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Akālika in the Buddhist canon*(published in: *Studien zur Indologie und Iranistik* 10 (1984 [1985]), pp. 187-190)

The word *akālika* 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. *kālika*), ‘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 *akālika* 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 *brahmacariyaṃ sandiṭṭhikaṃ akālikaṃ* (Sn 567 = MN II. 146 = Th 837), *dhammena diṭṭhena ... akālikena* (SN II. 58-59; IV. 328). Similarly in the Sanskrit *Mahāvastu* (III. 200) *akālika* comes in a sequence with *dharmavinaya*, *sāṃdr̥ṣṭika*, *ehipaśyika*.

Regarding the meanings of *sāṃdr̥ṣṭika* / *sandiṭṭhika* and *ehipaśyika* / *ehipassika* there is little doubt. The former means ‘visible, of the present (life)’ and recalls the oft-recurring phrase *dr̥ṣṭe 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 *akālika* must be more or less synonymous with these two words,¹ [188] the usual interpretation does not fit well. I propose the translation ‘not connected with death’. *kāla* 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 *akālika*. 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 akāliko chipassiko opaneyyiko pacattam veditabbo viññūhi* 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 *nibbānaṃ* instead of *dhammo*. Coomaraswamy’s (1939: 117 f.) proposal to understand the doctrine (*dhamma*) to be both ‘here and now’ (*diṭṭhe dhamme*) and ‘not in time’ (*akālika*) is not convincing.

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 two, and as far as I know only two, passages in the Buddhist canon² 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.” (*kālaṃ vo’haṃ na jānāmi / channo kālo na dissati // tasmā abhuvā 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 *sandiṭṭhika*.” (*bhuñja bhikkhu mānusaṃ kāme [189] mā sandiṭṭhikaṃ hitvā kālikaṃ anudhāvī ti*) Samiddhi replies: “Not indeed do I pursue what is *kālika*, abandoning what is *sandiṭṭhika*. Rather, I pursue what is *sandiṭṭhika*, abandoning what is *kālika*. For pleasures have been said to be *kālika* by the Exalted One, ... This doctrine (*dhamma*) [on the other hand] is *sandiṭṭhika*, *akālika*, *chipassika*.” (*na khvāhaṃ āvuso sandiṭṭhikaṃ hitvā kālikaṃ anudhāvāmi / kālikaṃ ca khvāhaṃ āvuso hitvā sandiṭṭhikaṃ anudhāvāmi / kālikā hi āvuso kāmā vuttā ... / sandiṭṭhiko ayaṃ dhammo akāliko chipassiko ... /.*)

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’.

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: *akkheyyasaññino sattā, akkheyyasmim patitṭhitā / akkheyyam apariññāya, 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*).”

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ABBREVIATIONS

(Abbreviations of Pāli works as in CPD)

- BHSD *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Dictionary*, by Frankling Edgerton. New Haven: Yale University Press. 1953.
- Childers *A Dictionary of the Pali Language*, by Robert Caesar Childers. London: Trübner & Co. 1875.
- CPD *A Critical Pāli Dictionary*, begun by V. Trenckner. Published by the Royal Danish Academy. Copenhagen, 1924 f,
- Mahāvastu *Mahāvastu*, ed. by É Senart. Paris: Imprimerie Nationale. 1882-97.
- PTC *Pāli Tipiṭakam Concordance*, listed by F. L. Woodward, E. M. Hare and others. London: Luzac. 1952 f.
- PTSD *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary*, edited by T. W. Rhys Davids and William Stede. Chipstead, Surrey. 1925.