The Kālāma Sutta: Freedom to Investigate

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 15:00

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā-sambuddhassa. Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-awakened one.

So we're going to look at this *Kālāma Sutta*, which is probably amongst Westerners who get converted one of the very well-known discourses. It's probably more widely known than that. Basically, it's really about the right to ask questions — that Buddhism doesn't come at you with "thou shalt believe."

What happens is, in the opening scene, the Buddha arrives at a place called Kesaputta, where he meets these Kālāmas, and they're in a state of confusion. "There are some monks and Brahmins, Venerable Sir, who visit Kesaputta. They expound and explain only their own doctrines, and the doctrines of others they despise, revile, and pull to pieces." So it's a case of "I'm right, everybody else is wrong." So the Kālāmas say, "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?"

What we discover, of course, is that they've got this existential terror of the age, which was: what will happen when I die and what will my rebirth be? Just as an aside, the Greeks and Romans, the ancient world, were afraid of fate, by which they meant what these capricious gods felt like doing. They had no power over it. And the horror was to end up in Hades, where when you hear descriptions of it, it's a bit like advanced dementia — you lose your identity, you're just wandering around aimless in this dark place. If you get to see the Odyssey, Homer has a stab at it.

In the medieval ages, of course, it was the sheer existential fear of going to hell. That's when the Roman Catholic Church came up with the idea of purgatory, so that only those who committed really bad mortal sins went to hell. The others could spend their time in a place where they were purified and then go to heaven. And these days, of course, for people who are scientific materialists, it's the abyss — what Nietzsche called the abyss — like death is moving into nothingness. When Nietzsche touched upon that, he called it the abyss.

So here we have it. At this particular time, it was this whole rebirth thing. And there were people at the time who were materialists who said, "Well, no, when your life ends, that's the end of it. You don't have to worry about what happens afterwards."

So now the Buddha wants to help the Kālāmas know the truth, and he doesn't fall into the error of these other teachers — telling them what he teaches and how everybody else is completely deluded. He starts by trying to lead them out of that confusion, to give them some guidelines. And he offers this method of

freedom to investigate.

He makes this what's considered a very famous statement: "It is proper for you, Kālāmas, to doubt, to be uncertain. Uncertainty has arisen in you about what is doubtful. Come, Kālāmas, do not go upon what has been acquired by repeated hearing" — and if you think of Trump and the way he keeps repeating his lies until a lot of people believe him — "nor upon tradition, nor upon rumour, nor upon the scriptures" — because just because something's written down in some holy scripture doesn't mean it's true — "nor upon surmise" — to form an opinion or guess without really having the evidence and then believing it — "nor upon an axiom" — something that's universally accepted doesn't mean it's true — "nor upon a bias towards a notion that has been pondered over" — and these days we get these information silos — "nor upon another's seeming ability" — their teaching ability and being drawn into that; if he can teach so well, he must be talking the truth — "nor upon the consideration, 'This monk is our teacher.'"

"Kālāmas, when you yourselves know: these things are immoral, these things are blameable, these things are censured by the wise, undertaken and observed these lead to harm and ill — when you know that by your own personal experience, then abandon them." So he's rejecting the idea of blind belief.

Now, he's not saying that you can decide what you want to believe. It's not a freedom to believe what you want, as if the spiritual life was a sort of smorgasbord and you just choose little bits that you like. And that often happens to Westerners, doesn't it? We can see the process of meditation, we like that, but rebirth — well, that's just an idea.

The test, of course, is to do with ethics. So there's a connection here with rebirth and ethics. He doesn't leave them entirely to their own resources. He says, "Kālāmas, when you yourselves know: these things are bad, these things are blameable, these things are censured by the wise, undertaken and observed these things lead to harm and ill — then abandon them." So that's a direct connection with what a person might feel to be unskillful.

And then he begins this Socratic method of questions and answers. "What do you think, Kālāmas? Does greed manifest in someone for their benefit or for their harm?" "For their harm, Venerable Sir." "Kālāmas, being given to greed and being overwhelmed and vanquished mentally by greed, such a person takes life, steals, commits adultery and tells lies. They also prompt others to do likewise. Will that not eventually be harmful and damaging to them?" "Yes, Venerable Sir." And of course, he repeats that with hatred and delusion.

So he's continuing this process of questioning them, and in a sense he's teaching them as I think Socrates had wanted to do — to find a way in which they can question themselves. "What do you think, Kālāmas? Are these things good or bad?" "Bad, Venerable Sir." "Blameable or not blameable?" "Blameable, Venerable Sir." "Censured or praised by the wise?" "Censured, Venerable Sir." "Undertaken and observed, do these things lead to harm or ill? Or how does it strike you?" And they say, "Undertaken and observed, these things lead to harm and ill. That's very clear to us."

And then, of course, he does the opposite. "What do you think, Kālāmas? Does absence of greed manifest in someone for their benefit or harm?" "For their benefit, Venerable Sir." And so on.

So the question, of course, is: how do we know that something is genuinely true, wise, or beneficial? Remember that we are prone to confirmation bias — just listening and talking to people who agree with us and always self-affirming our own beliefs. The Buddha talks about the three ingredients that go into freezing us into a wrong place: the initial wrong understanding, the wrong view; our emotional commitment to it; and of course, most entrapping, a sense of identity. As soon as you say "I am a..." — and whatever that finishes with, "I am a Buddhist" — then you're trapped, as it were, into that. Now, of course, some entrapments can be skillful, but he's particularly interested in entrapments that are not.

So in the *Kālāma Sutta*, he's giving them permission to think for themselves. Now, having done that, he gives them the exercise in which they can establish a good mind, a good heart. And that, of course, is the practice of *mettā*. "The disciple of the noble ones, Kālāmas, who in this way is devoid of coveting, devoid of ill-will, undeluded, clearly comprehending and mindful, dwells pervading one quarter with the thought of love, likewise the second, likewise the third, likewise the fourth." So above, below and across, he dwells, encompassing all sentient beings everywhere in the entire cosmos with the abundant, exalted, boundless thought of love that is free of hatred and malice. And he does the same for compassion, joy and equanimity. Here, of course, he's giving them an exercise which, in terms of rebirth, would angle them towards the happy realms.

So now he offers these four consolations or assurances, having understood what the central concern of the Kālāmas was — which was about rebirth and its connection to your *kamma*. "Supposing there is a hereafter and there is a fruit, result of deeds done well and 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." That's your first consolation if you take his arguments.

But suppose, he says, 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, I keep myself. This is the second consolation. So whether there is or not, it's better to live this way.

"Suppose evil results befall an evildoer. I, however, don't think of doing harm to anyone. Then how can ill results affect me, who has not harmed anyone?" You will find this as your third consolation, your third assurance after his teachings.

And the final one: "Supposing evil results do not befall an evildoer, then I see myself purified in any case."

So the teaching here, the basic line, is that the inner happiness of moral integrity surpasses anything which is momentary, superficial pleasure. And this, of course, really settles the Kālāmas. He's given them a way of investigating what they've been told, and he's given them this leeway to decide for themselves whether there are karmic results and whether there is a rebirth or not. And this seems to have inspired

the Kālāmas so much that they took the Buddha as their teacher.

So here we have this lovely discourse. He enters into this confusion, into these people who are confused. His intention is to help them out of the confusion, not to convince them that he's right and everybody else is wrong. He seems to have that ability to see where you are and to take you from that place to a deeper understanding. He's a great teacher. He offers them this freedom to inquire. He then gives them ethics as the first criterion of truth, and recognizing bias and distorted judgment. He's addressing their problems around *kamma* and rebirth, and he does this especially through these four assurances. And of course he's given them this *mettā*, these *brahmavihāras*, which will lift their heart.

When he sees that they now see him as perhaps their teacher, you can presume that either later in the day — because perhaps he arrived in the morning and now he's been offered some food and he takes a rest, the siesta — and then he comes back. Then, of course, seeing that these people have been affected by his teaching, he probably hits them with the Four Noble Truths. And if he doesn't think they're ready, then he'll come back and visit them at a later date.

So here we have a lovely story which tells us a lot about the Buddha and just his remarkable ability to teach people.

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance, that they have not caused confusion, and that by your devotion to investigating the truth and making sure that you practice, you will arrive at that wonderful place, free of suffering, *Nibbāna*, sooner rather than later.

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