Akålika in the Buddhist canon

(2) The word *akålika* as it occurs in the early Buddhist scriptures is translated ‘immediate, present, at hand’ (CPD), ‘immediate, not dependent on lapse of time’ (BHSD), ‘not delayed, immediate, in this world’ (PTSD, s.v. kålika), ‘without delay, immediate’ (Childers), etc. The Pāli commentaries (e.g., Vism 216; Nidd II. 52, 267; Pj II. 456, 605; etc.) support this interpretation. The present article is meant to investigate if this interpretation fits the contexts in which the word occurs, and if a better interpretation may be possible.

The contexts of *akålika* in the early Buddhist scriptures are few. In the Pāli texts it occurs as a rule in apposition with the words *dhamma*, *sandiṭṭhika*, *ehipassika*, or just *dhamma*, *ehipassika* (PTC); also with *sandiṭṭhika*, *ehipassika* (SN IV. 339; AN I. 221; II. 198). Minor variations occur, such as *brahmacariya sandiṭṭhika akålika* (Sn 567 = MN II. 146 = Th 837), *dhammena diṭṭhena ... akålikena* (SN II. 58–59; IV. 328). Similarly in the Sanskrit *Mahåvastu* (III. 200) *akålika* comes in a sequence with *dharmavinaya, sāmṛṣṭika, ehipaṣyika*.

Regarding the meanings of *sāmṛṣṭika*/*sandiṭṭhika* and *ehipaṣyika*/*ehipassika* there is little doubt. The former means ‘visible, of the present (life)’ and recalls the oft-recurring phrase *diṭṭhe dharme/*diṭṭhe va dhamme ‘in the present life’. The latter means ‘that invites (every man) to come and see’ (BHSD). Both these terms therefore emphasize that the aim of the teaching of the Buddha can be attained in this life.

Since *akålika* must be more or less synonymous with these two words,1 the usual interpretation does not fit well. I propose the translation ‘not connected with death’. *kåla* carries the meaning ‘death’, and is often used in this sense in the Buddhist scriptures, esp. together with the root *kṛ* and its derivatives.

There is a priori much to support this interpretation of the term *akålika*. We know that Buddhism arose in surroundings where different ways of salvation competed with each other. The Buddhist scriptures often criticize these alternative ways, and in particular dedicate much space to the criticism of the Jainas (*nigaṇṭha*). Of the Jainas we know that they expected liberation — in the case of those who were qualified for it — to take place at the moment of death (Schubring, 1935: 206-07), and there is reason to suppose that others too accepted this

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1 SN IV. 41 and AN I. 157 seem to give the phrase *sandiṭṭhiko dhammo akåliko ehipassiko opaneyyiko paccattaṃ veditabbo viññëhi* as an extended version of just *sandiṭṭhiko dhammo*, thus again suggesting that all these adjectives are more or less synonymous. AN I. 158 has the same with *nibbåna* instead of *dhamma*. Coomaraswamy’s (1939: 117 f.) proposal to understand the doctrine (*dhamma*) to be both ‘here and now’ (*diṭṭhe dhamme*) and ‘not in time’ (*akålika*) is not convincing.
AKĀLIKA IN THE BUDDHIST CANON

position (Bronkhorst, 1986). Buddhism differed in preaching liberation in life, not at death; the three attributes which we study, among them akālika, emphasize this.

There are tow, and as far as I know only two, passages in the Buddhist canon where the context allows us to determine the meaning of akālika; in both these passages — which are virtually identical in the parts which concern our problem — this word is understood in the sense ‘not connected with death’. SN I. 8-12 (Samiddhi Sutta; no. 1.2.10) describes the discussion between a god (devatā) and Samiddhi, a Buddhist monk; in SN I. 117-18 (Sambahulā Sutta; no. 4.3.1) the discussion takes place between Māra in the form of a Brahman and a group of monks. The word kāla is often used in the discussion, in both its senses ‘time’ and ‘death’, and there is consequently much play on words. I give the important parts of the Samiddhi Sutta.

The god advises Samiddhi not to turn to begging until he has enjoyed life, in order that kāla — here obviously ‘time’ — may not pass him by. Samiddhi replies: “I do not know your kāla; kāla is hidden, is not seen. Therefore I beg without having enjoyed [life], in order that kāla may not pass me by.” (kālam vo‘ham na jānāmi / channo kālo na dissatā / tasmā abhutvā bhikkhāmi / mā maṃ kālo upaccagā’ti.) Here kāla refers to ‘death’.3 The god then urges Samiddhi: “Enjoy the human pleasures, do not pursue what is kālika, abandoning what is sandhiṭṭhika.” (bhuñja bhikkhu mānusake kāme [189] māsandiṭṭhikaṃ hitvā kālikam anudhāvī tī) Samiddhi replies: “Not indeed do I pursue what is kālika, abandoning what is sandhiṭṭhika. Rather, I pursue what is sandhiṭṭhika, abandoning what is kālika. For pleasures have been said to be kālika by the Exalted One, … This doctrine (dhamma) [on the other hand] is sandhiṭṭhika, akālika, ehipassika.” (na khvāham āvuso sandhiṭṭhikaṃ hitvā kālikam anudhāvāni / kālikam ca khvāham āvuso hitvā sandhiṭṭhikam anudhāvāmi / kālikā hi āvuso kāmā vuttā … / sandiṭṭhiko ayaṃ dhammo akāliko ehipassiko … /) It seems clear that Samiddhi turns the tables on his opponent by taking kāla in the sense ‘death’ rather than ‘time’. Pleasures now become kālika ‘connected with death’,4 and the teaching of the Buddha is akālika ‘not connected with death’.

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2 I exclude late works like the Niddesa.
3 This was recognized earlier, e.g. by Rhys Davids (1917: 15 n. 1), Geiger (1930: 15 n. 1), and indeed the Pāli commentary (Spk I. 40).
4 Later on in the same sutta the Buddha utters some obscure stanzas, the first of which may here have to be interpreted in the light of this conversation. It reads: akkheyyasāṅhino sattā, akkheyyasam paṭiṭṭhī / akkheyyaṃ aparipāṇīya, yogam āyanti maccuno // I tentatively propose the following translation: “Beings form conceptions of what is to be expressed (by words like kāla), they base themselves on what is to be expressed (by such words). When they do not understand what is to be expressed (by kāla etc.), they come under the yoke of death (maccu).”
REFERENCES


ABBREVIATIONS

(Abbreviations of Pāli works as in CPD)


CPD *A Critical Pāli Dictionary*, begun by V. Trenckner. Published by the Royal Danish Academy. Copenhagen, 1924 f,

