

## Chapter 9

# ***‘What Do You Think, Kalamas?’ – A Visit from the Buddha***

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### ***India, a Troubled Society***

By the time of Socrates, Athens had become a democracy. Thanks to the reforms of the great lawgiver Solon, the rich aristocrats had lost much of their previous power. The burdens of debt and serfdom had gradually been lifted and citizens had the right to attend the Assembly, to speak their minds in public, and to elect their leaders. The democratic tendency was strong and when the oligarchs seized power after the Peloponnesian War their regime was short-lived.

In India the movement of society was very different. The caste system, supported by the Vedas, prevailed over wide areas; a rudimentary form of democracy was to be found among the tribes, though they were losing ground to the kings of the Gangetic plain, who practised an absolutist form of statecraft, highly efficient and quite ruthless. These expansionist regimes were ready to destroy, by fair means or foul, any group or individual who stood in their way. Such was the trend of the times and the Buddha and his followers had to make the best of it. One thing they did was to accommodate as much as possible of the old democratic ethos in the new community, the Sangha. The second was to formulate a code by which absolute monarchs might deal in a decent manner with their subjects. It is most elaborately spelt out in the well-known *Kutadanta Sutta*. It was recognized that absolute monarchs tend to resort to force to solve their problems, social ones included. This sutta proclaimed that it was not good enough merely to raise taxes and set up agencies to suppress brigands and other anti-social elements by force. A different approach was needed, beginning with the recognition that poverty and unemployment were at the root of social ills and proceeding to acknowledge that people will do the right thing if circumstances permit, and that the individual knows best how to manage his own affairs. The way, then, to make the best use of the state's riches is to supply people with the wherewithal to make a new start or to live without exploiting others: seed to the farmer, capital to the tradesman, regular pay to the

official, and so on. The best use of the ‘war-chest’ would be to finance public works such as providing a sufficient supply of water and planting trees along the trade routes. The Buddhists did not accept the new socio-political order without endeavoring to change it for the better.

Political uncertainty was not, however, the only thing to trouble Indian society. As in our own day, there was spiritual unrest, with old beliefs being challenged and new intellectual systems being developed. The Pali Canon shows a society in ferment, with people from all walks of life seeking out teachers and voicing their problems. And when one of these teachers came to a town or village it was an event, and not only individuals but representative groups would come to him. So it was when the Buddha came to the town of Kesaputta in Kosala, and met its people, the Kalamas. They were the people from whom his first teacher, the independent-minded Alara, had sprung. He had died shortly before his pupil’s Enlightenment. Now the Buddha will repay his debt to Alara’s people. The story is given in the *Anguttara Nikaya*. It can be summarized as follows.

### ***The Dialogue with the Kalamas***

The Buddha’s fame had preceded him in Kesaputta. The Kalamas made much of him, and after the formalities of welcome they asked his advice on a matter that was troubling them. Various teachers, they said, had come to their town before and had made an unfortunate impression, for not content with proclaiming their own doctrines they disparaged the doctrines of other teachers and were always trying to pull them to pieces. ‘In the end,’ said the Kalamas, ‘we are in a state of doubt and perplexity, not knowing which of them spoke true or false. Can you help us?’

The Buddha answered them as follows. ‘Well may you find yourselves in a state of doubt and perplexity, for the matter of which you speak is inherently problematical. Let me tell you how best to approach it. Do not accept anything just because you have heard it repeated over and over, or because it is part of your tradition. Do not accept anything at second hand, or because it is in a holy book. Do not go on speculation, or on rhetoric, or on facile reasoning, or on prejudice, even when it seems well founded. Do not accept anything just because it comes from someone in authority, or because the person giving it out is your teacher. When you know yourselves that things are bad, blameworthy, disapproved by the wise, and conducive to harm and ill, you should not do them.’

Then he goes on to deal with what he has found to be the three roots of evil – greed, hatred, and delusion. ‘When a person is dominated by these vices

he takes life, he steals, he fornicates, he lies. He urges others to do likewise. And that will be long for his harm and ill. What do you think, Kalamas?’

They agree. Then the Buddha reverses the procedure and asks ‘What do you think, Kalamas, of the person who is not dominated by greed, hatred and delusion, and does not kill, steal, lie or commit sexual misdeeds, or urge others to do so?’ The Kalamas agree that this will be long for his benefit and happiness.

There follows a description of the Four Sublime States, which are to be cultivated by the disciple who is free of greed, hatred and delusion. They are permeated with the virtues of amity, compassion, gladness and equanimity in consideration of all living beings. The disciple offers the benefit of these virtues to the world.

The benefit of this practice to the disciple himself is the Four Solaces. (1) If there is a hereafter with fruit of deeds good or bad, then it is possible the disciple may arise in a heavenly world of bliss. (2) If there is no hereafter and no fruit of deeds good or bad, he is happy here on earth, being free from hatred and malice. (3) If evil befalls the evil-doer, no evil can befall one who thinks of doing no evil. (4) If no evil befalls the evil-doer, so be it. The disciple has the solace of having purified himself and cultivated virtue.

From the foregoing it would appear that while the Kalamas were somewhat lacking in intellectual confidence, they were intelligent enough to know that the visiting teachers were unlikely, any of them, to be worthy of total credence; and decent enough to find their intolerance distasteful. Just by not attacking the teachers or their teachings, the Buddha puts himself into a different category, one they can instinctively respect. His advice to them in turn is characterized by a respect which might be described as challenging. First he tells them to cease being so passive, so ready to accept ideas just because they have heard them repeatedly, or because tradition seems to have made them unquestionable; neither should they accept ideas on report or because hallowed by scripture, or authorized by their personal gurus. They have it in themselves to know what is good or bad, what leads to happiness or harm. The first thing, then, is an expression of confidence in those honest tribesmen who have been brought to such perplexity. They must have felt both cheered and challenged.

Perhaps they already had some notion of the Buddha’s high estimate of human nature. In another part of the *Anguttara Nikaya* there is an extended comparison between purification of the heart and the refining of gold. At the end of the refining process there is a beautiful substance, ready for the craftsman’s hand; but even in its crudest, earthbound state it is still gold.

Down there with it, however, are the roots of evil – self-interest, ill-will and self-deception. They can be pulled out by one’s own efforts. This is made

clear to the Kalamas. There is no suggestion that they should look to the gods for help. In Buddhism there are no high expectations from that quarter. Its attitude is reflected in the legend of Brahma Sahampati, mentioned earlier. He is described as coming down from heaven to urge the newly-enlightened Buddha to preach the Dharma for the benefit of gods and men. All of them, divine as well as human, are in need of its light.

### ***A Critique of Fundamentalism***

If there is no appeal to the gods, so there is no reliance on their supposed revelations, meaning, at that time, the Vedas. Far from seeing scriptures as sacred, the Buddha considered them to be human compilations, created by priestcraft for its own worldly ends, and part of a spiritual prison built around society and the individual. This is not however as simple an attitude as it may seem, for the human condition is valued more highly in Buddhism than that of the so-called gods, who are inclined to let their carefree condition trap them in *samsara*, the round of birth and death, whereas humans are compelled to know their own condition for what it is, and may take steps to transcend it. This being so, a scripture composed by a thoroughly good person would be of greater value than one delivered by a god. In the *Aggañña Sutta* the composers of the texts are said to have been failed brahmins wanting an easy life and ready to deceive society to secure it.

The implication of this attitude is that any scripture given to man is by the nature of things subject to man's judgment, which is deemed to be adequate for the task. As Jesus said the Sabbath is made for man, not man for the Sabbath, so the Buddhist may say, scriptures are made for man, not man for scriptures. This is the anti-fundamentalist position, whatever the creed, and it accords well with the doctrine of the Middle Way. It need not be confined to polytheistic systems such as the Buddha had to deal with. We are free to assume that if it was the god of a monotheistic religion who created humanity, he would wish to treat it with respect and allow it a share in its own regulation, which would include the right to reinterpret any scripture he might reveal. This has been the liberal view in the great religions, but it has not always prevailed in the past, and it does not prevail everywhere today, nor seem likely to prevail in the near future. Fundamentalism professes absolute respect for scripture, but this invariably means the very narrowest interpretation of it, and is thus fundamentally disrespectful, for surely no Great God should have the understanding of his word bound by the confines of the narrowest minds among his believers. Disrespect for God is reflected in disrespect for man, as fundamentalism operates on a basis of fear – fear of punishment in this life or another or both – and lacks the capacity to understand that this is unacceptable to any who aspire to freedom. The effect at most is an enforced hypocrisy, a

mere mechanical observance of forms. But the moral individual is not a mechanism, and sooner or later humanity wins out. Power and fanaticism are also subject to the law of impermanence. They pass away, and the energies used in resisting or enduring them can be turned to the arena within and the struggle against self-interest, ill-will and self-deception.

### ***Generosity and Freedom***

When the Buddha has brought the Kalamas to an appreciation of the value of this struggle, he proceeds to discourse on the cultivation of the Four Sublime States, amity (*metta*), compassion (*karuna*), gladness (*mudita*) and equanimity (*upekkha*). The first is often translated as lovingkindness and the third as sympathetic joy. All four are successively contrasted with hate and malice. The disciple practises them by directing each of these benevolences in all directions, including upward to the thoughtlessly happy denizens of the heavens and downward to the sufferers in the hells. All living beings everywhere are to benefit from the feelings generated by the disciple. The Buddha clearly believed their transmission was possible and efficacious, and in this discourse we have a sort of ‘communion of saints’ based upon it. The place of the feelings in Buddhist ontology can easily be overlooked, given the emphasis on dispassion and detachment, but it is distinct and not to be underestimated.

We in the West have inherited a theologico-philosophical view of human nature based on soul, mind and body, with spirit sometimes accepted and sometimes not, as a fourth constituent. Somewhere in among them the feelings are accommodated, but not always deemed worthy of mention in their own right. Intellectual acuity, preferably accompanied by physical health, has traditionally been the goal of western education, and a Latin motto has made it seem not only a goal but an ideal. But ‘mens sana in corpore sano’ is a hollow motto if the ‘healthy mind’ does not comprise healthy emotions. If they are disabled, a fine intelligence and a sturdy body may not compensate. The time-honored motto may then be seen as expressing a dualism which, like some more recent psychological systems, fails to do justice to the richness of human nature.

Buddhist ontology provides a corrective for this, based as it is on the doctrine of the *skandhas*: body, feelings, intelligence; the activities of these three; and the consequences of the activities. The first three I understand as the constitutive elements, each with its own name and rights in the life of man, and all contributing through their activities to the maintenance of the fifth *skandha*, *viññāna*, in which the ongoing consciousness lives. Linking the physical and the mental spheres, feelings have an integrative function in this model of man. If they are not developed, the individual can hardly become whole.

Returning now to the Kalamas, one can see that what the Buddha has so far done is to give them the outline of a course in healthy living. First, he tries to rouse them from passivity and reliance on others, telling them they have the ability to discriminate between true and false, good and bad. Then there is an appeal to their moral nature, as he talks about the roots of evil, and with it an appeal to the will-to-goodness which he knows is in them. Third, he gives a lesson in generosity of spirit for, having freed themselves as much as possible from self-interest, ill-will, and delusion, they are not to pause to enjoy their happiness, but should work for the benefit of all beings through practice of the Sublime States.

Each of these three phases represents a level of freedom. After them there is a fourth to be attained. The mind not being subject to negative tendencies, the disciple comes to a state where possibilities may be considered without the crutch of certainty. It will be remembered that Socrates touched on something of the sort in his speech to the Athenian tribunal, saying that he was able to consider death as either annihilation or survival without desiring it to be either.

So here, at the end of the *Kalama Sutta*, we find freedom from certainty presented as a benefit of good living, in relation both to this life and the hereafter. The disciple has the inner resources to face any sort of future, neither desiring good consequences for his good deeds nor bad consequences for the bad deeds of others. He is free of both selfish and judgmental tendencies.

The difference between the Buddha and Socrates here is that the former takes such a positive view of uncertainty as to last things, seeing it as a major freedom; whereas to Socrates it is but something the honest thinker has to live – and die – with. A celebrated Greek of modern times would seem to be closer to the Buddha in this than to his compatriot. The inscription on Nikos Kazantzakis' tomb reads: *I hope for nothing. I am free.*

### ***Some Unusual Features of the Dialogue***

As said before, a caveat must always be entered when a Buddhist text is studied; that it is impossible to know how much, if any of it, came direct from the mouth of the Buddha. The Pali Canon and the Mahayana Sutras, to say nothing of the Tantras, were compiled hundreds of years after the *Parinirvana*, the Buddha's departure from the cycle of life and death. If we think of the New Testament, mostly written within a few decades of the Crucifixion, and of the differences between Plato's and Xenophon's Socrates, we shall not be surprised that some Buddhist texts seem to be at variance with others, and that the figures of the Buddha and his disciples are not always consistent. The texts are

recognized as being human compilations with human errors in them. This applies more perhaps to the Theravadin than to the Mahayanin texts, some of the latter, especially the Lotus Sutra, being esteemed as of very high inspiration indeed. The *Kalama Sutta* is a Theravadin text. It may or may not contain the Buddha's very words, translated into Pali from whatever language he addressed the Kalamas in. The question is, how consistent is it with his message as found elsewhere in the Canon?

In some respects the *Kalama Sutta* is unusual, if not unique. For one thing, the Buddha is not preaching his own doctrine: there is nothing about *dukkha*, the Four Noble Truths, or the Eightfold Path; there is no mention of nirvana, not even at the end, when the Kalamas 'go for refuge' in the conventional way, to the Buddha, the Doctrine and the Order. The non-sectarian nature of the discourse is maintained throughout.

Another unusual feature is that there is a variation in the *Pañcasila*, the Five Moralities or Precepts, as found here. In the part dealing with greed, hatred, and delusion, the Buddha lists the evils countered by the Moralities as killing, theft, sexual misconduct, lying, and *suggesting that others do them*. This last is quite different from the usual fifth Precept, which deals with the consumption of sloth-inducing substances. A number of explanations suggest themselves. Was this a list known already to the Kalamas? Is it possible that the Buddha's *Pañcasila* had not yet found its final form? Did he intend a different fifth Precept for lay folk in general? Or was the prohibition against involving others meant to form part of each Precept, including the usual fifth, not mentioned here?

The *Kalama Sutta* has been called the Buddha's Charter of Free Inquiry, the first statement of the right to freedom of thought and speech; and no doubt it merits these descriptions. But it is more; and for a better understanding, it may be helpful to call upon another text, the first in the *Majjhima Nikaya*, called the *Mulapariyaya Sutta* or the Discourse on Fundamentals. It is devoted to knowledge: the fields of knowledge as cultivated in ancient India and the kinds of knowledge known to the layman, the learner monk and the qualified monk. The fields of knowledge as listed are nature, the gods, the meditational states, and then, before the mention of nirvana that one would expect at this point, but appropriately in the context, the three great ideas of unity, diversity, and totality. These are the ideas that underlie the great religions. In theological terms they may be seen as represented by monotheism, polytheism, and pantheism. (The last might be rendered as monism, which is also a totalistic system. Perhaps we need a third term that would cover both. The favorite prefix of the moment would suggest holotheism.) The Buddha does not argue for any one of them against the others, but names nirvana as beyond all three; which I understand as meaning that there is something higher than knowledge of deity accessible to us, and that all theological systems (including all forms of mysticism) fall short of ultimate reality. From the nirvanal viewpoint it is no

more meaningful to talk of the exclusive One than of the inclusive Many or the all-embracing All.

The *Mulapariyaya Sutta* is said to have been delivered to trained monks pursuing the way to nirvana. The *Kalama Sutta* was spoken to ordinary people who were not followers of any particular way. The two discourses are very different in content and presentation, but they have one important thing in common: in each a viewpoint is commended detached from the choices normally thought to be the only or the best available, whether they be found in the fields of knowledge, or in the views of teachers, or in the ways of contemplating death.