

Buddhism as Non-Dogmatic ¹

From *Ānguttara-nikāya*, 3.65 ²

The Kālāma Sutta

...The Kālāmas, who were inhabitants of Kesaputta sitting on one side, said to the Blessed One [the Buddha]: “There are some monks and brahmans, venerable sir, who...expound and explain only their own doctrines; the doctrines of others they despise, revile, and pull to pieces. Some other monks and *brahmins* [do the same]. Venerable sir, there is doubt, there is uncertainty in us concerning them. Which of these reverend monks and brahmans spoke the truth and which falsehood?”

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; nor upon tradition; nor upon rumor; nor upon what is in a scripture; nor upon surmise; nor upon an axiom; nor upon specious reasoning; nor upon a bias toward a notion that has been pondered over; nor upon another’s seeming ability; nor upon the consideration “The monk is our teacher.”

Kālāmas, when you yourselves know: “These things are bad; these things are blamable; these things are censured by the wise; undertaken and observed, these things lead to harm and ill,” abandon them.

What do you think, Kālāmas? Does greed occur for benefit or harm?

—For harm, venerable sir.

Kālāmas, being given to greed, and being overwhelmed and vanquished mentally by greed, a person takes life, steals, commits adultery, and tells lies; this prompts others too, to do likewise. Will that be for harm and ill?

—Yes, venerable sir.

What do you think, Kālāmas? Does hate occur for benefit or harm?...Does delusion occur for benefit or harm?...

What do you think, Kālāmas? Are these things good or bad?

—Bad, venerable sir...

Undertaken and observed, do these things lead to harm and ill, or not? Or how does it strike you?

—Undertaken and observed, these things lead to harm and ill. Thus it strikes us here...

Therefore, did we say, Kālāmas, what was said thus, ‘Come Kālāmas. Do not go upon what has been acquired by repeated hearing; nor upon tradition; nor upon rumor; nor upon what is in a scripture; nor upon surmise; nor upon an axiom; nor upon specious reasoning; nor upon a bias

¹ The source-numbers below are the volume/page numbers from the Pāli Text Society’s standard edition. Small changes were made to the translations to improve style, to be gender-inclusive, etc.

² Translated by Soma Thera at <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/soma/wheel008.html>

toward a notion that has been pondered over; nor upon another's seeming ability; nor upon the consideration, "The monk is our teacher."

Kālāmas, when you yourselves know: "These things are bad; these things are blamable; these things are censured by the wise; undertaken and observed, these things lead to harm and ill," abandon them...

What do you think, Kālāmas? Does absence of greed occur for benefit or harm?

—For benefit, venerable sir.

Kālāmas, being not given to greed, and being not overwhelmed and not vanquished mentally by greed, a person does not take life, does not steal, does not commit adultery, and does not tell lies; this prompts others too, to do likewise. Will that be long for his benefit and happiness?

—Yes, venerable sir.

What do you think, Kālāmas? Does absence of hate occur for benefit or harm?...Does absence of delusion occur for benefit or harm?...

What do you think, Kālāmas? Are these things good or bad?

—Good, venerable sir...

Undertaken and observed, do these things lead to benefit and happiness, or not? Or how does it strike you?

—Undertaken and observed, these things lead to benefit and happiness. Thus it strikes us here...

Therefore, did we say, Kālāmas, what was said thus, 'Come Kālāmas. Do not go upon what has been acquired by repeated hearing; nor upon tradition; nor upon rumor; nor upon what is in a scripture; nor upon surmise; nor upon an axiom; nor upon specious reasoning; nor upon a bias toward a notion that has been pondered over; nor upon another's seeming ability; nor upon the consideration, "The monk is our teacher."

Kālāmas, when you yourselves know: "These things are good; these things are not blamable; these things are praised by the wise; undertaken and observed, these things lead to benefit and happiness," enter and abide them...

From *Majjhima-nikāya*, 68 and 72³

Questions that Tend Not to Edification: Mālunkyāputta

Now it happened to the venerable Mālunkyāputta, being in seclusion and plunged in meditation, that a consideration presented itself to his mind, as follows:

“These doctrines which the Blessed One has left unelucidated, has set aside and rejected—that the world is eternal, the world is not eternal, that the world is finite, that the world is infinite, that the soul and the body are identical, that the soul is one thing and the body another, that the saint exists after death, that the saint does not exist after death, that the saint both exists and does not exist after death, that the saint neither exists nor does not exist after death—these the Blessed One does not elucidate to me...If the Blessed One will elucidate to me [these doctrines], I will lead the religious life under the Blessed One. If the Blessed One will not elucidate to me [these doctrines], I will abandon religious training and return to the lower life of the layperson...”

Pray, Mālunkyāputta, did I ever say to you, ‘Come Mālunkyāputta, lead the religious life under me, and I will elucidate to you [those doctrines]’?

—No, truly, venerable Sir...

That being the case, vain man, whom are you so angrily denouncing? Mālunkyāputta, anyone who should insist upon [what you have said]—that person would die...before the Tathāgata [the Buddha] had ever elucidated them to that person.

It is as if, Mālunkyāputta, a man had been wounded by an arrow thickly smeared with poison, and his friends...were to procure for him a physician or surgeon; and the sick man were to say, ‘I will not have this arrow taken out until I have learned whether this man who wounded me...was tall, or short, or of the middle height...’

The religious life does not depend on the dogma that the world is eternal; nor does it depend on the dogma that the world is not eternal [and so of the other doctrines listed]. Whether the dogma obtains, Mālunkyāputta, there still remain birth, old age, death, sorrow, lamentation, misery, grief, and despair, for the extinction of which in the present life I am prescribing...

Accordingly, Mālunkyāputta, bear always in mind what it is that I have not elucidated, and what it is that I have elucidated. And what have I not elucidated? I have not elucidated [the doctrines that have been listed]. And why, Mālunkyāputta, have I not elucidated these? Because this profits not, nor has to do with the fundamentals of religion, nor tends to aversion, absence of passion, cessation, quiescence, the supernatural faculties, supreme wisdom, and *nirvāna*; therefore have I not elucidated them.

And what have I elucidated? Suffering have I elucidated, the origin of suffering have I elucidated; the cessation of suffering have I elucidated; and the path leading to the cessation of suffering have I elucidated.⁴ And why have I elucidated these? Because this indeed profits, has to

³ Translated by H.C. Warren (1915), *Buddhism in Translation*, Harvard UP, pp. 117-128.

⁴ These four topics are elucidated by the Buddha’s “Four Noble Truths.” See, e.g., *Samyutta-nikāya*, 56.1 (a.k.a., “The First Sermon”).

do with the fundamentals of religion, and tends to aversion, absence of passion, cessation, quiescence, knowledge, supreme wisdom, and *nirvāṇa*; thus have I elucidated it. Accordingly, Mālunkyāputta, bear always in mind what it is that I have not elucidated, and what it is that I have elucidated.

Questions that Tend Not to Edification: Vaccha

Vaccha, the wandering ascetic, spoke to the Blessed One as follows:

—How is it, Gotama? Does Gotama hold that the world is eternal, and that this view alone is true, and every other false?

Nay, Vaccha. I do not hold that the world is eternal, and that this view alone is true, and every other false.

—But how is it, Gotama? Does Gotama hold that the world is not eternal, and that this view alone is true, and every other false?

Nay, Vaccha. I do not hold that the world is not eternal, and that this view alone is true, and every other false.

—How is it, Gotama? Does Gotama hold that the world is finite...that the soul and the body are identical...that the saint exists after death...that the saint both exists and does not exist after death...that the saint neither exists nor does not exist after death, and that this view alone is true, and every other false?

Nay, Vaccha...the doctrine that the world is eternal is a jungle, a wilderness, a puppet-show, a writhing, and a fetter, and is coupled with misery, ruin, despair, and agony, and does not tend to aversion, absence of passion, cessation, quiescence, knowledge, supreme wisdom, and *nirvāṇa*...

[And similarly for the other doctrines which have been listed]

This is the objection I perceive to these doctrines, so that I have not adopted any one of them.

—But has Gotama any doctrine of his own?

The Tathāgata, O Vaccha, is free from all dogmas; but this, Vaccha, does the Tathāgata know: the nature of form, and how form arises, and how form perishes; the nature of sensation...of perception...of mental formations... of consciousness, and how consciousness arises, and how consciousness perishes.⁵ Therefore say I that the Tathāgata has attained deliverance and is free from attachment, inasmuch as all imaginings, or agitations, or false notions concerning an ego or anything pertaining to an ego have perished, have faded away, have ceased, have been given up and relinquished.⁶

—But, Gotama, where is the priest reborn who has attained this deliverance for his mind?

Vaccha, to say that he is reborn would not fit the case...to say that he is not reborn would not fit the case...to say that he is both reborn and not reborn would not fit the case...to say that he is neither reborn nor not reborn would not fit the case...

⁵ This is a reference to a key teaching of the Buddha, “dependent origination.” See, e.g., *Samyutta-nikāya* 12.1.

⁶ This concerns another core view of the Buddha, the non-existence of the ego. See, e.g., *Samyutta-nikāya* 22.59 (a.k.a. “The Second Sermon”).

—Gotama, I am at a loss what to think in this matter, and I have become greatly confused, and the faith in Gotama inspired by a former conversation has now disappeared.

Enough, O Vaccha! Be not at a loss what to think in this matter, and be not greatly confused. Profound, O Vaccha, is this teaching, recondite, and difficult of comprehension, good, excellent, and not to be reached by mere reasoning, subtle, and intelligible only to the wise...Therefore, Vaccha, I will now question you, and answer as seems right to you.

What think you, Vaccha? Suppose a fire were to burn in front of you...[and] someone were to ask you, “On what does this fire that is burning in front of you depend?” What would you answer, Vaccha?

—I would answer, Gotama, “It is on fuel of grass and wood that this fire burning in front of me depends.”

But, Vaccha, if the fire in front of you were to become extinct...[and] if someone were to ask you, “In which direction has that fire gone—east, or west, or north, or south?” What would you say, O Vaccha?

—The question would not fit the case, Gotama. For the fire which depended on fuel of grass and wood, when that fuel has all gone, and it can get no other, being thus without nutriment, is said to be extinct.

In exactly the same way, Vaccha:

All form by which one could predicate the existence of the saint, all that form has been abandoned, uprooted, pulled out of the ground like a palmyra-tree, and become non-existent and not liable to spring up again in the future. The saint, O Vaccha, who has been released from what is styled form, is deep, immeasurable, unfathomable, like the mighty ocean. To say that he is reborn would not fit the case. To say that he is not reborn would not fit the case. To say that he is both reborn and not reborn would not fit the case. To say that he is neither reborn nor not reborn would not fit the case.

[And so of feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness.]