

## Some Reflections on the Kalama Sutta

Shows Buddha's skillfulness as a teacher. Able to adapt His teachings to suit the student :

- In this case, the Kalamas were initially not followers of the Buddha. They were intellectuals as well as skeptics, and furthermore they were confused by all the conflicting views and theories put forward by different teachers. So rather than directly preaching the teachings (4 Noble Truths etc.), which would probably seem to them to be yet another one of the multitude views and theories, He encouraged them to investigate thoroughly, and with knowledge of right view, be able to discriminate whether a religious teacher was speaking the truth or not.
- Rather than making them passive listeners and simply feeding them information, He engaged the Kalamas by questioning them in such a way that led them to see that greed, hatred 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.
- In speaking about the benefits of right view, as his listeners might or might not believe in the doctrines of rebirth and ripening of evil kamma, he used the approach of giving all possible scenarios and showing that whatever the case, it would still be beneficial to have a pure mind free from greed, hatred and delusion.

Although the Buddha did not state His views and declare them to be truths, neither did He just leave the Kalamas to their own resources. Rather He gave them the tools to reach their own decision. The criteria to reach a decision was :

- Careful investigation, knowing what was not sufficient as a basis for religious beliefs,
- Knowledge of the unwholesome and wholesome roots, so as to be able to distinguish right from wrong. (i.e. develop samma ditthi).

The Buddha practiced what He preached :

- He did not ask the Kalamas to take his words at face value, hence the criterion for investigation extended to His own teachings as well. This in turn shows confidence and fearlessness, that He knew the teachings were the Truth and would be able to withstand the test of investigation.
- The Buddha did not criticize the views of others, and in fact encouraged his disciples to have an open mind, to learn about other religions so that they would

be able to make comparisons with His teachings. The teachings of any religion were to be respected if they were found to be reasonable and rational.

Thus, the Kalama Sutta emphasizes the importance of free enquiry, careful observation and investigation, illustrating that Buddhism rejects dogmatism, over-reliance and blind faith.

[In *Jnanasara-samuccaya*, the same counsel is repeated in different words :  
"As the wise test gold by burning, cutting and rubbing it on a piece of touchstone, so are you to accept my words after examining them and not merely out of regard for me".]

Also shows the importance of individual responsibility. One is responsible for one's own spiritual development. One should not just wait for a savior passively, or blindly follow what others tell him to do. Dependence on others for salvation is negative as it means surrendering one's efforts and intelligence. Instead, one needs to put in effort in order to understand the truths himself, to gain knowledge to the true reality of nature.

There is a story of a Brahmin student called Dhotaka, who implored the Buddha: "Please, Master, free me from confusion!" The Buddha's perhaps somewhat surprising response was, "It is not in my practice to free anyone from confusion. When you yourself have understood the Dhamma, the truth, then you will find freedom."

Also, in Dhammapada verse 145 :

"By oneself alone is evil done; by oneself is one defiled By oneself alone is evil avoided; by oneself is one purified Purity and Impurity depend on oneself No one can purify another"]

This further illustrates that the Buddha gave due credit to human intelligence and effort, without relying on supernatural beings'. He empowered people, gave them confidence to be independent thinkers who would not need to be subservient to anyone for their spiritual development.

**However, note that the Sutta should not be taken out of context, and interpreted that the Buddha encouraged His disciples not to believe in anything or anyone, that they could dispense with all faith and doctrine. Over-skepticism and suspiciousness leads to a wavering, restless mind.**

We should remember that the Buddha gave the advice that to be able to discriminate right from wrong, we need to develop right view (so that our opinions are not merely based on our prejudices and preconceived notions.) If upon thorough investigation we see that a teaching is correct, we should then have confidence in that teaching. Confidence is not the same as blind faith. Confidence is an assured expectation, not of an unknown beyond, but of what can be tested as experienced and understood personally

## Conclusion (Themes in Kalama Sutta)

- Being able to distinguish right from wrong
- Freedom of Inquiry
- Careful investigation
- Self-reliance

## References

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