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 PUÑṆA 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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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 Triest, 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, nor to discuss specifically the semantic (philosophical) value of terms as kusala and puñña. 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, between a non-Buddhist (or pre-Buddhist) moral range, to which the terms puñña/pāpa or puñña/apuñña («good/bad», «merit/demerit») refer, and a specifically Buddhist one, related to the terms kusala/akusala.


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.


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 puñya […] figure dans le Rgveda […] 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 puñya 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, puñya is said to be derived from √puñ («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 puñya 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/un-skilful»). 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 akusala dhammā (bad and unwholesome dhammas) and the akusalā dhammā (unwholesome dhammas), no mention is made of puñnakā 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 punya est d’abord le “bien” mais lié au mérite des œuvres» (my italics). Filliozat’s «merit des œuvres» is explained by Cousins (1996:153) with «performing) subhakarman [...]. 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 innocente 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 √pā, «to rise against» (on √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»), pidā («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 *sukal- from sukta-, is a Middle Indic development of three Old Indic words: Skt. sukt- “well made”, sukṛt- n. “a good deed”, and sukṛ- “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 akusala 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 kamman 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 bahubbīhi 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 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 puñna)». Iti §21: Ekam pi ce pāṇam aduṭṭhacitto mettāyati kusalo [AN: kusali] tena hoti | sabbe’ve pāṇe manasānakampam [AN: manasānakampi] pahūtam-ariyo pakaroti puñna ||. 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 kamman 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: cetanāhām bhikkhave kamman 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 kamman 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 naththikavāda).\(^{13}\) Perhaps the most renowned canonical passage where this teaching is imparted is the Kaccā(ya)na-gottasuttot of the Saṁyutta-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; kittāvatā 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 khvāya Kaccāyana loko yebhuyyena attitaṁ ceva natthitaṁ ca […]. Sabba atthī 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 Mahācattārīṣakasutta of the Majjhima-nikāya. In this text Gotama speaks with a group of bhikkhus about noble right concentration (Ariyam vo, bhikkhave, sammāsamādhiṁ desissāmi). He explains that noble

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\(^{12}\) See, for instance, SN v, 421: the middle way is the Eightfold Noble Path (katamā ca sā bhikkhave majjhimā paṭipadā […]? Ayam eva aryo atthaṅgiko 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 Hindū 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 (sammađhiñña, sammaśanakappo, sammaśācā, samma-kammanto, samma-aṭṭhavāyāmo, sammasati). Yā kho, bhikkhave, imehi satthatā cittassa ekaggatā parikkhatā, ayaṃ vuccati, bhikkhave, ariyo sammasamādhī). Afterwards, he specifies that «there, o bhikkhus, right vision is preceding» (Tatra, bhikkhave, sammađhiñña pubbaŋgamā 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 (Micchāđhiṭṭhi: micchadhiṭṭi pajānati, sammađhiṭṭhi: sammađhiṭṭi pajānanti. Sā'ssa hoti sammađhiṭṭi).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 sāmanas 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, micchādiṭṭhi? Na t'hi dinnam, na t'hi viṭṭham, na t'hi hutan, na t'hi sukaṭadhukkaṭanām kammān phalaṃ vipāko, na t'hi ayaṃ loko, na t'hi paro loko, na t'hi mātā, na t'hi pitā, na t'hi sattā opātikā, na t'hi loke samaṇabrāhmaṇā sammaggatā sammapatipanna ve imaṃ ca lokam paraṅ ca lokam sayam abhiñña sacchikatvā pavedentī; ayaṃ, bhikkhave, micchādiṭṭhi).17

Now, we know, from the Sāmañṇaphalasutta 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 t'hi mātā, na t'hi 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 duškarakas, «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 Pūrṇa 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». Although the negation of an existing self seems to be the principal point in common between Nihilism, and Buddhist anattavāda, a point theoretically so important to have pushed the detractors of Buddhism to tax it with being Nihilist, 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». 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 kamman, 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


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 ucchedam vināsaṃ vibhavam paññapeti, M[N] I, 140); it is the same language that is used to describe the main thesis of Materialism, viz. itth’eke sato sattassa ucchedam vināsaṃ vibhavam paññapeti (DN 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 kamman, a follower of the doctrine of efficacy of actions» ([…] nābhijānāmi kaṇci ājīvakam saggūpam aśi naśatra ekena, so pāśi kamnavādī kiriyaṃvādī iti). 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 pandite ca kāyassa bhedā ucehi janti vinassanti, na honti param maraṇā ti), 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.

At least in these terms Buddhists speak about Materialists, calling them akiriyavādins (followers of the doctrine of inefficacy of actions). 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 sāvetā 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 puññābhisa/FL1E45hkhāra and apuññābhisa/FL1E45hkhāra, but āneñjābhisa/FL1E45hkhāra 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 Ānāṇjasappāyasutta 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 sa/FL1E45hkhāra 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 (āneñjā). 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, unwholsome 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 sassa tavāda seen by an ājivika (or «almost-ājivika») see Jayatilleke 1998:257-258 point of view – was also Pakudha Kaccāyana with his singular theory that everything is barren (vaijīha); Chattopadhyaya 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 Gosāla: 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 (Dakkhinaṇaṃ ce pi Gaṅgā-tīraṃ āgaccheyya hananto ghātento chindanto chedāpento pacanto pācento, n’atthi tato nidānām pāpanā n’atthi pāpassa āgamo. Uttaṇaṇa ce pi Gaṅgā-tīraṃ gaccheyya daṇḍanto dāpento yajanto yajāpento, n’atthi tato nidānām puṇṇāṃ n’atthi puṇṇassa āgamo. Dānena damena saṃyamena sacca-vajjena n’atthi puṇṇāṃ n’atthi puṇṇassa 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 (Pāṭhavī-kāyo āpo-kāyo tejo-kāyo vāyo-kāyo sukhe dukkhe jīva-sattame. Imo satta kāyā acaṭā acaṭa-vidhā animittā animmattā vañjhā kūṭaṭṭhā esikaṭṭhāviṭṭhitā. Te na iñjanti na vipariṇamanti na

 dóctrine 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 niyativāda, and (Ibid:149) his denial of any (particular) cause led him to think the universe as a whole rigidly directed by a deterministic law.
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\[ aṇṇam-aṇṇam vyābādhanti nālaṃ aṇṇam-aṇṇassa sukḥāya vā dukkhāya vā sukha-dukkhāya vā. \]^{28}

And the ājīvika Makkhali Gosāla’s ahetuvāda,\textsuperscript{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 pacayo sattānaṃ saṃkilesāya, ahetu-apaccaya sattā saṃkilissanti. N’atthi hetu n’atthi pacayo sattānaṃ visuddhiyā, ahetu-apaccaya sattā visujjhanti).\textsuperscript{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 viriyaṃ ti).\textsuperscript{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-parinātā).\textsuperscript{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:

\textsuperscript{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.

\textsuperscript{29} On the ājīvikas in general see principally Basham (1951).

\textsuperscript{30} DN I, 53. Same passage in MN I, 516-517; SN III, 210; etc.

\textsuperscript{31} AN I, 286-287.

\textsuperscript{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 Gosala’s concepts of niyati. If for Kassapa, niyati is an all-embracing full-deterministic law, «Makkhal 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 niyativāda- 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? Sammādiṭṭhiṁ p’ahaṁ bhikkhave dvayaṁ vadāmi. Atthi bhikkhave sammādiṭṭhi sāsavā puññabhāgiyā 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» (puññabhāgiya), 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 puññabhāgiya, 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» puññabhāgiya depends on, or is on the level of, the puññabhāgiya right vision

³³ MN III, 72.
³⁴ MN III, 72: Atthi dinna, atthi yiṭṭham, atthi hutam, atthi sukaṇṭhabhāgaṇaṁ kammaṁ phalaṁ vipāko [...] The direct opposition between these two views is made explicit by Gotama in MN I, 402, quoted below.
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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-vatthu). 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-vatṭhūni. 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’ – 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): daksinā 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 kamman, 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). 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-nirodha, in Yogasūtra 1, 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») to enter the first jhāna, but only sammā-samādhi has been equated by the Buddha with the practice of all the four jhānas. So we conclude that, as far as the custom of dāna as means of subsistence has been accepted by Buddhism probably from a brāhmaṇical milieu, so Buddhists have built their meditational systems developing some mental exercises already known by yogins and samaṇas before them.

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.


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.).


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 Kāḷāma 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 Opasāḍa 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 Opasāḍa 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 bhavam Caṅkī samaṇam Gotamaṃ dassanāya upasamkamitum. Samaṇo tveva Gotamo arahati bhavantaṃ Caṅkīṃ dassanāya upasamkamitum). 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» (Bhava/FL1E43h Ca/FL1E45hkī 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 Caṅkī –, whereas Nihilism is the philosophical expression of a bad moral habit (pāpa).  

3.c. The dialectical use of puñña and kusala

In the Apanṇakasutta 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. 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”» (Tam/kim maññatha gahapatayo: nanu’me sama/ṇhabrāhma/ṇha aññamaṇṇassa ujuvipaccanīkavādā ti. – Evambhante). 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 Apanṇakasutta.

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» (Santa/yeva kho pana param lokam: natthi paro loko ti’ssa diṭṭhi hoti, sā’ssa hoti micchādiṭṭhi), 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

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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 paṭisaṅcikkhati: Sace kho na’thi paro loko evamaya bhavam purisasuggalo kāyassa bhedā sothimattānaṁ karissati, sace kho aththi paro loko evamaya bhavam purisasuggalo kāyassa bhedā parammaranā apāyaṁ duggatiṁ vinipātam nirayaṁ upapajjissati. Kāmaṁ kho pana mā’hu paro loko, hotu nesaṁ bhavatam samanabrāhmaṇānaṁ saccam vacanam, atha ca panāyaṁ bhavam purisasuggalo diṭṭhe va dhamme viññūnaṁ gārayho: dussīlo purisasuggalo micchādiṭṭhi nathikavādo ti. Sace kho ath’eva paro loko evam imassa bhoto purisasuggagalassa ubhayattha kaliggaho: yaṁ ca diṭṭhe va dhamme viññūnaṁ gārayho, yaṁ ca kāyassa bhedā parammaranā apāyaṁ duggatiṁ vinipātam nirayaṁ upapajjissati. Evam assāya apannakko dhammo dussamatte samādiṁno ekaṁsaṁ phartvā tiṭṭhaṁ, riṁcati kusalam thānaṁ).

Two points are to be underlined here: the wrong Nihilistic vision (nathikavāda) is described as dussīla, «morally bad», and Nihilism is said to be a unilateral (ekaṁsa) 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» (Santāṁ yeva kho pana param lokāṁ: atthi paro loko ti’ssa diṭṭhi hoti, sā’ssa hoti sammādiṭṭhi), 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 samanas and

49 MN I, 403. Compare with MN I, 515-516 (particularly with the following Ajita’s statement: tesaṁ tucchaṁ musā vilāpo ye keci atthikavādaṁ 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 paṭisaṅcikkhati: Sace kho atthi paro loko evamayaṁ bhavam purisapuggalo kāyassa bhedā parammaranā sugaṁ saggām lokam upapajjissati. Kāmaṁ kho pana mā’hu paro loko, hotu nesaṁ bhavatam sāmaṇabrāhmaṇānaṁ saccām vacaṁ, atha ca panāyam bhavam purisapuggalo diṭṭhe va dhamme viññūṇaṁ pāsamso: sīlavā purisapuggalo sammādiṭṭhi athikavādo ti. Sace kho atth’eva paro loko evam imassa bhoto purisapuggalassā ubhayattha kaṭṭagagho: yaṁ ca diṭṭhe va dhamme viññūṇaṁ pāsamso, yaṁ ca kāyassa bhedā parammaranā sugaṁ saggām lokam upapajjissati. Evam assāya apanṇhako dhammo susamatto samādiṭṭho ubhayaṁsaṁ pharitvā tiṭṭhati, riṅcati akusalaṁ ṭhānaṁ).

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, 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 (ubhayaṁsa 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 gods» (Atthi bhikkhave āsavā nirayagamanīyā, atthi āsavā tiracchānayonigamanīyā, atthi āsavā pittivisayagamanīyā, atthi āsavā manussalokagamanīyā, atthi āsavā devalokagamanīyā). 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 (\(sotthimattāna/FL1E43h\ karissati\)), 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», sotthi, is the Pāli form of Sanskrit svasti, composed by su- («good») and asti, from the root √as («to be»). Sotthi 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» (\(apannya\)), 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 paṭisañcikkhati, «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 Apanṇakasutta 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 sotthi 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».\textsuperscript{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 Caṇḍī 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 (*viññūṇāṃ pāsamso, viññūṇam 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.\textsuperscript{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 ṭhānam*), and the Eternalist «disregards the unwholesome stance» (*riñcati akusalam ṭhānam*). If, until now, we have pointed out that *sassata* is connected with *puñña*, and *ucchedava* is connected with *puñña*, 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 *kusala*, without signifying, however, that whoever performs

\textsuperscript{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 vā na ārādheyya nāyam dhammaṃ kusalan ti).

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-saṁgraha reminds us – a perspective «difficult to remove» (durucchedaṃ).

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 (sammādiṭṭhim 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 (sāsavas), and in direct opposition to one another (MN 1, 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,
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 nijjñā hoti; ye ca micchādiṭṭhipaccayā aneke pāpakā akusalā dhammā sambhavanti, te c’assa nijjñā 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 micchādiṭṭhim pajahati, sato sammādiṭṭhim upasampajja viharati, sāssa hoti sammāsāti. Itissime tayo dhammā sammādiṭṭhim anuparidhāvanti anuparivattanti, seyyathidham: sammādiṭṭhi sammāvāyāmo sammāsātī).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 sammānāna («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, 73. 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; ayaṃ, bhikkhave, sammā-ājīvo sāsavo puññabhāgiyo upadhivepakkko).
64 See the interesting discussion on the liberated by wisdom (paññāvimutta arahant) in Bodhi (2007).
vippassana-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 riṇcati akusala but not yet kusalam 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 Mahācattārīśakasutta, when he describes the ten «rightnesses», the Buddha specifies: «Thus, indeed, o bhikkhu, the disciple possesses the eight constituents of the path, the arahant possesses the ten constituents» (Iti kho, bhikkhave, aṭṭhaṅgasmānāgato sekho patipado dasaṅgasmānāgato arahā hoti).67 A passage of the Sappurisavagga of the

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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

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.
Aṅguttara-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).  

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, (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, 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. 

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.  

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

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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 ānuttariya/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).

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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