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Doubting the *Kālāma-Sutta*: Epistemology, Ethics, and the 'Sacred'

STEPHEN A. EVANS
Bangkok
saevans60@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: The *Kālāma-sutta* is frequently cited as proof of the rational and empirical spirit of early Buddhist epistemology, 'The Buddha's charter of free enquiry', according to Soma Thera. A close reading, however, calls that interpretation into question. The Kālāmas do not ask what is the truth, and the Buddha does not tell them how to find it. Rather the Kālāmas ask 'Who is telling the truth?' in what may have been the pursuit of sacred or quasi-magical power through the person of a teacher. The Buddha, in turn, encourages them to adopt a set of attitudes and actions, which includes choosing a teacher. The method of evaluation that the Buddha gives, which includes the famous 'know for yourselves' is found to be as least as much ethical as it is epistemological and to invoke the opinion of authority and the public. The Buddha here seems to call for a decision that is partly based on faith, and the Kālāmas respond not with independent research, but with an act of faith in committing themselves to (and being accepted by) the Buddha.

INTRODUCTION

The *Kālāma-sutta* (or, more accurately, the *Kesamutti-sutta*) is one of the best known and most widely cited *sutta*s of the Pāli *Nikāya*s. Its importance, on the one hand, is that it seems to give an account of the Buddha's epistemology; its popular appeal, on the other, is that the epistemology seems strikingly modern. In the usual interpretation, the Buddha advises the Kālāmas to discover truth for themselves through a process of investigation unbiased by faith or tradition. Soma Thera (1981) goes so far as to subtitle his translation 'The Buddha's Charter of Free Enquiry'. As such, it gives Buddhism the status of being at least 2,000 years ahead of the European Enlightenment and holds out the promise of a humanistic and rational religion.

Bhikkhu Bodhi (1998), evidently uncomfortable with this reading, suggests that the Kālāmas simply were not ready to hear deeper truths, which might require faith, so the Buddha offered, 'the most reasonable counsel on wholesome living possible when the issue of ultimate beliefs has been put into brackets'. Bodhi is right that the usual reading of the *Sutta* does not square with the

Nikāyas in general, where faith is indeed important. However, it seems reasonable to suppose that the concern *is* ultimate; moreover, as we shall see, the concern was not with belief. The sense of modernity in the *Sutta* should make us pause and ask whether we have been projecting our own categories of thought into it and thereby misunderstanding it. Bhikkhu Bodhi, in other words, might have done better to question the usual interpretation than to make excuses for the *Sutta*.

This essay endeavors to bring the usual interpretation into question through a closer than usual examination of the question that the Buddha addresses and a critical look at the mode of reasoning, or method, that the Buddha advocates. It is not my purpose here to defend an alternate interpretation of the *Sutta*, although the critique does suggest some elements of what a more adequate interpretation would include.

My concern here is not with what the historical Buddha may have said or thought. That question, it seems to me, is neither answerable nor, although many will disagree, is it of the greatest interest. I am rather interested in the Buddha who has been effective in history, the Buddha who has a voice, that is, the Buddha of tradition. That the Buddha of tradition may be mythical is no matter: having been operative in the world he is real. For the purposes of this paper, the Buddha is the Buddha of the Pāli *Nikāya*s as seen through the lens of the Theravāda tradition. Similarly, when I explore the possible meanings of the Kālāma's question, I do not presume access to the historical Kālāma's world of discourse or to their actual historical cultural presuppositions, rather, my interpretations are in terms of the story and within the context of the tradition. Of course, the *Nikāya*s are not uniquely Theravādin and one may interpret them through other traditions as well. Nevertheless, the Theravāda has always been closely associated with them, and it seems an appropriate (if not the only appropriate) interpretative framework.[1] I therefore make no distinction between texts that may reflect the words of the historical Buddha and those that may represent later accretions, and I consult the commentarial and post-commentarial literature as needed, assuming that the overall tradition constitutes a more-or-less coherent whole. That is a *methodological* assumption. There is no denying, nor would I wish to deny, that there is material in the commentaries that goes well beyond what the *Nikāya*s include, or that there are commentarial interpretations of constructs from the *Nikāya*s that can be, and are, contested (for example, the three-life interpretation of dependent origination). In short, I attempt here to interpret the *Sutta* from within the context of the Theravāda tradition. Nevertheless, a careful reading of the *Sutta* itself, even without reference to other material, does not support the usual modern interpretation.

I begin with a brief review of the *Sutta* itself.

1. Unfortunately, this *Sutta* is treated so briefly in the commentaries that the pre-modern tradition provides little clarification of its meaning.

The Kālāma-sutta[2]

The Buddha comes to Kesaputta and the Kālāmas approach him in the same way that they must have approached all the wandering teachers of the day.[3] These teachers, they say, each insist on his own teaching while condemning the teachings of others. The Kālāmas are confused and in doubt, 'Which of these reverend monks and Brahmins [*samaṇa-brāhmaṇa*] spoke the truth [*saccaṃ āha*] and which falsehood [*musā*]?' (Soma 1981, 5). The Buddha responds that their uncertainty is appropriate, 'It is proper for you, Kalamas, to doubt, to be uncertain; uncertainty [*vicikicchā*] has arisen in you about what is doubtful' (ibid.). The Buddha tells them that they must know for themselves and offers a method of evaluation that includes four criteria: whether something is bad or good (*akusala or kusala*), blameable or unblameable, censured or praised by the wise, and whether it leads to harm or benefit when undertaken. He then engages the Kālāmas in a dialogue, through which they agree that *lobha, dosa,* and *moha* lead to taking life, stealing and so on, which lead, in the long term, to 'harm and ill' for the perpetrator. The method is then applied to determine that 'these *dhammas*' should be 'abandoned'. *Alobha, adosa* and *amoha,* on the other hand, are said to lead a person not to steal and so on, and thence to 'happiness and benefit'. Applying the method to 'these *dhammas*' the Buddha advises the Kālāmas to 'enter into and abide in them'. *Lobha, dosa, moha* and *alobha, adosa, amoha*, usually translated 'greed', 'hatred', 'delusion' and their negations are the *mūlas,* 'roots', fundamental attitudes or, perhaps, motivating impulses, more-or-less, that give rise to good or bad actions (MN I 47).

The Buddha continues by telling them that a 'noble disciple' (*ariya-sāvaka*), free from covetousness, ill-will and confusion (*vigatābhijjho vigatavyāpādo asammūḷho*, implying being free of *lobha, dosa* and *moha*), practises the *brahma-vihāras*[4] (Soma 1981, 9, 10). With his mind purified by this practice, the disciple finds four solaces. They are: if there is an afterlife and result of actions (*kammānaṃ phalaṃ vipāko*), then I may be reborn in a heaven; if not, then I am nevertheless, at present, free from hatred, safe and happy; if there are painful results of wrong actions, I have nothing to fear; if not, I am still purified (Soma 1981, 10, 11). These solaces are interesting in that the Buddha is here saying that the *ariya-sāvaka* may remain in doubt about rebirth and the long-term efficacy of karma, although he lives as though it were efficacious in the assumed way. The term *ariya-sāvaka* normally refers to someone who has achieved at least the stream-enterer (*sotāpanna*) stage of enlight-

2. *Kesamutti-sutta*, AN I 188–93. There is, in fact no *Kālāma-sutta*, the *Sutta* popularly referred to by that name is the *Kesamutti-sutta.* All quotes are from Soma Thera's translation. Pāli terms and so on in square brackets are inserted by the author.
3. The word is '*samaṇa-brāhmaṇā'.* It is convenient to call them 'teachers', since they might not all have Brahmins or renunciants. They were, in any case, wandering teachers who gave themselves out as having ultimate knowledge.
4. *Mettā, karuṇā, muditā, upekkhā:* love, compassion, joy in the success of others, equanimity. The actual term '*brahma-vihāra'* is not used in the *Sutta.*

enment and that usage may be suggested here in that the Buddha has just said that the *ariya-sāvaka* is free of states equivalent to *lobha, dosa* and *moha*. Only *Arahat*s are completely and permanently free of *lobha, dosa* and *moha*, however, and it seems unlikely that the Buddha was referring to *Arahat*s, as they in any case have no further rebirths. He might rather have been referring to those who had achieved the meditatively tranquil states of *jhāna* based on the *brahma-vihāras* just mentioned,[5] in whom those states are temporarily absent. In either case, *vicikicchā* would be expected to be absent. As a fetter (*saṃyojana*), it has been eliminated in a person at any stage of enlightenment (Bodhi 1993, 358; DN II 93); as a hindrance (*nīvaraṇa*) it is overcome at least temporarily in the achievement of *jhāna* (DN I 71–3). *Vicikicchā* is often translated 'doubt' (Bodhi 1993) or 'uncertainty' (Ñāṇamoli 1964); we have here, then, the image of *ariya-sāvaka*s who have, at least temporarily, overcome uncertainty/doubt, being nevertheless uncertain/doubtful about such a central feature of the Buddha's teaching as karma and rebirth. There are ways of resolving this apparent contradiction, and indeed we should not expect rigorous logical consistency throughout the corpus of traditional and canonical material. Still, the very suggestion that an *ariya-sāvaka* would be uncertain about karma and rebirth seems odd. I return to this issue towards the end of the paper.

THE QUESTION

In our effort to understand the Buddha's answer, it may be helpful to examine the question. What did the Kālāmas want to know and why did they want to know it?

The Kālāmas ask neither what is true nor how to discover what is true. They ask instead *who* is speaking the truth and who is speaking falsehood, *ko su nāma imesaṃ bhavataṃ samaṇabrāhmaṇānaṃ saccaṃ āha, ko musā.* The question is couched within the Kālāmas' complaint that not only do different teachers give different teachings, but that each reviles the teachings of the others while glorifying his own. It is interesting that the string of vituperation – 'the doctrines of others they despise, revile, and pull to pieces' (Soma 1981, 5) – that each teacher is said to direct at the teachings of the others does not include that the teachings are false, giving the impression that the teachings are thought of rather in terms of good and evil. For the Kālāmas, the multiplicity of conflicting teachers calls them all into question.[6] But also, they evidently feel the necessity of asking

5. *The Visuddhimagga* explicitly makes the *brahma-vihāras* a basis of the *jhānas* (Ñāṇamoli 1964, 113).

6. As well it might: the *Udāna* includes a story in which King Pasenadi has sent out 35 spies disguised as ascetics of five different movements. Soon, the king tells the Buddha, they will return to a life of sensuality. It is interesting that the Buddha himself, apparently, does not realize that the ascetics are frauds. It takes long association, he says, to tell whether or not someone is an *Arahat* or on the path to becoming one (*Sattajaṭila-sutta*, Ud 64).

the question, 'Who speaks the truth?'; rejecting all the teachers out of hand is not an apparent option.

Filled with doubt (*kaṅkhā*), the Kālāmas say that there is 'uncertainty' (*vicikicchā*) in them. '*Vicikicchā*' , like the English word 'uncertainty', can take on a range of meanings from intellectual doubt, to confusion, to an inability or failure to make a commitment, all of which may be due to general indecisiveness. *Vicikicchā*, indeed, is often contrasted not with certainty but with *adhimokkha*, which means to decide, or to choose (cf. Nārada 1987, 92, 101; Ñāṇamoli 1964, 533). Abandoning *vicikicchā*, then, might mean that one overcomes indecisiveness by making a commitment rather than that one achieves epistemic certainty about the truth of statements. Since the Kālāmas' question has to do with choosing among teachers and the Buddha's answer has to do with choosing among fundamental attitudes and actions, we take *vicikicchā* here to mean primarily 'indecisiveness'. The Kālāmas cannot *decide* which teacher to believe or to follow.

The Kālāmas' question itself is ambiguous. It could mean, on the one hand, 'Who is *telling* the truth?', that is, who is giving an honest account of what he believes, or, on the other, 'Who is making statements that are independently true?'. *Ko ... saccaṃ āho, ko mūsā*, 'Which (of them) spoke the truth, which falsehood' could mean either. The Kālāmas evidently did not make the distinction. That the Buddha himself was aware of the distinction is evident in such *suttas* as the *Caṅki-sutta* (MN II 164–77), where he clearly recognizes that statements may be true or false independently of the person who utters them (MN II 170–72). Even after careful research and reflection, he says, one may come to a conviction that is false, one may be mistaken; on the other hand, a poorly researched opinion might, as it were by accident, be true.[7] In either case, when someone who believes *X* says, 'I believe *X*', he preserves a truth.[8] 'I believe it is raining in northeast Spain', is true, independently of the weather in northeast Spain, as long as the one who says it is telling the truth about what he believes. Yet, the Buddha says in the *Sutta*, such a preservation of truth, no matter how well researched, does not constitute 'awakening to truth' (*saccānubodho*). In addition to independently true statements and truth-telling, then, there is also a kind of truth that is awakened to and a further one that is attained (*saccanuppatti*)[9] only *via* personal transformation brought about by ethical and meditative effort under the guidance of a pure teacher. It may not be too much to say, based on the *Caṅki-sutta*, that this

7. The *Sutta* does not give examples. The topic of conversation had been the truth or falsity of Vedic lore (*mantapada*), but the analysis would apply to statements of fact as well. The statement, 'It rained in a particular part of Spain on 5 May 1999', is true or false, the Buddha would say, independent of the person who says it. I do not mean to impute a theory of truth to the Buddha here, but simply to say that, according to him, some statements may be independently true or false.
8. It is not clear what it means to 'preserve a truth' (*saccānurakkhaṇam*), but at the very least, telling the truth is involved.
9. The Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi translation, n. 892 suggests that awakening to truth and attaining truth in this *Sutta* refer to the attainment of stream-entry and Arahatship, respectively.

kind of truth *is* a personal transformation. In this *Sutta*, in a way that is reminiscent of the *Kālāma-sutta*, one awakens to truth first by identifying a teacher who is purified of *lobha, dosa* and *moha*, 'then he places faith in him; filled with faith he visits him and pays respect to him; having paid respect to him, he gives ear' (MN II 173). Similarly, in the *Sammādiṭṭhi-sutta* (MN I 46–55), 'right view' is treated as both comprehension and transformation. I shall refer to this last kind of truth as 'transformative truth' (including, but not necessarily limited to, both that which is 'awakened to' and that which is 'attained'). As utterance, transformative truth would, I suggest, be independently true utterances of transformed beings telling the truth; the utterances, as it were, of true persons. Only one who has been transformed by truth would be capable of telling a transformative truth, and only in his mouth could anything be transformatively true. I shall henceforth refer to such a person as a 'true-person' (similar, perhaps identical to, the Pāli concept of *sappurisa*, for example as at AN V 114–15) and to a true-person who teaches as a 'genuine teacher'.[10] Of course, it is not necessarily the case that every utterance of a true-person is transformatively true.

The Kālāmas' question, then, both in its form, and in the Buddha's likely understanding of it, assuming that his concern was with transformative truth, would have had to do with the person of the teacher as much as with the content of his teachings.[11] It would seem, then, the Kālāmas needed to know which *person* was true at least as much as they needed to know which *statements* were true: they need a genuine teacher.

Why did the Kālāmas want to know?

The above suggests that the Kālāmas needed to know whose utterances would be transformative. An adequate exploration of the motivations behind the question, however, would take us too far afield. I mention here three probable motivations: the need for objective information, the desire to access sacred[12] power through the ritual act of giving gifts to the teacher, and the desire to access the sacred power of ritual utterances.

The first is, to us moderns, obvious: they wanted the best possible advice on how to live and how to relate to ultimate concerns. They would have needed a true, or accurate, picture of the cosmos and its functional processes so that they could successfully navigate their way through it and manipulate it to achieve

10. Thus avoiding the possibly prejudicial implications of 'Buddha', '*Arahat*', 'enlightened being' and so on.
11. The Buddha frequently invoked the fundamental importance of having the right teacher, in particular himself: one gains faith in the *Tathāgata* and goes forth and so on (e.g. DN II 63). See, for example the *Pāsādika-sutta* (DN III 117–41).
12. I use 'sacred' for want of a better English term. The idea is a quasi-magical force that is spiritually and materially effective. It might be 'holy' (or 'unholy') in some sense, but there is no implication of a sacred–profane dichotomy.

their goals. From what we know of the times, the Kālāmas would have wanted wealth, power, and sons; perhaps rebirth in heaven or into a higher social class. Some would have wanted a variously conceived liberation, an ultimate achievement that would transcend all else. According to orthodox Brahmins, one way to achieve these things was via the sacred power accessed through sacrificial rites. Many of those rites could only be celebrated by trained Brahmins who were engaged by patrons to perform the rites on their behalf. The patron accessed that power *via* gifts, *dakṣiṇā*, to the celebrants (Olivelle 1996, xliv).

However, the Brahminical rites could be very expensive, and the most powerful rites were available only to patrons of the three higher classes. There were, however, alternative rites and the sacred itself was variously conceived. One alternative, available to anyone with a little rice, was making food offerings to holy men and women, such as the *samaṇa*s. The problems were, *which* rites to perform and to *which* holy persons to make offerings? The choice was agonistic in that choosing wrongly might result in ruin. Brahmins, for example, taught that animal sacrifice would confer sacred power, and that to neglect the sacrifices would bring ruin; the Buddha, on the other hand, taught that animal sacrifice itself would bring ruin and that offerings to Buddhist monks accessed more sacred power than offerings to Brahmins (DN I 146, 147, in the *Kūṭadanta-sutta*). The *Yodhājīva-sutta* (SN IV 308–9) recounts a tradition that a warrior killed in battle will be reborn among the *deva*s; the Buddha retorts that he will be reborn in hell instead. How was one to know which account was true?[13] This, of course, is the problem that the *Bhagavadgītā* attempts to resolve, with rather a different solution (Johnson 1994, xiii). It was urgent, then, to have accurate information. The question, nevertheless was 'Who?' not 'What?'. It should not be forgotten, moreover, that the *Sutta* concludes not with the Kālāmas committing themselves to independent research, but with their taking refuge in the Buddha, and with the Buddha accepting them as followers. In other words, an important component of the information they sought was exactly *who* is a genuine teacher. Some indication of why that would have been important is to be found in the other two motivations for their question suggested here.

In the Buddhist version of the distribution of sacred power, certain acts, whether 'ritual' or 'ethical', access *puñña*, others *pāpa,* positive and negative power.[14] Giving gifts to monks, for example, is good karma. Giving gifts to Buddhist monks accesses

13. There are many examples, some quite humorous, of how rites and practices could bring unintended and unhappy results. For example, a dog ascetic, if his practice was perfected, would be reborn as a dog; otherwise, he would be reborn in hell, according to the Buddha. Neither, of course, was his intention (*Kukkuravatika-sutta,* MN I 387).

14. *'Puñña' may* have originally been related to 'purification', but by the time of the *Nikāya*s, it seems to have meant something like 'good fortune' and could be cultivated via the sacrificial rites. It operates as a force that brings about happiness in the future, a good rebirth and so on (cf. Cousins 1996, 9). Even Keown, who wants to think of *puñña* as simply the pleasant result of good action (*kusala*), cannot help but speak of it as something that is 'produced', 'accumulated' and that brings about a happy rebirth (Keown 1992, 123–6).

more *puñña* than giving gifts to those of other sects or to common beggars and giving gifts to enlightened beings accesses more *puñña* than gifts to unenlightened beings (e.g. MN III 255–7). Gifts to a Buddha at critical moments of his life access the most *puñña* of all, even though the donor may not know that it is a critical moment, or even that the recipient is a Buddha. In the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* (DN II 135–6), the Buddha enumerates two gifts of 'very great fruit': the gift of a Buddha's final meal before *Parinibbāna*, and the gift of the last meal to a *Bodhisatta* before he achieves supreme enlightenment. Cunda, whose gift of the Buddha's final meal (DN II 126–7), thereby of very great fruit, could not have known that it was the final meal. Sujātā, who, in the traditional, if non-canonical, story, gave the *Bodhisatta* his last meal before supreme enlightenment, knew neither who he was nor that he was at a critical juncture in his life. Nevertheless her gift, judging by the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta*, was of very great fruit. The *Dakkhinavibhanga-sutta* (MN II 253–7) enumerates the multiplier effect that higher stages of virtue of the *recipient* have on the potency of the gift. It is not to be expected that the giver would know, for example, what stage of enlightenment, if any, a particular recipient had achieved. Moreover, the virtue of the recipient can purify, or make karmically effective, gifts given by unvirtuous persons without trust or even faith in the effectiveness of gifts. The intention of the donor plays a role as well, of course, and the virtue of the donor can purify the gift even where the recipient lacks virtue (MN II 257). As suggested above, such beliefs were by no means unique to the Buddha and his followers, the only question being *who* bears the most sacred power such that gifts to them would impart the most good fortune.

The third likely motivation for the Kālāmas' question concerns belief in the quasi-magical power of truth-telling, or *sacca-kiriyā*. Aṅguḷimāla, for example, could affect a smooth childbirth, simply by reciting, 'Sister, since I was born with the noble birth, I do not recall that I have ever intentionally deprived a living being of life. By this truth, may you be well and may your infant be well!' (MN II 103; Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi 1995, 430). It would appear that it is neither the content of the utterance that has power, nor that Aṅguḷimāla says something that happens to be true. For someone else to say that Aṅguḷimāla had not 'deprived any living thing of life' or for Aṅguḷimāla to say, 'the derivative of *x* square is twice *x*', would not have the effect. What has power is Aṅguḷimāla's act of telling his own truth. We may say that Aṅguḷimāla was such a true man that his utterances of personal truth conveyed sacred power to one who heard them. It is not even clear that it was necessary for the beneficiary to comprehend such utterances.

These possible motivations are intended only as a sampling of why the Kālāmas' may have felt the need to ask their question, but I believe that it is worth pointing out the overlap whereby the three motivations may have issued in a single question to which a single answer was expected. Only a true-person would be in a position to have accurate information about rites and the best conduct of life; gifts given to a true-person access more power than do gifts to others; and only the utterances of true-persons stand a chance of conveying sacred power to the hearers. The best teacher then would be a genuine teacher, a true-person

who conveyed the most accurate information, bore the most sacred power, and spoke the most efficacious truths. At least three kinds of truth are involved here: the independent truth of statements, including, perhaps among other things, accuracy; truth as truth-telling, that is, the ethical act of honest self-expression; and truth as the direct conveyance of sacred power. Together, these would seem partly to characterize what I earlier termed 'transformative truth'. The Kālāmas would have been concerned with all three kinds of truth, possibly without distinguishing sharply among them. The implied basic question, then, 'How do we access sacred power?', was reduced, through background assumptions about the importance of the teacher, to 'Who?'

THE BUDDHA'S ANSWER

The Buddha does not directly answer the question. This may seem a bit odd, as elsewhere he is certainly concerned with the importance of choosing the right teacher, and does not hesitate to claim best-teacher status for himself (e.g. DN III 127 in the *Pāsādika-sutta*). However, the form of the question threatens to invalidate any claim he might make to be a genuine teacher. The Buddha rather gives them a sample of his own teachings and guides them through a discourse such that they agree that following these teachings would lead to the achievement of material and spiritual goals. Thus edified, they commit themselves to him, so that, although he did not say so directly, the implied answer to their question would appear to have been, '*This* teacher!'.

The method

After affirming that their indecisiveness is appropriate, he gives them a method for addressing their concerns. The method, in Soma Thera's translation is:

A. Do not go upon what has been acquired by repeated hearing [*anussavena*]; nor upon tradition [*paramparāya*]; nor upon rumor [*itikirāya*]; nor upon what is in a scripture [*piṭaka-sampadānena*]; nor upon surmise [*takka-hetu*]; nor upon an axiom [*naya-hetu*]; nor upon specious reasoning [*ākāra-parivitakkena*]; nor upon a bias towards a notion that has been pondered over [*diṭṭhi-nijjhāna-kkhantiyā*]; nor upon another's seeming ability [*bhavya-rūpatāya*]; nor upon the consideration, 'The monk is our teacher [*samaṇo no garū ti*]'.
B. Kalamas, when you yourselves know [*kālāmā attanā 'va jāneyyātha*]:
   1. These things [*dhammā*] are bad [*akusalā*];
   2. these things are blamable;
   3. these things are censured by the wise [*viññu-*];
   4. undertaken and observed, these things lead to harm and ill, [then you should] abandon them.

C. Kalamas, when you yourselves know:
   1. These things are good [*kusalā*];
   2. these things are not blamable;
   3. these things are praised by the wise;
   4. undertaken and observed, these things lead to benefit and happiness, [*hitāya sukhāya*] [then you should] enter on and abide in them. (Soma 1981, 5–7)[15]

It is unclear what some of the terms in section A refer to. For example, *naya* and *takka* may simply mean 'inference' and 'logic' (or, perhaps, 'sophistry' (PED)), or they may refer to formal schools of reasoning. What gives the *Sutta* its modern flavour, however, is clear: the Kālāmas should not 'go upon' authority, whether of tradition, teachers or popular opinion (as well as not by reason alone or personal bias); rather they should come to 'know' for themselves. Having given the method, the Buddha applies it to evaluate the fundamental attitudes of *alobha, adosa* and *amoha*, and their opposites.

Reading the Kālāmas' uncertainty as epistemic, the *Sutta* seems to address specifically epistemological concerns: which doctrines are true? Or more generally, how are we to formulate statements about reality and then determine their truth-value? Taking this to be the theme, the first portion of the Buddha's answer to the Kālāmas reads like the beginning of an essay on critical reasoning or even scientific method. The truth of statements does not depend on the status of their sources, whether they be respected teachers or scripture; rather each must come to know for herself. But we should move cautiously. *What* is to be known? *How* is one to know?

What is to be known?

What exactly is being evaluated here? The phrase is, 'Kalamas, when you yourselves know: "These things ..."', where 'things' translates *'dhammā'*. *'Dhammā'* could mean 'duties', 'fundamental aspects of existence', 'fundamental structure of the cosmos' (although the plural form may argue against this), 'doctrines' and so on. One clue is that 'These *dhamma*s' are things that one might abandon or that one might enter into and abide in.

A narrowly epistemological interpretation would understand *dhamma*s as 'doctrines', although in that case *'vāda'* would have been more natural than *dhamma*s since that is the term already used for the doctrines of the wandering teachers. After giving the criteria, however, the Buddha applies them not to doctrines, or to statements of any kind, but to fundamental attitudes, the 'roots', or *mūla*s (*lobha/alobha* etc.). The Kālāmas agree that certain actions and results flow from these attitudes. It is not entirely clear whether the *dhamma*s under evaluation

15. Outline format and numbering added by the author.

include only the *mūla*s or also the actions that flow from them. In the view of the *Sutta*, bad *mūla*s are necessarily paired with bad actions, as are good with good. '*Dhammā*' could certainly cover both, and I take it that the method is meant to be applicable to actions as well as to fundamental attitudes. A habitual set of attitudes and actions, moreover, could be spoken of as a mode of comportment or a general way of living that might be 'abandoned' or 'entered into'.

In fact, the Buddha never talks in this *Sutta* about what is true as such, and, reading carefully, what is to be known here is not *dhamma*s, but *that* certain *dhamma*s are good or bad. The Buddha does not say, 'when you know for yourselves that these *dhamma*s are true, then believe them', but rather, 'when you know for yourselves that these *dhamma*s are good', and so on, then 'enter into and abide in them'. We would seem rather to be in the realm of ethics than of epistemology, and the *Sutta* would seem to offer a model of ethical reasoning, a method rather of determining the good than the true. It is true that the language in the opening phrase, 'know for yourselves', seems to suggest an epistemological interpretation. The word here is '*jāneyyātha*' where '*jānāti*' means 'to know', but also 'to be acquainted with' as with a friend, 'to have experience of', 'to find out', as well as 'to possess true propositions'. It has, in other words, roughly the same range of the English 'to know' as used in ordinary speech rather than as a technical epistemological term. *'Jān-eyyātha',* in turn, is a conditional form, so that the phrase might possibly be translated as, 'Should you yourselves come to feel that ...'. This, of course, proves nothing, but it leaves the door open to understanding the method articulated in the *Sutta* as something other than a rigorous epistemology. 'Should you come to feel' lacks the implied certainty of 'when you come to know'. To 'feel' lacks the implied rigour of 'to know'.

Because of the frequency with which this *Sutta* is cited as an epistemological tract, we will continue to consider interpretations for which '*dhammā*' means 'doctrines' and hence, collections of statements, and that the *Sutta* offers a method of determining whether they are true.

The method: how are we to know?

Recognizing that the evaluation is here applied to states of mind, rather than to doctrines, Peter Harvey supposes that the Buddha gives an empirical method for eliminating uncertainty via a procedure of test and observation, '*do* it, and see the effect' (1995, 118). An empirical interpretation is suggested by the fourth criterion, 'undertaken and observed, these things lead to benefit and happiness', coupled with 'when you know for yourselves'. However, an empirical interpretation seems unlikely once we think through what empiricism would entail. Harvey's wording, '*do* it, and see the effect', might suggest an experimental procedure. However, it is untenable that the Buddha would have them try out *dosa*, say, or perhaps killing, in order to discover its result. But perhaps the experiment would be to try out different teachers – or teachings – to discover whether or not they

make you feel *lobha, dosa* or *moha*. Such a trial and error approach seems rather unskilful, especially if we imagine, for example, choosing a school for our children. Moreover, once committed to a teacher who seemed wise and loving, but who in fact inspires ignorance and hatred, it may be difficult to break away. If, for example a teacher inspires *moha*, ignorance, in his followers, how would they know? An empiricism that observes and catalogues, but does not conduct experiments, is a more likely interpretation of the fourth criterion. It seems a reasonable task to observe the followers of various teachers, attempting to discern the relative levels of *alobha*, *adosa* and *amoha*. But what is to be known is not whether or not the different attitudes are present, but which attitudes lead to well-being and which to suffering. Given the cultural expectation, persistently reinforced by the Buddha himself, that much of the happiness or sorrow that results from present acts will occur in future lives, and that much present happiness and sorrow is the result of acts in past lives that the vast majority of us do not remember, there would seem to be no way to complete the observation. In other words, the *Sutta* yields no empirical way for the vast majority of us to know 'for ourselves', and with any certainty, that *lobha*, *dosa* and *moha* lead to sorrow and the rest. It may be objected, in view of the 'consolations' near the end, that the *Sutta* itself does not assume the reality of rebirth and results of karma in future lives, and that, therefore, the results of present acts *are*, in the view of this *Sutta*, observable in the present life. First, however, it is inconceivable that the Buddha of the *Nikāya*s as well as of tradition would cast doubt on such a central doctrine. He seems rather simply to be saying that virtue is its own reward, in what seems to me a tacit acknowledgement that there is no empirical way for most of us to link events with their karmic causes. Secondly, that the wicked often prosper and the good often suffer does not go unnoticed in the *Nikāya*s and the tradition. In such cases, karma in past lives (or results in future ones) is sometimes invoked to explain the apparent anomaly (e.g. the story of Suppabuddha the leper in the *Udāna* and the commentarial story to the first verse of the *Dhammapada* of the *Arahat* monk who went blind as a result of misdeeds in a past life). Of course, in a rough and ready way, one may observe that those who kill, steal, commit adultery and the like often suffer social disapprobation. But acute observation would also reveal that that isn't *necessarily* so. In any case, such an interpretation seems to reduce 'knowing for yourselves' to social conformity. In point of fact, the *Sutta* never explicitly advocates observation as a means of 'knowing for yourselves'.

The empirical interpretation depends on the fourth criterion. What about the others? The first criterion, whether the *dhamma* is good or bad, immediately raises the question: how do we determine whether a *dhamma* is good or bad?[16]

16. L. S. Cousins has not convinced me in his article, 'Good or Skillful? *Kusala* in Canon and Commentary', that 'good' is a poor translation for '*kusala*'. 'Good', as Keown (1992, 119) points out, in an argument cited by Cousins in order to disagree, better covers the range of meanings than 'skilful'. However, Cousins has indicated the importance of keeping the sense of skilful, especially as the result of skill or wisdom, in the foreground.

If '*dhammā*' means 'statements', what does it mean for statements to be good or bad (*kusala/akusala*)? If we take *kusala* to mean 'skilful' or 'healthy', we might suspect that the Buddha held a pragmatic theory of truth.[17] Peter Harvey (1995, 115), however, has shown that this is unlikely. On the other hand, if '*kusala*' means 'produced by skill, or by wisdom' (Cousins 1996) then it could easily apply to statements, suggesting that they were well considered or well researched. This interpretation is possible, although *kusala* is primarily an ethical term, applied typically not to statements, but to actions, attitudes and other mental states, and to techniques of meditation (Cousins 1996; Keown 1992). If '*dhammā*' refers to attitudes and actions on the other hand, then it is not problematic to ask whether they are good or bad (or skilful or healthy): that is the ethical question. But if the subject matter were ethics, then the goal of the method would be to determine what is good and the criterion would be a tautology: an act or attitude is good if it is good. It may be objected that the goal of the method is to decide what to do. But surely, what should be done is, by definition, good and the tautology remains. I suggest that this criterion be taken instead as a definition, establishing the goal of the evaluation: 'The attitudes to be adopted and the actions to be performed are those that are good'. We are left, in that case, with the other three criteria (above, 'The method', C. 2–4) to discover what the 'good' actually is.

The second and third criteria – whether the *dhamma* under evaluation is blameable or not, and, whether or not it is censured by the wise – seem to contradict the initial statement of what we should *not* 'go by'. Indeed, the 'spirit of free inquiry' here crumbles. Blame has to do with popular opinion and 'the wise', *viññu*, would refer to such authorities as elders, teachers, or perhaps, to *Arahat*s and Buddhas. It is easy enough to know whether or not something is blamed and censured. But supposing an epistemological interpretation, the *dhamma*s under consideration would be statements and it is not clear what it would mean to blame or to censure statements. Neither is it clear how blame or censure would bear on their truth. The ethical interpretation is again more natural: attitudes and actions *are* blamed and censured, and, in as much as ethics is a social concern, consultation with respected authorities and consideration of popular opinion are appropriate. But there are deeper problems here: blamed by whom? And who are the wise? The community is not a monolith, and the elders and teachers may not agree with each other. The Buddha evidently means by 'the wise' someone who actually knows, but that is the original problem. The Kālāmas do not know who to trust, and they seem here to be reduced to asking the wise, 'Who are the wise?' The method of this *Sutta*, whether it is epistemological or ethical, then, has an element of circularity, although the circle is rather practical or hermeneutical than it is logical.

17. But as Cousins points out, 'skilful' need not imply utilitarianism or pragmatism, and the sense is often the *result* of skill, especially in meditation (Cousins 1996, 1ff.). I suspect that *kusala* may be close to what we mean when we ask of an action, 'Is it wise to do that?'.

The fourth criterion, whether the *dhamma* leads to harm or to benefit, again reads more naturally as an ethical than as an epistemological statement. As such, this criterion suggests a pragmatic ethic.[18] However, the problem noted above, that some of the results of actions may come in another lifetime, and hence cannot be tracked, at least by the vast majority of people, and certainly not by the Kālāmas, means that even a pragmatic ethic yields at best only a partial empirical method of inquiry into what is good. The Buddha might perhaps have been thinking of the cultural assumptions of rebirth and of the results of actions, as recounted in folk-tales (and in the Buddha's own teachings) in which the characters traverse multiple life-times acting and receiving the results. If that were the case, then the method of the *Kālāma-sutta* would include an implicit appeal to tradition for the determination of the good.

To reiterate, the method of this *Sutta* is more naturally understood as ethical than as epistemological. But also, the method of evaluation here, whether epistemological or ethical, is not consistent with the modern project of knowing for oneself through free and open empirical and rational inquiry. Rather, although the *Sutta* does encourage a degree of autonomy in thinking through ethical decisions, that thinking-through includes also consulting popular opinion, authority, and perhaps tradition.

THE KĀLĀMAS' RESPONSE

The question was 'Who is the genuine teacher?', and not 'What is true?'. An epistemological interpretation of the answer, then, squares poorly with the question. But an ethical interpretation does not answer the question either. It may, however answer the implied question, how to access sacred power, as certain attitudes and actions are said to issue in future attainment. Moreover, as we have observed, the fact that the Kālāmas take refuge in the Buddha strongly suggests that they have found in him the genuine teacher, giving accurate information, distributing sacred power through accepting gifts, and through efficacious utterances.[19]

As noted earlier, there seems to be a contradiction towards the end of the *Sutta* when the Buddha implies that some of his enlightened and/or meditatively advanced followers may yet lack epistemic certainty on rebirth and the efficacy of karma. The problem is that *vicikicchā* should have been suspended or eliminated in these followers. For his enlightened followers, which '*ariya-sāvaka*' implies,

18. By 'pragmatic ethic', I mean ethical egoism (each should do that which brings himself the most happiness), utilitarianism (each should do that which brings the greatest happiness in the universe), and combinations of the two.
19. It can be argued cogently that, in the world of the *Nikāya*s, the Buddha's direct personal teaching was necessary for the achievement of enlightenment (Masefield 1987). The Buddha, in other words, spoke transformative truth. Certainly, the tenor of the *Nikāya*s, as of the tradition, is that a personal teacher is extremely important.

vicikicchā concerning the *Dhamma*, by implication including rebirth and karma,[20] would have been eliminated at the first stage of enlightenment. The contradiction is resolved if we translate *vicikicchā* as 'indecisiveness', as suggested above, rather than 'doubt'. Indecisiveness is overcome by decision, not by epistemic certainty. The Buddha's followers overcome *vicikicchā* by *choosing* to live as though the doctrine of karma and rebirth were true, without being certain that it was.[21] But that in turn suggests that the method given for making a decision leaves a gap of uncertainty, which is to be filled by an act of faith. An act of faith, indeed, is what the Buddha's discourse here elicits, the Kālāmas' taking refuge in him at the close of the *Sutta*. The phrase 'know for yourselves' is sometimes invoked to show that Buddhism does not require faith (and to support efforts to translate *saddhā* as something else). As indicated above, however, the phrase could be translated 'Should you yourselves come to feel that', suggesting the possibility that the method is not intended to be rigorous, and that it leaves ample room for a gap of uncertainty to be filled by faith.

CONCLUSION

The subject matter of the Buddha's answer to the Kālāmas is at least as much ethical as it is epistemological. The Buddha is talking not about doctrines and their truth or falsity, but about attitudes and actions and whether they are good or bad. Indeed, the Kālāmas are not invited to know for themselves in any general way, but only to know for themselves (or to come to feel) that certain attitudes and actions are good or bad. They are not then invited to believe or disbelieve certain *dhamma*s in the sense of doctrines but rather, either to enter and abide in or to abandon *dhamma*s in the sense of fundamental attitudes or motivations. Their choices, moreover, are to be made not only in a spirit of free inquiry, but also in terms of public opinion, authority and tradition, with faith as a component.

My suggestion of an ethical interpretation of the *Kālāma-sutta* is intended to call into question the usual epistemological interpretation. I do not maintain that an ethical interpretation would be fully adequate. Rather, a fully adequate interpretation would take account of the culture and felt cosmology of the time in which the good, the true and possibly other categories may not have been sharply distinguished. However, such an interpretation is beyond the present scope. Another theme that I have not explored here, but that I suspect is important, has to do with the subject of knowing: *who* is to 'know for yourselves'? The Kālāmas ask their question as a community, the Buddha addresses them in the plural, he does not say 'each is to know', but 'you (plural) are to know'. In the end, the Kālāmas take refuge in the Buddha as a community, not as individuals. If the

20. Cf. MN III 71–2 sees denial of karma and rebirth as wrong view.
21. Editor's note: indeed the abilities of remembering past lives and seeing the rebirth of others according to karma is seen as had by only *some Arahat*s (SN II 122–3).

subject of knowledge is a community rather than an individual, that fact might cast a different light both on the method and on what the method aims at.

Finally, moving away from an interpretation of the *Kālāma-sutta* as a rational-empirical epistemological treatise may suggest adjustments to the presuppositions and methods through which we interpret other parts of the *Nikāyas*. Scholars seem often to approach the *Nikāyas* as a rationally and internally coherent body of statements, more-or-less directly comprehensible in modern terms. That approach tacitly ignores or argues away more obviously superstitious aspects. I suspect that a more fruitful approach would attempt to understand both the Buddha and his teachings in the context of the cultural assumptions of the times, or at least of the traditions through which they come to us. One possibility, put simplistically, is that while Buddhism (and e.g. Jainism) may have demythologized the ritual and mythology of the *Veda*s and *Brāhmaṇa*s, many of the structures of that world-view may have been retained. If that is the case, then the Buddha and the doctrines, rites and ethics that he promulgated may, in part, be best understood as means of access to sacred power, perhaps through conformity with the dynamic structures of the cosmos. The ultimate fruit of such conformity would then have been the ability to escape those structures. Developing that suggestion must await further research.

ABBREVIATIONS

AN	*Aṅguttara-nikāya*	PED	Pali text Society Pali-English Dictionary
DN	*Dīgha-nikāya*	SN	*Saṃyutta-nikāya*
MN	*Majjhima-nikāya*		

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