



EVAM ME SUTTAM

This is how I heard it

by Patrick Kearney

Week one: How can we read the suttas?

Introduction

The source of all Buddhist traditions, their *mūla* or “root,” are the texts that make up the four *nikāyas* or “collections” of the Buddha’s discourses. These are: *Dīgha Nikāya* (Collection of long *suttas*); *Majjhima Nikāya* (Collection of middle-length *suttas*); *Samyutta Nikāya* (Collection of connected *suttas*); and *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (Collection of numerical *suttas*). A fifth *nikāya*, the *Khuddaka Nikāya* (Collection of miscellaneous *suttas*), is regarded as of lesser authority, and its contents may have varied from tradition to tradition. Usually read in translation from the Pāli, the four *nikāyas* are generally regarded as representing the teachings of Theravāda Buddhism. However, strictly speaking, the Theravāda (“teaching of the elders”) is just one of the mainstream schools of Buddhism which draws upon these collections for its inspiration. In fact, these discourses come from a time before Theravāda, before Mahāyāna, before any of the schools or sects of Buddhism we currently know. Rather, these discourses are the ultimate source of all Buddhist schools and sects.

Nevertheless, the school that identifies itself most closely with these discourses is the Theravāda. Strictly speaking, Theravāda Buddhism is that school of Buddhism which reads these discourses through the lens provided by Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa, who, in the fifth century AD, wrote the *Visuddhimagga* (Path of Purification) and edited and translated into Pāli a number of commentaries on the *Nikāyas*. He did this for the elders of the Mahāvihāra, an ancient and powerful monastic centre in Anurādhapura, the capital of Sri Lanka. Orthodox Theravāda Buddhists read the *Nikāyas* through Buddhaghosa, which means that for them, what the Buddha means in any given text is what Buddhaghosa, and any who follow him, says he means. So whether we are orthodox, adhering to or identifying with a particular stream of Buddhism, is therefore largely determined by our choice of what texts we take as authoritative, and how we go about reading those texts. Of course, not all who read the *Nikāyas* are Theravāda Buddhists, and not all Theravāda Buddhists are orthodox. So there are readers who identify themselves as Theravāda Buddhists, but who do not read the *Nikāyas* through Buddhaghosa’s eyes.

All of which shows us that there is more than one way to read the *Nikāyas*, and that the way we choose to read them has real consequences for our understanding of both ourselves and the tradition. Are we reading them as Buddhists? If so, as Theravāda Buddhists? Or as Mahāyāna Buddhists? Or as Western Buddhists? In fact, of course, many people don’t read them at all, finding them too alien to relate to. This is hardly surprising, given their distance from us in time, space and culture.

For when we read the *Nikāyas* it quickly becomes evident that we have entered a world which is not our own. For traditional Buddhists, and especially Theravāda Buddhists, the stories of the Buddha and his students take place within a world which, while idealised and located in a distant past, is recognisable as belonging to and forming them. Modern readers, those who are formed by the values and attitudes of modernity, cannot unselfconsciously accept the world represented in

the Nikāyas, any more than they can the world represented in the Bible, because it is a pre-scientific, pre-critical world that is alien to them, and which can be made their own only by some process of demythologisation and subsequent reappropriation. In what follows, I shall show how different communities within the modern world have come to read the Nikāyas, and what this might mean for us as practitioners of Buddhist meditation in contemporary Australia.

What is a sutta?

The Nikāyas are collections of *suttas*. The Pāli word *sutta* was sanskritised by Indian Buddhists into *sūtra*, generally translated as “discourse.” *Sūtra* literally means “thread,” but in the brahmanical tradition *sūtra* refers to a string of very brief verses which are meant to be memorised as the basis for teaching. Patañjali’s *Yoga sūtras* is a good example. The Buddhist *sūtras* are not like this, however, and it has been suggested that *sutta* corresponds to the Sanskrit *sūkta*, which means “something which is well said.” The *brāhmaṇas* described the *vedas* as *sūkta*, and it is possible that using this word to describe the Buddha’s discourses was a way of claiming his teachings to be on a par with the *vedas*.

In any event, the *suttas* are regarded by the tradition as the ultimate authority for understanding the nature of the buddha-dharma. They all begin with the words *evaṃ me suttam*, “Thus have I heard,” or “Here is how I heard it.” This indicates that the following text is the word of the Buddha (*buddha-vacana*), and is therefore authoritative. But we must remember that the *suttas* are not texts, for the Buddha and his students never wrote down a word of the teachings. The *suttas* are performances, and the “I” of “Here is how I heard it” is the audience of the originating performance, and the performer of the current performance. And since there are no written “texts” to appeal to, how do we know if any given teaching really is the word of the Buddha?

The tradition recognises four “great authorities” (*mahāpadesa*) that can be appealed to in order to establish the authenticity of a teaching. A teaching is authentic if: it was heard from the Buddha; or from a community of elder monks; or from a community of learned monks; or from one learned monk. In all these cases a further test of authenticity must be applied: one is to examine the teaching under question to see if it conforms to what is already known of the *dhamma*. The *dhamma*, of course, is oral in nature and held in the memory of a community or communities, not in libraries. The appeal here is twofold: to the source of the teaching (from whom did one hear it?), and to its place within an overall structure or pattern of teachings (how does it fit?).

The Buddha taught *dhamma*, which is not a system of thought but reality itself, the way things are, and a way of life which corresponds to the way things are. The *suttas* are both expositions of doctrines and prescriptions of how one should live. The knowledge that they pass on, therefore, is more like a skill, like learning to play a musical instrument, than information, like a bus timetable. And this teaching was created and has been preserved orally, handed down in a lineage of teacher to student, in particular within the monastic *saṅgha*. Only in modern times has the printed book superseded, to some extent, this intimate connection between *sutta*, performance and personal relationship to the monastic *saṅgha*. So the very question, how do we, as lay practitioners of the buddha-dharma, read the *suttas*, is a modern one. In traditional Buddhism it would not arise, as we would be *hearing* the dharma from members of the *saṅgha*. We would be hearers (*sāvakas*), not readers.

So when we read the *suttas* we are reading what is meant to be performed and heard, an institutionalised memory of an originary event that occurred over 2,000 years ago in India. How accurate could this memory be? This is a question we will examine next week, when we look at the oral nature of the *suttas*. But for now we will examine the question, how can the *suttas* be read?

How would we read the Nikāyas if we were academics?

The Nikāyas come from a world entirely alien from our own, and are oral compositions that were never meant to be read, and which always required commentary to unpack their meaning. How are we to read them? We can begin by looking at how others in the modern world have attempted to read them, beginning with the pioneers of modern Buddhism, the “Buddhologists,” and from there looking at how communities within the tradition read them.

One of the peculiar characteristics of Western Buddhism is that the repositories of knowledge regarding the buddha-dharma are to be found in secular universities, not monasteries. The holders of this knowledge are scholars and academics, not monks and nuns, and most of these scholars are not Buddhists, and have no belief that what they are studying is true or in any way meaningful for their own lives.

The academic study of Buddhism began in earnest during the nineteenth century. Called Buddhology, or Buddhist Studies, this was meant to be a “scientific” study of Buddhism that would reveal a genuine Buddhism to a European reading public, in contrast to the supposedly decayed and degenerate forms of Buddhism found in Asia. Buddhology’s concern was with a Buddhism defined by its “classical” texts of the distant past, as opposed to the Buddhism of “popular” beliefs and practices of presently existing people who regard themselves as followers of the Buddha(s). Buddhology borrowed its methods and assumptions from the already established field of Biblical Studies, and Buddhologists shared with Biblical scholars the guiding beliefs of primitivism and textualism, convictions borrowed from Protestant theology. Primitivism is the belief that the essence of a religion is to be found in its original form, and textualism is the belief that the authoritative manifestation of that tradition is to be found in its texts.

The method used by scholars to read the Nikāyas is “historical criticism.” There are three basic methods contained within historical criticism: source criticism, which seeks the intention of the original author of the text; form criticism, which examines the patterns of language used in the text; and redaction criticism, which looks at how texts are constructed out of these pre-existing patterns. In all methods, the aim is to arrive at the meaning of the text by breaking up texts in order to discover the intention of the original authors/editors.

Historical criticism is a form of textual archaeology, which is used to bring order to the collections of texts bequeathed by the tradition. For example, scholars assume that the Nikāyas and the teaching they contain are the products of a developing community rather than just one person - *buddha-vacana* is *saṅgha-vacana*. This is in contrast to the tradition, which sees the vast majority of *suttas* as the work of a single genius - the Buddha - and does not admit of any kind of progressive development in the teaching. A preliminary to a scholarly reading of the texts is disassembling them into their original components, and rearranging these newly separated components in chronological order. A guiding assumption in this project is that the earlier the text, the more “authentic” it is. Often scholars assume that successive generations of Buddhist editors and scholars got it wrong; that whatever the early texts mean, they do not mean what Buddhists think they mean. Even texts that described meditation methods and the path to liberation are in fact mistaken in their final form, and these mistakes can now be clarified by the superior scientific techniques of the modern scholar, who can at last reveal what the Buddha *really* taught and practised. Scholars will, for example, rewrite traditional meditation texts in order to establish how meditation was really practised by the early Buddhist community, but they do not then use these reconstructed texts as a guide to their own practice. Their work constitutes a new genre of meditation manuals, unique in Buddhist literature in that their authors never suppose that anyone will actually put them into practice.

A guiding assumption of this project is “methodological atheism,” the assumption that it is simply obvious that religious phenomena are no more than human projections. This assumption is itself

ideological, even quasi-religious, in the sense that it is based on a belief that the critical theories with which the methodologically atheist scholar explains religion are truer than the religious beliefs and practices themselves. This assumption simplifies the critical study of the Nikāyas. For example, the scholar can simply dismiss the possibility that the Buddha really *did* remember his previous lives or see the rebirth of other beings. Obviously these beliefs were made up, and his job is to see how and why they were made up. Further, readers who believe such claims can be dismissed as lacking objectivity, and their opinions on not just these but virtually all issues regarding the interpretation of the texts can be discarded. Scholars can unselfconsciously divide students of Buddhism into the two categories of “western Buddhologists” and “Buddhist apologists,” and enshrine the critical methods of Buddhologists as the final arbiter of meaning in questions relating to both doctrinal history and the nature of meditative disciplines, dismissing the understanding of “apologists” as subjective, biased and ultimately mistaken.

How would we read the Nikāyas if we were practitioners?

An alternative way of reading the Nikāyas could be called practitioner criticism. Practitioner criticism reads Buddhist texts as a guide to the nature and structure of human experience, using some form of Buddhist contemplative practice as a means of directly encountering the doctrines taught within the texts. Theravāda Buddhism embraces a wide range of practitioner communities, with different and sometimes conflicting approaches to reading the traditional texts. Here we could look at three examples to illustrate the diversity of these interpretative communities and their interpretative strategies: the Burmese lineage of Mahāsī Sayādaw; reformist Theravāda practitioner monks; and the lay “*vipassanā*” movement.”

Mahāsī Sayādaw (1904-82) was the founder of a lineage of meditation teachers in Burma and abroad. In Burma this tradition is strongly orthodox and traditional. It draws upon the complete literary tradition of the Theravāda and practises a medieval style of scholarship based on the memorisation of texts and a complete faith in their contents. Yet this lineage is devoted to teaching meditation practice to a wide number of lay people, both Burmese and foreign, Buddhist and non-Buddhist, and its teachers see no reason why lay practitioners - even non-Buddhist lay practitioners - cannot attain the higher stages of the path. In this it is thoroughly modern and lay oriented.

Then we have reformist practitioner monks like Ajahn Buddhādāsa in Thailand and Ñāṇavīra Thera in Sri Lanka. Ajahn Buddhādāsa (1906-1993) rejected the traditional Buddhism in which he was raised in favour of a return to the early textual sources, and he insisted that the fruits of practice were available to all Buddhists, lay as well as clergy. He was a self-taught meditator who used the Nikāyas as his guide and rejected both the Abhidhamma and the commentarial literature as unnecessary and even misleading additions to the Buddha’s teaching. He had a pragmatic relationship to the tradition, and assessed the traditional teachings according to whether and to what extent they aided the practitioner to personally realise the *dhamma* taught by the Buddha. He did not hesitate to reject traditional authorities if they failed this test. Ñāṇavīra Thera (1920-1965) was an English monk resident in Sri Lanka who, like Ajahn Buddhādāsa, rejected the bulk of the Theravāda canonical literature as at best irrelevant to the practitioner and at worst misleading, and he interpreted Buddhist teachings in existentialist and phenomenological terms. He and Ajahn Buddhādāsa practised a type of historical criticism in that they sought to return to the earliest texts to uncover the original and therefore pure teachings of the Buddha. But they read the texts from within the tradition, and represent a kind of modern Theravāda fundamentalism, returning to the fundamentals of the tradition by going direct to the Buddha’s word and bypassing any intermediaries.

Finally, we can consider the *vipassanā* movement based in the United States, where the practice of *vipassanā* meditation as originally taught by Mahāsī Sayādaw and others has been excised from the

Theravāda tradition to serve as a technique for personal development and transformation. Traditional Buddhist teachings are appropriated and then translated into contemporary American idioms, in particular that of psychotherapy, and meditation practice has become one commodity among many for sale in the spiritual marketplace. Jack Kornfield, a central teacher in this movement, teaches *vipassanā* meditation not as an integral aspect of Buddhism, Theravāda or otherwise, but as one aspect of a “Great Way,” a universal canopy that extends over and unites all spiritual traditions, but which is not limited by any one of them. The commitment to universalism entails a rejection of the particularisation implicit in an individual’s devotion to any specific tradition. This movement too is concerned with a return to the texts, although because of its eclectic nature the Nikāyas play a smaller role than they do in the reformist movements of Ajahn Buddhadasa and Nāṇavīra Thera. The texts that provide the foundation for the teaching are more likely to be those of *advaita vedānta*, Sufism, Carlos Castenada, Aldous Huxley, Krishnamurti, and so on, than those of Theravāda Buddhism, and when Buddhist texts are referred to, they are often altered to conform with the requirements of the Great Way. (See Kālāma Sutta below.)

Unlike academic readers, practitioner critics are reading the Nikāyas as a guide to experience. They are seeking in the texts a foundation for an approach to Buddhist teaching and practice which is relevant to modernity. Their reading strategies, whether traditional or eclectic, are designed to uncover the nature of experience as it is lived today rather than produce historical or philosophical information regarding an ancient past. Practitioner criticism sees unity rather than disunity in the texts, and is unwilling to break texts up into some supposed chronological order to uncover their meaning. It tends to see individual texts as part of a wider pattern which is the complete canon, although what is considered to be the canon varies between communities. For Mahāsī Sayādaw the canon is the Theravāda literature in its entirety; for Ajahn Buddhadasa and Nāṇavīra Thera it is the Nikāyas or the (supposed) oldest layer of the Nikāyas; for Kornfield it is whatever aspects of world literature can be incorporated into the Great Way. In all cases, however, practitioner criticism is concerned with how the texts can be used to interpret the lived experience of a contemporary community, rather than what historical information they provide regarding a community that lived in the distant past.

Since practitioner critics are concerned primarily with experience, experience is the final arbiter of meaning. Experience, however, is guided by text. Within the tradition, whether the orthodox tradition of Mahāsī Sayādaw or the reformed traditions of Ajahn Buddhadasa and Nāṇavīra Thera, personal experience can never contradict the canonical texts because it is the canonical texts that validate experience. As members of a tradition, the practitioners assume that experience has an inter-subjective or communal aspect. Experience is not individual but communal, the experience of the entire community as it has unfolded over centuries. The texts are the voice of this accumulated experience. Hence there is a relationship of mutual support between experience and text, where text guides experience and experience confirms text. The texts provide a means of filtering out those aspects of experience that do not fit the canonical model. Experience is read according to the *suttas*. The *vipassanā* movement is distinctive in that it exalts the individual’s experience as the highest authority. Hence the appeal of the *Kālāma-sutta* when it is read as the Buddha’s affirmation of Western individualism, ignoring or omitting its commitment to the communal validation of experience. Here the *suttas* are read - even shaped - according to experience.

Now we will read the Kālāma Sutta, and look particularly at how it has been shaped by members of the *vipassanā* tradition for their own purposes - in this case, setting the Buddha up as a teacher of modern Western individualism.

Kālāma Sutta

Background

Here is how I heard it. Once the Blessed One, while wandering in the Kosala country with a large community of bhikkhus, entered a town of the Kālāma people called Kesaputta. The Kālāmas thought: “Venerable Gotama, a contemplative (*samaṇa*), a son of the Sakyans, has entered Kesaputta. Venerable Gotama has an excellent reputation which has been spread in this way: ‘So indeed is this Blessed One, accomplished, fully awakened, endowed with knowledge and conduct, sublime, knower of worlds, unsurpassed trainer of people with the potential for training, teacher of gods and humans, awakened and blessed. He proclaims this world with its gods, with *Māra* and *Brahmā*, this world with its contemplatives and priests, its kings and peoples, having realised it with his own direct knowledge. He teaches a *dhamma* which is lovely in its beginning, lovely in its middle and lovely in its end, in both the spirit and the letter, and he displays the fully perfected and purified spiritual life. Truly it is good to see such accomplished ones.’ ”

Then the Kālāmas went to the Blessed One. On arriving some greeted him respectfully and sat down at one side; some exchanged friendly greetings with him and after polite conversation sat down on one side; some raised their joined palms to him and sat down on one side; some announced their name and family and sat down on one side; some remained silent and sat down at one side.

The problem

The Kālāmas said to the Blessed One: “There are some contemplatives and priests, bhante, who visit Kesaputta. They explain and clarify their own doctrines; the doctrines of others they despise, revile and pull to pieces. Other contemplatives and priests also come to Kesaputta and explain and clarify only their own doctrines; the doctrines of others they despise, revile and pull to pieces. Bhante, we are doubtful and uncertain about them. Who among these venerable contemplatives and priests spoke the truth, and who spoke falsehood?”

The criteria for rejection

“It is right, Kālāmas, for you to doubt, to be uncertain; uncertainty has arisen in a doubtful matter. Do not rely upon what has been acquired by repeated tradition (*anussava*); nor upon lineage (*paramparā*); nor upon rumour (*itikirā*); nor upon what is handed down in the teachings (*piṭaka*); nor upon logic (*takkahetu*); nor upon inference (*nayahetu*); nor upon a consideration of reasons (*ākāraparivitakka*); nor upon a delight in speculation (*ditṭhinijjhānakkhanti*); nor upon appearances (*bhavyrūpatā*); nor upon respect for your teacher (*samaṇo no garū ti*). Kālāmas, when you know for yourselves: ‘These things are unskillful (*akusala*); these things are blamable (*sāvajja*); these things are censured by the wise (*viññu-garahita*); undertaken and observed, these things lead to harm (*ahita*) and suffering (*dukkha*),’ then abandon them.

Greed, hatred and delusion

“What do you think, Kālāmas? Does greed (*lobha*) appear in a person for his benefit or harm?”
 “For his harm, bhante.” “Being given to greed, and being overwhelmed and mentally defeated by greed, this person takes life, steals, commits sexual misconduct, and lies; and he prompts another to do the same. Will that result in his long term harm and suffering?” “Yes, bhante.”

“What do you think, Kālāmas? Does hatred (*dosa*) appear in a person for his benefit or harm?”
 “For his harm, bhante.” [...] “What do you think, Kālāmas? Does delusion (*moha*) appear in a person for his benefit or harm?” “For his harm, bhante.” “Being given to delusion, and being overwhelmed and mentally defeated by delusion, this person takes life, steals, commits sexual misconduct, and lies; and he prompts another to do the same. Will that result in his long term harm and suffering?” “Yes, bhante.”

“What do you think, Kālāmas? Are these things skilful or unskilful?” “Unskilful, bhante.”
 “Blamable or blameless?” “Blamable, bhante.” “Censured or praised by the wise?” “Censured, bhante.” “Undertaken and observed, do these things lead to harm and suffering, or not? How does it seem to you?” “Undertaken and observed, these things lead to harm and suffering. This is how it seems to us.” [...]

The criteria for acceptance

“Do not rely upon what has been acquired by repeated tradition; nor upon lineage; nor upon rumour; nor upon what is handed down in the teachings; nor upon logic; nor upon inference; nor upon a consideration of reasons; nor upon a delight in speculation; nor upon appearances; nor upon respect for your teacher. Kālāmas, when you know for yourselves: ‘These things are skilful; these things are blameless; these things are praised by the wise; undertaken and observed, these things lead to benefit and happiness,’ then attain and live them.

Non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion

“What do you think, Kālāmas? Does non-greed (*alobha*) appear in a person for his benefit or harm?” “For his benefit, bhante.” “Not being given to greed, and not being overwhelmed and mentally defeated by greed, this person does not take life, does not steal, does not commit sexual misconduct, and does not lie; and he prompts another to do the same. Will that result in his long term benefit and happiness?” “Yes, bhante.”

“What do you think, Kālāmas? Does non-hatred (*adosa*) appear in a person for his benefit or harm?” “For his benefit, bhante.” [...] “What do you think, Kālāmas? Does non-delusion (*amoha*) appear in a person for his benefit or harm?” “For his benefit, bhante.” “Not being given to delusion, and not being overwhelmed and mentally defeated by delusion, this person does not take life, does not steal, does not commit sexual misconduct, and does not lie; and he prompts another to do the same. Will that result in his long term benefit and happiness?” “Yes, bhante.”

“What do you think, Kālāmas? Are these things skilful or unskilful?” “Skilful, bhante.” “Blamable or blameless?” “Blameless, bhante.” “Censured or praised by the wise?” “Praised, bhante.” “Undertaken and observed, do these things lead to benefit and happiness, or not? How does it seem to you?” “Undertaken and observed, these things lead to benefit and happiness. This is how it seems to us.” [...]

The divine abidings

“A student of the noble ones, Kālāmas, who is without greed, hatred or delusion, who is clearly understanding (*sampajāna*) and attentive (*patīsata*), lives pervading one quarter with a mind of love (*mettā*). In the same way he lives pervading the second, the third and the fourth; so above, below, around, and everywhere, and to all as to himself, he lives pervading the all-encompassing world with a mind imbued with love, abundant, exalted, immeasurable, without hostility or affliction. He lives pervading one quarter with a mind of compassion (*karuṇā*) ... with a mind of joy (*muditā*) ... with a mind of equanimity (*upekkhā*). In the same way he lives pervading the second, the third

and the fourth; so above, below, around, and everywhere, and to all as to himself, he lives pervading the all-encompassing world with a mind imbued with equanimity, abundant, exalted, immeasurable, without hostility or affliction.

The four comforts

“A student of the noble ones, Kālāmas, who has such a mind, free from hatred and malice, undefiled and purified, finds four comforts here and now. ‘If there is another world and there is a fruit, a result, of actions done well or badly, then at the break-up of the body, after death, I shall arise in a blissful heavenly world.’ This is the first comfort he finds. ‘If there is no other world and no fruit, no result, of actions done well or badly, then I keep myself peaceful, loving, calm and happy.’ This is the second comfort he finds. ‘If evil consequences befall one who is evil, and I intend (*ceteti*) evil to no one, how can suffering affect me who does no evil?’ This is the third comfort he finds. ‘If evil consequences do not befall one who does evil, I see myself purified in any case.’ This is the fourth comfort he finds.” [...]

“Excellent, bhante, excellent! It is as if one was to set upright what had been knocked down, or to uncover what is concealed, or to point out the way to one who is lost, or to carry a lamp in the darkness so those with eyes could see what is there; so has the Blessed One set forth the *dhamma* in many ways. We go to the Blessed One for refuge, to the *dhamma* for refuge, and to the community of bhikkhus for refuge. Bhante, may the Blessed One regard us as lay followers who have gone for refuge for life, from this day on.”

**Āṅguttara Nikāya, Tika Nipāta,
Mahāvagga, Sutta No. 65**

(Nyanaponika Thera & Bhikkhu Bodhi. *Numerical discourses of the Buddha: An anthology of suttas from the Āṅguttara Nikāya*. Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 1999: 64-67)

Notes on the sutta

This sutta is one of the most quoted in Western Buddhism, and the most quoted part of it is the section beginning:

It is right, Kālāmas, for you to doubt, to be uncertain; uncertainty has arisen in a doubtful matter. Do not rely upon what has been acquired by repeated tradition; nor upon lineage; nor upon rumour; nor upon what is handed down in the teachings; nor upon logic; nor upon inference; nor upon a consideration of reasons; nor upon a delight in speculation; nor upon appearances; nor upon respect for your teacher. Kālāmas, when you know for yourselves: ‘These things are unskillful; these things are blamable; these things are censured by the wise; undertaken and observed, these things lead to harm and suffering,’ then abandon them.

It is common practice among western writers on meditation or popular spirituality to cite or quote the Buddha without giving any reference to the source of the quote, thus making it difficult for the reader to refer to the original, and modifying the quoted passage to suit the purpose of the writer. This is interesting, when one reflects on normal practice among Christians quoting the Gospels, who almost invariably cite the source of their quote (in “chapter and verse”), and would never consider editing Christ’s words to suit their individual purpose. Consider this version of the above section of the Kālāma Sutta, given as a direct quote, provided by Jack Kornfield & Gil Fronsdal in their *Teachings of the Buddha*, Boston & London: Shambhala, 1993:

When you would know, Kalamas, for *yourselves*, [emphasis added] that ‘These things are unhealthy, these things, when entered upon and undertaken, incline toward harm and suffering’ - then, Kalamas, you should reject them. [103]

Or this version, given as a direct quote by Mu Soeng, co-director of the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, in his *The diamond sutra: Transforming the way we perceive the world*, Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000:

But, O Kalamas, when you know for yourselves that certain things are unwholesome (akusala), and wrong, and bad, then give them up and when you know for yourselves that certain things are wholesome (kusala) and good, then accept them and follow them. [95]

Or this version, presented not as a direct quote, but as an interpreted summary, by Thich Nhat Hanh, in *Old path white clouds: Walking in the footsteps of the Buddha*, Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1991:

Friends, do not be hasty to believe a thing even if everyone repeats it, or even if it is written in holy scripture or spoken by a teacher revered by the people. Accept only those things which accord with your own reason, things which the wise and virtuous support, things which in practice bring benefit and happiness. Abandon those things which do not accord with your own reason, which are not supported by the wise and virtuous, and which in practice do not bring benefit and happiness. [421]

What do the liberties taken with this text tell us of the relationship between modern western practitioners and the tradition?