

ISSN 1076-9005

Buddhism and Suicide
The Case of Channa

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Publication Date: 1 March 1996

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Introduction

In his 1983 paper “The 'Suicide' Problem in the Pāli Canon,” Martin Wiltshire wrote: “The topic of suicide has been chosen not only for its intrinsic factual and historical interest but because it spotlights certain key issues in the field of Buddhist ethics and doctrine.”¹ I think Wiltshire was right to identify suicide as an important issue in Buddhist ethics:² it raises basic questions about autonomy and the value of

¹ Wiltshire, Martin G. (1983) “The 'Suicide' Problem in the Pāli Canon,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 6, pp. 124-140. I am grateful to Lance Cousins, Peter Harvey and Richard Gombrich for comments on an earlier draft of this paper. A fuller discussion of suicide will be found in a forthcoming book on Buddhist ethics by Peter Harvey to be published by Cambridge University Press entitled *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics: Foundations, Values and Issues*, and I am grateful to the author for sight of an advance copy of the relevant chapters.

² The literature on suicide includes L. de La Vallée Poussin “Suicide (Buddhist)” in *The Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings (Edinburgh, Clark: 1922) XII, 24-26; Woodward, F.L. (1922) “The Ethics of Suicide in Greek, Latin and Buddhist Literature,” *Buddhist Annual of Ceylon*, pp. 4-9; Gernet, Jacques (1960) “Les suicides par le feu chez les bouddhiques chinoises de Ve au Xe siècle,” *Mélanges publiés par l'Institut des Hautes Études Chinoises* II, pp. 527-558; Filliozat, Jean (1963) “La Morte Volontaire par le feu en la tradition bouddhique indienne,” *Journal Asiatique* 251, pp. 21-51; Jan, Yün-hua (1964-5) “Buddhist Self-Immolation in Medieval China,” *History of Religion* 4, pp.243-268; Rahula, W. (1978), “Self-Cremation in Mahāyāna Buddhism,” in *Zen and the Taming of the Bull*, Gordon Fraser, London; Van Loon, Louis H. (1983) “Some Buddhist Reflections on Suicide,” *Religion in Southern Africa* 4, pp. 3-12; Lamotte, E. (1987) “Religious Suicide in Early Buddhism,” *Buddhist Studies Review* 4, pp. 105-126 (first published in French in 1965); Harvey, Peter (1987) “A Note and Response to ‘The Buddhist Perspective on Respect for Persons’,” *Buddhist Studies Review* 4, pp. 99-103; Becker, Carl B. (1990) “Buddhist views of suicide and euthanasia,” *Philosophy East and West* 40, pp. 543-556; Becker, Carl B. (1993), *Breaking the Circle: death and the afterlife in Buddhism*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press; Stephen Batchelor, “Existence, Enlightenment and Suicide: the Dilemma of Nāṇavīra Thera,” unpublished paper given at The Buddhist Forum, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, December 8th 1993. Woodward refers to a discussion of the Channa

human life, and plays a pivotal role in related questions such as physician-assisted suicide and euthanasia.

I will not discuss any of those questions here, since the first priority is to address the specific “problem” Wiltshire identified in the title of his paper, namely that suicide seems to be regarded with ambivalence in the Pali canon. Wiltshire wrote in his opening paragraph: “We should, perhaps, point out that suicide first presented itself to us as an intriguing subject of enquiry when we discovered that it appeared to be regarded equivocally within the Canon, that it was both censored and condoned.” The view that suicide is regarded equivocally in the canon goes back at least to the 1920s. In his 1922 entry on suicide in the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, de La Vallée Poussin wrote:

We have therefore good reason to believe (1) that suicide is not an ascetic act leading to spiritual progress and tonirvāna, and (2) that no saint or arhat—a spiritually perfect being—will kill himself. But we are confronted with a number of stories which prove beyond dispute that we are mistaken in these two important conclusions.³

In the same year F.L.Woodward expressed a similar opinion.

There are, however, passages in the Nikāyas where the Buddha approves of the suicide of bhikkhus: but in these cases they were Arahants, and we are to suppose that such

episode in “Edmunds, *Buddhist and Christian Gospels*, ii, 58” but I cannot locate this passage. For more general treatments see Thakur, Upendra (1963), *The History of Suicide in India*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal; *Suicide in Different Cultures*, ed. Norman L. Farberow, Baltimore: University Park Press, 1975; Young, Katherine K. (1989), “Euthanasia: Traditional Hindu Views and the Contemporary Debate,” in *Hindu Ethics. Purity, Abortion, and Euthanasia*, eds. Harold G. Coward, Julius J. Lipner, and Katherine K. Young, McGill Studies in the History of Religions, ed. Katherine K. Young, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, pp. 71-130, esp. pp.103-7. There is additional literature on ritual suicide in Japan (*seppuku*), but I see this practice as bound up with the Japanese Samurai code and as owing little to Buddhism (Becker apparently disagrees).

³ 1922:25. In a more recent encyclopedia entry Marilyn J. Harran writes: “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” s.v. “Suicide (Buddhism and Confucianism)” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. in chief Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan), vol. 14 p.129.

beings who have mastered self, can do what they please as regards the life and death of their carcass.⁴

Views of this kind have influenced Western scholarship over the past seventy years.⁵ In recent times Becker—going beyond the evidence of the texts—has spoken of the Buddha's “praise” of the suicides of Vakkali and Channa (1993:136) and claimed that there is a “consistent Buddhist position” (1993: 137) on suicide (a permissive one).

Various attempts, for the most part along similar lines, have been made to explain why suicide is prohibited for the unenlightened but permitted for the enlightened. In 1965 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 of the fruit of his action. In the case of the ordinary man, suicide is a folly and does not achieve the intended aim.

This situation is compared with the suicide of an enlightened person:

In contrast, suicide is justified in the persons of the Noble Ones who have already cut off desire and by so doing neutralised their actions by making them incapable of producing further fruit. From the point of view of early Buddhism, suicide is a normal matter in the case of the Noble Ones who, having completed their work, sever their last link with the world and voluntarily pass into *Nirvāna*, thus definitively escaping from the world of rebirths (1965:106f).

The significant distinction for Lamotte, then, is that the Arhat acts without desire whereas the unenlightened person does not. Wiltshire shares this view, commenting that “suicide is salvifically fatal in most cases, but not for the arahant, since he cannot be motivated by *tanhā*

⁴ 1922:8.

⁵ Views of this kind with certain variations are expressed by Poussin (1922), Wiltshire (1983), van Loon (1983), Lamotte (1987), Taniguchi, Shoyu (1987) “A Study of Biomedical Ethics from a Buddhist Perspective,” unpublished MA Thesis, Berkeley: Graduate Theological Union and the Institute of Buddhist Studies, p.86-89, Young (1989), Florida, Robert E. (1993) “Buddhist Approaches to Euthanasia,” *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 22, pp. 35-47, p.41.

(S.I.121).⁶ Becker, too, sees the morality of suicide as turning entirely on motivation, although he highlights the role of the second of the three “roots of evil” (*akusalamūla*) rather than the first. “There is nothing intrinsically wrong with taking one's own life,” he writes, “if not done in hate, anger or fear” (1993:137).

Contrary to views of this kind, it seems to me that Buddhism believes there *is* something intrinsically wrong with taking one's own life (or indeed taking any life), and that motivation—although of great importance in the assessment of the moral status of actions—is not the sole criterion of rightness.⁷ My unease about allowing a determining role to motivation is that it leads in the direction of an ethical theory known as Subjectivism. Subjectivism holds that right and wrong are simply a function of the actor's mental states, and that moral standards are a matter of personal opinion or feelings. For the subjectivist, nothing is objectively morally good or morally bad, and actions in themselves do not possess significant moral features. The “roots of evil” approach to moral assessment described above is subjectivist to the extent that it claims that the same action (suicide) can be either right or wrong depending on the state of mind of the person who suicides: the presence of desire (or fear) makes it wrong, and the absence of desire (or fear) makes it right.

If applied in other moral contexts, however, this reasoning would lead to unusual conclusions. It would mean, for example, that the wrongness of murder lies solely in the perpetrator's desire to kill. But this is to take no account at all of the objective dimension of the crime, namely the wrongness of depriving an innocent person of his life. In murder, a grave injustice is done *to someone*, regardless of the murderer's state of mind. To locate the wrongness of murder solely in desire, is to miss this crucial moral feature of the act. In suicide, of course, there is no victim, but the comparison illustrates that moral judgements typically pay attention to *what is done*, and not just the actor's state of mind.

To say that suicide is wrong because motivated by desire, moreover, is really only to say that *desire* is wrong. It would follow

⁶ 1983:134.

⁷ On the criteria for moral evaluation in Buddhism see Peter Harvey “Criteria for Judging the Unwholesomeness of Actions in the Texts of Theravāda Buddhism,” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 2 1995: 140-151. See also Keown, Damien (1995), *Buddhism & Bioethics*. (London: Macmillan), pp. 37-64.

from this that someone who murders without desire does nothing wrong.⁸ The absurdity of this conclusion illustrates why a subjectivist approach to the morality of suicide is inadequate. Subjectivism leads to the conclusion that suicide (or murder) can be right for one person but wrong for another, or even right and wrong for the same person at different times, as his state of mind changes, and desire comes and goes.

The suggestion that suicide is right for Arhats but wrong for non-Arhats also seems strange in another respect. Arhats and Buddha's are held up by the tradition as moral paradigms: in all circumstances to imitate a Buddha or an Arhat is to do right. Suicide, however, according to the views of Lamotte and others, is an exception to this rule. In this one respect the unenlightened should not emulate the enlightened. But why should suicide be the one anomalous moral issue? Why should there be a common morality in everything else, and a two-tier morality in the case of suicide? There seems no obvious reason why suicide (and not murder, stealing, or lying) should constitute a "special case."

The reasons above suggest that the explanation offered by Lamotte and others as to why Buddhism condones suicide is mistaken. This rejection of subjectivism calls into question the consensus that Buddhism condones Arhat suicide and suggests that the grounds for this claim need to be reassessed.

What I wish to do in this paper is take another look at the evidence and see whether it really does show "beyond dispute," as de La Vallée Poussin thought, that suicide is condoned. To this end I propose to examine one of the three suicide cases reported in the Pali canon, namely that of the monk Channa. I have chosen the case of Channa because it provides the strongest evidence of the three that Buddhism condones suicide under certain conditions. The case of Channa is well known but has not been examined in detail, nor have the views of the commentary been taken much into account, something I wish to remedy here. To anticipate my conclusions it seems to me that on closer examination the case is less straightforward than has

⁸ It may be objected that it is impossible to murder without desire or hatred. Regardless of whether this is psychologically true, the theoretical possibility of desireless murders being regarded as not immoral reveals the inadequacy of the subjectivist account. Another defect in the account is that the gravity of murders would be nothing more than a function of the amount of desire present. A "crime of passion," therefore, would be far more serious than a random "drive-by" shooting. The fact that courts often take an opposite view gives cause to question this conclusion.

sometimes been thought, both in terms of textual interpretation and as regards the normative conclusions to be drawn from it.

There are other aspects of the subject of suicide which deserve consideration, but which I will not have space to explore. In this paper I offer no definition of suicide since the cases I will mention create no definitional problems: they are all reasonably clear examples of self-willed and self-inflicted death. The concept of suicide, however, is complex, and it is by no means easy to offer a definition which is neither too narrow nor too broad. Many questions arise from how we define suicide *viz a viz* other forms of voluntary death. From a Buddhist perspective these include questions such as whether nirvana is a kind of suicide⁹ (the Buddha was sometimes accused of nihilism), whether the Buddha's own death was suicide,¹⁰ whether feeding one's body to a hungry tigress is suicide,¹¹ and whether the Japanese ritual of seppuku constitutes suicide.¹² It is with some relief that I leave these matters to one side as this time!

Visiting the Sick

Of the three canonical suicide cases, two—those of Channa and Godhika—are recounted in the conventional canonical format for describing visits to the sick.¹³ Visiting the sick is regarded as a worthy activity for monks.¹⁴ The following pattern is typical of such accounts, although there is considerable variation:

⁹ This is suggested at Miln. 195f.

¹⁰ As suggested, for example, by Florida, Robert E. (1993) "Buddhist Approaches to Euthanasia," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 22, pp. 35-47, p.45. Cf. Poussin, "In the case of Śākyamuni we have to deal with a voluntary death" (op cit). We must bear in mind, however, that the Buddha had rejected Māra's overtures in this direction at the start of his teaching career (D.ii.102) and did so again three months before his death (D.ii.99).

¹¹ The story of the hungry tigress is found in the Jātaka-māla and the Suvarnaprabhāsottama-sūtra.

¹² See Fairbairn, Gavin J. (1995), *Contemplating Suicide*. London: Routledge, pp. 144ff. Fairbairn suggests that seppuku is not suicide since the samurai does not seek to end his life, but only to perform his duty.

¹³ For example S.v.344 (Dīghāvu); S.iv.55, M.iii.263 (Channa); S.iii.119 (Vakkali); S.iii.124 (Assajji); M.iii.258, S.v.380 (Anāthapiṇḍika).

¹⁴ V.5.230(167):2. bhagavatā kho āvuso gilānupaṭṭhānaṃ vaṇṇitaṃ. References in this format are to the BUDSIR edition of the Thai Tipiṭaka on

1. Patient is introduced by name with a stock description of his condition (“afflicted, suffering and gravely ill”)⁵
2. Patient sends an emissary asking for a religious visit⁶
3. A senior disciple or the Buddha comes to visit
4. Visitor expresses the hope that the condition is improving but patient reports the condition is deteriorating
5. Visitor delivers a sermon then leaves
6. Something happens to the patient (recovers, dies, commits suicide)
7. News of what has transpired is reported to the Buddha
8. The Buddha makes a pronouncement.

Several other cases follow the pattern of the suicides but without ending in self-inflicted death. Wiltshire, however, treats these as relevant to the issue of suicide:

Owing to their fundamental resemblance to the indubitable suicide stories, we shall treat these as relevant to the issue. The problem of decipherment is partly created by the Pāli locution *katakāla* (lit., “making an end”) which is used both for death by natural causes and for suicide.¹⁷

Wiltshire goes astray here in two respects. The first is a minor one: the compound *katakāla* does not occur in the canon and the term invariably used is *kālakata*. More important, however, is his suggestion that this term is used for suicides. There is no reason to suppose from the contexts that any of the 174 occurrences of this term in the canon involve death by suicide.¹⁸ *Kālakata* simply means “dead,” and in the absence of further qualification there is no reason to think it denotes suicide any more than the use of the English word “dead” implies a death by suicide. It is noteworthy that the term *kālakata* is not used anywhere in connection with the three *bhikkhu* suicide cases: instead all three are said to have “used the knife” (*sattham āhāresi*).¹⁹ By including

CD-ROM. The present reference is to volume V, p.230, paragraph (or item) 167, line 2.

¹⁵ It is unclear whether Godhika is suffering from an illness or not.

¹⁶ In the case of Channa item 2 is absent and Sāriputta and Mahā Cunda visit on their own initiative.

¹⁷ 1983:132.

¹⁸ The same may be said of the 137 occurrences of *kālam akāsi* (“died”).

¹⁹ I take this (with the commentary) in a literal sense to mean that a knife (or similar sharp instrument) was actually employed. The commentary states that Channa “severed his windpipe” (*kanthanālam chindi*). It is possible that

the other cases in his discussion of suicide Wiltshire gives the impression that suicide was more common than it was. Assuming these stories to be connected with the three suicides, he writes:

The stories which belong in this category are those of the bhikkhu Assaji (S.III.124)—this story succeeds Vakkali's in the Samyutta text and shares the same format, apart from not mentioning his death; it was probably thought superfluous to mention this, as the primary object of these suttas is convey doctrine on the khandhas ... and of the two upāsakas Anāthapiṇḍika (M.III.258; S.V.380) and Dīghāvu (S.V.344).²⁰

There is no reason to link any of these stories to the suicides, and it is pure speculation to assume that any of the deaths involved a suicidal intent. As Wiltshire himself notes, the suicide cases are clearly distinguished by the reference to the monks “using the knife,” but there is no reference to this in any of the cases mentioned above. As far as Assaji is concerned, the text reports (S.v.380ff) that he is gravely ill with a breathing complaint. The Buddha visits and gives teachings but, as Wiltshire notes, no mention is made of the patient's death. Anāthapiṇḍika is visited once by Sāriputta (unusually, his pains disappear!) and once by Ānanda. In neither case is his death reported nor is there any mention of death being contemplated. The episode of Dīghāvu (A.v.344), a lay-disciple, follows the familiar pattern. Dīghāvu is seriously ill and his condition is deteriorating. He requests a visit from the Buddha who comes and give teachings. Dīghāvu dies and the Buddha reveals that he has been reborn as a non-returner (anāgāmin).

In fact there are only two cases in the canon which give any reason at all for thinking that suicide may be condoned, those of Channa and Vakkali.²¹ In the third case—that of Godhika—the Buddha

“using the knife” could be a locution which denotes suicide by any means, but I think this unlikely given that, as Wiltshire notes (1983:130), a razor is part of a monk's “kit” (although apparently not referred to as sattha). It seems likely that “using the knife” is meant in a literal sense, since the layman who commits suicide at M.ii.109f is not said to have “used the knife” but to have cut or ripped himself open (attānam upphālesi).

²⁰ 1983:132.

²¹ Other canonical suicides include those of the unnamed monks in the Vinaya whose deaths led to the promulgation of the third pārājika. At M.ii.109f (supra) a husband kills his wife and then himself so they will not be separated. Cases of attempted suicide leading to enlightenment include those of the monk Sappadāsa in the Theragāthā (408), and the nun Sīhā in the

voices no opinion at all on the monk's suicide. Even in the case of Vakkali the Buddha simply predicts that Vakkali's death will not be "ill" (*apāpika*)²²—a statement which could be interpreted in a variety of ways.²³ Only in one case—that of Channa—is anything resembling exoneration given after the event. This takes the form of a short statement by the Buddha which is translated by F. L. Woodward as follows:

For whoso, Sāriputta, lays down one body and takes up another body, of him I say "He is to blame." But it is not so with the brother Channa. Without reproach was the knife used by the brother Channa.²⁴

It would not be exaggerating greatly to say that the claim that suicide is permissible for Arhats rests to a large extent on the above passage. I will come in a moment to some reasons why the above translation may be doubtful, but even taking it at face value I think we should exercise caution before interpreting it to mean that suicide by Arhats is permissible.

The first point to note is that the Buddha does not explicitly state that he condones suicide by Arhats. He neither says this here, nor does he say it anywhere else. What the Buddha actually says in the first part of his statement is something slightly different, namely that what he regards as blameworthy is grasping after a new body. This is little more than an affirmation of standard Buddhist doctrine.²⁵ The Buddha could be seen here, as on numerous other occasions, as skillfully taking advantage of the context to make a point about the importance of remaining focused on the goal. In other words, Channa's death becomes

Therīgāthā (77) (both discussed by Sharma, 1987:123f. Cf Rahula 1978:22f). At Ud. 92f. the aged Arhat Dabba rises in the air and disappears in a puff of smoke. There is a similar passage on Bakkula at M.iii.124-8.

²² *Mā bhāyi Vakkali ... apāpakaṃ te maraṇaṃ bhavissati apāpikā kālakiriya.*

²³ It may be intended as simple reassurance to Vakkali that he has nothing to fear from death, or a prediction that he will die an Arhat.

²⁴ *Kindred Sayings*, vol. IV p.33. In her introductory essay to the Majjhima translation Horner seems to suggest that the compilers of the canon had actually "rigged" the text in order to exonerate Channa. Of the Buddha's exonerating statement she writes "they make him [the Buddha] sanction the unworthy act of the poor little sufferer" (p.xi.).

²⁵ The use of the word "blameworthy," however, is unusual. The Buddha does not elsewhere describe those who are reborn as "blameworthy."

a poignant occasion for the Buddha to emphasize the urgency of putting an end to rebirth.²⁶

The trickier bit to explain, however, is the final part of the statement where the Buddha says “Without reproach was the knife used by the brother Channa.” Do these words not clearly imply, as Wiltshire and others have suggested, an exoneration with respect to suicide? Yes, I think they do. Nevertheless, I do not think this leads to the conclusion that Buddhism *condones* suicide. Exoneration and condonation are two different things. Exoneration is the removal of a burden (*onus*) of guilt, while condonation is the approval of what is done. These two terms reflect the distinction—well established in Western ethics and law—between the wrongfulness of acts and the guilt incurred by those who commit them. Although an act may be wrong in itself, the burden of guilt incurred in its commission may vary. Self-defence, provocation, duress, and insanity are all grounds which mitigate otherwise wrongful acts. It is also widely recognized with respect to suicide in particular that there may be psychological and other factors present which diminish responsibility.²⁷ This is one reason suicide has been decriminalized in many jurisdictions.

If, like Woodward, we translate the Buddha's concluding statement to the effect that Channa used the knife “without reproach,” it could mean simply *that*—that the Buddha felt it would be improper to blame or reproach Channa (or someone in his situation). This need not mean that suicide is morally right: it simply acknowledges that the burden of guilt in many circumstances may be slight or non-existent.²⁸ Thus we might say in the present case the Buddha is exonerating *Channa* rather than condoning *suicide*. Wiltshire makes a similar point:

²⁶ For example, when asked about worshipping the six directions in the *Sigālovāda-sutta* he deftly switches the context to social relationships.

²⁷ This distinction is made clear in Catholic teachings. The *Declaration on Euthanasia* prepared by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith states: “Intentionally causing one's own death, or suicide, is therefore equally as wrong as murder ... although, as is generally recognized, at times there are psychological factors present that can diminish responsibility or even completely remove it” (Boston: St. Paul's Books and Media, 1980), p.7.

²⁸ This is similar to Christ's reaction to the woman taken in adultery: in defending the woman with the words “Neither do I condemn thee,” (John 8, 11) Christ is not endorsing adultery but displaying compassion for the woman who has sinned.

Apart from representing putative cases of suicide, these stories share one further overriding theme ... each of the protagonists is suffering from a serious degenerative illness ... So, when we try to understand why they are exonerated, it is initially necessary to appreciate that their act is not gratuitously performed, but constrained by force of circumstances.²⁹

The discussion so far, then, would suggest that there is no need to see the Buddha's pronouncement on Channa as establishing a normative position on suicide by Arhats. At the very least, the evidence falls a long way short of proving “beyond dispute” that suicide for Arhats is condoned.

So far I have discussed the Buddha's exoneration of Channa out of context. What I would like to do for the remainder of the paper is take a closer look at the facts of the case. The closer we look, the less confident I think we will feel about drawing any firm conclusions from it.

Channa

The story of Channa³⁰ occurs in two places in the canon, once in the *Majjhima-nikāya*³¹ and once in the *Samyutta-nikāya*.³² I will first of all summarise the narrative in the main text and then consider the views of the commentary.

The *Channovāda-sutta* relates how Sāriputta, Mahā Cunda and Channa were residing on Vulture Peak mountain. Channa was

²⁹ 1983:132.

³⁰ Three Channas are known in the canon: a *paribbājaka*, Gotama's charioteer, and the elder (*thera*) who commits suicide. Details in DPPN.

³¹ *Sutta* 144.

³² In the *Majjhima-nikāya* it occurs in The Division of the Sixfold Base (*Salāyatana-vagga*), the fifth and last division of the “final fifty” (*upari-pannāsa*). Here, it is the second of the five “advisory” (*ovāda*) style discourses which form the first half of the division. In the *Samyutta-nikāya* it is found in the *Salāyatana-samyutta*, where the rationale for its inclusion seems to be the passage in which Sāriputta gives teachings to Channa about the six sense-consciousnesses [S.18.72(107):10ff.].

“afflicted, suffering, and gravely ill.”³³ Arising from his evening meditation, Sāriputta suggests to Mahā Cunda that they visit the ailing Channa, which they do. Enquiring about Channa's health they are told that his condition is deteriorating rather than improving. The nature of the illness itself is not diagnosed but the symptoms are described in stock terms identical to those of the layman Anāthapiṇḍika in the preceding sutta. Both men complain of intense pain in the head and stomach, and throughout the body generally. The head pain is said to be like having one's head split open with a sharp sword, or having a leather strap progressively tightened around the head like a headband. The stomach pain is compared to having one's belly carved up by a sharp knife, in the way a butcher might carve up an ox's belly. The body pain is likened to that of being roasted over a pit of hot coals. The head and stomach pains are attributed to the action of “violent winds” (*adhimattā vātā*), but no specific cause is mentioned for the more diffuse but no less intense bodily pain.³⁴

³³ *ābhādhiko hoti dukkhito bālhagilāno.*

³⁴ The nature of Channa's complaint is not easy to diagnose from these symptoms. One medical opinion I have received is as follows: “The head pain is typical of migraine, which is universal and has been recognized for centuries. Other causes may be an intracranial tumour causing raised intracranial pressure, but this is often accompanied by vomiting and specific neurological signs which appear to be missing in this description. The abdominal pain is more difficult. Peritonitis causes this kind of severe, unremitting pain, and may result from any cause which leads to peritoneal infection such as a ruptured appendix, perforated ulcer, leaking bowel etc. Another cause of such pain could be a strangulated intestine, often due to vascular causes in older people or to twisting of the bowel with loss of blood supply. A third cause in this region of the world could be intestinal infection such as cholera or typhoid, often accompanied by diarrhoea. The general body pain is most difficult. There are not many things that cause generalized pain. This is typical of myalgia, aching of the muscles, and it may occur in severe generalized infections, often of viral origin, and in rare metabolic diseases of muscle in which certain enzymes are lacking. The combination is strange.” I am grateful to my brother Dr Paul A. Keown for this opinion (personal communication 23rd September 1995). A second opinion, for which I am indebted to Dr Steven Emmett is as follows: “Both the head and abdominal pain are ‘sharp’ which tends to point to a vascular phenomenon, but the pain throughout the body tends to point to an infectious etiology ... though any severe process can have concomitant body pain ... my guesses would be lupus erythematosus, viral illness, and possibly syphilis, though I don't know if it were present in that area of the world at that time, and what would be the chances of holy men contracting it ... assuming two people had similar illnesses at the same time (I

After describing his condition, Channa declares “I shall use the knife, friend Sāriputta, I have no desire to live.”³⁵ On hearing this the immediate response of Sāriputta is to dissuade Channa from taking his life:

Let the venerable Channa not use the knife! Let the venerable Channa live—we want the venerable Channa to live!³⁶ If he lacks suitable food, I will go in search of suitable food for him. If he lacks suitable medicine, I will go in search of suitable medicine for him. If he lacks a proper attendant, I will attend on him. Let the venerable Channa not use the knife! Let the venerable Channa live—we want the venerable Channa to live!

In response to this entreaty—which I believe encapsulates the normative Buddhist stance on suicide—Channa explains that he lacks neither food, medicine or care. He then remarks, somewhat obliquely, that he has long served the teacher with love as is proper for a disciple, before repeating his intention to “use the knife”:

Friend Sāriputta, it is not that I have no suitable food and medicine or no proper attendant. But rather, friend Sāriputta, the Teacher has long been served by me with love, not without love; for it is proper for the disciple to serve the Teacher with love, not without love. Friend Sāriputta, remember this: the monk Channa will use the knife blamelessly.

There is no logical connection between the three ideas in this passage (I have suitable food ... I have served the teacher ... I will use the knife) which suggests some textual interpolation may have taken place.³⁷ More important, however, is that in claiming that his his action

don't know how far apart in time the two suttas were) ... but if they were coeval, then an infectious illness, presumably viral, though possibly bacterial, would be the cause” (personal communication, 14th September 1995).

³⁵ *Satthaṃ āvuso Sāriputta āharissāmi nāvakaṅkhāmi jīvitān ti.*

³⁶ *Māyasmā Channo satthaṃ āhāresi, yāpetāyasmā Channo yāpentāṃ mayāṃ āyasmantāṃ Channaṃ icchāma.*

³⁷ In her translation of the *Majjhima* passage, Horner seems to suggest that Channa regards his previous reverence for the teacher as the justification for his planned course of action: “No, friend Sāriputta. I am not without proper food. I have it. I am not without proper clothing. I have it. I am not without fit attendants. I have them. I myself, friend, waited on the Master for many a long

will be blameless (anupavajja) Channa now introduces a moral dimension to his earlier declaration of suicide.

Or does he? The commentary offers an interesting gloss on the term anupavajja, the key word which will later be used by the Buddha apparently in exoneration. The commentary offers two synonyms for anupavajja in this context: the first is anuppattika meaning “without further arising,” and the second is appatisandhika which means “not leading to rebirth.”³⁸ Read this way Channa is saying “Sāriputta, I will use the knife and not be reborn—remember I said this.” According to the commentary, then, Channa is making a factual statement—perhaps a prediction—rather than passing a moral judgement on suicide.

After this the subject changes and first Sāriputta and then Mahā Cunda speak to Channa on matters of doctrine. Both elders then get up and leave, and soon afterwards Channa “uses the knife”. Sāriputta then approaches the Buddha and—clearly believing that Channa was not an Arhat—asks for information about Channa's post-mortem destination (gati) and future course (abhisamparāya). The Buddha's response betrays a degree of impatience and implies that Sāriputta should already know the answer: “But surely, Sāriputta,” he says, “the monk Channa told you in person of his anupavajjatā!”³⁹ What does anupavajjatā

day with service that was delightful, not tedious. That, friend, is the proper thing for a disciple to do. 'In so far as he served the Master with a service that was delightful, not tedious, blameless (must be accounted) the brother Channa's use of the knife': so should you uphold, friend Sāriputta.” Kindred Sayings, vol.II p.31. The text reads: *Etam hi āvuso sāvakassa paṭirūpaṃ sathhāraṃ paricareyya manāpeneva no amanāpena taṃ anupavajjaṃ channo bhikkhu sathhāraṃ āharissatiti evametam āvuso sāriputta dhārehīti*. Horner's reading arises from taking the yam ... taṃ construction as a separate sentence having the sense of “In so far as ... to that extent.” However, the taṃ is not present in all manuscripts, and in any event a more plausible reading is to take the yam clause as correlative to the initial Etam rather than the taṃ, in the sense of illustrating what is “proper” (patirūpa) to a disciple rather than announcing a state of affairs which is subsequently justified in the taṃ clause. Bhikkhus Ñānamoli and Bodhi do not follow Horner in their *The Middle Length Discourses of The Buddha* (Wisdom, 1995).

³⁸ MA.10.237(390). I am grateful to Lance Cousins for his observation that the commentary apparently takes the term as deriving from the root VRAJ (to go, walk, proceed). This term includes associations with rebirth: “with punar ‘to return to life’” (Monier Williams, s.v. VRAJ). Another possible derivation is from PAD. See CPD s.v. “an-upavajja.” Woodward suggests: “Sa-upavajjo (culpable: really 'attended by a supporter’)” (1922:8).

³⁹ *Nanu te Sāriputta channena bhikkhunā sammukhāya eva anupavajjatā*

mean here? Since Sāriputta's question was about rebirth, the context supports the commentarial interpretation of anupavajja as meaning “not being reborn” very well and makes the Buddha's reply perfectly intelligible. The Buddha is saying something like “Wake up, Sāriputta—you are asking me about the rebirth of someone who told you himself he was anupavajja—not going to be reborn!” To take anupavajja here in the sense of “blameless” would not fit the context nearly so well, since Sāriputta was asking for simple factual information on Channa's destiny, not a moral judgement on the way he died.

Immediately after this exchange Sāriputta uses the term upavajja again in the context of Channa's association with certain families in the Vajjian village of Pubbajira, Channa's home town.⁴⁰ He refers to these families as upavajjakulāni. The point of Sāriputta's remark here is not clear, neither is the meaning of upavajjakula. It could mean “blameworthy family” or it could mean—as the commentary suggests—“a family which is to be visited.”⁴¹ The issue, as the commentary explains it, concerns the fault of overly-close association with kin (kulasamsagga-dosa), a fault to which Channa seems to have been prone.

We cannot rule out the possibility that despite the macabre context obscure puns on the meaning of upavajja—the sense of which it is now difficult to recover—are being made throughout this passage. The most likely explanation for Sāriputta's remark about the kinfolk, however, is that he is pointing to another connection in which he had heard the term upavajja linked to Channa's name. By doing so he defends himself against the Buddha's criticism that he should know Channa's fate. He is saying, in effect, “Well, yes, Channa did tell me his death would be anupavajja, but I wasn't exactly sure what he meant by that since I have heard this term used of him in another context in connection with visiting certain families.”

The Buddha then concludes the discourse with the statement quoted at the start which has been taken as condoning Arhat suicide. I think that when we place the Buddha's statement 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. This is how his statement might be translated:

byākatā ti.

⁴⁰ DPPN s.v. “Channa.”

⁴¹ Upavajjakulānīti upasaṅkamitabbakulāni. This seems to confirm the derivation from Sanskrit upavrajya, “to be gone to.” Cf. CPD “upa-vajja.”

True, Sāriputta, there are these clansmen and relatives who were visited (upavajjakula) [by Channa],⁴² but I do not say he was “saupavajja” on that account (ettāvatā). By “saupavajja” I mean that someone lays down this body and takes up another. That is not the case with respect to Channa. Channa used the knife without being reborn (anupavajja). This is how you should understand it, Sāriputta.⁴³

It is noteworthy that in the Samyutta version quoted above, the term anupavajja is contrasted not as we might expect with upavajja—the normal word for “blameworthy”—but with saupavajja, a word which seems created specifically for this context, since the only two occurrences in the entire canon are found in the passage just quoted. This seems to confirm that upavajja is not being used here in its everyday sense of “blameworthy,” and that the contrast intended is between anupavajja as “not reborn” and saupavajja as “is reborn.”

By taking the key term anupavajja in the way suggested by the commentary, which I think fits the context well, the Buddha's concluding remark becomes not an exoneration of suicide but a clarification of the meaning of an ambiguous word in a context which has nothing to do with ethics.

The Commentary

The main text makes no reference to Channa gaining enlightenment. We know that Channa *died* an Arhat by inference from the Buddha's closing statement, although there is no corroborating evidence that Channa was an Arhat and no indication of when he became one.

Curiously, it is this question of the timing of Channa's enlightenment which concerns the commentary most, and it devotes a good deal of effort to show that Channa was not an Arhat before he committed suicide. It seeks to establish this in two ways.

⁴² Or, “who are blameworthy.”

⁴³ Honti hete Sāriputta Channassa bhikkhuno mittakulāni suhajjakulāni upavajjakulānīti. Na kho panāhaṃ Sāriputta ettāvatā saupavajjoti vadāmi. Yo kho Sāriputta imaṅca kāyaṃ nikkhipati aññaṅca kāyaṃ upādiyati tamahaṃ saupavajjoti vadāmi. Taṃ Channassa bhikkhuno natthi. Anupavajjaṃ Channena bhikkhunā satthaṃ āharitanti evametam Sāriputta dhārechīti [S.18.74(111)].

First, it volunteers a rationale for the specific teaching given to Channa by Mahā Cunda. The commentary suggests that Mahā Cunda gave this teaching because he deduced from Channa's inability to bear the pain of the illness, and his threat to take his life, that he was still an unenlightened person (puthujjana).⁴⁴ The attribution of this motive to Mahā Cunda is speculative, since the text says nothing at all about his motives for selecting the teaching in question. Nor is Channa referred to in the text as an “unenlightened person” (puthujjana).

Second, the commentary reconstructs Channa's last moments of life to make it very clear that enlightenment was gained at the last second:

“He used the knife” means he used a knife which removes life—he cut his throat. Now in that very moment the fear of death possessed him, and the sign of his next birth (gatinimitta) arose. Knowing he was unenlightened he was stirred (samviggo) and aroused insight. Apprehending the formations (sāṅkhāra) he attained Arhatship and entered nirvana simultaneous with his death (samasīsī hutvā).

The claim of the commentary is thus that Channa was a samasīsin (“equal headed”), that is to say someone who dies and attains nirvana simultaneously.⁴⁵ This reconstruction of Channa's death is likewise speculative, since no details at all are supplied in the text. Horner's verdict on the commentarial version of events is: “The facts could not have been known, and it seems a rather desperate effort to work up a

⁴⁴ It introduces this explanation in its elucidation of the word “Therefore” (tasmā). “Therefore” means that [this teaching is given] because Channa was unable to bear the great pain and said he would use the knife. The venerable Channa was not enlightened (puthujjana), so Mahā Cunda tells him to pay attention to this teaching. (Tasmāti yasmā māraṇantikavedanaṃ adhvāsetuṃ asakkonto satthaṃ āharāmiti vadati, tasmā. Putthujano āyasmā, tena idampi manasikarohīti dīpeti.)

⁴⁵ The same claim is made about Vakkali and Godhika. The concept of the samasīsī is put to good use by the commentary in these cases. Buddhaghosa explains there are three kind of samasīsī. i) Iriyāpatha-samasīsī: someone selects one of the four postures and resolves not to change posture until they attain Arhatship. The change of posture and Arhatship occur together. ii) Rogasamasīsī: someone recovers from an illness and attains Arhatship at the same time. iii) Jīvita-samasīsī: the destruction of the āsava (āsavaṅkhaya) and the end of life (jīvitakkhaya) occur simultaneously. It is the third which is intended here [SA.11.175(159):6-11].

satisfactory reason for this supposed attainment.”⁴⁶ While it seems true that the commentary's reconstruction can never be verified, the possibility of achieving “sudden enlightenment” at the critical point “betwixt the bridge and the brook, the knife and the throat”—as Robert Burton put it in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*⁴⁷—is recognised in Pali sources, and there are several examples of people gaining enlightenment just as they are about to kill themselves.⁴⁸ The commentarial claim that Channa was not an Arhat until his death seems also to be widely accepted in the secondary literature. Wiltshire is of the opinion that none of the three suicides were Arhats before their deaths. Discussing the case of Godhika he writes:

It so happens that in the other bhikkhu suicide cases, those of Channa and Vakkali, it is also made quite clear that they too were not arahants until the event of their death, after which the Buddha pronounces them *parinibbuta*.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Kindred Sayings V. p.33

⁴⁷ Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, Part 1, Section 4, Member 1. Quoted in Battin, Margaret Pabst (1982), *Ethical Issues in Suicide*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, p. 53.

⁴⁸ There are cases of “sudden enlightenment” reported in Pali sources as well as Mahāyāna ones. Rahula writes: “Examples of this kind of ‘sudden’ awakening or ‘sudden’ attainment of arahantship are not lacking also in Pali commentaries.” He cites three examples, the last from the *Theragāthā* commentary which is of relevance to our present theme: “Mahānāma Thera, living on a mountain, was thoroughly disgusted with his life because he was not successful in getting rid of such impure thoughts as lust, and just at the moment when he was about to commit suicide by jumping from the top of a rock, he attained arahantship.” Rahula, W. (1978), *Zen and the Taming of the Bull. Towards the Definition of Buddhist Thought*, London: Gordon Fraser, p.22. At S.v.69f someone attains enlightenment at the moment of death.

⁴⁹ 1983:134. Wiltshire does not say where this is “made quite clear.” In fact—as already noted—the main text makes no pronouncement on the matter one way or the other, and contains nothing inconsistent with the view that Channa was an Arhat before the time he began to contemplate suicide. Poussin, in his entry on suicide in the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, gives the suicides of Vakkali and Godhika as examples of suicide by Arhats, but gives no evidence for his claim that they were Arhats. In his capsule summary of Godhika's suicide, moreover, he states “Godhika reached arhatship just after he had begun cutting his throat.” This hardly counts as a suicide by an Arhat. What is most surprising, however, is the absence of any reference to Channa in his entire discussion.

More interesting than the truth or falsity of the commentarial version of events, however, is the question why the commentary should take such pains to establish that Channa was not an Arhat. The reason would appear to be that some aspect of Channa's behaviour was incompatible with the concept held by the tradition of how an Arhat should conduct himself. In other words, there must be one or more features of Channa's behaviour that the tradition found hard to swallow in an Arhat. I think there are three things the commentary might have taken exception to.

The most obvious thing is that the tradition simply found it inconceivable that an Arhat would be capable of suicide. Although this is nowhere mentioned in the text or commentary on this episode, it is often stated elsewhere that it is impossible for an Arhat to do certain things, the first of which is intentionally to kill a living creature.⁵⁰ Death-dealing acts of any kind are certainly not in keeping with the canonical paradigm of the calm and serene Arhat.

We are given a hint as to the second reason why the commentary might be unhappy with the notion of Channa being an Arhat prior to his suicide attempt in the motivation attributed to Mahā Cunda for providing his homily to Channa. The suggestion is made by the commentary that Mahā Cunda gave this particular teaching because he saw that Channa was “unable to tolerate the intense pain” and was seeking death in order to escape from it. The inability to tolerate pain shows a lack of self-mastery unbecoming to an Arhat. The danger of a lack of self-mastery is that a monk might do things unbecoming to his office and thereby cause the Order to lose face in the eyes of society. By maintaining that Channa was unlightened until the very end, the image of the Arhat remains untarnished by Channa's all-too-human show of weakness in the face of pain.

The third reason the commentary might have taken exception to suicide by an Arhat is a sectarian one. Suicide by voluntary fasting (*sallekhanā*) is a well-known Jain practice, and suicide may also have been customary among the Ājīvikas.⁵¹ Channa's suicide, and the two others, might have been seen as uncomfortably close to a distinctive sectarian practice and perhaps an unwelcome throwback to the discred-

⁵⁰ D.iii.235. At D.iii.133 nine things are mentioned, and the commentary says that even a stream-winner is not capable of such things (DA.iii.913).

⁵¹ With reference to Gosāla, Poussin cites *Uvāsagadasāo*, app. ii. p. 23 and comments: “Suicide is permitted to ascetics who have reached the highest degree of perfection” (1922:25).

ited path of self-mortification. The commentary's rejection of suicide by Arhats, therefore, may also carry an implicit rejection of Jainism.⁵²

What is most striking, however, is not what the commentary does say, but what it doesn't say. I refer to the complete absence of any discussion of the ethics of suicide. We might expect at least a mention of the third *pārājika*, which was introduced specifically to prevent suicide by monks.⁵³ What can be the reason for this silence? Perhaps the simple explanation is that Channa's suicide was not seen to raise any pressing moral or legal issues: only if Channa was an Arhat would such questions arise. In the eyes of the commentary, Channa was an unenlightened person (*puthujjana*) who, afflicted by the pain and distress of a serious illness, took his own life. Presented in this light, few ethical problems arise: suicides by the unenlightened are a sad but all too common affair. 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.

Conclusion

Where does all this leave us with respect to the seventy-year consensus that suicide is permitted for Arhats? I think it gives us a number of reasons to question it. First, there is no reason to think that the exoneration of Channa establishes a normative position on suicide. This is because to exonerate from blame is not the same as to condone.

⁵² This line of thought, which I cannot pursue here, was suggested to me by Richard Gombrich's article "The Buddha and the Jains. A Reply to Professor Bronkhorst" (*Asiatische Studien* XLVIII, 4, 1994: 1069-1096). The Pali canon suicide cases could provide interesting evidence in connection with Bronkhorst's theory regarding "non-authentic" elements in the Buddhist texts. The criterion for such examples is as follows: "Perhaps the only hope ever to identify non-authentic elements in the Buddhist texts is constituted by the special cases where elements which are recorded to have been rejected by the Buddha, yet found their way into the texts, and, moreover, are clearly identifiable as belonging to one or more movements other than Buddhism" (quoted by Gombrich, p.1070). The suicide cases seem to fit this requirement in every way: suicide is rejected by the Buddha (in the Vinaya and elsewhere, see note *infra*), finds its way into the texts (in the three suicide cases), and is identifiable as a Jain practice. Whether these cases add weight to Bronkhorst's theory, however, is another matter.

⁵³ Vin.iii.71.

Second, there are textual reasons for thinking that the Buddha's apparent exoneration may not be an exoneration after all. The textual issues are complex and it would not be safe to draw any firm conclusions. It might be observed in passing that the textual evidence that suicide may be permissible in Christianity is much greater than in Buddhism. There are many examples of suicide in the Old Testament: this has not, however, prevented the Christian tradition from teaching consistently⁵⁴ that suicide is gravely wrong. By comparison, Theravāda sources are a model of consistency in their refusal to countenance the intentional destruction of life.

Third, the commentarial tradition finds the idea that an Arhat would take his own life in the way Channa did completely unacceptable. Fourth, there is a logical point which, although somewhat obvious, seems to have been overlooked in previous discussions. If we assume, along with the commentary and secondary literature, that Channa was not an Arhat prior to his suicide attempt, then to extrapolate a rule from this case such that suicide is permissible for Arhats is fallacious. The reason for this is that Channa's suicide was—in all significant respects—the suicide of an *unenlightened* person. The motivation, deliberation and intention which preceded his suicide—everything down to the act of picking up the razor—all this was done by an unenlightened person. Channa's suicide thus cannot be taken as setting a precedent for Arhats for the simple reason that he was not one himself until *after* he had performed the suicidal act.

Fifth and finally, suicide is repeatedly condemned in canonical and non-canonical sources and goes directly “against the stream” of Buddhist moral teachings. A number of reasons why suicide is wrong are found in the sources⁵⁵ but no single underlying objection to suicide

⁵⁴ Certainly from the time of St. Augustine onwards. The anomalous cases in the O.T. are explained by St. Thomas as exceptions resulting from a direct command by God. On suicide in the early Church see Amundsen, Darrel W. (1989), “Suicide and Early Christian Values,” in *Suicide and Euthanasia*, ed. Baruch A. Brody, Dordrecht, Boston, London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, pp. 77-153. With reference to Judaism and Christianity see Droge, A.J. and J.D. Tabor *A Noble Death: Suicide and Martyrdom among Christians and Jews in Antiquity*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991. With reference to classical antiquity see van Hooff, Anton J.L. *From Autothanasia to Suicide. Self-Killing in Classical Antiquity*. London: Routledge, 1990.

⁵⁵ Reasons why Buddhism might be opposed to suicide include the following: 1) It is an act of violence and thus contrary to the principle of *aḥimsā*. 2) It is against the First Precept. 3) It is contrary to the third *pārājika* (Cf. Miln. 195).

is articulated. This is not an easy thing to do, and Schopenhauer was not altogether wrong in his statement that the moral arguments against suicide “lie very deep and are not touched by ordinary ethics.”⁵⁶ Earlier I suggested that the “roots of evil” critique of suicide—that suicide was wrong because of the presence of desire or aversion—was unsatisfactory in that it led in the direction of subjectivism. The underlying objection to suicide, it seems to me, is to be found not in the emotional state of the agent but in some intrinsic feature of the suicidal act which renders it morally flawed. I believe, however, there is a way in which the two approaches can be reconciled. To do this we must locate the wrongness of suicide in delusion (moha) rather in the affective “roots” of desire and hatred.

On this basis suicide will be wrong because it is an irrational act. By this I do not mean that it is performed while the balance of the mind is disturbed, but that it is incoherent in the context of Buddhist teachings. This is because suicide is contrary to basic Buddhist values. What

4) It is stated that “Arahants do not cut short their lives” (na ... apakkam pāṭenti) Miln. 44, cf. D.ii.32/DA.810 cited by Horner (Milinda's Questions, I.61n.). Sāriputta says that an Arhat neither wishes for death nor wishes not to die: it will come when it comes (Thag. vv.1002-3). 5) Suicide destroys something of great value in the case of a virtuous human life and prevents such a person acting in the service of others (Miln. 195f.) Wiltshire states that altruism is also cited in the Pāyāsi Sutta as a reason for not taking one's life (1983:131). With reference to the discussion here (D.ii.330-2) he comments “This is the only passage in the Sutta Pitaka in which the subject of suicide is considered in the abstract, and even then obliquely” (1983:130). Kassapa states that the virtuous should not kill themselves to obtain the results of their good karma as this deprives the world of their good influence (D.ii.330f). 6) Suicide brings life to a premature end. As Poussin expresses it: (op cit) “A man must live his allotted span of life ... To that effect Buddha employs to Pāyāsi the simile of the woman who cuts open her body in order to see whether her child is a boy or a girl” (D.ii.331). 7) Self-annihilation is a form of vibhava-tanhā. 8) Self-destruction is associated with ascetic practices which are rejected since “Buddhism had better methods of crushing lust and destroying sin” (Poussin, op cit). 9). There is empirical evidence provided by I Tsing. Poussin notes: “The Pilgrim I-tsing says that Indian Buddhists abstain from suicide and, in general, from self-torture” (op cit). 10) As noted above, Sāriputta's immediate reaction is to dissuade Channa in the strongest terms from taking his life. Sāriputta's reaction suggests that suicide was not regarded among the Buddha's senior disciples as an option even meriting discussion.

⁵⁶ *Foundation of Morals*, Section/Paragraph 5, quoted in Battin, Margaret Pabst (1982), *Ethical Issues in Suicide*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall. p. 74.

Buddhism values is not death, but life.⁵⁷ Buddhism sees death as an imperfection, a flaw in the human condition, something to be overcome rather than affirmed. Death is mentioned in the First Noble Truth as one of the most basic aspects of suffering (dukkha-dukkha). A person who opts for death believing it to be a solution to suffering has fundamentally misunderstood the First Noble Truth. The First Noble Truth teaches that death is the problem, not the solution. The fact that the person who commits suicide will be reborn and live again is not important. What is significant is that through the affirmation of death he has, in his heart, embraced Māra. From a Buddhist perspective, this is clearly irrational. If suicide is irrational in this sense it can be claimed there are objective grounds for regarding it as morally wrong.

⁵⁷ On life as a basic value for Buddhism see *Buddhism & Bioethics*, pp. 44-50.