

Kālāma Sutta (AN 3.65)

Bhante Bodhidhamma · YouTube Talks · 19:11

And I've also moved the repeater right here, so we've got one hundred percent all the way. I'm absolutely sure this evening I shall be with you all the time. I trust you've had a fruitful day. I don't say happy, but I hope it has been happy.

Homage to the Buddha, the Blessed Noble and Fully Self-Awakened One.

Now this evening I'm going a little off-piste. I've been, as you know, working from the scriptures. I do mean to reference the scripture, but I came across this essay. Those of you who know the *Kālāma Sutta*, where the Buddha really tries to explain what we should believe in—at some point I won't give the game away for those who've not read it. We'll wait until I've actually read the discourse, which I hope to read tonight. But I want to just read this essay by an Italian philosopher, Gloria Origgi. She wrote a book in 2017 called "Why Trust Matters."

There is an underappreciated paradox of knowledge that plays a pivotal role in our advanced, hyper-connected liberal democracies. The greater amount of information that circulates, the more we rely on so-called reputational devices to evaluate it. What makes this paradoxical is that the vastly increased access to information and knowledge we have today does not empower us or make us more cognitively autonomous. Rather, it renders us more dependent on other people's judgements and evaluations of the information with which we are faced.

We are experiencing a fundamental paradigm shift in our relationship to knowledge. From the information age, we are moving towards the reputation age, in which information will have value only if it is already filtered, evaluated and commented upon by others. Seen in this light, reputation has become a central pillar of our collective intelligence today. It is the gatekeeper to knowledge, and the keys to the gate are held by others. The way in which the authority of knowledge is now constructed makes us reliant on what are the inevitable biased judgements of other people, most of whom we do not know.

Let me give some examples of this paradox. If you are asked why you believe that big changes in the climate are occurring and can dramatically harm future life on earth, the most reasonable answer you're likely to provide is that you trust the reputation of the sources of information to which you usually turn for acquiring information about the state of the planet. In the best case scenario, you trust the reputation of scientific research and believe that peer review—the review of other scientists—is a reasonable way of sifting out truths from false hypotheses about nature. In the average case scenario, you trust newspapers, magazines, or TV channels that endorse a political view which supports scientific research to summarise its findings for you. In the latter case, you are twice removed from the sources. You trust other people's

trust in reputable science.

Or take an even more controversial example. One of the most notorious conspiracy theories is that no man stepped on the moon in 1969 and that the entire Apollo program, including six landings on the moon between 69 and 72, was a staged fake. The initiator of this conspiracy theory was Bill Kaysing, who worked in publications at the Rocketdyne Company, where Apollo's Saturn V rocket engines were built. At his own expense, Kaysing published the book "We Never Went to the Moon: America's Thirty Billion Dollar Swindle." After publication, a movement of sceptics grew and started to collect evidence about the alleged hoax.

According to the Flat Earth Society, one of the groups that still denies the facts, the moon landings were staged by Hollywood with the support of Walt Disney and under the artistic direction of Stanley Kubrick. Most of the proofs they advanced are based on seemingly accurate analysis of the pictures of the various landings: the shadow angles are inconsistent with the light; the United States flag blows even if there's no wind on the moon; the tracks of the steps are too precise and well-preserved for a soil in which there is no moisture. Also, is it not suspicious that the program that involved more than 400,000 people for six years was shut down abruptly, and so on?

The great majority of people we would consider reasonable and accountable—myself included—will dismiss these claims by laughing at the very absurdity of the hypothesis. Although there have been serious and documented responses by NASA against these allegations, if I asked myself on what evidentiary basis I believe that there has been a moon landing, I must admit that my evidence is quite poor, and that I've never invested a second trying to debunk the counter-evidence accumulated by those conspiracy theorists.

What I personally know about the facts mixes confused childhood memories, black and white television news, the deference to my parents who told me about the landing in subsequent years. Still, the wholly second-hand and personally uncorroborated quality of this evidence does not make me hesitate about the truth of my beliefs in the matter. My reasons for believing that the moon landing took place go far beyond the evidence I can gather and double-check about the event itself. In those years, we trusted a democracy such as the US to have a justified reputation for sincerity.

Without an evaluative judgement about the reliability of a certain source of information, that information is, for all practical purposes, useless. The paradigm shift from the age of information to the age of reputation must be taken into account when we defend ourselves from fake news and other misinformation and disinformation techniques that are proliferating through contemporary societies.

What a mature citizen of the digital age should be competent at is not spotting and confirming the veracity of the news. Rather, she should be competent at reconstructing the reputational path of a piece of information in question, evaluating the intentions of those who circulated it, and figuring out the agendas of those authorities that lent it credibility. Whenever we are at the point of accepting or rejecting new information, we should ask ourselves: where does it come from? Does the source have a good reputation?

Who are the authorities who believe it? And what are my reasons for deferring to these authorities? Such questions will help us to get a better grip on reality than trying to check directly the reliability of the information at issue.

In the hyper-specialised system of the production of knowledge, it makes no sense to try to investigate on our own, for example, the possible correlation between vaccines and autism. It would be a waste of time and probably our conclusions would not be accurate. In the reputation age, our critical appraisals should be directed not at the content of information, but rather at the social network of relations that has shaped that content and given it a certain deserved or undeserved rank in our system of knowledge.

These new competencies constitute a sort of second-order knowledge. They prepare us to question and assess the reputation of an information source, something that philosophers and teachers should be crafting for future generations. According to Frederick Hayek's book "Law, Legislation and Liberty," civilisation rests on the fact that we all benefit from knowledge we do not possess. A civilised cyber world will be one where people know how to assess critically the reputation of information sources and can empower their knowledge by learning how to gauge appropriately the social rank of each bit of information that enters their cognitive field.

I just think it's a great article when you bring to mind everything that happened around Brexit—the fabrications, the exaggerations and so on and so forth. It basically fed into people's prejudices, and we weren't sure many times where the information was coming from.

Now to complement that is of course the famous *Kālāma Sutta*. I'll just read the first part so that you can get the flavour of it, and then tomorrow we can go into it a little bit more deeply.

I have heard that on one occasion, the Blessed One, on a wandering tour among the Kosalans with a large community of monks, arrived at Kesaputta, the town of the Kalamas. The Kalamas of Kesaputta heard it said: "Gotama the contemplative, son of the Sakyans, having gone forth from the Sakyan clan, has arrived at Kesaputta. And of that Master Gotama, this fine reputation has spread: 'He is indeed the Blessed One, worthy, rightly self-awakened, consummate in knowledge and conduct, well-gone—I don't know why they keep translating *Tathāgata* as well-gone—the transcendent one, a knower of the cosmos—that's not the physical cosmos, that's all the different worlds—an unexcelled trainer of those persons ready to be trained, teacher of human and divine beings, awakened, blessed. He has made known, having realised it through direct knowledge, this world with its *devas*, its gods, its *māras*, *brahmās*, its generations with its contemplatives and brahmins, their rulers and common people. He has explained the *Dhamma*, admirable in the beginning, admirable in the middle and admirable in the end. He has expounded the holy life, both in its particulars and in its essence, entirely perfect, surpassingly pure. It is good to see such a worthy one.'"

All that is often repeated through the scriptures as a description of the Buddha. Actually in the morning we chant part of that series.

Now this next little bit gives us some idea of their social habits. So the Kalamas of Kesaputta went to the Blessed One. On arrival, some of them bowed down to him and sat to one side. Some of them exchanged courteous greetings with him and, after an exchange of friendly greetings and courtesies, sat to one side. Some of them sat to one side having saluted him with hands palm to palm over their hearts. Some of them sat to one side having announced their name and clan. And some of them sat to one side in silence.

As they sat there, the Kalamas of Kesaputta said to the Blessed One: "Lord, there are some brahmins and contemplatives who come to Kesaputta. They expound and glorify their own doctrines, but as for the doctrines of others, they deprecate them, revile them, show contempt for them and disparage them. And then other brahmins and contemplatives come to Kesaputta. They expound and glorify their own doctrines, but as for the doctrines of others, they deprecate them, revile them, show contempt for them and disparage them. They leave us absolutely uncertain and in doubt. Which of these venerable brahmins and contemplatives are speaking the truth and which ones are lying?"

The Buddha replies: "Of course you're uncertain, Kalamas. Of course you're in doubt when there are reasons for doubt. Uncertainty is born. So in this case, Kalamas"—now here's the statement for personal freedom of thought or direction, in the same sense as the essay that I've read—"don't go by reports, by legends, by traditions, by scripture, by logical conjecture, by inference, by analogy, by agreement through pondering views, by probability, or by the thought, 'This contemplative is our teacher.' When you know for yourselves that these qualities are unskillful, these qualities are blameworthy, these qualities are criticised by the wise, these qualities when adopted and carried out lead to harm and to suffering, then you should abandon them."

I want to leave it there. It's a good time to leave it, and what we'll do tomorrow is just go into the Buddha's categories of why we shouldn't believe something, or at least not give it credence. He's always going towards the practical: what have you actually experienced? Now this of course relates specifically to the spiritual life within ourselves, because it's about our personal experience—not so much to what the essay is about, which is the information coming from the outside world. But there's obviously a correlation.

I shall leave you in suspense until tomorrow. I can only hope the little reading and readings have been helpful, and that you will continue your meditations.

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