

# The Kālāma Sutta and Its Reflections in Modern Buddhist Education: Authority, Critical Inquiry, and Pedagogical Transformation\*

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## Abstract

Employing qualitative textual analysis of Pāli canonical sources combined with conceptual analysis of modern pedagogical frameworks, this paper examines the Kālāma Sutta (Aṅguttara Nikāya, 3.65), as well as modern pedagogy within Buddhism, to clarify what methods and means are taught in the Kālāma Sutta for learning about the Dharma. The analysis focuses on the sutta's critique of uncritical deference to tradition and authority. The study also considers the moral and empirical standards that the Buddha recommends for decision-making and knowledge acquisition. These findings suggest that the sutta offers a pedagogical model that is grounded in critical inquiry, personal experience, ethics rather than dogma, and a willingness to make mistakes. This study shows how it is possible to break the rigidity of tradition by using this method, enabling a balanced integration of critical thinking, practice-based learning, and moral cultivation in response to the challenges of modernity.

**Keywords:** Kālāma Sutta; Modern Buddhist education; Critical inquiry; Buddhist epistemology; Religious pedagogy; Educational philosophy; Experiential learning

## Introduction

Critical thinking is a skill that education has been increasingly trying to teach students over recent decades, with student-centered learning and reflective engagement as core components of effective pedagogy. Furthermore, there is renewed interest in classical sources used to teach about the relationships among primary sources, knowledge, wisdom, and virtue within religious education. The Kālāma Sutta is of particular interest from a Buddhist perspective because it directly challenges uncritical reliance upon tradition, scriptures, lineages, and teachers. It is frequently cited as canonical endorsement of free inquiry, as Soma (1994) and Bodhi (1998) noted, and it

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raises some important questions regarding the meaning of learning, the role of authority, and standards for judging what is true or not in Buddhist education settings.

The way monastic education is carried out today, however, is quite different from the past. Their curriculum and syllabi are updated according to modern educational standards (Chuanming, 2022), while the training of laity has increased greatly through universities, temples, and transnational Dharma centers or meditation centers. The above developments raise a number of pedagogical issues, including the interplay between tradition and critical study: combining the role of the teacher as a guide for students who learn by themselves and employing classic objectives from Buddhism within a modern pedagogical framework. Therefore, the research questions raised here are: 1) How does the Kālāma Sutta articulate a model of knowing and learning? 2) In what ways has this model influenced or can it inform modern Buddhist education in its pedagogical transformation? Within this context, the Kālāma Sutta offers a potentially valuable resource for educational reflection on its pedagogical model that is grounded in critical inquiry, personal experience, and ethics rather than dogma.

The primary objective of this paper will be to approach the Kālāma Sutta from a pedagogical and epistemic perspective with a view toward discerning what it has to say about contemporary Buddhist teaching and practice. Instead of interpreting the sutta as an expression of skepticism or individualism, this study will seek to distinguish between the Kālāma Sutta's historical pedagogical method—emphasizing ethical verification over doctrinal authority—and its contemporary applications in modern Buddhist educational reform. This is the way that this paper shall employ to give us an idea about what critical inquiry was like in early Buddhist thought and how we ought to responsibly apply it in modern Buddhist educational contexts.

Methodologically, the paper employs qualitative textual analysis of the Pāli canon, with attention to the historical and doctrinal context of the Kālāma Sutta. This analysis is complemented by engagement with modern Buddhist scholarship like that of Bhikku Bodhi & Stephen Evans. By combining textual and conceptual analysis, the article seeks to bridge classical Buddhist sources and modern educational discourse without reducing either to the terms of the other.

Why does this ancient discourse on epistemological uncertainty remain particularly prominent in contemporary reforms? The Kālāma Sutta offers a unique perspective as it addresses the pedagogical dilemma of how to teach critical thinking without falling into authoritarian dogmatism or relativistic individualism. So we can say that the significance of this research lies in its contribution to both Buddhist studies and educational theory. In regard to Buddhist studies, it offers a careful reexamination of a frequently cited but often misinterpreted discourse, situating it within a coherent framework of ethical and soteriological concerns. As for Buddhist education itself, this study provides a conceptual model that supports critical inquiry while maintaining a clear normative orientation toward the reduction of suffering and the cultivation of wholesome qualities. More broadly, the article contributes to ongoing debates about the role of critical thinking in religious education by showing that classical Buddhist texts can inform contemporary pedagogical challenges without abandoning their distinctive philosophical and ethical foundations.

## The *Kālāma Sutta*: Textual Context and Core Teachings

### 1. Historical and Canonical Context

Within the *Aṅguttara Nikāya (AN)*, the *Kālāma Sutta* is unique in that it explicitly engages with the problem of epistemic uncertainty and evaluates competing teachings. This is significant, as the discourse culminates in a threefold evaluative framework that distinguishes between wholesome, unwholesome, and morally neutral states, thereby aligning the sutta's epistemological concerns with ethical discernment.

As far as historical context goes, the *Kālāma Sutta* has been taken to reflect a pluralistic, even sometimes competitive, intellectual climate in ancient India during the early Buddhist period. In the period contemporary with the Buddha's teaching, society featured an abundance of śramaṇa movements, Brahmanical schools, and itinerant monks with their own answers to ultimate issues, ethics, and means of salvation. There was a lot of debate on things like what the soul is, how karma works, how you attain enlightenment, and the use of rites and rituals. Lay communities such as the Kālāmas in Kesaputta, who had taken up residence, were subject to opposing views put forth by rival authorities. The resulting confusion that this causes in the minds of the Kālāmas upon hearing these contradictory opinions provides the setting for a very famous teaching of the Buddha.

This socio-intellectual context will help us understand the *Kālāma Sutta*'s direction and its limits: it is important to note that this text does not aim to provide an overall theory of knowledge; rather, it addresses an educational situation in which ordinary believers are exposed to contradictory religious claims without having been taught philosophy. The Buddha's initial refusal to endorse tradition (*anussava*), lineage (*paramparā*), scriptural authority, speculative reasoning, or the charisma of individual teachers should therefore be read as a pragmatic strategy designed to address this condition of doctrinal competition. The sutta does not reject these sources of knowledge in principle but cautions against their uncritical acceptance in situations where they function as substitutes for careful evaluation and ethical reflection.

Equally important is the pedagogical setting of the *Kālāma Sutta*, which is directed explicitly toward laypeople rather than monastics. Unlike many discourses that presuppose familiarity with monastic discipline or advanced meditative practice, this sutta addresses the concerns of householders engaged in social, economic, and familial life. The evaluative criteria proposed—namely, whether a teaching leads to greed, hatred, and delusion or to their abandonment—are framed in terms accessible to ordinary experience and observable consequences. This orientation reflects an educational approach that emphasizes practical judgment and moral clarity over doctrinal mastery.

Canonical scholarship has further noted that the concluding section of the *Kālāma Sutta*, which introduces the notion of the “four assurances” (*cattāro assāsā*), reinforces this practical orientation. By presenting benefits that hold regardless of metaphysical uncertainty—such as living without hostility and remorse—the discourse situates ethical practice as the primary educational outcome. This reinforces the view that the sutta's epistemological guidance is inseparable from its ethical aims.

### 2. The Ten Grounds for Doubt

What is unique about the *Kālāma Sutta*, however, is that the Buddha goes on to enumerate ten grounds why one should not accept any teaching solely because it

satisfies these criteria. This passage has often been cited as evidence of early Buddhism's endorsement of critical inquiry (*sokakāṅkha*) or skepticism (*saṃśaya*). A closer reading shows that it is primarily about the limits of non-questioning use of traditional authority as sources. The point here is not that tradition, reason, or expertise are unimportant; it is rather a cautionary note about regarding them as ultimate and authoritative criteria, particularly in cases of conflict among the religions or when morality is not clear:

*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.'* (Bodhi, 2021)

The first ground mentioned here is *anussava*, which has been rendered variously in English as “tradition,” “oral teaching,” and “learning by heart.” In ancient Indian religious terms, oral transmission was regarded as the best method for preserving and verifying doctrinal truth. But it is clear from the Buddha's admonition not to rely exclusively upon *anussava* that simply longevity and popularity do not guarantee a teaching's ethical validity or efficacy. The transmission of even well-known teachings can lead to harmful mental states and unwholesome actions. We are not criticizing the practice of recitation, which remained important for early Buddhist practice, but the assumption that traditional status confers automatic authority.

The second issue to be noted is that many relied upon succession or lineage teachers (*paramparā*), and these were often used as criteria for authenticity—that they are linked to a respected lineage of teacher–student chain. The warning in this case is that what may be traced back to a revered teacher still needs ethical evaluation. In situations where there are rival genealogies claiming to be authentic, transmission alone is not an adequate criterion of authenticity for rites and teachings.

The discourse also cautions against the blind following of what is reported from others (*itikirā*) or hearsay, indicating a concern for accepting things that are not investigated when they have been passed on by others in this way. In many different contexts where caricatures of other beliefs were rampant along with rumors about them, reliance upon these anonymous accounts would easily lead to errors of judgment and incorrect inferences. The Buddha's teaching encourages learners' free inquiry and critical thinking over the uncritical reception of what is passed on.

The notion of scriptural authority (*piṭakasampadā* or *byañjanā*) is also present among the grounds for doubt. Special mention is made of this, suggesting that early Buddhism was not committed to scripture per se as a source of authority, and although scriptural texts are valuable repositories of doctrine, they are interpretive and applicable. Without the accompanying reflection on morality and one's own conduct, however, reciting scriptures may encourage dogmatism over insight (Chongla-iat, 2023).

The discourse also refers to various forms of reasoning, such as reliance on mere reasoning (*takka*), inference (*naya*) (refers to formal reasoning procedures that,

while valuable, can become speculative when disconnected from ethical consequences), and analogy on grounds of external similarity (*ākāraparivitakka*). At first glance it seems that these warnings could be interpreted as an aversion to inquiry in general. But such interpretation would run counter to the general Buddhist epistemological tradition, which applies proofreading, analysis, and reasoning in an organized manner. The sutta more explicitly points out the problems with treating rationalizations as independent, ultimate authorities for issues of truth. Internal consistency and aesthetic elegance don't ensure that certain opinions are good for us mentally or in other ways. If we separate our thinking process from morality and facts, they are at risk of being speculative and/or misleading.

Another ground for doubt is agreement with what one has heard, inclination, and view (*diṭṭhinijjhānakkhanti*). This prefigures modern notions such as confirmation bias. It appears the Buddha warns his followers not to assent to views simply on account of them agreeing with their previously held beliefs or philosophies; this type of acceptance will only entrench positions rather than lead to understanding.

The final grounds are about authority figures: whether one refers to an authoritative figure's knowledge or "the monk is our teacher." (*samaṇo no garū*) (Bodhi, 1998) The caution here points towards authority figures' charisma and power. While the Buddha was respected, he deliberately refrained from demanding obedience merely by virtue of his position. It is an education for judgment, not obedience, and it seeks to make men responsible for their own opinions, not dependent upon others.

All together, the ten grounds are not a rejection of tradition, scripture, or reason as such. Rather, they act as an antidote to cognitivist modes of thought, which ignore ethics or reflection. The second point is supported also by these canonical texts, which set an ideal standard of what Buddhist education should look like:

*If at any time you know of yourselves: 'These things are profitable; they are blameless; they are praised by the intelligent; ... — then you should undertake them and abide therein.* (Woodward & Hare, 2019)

When referring to the standard "praised by the intelligent" (*viññuppasatthā*), it might replace traditional authority with a form of intellectual elitism. In the context of modern education, the term "wise" should not be understood as a social category but rather as those who demonstrate ethical capabilities.

Based on the above ten grounds for doubt, we can see that the "Critical Buddhism" (Hihan Bukkyō) advocated by Matsumoto (1997) and Hakamaya (2006) resonates profoundly. They emphasize that true Buddhism should be founded on "criticism," which means a thorough examination of all established authorities. This is highly consistent with the Buddha's teachings in the sutta that reject ten kinds of blind adherence. Its critical spirit always serves the practical goal of the path to liberation, rather than establishing another set of anti-traditional dogmas. Therefore, the *sutta* provides a "normative critique"—while rejecting blind faith, it uses ethical

effectiveness as an anchor to avoid falling into the infinite regression of “criticism of criticism.”

### **3. Ethical and Experiential (Criterion)**

After rejecting unquestioning trust in the authority of others, the *Kālāma Sutta* articulates some positive evaluative principles for judging what is or is not valid: providing objective criteria by which to judge the content and quality of religious doctrines, rather than relying upon philosophical speculation and/or authority. The discourse directs attention to qualitative effects and actions on behavior and mental states. In this way, the sutta integrates epistemic discernment with moral cultivation.

Note also that moral purity does not simply refer here to inner states of mind, but in general Buddhism tends to associate psychological elements with what can be seen and experienced as the result. Teachings encouraging greed, hatred, and delusion are said to lead to harm, conflict, and suffering, producing harmful effects on people and society. While teachings about non-greed/hatred/delusion support well-being, social harmony, and ethical integrity. This relational dimension underscores the socially embedded nature of Buddhist ethics and resists interpretations that reduce evaluation to purely subjective experience (Li, 2022).

The importance of results is another indication that the *Kālāma Sutta* addresses a practical concern. Right action depends upon estimating consequences, not upon the observance of rules or dogma. This consequential position could be interpreted as allowing for a certain amount of moral relativism; it retains its rigor through the invocation of general principles such as the avoidance of harm, maximization of happiness, and cultivation of virtue. Instead of relying on situational ethics, we take an educational approach to encourage careful thinking about the role of how intentions, actions, and outcomes are linked.

The second component of the evaluation schema is personal experience. The Buddha instructs the Kālāmas that they should “know for themselves” (*attānaṃ yeva jāneyyātha*) (Bodhi, 2012), emphasizing personal inquiry and critical judgment over uncritical intuition or gut feelings, but rather to a continuous exercise of the discernment that is formed by experience, reflection, and ethical sensitivity. In the light of these considerations, our experiences are analyzed and interpreted in a moral sense.

The capacity for critical thinking is seen here as being a key mediator between experience and evaluation; this view supposes that individuals have the capability to reflect upon themselves cognitively and understand better the consequences of their actions if they are provided with appropriate tools for evaluation. Critical thinking skills constitute learning outcomes. Knowledge is neither something we have, nor can it be conceived of as the result of an act or process, but as an ongoing process of discernment responsive to changing conditions.

## Epistemological Implications of the *Kālāma Sutta*

### 1. Buddhist Epistemology Beyond Dogmatism

The *Kālāma Sutta* is one example of a Buddhist philosophical answer to questions concerning knowledge and epistemic justification, suggesting that there is no need for an epistemology of morality or pragmatism, since it would be dogmatic in nature. In early Buddhism, dogmatic epistemology may be understood as the view according to which truth is guaranteed by external causes such as tradition, scripture, lineage, and the prestige of a guru. The sutta cautions strongly against uncritical trust in any one of these bases and thereby implicitly challenges the view that a statement is justified simply because it is institutionally/socially approved. Rather, it emphasizes the responsibility of the learner to engage in reflective evaluation guided by ethical criteria.

I do not see this study as offering an epistemic theory per se. The *Kālāma Sutta* refrains from enumerating the sources of information and setting up systematic tests for verification. Rather, it addresses a practical problem: how individuals should respond to competing truth claims in situations of uncertainty. The Buddha's response turns epistemic responsibility into ethical responsibility. The evaluation of comprehension changes from its origin to its effect, particularly its capacity to reduce greed, hatred, and delusion. Here the text is humbled by reason and acknowledges the limitations of human understanding while rejecting the delegation of judgment to external authorities.

Importantly, this should not be understood as an anti-intellectual position, nor a relativist one. The discourse does not deny the value of reasoned inquiry, textual study, or expert instruction. But it resists the temptation of absolutizing them in some way. Authority figures and reason itself remain provisional tools that must always be judged by ethical and experiential validation. This is consistent with the general Buddhist orientation towards pragmatic efficacy (*atthasaṃhita*), as opposed to a speculative certainty, and knowing and teaching that this is to be embedded in the highest religious value, which is to alleviate human suffering.

A comparison of later developments in Buddhist epistemologies, such as those of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti's *pramāṇasvāyāmcaṭtana* systems (Bogacz, 2024), exposes its permanent and changing features, as well as the classical *pramāṇa* framework that categorizes epistemic procedures that are considered to be trustworthy: it mainly accepts perception (*pratyakṣa*) and inference (*anuamana*) as sources of valid cognition (Hayes, 1980). The later thinkers are much more concerned with logic, precise language use, epistemic criteria of mental correctness, and so forth. They represent the move towards rationalism and formalization: satisfying both inter-traditional discussion and the demands of scholastic discourse.

Though these views differ, the ethical position in the *Kālāma Sutta* does not conflict with the *pramāṇa* theory. Both methods eschew uncritical adherence to authorities and are to be verified by experience. In this view of *pramāṇa*, inference or perception becomes epistemically relevant because it provides a valid basis for cognition. However, in contrast to thinkers like Dignāga or Dharmakīrti, who emphasize the epistemic quality of *pramāṇa* (truthfulness and veridicality), the *Kālāma Sutta* emphasizes more the ethical results. There is no contradiction here, just a difference of emphasis due to different pedagogical contexts.

## **2. Faith (*saddhā*) and Critical Inquiry**

The Pali word for “faith” in Buddhism is *saddhā*, but it plays a different role than English words such as “faith,” “belief,” “trust,” and “religion” often do; that is, *saddhā* does not mean unconditional belief or doctrinal assent. The *Kālāma Sutta* and related texts suggest that *saddhā* appears better captured by an epistemic attitude akin to provisional belief, which invites one to proceed along the path but not without critical scrutiny. This shift is important to understanding not only the lack of tension but also the compatibility of faith in devotion with inquiry in Buddhist educational and philosophical frameworks.

While the term *saddhā* does not appear explicitly in this passage of the *Kālāma Sutta*, its didactic function suggests that there was an understanding of faith in Buddhism quite different from what we have described above. In other words, instead of demanding blind faith in religion, the Buddha is quietly changing our definition for religious belief. Faith is not the slavish submission to teachers or traditions; it is the provisional willingness to test claims by ethical criteria and one’s own experience. In this formulation, faith precedes inquiry—it does not substitute for it—which enables the practitioner to test the validity of spiritual principles by experience.

In early Buddhist texts, *saddhā* tends to be described as a preliminary stage in the path that comes prior to effort, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom. So although faith is an important factor in getting started on the path, this is not thought of as perfect knowledge. This faith becomes the incentive to investigation (*vicaya/vimamsā*), and this leads to understanding. Through continued effort, this certainty slowly changes and becomes more internalized rather than based on other people’s opinions. And the relationship between *saddhā* and inquiry dynamically develops and changes alongside the practitioner’s engagement with the teachings.

The transition from “*saddhā*” to “*paññā*” can be understood through the scaffolding theory in educational psychology (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976). The initial belief provided the “scaffolding,” enabling monastic learners to engage in practices that they could not fully verify yet. As the accumulated experiences through meditation and moral practice were verified, the scaffolding was gradually removed, leaving behind independent wisdom. This model explains why the *Kālamā Sutta* did not completely abandon faith but instead restructured it into a temporary epistemological support rather than an ultimate belief.

It also shows, in particular, the interplay between skepticism and trust—that some level of faith must be present to enable inquiry, neither too much faith, which leaves you drifting around uncontrolled, nor not enough faith, which leaves you without confidence. Inquiry, on the other hand, is required for protection from dogmatism. There’s a tension here between the two, which we can see reflected in the *Kālāma Sutta*, where inquiry is encouraged but there are clearly set out some ethical criteria by which to judge this. Confidence is not thrown away nor taken to be fixed but instead updated in light of evidence and reasoning.

### **3. The Therapeutic Orientation of Knowledge**

Another aspect that emerges from the presentation given here about Buddhist epistemology and especially shown by the *Kālāma Sutta* is a kind of therapeutic orientation: wisdom is valued primarily not because it can lead to ultimate metaphysical certainty nor because it allows us to build up large philosophical theories, but more as an instrument in reducing suffering (*dukkha*). Thus, epistemic evaluation is always inseparable from soteriological concerns. Teachings are evaluated according to the extent they change cognition, behavior, or feelings; and/or the cultivation of beneficial qualities.

The *Kālāma Sutta*, however, is a notable exception in that it urges one not to take for granted certain dogmatic presuppositions but rather to act pragmatically with regard to the consequences of actions. This approach favors the measurement of what is known by how it impacts one’s actions as well as those of others in society; a pragmatic orientation reflects a prioritization of functional efficacy over theoretical completeness (Bodhi, 1998).

This view is reminiscent of some aspects of early Buddhist thought but also closely resembles the emphasis on the Four Noble Truths (*Cattāri Ariyasaccāni*) as a practical framework for understanding *dukkha* and finding ways to respond effectively to it (Bodhi, 2005). Just as with medicine, what counts as knowing is precisely this capacity to diagnose the cause(s) of pain and find effective remedies. It is in such a context that we may judge philosophical questions that do not contribute towards the realization of human liberty as educational irrelevancies—irrelevancies they are not necessarily by virtue of their being meaningless, but because there is no real benefit in them towards the relief of suffering. This kind of mental cultivation therefore has a pragmatic purpose, so as not to get bogged down and distracted by ideas that are irrelevant to the pursuit of liberation.

This practical and liberative use of knowledge has important implications for pedagogy. First, it suggests that the teaching process of Buddhism must focus more on self-cultivation rather than rote learning, although reading and studying scriptures are still important. Their major usefulness is in their application to moral and psychological education. Information is regarded as transient and utilitarian rather than an end in itself.

Secondly, it is proposing to use an iterative, experience-based model of education: knowledge grows by acting upon the wisdom learned and assessing and critically reflecting on it. So teaching methods are flexible, and who will prize evidence no less than understanding? This model breaks down the traditional distinction between theory and practice because they are constantly being evaluated against each other in this feedback loop.

Thirdly, it is clear that the knowledge-as-therapy view has important implications for notions of authority within a learning context. Authority does not come only through one's title or role, knowledge of texts, or conventional connections; moral authority derives from demonstrated competence at helping pupils reduce suffering and increase ethical insight. This perspective is compatible with the *Kālāma Sutta*'s critique of authoritative epistemic claims but not incompatible with a pedagogical structure in an ethics of instruction.

Finally, the above epistemic model provides an analytical platform to address contemporary concerns of Buddhist education, especially in academic and profane settings. When knowledge is understood as its practical and ethical ways, in which Buddhism has been taught, it could be challenged by current epistemic standards without undermining its aims of transformation. The *Kālāma Sutta* outlines an epistemological strategy that is both critical and active in nature: it shows us how to critically evaluate the validity of things while simultaneously relieving suffering and cultivating ethical habits.

## **Modern Buddhist Education: Concepts and Challenges**

### **1. Defining “Modern Buddhist Education”**

Modern Buddhist education encompasses a range of educational practices, institutions, and curricula that engage with Buddhist teachings in contexts shaped by contemporary social, intellectual, and pedagogical developments. Whereas classical monastic education historically studied only textual memorization, rites and ceremonies according to the tradition, and meditation training (Keown, 2000). Modern Buddhist education has been radically altered through processes of globalization and interaction with secular educational paradigms (Liu, 2022). In order to understand this broad phenomenon, we need to look at different expressions of it, e.g., changes in monastic education or university programs.

Monastic education has been affected by many factors both inside and outside the monastery. In addition to traditional rote memorization and ritualistic practice, modern Buddhist education throughout Asia is introducing new teaching methods that incorporate in-depth study of philosophy, historical events, and ethical lessons. Such programs are frequently taught using contemporary teaching strategies that focus on conceptual learning, and textual analysis. These changes are intended to produce religious professionals equipped with knowledge of traditional practices and also the critical skills needed to participate in contemporary scholarly discourse and public life. With the development of international cultural exchanges, the dissemination and spread of the Buddhist education system among nations is becoming faster and faster, supporting cross-cultural communication among the different epistemological traditions and pedagogical strategies.

### **2. Pedagogical Challenges**

Some pedagogical problems confront modern Buddhist education, arising from attempts to harmonize traditional doctrinal transmission with modern educational requirements. In the old tradition, there was an emphasis on rote learning, ritual competence, and scrupulous adherence to authoritative texts. While all of these approaches provide doctrinal fidelity and institutional stability, none of them may necessarily foster meditative understanding and independent reasoning by default; on the contrary, contemporary pedagogy encourages critical inquiry, and being able to critically evaluate teaching on either an ethical or a pragmatic basis. This tension requires a careful curricular design that maintains core principles and at the same time allows for the training of critical thinking skills.

The other problem is a tension between the authority of teachers on one hand and student autonomy on the other. In monastic programs and university courses, instructors possess epistemic and ethical authority based on experience, knowledge, and institutional role. It's a pedagogical question that requires some balancing of intervention vs. non-intervention, because if we intervene too much, then we can promote blind following and passive education. In contrast, too much freedom promotes individualistic or partial knowledge without a moral basis. The challenge is to create learning opportunities that promote reflection, yet provide the appropriate level of guidance.

The above-mentioned pedagogic problems share the same peril, besides others that are specific to each of them: dogmatism and relativism. The former means that syllabi or teaching encourages blind submission to books or teachers' orders. Students may just repeat dogma, rather than reflect on what this information means for them in terms of action or development. The second one, however, happens whenever analysis is encouraged without any value criteria and ethical norms being available to guide it, at such a point that students may come to believe that all positions are justifiable and acceptable actions.

The difficulty of these questions is compounded by the diversity of contemporary pedagogical environments. There have been many models—from classical monastic formation, the content of the curriculum (e.g., religion, academic curriculum, secular mindfulness class), basic assumptions, method of teaching, or particular needs of students. Teachers will need to be judicious in their implementation so as not to over- or under-emphasize traditions and critical analysis, while simultaneously providing the pedagogical direction of instruction and the autonomy for students, as well as being specific to certain learning objectives. All this requires flexible instruction that is responsive to variations in cognitive capacity, previous experience, and student interests.

In order to overcome these educational problems, it is helpful if a moral standard and a practical standard are introduced into the learning framework, as exemplified in the *Kālāma Sutta* above. If teachings are judged according to their effects on mental states, then ethics and social responsibility are emphasized, and educators provide an intellectual framework within which to analyze the issue. This process cultivates a teaching model in which transmission, morality training, and mental cultivation are interwoven together so that monastic students can develop their own judgment skills without losing touch with authentic Buddhist teachings.

## **Reflections of the *Kālāma Sutta* in Modern Buddhist Educational Practices**

### **1. Learner-Centered Pedagogy**

In modern Buddhist education practices, it has been greatly changed by applying learner-centered teaching methods and promoting active learning, personal reflection, and inquiry-based learning rather than through the rote teaching-learning process only. These teaching methods are in line with contemporary education's emphasis on the development of analytical thinking skills, ethical discernment, and experiential understanding, e.g., in the Guangdong Buddhist College, these are progressive pedagogical methods that attempt to balance contemporary learning goals against the fundamental spiritual and meditative objectives of Buddhism.

The second major feature of learner-centered pedagogy is the encouragement of questioning methods. The instructor encouraged learners to ask questions and analyze what they learned in the courses, explore alternative interpretations, and ask questions that relate to their experiences. It is this mode of education that corresponds with the epistemological position articulated by the *Kālāma Sutta*, which stresses reflection instead of mere acceptance. Instructors who foster classrooms that make inquiry routine allow students to consider not only how their learning can be applied but also its ethics: more than just relying solely on authorities, or memorization, etc.

Dialogue plays a central role in learner-centered teaching and learning activities. Structured discussions, debates, and collaborative exploration enable students to articulate their knowledge, confront other perspectives, and foster civic engagement in the service of critical thought. Within a Buddhist school or monastery, such activity could be in the form of guided study sessions and monastic debates or group reflection exercises. These promote intellectual, moral, and social growth, as they learn to be respectful in their discussions about how religion works in real life.

The teaching strategy is incomplete without including the element of introspection. Reflection: Students are able to apply theory to real-life situations, analyze outcomes of actions, and reflect on changes in thoughts and behavior. Self-reflection through keeping a journal, meditation, or self-assessment can help internalize learning and use ethical judgment to make decisions about what one does. Self-reflection helps translate theory into practice, thus enhancing the utilitarian function of Buddhism and encouraging education in the long run.

A central element of learner-centered pedagogy is moving away from rote memorization toward deeper understanding. Education traditionally has focused on memorizing canonical texts as well as ritual procedures. This provides a legacy of content transfer, but it may inhibit analysis or common sense. On the other hand, learner-centered approaches lean towards a greater emphasis in terms of comprehension and use of information and evaluating results. Memorization may still be involved in learning but as part of more complex processes that include reflection, discussion, and experiential learning. This change empowers the students' capacity for reflective judgment, ethical awareness cultivation, and applying the concepts in complex contemporary contexts.

This has a profound effect on the role teachers play in the classroom. They are no longer simply transmitters of information; teachers become facilitators of learning. Teachers provide a structure and context in which inquiry can occur, debate may take place, and we show how we think analytically while helping students learn to assess sources on their own, question assumptions, and integrate knowledge. This kind of teaching fosters an interactive classroom atmosphere where moral development, critical inquiry, and personal experience converge.

## **2. Experiential Learning and Practice-Based Validation**

In modern Buddhist education, there is an increased focus upon experiential learning and practice-based validation: “what is verified by direct experience instead of mere thinking.” (Sujato, 2025) According to this perspective in the *Kālāma Sutta*, one must evaluate religious teachings based on what they produce as effects within oneself (mental states and ethical conduct).

Meditation is one of the most important aspects of Buddhist pedagogy that can be described as a form of experimental education. Through regular meditative practices on mindful attention, people cultivate concentration and insight into their minds; they are able to observe how different processes arise and pass away, providing first-hand evidence for the effect that moral precepts have on mental conditions. The combination of theory and inner reflection makes meditation a practice of confirmation, enabling individuals to experience firsthand the efficacy.

Ethical cultivation, paired with meditative practice, can help put one's experience into the context of a social and relational framework. Moral virtues such as compassion should be lived out, and virtue, goodness, and candor should be present in daily life and human relations. The experience that moral actions can have direct effects on our lives and society is an empirical proof for morality (Yutlert & Panyavachiro, 2024). This aligns with what the *Kālāma Sutta* advises us to consider about teachers according to their effects on greed, hatred, and delusion, demonstrating that moral outcomes are an integral component of knowledge assessment.

Mindfulness training broadens the context for learning from experience through cultivating moment-to-moment awareness of one's own mind, behavior, and how they are interacting with the world around us. By practicing mindfulness, we observe what is going on in our thoughts, emotions, and habitual patterns. This awareness can enhance one's metacognitive skills so that students are able to evaluate not only the practical utility but also the ethical aspects of what they learned during the learning process against their real-life scenarios. Therefore, mindful observation is both a pedagogy and an evaluation technique, establishing the link between direct experience and conceptual understanding.

These experiential methods parallel contemporary theories of experiential learning in modern education, such as the experiential learning cycle proposed by Kolb (2014). According to this learning theory, there are four stages in a process of experience: concrete experience, reflective observation, conceptualization, and active experimentation. Likewise, meditation practices in Buddhism provide structured approaches to attention and reflection, and behavior training provides an adaptive means to integrate character education and academics. Both models show how knowledge is acquired as a constructive, active process that results when understanding derives from and is tested by experience with the world.

Therefore, the experiential learning and practice-based verification in modern Buddhist education employ meditation, moral cultivation, and mindful observation to connect theory with practice. These methods provide direct evidence of the impact of doctrines on mental and moral development, aligning with the principles expounded in the *Kālāma Sutta*. The similarities with modern experiential learning theories highlight the relevance of this approach to contemporary pedagogy, indicating that organized and reflective experiential engagement can serve as a core mechanism for knowledge acquisition, moral development, and critical evaluation.

### 3. Ethical Discernment as Educational Outcome

A central pedagogical goal in modern Buddhist education is to cultivate ethical discernment, reflecting the unity of the cognitive, moral, and technical dimensions of teaching (Baker, 1996). It is different than a mere memorization of scripture or pure academic study, modernity. Today, the pedagogical emphasis in Buddhist education is on cultivating wisdom (*paññā*) and compassion (*karuṇā*). These qualities are both the standard by which to judge and a guide to how we should practice Buddhism, knowledge that should be used for the moral improvement of ourselves and others, not left as idle in our minds.

Here, *paññā* means insight or intelligence in accurately seeing things as they are and understanding *kamma-vipāka*, separating the ethical from the pragmatic implications of action. Teaching methods encourage pupils toward reflective consciousness through integration of biblical interpretation, meditation, contemplation, and experiential learning as means of cultivating insight. This emphasis on critique helps professionals examine ideas, practice, and the context of the society, where the moral values and aims of Buddhism are also taken into account; hence, learning is tied up with applying what has been learned for cultivating mental states conducive to a healthy mind as well as good conduct.

The counterbalancing virtue is compassion (*karuṇā*), which guides the ethical application of insight. Through engaging with ethical reflection, interactive learning, and social action, we help our learners expand their concern beyond personal development toward that of society as a whole. Such an approach reinforces the collective nature of moral knowledge—that educational results will be both individual and social obligations. In this way, empathy translates moral evaluation from the metaphysical realm to a concrete level of social life.

We can see that *paññā* and *karuṇā* are vital factors here. The goal of modern critical thinking is the validity of propositions, while the Buddhist inquiry (*vicaya*) provoked in the *Kālāma Sutta* aims to achieve non-attachment (*virāga*) and the cessation of suffering (*dukkha-nirodha*). The former assesses the arguments; the latter examines whether the viewpoints will intensify or alleviate suffering—transforming epistemological criticism into soteriological practice.

## Conclusion

The key findings of this study suggest that the *Kālāma Sutta* provides an early critique of intellectual authoritarianism, emphasizing reflective assessment rather than blind reliance on tradition, scripture, or teacher authority. Buddhist institutions failing to adopt these *Kālāma*-taught methods face specific risks: dogmatic stagnation (inability to adapt to contemporary challenges), authority crises (scandals involving unquestioned teacher power), and epistemic irrelevance (inability to engage critically with modernity). Conversely, successful implementation offers Buddhist education a distinctive contribution to global educational discourse: a model of critical inquiry that maintains ethical normativity without authoritarianism. Its core evaluation criteria—distinguishing between wholesome and unwholesome behavior and assessing the impact of doctrine on oneself and others—show that knowledge in the Buddhist framework is inherently ethical and experiential, aimed at reducing suffering rather than pursuing abstract or metaphysical certainty. Thus, the *sutta* provides a coherent model for integrating critical thinking, ethical reflection, and practical application in modern Buddhist education, focusing on curriculum design, educational theory, and experiential understanding to develop monastic students who are reflective, morally responsible, and socially engaged in diverse contemporary contexts. However, the limitation of this study is conceptual; empirical validation through ethnographic research remains

necessary. Future studies could be carried out including qualitative interviews with Buddhist educators regarding classroom “doubt” management and longitudinal tracking of ethical outcomes across pedagogical models.

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