

## Buddhism and doubt

### Introduction

1. When it comes to doubt, there are widely held opinions on Buddhism which are polar opposites
  - a. Some contend that Buddhism's attitude to doubt is easily as rigorous as the scientific method itself, and that Buddhist doubt and the scientific method are equivalent
  - b. Others contend that Buddhism talks about faith about as often as any other religion, and the Buddhist attitude towards doubt is just as rigid, one sided, and dangerously closed-minded as that of any other religion
2. My final answer to these question, is, unfortunately, "Depends"
  - a. It depends on the school of Buddhism you are examining, and also, to an extent, to the aspect of Buddhism you are examining.
3. So today, I will be speaking about Buddhism, faith and doubt
  - a. I will be examining three main areas:
    - i. Buddhism and Doubt
    - ii. Buddhism and Faith
    - iii. The tiered nature of Buddhist doctrine

### Body

1. Buddhism and Doubt
  - a. The main section of the Buddhist scriptures that I want to reference tonight is known as the Kalama Sutta.
    - i. This is the sutta that best describes the Buddhist attitude towards doubt, or skepticism.
    - ii. It talks about the levels of rigor one must attribute to a source before declaring it trustworthy
    - iii. It also talks about the level of rigor one must apply to an ideology or worldview before accepting it as appropriate.
  - b. So the Buddha visits this village known as Kalama, or sometimes, Kesaputta, and is greeted by its people
    - i. They like his message, but they ask
      1. They have had a large number of ascetics and hermits pass through the village, over the years, and have paid attention to their teachings
      2. Some have teachings that are equally pleasant and attractive
      3. Therefore, how do they decide which teachings to adopt and follow?
    - ii. The Buddha replies by listing the criteria that can be used to decide which teachings to accept
      1. The following criteria are mentioned by the Buddha to determine if sources should not be attended to, without further verification:
        - a. Oral Histories
        - b. Traditions

- c. Sources of rumour
  - d. Scriptures and other official texts
  - e. Suppositional reasoning (upon surmise)
  - f. Philosophical reasoning (if specious)
  - g. Common sense
  - h. One's own opinions
  - i. Authorities or experts
  - j. One's own teacher
2. Instead, he states, when you know that these things are good, these things are not blamable, these things are praised by the wise; undertaken and observed, these things lead to the benefit and happiness of others, you should enter on and abide in them
- a. So the sutta is not a carte blanche to act on one's own opinions.
  - b. Instead you are encouraged to check every single source against 3 things
    - i. Your own conscience
    - ii. Whether, when acted upon, the teachings cause good or harm to others
    - iii. Whether wise people would praise or condemn acting upon such teachings
  - iii. So, in a sense, Theravada Buddhism does offer a rather rigorous means through which one can decide which teachings are worthy of adoption
2. Next, I want to address Buddhism and Faith.
- a. I hope you've noticed that in our Dhamma talks, we talk about the word faith rather often. The Buddhist scriptures do often list lack of faith, and excessive doubt as an obstacle to reaching enlightenment
    - i. For example, skeptical doubt (vichikicca) is listed as one of the five hindrances, which, naturally, hinder one's path toward enlightenment.
    - ii. Faith in the Buddha's enlightenment is also often considered a virtue, and is considered beneficial to one's own journey toward enlightenment.
  - b. I believe that this is another of those times where the disparity between English and Pali leads to somewhat misleading translation
    - i. The word the texts use is "Sradhha," which is often translated to faith.
    - ii. Sradhha is better translated as Confidence based on firsthand understanding
    - iii. This is highlighted in the Kalama sutta, which encourages confidence based on understanding, and not blind faith
  - c. In context, the Buddha's exhortations to have firm conviction in the Dhamma tend to make more sense
    - i. During the Buddha's lifetime there were a group named the carvakas who were absolute skeptics and materialists
    - ii. They refrained from spiritual beliefs entirely, and confined themselves to hedonism and sensual pleasure

- iii. According to the Buddha there should be some element of confidence in the Dhamma to gain enlightenment; well placed confidence and not blind faith, but confidence nonetheless.
- 3. The last thing I want to talk about today is also connected with the Kalama sutta
  - a. The thing about this sutta is that it can be applied retroactively; It can be used to temper one's perspective of Buddhist doctrine as a whole
  - b. Buddhism can be seen as a multitiered religion, as thought by some of my past teachers
    - i. The outer tiers contain elements of basic morality, mixed in with elements of the fantastic and supernatural, to attract and retain the interest of the masses, and to engage them
    - ii. The inner tiers contain the more fundamental and down-to-earth parts of Buddhism, the "actual wisdom," so to speak
      - 1. The inner tiers would contain the four noble truths and the eightfold path
    - iii. So the outer tiers, when assayed through Buddhist skepticism as per the Kalama sutta can be seen as less reliable, while the inner tiers do fare better under scrutiny.
  - c. Personally, I believe that the Kalama sutta is one of the most important suttas in the Buddhist doctrine, and I try to view the rest of Buddhism through the perspective espoused there.
    - i. I feel that the sutta showcases a fundamental distinction unique to Buddhism: Instead of telling you what is wrong and what is right, Buddhism encourages you to find out, and does it's best to establish a rigorous means through which to do so.
    - ii. And I think that's important.