

# SUICIDE AND BUDDHISM

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## Introduction

The issue of suicide within any religious tradition raises basic questions about the value of human life and the freedom of the individual to take control of the most fundamental and unavoidable end of living: death itself. For Buddhism, the problem is not as clearly delineated as it is for Christianity – which Professor Markham describes as, “virtuously unanimous in considering suicide as sin”.<sup>1</sup> Of the three clear cases of suicide reported in the Pali Canon, the case of Channa seems to be the most widely used to demonstrate Buddhist ambivalence on the subject. For this reason – and because it gives the best evidence of the Buddha’s accord with this act – I will focus on this case alone.

I intend to show that the majority of Buddhists and scholars of Buddhism take the view that suicide is wrong for the unenlightened but acceptable for the Arhat and I will examine the reasons why this is so. I will then show why this causes tension with other aspects of Buddhist thought before moving on to an examination of objective grounds for believing all suicide to be wrong when looked at in the context of Buddhist teachings and values.

There are complications here. Firstly, in reducing a complex and varied religion to the reports in the Pali Canon without bringing in thousands of years of contextual and cultural variation I am in danger of over simplification. My search, however, is restricted to looking for grounds for an objective belief in the immorality of suicide within the Pali Canon and not to presume a binding ethical position to which all Buddhists should adhere.

Secondly, a definition of suicide in itself will not be attempted – beyond stating that I refer to the deliberate self-inflicted death for no other (worldly) reason than putting an end to a life and everything therein. Issues concerning whether feeding one’s body to a hungry tigress (as in *Jatakamala*) or the Jain tradition of fasting to death constitute suicide, will not be discussed here as space is limited.

## Suicide and the Arhat/Non-Arhat division

Harran, writing in Mircea Eliade’s *Encyclopaedia of Religion* points towards the equivocal treatment of suicide in Buddhism, stating: “Buddhism, in its various forms affirms that, while suicide as self sacrifice may be appropriate for the person who is an arhat, one who has attained enlightenment, it is still very much the exception to the rule.”<sup>2</sup>

Carl Becker, commenting upon the suicide of the monks Channa and Vakkali, refers to “the Buddha’s praise of the suicides” and claims that this ‘praise’ is based upon the fact that, “...their minds were selfless, desireless and enlightened at the moment of their passing.”<sup>3</sup> Whilst I disagree with Becker regarding the Buddha’s praising of these suicides (and I will shortly show why) this does give us an insight into the reasons why there is a division in morality between the suicidal act of an arhat and a non-arhat. In 1987, Etienne Lamotte wrote: “The desperate person who takes his own life obviously aspires to annihilation: his suicide, instigated by desire, will not omit him from fruition and he will have to partake in the fruit of his action. In the case of the ordinary man, suicide is folly and does not achieve the intended aim.”<sup>4</sup>

The position is summed up by Wiltshire who commented that “suicide is salvifically [sic] fatal in most cases, but not for the arahant since he cannot be motivated by desire.”<sup>5</sup> and this position is demonstrated further by my own research amongst Buddhist newsgroups on the internet where the unanimous response to my inquiries was fundamentally the same as the views

expressed by the scholars I have quoted.

We must therefore conclude that the majority view is that there is nothing wrong *per se* in the act of suicide, but that the morality of the act is entirely dependent upon the motivation and state of mind of the person who commits the act. In other words, morality in the case of suicide is purely subjective.

### **The tension between this position and Buddhism**

This idea that the individual's state of mind is the defining factor of morality seems to lead to conclusions which are contrary to Buddhist doctrine, when applied to other issues. Keown<sup>6</sup> gives the example that this hard and uncompromising form of subjectivism would mean that the wrongness of murder lies solely in the perpetrator's desire to kill, which ignores the objective dimension of the act: that an injustice is done to someone insofar as a person is deprived of his life. This formulation of subjectivism actually ignores the act itself and only takes account of the actor. In this way, it is only the desire which is wrong and not the suicide or murder itself. The inescapable conclusion of this line of argument is therefore that someone who murders without desire does nothing wrong.

One could argue here that it is impossible to murder without desire and yet if an arhat is able to commit suicide without desire (as is claimed) there seems no theoretical reason why that same arhat could not murder without desire which – as my incursions into Buddhist internet newsgroups assure me – is absurd. This point does involve a linkage between suicide and murder which some may object to and yet the similarities are strong: both involve violence and death and both can (as in the case of euthanasia) involve compassion. For this reason the point has some force.

Another objection to this subjectivist position as compatible with Buddhism

– or indeed any other practical ethic – is that the gravity of a crime would seem to be directly proportional to the amount of passion or desire present in the mind of the perpetrator. In this scenario, the murder of an abusive, drunken husband in a rage of fury (for example) would be far worse than the cold-blooded, dispassionate execution of a person by a contract killer. In Buddhist as well as Western countries, the opposite is deemed to be true.

There is also another reason why suicide would have to be given the special status of the arhat/non-arhat division if it is to be maintained: the Buddhist tradition of imitating the enlightened ones in everything. This exhortation covers all aspects of the life and thought of the enlightened ones who are striving to be like their masters – and it is not clear why suicide should be the only exception to this rule.

For these reasons, the theory that the state of mind in suicide is definitive in ascertaining its morality within Buddhism appears to be on weak ground. In the final part of this essay, I propose to show that accounts of the Buddha's 'praise' of suicide are inconsistent with the primary texts. From this base I will put forward objective grounds for the immorality of suicide with Buddhism.

### **The Buddha and suicide**

The facts of the Buddhist monk Channa's suicide are very straightforward. He had an incurable disease which caused him immense pain and suffering. He killed himself believing – perhaps falsely – that he had reached *parinirvana* (see Schumann 1982<sup>7</sup>). He also believed that he had no further purpose on earth and that therefore all further suffering was pointless. His last words to his friend Sariputta were, "remember this: the monk Channa will use the knife blamelessly." After uttering these words he killed himself. The central issue here is whether Channa was an arhat at the time he decided to commit suicide. He seems to claim that he was and yet that

does not mean that this was the case. It also doesn't seem to be the opinion of the early commentators on the Pali Canon – as I will demonstrate.

Becker, Keown and Wiltshire all agree that the case of Channa gives the best evidence that the Buddha condoned suicide and Keown cites the particular passage that is used to show permission. The Buddha said: *“For whoso Sariputta, lays down one body and takes up another body, of him I say, ‘he is to blame’. But not so with brother Channa. Without reproach was the knife used by the brother Channa.”*

Here we can see the roots of the current majority position outlined earlier. One initial comment is that saying his action is “without reproach” is not necessarily the same thing as condoning the act and is certainly not the “praising” referred to by Carl Becker. Keown draws a useful parallel here with Christ's reaction to the adulterous woman, defending her with the words, *“Neither do I condemn thee.”* Clearly Christ intends not to condone adultery but to show compassion to a sinner. Compassion is one of the central doctrines of Buddhism and it is at least as likely that the Buddha was exonerating Channa rather than condoning suicide in a paradigmatically similar fashion to Christ with the adulteress.

The commentary accompanying the main text of the story of Channa in the Pali Canon attempts to make sense of this death in the following ways. (I am relying here upon Damien Keown's account, as I have been unable to locate an English translation of the primary source.)

It is suggested that Channa, because he was unable to bear the pain of the illness, could not have been enlightened when he decided to take his own life. There is clearly a problem in the view that an enlightened person, having escaped from suffering, could be subservient to pain and so the commentary seems justified in

this presumption. We are then told that Channa achieved enlightenment at the point of death and was thus a *samasisin* (equal headed one). There is a long tradition of sudden enlightenment at the point of death within the Buddhist tradition and this interpretation throws a different light upon the case of Channa which the traditional interpretations discussed here fail to take into account.

In saying that Channa was not an arhat until the point of death, those who suggest that suicide is wrong for a non-arhat would have to accept that Channa was wrong to commit the act. It is at least probable that in the conception and execution of the act he was not an arhat and this temporal issue is crucial to the following conclusions.

### Conclusions

We have arrived at the point where the conclusion that suicide by an arhat is acceptable to Buddhism, has become unjustifiable with regards to the teachings of the Buddha as reported in the Pali Canon. The prime example of an arhat committing suicide (Channa) turns out to be not the suicide of an arhat, but instead the actions of an unenlightened man who can stand the pain of life no more. He was only to become enlightened at the point of death and thus, his enlightened ‘self’ was exonerated of responsibility. It was the old, flawed Channa who committed the act and the old, flawed Channa who was wrong to do as he did.

The point here is that there is evidence to suggest that no arhat has committed suicide and that those who point to Channa are misled if they use his death to substantiate such a claim. Therefore, although an enlightened person may be able to commit suicide in an a priori sense, we have no empirical evidence to support the view that he or she might do so. The argument is therefore no more substantial than a claim that an arhat can blamelessly murder, or blamelessly use a nuclear device on an innocent population. This may be true as his

greater insight into nature could allow him such a course of action, but I suspect that no Buddhist would claim that this is the case.

This interpretation is consistent with Buddhist doctrine in a way that others are not. Indeed, the First Precept shows that the taking of any human life is the gravest offence a Buddhist can commit.<sup>8</sup> Further, the third *parajika* is clearly against suicide, abetting suicide and commending death by suicide<sup>9</sup>; and the principle of *ahimsa* (non-injury) is clearly shattered by any act of violence – including suicide.

Therefore it seems reasonable to conclude that rather than the morality of suicide being subjective there is a great deal of evidence to support the contrary view, namely that there is some feature of the act itself which marks it out as morally suspect.

Buddhism sees death not as an end to life, but merely as a transition to another life. Anyone who thinks of death as an end to suffering has misunderstood the First Noble Truth, which clearly states that death itself is one of the most basic aspects of suffering and that in this way it is the problem, not the solution. An arhat will not commit suicide because he cannot wish for death (or life). When death comes, it comes and can only be met with indifference otherwise the arhat has revealed himself to be less than enlightened.

If, like Channa, the person who commits suicide gains enlightenment at the point of death then his good fortune will not require him to go through the suffering of another life, regardless of the objective immorality of his act.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> Markham. *The Times newspaper* 14 May 1998.
- <sup>2</sup> Eliade, M. *Encyclopaedia of Religion*. New York: Macmillan, 1987.
- <sup>3</sup> Becker, C. B. Buddhist views of suicide and euthanasia. *Philosophy East and West*. 1990; 40:544-556

<sup>4</sup> Lamotte, E. Religious suicide in early Buddhism. *Buddhist Studies Review* 1987. 4/2: 105-118

<sup>5</sup> Wiltshire, M. G. The 'suicide' problem in the Pali Canon. *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 1983. 6:124-140

<sup>6</sup> Keown, D. *Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.

<sup>7</sup> Schumann, H. W. *The Historical Buddha*. London: Arkana 1982.

<sup>8</sup> Saddhatissa, H. *Buddhist Ethics*. Boston: Wisdom 1970.

<sup>9</sup> Nakasone, R. Y. *Ethics of Enlightenment*. Freemont: Dharma Cloud Publishers, 1990.

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*"It will generally be found that as soon as the terrors of life reach the point where they outweigh the terrors of death, a man will put an end to his life. But the terrors of death offer considerable resistance; they stand like a sentinel at the gate leading out of this world. Perhaps there is no man alive who would not have already put an end to his life, if this end had been of a purely negative character, a sudden stoppage of existence. There is something positive about it; it is the destruction of the body; and a man shrinks from that, because his body is the manifestation of the will to live..."*

*Suicide may also be regarded as an experiment – a question which man puts to Nature, trying to force her to answer. The question is this: What change will death produce in a man's existence and in his insight into the nature of things? It is a clumsy experiment to make, for it involves the destruction of the very consciousness which puts the question and awaits the answer."*

**Arthur Schopenhauer** (1788-1860)