

# Discourse to the Kālāmas

Bhante Bodhidhamma · DhammaBytes · 16:34

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*Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma Sambuddhassa Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma Sambuddhassa Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma Sambuddhassa*

Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

There's a very famous discourse that people always quote to express the non-dogmatic way that the Buddha taught, and it's known as the *Kalama Sutta*, the discourse to the Kalamas. The question, of course, is how do we know something is true?

Here's a time where all sorts of gurus and ideas are coming forward. It's quite an exciting little time, really. And you're living in a town, a small town, with only a few thousand inhabitants. These gurus keep turning up and telling you what for. They're all saying slightly different things, and of course, saying everybody else is absolutely useless. So you're stuck. You wonder, well, who's right and who's wrong?

If you think of these days, somebody who's been brought up in a non-religious family suddenly becomes interested in the religious field and goes out in search. I mean, it's colossal, isn't it? Where will you start? So this is, in a slightly lesser degree, the situation of the Kalamas. It's very modern in a way.

So I'll just read it through so you get the feel of the discourse, and then say one or two things and continue next week.

Thus have I heard. So remember all these scriptures were related by Ananda, his assistant, remembered by him. He had to repeat them all at this meeting.

On one occasion the Blessed One was wandering on tour with a large sangha of monks when he arrived at the town of the Kalamas called Kesaputta. Now the Kalamas of Kesaputta had heard: "It is said that the ascetic Gautama, the Sakyan son who went forth from the Sakyan family, has arrived at Kesaputta. Now a good report about that master Gautama has been circulating thus: that the blessed one is an Arahant, perfectly enlightened, accomplished in true knowledge and conduct, fortunate, knower of the world, unsurpassed leader of persons to be tamed, teacher of devas and humans, the enlightened one, the blessed one. And having realized, with his own direct knowledge, this world, with its devas, mara and brahma, this population, with its ascetics and brahmins, with its devas and humans, he makes it known to others. And he teaches a dharma that is good in the beginning, good in the middle, and good in the end, with the right meaning and expressions. He reveals a spiritual life that is perfectly complete and purified. Now it's good to see such a worthy one."

Then the Kalamas of Kesaputta approached the Blessed One. Some paid homage to him and sat down to one side. Some exchanged greetings with him and after greeting and cordial talk sat down to one side. Some saluted him reverentially and sat down to one side and some remained silent and sat down to one side.

And the Kalamas said to the Blessed One: "Venerable Sir, some ascetics and Brahmins who come to Kesaputta explain and elucidate their own doctrines, but disparage, debunk, revile and vilify the doctrines of others. But then some other ascetics and Brahmins come to Kesaputta and they too explain and elucidate their doctrines, but disparage, debunk, revile and vilify the doctrines of the others. For us, venerable sir, there is perplexity and doubt as to which of these good ascetics speaks truth and which speaks falsehood."

"It is fitting for you to be perplexed, O Kalamas. It is fitting for you to be in doubt. Doubt has arisen in you about a perplexing matter. Come, Kalamas, do not go by oral tradition." So this is the bit that's always quoted. "Do not go by oral tradition, by lineage of teaching, by hearsay, by a collection of texts, by logic, by inferential reasoning, by reasoned cogitation, by the acceptance of a view after pondering it, by the seeming competence of a speaker, or because you think the ascetic is our teacher. But when you know for yourselves these things are unwholesome, these things are blameable, these things are censured by the wise. These things, if undertaken in practice, lead to harm and suffering, then you should abandon them."

"Now what do you think, Kalamas? When greed, hatred and delusion arise in a person, is it for his welfare or harm?"

"For his harm, Venerable Sir."

"Kalamas, a person who is greedy, hating and deluded, overpowered by greed, hatred and delusion, his thoughts controlled by them, will destroy life, take what's not given, engage in sexual misconduct and tell lies. He will also prompt others to do likewise. Will that conduct be to his harm and suffering for a long time?"

"Yes, Venerable Sir."

"Now what do you think, Kalamas? Are these things wholesome or unwholesome?"

"Unwholesome, Venerable Sir."

"Blameable or blameless?"

"Blameable, Venerable Sir."

"Censured or praised by the wise?"

"Censured, venerable sir."

"Undertaken and practiced, do they lead to harm and suffering or not? Or how is it in this case?"

"Undertaken and practiced, these things lead to harm and suffering, so it appears to us in this case."

"It is for this reason, Kalamas, that we said, do not go by oral tradition..." I'm going to repeat that. Remember, this is the oral tradition, so it's put in a very repetitious way so people can remember it.

Now he goes on to the opposite. "So what do you think Kalamas? When non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion arise in a person, is it for his welfare or harm?"

"For his welfare, venerable sir."

"Kalamas, a person who is without greed, without hatred, without delusion, not overpowered by greed and hatred and delusion, his thoughts not controlled by them, will abstain from the destruction of life, from taking what is not given, from sexual misconduct and from false speech. He will also prompt others to do likewise. Will that conduce to his welfare and happiness for a long time?"

"Yes, Venerable Sir."

"What do you think, Kalamas? Are these things wholesome or unwholesome?"

"Wholesome, Venerable Sir."

"Blameable or blameless?"

"Blameless, Venerable Sir."

"Censured or praised by the wise?"

"Praised, venerable sir."

"Undertaken and practiced, do they lead to welfare and happiness or not? Or how is it in this case?"

"Undertaken and practiced, these things lead to welfare and happiness. So it appears to us in this case."

"It is for this reason, Kalamas, that I said, do not go by oral tradition, and so forth."

And then he gives them this practice: "Then Kalamas, that noble disciple, devoid of covetousness, devoid of ill will, unconfused, clearly comprehending and ever mindful, dwells pervading one quarter with a mind imbued with loving kindness. Likewise the second, the third and the fourth. Thus above, below and across and everywhere and to all as to himself, he dwells pervading the entire world with a mind imbued with loving kindness, vast, exalted, measureless, without hostility and without ill will."

And this he says also of compassion, altruistic joy and equanimity.

"When Kalamas, this noble disciple has thus made his mind free of enmity, free of ill will, uncorrupted

and pure, he has won four assurances in this very life.

The first assurance he has won is this: if there is another world and if good and bad deeds bear fruit and yield results, it is possible that on the breakup of the body after death I shall arise in a good destination in a heavenly world.

The second assurance he has won is this: if there is no other world and if good and bad deeds do not bear fruit and yield results, still right here in this very life, I live happily, free of enmity and ill will.

The third assurance he has won is this: suppose evil befalls the evildoer. Then, as I do not intend evil for anyone, how can suffering affect me, one who does no evil deed?

The fourth assurance he has won is this: suppose evil does not befall an evildoer, then right here I see myself purified in both respects.

When Kalamas, this noble disciple has thus made his mind free of enmity, free of ill will, uncorrupted and pure, he has won these four assurances in this very life."

"So it is, blessed one, so it is, fortunate one, when this noble disciple has thus made his mind free of enmity, free of ill will, uncorrupted and pure, he has won these four assurances in this very life."

And then the usual ending: "Magnificent Venerable Sir, Magnificent Venerable Sir, the Blessed One has made the Dharma clear in many ways, as though he were turning upright what had been overthrown, revealing what had been hidden, showing the way to one who was lost, or holding up a lamp in the darkness so those with good eyesight can see forms. So now we go for refuge to the Blessed One, to the Dharma and to the Sangha of Monks. Let the Blessed One accept us as lay followers who have gone to refuge from today until life's end."

Very successful, eh? So let's just look at this, the main thing that he says. The first one he says is don't believe anything. Don't believe anything just because it comes from these things that are established by scriptural authorities or something coming from the past - so oral tradition, lineage of the teacher, hearsay, collection of texts. So fundamentalists might be described as people who believe that the texts are infallible, that they are true records and that they have to be entirely and fully believed.

My brother-in-law believes that the whole of the Bible is the word of God, full stop. And you'll find people in the East who believe that all the scriptures are actually the word of the Buddha, I mean the direct word of the Buddha. Sometimes you can get the flavour of the Buddha's teaching coming through, but to say, you know, to make a statement that it's the actual words he spoke... but it gives them assurance that, you know, it must be right. Of course they don't recognise that the way they read it is their own interpretation. Putting that aside, they just take it for real.

Then there are the four rational grounds: logic, inferential reasoning and reasoned cogitation and the acceptance of views after pondering upon it. Now most people would think that if they'd thought

something through it must necessarily be true. But we know from the history of our own rationality that it can lead you in a very strange place.

I mean, our 18th century enlightenment, which was about rationality, and probably its greatest product was the Declaration of Human Rights, also produced communism and Nazism, which were very rational doctrines. Remember, all rationality has to be based on a premise. And if the premise is wrong, then you're going to end up somewhere else. A lot of people would believe that just because they've thought something through, it must be therefore right. It's a dangerous one, eh?

And then there are those on authoritative persons, the impressive speakers and the respected teachers. So we've had the sad death of... maybe that, yeah. I was just reading some of the responses. It's unbelievable, actually. It's as bad as it was when she was there. The opposing views. And, you know, you just don't believe somebody because they have authority.

So now you've got this real problem of how do you find out whether something is true or not? Then on top of that, you've got the post-modern understanding that all our truths are completely relative to the individual person. So whatever's true for you, well, it might be true for you, but it's not true for me.

So you have these three ways of trying to decide for ourselves as to what's true: what's given to us from traditions, what we can think about and rationalise with others and come to some understanding, and what's true for me. So the Buddha simply says well go back to your experience and that's why he talks about something which is so concrete as greed, hatred and delusion and he asks you well does this create harm or not. So he's always going back to direct experience and to using that as a basis for our understanding of what truth is.

So remember that when he died, when he was dying, Ananda asks him, are you going to leave somebody to lead us? And he says, no. He said, take the Dharma, the teaching, as your light, as your lamp. Take yourself as the lamp. See? So the Dharma, of course, is the tradition and all that, and the logic and all that. But eventually, I'm afraid it's us. And if we get it wrong, it's only us that suffer.

So it's a very important point for us to think about. How do we know something is true? How do we know something is true?

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance. May you, by your investigation of this, arrive at that place of utter happiness sooner rather than later.

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