

## **An analysis of factors related to the *kusala*/ *akusala* quality of actions in the Pāli tradition**

Peter Harvey

Scattered through the texts of the Pāli Canon, and supplemented by some commentarial passages, are a series of discussions of such matters as the nature of action (Pāli *kamma*, Skt. *karman*), praiseworthy and reprehensible actions, criteria for determining an action as praiseworthy or reprehensible, and reflections on how the intention and knowledge of an agent should affect the moral assessment of an action. In these one can see a set of complementary principles of ethics.

These passages are helpful in ascertaining the closest Western analogue to the ethics of early and Theravāda Buddhism. Is it Utilitarianism, where actions are judged only by the amount of pain or happiness that they cause people, or sometimes also animals? Is it Kantian ethics, where the good will is central? Is it virtue ethics, as argued by Keown (1992), where actions are judged by the virtues or vices that they express, and their contribution to character traits that produce a certain kind of person? Is it simply a form of moral realism, in which ethical statements are seen to report certain moral facts about the world, particularly that certain specified acts are wrong? Or is it that these theories each correspond to only certain aspects of Buddhist ethics? As we will see, the last of these turns out to be the case.

### ***Kusala* and *akusala* actions and their roots**

*Kusala* and *akusala* are the terms perhaps most commonly used for praiseworthy and reprehensible actions or states of mind in early

Buddhist texts. *Kusala* can be translated as “wholesome”<sup>1</sup> or “skilful,” and *akusala* means the opposite of this. For the time being, the translation “wholesome” will be used.

In the *Sammādiṭṭhi Sutta* is a passage (MN I.46–47), which identifies typical *akusala* and *kusala* actions and makes clear what lies at the root of such actions:

When, friends a noble-disciple<sup>2</sup> understands the unwholesome (*akusalañ*) and the root of the unwholesome (*akusalamūla-*), the wholesome (*kusalañ*) and the root of the wholesome (*kusalamūla-*), in that way he is one of right view (*sammādiṭṭhi*), whose view is straight, who has perfect confidence in the Dhamma and has arrived at this true Dhamma.

And what is the unwholesome (*akusalaṃ*)? ... Killing living beings is the unwholesome; taking what is not given is the unwholesome; misconduct in sensual pleasures is the unwholesome; false speech is the unwholesome; divisive speech is the unwholesome; harsh speech is the unwholesome; frivolous chatter is the unwholesome; covetousness is the unwholesome; ill-will is the unwholesome; wrong view is the unwholesome. This is called the unwholesome.

And what is the root of the unwholesome? Greed (*lobho*) is a root of the unwholesome; hatred (*doṣo*) is a root of the unwholesome; delusion (*moho*) is a root of the unwholesome. This is called the root of the unwholesome.

And what is the wholesome? Abstention from killing living beings is the wholesome; ... abstention from frivolous chatter is the wholesome; uncovetousness is the wholesome; non-ill-will is the wholesome; right view is the wholesome. This is called the wholesome.

And what is the root of the wholesome? Non-greed (*alobho*) is a root of the wholesome; non-hate (*adoso*) is a root of the wholesome; non-delusion (*amoho*) is a root of the wholesome. This is called the root of the wholesome.

Here, the roots of wholesome action, literally non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion, are not just the *absence* of greed, hatred and

---

<sup>1</sup> The sixth edition of the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (1976) defines “wholesome” as “promoting physical or moral health.” The idea of *kusala* actions as nourishing “moral health” seems appropriate.

<sup>2</sup> *Ariya-sāvako*: noble disciple or disciple of the noble ones.

delusion, but states which oppose them: anti-greed (generosity and renunciation), anti-hatred (loving-kindness and compassion) and anti-delusion (wisdom).<sup>3</sup>

In this passage, “the unwholesome” is explained as consisting of actions of body and speech that are widely recognized as harmful to others, plus mental states that are likely to later lead to such harmful actions. The neuter term *akusalam* is used with all these actions, showing it is a noun, not an adjective agreeing with the gender of the respective actions. This seems to indicate that these actions are key ingredients of “the unwholesome,” rather than things which happen to have the quality of being unwholesome. In this passage, greed, hatred and delusion, as the “roots” of harmful actions, are not presented as the criteria for labeling something as “the unwholesome,” but as the inner causes of “the unwholesome.”

However, at AN I.197, greed, hatred and delusion are not just causes of unwholesome action, but their very existence is an unwholesome situation: an *arahant* understands: “Formerly there was greed; that was an unwholesome thing (*akusalam*). Now it does not exist; this is a wholesome thing (*kusalam*)” (and the same for hatred and delusion). This is also seen at AN I.201–205 which, having identified greed hatred and delusion as each a “root of the unwholesome (*akusalamūlam*),” says:

Whatever, monks, is greed, that is also is an unwholesome thing (*Yad api bhikkhave lobho tad api akusalam*). Whatever the greedy one performs by body, speech or mind, overpowered by greed, his thoughts controlled by it (*pariyādinna-citto*), doing to another by falsely<sup>4</sup> causing him pain (*asatā dukkhaṃ upadahati*) through punishment, imprisonment, loss of wealth, abuse, banishment, (thinking) ‘I am strong, (I have the) advantage of strength,’ that is also is an unwholesome thing. Thus these various evil (*pāpakā*), unwholesome states born of greed, with greed as cause, greed as origin, greed as condition are assembled together in him.

<sup>3</sup> As indicated by the fact that Dhs 32–34 treats them as positive presences, with 34 explaining *amoha* as *paññā*, wisdom.

<sup>4</sup> The context indicates that the situation concerns lying about someone, so that they are then subject to punishment.

The same is then said of behaviour based upon hatred and delusion. The passage continues:

Such a person, overpowered by evil, unwholesome states born of greed, being of uncontrolled mind, in this very life lives in pain, with distress, unrest and fever (*dukkhaṃ savighātaṃ saupāyāsaṃ sapariḷāhaṃ*), and when the body breaks up after death, a bad destiny is to be expected.

The same is then said of someone overwhelmed by states born of hatred or delusion, all such cases being like the case of a tree destroyed by parasitic creepers. On the other hand, non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion are each a root of the wholesome, and one who abandons states born of greed, hatred and delusion is released in this very life, like a tree that a person completely frees of parasitic creepers.

This holds not only that greed etc. are causes for unwholesome action, but are themselves included in what is unwholesome. They can take over the mind so as to lead a person to act in a way that brings suffering on others. This, though, leads to pain and distress to the agent in this life, and a bad rebirth. Showing this as a causal sequence:

unwholesome roots

→ unwholesome actions that bring pain to others

→ harm and pain in this and later lives to the agent.

AN I.263 sees both greed, hatred and delusion and non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion as “causes for the origin of actions (*nidānāni kammānaṃ samudayāya*).” Furthermore:

... whatever action is of the nature (*pakataṃ*) of greed (or hatred, or delusion), born of greed, caused by it, that action is unwholesome, it is with fault/blameable (*sāvajjaṃ*), it ripens in pain (*dukkhavipākaṃ*).

On the other hand, an action of the nature of non-greed etc., “is wholesome, it is faultless/blameless, it ripens in happiness.” However, while the first kind of action, that born of greed etc., “conduces to the origin of actions (*kammasamudayāya*), not to the cessation of actions,” the second, born of non-greed etc., does the opposite. Wholesome actions, then, are actions which bring hap-

piness in *saṃsāra* but also go beyond entrapment in action-fuelled *saṃsāra*.

### The nature and relative effect of attachment, hatred and delusion, and the role of attention

What is the nature of the three “roots” of the unwholesome, and what feeds them? In some passages, *lobha*, greed, is replaced by *rāga*, attachment or lust. This covers sexual lust, but also lusting after anything, including subtle meditative states. It encompasses the same ground as “greed” (*lobha*). At AN I.194, the Buddha calls “greed” “covetousness” (*abhijjhā*), calls “hatred” “ill-will” (*vyāpādo*), and calls “delusion” “ignorance” (*avijjā*). This sees the first two of these as the same as the first two of the three unwholesome mental actions – though a consciously developed line of thought is more of an action than the initial root that it expands from –, but the third as ignorance rather than the mental action of wrong view. Greed and hatred are affective, non-cognitive states and, as directed to certain goals, can be termed “motives.” While the confusion aspect of delusion can have an affective component, delusion is mainly a cognitive state, not itself a motive, in the sense of an impulse directed at a certain kind of goal, now or in the future. In the *Abhidhamma*, it is equated with spiritual ignorance (*avijjā*), and both are explained as:

... unknowing (*aññāṇaṃ*) as regards *dukkha* (the painfulness of life), ... the origin of *dukkha*, ... the cessation of *dukkha*, ... the way leading to the cessation of *dukkha*;<sup>5</sup> unknowing as regards the past ... the future ... the past and future;<sup>6</sup> unknowing as regards dependently arisen states from specific conditionality (*idappaccayatā paṭiccasamupannesu dhammesu*);<sup>7</sup> even all that kind of unknowing which is unseeing, non-achievement, non-wakening, non-awakening, non-penetration, non-apprehension, non-comprehension, non-con-

<sup>5</sup> The “unknowing” is not lack of information about these, but lack of direct insight into them.

<sup>6</sup> That is, relating to past lives, and to future lives yet to be produced by present and past *karma*.

<sup>7</sup> That is, dependent origination.

sideration, non-reflection, non-clarification – stupidity, folly, lack of clear comprehension,<sup>8</sup> delusion, bewilderment, confusion, ignorance, the flood of ignorance, the yoke of ignorance, the latent tendency of ignorance, the besetting of ignorance, the barrier of ignorance, delusion, the root of the unwholesome (Dhs 1061, 1162; cf. Vibh 362).

Delusion, then, is a kind of ingrained misperception, a distorted perspective, even stupidity, a kind of general mental misorientation that gives a view of things – blind to *dukkha* etc., and conditionality – in which certain motives, such as greed directed at gaining or holding on to something, or hatred, directed at bringing harm to someone, are seen to make sense. Non-delusion is the clarity and wisdom that sustains wholesome motives.

AN I.199–201 is another passage that probes the nature of attachment, hatred and delusion, and discusses what causes them and their opposites.

If wanderers of other sects should ask you about the distinction, disparity and difference among these three qualities (*dhammā*) – attachment (*rāgo*), hatred (*doso*) and delusion (*moho*) – you should answer them thus: ‘Attachment is a small fault (*appasāvajjo*) but its removal is slow (*dandhvirāgī*); hatred is a great fault (*mahāsāvajjo*) but its removal is quicker (*khīppavirāgī*); delusion is a great fault and its removal is slow.’<sup>9</sup>

If they ask, ‘Now friends, what is the cause and reason for the arising of unarisen attachment (or hatred or delusion), and for the increase and strengthening of arisen attachment (or hatred or delusion)?,’ you should reply: ‘... For one attending unwisely (*ayoniso manasīkaroto*) to (an object’s) attractive aspect (*subhanimittam*), unarisen attachment will arise and arisen attachment will increase and become strong. ... For one attending unwisely to (an object’s) irritating aspect (*paṭighanimittam*) unarisen hatred will arise and arisen hatred will

---

<sup>8</sup> Clear comprehension is a close complement to mindfulness.

<sup>9</sup> While this might refer to the short-term subsidence of these three states, it more likely applies to their long-term eradication. In terms of the ten fetters destroyed by noble persons, while a non-returner destroys ill-will (hatred) and desire for sense-pleasures, other forms of *rāga* still remain for him: for the subtle elemental form and formless levels. These, along with ignorance (delusion) are only destroyed at *arahantship*.

increase and become strong. ... For one attending unwisely,<sup>10</sup> unarisen delusion will arise and arisen delusion will increase and become strong.’

If they ask, ‘Now friends, what is the cause and reason for the non-arising of unarisen attachment (or hatred or delusion), and for abandoning of arisen attachment (or hatred or delusion)?,’ you should reply: ‘... For one attending wisely (*yoniso manasikaroto*) to (an object’s) unattractive aspect (*asubhanimittam*), unarisen attachment will not arise and arisen attachment will be abandoned. ... For one attending wisely to the liberation of mind by loving-kindness, unarisen hatred will not arise and arisen hatred will be abandoned. ... For one attending wisely, unarisen delusion will not arise and arisen delusion will be abandoned.’

Here we see that the crucial sustainer of attachment, hatred and delusion is attention that is *ayoniso*: unwise, unsystematic, inappropriate, not focussing on the fundamental nature of its object. Elsewhere, it is said that *ayoniso* attention supports lack of both mindfulness (*sati*) and clear comprehension (*sampajañña*), which then supports non-guarding of the sense-faculties, and this then supports misconduct of body, speech and mind. Wise attention has the opposite effect (AN V.113–116). Wise attention is something that is used in and strengthened by the various forms of Buddhist mind-training or “meditation.”

That wise attention feeds the roots of *kusala* action is reflected in the fact that “*kusala*,” when applied to a person, can mean “skilled” or “expert.” This is seen at AN I.112, where the Buddha says that in a past life he had been a wheelwright. A wheel he took nearly six months to make was without faults, and when set rolling on its own, did not fall over when the impetus ran out. One he had only six days to make was crooked and with faults and flaws (*savaṅkā sadosā sakasāvā*), so it did fall over after the impetus ran out. Thus he says,

Then, monks, I was one skilled (*kusalo*) in [understanding] wood that was crooked, the faults and flaws of wood. Now, monks, I ... am one

---

<sup>10</sup> Note that no specific object of unwise attention is specified here as regards delusion (or, below, wise attention as regards non-delusion).

skilled in the crooked ways, the faults and flaws of body... of speech and mind.<sup>11</sup>

We can thus extend the causal sequence given above, to:

*unwise attention*

→ unwholesome roots

→ unwholesome actions that bring pain to others

→ harm and pain in this and later lives to the agent.

Why is the moral tone of an action seen to cause certain karmic results? It is said that wrong view leads on to wrong resolve (*saṅkappa*), and this to wrong speech and thus wrong action, while right view has the opposite effect (AN V.211–212). As wrong actions thus come from the misperception of reality, they can be seen to be “out of tune” with the real nature of things. As they thus “go against the grain” of reality – though they may be the sort of thing that many people do –, they naturally lead to unpleasant results. Thus it is said to be impossible that wrong conduct of body, speech or mind could produce a “ripening that was agreeable, pleasant, liked,” or for right conduct to produce a “ripening that was disagreeable, unpleasant, not liked” (MN III.66).

### **Corrupt actions of unwholesome volition with painful ripening**

As is well known, at AN III.415<sup>12</sup> it is said, “It is volition (*cetanā*), monks, that I call karma. Having willed (*cetayitvā*), one performs an action (*kammaṃ karoti*) by body, by speech, by mind.” Moreover: “the ripening (*vipāka*) of action is in this life, in the next life, or subsequently.”

Here, the identifying feature of human “action” is specified as the will or volition (*cetanā*) that is expressed in a performed action of body, speech or mind (an active line of thought). This seems to be a recognition of the fact that an unwilled movement of limbs is

<sup>11</sup> Cousins (1996: 143–144) discusses this and similar passages, linking such passages to the skill required in meditation.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Asl 88.



not, as such, a human “action,” and how an action is morally characterised typically depends on the volition that it expresses. *Cetanā* encompasses the general motive for which an action is done, its immediate intention (directed at a specific objective, as part of fulfilling a motive), and the immediate mental impulse which sets it going and sustains it (Keown 1992: 213–218). Buddhaghosa explains it thus (Vism 463):

‘It wills (*cetayati*),’ thus it is volition (*cetanā*); ‘it collects (*abhisandahati*)’ is the meaning. Its characteristic is the state of volition (*cetanā*). Its function is to strive (*āyūhana-*). It is manifested as co-ordination. It accomplishes its own and others’ functions, as a senior pupil, a head carpenter etc. do. But it is evident when it occurs in marshalling of associated states in connection with urgent work, remembering and so on.

At AN V.292–297, what are elsewhere described as unwholesome actions are seen to express an unwholesome volition:

There are, monks, corrupt and harmful actions (*kammantasandosa-vyāpatti*) of unwholesome volition (*akusalasañcetanikā*) with painful consequences (*dukkhudrayā*), ripening in pain (*dukkhaviṭṭhā*): three of body, four of speech, and three of mind. ...

These actions are the above three forms of wrong action, four forms of wrong speech, and three forms of wrong thought. In the following delineation of these, both the overt action and inner mind state are described:

There is a person who kills living beings; he is cruel and his hands are blood-stained; he is bent on slaying and murdering, having no compassion for any living being.

He takes what is not given to him, appropriates with thievish intent ...

There is one who is a liar ... he utters deliberate lies ...

He utters divisive speech ... He is fond of dissension ...

He is given to frivolous chatter ...

There is a person who is covetous; he covets the wealth and property of others, thinking: ‘Oh, that what he owns might belong to me!’

There is also one who has ill will in his heart. He has corrupt mental resolve (*manasāṅkappo*): ‘Let these beings be slain! Let them be killed and destroyed! May they perish and cease to exist!’

He has wrong views (*micchādiṭṭhiko*) and a perverted way of seeing (*viparītadassano*): ‘There is no gift, there is no offering, there is no (self-)sacrifice (that is, these have no worth); there is no fruit (*phalaṃ*) or ripening (*vipāko*) of actions well done or ill done (that is, how one behaves does not matter, it has no effect on one’s future); there is no this world, no other world (that is, this world is unreal, and one does not go to another world after death); there is no mother or father (that is, there is no point in respecting the people who established one in this world); there are no spontaneously arising beings (that is, beings without parents in some rebirth worlds); in this world, there are no renunciants and brahmins who are faring rightly, practising rightly, who proclaim this world and the world beyond, having realized them by their own super-knowledge (that is, spiritual development is not possible; people cannot come to have direct meditative knowledge of rebirth into a variety of kinds of world).’

Such actions lead to rebirth in hell. On the other hand there are “beneficial (*sampatti*) actions of wholesome volition, with happy consequences, ripening in happiness: three of body, four of speech, and three of mind.” These are to abstain from the above ten kinds of action and where appropriate do the opposite kind. For example, “there is a person who abstains from the destruction of life; with rod and weapon laid aside, he is conscientious and kindly and dwells compassionate towards all living beings.” This then leads to a heavenly rebirth.

Here the volitions involved in unwholesome actions are themselves unwholesome, and the actions “corrupt and harmful.” They have “painful consequences (*dukkhudrayā*), ripening in pain (*dukkhavipākā*).” The term for “ripening,” *vipāka*, is usually used for future karmic results for the agent of an action,<sup>13</sup> but the term for “consequence,” *udraya*, may refer to the more immediate effects of an action on anyone.

The causal sequence now becomes:

---

<sup>13</sup> An action is often likened to a “seed” and its karmic result to the “fruit” (*phala*) or “ripening” (*vipāka*) of this.

unwise attention

→ unwholesome roots

→ unwholesome actions, *of unwholesome volition, that are corrupt* and bring pain to others

→ harm and pain in this and later lives to the agent.

### **How intention and perception of relevant facts affects the moral assessment of an action**

In certain *Vinaya* passages, it becomes clear that how a monk perceives the facts of a situation affects whether or not he breaks a relevant monastic rule fully, partially, or not at all and, by implication, whether and by how much the act is unwholesome. Most monastic rules can also only be broken when the act is intentionally done (Harvey 1999: 273–280). Vin IV.124–125 concerns the rule against intentionally killing a non-human living being, and comes after a story of a monk shooting crows with arrows:

Whatever monk should intentionally (*sañcicca*) deprive a living being of life, there is an offence of expiation. ...

‘Intentionally’ means a transgression committed knowingly (*jānana-to*), consciously (*sañjānanto*), deliberately (*cecca*). ...

It is then said that there is an offence of expiation when:

a) he thinks that it is a living being when it is a living thing, and deprives it of life.

There is a lesser offence of wrongdoing when:

b) he is in doubt as to whether it is a living being, and deprives it of life.

c) he thinks that it is a living being when it is not a living being, and acts to ‘kill’ it.

d) he is in doubt as to whether it is not a living being, and deprives it of life.

There is no offence when:

e) he thinks that it is not a living being when it is a living being,<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> As when one misperceives a crow as a patch of shade; not as when one,

- f) he thinks that it is not a living being when it is not a living being.  
 g) ‘if it is unintentional; if there is no mindfulness (*asatiyā*) (of what is being done); if he does not know;<sup>15</sup> if he is not meaning death; if he is mad, if he is the first wrong-doer (i.e. a monastic rule cannot be broken before there is such a rule).’

The causal sequence now becomes:

unwise attention

→ unwholesome roots

→ unwholesome actions, of unwholesome volition, that are intentional, corrupt and bring pain to others, *in a way that is anticipated by correct perception of the immediate facts of the situation*

→ harm and pain in this and later lives to the agent.

### **Unwholesome acts as with fault/blameable, criticised by the wise, not to be done**

In the *Lakkhaṇa Sutta*, it is said that the past karmic cause of the *Bodhisatta* having smooth skin, to which dust does not stick – this being an indication of his great wisdom –, was that he used to enquire of renunciants and brahmins:

What is it that is wholesome (*kusalam*), what is it that is unwholesome? What is with fault (*sāvajjam*), what is not? What course is to be followed (*sevitabham*), what is not? What, if I do it, will be to my lasting harm (*ahitāya*) and pain (*dukkhāya*), ... what to my lasting benefit and happiness? (DN III.157).

This sees understanding the distinction between what is wholesome and unwholesome as linked to wisdom, just as the above *Sammā-ditṭhi Sutta* associates it with right view. It also sees being “with fault” as closely linked to unwholesomeness, and clearly sees both as not to be pursued. Cousins (1996: 148) comments that:

---

for example, recognises a worm as a worm, but does not count it as a “living being.”

<sup>15</sup> That is, does not know that his action might kill a living being.

In the great majority of cases ... whatever other terms are associated with *kusala*, the term which is always present, usually immediately next to *kusala*, is blameless (*anavajja*).

There is a small uncertainty in how best to translate *sāvajja* and *anavajja*. Cousins (1996: 139) sees *anavajja*, as “(originally) not reprehensible, blameless; (later) faultless.” Margaret Cone (2001: 245) says that *avajja* means, as an adjective, “blameable; low, inferior,” as a noun, “what is blameable; imperfection, fault,” and *sāvajja* as an adjective meaning “blameable; faulty.” Perhaps a word which captures both aspects of the adjectival meaning is “wrong,” with “right” for *anavajja*. While *micchā* and *sammā* are also translated this way, at AN V.242, the *micchā* and *sammā* path factors are respectively called, among other things, *sāvajja* and *anavajja*.

It is not surprising, then, that an unwholesome action is also criticised by the discerning or wise (*viññugarahitā*).<sup>16</sup> Of course blame from those who are not wise may not be appropriate: the eight worldly phenomena that one needs equanimity in the face of are gain and loss, fame and shame, blame and praise (*nidā, pasamsā*), and pleasure and pain (e.g. DN III.260). As king Pasenadi says in the *Bāhitika Sutta* (MN II.114):

... we do not recognise anything of value in the praise and blame (*vaṇṇaṃ vā avañṇaṃ*) of others spoken by foolish and ignorant people who speak without having investigated and evaluated; but we recognise as valuable the praise and blame of others spoken by wise, intelligent and sagacious (*paṇḍitā vyattā medhāvino*) persons who speak after having investigated and evaluated.

The relevance of criticism from the wise is seen in the *Kālāma Sutta*, the popular name for the *Kesaputta Sutta* (AN I.188–193), which sees greed, hatred and delusion as the states identified:

... when you know for yourselves, ‘these states (*dhammā*) are unwholesome (*akusalā*) and with fault (*sāvajjā*), they are criticised by the wise (*viññugarahitā*); these states, when undertaken and practised, conduce to harm (*ahitāya*) and pain (*dukkhāya*)’ ...

<sup>16</sup> There is also reference to “virtues dear to the noble ones” (*ariyakantehi sīlehi*) (SN V.343).

They should, therefore, be abandoned (AN I.189). This is because a person:

... overpowered by greed (hatred or delusion), his thoughts controlled by it, will destroy life, take what is not given, engage in sexual misconduct, and tell lies; he will also prompt others to do likewise.

Hence they “conduce to his harm and pain for a long time.” States of non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion have the opposite qualities and effects. Indeed, one “devoid of covetousness, devoid of ill-will, unconfused,<sup>17</sup> clearly comprehending, ever mindful, dwells pervading ... the entire world with a mind imbued with loving-kindness,” i.e. he can develop in meditation and be calm and confident.

The causal sequence thus becomes:

unwise attention

→ unwholesome roots

→ unwholesome actions, of unwholesome volition, that are intentional, corrupt, *with fault*, and bring pain to others, in a way that is anticipated by correct perception of the immediate facts of the situation, and which are *criticized by the wise, not to be done*

→ harm and pain in this and later lives to the agent.

### **Unwholesome actions as also bringing injury to others, future karmic pain, affliction to self and others, and a bad effect on one's character**

A *sutta* which gives a series of near equivalents of the term *akusala*, and then for *kusala* is the *Bāhitika Sutta* (MN II.114–115).<sup>18</sup> Here Ānanda explains, in response to questioning by king Pasenadi that:

1. An action of body (or speech or mind) which is ‘censured (*opārambho*) by wise (*viññūhi*) renunciants and brahmins’ is:

<sup>17</sup> These suggest the overcoming, or at least suspension, of greed, hatred and delusion. Note, though, that such a disciple is only said to be free of enmity and ill will (perhaps temporarily), not delusion.

<sup>18</sup> Anālayo (2007) compares this to a *Madhyamāgama* parallel *sutta* which he also translates from the Chinese.

2. ‘Any bodily behaviour (*kāyasamācāro*) that is unwholesome (*akusalo*),’ which in turn is:
  3. ‘Any bodily behaviour that is with fault (*sāvajjo*),’ which in turn is:
  4. ‘Any bodily behaviour that is injurious (*savyāpajjho*),’ which in turn is:
  5. ‘Any bodily behaviour ripening in pain (*dukkhavipāko*),’ which in turn is:
  6. ‘(a) Any bodily behaviour, great king, that leads to one’s own affliction (*attabyābādhāya*), or to the affliction of others, or to the affliction of both, and (b) on account of which unwholesome states increase and wholesome states diminish.
- Such bodily behaviour is censured by wise renunciants and brahmins.<sup>19</sup>

The passage goes on to say that behaviour uncensured by wise renunciants and brahmins is behaviour that is wholesome. And then, in response to the king’s questions, he explains that wholesome actions are faultless ones; these are ones that do not bring harm; these are ones that ripen in pleasure. Furthermore, these are any that:

... does not lead to one’s own affliction, or to the affliction of others, or to the affliction of both, and on account of which unwholesome states diminish and wholesome states increase. – Such bodily behaviour is uncensured by wise renunciants and brahmins, great king.

Here the faultiness (3) of an action is explained in terms of item 4: it being associated with *vyāpajjha*: injury, harm, trouble. Presumably this refers to the injury caused to others by killing, stealing, etc.

---

<sup>19</sup> The Chinese parallel refers in turn to conduct that is: i. (= 1 above) “detested by recluses and brahmins,” ii. (= 2) “unwholesome,” iii. (= 3) “constitutes an offence,” iv. (cf. 1) “is detested by the wise,” v. (~= 6) “harms oneself, harms others, harms both; that destroys wisdom and fosters evil; that does not [lead to] attaining *Nibbāna*, does not lead to knowledge, does not lead to awakening, and does not lead to *Nibbāna*” (Analāyo 2007: 158–159). Here, item i and iv are close in meaning and v specifically refers to hindering the attainment of *nibbāna*, while 4 and 5 of the above are not listed. The passage adds that those who carry out such conduct do not know, according to reality, what should or should not be undertaken, accepted, eliminated or accomplished (Analāyo 2007: 159–160). Analāyo sees v/6. as the “basic definition” (2007: 168).

This is implied by the *Kālama Sutta* and by the fact that *avyāpajjha* means to be peaceful and friendly. An injurious action is then explained as item 5: an action “ripening in pain (*dukkhavipāko*).” The term *vipāka* usually refers to future karmic results, so here 5 gives not so much the meaning of 4 as refers to its inevitable consequences for the agent. Item 6a then links 5 back to affliction (*byābādha*): to self, others, or both. “Affliction” to others cannot be referring to future karmic results, as the affliction that one person’s actions may bring to other people cannot mean karmic results that come to *them*: such results come to the agent of actions, not those they act on. This also implies that the “affliction” to self refers to immediate harm to oneself. Indeed at MN I.342–349, a person who is a “self-tormentor (*attantapo*),” is one who inflicts harsh asceticism on himself,<sup>20</sup> an “other-tormentor” is a butcher, hunter or executioner, while one who torments both is an ascetic king who has large animal sacrifices done by enforced and suffering workers. Nevertheless, 6b brings another reference to the future, not in terms of karmically caused pain for the agent of present actions, but in terms of the affect on their character or virtue: an increased disposition to further unwholesome actions and decrease in wholesome traits. This can also be seen at DN II.279–280, which says that any bodily or verbal behaviour, or the pursuit of goals (*pariyesana*) should be avoided if it leads to the increase of unwholesome *dhammas* and decrease of wholesome ones, but followed (*sevitabba*) if it leads to the decrease of unwholesome *dhammas* and the increase of wholesome ones.<sup>21</sup> Here, *dhammas* most likely refer to mental states.

The causal sequence thus becomes:

unwise attention

→ unwholesome roots

→ unwholesome actions, of unwholesome volition, that are intentional, corrupt, with fault, bring pain and *injury to oneself* or

<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, SN IV.338–339 says that a person who (generally) “afflicts and torments (*ātāpeti paritāpeti*) himself” may still develop a wholesome state.

<sup>21</sup> My thanks to the reviewer of this paper for drawing my attention to this passage.



to others in a way that is anticipated by correct perception of the immediate facts of the situation, criticized by the wise, not to be done

→ harm and pain in this and later lives to the agent, and *unwholesome character tendencies*.

### **Afflictive, dark action with afflictive, dark ripening**

Item 6a above is also a feature of other passages. In the *Ambalaṭṭhikārāhulovāda Sutta* (MN I.415–419), the Buddha advises his son Rāhula, now a novice, to reflect before an action of body, speech or mind and ask himself:

Would this action that I wish to do with the body lead to my own affliction (*-attabyābādhāya*), or to the affliction of others, or to the affliction of both? Is it an unwholesome bodily action with painful consequences (*dukkhudraya-*), with painful ripening (*dukkhavipāka-*)? (MN I.415).

If the answer is “yes,” he should not do the action, if “no,” he can do it. He should likewise break off an action if he realises during its performance that it is leading to these effects and, if after an action he reflects that it has led to such affliction and has painful consequences and ripening, he should confess it and undertake not to repeat it. Along with 6a, factor 5 is mentioned, and “painful consequences” is probably equivalent to 4.

The concern not to bring affliction to self or other is also seen in the *Veḷudvāreyyā Sutta* (SN V.353–356), which urges a noble-disciple to reflect using a negative version of the golden rule:

I am one who wishes to live, who does not wish to die; I desire happiness and am averse to suffering. Since this is so, if someone were to take my life, that would not be pleasing and agreeable to me. Now if I were to take the life of another – of one who wishes to live, who does not wish to die, who desires happiness and is averse to suffering – that would not be pleasing and agreeable to the other either. What is displeasing and disagreeable to me is displeasing and disagreeable to the other too. How can I inflict upon another what is displeasing and disagreeable to me?

On the basis of this, it is said that a person abstains from the three forms of wrong action and four forms of wrong speech, as well as exhorting others to do so, and praising such abstinence. The context of the passage is that the Buddha is asked by some brahmins for a teaching that will help them live happy lives of many children, beautiful possessions and good rebirths. That is, just as one does not like to be afflicted oneself, do not afflict others – and this abstinence will bring one future good fortune. Indeed, whether he is presently in pain or happy, the wise person does not do any of the three forms of wrong action, four forms of wrong speech or three forms of wrong mental action, as these will ripen in pain (*dukkhavipāka*) in the future; rather, he or she does actions that ripen in happiness (MN I.313–315).

In the *Kukkuravatika Sutta*, the focus is on not afflicting oneself, as here the Buddha addresses an ascetic who models his behaviour on that of a dog (i.e. he afflicts himself), and explains that this conduct will lead to rebirth as an animal or in hell. He then explains that there are four kinds of action (MN I.389–391), the first three of which are:

- ‘action that is dark<sup>22</sup> and with a dark ripening’ (*kammaṃ kaṇhaṃ kaṇhavipākaṃ*): one ‘generates an activity’ (*saṅkhāraṃ abhisankharoti*) of body speech or mind that is ‘afflictive’ (*sabyābajjahaṃ*) and hence is reborn in an ‘afflictive’ world such as hell, with afflictive contacts and afflictive, painful feelings. AN II.234 explains dark actions as breaking the five precepts.
- ‘action that is bright (*sukkaṃ*) with a bright ripening:’ generating unafflictive activities, so as to be reborn in an unafflictive world, such as that of the Subhakiṇṇā heaven (of the elemental form level). AN

---

<sup>22</sup> Cf. DN I.163 refers to “those things that are unwholesome, and reckoned as such, with fault (*sāvajjā*), to be refrained from (*asevitaḅbā*), unbefitting noble ones (*nālamariyā*), dark (*kinhā*, vl. *kaṇhā*) ...,” with the opposite kinds of things as e.g. “bright” (*sukkā*). At SN V.104, the nutriment for the arising and development of the discrimination of *dhammas* factor of awakening is giving wise attention to: “*dhammas* which are wholesome and unwholesome, with fault and faultless, inferior and superior (*hīnapaiṇīṭā*), dark and bright with their counterparts (*kaṇhasukkasappaṭibhāgā*).” These four pairs also occur at SN I.129 and AN III.165; cf. AN IV.363.

II.234 explains bright actions as keeping the five precepts, and AN II.235 explains them as the ten right actions ending in right view.

- ‘action that is dark-and-bright with dark-and-bright ripening:’ generating a mixture of afflictive and non-afflictive activity, so as to be reborn in a world that is both afflictive and non-afflictive, such as the human world.

This passage makes clear that while the nature of an action’s karmic ripening corresponds to the nature of the action, it does not determine its nature. For example a “dark” action is not to be counted as dark because it has a dark karmic result; rather, it has a dark result because it is itself dark: causing affliction here and now.<sup>23</sup> Its having dark karmic results is a *sign* of its dark, afflictive, unwholesome nature, but not the criterion for its being unwholesome in the first place. Nevertheless, the passages we are examining in this article hardly neglect to mention karmic results, in the form of pleasant or unpleasant experiences, – perhaps as additional motivating or demotivating factors for the actions –, and of course do concern themselves with the immediate (non-karmic) effects of actions on both others and oneself.

The causal sequence thus becomes:

unwise attention

→ unwholesome roots

→ unwholesome actions, of unwholesome volition, that are intentional, *dark*, corrupt, with fault, bring pain and injury to oneself or to others in a way that is anticipated by correct perception of the immediate facts of the situation, criticized by the wise, not to be done

→ *dark* harm and pain in this and later lives to the agent, and unwholesome character tendencies.

The fourth kind of action at MN I.389–391 is:

---

<sup>23</sup> Adam (2005: 68) sees the “affliction” aspect which makes an action “dark” as its “obscuring the mind” and the “dark” (or “bright”) aspect as concerning both “the moral quality and the epistemic character of the action itself” (2005: 69). An epistemic aspect is possible here, but I do not see any direct evidence for it.

- ‘action that is neither dark nor bright with neither-dark-nor-bright ripening, action that leads to the destruction of action:’ the ‘volition for abandoning (*pahānāya yā cetanā*)’ the above three kinds of action.

AN II.236 explains this kind of action as right view through to right concentration, and Asl 89 explains it as both the seven factors of awakening (*bojjhaṅgas*) and the Noble Eightfold Path. AN III.384–385 sees *nibbāna* as neither dark nor bright, in the sense of neither a bad nor good rebirth. As we have seen above, AN I.263 sees actions born of non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion – i.e. wholesome actions, as leading to the cessation of (*saṃsāra*-fuelling) actions. Adam (2005: 72) tentatively identifies the person who does the fourth kind of action as the noble persons who have not yet attained *arahantship*.<sup>24</sup> While the first of these he mentions is the stream-enterer, we should also probably include the “person practising for the fruit that is stream-entry” (*soṭāpattiphalasacchikiriya paṭipanno*), who is close to becoming a stream-enterer.<sup>25</sup>

Wholesome action is in one aspect “bright” action that also leads to “bright” future results in *saṃsāra*, but at the level of “path” actions it enables a person to go beyond even the “bright” aspects of *saṃsāra*.

---

<sup>24</sup> However, at AN V.244–245: right view through to right liberation is the *sukkamagga* in contrast to wrong view through to wrong liberation as the *kaṇha-magga*. This implies either that “bright” may sometimes exclude and sometimes include the path, or that only the path’s *lokuttara* form is beyond both “dark” and “bright.” On this fourth kind of action, see Harvey (2000: 43–46).

<sup>25</sup> AN IV.372 sees them as no longer an ordinary person (*puṭhujjana*), SN V.23 sees one who is “rightly practising” (*sammāpaṭipanno*) as having the eight factors of the *magga*, and SN V.25 sees the eight factors of the *magga* as what being a renunciant (*sāmañña*), a *samaṇa*, entails, whose fruits are the stream-entry-fruit up to the *arahantship*-fruit. As the *magga* leads to not only the three higher fruits, but the first one, stream-entry, then those engaged in the *magga* include the first kind of *paṭipanna* person. Such a person is endowed with its eight factors to some degree (Harvey 2011).

### **Afflictive action that obstructs wisdom and leads away from *nibbāna***

The *Dvedhāvitakka Sutta* (MN I.115–116) echoes the *Bāhitika Sutta*'s item 6a, but also expands on 6b. Here the Buddha explains that before his awakening, while still a *Bodhisatta*, he had divided his thoughts (*vitakkas*) into two groups: those of sensual desire, ill-will and cruelty, and those of renunciation, of non-ill-will, and of non-cruelty.<sup>26</sup> Whenever one of the first group of thoughts arose, he understood that it:

... leads to (*saṃvattati*) my own affliction (*attabyābādhāya*), to others' affliction, and to the affliction of both;<sup>27</sup> it obstructs wisdom (*paññānirodhiko*), causes difficulties (*vighātapakkhito*), and leads away from *nibbāna* (*anibbānasaṃvattaniko*).

With each of these reflections, such a thought subsided and was then abandoned.

The character-forming effect of the nature of one's thoughts is then emphasised: "Monks, whatever a monk frequently thinks and ponders on (*anuvitakketi anuvicāreti*), that will become the inclination (*nati*) of his mind ...." It is then said that when one of the second group of thoughts arose, he understood:

'This does not lead to my own affliction, or to others' affliction, or to the affliction of both; it aids wisdom, does not cause difficulties, and leads to *nibbāna*. If I think and ponder upon this thought even for a night, even for a day, even for a night and a day, I see nothing to fear from it. But with excessive thinking and pondering, I might tire my body; and when the body is tired, the mind becomes disturbed, and when the mind is disturbed, it is far from concentration'. So I steadied my mind internally, quieted it, brought it to singleness (*ekodikaromi*), and concentrated it.<sup>28</sup> Why is that? So that my mind should not be disturbed.

<sup>26</sup> The objects of these last three "thoughts" are the same as of the three forms of "right resolve" (*sammāsaṅkappa*), the second factor of the noble eightfold path.

<sup>27</sup> At SN IV.339, it is said that attachment, hatred or delusion lead to willing (*ceteti*) for the affliction of oneself, others or both.

<sup>28</sup> That is, he attained a *jhāna*, especially the second of these, in which

Here the emphasis is on mental action that does not lead to afflicting oneself or others (presumably through harmful verbal or physical actions) and which does not make the mind incline away from wisdom or *nibbāna*. That is, the concern with future results is not in regard to karmically induced pleasures or pains, but on the character trait of wisdom that enables one to go beyond any karmically shaped state. This links with action that is “neither dark nor bright,” and clearly relates to the right resolve factor of the Eightfold Path, itself counted as part of wisdom (MN I.301). The suspension of thought by meditative concentration, even wholesome thought, indicates the more subtle aspects of wholesome/skilful states.

The causal sequence thus becomes:

unwise attention

→ unwholesome roots

→ unwholesome actions, of unwholesome volition, that are intentional, dark, corrupt, with fault, bring pain and injury to oneself or to others in a way that is anticipated by correct perception of the immediate facts of the situation, criticized by the wise, not to be done

→ dark harm and pain in this and later lives to the agent, and unwholesome character tendencies, *obscuring wisdom and moving one away from nibbāna*.

### Further reflections on the terms *kusala* and *akusala*

Having surveyed what the *suttas* have to say on these terms and related ones, what do the commentaries say? The *Atthasālinī* (Asl 38–39; cf. Cousins 1996: 141–142) gives this explanation of the phrase “*kusala* states” (*kusalā dhammā*) at the start of the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*:

The word ‘*kusala*’ means healthy (*ārogya*), faultless (*anavajja*), skilled (*-cheka*), ripening in happiness (*sukhavipākesu*). In such passages as, ‘Is your reverence well (*kusalam*)? Is your reverence free from ailment?’ etc., *kusala* means healthy. In such passages as, ‘Venerable sir, what bodily behaviour is *kusala*? Great king, it is bodily behav-

---

*vitakka* and *vicāra*, related to “thinking and pondering,” are absent.

your that is faultless (*anavajjo*)’ (*Bāhitika Sutta*, above); and again in, ‘Venerable sir, the Blessed One’s way of teaching Dhamma in regard to *kusala* states is unsurpassed’ (DN III.102), *kusala* means faultless.

In such passages as, ‘You are *kusala* at the different parts of a chariot’ (MN II.94); ‘Graceful women who have been trained are *kusala* in singing and dancing’ (Jat VI.25) etc., *kusala* means skilled.

In such passages as, ‘Monks, it is by the building up of *kusala* states (that this *puñña* increases)’ (DN III.58), and ‘from being accumulated (*upacittā*) from the doing of *kusala* actions,’ *kusala* means ripening in happiness.

Now here, in the phrase ‘*kusala* states,’ either ‘healthy’ or ‘faultless’ or ‘ripening in happiness’ is applicable.

... But in regard to word-definitions: *kusalas* are so called as they cause contemptible evil things (*kucchite pāpadhamme*) to tremble (*salayanti*), to shake, to be disturbed, to be destroyed ...

Asl 62–63, on a ‘*kusala* state of mind (*citta*)’ that is connected with knowledge, says:

‘*Kusala:*’ *kusala* in the sense of destroying contemptible states (*kucchitānaṃ salanādīhi*); or in the sense of healthy (*ārogyaṭṭhena*), or in the sense of being faultless (*anavajjaṭṭhena*), or in the sense of produced by skill (*kosallasambhūtaṭṭhena*).

To illustrate: in ‘How are you? Are you *kusala* sir?’, *kusala* is used to mean healthy, i.e. not being ill or sick or unwell in body. So in mental states it should be understood in the sense of ‘healthy,’ i.e. absence of sickness, illness or disease in the form of the defilements (*kilesa*).

Moreover, from the absence of the fault of the defilements (*kilesavajja-*), blemish (*dosassa*) of the defilements, torment (*darathassa*) of the defilements, *kusala* has the sense of faultless.

Wisdom (*paññā*) is called skill (*kosallaṃ*). *Kusala* has the sense of produced by skill from being produced by skill.

At DN-a 883 (on DN III.102), Buddhaghosa explains the meaning “healthy” as that used in the *Jātaka* method of exposition, “faultless” as that used in the *Suttanta* method of exposition, and meanings used in the *Abhidhamma* method as being: “produced by skill,” “freedom from distress (*niddharatha*)” and “ripening in happiness.” Cousins (1996: 139–140) comments that “freedom from distress” is otherwise neglected, and says on “ripening in happiness,”

“the commentators do not in fact often explain the word *kusala* as having this sense.” He also points out that the *ṭīkā* on this passage explains “produced by skill” as “caused by appropriate bringing to mind” (*yonisomanasikārahetuka*), i.e. by what is referred to above as “wise attention.” Cousins (1996: 149) comments that this last meaning is not found only in the *Abhidhamma*, but “it is intended to suggest that this is in some way a higher or more profound explanation of *kusala*, or at least one which is more strictly correct.”

Here, then, something that is *kusala*:

- a) is morally/spiritually healthy in being unaffected by defilements, i.e. by greed, hatred or delusion.
- b) is faultless in being free of defilements.
- c) destroys contemptible states.
- d) in the case of *kusala* states connected to knowledge, and perhaps less directly in other cases, is produced by skill, by wisdom.
- e) more generally, it ripens in happiness.

a)–c) support the translation “wholesome,” d) and the non-delusion-affected aspect of a) support “skilful,” and e) supports something like “beneficial.”

Cousins (1996) traces the meaning of *kusala/kuśala* in pre-Buddhist and Buddhist sources and summarises thus:

1. An original meaning [applied to a person] of ‘intelligent’ ‘wise;’
2. Expert in magical and sacrificial ritual (in the [pre-Buddhist] *Brāhmaṇas*); for brahmins, of course, this would precisely constitute wisdom.
3. a) Skilled in meditational/mystic (/ascetic?) practices (in the early Pāli sources and, no doubt, in other contemporary traditions), including skilled in the kind of behaviour which supported meditation, etc., i.e. *śīla* [keeping moral precepts], etc.
  - b) Skilled in performing *dāna* [giving] and *yañña* [sacrifice], now interpreted in terms of central Buddhist ethical concerns; and associated with keeping the precepts and so on.
4. *Kusala* in later Buddhist and Jain sources becomes generalized to refer to something like wholesome or good states.

So there is no reason to doubt that by a later period (i.e. in the commentaries and perhaps later canonical sources) *kusala* in non-techni-



cal contexts means something which could be translated as “good” (Cousins 1996: 156).

This emphasises “skilful” as the earlier meaning, but it is by no means clear from the above survey that, in the *suttas*, there is stronger evidence for this than “wholesome” – moreover, this latter meaning cannot simply be equated with “good,” as Cousins implies, as this English term has a rather wide meaning, as Keown argues, though in *support* of this as the translation for *kusala* (1992: 119–120). Nevertheless, “skilful” is certainly *part* of the meaning of the term in the *Sutta* passages examined here.

### ***Kusala and sīla, samādhi, paññā***

It is notable that both the English term “morality” and the Pāli word *sīla* concern only physical and verbal action: *sīla* is explained as the right speech, right action and right livelihood aspects of the Noble Eightfold Path (MN I.301). All aspects of the path are *kusala*, though, so this term covers more than *sīla* or moral conduct: it also covers aspects of the path pertaining to *samādhi* and wisdom (Cousins 1996: 144–146). Accordingly: the first *jhāna* is typically said to be “detached from *akusala* states” (DN I.73); the four *jhānas* and other meditative states are referred to as *kusala dhammas* (Vin I.104 and Vin III.91); the *kusala dhammas* that the Buddha teaches about are the seven sets later known as the 37 *bodhipakkhiya dhammas* (DN III.102); and the four right efforts, which pertain to the *samādhi* aspect of the path concern the ending of *akusala dhammas* and development of *kusala* ones (DN II.312). Moreover, the first two of the three forms of right mental action, non-covetousness and non-ill-will, also pertain to mind training, and the third, right view – as either right belief on karma and rebirth etc or noble wisdom (MN III.71–72, below) – pertains to wisdom.

*Sīla* is only part of the path, but the foundation of it all:

So you see, Ānanda, wholesome virtues (*kusalāni sīlāni*) have freedom from remorse as object and profit; freedom from remorse has gladness; gladness has joy; joy has tranquillity; tranquillity has happiness; happiness has concentration; concentration has seeing things as they really are; seeing things as they really are has turning away

and non-attachment; turning away and non-attachment have release by knowing and seeing as their object and profit. So you see, Ānanda, wholesome virtues lead gradually up to the summit (AN V.2).

*Sīla* restrains overt unwholesome actions: those of body and speech (though the mindfulness needed for the more detailed monastic *sīla* also involves mind-training too). *Samādhi* counteracts mental unwholesome actions that are expressions of greed/attachment and hatred/ill-will, as well as cultivating their opposites, and *paññā* digs out the deep roots of greed and hatred and of delusion/ignorance and related wrong view.

### ***Puñña, apuñña and pāpa***

Actions of *dāna*, *sīla* and *bhāvanā* (meditative cultivation) are also bases for effecting “*puñña*” (*puññakiriyavatthu*; DN III.218; AN IV.214; It 51) and unwholesome actions are often described as “*apuñña*.” As an adjective, Cousins sees *puñña* as the “fortune-bringing or auspicious quality of an action” (1996: 153), while as a noun “it is applied either to an act which brings good fortune or to the happy result in the future of such an act (1996: 155).” Thus we see:

Monks, do not be afraid of *puññas*; this, monks, is a designation for happiness, for what is pleasant, charming, dear and delightful, that is to say, *puññas*. I myself know that the ripening of *puññas* done for a long time are experienced for a long time as pleasant, charming, dear and delightful. After developing a heart of loving kindness for seven years, for seven eons of evolution and devolution, I did not come back to this world ... (being reborn in a delightful heaven for that time; It 14–15, cf. AN IV.88–89).

As an adjective, *puñña* can be seen as “auspicious,” “bringing good fortune,” hence “karmically fruitful.” As a noun it refers to the auspicious, uplifting, purifying power of good actions to produce future happy results, or sometimes to such results themselves. The opposite of *puñña* is *apuñña*, which one can see as meaning “(an act of) karmic unfruitfulness” or “karmically unfruitful,” i.e. producing no pleasant fruits, but only bitter ones.

A synonym for *apuñña* is *pāpa*, which is often given with *puñña* as its opposite (e.g. Sn 636). *Pāpa* is often translated as “evil,” but really means that which is “infertile” (SN IV.315), “barren,” “harmful” (Cousins 1996: 156) or “ill-fortuned” (Cousins 1996: 148). A good way of rendering these meanings would be to see *pāpa* as an adjective as meaning “(karmically) deadening,” and as a noun as “(karmic) deadness,” meaning that what is so described has a deadening effect on the psyche, making it more constricted and lifeless, rather than having an uplifting, fruitful effect. The term *pāpa* is fairly frequently used with *akusala*. AN I.201–205, above, talks of being “overpowered by *pāpa*, unwholesome states born of greed” and SN V.417 says “do not think *pāpaka*, unwholesome thoughts (*vitakke*); that is sensual thought, thought of ill-will, thought of harming.” To have done the *kusala* is to have “not done what is *pāpa*” (Vin III.72). The foolish person (*bāla*) who has done misdeeds, whose past *pāpa* deeds “envelop” him, thinks:

‘I have not done what is good (*kalyāṇaṃ*),<sup>29</sup> I have not done what is wholesome, I have not made myself a shelter from anguish (*bhīruttaṇaṃ*). I have done what is *pāpa*, I have done what is cruel (*luddaṃ*), I have done what is wicked (*kibbisāṃ*) ...’

Thus he contemplates the bad rebirth he is heading for (MN III.165; cf. AN II.174). Dhṃ 116 says:

Make haste in doing good (*kalyāṇe*); check your mind from *pāpa*;  
For the mind of one who is slow in doing the karmically fruitful (*puññaṃ*) delights in *pāpa*.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Cone sees *kalyāṇaṃ* as meaning “what is good, excellent; virtuous action ...” (Cone 2001: 665). At AN II.222–223, *pāpa* is to do the ten bad deeds starting with killing. *Kalyāṇa* is to refrain from these. Or these are respectively wrong view to wrong liberation, and right view to right liberation.

<sup>30</sup> Note that, just at the English terms “evil” or “bad” can refer both to immoral actions and bad things that happen to one, and *puñña* can refer to both bad actions and their fruits, *pāpa* can refer to both actions and things that happen to one: “Even a *pāpa* person sees good fortune (*bhadraṃ*) as long as the *pāpa* does not ripen (*paccati*); but when *pāpa* ripens, then the *pāpa* person sees *pāpas*” (Dhṃ 119).

Clearly, the referent of the term *puñña* overlaps to a considerable extent with that of *kusala*, but it emphasises the aspect of a good action that is its power to bring future happy karmic results. Cousins comments that in Buddhist canonical texts, *puñña* “occurs much less frequently than *kusala*” (1996: 154) and suggests that it “was almost certainly not a technical term in the thought of the Buddha and his early disciples. It was no doubt a part of the background of beliefs current at the time” (p. 155).

One can say that in terms of the causal sequence described in this paper, doing an action with an orientation towards its being *puñña* – a *puñña*-centric action – emphasises its future karmic results: the happiness that the action will in time engender in one. Typically, in the *suttas*, such action is associated with giving and other aspects of lay religiosity (Cousins 1996: 154). Doing an action with an orientation to its being *kusala* – a *kusala*-centric action – focuses more on the nature of the action itself, and its roots, and its ongoing effect on character, perhaps with wisdom and *nibbāna* in mind. Ironically, though, the greater the concern with *puñña*, the lesser the degree of the good result. It is said that, “the mental aspiration of a moral person (*sīlavato*) is effective through its purity (*suddhattā*)” (DN III.259), in terms of the rebirth aspired to in giving a gift, but for such an aspiration to truly work, it should not be itself the sole motive of the giving. If a person gives something to a monk “with longing (*sāpekkho*), with the heart bound (to the gift; *paṭibaddha-citto*), intent on a store (of karmic fruitfulness; *sannidhipekho*), thinking ‘I’ll enjoy this after death’ (*imaṃ pecca paribuñjissāmi ti*),” it is said that he will be reborn for a while in the lowest of all the heavens. A series of what seem to be meant as progressively higher motives is then outlined: giving because one feels “it is auspicious (*sāhu*) to give!;” wishing to continue a family tradition of giving; wishing to support those who do not cook for themselves; because great sages of the past were supported by alms; because giving leads to mental calm, joy and gladness; or because giving enriches the heart and equips it for meditation (AN IV.60–63). Giving from the last of these motives is then said to lead to rebirth in the first heaven of the realm of (elemental) form, where the *brahmās* dwell. Thus doing a good action simply because it is seen to have pleasant results is not the highest of motives – it is

better to value goodness in itself, and the peace and wisdom that it facilitates. Accordingly, Buddhaghosa says on *sīla*:

That undertaken just out of desire (*-kāmatāya*) for fame is inferior; that undertaken just out of desire for the fruits of karmically fruitful actions (*puññaphala-*) is medium; that undertaken for the sake of the noble state thus, ‘This is to be done’ is superior (Vism 13).

– with all three involving forms of *chanda*, or desire-to-do.

Any *akusala* action will also be *apuñña*, and vice versa. Any *puñña* action will also be a *kusala* one, i.e. be harmless, and contribute to skilful, wholesome, faultless states. Even to give from desire for the future karmic benefit of this is *kusala* to a degree – desire is not necessarily *akusala*, as is shown by the fact that *chanda* can be a *kusala* state, it being the basis of one of the four bases of spiritual success, the *iddhi-padas* (e.g. DN II.213–214). A person may initially focus on generating *puñña*, perhaps by acts of *dāna*, only to contribute to his or her future worldly happiness, but then also to help give a supporting basis for the path to *nibbāna*. That said, there remains a question of whether all *kusala* actions are also *puñña* ones.

The three aspects of the *nidāna* of *saṅkhāras* are *puñña’bhisāṅkhāras*, *apuñña’bhisāṅkhāras* and *āneñja’bhisāṅkhāras* (DN III.217). The last of these are actions leading to the formless realms (in meditation or rebirth) (Vibh 135), and while such actions will involve *kusala* states of mind, they lead to a state in which there is only neutral feeling, not happiness: hence they are differentiated from the first, *puñña*, ones. In relation to the noble path, moreover, the actions which are “neither dark nor bright” will still be *kusala*, but not *puñña*, as they pertain to going beyond rebirths, and any happiness they may contain. Indeed we see that the *Mahācattārisaka Sutta* (MN III.71–72) differentiates between two kinds of right view:

[T]here is right view that is affected by taints (*sāsavā*), partaking of *puñña* (*puññābhāgiyā*) ripening on the side of attachment (*upadhivepakkā*), and there is right view that is noble, taintless, transcendent, a factor of the path (*ariyā anāsavā lokuttara maggaṅgā*).

The first kind of right view is to believe in karma and rebirth, and that some renunciants and brahmins know of these directly, whereas the second is:

... the wisdom (*paññā*), the faculty of wisdom, the power of wisdom, the investigation-of-states awakening factor, the path factor of right view in one whose mind is noble, whose mind is taintless, who is possessed of the noble path and is developing the noble path ...

By the time a person has attained stream-entry, and so is destined for *arahantship* within seven lives at most (AN V.120) their *sīla* is perfected (AN I.231–232), though they do not cling to their *sīla* (*aparāmaṭṭhehi*, SN V.343–344) as the whole of the path. Moreover, while their emphasis is no longer on the *puñña* aspect of good actions, their actions still generate much *puñña* as a side-effect of their quest for *nibbāna*: the four factors of streamentry (SN V.343) are also called “streams of *puñña* (*puññābhisandā*), streams of the wholesome (*kusalābhisandā*), nutriments of happiness” (SN V.391), they cannot have any sub-human rebirths, and their future lives may include millions of years in a heavenly realm. The *arahant* goes wholly beyond *puñña* (Sn 636; Harvey 2000: 43–46), as he or she will have no future rebirths.

Those who do *kusala/puñña* actions out of concern for the future karmic fruits (though still with regard to not afflicting others) may not be directly aiming for *nibbāna*, but their actions still help to prepare the ground for later efforts to attain this goal. It is in this sense that Velez de Cea (2004: 129) calls them “instrumental” actions in that they are “actions leading to favourable conditions for cultivating nirvanic virtues,” in contrast to “teleological” actions which are “actually displaying nirvanic virtues or virtues characteristic of the Buddhist ideal of sainthood,” whether or not a person doing such action is consciously aiming for *nibbāna*. Adam (2005: 74) uses similar language but in a different way, saying that actions aimed at *nibbāna*, as they still generate *puñña* as a side-effect, while “teleologically nirvānic,” are also “instrumentally karmic.” On the other hand, actions that are focussed on generating good karmic results are “teleologically karmic” and, as a side-effect, “instrumentally nirvānic.” That said, it is perhaps clearer to here

replace “instrumentally” by “indirectly” and “teleologically” by “directly:”

- ‘directly nirvāṇic’ actions directly display virtues that are most fully embodied in the kind of person who has fully experienced *nibbāna*, the *arahant*, and directly contribute to attaining *arahantship* – whether or not this is the conscious aim of such actions. These are also ‘indirectly karmatic’ as they have the side-effect of producing good karmic fruits – except in the case of the *arahant*, that is, as he or she generates no more karmic fruits, though inspires others to act in ways that generate good karmic fruits.
- ‘directly karmatic’ actions consciously aim at good karmic results, and are ‘indirectly nirvāṇic’ as they have the side-effect of helping to prepare the ground for ‘directly nirvāṇic’ actions.

### Comparison to Western ethical theories

If we survey the above factors related to an unwholesome/unskilful (*akusala*) actions, which actions are also misfortune-bringing (*apuñña, pāpa*) ones, we have:

1. unwise attention, feeding
2. attachment/greed/covetousness, hatred/ill-will, and delusion/ignorance, which are both ‘the unwholesome’ and are roots that that sustain
3. ‘the unwholesome’: specified unwholesome actions of body, speech or mind
4. that are of unwholesome volition, and intentional,
5. that are dark, corrupt, with fault/blameable (by the wise), as they
6. bring pain and injury to oneself or to others
7. in a way that is anticipated by correct perception of the immediate facts of the situation,
8. such that one should not inflict on another what one would not like inflicted on oneself
9. and are criticized by the wise,
10. not to be done
11. and that, as a karmic result, bring dark harm and pain in this and later lives to the agent, as well as
12. unwholesome character tendencies,

13. obscuring wisdom and moving one away from *nibbāna*.

Wholesome actions have the opposite qualities. Of these factors:

- realist ethics focuses simply on the body and speech aspects of 3.
- utilitarianism focuses on 6, perhaps 7, and the body and speech aspects of 3.
- Kantian ethics, with its emphasis on the good will, universalisability, and duty, focuses on 4, 8, 10, 3, and perhaps 5.
- Aristotelian virtue ethics focuses on 12, an analogy to 13, 2 and perhaps 3. A further virtue aspect of Buddhist ethics is that in seeking to do acts rooted in non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion, one is cultivating virtues that have a strong affinity with the destruction of greed/attachment, hatred and delusion that is the goal of the Buddhist path.

None of these particularly focuses on 1, 9, 11, or the *nibbāna* aspect of 13, all of which except 11 connect to wisdom and skilfulness.

Buddhist ethics encompasses all these aspects. A beginner may focus on 11, the particularly *puñña* aspects, but more serious practitioners focus on the rest, especially 1 and 13. Of course with a number of factors being involved, one may ask whether they can conflict, necessitating a choice of one or more factors over others. For example, can an injurious action (6) originate in a well intentioned action of wholesome volition (the opposite of 4)? I would say that, taking into account aspect 7, a genuinely wholesome volition may result in harm to others or oneself if it is based on incorrect factual information or incorrect perception of the situation. Nevertheless, when insufficient care has been taken to ascertain the facts of the situation, this may bring in culpable carelessness, so as to make the action unwholesome to some extent. There may, though, be cases where the agent of a harmful action thinks of the action as wholesome and beneficial, but where delusion, also leading to wrong view, is one of the action's roots, rendering it unwholesome. For example, Hitler may have genuinely thought his actions were right. One might also think that a beneficial result can come from an action of unwholesome volition, for example when a starving person is fed by killing and cooking an animal for him. But here, both benefit and harm are actually the result, and the full



action involves both wholesome (to feed a hungry person) and unwholesome (to kill) volitions.

How a person deals with potential conflicts of moral criteria may depend on where they are on the path, for example a lie (cf. 3) may help prevent harm to another (6), but strengthen an unwholesome tendency (12) and even have some minor bad karmic results (11); yet with wise attention (1), one may see a way to both avoid lying, and preventing harm to the person. Of course the Mahāyāna is more open to “skilful means” precept breaking, out of compassion. Moreover, potential conflict between certain factors may be skilfully dealt with by bringing in another factor, for example someone’s wish to ordain, or an act of great generosity, *may* bring suffering to some relatives (cf. 6), but help generate good character traits (12) and facilitate a movement towards *nibbāna* (13); moreover the harm may be counteracted by sharing *puñña* with the relative (cf. 11), and the strengthened good character traits, perhaps including wisdom, will also bring benefit to others in the future.

While Keown (1992) has argued that a virtue ethic model is the best fit for early Buddhist ethic, this study shows that while there *is* a virtue-ethics dimension to such ethics, a utilitarian concern for directly caused suffering and happiness, and a Kantian concern for a good will, are also present. There are also plenty of specific ethical rules, which accords with a kind of realist ethics. These aspects are integrated into one system, and as Velez de Cea says, “Early Buddhist ethics is *sui generis*, that is, one of a kind” (2004: 138).

The key content of *akusala* actions are specified actions that directly (actions of body and speech) or indirectly (mental actions) bring pain and affliction to others, oneself, or both, and the greed/attachment, hatred and delusion that are the motivating or orientating roots of these. *Kusala* states are actions which avoid these actions and roots, and are the opposite of them; moreover, they include the meditative states involved in the development of the Eightfold Path, which go further than, but still depend on, ethics *per se*. *Kusala* states come from wise skill and contribute to wise skill, and are both morally and spiritually wholesome: morally faultless, nourishing further wholesome states, healthily without greed, hatred or

delusion, and contributing to the end of these. They bring no harm to anyone, and lead to happiness for the agent of them.

## Literature

### Primary sources

The above translations are the author's own, though they are generally close to those listed below.

- AN *Aṅguttara-Nikāya*: 1961, eds. R. Morris and A.K. Warder; 1888, ed. R. Morris; 1897, 1899, 1900, ed. E. Hardy.
- Asl *Atthasālinī*: 1897, ed. E. Müller.
- Dhs *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*: 1885, ed. E. Müller.
- Dhp *Dhammapada*: 1994, eds O. von Hinüber and K.R. Norman.
- DN *Dīgha-Nikāya*: 1890, 1903, ed. T.W. Rhys Davids and J.E. Carpenter; 1911, ed. J.E. Carpenter.
- DN-a *Dīgha-Nikāya-Aṭṭhakathā = Sumanāgalavilāsini*: 1929, eds T.W. Rhys Davids and J.E. Carpenter; 1931, 1932, ed. W. Stede.
- It *Itivuttaka*: 1889, ed. E. Windisch.
- Jat *Jātaka with Commentary*: 1877–96, ed. E. Fausboll.
- MN *Majjhima-Nikāya*: 1888, ed. V. Treckner; 1898, 1899, ed. R. Chalmers.
- SN *Saṃyutta-Nikāya*: 1884–1898, ed. M.L. Freer.
- Sn *Suttanipāta*: 1913, eds D. Andersen and H. Smith.
- Vin *Vinaya Piṭaka*: 1879–1883, ed. H. Oldenberg.
- Vibh *Vibhaṅga*: 1904, ed. C.A.F. Rhys Davids.
- Vism *Visuddhimagga*: 1920, 1921, ed. C.A.F. Rhys Davids.

### Secondary sources

- Adam, M. T., 2005, "Groundwork for a Metaphysic of Buddhist Morals: a New Analysis of *puñña* and *kusala*, in the Light of *sukka*," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, Vol. 12: 62–85; <http://www.buddhistethics.org/12/adam-article.pdf>. Last visited 06-07-2011.
- Anālayo, 2007, "What the Buddha Would Not Do, According to the *Bāhitika-sutta* and its *Madhyama-āgama* Parallel," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, Vol. 14: 153–179; <http://www.buddhistethics.org/14/anaalayo-article.pdf>. Last visited 06-07-2011.

- Cone, M., 2001, *A Dictionary of Pāli, Part I, a–kh*, Oxford, The Pali Text Society.
- Cousins, L. S., 1996, “Good or Skilful? Kusala in Canon and Commentary,” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, Vol. 3: 136–164; <http://www.buddhistethics.org/3/cousins1.pdf>.
- Harvey, P., 1999, “Vinaya Principles for Assigning Degrees of Culpability,” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, Vol. 6: 271–291; <http://jbe.gold.ac.uk/6/harvey991.pdf>. Last visited 06-07-2011.
- Harvey, P., 2000, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics: Foundations, Values and Issues*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Harvey, P., 2011, “The Nature of the Eight-factored Ariya, Lokuttara Magga in the Suttas Compared to the Pali Commentarial Idea of it as Momentary,” *Religions of South Asia*, Vol. 5 – forthcoming.
- Keown, D., 1992, *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*, London, Macmillan.
- Velez de Cea, A., 2004, “The Criteria of Goodness in the Pāli Nikāyas and the Nature of Buddhist Ethics,” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, Vol. 11: 123–142; <http://www.buddhistethics.org/11/vele0401.pdf>. Last visited 06-07-2011.



# JIABS

Journal of the International  
Association of Buddhist Studies



Volume 33 Number 1–2 2010 (2011)

The *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* (ISSN 0193-600XX) is the organ of the International Association of Buddhist Studies, Inc. As a peer-reviewed journal, it welcomes scholarly contributions pertaining to all facets of Buddhist Studies. *JIABS* is published twice yearly.

As announced at the XVIth IABS Congress in Taiwan, the *JIABS* is now available online in open access at <http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/ojs/index.php/jiabs/index>. Articles become available online for free 60 months after their appearance in print. Current articles are not accessible online. Subscribers can choose between receiving new issues in print or as PDF. We are kindly requesting all authors that could be opposed to this decision to inform the Editors by June 2012.

Manuscripts should preferably be submitted as e-mail attachments to: [editors@iabsinfo.net](mailto:editors@iabsinfo.net) as one single file, complete with footnotes and references, in two different formats: in PDF-format, and in Rich-Text-Format (RTF) or Open-Document-Format (created e.g. by Open Office).

Address books for review to:  
*JIABS* Editors, Institut für Kultur- und Geistesgeschichte Asiens, Apostelgasse 23, A-1030 Wien, AUSTRIA

Address subscription orders and dues, changes of address, and business correspondence (including advertising orders) to:

Dr Jérôme Ducor, IABS Treasurer  
Dept of Oriental Languages and Cultures  
Anthropole  
University of Lausanne  
CH-1015 Lausanne, Switzerland  
email: [iabs.treasurer@unil.ch](mailto:iabs.treasurer@unil.ch)  
Web: <http://www.iabsinfo.net>  
Fax: +41 21 692 29 35

Subscriptions to *JIABS* are USD 55 per year for individuals and USD 90 per year for libraries and other institutions. For informations on membership in IABS, see back cover.

## EDITORIAL BOARD

KELLNER Birgit  
KRASSER Helmut  
Joint Editors

BUSWELL Robert  
CHEN Jinhua  
COLLINS Steven  
COX Collet  
GÓMEZ Luis O.  
HARRISON Paul  
VON HINÜBER Oskar  
JACKSON Roger  
JAINI Padmanabh S.  
KATSURA Shōryū  
KUO Li-ying  
LOPEZ, Jr. Donald S.  
MACDONALD Alexander  
SCHERRER-SCHAUB Cristina  
SEYFORT RUEGG David  
SHARF Robert  
STEINKELLNER Ernst  
TILLEMANS Tom

Cover: Cristina Scherrer-Schaub  
Font: "Gandhari Unicode"  
designed by Andrew Glass (<http://andrewglass.org/fonts.php>)

© Copyright 2011 by the  
International Association of  
Buddhist Studies, Inc.

Print: Ferdinand Berger & Söhne  
GesmbH, A-3580 Horn

# JIABS

Journal of the International  
Association of Buddhist Studies

Volume 33 Number 1–2 2010 (2011)

## Articles

William CHU

*The timing of Yogācāra resurgence in the Ming dynasty  
(1368–1643)* . . . . . 5

Vincent ELTSCHINGER

*Ignorance, epistemology and soteriology – Part II* . . . . . 27

Richard F. NANCE

*Tall tales, tathāgatas, and truth – On the “privileged lie” in  
Indian Buddhist literature.* . . . . . 75

Alexander WYNNE

*The ātman and its negation – A conceptual and chronologi-  
cal analysis of early Buddhist thought* . . . . . 103

## Indian Buddhist metaethics

Contributions to a panel at the XV<sup>th</sup> Congress of the International  
Association of Buddhist Studies, Atlanta, 23–28 June 2008

Guest editor: Martin T. Adam

Peter HARVEY

*An analysis of factors related to the kusala/akusala quality  
of actions in the Pāli tradition* . . . . . 175

Abraham VÉLEZ DE CEA

*Value pluralism in early Buddhist ethics* . . . . . 211

Martin T. ADAM

*No self, no free will, no problem – Implications of the Anatta-  
lakkhaṇa Sutta for a perennial philosophical issue* . . . . . 239

Bronwyn FINNIGAN

*Buddhist metaethics* . . . . . 267

Stephen JENKINS

*On the auspiciousness of compassionate violence* . . . . . 299

Jay L. GARFIELD

*What is it like to be a bodhisattva? Moral phenomenology in  
Śāntideva's Bodhicaryāvatāra* . . . . . 333

Tom J. F. TILLEMANS

*Madhyamaka Buddhist ethics* . . . . . 359



## **Miracles and superhuman powers in South and Southeast Asian Buddhist traditions**

Contributions to a panel at the XV<sup>th</sup> Congress of the International  
Association of Buddhist Studies, Atlanta, 23–28 June 2008

Guest editor: David V. Fiordalis

David V. FIORDALIS

*Miracles in Indian Buddhist narratives and doctrine* . . . . . 381

Bradley S. CLOUGH

*The higher knowledges in the Pāli Nikāyas and Vinaya.* . . . . . 409

Kristin SCHEIBLE

*Priming the lamp of dhamma – The Buddha’s miracles in the  
Pāli Mahāvamsa* . . . . . 435

Patrick PRANKE

*On saints and wizards – Ideals of human perfection and  
power in contemporary Burmese Buddhism* . . . . . 453

Rachelle M. SCOTT

*Buddhism, miraculous powers, and gender – Rethinking the  
stories of Theravāda nuns.* . . . . . 489

Luis O. GÓMEZ

*On Buddhist wonders and wonder-working.* . . . . . 513

•

*Notes on the contributors* . . . . . 555