



# Kālāma Sutta

The Buddha's Charter of Free Inquiry

Translated from the Pali by

Soma Thera

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The discourse to the Kālāmas is well known for its encouragement of inquiry. It sets forth the principles that should be followed by a seeker of truth and contains a standard by which spiritual teachings can be judged. In this discourse the Buddha shows that the reason for a virtuous life does not necessarily depend on beliefs, but on mental well-being acquired through the overcoming of greed, hatred, and delusion.

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## PREFACE

The instruction to the Kālāmas (Kālāma Sutta) is justly famous for its encouragement of free inquiry; the spirit of the sutta signifies a teaching that is exempt from fanaticism, bigotry, dogmatism, and intolerance.

The reasonableness of the Dhamma, the Buddha's teaching, is chiefly evident in its welcoming careful examination at all stages of the path to enlightenment. Indeed the whole course of training for wisdom culminating in the purity of the consummate one (the arhat) is intimately bound up with examination and analysis of things internal: the eye and visible objects, the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and tastes, the body and tactile impressions, the mind and ideas.

Thus since all phenomena have to be correctly understood in the field of the Dhamma, insight is operative throughout. In this sutta it is active in rejecting the bad and adopting the good way; in the extracts given below in clarifying the basis of knowledge of conditionality and arhatship. Here it may be mentioned that the methods of examination found in the Kālāma Sutta and in the extracts cited here, have sprung from the knowledge of things as they are and that the tenor of these methods are implied in all straight thinking. Further, as

penetration and comprehension, the constituents of wisdom are the result of such thinking, the place of critical examination and analysis in the development of right vision is obvious. Where is the wisdom or vision that can descend, all of a sudden, untouched and uninfluenced by critical thought?

The *Kālāma Sutta*, which sets forth the principles that should be followed by a seeker of truth, and which contains a standard things are judged by, belongs to a framework of the Dhamma; the four solaces taught in the sutta point out the extent to which the Buddha permits suspense of judgment in matters beyond normal cognition. The solaces show that the reason for a virtuous life does not necessarily depend on belief in rebirth or retribution, but on mental well-being acquired through the overcoming of greed, hate, and delusion.

More than fifty years ago, Moncure D. Conway, the author of *My Pilgrimage to the Wise Men of the East*, visited Colombo. He was a friend of Ponnambalam Ramanathan (then Solicitor General of Ceylon), and together with him Conway went to the Vidyodaya Pirivena to learn something of the Buddha's teaching from Hikkaduve Siri Sumangala Nāyaka Thera, the founder of the institution. The Nāyaka Thera explained to them the principles contained in the *Kālāma Sutta* and at the end of the conversation Ramanathan whispered to Conway: "Is it not strange that you and I, who come from far

different religions and regions, should together listen to a sermon from the Buddha in favour of that free thought, that independence of traditional and fashionable doctrines, which is still the vital principle of human development?”—Conway: “Yes, and we with the (Kālāma) princes pronounce his doctrines good.”



# THE INSTRUCTION TO THE KĀLĀMAS

## THE KĀLĀMAS OF KESAPUTTA GO TO SEE THE BUDDHA

1. I heard thus. Once the Blessed One,<sup>1</sup> while wandering in the Kosala country with a large community of bhikkhus, entered a town of the Kālāma people called Kesaputta. The Kālāmas who were inhabitants of Kesaputta heard: “Reverend Gotama, the monk, the son of the Sākiyans, has, while wandering in the Kosala country, entered Kesaputta. The good repute of the Reverend Gotama has been spread in this way: Indeed, the Blessed One is thus consummate, fully enlightened, endowed with knowledge and practice, sublime, knower of the worlds, peerless, guide of tameable men, teacher of divine and human beings, enlightened, blessed. He makes known this world with its beings, its māras and its brahmas, and the group of creatures, with its monks and brahmins, and its divine and human beings, which he by himself has through direct knowledge understood clearly. He

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1. *Āṅguttara Nikāya, Tika Nipāta, Mahāvagga, Sutta No. 65*

sets forth the Dhamma, good in the beginning, good in the middle, good in the end, possessed of meaning and the letter, and complete in everything; and he proclaims the holy life that is perfectly pure. Seeing such consummate ones is good indeed.”

2. Then the Kālāmas who were inhabitants of Kesaputta went to where the Blessed One was. On arriving there some paid homage to him and sat down on one side; some exchanged greetings with him and after the ending of cordial memorable talk, sat down on one side; some saluted him raising their joined palms and sat down on one side; some announced their name and family and sat down on one side; some, without speaking, sat down on one side.

#### **THE KĀLĀMAS OF KESAPUTTA ASK FOR GUIDANCE FROM BUDDHA**

3. The Kālāmas who were inhabitants of Kesaputta sitting on one side said to the Blessed One: “There are some monks and brahmins, venerable sir, who visit Kesaputta. They expound and explain only their own doctrines; the doctrines of others they despise, revile, and pull to pieces. Some other monks and brahmins too, venerable sir, come to Kesaputta. They also expound and explain only their own doctrines; the doctrines of others they despise, revile, and pull

to pieces. 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?”

#### THE CRITERION FOR REJECTION

4. “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 rumour; nor upon what is in a scripture; nor upon surmise; nor upon an axiom; nor upon specious reasoning; nor upon a bias towards 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 blameable; these things are censured by the wise; undertaken and observed, these things lead to harm and ill,’ abandon them.

**GREED, HATE, AND DELUSION**

5. “What do you think, Kālāmas? Does greed appear in a man for his benefit or harm?”—“For his harm, venerable sir.”—“Kālāmas, being given to greed, and being overwhelmed and vanquished mentally by greed, this man takes life, steals, commits adultery, and tells lies; he prompts another too, to do likewise. Will that be conducive for his harm and ill for a long time?”—“Yes, venerable sir.”

6. “What do you think, Kālāmas? Does hate appear in a man for his benefit or harm?”—“For his harm, venerable sir.”—“Kālāmas, being given to hate, and being overwhelmed and vanquished mentally by hate, this man takes life, steals, commits adultery, and tells lies; he prompts another too, to do likewise. Will that be conducive for his harm and ill for a long time?”—“Yes, venerable sir.”

7. “What do you think, Kālāmas? Does delusion appear in a man for his benefit or harm?”—“For his harm, venerable sir.”—“Kālāmas, being given to delusion, and being overwhelmed and vanquished mentally by delusion, this man takes life, steals, commits adultery, and tells lies; he prompts another too, to do likewise. Will that be conducive for his harm and ill for a long time?”—“Yes, venerable sir.”

8. “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 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.”

9. “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 rumour; nor upon what is in a scripture; nor upon surmise; nor upon an axiom; nor upon specious reasoning; nor upon a bias towards 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 blameable; these things are censured by the wise; undertaken and observed, these things lead to harm and ill,” abandon them.

#### THE CRITERION FOR ACCEPTANCE

10. “Come, Kālāmas. Do not go upon what has been acquired by repeated hearing; nor upon tradition; nor upon rumour; nor upon what is in a scripture; nor upon surmise; nor upon an axiom; nor upon specious reasoning; nor upon a bias towards 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 blamea-

ble; these things are praised by the wise; undertaken and observed, these things lead to benefit and happiness,' enter on and abide in them.

#### ABSENCE OF GREED, HATE, AND DELUSION

11. "What do you think, Kālāmas? Does absence of greed appear in a man for his benefit or harm?"—"For his benefit, venerable sir."—"Kālāmas, being not given to greed, and being not overwhelmed and not vanquished mentally by greed, this man does not take life, does not steal, does not commit adultery, and does not tell lies; he prompts another too, to do likewise. Will that be conducive for his benefit and happiness for a long time?"—"Yes, venerable sir."

12. "What do you think, Kālāmas? Does absence of hate appear in a man for his benefit or harm?"—"For his benefit, venerable sir."—"Kālāmas, being not given to hate, and being not overwhelmed and not vanquished mentally by hate, this man does not take life, does not steal, does not commit adultery, and does not tell lies; he prompts another too, to do likewise. Will that be conducive for his benefit and happiness for a long time?"—"Yes, venerable sir."

13. "What do you think, Kālāmas? Does absence of delusion appear in a man for his benefit or harm?"—"For his benefit, venerable sir."—"Kālāmas, being not given to delusion, and being not

overwhelmed and not vanquished mentally by delusion, this man does not take life, does not steal, does not commit adultery, and does not tell lies; he prompts another too, to do likewise. Will that be conducive for his benefit and happiness for a long time?”—“Yes, venerable sir.”

14. “What do you think, Kālāmas? Are these things good or bad?”—“Good, venerable sir.”—“Blameable or not blameable?”—“Not blameable, venerable sir.”—“Censured or praised by the wise?”—“Praised, 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.”

15. “Therefore, indeed, 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 rumour; nor upon what is in a scripture; nor upon surmise; nor upon an axiom; nor upon specious reasoning; nor upon a bias towards 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 blameable; these things are praised by the wise; undertaken and observed, these things lead to benefit and happiness,” enter on and abide in them.

**THE FOUR EXALTED DWELLINGS**

16. “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 having pervaded with the thought of amity one quarter; likewise the second; likewise the third; likewise the fourth; so above, below, and across; he dwells, having pervaded because of the existence in it of all living beings, everywhere, the entire world, with the great, exalted, boundless thought of amity that is free of hate or malice.

“He lives, having pervaded with the thought of compassion one quarter; likewise the second; likewise the third; likewise the fourth; so above, below, and across; he dwells, having pervaded because of the existence in it of all living beings, everywhere, the entire world, with the great, exalted, boundless thought of compassion that is free of hate or malice.

“He lives, having pervaded with the thought of gladness one quarter; likewise the second; likewise the third; likewise the fourth; so above, below, and across; he dwells, having pervaded because of the existence in it of all living beings, everywhere, the entire world, with the great, exalted, boundless thought of gladness that is free of hate or malice.

“He lives, having pervaded with the thought of

equanimity one quarter; likewise the second; likewise the third; likewise the fourth; so above, below, and across; he dwells, having pervaded because of the existence in it of all living beings, everywhere, the entire world, with the great, exalted, boundless thought of equanimity that is free of hate or malice.

#### THE FOUR SOLACES

17. “The disciple of the Noble Ones, Kālāmas, who has such a hate-free mind, such a malice-free mind, such an undefiled mind, and such a purified mind, is one by whom four solaces are found here and now.

“Suppose there is a hereafter and there is a fruit, result, of deeds done well or 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.’ This is the first solace found by him.

“Suppose 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, and happy, I keep myself.’ This is the second solace found by him.

“Suppose evil (results) befall an evil-doer. I, however, think of doing evil to none. Then, how can ill (results) affect me who do no evil deed?’ This is the third solace found by him.

“Suppose evil (results) do not befall an evil-doer. Then I see myself purified in any case.’ This is

the fourth solace found by him.

“The disciple of the Noble Ones, Kālāmas, who has such a hate-free mind, such a malice-free mind, such an undefiled mind, and such a purified mind, is one by whom, here and now, these four solaces are found.”

“So it is, Blessed One. So it is, Sublime One. The disciple of the Noble Ones, venerable sir, who has such a hate-free mind, such a malice-free mind, such an undefiled mind, and such a purified mind, is one by whom, here and now, four solaces are found.

“Suppose there is a hereafter and there is a fruit, result, of deeds done well or 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.’ This is the first solace found by him.

“Suppose 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, and happy, I keep myself.’ This is the second solace found by him.

“Suppose evil (results) befall an evil-doer. I, however, think of doing evil to none. Then, how can ill (results) affect me who do no evil deed?’ This is the third solace found by him.

“Suppose evil (results) do not befall an evil-doer. Then I see myself purified in any case.’ This is the fourth solace found by him.

“The disciple of the Noble Ones, venerable sir, who has such a hate-free mind, such a malice-free mind, such an undefiled mind, and such a purified mind, is one by whom, here and now, these four solaces are found.

“Marvellous, venerable sir! Marvellous, venerable sir! As if, venerable sir, a person were to turn face upwards what is upside down, or to uncover the concealed, or to point the way to one who is lost or to carry a lamp in the darkness, thinking, ‘Those who have eyes will see visible objects,’ so has the Dhamma been set forth in many ways by the Blessed One. We, venerable sir, go to the Blessed One for refuge, to the Dhamma for refuge, and to the Community of Bhikkhus for refuge. Venerable sir, may the Blessed One regard us as followers who have gone for refuge for life, from today.” (AN 3:65)

## SUPPLEMENTARY TEXTS

“Friend Savitṭha, apart from faith, apart from liking, apart from what has been acquired by repeated hearing, apart from specious reasoning, and from a bias towards a notion that has been pondered over, I know this, I see this: ‘Decay and death are due to birth.’ (SN 12:68)

“Here a bhikkhu, having seen an object with the eye, knows when greed, hate, and delusion are within, ‘Greed, hate, and delusion are in me’; he knows when greed, hate, and delusion are not within, ‘Greed, hate, and delusion are not in me.’ Bhikkhus, have these things to be experienced through faith, liking, what has been acquired by repeated hearing, specious reasoning, or a bias towards a notion that has been pondered over?”—“No, venerable sir.”—“Bhikkhus, this even is the way by which a bhikkhu, apart from faith, liking, what has been acquired by repeated hearing, specious reasoning, or a bias towards a notion that has been pondered over, declares realisation of knowledge thus: I know that birth has been exhausted, the celibate life has been lived, what must be done has been done and there is no more of this to come.” (SN 35:152)

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