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FROM TRADITION TO REASON: APPLYING KALAMA PRINCIPLES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

A Paper in Buddhist Philosophy and Educational Theory

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Abstract: The Kalama Sutta (Anguttara Nikaya 3.65), one of the most celebrated discourses in the Pali Canon, presents the Buddha's exhortation to the Kalama people to evaluate teachings not by tradition, lineage, or authority, but by their observable consequences in one's own experience. This paper argues that the epistemological and pedagogical framework embedded in the Kalama Sutta offers a profound and practical model for fostering critical thinking in contemporary higher education. Drawing on Buddhist philosophy, educational theory, and neuroscience, the paper explores how the Sutta's ten criteria for evaluating knowledge map onto modern pedagogical approaches such as inquiry-based learning, Socratic dialogue, and reflective practice. It also examines institutional challenges to implementing such a framework, including epistemic dependence, authority bias, and the cultural dimensions of learning. By positioning the Kalama Sutta as a trans-historical guide to intellectual maturity, the paper calls for a renewed engagement with Buddhist epistemology as a resource for transforming university education.

Index Terms - Kalama Sutta, Buddhist epistemology, critical thinking, higher education, epistemic autonomy, contemplative pedagogy, inquiry-based learning, experiential learning

I. INTRODUCTION

Higher education has long proclaimed itself the home of critical inquiry, rational debate, and the pursuit of truth. Yet the reality in many universities today tells a more complicated story. Students routinely absorb information passively, deferring to professors, textbooks, and algorithms without subjecting that information to independent scrutiny. Intellectual conformity is often rewarded over genuine curiosity. The transmission of tradition - disciplinary norms, canonical texts, authoritative frameworks - frequently displaces the cultivation of the very reasoning skills that define genuine education.

It is in this context that the Kalama Sutta, a discourse delivered by the Buddha over two and a half millennia ago, speaks with surprising relevance. When the people of Kesaputta - known as the Kalamas - came to the Buddha confused by the conflicting claims of various teachers, the Buddha did not simply replace one authority with another. Instead, he offered them something far more radical: a set of epistemological principles for evaluating any claim, from any source, including himself. As Bhikkhu Bodhi's authoritative translation renders the central teaching: do not accept something merely because it is tradition, lineage, scripture, speculative reasoning, or because the speaker is your teacher - accept it only when you yourselves know it to be wholesome, beneficial, and praised by the wise.¹

This paper argues that these Kalama principles constitute a coherent and practically applicable framework for higher education. They do not simply advocate skepticism; they advocate a disciplined, experientially grounded, ethically anchored form of critical inquiry. The following sections explore the Sutta's content and context, diagnose the crisis of epistemic dependence in modern universities, map the Sutta's principles onto contemporary pedagogical approaches, and address the challenges and comparative dimensions of this framework.²

II. THE KALAMA SUTTA: CONTEXT AND CORE PRINCIPLES

The Kalama Sutta is found in the Anguttara Nikaya (Collection of Numerical Discourses), a major division of the Pali Canon, and is designated as AN 3.65. It is set in Kesaputta, a town in northern India, where the Buddha encounters a people perplexed by the competing doctrines of wandering teachers who each claimed exclusive truth. The Buddha's response is not to add one more competing doctrine but to teach the Kalamas how to evaluate all doctrines.³ For this reason, the Sutta has come to occupy a uniquely prominent place in Buddhist epistemological thought - it is the canonical text most consistently cited when Buddhist philosophy engages questions of how knowledge is to be evaluated and justified.

The central teaching of the Sutta is the enumeration of ten criteria - sometimes called the ten bases of wrong belief - which should not be sole justifications for accepting a teaching. These are: oral tradition (anussava), lineage of teaching (parampara), report or rumor (itikira), the authority of scriptural collections (pitakasampada), logic alone (takkahetu), inferential reasoning (nayahetu), reasoned cogitation (akaraparivitakka), acceptance of a view after pondering it (ditthinijjhanakkhanti), apparent competence of a speaker (bhabbarupataya), and the fact that a teacher is one's own master (samano no garu). As Bhikkhu Bodhi notes in his commentary, the Sutta does not argue that these are irrelevant to knowledge, but that none of them, taken alone, is a sufficient basis for accepting a teaching as true.⁴

The positive standard the Buddha offers is pragmatic and ethical: one should accept teachings that, when practiced, lead to benefit and happiness - for oneself and for others - and that are praised by the wise. Greed, hatred, and delusion (lobha, dosa, moha) are cited as the core distorting forces that corrupt judgment. Conversely, non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion are the foundations of clear and reliable discernment. The Sutta thus presents not merely an epistemology but an ethical epistemology: right knowledge is inseparable from moral cultivation. Soma Thera's earlier translation similarly emphasizes this ethical-pragmatic dimension as the Sutta's defining contribution to Buddhist thought.⁵

III. HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE CRISIS OF EPISTEMIC DEPENDENCE

Contemporary higher education is beset by what might be called a crisis of epistemic dependence - a systemic tendency for students to accept knowledge passively, deferring to institutional authorities rather than developing the capacity for independent, critical evaluation. Rote learning, surface-level processing, and the strategic accumulation of grades without deep understanding are pervasive patterns in university culture worldwide.

The sources of this crisis are multiple. First, there is the authority bias embedded in academic culture itself: professors are positioned as bearers of knowledge, and the lecture format structurally reinforces a one-directional flow of information. Students learn quickly that the most rewarded behavior is accurate reproduction of what they have been told, not independent questioning. This mirrors precisely what the Buddha warned the Kalamas against - the uncritical acceptance of teaching simply because it comes from one's teacher (samano no garu). Paulo Freire famously termed this the "banking model" of education, in which students are treated as passive receptacles into which teachers deposit knowledge.⁶

Second, the digital information environment has complicated matters further. Students today are surrounded by an unprecedented quantity of information, much of it conflicting, politically charged, and algorithmically curated. The challenge is no longer access to information but the ability to evaluate it - to distinguish reliable knowledge from misinformation, well-reasoned argument from rhetorical manipulation. Confirmation bias and echo chambers on university campuses reflect the same phenomenon the Kalamas encountered: an overwhelming multiplicity of teachers, each claiming authority.

Third, the cultural dimensions of epistemic dependence must be acknowledged. In many societies, particularly across Southeast Asia, South Asia, and East Asia - where Buddhist traditions are deeply rooted - deference to elders, teachers, and established traditions is a cardinal social virtue. While this has its own wisdom and moral value, it can, in an educational context, suppress the kind of questioning and self-verification that genuine learning requires. The Kalama Sutta is remarkable precisely because it emerges from within the Buddhist tradition itself as a corrective to this tendency.

IV. MAPPING KALAMA PRINCIPLES ONTO HIGHER EDUCATION

The principles of the Kalama Sutta find rich and detailed correspondences with several established frameworks in educational theory and pedagogy. The following section traces these correspondences across four key domains.

4.1 Rejecting Authority Alone: Academic Questioning Culture

The Sutta's warning against accepting teachings merely on the basis of lineage or teacher authority directly parallels the Socratic tradition in Western education. Socrates, like the Buddha, refused to simply transmit a body of doctrine. Instead, he modeled a practice of rigorous questioning - the *elenchus* - designed to reveal the limits of assumed knowledge and awaken genuine inquiry. In higher education, this translates into the creation of classroom cultures where students are explicitly encouraged to challenge claims, including those made by their instructors. The professor's role shifts from authoritative transmitter to skilled facilitator of inquiry. Matthew Lipman, who developed the community of inquiry approach in philosophy education, argued that genuine critical thinking emerges precisely from this kind of dialogic, collaborative practice.⁷

4.2 Experience as Criterion: Experiential and Inquiry-Based Learning

The Sutta's insistence that knowledge be tested through personal experience maps directly onto the tradition of experiential learning developed by John Dewey and later extended by David Kolb's experiential learning cycle. Dewey argued that genuine education is not the passive absorption of information but an active, reflective engagement with experience. Knowledge is not something one receives; it is something one constructs through doing and reflecting.⁸ Inquiry-based learning (IBL) pedagogies operationalize exactly this principle: students investigate real problems, test hypotheses, and evaluate outcomes - a process of self-verification analogous to the Kalama standard. Kolb's four-stage cycle - concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation - is the most widely cited framework for this kind of structured experiential learning.⁹ The parallel with the Kalama method is striking: both insist that knowledge must pass through direct personal engagement before it can be accepted as reliable.

4.3 Ethical Grounding: Wholesome vs. Unwholesome as Pedagogical Criteria

One of the most distinctive features of the Kalama Sutta is its explicitly ethical dimension. The standard for accepting a teaching is not merely logical consistency or empirical support, but whether it leads to welfare and happiness, for oneself and for others. This introduces an ethical criterion into epistemology that is absent from most purely rationalist frameworks. In educational terms, this corresponds to what Paulo Freire called critical consciousness (*conscientizacao*) - the capacity not merely to understand the world but to evaluate it in terms of human dignity, justice, and flourishing.¹⁰ Education, on this view, is not value-neutral; it is always already oriented toward the question of what kind of human being and what kind of society we wish to cultivate.

4.4 Consulting the Wise: Mentorship and Collaborative Inquiry

The Sutta does not advocate a purely solitary, individualistic epistemology. The Kalamas are told to consider what the wise (*pandita*) would praise or blame. This introduces a crucial communal dimension: knowledge is not simply a private matter but is evaluated within a community of practice. Lipman argued that genuine critical thinking emerges from dialogue within a community of inquiry, where ideas are tested through reasoned discussion rather than individual reflection alone.¹¹

V. PRACTICAL CLASSROOM APPLICATIONS

Translating the Kalama framework into concrete pedagogical practice requires both structural and attitudinal changes within higher education institutions. Several approaches are particularly promising.

Reflective journaling and metacognitive practice directly instantiate the Kalama principle of self-verification. When students are asked to track not only what they have learned but how they came to believe it - what sources they relied on, what assumptions they brought, what experiences confirm or disconfirm their views - they are engaging in exactly the kind of epistemological self-examination the Buddha recommended. Dewey's account of the relationship between reflection and genuine learning provides the theoretical foundation for this approach.¹²

Constructive controversy, a technique developed by David W. Johnson and Roger T. Johnson, is another method that embodies Kalama principles. In constructive controversy, students are assigned positions on a controversial issue and required to argue for that position, then reverse roles and argue the

opposing position, before finally working toward a reasoned consensus.¹³ This process trains students to separate the strength of an argument from their personal attachment to it - a direct parallel to the Buddha's warning against accepting a view simply because it is one's own (*ditthinijjhanakkhanti*).

Contemplative pedagogy, which has gained significant traction in American universities over the past two decades, integrates mindfulness practices with academic inquiry. Programs at institutions such as Brown University's Contemplative Studies program or the Mind and Life Institute's academic initiatives draw directly on Buddhist epistemological traditions, including the Kalama Sutta's emphasis on direct experience as a criterion of knowledge. Zajonc has been among the most prominent advocates for this integration, arguing that contemplative practices cultivate precisely the qualities of attention, discernment, and ethical sensitivity that the Kalama Sutta identifies as essential to sound knowing.¹⁴

The professor, in a Kalama-inspired classroom, takes on a fundamentally different role. Rather than being the transmitter of authoritative knowledge, the teacher becomes a co-inquirer - a more experienced practitioner of inquiry who models the very epistemic virtues she wishes students to cultivate: intellectual humility, openness to revision, willingness to say 'I do not know,' and commitment to following argument where it leads rather than where authority points. Daniel Siegel's neuroscientific research on mindful awareness supports the claim that this kind of reflective, non-reactive engagement with experience actually rewires the brain toward greater cognitive flexibility and insight.¹⁵

VI. CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

The application of Kalama principles in higher education is not without its challenges and legitimate objections. Three deserve particular attention.

First, there is the risk of misreading the Sutta as an endorsement of pure relativism. If no tradition, no text, and no teacher's authority is sufficient justification for belief, does this not collapse into the view that all beliefs are equally valid? This misreading must be firmly resisted. As Bhikkhu Bodhi has carefully argued, the Kalama Sutta does not say that all bases of knowledge are worthless - it says that none of them, taken alone, is sufficient.¹⁶ It explicitly retains an appeal to the judgment of the wise and to the criterion of benefit and harm. This is a nuanced epistemological position, not a license for arbitrary belief.

Second, there is the institutional resistance that any genuinely transformative pedagogy must face. Universities are, in many respects, conservative institutions. Curricula, assessment frameworks, and faculty reward structures are not easily reformed. A pedagogy that emphasizes process over content, reflection over reproduction, and questions over answers sits awkwardly within institutions primarily organized around the efficient transmission of disciplinary knowledge and the production of credentialed graduates. Freire's analysis of how systems of oppression perpetuate themselves through education remains as relevant here as ever.¹⁷

Third, the cultural dimensions of the Kalama framework require careful handling. In many societies where deference to elders and teachers is a deeply embedded moral norm, encouraging students to question authority can feel not merely intellectually challenging but morally transgressive. Any implementation of Kalama-inspired pedagogy must be sensitive to these cultural dynamics, framing critical inquiry not as disrespect but as a form of deeper engagement - one that honors tradition while opening it to genuine examination. This is, in fact, precisely the spirit of the Kalama Sutta itself.

VII. COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES

The Kalama Sutta does not stand alone in the history of thought as an advocate of epistemological autonomy. Comparative analysis enriches our understanding of both its uniqueness and its universality.

The Socratic parallel is the most frequently drawn. Both Socrates and the Buddha engaged interlocutors in dialogue, refused to claim final authority, and insisted that genuine knowledge requires personal engagement rather than passive reception. Yet there is an important difference: Socratic inquiry is primarily logical and aporetic - it often ends in productive perplexity. The Kalama Sutta, by contrast, offers a positive, pragmatic criterion: what leads to welfare and happiness. The Buddhist framework is less interested in *aporia* and more interested in transformation.

Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy offers another important parallel. Freire's critique of the banking model of education - in which students are treated as passive receptacles for deposited knowledge - resonates powerfully with the Kalama Sutta's critique of epistemic dependence. Both frameworks insist that genuine education is a practice of liberation, not domestication.¹⁸ However, Freire's framework is rooted in Marxist social analysis and focuses on the structural and political dimensions of epistemic oppression, whereas the Sutta's analysis centers on the psychological and ethical roots of distorted cognition in greed, hatred, and delusion.

John Dewey's pragmatism also aligns closely with the Kalama framework. For Dewey, knowledge is always instrumental - it is knowledge for the sake of intelligent action in the world. Ideas are tested by their consequences.¹⁹ This pragmatic criterion closely parallels the Sutta's insistence that teachings be evaluated by their fruits in actual experience. The difference lies in Dewey's secular naturalism versus the Sutta's ethical and soteriological horizon: for the Buddha, the ultimate criterion is not merely effective action but liberation from suffering.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The Kalama Sutta is not merely a historical document in the Buddhist canon. It is a living guide to intellectual maturity - one that speaks as directly to a twenty-first-century university student as it did to the bewildered Kalamas of ancient Kesaputta. Its core insight - that genuine knowledge requires personal verification, ethical grounding, and freedom from the distortions of desire, aversion, and delusion - is not a specifically Buddhist insight. It is a universal one.

Higher education today faces an urgent need to recover this insight. The production of credentialed graduates who have learned to reproduce what they have been told is not education in any meaningful sense. It is a sophisticated form of epistemic dependence. What the Kalama Sutta offers, and what the best traditions of educational theory have always aspired to, is the cultivation of students who can think - who can evaluate claims, test their own assumptions, engage with the wise, and act from genuine understanding rather than inherited belief.

Applying Kalama principles in higher education requires no conversion to Buddhism and no rejection of Western educational traditions. It requires only a willingness to take seriously what the best thinkers in every tradition have known: that the examined life is the only life worth calling truly educated. From tradition to reason is not a journey away from wisdom. It is the journey toward it.

NOTES

1. Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Anguttara Nikaya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2012), 280–82. The Kalama Sutta is at AN 3.65.
2. For the scholarly and textual significance of the Kalama Sutta as an epistemological framework, see Bodhi, *Numerical Discourses*, translator's introduction.
3. Bodhi, *Numerical Discourses*, 279. See also Soma Thera, trans., *The Kalama Sutta: The Buddha's Charter of Free Inquiry* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1981), 1–5.
4. Bodhi, *Numerical Discourses*, 280–81. For a comprehensive Pali analysis of the epistemological basis of the ten criteria, see K. N. Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1963).
5. Soma Thera, *Kalama Sutta*, 7–10.
6. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 72.
7. Matthew Lipman, *Thinking in Education*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
8. John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1938), 33–50.
9. David A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1984), 20–38.
10. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, chaps. 2–3. The concept of *conscientizacao* - critical consciousness - is developed throughout these chapters as the educative goal of problem-posing pedagogy.
11. Lipman, *Thinking in Education*, 83–99.
12. Dewey, *Experience and Education*.
13. David W. Johnson and Roger T. Johnson, "Energizing Learning: The Instructional Power of Conflict," *Educational Researcher* 38, no. 1 (2009).
14. Arthur Zajonc, *Meditation as Contemplative Inquiry: When Knowing Becomes Love* (Great Barrington, MA: Lindisfarne Books, 2009), 45–68.
15. Daniel J. Siegel, *The Mindful Brain: Reflection and Attunement in the Cultivation of Well-Being* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), 174–208.
16. Bodhi, *Numerical Discourses*, 279–80.
17. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 44–57.
18. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, chap. 2.
19. Dewey, *Experience and Education*.

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