Meta-ethics: Teachings on Good and Bad in the Pre Buddhist Era.

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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 Pitru … 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 *ṛta* 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 *ṛta* as a law of the universe was a fundamental teaching of *kamma*. *Ṛta* 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 *ṛta* 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 *ṛta* in Vedic literature is depicted as a phenomenon inherent in the world, but behavior and ethics are also prescribed in the concept of *ṛta*. 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. "pūrata" 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 *ṛṣi* 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*)[6] 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.[7]

Āgas has been met with as a synonym of *enas*. In the Ṛgveda, *āgas*[8] is less frequent than *enas*, but *anāgas* (or *anāga*)[9], "without sin", is more frequent than *anenas*.[10] 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".[11]

The word for "sin" is here *drugdha*[12], related with *druh*, 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.[13] As a rule *anṛta*[14] 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*, *ṛta* 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 *ṛta* and *anṛta* are contrasted is met with in RV. I. 152.1, where Mitra ū Varuṇa are said to conquer *anṛta* and keep *ṛta*. *Anṛta* may also be combined with *satya.* As *satya* is usually translated "truth", so *anṛta* is usually translated "untruth".

Thus the *ṛṣis* 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)*."[15]

The same words for sin are met with in Atharvan Veda as in Ṛgveda: *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.[16] We find the disease called *enasya*, sinful, caused by sin. *Anṛta* is used in Atharvan Veda mainly in the same way as in the Ṛgveda. Often it is contrasted with *satya*. In AV. IV.9. 7, the *ṛṣi* says that he will speak truth not untruth (*satyaṁ vakṣyāmi nānṛtaṁ*). *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 Brāhmaṇas." There sin has the same aspects as in Ṛgveda 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.[17]

Altough in the Brāhmana literature, we find the word '*kusala*', it is not employed in the meaning of ethics.[18] In the Sathapatha Brāhmana the word *kusala* is used in the sense of clever.[19]

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, puṇya-pāpa* etc.[20] 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[21] and the word *enas* which mean evil.[22]

Monier Williams interprets it as plan, design, intention, resolution, determination, purpose, power, ability, deliberation, consultation, intelligence, understanding and a sacrificial rite or ceremony.[23] Benfey explained it as power (RV. I. 64. 13) and sacrifice (RV.VII. 79).[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[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[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.[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.[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.[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.[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.[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 *kṛtu*.[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 *ṣudra*, *nesāda* etc. In the Chandogya Upaniṣad *ramaṇīyacaraṇa* is equated to the idea of *kusala* and *kapucaraṇa* 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.

ABBREVATIONS

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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[2] RV. VII.86
[3] RV. X.14.8
[4] Macdonell, A.N, *A Practical Sanskrit Dictionary*, London, 1924, p 46.
[5] Benfey Theodore, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, New Delhi, 1979, p 247.
[6] RV, VII.86.3
[7] Rodhe, Sten, *Deliver us from evil*.1946. Lund. p 139.
[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

[11] Rodhe, Sten, *Deliver us from evil*.1946. Lund. p 139.
[12] RV, VII.86.5
[13] RV, VII 86.
[14] RV, VII.86.6
[15] Rodhe, Sten, *Deliver us from evil*.1946. Lund. p 147.
[16] AV, VI.115.
[17] Rodhe, Sten, *Deliver us from evil*.1946. Lund. p 159.
[18] RV, VII.87.7.
[19] RV, IV.54.3.
[20] RV, VII.87.7.
[21] SB, Editor Acarya Satyavrata Samasram, First Edition 1908, Hitavrata Chatterji, Calcutta, xi 4-2-1.
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[24] Benfey, Theodore, *A Sanskrit- English Dictionary*, Asian Educational Services- New Delhi, 1991, p.224.
[25] Apte, Vidyndhar Vaman, *A Concise Sanskrit- English Dictionary,* First Reprint 1986, Gian Publishing House, Delhi p. 394.
[26] SB, XI 2-7.33
[27] SB, II.5.2.3.
[28] CU, I. 12. 1-5
[29] TU, 1.2.1.
[30] BU, iv, 4.5.
[31] Macdonell, A.N. *Vedic Reader*, p. 155.
[32] Radhakrishna*, Pricipal of Upanishad*, First Published 1953, George Allen & Unwin Ltd, London, p. 355.