How to Tell if a Spiritual Teaching is Valid
Ryan M. Hastings, 21 Jan 2020

In this day and age, we have access to a bewildering array of spiritual teachings from all around the world. Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, Judaism, Wicca, as well as esoteric teachings like Tantra or Qabala. How are we to know what teachings are vaild and what are not?

The Kālāma people of the Buddha's time were faced with a similar problem. At that time in India, there were the established priesthoods, or brahmins, as well as a wide variety of heterodox movements taught by wandering ascetics called samaṇa. They had virtually every teaching available, from strict materialism and hedonism to ideas of an eternal world and eternal soul. When the Buddha came to the Kālāmas, they were so confused by this. Their story is recorded in AN 3.65. (I am using Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation.)

> On one occasion the Blessed One was wandering on tour among the Kosalans together with a lange Sangha of monks when he reached the town of Kālāmas named Kesaputta. The Kālāmas of Kesaputta heard: "It is sad that the ascetic Gotama, the son of the Sakyans who went forth from a Sakyan family, has arrived at Kesaputta. Now a good report about that Master Gotama has circulated thus: 'That Blessed One is an arahant, perfectly enlightened, accomplished in true knowledge and conduct, fortunate, knower of the world, unspurpassed leader of persons to be tamed, teacher of devas and humans, he makes it known to others. He teaches a Dhamma that is good in the beginning, good in the middle, and good in the end, with the right meaning and phrasing; he reveals a spiritual life that is perfectly complete and pure.' Now it is good to see such arahants."
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> Then the Kālāmas of Kesaputta approached the Blessed One. Some paid homage to the Blessed One and sat down to one side; some exchanged greetings with him and, when they had concluded their greetings and cordial talk, sat down to one side; some reverentially saluted him and sat down to one side; some pronounced their name and clan and sat down to one side; some kept silent and sat down to one side. Sitting to one side, the Kālāmas said to the Blessed One:
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> "Bhante, there are some ascetics and brahmins who come to Kesaputta. They explain and elucidate their own doctrines, but disparage, denigrate, deride and denounce the doctrines of others. But then some other ascetics and brahmins come to Kesaputta, and they too explain and elucidate their own doctrines, but disparage, denigrate, deride and denounce the doctrines of others. We are perplexed and in doubt, Bhante, as to which of these good ascetics speak truth and which speak falsehood."

So this paints us a picture. We have all of these wandering teachers, in India, coming to visit the Kālāma people. And they come in, each with their own teachings and practices, and tell the Kālāma people about them. Each one promotes their view and disparages the views of others. And the Kālāmas are understandably perplexed. Who to believe? Which ones are the true views, and which ones are falsehoods?

> "It is fitting for you to be perplexed, Kālāmas, fitting for you to be in doubt. Doubt has arisen in you about a perplexing matter. Come Kālāmas, do not go by oral tradition, by lineage of teaching, by hearsay, by a collection of scriptures, by logical reasoning, by inferential reasoning, by reasoned cogitation, by the acceptance of a view after pondering it, by the seeming competence [of a speaker], or because you think: 'The ascetic is our guru.'"

Here, the Buddha has done something profound. *All* of these are ways we typically adopt views, and the Buddha says to use none of them. Not by tradition, not even by your own logic and reasoning. None of these are paths to spiritual truth. Not even the authority of a guru. And here, the Buddha is most definitely including himself. While any of these may be reasons to *start* a practice, none are reasons to *accept* a teaching as a spiritual truth.

> "But when, Kālāmas, you know for yourselves: 'These things are unwholesome; these things are blameworthy; these things are censured by the wise; these things, if accepted and undertaken, lead to harm and suffering,' then you should abandon them.'"

This is the punch line. This is the underlying lesson permeating this sutta. You cannot tell if a spiritual teaching is valid by the authority of tradition or a teacher, or by reasoning and logic. You can only tell by putting it into practice, and knowing for yourself. The Buddha digs into this a bit and gives more specifics: "What do you think, Kālāmas? When greed arises in a person, is it for his welfare or for his harm?"

Here, we should take a pause. What is *greed*? The word in Pāli is *lobha*, and refers to wanting gain. It comes from the verb *labhati* which typically refers to material gain, but can really be any sort of gain. It is *wanting more than what you have.* Wanting gain. There are some obvious and straightforward senses of the term. Material greed, for example. Wanting more stuff than you need. It can mean covetousness, which is wanting something that someone else has. It can mean wanting sensual gratification, craving for pleasures that you don't currently have. But there can also be a spiritual greed. A desire for some of the exalted states of consciousness in meditation, for example. This sort of desire can be helpful, in that it pulls us along the path of practice. But it can also become a source of stress, in which case it is unwholesome, blameworthy, censured by the wise. Moreover, greed ultimately means wanting anything more than what is happening right now. It is a way of not being present. It is wanting something more to happen in this present moment than what is happening now.

> "Kālāmas, a greedy person, overcome by greed, with a mind obsessed by it, destroys life, takes what is not given, transgresses with another's wife, and speaks falsehood; and he encourages others to do likewise. Will that lead to his harm and suffering for a long time?"
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> "Yes, Bhante."

Here we have the four fundamental ethical training rules in Buddhism, all in place because they cause harm to another. They are: Not killing, not taking what is not freely given, sexual misconduct (that is, using your sexuality in a way that harms others), and lying. In general, with some notable exceptions that are not worth getting into now, these are things that cause harm, that cause stress, that cause suffering.

> "What do you think, Kālāmas? When hatred arises in a person, is it for his welfare or for his harm?"
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> "For his harm, Bhante."

Another pause is good here. What is *hatred*? Again, we have a common understanding of the word. It conjures a sense of anger, and, well, hate. And it brings harm. But, as with everything, the Buddha has a subtler meaning for the word. It's meant to be any form of aversion. Any time you want things to be different. Any time you are rejecting what is happening. This, again, is a way of not being present.

The Buddha then asks about a third quality, one that underlies the other two. "What do you think, Kālāmas? When delusion arises in a person, is it for his welfare or for his harm?"

What, then, is *delusion*? A delusion is when you have a mistaken belief system about reality. When you are not seeing reality as it is, but living within a fantasy world that you believe is real. Again, it's a way of not being present.

So we've covered three things that are unwholesome, blameworthy, and censured by the wise. Three things that, if a spiritual teaching causes, you should abandon it. But that doesn't tell us which ones are valid. Just which ones are invalid. That doesn't answer our question. Fortunately, the Buddha doesn't stop there:

> "Thus, Kālāmas, when we said: 'Come, Kālāmas, do not go by oral tradition…But when you know for yourselves: "These things are unwholesome; these things are blameworthy; these things are censured by the wise; these things, if undertaken and practiced, lead to harm and suffering," then you should abandon them,' it is because of this that this was said.
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> "Come, Kālāmas, do not go by oral tradition, by lineage of teaching, by hearsay, by a collection of scriptures, by logical reasoning, by inferential reasoning, by reasoned cogitation, by the acceptance of a view after pondering it, by the seeming competence [of a speaker], or because you think: 'This ascetic is our guru.' But when you know for yourselves: 'These things are wholesome; these things are blameless; these things are praised by the wise; these things, if accepted and undertaken, lead to welfare and happiness,' then you should live in accordance with them.
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> "What do you think, Kālāmas? When non-greed arises in a person, is it for his welfare or for his harm?"

Here, once again, we have the admonition not to go by authority of teacher or scriptures (again, including even the Buddha himself) or by reason, but instead by putting the teachings into practice and seeing their effects.

The phrase "non-greed" literally expresses an absence of greed. But it is to be understood as encompassing certain positive qualities, primarily those of generosity and of letting go. As before, this can mean both in a material sense, but also in an immaterial sense. You can be generous with your wealth, but you can also be generous with your time, with your assistance. Generolity is simply giving to others what you can give. It is a spirit of giving, of helping others, rather than shutting off from the world and being concerned only for yourself. Letting go is an important complement to this. To be generous, you have to let go of what you are holding onto. But in general, you want to let go. This is the opposite of greed: Nonclinging. Not holding on to what is happening, and being able to let go. This is an essential component of being present: the present moment is constantly changing, and holding on to what is passing is a central source of stress and suffering. Being able to let go means letting the moment pass, no matter how pleasurable the moment is, and being free to experience what comes next.

Next, the Buddha asks, "What do you think, Kālāmas? When non-hatred arises in a person, is it for his welfare or for his harm?"

Again, while the phrase is literally an absence of hatred, it refers to a set of positive qualities: Benevolence, compassion, taking joy in the accomplishments of another, and loving acceptance. These four qualities actually have a special name in Buddhism: The Four Divine Abodes, or the Four Unlimited Minds. One form of hatred is wishing ill upon another—ill-will. This can be replaced by goodwill or benevolence. Compassion means wanting better for someone who has misfortune. It should not be mistaken for sharing in another's sorrow, or for pity. It's an extension of benevolence—wishing that good things happen for someone having a bad time. The third is *muditā,* which is a difficult word to translate exactly, but it's sort of the opposite of jealousy. When something good happens to someone else, instead of feeling envious, we share their joy. We encourage, and cheer on people who are having good fortune.

And finally there is calm acceptance, which neither clings nor rejects. It's also referred to as equanimity, and represents the ultimate solution to the problem of hatred. It's often equated to "grandmotherly love", the open acceptance that a good grandmother has for her grandchildren, loving them all. All of these are ultimately ways of being fully present, both for another and to yourself and your own experience.

The Buddha concludes with, "What do you think, Kālāmas? When non-delusion arises in a person, is it for his welfare or for his harm?"

Here, "non-delusion" means knowledge and wisdom. It means seeing things as they are. It means being fully present to what is happening and knowing it. When you accept what is happening, without clinging or rejecting, then a natural wisdom unfolds. Of course there are things we want—what's the point of a spiritual path if we're not following it to get somewhere? And of course there are things that we want to change—the injustice of the world, for example. But here's the thing: Until we can accept that things exist, we are impaired in our ability to actually do something about them. Until we can be fully present to what is happening, we cannot fully address the wrongs of the world. Once we find this acceptance, our wisdom can take over. Those things that are inconsequential simply evaporate. Those things that need to be addressed, instead of addressing them with greed, hate, and delusion, we can address them with wisdom, with kindness and compassion.

So this, then, is the Buddha's teaching on which spiritual teachings are valid. All should be put to the test of practice and experience—even this teaching itself! None can be accepted as true simply because someone else said they were true, no matter how much authority that person commands. There are many practices out there that can have these effects. Contemplative theistic traditions, for example, or forms of secular humanism. I choose Buddhism, because it lays out a set of concrete practices for accomplishing this and sets this as its central goal, but any teaching that has this effect the Buddha would judge as true.