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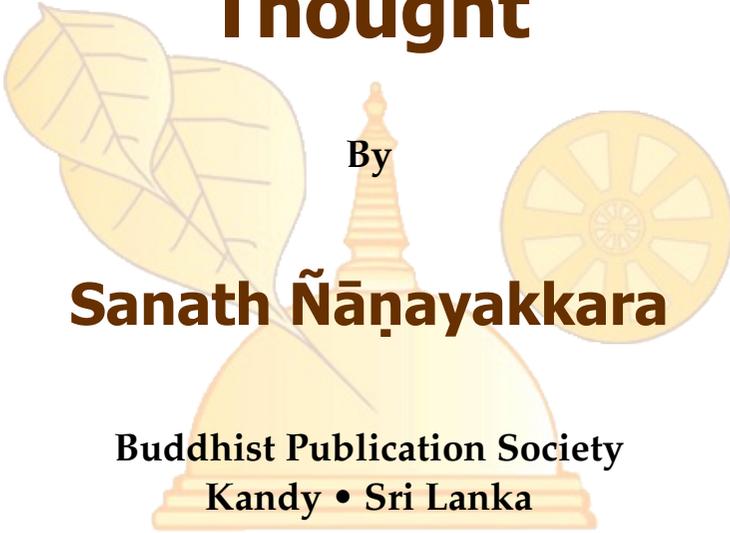
How Free is Freedom of Thought

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How Free is Freedom of Thought

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here is at present a view, widely prevalent especially among the educated Buddhists, that Buddhism is a rationalist teaching based on scientifically verifiable evidence.

Much has been written to substantiate this viewpoint and, undoubtedly, such writings have immensely contributed to the further strengthening and spreading of this view. Most of the proponents of this view cite the Kālāma Sutta of the Aṅguttara Nikāya as providing unassailable evidence to prove that Buddhism is a rationalistic teaching with an absolutely scientific basis, and that the Buddha advocated a rationalistic approach as the sole method of understanding all his teachings.

It is no exaggeration to say that it is Western scholarship that highlighted the importance of the Kālāma Sutta as some kind of 'Charter of Free Inquiry.' This 'new finding' was enthusiastically taken up and strongly supported by the predominantly Western-trained Buddhist scholarship of the time to bring to light that the Buddha denounced adherence to blind faith and dogmatism and instead encouraged

free inquiry and investigation. In further support of such a position, these writers cited the Buddha's rejection of the belief in a divine creator, his acceptance of free will, his anthropocentric approach to the human predicament, his acceptance of the superiority of man, his invitation to the followers to inquire about the Dhamma as well as his own claim to enlightenment and so on.

While the serious Buddhist scholarship was engaged in evaluating the Kālāma Sutta in order to find out the Buddha's attitude to freedom of thought and inquiry and to ascertain the parameters within which this freedom could be put into practice, the over-enthusiastic Buddhists lost in the euphoria of this 'new finding', made indiscriminate use of the Kālāma Sutta in their devoted attempt to hail Buddhism as an out-and-out rationalist teaching, based purely on scientific facts. In this attempt they found strong support from staunch rationalists, who also freely cited the Kālāma Sutta to show that even the Buddha advocated free inquiry as the only valid means of obtaining knowledge.

Those who strongly held the view that Buddhism is entirely a form of rationalism were so convinced of the validity of their position that they unhesitatingly and hurriedly arrived at two significant conclusions. First, they concluded that Buddhism is absolutely rationalist

in its approach and that this is evident from the Kālāma Sutta, which advocates the complete rejection of the then generally accepted ten means of knowledge, which also served as criteria to establish the truth and wholesomeness of teachings and views. Second, they concluded that the Kālāma Sutta advocates the use of free, independent thinking as the only valid means of deciding what is right and wrong with regard to all matters, religious as well as otherwise. As these conclusions have much bearing on both the theory and practice of Buddhism, they should be examined and evaluated carefully.

An unbiased and a careful reading of the Sutta makes it clear that there is no evidence in it, either implicit or explicit, to show that the Buddha advocated the 'rejection' of the ten means (criteria) of knowledge (truth). On the contrary, the Sutta contains evidence, corroborated by canonical references, to accept the fact that the Buddha himself made appropriate use of many of these means as aids to get at the truth and to distinguish between right and wrong.

The following are the ten means of criteria and their general meanings.

1. *anussava* = Vedic textual tradition
2. *paramparā* = unbroken tradition maintained by a

successive generation of teachers

3. *itikirā* = hearsay
4. *piṭakasampadā* = any approved textual tradition
5. *takkahetu* = logic
6. *nayahetu* = reasoning
7. *ākāraparivitaṅka* = validity of the reasons contained in the teaching
8. *ditṭhinijjhānakkhati* = agreement between the teaching and the views of the individual
9. *bhabbarūpatā* = competence of the teacher
10. *samaṇo no garu* = respectability and reputation of the teacher.

These ten could be broadly divided into two groups with Nos. 1, 2, 3, 4, 9 and 10 as means or criteria depending on some kind of 'authority' and the remaining four i.e., Nos. 5, 6, 7 and 8, depending on 'reason.'

In fact unlike some of the *samaṇa* teachers the Buddha did not totally condemn the Vedas as foolish babble. Instead, in suttas such as *Tevijja Sutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya*, the Buddha criticised the Vedas on different grounds, pointing out their limitations and shortcomings, thus cautioning the people against blindly accepting them as containing infallible, gospel

truth. Similar was the attitude of the Buddha with regard other means coming under the category of 'authority.' In the Buddha's view all kinds of tradition, whether it is the unbroken traditions maintained by generation of teachers, texts or any other traditions, need be neither discarded nor blindly clung to. The four Mahāpadesas (great authorities) referred to in the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta of the Dīgha Nikāya clearly show the importance attached by the Buddha to such traditions. The Payasi Sutta of Dīgha Nikāya shows the Buddha's general attitude to all kinds of tradition. It is the slavish acceptance of traditions that the Buddha condemned. It is seen that even hearsay was not considered as being intrinsically useless, for even that could be made use of after verification.

There is ample evidence in the Canon to show that the Buddha never rejected outright the use of logic and reason. He has made it quite clear, as he did in the Sandaka Sutta of Majjhima Nikāya, that both these have their own inherent limitations and, therefore, he vividly brought out how logic and reason often lead to endless conflicts. Suttas such as Kalahavivāda, Cūlavyūha, Mahāvīyūha, all in the Suttanipāta, provide concrete evidence to the Buddha's attitude to all means of knowledge falling under 'reason.'

Yet, textual evidence shows that the Buddha did not discard the use logic and reason as totally invalid and

useless. The Upāli, Apanṇaka and Cūlamāluṅkya Suttas of Majjhima Nikāya show how the Buddha very aptly used logic and reason, well keeping in mind their limitations and the pitfalls into which they could lead indiscriminate users of such means.

The four Mahāpadesa show also the important place assigned to both '*bhabbarūpatā*' and '*samaṇo no garu.*' Nowhere did the Buddha advocate the total rejection of the authority of teachers. In fact, the Buddha named '*paratoghosa*', i.e., teaching coming from outside which includes instruction and guidance of teachers, as one of the two factors that is essential to develop right view (*sammādiṭṭhi*), the other factor being proper reflection (*yoniso manasikāro*).

If this is the true position, then there is no ground whatsoever to hold that in the Kālāma Sutta the Buddha advocates the rejection of any of the ten means (criteria) of knowledge (truth). If so, what does the Buddha advocate? From the content of the Sutta what is clear is that the Buddha admonishes the Kālāmas not to adopt any of the above-mentioned ten means of knowledge as absolute criteria or standards or measurements in evaluating the quality of a religious teaching, especially of teachings pertaining to ethics. The mere fact that a teaching is found in the texts considered sacred, or taught by an honoured, reputed teacher, or is in total agreement with logic and

reason and so on should not be taken as sufficient and valid grounds to accept any teaching as true and wholesome.

Instead the Buddha presents a new criterion, which is also found often referred to in such other suttas as the Bahitika, Ambalaṭṭhikārāhulovāda (both in the Majjhima Nikāya). This criterion is to be applied by carrying out a personal test of the teaching by using one's understanding and experience. This is a very simple, straightforward, and easily applicable test. The Buddha while asking the Kālāmas not to depend on any of the earlier mentioned criteria says: "But, Kālāmas, when you know for yourselves, these things are unprofitable, these things are blameworthy, these things are censured by the wise; these things when performed and undertaken, conduce to loss and sorrow— then indeed you should reject them." And the Buddha adds that "... when you know for yourselves that these things are profitable, blameless, praised by the wise, when performed and undertaken conduce to profit and happiness, then having undertaken them, abide in them."

Now what is the position with regard to the second conclusion? This concerns the scope of application of this criterion. When considered broadly, there appear to be two viewpoints on this. One is that it is applicable to all matters concerned with the Dhamma,

the other is that it is applicable to Dhamma as well as 'all other matters.' It is necessary that one should consider the specific context in which the Kālāma Sutta was preached. The Sutta says that the Kālāmas were perplexed and confused by the claims put forward by different religious teachers who visited their village, praising their own teachings and denouncing the rest as false. When the Buddha visited the village of Kesaputa, its residents, the Kālāmas, came up to him and said: "Sir, certain recluses and brahmins come to Kesaputta. As to their own view they proclaim and expound it in full, but as to the views of others, they abuse, revile, depreciate and condemn... when we listen to them, Sir, we have doubt and wavering, as to which of these teachers speaks the truth and which speaks falsehood."

It is to allay this specific "doubt and wavering" that the Buddha presented the novel criterion, involving a personal test of the teachings concerned. From the answer given by the Buddha it appears that he considered the question as pertaining to an ethical issue. The Buddha's admonition to Kālāmas is to find out for themselves, whether any of these teachings leads to the growth of greed, malice and delusion. These are the three root-causes of evil, and the avoidance of these is the assured way to a moral life, finally leading to Nibbāna. The injunction, "when you

know for yourselves” (*attanāva jāneyyātha*), has necessarily to be taken as being limited to this context.

The Sutta itself does not provide any justification to expand the ambit of its application, either to cover all matters pertaining to the Dhamma, or in general to all matters. This second assumption is obviously very far-fetched. There are many matters that we all cannot understand and know for ourselves. Yet, we accept them and take them for granted, reposing ‘faith’ on the competence of those who pronounce views on them. We would not be able to conduct even affairs of day-to-day life if we ourselves try to understand and know all issues and problems that we have to face. This is why we seek the help, and advice of those who are more knowledgeable, and possessing expertise in different areas.

Even the first assumption is questionable. The Buddha made this admonition to an ordinary set of people. Therefore, it is apparent that he did not expect them to use any expertise or super-knowledge in deciding on the issues concerned. His advice was to use common sense and the personal experience they have had with regard to ordinary situations, leading them to greed, hate and delusion. The Buddha very clearly said in the Kiṭṭāgiri Sutta of the Majjhima Nikāya that final knowledge is not achievable at the beginning itself, but it is an outcome of gradual

training.

It should be remembered that the Buddha's teachings contains fundamentals which are not within the comprehension of the beginners or of the untrained. There is quite a lot of textual evidence showing even liberated senior disciples of the Buddha approaching the Buddha for clarification regarding certain basic issues. They clear their knowledge and obtain clear vision on such issues only after listening to the Buddha's explanations. Question pertaining to kamma, rebirth, etc. necessarily have to be understood through forms super-knowledge, which are above the capability of ordinary human beings. Until such knowledge is gained we have to accept them on 'faith.'

In this context, is it possible to justify the assumption that the Kālāma Sutta gives a blanket approval for all to use free inquiry to obtain knowledge regarding all matters pertaining to the Dhamma? Neither the evidence found in the Kālāma Sutta nor evidence in other canonical texts supports such an assumption.

This does not mean that we are not allowed to inquire into these issues. We could, but we should not hurriedly conclude that we have arrived at the truth and, then not only cling to it, but engage in pronouncing it loud, denouncing every other view as

false. This is really what happens when one arrives at truth through free inquiry. Then one's conclusion becomes one's 'own view' which prompts a person to proclaim it and defend it at any cost. This, on the one hand, leads to conflict, and on the other, to misrepresentation of the teaching. Results of both are harmful.

A very strong reason why a majority wish to widen the parameters of free inquiry is the belief that 'faith' is a feature of primitive and undeveloped religions and that Buddhism which is a novel teaching denounces all forms of faith. This again is a little far from the truth. It is well known that *saddhā*, in whichever manner it is translated—confidence, trust, faith etc.—is an essential feature of Buddhist practice. It is not a kind of blind faith (*amūlikā saddhā*) but faith founded on reasonable grounds, (*ākāravati saddhā*). To develop *saddhā* one need not have absolute proof, but reasonably acceptable evidence. Free inquiry comes very much later, after *saddhā*.

The Cankii Sutta of Majjhima Nikāya clearly lays down the proper procedure for the application of this free inquiry. This procedure starts with *saddhā*, which finally gives way to *paññā* (wisdom). In between, there is a gradual process that leads a person, step by step, towards the truth, which is beneficial and wholesome. There is no reason for the Buddhists to

shy away from the fact that Buddhism accepts the usefulness of saddhā as an essential, primary element in its practice. Saddhā provides us with a good start to properly grasp the doctrine. It certainly will be good to remember what the Alagaddūpama Sutta of Majjhima Nikāya says would be the fate of those who wrongly grasp the Dhamma. It says that just as a man who catches a snake by its coil or tail would be stung by the snake, similarly a man who wrongly grasps the teaching would also come to harm and suffering.

Free inquiry has become almost a fad among the Buddhists. There is a proliferation of literature giving fascinating and novel interpretations, which are not only far-fetched but also total misrepresentations of the Buddha's teachings. Some balanced writers have attempted to caution these over-enthusiastic propagators of Buddhism by presenting the true significance of the Kālāma Sutta. [1] But unfortunately, these warnings have gone unnoticed. Unlimited freedom of thought is being brandished as the 'trademark' of Buddhism, thus further opening the flood-gates for more misrepresentations to flow out.

Notes

1. For example, [Buddhist Publication Society Newsletter No. 9](#), Spring 1988. [\[Back\]](#)

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