

AN 3.66: Kālāma Sutta (Annotated)

Discourse to the People of Kālāma

Translated and Annotated by Suddhāso Bhikkhu

Thus have I heard. On one occasion, while the Blessed One was traveling among the Kosalans accompanied by a large community of monks, he approached a Kālāman town called Kesaputta. The Kālāmas of Kesaputta heard, “The contemplative Gotama, a Sakyan who went forth from the Sakya-clan, has arrived at Kesaputta. A good report of the honorable Gotama has been spread about in this way: ‘He is the Blessed One, an Arahant¹, a rightly self-awakened one; he is perfect in knowledge and conduct, sublime, knower of the world, unsurpassed trainer of trainable people, teacher of celestial and human beings, enlightened and blessed.’ Having realized it for himself with his own higher knowledge, he explains this world with its angels, demons, and gods, this generation with its contemplatives, priests, celestial and human beings. He teaches a Dhamma that is wonderful in the beginning, wonderful in the middle, and wonderful in its conclusion, with the [right] meaning and phrasing. He demonstrates a spiritual life that is completely perfect and totally pure. It is good to see such worthy beings.”

After the Buddha had been teaching for a while, word began to spread about him and his teachings. Thus he would often arrive at a place he had never been to before to find that the people there already knew of him, and had heard that he was an enlightened being who was capable of teaching a profound path of spiritual self-development. This is one such case.

Then the Kālāmas of Kesaputta approached the Blessed One. After approaching, some paid respects to the Blessed One and sat to one side. Some conversed with the Blessed One, and after the appropriate polite talk was finished, they sat to one side. Some held their hands in *añjali*² and sat to one side. Some announced their name and clan and sat to one side. Some remained silent and sat to one side.

This variety of different greetings indicates that many of the Kālāmas were still hesitant about the Buddha. While some displayed reverence, others merely shared some polite greetings, and some gave neither reverence nor polite words and just silently sat down. In the Suttas, disciples of the Buddha always begin by paying respects to the Buddha before sitting down; since only a handful of the Kālāmas did so, we can conclude that most of them were not followers of the Buddha's teachings.

1 Lit. “worthy one.”

2 With palms pressed together and the fingers extended, as in many Western depictions of prayer. A common gesture of respect at the time, which is still used in much of Asia.

When they were [all] seated to one side, the Kālāmas of Kesaputta said to the Blessed One, “Bhante, some contemplatives and priests come to Kesaputta. They explain and glorify their own doctrine, and revile, criticize, condemn, and denigrate the doctrines of others. Bhante, other contemplatives and priests also come to Kesaputta. They also explain and glorify their own doctrine, and revile, criticize, condemn, and denigrate the doctrines of others. Bhante, regarding this, we are full of uncertainty and doubt, thinking, 'Among these honorable contemplatives and priests, who has spoken truthfully, and who has spoken falsely?’”

There are a lot of different philosophies, religions, and spiritual systems in the world, which teach a wide variety of ideas. These ideas are often contradictory. One who is seeking the truth thus finds oneself faced with a seemingly impossible choice: when so many contradictory statements are being made, what basis can we use for determining what is true and what is not?

[The Buddha replied,] “Kālāmas, it is reasonable for you to be uncertain; it is reasonable for you to doubt. Your circumstance is a basis for uncertainty and doubt.

“Kālāmas, do not go by hearsay. Do not go by tradition. Do not go by what seems appropriate. Do not go by scriptural authority. Do not go by thought. Do not go by inference. Do not go by logic. Do not go by personal preference. Do not go by a [teacher's] semblance of competence. Do not go by the thought 'This contemplative is our teacher.' Instead, Kālāmas, when you know for yourself, 'These phenomena are unwholesome, blameworthy, condemned by the wise; when committed to, they lead to harm and suffering,' then abandon them.

Here is the flagship statement of this discourse. This passage has become extremely popular in Western Buddhism, and thus is worth taking a closer look at.

The Buddha lists ten things that someone might use as a reason to believe something, and rejects them all as insufficient. They can be summarized in three categories:

- 1. Believing what you hear - hearsay, tradition, scripture*
- 2. Believing what you think - thought, inference, logic, preference, what seems appropriate*
- 3. Believing what a teacher says - apparent competence of a teacher, commitment to one's own teacher*

You can hear things that are untrue; therefore it is unwise to believe something just because it was told to you, or you read it in a book, or because it's traditional.

You can think things that are untrue; therefore it is unwise to believe something just because you like it, or it seems appropriate to you, or you thought it up yourself, or you inferred it from other information, or you think it's logical.

A teacher can say things that are untrue; therefore it is unwise to believe something just because a teacher said it.

This doesn't mean you can't consider these factors; many of these are still useful starting points, and can support hypotheses or educated guesses; they can also indicate what we might want to investigate more closely. However, by themselves, they do not provide enough support for determining what is true. The only valid basis for belief is personal experience, which is indicated by the phrase "when you know for yourself."

"What do you think, Kālāmas? When greed arises in a person, does that lead to benefit or harm?"

"Harm, Bhante."

"Kālāmas, when a person is greedy and their mind is overcome by greed, might they kill, steal, commit adultery, tell lies, and encourage others to do the same - which would lead to their long-term harm and suffering?"

"Yes, Bhante."

"What do you think, Kālāmas? When hatred arises in a person, does that lead to benefit or harm?"

"Harm, Bhante."

"Kālāmas, when a person is filled with hate and their mind is overcome by hatred, might they kill, steal, commit adultery, tell lies, and encourage others to do the same - which would lead to their long-term harm and suffering?"

"Yes, Bhante."

"What do you think, Kālāmas? When delusion arises in a person, does that lead to benefit or harm?"

"Harm, Bhante."

"Kālāmas, when a person is deluded and their mind is overcome by delusion, might they kill, steal, commit adultery, tell lies, and encourage others to do the same - which would lead to their long-term harm and suffering?"

"Yes, Bhante."

“What do you think, Kālāmas? Are these phenomena wholesome or unwholesome?”

“Unwholesome, Bhante.”

“Blameworthy or blameless?”

“Blameworthy, Bhante.”

“Condemned by the wise or praised by the wise?”

“Condemned by the wise, Bhante.”

“When committed to, do they lead to harm and suffering? What is it in this case?”

“Bhante, when committed to, they lead to harm and suffering. That is what we think in this case.”

“Kālāmas, that is why I said, 'Do not go by hearsay... when you know for yourself, 'These phenomena are unwholesome, blameworthy, condemned by the wise; when committed to, they lead to harm and suffering,' then abandon them.' This is what was said, and it was said in reference to this.

This clarifies the Buddha's instructions to the Kālāmas. He asks them to examine three mindstates - greed, hatred, and delusion - and to consider what people might do when they are overcome by such mindstates. Most notably, might such people engage in harmful and destructive acts like murder, theft, adultery, and dishonesty? And do such actions lead to good results or bad results? The natural conclusion is apparent: greed, hatred, and delusion tend to lead to immoral behavior, which produces a variety of unpleasant results - regret, remorse, self-condemnation, a bad reputation, and so on. This is something that we can see and know for ourselves; we do not need to rely on hearsay or scripture or authority or any of the other invalid bases of belief which the Buddha listed.

“Kālāmas, do not go by hearsay. Do not go by tradition. Do not go by what seems appropriate. Do not go by scriptural authority. Do not go by thought. Do not go by inference. Do not go by logic. Do not go by personal preference. Do not go by a [teacher's] semblance of competence. Do not go by the thought 'This contemplative is our teacher.' Instead, Kālāmas, when you know for yourself, 'These phenomena are wholesome, blameless, praised by the wise; when committed to, they lead to benefit and happiness,' then live in accordance with them.

“What do you think, Kālāmas? When non-greed arises in a person, does that lead to benefit or harm?”

“Benefit, Bhante.”

“Kālāmas, when a person is not greedy and their mind is not overcome by greed, wouldn't they refrain from killing, stealing, committing adultery, telling lies, and encouraging others to do the same - which would lead to their long-term benefit and happiness?”

“Yes, Bhante.”

“What do you think, Kālāmas? When non-hatred arises in a person, does that lead to benefit or harm?”

“Benefit, Bhante.”

“Kālāmas, when a person is not filled with hate and their mind is not overcome by hatred, wouldn't they refrain from killing, stealing, committing adultery, telling lies, and encouraging others to do the same - which would lead to their long-term benefit and happiness?”

“Yes, Bhante.”

“What do you think, Kālāmas? When non-delusion arises in a person, does that lead to benefit or harm?”

“Benefit, Bhante.”

“Kālāmas, when a person is not deluded and their mind is not overcome by delusion, wouldn't they refrain from killing, stealing, committing adultery, telling lies, and encouraging others to do the same - which would lead to their long-term benefit and happiness?”

“Yes, Bhante.”

“What do you think, Kālāmas? Are these phenomena wholesome or unwholesome?”

“Wholesome, Bhante.”

“Blameworthy or blameless?”

“Blameless, Bhante.”

“Condemned by the wise or praised by the wise?”

“Praised by the wise, Bhante.”

“When committed to, do they lead to benefit and happiness? What is it in this case?”

“Bhante, when committed to, they lead to benefit and happiness. That is what we think in this case.”

“Kālāmas, that is why I said, 'Do not go by hearsay... when you know for yourself, 'These phenomena are wholesome, blameless, praised by the wise; when committed to, they lead to benefit and happiness,' then live in accordance with them.' This is what was said, and it was said in reference to this.

This is the positive formulation: when we know what is wholesome, blameless, praiseworthy, and beneficial, then we make an effort to live accordingly, as we know it is worth committing to. Once again, this does not depend upon any of the ten invalid bases of belief; it relies on our own personal experience. So what does the Buddha point to? The absence of greed, hatred and delusion.

“Kālāmas, a noble disciple who is free of covetousness, free of aversion, unconfused, clearly comprehending, and mindful in this way, pervades one direction with a mind endowed with loving-friendliness; likewise the second, third, and fourth [directions], above, below, all around, everywhere, and impartially, he pervades the entire world with a mind endowed with loving-friendliness - abundant, extensive, and limitless, free of hostility and aversion.

“He pervades one direction with a mind endowed with compassion... with sympathetic joy... with equanimity; likewise the second, third, and fourth [directions], above, below, all around, everywhere, and impartially, he pervades the entire world with a mind endowed with equanimity - abundant, extensive, and limitless, free of hostility and aversion.

These four mindstates - loving-friendliness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity - are called “Divine Abodes” (brahma-vihāra). These are very pleasant mindstates that naturally lead to thinking, speaking, and acting in ways that are beneficial to everyone involved. They also directly counteract several harmful mindstates - such as hatred, cruelty, jealousy, and discontent.

The first one - loving-friendliness (mettā) - is the genuine wish for happiness. Optimally, this is extended universally to everyone: wishing for everyone to be happy, healthy, and safe. If that is too difficult, it is also acceptable to direct this wish towards a smaller group or even to just a single individual. In fact, when beginning to develop loving-friendliness, it is often easiest to begin by focusing on someone you already care about; then after you've established a feeling of loving-

friendliness towards that individual, you can extend it to include more - and eventually all sentient beings.

The second one - compassion (karuṇā) - is the wish for people to be free from suffering. While similar to loving-friendliness, this is a somewhat different mental quality. It is based in the recognition that most people experience various forms of dissatisfaction, irritation, and anguish; from that basis, one wishes for them to be free of that suffering. Compassion relies on a certain degree of wisdom: the ability to recognize the suffering of others. This is one of the main differences between compassion and loving-friendliness. The other is that while loving-friendliness is about wanting people to have pleasant experiences, compassion is about wanting people to not have unpleasant experiences.

The third one - sympathetic joy (muditā) - is experiencing happiness when we are aware of the happiness of others. This is the polar opposite of jealousy; it is the delight and joy that arises when we appreciate the good fortune that others are experiencing.

The fourth one - equanimity (upekkhā) - is maintaining our neutrality regardless of what we experience. Everything that we feel fits into one of three categories: pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Our usual tendency when we feel something pleasant is to become infatuated with it, attached to it; we like it, we want it, we crave it. When we feel something unpleasant, we tend to reject it and push it away; we hate it, we want it to stop, we want it to disappear. And when we feel something neutral, we tend to ignore it: it isn't interesting enough to hold our attention. Equanimity is maintaining clear awareness of the experience without falling into any of these three reactions - desire, aversion, and apathy.

“Kālāmas, when a noble disciple's mind is free of hostility, free of affliction, free of impurity, and purified in this way, there are four assurances³ he has attained about the visible world.

“If there is another world and there are effects and results of good and bad deeds, then when I am separated from this body after death, I will arise in a good destination: a heavenly world.’ This is the first assurance he has attained.

“If there is no other world and there are no effects or results of good and bad deeds, then in this visible world I keep myself free of hostility, free of affliction, untroubled, and happy.’ This is the second assurance he has attained.

“If harmful deeds return to the doer, then I know that since I have done nothing harmful, suffering cannot touch me.’ This is the third assurance he has attained.

³ Assāsa. From *assasati* (breathes). This word indicates a sense of relief and security, as in the idiom “breathing easily.”

“If harmful deeds do not return to the doer, then I see myself as pure in both ways.’ This is the fourth assurance he has attained.”

The basic idea here is that regardless of whether or not rebirth and karma are real, it is still a good idea to live a moral, virtuous life and to maintain wholesome, beneficial mindstates: if there are karmic consequences to our choices, then we benefit in future lives as well as this life; and if there are no karmic consequences, then we still live a happy life here and now. Thus we stand to benefit either way.

This fits in with the overall theme of the discourse: the Buddha is not telling the people of Kālāma to believe in rebirth and karma; instead, he is advising them to look at their own experiences in this life, so that they may draw the reasonable conclusion that he gives here: namely, that even if we don't know whether or not karma and rebirth are real, it is still worth acting as though they are. This is effectively the Buddhist version of “Pascal's Wager.”

A slightly different formulation of this concept can be found in the Apanṇaka Sutta (MN 60).

[The Kālāmas reply,] “Bhante, when a noble disciple's mind is free of hostility, free of affliction, free of impurity, and purified in this way, these are four assurances he has attained about the visible world. Excellent, Bhante! Excellent, Bhante! Bhante, it is just like someone set upright what had been overturned, or revealed what had been hidden, or described a path to one who is confused, or brought an oil lamp into the darkness so that those with eyes could see. In the same way, Bhante, the Dhamma has been demonstrated in many ways by the Blessed One. Bhante, we go for refuge to the Blessed One, to the Dhamma, and to the monastic Saṅgha. Bhante, let the Blessed One remember us as lay disciples who have gone for refuge for life.”

The people of Kālāma were apparently quite impressed with the Buddha's teachings, as after hearing it they took refuge in the Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha: the standard way of expressing one's commitment to Buddhist practice. While the other spiritual teachers they encountered held forth a doctrine and expected blind belief, the Buddha did neither: instead, he encouraged them to examine their own experience, and guided them towards the appropriate conclusions - conclusions that naturally lead to living a life of moral rectitude and spiritual self-development. As these conclusions are based on their own direct experience rather than on mere faith, the people of Kālāma found them to be undeniable.