

The Kalama Sutta

The Buddha's Charter of Free Inquiry

Translated from the Pali

by
Soma Thera

The Instruction to the Kalamas .

Anguttara Nikaya, Tika Nipata, Mahavagga, Sutta No. 65

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 from the Buddha

3. The Kalamas who were inhabitants of Kesaputta sitting on one side said to the Blessed One: "There are some monks and brahmins, 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 brahmins 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 brahmins 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,' 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 (metta), 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 (at the success of others), 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

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

Further commentary from Soma Thera:

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, [as shown] in the extracts given ... clarifying the basis of knowledge of conditionality and arhatship.

The methods of examination in the Kalama Sutta and in the extracts cited, have sprung from the knowledge of things as they are and these methods are dependent on 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.

The Kalama Sutta, which sets forth the principles that should be followed by a seeker of truth, and which contains a standard which things are judged by, 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."

Source: *The Wheel* Publication No. 8 (Kandy: [Buddhist Publication Society](#), 1987).

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Revised: Tuesday 2007-08-14