

The Kalama Sutta: Living an Ethical Life

Gil Fronsdal

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So before giving the talk, I would like to make a few announcements. One is I think I said this here on Sunday that a few weeks ago we had a little big fund raising drive for a couple of days for a charity after the earthquake there. And we raised money for a non profit that does grass roots work there, working in partnership with local health care workers, and called Partners in Help. And it was delightful that we raised about thirty two thousand dollars for that, and that, confident, can make a difference. And make for the people of hate, and the communities where the staff in health goes in and partners with people. That was very nice.

And the other is that we're beginning to think again about ways of opening a space maybe in October, and maybe with more restrictions on it than we were planned originally in August, and maybe fewer people and proof of vaccination and things like that. So I thought that for those of you who are interested, especially the local people, we could have a community meeting about this on April fourth, on October fourth. So its a way, but then next week I won't be here teaching a retreat for the next two weeks. And so next week, I am happy that Max Urgstine, one of the teachers here at IKEA, will come and give the talk, and am delighted that Max will be able to do that. He had a baby in, I think, in April, so he's been a little bit not teaching so much, but he's ready to do some teaching. And so he'll be here next Sunday.

So for the talk, I've been thinking some this week about an important discourse of the Buddha called the *Kālāma Sutta*, and it's one of the more well known suttas in the West. And now the Buddha Kana teaches, I think, kind of brilliantly in this text, and taking his audience, the Kālāma people, on a journey. I think of it as a four or five step journey where he reframes their question to him. In a sense, he reframes it by turning away from abstract questions of abstract questions of truth and falsehood and questions of Who is it that speaks the truth and who is it that speaks the falsehood to a directing people's attention inward to themselves

with ethical principles of attention, and then applying that in their behavior, and then leading it into pointing to the absence of ill will and the presence of good will. So it goes from kind of Buddha talks about kind of principles to behaviour, to inner dispositions, and so its kind of leading the audience through this.

And so it begins by the Buddha visiting this country where the Kālāma people live, and they've had a lot of spiritual teachers visiting, and perplexed by them because they all seem to say things like or quote the text. They say they explain and elucidate their own doctrines, but disparage, denigrate, and deride, and denounce the doctrines of others. So they champion their teachings, but they criticize in dramatic terms the doctrine of others, and so they say, We're perplexed and have doubt. They are all saying the same thing, that where we teach what's true and other people are all wrong, and so they ask the Buddha, Which of them speaks the truth and which of them speak falsehoods? It's a question about what is true and what is false.

And so the Buddha. I guess he doesn't want to be just one more person that champions his doctrine, and certainly doesn't want to denigrate anybody else. So what he does is he changes the he reframes the conversation. He doesn't actually answer their question directly. But who speaks the truth and who's false. He first says what you should not rely on in deciding what is true, and then he points to how you could know something for yourself.

And he doesn't say it's the truth exactly, but maybe it's implied, but you'll see for yourself. And when I go through this, and when the Buddha responds and says, Yes, It's reasonable. You should be perplexed and have doubts, given that all these people are coming and making claims and then criticizing others. And here is something you should be careful for. Don't. These are some things you should not rely on in order to shouldn't rely on these things.

These are kind of spiritual sources of authority, common ones for many people that they take these sources as providing some access to the truth. And the Buddha says, Don't rely on these. After a number of scandals and challenges, and a Western Buddhism here in the United States, there was a wonderful Zen teacher named Ivan Rand is now passed away, and she was a very strong orientation towards being ethical and addressing the ethical, unethical behaviour that was going on in Buddhism at that time. And now she once said that these are this little what I'm going to read you now. She said it's Kanodramatic tattooed on the inside of people's eyelids. She wanted everyone to know this really well.

So he says, Do not go by oral tradition, oral tradition, because there's all oral tradition. Back there, there was no books. But I guess I don't go by the traditional teachings in books, or because it's the tradition. These particular teachings don't go by traditional teachings or

by the lineage of teaching. So if you're in a particular lineage of teachings, in a particular organization, religion, denomination, just because it's part of that lineage. Don't just accept it as a by, just automatically by that.

Don't go by hearsay just because you've heard it around and maybe it sounds good. Don't depend on hearsay. Don't go by a collection of scriptures. So don't because it's in scriptures that are particularly important for you or your tradition. The fact that it's in scriptures doesn't make it mean that it's true, and don't go by logical reasoning. So to establish what's really most valuable is, from the Buddhist point of view, don't go because it seems reasonable or logical.

Don't construct a logical argument for it. And don't go by inferential reasoning kind of intuition, for example, and by reason cognition more of the same thing, and by some kind of acceptance of it just because you've thought it out all kind of similar kind of mental kind of consideration, or by the seeming competence of a speaker. Just because someone has charisma, or seems confident, or seems very convincing in how they are, that's not a reason to accept something. And then finally, I don't accept it. Don't rely on a The ascetic is our guru just because someone you think it's because a person's my teacher. I should accept it. So all, always be very careful. Don't accept naïvely or simplistically or these other sources. It's not a rejection of those sources, but rather that's not that you might get ideas. You might get encouragement, inspiration, a things to think about from all these sources, but they are not the place to find out what is true.

Now, the Buddha doesn't actually talk about what's true, doesn't use that language. But now he talks about principles of what you should go by, and he says, But when you know for yourselves, These things are unwholesome, these things are blameworthy, these things criticized by the wise. These things, if accepted and undertaken, lead to harm and suffering, then you should abandon them. So when there are, when there's any word for things here, can mean action. When there's activities that you do that involve they are unwholesome, that you can feel they make you feel bad, they deflate you. They somehow feel unhealthy in doing them. Then I don't do them.

So hold on. Abandon them when they are blameworthy. And exactly what that means we don't know. But if they seem unfair or unfair, just abandon them. And then if they're criticized by the people who are wise, which means take into account the people whom you respect and maybe they know something you don't know. Maybe they had more experience or something. So here we say here when you know for yourself, but here relying a little bit on other people, on those people who are wise. And what that means, it's not relying on them

on what's true, but relying a little bit to be careful about how we act in the world.

And then, if you know for yourself that these things, if accepted and undertaken, lead to harm and suffering. So the idea is, we don't want to do anything that has the consequences is harm, either to ourselves or to others. But then he goes and says the opposite: If you know for yourself these things are wholesome, these actions. These actions are blameless. These actions are praised by the wise. These, if accepted and undertaken, lead to welfare and to happiness. So that's the principle he's offering.

So it's a principle of your own evaluation with the help of the wise people. That's only one of four five criteria. And so here the emphasis now is on what you undertake the actions we do. So the Buddha now switches the conversation from the question, which is about truth and falsehood, to action behaviour. And this indicates an orientation the Buddha has. He's often certainly disinclined to get involved in controversies around what is true and false. He's not getting involved in the question that was asked, but he is pointing people to behaviour, to their actions.

And he's talking of principles for which to evaluate your actions, and they're consequential. There's two things about them that I emphasize. One is the that there's a reference point to what feels wholesome inside, what feels that has a goodness or a rightness to it. It may be shouldn't be the only criteria, but certainly we want to avoid what feels unhealthy, to do a kind of inner since well being is diminished as we do these things. And then also where it involves consequential thinking: do these things lead to harm and suffering? Do they lead to benefit, to welfare, and to happiness?

And so it involves some reflections, some thinking, some based on experience. Perhaps where we have some sense of the harm that these things are, the benefit that comes. And the text does not specify to who. So it can be either to oneself or to others, and we are meant to be the or custodians of our own well being and being careful not to harm other human beings. This is a central orientation principle of the Buddha's teachings. And I probably can't underscore enough how essential important this is. So here he's bringing it up.

And then, because he is talking about behaviour, he then applies it to a particular forms of behaviour, which we can understand here, for first four of the five precepts. He also goes on to say, Well, he applies it not to behavior first, but rather to mind states and the behaviour that comes from mind states. And he says, Is greed wholesome or unwholesome? Is hatred, ill will wholesome or unwholesome? Is delusion wholesome or unwholesome? And the answer is that greed, hatred, delusion is unwholesome, that it harms the person who has them.

There's something unhealthy about the presence of greed in the person who's greedy. It's often invisible because greed is so focused on the object, what we want. People are not paying attention what it feels like to be greedy with ill will or hatred. Same thing. People are often focused on what they dislike, and so they're not noticing the effect it has on them. But is considered unhealthy. And if we act out of that, then that is also unwholesome.

So the example he gives is if we kill, steal, engage in sexual misconduct, or lie based on greed, or based on anything that's unwholesome, and to those things should not be done, so they lead to harm. But if we analyse and analyze our value at the situation that this is wholesome, we recognize the goodness in it, and that it doesn't lead to harm, then we do it. But jumping round a little bit, he does the same analysis with non greed, non hatred, and non delusion. And so non greed is not only the absence. It's a wholesome state. He asks them, Is non greed wholesome? And they say, It's wholesome. The Kālāmas do.

So this kind of care and sensitivity, this might seem abstract and might seem kind of theoretical or principle based. It is little but principles, but their principles that are meant to be oriented towards an inner sensitivity, an inner capacity to feel and sense for oneself what is healthy and what is not healthy, what harms ourselves and what does not harm ourselves, what is beneficial for ourselves and what is not beneficial. And this kind of capacity for clearly being present, being mindful, it's something we are training ourselves to do in the mindfulness tradition. And this training to be present and be mindful as we go through our day has this ethical component, because as we are more mindful in the present moment. We have access to these feelings, the sensations inside of what has an outch and what has an a in it. We cannot feel. We become our own reference point, our own guide for what kind of behavior is to do that supports us.

Then to avoid greed and stay close to non greed, avoid hate and stay close to non hate, avoid delusion, and stay close to non delusion. This is the direction the Buddha's going as we do this. As we do this, kind of care and attention to the present moment experience that arises within us of wholesome and unwholesomeness as we pay attention to the presence of mind allows us to pay attention to the to consequences. This then tends to lead people to living without ill will, to live unconfused, and to live with a clear comprehension of what's happening. So the Buddha, Kana, is leading the Kālāmas, and it evokes this based on living this way. Then there is this non confusion. There is clear comprehension and a lack of ill will with those three states strong.

The Buddha then moves into a being rooted in good will, rooted in compassion, rooted in appreciative joy, and rooted in equanimity. And these are these inner dispositions that can

arise from wholesome states of being. And so and these are dispositions with or social dispositions or social emotions. There, how we relate to other people, we relate to them with good will, or when it's appropriate with compassion, when it's appropriate with appreciative joy, feeling joy, appreciating their success in other people's happiness, and with a certain kind of love or care called equanimity, which is to be caring for people, but to do so without being caught up with any reactivity and activity around it. And so we have this journey. The Kālāmas ask about truth and falsehood and who has it. The Buddha answers differently than the questions been asked. He says he focuses on what you can know for yourself. He describes the principles or how of what's useful to know for yourself, and especially an idea of wholesomeness and leading to harm and suffering. He then asks this question about greed, hatred, and delusion, these inner dispositions towards greed, hatred, and delusion, and helps people to recognize that these are unhealthy, and that behaviour that comes from them is also unhealthy.

And then he does it for the opposite, and this is all kind of turning the attention in towards oneself. So it's not answering abstractly or philosophically, but he is kind of pointing them inwards. And I see this is a progressive talk, almost like a guide in meditation, if you will, encouraging his audience to recognize this in them, these things in themselves. And if they do this well, that leads to a state where there is no ill will and there's no confusion. Any more about what to do and not to do, because that we have clear criteria for avoiding harm and doing good. And then there's a clear comprehension. There's a clear sense of presence and that attentiveness to what we're doing. Not just mindfulness, but mindfulness where we're just aware of something, but a wise understanding about behaviour and action and impact of what we're doing that leads to a disposition, and exactly how it leads to it. The Buddhists explain to these things that are highly valued in the early Buddhist tradition, which is good will, compassion, sympathy, appreciative joy, and equanimity.

And so one of things I want to bring a high light in this discussion is that in switching the it to focus from truth and falsehood. The Buddha offers central teachings, core teachings of what he wants to emphasize. And all of these could, in Western terms, be considered ethical. They have to do with how we behave in relationship to ourselves and our relationship to others, how we behave in our mind, how we behave in our behavior physical and verbal behavior, And so there is so such a central feature of the Buddhist teachings has to do with how we get transformed, so we live in the world in a beneficial way, that the transformation that Buddhism is looking for is not just to make people who are peaceful and calm and free for themselves, and they go off in a kind of enlightened retirement. And have nothing to do

with the world any more. But rather, the whole enterprise is couched contextualized in being ethical in nature. Or, if you don't like the word ethics, it's contextualized in the healthy relatedness that we can have with the world around us, the people around us.

And it's not a practice in a goal that is only to benefit oneself. It's a goal and practice that's there to benefit self and others, and both self and others. One of the So this is my reading of the Buddhist teachings is one of the really central components of it. And this *Kālāma Sutta* is a wonderful text, both because of the challenge it is to us about what we use to rely on to know what is true. And the Buddhists a brilliant way in which he turns that towards avoiding questions of truth and falsehood, and rather focusing on behaviour. And if you follow through on what the Buddha is teaching here really thoroughly, not only is it beneficial for the world around us as a lead to an ethical disposition, it also brilliantly, if you do carefully, leads to awakening, to the spiritual liberation that the Buddha also champions. These two are not separate. They are closely connected, intertwined to each other. So thank you. And this *Kālāma Sutta* is found in The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha in Chapter Three, and a delightful text. So thank you all. very much.