



A Look at the Kalama Sutta

In this issue of the newsletter we have combined the feature essay with the “Sutta Study” column as we take a fresh look at an often quoted discourse of the Buddha, the Kalama Sutta. The discourse—found in translation in Wheel No. 8—has been described as “the Buddha’s Charter of Free Inquiry,” and though the discourse certainly does counter the decrees of dogmatism and blind faith with a vigorous call for free investigation, it is problematic whether the sutta can support all the positions that have been ascribed to it. On the basis of a single passage, quoted out of context, the Buddha has been made out to be a pragmatic empiricist who dismisses all doctrine and faith, and whose Dhamma is simply a freethinker’s kit to truth which invites each one to accept and reject whatever he likes.

But does the Kalama Sutta really justify such views? Or do we meet in these claims just another set of variations on that egregious old tendency to interpret the Dhamma according to whatever notions are congenial to oneself—or to those to whom one is preaching? Let us take as careful a look at the Kalama Sutta as the limited space allotted to this essay will allow, remembering that in order to understand the Buddha’s utterances correctly it is essential to take account of his own intentions in making them.

The passage that has been cited so often runs as follows: “Come, Kalamas. Do not go upon what has been acquired by repeated hearing, nor upon tradition, nor upon rumour, nor upon scripture, nor upon surmise, nor upon axiom, nor upon specious reasoning, nor upon bias towards a notion pondered over, nor upon another’s seeming ability, nor upon the consideration ‘The monk is our teacher.’ When you yourselves know: ‘These things are bad, blameable, censured by the wise; undertaken and observed, these things lead to harm and ill,’ abandon them...: When you yourselves know: ‘These things are good, blameless, praised by the wise; undertaken and observed, these things lead to benefit and happiness,’ enter on and abide in them.”

Now this passage, like everything else spoken by the Buddha, has been stated in a specific context—with a particular audience and situation in view—and thus must be understood in relation to that context. The Kalamas, citizens of the town of Kesaputta, had been visited by religious teachers of divergent views, each of whom would propound his own doctrines and tear down the doctrines of his predecessors. This left the Kalamas perplexed, and thus when “the recluse Gotama,” reputed to be an AwakenedOne, arrived in their township, they approached him in the hope that he might be able to dispel their confusion. From the subsequent development of the sutta, it is clear that the issues that perplexed them were the reality of rebirth and kammic retribution for good and evil deeds.

The Buddha begins by assuring the Kalamas that under such circumstances it is proper for them to doubt, an assurance which encourages free inquiry. He next speaks the passage quoted above, advising the Kalamas to abandon those things they know for themselves to be bad and to undertake those things they know for themselves to be good. This advice can be dangerous if given to those whose ethical sense is undeveloped, and we can thus assume that the Buddha regarded the Kalamas as people of refined moral sensitivity. In any case he did not leave them

wholly to their own resources, but by questioning them led them to see that greed, hate and delusion, being conducive to harm and suffering for oneself and others, are to be abandoned, and their opposites, being beneficial to all, are to be developed.

The Buddha next explains that a “noble disciple, devoid of covetousness and ill will, undeluded” dwells pervading the world with boundless loving-kindness, compassion, appreciative joy and equanimity. Thus purified of hate and malice, he enjoys here and now four “solaces”. If there is an afterlife and kammic result, then he will undergo a pleasant rebirth, while if there is none he still lives happily here and now; if evil results befall an evil-doer, then no evil will befall him, and if evil results do not befall an evil-doer, then he is purified anyway. With this the Kalamas express their appreciation of the Buddha’s discourse and go for refuge to the Triple Gem.

Now does the Kalama Sutta suggest, as is often held, that a follower of the Buddhist path can dispense with all faith and doctrine, that he should make his own personal experience the criterion for judging the Buddha’s utterances and for rejecting what cannot be squared with it? It is true the Buddha does not ask the Kalamas to accept anything he says out of confidence in himself, but let us note one important point: the Kalamas, at the start of the discourse, were not the Buddha’s disciples. They approached him merely as a counsellor who might help dispel their doubts, but they did not come to him as the Tathagata, the Truth-finder, who might show them the way to spiritual progress and to final liberation.

Thus, because the Kalamas had not yet come to accept the Buddha in terms of his unique mission as the discloser of the liberating truth, it would not have been in place for him to expound to them the Dhamma unique to his own Dispensation—such teachings as the Four Noble Truths, the three characteristics, and the methods of contemplation based upon them. These teachings are specifically intended for those who have accepted the Buddha as their guide to deliverance, and in the suttas he expounds them only to those who “have gained faith in the Tathagata” and who possess the perspective necessary to grasp them and apply them.

The Kalamas, however, at the start of the discourse are not yet fertile soil for him to sow the seeds of his liberating message. Still confused by the conflicting claims to which they have been exposed, they are not yet clear even about the groundwork of morality.

Nevertheless, after advising the Kalamas not to rely upon established tradition, abstract reasoning, or charismatic gurus, the Buddha proposes to them a teaching that is immediately verifiable and capable of laying a firm foundation for a life of moral discipline and mental purification. He shows that whether or not there be another life after death, a life of moral restraint and of love and compassion for all beings brings its own intrinsic rewards here and now, a happiness and sense of inward security far superior to the fragile pleasures that can be won by violating moral principles and indulging the mind’s desires. For those who are not concerned to look further, who are not prepared to adopt any convictions about a future life and worlds beyond the present one, such a teaching will ensure their present welfare and their safe passage to a pleasant rebirth—provided they do not fall into the wrong view of denying an after-life and kammic causation.

However, for those whose vision is capable of widening to encompass the broader horizons of our existence, this teaching given to the Kalamas points beyond its immediate implications to the very core of the Dhamma. For the three states brought forth for examination by the Buddha—greed, hate and delusion—are not merely grounds of wrong conduct or moral stains upon the mind. Within his teaching’s own framework they are the root defilements—the primary causes of all bondage and suffering—and the entire practice of the Dhamma can be viewed as the task of eradicating these evil roots by developing to perfection their antidotes—dispassion, kindness and wisdom.

Thus the discourse to the Kalamas offers an acid test for gaining confidence in the Dhamma as a viable doctrine of deliverance. We begin with an immediately verifiable teaching whose validity can be attested by anyone with the moral integrity to follow it through to its conclusions, namely, that the defilements cause harm and suffering both personal and social, that their removal brings peace and happiness, and that the practices taught by the Buddha are effective means for achieving their removal. By putting this teaching to a personal test, with only a provisional trust in the Buddha as one's collateral, one eventually arrives at a firmer, experientially grounded confidence in the liberating and purifying power of the Dhamma. This increased confidence in the teaching brings along a deepened faith in the Buddha as teacher, and thus disposes one to accept on trust those principles he enunciates that are relevant to the quest for awakening, even when they lie beyond one's own capacity for verification. This, in fact, marks the acquisition of right view, in its preliminary role as the forerunner of the entire Noble Eightfold Path.

Partly in reaction to dogmatic religion, partly in subservience to the reigning paradigm of objective scientific knowledge, it has become fashionable to hold, by appeal to the Kalama Sutta, that the Buddha's teaching dispenses with faith and formulated doctrine and asks us to accept only what we can personally verify. This interpretation of the sutta, however, forgets that the advice the Buddha gave the Kalamas was contingent upon the understanding that they were not yet prepared to place faith in him and his doctrine; it also forgets that the sutta omits, for that very reason, all mention of right view and of the entire perspective that opens up when right view is acquired. It offers instead the most reasonable counsel on wholesome living possible when the issue of ultimate beliefs has been put into brackets.

What can be justly maintained is that those aspects of the Buddha's teaching that come within the purview of our ordinary experience can be personally confirmed within experience, and that this confirmation provides a sound basis for placing faith in those aspects of the teaching that necessarily transcend ordinary experience. Faith in the Buddha's teaching is never regarded as an end in itself nor as a sufficient guarantee of liberation, but only as the starting point for an evolving process of inner transformation that comes to fulfilment in personal insight. But in order for this insight to exercise a truly liberative function, it must unfold in the context of an accurate grasp of the essential truths concerning our situation in the world and the domain where deliverance is to be sought. These truths have been imparted to us by the Buddha out of his own profound comprehension of the human condition. To accept them in trust after careful consideration is to set foot on a journey which transforms faith into wisdom, confidence into certainty, and culminates in liberation from suffering.

—Bhikkhu Bodhi

Exploring the Wheels

Embedded in the Pali Canon and its commentaries are numerous accounts dealing with the Buddha's chief disciple, the venerable Sāriputta Thera. This disciple appears so often, and plays such an important role in the Buddha's ministry, that he has come to receive great veneration throughout the Buddhist world. The Buddha himself has said of his "Marshall of the Dhamma":

If one could ever say rightly of one that he is the Blessed One's true son, born of his speech, born of the Dhamma, formed of the Dhamma, heir to the Dhamma, not heir to worldly benefit, it is of Sāriputta that one could thus rightly declare. After me, O monks, Sāriputta rightly turns the supreme Wheel of Dhamma, even as I have turned it.

In the traditional Pali literature, however, there has been no work available which gathers the deeds and teachings of Sāriputta into a cohesive account of his life. But now, in *The Life of Sāriputta* (Wheel No. 90-92), Ven. Nyanaponika Thera has assembled the material from the canonical and commentarial sources, organising it into a biography of the man who became “second only to the Buddha.” What emerges is the story of the life of a multifaceted man of great character, one who lived the Buddha’s teachings to the fullest and exemplified its highest perceptions of the human ideal. In story after story, from Sāriputta’s boyhood until his death, three personal characteristics are repeatedly revealed: as a friend, his warmth and consideration for others; as a teacher, his ability to teach the doctrine of deliverance with utmost skill and mastery; and as a man of wisdom, the depth and range of his understanding, in which he had no peer.

Abiding friendship and sincere gratitude are the hallmarks of Sāriputta’s attitude towards his friend from his youth, Mahamoggallana, towards his former teachers, and towards his brother monks within the Order. Recounted here are his relationships with Ananda, Anuruddha and other bhikkhus, always graced by his kindness, his modesty, and his uprightness.

Sāriputta expressed his devotion to the faithful preservation of the Master’s doctrine and his role as a guardian of the Sangha through his teaching. This reveals, too, his ability to share his vision of the Dhamma, his patience and sensitivity in adjusting his presentation of the doctrine to the needs of the individual he is teaching. Yet the treatises he has delivered on the Dhamma have such a universality and perennial freshness that they are still being studied and expounded today.

The suttas and manuals left to us by Sāriputta indicate the breadth and depth of his knowledge of the Dhamma. A list of his works with a brief description of each is included in this book, and Ven. Nyanaponika gives a more detailed analysis of several of Sāriputta’s most important discourses.

Perhaps Sāriputta’s most valuable contribution to the Dispensation was his work on the Abhidhamma. Tradition holds that when the Buddha was expounding the Abhidhamma in the Tavatimsa heaven, each day he would descend to earth and teach the guidelines of his exposition to Sāriputta who would elaborate it and record it according to the Master’s intentions. Thus Sāriputta came to be regarded as the progenitor of the codified Abhidhamma.

In his Introduction, Ven. Nyanaponika states that his purpose in writing this book is to present a “record of something of the qualities of man perfected, of man fully liberated and raised to the highest level of his being; of how such a man acts and speaks and comports himself towards his fellows,” and to give the reader “strength and faith in the assurance of what man may become.” Such a purpose is surely worthy of this great disciple, and the book about him will inspire as much as it informs.

—Ayya Nyanasiri

Notes and News

We started the New Year on a happy note. The first of January marked the 30th Anniversary of the BPS, which was officially launched on New Year’s day of 1958, and to show recognition of our services in the cause of the Dhamma, the Government of Sri Lanka issued an anniversary postage stamp imprinted with our familiar logos. A felicitation meeting was held on New Year’s day at our headquarters. Our chief guest, the Minister of Posts & Telecommunications,

presented first-day covers to our directors and staff, and several distinguished speakers addressed the gathering of selected invitees.

This past December, at the first convocation in its history, the Buddhist and Pali University of Sri Lanka conferred its first-ever honorary degree—Doctor of Literature *honoris causa*—upon our President, Ven. Nyanaponika Mahathera. In his address the Vice-chancellor of the University, Ven. Dr. K. Anuruddha, stated: “While we are engaged in producing personnel equipped with the necessary knowledge for the propagation of the Buddha Dhamma, Ven. Nyanaponika Mahathera has been attempting for nearly half a century to achieve the same objective in a different manner. The University Council therefore decided, on the recommendation of the Board of Studies, that this Convocation is a fitting occasion to pay tribute to this Mahathera in recognition of his yeoman service to the cause of Buddhism.”

We have been pleased and encouraged by the warm response given to our efforts to upgrade the quality of our productions, and are thankful for the favourable comments passed on to us both orally and through the mail. For example, Michael Roehm of Seoul, Korea, writes: “I recently received the 2nd & 3rd quarter 1987 mailings from BPS, and I was very pleased by the greatly improved quality of the paper, print and cover art. In fact I think the Maha Kassapa Wheel has the best Wheel cover that I have seen to date. So, congratulations.” And from the U.S.A., P.K. Ontl of Garfield, N.J. writes: “Some days ago the mail brought a packet of BPS publications. They are, both in content and appearance, excellent. Am I greedy to wish that a BPS packet would come once a week instead of once every few months?”

We have received notices on two new Buddhist centres in the U.S.A. we wish to pass on to our readers. One is a Buddhist Nunnery and Retreat Centre in Colorado, close to Denver. Buddhist nuns and laywomen of all Buddhist traditions are welcome to visit and practise, and women who are considering the nun’s life are especially encouraged to visit. Inquiries can be sent to: Rev. Martha Dharmapali, Chan-Nhu Buddhist Pagoda, 7201 West Bayaud Place, Lakewood, CO 80226, U.S.A. The second is the Bhavana Center, a meditation centre in the Theravada tradition under the direction of Ven. H. Gunaratana Mahathera, president of the Washington Buddhist Vihara. The centre is open for personal retreats as well as more formal group retreats, with bhikkhus in residence who are available for instruction. For more information write to: Bhavana Center, Rt. 1, Box 218-3, High View, WV 26808, U.S.A.

—Albert Witanachchi

Book Review

Rebirth and the Western Buddhist. Martin Willson. Wisdom Publications, 23 Dering Street, London W1. 90 pp. £3.25/\$6.25

Westerners drawn to the Buddha’s Teaching still often stumble over the doctrine of rebirth, which they claim they find difficult to reconcile with the premises of their own scientifically oriented culture. Such individuals, as well as Western-educated Asian Buddhists, will find this brief overview a stimulating and challenging corrective to their assumptions. The author, Martin Willson, possesses sound scientific credentials: he holds a Ph.D. in radio-astronomy from Cambridge University and worked for several years as a research physicist. After ordaining into a Tibetan Buddhist monastic order in 1977, he distinguished himself as a translator of Buddhist texts and now heads Wisdom’s translation unit. However, while he thus straddles both modern science and Buddhism, Willson does not offer us either a “demythologizing” reinterpretation of Buddhist doctrines in scientific terms, or an apologetic defence of traditional Buddhist doctrine with superficial scientific references. Instead he gives us a cool, sober, critical and intelligent

overview of the available evidence on rebirth and reflections on its implications for both Buddhism and science.

Willson begins by making it plain that a proper understanding of rebirth is a prerequisite to correct practice of the Dhamma. Dismissing the ploys used by some modern Western Buddhists to evade the point, he maintains by reference to the Buddhist canon and other classical sources that the real aims of Buddhist practice only become fully meaningful when rebirth is accepted as a fact. Taking this as his starting point, Willson goes on to examine the grounds for accepting the idea of rebirth. He divides these into two categories—observational evidence and logical reasoning—devoting a chapter to each. Under observational evidence he reviews such experiential evidence for rebirth as spontaneous recollection of past lives, recall through deliberate training, and recall under hypnotic regression. Willson evaluates this evidence with scientific objectivity, discussing briefly the need for verification of such reports and the ways in which it can be achieved in a fully trustworthy manner.

In the chapter on logical “proofs” of rebirth, Willson deals with the scholastic arguments devised by mediaeval Buddhist thinkers to establish the doctrine as logically irrefutable. He contends that far from being irrefutable, these arguments are all saddled with inherent problems that deprive them of any cogency. This chapter may be daunting for readers unfamiliar with scholastic Buddhist argumentation, but Willson does his best to make the principles clear and must be admired for his courage in criticising some of the foremost figures in his own Tibetan Buddhist lineage.

A chapter on “Buddhism, Science and Scientism” serves to expose those unconscious assumptions fostered by modern science which tend to obstruct an appreciation of Buddhist doctrine as well as of the Buddhist cognitive project as a whole. In the last and perhaps most interesting chapter, Willson attempts to draw out, from the available empirical evidence, some of the details concerning rebirth and compares them with the corresponding accounts in the traditional Buddhist literature. He discusses such topics as non-human rebirths (suggested by a few inconclusive cases), the rarity of human birth (much less rare than Buddhist tradition supposes), the intermediate state (supported by the evidence against the tenets of some Buddhist schools, including the Theravada), and the manner in which rebirth occurs. (It should be pointed out, however, that Theravadins do not interpret the Gandharva as a deity who presides over child-conception (p.70): this is a brainchild of Western scholars, not Theravadins.)

Establishing the idea of rebirth on empirical evidence will certainly not suffice to convince anyone of the full truth of the Dhamma. That conviction requires a certain spiritual maturity which does not necessarily accompany a belief in rebirth, and moreover involves a grasp of the “vertical” dimension of human existence as much as of its “horizontal” structure in time. However, the presentation of verifiable evidence for rebirth can surely clear away the doubts of those who are otherwise favourably disposed towards the teaching but hesitate to accept it due to scientific qualms. In bringing this material together and carefully evaluating it from a rigorous scientific perspective, this book can help skeptics to overcome their doubts and will also challenge staunch traditional Buddhists to reconsider a number of their basic beliefs.

—Bhikkhu Bodhi

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