



KNOWING FOR YOURSELF

The Buddha's Teaching on Direct Inquiry and Embodied Wisdom

TEACHING TWO: The Kalama Sutta

Direct Inquiry and the Path of Verification

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The Teaching: The Buddha Comes to Kalama Town

Siddhartha Gautama entered the town of Kesaputta, where the Kalama people lived. They greeted him with respect, but also with a heavy burden of confusion.

They said:

"Venerable sir, we do not know whom to trust. Many teachers come here, each claiming their way alone is true. How can we discern what is trustworthy? Where can we find solid ground?"

The Buddha did not ask for their faith. He did not advertise his attainment. He did not elevate himself above the other teachers who had passed through their town.

Instead, he honored their doubt:

"Good, Kalamas. It is right to question. When there are reasons for uncertainty, doubt naturally arises. Do not let confusion paralyze you. Let it become the opening to genuine inquiry."

With this simple validation, the Buddha transformed their confusion from an obstacle into a doorway. He was saying: Your doubt is not a problem to be solved, it's intelligence at work. Your uncertainty is not weakness, it's the beginning of real investigation.

Then he offered them something revolutionary:

"Do not rely on something simply because a person says it, whether a friend, a parent, a monk, a sage, or even a teacher known to be awakened. Do not accept teachings based on tradition, scripture, rumor, logical reasoning alone, inference, appearance, speculation, or agreement with your cherished opinions. And do not accept something simply because the speaker seems credible or because you think 'this is our teacher.'"

This is an astonishing invitation, even now. The Buddha is systematically dismantling every conventional basis for belief, tradition, authority, logic, and personal preference, including charisma. He's stripping away everything except direct observation.

Then he said:

"Instead, when you know for yourselves: 'These teachings and actions lead to harm and suffering', abandon them. When you know for yourselves: 'These teachings and actions lead to benefit and happiness', accept and practice them."

Know for yourselves. Not "believe what I tell you." Not "have faith." Not "accept this on authority." But *know for yourselves*.

This is empirical dharma, an invitation to become scientists of your own consciousness.

The Inquiry: Observing Cause and Effect in Your Own Life

The Buddha didn't launch into philosophy. Instead, he guided the Kalamas through a practice of direct observation, not asking them to believe anything, but inviting them to look at what they could already see in their own experience.

"Kalamas, let us inquire together. Consider this: When delusion arises in a person, when their mind is clouded and confusion obscures their vision, is this state for their welfare or for their harm?"

The Kalamas answered immediately: *"For their harm, venerable sir."*

"And when a person is overcome by delusion and confusion, what naturally follows?"

The Kalamas could see it clearly. They'd witnessed it in their own town, in their own lives: When someone is confused and deluded, they cause harm. They might hurt living beings. They might

take what isn't given. They might lie or manipulate. They might encourage others to do the same.

"When you observe these actions arising from a confused mind, are these recognized by the wise as wholesome or as harmful?"

"As harmful, venerable sir. Harmful to themselves and to others."

"And when such actions are engaged in repeatedly, do they lead to well-being or to suffering?"

"To suffering, venerable sir."

The Buddha let this sit for a moment. Then:

"So here you can see directly: delusion leads to confused thinking, confused thinking leads to harmful actions, harmful actions lead to suffering, for oneself and for others. You do not need to believe this. You can observe it in your own life right now."

This is empirical dharma. The Buddha isn't asking the Kalamas to accept a doctrine about karma or morality. He's asking them to look: What happens when your mind is clouded? What follows from that? And they can see it, everyone can see it, if they look honestly.

Then he guides them through the opposite inquiry:

"Now consider the opposite. When clarity and wisdom arise in a person, when their mind is free from delusion and confusion, what naturally follows?"

Again, the Kalamas could see it directly. When someone's mind is clear, they don't harm others. They don't take what isn't theirs. They don't lie. They naturally refrain from these actions, and their clarity often inspires others toward wisdom as well.

"When you observe these actions arising from clarity and wisdom, are these recognized by the wise as wholesome and beneficial?"

"Yes, venerable sir. Beneficial to themselves and to others."

"And when such actions and intentions are engaged in repeatedly, do they lead to suffering or to well-being?"

"To well-being and peace, venerable sir."

"Here too, you can see directly: clarity leads to wise thinking, wise thinking leads to beneficial actions, and beneficial actions lead to freedom and well-being. You do not need to believe this. You can test it in the crucible of your own life."

This is one of the most practical teachings in the entire Buddhist canon. The Buddha shows the Kalamas and us that we don't need complex philosophy to understand what leads to suffering and what leads to freedom. We just need to observe honestly.

In QigongDharma practice, we constantly work with this same principle. When you're practicing standing meditation and your mind becomes agitated, what happens in your body? Tension arises. The breath gets shallow. The qi stops flowing smoothly. You can feel it immediately, no philosophy required.

And when your mind settles and becomes clear? The body naturally releases. The breath deepens. Energy flows. You don't have to believe me about this, you can verify it in your own practice, in your own body, again and again.

This is the gift of the Kalama Sutta: it brings dharma out of the realm of belief and into the realm of direct observation. It turns awakening into a scientific inquiry rather than a religious conversion.

Embodied Integration: The Harmony of Thought, Word, and Deed

The Buddha then described what naturally emerges when this clarity deepens:

"When your thinking is clear, when your speech is truthful, when your actions are guided by compassion, these three naturally create a unified field of energy and intention. This harmony generates what we might call boundless, panoramic peace."

I love this teaching because it points to something you can actually feel. When thought, word, and deed align, there's a palpable sense of integration in the body. Everything settles. There's no internal conflict, no part of you trying to hide, justify, or defend.

You know this feeling. You've experienced it, those moments when what you think, what you say, and what you do are all pointing in the same direction. There's a rightness to it, a flow, an ease that doesn't require effort.

And the opposite is equally recognizable. When you're thinking one thing, saying another, and doing something else entirely, the body feels it as stress, fragmentation, and a low-grade anxiety that never quite resolves.

The Buddha isn't describing some lofty spiritual attainment here. He's pointing to a natural human experience: alignment feels good, and it naturally radiates into your environment. When you're genuinely integrated, you don't have to work at being peaceful. The peace is simply there, and others feel it.

"This peace is not dependent on external circumstances. It's not something you must create or force. It is the natural fruit of aligning your being with what is true, wise, and compassionate."

This is what we practice in qigong, not just moving the body but learning to recognize when everything is aligned. When the intention, the movement, and the breath are unified, qi flows naturally. When they're fragmented, for example, thinking about lunch while moving through the form, the practice becomes mechanical and disconnected.

But here's what's profound: this alignment within you naturally awakens similar clarity and peace in others. Your embodied integration becomes an invitation, a silent teaching that doesn't require words.

Have you ever been in the presence of someone deeply at ease, genuinely integrated? You feel it. Something in you settles too. Not because they're doing anything to you, but because clarity is contagious. Peace invites peace.

"This is the real meaning of embodied compassion. It is not sentiment or good intentions. It is the natural ripple effect of your own liberation."

The Four Assurances: Freedom Now, Regardless of Metaphysics

Now the Buddha anticipated something the Kalamas were surely wondering about. They'd heard many teachings on karma and rebirth, and on rewards and punishments in future lives. Some teachers insisted that these metaphysical claims were essential to morality: "You must believe in rebirth, or you'll have no reason to be good."

The Buddha took a completely different approach. He said, in effect: "I'm not going to ask you to believe in anything you can't verify. Whether or not there's an afterlife, whether or not karma continues beyond death, these are unknowables. You can speculate about them endlessly and never reach certainty. So let's focus on what you can actually know."

He offered what are called the **Four Assurances**, and they're brilliant precisely because they work whether traditional Buddhist cosmology is true or not:

"When a person has cultivated a mind free from hostility, free from the desire to harm, free from ill will, such a person naturally thinks:"

The First Assurance

"If there is indeed a world beyond this one, and if the fruits of my actions continue into that realm, then by my virtuous conduct I have assured myself of a blessed rebirth."

In other words: If traditional teachings about karma and rebirth are true, you're covered. Your virtuous life will bear fruit in future existences.

The Second Assurance

"But even if there is no realm beyond this life, even if death is the complete ending of consciousness, I know this: I have lived with integrity, kindness, and wisdom in this very life. Here and now, I dwell free from hatred, free from malice, at ease and at peace."

And if there's no afterlife? You've still lived well. You've still experienced freedom and peace right now, in this life, in this body. The reward isn't postponed to some uncertain future, it's available immediately.

These first two assurances address the **question of rebirth** directly. The Buddha isn't asking you to believe in it or reject it. He's saying: either way, a life of clarity and compassion is its own reward.

The Third Assurance

"Furthermore, if suffering befalls those who cause harm, and if my conduct has been free from harm, then by nature I will not be touched by such suffering."

Now he's addressing karmic causality, the metaphysical question of whether harmful actions necessarily bring negative consequences. If that cosmic law is true, you're protected by your virtue.

The Fourth Assurance

"And if suffering does not necessarily come to those who act harmfully, if there is no cosmic justice, no automatic karmic rebalancing, then I know for certain that I myself am purified through my own virtuous conduct and pure intention. My purity does not depend on external rewards or punishment. It is inherent in how I choose to live."

This fourth assurance is perhaps the most radical. Even if there's no karmic law, even if harmful people sometimes prosper and good people sometimes suffer unjustly, your virtue still matters because it transforms *you*. The purity of your own heart, the clarity of your own mind, the integrity of your own being, these are immediate, tangible realities that don't depend on metaphysical guarantees.

"So whether there is an afterlife or not, whether there is cosmic justice or not, a virtuous person discovers real, tangible assurance right now, in this very life. The fruits of wisdom and compassion are immediately available."

In all my years of teaching, I've found these **Four Assurances** speak powerfully to contemporary practitioners who may not accept traditional Buddhist cosmology. You don't have to believe in rebirth to practice dharma. You don't have to accept karma as cosmic law to recognize that clarity leads to well-being and confusion leads to suffering.

The Buddha is offering a completely pragmatic teaching: Live virtuously not because you're afraid of future punishment or hoping for future reward, but because a clear, compassionate life is better *right now*. The peace is immediate. The freedom is immediate. The taste of liberation is immediate.

This is dharma stripped of all metaphysical requirements, grounded entirely in what you can verify in your own lived experience.

The Brahmavihāras: The Boundless Heart Practices

Finally, the Buddha offered the Kalamas, and all of us, a complete practice for transforming consciousness itself. These are called the *brahmavihāras*, the divine abodes, the boundless heart practices:

Mettā: Loving-Kindness

"Let your heart extend toward all beings with genuine well-wishing. As a mother would protect her only child with her life, extend this boundless loving-kindness to all beings without exception, to those you love, to those you are neutral toward, and even to those you find difficult."

This isn't sentiment. It's not about feeling warm and fuzzy. Mettā is the natural radiance of an awakened mind; the recognition that all beings want to be happy, want to be free from suffering, and deserve kindness, regardless of their behavior.

When you practice mettā, you're not trying to manufacture a feeling. You're removing the obstacles, the judgment, the resentment, the fear, that keep your natural kindness from flowing. You're remembering what children know instinctively: connection is our fundamental state.

Karunā: Compassion

"When you witness suffering in yourself or in others, let your heart respond with the wish to ease that suffering. Not pity, not feeling sorry for someone, but genuine compassion, the willingness to be with suffering and do what you can to transform it."

True compassion is fierce. It doesn't turn away from difficulty. It moves toward suffering with presence and clarity, asking "What does this situation need? What would actually help?"

In QigongDharma, we cultivate compassion through the body. When you feel physical pain in practice, can you meet it with kindness rather than resistance? Can you be curious about it rather than trying to make it go away? This is training in compassion and learning to be present with discomfort without adding the second arrow of aversion.

Muditā: Sympathetic Joy

"When you encounter another's happiness, another's success, another's good fortune, let your heart respond with genuine delight."

In a culture of comparison and competition, this practice is revolutionary. Envy is so automatic and so deeply conditioned that most of us don't even recognize how much energy we spend feeling diminished by others' good fortune.

Muditā is the antidote. It's the recognition that joy is not a limited resource. Someone else's happiness doesn't diminish yours. In fact, when you genuinely celebrate another's success, your capacity for joy expands exponentially.

This is one of my favorite practices because it's so immediately practical. Every time you notice envy or comparison arising, you have a choice: let it close your heart, or transform it into muditā. "Of course they're happy, that's wonderful! May they continue to flourish!" Feel what happens in your body when you make that choice.

Upekkhā: Equanimity

"And finally, cultivate a steady, spacious awareness that can hold all experiences without grasping or rejecting. Equanimity is not indifference or cold detachment. It is the vast, clear awareness that can embrace both joy and sorrow, both gain and loss, with equal presence and acceptance."

Equanimity is often misunderstood. People think it means not caring or becoming cold or distant. But true equanimity is warm, intimate, fully engaged, and spacious enough to hold everything without being overwhelmed.

It's the mountain that can receive both sunshine and storms. It's the ocean that can hold both calm and waves. It's the awareness that recognizes: *this too will pass, and this too, and this too*, not as resignation, but as wisdom.

When these four practices flower in your consciousness, something remarkable happens. The boundaries of the separate self soften. Your awareness naturally expands to include more and more beings in your circle of care. Your default state becomes one of openness rather than defensiveness, connection rather than isolation.

"And here is the secret. This awakening in you precipitates the awakening of sentient beings everywhere. As you free yourself from delusion and cultivate these boundless heart practices, you become a beacon of clarity for all consciousness."

This is not about "saving" others through force or proselytizing. It's much simpler and more profound: When you genuinely wake up and clarity becomes your natural state, that clarity radiates. You become an invitation, a living possibility others can sense and respond to.

We've all experienced this. You walk into a room where someone is deeply at peace, and something in you relaxes too. Not because they're doing anything to you, but because awakeness is contagious. Clarity invites clarity. Peace invites peace. Freedom invites freedom.

The Path of Direct Knowing

The Buddha brought the teaching full circle:

"So Kalamas, and to all who hear these words: Do not accept what I teach on faith. Do not follow me because I am Buddha. Do not believe what anyone says simply because they said it.

"Instead, test everything in the laboratory of your own lived experience. Bring the teaching into your body, your breath, your heart. Observe: Does this teaching bring clarity or confusion? Does it lead to compassion or self-centeredness? Does it awaken the natural wisdom already present in you, or does it ask you to believe something you cannot verify?"

"If a teaching, when deeply practiced, leads you toward freedom, toward compassion, toward the natural alignment of thought, word, and deed, then you have found something true. Not because anyone told you so, but because you have verified it yourself."

This is the path of awakening beings, those who do not wait for permission, who do not rely on another's authority, but who take full responsibility for their own seeing, their own knowing, their own liberation.

In all my years of practicing and teaching, I keep returning to this invitation. The Buddha is not asking us to join a religion or accept a belief system. He's pointing us back to our own capacity for direct knowing, our innate wisdom, and our awakening consciousness.

This is profoundly empowering and profoundly humbling at the same time. You don't need a special teacher, perfect circumstances, or ideal conditions. You need honesty, sincerity, and the willingness to look directly at your own experience.

What leads to suffering? Look and see.

What leads to freedom? Look and see.

What is true? Look and see.

As you walk this path, practicing direct inquiry, embodying wisdom in every moment, and cultivating boundless heart practices, remember: you are not alone. All beings throughout history who have awakened have walked this same path of questioning, testing, and direct knowing.

You're joining a lineage that extends beyond any particular tradition or teacher. It's the lineage of consciousness itself, waking up to its own nature. This is the true Sangha, not an organization or belief system, but the living communion of all beings moving toward clarity, compassion, and freedom.

May all beings awaken to their true nature.

May wisdom flourish.

May compassion be boundless.

May the harmony of awakening ripple through all existence.

Practice Inquiries

These are not instructions to follow, but invitations to investigate. Bring them into your meditation, your qigong practice, your daily life. See what arises when you genuinely inquire.

Direct Observation: Testing Cause and Effect

In meditation:

- Sit for a week and simply observe: When does your mind become confused or agitated? What follows in your body? tension, shallow breath, contraction? When does clarity arise? What follows? openness, ease, spaciousness? Don't judge, just notice the pattern.

In qigong practice:

- Stand in a basic qigong posture. Notice when your mind becomes resistant or critical. What happens in your body immediately? Does qi flow or stop? Now let your mind settle. What happens? This is a direct observation of the teaching: confusion contracts, clarity opens.

In daily life:

- Conduct a week-long experiment: When you act from confusion, anger, or fear, what are the consequences? Write them down. When you act from clarity and kindness, what follows? You're not trying to prove anything, just observing honestly what you can already see.

Observing Alignment and Fragmentation

In movement practice:

- As you move through a qigong form, notice whether your intention, your movement, and your breath are unified. What does alignment feel like in your body? What happens when they fragment, when you're thinking about dinner while moving? Can you feel the difference immediately?

In daily interactions:

- Notice a moment when what you're thinking, what you're saying, and what you're doing are all aligned. How does your body feel? Now notice a moment when they're not aligned, maybe you're smiling while feeling irritated, or saying "yes" while thinking "no." How does that feel? This is not judgment, just observation.

The Four Assurances: Your Own Investigation

A contemplation practice:

- Sit quietly and ask yourself: What if there's no afterlife, no cosmic justice, no karmic accounting? Would your life change? Have you already discovered that clarity and compassion are their own reward, regardless of metaphysics?
- Notice where you're being "good" because you fear punishment or hope for reward. What would shift if you acted virtuously simply because it feels better right now, in this body, in this breath?

The Brahmavihāras: Working with the Heart Practices

Mettā (Loving-Kindness):

- Stand in stillness or sit in meditation. Bring to mind someone you love easily, perhaps a child, a beloved pet, a dear friend. Feel mettā arise naturally, that warmth, that wish for their happiness. Now gradually expand: Can that same warmth include someone neutral? Someone you find difficult? Not forcing, just inviting. What happens in your body as the heart opens or closes?

Karuṇā (Compassion):

- In qigong practice, when you encounter physical discomfort, can you meet it with curiosity rather than resistance? Can you be present with the sensation without trying to make it go away? This is training in compassion, learning to be with difficulty without adding aversion.

Muditā (Sympathetic Joy):

- This week, notice when you encounter another's success or happiness. Does your body contract (envy, comparison) or expand (genuine delight)? This is not judgment, just observation. Can you practice choosing expansion? "Of course they're happy, wonderful!" Feel what shifts in your body when you make that choice.

Upekkhā (Equanimity):

- In sitting practice, observe both pleasant and unpleasant experiences arising. Can you hold both with equal presence, without grasping at the pleasant or pushing away the unpleasant? This is not indifference, it's spacious awareness that can hold everything.

The Central Practice: Your Own Verification

Return to this investigation again and again:

Does this teaching, this practice, this path, when lived into deeply and honestly, lead me toward:

- *Greater clarity or more confusion?*
- *More compassion or increased self-centeredness?*
- *Freedom or subtle entanglement?*
- *Opening or closing?*
- *Alignment or fragmentation?*

The answer doesn't come from thinking about it. It comes from living it and observing what actually happens.

A daily practice:

- End each day with five minutes of reflection: Where did I act from clarity today? What followed? Where did I act from confusion? What followed? This is not self-judgment, it's becoming a scientist of your own consciousness.

Integration

A question to live with:

- What would change in your practice if you truly trusted your own direct knowing as much as you trust external authority? What permission are you waiting for that you could give yourself right now?

The Kalama Sutta invites you into radical autonomy: You are the laboratory. Your life is the experiment. Your direct observation is the only authority that won't fail you.

Trust that.

Translator's Note

This rendering of the Kalama Sutta (Anguttara Nikaya 3.65, also known as the Kesamutti Sutta) draws on decades of study, practice, and teaching. It is not a word-for-word translation of the Pali Canon. I am not a Pali scholar, and excellent literal translations already exist for those who want them.

Instead, this is a contemplative translation, born of sitting with this sutta over many years, teaching it in countless retreat settings, observing how it lands in contemporary practitioners' bodies and lives, and allowing it to speak in language that resonates with our time.

My approach has been comparative rather than etymological, drawing on multiple translations (Thanissaro Bhikkhu, Bhikkhu Bodhi, Soma Thera, and others), traditional commentaries, and contemporary interpretations, then asking: What is the living essence here? How does this teaching actually work in practice? What would the Buddha say if he were speaking directly to us now, in our language, addressing our particular confusions?

The **Kalama Sutta** is among the most accessible and practically relevant teachings in the entire Pali Canon. It speaks directly to contemporary skepticism, our wariness of blind faith, and our desire for verification through direct experience. Yet it's often taught in ways that remain too abstract or too culturally distant to have real impact.

I've aimed to bring this teaching fully into the present moment, showing how it applies not only to evaluating religious claims but also to navigating all of life: spiritual practice, relationships, work, and daily decisions. The Buddha's method of direct inquiry is as relevant to choosing a meditation technique as it is to evaluating political rhetoric or making ethical choices.

The Brahmavihāras (the four boundless heart practices) and the **Four Assurances** are integral to the traditional sutta, though some contemporary presentations abbreviate or omit them. I've included them fully because they complete the teaching: it's not enough to know how to discern truth, we also need practices that transform consciousness and assurance that living virtuously brings immediate freedom.

Some will find this approach too free, too contemporary, insufficiently rooted in traditional scholasticism. Others may find it still contains too much Buddhist framework. I can only offer it as one practitioner's sincere attempt to make this profound teaching accessible and practical without diminishing its depth or transformative power.

If this rendering helps you trust your own direct knowing, if it frees you from spiritual dependency while deepening your practice, if it clarifies your path, then it has served its purpose.

If it doesn't resonate, set it aside. That itself is the Kalama Sutta in action.

The teaching is what matters, not the teacher.

The meaning is what liberates, not the words.

Your own direct experience is the final authority.