

The Kalamas' Question: How Do We Know When A Teaching Is True?

Theme: how to distinguish true teachings from the variety of 'opinions'

This is what we have been told. On one occasion the Buddha, in his travels, came to the town of Kesaputta, where the inhabitants belonged to a large clan called the Kalamas. When people heard that the Buddha and a great company of his followers had arrived in their town, they thought this was a great opportunity to meet with a man whose wisdom was famed throughout the country. So they went to see him and sat down before him with great reverence.

They greeted him most courteously, saying that they were the Kalamas of Kesaputta, and that they wanted to ask him a question. 'Sir,' they said, 'Certain wandering teachers often come to Kesaputta and tell us what they think about various matters, telling us that their own view is the correct one and that other views are wrong and ridiculous. But then, later, other teachers come to the town and tell us that *their* ideas, quite different ones, are the only correct views and that the ideas of the *others* are wrong and ridiculous. When we listen to them we are full of doubt, and don't know what to believe, since these learned ones all disagree with one another. How then can we tell which of them are speaking the truth?'

The Buddha replied, 'Kalamas, you are quite right to be full of doubt because this is indeed a difficult question. The important thing is not to rely on what someone tells you just because, for example, they seem to know all the traditional scriptures, or are very clever with reasons and theories, or simply because you think, "Well, after all, this person *is* our teacher". On the contrary, if you yourself really feel sure that, "This teaching is not helpful", or "If I were to practise it, it is likely to cause harm or make me unhappy", or "This is not what wise people believe", then go ahead, reject it, don't take any notice. So, for example, Kalamas, if you think that a teaching is likely to make you feel greedy or angry or full of hatred or confused, is that helpful?'

The Kalamas replied, 'No, certainly not.'

'And why are such teachings not helpful?' said the Buddha. 'Is it not because teachings like that are likely to make you do things that harm other creatures, make you take what is not given, make you discontented, make you speak untruthfully, make you lose control of your mind and make you cause unhappiness to yourself and others? And is it not also true that such teachings are not what wise people believe?'

The Kalamas replied, 'Yes, indeed this is so.'

'So,' said the Buddha, 'That is why I said that the important thing is not whether a teacher seems to know all the traditional scriptures, or is very clever with reasons and theories or simply that you think, "Well, after all, this person *is* our teacher". The important thing is to ask yourself, "Do I really know whether this likely to make me and others happy or unhappy; is this what wise people believe?"

'On the other hand,' the Buddha continued, 'If you really are certain that a teaching is helpful, that if you were to practise it, it would help you to become happy and that it is indeed what wise people believe, then accept that teaching and act upon it. For example, if a teaching helps you to avoid greed, helps you to avoid hatred and stops you feeling confused, such a teaching would be helpful, wouldn't it?'

'Yes,' said the Kalamas, 'it certainly would.'

'Then, Kalamas, when you hear teachings like that,' said the Buddha, 'Accept them and act in accordance with them. Because a person who has become free from greed, hatred and confusion, whose mind is free, whose heart is full of love and compassion for the whole world, and who is filled with tranquillity will find great comfort and happiness in four ways:

'The first comfort is that if there is another life after this one, and if our good and bad actions do lead to good and bad results after we die; then, if our life has been free from greed and hatred we will be reborn in a happy life.

The second comfort is that if there is no life after this one, and if our good and bad actions do *not* lead to good and bad results; then, even so: a person whose life has been free from greed and hatred will live happily in this life.

The third comfort is that even if people who commit actions that harm others do, as a result, suffer pain; since I never think of committing any harmful acts, I will always be free of suffering.

And the fourth comfort is that if people who commit actions that harm others do *not* suffer because of them; then, since I never think of committing any harmful acts anyway, my happiness will be doubly certain!

These are the comforts of the teachings that lead to freedom from greed and hatred and from actions that harm others. And such teachings are those that you can know for yourself will help in the search for happiness.'

So ended the Buddha's reply to the Kalamas' question about how to know whether or not a teaching is true. And the Kalamas thanked him and said that when they returned to their homes in Kesaputta they would continue to be followers of the Buddha's teachings.

Questions

1. Why did the Kalamas need to ask the Buddha how they could know whether or not a teacher was speaking the truth?
2. What was the answer that the Buddha gave?
3. How can we tell whether we really *understand* something, as opposed to just accepting what we have been told?
4. Why is it that knowing a teaching helps us avoid greed and hatred proves this teaching is true?
5. How can we recognise the 'wise' people whose guidance we should follow?

Dharma Issues:

- *The test of the truth of the Dharma is that it leads to ethical progress –i.e. to changes in one's state of mind and one's actions.*
- *The truth of the Dharma cannot simply be provided by a teacher but must always be experienced for oneself.*
- *Balancing respect for others' wisdom against awareness of our own experience.*
- *The relationship between belief in 'karma' and belief in rebirth.*

*Based on 'The Kalama Sutta' in the Anguttara Nikaya (The Book of the Gradual Sayings), Pali Text Society, 1932; pp.171-5
and 'Numerical Discourses of the Buddha', Altamira Press, Rowman & Littlefield, International Sacred Literature Trust, 1999, pp. 64-7*