



The Role of *puñña* and *kusala* in the Dialectic of the Twofold Right
Vision and the Temporary Integration of Eternalism in the Path
Towards Spiritual Emancipation According to the Pāli *Nikāyas*
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THE ROLE OF *PUÑÑA* AND *KUSALA* IN THE DIALECTIC OF THE
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ETERNALISM IN THE PATH TOWARDS SPIRITUAL EMANCIPATION
ACCORDING TO THE PĀLI *NIKĀYAS**

Krishna Del Toso

...a motto adopted from one of Salvor Hardin's epigrams,
"Never let your sense of morals prevent you
from doing what is right!"
Isaac Asimov¹

Abstract: This article shows how in the Pāli *Nikāyas*, after having defined Eternalism and Nihilism as two opposed positions, Gotama makes a dialectical use of Eternalism as means to eliminate Nihilism, upheld to be the worst point of view because of its denial of kammic maturation in terms of *puñña* and *pāpa*. Assuming, from an Eternalist perspective, that actions have effects also beyond the present life, Gotama underlines the necessity of betting on the validity of moral kammic retribution. Having thus demonstrated the central ethical error of Nihilism, he subtly introduces peculiar Buddhist moral concepts (*kusala/akusala*) to purify the Eternalist vision from the doctrine of a real existing self (*attāvāda*) and from the *puñña/pāpa* dichotomy. We can summarize this dialectical course as follows: Nihilism is *pāpa/akusala* because it denies *kamman*, Eternalism is *puñña/not-akusala* because it upholds *kamman* from a non-Buddhist perspective, Buddhism is *kusala* because it admits the law of *kamman* not centered on a theory of a real existing self (*anattāvāda*).

* This paper is a re-elaboration of some secondary material collected in my Ph.D. thesis: *La questione della verità in Nāgārjuna e i suoi presupposti teorici nel buddhismo canonico* (discussed at the Dept. of Philosophy, University of Trieste, March 2006). All the Pāli texts are quoted from the Pali Text Society (PTS) editions: Roman numbers refer to the volume(s) and Arabic numbers refer to the page(s). Although, here, all translations from Pāli are mine, I'm nonetheless deeply indebted to PTS translations. I am grateful to Claudio Cicuzza for having read this paper before it was published and for his valuable suggestions, and to Myrna Neff for having revised the English text.

¹ Asimov (1960:113).

1. Introduction

The aim of this work is neither to present an exposition or an interpretation of Buddhist ethics in general,² or in particular,³ nor to discuss specifically the semantic (philosophical) value of terms as *kusala* and *puñña*.⁴ It is rather to analyze a precise case – with noteworthy theoretical implications – in which the terms *kusala* and *puñña* are dialectically utilized in connection with Nihilism (*ucchedavāda*) and Eternalism (*sassatavāda*), and therefore to develop some considerations concerning the Buddhist philosophical-ethical attitude towards the doctrines of «is» (*atthikavāda*) and «is not» (*natthikavāda*).

1.a. Preliminary considerations

It will be helpful for our discussion to remember preliminarily that:

(a) There is a distinction, already underlined by Premasiri (1976), and commonly accepted,⁵ between a non-Buddhist (or pre-Buddhist) moral range, to which the terms *puñña/pāpa* or *puñña/apuñña* («good/bad», «merit/demerit») refer,⁶ and a specifically Buddhist one, related to the terms *kusala/akusala*

² On this subject see the following studies: Keown (1992), Kalupahana (1995) – also Harvey (1996) – and Harvey (2000).

³ I'm convinced, following Hallisey (1996), that Buddhist ethics – and Buddhism in general – lends itself with difficulty to be understood according to the patterns of a single theory or of a single point of view.

⁴ See the discussion that involves Tedesco (1954), Premasiri (1976), Cousins (1996), Adam (2005); in addition: Filliozat (1980), Velez de Cea (2004). For a clear analysis of *kusala* and *akusala* in the perspective of canonical Buddhist ethics see, among other studies, Harvey (1995).

⁵ See, for instance, Ross Carter (1984), Cousins (1996:154-155).

⁶ Here I prefer the term «bad» instead of «evil» in the light of the considerations put forward by Piya Tan (2006:4-9) who summarizes the positions of Southwold – in Buddhism a «radical evil» does not exist, but an evil «in a weak ethical sense» (Southwold 1985:132) – and Boyd – to translate *pāpa* with «evil» could lead to involve «implicit Christian meanings which do not necessarily belong to the Buddhist understanding of *pāpa*» (Boyd 1975:73 footnote). Although the aim of this article is not to investigate the semantic extent of the terms that I examine here, nonetheless it can be of a certain interest to point out some general remarks on the etymology of (a) *puñña*, (b) *pāpa* and (c) *kusala*. (a) As far as *puñña* is concerned, Filliozat (1980:101) reminds us that: «Le mot *puṇya* [...] figure dans le *R̥gveda* [...] s'y trouve en parallèle avec *bhadra* et tous deux ont le même sens de «bonheur» ou de «bien». He continues (Ibid:102): «Dans la littérature classique *puṇya* a le sens général d'«avantageux», «bon», «convenable», «bénéfique», «purifiant», selon ce qu'il qualifie.» Cousins (1996:153) specifies that, according to the Indian grammatical tradition, *puṇya* is said to be derived from √*puṇ* («to act piously»), or from √*pū* («to cleanse», «to purify»), and adds that occasionally *puñña* is connected to √*pr* («to bring over», «to save», «to protect», etc.) Notwithstanding its original meaning (as adjective: «pleasant», etc.; as noun: «happiness», etc.), when he treats *puṇya* in the Buddhist perspective, Filliozat (1980:107) underlines that: «la traduction par «mérite» a souvent l'avantage d'exprimer une notion latente dans le texte original. [...] En tous

(«wholesome/unwholesome»), «wholesomeness/unwholesomeness»), «skilful/unskilful»). However, although a semantic overlap seems not to exist between *puñña* and *kusala*, nonetheless it appears to exist between *pāpa* and *akusala* as, for example, the definition of the two categories of *dhammas* shows macroscopically. If, indeed, from the Pāli *Nikāyas* emerges a full equation between the *pāpakā akusalā dhammā* (bad and unwholesome *dhammas*) and the *akusalā dhammā* (unwholesome *dhammas*),⁷ no mention is made of *puññakā kusalā dhammā* (good and wholesome *dhammas*), whereas the formula employed is always (and only) *kusalā dhammā* (wholesome *dhammas*). It may be concluded that although Buddhism does not distinguish so much between what is demeritorious (and/or unwholesome) from a general, non specifically

cas nombre de textes bouddhiques rappellent que *puṇya* est d’abord le “bien” mais lié au mérite des œuvres» (my italics). Filliozat’s «mérit des œuvres» is explained by Cousins (1996:153) with «(performing) *śubhakarman* [...]. Already in the pre-Buddhist period the word had developed in its usage and become part of the brahminical cultus, both sacrificial and more general. So what was earlier probably simply “good fortune” came to refer to whatever brings fortune and hence to the rites and practices intended to assure good fortune. The sacrifice is precisely an act intended to provide protection and happiness in the future.» (b) If, on the one side, *apunya* indicates something that is “désavantageux”, “mauvais”, “inconvenant”, “maléfique”» (Filliozat 1980:103), on the other side, *pāpa* «qu’on traduit fréquemment par ‘peché’, n’a pas ce sens à l’époque la plus ancienne où il désigne un mal dont la manifestation n’implique pas nécessairement la responsabilité de celui qu’il atteint, lequel peut n’être que son innocent victime» (Ibid:103-104). Filliozat’s words lead us to understand that, originally, *pāpa* – the radical theme of which is uncertain; perhaps it is connected to a verbal root $\sqrt{pā}$, «to rise against» (on $\sqrt{pā}$, among others, see Whitney 1997:96, s.v. 3 *pā*) – belonged to that group of concepts to which belong also ideas expressed by words like *enas* («offence», «misfortune», «calamity»), *āgas* («offence», «injury»), *drugdha* (noun: «offence», «misdeed»: adjective: «hurtful»), *pīḍā* («suffering», «injury», «damage»), etc., all of them referring to an external evil, that is to say, to an evil that befalls a person who is not necessarily the direct cause of it. It seems that *pāpa* assumed the meaning of moral demerit only with the development of the doctrine of moral retribution (Filliozat 1980:104). (c) As far as *kusala* is concerned, I refer here Cousins’s observations: he rejects Tedesco’s position – (Tedesco 1954:131) «Skt. *kuśala*- “skilful, welfare, etc.” transposed from **sukaḷa*- from *sukaṭa*-, is a Middle Indic development of three Old Indic words: Skt. *sūkrta*- “well made”, *sukṛtā*- n. “a good deed”, and *sukṛt*- “doing good” –, and correctly affirms that (Cousins 1996:137): «The original meaning of *kuśala* in the sense with which we are concerned would then be “intelligent.” Its sense in early Buddhist literature would be “produced by wisdom”» (see, also, Ibid:156, the four steps of the semantic development of *kuśala*). It has to be added that *kuśala*, as an adverb, can be rendered with «properly», «in due order». Thus, we can conclude that *kuśala/kusala*, before its use with reference to a moral behaviour, was undoubtedly employed to refer to a «mental factor», and probably the word derives from the ability (*kauśalya*) to handle the *kuśa* grass, whose leaves are known to be very keen (I am indebted, for this last suggestion, to a C. Cicuzza’s personal communication). We can also note that *kuśa* grass was used in religious rites, and consequently the ability to handle it could, at a certain point, have meant extensively the ability to perform ceremonies in a due way.

⁷ Compare, for instance, *MN* III, 35; *SN* IV, 190; *DN* III, 91-94; etc. (where there is mention of *pāpakā akusalā dhammā*) and *DN* II, 215; II, 278-279; III, 285; etc. (where mention is made of *akusalā dhammā*). It is interesting, here, to note that at least *DN* III, 90-94 corroborates the idea that practically there is no difference between *pāpaka* and *pāpaka akusala dhammas*.

Buddhist, point of view *and* from a typically Buddhist point of view, nonetheless it takes special lexical care in differentiating the non-Buddhist merit from the Buddhist one.

(b) Buddhism has no transcendentalistic inclinations as regards morality. If it is true that some canonical passages express the necessity to go beyond the level of merit and demerit (*puñña* and *pāpa*),⁸ it is likewise true that nowhere in the Canon is the idea of surpassing what is *kusala* detectable,⁹ whereas it is explicitly stated that the *arahant* has abundant *kusala*, has excellent *kusala*.¹⁰ The attitude of the Buddha towards *kamma* is not to *transcend* the rules of kammic retribution (retribution that in the Hindū context depends principally on the observance of sacrificial duties), but to *reformulate* the understanding of it as based on intentional volitions.¹¹

Besides these two points we may also add the following two, dealing with more general – not ethical *stricto sensu* – features:

⁸ *SN* I, 182; *Sn* 520, 547; *Dham* 39, 267; etc.

⁹ See Keown (1992:124), Anālayo (2003:258). In various canonical passages there is explicit mention of abandonment of what is *akusala* and cultivation of what is *kusala* (*AN* II, 19; IV, 109-111; *MN* II, 241; *Iti* §16, §38; etc.).

¹⁰ See Karunadasa (2001:20), Adam (2005:70-71). *MN* II, 28-29: *sampannakusalam paramakusalam* (I consider both the compounds as *bahubbhi* but obviously other readings are possible). See also the well-known *Dham* 183, which reveals that the abolition of *pāpa* necessitates the cultivation of *kusala*. On this subject Piya Tan (2006:22-23), referring to a reflection of Ross Carter (1984:48), reminds us of the presence in the Pāli Canon of passages that could lead to infer a certain semantic equivalence between *puñña* and *kusala* (see also Filliozat 1980:106-107). Piya Tan focuses our attention on a stanza, repeated at least twice in the Canon (*AN* IV, 151; *Iti* §21), in which it is stated that «the wholesome noble one (*kusalo* [...] *ariyo*) performs the good (*pakaroti puññam*)». *Iti* §21: *Ekam pi ce pāṇam aduṭṭhacitto mettāyati kusalo* [*AN: kusali*] *tena hoti | sabbe 'va pāṇe manasānukampaṃ* [*AN: manasānukampi*] *pahūtam-ariyo pakaroti puññam* ||. Furthermore, the Canon also presents passages from which it is evident that there is pre-eminence of *kusala* over *puñña*; *SN* V, 402 seems to mean that there is no actual *puñña* outside *kusala*: «The one who desires merit, established in what is wholesome, develops the way for the attainment of immortality; he, acquiring the valuable *dhamma*, delighting in the destruction [of defilements] does not quiver “the king of death will come”» (*Yo puññakāmo kusale patiṭṭhito bhāveti maggam amatassa pattiyā | so dhammasārādhigamo khaye rato na vedhati maccurāja gamissatī ti* ||).

¹¹ For a clear exposition of the differences between the Hindū perspective and the Buddhist one on *kamma* see, among others, Manishini (p. 4), and especially (p. 8): «The Buddha's reinterpretation of kamma as intention is stated quite categorically elsewhere in the Canon when he says: “it is intention, monks, that I call kamma”. It is not so much action itself that has causal moral potency, but the state of mind from which the action is produced». Here Manishini makes reference to canonical statements as: *cetanāhaṃ bhikkhave kammaṃ vadāmi* (*AN* III, 415). On the same subject see: Collins (1982:46), Nyanatiloka (1988:149), Thittila (1992:319-323), Payutto (1993:6-9), Nyanaponika (1999:40-41), Banks Findly (2003:253-257); with particular reference to *akusala* see also Harvey (1995:143-148). For a comprehensive survey on *kamma* from the Buddhist point of view see: McDermott (1984).

(c) Buddhist doctrine – defined by Gotama Buddha as «right vision» (*sammādiṭṭhi*) – is said to constitute the middle path (*majjhimā paṭipadā*)¹² between two opposed perspectives: Eternalism (*sassatavāda* or *atthikavāda*) and Nihilism (*ucchedavāda* or *natthikavāda*).¹³ Perhaps the most renowned canonical passage where this teaching is imparted is the *Kaccā(ya)nagottasutta* of the *Samyutta-nikāya*. To the question of Kaccāyana: «Right vision, right vision, o honourable one, is said; in what way, o honourable one, [a vision] is a right vision?» (*Sammādiṭṭhi sammādiṭṭhi bhante vuccati; kittāvataṅ nu kho bhante sammādiṭṭhi hotīti*), the Buddha answers: «This world indeed, o Kaccāyana, is mostly doubly leaned: existence and non existence [...]. “Everything is”, indeed, o Kaccāyana, this is one extreme. “Everything is not”, this is the second extreme. O Kaccāyana, not approaching both these extremes, the Tathāgata teaches the *dhamma* by means of the middle [way]» (*Dvayanissito khvāyaṃ Kaccāyana loko yebhuyyena atthitaṅ ceva natthitaṅ ca [...]. Sabbam atthīti kho Kaccāyana ayam eko anto. Sabbam natthīti ayam dutiyo anto. Ete te Kaccāyana ubho ante anupagamma majjhena Tathāgato dhammam deseti*).¹⁴

(d) The Buddha, explaining the doctrine, makes use of different modes of exposition according to the audience he speaks to: with monks and followers generally he employs «technical» words, with *brāhmaṇas* he frequently uses terms borrowed from their cultural range,¹⁵ and with people not directly belonging to the Saṅgha – for example householders or wanderers – he variably limits himself to the common conventional vocabulary more, or less, contaminated with «technical» Buddhist expressions. This means that, when we read a canonical discourse, it is relevant to determine the social and cultural position of the Buddha’s interlocutor(s).

2. The Wrong Vision

Let us consider the *Mahācattārīsakasutta* of the *Majjhima-nikāya*. In this text Gotama speaks with a group of *bhikkhus* about noble right concentration (*Ariyaṃ vo, bhikkhave, sammāsamādhiṃ desissāmi*). He explains that noble

¹² See, for instance, *SN* v, 421: the middle way is the Eightfold Noble Path (*katamā ca sā bhikkhave majjhimā paṭipadā [...]? Ayam eva aryo aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo*).

¹³ «Eternalism» and «Nihilism» are two general terms referring not to two particular schools, but to several points of view that can be subsumed under the broad categories of «Eternalist» and «Nihilist.» In the *Brahmajālasutta* (*DN* I, 12-38) we find a canonical exposition of all the more or less philosophical positions known during the Buddha’s times. For a careful examination of this *sutta* see Rigopoulos (1992); see also Dutt (1932).

¹⁴ *SN* II, 17. Note the instrumental case *majjhena*.

¹⁵ On the communication strategies between Buddhists and Hindu see, among others, Deshpande (1993).

right concentration is the one-pointedness of the mind provided with right vision, right intention, right speech, right undertaking, right livelihood, right exercise, right mindfulness (*sammādhīṭṭi sammāsaṅkappo sammāvācā sammākammanto sammā-ājīvo sammāvāyāmo sammāsati. Yā kho, bhikkhave, imehi sattāṅgehi cittassa ekaggatā parikkhatā, ayaṃ vuccati, bhikkhave, ariyo sammāsamādhi*). Afterwards, he specifies that «there, o *bhikkhus*, right vision is preceding» (*Tatra, bhikkhave, sammādhīṭṭi pubbaṅgamā hoti*), explaining this «precedence» – that is, the point of departure of all good and right thoughts and deeds – would lie in the consideration that right vision is right and wrong vision is wrong (*Micchādhīṭṭiṃ: micchadhīṭṭi pajānati, sammādhīṭṭiṃ: sammādhīṭṭi pajānāti. Sā'ssa hoti sammādhīṭṭi*).¹⁶

Gotama, then, expounds the wrong vision as follows:

And what, o *bhikkhus*, is wrong vision? There is no gift, there is no sacrifice, there is no oblation, *there is no fruit, no result of well done or ill done actions*, there is not this world, there is not another world, there is not a mother, there is not a father, there are not spontaneously born beings, there are in the world no *samaṇas* and *brāhmaṇas* rightly gone, rightly gone along, and who make known this world and the other world, having experienced [them] by means of their direct knowledge. This, o *bhikkhus*, is the wrong vision (*Katamā ca, bhikkhave, micchādhīṭṭhi? Na'tthi dinnam, na'tthi yiṭṭham, na'tthi hutam, na'tthi sukaṭadukkaṭānam kammānam phalaṃ vipāko, na'tthi ayaṃ loko, na'tthi paro loko, na'tthi mātā, na'tthi pitā, na'tthi sattā opapātikā, na'tthi loka samaṇabrāhmaṇā sammaggatā sammāpaṭipannā ye imaṃ ca lokam paraṃ ca lokam sayam abhiññā sacchikatvā pavedentī; ayaṃ, bhikkhave, micchādhīṭṭhi*).¹⁷

Now, we know, from the *Sāmaññaphalasutta* of the *Dīgha-nikāya*, that this wrong vision is nothing but the view upheld by one of the so-called six heretical thinkers active during Buddha's times: the Nihilist-Materialist Ajita Kesakambalin.¹⁸ The French scholar Lilian Silburn (1989:129) clearly

¹⁶ MN III, 71. We must remember, here, that this *sutta* has probably undergone some late canonical re-elaborations. See Bodhi (2007:59 note 23).

¹⁷ MN III, 71-72. Same passage in AN V, 265; V, 268; DN III, 264-265; SN III, 206; etc. Compare with MN I, 287; III, 22, where this wrong vision is said to be the *asappurisa*'s point of view. Here, the expression *na'tthi mātā, na'tthi pitā* appears to have a moral significance, meaning something like «there is no evidence that one must be respectful towards his/her own parents.» About the Buddhist perspective on this subject see, for instance, Schopen (2007) who underlines that the parents are seen as *duṣkarakas*, «the doers of what is difficult» for a son (Ibid:124, 128).

¹⁸ DN I, 55. The six heretics are: the Nihilists-Materialists Ajita Kesakambalin and Pūraṇa Kassapa (we have to consider that Kassapa played an important role in the constitution of early Ājīvikism), the Eternalist Pakuda Kaccāyana, the *ājīvika* Makkhali Gosāla, the Eel-wriggler

summarizes the position of Ajita as follows: «*Il est au premier rang des ucchedavādin*, ces partisans de la destruction totale après la mort, destruction qui englobait l'âme et les conséquences des actes».¹⁹ Although the negation of an existing self seems to be the principal point in common between Nihilism, and Buddhist *anattavāda*,²⁰ a point theoretically so important to have pushed the detractors of Buddhism to tax it with being Nihilist,²¹ nonetheless there is at least one – actually more than one! – *essential* philosophical difference that distinguishes these two perspectives: «Si Ajita mérite aux yeux des Buddhistes l'épithète de matérialiste et de nihiliste ce n'est que parce qu'il s'attaque au dogme fondamental de la philosophie indienne, la doctrine de l'acte, le *karman*».²² The Materialist, denying the validity of kammic retribution, consequently eliminates from his philosophical assumptions the idea of, and the hope for, any future spiritual emancipation. This anti-soteriological position has historically led his sustainers to a strong delegitimation of the established authority supposed to be, and self-proclaimed as, holder of the knowledge of the law of *kamma*, entailing in reality, on the one hand, the minimization of the social weight of the brāhmaṇical caste responsible for performing Vedic sacrifices (thought to be the cause of good merit), and on the other hand, to

(*amarāvikkhepika*; see *DN* I, 25-27) Sañjaya Belaṭṭhiputta and the Jain Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta. See Vogel (1970). Moreover: Dasgupta (1991:520-526), Chattopadhyaya (1959:504-524). For a general survey on Indian Materialism: Dasgupta (1991), Tucci (1971), Frauwallner (1956:295-309), Chattopadhyaya (1959), Joshi (1995).

¹⁹ My italics. See also Karunadasa (2001:4-5).

²⁰ Silburn (1989:129): «Comme les Bouddhistes, et probablement avant eux, Ajita se dresse contre la religion védique, ses sacrifices, ses prescriptions et ses livres sacrés: comme eux encore il s'oppose à la doctrine de l'âme immortelle et unique objet de la spéculation des anciennes Upaniṣad. Il nie un Soi compris comme une entité transcendante qui serait susceptible de survivre à la disparition du corps. Le Soi n'est pour Ajita qu'un ensemble d'activités physiques et de fonctions mentales qui dérivent de la combinaison des grand éléments matériels».

²¹ See, for instance, Jayatilleke (1998:374-375): «The doctrine of *anattā* in denying or discarding the concept of the soul, which was one of the central theses of the Eternalists seems to make the Buddha veer more towards the Materialists than the Eternalists. In fact, in his own time according to the evidence of the Nikāyas, we find his own contemporaries accusing him of being a Materialist and not an Eternalist. It is said that “the recluse Gotama declares the cutting off, the destruction and the annihilation of a real being” (*samaṇo Gotamo sato sattassa ucchedaṃ vināsaṃ vibhavaṃ paññapeti*, *M[N]* I, 140); it is the same language that is used to describe the main thesis of Materialism, viz. *ith'eke sato sattassa ucchedaṃ vināsaṃ vibhavaṃ paññapeti* (*D[N]* I, 34-35)». On the translation of *anattā* with «not-self», instead of «without self», etc., see: Norman (2006:34-36).

²² Silburn (1989:130). See the provocative but illuminating words that Buddha addresses to Vacchagotta in *MN* I, 483: «[...] I do not know of any *ājīvaka* who has reached heaven but one: he was a follower of the doctrine of *kamma*, a follower of the doctrine of efficacy of actions» ([...] *nābhijānāmi kañci ājivakaṃ saggūpaḡaṃ aññatra ekena, so p'āsi kammavādī kiriyavādī ti*). McDermott (1984:1) defines this passage as a «jibe at the Ājīvakas». On the philosophical positions usually attributed to the *ājīvakas* (*ājīvikas*), besides *MN* III, 71-72 (quoted above), see also *DN* I, 52-53, *DN* I, 56, *DN* I, 53, quoted below, and notes 18, 26, 27, 28, 29 and 32.

belittle the Buddha's (and Mahāvīra's) words which claim to explain the right (best) moral path. This delegitimation has taken a written form in the statement: «fools and learned men, after the disgregation of the body, are reduced to nothing, are destroyed, they do not exist after death» (*bāle ca paṇḍite ca kāyassa bheda ucchijjanti vinassanti, na honti param marañā ti*),²³ that is another way to refute the moral rule supposed to regulate the *puñña/pāpa* retributions in this and in future lives, it means to refute *morally significant* good and bad kammic effects.²⁴

At least in these terms Buddhists speak about Materialists,²⁵ calling them *akiriyavādins* (followers of the doctrine of inefficacy of actions).²⁶ A well-

²³ DN I, 55. We can also add, here, the statement attributed to Pakudha Kaccāyana: «Therefore there is neither slayer nor instigator to kill, neither hearer nor reciter, *neither discerner nor causer of discernment*» (*Tattha n'atthi hantā vā ghātetā vā sotā vā sāveta vā viññātā vā viññāpeta vā*). Although Pakudha Kaccāyana's philosophical perspective is a form of Eternalism (and for this reason, as we will see, it would be better than Nihilism), nonetheless Gotama refuses it because Pakudha's point of view – unlike other forms of Eternalism – denies kammic moral retribution.

²⁴ To tell the truth, in the Pāli Canon there is also mention of actions that lead neither to positive nor to negative effects; for instance, in SN II, 82 and DN III, 217 we meet not only *puññābhisaṅkhāras* and *apuññābhisaṅkhāras*, but *āneñjābhisaṅkhāras* too. The word *āneñja-* means «unchanging», «imperturbable», and in case of need it can indicate a quiet, not troubled mental state (see Ud 26, where *āneñja* is referred to *samādhi*; see also the *Aṇaṅgasappāyasutta* of the *Majjhima-nikāya*, MN II, 261-267). In SN II, 82 *āneñja-* hasn't got a positive meaning: here it does not mean «unchanging» in the sense of «neither meritorious, nor demeritorious», rather it denotes every *saṅkhāra* not productive of a visible good or bad effect, always under the influence of *avijjā*. The passage explains that whoever eliminates ignorance does not perform any action: neither productive of merit (*puñña*), nor of demerit (*apuñña*), nor leading to an unchanging state (*āneñja*). Weragonda interprets this tripartition as follows (1993:660): «This three-fold division covers *kammic* activity in all spheres of existence: the meritorious *kamma*-formations extend to the sensuous and the fine-material sphere, the demeritorious ones only to the sensuous sphere, and the imperturbable only to the immaterial sphere». It must be pointed out that there also exists a tripartition in *kusala-*, *akusala-* and *abyākata-dhammas* (wholesome, unwholesome and neutral *dhammas*), but this distinction seems not to be present in the *Nikāyas* (where the *dhammas* are *kusala* or *akusala* only), being a contribution peculiar to Abhidhamma and commentarial literature. See: Nyanatiloka (1988:387).

²⁵ To think that the Materialists were all amoral is certainly an exaggeration, but this exaggeration seems to have charmed – at least in part – also Chattopadyaya (1959); more rigorous arguments are proposed by Joshi (1995). Although an edonistic inclination of Materialism (of course more similar to Epicureism than to bare amorality) is undeniable, nonetheless Tucci reminds us that (1971:137): «C'erano persino sette di Cārvāka [Materialists] che sicuri della ferrea legge inerente alla evoluzione degli elementi materiali, di cui i vari organismi si compongono, attendevano, in una specie di distacco dal mondo, come altre sette di yogi e mistici, che questo corpo si dissolvesse».

²⁶ Certainly this doctrine, even if according to different declensions, was upheld by Ajita Kesakambalin and Pūraṇa Kassapa. Of the same orientation – but grounded on distinct philosophical tenets, that is, on a particular form of *sassatavāda* seen by an *ājīvika* (or «almost-ājīvika»; see Jayatilke 1998:257-258) point of view – was also Pakudha Kaccāyana with his singular theory that everything is barren (*vañjha*); Chattopadyaya explains (1959:517): «It was a barrenness from the point of view of human enterprise, or more particularly, of moral enterprise». To these three, we can also add Makkhali Gōsāla: although he be not *stricto sensu* a Materialist, nonetheless his *ahetuvāda*

known representative of what we could call Deterministic-Materialism, Pūraṇa Kassapa, indeed hurl himself with great vigour against this kammic morality. His view is thus described:

And even if one should come to the southern shore of the Ganges, slaying, instigating [others] to kill, maiming, instigating [others] to maim, torturing, instigating [others] to torture, in that case, through this, *there is not demerit, there is not a coming of demerit*. And even if one should come to the northern shore of the Ganges, giving, making [others] give, sacrificing, making [others] sacrifice, in that case, through this, *there is not merit, there is not a coming of merit*. By means of giving, of restraint, of self-control, of speaking the truth there is not merit, there is not a coming of merit (*Dakkhiṇaṅ ce pi Gaṅgā-tīraṃ āgaccheyya hananto ghātentō chindanto chedāpentō pacanto pācentō, n'atthi tato nidānaṃ pāpaṃ n'atthi pāpassa āgamo. Uttaraṅ ce pi Gaṅgā-tīraṃ gaccheyya dadanto dāpentō yajanto yajāpentō, n'atthi tato nidānaṃ puññaṃ n'atthi puññaṃ āgamo. Dānena damena saṃyamena sacca-vajjena n'atthi puññaṃ n'atthi puññaṃ āgamo ti*).²⁷

Besides this two strictly Materialist thinkers, we must briefly remember the *sassatavādin* Pakudha Kaccāyana, whose view – a doctrine of barren-ness similar to the *akiriyavāda* of Kassapa – runs as follows:

The earth-group, the water-group, the heat-group, the air-group, pleasures, sufferings, and life principles as the seventh. These seven groups are not made, consisting of [something] not made, unaffected, without creator, barren, immovable as a peak, steadfast as a stable pillar. They do not move, they do not change, they do not damage one another, they are not suitable [to cause] pleasure, or suffering, or pleasure and suffering (*Paṭhavi-kāyo āpo-kāyo tejo-kāyo vāyo-kāyo sukhe dukkhe jīva-sattame. Ime satta kāyā akaṭṭā akaṭṭa-vidhā animittā animittā vañjhā kūṭaṭṭhā esikaṭṭhāvīṭṭhitā. Te na iñjanti na vipariṇamanti na*

(doctrine of no-cause) allows us to number him among those who believe that the human actions are morally ineffective.

²⁷ *DN* I, 52-53. Same passage in *MN* I, 516; *SN* III, 208; etc. I use the definition «Deterministic-Materialism» following Jayatilleke's argumentations. Jayatilleke, indeed, points out that (1998:143-145) Pūraṇa's philosophy is a form of *niyatīvāda*, and (Ibid:149) his denial of any (particular) cause led him to think the universe as a whole rigidly directed by a deterministic law.

*aññam-aññam vyābādhenti nālam aññam-aññassa sukhāya vā dukkhāya vā sukha-dukkhāya vā).*²⁸

And the *ājīvika* Makkhali Gosāla's *ahetuvāda*,²⁹ referred to in the Pāli Canon in these words:

O great king, there is no cause, there is no condition for the impurity of beings, beings become impure without cause and condition. There is no cause, there is no condition for the purification of beings, beings become purified without cause and condition (*N'atthi mahārāja hetu n'atthi paccayo sattānaṃ saṃkilesāya, ahetu-apaccaya sattā saṃkilissanti. N'atthi hetu n'atthi paccayo sattānaṃ visuddhiyā, ahetu-apaccaya sattā visujjhanti*).³⁰

For Gosāla, the present and future good and bad states cannot be rooted in past deeds because: «there is no action, there is no doing of action, there is no energy [in doing actions]» (*n'atthi kammaṃ, n'atthi kiriyaṃ, n'atthi viriyan ti*).³¹ The being in bound and the spiritual emancipation of living beings, according to him, would depend solely on an unavoidable universal law called *niyati* which regulates a historical pre-determined course in which living beings have no changing power or influence (*DN I, 53: sabbe sattā [...] niyati-saṅgati-bhāva-pariṇatā*).³²

3. The Twofold Right Vision

After the exposition of the wrong vision, in the *Mahācattārīsakasutta* the Buddha explains what the right vision consists of:

²⁸ *DN I, 56*. Same passage in *MN I, 517; SN III, 211*; etc. Jayatilleke (1998:142) defines the perspective of Pakudha Kaccayāna an *ājīvika* «proto-Vaiśeṣika Realism», which involves the existence of (Ibid:268): «discrete independent substances (the material substances and the soul), uncreated and undestructible». The independence of each substance constitutes the basis for Pakudha's *vyāñjhā*-theory.

²⁹ On the *ājīvikas* in general see principally Basham (1951).

³⁰ *DN I, 53*. Same passage in *MN I, 516-517; SN III, 210*; etc.

³¹ *AN I, 286-287*.

³² See Basham (1951:224-226). As we have seen (above, note 27) this was also the point of view of Pūraṇa Kassapa. There is, indeed, a fundamental difference between Kassapa's and Gosāla's concepts of *niyati*. If for Kassapa, *niyati* is an all-embracing full-deterministic law, «Makkhali does not become a Strict Determinist since the opposite category of "chance" or Indeterminism plays a significant part in his system. He therefore subscribed to *niyatīvāda*- only in the sense that he thought that *some* future events like salvation for all [...] were strictly determined» (Jayatilleke 1998:145).

And what, o *bhikkhus*, is right vision? Now, right vision, o *bhikkhus*, I say to be twofold: there is, o *bhikkhus*, a right vision having intoxicants, associated with merit, resulting in a substratum [of rebirth]; there is, o *bhikkhus*, a right vision that is noble, without intoxicants, supramundane, constituent part of the way (*Katamā ca bhikkhave sammādiṭṭhi? Sammādiṭṭhiṃ p'ahaṃ bhikkhave dvayaṃ vadāmi. Atthi bhikkhave sammādiṭṭhi sāsavā puññābhāgiyā upadhivepakkā; atthi bhikkhave sammādiṭṭhi ariyā anāsavā lokuttarā maggaṅgā*).³³

The first right vision is described here as the opposite point of view to the Kesakambalin's one, that is, as the point of view opposite to Nihilism: «There is gift, there is sacrifice, there is oblation, *there is fruit, result of well done or ill done actions*», and so on.³⁴ Now, on the basis of what is referred to in the preliminary note (c) it follows that, if Nihilism and Eternalism are opposed to one another, and if Eternalism is said to be «associated with merit» (*puññābhāgiya*), then Nihilism – at least according to the Buddhist point of view – must be associated with demerit (in Pāli would sound *pāpabhāgiya*). We conclude that wrong vision and the first right vision are not only philosophically, but also morally *complementary* perspectives, the one conducive to demerit, the other to merit.

Moreover, in the *Mahācattārīsakasutta*, besides the wrong and the twofold right visions, Gotama specifies that there is also a single wrong intention, but one twofold right intention, a single wrong speech, but one twofold right speech, and so on up to the wrong livelihood and one twofold right livelihood. However, he does not say that there is a single wrong exercise and one twofold right exercise or a single wrong mindfulness and one twofold right mindfulness, and no mention is made of a single wrong concentration and one twofold right concentration. We will return to this point later. What is noteworthy here is, firstly, that every first «rightness» is described as *puññābhāgiya*, whereas every second «rightness» as *ariya* (noble), and secondly, that Gotama relentlessly repeats for *all* the constituents of the Eightfold Noble Path, that «there, o *bhikkhus*, right vision is preceding» (*Tatra, bhikkhave, sammādiṭṭhi pubbaṅgamā hoti*). This allows us to conclude that every «rightness» *puññābhāgiya* depends on, or is on the level of, the *puññābhāgiya* right vision

³³ MN III, 72.

³⁴ MN III, 72: *Atthi dinnam, atthi yijjam, atthi hutam, atthi sukaṭadukkaṭānam kammānam phalaṃ vipāko* [...]. The direct opposition between these two views is made explicit by Gotama in MN I, 402, quoted below.

and every «rightness» *ariya* depends on, or is on the level of, the *ariya* right vision.

3.a. *The bases for performing merit*

It will be useful, now, to open a brief digression on the factors from which *puñña* develops (*puñña-kiriya-vatthus*). Several canonical passages report that «three are the bases for performing merit: the base for performing merit consisting of giving, the base for performing merit consisting of moral conduct, the base for performing merit consisting of mental development» (*Tīṇi puñña-kiriya-vatthūni. Dāna-mayaṃ puñña-kiriya-vatthu, sīla-mayaṃ puñña-kiriya-vatthu, bhāvanā-mayaṃ puñña-kiriya-vatthu*).³⁵ Among these three bases, undoubtedly the Pāli Canon confers a relevant position to *dāna* (giving),³⁶ probably because collecting offerings was the Saṅgha's – but also *brāhmaṇas*'s –³⁷ principal means of support, as is clearly pointed out by Banks Findly (2003:250) quoting a reflection of McDermott (1984:32) about «the importance of alms for the continued survival of the community of monks». Furthermore, we must remember that the term *bhikkhu*, with which the Buddhist monks call themselves, originally means «beggar». This centrality of *dāna* was surely one of the reasons why both Buddhists and *brāhmaṇas* were equal opponents of Ajita Kesakambalin, for whom «there is no gift, there is no sacrifice».

Another base for performing merit is *bhāvanā*, a term literally meaning «development» but translatable as «mental development» or «meditation».³⁸ It is

³⁵ *DN* III, 218; *AN* IV, 241; *Iti* §60; etc.

³⁶ In many passages the Pāli Canon underlines the strict correlation between *dāna* and *puñña*. See, for instance: *SN* I, 18; I, 20; I, 233; etc. Moreover: *AN* II, 52-56. See also Banks Findly (2003:250, 281 note 14) who mentions Tambiah (1968:103-104). For a clear discussion about the merit developed practicing *dāna*: Banks Findly (2003:257-262). In *MN* III, 257 we find five stanzas in which the various possibilities of good and bad gifts, depending on the moral value of the giver and the receiver are analyzed: *sīlavā dussīlesu dadāti; dussīlo sīlavantesu dadāti; dussīlo dussīlesu dadāti; sīlavā sīlavantesu dadāti*.

³⁷ See, for instance, Vātsyāyana's *Nyāyasūtrabhāṣya* (*ad Nyāyasūtra* II, 1, 58), where the author explicitly says that the good result of a sacrifice depends also on an adequate recompense paid to the priests (Sastri Tailanga 1984:95): *dakṣiṇā durāgatā hīnā ninditā ceti*.

³⁸ I am not interested here in discussing the fundamental distinction between the «Kammatic Buddhism» (related to *dāna* and *sīla*) and the «Nibbanic Buddhism» (related to *bhāvanā*) proposed by King (1964) and Spiro (1970), and accepted, or partially accepted, for example by Banks Findly (2003:249-250), and more implicitly by Adam (2005), or criticized by Keown (1996:83-92). I think that even if this kind of distinction exists, nonetheless we may speak of «distinction» in a weak sense, not only because Buddhism remains *essentially* a path towards *nibbāna*, and not a path towards the accumulation of good *kamma*, but also because it seems – as may be inferred from our discussion – that *dāna*, *sīla*, and *bhāvanā* too, can be interpreted at least in two principal ways: one

well-known that *bhāvanā* in the Buddhist context has a two-faced feature: on the one hand, it refers to the «development of serenity» (*samatha-bhāvanā*), also said «development of concentration» (*samādhi-bhāvanā*), on the other hand, it refers to the «development of intuition» (*vipassanā-bhāvanā*), also known as «development of insight» (*paññā-bhāvanā*).³⁹ Gunaratana (1980:12) observes that: «serenity-meditation is recognized as common to both Buddhist and non-Buddhist contemplative discipline», and «insight meditation is held to be the unique discovery of the Buddha and an unparalleled feature of his path». Therefore, *samatha-* or *samādhi-bhāvanā*, although it be not a typical Buddhist form of meditation (*samatha*, «serenity»), evokes indeed the famous expression *citta-vṛtti-nirodhaḥ*, in *Yogasūtra* I, 2), has nonetheless been incorporated within the Buddhist meditational practices as an essential step towards *vipassanā-bhāvanā*. One has to master *samādhi-bhāvanā* (defined as *cittass'ekaggatā*, «one-pointedness of mind»)⁴⁰ to enter the first *jhāna*,⁴¹ but only *sammā-samādhi* has been equated by the Buddha with the practice of all the four *jhānas*.⁴² So we conclude that, as far as the custom of *dāna* as means of subsistence has been accepted by Buddhism probably from a brāhmanical milieu, so Buddhists have built their meditational systems developing some mental exercises already known by *yogins* and *samaṇas* before them.⁴³

3.b. The problem of *sīla*

This last reflection leads us to an unavoidable question: are we legitimated to think that even *sīla*, as a base for performing merit (*puñña-kiriya-vatthu*), has had a similar treatment as *dāna* and *bhāvanā* had? In other words, can we affirm that morality *from a Buddhist point of view* is indebted to some extra-Buddhist moral perspective? The answer is obviously affirmative, as we have

non-nibbānic non-Buddhistic (in the case of necessity temporarily accepted within the Buddhist point of view) and one specifically nibbānic Buddhistic.

³⁹ On this subject, besides the clear study of Gunaratana (1980), see Nyanatiloka (1988:67-69) and Thittila (1992:216-238). A punctual translation of *bhāvanā* («maintaining in being») has been suggested by Ñānamoli and supported by Cousins (1997:263).

⁴⁰ *MN* I, 301; *AN* I, 36; *SN* v 197-198; v, 225; v, 268-269; etc. Notwithstanding the differences, it seems that all kinds of *samādhi*, both the «lower» extra-buddhist *samādhi-bhāvanā* and the «superior» buddhist *sammā-samādhi*, are defined as *cittass'ekaggatā* (*sammā-samādhi* in *MN* III, 71 quoted above is in fact defined in the same way; see also *AN* IV, 40; *SN* v, 21; etc.).

⁴¹ *MN* I, 294; III, 25; etc. See Gunaratana (1980: 19-21, 88-92).

⁴² For instance, *DN* III, 313. See Gunaratana (1980:20). However – as Gunaratana observes – this does not mean that there is *total* identity between *sammā-samādhi* and the four *jhānas*.

⁴³ The technics of *samādhi-bhāvanā* probably represent nothing but what Buddha himself learned under the guide of his masters Ālāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta.

remembered in the preliminary note (a), referring to Premasiri's work. But the question that we have just posed involves a deeper consideration: if Buddhism admits an extra-Buddhist moral perspective, indeed we are faced with the problem of defining which kind of perspective does it accept, and in which way.

Let us examine now the *Caṅkīsutta* of the *Majjhima-nikāya*. The first part of this *sutta*, is about a *brāhmaṇa* of Opasāda village named Caṅkī, highly respected by Pasenadi, king of Kosala. At the beginning of the narration, the Buddha is visiting the region and a crowd of *brāhmaṇas* starts to move from Opasāda to pay him homage. Caṅkī, the highly respected *brāhmaṇa*, after having known that the Buddha is somewhere in the neighbourhood, decides to join the procession but, the other *brāhmaṇas* object to him saying that: «It is not suitable for the honourable Caṅkī to go to see the *samaṇa* Gotama; indeed, it is suitable for the *samaṇa* Gotama to go to see the honourable Caṅkī» (*Na arahati bhavaṃ Caṅkī samaṇaṃ Gotamaṃ dassanāya upasaṃkमित्तुṃ. Samaṇo tveva Gotamo arahati bhavantaṃ Caṅkiṃ dassanāya upasaṃkमित्तुṃ*). To demonstrate why Caṅkī should not approach Gotama first, they enumerate a long list of his good qualities, among which we read: «because the honourable Caṅkī is moral, has an increased morality, is endowed with increased morality» (*Bhavaṃ hi Caṅkī sīlavā vuddhasīlī vuddhasīlena samannāgato*).⁴⁴ However, to his interlocutors Caṅkī – who does not deny the description they have made of him – answers back that he must go first because, even if he himself has a good moral habit «indeed, o honourable one[s], the *samaṇa* Gotama is moral, has a noble morality, has a wholesome morality, is endowed with a wholesome morality» (*Samaṇo khalu bho Gotamo sīlavā ariyasīlī kusalasīlī kusalasīlena samannāgato*).⁴⁵

From these two last quotations, the fundamental distinction between Caṅkī and Gotama clearly emerges: although the first one is said to be moral (*sīlavā vuddhasīlī*) by a group of *brāhmaṇas*, nonetheless Caṅkī himself underlines that the Buddha is not only, or merely, moral (*sīlavā*), but has a specifically noble morality (*ariyasīlī*) and is wholesome (*kusalasīlī*). In other words, Caṅkī and Gotama are both *sīlavā*, but the former acknowledges to the latter a *different and higher degree of morality*, and meaningfully he expresses this difference employing the two terms *ariya* and *kusala*. This allows us to shed more light on the passage MN III, 72 quoted above: the first right vision, the one associated with merit (*puññābhāgiya*) and equated to the Eternalist point of view, is *merely sīla*, whereas the second right vision, described as *ariya* is, of course *sīla*, but *also kusala(-sīla)*. All this corroborates the aforementioned consideration that,

⁴⁴ MN II, 165.

⁴⁵ MN II, 167. The same narration is repeated in DN I, 115, where the protagonist is the *brāhmaṇa* Soṇadaṇḍa, and in DN I, 132, where the protagonist is the *brāhmaṇa* Kūṭadanta.

from the Buddhist point of view, the adoption of an Eternalist perspective involves a certain degree of good morality – the good morality exemplified by the *sīlavā* Cāṅkī –, whereas Nihilism is the *philosophical expression* of a bad moral habit (*pāpa*).⁴⁶

3.c. The dialectical use of puñña and kusala

In the *Apaṇṇakasutta* of the *Majjhima-nikāya* the Buddha not only states this last concept forcibly, but also gives material for an ethical and philosophical (dialectical) explanation of it.⁴⁷ Here, Gotama discusses with a group of householders how to consider the possible existence or inexistence of a future world. After having exposed the wrong vision and the (first) right vision in the exact same words of, respectively, *MN* III, 71-72, and *MN* III, 72, he asks: «“O householders, what do you think about this: don’t these *samaṇas* and *brāhmaṇas* hold doctrines in direct opposition to each other?” – “It is so, o honourable one”» (*Taṃkim maññatha gahapatayo: nanu’me samaṇabrāhmaṇā aññamaññassa ujuvipaccanīkavādā ti. – Evaṃbhante*). Now, it is fundamental, here, not only to notice the conceptual proximity to the *Kaccā(ya)nagottasutta* (*ayam eko anto, ayam dutiyo anto*), but also to remember that in that *sutta* Gotama clearly specifies that *both* the opposed views *must* be avoided. This will allow us not to misinterpret the remaining part of the *Apaṇṇakasutta*.

Well, Gotama, after having considered: «Now, indeed, only if another world exists, [and if] the vision of someone is “there is not another world,” this is his wrong vision» (*Santaṃ yeva kho pana paraṃ lokam: natthi paro loko ti’ssa diṭṭhi hoti, sā’ssa hoti micchādiṭṭhi*),⁴⁸ adds:

There, o householders, a wise man considers in this way: «If, indeed, there is not another world, in that case this honourable person will make himself safe after the dissolution of the body; if, indeed, there is another world, in that case this honourable person, after the dissolution of the body, after death, will be reborn in misery, in a bad condition, in ruin, in the *niraya* hell. Now, indeed, if it be conceded that there is not another world, and this be a true speech of these honourable *samaṇas* and *brāhmaṇas*, nonetheless in the present existence this honourable person is blamed by wise men: “Morally bad is this person, he holds a wrong

⁴⁶ As we will see, the Pāli Canon (*MN* I, 403) employs the term *dussīla*, «morally bad».

⁴⁷ A *sutta* conceptually identical to this one is the *Sandakasutta* (*MN* I, 513-524), where Ānanda explains similar doctrinal points to the wandering ascetic Sandaka.

⁴⁸ *MN* I, 402.

vision, he holds the there-is-not doctrine”». If, indeed, there is another world, then for this honourable person in both places there is bad luck: because he is blamed by wise men in the present existence and because after the dissolution of the body, after death, he will be reborn in misery, in a bad condition, in ruin, in the *niraya* hell. Thus, this sure *dhamma* remains imperfectly undertaken by him, having pervaded [it] unilaterally he disregards the wholesome stance (*Tatra gahapatayo viññū puriso iti paṭisañcikkhati: Sace kho na'tthi paro loko evamayam bhavam purisapuggalo kāyassa bhedā sotthimattānaṃ karissati, sace kho atthi paro loko evamayam bhavam purisapuggalo kāyassa bhedā parammaraṇā apāyaṃ duggatiṃ vinipātaṃ nirayaṃ upapajjissati. Kāmaṃ kho pana mā'hu paro loko, hotu nesam bhavataṃ samaṇabrāhmaṇānaṃ saccam vacanaṃ, atha ca paṇāyaṃ bhavam purisapuggalo diṭṭhe va dhamme viññūnaṃ gārayho: dussīlo purisapuggalo micchādiṭṭhi natthikavādo ti. Sace kho atth'eva paro loko evaṃ imassa bhoto purisapuggalassa ubhayattha kaliggaho: yañ ca diṭṭhe va dhamme viññūnaṃ gārayho, yañ ca kāyassa bhedā parammaraṇā apāyaṃ duggatiṃ vinipātaṃ nirayaṃ upapajjissati. Evam assāyaṃ apaṇṇako dhammo dussamatto samādiṇṇo ekamsaṃ pharitvā tiṭṭhati, riñcati kusalaṃ thānaṃ*).⁴⁹

Two points are to be underlined here: the wrong Nihilistic vision (*natthikavāda*) is described as *dussīla*, «morally bad», and Nihilism is said to be a unilateral (*ekamsa*) point of view, that is, a point of view not sufficiently articulated to take into account several conceptual possibilities. From an ethical perspective, the text focuses our attention on the bad consequences, both in this and in a future life, that one can be subjected to upholding Nihilism. As regards the (first) right vision, then, Gotama says: «Now, indeed, only if another world exists, [and if] the vision of someone is “there is another world,” this is his right vision» (*Santaṃ yeva kho pana paraṃ lokaṃ: atthi paro loko ti'ssa diṭṭhi hoti, sā'ssa hoti sammādiṭṭhi*),⁵⁰ and explains:

There, o householders, a wise man considers in this way: «If, indeed, there is another world, in that case this honourable person, after the dissolution of the body, after death will be reborn in happiness, in a heavenly world. Now, indeed, if it be conceded that there is not another world, and this be a true speech of these honourable *samaṇas* and

⁴⁹ MN I, 403. Compare with MN I, 515-516 (particularly with the following Ajita's statement: *tesaṃ tucchaṃ musā vilāpo ye keci atthikavādaṃ vadanti*).

⁵⁰ MN I, 403.

brāhmaṇas, nonetheless in the present existence this honourable person is praised by wise men: “Moral is this person, he holds a right vision, he holds the there-is doctrine”». If, indeed, there is another world, then for this honourable person in both places there is good luck: because he is praised by wise men in the present existence and because after the dissolution of the body, after death, he will be reborn in happiness, in a heavenly world. Thus, this sure *dhamma* remains perfectly undertaken by him, having pervaded [it] bilaterally he disregards the unwholesome stance (*Tatra gahapatayo viññū puriso iti paṭisañcikkhati: Sace kho atthi paro loko evamayam bhavam purisapuggalo kāyassa bheda parammaraṇā sugatiṃ saggam lokam upapajjissati. Kāmam kho pana mā’hu paro loko, hotu nesam bhavataṃ samaṇabrāhmaṇānaṃ saccam vacanam, atha ca panāyam bhavam purisapuggalo diṭṭhe va dhamme viññūnaṃ pāsaṃso: sīlavā purisapuggalo sammādiṭṭhi atthikavādo ti. Sace kho atth’eva paro loko evam imassa bhoto purisapuggalassa ubhayattha kaṭaggaho: yañ ca diṭṭhe va dhamme viññūnaṃ pāsaṃso, yañ ca kāyassa bheda parammaraṇā sugatiṃ saggam lokam upapajjissati. Evam assāyam apanṇako dhammo susamatto samādiṇṇo ubhayamsam pharivā tiṭṭhati, riñcati akusalam thānaṃ*).⁵¹

The Eternalist perspective is considered here to be right *because*, taking into account the possibility of a future existence, it would consequently lead its upholders to good moral conduct (*sīlavā*) involving at least two effects: a future good rebirth,⁵² and the present praises of the sages. Now, it appears that this point of view gains a certain degree of Buddha’s appreciation because the belief in the possible existence of a future world seems to entail implicitly (*ubhayamsa* says the passage) a deeper dialectical awareness: the consideration of its possible non-existence. Immediately after having analyzed this (Kesakambalin’s) Nihilistic vision, Gotama continues disapproving in an

⁵¹ MN I, 404.

⁵² We must remember that the first right vision has been described as *sāsava* («having intoxicants», MN III, 72). This means that future births will take place in a more or less good condition depending on the influence that these intoxicants have in the present life: good rebirths if less, bad if more. If the more intoxicated life is *pāpa*-making, the less intoxicated life must be – or should be – *puñña*-making: thus, there is no actual freedom at the level of *puñña*. In AN III, 414, for instance, we read: «There are, o *bhikkhus*, intoxicants leading to the *niraya* hell, intoxicants leading to the realm of animals, intoxicants leading to the realm of the manes, intoxicants leading to the realm of men, intoxicants leading to the realm of gods» (*Atthi bhikkhave āsavā nirayagamaniyā, atthi āsavā tiracchānāyonigamaniyā, atthi āsavā pīṭṭivisayagamaniyā, atthi āsavā manussalokagamaniyā, atthi āsavā devalokagamaniyā*). The underlying concept, here, is that *puñña* deeds do not completely save from bad – or at least not good – effects.

identical way both Pūraṇa Kassapa's *akiriyavāda*,⁵³ and Makkhali Gosāla's *ahetuvāda*,⁵⁴ concluding in favour of, respectively, a *kiriyavāda* and a *hetuvāda*.⁵⁵

At this point, we have enough material for some philosophical considerations. Firstly, only in the first passage (*MN* I, 403) Gotama explicitly mentions the possibility of safety for the Nihilist (*sothimattānaṃ karissati*), whereas in the second passage he limits himself to say that the Eternalist will gain a good life, and no mention is made of any kind of safety. The term here translated with «safety», *sothi*, is the Pāli form of Sanskrit *svasti*, composed by *su-* («good») and *asti*, from the root *√as* («to be»). *Sothi* means a safety not caused by a personal effort. Rather it is a «good state of being» depending on fortuitous events that we can define as «good fortune». From *MN* I, 403, it emerges that the Nihilist, who behaves without taking into account the possibility of a kammic retribution, gains safety *only if* there is not another world (but we cannot know before death if it does not actually exist). This safety is, therefore, equated with the *total* dissolution of the body: death without any «beyond»; in other words, the Nihilist would be freed from a bad future rebirth, which surely would occur to him because of his bad views *if* a world beyond actually exists. So we can sum up the moral judgment depicted here as follows: Nihilists do not believe in a moral system that could in *any case* affect their good behaviour, on which would depend a good rebirth *only if* there is a world beyond (and, again, we cannot know before death if this other world actually exists).⁵⁶ Secondly, although Gotama defines this *dhamma* as «sure», «certain» (*apaṇṇaka*), nonetheless this surety expresses not the Buddha's point of view, rather the *wise man's* one (remarkable is the repetition of *viññū puriso iti patisañcikkhati*, «a wise man considers in this way»). About the «wise man», Jayatilleke (1998:229-230) reflects thus: «The *viññū* represented for the Buddha the impartial critic *at the level of intelligent common sense* and the Buddha and his disciples sometimes introduce the “*viññū puriso*” or the hypothetical rational critic when it seems necessary to make an impartial and intelligent assessment

⁵³ *MN* I, 404-407. Compare with *MN* I, 516.

⁵⁴ *MN* I, 407-410. Compare with *MN* I, 516-517.

⁵⁵ In the *Sandakasutta* Ānanda also treats the position of Pakudha Kaccāyana, that is a sort of *akiriyavāda*, quite similar to that of Kassapa (*MN* I, 517-518), but developed from a *sassatavāda* point of view (see above, notes 23 and 26). The fact that Pakudha's doctrine is a form of Eternalism is, in my opinion, the reason why in the *Apāṇṇakasutta* this perspective is not explicitly taken into consideration: it would have been difficult to justify, on the one hand, the partial acceptance of Eternalism from the *viññū's* point of view in this particular *sutta*, and on the other hand, the general (canonical) but explicit critics against Pakudha's *sassatavāda*.

⁵⁶ Here, besides *sothi* we may also consider Makkhali Gosāla's *niyati* along with its indeterministic counterpart (both, in fact, are events completely independent of human efforts) towards which Gotama is equally critic (see, above, note 32).

of the relative worth of conflicting theories». ⁵⁷ It is meaningful, here, that Gotama puts into the wise man's mouth the term *dussīla* in opposition to *sīlavā* (a characteristic, as we have seen, *both* of the non Buddhist Cankī *and* of the *ariya* Gotama). These words denote respectively a bad and good moral behaviour but, following Jayatilleke, according to common sense – that, however, seems to win a certain degree of Buddha's approval, as it emerges from the sentences about the be or not be praised by wise men (*viññūnaṃ pāsamsa*, *viññūnaṃ gārayho*). Therefore the two judgements of the *viññū*, on Nihilism and on Eternalism, are to be considered as «impartial and intelligent» expressions of someone who, at least, sympathizes for – not to say upholds – Eternalism.

Another important aspect is the use of dubitative phrases («if, indeed, there is another world, then...») that make this discourse assume the shape of a Pascalian bet. ⁵⁸ This bet has validity, however, only if we consider the *ucchedavāda* and the *sassatavāda* points of view from the inside of their opposition. In that case, to have the spur for meritorial behaviour, the text seems to underline the necessity of betting on the existence of another world, instead of its non existence. But at the level of a genuinely Buddhist perspective we come across quite a different consideration: the crux of the matter is the different terminology used by a wise man, who speaks of *dussīla* and *sīlavā*, and by Gotama who, without disagreeing with the *viññū*, modifies the ethical worth saying that the Nihilist «disregards the wholesome stance» (*riñcati kusalam thānaṃ*), and the Eternalist «disregards the unwholesome stance» (*riñcati akusalam thānaṃ*). If, until now, we have pointed out that *sassatavāda* is connected with *puñña*, and *ucchedavāda*, which is in direct opposition (*ujjvippaccanīka*) to Eternalism, is connected with *pāpa*, now Gotama specifies that Eternalists do not take into consideration what is unwholesome (*akusala*) and Nihilists what is wholesome (*kusala*). The whole ethical meaning of this text, I think, is hidden by the indirect negative verb *riñcati* («he disregards»): in fact, Gotama does not say that the Nihilist «performs what is unwholesome» (which in Pāli would sound as *akusalam pakaroti*) and the Eternalist «performs what is wholesome» (*kusalam pakaroti*) because in this last case, it would have meant to equate the *sīlavā* with the (*ariyasīlī*) *kusalasīlī*. Here the Buddha meaningfully affirms that the Eternalist, who upholds a perspective related to *puñña*, disregards *akusala*, *without* signifying, however, that whoever performs

⁵⁷ See also Karunadasa (2001:19). Compare with what Ānanda says about all the four wrong views in the *Sandakasutta*: «[these are ways of living] which a wise man, as much as he can, should not live or, if living [them], he would not fulfil the method, the *dhamma*, [and] what is wholesome» (*yattha viññū puriso sasakkaṃ brahmacariyaṃ na vaseyya vasanto vā na ārādheyya ñāyaṃ dhammaṃ kusalan ti*).

⁵⁸ See Pascal, fragment 397, edition Le Guern (2004:249-252).

puñña also performs *kusala*. Notwithstanding that, we can suppose that whoever makes *puñña*, disregarding *akusala*, must have a more or less latent inclination towards *kusala*, inclination that the Nihilist does not cultivate because *first of all* he does not admit *puñña*. Moreover, on the basis of the semantic overlap between the two terms – as pointed out in the preliminary note (a) –, it follows that from a Buddhist perspective the *ucchedavādin* would have an inclination towards both *pāpa* and *akusala*.

We conclude that Buddhism, which appears to support the necessity of betting on a future life, considers this bet (that involves Eternalism and *puñña*) as a preliminary step towards some other and deeper stance (related to *kusala*). This means that, to a certain degree, Buddhism admits that it is really *better* to agree on the existence of a self (*attā*) – that is, on an Eternalist assumption – rather than on its non existence, because it seems that only the belief in a permanent self would push far from Nihilism, in the direction of a good moral life. But how to harmonize this consideration with the *anattāvāda* (doctrine of no-self), one of the Buddhist fundamental tenets? Must we conclude that this particular bet has validity *only* for those who are not proceeding, or not completely proceeding, on the ariyan path? The answer, of course, is: yes, this bet is for those who are not yet ariyan. But this obvious consideration leads us to a further, less obvious, reflection: Eternalism can in the case of need be integrated *into* the path towards Buddhist emancipation as a dialectical means against the Nihilist point of view, which is – as even the fourteenth-fifteenth century thinker Sāyaṇa-Mādhava in his *Sarva-darśana-saṃgraha* reminds us – a perspective «difficult to remove» (*durucchedaṃ*).⁵⁹

Some textual clues indicating the necessity to pass from a *puñña* condition to a *kusala* one can be found also in the *Mahācattārīsakasutta*. Firstly, the fact that Gotama does not say that there are *two* right visions (that in Pāli would sound as *duve sammādiṭṭhiyo*), but *one* right vision that is *twofold* (*sammādiṭṭhiṃ dvayaṃ*), allows us to interpret both aspects of the twofold right vision as two modes of a same point of view, the one «superficial» and related to common sense but assumed in the light of the Buddhist perspective, the other deeper and related to the Buddhist peculiar philosophical position. The first is «transitory», the second «definitive». However, if from the *puñña* point of view there is always a risk to fall back in *pāpa*, because *puñña*- and *pāpa-bhāgiya* perspectives are both connected with intoxicants (*sāsava*s),⁶⁰ and in direct opposition to one another (*MN* I, 402), only the ariyan right vision assures the complete dissolution of wrong assumptions, as we can understand from the comparison of the following two sentences of Gotama, who says: «O *bhikkhus*,

⁵⁹ Abhyankar (1978:2 of the text).

⁶⁰ See above, note 52.

of the one who has right vision the wrong vision is destroyed; and those bad and unwholesome *dhammas* which depend on wrong vision, these of him are destroyed, and those wholesome *dhammas* which depend on right vision go to the development and fulfillment» (*Sammādiṭṭhissa bhikkhave, micchādiṭṭhi nijjiṇṇā hoti; ye ca micchādiṭṭhipaccayā aneke pāpakā akusalā dhammā sambhavanti, te c'assa nijjiṇṇā hoti; sammādiṭṭhipaccayā ca aneke kusalā dhammā bhāvanāpāripūriṃ gacchanti*),⁶¹ after having specified about the ariyan right vision: «the one who exerts himself in abandoning wrong vision and in entering right vision, that is his right exercise. Mindful he abandons wrong vision, mindful dwells having entered right vision, that is his right mindfulness. Thus, these three *dhammas* move round and run after right vision, that is: right vision, right exercise, right mindfulness» (*Yo micchādiṭṭhiyā pahānāya vāyamati sammādiṭṭhiyā upasampadāya, sāssa hoti sammāvāyāmo. So sato micchādiṭṭhiṃ pajahati, sato sammādiṭṭhiṃ upasampajja viharati, sāssa hoti sammāsāti. Itissime tayo dhammā sammādiṭṭhiṃ anuparidhāvanti anuparivattanti, seyyathidaṃ: sammādiṭṭhi sammāvāyāmo sammāsāti*).⁶² It is for this reason, indeed, that the «rightnesses» are twofold only up to right livelihood (*sammā-ājīva*), because from *sammā-ājīva* onwards one enters the actual Buddhist meditative path (after having eliminated the *pāpaka akusala dhammas* and developed the *kusala* ones), based *exclusively* on the ariyan right vision. And this is the reason why Gotama specifies only at this point that whoever trains himself also in the first right livelihood (and not only in the ariyan one), is an ariyan disciple,⁶³ because it is here the place in which the dichotomy between *puñña* and *pāpa* must be left: to enter right exercise, right mindfulness and, consequently, right meditation, means to have already abandoned firstly what is *pāpabhāgiya* and secondly, what is *puññabhāgiya*, that is, it means to begin a life in what is purely *ariya*, beyond Eternalism and Nihilism. Only with the cultivation of the *kusala dhammas* one enters the first *jhāna* in *sammāsamādhi* and proceeds towards *sammāñāṇa* («right knowledge») and *sammāvimutti* («right emancipation»), the two characteristics of an *arahant*.⁶⁴ Therefore *sammāsamādhi*, because it is said to be an ariyan meditation, must be here understood as conjointly *samatha-bhāvanā* and

⁶¹ MN III, 76.

⁶² MN III, 72. See also the discussion in Gunaratana (1980:22-24).

⁶³ MN III, 75: «Here, o *bhikkhus*, a noble pupil, having abandoned the wrong livelihood gets his living by the right livelihood; this, o *bhikkhus*, is the right livelihood having intoxicants, associated with merit, resulting in a substratum [of rebirth]» (*Idha, bhikkhave, ariyasāvako micchā-ājīvaṃ pahāya sammā-ājīvena jīvikaṃ kappeti; ayam, bhikkhave, sammā-ājīvo sāsavo puññabhāgiyo upadhivepakko*).

⁶⁴ See the interesting discussion on the liberated by wisdom (*paññāvimutta arahant*) in Bodhi (2007).

vipassana-bhāvanā: the aim is not the *citta-vṛtti-nirodha*, but the noble *vimutti*. For this reason Gotama does not speak of a twofold right concentration, and for this reason too, indeed, only before the improvement of right exercise (that is, only at the level of the first right vision) *samādhi* could be an incomplete Buddhist practice (not completely *ariya*) as pointed out by Gunaratana, quoted above (1980:12).

Now we can sum up in brief our discussion in the following terms:

(A) For a Nihilist there are neither *puñña* nor *pāpa*.

(B) For an Eternalist (the *viññū*, and somehow Caṅkī), Nihilism is *pāpa* (*dussīla*) and Eternalism is *puñña* (*sīlavā*).

(C) For a Buddhist, Nihilism is *pāpa/akusala* and can be removed having recourse to Eternalism which is *puñña/not-akusala*; however, after the removal of Nihilism it is necessary to go further towards a neither-*pāpa*-nor-*puñña* point of view – as remembered in the preliminary consideration (b) –, that is, towards a *kusala* perspective: from the state of *sīlavā* (the one who *riñcati akusalaṃ* but not yet *kusalaṃ pakaroti*) to the state of *ariyasīlī kusalasīlī*.⁶⁵

4. Conclusion

As concluding remarks, I would briefly discuss the problem of arahantship in relation to *kusala* deeds, that must be intended as no more than an incomplete and general sketch suggesting a possible direction for further investigations.⁶⁶

Reconsidering the *Mahācattārīsakasutta*, when he describes the ten «rightnesses», the Buddha specifies: «Thus, indeed, o *bhikkhus*, the disciple possesses the eight constituents of the path, the *arahant* possesses the ten constituents» (*Iti kho, bhikkhave, aṭṭhaṅgasamannāgato sekho paṭipado dasaṅgasamannāgato arahā hoti*).⁶⁷ A passage of the *Sappurisavagga* of the

⁶⁵ It is relevant to notice here that, in the *Sandakasutta*, speaking to the wanderer Sandaka, Ānanda, who makes use of a perspective that had to be familiar to him, opts for adopting the *viññū*'s point of view as a «middle argument» between the wrong and the Buddhist position. As a consequence of Ānanda's well-pondered discourse Sandaka and his followers decide to join the Saṅgha.

⁶⁶ This is a brief reflection on some doubts pointed out by Adam (2005:76) and summarized by him as follows: «*Arahats* (including the Buddha): good conduct is beyond duality – neither bright nor dark, neither karmically meritorious nor detrimental, neither wholesome nor unwholesome. There is, in fact, some ambiguity as to whether the *Arahat*'s good conduct should be called wholesome. As we have seen, *kusala* states are said to be perfected in the *Arahat*. On the other hand, because *kusala* and *akusala* are often understood as applying to *action* (*karma*), we would also expect to find passages indicating that the conduct of *Arahats* is neither». See also the discussion in Karunadasa (2001:20) and Piya Tan (2006:37).

⁶⁷ MN III, 76.

Āṅguttara-nikāya (II, 221-222), allows us to know that whoever cultivates the eight or the ten «rightnesses» is a *sappurisa* (a worthy man), whereas whoever cultivates them and prompts others to cultivate them is a *sappurisena sappurisatara* (a man more worthy than a worthy man).⁶⁸ Now, if only the *arahant* possesses all the ten «rightnesses», it follows that, on the one hand, the *sappurisena sappurisatara* who possesses the first eight «rightnesses» must be a *sekha* (a disciple) more worthy than a worthy *sekha*, and on the other hand, we meet also with two types of *arahant*: the one *sappurisa* and the other *sappurisena sappurisatara*. Furthermore, (I) the fact that in several canonical passages it is stated that the *arahant*'s actions do not produce kammic effects,⁶⁹ (II) the fact that other passages state that *arahant*'s actions are excellently *kusala*, and (III) the fact that the Buddha has re-articulated *kamman* on intentional bases – as pointed out in the preliminary consideration (b) –, all this leads us to suggest that the *sappurisa arahant*'s deeds do not produce *puñña* or *pāpa* retributions, although they *must* be *kusala* because they *cannot* be *akusala*,⁷⁰ whereas the deeds of the *sappurisena sappurisatara arahant* are *kusala* in se (for the reasons just pointed out), and *have* a *kusala* effect not on the *arahant* himself (who, according to several canonical texts, cannot enjoy any effect of actions), but – we must conclude – on those who are prompted by him.⁷¹ This means that the *arahant* never lives a non kammic life: he is never outside or beyond *kamman* because the effects of his deeds, if not for himself, are nevertheless operative for others.⁷²

From this brief conclusive discussion it emerges that the Buddhist appeal to go beyond the *puñña/pāpa* dichotomy must not be understood as a vocation for a condition beyond *kamman*, a condition free from kammic effects, but as a spur to pursue the highest Buddhist ethical idea: to behave in a *kusala* way means not only to perform wholesome actions (*sappurisa*), but also to prompt others to perform them (*sappurisena sappurisatara*), it means – in other words – to eliminate the effects of actions *as* retributions (that is, as effects enjoyed by the

⁶⁸ For further lists of the *sappurisa*'s qualities – particularly in relation to the bad characteristics of the *asappurisa* – see *MN* III 37-45. See also, above, note 17.

⁶⁹ See, for instance, *SN* III, 69, as referred to in Karunadasa (2001:23 notes 87, 88).

⁷⁰ As we have already said (see above note 24) the idea of *abyākata-dhammas*, indicating actions free from kammic effects, is not present in the *Nikāyas*. Besides this, we note that in *DN* III, 102 the *nibbāna* is defined as *ānuttariyaṃ* [...] *kusalesu dhammesu*, that leads us to think that the spiritual emancipation is not outside or beyond what is *kusala*. See: Piya Tan (2006:38 note 141).

⁷¹ This aspect seems to be closely related to the Buddhist idea of transferring merit, according to which only the effect of good actions, not of bad ones, can be shared with others. On this argument see: Filliozat (1980:106-116), Banks Findly (2003:272-280).

⁷² See *Anālayo* (2003:258): «What *arahants* have “gone beyond” is the *accumulation* of karma» (my italics). See also: Piya Tan (2006:37-38).

doer) and to «re-distribute» those very (good and beneficial) effects to others by prompting them to act in an ethical good and beneficial way.

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