It can be understood that the teaching on *kusala-akusala* and *puñña-pāpa* belong to Buddhist fundamental ethical teachings. These teachings interpret what is good and bad from an ethical point of view but the purpose of this article is to examine the ethical context of such words in pre-Buddhist times. The ethical teaching regarding *kusala-akusala*, the unique teaching of Buddhist philosophy, raises the question whether there were such ethical evaluations in the pre-Buddhist era or not. Therefore this article focuses attention specifically on this area of study from the Vedic to the Upanishadic eras.

Vedic people revered the invisible power of gods thought to be immanent in natural phenomena. They believed that they could receive whatever good results from this invisible natural power through the performance of sacrifices. They thought that these results could be expected to appear in this world or in the world beyond. It can be assumed that though the developed theories on *kamma*, causality and rebirth were not mentioned in the texts of this era, the beginnings of those fundamental teachings could be traced to those texts. The Vedic *suktas*, Surya, Varuṇa, Yama and Pitrū … etc. exhibit important evidence of this fact.

The Vedic people believed there was an invisible power in nature. They who didn’t understand this concept tried to interpret the invisible power as a personification of a divine being. They assumed it was a form of being or a fearful energy in nature. They were keen to understand the truth of nature through its invisible and visible activity. Thus the concept
of rta that arose in Vedic texts was an important development of this belief of an immanent power in and behind nature.

In the Vedic era it was believed that the concept of rta as a law of the universe was a fundamental teaching of kamma. Rta is the truth and order of the world and anṛta is the fall and disorder of the world.¹ In the Vedic era it was also believed that the sacrifice was kamma. It was a principle that had to be obeyed by all human beings and gods of the whole world. If there was any regulated order in the world it had to be an active universally applicable principle. Anyway, if its results did not appear in this world, then they must surely appear in some other place.

The Ṛgveda exhibits the overarching universality and rigidity of the kamma doctrine presented by later Indian philosophers. The primary meaning of the concept of rta is a universally pervading order that is permanent. Furthermore, it is expressed in the phenomena of rituals such as sacrifices, oblations, etc. It is not only that the concept of rta in Vedic literature is depicted as a phenomenon inherent in the world, but behavior and ethics are also prescribed in the concept of rta. It embodies order, cosmic, the ethical and the ritualistic.²

We find the word iṣṭāpūrta in the Vedas which was a fundamental concept of the teaching of kamma and rebirth at a later date.³ The word iṣṭāpūrta originated from the root of √yaj. “pürata” meaning helpful to others. The whole word, iṣṭāpūrta, represents “sacrificer”. Macdonell explained this word as wish, sacrifice, fulfillment and reward of pious works.⁴ Theodore Benfey explains it as the performance of pious and charitable deeds.⁵ Monier Williams interpreted it as charitable effects originating in charitable action. According to the Ṛgveda, human beings go to heaven and experience happiness as a result of iṣṭāpūrta.

Enas appears in RV 1.24.9, with the meaning of muñcati where the rṣi prays to Varuṇa: “Deliver us from whatever sin (enas) we have committed.” Another stanza (14) of the same hymn combines enas with
śrathayati: “With homage, with sacrifices, with offerings, we turn down thy wrath, O Varuṇa, Wise Asura, as a ruling king, free us from the sins (enas) we have committed.”

Another example of enas appearing with the meaning of muñcati is met with in RV. VIII. 18, a hymn mainly directed to the Ādityās who in this hymn are said to be Varuṇa, Mitra, Aryaman, Bhaga and Savitṛ. The ṛṣi mentions various kinds of evil from which he wants to be delivered: enmity (dveṣas), enemies (sṛdh), physical weakness (rapas), disease (amīvā), malignity (durmati), distress (aṁhas), want (āmati), disaster (durita) etc. In the midst of these things sin (enas) is mentioned: “Grant to us, O Ādityās, the shelter that delivers (mumocati) the sinner (enavat) from any sin (enas), Ye rich ones.” Sin is here regarded as an evil of the same kind as other evils, but in attracting the verb muñcati it differs from them.

Āgas has been met with as a synonym of enas. In the Rgveda, āgas is less frequent than enas, but anāgas (or anāga), “without sin”, is more frequent than anenas. In certain instances we find anāgas, āgas and enas together: “Most youthful god, whatever sin (āgas) we have committed in a human way, through thoughtlessness, make us sinless (anāga) to Aditi.” As is seen from these two examples, anāgas is combined especially with Aditi. Scholars have had varying opinions on the character of this female deity though of uncertain divinity. The material at hand does not permit any final conclusion. When her name is used in the expression “sinless to Aditi”, it brings to mind not a concrete divinity but only the sound of the word, meaning “not fettered”.

The word for “sin” is here drugdha, related with druḥ, used as a synonym for enas and agas. Ṛṣi wants to put the whole blame of this unknown sin on various things: delusion, drink, anger, dick, lack of thought, an older man. There is no sign of a repenting sinner taking the guilt onto himself. Directly the poet frees his own will from
responsibility. The sin may have been committed even in sleep. As a rule anṛṭa signifies the sign connected with speech, but it may also have a wider context.

RV VII. 89 is a cry for mercy from a man struck with dropsy, standing in “the midst of waters” and fearing to die. In this stanza, the words used for sin are abhirodha and enas. Kilbiṣa is used in RV. X.97.16 in the same manner as heḍana, combined with deva. To the plant the prayer is directed “may they (the plants) deliver (muñcatu) me from that which comes from a curse, from that which comes from Varuṇa, from the fetter of Yama, every sin against the gods (devakilbiṣa).” The plants take away sin as well as other evils.

The dharman, dhāman, rta and vṛta are used side by side as expressions of a law that operates similarly in nature in the sacrifice and the moral life. As a rule, Varuṇa appears as the guardian of the law. He is the king, punishing transgressions of the law and very naturally such transgression may be called anṛta. Another example of how rta and anṛta are contrasted is met with in RV. I. 152.1, where MitraūVaruṇa are said to conquer anṛta and keep rta. Anṛta may also be combined with satya. As satya is usually translated “truth”, so anṛta is usually translated “untruth”.

Thus the rṣis speak of the anger of various gods, and ascribe their wrath to sins, committed by men. Every god may be appeased and forgive sins when addressed with prayers and sacrifices. There are no clear distinctions made between sin and other kinds of evil. Disease may be regarded as a consequence of sin, but not always is there such a connection between cause and effect. How the text makes no distinction between committed and non-committed sin at the same time, as they declare both kinds of evil belong to sin, may be illustrated in RV. X. 63.8. “O gods, deliver (paripipṛta) us today from committed (kṛta), from non-committed (akṛta) sin (enas).”
The same words for sin are met with in Atharvan Veda as in Rgveda: *hedana, enas, āgas, drugdha, duṣkṛta, ṛṇa, kilbiṣa, anṛta*. We have seen forms of *muñcati* frequently used in Atharvan Veda to express the deliverance from disease. Sin and disease being most intimately connected in Atharvan Veda, we find *muñcati* used frequently with words for sin, too.

According to the Atharvan Veda sins may be committed knowingly or unknowingly, sleeping or waking. We find the disease called *enasya*, sinful, caused by sin. *Anṛta* is used in Atharvan Veda mainly in the same way as in the Rgveda. Often it is contrasted with *satya*. In AV. IV.9. 7, the ṛṣi says that he will speak truth not untruth (*satyam vaksyāmi nānṛtam*). *Anṛta* is a transgression committed by the tongue against the law, dharman of Varuṇa. From Atharvan Veda and its non-official charms “I proceed to the official rituals as we meet them in Yajur Veda and in the Brāhmaṇa.” There sin has the same aspects as in Rgveda and Atharvan Veda. It is the transgression of heavenly laws, especially those of Varuṇa, and it is a physical evil that can be wiped or washed off. In Atharvan Veda we have found several examples of sins committed in social life.

Although in the Brāhmaṇa literature, we find the word ‘kusala’, it is not employed in the meaning of ethics. In the Sathapatha Brāhmaṇa the word *kusala* is used in the sense of clever.

In the Itareya Brāhmaṇa *kusala* is used with the meaning of “good”. It is thought that one should not talk of evil to a Brāhmaṇa. Still this is not ethics. In the Brāhmaṇa literature, the use of the word *kusala* in related to sacrifice. Therefore it is not based on a pure analysis in terms of ethics.

In Brāhmaṇa literature of later times we find several pairs of such words as *sukṛta-duṣkṛta, sādhu-asādhu, punya-pāpa* etc. They are pairs of opposites. In Sathapatha Brāhmaṇa there appears a judgemental quality...
of assessing whether a person is good or bad in relation to whether he is qualified to go to heaven or hell, like weighing qualities of good and bad on a pair of scales. In Sathapatha Brāhmaṇa we also find a word akilbiṣa which mean stainless\textsuperscript{21} and the word enas which mean evil.\textsuperscript{22}

Monier Williams interprets it as plan, design, intention, resolution, determination, purpose, power, ability, deliberation, consultation, intelligence, understanding and a sacrificial rite or ceremony.\textsuperscript{23} Benfey explained it as power (RV. I. 64. 13) and sacrifice (RV.VII. 79).\textsuperscript{24} Mr. Apte interprets it as follows:

1. A sacrifice
2. An epithet of Vishnu
3. One of the ten Prajapatis
4. Intelligence, talent
5. Power, ability
6. Plan, design, purpose
7. Resolution
8. Desire, will
9. Fitness
10. Deliberation
11. Worship\textsuperscript{25}

The word kratu in Brāhmaṇa literature has the connotation of determining whether the person is qualified to attain heaven or not. The Ṛgveda states that an evil doer at death gets annihilated and the virtuous attains eternal life. But in the Brāhmaṇa literature it is stated that both the evil doer and the virtuous person are reborn and experience the result of their actions. We gather from this that there was a concept of rebirth in the Brāhmaṇas. One finds in the Sathapatha Brāhmaṇa that man lives in a world that he himself has constructed\textsuperscript{26} and there is a saying that whatever food that a man eats in this life, he is eaten by that food in his next life.\textsuperscript{27} This means that whatever action performed by a person in this life, brings him a corresponding result in the next.
By the time of the Upaniṣads, the concept of good and evil is explained with subtle distinctions. This implies that in the Upaniṣad the word *kusala* came to bear an ethical value. The Chāndogya Upaniṣad explains the word “*kusala*” with the analogy of a well-lit fire. This simile clarifies the meaning of good further.\(^\text{28}\)

We find Upaniṣadic literature devoting much more space to ethical considerations than the Vedic and Brāhmaṇa literature. The Upaniṣads criticize hitherto held ideas of sacrifice. They moved more towards the spiritual development aspect in man.\(^\text{29}\) They believed, for instance, that a person became either a human being or god or attained liberation not by performing sacrifices but through spiritual development.\(^\text{30}\) They began to see that it was not the sacrifice that held the key to liberation from the fetters of evil but *kamma* and the concept of *kamma* also underwent a change, the emphasis being laid more on the psychological aspect than mere physical action alone. Therefore what began to figure prominently was not the sacrifice but restraint of the senses, the practice of austerity, celibacy, purity and ethics. It is by good action that human beings became gods. They also believed that it is determination of the mind that creates one’s future existence, which meant that one had to make a determination to perform good action.\(^\text{31}\) Here we see the beginning of the concept of *kamma* as will or volition. Therefore the origin of *kamma* is seen in the concept of *kṛtus*.\(^\text{32}\) Then the idea arose that merit and demerit originated from what we do. Now we see the seers of the Upaniṣads turning towards the psychological aspect and its relation to human behavior. So it can be seen that these ideas are very akin to Buddhist ideas, ideas relating to *kamma* and rebirth, that good actions send one to heaven and bad actions to hell, that to liberate oneself from rebirth one must attain self-realization. This, they believed, could be achieved not by external actions but through spiritual development based on the practice of austerity, celibacy, faith and ethics. Those who developed these qualities will not be born again.
In the Chandogya Upaniṣad, we find the concept that those who do good deeds are born in high castes: brāhmaṇa, kṣatriya, vaiṣya, etc., and those who do bad deeds are born in low castes such as śudra, nesāda etc. In the Chandogya Upaniṣad ramaṇīyacarana is equated to the idea of kusala and kapucarana equated to the idea of akusala. The former causes a person to be born in a high caste and latter to be born in a lower caste.

We can see that in the Upaniṣads the idea of spiritual development came to the fore and revealed great affinity with Buddhist ideas.

ABBREVIATIONS

AB Aitareya Brāhmaṇam
RV Ṛgveda
AV Atharvan Veda
SB Sathapatha Brāhmaṇam
CU Chandogya Upaniṣad
TU Taittiriya Upaniṣad
BU Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad

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NOTES

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8 RV, VII.86.4 / II.29.5
9 RV, I.24.15 / IV.124
10 RV, 1.24.15. In RV. IV.12.4
12 RV, VII.86.5
13 RV, VII 86.
14 RV, VII.86.6
16 AV, VI.115.
18 RV, VII.87.7.
19 RV, IV.54.3.
20 RV, VII.87.7.
26 SB, XI 2-7.33
27 SB, II.5.2.3.
28 CU, I. 12. 1-5
29 TU, I.2.1.
30 BU, iv, 4.5.