

ISSA Proceedings 2006 - Classes Of Moral Agent And The Art Of Persuasion In The Pali Nikayas

☒ Not doing any evil (paapa)
Cultivating what is good (kusala)
Purifying the mind
This the teaching of the Buddhas
(*Dhammapada* 183)

Introduction

This paper is divided into two parts. The first part is a philosophical argument, based upon Buddhist principles, about the nature of early Buddhist moral thinking. I do not pretend that the arguments in this part of the paper were ever given by, or even occurred to, the Buddha or any Buddhist thinker. Rather, what I hope to show is that the arguments presented here are implicit in the teachings of the Pali Canon and serve to clarify the underlying principles in terms of which early Buddhists appear to have thought. Although my formulation is new, most of the points I make have made been before. I view this work as one of connecting the dots. I don't believe my arguments would strike thinkers of the Theravada tradition as particularly controversial, but I do hope that they would be regarded as useful clarification. The second part of this paper concerns the extent to which the theoretical conclusions established in the first part are supported by solid textual evidence. One might well ask whether the shapes I discern are actually present, or are rather more like constellations in the night sky. This must always be a concern.

In the end, the arguments presented here will lead us to address the question of audience in the Pali Suttas asking whether it is possible to identify different modes of moral exhortation corresponding to different classes of moral agent. By "classes of moral agent" I have in mind the fundamental threefold distinction of ordinary person, noble disciple, and the liberated being. By "modes of moral exhortation" I mean both the vocabulary and the forms of persuasion employed in enjoining individuals to act in manner considered "good" and praiseworthy by the tradition. Thus the question concerns moral rhetoric in Buddhism.

That there are distinctions to be made among the various audiences entertained

by the Buddha and his immediate circle is clear enough. One has only to think of the division between bhikkhus and bhikkhunis on the one hand and members of the laity on the other, as well as the many wanderers and ascetics who the Buddha engages in dialogue.

But in this paper we are particularly concerned with the classification of persons according to their proximity to nirvaa.na. As is well known, aside from the Tathaagata himself, there are the three basic classes of person listed at numerous points in the Pali Canon. There is, first of all, the ordinary person (puthujjana), one who has not experienced the life-transforming insight into selflessness that alone guarantees liberation. Secondly, there is the noble disciple (sekha), who has had this experience – this first intimation of nirvaa.na, and who is, as a consequence assured of final liberation in a maximum of seven lives. He is one who has entered the supramundane path. **[i]** Finally there is the liberated being (arahat), who has not only eliminated the wrong view of “self” but also entirely eradicated even the subtlest traces of the inclinations towards craving and conceit to which a lingering sense of self may be attached, and upon the basis of which rebirth occurs. **[ii]** It is my view that to properly understand Buddhist moral thinking, and therefore Buddhist moral discourse, moral conduct (siila) in early Buddhism must be analyzed in relation to these different classes of person. Why?

The prima facie response is that just as persons can be distinguished on the basis of their proximity to nirvaa.na, spiritual purity and insight, so too there must be theoretical differences in connection with their inner moral lives. If their subjective worlds differ, it is only natural that their respective experiences of moral conduct will also differ. The central idea, then, is that differences in spiritual development affect the phenomenology, and therefore the correct description, of the moral conduct associated with each kind of agent. Although this suggestion seems reasonable, it requires further justification.

Part 1: Theoretical considerations

In an earlier paper (Adam 2005) I have gone some way towards providing such a justification in the context of an ongoing debate in the field of Buddhist ethics (Keown 1992, Harvey 2000, Velez de Cea 2004). The discussion concerns the language of “goodness” employed in the Pali Canon. There exist two distinct yet related vocabularies used in describing good action, namely, those of merit (puñña) and wholesomeness (kusala). Meritorious actions are actions that cause

pleasant, enjoyable future experiences; in the Indian worldview they are particularly associated with favorable rebirths in sa.msaara. Wholesome actions, on the other hand, are characterized by naturally positive, healthy qualities (dhammas) conducive to the attainment of nirvaa.na. Hence kusala is also translated as “skilful” – such conduct arises from wisdom and leads to awakening. Indeed, the Buddha himself — the very embodiment of skill — is sometimes characterized as possessing kusala qualities:

“The Tathaagata. . . has abandoned all unwholesome states (akusaladhamma) and is possessed of states that are wholesome (kusala)” **[iii]**

Because of the association of the term kusala with awakening and nirvaa.na, such actions have been called “nirvanic” by some scholars working in the field of Buddhist ethics (Keown 1992).

Now various analyses have been given of the relationship obtaining between kusala and puñña, but none have proven very satisfactory. Clearly there is a conceptual tension here: on the one hand we have a term for “good” whose principal association is with the result of favorable rebirths in sa.msaara; on the other we have a term for “good” associated with the result which is the end of rebirths, nirvaa.na. On the surface then, the two terms seem to be diametrically opposed.

This twin ethical structure has been the topic of anthropological research in Buddhist societies. Winston L. King (1964: 89-90) appears to have been among the first to clearly articulate this notion of a radical split between two parallel value systems in Buddhist societies – one lay, one monastic. **[iv]** Spiro (1971) followed suit – explicitly connecting the ontological division between sa.msaara and nirvaa.na to two distinct value systems (66-70). Although Spiro grounds many of his arguments on empirical observations of actual behavior in the social context, he also identifies the discourses of kusala and puñña as the terminological basis for this theoretical division (Spiro 97-98). I will have more to say about the so-called King-Spiro hypothesis towards the close of this paper.

From a logical point of view the relationship between these two terms could take one of five forms, which are easily depicted with Venn diagrams.

1. Puñña and kusala could each refer to entirely different sets of phenomena.
2. Puñña and kusala could refer to exactly the same set of phenomena.
3. Puñña could be a subset of kusala.
4. Kusala could be a subset of puñña.
- 5 While sharing some common members, both kusala and puñña could each

encompass some members not included in the other.

So how do we decide?

The first logical consideration that appears germane is the fact that puñña and kusala are both positive moral terms and each has its negative opposite:

- A. puñña and apuñña (paapa): meritorious and detrimental (merit and demerit)
- B. kusala and akusala: wholesome and unwholesome (the skillful and unskillful)

In order to clarify the relationship between these two pairs of antonyms it is helpful to introduce a third, neutral pair, which can serve as a kind of heuristic device. In fact this tool was first introduced by the Buddha himself in order to explain the nature of action in general; it is, therefore, highly relevant to any attempt at framing a theory of Buddhist ethics in Buddhist rather than western philosophical terms.

C. sukka and ka.nha: bright and dark (white and black, positive and negative, pure and impure, good and evil)

In the Kukkuravatika Sutta the Buddha describes human action as divisible into four logical categories based on this pair **[v]**. Actions may be:

- (1) dark with dark result;
- (2) bright with bright result;
- (3) both dark and bright and with dark and bright result;
- (4) neither dark nor bright, neither dark nor bright in result, the action that leads to the destruction of actions.

How does this schema relate to Pairs A and B?

Initially, the first three of these four categories seem to correspond to the “samsaric” pair, A: puñña and apuñña. This seems to fit the context: the Kukkuravatika Sutta is the Buddha’s reply to two ascetics concerned with their fate in the afterlife. (One has chosen to undertake a practice of imitating the behavior of a dog, the other is copying the conduct of an ox). The fourth category, on the other hand, seems to be referring to actions that lead to the “destruction of actions” or nirvaa.na, and hence to be especially linked to the term kusala of Pair B.

Thus for categories 1 through 3: dark actions cause dark, unpleasant results in one’s future experience; bright actions produce bright, pleasant results in one’s future experience. Those with a mixed nature lead to a mixed result. **[vi]** Thus:

Category 1 is apuñña

Category 2 is puñña

Category 3 is both puñña and apuñña

If we follow this analysis and exclusively identify categories 1 through 3 with Pair A, is it possible to maintain that Category 4 exclusively refers to kusala actions? Its description as action that leads to “the destruction of actions” does seem to be a clear allusion to the attainment of nirvaana. On this basis, the suggestion seems plausible.

On second glance, however, it does not appear satisfactory. For on this reading the term akusala seems to lack a referent. It might be suggested that that Categories 1-3 are all akusala, but this leads to the absurdity, in Buddhist terms, that meritorious actions (Category 2) are unwholesome. Obviously we need to back up in our analysis; somewhere we have gone astray.

Clearly there is something to the intuition that would associate the first three categories with Pair A. Given their clear formulation in terms of precedent and matching consequence it seems natural that they be associated with the notion of merit, and more generally, karma. Perhaps the problem lies in suggesting that that they do so exclusively. Is it possible that these three categories also refer to Pair B? This would resolve the issue of finding a referent for the term akusala (i.e. Category 1). Here I will argue that this is in fact the case, framing my argument in terms of an ongoing debate in the field of Buddhist ethics.

A number of scholars have convincingly argued that early Buddhism does not teach a form of consequentialism (e.g. Harvey 49) – this in spite of the regular appeal made to the consideration of consequences in assessing good and bad conduct. I think this is correct: the Buddha appears to have taught that morally positive actions (i.e. those that are good or right, etc) have positive results because they are positive; they are not considered positive because they have positive results. Morally negative actions have negative results because they are negative; they are not considered “negative” because that they have negative results.

Or in the terms of the Kukkuravattika Sutta, bright actions have bright experiential results because they are bright; they are not considered “bright” simply because they have bright experiential results. Dark actions have dark results in experience because they are dark; they are not considered “dark” in virtue of the fact that they have dark experiential results.

Actions have natures. Darkness and brightness are qualities of actions in and of

themselves.

If this is so, it leads to the inevitable question as to what kind of quality is being referred to. In their most abstract sense sukka and ka.nha can be seen as mutually exclusive “positive” and “negative” poles of value. In the specific realm of moral discourse they thus refer to the “good” and the “bad,” or even the “pure” and the “impure.” But in point of fact, these terms are first and foremost “colour” terms related to the sense of sight: “bright and dark” or “white and black.” Thus to label an action sukka or ka.nha is not simply to indicate its moral quality, it is to indicate the epistemic quality of the action in relation to the agent’s mind vis-à-vis spiritual vision and Awakening. In fact, it is the underlying state of mind characterizing one’s intention that is the key factor determining the brightness or darkness of an action. Afflictive, unwholesome mental formations (i.e. those conditioned by greed, hatred, and delusion) are dark. They block insight. Wholesome mental formations (those based on generosity, love, and wisdom) are bright. They do not block insight.**[vii]**

In this context we need to recall that in Buddhist thinking the concept of “action” is understood in terms of the underlying volition or mental intention (cetanaa) of the agent. In one of the more commonly quoted passages of the Pali Canon (AN iii 415), the Buddha states: “It is intention, O Monks, that I call action; having formed the intention one performs acts by body, speech and mind.” Thus every action, whether it be of body, speech or mind is defined in terms of its underlying intentional state.

With these considerations in mind Pair C can be seen as simultaneously referring to two aspects of a single underlying mental state, namely, the moral and the epistemic. These two aspects correspond to pairs A and B. A and B refer to exactly the same extensional set, but with diametrically opposed intensions, namely, the samsaric and the nirvanic. Pair A alludes to the experiential results of the action in sa.msara. Pair B signifies the quality of the action with respect to insight and the possibility of nirvaa.na. Pair C brings sa.msara and nirvaa.na together, simultaneously indicating the moral quality and the epistemic character of the action. **[viii]** The apparent conceptual gulf between the discourses of puñña and kusala is thereby eliminated. This analysis provides a strong theoretical basis for questioning the King-Spiro hypothesis. For the first three categories of action at least, these two terms turn out to be co-extensional. All kusala action is puñña and vice versa. The concept of sukka provides the missing link.

In spite of this felicitous result, we have not yet addressed the riddle of the fourth category. Thus far we have only indicated that as a description of the path leading to nirvaa.na, it seems to be especially connected to the term kusala. Indeed, the language of kusala does predominate in accounts of the moral practices that lead to the final goal. Indeed the standard account of the path factor of right effort (sammaa-vaayaama) is that it is fourfold: the cultivation of wholesome mental states not present in the mind, the maintenance of wholesome states already present, the discouragement of unwholesome states present, and the resolution to keep in abeyance unwholesome states that are not present. Here, for example, is a brief description of a noble disciple who is practicing correctly: “[H]e is energetic in abandoning unwholesome states and in undertaking wholesome states; he is steadfast, firm in striving, not remiss in developing wholesome states.” (MN 53 i 357)

This passage is taken from the Sekha Sutta a discourse specifically devoted to the portrayal of the disciple in higher training (sekha), the practitioner who is bound for nirvaa.na. It is clear that the term kusala is deeply implicated in the theoretical understanding of this particular class of spiritual actor. If we wish to maintain that there is also a special association between the term kusala and Category 4 action, then this would suggest that this fourth category is intended as a description of the conduct of the sekha. The action of a normal person (puthujjana) clearly does not fit the description of the fourth category, for it does not lead to “the destruction of actions”.

As far as other possible agents for Category 4 actions go, at the other end of the spiritual spectrum is the Arahant. But he too would appear to be ruled out. For, by definition, an Arahant is one who has already achieved the destruction of actions. His conduct has no karmic effects whatsoever; he will not be reborn.

Thus it seems reasonable to suggest that the agent of Category 4 actions be someone in an intermediate position, a person who has entered the Noble Eightfold Path, who has had an initial intimation of the freedom of nirvaa.na, but who has not yet achieved it. The sekha fits that bill. This is indeed how the tradition itself understands the situation (Ñānamoli and Bodhi 1258, Payutto 76). The noble disciple’s action is kusala.

But because our earlier analysis led us to conclude that kusala and puñña are coextensive terms in the realm of action, Category 2 actions, which are puñña and belong to the ordinary person, must also be kusala. This suggests that there must be two usages of kusala as an adjective describing actions:

Wholesome actions of Ordinary persons: bright and not dark (Category 2)

Wholesome actions of Noble Disciples: not bright and not dark (Category 4)

Actions of both classes of agent are kusala, but only those of the ordinary person are “bright” (sukka).

Given this understanding it becomes possible and necessary to ask whether the Category 4 actions of the sekha are also puñña. The fact that they are actions (karma) suggests as much. Here I will argue that the actions of the noble disciple are in fact puñña, but in a manner that is rather different than those of the ordinary person.

To understand the peculiar status of the noble disciple’s action qua puñña we can make use of a distinction recently suggested by Abraham Velez de Cea — between what he calls the “instrumental” and “teleological”:

By instrumental actions I mean actions leading to favorable conditions for cultivating nirvanic virtues and by teleological I mean actions actually displaying nirvanic virtues or virtues characteristic of the Buddhist ideal of sainthood. (2004:128)

Now the notion that among actions there exists some such theoretical distinction to be made relative to the final goal of nirvaana is not original to Velez de Cea. We find a similar idea in the writing of King:

[T]here are some values, states of consciousness, and related modes of conduct that can be called intrinsically good because they themselves partake of the nature of Nibbana. Naturally such consciousness and conduct characterize the higher ranges of saintly attainment. But there are also what we may call instrumental and analogical goods, or those deeds and attitudes that lead to Nibbana, or are more like Nibbana than their opposites. (1964: 89)

Although these two writers differ on practically everything else, they nevertheless seem to be agreed that Buddhist ethical thinking rests upon a distinction between two basic kinds of actions, one which is merely instrumental to the attainment of the final goal and the other of which displays or “participates in” this goal. **[ix]** I agree that some such distinction should be made. But where I differ from these writers is in their assertion that the instrumental and the non-instrumental refer to two distinct sets of actions. All action is both teleological and instrumental.

The noble disciple’s good actions are teleologically nirvanic (kusala), but they are also correctly viewed as instrumentally samsaric (puñña). The notion of “instrumentality” is here being understood as referring to the unintended effects

of the action. Category 4 actions participate in nirvaa.na; but unless the noble disciple reaches this goal he or she will be reborn in sa.msara. Such actions will have had the inevitable effect of leading to a higher rebirth, even though this result will have been gained inadvertently. This beneficial result for the person did not inform his or her intention.

The description of the good actions of the ordinary person displays an interesting symmetry. These actions have the unintended effect of leading the agent closer to nirvaa.na. (See King 54-59). They are, therefore, only instrumentally nirvanic (kusala). They are not informed by the final goal, but undertaken for the projected benefit of oneself. The agent's actions therefore lead only to pleasant future experiences, such as a better rebirth. It is precisely a higher rebirth that many ordinary Buddhist lay-people consciously aspire towards. And such they will attain through the performance of their bright category 2 good deeds. There is directionality inherent in the natural order of things. We can therefore speak of such actions as teleologically samsaric (puñña).

The category 4 actions of the noble disciple are both kusala and puñña, but they are also neither bright nor dark. This is to say that while they are not sukka, but also not not sukka (i.e. not ka.nha). The category 2 actions of the ordinary person, on the other hand are sukka and not not sukka (i.e. not ka.nha).

In general then we can conclude that kusala and puñña action is action that is not dark. This account allows us to see the deeper logical structure of Buddhist moral thinking. For disciples in higher training the association between kusala and puñña on the one hand, and sukka on the other, breaks down.

As long as an action is not dark it is both wholesome and meritorious. If it is not dark and is bright then it is instrumentally wholesome (and teleologically meritorious: it has the effect of situating one in a better circumstance to attain nirvaa.na, but this was not the intention). It belongs to the ordinary person. If it is not dark and not bright then it is teleologically wholesome (and instrumentally meritorious: it has positive karmic effects, but these were not intended). Such actions belong to the noble disciple.

The key determinant of an action's being either Category 2 or 4 is the awareness that marks the intention of the agent. Ordinary persons are motivated by a concern informed by the delusion of self; one's moral conduct is motivated by the desire to benefit oneself (e.g., with a higher rebirth, the prospect of pleasure, etc.). The agent's mentality is samsaric.

But upon entering the Noble Eightfold Path, the agent's actions are marked by nirvaa.na; the efforts made are undertaken in the context of an underlying recognition of this final goal. The deluded view of "self" has been penetrated by certain insight, even if the other unwholesome roots have not been entirely eradicated. Selfless, altruistic conduct becomes possible. The agent's mentality is nirvanic.

What does this mean in concrete terms? The experiential quality of moral action of the two classes of agent-subject is entirely different. They display radically different intentional structures in relation to the twin poles of self and selflessness, or, put another way, sa.msaara and nirvaa.na. For a person with a samsaric orientation actions are positively and negatively charged in experience, they are undertaken with positive or negative results for oneself in mind, i.e. with attachment. For a person with a nirvanic orientation actions are neither positively nor negatively charged in experience. They are emptied of charge in virtue of the absence of a view of self in which to inhere. They are not undertaken or experienced in terms of the results for oneself. The agent feels inevitably drawn towards nirvaa.na, but, paradoxically, not motivated by the goal of attaining it for him or herself. While her actions continue to have unintended effects on the psychophysical organism in sa.msaara, in terms of motive they are unattached.

To sum up: The description of a "good" or "moral" action in early Buddhist thought depends on the agent's spiritual status. We can distinguish two classes of agent and the descriptions of their respective actions:

(1) Ordinary persons (puthujjana): good action is bright, teleologically meritorious and instrumentally wholesome; it is principally describable as puñña, and secondarily as kusala.

(2) Disciples in higher training (sekha): a good action is neither bright nor dark, teleologically kusala and instrumentally puñña; it is accurately described as principally kusala, and secondarily puñña.

If we assume that it is more common for members of the monastic community to have had the experience of transformative insight than it is for members of the laity, then this would allow the same distinction to be drawn along social lines, as opposed to phenomenological and soteriological ones. In so far as Buddhist societies accept this line of thinking, in certain instances the account we have outlined here could be reflected in the social sphere. It could thus lend support to a revised King-Spiro hypothesis. Some Buddhist societies may indeed embody the general notion that there exists two distinct levels of morality, one worldly and

one other-worldly (Spiro 68) — and that these two are associated with the laity and monastics respectively. While the ordinary person's conduct is worldly, the conduct of the monastic/noble disciple appears to be both worldly and other worldly at the same time. It occurs in the world, but is not of it, as it were.

In the next section we will investigate the degree to which this account finds support in the scriptures. Before turning our attention in this it would be prudent to carefully distinguish this descriptive account, which is based on a phenomenological distinction, from any account that would suggest that different moral prescriptions apply to different categories of agent. This is an entirely different claim – one that will not be investigated here.

Part 2

How might we test the validity of this hypothesis by analyzing the word-usages and rhetoric the Pali Canon? Here we outline three questions for future investigation:

- 1) Is there a predominance of kusala language in theoretical descriptions of the noble disciple, and along with this a corresponding predominance of the language of puñña in descriptions of the ordinary person?
- 2) Is there a tendency for the Buddha to adopt these different vocabularies in addressing these different kinds of agent?
- 3) Finally, beyond questions of vocabulary, are different forms of moral exhortation used by the Buddha in addressing these different classes of audience?

1. Let us begin with vocabulary. Is this understanding I have outlined corroborated by the use of different moral vocabularies in the discourses themselves? Do the texts tend to prefer the language of kusala in describing the good action of noble disciples? Do they employ the language of puñña in describing the action of ordinary persons?

Initial investigations suggest that this appears to be the case for the noble disciple. Pair B appears to be used most commonly. We have already seen one instance of this above, in the Sekha Sutta. Pair A tends not to be commonly used in describing the virtuous conduct of the noble disciple.

As for the ordinary person, our conclusion has to be somewhat more tentative. It is clear that Pair A is used in describing the virtuous conduct of members of the laity. In most cases we can assume that the individuals discussed are meant to be viewed as ordinary persons (e.g. MN i 371). However, Pair B also appears to be commonly used in describing the good conduct of lay people.

2. The vocabulary employed in the Buddha's addresses to these different classes of agent could vary as well.

This suggestion is also difficult to conclusively support. The reason for this is clear. The Buddha's audiences in different discourses are often only specified in terms that do not map neatly onto the division of different classes of agent. Bhikkhus can be ordinary persons (MN i 34). And lay-people can be sekhas (MN ii 262). Although we can often learn the tradition's own understanding of the spiritual status of a particular audience on the basis of a commentary, this isn't always possible. And indeed there is good reason for this. Almost certainly, the Buddha's audiences were often a mixed bag. On any particular occasion a group uniformly addressed "Bhikkhus" could be composed of everyone from newly ordained novices right up to full-fledged arahats. Nor is the spiritual status of the lay-people addressed always clear. To complicate matters further, it is often the case that both lay-people and bhikkhus are in attendance.

In addition, we often see the Buddha in dialogue with one of a variety of samanas such as Niganthas and Ajivakas. The spiritual insight of these individuals is not uniform — some are almost arahats (MN i 489-497), others (such as Ajjivakas) are regarded as spiritually inferior to many lay-people (MN i 483). Because non-bhikkhus can be sekhas, and bhikkhus can be puthujjanas, it becomes difficult to corroborate the hypothesis that the language of puñña tends to be used in addressing the ordinary person while that of kusala is more closely associated with his addresses to noble disciples. In point of fact, we commonly find the language of puñña used in the Buddha's addresses to bhikkhus (e.g. MN i 133). And, often enough, we find the language of kusala used in addresses to non-bhikkhus, including lay-people (MN i 402).

Now we may want to suggest that in these cases the Buddha was addressing spiritually advanced lay-people and non-spiritually advanced bhikkhus, as the case may be. But this isn't always clear. To assert it would be to assume that which we are trying to determine. Our investigation therefore remains inconclusive on this point.

3. A further suggestion would be that the Buddha adopted different forms of moral exhortation in addressing different classes of agent. For example, it might be thought that the Buddha would tend to employ the carrot and stick approach of reward and punishment in lives to come when exhorting the ordinary person to act virtuously, while appealing to the self-evident wholesomeness of virtuous conduct when encouraging the disciple in higher training. Certain forms of

address would be more fitting for one who has had their basic orientation reversed by a glimpse of nirvaa.na. Presumably such a person would need less convincing and more encouraging. A worldly minded person on the other hand might need convincing through argument or through promises of reward and punishment in future lives.

But the same considerations just mentioned apply here. If anything the situation is even more vague. There are clear cases where bhikkhus are disciplined or advised with the carrot and stick approach, with considerations of heaven and hell (MN i 142; Also see MN 40, 45, 46). Are these individuals necessarily to be regarded as ordinary persons? In some cases they most certainly are not (e.g. MN 86).

At present the results are inconclusive. In general the texts are not inconsistent with the understanding outlined here. The theoretical grid presented in this paper can be used to as a framework for understanding the contents of a collection of texts that inevitably contains a large number of irresolvable ambiguities.

NOTES

[i] Throughout this paper I shall employ the Sanskrit “nirvaa.na” and “karma” in place of the Pali, nibbaana and kamma.

[ii] See Bodhi 1992, 14-15. Although I will not go into such details in this paper it should be noted that the term sekha is a general term covering seven out of eight categories of noble person (ariyapuggala) who have not yet reached the fruit of arahathood. This group includes those who have attained the path and the fruit of the stages of Stream-Enterer (sotaapanna), Once-Returner (sakadaagaamin), and Never-Returner (anaagaamin), as well as those who have attained the path but not the fruit of the stage of the arahat. Each of these stages is distinguished on the basis of the progressive elimination of different kinds of defilement. The eighth class of noble person, no longer a disciple, is the individual who has attained the fruit of arahathood – one who has completely purified his or her mind. Such are termed asekha.

[iii] Sabbaakusaladhammapahiino... Tathaagato kusaladhamma samannaagato ti / (MN ii 116). Quoted in Keown (1992:118).

[iv] King’s research was centred in Burma, but he appears to regard his findings as applicable to Theravada societies in general. Spiro’s fieldwork was also in Burma, but his is a more nuanced account – providing for differences among Buddhist countries (see e.g. Spiro: 97).

[v] “O Pu.n.na, there are four kinds of action taught by me after realizing them directly myself. What are the four? There is, O Pu.n.na, dark action with dark result. There is, O Pu.n.na, bright action with bright result. There is, O Pu.n.na, action which is dark and bright, with dark and bright result. There is, O Pu.n.na, action which is neither dark nor bright, with neither dark nor bright result, action that leads to the destruction of actions.” Cattaar’ imani, pu.n.na, kammaani mayaa saya.m abhiñña sacchikatvaa paveditaani, katamaani cattaari: atthi, pu.n.na, kamma.m ka.nha.m ka.nhavipaaka.m; atthi, pu.n.na, kamma.m sukka.m sukkavipaaka.m; atthi, pu.n.na, kamma.m ka.nhasukka.m ka.nhasukkavipaaka.m; atthi, pu.n.na, kamma.m aka.nha.m asukka.m aka.nhaasukkavipaaka.m, kamma.m kammakkhayaaya sa.mvattati / (MN i 389)

[vi] The idea behind the third category is that we are beings of mixed motive: our intentions are a confusion of the positive and the negative. But there are conceptual problems here; strictly speaking, there can be no shades of grey. The description of a “single” action as “mixed” must be understood as indicating a rapid fluctuation in underlying motive (Harvey 2000:44).

[vii] The unwholesome consists in killing, taking what is not given, sensual misconduct, malicious speech, harsh speech, gossip, covetousness, ill-will, and wrong view. The wholesome is listed as the negation of the unwholesome (MN i 47).

[viii] In a previous paper (2005) I referred to the two value domains as the karmatic and the soteriological or nirvanic. Here, on the other hand, for pairs A and B I prefer samsaric and nirvanic respectively. The reason for this is threefold. First of all, the notion of merit is a soteriological notion, in the most general sense. Second, the terms kusala and akusala are in the Pali canon regularly applied as adjectives qualifying action (karma). Third, by employing the starkly opposed terminology of sa.msaara and nirvaa.na, greater logical clarity is achieved in analysis – and in terms originating within the Buddhist tradition itself.

[ix] Their label for the latter differs of course; for a variety of reasons, which I won’t argue here, I prefer Velez de Cea’s “teleological” over King’s “intrinsic”. The important point is the twofold structure. By ‘teleological’ I mean to convey the intentional aspect of the action. Another way of saying this would be to say that an action is teleological in that it is directed by the agent towards a goal. It has an aim. An action’s telos then, is that for the sake of which it is undertaken. By ‘instrumental’ I mean to convey the secondary, non-intended results and side-effects of the action; in some cases these may be known by the agent and indeed deliberately aimed for as subsidiary steps towards the attainment of the

overarching goal.

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