

## **In the Buddha's Words: An Anthology of Discourses from the Pali Canon (The Teachings of the Buddha, Chapter III - Introduction)**

One of the most distressing predicaments any earnest, open-minded spiritual seeker might face is the sheer difficulty of choosing from among the bewildering diversity of religious and spiritual teachings available. By their very nature, spiritual teachings make claims upon our allegiance that are absolute and all-encompassing. Adherents of a particular creed are prone to assert that their religion alone reveals the final truth about our place in the universe and our ultimate destiny; they boldly propose that their path alone offers the sure means to eternal salvation. If we could suspend all belief commitments and compare the competing doctrines impartially, submitting them to empirical tests, we would have a sure-fire method of deciding between them, and then our ordeal would be over. But it isn't that simple. Rival religions all propose—or presuppose—doctrines that we cannot directly validate by personal experience; they advocate tenets that call for some degree of trust.

So, as their tenets and practices clash, we run up against the problem of finding some way to decide between them and negotiate their competing claims to truth.

One solution to this problem is to deny that there is any real conflict between alternative belief systems. The adherents of this approach, which we might call religious universalism, say that at their core all spiritual traditions teach essentially the same thing. Their formulations may differ but their inner core is the same, expressed differently merely to accord with different sensibilities. What we need to do, the universalist says, when faced with different spiritual traditions, is to extract the kernel of inner truth from the pods of their exoteric creeds. From ground level our goals look different, but from the heights we will find the goal is the same; it is like the view of the moon from different mountain peaks. Universalists in matters of doctrine often endorse eclecticism in practice, holding that we can select whatever practices we prefer and combine them like dishes at a buffet. This solution to the problem of religious diversity has an immediate appeal to those disillusioned with the exclusive claims of dogmatic religion.

Honest critical reflection, however, would show that on the most vital issues the different religions and spiritual traditions take different standpoints. They give us very different answers to our questions concerning the basic grounds and goals of the spiritual quest and often these differences are not merely verbal. To sweep them away as being merely verbal may be an effective way of achieving harmony between followers of different belief systems, but it cannot withstand close examination. In the end, it is as little tenable as saying that, because they have beaks and wings, eagles, sparrows, and chickens are essentially the same type of creature, the differences between them being merely verbal.

It is not only theistic religions that teach doctrines beyond the range of immediate empirical confirmation. The Buddha too taught doctrines that an ordinary person cannot directly confirm by everyday experience, and these doctrines are fundamental to the structure of his teaching. We saw, for example, in the introductions to chapters I and II, that the Nikāyas envisage a universe with many domains of sentient existence spread out in boundless space and time, a universe in which sentient beings roam and wander from life to life on account of their ignorance, craving, and kamma. The Nikāyas presuppose that throughout beginningless time, Buddhas without number have arisen and turned the wheel of the Dhamma, and that each Buddha attains enlightenment after cultivating spiritual perfections over long periods of cosmic time.

When we approach the Dhamma we are likely to resist such beliefs and feel that they make excessive demands on our capacity for trust. Thus we inevitably run up against the question

whether, if we wish to follow the Buddha's teaching, we must take on board the entire package of classical Buddhist doctrine.

For Early Buddhism, all the problems we face in deciding how far we should go in placing faith can be disposed of at a single stroke. That single stroke involves reverting to direct experience as the ultimate basis for judgment. One of the distinctive features of the Buddha's teaching is the respect it accords to direct experience.

The texts of Early Buddhism do not teach a secret doctrine, nor do they leave scope for anything like an esoteric path reserved for an élite of initiates and withheld from others. According to Text III,1, secrecy in a religious teaching is the hallmark of wrong views and confused thinking. The teaching of the Buddha shines openly, as radiant and brilliant as the light of the sun and moon. Freedom from the cloak of secrecy is integral to a teaching that gives primacy to direct experience, inviting each individual to test its principles in the crucible of his or her own experience.

This does not mean that an ordinary person can fully validate the Buddha's doctrine by direct experience without special effort. To the contrary, the teaching can only be fully realized through the achievement of certain extraordinary types of experience that are far beyond the range of the ordinary person enmeshed in the concerns of mundane life.

However, in sharp contrast to revealed religion, the Buddha does not demand that we begin our spiritual quest by placing faith in doctrines that lie beyond the range of our immediate experience. Rather than ask us to wrestle with issues that, for us in our present condition, no amount of experience can decide, he instead asks us to consider a few simple questions pertaining to our immediate welfare and happiness, questions that we can answer on the basis of personal experience.

I highlight the expression "for us in our present condition," because the fact that we cannot presently validate such matters does not constitute grounds for rejecting them as invalid or even as irrelevant. It only means that we should put them aside for the time being and concern ourselves with issues that come within the range of direct experience.

The Buddha says that his teaching is about suffering and the cessation of suffering. This statement does not mean that the Dhamma is concerned only with our experience of suffering in the present life, but it does imply that we can use our present experience, backed by intelligent observation, as a criterion for determining what is beneficial and what detrimental to our spiritual progress.

Our most insistent existential demand, springing up deep within us, is the need for freedom from harm, sorrow, and distress; or, positively stated, the need to achieve well-being and happiness. However, to avoid harm and to secure our well-being, it is not sufficient for us merely to hope. We first have to understand the conditions on which they depend. According to the Buddha, whatever arises, arises through appropriate causes and conditions, and this applies with equal force to suffering and happiness.

Thus we must ascertain the causes and conditions that lead to harm and suffering, and likewise the causes and conditions that lead to wellbeing and happiness. Once we have extracted these two principles—the conditions leading to harm and suffering, and the conditions leading to well-being and happiness—we have at our disposal an outline of the entire process that leads to the ultimate goal, final liberation from suffering.

One text offering an excellent example of this approach is a short discourse in the *Āṅguttara Nikāya* popularly known as the *Kālāma Sutta*, included as Text III,2. The *Kālāmas* were a people living in a remote area of the Ganges plain. Various religious teachers would come to visit them and each would extol his own doctrine and tear down the doctrines of his rivals. Confused and perplexed by this conflict of belief systems, the *Kālāmas* did not know whom to trust.

When the Buddha passed through their town, they approached him and asked him to clear away their doubts. Though the text does not specify what particular issues were troubling the *Kālāmas*, the later part of the discourse makes it clear that their perplexities revolved around the questions of rebirth and *kamma*.

The Buddha began by assuring the *Kālāmas* that under such circumstances it was proper for them to doubt, for the issues that troubled them were indeed common sources of doubt and perplexity.

He then told them not to rely on ten sources of belief. Four of these pertain to established scriptural authority (oral tradition, lineage of teaching, hearsay, and collections of texts); four to rational grounds (logic, inferential reasoning, reasoned cogitation, and the acceptance of a view after pondering it); and two to authoritative persons (impressive speakers and respected teachers).

This advice is sometimes quoted to prove that the Buddha rejected all external authorities and invited each individual to fashion his or her own personal path to truth. Read in context, however, the message of the *Kālāma Sutta* is quite different. The Buddha is not advising the *Kālāmas*—who, it must be stressed, had at this point not yet become his own disciples—to reject all authoritative guides to spiritual understanding and fall back solely on their personal intuition. Rather, he is offering them a simple and pragmatic outlet from the morass of doubt and perplexity in which they are immersed.

By the use of skillful methods of inquiry, he leads them to understand a number of basic principles that they can verify by their own experience and thereby acquire a sure starting point for further spiritual development.

Always underlying the Buddha's questions and their replies is the tacit premise that people are primarily motivated to act by a concern for their own welfare and happiness. In asking this particular set of questions, the Buddha's purpose is to lead the *Kālāmas* to see that, even when we suspend all concern with future lives, unwholesome mental states such as greed, hatred, and delusion, and unwholesome actions such as killing and stealing, eventually redound to one's own harm and suffering right here and now.

Conversely, wholesome mental states and wholesome actions promote one's long-term welfare and happiness here and now. Once this much is seen, the immediately visible harmful consequences to which unwholesome mental states lead become a sufficient reason for abandoning them, while the visible benefits to which wholesome mental states lead become a sufficient motivation for cultivating them.

Then, whether or not there is a life after death, one has adequate reasons in the present life to abandon unwholesome mental states and cultivate wholesome mental states. If there is an afterlife, one's recompense is simply that much greater.

A similar approach underlies Text III,3, in which the Buddha demonstrates how present suffering arises and ceases in correlation with present craving. This short sutta, addressed to a lay follower, concisely articulates the causal principle that lies behind the Four Noble Truths, but rather than doing so in the abstract, it adopts a concrete, down-to-earth approach that has a remarkably contemporary appeal. By using powerful examples drawn from the life of a layman deeply attached to his wife and son, the sutta makes a deep and lasting impression on us.

The fact that such texts as this sutta and the Kālāma Sutta do not dwell on the doctrines of kamma and rebirth does not mean, as is sometimes assumed, that such teachings are mere cultural accretions to the Dhamma that can be deleted or explained away without losing anything essential. It means only that, at the outset, the Dhamma can be approached in ways that do not require reference to past and future lives.

The Buddha's teaching has many sides, and thus, from certain angles, it can be directly evaluated against our concern for our present well-being and happiness. Once we see that the practice of the teaching does indeed bring peace, joy, and inner security in this very life, this will inspire our trust and confidence in the Dhamma as a whole, including those aspects that lie beyond our present capacity for personal verification.

If we were to undertake certain practices—practices that require highly refined skills and determined effort—we would be able to acquire the faculties needed to validate those other aspects, such as the law of kamma, the reality of rebirth, and the existence of supersensible realms (see Text VII,4 §§23–24 and Text VII,5 §§19–20).

Another major problem that often besets spiritual seekers is the demands that teachers place upon their capacity for trust. This problem has become especially acute in our own time, when the news media gleefully spotlight the frailties of numberless gurus and jump at the chance to show up any modern-day saint as nothing better than a swindler in robes. But the problem of rogue gurus is a perennial one by no means peculiar to our age. Whenever one person exercises spiritual authority over others, it is only too easy for that person to be tempted to exploit the trust others place in him in ways that can be seriously detrimental to himself and his disciples.

When a pupil approaches a teacher who claims to be perfectly enlightened and thus capable of teaching the path to final liberation, the pupil must have some criteria at hand for testing the teacher to determine whether the teacher truly measures up to the lofty claims he makes about himself—or that others make about him. In the *Vīmaṃsaka Sutta*—Text III,4—the Buddha lays down guidelines by which a monk can test “the Tathāgata,” that is, the Buddha, to evaluate his claim to be perfectly enlightened.

One benchmark of perfect enlightenment is freedom of the mind from all defilements. If a monk cannot directly see into the Buddha's own mind, he can nevertheless rely on indirect evidence to ascertain that the Buddha is freed from defilements; that is, by evaluating the Buddha's bodily deeds and speech he can infer that the Buddha's mental states are exclusively pure, uninfluenced by greed, hatred, and delusion. In addition to such observational inference, the Buddha further encourages the monk to approach him and directly inquire about his mental states.

Once the pupil gains confidence that the Buddha is a qualified teacher, he then puts the Master to the ultimate test. He learns his teaching, enters upon the practice, and penetrates the Dhamma by direct knowledge. This act of penetration—here equivalent at minimum to the attainment of stream-entry—brings the gain of “invincible faith,” the faith of one who is established upon the irreversible path leading to final release.

Taken in isolation, the *Vīmaṃsaka Sutta* might give the impression that one acquires faith only after gaining realization of the teaching, and since realization is self-validating, faith would then become redundant. This impression, however, would be one-sided. The point the sutta is making is that faith becomes invincible as a result of realization, not that faith first enters the spiritual path only when one attains realization. Faith is the first of the five spiritual faculties, and in some degree, as trusting confidence in the Buddha's enlightenment and in the main principles of his teaching, it is a prerequisite for the higher training. We see faith functioning in this preparatory role in Text III,5, a long excerpt from the *Caṅkī Sutta*.

Here, the Buddha explains that a person who has faith in something "preserves truth" when he says "this is my faith." He "preserves truth" because he merely states what he believes without jumping to the conclusion that what he believes is definitely true and anything else contrary to it false. The Buddha contrasts the "preservation of truth" (*saccānurakkhanā*) with the "discovery of truth" (*saccānubodha*), which begins by placing faith in a teacher who has proved himself worthy of trust. Having gained faith in such a teacher, one then approaches him for instruction, learns the Dhamma, practices it (according to a series of steps more finely calibrated than in the preceding text), and finally sees the supreme truth for oneself.

This does not yet mark the end of the road for the disciple, but only the initial breakthrough to the truth, again corresponding to the attainment of stream-entry. Having achieved the vision of truth, to reach the "final arrival at truth" (*saccānupatti*)—that is, the attainment of arahantship or final liberation—one must repeat, develop, and cultivate the same series of steps until one has fully absorbed and assimilated the supreme truth disclosed by that initial vision. Thus the entire process of training in the Dhamma is rooted in personal experience. Even faith should be rooted in investigation and inquiry and not based solely upon emotional leanings and blind belief. Faith alone is insufficient but is the door to deeper levels of experience. Faith serves as a spur to practice; practice leads to experiential understanding; and when one's understanding matures, it blossoms in full realization.

## Texts

1. **Not a Secret Doctrine (AN 3.129)**
2. **No Dogmas or Blind Belief – Kalama Sutta (AN 3.65)**  
(Texte im Anhang)
3. The Visible Origin and Passing Away of Suffering (SN 42.11)
4. Investigate the Teacher Himself - *Vīmaṃsaka Sutta* (MN 47)
5. Steps toward the Realization of Truth - *Caṅkī Sutta* (from MN 95)

### Anhang

#### 1. NOT A SECRET DOCTRINE

"These three things, monks, are conducted in secret, not openly. What three? Affairs with women, the mantras of the brahmins, and wrong view. "But these three things, monks, shine openly, not in secret. What three? The moon, the sun, and the Dhamma and Discipline proclaimed by the Tathāgata." (AN 3:129; I 282–83)

#### 2. NO DOGMAS OR BLIND BELIEF - **KALAMA-Sutta**

Thus have I heard. On one occasion the Blessed One was wandering on tour together with a large Saṅgha of monks when he arrived at a town of the Kālāmas named Kesaputta.

Now the Kālāmas of Kesaputta heard: “It is said that the ascetic Gotama, the Sakyan son who went forth from a Sakyan family, has arrived at Kesaputta. Now a good report about that master Gotama has been circulating thus: ‘That Blessed One is an arahant, perfectly enlightened, accomplished in true knowledge and conduct, fortunate, knower of the world, unsurpassed leader of persons to be tamed, teacher of devas and humans, the Enlightened One, the Blessed One. Having realized with his own direct knowledge this world with its devas, Māra, and Brahmā, this population with its ascetics and brahmins, with its devas and humans, he makes it known to others. He teaches a Dhamma that is good in the beginning, good in the middle, and good in the end, with the right meaning and expression; he reveals a spiritual life that is perfectly complete and purified.’ Now it is good to see such arahants.

Then the Kālāmas of Kesaputta approached the Blessed One. Some paid homage to him and sat down to one side; some exchanged greetings with him and, after their greetings and cordial talk, sat down to one side; some saluted him reverentially and sat down to one side; some remained silent and sat down to one side. Then the Kālāmas said to the Blessed One: “Venerable sir, some ascetics and brahmins who come to Kesaputta explain and elucidate their own doctrines, but disparage, debunk, revile, and vilify the doctrines of others. But then some other ascetics and brahmins come to Kesaputta, and they too explain and elucidate their own doctrines, but disparage, debunk, revile, and vilify the doctrines of the others. For us, venerable sir, there is perplexity and doubt as to which of these good ascetics speak truth and which speak falsehood.” “It is fitting for you to be perplexed, O Kālāmas, it is fitting for you to be in doubt. Doubt has arisen in you about a perplexing matter. Come, Kālāmas. Do not go by oral tradition, by lineage of teaching, by hearsay, by a collection of texts, by logic, by inferential reasoning, by reasoned cogitation, by the acceptance of a view after pondering it, by the seeming competence of a speaker, or because you think, ‘The ascetic is our teacher.’

But when you know for yourselves, ‘These things are unwholesome; these things are blamable; these things are censured by the wise; these things, if undertaken and practiced, lead to harm and suffering,’ then you should abandon them. “What do you think, Kālāmas? When greed, hatred, and delusion arise in a person, is it for his welfare or harm?”

“For his harm, venerable sir.”—“Kālāmas, a person who is greedy, hating, and deluded, overpowered by greed, hatred, and delusion, his thoughts controlled by them, will destroy life, take what is not given, engage in sexual misconduct, and tell lies; he will also prompt others to do likewise. Will that conduce to his harm and suffering for a long time?”—“Yes, venerable sir.”

“What do you think, Kālāmas? Are these things wholesome or unwholesome?”—“Unwholesome, venerable sir.”—“Blamable or blameless?”—“Blamable, venerable sir.”—“Censured or praised by the wise?”—“Censured, venerable sir.”—“Undertaken and practiced, do they lead to harm and suffering or not, or how is it in this case?”—“Undertaken and practiced, these things lead to harm and suffering. So it appears to us in this case.”

“It was for this reason, Kālāmas, that we said: Do not go by oral tradition.... “Come, Kālāmas. Do not go by oral tradition, by lineage of teaching, by hearsay, by a collection of texts, by logic, by inferential reasoning, by reasoned cogitation, by the acceptance of a view after pondering it, by the seeming competence of a speaker, or because you think, ‘The ascetic is our teacher.’

But when you know for yourselves, ‘These things are wholesome; these things are blameless; these things are praised by the wise; these things, if undertaken and practiced, lead to welfare and happiness,’ then you should engage in them. “What do you think, Kālāmas? When nongreed,

nonhatred, and nondelusion arise in a person, is it for his welfare or harm?”—“For his welfare, venerable sir.”—“Kālāmas, a person who is without greed, without hatred, without delusion, not overpowered by greed, hatred, and delusion, his thoughts not controlled by them, will abstain from the destruction of life, from taking what is not given, from sexual misconduct, and from false speech; he will also prompt others to do likewise. Will that conduce to his welfare and happiness for a long time?”—“Yes, venerable sir.” “What do you think, Kālāmas? Are these things wholesome or unwholesome?”—“Wholesome, venerable sir.”—“Blamable or blameless?”—“Blameless, venerable sir.”—“Censured or praised by the wise?”—“Praised, venerable sir.”—“Undertaken and practiced, do they lead to welfare and happiness or not, or how is it in this case?”—“Undertaken and practiced, these things lead to welfare and happiness. So it appears to us in this case.”

“It was for this reason, Kālāmas, that we said: Do not go upon oral tradition.... “Then, Kālāmas, that noble disciple—devoid of covetousness, devoid of ill will, unconfused, clearly comprehending, ever mindful—dwells pervading one quarter with a mind imbued with loving-kindness, likewise the second quarter, the third, and the fourth. Thus above, below, across, and everywhere, and to all as to himself, he dwells pervading the entire world with a mind imbued with loving-kindness, vast, exalted, measureless, without hostility and without ill will. “He dwells pervading one quarter with a mind imbued with compassion ... with altruistic joy ... with equanimity, likewise the second quarter, the third, and the fourth. Thus above, below, across, and everywhere, and to all as to himself, he dwells pervading the entire world with a mind imbued with equanimity, vast, exalted, measureless, without hostility and without ill will.

“When, Kālāmas, this noble disciple has thus made his mind free of enmity, free of ill will, uncorrupted and pure, he has won four assurances in this very life.

“The first assurance he has won is this: ‘If there is another world, and if good and bad deeds bear fruit and yield results, it is possible that with the breakup of the body, after death, I shall arise in a good destination, in a heavenly world.’

“The second assurance he has won is this: ‘If there is no other world, and if good and bad deeds do not bear fruit and yield results, still right here, in this very life, I live happily, free of enmity and ill will.

“The third assurance he has won is this: ‘Suppose evil befalls the evil-doer. Then, as I do not intend evil for anyone, how can suffering afflict me, one who does no evil deed?’

“The fourth assurance he has won is this: ‘Suppose evil does not befall the evil-doer. Then right here I see myself purified in both respects.’ “When, Kālāmas, this noble disciple has thus made his mind free of enmity, free of ill will, uncorrupted, and pure, he has won these four assurances in this very life.”

“So it is, Blessed One! So it is, Fortunate One! When this noble disciple has thus made his mind free of enmity, free of ill will, uncorrupted and pure, he has won these four assurances in this very life. “Magnificent, venerable sir! Magnificent, venerable sir! The Blessed One has made the Dhamma clear in many ways, as though he were turning upright what had been overthrown, revealing what was hidden, showing the way to one who was lost, or holding up a lamp in the darkness so those with good eyesight can see forms.

We now go for refuge to the Blessed One, to the Dhamma, and to the Saṅgha of monks. Let the Blessed One accept us as lay followers who have gone for refuge from today until life’s end.”