osānakarānato nāṇam kusam nāma. Tena kusena lātāb-bāti kusalā. Gahetabbā, pavattetabbā ti attho. Yathā vā kusā ubhayabhāgagatam hatthapadesam lunanti evan ime ti pi uppannūpannabhāvena ubhayabhāgagatam saṅki-lesapakkham lunanti Tasmā kusā viya lunanti pi kusalā.—Atthasalini, p. 39, ed. by E. Muller, PTS, London, 1897, translated by P. M. Tin, ed. & revised by Mrs. Rhys Davids, *Expositor*, p. 50 PTS, London, 1958.*

8 *Atthasalini*, p. 38.

9 *Dhammasangani* (Trs. by C. A. F. Rhys Davids, *A Buddhist Manual of Psychological Ethics*, p. XCI, second edition, London 1923.

10 ‘*Idam kusalanti yathābhūtam nappajānāti idam akusalanti yathābhūtam nappajānāti*’ occurring in D.N. Vol. I, p. 26, ed. by Prof. T. W. Rhys Davids and J. E. Carpenter, PTS, London 1949 is translated as ‘does not understand good in its real nature nor the evil’ by T. W. Rhys Davids, in the *Sacred Books of the Buddhists (SBB)* Vol. II, p. 37, ed. by Max Muller, London, 1956.

11 ‘*Yato kho āvuso ariyasāvako akusalañca pajānāti akusalamūlañca pajānāti*’ occurring in M. N. Vol. I, p. 46, is translated as “When a disciple of the Aryans comprehends unskill and unskill’s root” by I. B. Horner, *Middle Length Sayings (MLS)* Vol. I, p. 58, PTS, London, 1954; See also MLS, Vol. II, p. 89f. PTS, London, 1957.

this is not in a moral context.¹² The *śatapathabrāhmaṇa* uses the word in the sense of 'clever': "Now then, as to the taking up of the two offering spoons. Now in this respect, some people, thinking themselves clever, take up the *juhū* with the right."¹³ In the *Aitareya Āraṇyaka* the term is used in the sense of 'auspicious'. It says: "To a Brahman one must not say anything except what is auspicious."¹⁴

In the Upanishads too, the term *kuśala* seldom occurs in a moral use. In the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* occurs the following: "...has tended the fires well."¹⁵ In another instance is found: "There were three persons well versed in the udgītha."¹⁶ The *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* contains an occurrence of the word suggestive of an ethical use. "Let there be no neglect of truth, let there be no neglect of virtue, let there be no neglect of welfare, let there be no neglect of prosperity, let there be no neglect of study and teaching."¹⁷

The early Jains too do not seem to have used the term *kuśala* in a moral sense as often as the Buddhists did. Among the ethical terms that occur in the *Sūtrakṛtāṅga*, *kuśala-akuśala* are conspicuous by their absence whereas other ethical terms commonly used in the religious literature of the time occur frequently. The *Sūtrakṛtāṅga* asserts the existence of moral distinctions in the following terms:

Dhamma-adhamma (same as in Pāli)¹⁸

Sāhu-asāhu (*sādhu-asādhu* in Pāli)¹⁹

Kallāna-pāva (*kalyāṇa-pāpaka* in Pāli)²⁰

Puṇṇa-pāva (*puṇṇa-pāpa* in Pāli)²¹

Where the word *kuśala* occurs it is used in the sense of clever, skill, benefit etc.²²

The term *kuśala* (Sk. *kuśala*) does not seem to have been in regular use in ethical contexts in the pre-Buddhistic Indian literature. Tedesco too observes that: "...The most frequent meaning of Pāli *kuśala* is one that in regular Sanskrit is virtually unknown."²³ He also holds that the term *kuśala* in Pāli is

- 12 'Na te kuśalam menire', 'They did not think it right', *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* Vol. IV, VII 18, ed. by Acārya Satyavratā Sāmasrāmi, Bibliotheca Indica, published by the Asiatic Society of Bengal, Trs. by A. B. Keith, Harvard Oriental Series, Vol. XXV, p. 307, ed. by R. Landan, Harvard 1920.
- 13 'Athātaḥ śrucorādānasya: Taddhaitadeke kuśalā manyamānā dakṣiṇenaiva juhūmadadate'-*śatapathabrahmaṇa*, XI. 4. 2. 1. ed. by A. Weber, Leipzig 1924 trs. by Julius Eggeling, *The Sacred Books of the East (SBE)*, Vol. XLIV, pp. 56ff. ed. by F. Max Muller, Oxford, 1900.
- 14 'Na tvevānyat kuśalāt brāhmaṇam brūyāt'—*Aitareya Āraṇyaka*, III. I. 3 & 4, ed. and trs. by A. B. Keith, Oxford, 1909.
- 15 'Kuśalam agnīm paricacārīn—*The Principal Upaniṣads*, *Chandogya Upaniṣad* I. 11. 1. ed. and trs. by S. Radhakrishnan, London, 1953.
- 16 'Trayo hodgūthe kuśalā babhūvuh'—*Ibid.* I. 8. 1.
- 17 'Satyān na pramaditavyaṃ dharmān na pramaditavyaṃ kuśalān na pramaditavyaṃ bhūtyai na pramaditavyaṃ svādhyāyapracānanābhyāṃ na pramaditavyaṃ—*The Principal Upaniṣads*, *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* I. 11. 1. ed. and trs. by S. Radhakrishnan, London 1953.
- 18 *Suttāgame*, *Sūtrakṛtāṅga* (*Sūyagaḍam*), II. 5. 14 ed. by Puṣṭhabhikkhu, Bombay 1953.
- 19 *Ibid.* II. 5. 27
- 20 *Ibid.* II. 5. 28
- 21 *Ibid.* II. 5. 16
- 22 'Akkhehim kusalehi' (clever at dice) *Ibid.* I. 2. 2. 23; see also II. 1. 2; II. 7. 8.
- 23 *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 74, p. 134, ed. by H. M. Hoenigswald 1954.

equivalent to *puñña*,²⁴ a view which will be examined below. There is sufficient reason to believe that in early Buddhism the term indicated a special sense of moral value, which was differentiated from the value represented by the ethical term *puñña* (Sk. *puṇya*).

The term *puñña* (Sk. *puṇya*) with its opposite sometimes as *apuñña*, and more often as *pāpa*, also occurs in the Pāli Nikāyas for the evaluation of actions. Monier Williams gives a host of meanings to the term *puṇya* viz. good, pure, holy, right, righteous, virtuous, just, sacred, happy, prosperous, favourable, propitious, auspicious, lucky, bright, fine, beautiful, pleasing, sweet, fragrant, solemn, festive, ferial.²⁵

The term *puṇya* does not seem to have been used in the Vedas for the moral appraisal of actions. In the *Rigveda* it occurs in the sense of good-fortune. "Announce to us good fortune bird, from every side."²⁶ The *Atharvaveda* uses it in the sense of "good" or "auspicious" but not suggesting any moral sense. "A hundred and one are the signs of a mortal, born from his birth, together with his body; the worst of these we send forth out from here; to us O Jāta-vedas confirm propitious ones. These same have separated like kine, scattered on a barren, let the good signs stay, those that are evil have I made disappear."²⁷

Although *puṇya* is not used in the Vedas for the moral evaluation of persons and their actions, the word *pāpa*, which is mostly used as the opposite of *puṇya* in later literature is used in the Vedas in the evaluation of persons and their actions. It is used in the sense of wicked, sinful and evil in the *Rigveda* and the *Atharvaveda* as exemplified by the following instances:

"They who are full of sin, untrue, unfaithful, they have engendered this abysmal station."²⁸

"Thou slayer of the evil fiend, saviour of singer such as I."²⁹

"I will not fold my arms about thy body: they call it sin, when one comes near his sister."³⁰

"What we have practised evilly, by thee, O all-ways-facing-off-wiper, we wipe that off."³¹

24 Ibid.

25 *A Sanskrit English Dictionary*, (New Edition), Oxford, 1951.

26 'Viśvato nah śakune puṇyam āvada'—*Rigveda*, Vol. I, II. 43. 2 ed. by F. Max Muller Second Edition, London, 1877, trs. by R. T. H. Griffith, *The Hymns of the Rigveda*, Vol. I, p. 403, Benares, 1899.

27 'Ekaśataṃ lakṣmyo martyasya sākam tanvā januṣo' dhijātāh tāsām pāpīṣtā niritah prahinmah śivā asmabhyaṃ Etā enā vyākaram khile gā viśhitā iva Raṃantam puṇyā lakṣmīyāh pāpīṣtā anīnaśam'—*Atharvaveda* VII, 120. 3.4, ed. by S. D. Śrīpādaśarma, Bombay, 1943, trs. by W. D. Whitney, *Atharvaveda Samhita*, Vol. I, p. 469, Delhi, 1962.

28 'Pāpāśah santo anṛtā asatyā idam padam ajanatāgabhīram' *Rigveda*, Vol. I, IV. 5. 5., ed. by F. Max Muller, Second Edition, London 1877, trs. by R. T. H. Griffith, *The Hymns of the Rigveda*, Vol. II, p. 101, Benares, 1889.

29 'Hantā pāpasya rakśasas trātā viprasya māvatah'—*Rigveda*, Vol. I, I. 129. 11 ed. by F. Max Muller, Second edition, London 1877, trs. by R. T. H. Griffith, *The Hymns of the Rigveda*, Vol. I, p. 232, Benares 1889.

30 'Na vā u te tanvā tanvam sam papreyāṃ pāpam āhur yah svasāraṃ nigacchāt'—*Rigveda* Vol. II. X. 10. 12, *The Hymns of the Rigveda*, Vol. IV. p. 121. Benares 1889.

31 'Yad vā cerima pāpayā—tvayā tad viśvato mukhā Pāmārgāpa mṛjmahe'—*Atharvaveda* VII, 67. 2, ed. by S. D. Śrīpādaśarma Bombay 1943, trs. by W. D. Whitney, *Atharvavedasahmitā*, Vol. I, p. 432, Delhi, 1962.

In the Brāhmaṇas the term *punya* appears to be used more often in the appraisal of conduct with its opposite *Pāpa*, although the earlier non-moral sense of "auspicious" is also retained. The *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* says: "The righteous *parīkṣitās*, performing horse sacrifices by their righteous work did away with sinful work one after another."³² In the same Brāhmaṇa it is said: "One becomes good by good action, and evil by evil action."³³ The Āraṇyakas and the Upanishads appear to follow the same usage.³⁴

There is reason to believe that the evaluative terms which became prominent in the Vedic tradition by the time of the early Upanishadic period for the appraisal of conduct were *punya* and *pāpa*. In early Buddhism, on the other hand, two pairs of prominent terms came to be used, namely, *kusala-akusala* and *puñña-pāpa*. There is reason to believe that in the canonical period *kusala* signified something different from *puñña* although there are instances in which there is overlapping of the senses. *Pāpa* and *akusala* have been used as synonymous terms although *puñña* and *kusala* have not been so used.

It is pertinent here to examine the specific uses of the terms *kusala* and *puñña* in the Pāli canon to determine precisely the sense in which each of these terms was used in early Buddhism. It is noteworthy that the Aṅguttaranikāya, which uses evaluative language in characterizing the specific modes of behaviour and conditions of mind which conduce to the attainment of the ultimate goal of Buddhism, omits the terms *puñña* and *pāpa*.³⁵

Elsewhere, a person endowed with ten qualities is called one who is endowed with *kusala*.³⁶ These qualities are evidently those that are directly related to *nibbāna*. The Buddha asserts that the practices that are *kusala* gradually lead a person to the highest state.³⁷

The *kusala* states are sometimes enumerated as the four bases of mindfulness (*cattāro satipaṭṭhānā*), the four modes of right endeavour (*cattāro sammappadhānā*), the four bases of psychic power (*cattāro iddhipādā*), the five faculties (*pañcendriyāni*) the five powers (*pañcabalāni*), the seven factors of enlightenment (*sattabojjhaṅgā*) and the eightfold path (*ariya-aṭṭhangiko maggo*).³⁸ In the same context it is said that when a monk,

32 'Parīkṣitā yajamānāśvamedhaiḥ paro'varaṃ ajahuh karmapāpakam puṇyāḥ puṇyena karmaṇeti'—*Śatapathabrāhmaṇa*, XIII, 5. 4. 3. ed. by A. Weber, Leipzig 1924, trs. by Julius Eggeling, *SBE*, Vol. XLIV, p. 396 ed. by F. Max Muller, Oxford, 1900.

33 'puṇyo vai puṇyena karmaṇā bhavati pāpāḥ pāpeneti. Ibid. XIV. 6. 2. 14.

34. 'Candramā asmaī pūrvapakṣāparapakṣān vicinoti puṇyayā karmaṇā' (The moon produces for him the bright and dark halves for good deeds)—*Aitareya Āraṇyaka*, II. 1. 7. ed. and trs. by A. B. Keith, Oxford, 1909;

'Tan ha yad ūcatuḥ karma haiva tad ūcatuḥ. Atha ha yad praśaśamsatuḥ, puṇyo vai puṇyena karmaṇā bhavati pāpāḥ pāpeneti'—(What they said was karma and what they praised was karma. Verily one becomes good by good action, bad by bad action)—*The Principal Upanishads, Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* III. 2. 13 ed. and trs. by S. Radhakrishnan, London, 1953;

'Atra ananvāgataṃ puṇyena ananvāgataṃ pāpena tīrṇo hi tadā sarvān śokān hṛdayasya bhavati' (He is not followed by good, he is not followed by evil, for then he has passed beyond all the sorrows of the heart) Ibid. IV. 3. 22.

35. A. N., Vol. V, pp. 240ff; 273ff.

36 M. N., Vol. II, p. 28f. ed. by R. Chalmers PTS London 1951.

37 'Iti kho bhikkhāve kusalāni sīlāni anupubbena aggāya pāpeneti—A. N., Vol. V, p. 1f.

38 D. N., Vol. III, p. 102.

at the eradication of defilements enters and abides in the freedom of mind and freedom through wisdom in this very existence, having realised it by his own super knowledge, that state is the highest of *kusala* states.³⁹

Nibbāna is said to be characterized by the absence of *rāga* (lust), *dosa* (hatred), and *moha* (delusion).⁴⁰ There are instances in which *lobha* etc. are characterized as *akusala* and *alobha* etc. as *kusala*, whereas the term *puñña* appears to be used in contexts which differ basically from the above.

Puñña, on the other hand, has been generally used in early Buddhism to denote that which benefits the person who is intent on bettering his future existence, without renouncing the pleasures of household life. This sense of *puñña* as a word in the evaluative language of Buddhism has been inherited from the earlier Brahmanic usage of the term although the Buddha did not totally agree with them on what constituted such *puñña*. Thus when Ratthapāla wishes to leave the life of a householder, and lead the life of a *bhikkhu* under the Buddha, he is advised by his parents: "Come Ratthapāla, eat and drink and amuse yourself, you can enjoy diverting yourself with sense pleasures, and doing meritorious things."⁴¹

Puñña is looked upon as that which supports a person in his future birth.⁴² Acts of social welfare, such as planting of pleasure groves and forests, making of bridges, (public) wells and drinking places, are said to increase *puñña* and consequently, to lead a person to heaven.⁴³ A person who dies, is said to own none of his material things any more, but to take with him whatever *puñña* and *pāpa* he has accumulated here.⁴⁴ All mortals are said to take a new birth according to the consequences of their *puñña* or *pāpa* deeds. Those who have done *pāpa* are said to be reborn in hell, and those who have done *puñña* in heaven.⁴⁵ The Dhammapada says that a person who has done *puñña* delights both here and hereafter, and that he is intensely delighted when he goes to heaven.⁴⁶ The Sakkapañhasutta shows how Pañcasikha wishes that whatever *puñña* he has done concerning the steadfast *arahants*, he should reap its consequences in sensuous enjoyment with the one whom he loved.⁴⁷

39 'Idha bhante bhikkhu āsavānaṃ khayā anāsavaṃ cetovimuttiṃ paññāvimuttiṃ dīṭṭheva dhamme sayam abhiññā sacchikatvā upasampajja viharati etad ānuttariyaṃ bhante kusalesu dhammesu'—D. N. Vol. III, p. 102.

40 'Yo kho āvuso rāgakkhayo dosakkhayo mohakkhayo idaṃ vuccati nibbānanti'—S. N., Vol. IV, p. 251, ed. by M. L. Feer, PTS, London, 1960.

41 'Ehi tvam tāta Ratthapāla, bhūjja ca piva ca paricārehi ca bhūjanto pivanto paricārento kāme paribhūjanto puññāni karonto abhūramassu'—M. N., Vol. II, p. 57, MLS, Vol. II, p. 252.

42 'Puññāni paralokasmim patitthā honti pāpinaṃ'—S. N., Vol. I, p. 18, ed. by M. L. Feer, PTS, London, 1960.

43 'Arāmaropā vanaropā ye janā setukārakā papañca udapānañca ye dadanti upassayaṃ tesam divā ca ratto ca sadā puññaṃ pavaḍḍhati dhammatthā sīlasampannā te janā saggagāmino'—Ibid. p. 33

44 'Antakenāhipannassa jahato mānusaṃ bhavaṃ kim hi tassa sakam hoti kiñca ādayā gacchati ubho puññañca pāpañca yaṃ macco kurute idha tam hi tassa sakam hoti tañca ādāya gacchati'—S. N., Vol. I, p. 72.

45 'Yathākammaṃ gamissanti puññapāpaphalūpagā Nirayaṃ pāpakammantā puññakammā ca saggatim'—ibid. p. 97.

46 'Idha nandati pecca nandati katepuñño ubhayattha nandati puññaṃ me katanti nandati bhiiyyo nandati saggatim gato'—Dhammapada (Dhp) Verse 18, ed. by Sūriyagoda sumangala Thera, PTS, London, 1914.

47 'Yaṃ me atthi kataṃ puññaṃ arahantesu tādisu taṃ me sabbaṅgakalyāni tayā saddhim vipaccatam'—D. N. Vol. II, p. 266 ed. by Prof. T. W. Rhys Davids and J. E. Carpenter, PTS, London, 1947.

From the above instances it becomes clear that acts of *puñña* were conceived in early Buddhism as deeds of positive merit, which bring about, as their consequences, enjoyment of a sensuous kind, but not generally of a spiritual kind. *Kusala* on the other hand emphasizes the non-sensuous, spiritual bliss, which results from it, and culminates in the eradication of the defilements of *rāga* (lust), *dosa* (hatred) and *moha* (delusion). Hence the term that is invariably used in specifying the good actions which lead to the spiritual bliss of *nibbāna* is *kusala*, whereas the term more frequently used for specifying the good actions which lead to sensuous enjoyment and happiness in *saṃsāra* is *puñña*. This distinction in meaning accounts for the Buddha's attitude towards *puñña* expressed in numerous instances where he assigns a somewhat lower status to *puñña*. Thus when the Buddha hears the warning sounded by Uttaradeva-putta:

"Life to its doom is led
our years are few
For us led to decay no shelters stand.
Whoso doth contemplate this fear of death,
let him so act that merits (*puññāni*) bring him bliss,"

He expresses disconcert for *puñña* and says instead:

"... Let him reject the bait of all the worlds,
let him aspire after the final peace."⁴⁸

It is perhaps while expressing a similar attitude towards *puñña* that the Buddha, when invited to deviate from his life of austerity and do meritorious deeds (*puññāni*) instead, rejects this suggestion saying that he is not in need of the slightest *puñña*.⁴⁹ He seems here to value *saddhā* (faith), *virīya* (effort) and *paññā* (wisdom), which are elsewhere reckoned as *kusalā dhammā*⁵⁰ over the accumulation of *puñña*.⁵¹

The Buddha also makes a distinction between two aspects of every single factor of the noble-eightfold-path. "There is, monks, the right view that has cankers, that is on the side of merit (*puñña*), that ripens unto cleaving (to new birth). There is monks the right view, that is Aryan, cankerless, supermundane, a component of the way."⁵² It is also said that a monk who has eradicated defilements would not perform an act of *puñña*, *apuñña* or *āneñja*.⁵³

48 Uttaradeva-putta:

'*Upanīyati jīvitam appam āyu jarūpantassa na santi tāṇā etaṃ bhayaṃ maraṇe pekkhamāno puññāni kayirātha sukhāvahāni*'

Buddha:

'... *Lokāmisam pajahe santipekkho*' — S. N. Vol. I, p. 55, trs. by Mrs. Rhys Davids, *Kindred Sayings*, Vol. I, p. 79, PTS, London, 1950.

49. '*Anumattena pi puññena attho mayhaṃ na vijjati*'.—*Suttanipāta* (*Sn.*), Verse 431, ed by D. Anderson and H. Smith, PTS, London, 1965.

50. They are included under the '*pañcendriyāni*', '*pancabalāni*' '*sattabojjhaṅgā*' which are reckoned as *kusalā dhammā*.—See D. N., Vol. III, p. 102.

51. '*Atthi saddhā tato virīyam paññā ca mama vijjati*'—*Sn.* Verse 432.

52. '*Atthi bhikkhave sammāditthi sāsavaṃ puññabhāgiyā upadhi-vepakkā atthi bhikkhave sammāditthi ariyā anāsavaṃ lokuttarā maggaṅgā*'. M. N. Vol. III, p. 72, ed. by R. Chalmers, London, 1960, trs. by I. B. Horner, MLS, Vol. III, p. 114, ff., PTS., London, 1959.

53. '*Taṃ kiṃ maññātha bhikkhave. Api nu kho khīṇāsavo bhikkhu puññābhisaṅkhāram vā abhisaṅkhareyya, apuññābhisaṅkhāram vā abhisaṅkhareyya aneñjābhisaṅkhāram vā abhisaṅkhareyyāti, no hetam bhāṇe*'. S. N. Vol. II, p. 83, ed. by M. L. Feer, PTS, London, 1960.

The opinion that has hitherto prevailed among modern interpreters of Buddhist ethics has been that the Buddhist saint is one who transcends both good and bad. This interpretation may be said to be based on paying inadequate attention to the import of the terms *kusala* and *puñña* in early Buddhism.

Oldenberg, for instance says: "Good works are for him to do, who is pressing on to perfection. The perfect one himself hath overcome both shackles, good and evil."⁵⁴ He refers to *Dhammapada* 412, and further comments that Buddhism here stands wholly on the ground of the Brahmanical philosophy which preceded it.

According to Tachibana, one of the main points of divergence between the philosophy of the Upanishads and that of Buddhism, is that although the Buddha esteems knowledge very highly, he does not place it above morality as the Upanishads do. He says that the omnipotent Upanishadic knowledge elevates the knower beyond the range of the ethical, aesthetical and logical distinctions.⁵⁵ He further observes that contrary to our expectations, we find in Buddhism too, especially in the *Dhammapada* and the *Suttanipāta*, which are generally regarded as sources of Buddhist ethical ideas, the same view that is expressed in the Upanishads and suggests that it may have been due to the influence of the thoughts of the time, which we may say, in some sense, the Upanishads represent. "...The Bhikkhu, the Brāhmaṇa, the Buddha are said to be free from such distinctions as good and evil, pleasantness and unpleasantness, purity and impurity and so on." In favour of his view he refers to the following sections of the Pāli Canon:

*Yo'dha puññañca pāpañca bāhetvā brahmacariyavā
sankhāya loke carati sa ve bhikkhūti vuccati.*⁵⁶

*Yo'dha puññañca pāpañca ubho saṅgaṃ upaccagā
asokaṃ virajaṃ suddhaṃ tam ahaṃ brūmi brāhmaṇam.*⁵⁷

*Puṇḍarikam yathā vaggu toyē na upalippati
Evaṃ puññe ca pāpe ca ubhaye tvaṃ na lippasi.*⁵⁸

*Na brāhmaṇo aññato suddhim āha ditthe sute sīlavate mute vā
puññe ca pāpe ca anūpalitto attañjaho na yidha pakubbamāno.*⁵⁹

A. W. P. Guruge says: "...According to the Buddhist concept of emancipation, the ultimate achievement is beyond ethical differentiation or evaluation. Not only is the Arahāt considered to be freed of both the good and the evil (*puññapāpapahīna*), but even his altruistic and otherwise meritorious deeds, are said to be accompanied by a functional consciousness (*kiriya-citta*), incapable of producing any reward or retribution."⁶⁰

Gunapala Dharmasiri makes certain remarks on the Buddhist saint based on a similar assumption. He says: "When one is spiritually perfect one does not have moral struggles, so one has gone beyond good and evil. In the *Suttanipāta* the Buddha describes the saint as one who has gone beyond good and evil."⁶¹

54 Buddha, p. 304, Calcutta, 1927.

55 *The Ethics of Buddhism*, S. Tachibana, p. 52, Oxford 1926.

56 *Dhp.*, Verse 267; *S. N.*, Vol. I, p. 182

57 *Dhp.*, Verse 412; *Sn.*, Verse 636.

58 *Sn.*, Verse 547.

59 *Ibid.* Verse 790.

60 "Some problems in Buddhist Ethics", *Añjali. O. H. de A. Wijesekera Felicitation Volume* p. 5 ed. by J. Tilakasiri, Colombo 1970.

61 *A Buddhist Critique of the Christian Concept of God*, p. 106 Colombo, 1974.

It is clear that in all the foregoing instances, a person who has attained perfection is considered to be one who has discarded *puñña* and *pāpa*. If we fail to see the actual meaning attached to these words in their proper context we tend to draw erroneous conclusions about the role of moral evaluation in early Buddhism. It is significant that in the Pāli Nikāyas, although a person who has attained perfection is considered to be one who has discarded *puñña* and *pāpa*, the same is not said of *kusala* and *akusala*, which justifies the distinction that was intended to be drawn in the preceding discussion of the use of these terms.

Puñña and *kusala* cannot be considered completely synonymous terms in the Nikāya literature, although there is evidence of some overlapping. In the context of an analysis of the concepts of *kusala* and *akusala* by Ānanda, one of the chief disciples of the Buddha, king Pasenadi of Kosala questions Ānanda: "Is it the case that the Buddha commends the acquisition of all states that are *kusala*? (*Kiṃ pana bhante Ānanda, so bhagavā sabbesam yeva kusalānam dhammānaṃ upasampadaṃ vaṇṇetīti?*). Ānanda answers: "The Tathāgata... is one who has discarded all states that are *akusala* and possessed of states which are *kusala*." (*sabbākusaladharmapahīno kho mahārāja tathāgato kusaladhammasamannāgatoti*).⁶² *Kusala* cannot here be taken as equivalent to *puñña*, for an *arahat* is said to discard both *puñña* and *pāpa* whereas he discards only *akusala* but is possessed of *kusala*.

It is also said that a *bhikkhu* who is endowed with ten factors may be declared as one who is endowed with *kusala*; he is (of) the highest *kusala*, and has attained the highest attainment. (*dasahi dhammehi samannāgataṃ purisapuggalam paññāpemi sampannakusalaṃ paramakusalaṃ uttamapattipattaṃ samanaṃ ayojjham*).⁶³ These ten qualities are the perfected factors of the noble-eightfold-path with the addition of the perfection of right knowledge (*sammāñāna*) and right emancipation (*sammāvimutti*). This, obviously, is reference to the person who has attained arahatship.

Moreover, the Buddha is said to have reflected on the nature of himself as having discarded numerous *akusala* qualities, and perfected by development, numerous *kusala* qualities, (*Tena kho pana samayena bhagavā Sāvattihyaṃ viharati attano aneke pāpake akusale dhamme pahīne paccavekkhamāno nisinno hoti aneke ca kusale dhamme bhāvanāya pāripūrikate*).⁶⁴

The Buddha was venerated for possessing noble and *kusala* qualities. (*Yampi bhante bhagavā sīlavā, buddhasīlo ariyasīlo kusalasīlena samannāgato, imampi kho ahaṃ bhante atthavaṣaṃ sampassamāno bhagavati evarūpaṃ paramanipaccākāraṃ karomi mettūpahāraṃ upadaṃ semi*).⁶⁵

Kusala is generally referred to as a quality that should be cultivated. It is said that the cultivation of *kusala* conduces to happiness and welfare.⁶⁶ The Buddha is referred to as one who has cultivated that which ought to be cultivated and eliminated that which ought to be eliminated, which may be understood among other things as a reference to his cultivation of *kusala* and elimination of *akusala*.⁶⁷

62 M. N., Vol. II, p. 116

63 Ibid. p. 29.

64 *Udāna*, p. 66 ed. by P. Steinthal, PTS London, 1885.

65 A. N., Vol. V, p. 66.

66 A. N., Vol. I, p. 58.

67 *Sn.*, Verse 558

That the use of *kusala* and *puñña* in the Nikāyas is sometimes overlapping is a fact that may be admitted. That a deed which was considered to be *puñña* was also considered to be *kusala* and vice versa is also admissible on the evidence of the Pāli Nikāyas. For this reason there are instances in which *puñña* and *kusala* are used in the Nikāyas as if they were synonyms. In the Saṃyutta for instance, is found: "Sir, I do not find an end to the *puñña* done for so long a period of time, to the *kusala* done for so long a period of time, as this much is the *puñña* and this much is the fruition of *puñña* or for this long should I stay in heaven." (So *khvāhaṃ bhante evaṃ dīgharattaṃ katānam puññānam evaṃ dīgharattaṃ katānam kusalānam pariyaṇānaṃ nādhigacchāmi ettakaṃ puññanti vā ettakaṃ puññavipākoti vā ettakaṃ sagge thātabbanti vā ti*).⁶⁸ A similar use is found elsewhere as follows: "Behold the fruition of *puñña*, of *kusala*, of those who are in the pursuit of happiness." (*Passa puññānaṃ vipākaṃ — kusalānaṃ suhhesinaṃ*).⁶⁹

Yet there is evidence to the effect that the two terms *kusala* and *puñña* were not taken to be totally synonymous even as late as the time the *Niddesa* was compiled. The *Mahāniddesa*, commenting on "*puññe ca pāpe ca anūpallitto*" occurring in the *Suttanipāta* verse No. 790 says the following: "*Puñña* means whatever *kusala* activity which belongs to the three elements of existence. *Apuñña* means all *akusala*. When all activity *puñña*, *apūñña* and *Āneñja* are discarded . . . on account of this one does not get tainted . . . by *puñña* and *pāpa*. (*Puññaṃ vuccati yaṃ kinci tedhātukaṃ kusalābhisaṅkhāram. Apuññaṃ vuccati sabbaṃ akusalāṃ. Yato puññābhisaṅkhāro ca apuññābhisaṅkhāro ca āneñjābhisaṅkhāro ca pahīnā honti . . . ettāvataṃ puññe ca pāpe ca na limpanti . . .*")⁷⁰

It is significant that in this comment *puñña* is taken to include only *abhisāṅkhārakusala*. This suggests that the *Niddesa* has also recognized that in the Nikāya usage *puñña* was a narrower concept than *kusala*. *Kusala* includes all *puñña* plus other commendable qualities that even a person who has discarded *puñña* might possess. Hence *kusala* is a wider term in the evaluative language of early Buddhism.

Even during the commentarial period the distinction between *kusala* and *puñña* seems to have been recognized although there was a tendency to fuse the two terms together. The wider implication of *kusala* is indicated by the commentator Buddhaghosa in drawing a distinction within *kusala* itself. The commentary to the *Dīghanikāya* says: "There *kusala* is two-fold, as that which conduces to the round of births and that which opposes the round of births. There, *kusala* which conduces to the round of births is the tenderness of mind of parents towards (their) sons and daughters, and of sons and daughters towards (their) parents, by virtue of their attachment. *Kusala* which opposes the round of births is the thirty seven factors belonging to enlightenment beginning from the four bases of mindfulness. Out of them the end result of *puñña*, which is conducive to the round of births is the might and glory of a universal monarch in the world of men, and that of *kusala* which opposes the round of births is the attainment of *nibbāna* which is the fruit of the path." (*Tattha duvidhaṃ kusalaṃ: vaṭṭāgāmica vivaṭṭāgāmi ca. Tattha vaṭṭāgāmikusalaṃ nāma mātāpitunnaṃ puttadhītādisu puttadhītānaṃca mātāpitusu sinehavasena mudumaddavacittaṃ. Vivaṭṭāgāmikusalaṃ nāma cātṭāro satipaṭṭhānā ti ādib-*

68 S. N., Vol. I, p. 59.

69 A. N., Vol. I, p. 89.

70 *Niddesa*, Vol. I, p. 90 ed. by L. de la Vallée Poussin and E. J. Thomas, PTS, London, 1916.

*hedā sattatim sabodhipakkhiyadhammā. Tesu vaṭṭagāmi puññaṃ pariyoṣānaṃ manussaloke cakkavattisrivibhavo. Vivatṭagāmikusalassa maggaphalanibbānasamāpatti).*⁷¹

It is significant and not merely accidental that Buddhaghosa, while making this distinction within *kusala* itself, uses *puñña*, to refer to the former category of *kusala* as *vaṭṭagāmi puñña*, and *kusala*, to refer to the latter category as *vivatṭagāmikusala*. This reveals his consciousness of the distinction in meaning implied by the canonical use of the terms *kusala* and *puñña*.

There are two questions which arise, resulting from the above inquiry into the occurrences of the terms *kusala* and *puñña*: (1) The question whether it is correct to take them as synonyms, and (2) the question whether it is correct to say that the *arahat* is one who has transcended both good and bad. An affirmative answer to either of these questions is evidently wrong. Such a position is traceable to the single error of overlooking the fact that early Buddhism has used *puñña* and *kusala* as terms with distinctive evaluative meanings. *Puñña* was evidently a term which exclusively signified the "good" of the person who is yet in *sam sāra* (the cycle of continued rebirth), whereas *kusala* cannot be qualified in this sense. A person who becomes an *arahat*, therefore is the very embodiment of *kusala* although *puñña* as well as *pāpa* are given up by him. To say that the *arahat* is one who has transcended both good and bad is wrong, in that it overlooks the above mentioned distinction between *kusala* and *puñña*, and also ignores the significance of the term *kusala* in the moral language of early Buddhism, restricting the discussion of "moral goodness" to contexts where the terms *puñña* and *pāpa* occur.

Besides, it may be asked as to what one intends to convey by such remarks as "One who has attained perfection is one who has overcome the distinctions of good and bad." Quite obviously this does not mean that the Buddhist *arahant* does not recognize what a good action is or what a bad action is, or that he is indifferent to such distinctions. The Buddha is himself referred to as one who knew what was good and what was bad, and also laid down what was good and what was bad. Yet it is a suggestion incompatible with this that Tachibana seems to be making when he compares the Buddha or the *arahant* with "one who knows thus" in Brahmanism.⁷² For according to Tachibana, the "one who knows thus" in the Upanishads "Has reached the mental condition where there is no consciousness of moral, aesthetical or logical distinction, the relative ideas therefore of good and evil, pleasure and pain...right and wrong are all annihilated for him."⁷³ This, as has been shown, adducing weighty evidence from the Pāli Nikāyas, is incompatible with early Buddhism.

Nor could the affirmation that the *arahant* is above good and bad mean that what the Buddha or the Buddhist saints did, cannot be described as either good or bad. For obviously, the life that the Buddha and the *arahants* led is referred to as one which was devoted to the happiness and well-being of the multitude (*bahujanahitāya paṭipanno, bahujanasukhāya*). The significance that A. W. P. Guruge attaches to such a notion does not seem satisfactory. He considers the ultimate achievement to be beyond ethical differentiation or evaluation. But, surely, the Buddha himself considered it as the highest truth (*paramasacca*) and the most valuable attainment (*uttamapatti*).

71 *Dīghanikāyaṭṭhathā*, Vol. III, p. 848 ed. by W. Stede, PTS, London, 1932.

72 *The Ethics of Buddhism*, Oxford, 1926. p. 56

73 *Ibid.* p. 55.

The view that Dharmasiri holds in this respect, viz., "When one is spiritually perfect, one does not have moral struggles, so one has gone beyond good and evil"⁷⁴ is also not totally acceptable. One may agree with the first part of this statement, from which, however, the second does not follow. If the second is a way of saying the first, it should be remarked that it is a very inappropriate and misleading way of saying it.

From the above considerations the conclusion can safely be drawn that early Buddhism used the terms *kusala* and *puñña* with distinctive meanings. Both terms clearly have an ethically evaluative function. *Puñña* in its canonical use generally signified the actions etc. which conduce to a happy consequence to the agent in a future existence. This term was clearly borrowed from the earlier ethical terminology of the Brahmanic tradition. *Kusala*, on the other hand, generally signified that which conduces to spiritual bliss culminating in the attainment of the highest bliss of *nibbāna* which leaves no room for the fruition of any actions. It may be said to be a specifically Buddhist usage, perhaps because it was intended to signify a different sense of ethical value from that signified by *puñña*. When one attains *nibbāna*, (the state which is equivalent to arahatship) a person is fully endowed with *kusala* qualities and is free from *akusala* as well as both *puñña* and *pāpa*. The assertion which is almost universally made by modern interpreters of Buddhist ethics that the Buddhist saint is beyond good and bad can therefore be seen to be the result of a terminological muddle.⁷⁵

P. D. Premasiri.

74 *A Buddhist Critique of the Christian Concept of God*, p. 106.

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