

# Suicide as A Response to Suffering

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We all suffer. Many of us experience extreme suffering, and for some of us the suffering we experience seems unbearable. When suffering seems unbearable thoughts of suicide commonly arise, and some of us will attempt to take our own lives. Suicide is a leading cause of death in the West, and while death is never pleasant, suicide seems an especially tragic way to die. But then again, since we all have to die in the end, if life becomes unbearable, then why prolong the agony?

What does the Buddhist tradition say about suicide? How should Buddhists respond to thoughts of suicide, in ourselves or in others? Much of what is written on suicide from a Buddhist viewpoint is academic and has a legalistic focus, trying to establish whether suicide is 'permissible' for Buddhists. I want to try to get beyond this approach and look at whether suicide is a viable response to suffering. At its heart the question is an ethical one, so first we must look at how the problem looks from the point of view of Buddhist ethics. Then I want to examine cases of suicide in the Pali Canon. Finally I will attempt a synthesis of all these sources and to come to a conclusion about suicide as a response to suffering.

I have chosen to focus this article on the Pali Canon largely because, as well as being full of spiritual jewels, it is rich in social history, and is accessible in reliable translations. The suttas can tell us how people lived and responded to life's vicissitudes at that time. It is also, perhaps surprisingly, rich in case studies of suicide – far more so than other Buddhist writings.

## Buddhist Ethics

The basic Buddhist approach to ethics, or *sīla*, sets out a small number of ethical principles that can be applied to assess the ethical nature of any action of body, speech or mind. Rather than looking at actions themselves, and ending up with long lists of prohibited and permitted actions, Buddhism considers two aspects of action: the mental state behind it, and the consequences of it. The two are closely interrelated.

Mental states based in craving, hatred and delusion will give rise to actions that lead to consequences

of increased suffering and decreased happiness. These mental states and the actions arising from them are termed 'unskillful'. Contrarily, mental states that are based in contentment, love and wisdom will give rise to actions that lead to a decrease in suffering, and an increase in happiness. These are termed 'skillful'.

The terms 'good' and 'bad' are not used in this context. Skillfulness can increase by degrees, allowing for progress. Paraphrasing the Dhammapada slightly we may say that the Buddhist path consists in maximising what is beneficial to living beings, minimising what is harmful, and purifying the mind, which enables us to see the difference more clearly.<sup>[1]</sup>

To guide the spiritual aspirant, the application of Buddhist ethical principles has given rise to a number of sets of precepts, or training principles. Foremost in almost every list is the precept against killing or harming living beings. As a Buddha is said to be incapable of intentionally harming a living being, those aspiring to become Buddhas take on this principle of abstention from harm (ahiṃsā). Indeed a commitment to non-violence is probably the most recognisable ethical trait of Buddhists.

Sangharakshita has elucidated the central importance of the first precept in a paper on ethics, published as *The Ten Pillars of Buddhism*. Killing, he points out, is the most extreme form of violence, and the first precept is concerned, in principle, with the use (or non-use) of violence. The use of violence is effectively the negation of one ego by another, with killing being the absolute negation of that being. It is also 'the absolute negation of the solidarity of one living being qua living being with another'.<sup>[2]</sup> Using material from Shelley, the Dhammapada, and the

Bodhicaryāvatāra, Sangharakshita establishes an important principle with respect to the first precept. He concludes that the practice of the precept involves an 'imaginative identification'<sup>[3]</sup> with beings – with their joys and sufferings, with their very being. We find that this identification with other living beings not only underlies all the other precepts, but also forms a vital part of the spiritual life itself. It is the germ of altruism and, as we shall see, it is useful both for understanding suicide and for offering a way forward for those contemplating suicide. It will be imagined then that killing oneself is simply one variation of killing a living being and will therefore be seen in a negative light as simply another cause of suffering.

#### The Case of Godhika<sup>[4]</sup>

The bhikkhu Godhika is an enthusiastic meditator. He achieves 'temporary liberation of mind', or one

or other of the higher superconscious states, but always fails to gain final liberation because he is beset by illness. After six failures he finds himself once again in a state of temporary liberation and it occurs to him to 'take the knife', i.e. to cut his throat. His rationale is apparently that if he dies in an ordinary state of consciousness his rebirth is uncertain, but if he dies while in a superconscious state he will be reborn in the Brahma realm.[\[5\]](#)

Mara senses what is about to happen and he knows that Godhika is likely to attain liberation by his act since it shows he is 'unconcerned with body and life'.[\[6\]](#) He approaches the Buddha and instead of his usual sneering he is very polite and even deferential, addressing the Buddha as 'Great Hero'. He requests that the Buddha intervene to prevent Godhika from carrying out his resolution on the grounds that it is wrong for a bhikkhu to commit suicide. However, he is too late, and the Buddha says.

'Such indeed is how the steadfast act:

They are not attached to life.

Having drawn out craving at its root

Godhika has attained final Nibbāna.'[\[7\]](#)

So in this case, far from being considered an unskilful act, suicide results in Godhika's enlightenment. Godhika is not attached to life, so he can commit suicide and not suffer any ill consequences spiritually. Here we have the beginning of a puzzle.

### The Case of Vakkali

The bhikkhu Vakkali is extremely ill and racked with excruciating pain.[\[8\]](#) At his request the Buddha visits him and enquires after his health and state of mind. Vakkali reports his weakening condition and expresses his regret at not being well enough to visit his teacher, but the Buddha responds vigorously saying, 'Enough Vakkali! Why do you want to see this foul body? One who sees the Dhamma sees me; one who sees me sees the Dhamma'.[\[9\]](#) He follows this up with a teaching about the impermanence of phenomena, and then departs for the Vulture's Peak.

Then Vakkali requests that his attendants remove him from the house he has been staying in to somewhere more fitting for a bhikkhu to die. That evening two devatās visit the Buddha and predict that Vakkali will attain final liberation. The next day the Buddha sends some bhikkhus to Vakkali to pass on this message of hope. Vakkali thanks the bhikkhus for their message and gives them one for the Buddha. He makes a declaration of his insights into the Buddha's teaching saying, 'I do not doubt

that in regard to what is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change, I have no more desire, lust, or affection.’<sup>[10]</sup> He is effectively saying that he has become an arahant. Soon after the bhikkhus have left, he cuts his throat and dies. As in the story of Godhika the Buddha says that Vakkali has attained final Nibbāna.

In the notes to the translation, Bhikkhu Bodhi offers snippets from the post-canonical Pali commentary. The commentary insists that Vakkali has overestimated his spiritual attainments and that he attained enlightenment only after cutting his jugular vein.<sup>[11]</sup> As discussed in further detail in the case of Channa below, we may be inclined to believe the commentary. First Vakkali feels regret about not going to see the Buddha, but the Buddha points out that it is not his body which is important, but the Dhamma; an arahant would surely have known this. We can also infer that at the time of his visit the Buddha did not consider Vakkali an arahant since he gives him a teaching on impermanence, which would surely have been unnecessary for an arahant.

It is beginning to seem that the Buddhist tradition is not absolute in condemning suicide – not at least if it results in a person attaining ‘final Nibbāna’.

### The Case of Channa

The case of Channa<sup>[12]</sup> is the fullest account of a suicide in the Pali Canon. Damien Keown, editor of the Journal of Buddhist Ethics, has produced a detailed analysis of the sutta in an article entitled ‘The Case of Channa’.<sup>[13]</sup>

Sāriputta, Mahā Cunda and Channa are all living on Vulture’s Peak Mountain, and Channa is very ill. Sāriputta suggests to Mahā Cunda that they visit Channa to see how he is. They find him in a bad state with violent pains in his head and belly, and a burning fever, and his condition is steadily worsening. Channa ends a florid description of his symptoms by saying that he has no desire to live and will therefore ‘use the knife’.

Sāriputta is obviously deeply affected. He offers to attend to Channa personally. ‘Let the venerable Channa not use the knife,’ he says, ‘let the venerable Channa live. We want the venerable Channa to live.’<sup>[14]</sup> But Channa declares that he lacks nothing, that he has worshipped the Teacher with love, and concludes, ‘Friend Sāriputta, remember this: the Bhikkhu Channa will use the knife blamelessly’, implying that he is already an arahant and therefore cannot act unskillfully.<sup>[15]</sup>

Sāriputta, however, is clearly not convinced about Channa, and proceeds to question him about his attainments, especially with respect to how Channa regards the six senses, and about self-view.

Channa gives the answers that we would expect of an arahant: he is not attached to the six senses and doesn't cling to any self-view.

Sāriputta further asks him how he came to these conclusions and Channa answers that he has 'seen and directly known' them – that is that they are the result of transcendental insight. Now Mahā Cunda intervenes; it is clear that he too is not convinced by Channa's words, and gives Channa some pithy advice on what insight and awakening are really about.

Shortly after Mahā Cunda and Sāriputta have left, Channa cuts his throat and dies. Sāriputta then asks the Buddha about the circumstances of Channa's rebirth. The Buddha, apparently surprised, reminds Sāriputta that Channa said that he would 'use the knife blamelessly'. Sāriputta in response expresses his doubts by pointing out that Channa appeared to be blameworthy since he was attached to his family. The Buddha then echoes Channa's own words to the effect that he was an arahant and his suicide was not an unskillful act.

There is an argument that that in the cases of Godhika, Vakkali, and Channa, the Buddha actually condones their suicides on the grounds that the three bhikkhus were arahants, incapable of acting unskillfully. Indeed, if we only had the suttas to go on we might come to this conclusion ourselves. However, as in Vakkali's case, the commentaries once again argue that Channa has overestimated his attainment.

Keown is uneasy with the thought that the Buddha is seen to be condoning suicide because it seems out of context with the wider Buddhist reverence for life (c.f. comments on the Pāyāsi Sutta below). The interpretation relies on viewing ethics solely from the point of view of the motivations of the one who acts. Keown points out that if we look only at motivation then, for instance, murder could be carried out with impunity despite the victim not wanting to die. However, the consequences also need to be taken into account. A person deprived of life will suffer and an act that leads to suffering is judged to be unskillful, even if it is carried out with no apparent ill will.

While the Buddha is not critical of either Godhika or Vakkali, it is only in the case of Channa that he appears to make an unequivocal statement exonerating suicide. He says of Channa:

'Sāriputta, when one lays down this body and clings to a new body, then I say that that one is blameworthy. There was none of that in the Bhikkhu Channa; the Bhikkhu Channa used the knife blamelessly.'[\[16\]](#)

The first sentence of this statement is not related to suicide. It is clinging to a new body which is blameworthy. This could be read as the Buddha simply making use of a tragic situation to highlight a point of Dharma, much as we often do at funerals. The second sentence is the crux of the problem and to Keown it comes down to the difference between condoning an act and exonerating someone who acts. The Buddha was not making a generalised statement about the acceptability of suicide; he was exonerating Channa in this particular case. This weakens the case of those claiming that suicide amongst arahants is acceptable, and accords with the previous two cases.

A second point arises out of translation issues. Sāriputta enquires about Channa's next rebirth and the Buddha replies, 'Sāriputta, didn't the Bhikkhu Channa declare to you his blamelessness (anupavajja).' [17] Keown suggests, on the basis of the commentary, that the word 'anupavajja' would be better translated in this context as 'not being reborn'. [18] In this case Keown says, 'I think that when we place the Buddha's statement (quoted above) in context, we see that the Buddha is offering not an exoneration of suicide but a clarification of the meaning of anupavajja for Sāriputta's benefit.' [19]

Keown then moves onto the commentary, which informs us that Channa was not considered to be an arahant before his suicide, despite his claim. [20] He wonders why, given that the writers of the commentary could not have reconstructed events with any accuracy, they should have been at pains for us to know that Channa was not an arahant before he took the knife.

Keown offers three reasons why the commentary might have objected to us believing Channa's claim. The first is that an arahant is said to be unable to kill a living being intentionally. 'Death-dealing acts of any kind are certainly not in keeping with the canonical paradigm of a calm and serene Arhat.' [21] The second is Channa's apparent inability to tolerate pain which 'shows a lack of self-mastery unbecoming to an Arhat.' [22] The third is that it was possibly an attempt to distance the Buddhists from certain practices of other religious groups, especially the Jain practice of *sallekhanā*, or fast to death (although, as we will see, this was not a concern for the Pali commentary to the Vinaya). The other aspect of the commentarial text is that it contains no discussion of the ethics of suicide and, in particular, no reference to the Vinaya rule that forbids suicide by monks. [23] Keown says, 'By holding that Channa gained enlightenment only after he had begun the attempt on his life, the commentary neatly avoids the dilemma of an Arhat breaking the precepts.' [24]

With his analysis of the contextual and translation factors, Keown has weakened the case for believing that the Buddha condoned arahants committing suicide. By displaying an apparent abhorrence for such a belief, the authors of the Pali commentary weaken the case even further. However, the fact remains that in the three cases so far examined, these men did commit suicide and yet were not reborn.

In conclusion Keown says:

‘What Buddhism values is not death, but life ... a person who opts for death believing it to be a solution to suffering has fundamentally misunderstood the First Noble Truth ... what is significant is that through the affirmation of death he has, in his heart, embraced

Māra.’ [\[25\]](#)

However, by focusing on only one of the three stories we’ve looked at, Keown has minimised the reinforcement that occurs with repetition. The fact is that not one but three arahants, or near-arahants, chose suicide and succeeded in attaining final Nibbāna. Also it is not clear whether, in taking their own lives, any of the three were affirming death. In the case of Godhika the opposite point seems to be being made: that he was not clinging to life! So while it seems clearly established that the Buddha is not lauding suicide, it is by no means clear that he is condemning it.

Immediately preceding this sutta in the Majjhima Nikāya is the story of the death of the lay disciple Anāthapiṇḍika, [\[26\]](#) who describes the pains of his illness in identical terms to those used by Channa when he was visited by Sāriputta. Sāriputta gives him a profound discourse on not clinging to sense experience, nor to this world nor to the next world (i.e. rebirth), which moves Anāthapiṇḍika to tears. He is not overwhelmed by despair as Sāriputta fears, but with joy and gratitude at hearing such a profound discourse which, being a layman, he has never heard the like of before, even though he was a long time disciple of the Buddha and a stream entrant. He dies soon afterwards and is reborn in the Tusita heaven. Despite having identical pains, Anāthapiṇḍika does not despair; does not even seem to contemplate suicide, even though, on the face of it, he is much less spiritually advanced than Channa. And yet he is reborn in a deva realm, which, while a very pleasant place to be, is still part of saṃsāra, still tinged with suffering: Channa, on the other hand, escapes suffering altogether.

Keown suggests that moha, or delusion, is the underlying cause of suicide, a failure to appreciate that death is the greatest suffering. As we have seen, according to the Buddhist tradition, death is a form of suffering, but Keown appears to overlook the evidence that he himself has presented. Death was not the greatest suffering for Channa, nor for Godhika, nor Vakkali. Indeed we might say that the opposite is true; that for them the greatest suffering was living, and that their death at their own hands led to their final liberation from all suffering. We suffer at death only because we cling to life, to our bodies, to our personalities, to material possessions – but if we are not clinging to these things then death is not suffering. I think we have to conclude that for Channa, and the others, as for the Buddha and all the other arahants, death did not involve suffering.

## A Case of Mass Suicide

Once while staying at Vesālī<sup>[27]</sup> the Buddha gave a teaching on the foulness of the body, and on the contemplation of the stages of decomposition of a corpse. These are traditional meditation subjects which help to subdue craving for sensual pleasure. Afterwards he goes into seclusion for two weeks. On returning from his retreat he notices that there are far fewer bhikkhus present than before, musing that formerly the park seemed ‘ablaze with bhikkhus’. When he asks Ānanda about it, Ānanda replies that after the Buddha’s teaching the bhikkhus became ‘repelled, humiliated, and disgusted with this body’ and they had committed suicide. The sutta says that as many as thirty bhikkhus took their lives each day. Ānanda, somewhat mildly perhaps, requests that the Buddha give another teaching. The Buddha calls an assembly of all the bhikkhus in the area and teaches them the mindfulness of breathing meditation.

There is a curious lack of emotion in this sutta; it seems remote and rather dry in comparison to the case of Channa. Surely if up to thirty bhikkhus a day are committing suicide then it must have made some kind of impact, on Ānanda at least. Did he try to stop them, to reason with them? The sutta doesn’t say. Neither does the Buddha condemn the bhikkhus, although he does give a different teaching. He makes no direct reference to the suicides. There is no concern similar to that expressed by Sāriputta at hearing Channa’s intention to ‘use the knife’.

So what has happened here? Has the Buddha made an error in teaching this meditation to these bhikkhus? The commentary gives the possible explanation that 500 of the bhikkhus were linked by common karma. They had formally been hunters who lived together, and then been reborn together in the hell realms. Later they managed to attain a human birth and were all ordained as bhikkhus. However, some portion of their evil karma remained and the Buddha foresaw that it was about to ripen and bring about their violent deaths through suicide (and homicide). Among the bhikkhus so affected were arahants, non-returners, once returners, stream-entrants and ordinary people. It is said that the arahants achieved final Nibbāna, the non-returners, once-returners and stream entrants were bound for a happy rebirth, but that the ordinary people were bound for an uncertain rebirth. Realising that he could not avert the tragedy, the Buddha is said in the commentary to have taught them about the foulness of the body in order to reduce their fear of death and so make it easier for them to die when the time came.

What the commentary seems to be saying is that the Buddha was not extolling death, not encouraging suicide, but trying to mitigate the effects of karmically inevitable suicide by the monks. The translator, Bhikkhu Bodhi, has difficulty in accepting this explanation: ‘the idea of a karmically predetermined suicide seems difficult to reconcile with the conception of suicide as a “volitionally

induced” act’.[\[28\]](#) I also find the commentary's explanation difficult to reconcile with the sutta. If the Buddha knew all along what was happening, why did he need to ask Ānanda?

There is another problem with this episode. Why should an arahant, or even a stream entrant, react to the contemplation of death with repulsion, humiliation and disgust? We would expect an arahant to react with equanimity as, after all, they have been released from all suffering! Compare for example the Buddha’s response to the death of his leading disciples, Sāriputta and Moggallāna: ‘It is wonderful bhikkhus, on the part of the Tathāgata, it is amazing on the part of the Tathāgata, that when such a pair of disciples has attained final Nibbāna, there is no sorrow or lamentation in the Tathāgata.’[\[29\]](#)

We are left with two problems from this episode: apparent inaction in the face of mass suicide, and a deterministic view of karma. The story is retold in the Vinaya, with an additional small detail, and discussed along with other Vinaya material below. It is difficult to know what to make of the discrepancies between sutta and commentary, and between both and the rest of the Buddhist tradition, but I will return to it in the discussion section later. It is tempting to conclude that this sutta has become garbled in the course of transmission.

#### Other Instances in the Nikāyas

The Piyaṅgika Sutta[\[30\]](#) concerns the psychological effect of grief. The main theme of the sutta is that those we hold dear are a source of grief and despair. One example concerns us here. This features a woman who goes to live with her relatives and discovers that they want to divorce her from her husband and give her to another man whom she doesn’t want. When she tells her husband about this he kills her and then commits suicide, thinking that they will be reunited in a future rebirth.

The underlying idea seems to be that the suicide, though a result of despair in this life, is motivated by a belief that a future life may be better. The idea is not challenged in the sutta, but it is addressed to some extent in the next case. However, there is an implied criticism in the context of the sutta. This murder followed by suicide, motivated as it is by grief and despair, is considered unskillful. The man assumes that he and his wife will be reborn. Referring back to what the Buddha said regarding blameworthiness with respect to Channa it would seem to be an unskillful urge.

The Pāyāsi Sutta[\[31\]](#) records a lively debate between Prince Pāyāsi of Kosala and the bhikkhu Kumāra-Kassapa. The prince maintains that there is no rebirth, and that actions have no fruits or results, which is in direct contradiction of the Buddha’s teachings. He is closely questioned by Kassapa and gives a whole series of reasons for his views, and to each Kassapa gives a counter

example to show that the view is erroneous.

The prince argues that if the virtuous know that as a result they will be reborn in more fortunate circumstances, they ought to take advantage of this and kill themselves. However, noting that despite this even virtuous people cling to comfort and to life, he concludes that actions do not have consequences. Kassapa replies with a parable designed to show that it is unwise to try to get ahead of yourself, that the fruits of practice require time to ripen. He tells the story of the two wives of a recently deceased Brahmin. One wife is heavily pregnant; the other, who has a son of ten or twelve who stands to inherit everything, taunts the first woman. The pregnant woman knows that if her child is a boy he will inherit a portion of the estate. Unable to bear to wait to find out the gender of her baby, she cuts open her belly, killing both herself and the child.

Kassapa also points out that the longer those who practise ethics live, the better it is for them since they accrue even more merit. And it is better for all beings because they practise ‘for the welfare of the many, for the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the profit and benefit of devas and humans’.[\[32\]](#)

In the Theragātha and the Therīgāthā we find two poignant stories of disciples who attempt suicide but on the verge of death have sudden realisations. The bhikkhu Sappadasa[\[33\]](#) after 25 years of practice has not attained any peace and is wracked with lust. Feeling that he cannot go back to the household life, and having (seemingly) not made any progress as a bhikkhu, he is about to cut his throat when ‘reasoned thinking arose in me; the peril became clear, disgust with the world was established. Then my mind was released.’[\[34\]](#)

Similarly, in the Therīgāthā, Sīhā, reflecting on her former life when she was ‘distracted and harassed by desires of the senses’, mindlessly ‘following heedless dreams of happiness’, remembers that she became so distraught and unhappy that she decided to hang herself. She takes some rope and goes into the forest:

‘Strong was the noose I made; and on a bough  
I bound the rope and flung it round my neck,  
When see! ... my heart was set at liberty!’[\[35\]](#)

Here we see despair leading to suicidal urges and the urge to follow them bringing about an unexpected transformation. It suggests that even when we have exhausted all personal resources and can see no way forward, there is always a way.

## Suicide and the Vinaya

A frequent pattern in the Vinaya is cases in which a bhikkhu behaves in a certain manner, prompting the Buddha to proscribe that behaviour and institute a rule against it. Many of these rules would have no application in lay life, and are even of dubious ethical significance. Three cases relating to suicide are apposite to this discussion.

The first case is the same as ‘a case of mass suicide’ discussed above. The Vinaya version helps to shed light on an aspect of the story which was not covered in the sutta account. The bhikkhus’ karma results in both suicide and homicide. In this version we find out that rather than take their own lives, some of the bhikkhus find an unscrupulous man to kill them. Secondly we read about a group of monks who persuade a man to kill himself so that they may seduce his wife! They use the same argument as Prince Pāyāsi: that since the man is virtuous he ought to take advantage of this by dying early and thus ensuring a fortunate rebirth.

Based on these two cases a rule is formulated that proscribes assisting a suicide, praising the beauty of death in any way, and inciting anyone to kill themselves.[\[36\]](#) Breaking this rule entails permanent expulsion from the bhikkhu sangha. But here suicide itself is not specifically forbidden. Peter Harvey points out, in his book on Buddhist ethics, that since suicide is death, there is no need to have a rule expelling from the sangha the bhikkhu who kills himself, since he is already dead.

There is rule which seems to forbid attempting suicide, arising from the case of a monk who, tormented by sexual desire, throws himself off the Vulture’s Peak. He does not die because his fall is broken by an unfortunate bhikkhu who does die. In untangling the ethical knots of the situation, the Buddha says, ‘Monks, one should not cast oneself off. Whoever shall cast himself off, there is an offence of wrong doing.’ [\[37\]](#) Nāgasena quotes this rule in The Questions of King Milinda saying that virtuous people should not commit suicide.[\[38\]](#) Here the term ‘cast himself off’, seems to refer, more generally, to casting off the body in the sense of killing oneself by any method.

Harvey translates a section of the Vinaya commentary for us which gives a set of circumstances where suicide is not considered to be a breach of the Vinaya rules. The four situations are (1) suicide, by any means, is wrong if one is ill but medicine and attendants are available (2) In the case of long and serious illness, where one’s attendants are weary and disgusted and begin to ponder euthanasia, one may stop eating and taking medicine, and thereby die without blame, contradicting Keown’s observation that this was a Jain practice from which Buddhists wished to distance themselves; (3)

When a person is clearly dying but has reached the meditative state aimed at, one may stop eating, which seems to be what happened in the case of Godhika; (4) when one is so absorbed in meditation that breaking one's concentration in order to eat would be an obstacle to awakening.[\[39\]](#)

In the Vinaya generally, suicide is condemned. Assisting or encouraging suicide is equal to the gravest offences and demands the strongest possible response, i.e. expulsion from the Sangha for life. But by the time the commentaries were composed, various types of suicide had become sanctioned for bhikkhus.

## Conclusions

I approached this subject expecting to find clear statements against suicide but, perhaps surprisingly, it is not possible, from a study of various instances in the Pali Canon, to come to any hard and fast conclusion regarding suicide. There appear to be times when suicide in that context at least does no harm, though these must surely be very rare. The ethical principles of Buddhism, however, do give us some useful guidelines and there are other indications that suicide is not an acceptable response to suffering in general. Certainly self-harm is unhelpful and a cause of future suffering, and suicide does generally involve self-harm. Taking a slightly broader look at the Pali Canon, we find that the practice of self-torture or self-harm as spiritual exercises is specifically rejected by the Buddha, as, for instance, in the *Kandaraka Sutta*.[\[40\]](#) Elsewhere the Buddha says, 'one who seeks delight in suffering ... is not freed from suffering. One who does not seek delight in suffering ... is freed from suffering.'[\[41\]](#) Self-harm simply leads directly to suffering. Although it would seem that in principle suicide is self-harm, some of the cases cited in the Pali Canon are exceptions in that they result not in suffering, but in the complete release from all suffering!

Violence in any form is not simply a breach of the precepts in a legalistic sense; it actually increases the suffering in the world. In general any action that is based upon unskillful states of mind, such as despair and grief, leads only to more suffering. From a Buddhist point of view death is no answer to suffering since we are simply reborn and cannot, it seems, escape the ripening of our karma. Clinging to life and clinging to death being equally causes of suffering, we are presented with dilemmas. This study has hopefully shown that we cannot prejudge a situation ethically. We must weigh each case carefully, and even then we may, like Sāriputta, who was 'foremost in wisdom', make a mistake.

In his seminal book, *Suicide: A Study In Sociology*, Durkheim suggests that one of the main causes of suicide is a failure to connect with other people:

‘In this case the bond attaching man to life relaxes because that attaching him to society is itself slack. The incidents of private life that seem the direct inspiration of suicide and are considered its determining causes are in reality only incidental causes. The individual yields to the slightest shock of circumstance because the state of society has made him a ready prey to suicide.’[\[42\]](#)

Durkheim also discusses other causes such as mental illness, but underlying this type of suicide is a failure, in Sangharakshita’s terms, to imaginatively identify with other beings. One experiences one’s self as isolated and unloved. Objectively neither of these things is true, but subjectively the experience can be intense and seem inescapable. To overcome it one must strive to make that imaginative leap to identify with people. One must go out to people, search one’s own experience and use it to empathise with others. The Buddha gives us many clues as to how to do this:

‘Having traversed all quarters with the mind,

One finds none anywhere dearer than oneself.

Likewise, each person holds himself dear;

Hence one who loves himself should not harm others.’[\[43\]](#)

Here then are the beginnings of empathy. In Durkheim's terminology one must strengthen, must exercise even, that bond one has with society, so that it becomes strong, flexible and robust.

One glimmer of hope comes from the close call stories of Sappadasa and Sīha. In the ‘positive nidana’ series we see that from suffering arises faith.[\[44\]](#) They are very much aware of their suffering, and somehow in the midst of it they not only gain a greater perspective on it, but they also gain insight into reality itself. It is as though we can go from the depths of despair straight to insight, that in the experience of suffering insight is somehow more accessible. Sangharakshita alludes to this possibility in his Guide to the Buddhist Path in the section on the six realms of conditioned existence. In writing about the hell realms (mental suffering and despair being the psychological counterpart of the this realm) he tells us that the Buddha who appears in this realm offers the being there amṛta.

‘Amṛta’ means ‘deathless’ which is a synonym for Nirvāna. ‘It is as though there is nothing left for us to do about our suffering except to go, as it were, straight to Nirvāna. There is no other hope for us: all worldly hope has foundered.’[\[45\]](#)

The first of the Buddha's Noble Truths tells us that we cannot run away from pain, that it is there in everything we experience in the world. In responding to those who are contemplating suicide, or who have attempted it and lived, we face a difficult task. All the ethical case studies and all the legalistic workings out of ethical principles may well be useless in the face of extreme suffering. Telling

someone who is in extreme physical or mental pain that by ‘taking the knife’ they are breaking the precepts, or that they are only hurting themselves, would be unlikely to dissuade them. What seems important is the imaginative identification. If we are able to empathise with others then we will be more able to face our own suffering, and therefore in a better position to help others face theirs.

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## Notes

[1]. Dhammapada, The Way of Truth, trans. Sangharakshita, Windhorse Publications 2001, 183.

[2]. Sangharakshita, The Ten Pillars of Buddhism, Windhorse Publications, Birmingham, 1996, p.54.

[3]. Ibid., p.57.

[4]. The Connected Discourses of the Buddha, A Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya, trans. Bikkhu Bodhi, Wisdom Publications, Boston, 2000, pp. 212–15.

[5]. Ibid p. 420, note 309.

[6]. Ibid p.420, note 310.

[7]. Ibid p.214.

[8]. The Connected Discourses of the Buddha, op.cit. pp.938–41.

[9]. Ibid p.939.

[10]. Ibid.

[11]. Ibid., p.1082, note 172.

[12]. Channovāda Sutta. The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya, trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi and Bkikkhu

Ñāṇamoli, Wisdom Publications, Boston 1995, p.1114–6. Also appears as

Saṃyutta Nikāya IV.87. See The Connected Discourses of the Buddha, op.cit. pp.1164–7.

[13]. Keown, D. Buddhism and Suicid: The Case of Channa. Journal of Buddhist Ethics 3, 1996, p.83–1.

[14]. Middle Length Discourses, op.cit., p.1114.

[15]. Ibid., p.1115.

- [16] [ibid.](#),
- [17]. [Ibid.](#),
- [18]. Keown [op.cit.](#) p.22. See also [Connected Discourses](#), [op. cit.](#) p.1406 n.51.
- [19]. [Ibid.](#) p.23.
- [20]. Keown [op.cit.](#) p.24. See also [Middle Length Discourses](#). [op. cit.](#) notes 1309, 1310–12.
- [21]. Keown. [op cit.](#) p.27.
- [22]. [Ibid.](#)
- [23]. [Ibid.](#) p.28.
- [24]. [Ibid.](#)
- [25]. [Ibid.](#), pp.30–1.
- [26]. Anāthapindikovāda Sutta, Majjhima Nikāya 143, in [Middle Length Discourses](#), [op.cit.](#), pp.1109–13.
- [27]. [Connected Discourses op.cit.](#) pp.1773–4. It also occurs in the Vinaya at Vin.Ī I 68–70.
- [28] [Ibid.](#), pp.1951–2.
- [29]. [Connected Discourses op.cit.](#) p.1644–5.
- [30]. Majjhima Nikāya 87 (Mī , 106–12) in [The Middle Length Discourses](#), [op.cit.](#) pp.718–22.
- [31]. [The Long Discourses of the Buddha, A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya](#), M. Walshe, Wisdom Publications, Boston, 1995. pp. 356–8.
- [32]. [Ibid.](#), pp.357–8.
- [33]. [Theragāthā op.cit.](#) VI.6 405–10, p.48.
- [34]. [Ibid.](#)
- [35]. [Therigāthā: Poems of the Early Buddhist Nuns](#), trans. C.A.F.Rhys Davids and K.R. Norman, Pali Text Society, Oxford, 1997 (Canto 5, 40, Sīhā ), p.43.
- [36]. [Vinaya Ī I.73](#) quoted in Harvey, P. [An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics](#), Cambridge University Press, 2000, p.289.
- [37]. [Vinaya Ī I.82](#) [ibid.](#) p.291.
- [38]. [The Questions of King Milinda](#) pp.195–7.
- [39]. Harvey. P. [op. cit.](#) p.290–1.
- [40]. [Middle Length Discourses op.cit.](#), pp.443 ff. See especially sections 8–12.
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[44]. Upanisā Sutta, ibid., pp.553–6. See also p.746, note 69.

[45]. Sangharakshita. A Guide to the Buddhist Path, Windhorse Publications, Birmingham, 1996, pp.78–9.