

## Just Be Good (or why Pascal is wrong)

“Just be good” might sound trite or reductionist to some. However, this is exactly what the Apanṇaka Sutta (M 60) basically tells us, and in a very convincing way. *Apanṇaka* can be translated as “what is sure, or the sure teaching.” In short, the Buddha persuasively assures us why it is better for us to do good rather than bad.

The Buddha unreservedly rejects three wrong views common in his days and which are also prevalent today. These wrong views are:

- (1) Nihilism: that there is neither morality (goodness) nor life after death.
- (2) Amoralism: that there is neither good nor evil (it’s all right to kill, etc).
- (3) Determinism: that there neither causes nor conditions; everything is fated.

The first wrong view is popular with the materialists who claim that this is our one and only life: so let us enjoy it to the fullest even if we have to break the law. The second view is that there is no morality: if you can get away with it, then do it. The third view is that since everything is fated or luck, there is no point making any personal effort; we might as well give up and let things be.

The Buddha says that one who accepts any of these three wrong views would see no reason to keep away from greed, hate or delusion. Since this is my only life, let me get and do what I want. Since there is neither good nor evil, it’s all right to desire for anything, or to hate, or to believe anything. Since all is fated, whatever happens happens, whether good or bad; so there is no point of our initiating anything.

The Buddha gives us a simple assurance: it is better to do good than do bad. Suppose we habitually do bad: if there is neither morality nor hereafter, nothing happens to us, as it were. But if there *are* morality and the hereafter – that is, rebirth or afterlife is true, then we will face negative and painful rebirth.

Suppose we habitually do bad: if there is neither good nor bad, nothing happens to us. But if there are good and bad – that is, karma is true – then we will have to face our negative and painful karmic results.

Suppose we habitually do bad: if everything is determined, nothing happens to us. But if our actions are efficacious, they have consequences, then we will suffer painful results.

On the other hand, suppose we habitually do good; that is, avoid greed, hate and delusion. If there is neither morality nor the hereafter, then nothing happens to us, as it were. But if there *are* morality and the hereafter – that is, rebirth or afterlife is true – then we will enjoy wholesome rebirth, all the same.

Let us habitually do good: if there is neither good nor bad, nothing happens to us. But if there are good and bad – that is, karma is true – then we will enjoy good karmic fruits, all the same.

Let us habitually do good: if everything is determined, nothing happens to us. But if our actions are efficacious, they have consequences, then we will enjoy positive results, all the same.<sup>1</sup>

About 2000 years after the Buddha, in 1670, French philosopher Blaise Pascal, came up with this wager, a challenge, why it is more profitable to believe in God:

- If you believe in God:  
If God exists, you go to heaven: your gain is infinite.  
If God does not exist, your loss (because of mistaken belief) is finite.
- If you do not believe in God:  
If God does not exist, your gain is finite and therefore negligible.  
If God exists, your loss is infinite: your gain is zero, and you may be punished.

The basic flaws in Pascal's wager are clear, for example:

- (1) We assume that there is only one God: most religions and cultures believe that there are many Gods and gods.
- (2) All the God-religions believe there is only one God, their God. So which God should we choose?
- (3) If God is all-loving, would he not tolerate both belief and unbelief?
- (4) Who gives you the right to speak for God anyway? To resort to a wager (that is, a gamble) only shows you lack faith in such a belief.<sup>2</sup>

An unwholesome point about such a wager is that it is a triumphalist threat. We only need to look a little closer to the Buddha's own assurance (not a wager) that it is better to do good. Please study the Buddha's gentle assurance and think for yourself. If you still cannot see the assurance, look at it again in the years ahead. The Buddha calls it an assurance for a very good reason: you are assured of true happiness here and now.

Piya Tan ©2011

---

<sup>1</sup> For a detail study, see **Apāṇṇaka Sutta** (M 60/1:400-413) = SD 35.5:  
<http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/35.5-Apannaka-S-m60-piya.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> For a detail study, see **Kesa,puttiya Sutta** (A 3.65/1:188-193) = SD 35.4a:  
<http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/35.4a-Kesaputtiya-S-a3.65-piya.pdf>