

Talking to the Kālāmas

(AN 3.65; PTS A i.188)

Jayarava, Feb 2011.

Translation

Thus have I heard. Once the Bhagavan was going walkabout in Kosala with a large group of monks, and arrived at a Kosalan town called Kesaputta, home of the Kālāmas. They heard that Gotama the Sakya had reached Kesaputta and they knew his reputation “he is blessed...”¹ and they said “seeing one like that is good”.

So the Kālāmas went to the Bhagavan. Some saluted him and sat to one side; others exchanged polite greetings and polite small talk and sat to one side; others made obeisance with folded hands and sat to one side; some announced their clan name and sat to one side; and the rest silently sat to one side. Once they were all seated the Kālāmas spoke to the Bhagavan.

“There are some toilers and priests² who come to Kesaputta who illustrate and explain their own doctrine (*vāda*), but curse, despise, scorn, and ‘clip the wings’³ of other doctrines. Other toilers and priests come to Kesaputta, and they also illustrate and explain their own doctrine but curse, despise, scorn, and ‘clip the wings’ of other doctrines. We have doubt (*kaṅkhā*) and indecision (*vicikicchā*)⁴ about them – which of the toilers and priests has spoken the truly, who falsely?”

“That is enough, Kālāmas to cause doubt and indecision! However indecision has arisen about something to be doubted.”

“Here Kālāmas: don’t use revelation,⁵ don’t use lineage, don’t use quotations, don’t use tradition; don’t use speculation, don’t use inference, don’t use signs, don’t use understanding based on views, don’t uncritically accept what seems likely; don’t use respect for a toiler. When you know for yourselves ‘these things are unskilful, offensive (*sāvajja*)⁶, criticised by the wise, these things undertaken and accomplished result in harm and misery’ then you should abandon them.”

“What do you think, Kālāmas, when craving (*lobha*) inwardly arises in a person is that beneficial or harmful?”

¹ The text is abbreviated but clearly the ten epithets from the *itipi so* verses are intended.

² *samana-brāhmaṇa*: *samana* from √śram ‘to toil’; *brāhmaṇa* ‘a Brahmin’.

³ *opapakkhiṃ karonti* – clip wings (*pakkhi*), i.e. render powerless.

⁴ Evans (2007) notes that *vicikicchā* is often contrasted with *adhimokkha* ‘resolve, decision, determination’.

Buddhaghosa merely suggests that *vicikicchā* is a synonym (*vevacana*) of *kaṅkhā*. Nyanatiloka (2004) points to Vism XIV.177: “[*vicikicchā*] is a lack of desire to think (things out, i.e. come to a conclusion...); it has the nature of wavering, and its manifestation is indecision and a divided attitude...” (p.225)

⁵ The verb is missing in all of these sentences, the form being “*mā anussavena*” the prohibitive particle with an instrumental. AA supplies the verb *gaṇhittha* past participle of *gaṇhati* ‘to grasp’. The context shows that these are various means for making decisions about how to behave. I discuss the individual terms below.

⁶ *sāvajja* is often translated as ‘blameworthy’ which strikes me as clumsy. PED suggests “blameable, faulty; what is censurable, sin”. The etymology *sa-* ‘with’ + *avajja* ‘low, inferior, bad’; where *avajja* is probably from Sanskrit *vadya* and means ‘not to be spoken of’.

“Harmful, Sir.”

“The craver, the person over-whelmed and overcome with craving, kills breathing beings; takes the not given; goes with another’s spouse; speaks falsely, and incites others to this state. For them there is harm and misery for a long time.”

“What do you think, Kālāmas, when aversion (*dosa*) arises inwardly in a person is that beneficial or harmful?”

“Harmful, Sir.”

“The hater, the person over-whelmed and overcome with aversion, kills breathing beings; takes the not given; goes with another’s spouse; speaks falsely, and incites others to this state. For them there is harm and misery for a long time.”

“What do you think, Kālāmas, when confusion (*moha*) inwardly arises in a person is that beneficial or harmful?”

“Harmful, Sir.”

“The bewildered, the person over-whelmed and overcome with confusion, kills breathing beings; takes the not given; goes with another’s spouse; speaks falsely, and incites others to this state. For them there is harm and misery for a long time.”

“What do you think, Kālāmas, are these things (*dhammā*) skilful or unskilful?”

“Unskilful, Sir.”

“Offensive or blameless?”

“Offensive, Sir.”

“Criticised or commended by the wise?”

“Criticised, Sir.”

“Undertaken and accomplished do they result in harm and misery, or not? What do you say to this?”

“We think that, undertaken and accomplished, they do result in harm and misery, Sir.”

“[These answers] are the reason I said to you, and repeat, do not use tradition etc, but when you know for yourselves ‘these things are unskilful, offensive, criticised by the wise, these things undertaken and accomplished result in harm and misery’ then you should abandon them.”

“What do you think, Kālāmas, when contentment (*alobha*⁷) inwardly arises in a person is that beneficial or harmful?”

“Beneficial, Sir.”

“The contented, the person not over-whelmed or overcome with craving, does not kill breathing beings; does not take the not given; doesn’t go with another’s spouse, doesn’t speak falsely, and does not incite others to this state. For them there is benefit and happiness for a long time.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Similarly for the loving (*adosa*⁸), and the unconfused (*amoha*).⁹

“Yes, Sir.”

“What do you think, Kālāmas, are these things (*dhammā*) skilful or unskilful?”

“Skilful, Sir.”

⁷ literally ‘without craving’

⁸ ‘without aversion’

⁹ The text is abbreviated.

“Offensive or blameless?”

“Blameless, Sir.”

“Criticised or commended by the wise?”

“Commended, Sir.”

“Undertaken and accomplished do they result in benefit and happiness, or not? What do you say to this?”

“We think that, undertaken and accomplished, do they result in benefit and happiness, Sir.”

“[These answers] are the reason I said to you, and repeat, do not use tradition etc, but when you know for yourselves ‘these things are skilful, blameless, commended by the wise, these things undertaken and accomplished result in benefit and happiness’ then you should cultivate them.”

“Kālāmas, the noble disciple¹⁰ dwells without covetousness, without hating, unconfused, attentive and thoughtful he pervades one direction with thoughts connected with loving kindness. Pervading above, below, on the level, everywhere, and everyone together¹¹, the entire world, with abundant, universal¹², boundless thoughts of loving kindness, without aversion, peaceful. Likewise they pervade the entire world with compassion (*karuṇā*) and sympathetic joy (*muditā*) and equanimity (*upekkhā*); and also in the second, third, and fourth quarters.

“Kālāmas for the noble disciple – with their mind free of aversion, free of hate, unstained and purified, four consolations are acquired in this life¹³:

“‘If there is an afterlife¹⁴, and there is the result and fruit of actions done well or badly, in that case at the death of the body I will be reborn in the bliss of heaven¹⁵.’ This is the first consolation.”

“‘If there is no afterlife, and no result or fruit of actions done well or badly, then I free of aversion and hate, undisturbed and happy, I will look after myself¹⁶ in this life.’ This is the second consolation.”

“‘If evil is done, to the [evil] doer, but I do not think¹⁷ evil of anyone – not doing evil acts how will misery touch me?’ This is the third consolation.”

¹⁰ *ariyasāvako* ‘one who hears the nobles’ or ‘a noble hearer’ c.f. comments on *anussava* below.

¹¹ *sabbattatā* – ‘all-and-self-ness’, the state of all as self? Nyanaponika & Bodhi (1999) have “to all as to himself” (p.66). Buddhaghosa is silent here. The *Cūlaniddesa Aṭṭhakathā* suggests that this word means ‘not making distinctions between self and other beings’: *ayaṃ parasatto ’ti vibhāgaṃ akatvā attasamatāyāti* CnA 118.

¹² *mahaggata* ‘becoming great, enlarged, extensive, with a wide scope’. I’m taking this poetically to mean a great extent, as much as the universe, and hence universal.

¹³ ‘In this life’ translates *diṭṭheva dhamme*. literally ‘actually visible things’ which Buddhaghosa frequently glosses with variations on *imasmimīyeva attabhāve* ‘in this very person’ (e.g. DA i.313, ii.363). PED sv. *attabhāve*: “person, personality, individual; form, appearance, life, rebirth”

¹⁴ *paro loko* – another world, i.e. the world one goes to next after death,

¹⁵ *sugatim saggam lokam* - ‘the happy destination which is the heavenly world’.

¹⁶ *pariharāmi* < *pariharati* ‘protect, take care of; carry out; go around’

¹⁷ *cetemi* ‘I think’ < *ceteti* ‘to think, to intend’. Nyanaponika & Bodhi emphasise the ‘intentional’ connotation as elsewhere.

“‘If evil is not done to the doer, here I regard myself as purified both ways.’ This is the fourth consolation.¹⁸

“Kālāmas for the noble disciple – with their mind free of aversion, free of hate, unstained and purified, these four consolations are acquired in this life.”

“That’s it, Bhagavan! That’s it, Sugata!”

“It is just as you say.”¹⁹

It is excellent, Sir ...²⁰ we go to the Bhagavan as a refuge, to the dhamma and the community as refuges. Please remember us as disciples for gone for refuge for life.

¹⁸ The fourth consolation is a little ambiguous: AA interprets *yañca pāpam na karomi, yañca karotopi na kariyati* ‘since I do no evil, and no evil if done to the doer’, i.e. no evil is created either by me or by the other person. This really only makes sense in a Buddhist moral framework since if evil has no consequences, as this option allows, then why would it matter if I did evil? Clearly it does matter to the Buddha who believes it is better *not* to do evil because of the consequences.

¹⁹ They repeat the four consolations verbatim.

²⁰ The text is abbreviated. What’s missing is a standard phrase praising the Buddha’s teaching. It occurs in full in the preceding sutta AN 3.64 (PTS A i.184.)

Comments

Others have noted that this text is not called the *Kālāmā Sutta*, but the *Kesamutti* or *Kesaputta Sutta*. It is named after the town, Kesaputta, not the people. However it is so widely known as the *Kālāmā Sutta* that, ironically, referring to it by its proper title would be confusing. The structure of this short text is:

1. the Buddha arrives in Kesaputta and the Kālāmas, having heard his reputation, decide to ask him about their dilemma which is that various religious have been teaching and each reviling the teaching of the others. The Kālāmas are confused about who is telling the truth.
2. The Buddha gives them 10 negative criteria for assessing their own behaviour. He tells them to abandon what they know to cause misery and harm; and to cultivate what they know to cause happiness and benefit.
3. Through questions the Buddha establishes that he and the Kālāmas are agreed on the kinds of things that cause harm and misery; and their opposites benefit and happiness. Behaviour is also characterised in terms of skilful or unskilful, offensive or blameless, criticised or commended by the wise.
4. The Buddha outlines the disposition of the ideal Buddhist (*ariyasāvaka*) – the four *brahmavihāras*. The Kālāmas endorse this vision enthusiastically.
5. The Buddha lists four ‘consolations’ for the ideal Buddhist.
6. The Kālāmas go for refuge to the three jewels.

This sutta has been called “the Buddha’s Charter of Free Enquiry”.²¹ However this is overstating things somewhat. I will argue that the form is not so much a charter of free enquiry, but a demonstration that any thinking person will be a Buddhist.

The idea that the *Kālāmā Sutta* is a ‘charter for free enquiry’ has, however, taken hold and been endlessly repeated in Western Buddhist circles. The idea plays to Western bias against authority and monolithic religious organisations – the roots of which are complex and deep, but include strands of Protestantism and Romanticism. On the other hand the idea of “free inquiry” fits neatly with Post-Enlightenment values. So the idea has been accepted relatively uncritically.²²

The question

As Stephen Evans (2007) has pointed out, we do not know what the Kālāmas were interested in, possibly magical powers, possibly salvation, we just don’t know. The *Brahmajāla Sutta* gives an idea of how varied the religious goals of the day were. Evans offers some speculations, but there is nothing to suggest that these rather than other ideas were in their minds or that knowing the answer to the religious goals of the Kālāmas would improve our understanding of the teaching in the *sutta*.

²¹ Soma 1987.

²² However see Evans 2007 for a critical view.

We don't know much about the Kālāmas more generally, except that one – the *samana* Alāra-Kālāma – was one of the Buddha's early teachers. Given that Alāra was a *samana* we might conclude that the rest were also. But we don't know. I note that the way the Kālāmas greet the Buddha is quiet unusually varied which suggests that they themselves were not a homogeneous group. Perhaps they had adopted various teachings from various groups. The text mentions *samanabrāhmaṇa*, toilers and priests, which is a generic term for religious, but we might stretch the point to conclude that both *samanas* and *brāhmanas* visited Kesaputta. Kosala, with its capital Sāvattihī, was closer to the homeland of the Brahmins and may have had more contact than further East.

Evans points out that the Kālāmas do not ask “*what* is the truth?” but “*who* is telling the truth?” and we do not discover “the truth *about what*?” Is this just a lost detail, or a detail that the context would have supplied to someone living in the milieu in which the text was composed? Or is the lack of detail irrelevant because the content of the question is irrelevant to the rhetorical purpose of the text. My feeling is that the latter is worth considering. I will return to this point.

The Criteria

In the *Kālāma Sutta* the Buddha provides a list of negative criteria for making a moral decisions. These are quite interesting, and also idiomatic and therefore quite vague, and I thought I'd spend some time elucidating them. Other translations of these terms appear to be quite ragged – they don't necessarily hang together in sets. So my translations combine etymology with context to come up with a fresh interpretation that I hope is more plausible as a *set* of criteria.

The general formula is *mā X-ena* – i.e. the prohibitive particle *mā* ‘don't’ with a word in the instrumental case, and no verb. The sentence then means ‘don't use X to do something’, and we are left to discover what the ‘something’ is from the context. Clearly the context shows that the ‘something’ is making a decision about morality, about how to behave. Buddhaghosa's commentary on the *Anguttara Nikāya* supplies the verb *gaṇhittha* which is the second person aorist of *gaṇhati* ‘to grasp’.²³ Is the instrumental here functioning as an indirect object ‘don't grasp at X’; or is grasping being used in the abstract ‘don't grasp anything through X’? I'm not sure. In any case the broad sense is reasonably clear from the context.

So now let us look at the list.

mā anussavena, mā paramparāya, mā itikirāya, mā piṭakasampadānena, mā takkahetu, mā nayahetu, mā ākāraparivitakkena, mā diṭṭhinijjhānakkhantiyā, mā bhabbarūpatāya, mā samaṇo no garūti.

“don't use revelation, don't use lineage, don't use quotations, don't use tradition; don't use speculation, don't use inference, don't use signs, don't use understanding based on views, don't uncritically accept what seems likely; don't use respect for a toiler.”

²³ This syntax is discussed in Warder's *Introduction to Pāli* on p.31.

There are ten phrases here. They can be grouped into three sets – criteria relating to tradition, to intellect, and to a teacher.

We begin with *anussava* which comes from √*śru* ‘to hear’. In this kind of context what is heard is the sacred texts. For example the Vedas are known as *śruti* ‘the result of hearing’ or more aptly ‘revealed through hearing’. The suffix *anu-* means ‘after, along, along with’. This and the next three terms can all be translated as ‘tradition’, PED has “hearsay, report, tradition”, but each brings out a different aspect of tradition. My sense of this word is that it reflects the origins of tradition in revealed truths. Buddhaghosa merely supplied the gloss *anussavakatha* ‘talk of tradition’. I’ve opted to use ‘revelation’ but I might have also rendered this term as ‘tradition’ though this does seem to better fit *piṭakasampadāna* (see below).

Next we have *parampara*: literally this means ‘one after another’ or ‘a succession’. We might translate as ‘lineage.’ This refers to the passing on of revealed truths from teacher to student generation after generation. This kind of succession receives a sharp criticism in the *Tevijjā Sutta* (DN 13) where the Buddha suggests that what is passed on is only empty words (*appāṭihīrakatham*), because he doesn’t accept the original revelation - it is not based on personal experience (*sakkhiditṭhi*). Buddhaghosa glosses *paramparakatha* ‘talk of succession’.

Then comes *itikirā* which is a compound of the two words used to indicate quoted speech: *iti* and *kirā*. PED says that *kirā* is used in continuous story where *iti* is used in direct or indirect speech. PED suggests ‘hearsay’, but I think the context makes this more specific and suggests to me the practice of quoting from spiritual teachers and spiritual stories. The contrast is, again, with personal experience. We probably know this approach: ‘Bhante/Geshe/Sensei says...’ It’s not *our* experience.

The last term in this set is *piṭaka-sampadāna*: ‘handing on of collections’. *Piṭaka* may be familiar from the Buddhist usage. We refer to three sections of the Canon - *sutta*, *vinaya*, *abhidhamma* - as *tipiṭaka* ‘three collections’. The etymology is not clear but it apparently means ‘basket’ with an agricultural application – *vīhipiṭaka* ‘a basket for rice’, and *kuddāla-piṭaka* ‘hoe & basket’. It’s not clear when this term came to mean ‘a collection of writings’ – the usage seems to me to be Buddhist. Would the metaphor predate writing, i.e. predate the need for a physical container to place physical texts in? Else it might refer to the mind of the expert who memorised the texts before they were written? Buddhaghosa is no great help: *...piṭaka-tantiyā saddhim sametīti* ‘collections of sacred teachings (*tanta* = Sanskrit *tantra*) assembled together’ (PED *sameti* ‘to come together, assemble’). If there is a contrast here perhaps it is with the sporadic quotations of the previous item - here we are talking about the massed collection of memorised texts that make up the tradition.

Having dismissed tradition in its various manifestations, the Buddha then moves on to more intellectual criteria. Firstly *takkahetu*. PED gives ‘ground for doubt, or reasoning’. *Hetu*, of course, is ‘cause, reason, condition’ and *takka* is literally ‘twist, turn’ and metaphorically ‘to turn something over in your mind, to think about’. For the Sanskrit *tarka* MW suggests ‘reasoning, speculation, inquiry’ or ‘logic’. The question then is: what kind of compound is this? A search on Pāli and Sanskrit compounds ending with *-hetu* suggests that compounds of this type are *tatpuruṣa* compounds with the sense ‘for the sake of, caused by, or by reason of) so in this case: ‘caused by thinking, by reason of logic’. Buddhaghosa

glosses: *takkaggāhenapi mā gaṇhittha* ‘also don’t grasp by seizing of reasoning’. The sentence seems to be saying ‘don’t reason’; but I think we have to take this as referring to hypothetical reasoning in light of what comes after. That is, reasoning disconnected from experience and especially from emotions and values; what we might call speculation.²⁴ There’s nothing wrong with reason per se, but one can’t decide moral questions from *pure* reason, one must understand it from experience.

The next term is similar in form: *nayahetu*. *Naya* is from \sqrt{ni} ‘to lead’ and means ‘method, plan, inference; sense; behaviour, conduct’. ‘Inference’ fits the context nicely as a counterpart of, and development from, speculation.

Next we have *ākāraparivittaka* which is a bit more complex. *Ākāra* is from \bar{a} - + \sqrt{kr} ‘to do, to make’ and means ‘a way of making; a state or condition; a property, sign; a mode’; while *parivittaka* derives from *takka* with prefixes *pari-* and *vi-* and means ‘thought, reflection’, or ‘meditation’ (in the English sense). PED suggests ‘study of conditions, careful consideration, examination of reasons’ but these seem to be perfectly good ways of approaching moral decisions, and in keeping with the general trend of Buddhist approaches. Nyanaponika & Bodhi translate it “reflection on reasons” (1999, p.65). I’m not satisfied with this. Turning to Buddhaghosa we get:

‘sundaramidaṃ kāraṇaṃ ’ti evaṃ kāraṇaparivittakkenapi mā gaṇhittha

One should also not grasp thinking about obligation as ‘this obligation is beautiful’.

So Buddhaghosa appears to relate *ākāra* with *kāraṇa* ‘obligation’ – both from the same root. I’m not convinced that this fits the context either. My feeling is that it might be a reference to seeking knowledge through interpreting (*parivittaka*) signs (*ākāra*) - of the kind that are banned to monks in the *Brahmajāla Sutta* (DN 1) - such as reading omens and divination. Trying to understand morality based on omens is another form of reasoning that is disconnected from personal experience, especially of relating to other people.

After this comes *ditṭhinijjhānakhantiya*; PED ‘delighting in speculation’. It’s a triple compound with *ditṭhi* ‘views’; *nijjhāna* ‘understanding, insight; favour, indulgence’; and *khanti* ‘patience, forbearance’. Nyanaponika & Bodhi suggest “accepting a view after pondering”. Clearly *khanti* here suggests passivity so ‘accepting’ fits quite well. I can just about see how the compound could mean ‘accepting a view after pondering’, presuming that *nijjhāna* can mean ‘pondering’. I wonder if it would be more straightforward to read it as saying ‘accepting an insight based on a view’, i.e. uncritically accepting an ideologically based opinion. The compound certainly allows for this, and it makes more sense to me. It also fits the context.

Next comes *bhabbarūpatā*. PED has no suggestion for this compound though *bhabba* (a gerund from $\sqrt{bhū}$) means ‘able, capable; fit for’. *Rūpatā* is from *rūpa* ‘form’ and means ‘appearance’. Nyanaponika & Bodhi, apparently following Buddhaghosa attribute the fitness (*bhabba*) to the ‘speaker’ (or ‘*bhikkhu*’ in AA). I understand the appearance of capability to relate to the idea however. I think it means something that ‘seems likely’. That is it is

²⁴ In this the approach is similar to some of the ancient Greeks who tried to nut out the world while completely ignoring the real world.

intellectual laziness, something seems likely so we just accept it uncritically. Thus I read the phrase as related to the previous phrases – an aspect of the intellectual approach to morality. Nyanaponika & Bodhi however taking this to relate to the speaker of the idea place this criteria not with the previous four, but with the next one. There is a symmetry to this - four criteria relating to tradition; four to intellect; and two relating to immediate teachers.

The last criteria is *samaṇo no garu* ‘we have respect for the toiler’. Here it seems that the *samaṇa* (literally ‘one who toils’ from $\sqrt{\text{śram}}$ ‘to toil’) is the one who outlines a doctrine (*vāda*), but lashed out at other doctrines. It may be significant that the Kālāmas referred to *samanabrāhmaṇas* and yet here only *samanas* are mentioned. *Garu* means ‘weight’, and by association ‘respect’. A *guru* (from the same root) is someone with *gravitas*.

To summarise: the Kālāmas are advised not to decide moral matters using revelations, teaching lineages, quotations or bodies of spiritual teachings. This should probably be read in the light of the *Tevijjā Sutta* (DN 13) which critiques teachers who profess to lead somewhere that they have never been (and by their own definitions cannot have). Similarly forms of reasoning divorced from experience such as speculation, inference, interpreting omens, uncritical acceptance of views, lazily accepting whatever seems likely. And lastly they should not decide things based on respect for a holy person.

Questions and Answers

The Buddha then leads the Kālāmas through a series of questions and answers about morality. These are stereotypical Buddhist questions, and the answers are stereotypically Buddhist as well. For instance: “is it beneficial or harmful when aversion (*dosa*) arises in a person?” Is this a foregone conclusion? I would argue that it is not. What about the aversions we have to poison, to rotten food, to dangerous predators etc? These aversions have a purpose: they keep us safe. We are right to be averse to poison, to spit out the bitter berry; to avoid the spoiled food. Ironically the Buddha himself is said to have died from eating spoiled food. This cannot have been what was meant. I suggest the question is in fact more specific and refers to aversion to *people*. This is suggested by the ideal that we come to later – universal loving kindness to all beings. Morality in this case is closely related to how we treat other living beings, but especially other people. The three root poisons – craving, aversion, and confusion – are harmful and cause misery because they motivate us to kill, steal, cheat (in the sexual sense) and lie; and to incite others to these kinds of acts. That is they motivate us to related to people in ways that cause harm. For the Buddhist these are universal values, and it would be hard to argue that they are not universally good. However they cannot exhaust the list of universal values, they must be representative, or a minimal set.

The answers the Kālāmas give are also important. We note that they enthusiastically endorse the morality proposed by the Buddha and do not question it at all. After the questions have been posed and answered the Buddha tells the Kālāmas that is it because that some actions cause harm and misery, and some cause benefit and happiness that he has said to employ the criteria. Neither the Kālāmas nor the Buddha seem to have any doubt about karma, even if they don’t name it here.

It is interesting to note that the poison causes the person to act unskillfully when it overwhelms or overpowers them. Some emotions, these very basic emotions, are so powerful

that they take over from the rational brain and make decisions for us. I think most people have experience of this flood of emotion that hurls us into motion. It's interesting that the focus here is how this rebounds on the person and causes them misery and harm. It suggests that implicitly the message is set to appeal to our self interest. Elsewhere of course refraining from harming of other beings is for their benefit. One must always read a text like this in context.

The criteria given by the Buddha say that we should not make moral decisions divorced from our own experience of action and consequence. That this kind of reasoning is not present in the text tells us something about the assumptions of the author. They assumed that the process of reasoning that lead the Kālāmas to their conclusion would be obvious to the audience. It's not spelled out – the text does not show it's working. The Kālāmas do not have the kind of discussion that we associate with morality – even leaving aside the hypothetical approach. When discussing morality we often relate our experience through anecdotes: I acted in such away, and when I did that my experience was like this. We build up our moral sense through collating such stories from our own lives, and from those around us. Arguably we may be born with some moral sense, and we do inherit a set of moral values from those around us which are not tested by us, but which have stood the test of time for our community. As Buddhists we often have to revisit these mores and decide for ourselves whether they are still relevant.

The Kālāmas agree with the Buddha without any questions or fuss. What this suggests to me is rhetoric. The criteria are established, and the interlocutors are questioned about values, and come to a conclusion, presumably using the criteria given. This makes the conclusion – agreement with the Buddha – seem like the most intelligent conclusion. The only conclusion a thinking person would or could come to. It's a bit to tidy for anything but a committed Buddhist audience. So the text seems to be reinforcing a decision already made, and congratulating the audience on their good sense.

There is an outright contradiction in this part of the text. Having denied the efficacy of revelation, lineage, quotations and traditions; and particularly respect for a teacher, the Buddha asked the Kālāmas whether the moral issues attract commendation or condemnation by 'the wise' (*viññu*). Who are these 'wise' that exist outside of this framework? They crop up quite often in Buddhist discourses. The reference is most likely to the Buddha himself, and to the other *arahants*. They are wise in the particular sense that this knowledge being imparted by the Buddha is now second nature to them. They are synonymous with the *ariyasāvaka*.

The text repeated refers to 'things' to be abandoned. 'Things' here is a translation of *dhammā*. Some authors have apparently spent time pondering what *dhammā* could mean since *dhammā* can be translated a number of ways.²⁵ However I think this is a red-herring. *Dhammā* here is just 'things' – the context makes it clear. I did find that Rupert Gethin and Bhikkhu Thanissaro had translated *dhammā* as 'qualities' but this suggests that they also understood the reference to be to the poisons and their resultant behaviour.²⁶ What is being referred to is the list of things such as the positive and negative mental states that the actions

²⁵ This is asserted by Evans who spends much time discussing it without ever saying whose view it is. I had difficulty locating any account of this text which takes the view that Evans critiques.

²⁶ Gethin 2008, p.252; Thanissaro 2011.

that arise out of them: craving, aversion and confusion, and killing, stealing, lying and sexual-misconduct are to be abandoned; contentment, love, and clarity, and the *brahmavihāra* meditations are to be cultivated. No other more significant meaning of *dhamma* is intended. The Buddha in particular is not referring back to the conflicting ‘teachings’ in the first section of the sutta which are indicated by the word *vāda* ‘doctrine, ideology’.

The Ideal Buddhist

Having established the moral baseline, the next section describes an ideal Buddhist: the *ariyasāvaka*. A literal translation would be ‘one who has listened to the noble ones’²⁷ and the noble ones are the same as the wise. Again there is a tension between listening to the wise, and the criteria outlines above. Or we might translate as ‘the hearer who is noble’²⁸. Hearer (*sāvaka*) is a term for a disciple. Recall that in discussing the decision making criteria I made reference to *śruti* ‘revelation through hearing’ and *sāvaka* (Sanskrit *śravaka*) comes from the same root $\sqrt{\text{śru}}$ ‘to hear, to listen’.

The ideal Buddhist has eliminated the poisons and dwells radiating loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. We recognise these qualities as associated with the meditation practices know individually as *mettābhāvanā*, etc, and collectively as *brahmāvihāra*. However here they do not seem to constitute a meditation practice – there is no sense of *bhāvanā* or cultivation in other words. The ideal Buddhist just does radiate these qualities. This is not a practice orientated description, it is describing an ideal. In fact reading closely we do not see by the close of the *sutta* any teaching beyond the advice on how to make moral decisions. The ideal is presented as a kind of motivational image. Presumably the Buddha himself, being the archetype, radiates loving kindness and this is obvious to those who meet him. Though again this creates a tension as the Buddha has said that respect for the teacher is not a good criteria for making moral decisions. Perhaps it allows that though this respect is not a good decision making criteria, it can none the less function as an inspiring example of what good moral decision making can do for you? If one relates to all living beings without craving, hatred, or confusion then one dwells godlike (*brahmaṃ etaṃ vihāraṃ*) as the Karanīya Mettā Sutta says. This seems to reinforce the idea that morality is specifically about how we treat beings (including ourselves) rather than any abstract notion of goodness. This is why theories of morality disconnected from experience are not useful criteria for decision making.

The Four Consolations

Just as much has been made of the 10 criteria by Western Buddhists seeking confirmation of Post-Enlightenment values, the four consolations have received a great deal of attention. Briefly the consolations are that whether or not there is an afterlife and whether or not actions have consequences, the ideal disciple is better off. The fruits accrue in this life there is no need to wait until the afterlife –

²⁷ Treating it as a *tatpuruṣa*.

²⁸ Treating it as a *karmadhāraya*.

There are resonances here with the teaching to Vāseṭṭha and Bharadvaja in the *Tevijjā Sutta* who were concerned with the afterlife. The Buddha demolishes the idea that the Brahmins could lead anyone out of saṃsāra to *brahmasahavyatā* (companionship – i.e. merger – with Brahmā). The argument rests on the unstated knowledge that someone who attains *brahmasahavyatā* could not return to life to lead anyone anywhere, so the teachers, and their teachers back to the original seers who had the revelation, cannot know from personal experience (*sakkhidiṭṭhi*) what they claim to know. The sphere is metaphysics rather than morality, but the argument is similar. The background is also similar in that in the *Tevijjā Sutta* there is disagreement about who is telling the truth, which is solved by the Buddha speaking from personal experience. Also in the *Tevijjā Sutta* he teaches the *brahmavihāra* meditations as the way to *brahmasahavyatā* (and it has been pointed out by Richard Gombrich that *vihāra* and *sahavyatā* are synonyms).

The thing that excites Western Buddhists is the apparent recognition that one may not believe in an afterlife (*paro loko* – the other world) or in *karma* and yet still benefit from this teaching on morality. This appeals to those Westerners who find the ideas of karma and rebirth, like other religious or metaphysical ideas, difficult to accept as facts. It is indeed a consolation if one is attracted by, and even committed to Buddhist practices, but finds Buddhist metaphysics unpalatable, to find that the Buddha was not committed to those metaphysics. There is no doubt that from an empirical view that karma and rebirth combined are problematic. I have written about some of these problems on my blog.²⁹

The consolations are not general. The consolations are those of the *ariyasāvaka*, the ideal Buddhist, who dwells at all time, radiating loving kindness to all beings everywhere. However they do have a general implication, which is that no matter what you believe about karma and rebirth it is better to be free of craving, aversion, and confusion. Can we conclude from this that it does not matter what you believe?

I do not think this is the message of the text. I've already noted above that neither the Buddha nor the Kālāmas have any doubts about karma. They agree that actions have consequences: that craving, aversion and confusion lead to harm and misery; that the contentment, kindness, and clarity lead to benefit and happiness. There is no suggestion here that not believing in karma is an option for Buddhists.

Furthermore the rhetoric of the text is designed to highlight the prestige of the Buddhist path, probably to an audience of Buddhists. So it doesn't make much sense to suggest to them that they need not be Buddhists to enjoy the fruits of being Buddhists. The point is not free thinking, but to reinforce the universality of Buddhist values in the minds of Buddhists. This is a rhetorical strategy still in use by Buddhists I would say. We often present our moral values as the highest, most noble values. In an audience of Buddhists this serves a different purpose than if the audience were non-Buddhists. The idea is not to persuade anyone to change their mind, but to reinforce a view already held: that Buddhism is universally good. I have my sympathies with this position – I am a Buddhist after all. I have attended many a gathering of Buddhists where precisely this kind of rhetoric was used to reinforce the goodness of Buddhism.

²⁹ See for instance: Jayarava (2008a) and (2010)

Now some will argue that the Kālāmas are not Buddhists and that the audience is therefore non-Buddhist. But this is a superficial understanding of the context. It assumes that the *Kālāmā Sutta* faithfully records some historical meeting, and that no motive on the part of the story teller intrudes. It assumes that for several hundred years the story was passed on without any substantial changes and that the current version in Pāli is a faithful reflection of that original meeting. This is actually quite unlikely. Although I disagree with some of his conclusions Stephen Evans makes an important distinction between the historical Buddha, and the traditional Buddha. What we meet in the Pāli texts is the traditional Buddha – the Buddha as remembered and portrayed by a tradition. It seems likely to me that there was an historical Buddha, that the traditional Buddha is based on this historical person, but the extent of the similarity is difficult to fathom. I think that in large measure the traditional accounts of the Buddha are hagiography not history. This means that we can use the stories as inspiration, that we can use the techniques as starting points, but that we get few hard facts from the Pāli texts. So the possibility that the audience for this text is anything other than orthodox Buddhists is unlikely. We must, I think, assume that the details are intended to be heard and understood by Buddhists, and to see the consolations in this light.

Final Thoughts

The final act of the sutta is that the Kālāmas, en masse, go for refuge to the Three Jewels as *upasakas* – sometimes translated as ‘lay disciples’ in accordance with modern conventions of what an *upasaka* is. In fact they make a lifelong commitment to the Buddha. At the beginning they asked ‘who is telling the truth?’ and the answer, no unexpectedly for a Buddhist text, is that the Buddha is telling the truth. And so they take him as their guru. This is an unequivocal endorsement of all that the Buddha has said, the Kālāmas who begin in a state of doubt and indecision, are now sure and decisive. The transformative power of a discussion with the Buddha is revealed.

We all have a range of relationships with people and other living beings. We act and interact all the time. Most of the time we do not stop to intellectually consider morality – we act from what *feels right*. Morality is not a question ‘truth’ in any abstract sense. Morality, in the Buddhist view anyway, is about the quality of our interactions; on the emotions that move us, and about what is stirred up in our emotions when we interact with people. What this means is that we must often ponder morality in retrospect. Our moral learning comes from reflecting on interactions after the fact. We learn morality from our mistakes as much as anything. Despite this very few scholars have commented on the role of confession in Buddhism – and yet it remains a quintessential Buddhist practice.³⁰

My reading of the *Kālāmā Sutta*, then, is not diametrically opposed to the idea that it encourages free thinking, or free enquiry. However I see this as a rhetorical text, aimed at Buddhists, which seeks to affirm the universal nature of Buddhist values. The conclusion is that any intelligent person would want to follow the Buddha, with the implication that as we are Buddhists already then we are intelligent. I don’t agree with those who conclude that the text really does allow the Buddhist to not believe in karma and rebirth. The message stops

³⁰ See my discussion of confession in the Pāli texts. Jayarava (2008a) and Attwood (2008).

well short of that conclusion. It says instead that Buddhist morality is universal; it is best to be a Buddhist. And anyway many other texts attest that karma and rebirth are central Buddhist doctrines.

Perhaps the most important conclusion to draw from this text is that morality consists in our approach to relating to living beings, especially people. That we cannot usefully think about morality in the abstract or use pure reason to understand Buddhist ethics, nor can we simply ape someone we respect. This is not necessarily an ‘empirical’ approach but acknowledges that decisions, especially moral decisions involve the emotions. It is our experience of emotional states in relation to other people that is the focus: where we crave or avert in relationship to other people we tend to create harm and misery, both in ourselves and in others. I make the point that thinking about morality must often be done in retrospect, and that confession is an overlooked Buddhist practice.

Abbreviations

A	Aṅguttara Nikāya
AA	Aṅguttara Aṭṭhakatha
AN	Aṅguttara Nikāya PTS edition
DN	Dīgha Nikāya
PED	Pali Text Society, Pali English Dictionary

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