

The Significance of the Kâlâma Sutta

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An Examination of the Kâlâma Sutta and some of its critics

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1. Introduction

The Kâlâma Sutta is unique amongst religious texts as it affirms an essential characteristic of the Buddha's teaching which is not found, and indeed is denied, in other teachings. This characteristic is stated by Ven Soma Thera in the preface to his translation of this discourse, which is reproduced as Appendix I to this publication:

"The instruction of the Kâlâmas (Kâlâma 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 arhat) 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 in clarifying the basis of knowledge of conditionality and arhatship. Here it may be mentioned that the methods of examination in the Kâlâma 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 Kâlâma Sutta, which sets forth the principles that should be followed by a seeker of truth, and which contains a standard 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."

These comments of Ven Soma Thera, which are fully endorsed by the present author. The Kâlâma Sutta is the fifth sutta in the Mahaavagga of the Tika Nipaata of the Aguttara Nikaaya, one of the books of the Sutta Pitaka. It was given to the Kalama people in a town called Kesaputta in the Kingdom of Kosala, then ruled by King Pasanedi. The location of this town has not been determined.

India in the Buddha's time was a place of great religious and philosophical ferment. The ancient Vedic religion was being transformed by newer developments like the Aranyakas, the Upanishads, and the Brâhmanas. All these could be considered stages in the development of the Brâhmanical religion which in the Buddha's time was the dominant religion of India. Later this development culminated in classical Hinduism which is strictly a post-Buddhist development.

At this time new religious views were also being propounded by *samana* (skt.*sramana*) thinkers who rejected completely the Brahmanical system. There were many teachers such as Nigantha Nâtaputta (the founder of the Jain religion), Makkali Gosala (who is associated with the Ajivakas), Sanjaya Belattiputta, Purâna Kassapa and others. There were also materialists (like Ajita Kesakambali), rationalists (like the Cârvakas) and sceptics who were completely secular and denied all spiritual claims. With so many religious thinkers and philosophers propounding their views, and vying for the support of the lay people, many were confused, not knowing which teacher to follow.

The Kâlâmas told the Buddha of the various teachers who came to them with their contradictory views and asked the Buddha: "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 Kâlâma sutta was given in response to this entreaty of the people of Kesaputta.

However this sutta is not some kind of special instruction to the Kâlâma people alone. Parts of it were repeated to Liccavi Bhaddiya at Vesali (Anguttara, II pp.190-194). Other places in the Tipitaka also restate its principles, e.g. Mahavagga (Nidânavagga Sutta 8), and Navapuravagga (Salâlâyatanavagga, Sutta 8) of the Samyutta Nikâya. It is also stated in the Nidessa. It can therefore be considered as an essential part of the Buddha's teaching.

The Kâlâma Sutta has been relatively neglected in traditional Buddhist countries and came into prominence when the Buddha's teaching came to the attention of Western scholars. They were surprised that the Buddha had already proclaimed what some of their

more enlightened philosophers had been saying on what were valid grounds for belief. Since then there has been a revival of interest in this Sutta in Buddhist countries, and opinion on its interpretation has varied. Ven Soma Thera who translated it for the Wheel Series (No. 8, 1959) calls it the Buddha's Charter of Free Inquiry and wrote: "the spirit of the sutta signifies a teaching that is exempt from fanaticism, bigotry, dogmatism, and intolerance". A detailed discussion of the terms used is contained in K. N. Jayatilleke's *The Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*. However their interpretation has recently been challenged by Bhikkhu Bodhi, Sanath Nanaykkara ("How Free is Freedom of Thought?", *Bodhi Leaves* No. 156) and others. It is therefore necessary to reflect on what the sutta says, and consider its importance.

The Sutta starts with the famous ten conditions which the Buddha said were not valid grounds for believing in a teaching. Six of these conditions deal with various forms of faith and reliance on authority, and four relate to different kinds of wrong reasoning. The Buddha then gives the grounds on which a teaching could be accepted as correct. Finally there is the concluding section in which the Buddha deals with the doctrines of kamma and rebirth. We shall consider each of these in the four sections that follow.

2. Faith as a Ground for Belief

Six grounds are given which are considered unsatisfactory because they rely on faith and authority. There has been some disagreement on the exact meaning of each of these grounds, and this is reflected in the different ways they have been translated. We shall first give the Pali term used and then comment on the most likely meaning.

(1) *anussavena*: This has been translated as 'report', 'tradition', and even more formally as 'revelation'. The Vedas which formed the basis of the traditional religion were considered as being revealed ('ruti') by a divine source (Prajâpati, or Brahmâ). The Middle Eastern religions like Judaism, Christianity or Islam are also considered as revelations from God through Prophets. According to the Buddha's first condition this is not a sufficient ground to establish their validity as a correct form of belief.

(2) *paramparâya*. This refers to a teaching which is handed down from teacher to pupil. This was the normal method of propagation in those days, especially for upanishadic teaching, but was also common in other traditions also. The point is that the fact that a teaching had a long pedigree does not mean that it is a valid teaching. There must be other things attesting to its validity. The Buddha gives the analogy of a string of blind men (*andavei*), each leading the other and not knowing where they were going.

(3) *itikirâya*. This has usually been translated as 'hearsay' (Woodward for the Pali Text Society) and 'rumour' (Bhikkhu Soma) but it includes all kinds of legendary and historical material. The term was used in relation to Brahmanical teachings like the Nyâya Sûtra which relied on a kind of hearsay (*aithiya*) for its validity. The Buddha says that the Dhamma does not rely on itikiraya for its validity.

(4) *pitakasampadâya*. This refers to a system which relies on a textual tradition for its validity. It would apply where a ‘holy book’ is the basis of belief, like the Vedas, the Bible or the Koran. What this implies is that the Pali Canon itself cannot automatically be considered as a divinely inspired source. What is contained there should be subject to examination and accepted only if they satisfy the criteria set down for valid belief.

(5) *bhavyarpatâya*. This is a difficult term to translate. Woodward has ‘because it fits becoming’. K.N.Jayatileke gives the literal rendering as ‘because of its having the nature of what ought to be’ or more freely as ‘because of its suitability or fittingness’. Bhikkhu Soma has ‘another’s seeming ability’ which seems to be the simplest. What it means that you should not take the theory because its author appears to be well qualified.

(6) *samano no garu*. This literally means ‘our teacher (or recluse) is venerable’. The *sramana* may be venerable because of his personal qualities and high moral principles, but these do not necessary guarantee that his teaching is necessarily correct.

The above six qualities could be subsumed into the proposition that belief in a religion simply out of faith is not justifiable. Most religions today, especially the theistic ones, are based on simple faith that what is taught in the religion is necessarily true. This claim has sometimes been made for the Buddha’s teaching on the ground that the Buddha has repeatedly stated that *saddha* is a desirable virtue for a Buddhist. Some comments on this interpretation will be made in the last section of this essay.

3. Reasoning as a Ground for Belief

The Buddha gives four types of unsound reasoning as also being unsatisfactory. These are:

(1) *takkahetu*. This is translated as ‘based on (deductive) logic’. The Western notion of Logic came from the Greek philosophers and related to the consistency of different statements and deductions that could be made from assumptions. In this sense logic will not be useful in establishing the absolute veracity of systems of belief. Logic tells us whether inferences are correctly drawn from premises, not that they are true. Even though the logic may be correct if the premise is wrong the conclusion can be wrong. The truth of the Dhamma cannot be proven by mere logical analysis. That is why *takkahetu* leads this second list of undesirable grounds just as *anussavena* leads the first list.

(2) *nayahetu*. This has been translated as ‘from a standpoint’. Bhikkhu Soma has ‘specious reasoning’. It indicates a kind of sophistry where an assumption is made and deductions made from it trying to prove the assumption from which the argument started. The Buddha condemned the sophists of his day (called *amarâvikkhepikâ*) as they usually resorted to *nayahetu* to defend their claims.

(3) *âkâraparivitakkena*. This refers to accepting anything ‘after considering reasons’ (Woodward). The reasons referred to are those based on mere theory, or on baseless assumptions. Some of the “proofs” of the existence of God advanced

by theologians would fall under this category, and are unacceptable according to Buddhism, as they do not “prove” anything at all.

(4) *dittinijjhânakkhantiyâ*. This rather complicated term has been translated by Bhikkhu Soma as ‘a bias towards a notion that has been pondered over’ and by Woodward as ‘reflection on and approval of some theory’. This procedure involves starting from some view (*ditthi*) which may be one’s own or derived from some teacher. In the Pali Canon the word *ditthi*, unless qualified by *sammâ* (right) invariably means a wrong view, even though the word for wrong (*miccâ*) may not be explicitly used. Thus this term really means starting with a wrong view. Clearly any reasoning based on a wrong view is unacceptable.

The identification of these four types of wrong reasoning does not mean that the Buddha did not approve the use of logic or reasoning. They have their proper place. In fact Buddhist philosophers developed elaborate systems of logic that would compare well with those of any other logician. The *Abhidhamma* is replete with examples of logical analysis. It is only wrong logic, or specious reasoning, that the Buddha warns people against. This warning is also contained in the *Brahmajâla sutta* of the *Dîgha Nikâya*.

4. The Valid Grounds for Belief

In contrast to the elaborate analysis of the wrong grounds for believing in doctrines the Buddha’s statement of what are the valid grounds for belief appears at first sight to be extremely simple. He told the *Kâlâmas*: “*Kâlâmas*, when you know these things are good, these things are not blamable, these things are praised by the wise, undertaken and observed these things lead to happiness enter on and abide in them.”.

This brief statement contains four conditions but they all have one thing in common. It is for the person accepting the belief to test its effects, not in some theoretical sense but in practice, particularly observing its effects regarding its goodness and whether it leads to happiness or misery. This is an appeal to empirical testing. It is also the principle that underlies modern science. The practice, or the experiment, must confirm the theory, otherwise the theory or belief has to be rejected. In this sense the Buddha enunciated the fundamental principle of science even though there was no scientific culture in his day.

The only condition that is likely to create some problem is the requirement that right belief should be “praised by the wise”. If the term “the wise” (*vinuppasattâ*) is to be taken here to mean *arahants* so as to remove ambiguity.

The *Kâlâma sutta* does not go into how the *Dhamma* could be empirically verified. This is part of the *ehipassiko* (“come and see”) aspect of the *Dhamma*. There are several ways that people can verify the *Dhamma*. Since the days of the Buddha meditation” (*bhâvanâ*) has been the preferred technique. Still some consider it to be the only valid way of apprehending the *Dhamma*, especially the practice of *vipassanâ* meditation. Here through the exercise of mindfulness (*sati*) and concentration (*samâdhi*) the practitioner can see reality as it truly this. Today in addition to the meditation methods there are also other methods of accomplishing the same objective. These include intellectual analysis

(provided the four types of unsatisfactory reasoning are avoided). This was not possible in the Buddha's day because the technology needed (books, writing, education, etc.) had not been developed.

5. The Four Solaces

One cardinal doctrine that the Buddha repeatedly stressed is the doctrine of action (kamma) and its fruits (phala). Can the acceptance of this doctrine be justified on the basis of the criteria laid down in the Kâlâma Sutta? The Buddha realised that there would be a problem in doing so for most people, and this explains why the Buddha concludes this discourse with a brief consideration of this doctrine, one of the most difficult to understand in the whole of the Dhamma.

Where action and its fruit take place in a given lifetime it is possible to observe it empirically. But the Buddha said that some actions bear their consequences beyond death (*para maranam*). This is the theory of samsâra, the cycle of birth and re-birth. How could the fruiting of actions be observed if the kamma takes place in one lifetime and the phala in another?

According to the Buddha his three-fold knowledge (*tisso vijjâ*) includes the knowledge to see past births. Other enlightened persons too may develop the psychic power to recall some past lives. However most people are not in this position, and would not have developed this psychic ability. How could they then observe empirically the post-mortem operation of the law of kamma?

In the concluding section of the Kâlâma sutta the Buddha speaks of four different levels of confidence (*assasâ*) that people can have relating to this particular doctrine. These are given as follows:

" '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 first solace is for those who believe in kamma and rebirth. For them the fruits of their good actions will be manifested in a future life. The second solace is for one who cannot accept the hypothesis of rebirth. Such a person if he does good kamma he can aspire to happiness on that account in this very life. The third solace is for the evil doer who believes in the consequences of evil actions and thereby decides to refrain from evil actions. The last solace is for a person who does not believe in the consequences of evil acts, yet sees in not committing evil deeds a kind of self-purification.

What is significant here is that the Buddha does not require absolute confidence in the post-death operation of the law of kamma. If he did so he would have stopped at the first solace. By putting in the supposition that ‘there is no hereafter and there is no fruit, no result, of deeds done well or ill’ he is accommodating the possibility that a person who is sceptical of the (post-death) operation of kamma (and therefore in re-birth) could also be a dhamma-farer. So even if you do not believe in rebirth, but only in this present life, doing good kamma has benefits here and now, and similarly for bad kamma.

6. Conclusion

What emerges from the above consideration of the Kâlâma sutta is that for the Buddha faith and abstract reasoning are not necessarily valid grounds for the acceptance of the truth of the Dhamma. It is observing the consequences of the practice of the Dhamma that ultimately determines its validity. Thus a Buddhist should not look on the Dhamma as an abstract set of deeds. He or she should seek to practice it constantly.

As mentioned in the introductory comments some Buddhists dispute the implication of this Sutta that mere faith is not sufficient to establish the truthfulness of the Dhamma. They translate the Buddhist term saddhâ as ‘faith’, and argue that the Dhamma is also a faith-based “religion” just like Christianity or Hinduism. This interpretation arises from what the term ‘faith’ really means in Western religious discourse.

The term faith is almost always used in connection with religious beliefs. Thus we do not say that we have ‘faith’ in Darwin’s theory of evolution, as this theory is based on scientific evidence and objective facts. However the claims of some religions, e.g. that there is a Day of Judgement presided over by God, are accepted by the followers of these religions solely on faith. The Oxford Dictionary defines faith as ‘belief in religious doctrine or divine truth’. Faith in this theological sense cannot apply to the Buddha’s teaching which does not come from any divine source but from a human source, viz. the Buddha himself. The Buddha did not expect his followers believe anything simply because he said it but to investigate it and try it out.

Thus the translation of saddhâ as faith is inappropriate. It is for this reason that the early translators of the Pali Canon preferred terms like ‘confidence’ or ‘trust’ as a suitable translation. Some use the qualified term ‘rational faith’ (âkâravati saddhâ). Of course the word ‘faith’ can be used in a metaphorical sense, not its strict theological sense. Some people in using faith for saddhâ may be adopting this metaphorical usage. However this

is unfortunate as there is also a theological meaning attached to the term and its use in the metaphorical sense may give a wrong impression.

Just as we have confidence in certain scientific propositions even though we may not be able to prove it, so too the Buddhist has confidence in the teaching of the Buddha. Certainly no 'faith' in the sense of having one of more of the above-mentioned six qualities is involved. It is unfortunate that many Buddhists continue to speak of saddhâ as (religious) faith.

The Kâlâma sutta has a special relevance today. There is a concerted attempt by followers of theistic religion to convert people, especially in Buddhist countries. Some countries like South Korea have lost their Buddhist majority. Even in Sri Lanka evangelical activity of Christians and Muslims have resulted in some Buddhists being converted. Thus the question posed by the Kâlâmas and the Buddha's reply to it has some contemporary relevance in relation to the modern inter-religious debate.