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 puṇṇa 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 puṇṇa 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. Also it is used to qualify human behaviour bodily, verbal and mental. There are numerous instances in which it is used as a substantive.

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

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 Atthasālīni where an attempt is made to define the word kusala

it says: "kusālas 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 kusālas are so called because they lop off, cut off what are known as immoralities (akusālas). Or, knowledge is called kusa because of the reduction or eradication of contemptible things, and kusāla 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 kusāla are so called because they cut off the corruptions like the kusa grass." These comments, however, are not illuminating from an etymological point of view.

The commentator also mentions, with examples, four basic meanings of the word kusāla, namely (1) good-health, (2) blameless, (3) skilful and (4) felicitous result. According to the commentator the meaning of “skilful” 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." This shows that Mrs. Rhys Davids favours the rendering of Pāli kusāla into English as "good".

The term kusāla used in moral contexts is usually rendered into English by modern scholars as "good". The Pāli Text Society Dictionary gives the meanings good, right, meritorious, clever, skilful and expert. Miss Horner consistently translates kusāla as skill. However kusāla 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 kusāla as skill, specially where the term occurs in moral contexts.

The use of the term kusāla, 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

8 Atthasalini, p. 38.
this is not in a moral context. The *Satapatha-Brahmana* 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 *juhu* with the right.” In the Aitareya *Aranyaka* the term is used in the sense of ‘auspicious’. It says: “To a Brahman one must not say anything except what is auspicious.”

In the Upanishads too, the term *kusala* seldom occurs in a moral use. In the *Chandogya Upanisad* occurs the following: “...has tended the fires well.” In another instance is found: “There were three persons well versed in the udgitha.” The *Taittiriya Upanisad* 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.”

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

*Dhamma-adhamma* (same as in Pali)

*Sāhu-asāhu* (*sāduha-ásādu* in Pāli)

*Kallōna-pāva* (*kalyāna-pāpaka* in Pāli)

*Puṇṇa-pāva* (*puṇṇa-pāpa* in Pāli)

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

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


18 *Sutōgame, Sutrakrītīgāna (Śyagadāya),* II. 5. 14 ed. by Pusphabhikkhu, Bombay 1953.

19 Ibid. II. 5. 27

20 Ibid. II. 5. 28

21 Ibid. II. 5. 16

22 ‘Akkhēhīn kusālehi’ (clever at dice) Ibid. I. 2. 2. 23; see also II. 1. 2; II. 7. 8.

equivalent to puṇṇa,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 puṇṇa (Sk. punya).

The term puṇṇa (Sk. punya) with its opposite sometimes as apruṇṇa, 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 Jātavedas 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.
In the Brāhmanas the term puṇya 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 parīkṣita, performing horse sacrifices by their righteous work did away with sinful work one after another.” 32 In the same Brāhmana 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 puṇya and pāpa. In early Buddhism, on the other hand, two pairs of prominent terms came to be used, namely, kusala-akusala and puṇṇa-pāpa. There is reason to believe that in the canonical period kusala signified something different from puṇṇa although there are instances in which there is overlapping of the senses. Pāpa and akusala have been used as synonymous terms although puṇṇa and kusala have not been so used.

It is pertinent here to examine the specific uses of the terms kusala and puṇṇa 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 Āguttarāraniķīya, 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 puṇṇa 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 satipatthānā), the four modes of right endeavour (cattāro sammappadhānā), the four bases of psychic power (cattāro iddhipādā), the five faculties (pañcindriyāni) the five powers (pañcabalānī), the seven factors of enlightenment (sattabojjhitā) and the eightfold path (ariyā-atthaṅgiko maggo). 38 In the same context it is said that when a monk,

33 ‘puṇyo vai puṇyena karmā bhavati pāpah pōpeneti.’ Ibid. XIV. 6. 2. 14.
34. ‘Candramā asmai pūrṇapakṣa-parapakṣōn vicinoti pūnyavā karmavā’ (The moon produces for him the bright and dark halves for good deeds)—Aitareya Āraṇyka, II. 1. 7. ed. and trs. by A. B. Keith, Oxford, 1909;
35. ‘Tān ha vād kāraṁ haiva tāvād kāraṁ.’ Aṣṭha ha vād prājñvesaṁcāte, puṇyo vai puṇyena karmā bhavati pāpah pōpeneti’—(What they said was karmā and what they praised was karmā. Verily one becomes good by good action, bad by bad action)—The Principal Upanisads, Brhadārānyaka Upaniṣad III. 2. 13 ed. and trs. by S. Radha-krishnan, London, 1953;
36. ‘Atra anuvivaṇṭataḥ puṇyena anuvivaṇṭatāḥ pōpena tīrya hi tadā sarvāṁ sākaṁ hydayassy bhavati’ (He is not followed by good, he is not followed by evil, for then he has passed beyond all the sorrors of the heart) Ibid. IV. 3. 22.
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 pūnā appears to be used in contexts which differ basically from the above.

Pūnā, 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 pūnā 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 pūnā. Thus when Raṭṭhapāla wishes to leave the life of a householder, and lead the life of a bhikku under the Buddha, he is advised by his parents: "Come Raṭṭhapāla, eat and drink and amuse yourself, you can enjoy diverting yourself with sense pleasures, and doing meritorious things."\(^41\)

Pūnā 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 pūnā 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 pūnā and pāpa he has accumulated here.\(^44\) All mortals are said to take a new birth according to the consequences of their pūnā or pāpa deeds. Those who have done pāpa are said to be reborn in hell, and those who have done pūnā in heaven.\(^45\) The Dhammapada says that a person who has done pūnā delights both here and hereafter, and that he is intensely delighted when he goes to heaven.\(^46\) The Sakkapāñhasutta shows how Pañcasikha wishes that whatever pūnā he has done concerning the steadfast arahants, he should reap its consequences in sensuous enjoyment with the one who he loved.\(^47\)


\(^43\) "Arāmaropā vanaropā ye jānā setukārakah pāpadeva udapiṇācicca ye daddantī upassaṃyī taṃsam dīvā ca rato ca saddhi pūnāṃ pavaṭṭhati dhammaṭhā śilasampannā te jānā saggāgāminī"—Ibid. p. 33.


\(^45\) "Yathākāmam gamissanti pūnakāpo pāpakāpo Nirayam pāpakāmanto pūnakāmanto ca suggati"—Ibid. p. 97.

\(^46\) "Idha nandati pecca nandati kātavipūṇo ubhavattha nandati pūnāṃ me katanti nandati bhīyo nandati suggatīṃ gato"—Dhammapada (Dhp) Verse 18, ed. by Sūriyagocāra sumangala Thera, PTS, London, 1914.

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 *samsāra* 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 Uttaradevaputta:

“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 disconcern for *puñña* and says instead:

“... Let him reject the bait of all the worlds,
let him aspire after the final peace.”

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*. He seems here to value *saddhā* (faith), *viriya* (effort) and *panna* (wisdom), which are elsewhere reckoned as *kusala* dharmā over the accumulation of *puñña*. 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, supern mundane, a component of the way.”


50 They are included under the ‘pañcindriyāni’, ‘pancabakini’ ‘sattaboijhangā’ which are reckoned as *kusala dhammā*. See D. N., Vol. III, p. 102.

51 ‘Atthi saddhā tato vibhīno puññā ca mama vibhī’ — Sn. Verse 432.


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 *puṇṇa* 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.” 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, aesthetic and logical distinctions. 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:

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Yo’dha puṇṇaṁca pāpaṁca bāhe tvā brahmaccariyavā sankhūya loke carati sa ve bhikkuṭhi vuccati.56
Yo’dha puṇṇaṁca pāpaṁca ubho saṁgaṁ upaccagā asokam virajaṁ suddham tam ahaṁ brūmī brāhmaṇam.57
Puṇḍarikam yathā vaggū toye na upalippati Evasa puṇe ca pāpe ca ubhyene āvam na lippasi.58
Na brāhmaṇo aśato suddhim āha ditthe sute silavate mute vā puṇe ca pāpe ca anapalāto attaṅjāho na vidha pakubbamāno.59
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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 Arahat considered to be freed of both the good and the evil (puṇṇapāpapahīna), but even his altruistic and otherwise meritorious deeds, are said to be accompanied by a functional consciousness (kiriyacittā), incapable of producing any reward or retribution.

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.”

54 Buddha, p. 304, Calcutta, 1927.
55 *The Ethics of Buddhism*, S. Tachibana, p. 52, Oxford 1926.
56 *Dhp.*, Verse 267; *S. N.*, Vol. 1, p. 182
57 *Dhp.*, Verse 412; *Ss.*, Verse 636.
58 *Su.*, Verse 547.
59 Ibid. Verse 790.
ETHICAL TERMS IN EARLY BUDDHISM

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 Pali 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 kusalānām dhammānāṃ upasampadām vanneti?)”. Ānanda answers: “The Tathāgata...is one who has discarded all states that are *akusala* and possessed of states which are *kusala*.” (sabbākusaladhammapāhino kho mahārāja tathāgato kusaladhammanamānāgato). Ā. N., Vol. V, p. 66. 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 stated 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 pāññapemi sampannakusalaṃ paramakusalaṃ uttamapattipattanā samanāṃ avojjham). Ā. N., Vol. I, p. 58. These ten qualities are the perfected factors of the noble-eightfold-path with the addition of the perfection of right knowledge (sammāvīmutta) and right emancipation (sammāvīmutta). 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 Savatthiyam viharati attano aneke pāpake akusale dhamme paññāne paccekkhamāno nisinnho hoti aneke ca kusale dhamme bhūvanīyā pāripiyākate). Ā. N., Vol. V, p. 66. The Buddha was venerated for possessing noble and *kusala* qualities. (Yampi bhante bhagavā sīlavā, buddhastalo ariyasālo kusalasīlenā samannāgato, imampi kho ahān bhante atthavesanān sampassamāno bhagavati evanāpanā paramanipaccākārayā karomi metṭāpahāraṃ upadānaṃ semi). Ā. N., Vol. V, p. 66.

*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. 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*. Sn., Verse 558.

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63 Ibid. p. 29.
64 Udāna, p. 66 ed. by P. Steinthal, PTS London, 1885.
67 Sn., Verse 558
That the use of *kusala* and *puuñña* in the Nikāyas is sometimes overlapping is a fact that may be admitted. That a deed which was considered to be *puuñña* 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 *puuñña* and *kusala* are used in the Nikāyas as if they were synonyms. In the Samyutta for instance, is found: “Sir, I do not find an end to the *puuñña* done for so long a period of time, to the *kusala* done for so long a period of time, as this much is the *puuñña* and this much is the fruition of *puuñña* or for this long should I stay in heaven.” (So khvahan bhante evam digharattam katānam puuññanam evam digharattam katānam kusalānaṁ pariyanāṁ nādhigacchāmi ettakaṁ puuññantī vā ettakaṁ puuññavipākoti vā ettakaṁ saggio theṭabbanti vā ti). 68 A similar use is found elsewhere as follows: “Behold the fruition of *puuñña*, of *kusala*, of those who are in the pursuit of happiness.” (Passa puuññanam vipākaṁ—kusalānaṁ sukhesitāṁ). 69

Yet there is evidence to the effect that the two terms *kusala* and *puuñña* were not taken to be totally synonymous even as late as the time the Niddesa was compiled. The Mahāniddesa, commenting on “*puuñña ca pāpe ca anipālitto*” occurring in the Suttanipāta verse No. 790 says the following: “*Puuñña* means whatever *kusala* activity which belongs to the three elements of existence. *Apuñña* means all *akusala*. When all activity *puuñña*, *apuñña* and Āneñja are discarded... on account of this one does not get tainted... by *puuñña* and *pāpa*. (Puuññam vuccati yam kinci tedhātukam kusalābhisaṅkhāram. Apuññanam vuccati sabbam akusalām. Yato puuññābhisaṅkhāro ca apuññābhisaṅkhāro ca āneñjābhisaṅkhāro ca pahīnā honti... ettāvātā puuññe ca pāpe ca na limpāti...”) 70

It is significant that in this comment *puuñña* is taken to include only *abhisaṅkhārakusala*. This suggests that the Niddesa has also recognized that in the Nikāya usage *puuñña* was a narrower concept than *kusala*. *Kusala* includes all *puuñña* plus other commendable qualities that even a person who has discarded *puuñña* 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 *puuñña* 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 Dīghakāya 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 tenderness of mind of early Buddhism.

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 vattaṭagāmipuñña, and kusala, to refer to the latter category as vivaṭtagāmikusala. 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 samśāra (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. For according to Tachibana, the “one who knows thus” in the Upanishads “Has reached the mental condition where there is no consciousness of moral, aesthetic or logical distinction, the relative ideas therefore of good and evil, pleasure and pain...right and wrong are all annihilated for him.” This, as has been shown, adding 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 patipanno, 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).

12 The Ethics of Buddhism, Oxford, 1926. p. 56
13 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"\textsuperscript{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 \textit{kusala} and \textit{puṇṇa} with distinctive meanings. Both terms clearly have an ethically evaluative function. \textit{Puṇṇa} 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. \textit{Kusala}, on the other hand, generally signified that which conduces to spiritual bliss culminating in the attainment of the highest bliss of \textit{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 \textit{puṇṇa}. When one attains \textit{nibbāna}, (the state which is equivalent to arahatship) a person is fully endowed with \textit{kusala} qualities and is free from \textit{akusala} as well as both \textit{puṇṇa} and \textit{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.\textsuperscript{75}

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\textsuperscript{74} \textit{A Buddhist Critique of the Christian Concept of God}, p. 106.

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