

The Kalama Sutta

The Buddha's Charter of Free Inquiry

Translated from the Pali by

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Contents

- Preface
- Supplementary Texts
- The Instruction to the Kalamas

Preface

The instruction of the Kalamas (Kalama Sutta) is justly famous for its encouragement of free inquiry; the spirit of the sutta signifies a teaching that is exempt from fanaticism, bigotry, dogmatism, and intolerance.

The reasonableness of the Dhamma, the Buddha's teaching, is chiefly evident in its welcoming careful examination at all stages of the path to enlightenment.

Indeed, the whole course of training for wisdom culminating in the purity of the consummate one (the arahant) is intimately bound up with examination and analysis of things internal: the eye and visible objects, the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and tastes, the body and tactile impressions, the mind and ideas.

Thus, since all phenomena have to be correctly understood in the field of Dhamma, insight is operative throughout.

In this sutta, it is active in rejecting the bad and adopting the good way, in the extracts given below clarifying the basis of knowledge of conditionality and arhatship.

Here it may be mentioned that the methods of examination in the Kalama Sutta and in the extracts cited here, have sprung from the knowledge of things as they are and that the tenor of these methods are implied in all straight thinking. Further, as penetration and comprehension, the constituents of wisdom are the result of such thinking, the place of critical examination and analysis in the development of right vision is obvious. Where is the wisdom or

vision that can descend, all of a sudden, untouched and uninfluenced by a critical thought?

The Kalama Sutta, which sets forth the principles which should be followed by a seeker of truth, and which contains a standard by which things are judged, belongs to a framework of the Dhamma; the four solaces taught in the sutta point out the extent to which the Buddha permits suspense of judgment in matters beyond normal cognition.

The solaces show that the reason for a virtuous life does not necessarily depend on belief in rebirth or retribution, but on mental well-being acquired through the overcoming of greed, hate, and delusion.

More than fifty years ago, Moncure D. Conway, the author of "My Pilgrimage to the Wise Men of the East," visited Colombo. He was a friend of Ponnambalam Ramanathan (then Solicitor General of Ceylon), and together with him Conway went to the Vidyodaya Pirivena to learn something of the Buddha's teaching from Hikkaduve Siri Sumangala Nayaka Thera, the founder of the institution. The Nayaka Thera explained to them the principles contained in the Kalama Sutta and at the end of the

conversation Ramanathan whispered to Conway: "Is it not strange that you and I, who come from far different religions and regions, should together listen to a sermon from the Buddha in favor of that free thought, that independence of traditional and fashionable doctrines, which is still the vital principle of human development?" — Conway: "Yes, and we with the (Kalama) princes pronounce his doctrines good."

Supplementary Texts

"Friend Savittha, apart from faith, apart from liking, apart from what has been acquired by repeated hearing, apart from specious reasoning, and from a bias towards a notion that has been pondered over, I know this, I see this: 'Decay and death are due to birth.'"

*Samyuttanikaya, Nidanavagga, Mahavagga, Sutta
No. 8*

"Here a bhikkhu, having seen an object with the eye, knows when greed, hate, and delusion are within, 'Greed, hate, and delusion are in me'; he knows when greed, hate, and delusion are not within, 'Greed,

hate, and delusion are not in me.' Bhikkhus, have these things to be experienced through faith, liking, what has been acquired by repeated hearing, specious reasoning, or a bias towards a notion that has been pondered over?" — "No, venerable sir." — "Bhikkhus, this even is the way by which a bhikkhu, apart from faith, liking, what has been acquired by repeated hearing, specious reasoning, or a bias towards a notion that has been pondered over, declares realization of knowledge thus: I know that birth has been exhausted, the celibate life has been lived, what must be done has been done and there is no more of this to come."

*Samyuttanikaya, Salyatanavagga,
Navapuravagga, Sutta No. 8*

The Instruction to the Kalamas

*Anguttara Nikaya, Tika Nipata, Mahavagga, Sutta
No.*

The Kalamas of Kesaputta go to see the Buddha

1. I heard thus. Once the Blessed One, while wandering in the Kosala country with a large community of bhikkhus, entered a town of the Kalama people called Kesaputta. The Kalamas who were inhabitants of Kesaputta: "Reverend Gotama, the monk, the son of the Sakyans, has, while wandering in the Kosala country, entered Kesaputta. The good repute of the Reverend Gotama has been spread in this way: Indeed, the Blessed One is thus consummate, fully enlightened, endowed with knowledge and practice, sublime, knower of the worlds, peerless, guide of tamable men, teacher of divine and human beings, which he by himself has through direct knowledge understood clearly. He set forth the Dhamma, good in the beginning, good in the middle, good in the end, possessed of meaning and the letter, and complete in everything; and he proclaims the holy life that is perfectly pure. Seeing such consummate ones is good indeed."

2. Then the Kalamas who were inhabitants of Kesaputta went to where the Blessed One was. On arriving there some paid homage to him and sat down on one side; some exchanged greetings with him and after the ending of cordial memorable talk, sat down on one side; some saluted him raising their

joined palms and sat down on one side; some announced their name and family and sat down on one side; some without speaking, sat down on one side.

The Kalamas of Kesaputta ask for guidance

3. The Kalamas who were inhabitants of Kesaputta sitting on one side said to the Blessed One: "There are some monks and brahmans, venerable sir, who visit Kesaputta. They expound and explain only their own doctrines; the doctrines of others they despise, revile, and pull to pieces. Some other monks and brahmans too, venerable sir, come to Kesaputta. They also expound and explain only their own doctrines; the doctrines of others they despise, revile, and pull to pieces. Venerable sir, there is doubt, there is uncertainty in us concerning them. Which of these reverend monks and brahmans spoke the truth and which falsehood?"

The criterion for rejection

4. "It is proper for you, Kalamas, to doubt, to be uncertain; uncertainty has arisen in you about what is doubtful. Come, Kalamas. Do not go upon what has been acquired by repeated hearing; nor upon

tradition; nor upon rumor; nor upon what is in a scripture; nor upon surmise; nor upon an axiom; nor upon specious reasoning; nor upon a bias towards a notion that has been pondered over; nor upon another's seeming ability; nor upon the consideration, 'The monk is our teacher.' Kalamas, when you yourselves know: 'These things are bad; these things are blamable; these things are censured by the wise; undertaken and observed, these things lead to harm and ill,' [then] abandon them.

Greed, hate, and delusion

5. "What do you think, Kalamas? Does greed appear in a man for his benefit or harm?" — "For his harm, venerable sir." — "Kalamas, being given to greed, and being overwhelmed and vanquished mentally by greed, this man takes life, steals, commits adultery, and tells lies; he prompts another too, to do likewise. Will that be long for his harm and ill?" — "Yes, venerable sir."

6. "What do you think, Kalamas? Does hate appear in a man for his benefit or harm?" — "For his harm, venerable sir." — "Kalamas, being given to hate, and being overwhelmed and vanquished mentally by

hate, this man takes life, steals, commits adultery, and tells lies; he prompts another too, to do likewise. Will that be long for his harm and ill?" — "Yes, venerable sir."

7. "What do you think, Kalamas? Does delusion appear in a man for his benefit or harm?" — "For his harm, venerable sir." — "Kalamas, being given to delusion, and being overwhelmed and vanquished mentally by delusion, this man takes life, steals, commits adultery, and tells lies; he prompts another too, to do likewise. Will that be long for his harm and ill?" — "Yes, venerable sir."

8. "What do you think, Kalamas? Are these things good or bad?" — "Bad, venerable sir" — "Blamable or not blamable?" — "Blamable, venerable sir." — "Censured or praised by the wise?" — "Censured, venerable sir." — "Undertaken and observed, do these things lead to harm and ill, or not? Or how does it strike you?" — "Undertaken and observed, these things lead to harm and ill. Thus it strikes us here."

9. "Therefore, did we say, Kalamas, what was said thus, 'Come Kalamas. Do not go upon what has been

acquired by repeated hearing; nor upon tradition; nor upon rumor; nor upon what is in a scripture; nor upon surmise; nor upon an axiom; nor upon specious reasoning; nor upon a bias towards a notion that has been pondered over; nor upon another's seeming ability; nor upon the consideration, "The monk is our teacher." Kalamas, when you yourselves know: "These things are bad; these things are blamable; these things are censured by the wise; undertaken and observed, these things lead to harm and ill," abandon them.'

The criterion for acceptance

10. "Come, Kalamas. Do not go upon what has been acquired by repeated hearing; nor upon tradition; nor upon rumor; nor upon what is in a scripture; nor upon surmise; nor upon an axiom; nor upon specious reasoning; nor upon a bias towards a notion that has been pondered over; nor upon another's seeming ability; nor upon the consideration, 'The monk is our teacher.' Kalamas, when you yourselves know: 'These things are good; these things are not blamable; these things are praised by the wise; undertaken and observed, these things lead to benefit and happiness,' enter on and abide in them.

Absence of greed, hate, and delusion

11. "What do you think, Kalamas? Does absence of greed appear in a man for his benefit or harm?" — "For his benefit, venerable sir." — "Kalamas, being not given to greed, and being not overwhelmed and not vanquished mentally by greed, this man does not take life, does not steal, does not commit adultery, and does not tell lies; he prompts another too, to do likewise. Will that be long for his benefit and happiness?" — "Yes, venerable sir."

12. "What do you think, Kalamas? Does absence of hate appear in a man for his benefit or harm?" — "For his benefit, venerable sir." — "Kalamas, being not given to hate, and being not overwhelmed and not vanquished mentally by hate, this man does not take life, does not steal, does not commit adultery, and does not tell lies; he prompts another too, to do likewise. Will that be long for his benefit and happiness?" — "Yes, venerable sir."

13. "What do you think, Kalamas? Does absence of delusion appear in a man for his benefit or harm?" — "For his benefit, venerable sir." — "Kalamas, being not given to delusion, and being not

overwhelmed and not vanquished mentally by delusion, this man does not take life, does not steal, does not commit adultery, and does not tell lies; he prompts another too, to do likewise. Will that be long for his benefit and happiness?" — "Yes, venerable sir."

14. "What do you think, Kalamas? Are these things good or bad?" — "Good, venerable sir." — "Blamable or not blamable?" — "Not blamable, venerable sir." — "Censured or praised by the wise?" — "Praised, venerable sir." — "Undertaken and observed, do these things lead to benefit and happiness, or not? Or how does it strike you?" — "Undertaken and observed, these things lead to benefit and happiness. Thus it strikes us here."

15. "Therefore, did we say, Kalamas, what was said thus, 'Come Kalamas. Do not go upon what has been acquired by repeated hearing; nor upon tradition; nor upon rumor; nor upon what is in a scripture; nor upon surmise; nor upon an axiom; nor upon specious reasoning; nor upon a bias towards a notion that has been pondered over; nor upon another's seeming ability; nor upon the consideration, "The monk is our teacher." Kalamas, when you yourselves know:

"These things are good; these things are not blamable; these things are praised by the wise; undertaken and observed, these things lead to benefit and happiness," enter on and abide in them.'

The Four Exalted Dwellings

16. "The disciple of the Noble Ones, Kalamas, who in this way is devoid of coveting, devoid of ill will, undeluded, clearly comprehending and mindful, dwells, having pervaded, with the thought of amity, one quarter; likewise the second; likewise the third; likewise the fourth; so above, below, and across; he dwells, having pervaded because of the existence in it of all living beings, everywhere, the entire world, with the great, exalted, boundless thought of amity that is free of hate or malice.

"He lives, having pervaded, with the thought of compassion, one quarter; likewise the second; likewise the third; likewise the fourth; so above, below, and across; he dwells, having pervaded because of the existence in it of all living beings, everywhere, the entire world, with the great, exalted, boundless thought of compassion that is free of hate or malice.

"He lives, having pervaded, with the thought of gladness, one quarter; likewise the second; likewise the third; likewise the fourth; so above, below, and across; he dwells, having pervaded because of the existence in it of all living beings, everywhere, the entire world, with the great, exalted, boundless thought of gladness that is free of hate or malice.

"He lives, having pervaded, with the thought of equanimity, one quarter; likewise the second; likewise the third; likewise the fourth; so above, below, and across; he dwells, having pervaded because of the existence in it of all living beings, everywhere, the entire world, with the great, exalted, boundless thought of equanimity that is free of hate or malice.

The Four Solaces

17. "The disciple of the Noble Ones, Kalamas, who has such a hate-free mind, such a malice-free mind, such an undefiled mind, and such a purified mind, is one by whom four solaces are found here and now.

"Suppose there is a hereafter and there is a fruit, result, of deeds done well or ill. Then it is possible that at the dissolution of the body after death, I shall

arise in the heavenly world, which is possessed of the state of bliss.' This is the first solace found by him.

"Suppose there is no hereafter and there is no fruit, no result, of deeds done well or ill. Yet in this world, here and now, free from hatred, free from malice, safe and sound, and happy, I keep myself.' This is the second solace found by him.

"Suppose evil (results) befall an evil-doer. I, however, think of doing evil to no one. Then, how can ill (results) affect me who do no evil deed?' This is the third solace found by him.

"Suppose evil (results) do not befall an evil-doer. Then I see myself purified in any case.' This is the fourth solace found by him.

"The disciple of the Noble Ones, Kalamas, who has such a hate-free mind, such a malice-free mind, such an undefiled mind, and such a purified mind, is one by whom, here and now, these four solaces are found."

"So it is, Blessed One. So it is, Sublime one. The disciple of the Noble Ones, venerable sir, who has

such a hate-free mind, such a malice-free mind, such an undefiled mind, and such a purified mind, is one by whom, here and now, four solaces are found.

"Suppose there is a hereafter and there is a fruit, result, of deeds done well or ill. Then, it is possible that at the dissolution of the body after death, I shall arise in the heavenly world, which is possessed of the state of bliss.' This is the first solace found by him.

"Suppose there is no hereafter and there is no fruit, no result, of deeds done well or ill. Yet in this world, here and now, free from hatred, free from malice, safe and sound, and happy, I keep myself.' This is the second solace found by him.

"Suppose evil (results) befall an evil-doer. I, however, think of doing evil to no one. Then, how can ill (results) affect me who do no evil deed?' This is the third solace found by him.

"Suppose evil (results) do not befall an evil-doer. Then I see myself purified in any case.' This is the fourth solace found by him.

"The disciple of the Noble Ones, venerable sir, who has such a hate-free mind, such a malice-free mind, such an undefiled mind, and such a purified mind, is one by whom, here and now, these four solaces are found.

"Marvelous, venerable sir! Marvelous, venerable sir! As if, venerable sir, a person were to turn face upwards what is upside down, or to uncover the concealed, or to point the way to one who is lost or to carry a lamp in the darkness, thinking, 'Those who have eyes will see visible objects,' so has the Dhamma been set forth in many ways by the Blessed One. We, venerable sir, go to the Blessed One for refuge, to the Dhamma for refuge, and to the Community of Bhikkhus for refuge. Venerable sir, may the Blessed One regard us as lay followers who have gone for refuge for life, from today."

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A Look at the Kalama Sutta

by Bhikkhu Bodhi

Buddhist Publication Society

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In this issue of the newsletter we have combined the feature essay with the "Sutta Study" column as we take a fresh look at an often quoted discourse of the Buddha, the Kalama Sutta.

The discourse -- found in translation in Wheel No. 8 -- has been described as "the Buddha's Charter of Free Inquiry," and though the discourse certainly

does counter the decrees of dogmatism and blind faith with a vigorous call for free investigation, it is problematic whether the sutta can support all the positions that have [by some] been ascribed to it.

On the basis of a single passage, [when] quoted out of context, the Buddha has been made out to be a pragmatic empiricist who dismisses all doctrine and faith, and whose Dhamma is simply a freethinker's kit to truth which invites each one to accept and reject whatever he likes.

But does the Kalama Sutta really justify such views? Or do we meet in these claims just another set of variations on that egregious old tendency to interpret the Dhamma according to whatever notions are congenial to oneself -- or to those to whom one is preaching?

Let us take as careful a look at the Kalama Sutta as the limited space allotted to this essay will allow, remembering that in order to understand the Buddha's utterances correctly it is essential to take account of his own intentions in making them.

The passage that has been cited so often runs as follows: "Come, Kalamas. Do not go upon what has

been acquired by repeated hearing, nor upon tradition, nor upon rumor, nor upon scripture, nor upon surmise, nor upon axiom, nor upon specious reasoning, nor upon bias towards a notion pondered over, nor upon another's seeming ability, nor upon the consideration 'The monk is our teacher.' When you yourselves know: 'These things are bad, blamable, censured by the wise; undertaken and observed, these things lead to harm and ill,' abandon them... When you yourselves know: 'These things are good, blameless, praised by the wise; undertaken and observed, these things lead to benefit and happiness,' enter on and abide in them."

Now this passage, like everything else spoken by the Buddha, has been stated in a specific context -- with a particular audience and situation in view -- and thus must be understood in relation to that context.

The Kalamas, citizens of the town of Kesaputta, had been visited by religious teachers of divergent views, each of whom would propound his own doctrines and tear down the doctrines of his predecessors. This left the Kalamas perplexed, and thus when "the recluse Gotama," reputed to be an Awakened One,

arrived in their township, they approached him in the hope that he might be able to dispel their confusion.

From the subsequent development of the sutta, it is clear that the issues that perplexed them were the reality of rebirth and kammic retribution for good and evil deeds.

The Buddha begins by assuring the Kalamas that under such circumstances it is proper for them to doubt, an assurance which encourages free inquiry. He next speaks the passage quoted above, advising the Kalamas to abandon those things they know for themselves to be bad and to undertake those things they know for themselves to be good. This advice can be dangerous if given to those whose ethical sense is undeveloped, and we can thus assume that the Buddha regarded the Kalamas as people of refined moral sensitivity. In any case he did not leave them wholly to their own resources, but by questioning them, led them to see that greed, hate and delusion, being conducive to harm and suffering for oneself and others, are to be abandoned, and their opposites, being beneficial to all, are to be developed.

The Buddha next explains that a "noble disciple, devoid of covetousness and ill will, undeluded" dwells pervading the world with boundless loving-kindness, compassion, appreciative-joy and equanimity. Thus, purified of hate and malice, he enjoys here and now four "solaces": If there is an afterlife and kammic result, then, he will undergo a pleasant rebirth, while if there is none, he still lives happily here and now; if evil results befall an evil-doer, then no evil will befall him, and if evil results do not befall an evil-doer, then he is purified anyway. With this the Kalamas express their appreciation of the Buddha's discourse and go for refuge to the Triple Gem.

Now does the Kalama Sutta suggest, as is often held, that a follower of the Buddhist path can dispense with all faith and doctrine, that he should make his own personal experience the criterion for judging the Buddha's utterances and for rejecting what cannot be squared with it? It is true the Buddha does not ask the Kalamas to accept anything he says out of confidence in himself, but let us note one important point: the Kalamas, at the start of the discourse, were not the Buddha's disciples.

They approached him merely as a counselor who might help dispel their doubts, but they did not come to him as the Tathagata, the Truth-finder, who might show them the way to spiritual progress and to final liberation.

Thus, because the Kalamas had not yet come to accept the Buddha in terms of his unique mission, as the discloser of the liberating truth, it would not have been in place for him to expound to them the Dhamma unique to his own Dispensation: such teachings as the Four Noble Truths, the three characteristics, and the methods of contemplation based upon them.

These teachings are specifically intended for those who have accepted the Buddha as their guide to deliverance, and in the suttas, he expounds them only to those who "have gained faith in the Tathagata" and who possess the perspective necessary to grasp them and apply them.

The Kalamas, however, at the start of the discourse are not yet fertile soil for him to sow the seeds of his liberating message. Still confused by the conflicting

claims to which they have been exposed, they are not yet clear even about the groundwork of morality.

Nevertheless, after advising the Kalamas not to rely upon established tradition, abstract reasoning, and charismatic gurus, the Buddha proposes to them a teaching that is immediately verifiable and capable of laying a firm foundation for a life of moral discipline and mental purification. He shows that whether or not there be another life after death, a life of moral restraint and of love and compassion for all beings brings its own intrinsic rewards here and now, a happiness and sense of inward security far superior to the fragile pleasures that can be won by violating moral principles and indulging the mind's desires.

For those who are not concerned to look further, who are not prepared to adopt any convictions about a future life and worlds beyond the present one, such a teaching will ensure their present welfare and their safe passage to a pleasant rebirth -- provided they do not fall into the wrong view of denying an afterlife and kammic causation.

However, for those whose vision is capable of widening to encompass the broader horizons of our existence, this teaching given to the Kalamas points beyond its immediate implications to the very core of the Dhamma.

For the three states brought forth for examination by the Buddha -- greed, hate and delusion -- are not merely grounds of wrong conduct or moral stains upon the mind.

Within his teaching's own framework they are the root defilements -- the primary causes of all bondage and suffering -- and the entire practice of the Dhamma can be viewed as the task of eradicating these evil roots by developing to perfection their antidotes -- dispassion, kindness and wisdom.

Thus, the discourse to the Kalamas offers an acid test for gaining confidence in the Dhamma as a viable doctrine of deliverance.

We begin with an immediately verifiable teaching whose validity can be attested by anyone with the moral integrity to follow it through to its conclusions, namely, that the defilements cause harm and suffering both personal and social, that

their removal brings peace and happiness, and that the practices taught by the Buddha are effective means for achieving their removal.

By putting this teaching to a personal test, with only a provisional trust in the Buddha as one's collateral, one eventually arrives at a firmer, experientially-grounded confidence in the liberating and purifying power of the Dhamma. This increased confidence in the teaching brings along a deepened faith in the Buddha as teacher, and, thus, disposes one to accept on trust those principles he enunciates that are relevant to the quest for awakening, even when they lie beyond one's own capacity for verification. This, in fact, marks the acquisition of right view, in its preliminary role as the forerunner of the entire Noble Eightfold Path.

Partly in reaction to dogmatic religion, partly in subservience to the reigning paradigm of objective scientific knowledge, it has become fashionable to hold, by appeal to the Kalama Sutta, that the Buddha's teaching dispenses with faith and formulated doctrine and asks us to accept only what we can personally verify.

This interpretation of the sutta, however, forgets that the advice the Buddha gave the Kalamas was contingent upon the understanding that they were not yet prepared to place faith in him and his doctrine; it also forgets that the sutta omits, for that very reason, all mention of right view and of the entire perspective that opens up when right view is acquired. It offers instead the most reasonable counsel on wholesome living possible when the issue of ultimate beliefs has been put into brackets.

What can be justly maintained is that those aspects of the Buddha's teaching that come within the purview of our ordinary experience can be personally confirmed within experience, and that this confirmation provides a sound basis for placing faith in those aspects of the teaching that necessarily transcend ordinary experience.

Faith in the Buddha's teaching is never regarded as an end in itself nor as a sufficient guarantee of liberation, but only as the starting point for an evolving process of inner transformation that comes to fulfillment in personal insight. But in order for this insight to exercise a truly liberative function, it must unfold in the context of an accurate grasp of

the essential truths concerning our situation in the world and the domain where deliverance is to be sought.

These truths have been imparted to us by the Buddha out of his own profound comprehension of the human condition. To accept them in trust after careful consideration is to set foot on a journey which transforms faith into wisdom, confidence into certainty, and culminates in liberation from suffering.

Source: Dharma Web Transcription of BPS Cover Letter 8