

*The "Suicide" Problem in the Pāli Canon*, by Martin G. Wiltshire

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# The “Suicide” Problem in the Pāli Canon

by *Martin G. Wiltshire*

This paper is addressed to the subject of “suicide” within the Pāli Canon. 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. In particular, our investigations into this phenomenon may be seen to have a bearing on the doctrinal issue of the individual’s relationship to his own “body” in Buddhism and on the ethical matter of the relationship between the individual and society as a whole. We should, perhaps, point out that suicide first presented itself to us as an intriguing subject of inquiry when we discovered that it appeared to be regarded equivocally within the Canon, that it was both censored and condoned. It was the attempt to explain and resolve this apparent anomaly which resulted in this paper.

One cannot say that the theme of suicide forms a major item of interest or dogmatic concern in the Canon, but it does occur sufficiently for us to arrive at some definitive statement on the subject and its ramifications. Material relating to it we have divided into three basic categories: i) regulations on the subject contained within the *Vinaya Piṭaka*. These purportedly arise out of an incident of “mass” or multiple suicide within the ranks of the saṅgha; ii) a short disquisition occurring within the *Pāyāsi Sutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya* and commenting on the “moral” side of the issue; and iii) anecdotal passages of which a handful are scattered throughout the remaining *Nikāyas*; these describe cases of individual suicide and the circumstances of their occurrence. We shall, therefore, examine the material in the order we have listed it. But, before we do this, we wish to set the context with a few words about the concept of “suicide” in

terms of the religion and culture of the Indian sub-continent generally.

Quite evidently suicide takes on an altogether different complexion in India than the West—let us say, the Semitic and secular traditions—if only because they possess contrasting conceptions of post-mortem existence. In the West each person is allotted only one existence or life-chance, and this either ends in total annihilation (according to “secularism”) or, alternatively, determines our fate for the remainder of eternity. In India, on the other hand, the ending of a person’s life is merely the preview to entry upon another, itself subject to much the same kind of rules and conditions, and so on *ad infinitum*. We are not as concerned with the accuracy of these generalisations, however, as with the differing impacts these conceptions have on the religious outlooks of the people concerned. Stated simply, these are as follows: religious transcendence in the one case is conceived in terms of revivification or resurrection of the individual with a transformed body and in a transformed world where existence is thought of as a kind of indefinite finitude. In India, on the other hand, since Vedic times the belief in transmigration has meant that we are already part of the indefinite finitude continuum and, as a result, “transcendence” comes to represent the very contrary of that notion: the “ultimate” salvific goal is therefore depicted as the dissolution of individuality and as an absorption to the principle of absolute stillness or quiescence. The Indian standpoint, then, could be said to start precisely where the Western leaves off, and the overlooking of this basic difference in premises has unfortunately led to many misunderstandings when making cross-cultural comparisons and evaluations. In practical terms, the Indian system means that our “individuality” is not just *an* obstacle or impediment to religious consummation but *the* essential barrier, whilst the conception of “individuality” itself is basically defined in terms of “bodily existence and its parameters. Therefore Indian religious paths (mārga)—viz., jñāna, bhakti, karma—are devised specifically for the shedding of individuality, and this involves the formulation of theoretical and practical manuals and techniques (yoga) directed at the “body” as a corporate entity.

Underlying the denial of individuality is, of course, the principle and practice of asceticism and ascetic behaviour. The

many varieties and modes of asceticism found in India are themselves a reflection of the divergent interpretations placed upon this basic religious premise regarding the individual and his body. To mention just a few: Jainism, for instance, represents the most extreme interpretation, where individuality is seen as literally synonymous with corporeal existence and, therefore, the body has to be physically subdued and quelled in its functions right up to and including the moment of death. Jainism prescribes "slow suicide" as part of its higher level of teaching and is operating perfectly consistently with its basic premises in so doing.<sup>1</sup> For death is as much a property of the body as any of those properties we normally identify with it, such as mobility and the sense operations; therefore, it too must be admitted and faced. Here, we may mention a distinction which is relevant to our discussion of Buddhism at a later point: to kill oneself by a direct, singular act—sudden suicide—interrupts the natural sequence of bodily processes and is therefore construed as a deed of *himsā* against one's own person; this is outlawed by Jainism, which seeks to interfere as little as possible in the natural processes. On the other hand, to allow oneself to die slowly, by fasting over a period of years in accordance with carefully laid-out ordinances, is to create the opportunity to watch and monitor one's own death and thereby master and transcend it.

Buddhism's ascetic stance represents a subtle variation of Jainism, mirroring the fact that historically it is probably its younger cousin. Here also the body is the prime "enemy," as it were, but the concept "body"<sup>2</sup> receives a less literal and materialistic denotation: though having form (*nāma-rūpa*), it is essentially a creation and outgrowth of the mind (*viññāṇa*).<sup>3</sup> Consequently, the clue to its dissolution as a vehicle of individuality lies with the mind (*manas*) ridding itself first of the conception of individuality (re. *anattā*: no self). More will be said about this later.

For a third illustration we might choose the Sāṃkhya-Yoga system, as exemplified within the philosophy of the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Although this scripture is syncretist in its aims, and allows for a range of salvific paths (*mārga*), one of its main pronouncements is that individual interests should be subordinated to higher "dharmic" duty, and that if such duty requires one

to take others' lives or forfeit one's own life in the attempt, as it does in Arjuna's case, then one should do so readily. In this philosophy we see once again that the transcendence of the individual and his body is the governing principle, yet this time it is expressed in terms of a subduing and subordination at a *social* level primarily, not by regimenting the body conceived as a physiological or as a psychological mechanism, as in Jainism and Buddhism respectively. The *Bhagavad Gītā*'s ethical philosophy, of course, derives its inspiration from the Sāṅkhya metaphysics of the absolute distinction between body (*śarīra*) and soul (*ātman/jīva*)<sup>4</sup>: because it is infinite the soul remains unaffected by the destruction and destructibility of the body — it cannot die<sup>5</sup>. Although there is no reference to suicide in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, so far as we can tell, it is not difficult to work out a view on that particular issue (as on many issues) consistent with its overall philosophy. Firstly, suicide would be regarded as socially irresponsible unless it were laid down as one's dharmic duty (there are circumstances in which this might be conceivable, e.g., as part of a mass protest) and, secondly, it would be considered vacuous, because taking one's own life is simply a matter of taking it up again in another existence, owing to the continuity of the soul—a futile gesture.

This brings us to consider what Hindu dharma actually is on the subject. As in all social communities, suicide seems to receive official disapproval for the simple reason that any incidence of the phenomenon signifies that there is something seriously wrong with the social fabric. But we must be careful to observe the distinction, already alluded to, between sudden and slow suicide. The first is socially disruptive, since its very suddenness creates a "surprise" effect on society. The second kind comprises a specialized form of longer term behaviour which can, for this very reason, be tolerated by a society. This latter can in due course be accommodated by society by being dubbed "religious austerities" and made subject to certain hierarchical stipulations. This, in fact, is the way orthodox Brahmanism handles the problem of the potentially socially disruptive force of religious renunciation. By the time of śāstra compilation (circa 2nd cent. B.C.<sup>6</sup>), Brahmanism had succeeded in rationalizing renunciation within its own religious system and thereby alleviated any threat it posed to its hold on social power. Re-

nunciation was essentially emasculated, by virtue of being confined to the "twice-born," and reserved for the third and fourth stages (*āśramas*) of life, when a person's economic value in society had considerably dwindled. "Religious," or slow suicide, as an aspect of ascetic austerities, formed a component of renunciation, and was therefore subject to the same restrictions. Accordingly, Manu permits this course of action for the twice-born *vanaprastha*: "Let him walk, fully determined and going straight on, in a north-easterly direction, subsisting on water and air, until his body sinks to rest" (VI. 31).<sup>7</sup> Still, evidence suggests that suicide in its conventional social form was severely stigmatised.<sup>8</sup>

It is difficult to avoid seeing a close connection between the phenomenon of renunciation, which is a principle hallmark of Indian religion in post-Vedic times, and the relatively widespread practice of religious suicide. In short, the principle of renunciation begins with disaffiliation with social phenomena—attributable in Indian history, perhaps, to the alienation experienced by the indigenous people on being subjugated by the Āryans in the early part of the first millenium B.C.—and, carried through to its logical conclusion, culminates with disaffiliation from *all* phenomena, including one's individual self and its corporeal form.

So, having attempted to show how religious suicide can form part of the logic of Indian religion, we shall now see how it relates to the specific tradition of Buddhism.

Before we can consider the actual texts, we should first draw attention to the all-important question of motivation: one can take one's own life for selfish or self-centered reasons, or one can voluntarily surrender one's life in an act of self-sacrifice for the welfare of others. The former might be described as tantamount to suicide proper and the latter as martyrdom, except that by martyrdom is not always meant a voluntary act, and it usually revolves as well around confessional disputes. The distinction between self-centered and altruistic motives becomes an increasingly key factor in determining the direction in which Buddhism was to develop after its initial establishment. We can trace an evolving pattern away from one and towards the other: the oldest form of the tradition comprised the *paccekabuddhas*, forerunners of the Buddha, who epitom-

mised the self-interested ascetic<sup>9</sup>; then, in the story of the Buddha's initial hesitation to teach<sup>10</sup>, the break with the *paccekabuddha* tradition is symbolised; and towards the end of his life he postpones his *parinibbāna* until he has fulfilled all his teaching responsibilities<sup>11</sup>; next, we have the emergence of Jātaka legends illustrating altruistic virtues—the most precious and cherished of which is the tale of Prince Vessantara, who relinquishes his own wife and children<sup>12</sup>; finally, the supreme act of self-sacrifice becomes part of Buddhism's ethical values—the proto-Mahāyāna legend from the *Jātakamāla* and elsewhere,<sup>13</sup> in which the bodhisattva gives his own body as provender to save a tigress and her cubs from starvation. This particular literary episode, perhaps, marks the point where voluntary, altruistically-motivated suicide is given an official stamp of approval within Buddhism, for subsequently a strong tradition of this practice has existed, right up to and including the self-immolations of the recent Vietnam war.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, we see that "voluntary" suicide does not rank as any kind of issue for early Buddhism since it has not yet entered into its field of vision. This leaves us with the matter of purely self-interested motives.

In the Pāli Canon, there is mention of just one crisis relating to the practice of suicide within the saṅgha, a sufficient crisis to warrant a Vinaya regulation on the matter. The particular incident in question is both mentioned by hearsay (M.III.269; S.IV.62) and narrated in some detail (S.V. 320ff; Vin.III.68ff). It is said that a number of bhikkhus developed the "meditation on the unlovely" (*asubha-bhāvanā*) in accordance with the Buddha's instructions and became so disgusted with their own bodies (*kāya*) in the process that they all committed suicide. When the Buddha discovered what had happened he framed an alternative strategy and recommended to other bhikkhus the meditation on breathing (*ānāpānasati samādhi*). It is left somewhat unclear as to whether the latter meditation was intended by the Buddha altogether to replace the former or whether it was just to act as an antidote. From its description as conducing to peace (*santam*) and a sense of well-being (*sukho vihāro*) the latter at least seems to have been intended.<sup>15</sup> The Vinaya then proceeds to condemn, not suicide per se, but any act or form of conduct which may be construed as inciting or

assisting another to commit suicide (op cit. III.71,73) and prescribes expulsion from the Order (*pārājika*) as punishment for the offence. The reason why suicide itself is not pronounced upon concerns, we think, a technical point: suicide cannot be adjudged an offense by the saṅgha because the person is no longer living and so cannot come under its jurisdiction. Quite what ordinance would apply to a case of a failed-suicide member of the saṅgha, we don't know; but perhaps this actual circumstance was not envisaged, since the Buddha had, after all, taken precautionary measures to discourage attempts at suicide, by readjusting his teaching, while a bhikkhu had readily available the means to dispatch his own life should he be sufficiently determined to do so. The Canon mentions poisoning, hanging (Vin. III. 72), cutting one's throat (the bhikkhu's few possessions included a razor [*khura*] or scissor implement [*satthaka*]) and throwing oneself off a high place as the most conventional methods of suicide.<sup>16</sup> The case of the monks who meditated on unloveliness is illuminating because it illustrates that the roots of Buddhism still lay within the religious austerities practiced by the Śramaṇa tradition and that, from time to time, there were lapses or retreats into ascetic behaviour, going counter to the spirit of the middle way.

The Vinaya proscriptions against inciting others to suicide are principally directed at a practice, which seemed to have arisen among some bhikkhus, of encouraging buddhist laymen (*upāsakas*) to commit suicide on the grounds that they would the sooner enjoy the pleasures of heaven earned by their good *kamma*. This particular offense was known as to "praise the beauty of death" (*maraṇavannaṇaṃ saṃvaṇṇeti*) or "to speak praise of death" (*maraṇe vannaṇaṃ bhaṇati*—V.III.73). Considerable gravity attached to it because it concerned relations between the saṅgha and the laity.

We now come to consider the passage in the *Pāyāsi Sutta* (D.II.330–32). This is the only passage in the *Sutta Piṭaka* in which the subject of suicide is considered in the abstract, and even then obliquely, as part of a wider argument aimed at refuting a heretical opinion about life after death. The sutta is about a dialogue between a certain chieftain called Pāyāsi and the Buddha's disciple Mahā-Kassapa. Pāyāsi expresses the view that there is no after-life and hence that deeds performed in



this life can have no consequences beyond death. Otherwise, he maintains in defense of his belief, good people would seek premature death by suicide in order to reap the benefit of their good deeds immediately. Evidently, he was unaware that this did sometimes happen, as we have just seen, if we can safely rely on the Vinaya testimony. Mahā-Kassapa attempts to demolish Pāyāsi's argument by resort to the following illustration: an expectant mother is anxious to discover the gender of the child in her womb because it bears upon her own rights to inheritance; in her desperation to know, she cuts open the womb, inadvertently killing herself and the child. The point of this illustration ostensibly is to show that prudentially-motivated suicide proves entirely counter-productive and stems from a basic misunderstanding about the real nature of the facts. Mahā-Kassapa expands his point by comparing spirituality to a ripening fruit: if it is plucked before its time then it will simply die and not mature at all. But Mahā-Kassapa adds a further reason why seeking premature death should be considered wrong. He maintains that the object of living is not just to promote one's own spiritual welfare but others' as well; one has an obligation to others to remain in this body. This last assertion of Mahā-Kassapa's is quite resounding, for it is one of the few occasions in the Canon where lip-service is expressly paid to altruistic action.

The main interest of this paper, however, focuses upon the anecdotal cases of individuals, which we shall now examine. They stand out from the other material because they represent instances of suicide which, if not condoned, are certainly exonerated. We aim to find out exactly why this should be so. We have located three stories which are indubitable suicide cases. They concern the bhikkhus named Vakkali (S.III.119; cf. also Thag.350-4; Dh.A.IV.117; Vism.129), Godhika (S.I.120) and Chaṇṇa (M.III.263; S.IV.55), each of whom takes his own life with a knife. There are other stories as well, which share the same basic theme and structural pattern, but which do not make it entirely explicit at the end whether the protagonist puts an end to his own life or dies of natural causes. 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; unless the context makes an explicit reference to “using the knife” (*sattham āharati/satthāharakam*) or some equivalent expression,<sup>17</sup> then the precise manner of death is left unclear. 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 to convey doctrine on the *khandhas* (see fn.19) — and of the two *upāsakas* Anāthapiṇḍika (M.III.258; S.V.380) and Dīghāvu (S.V.344).

Apart from representing putative cases of suicide, these stories share one further overriding theme (with one possible exception we shall consider in a moment): each of the protagonists is suffering from a serious degenerative illness. Consequently, they seek the respite of death as a way of release from their acute sufferings. In this respect, their motivation and the circumstances of their demise differs from those of the bhikkhus whom we have seen commit suicide as a form of emotional revulsion against living, or those motivated by desire for quick access to heavenly delights, or the Jains, with their long-term, studied suicide. In fact, they are cases which might be categorized as examples of self-administered euthanasia. 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 circumstance.

Since all these suicides are *prima facie* examples of persons seeking alleviation of pain of physical illness, it is important to understand that canonical Buddhism did acknowledge the existence and legitimacy of certain standard traditional remedial treatments for illness. In other words, it is made quite plain, in the context of the stories, that recognized conventional treatments had been and were being used to alleviate the ailment, but that they had a limited value in these particular instances. If this were not made plain, then exonerating these suicides might have the effect of opening the floodgates for people to take their own lives on the pretext of slighter complaints. We shall, therefore, examine for a moment those treatments which the Canon recognizes as counteracting physical illness and its resulting pain.

Firstly, there is the conventional treatment using medicines and nursing care.<sup>18</sup> This has the capacity to arrest, allay and possibly cure the illness. But it should be stressed that it is not a complete panacea, because it cannot alter the fundamental law of impermanence (*anicca*), which inheres in all things. There is in the Pāli Canon the recognition that man has no control over events in the external world per se, because they are without self (*anattā*), and this includes his own body (*kāya*) as composed of the *khandhas* (e.g. S.III.3f et seq). What he does have control over, however, is his own attitude towards these external (and internal) phenomena.<sup>19</sup>

This brings us to the two remaining methods of treatment, which are specifically Buddhistic. Through the activity of *samādhi* one can for a time withdraw from sense-objects, the senses and their operations (the 18 *dhātu*) and so experience temporary respite by attenuating or eliminating sensation (*vedanā*). But this is not a method of cure. In this respect, it may be compared, perhaps, with drug-therapy, without the detrimental side-effects drugs so often have. Failure to achieve *samādhi* and allay pain forms the theme of the story of bhikkhu Assaji. His illness has debilitated him so much that he can no longer summon the energy to achieve *samādhi*. He is consoled by the Buddha, who teaches him of the impermanence of all sensations, mental and physical, painful and pleasurable (S.III.126). Having gone beyond the stage where the pain can be arrested, Assaji is left with the one remaining consolation: the knowledge of spiritual truth. A similar case but at a more developed stage is that of Godhika, who is a *sāvaka-bhikkhu* (S.I.121).<sup>20</sup> He finds it impossible to sustain "mind-release through *samādhi*" (*cetovimuttiṃ samādhikaṃ*): he is reported to have attained it and fallen away six times. His plight leads him to commit suicide, yet he is posthumously declared an arahant by the Buddha. Of all the suicide cases we are examining, this one is the most problematic, for there is no mention in the text of what precise external phenomenon prevented him from sustaining his mind-release, and there is no other case in the Canon of this type of complaint with which we could compare it. The Comy maintains that it was a physical sickness that affected him and adds that he attained arahantship after cutting his throat (S.A.I.144). We may infer from this that the actual dying process had the effect of removing the particular feature inhibiting his release (*vi-*

*mutti*). It so happens that in the other bhikkhu suicide cases, those of Chaṇṇa 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*. This, we think, goes to show that Buddhism by no means constitutes a simple dualist philosophy between “matter” and “spirit.” It seems to demonstrate that there are circumstances in which material conditions can intrude upon “spiritual” factors, on the one hand and, on the other hand, that spiritual development can only sometimes take place when external constraints or inhibitors are first removed. Similarly, there are occasions when “spiritual” forces can have a causal effect on the external world, as we shall see shortly in the case of Anāthapiṇḍika. To return to the story of Godhika. His is the most amusing of the cases—if we can talk about amusement in this context—since the main purpose of the story is to illustrate the ousting of Māra. Māra gets very excited at the prospect that Godhika will commit suicide. He thinks that, as Godhika is only a *sekha* (trainee), he will accrue bad *kamma* (*pāpa*) from his act and fall into Māra’s hands (literally *qua* death and metaphorically *qua* apotheosis of evil). Convinced that the Buddha can do nothing to save Godhika, Māra, with his tongue in cheek, taunts the Buddha and urges him to “dissuade” (*nisedha*-S.I.121) his disciple from committing the fatal act. But the Buddha already knows that Godhika is about to become an arahant. After Godhika’s expiry, Māra searches for his *viññāṇa*—a sure sign that one is still within the wheel of rebirth. But he is unable to trace it, because Godhika is *parinibbuta*; so Mara slinks sulkily away. The whole episode would seem to indicate that suicide is salvifically fatal in most cases, but not for the arahant, since he cannot be motivated by *tañhā* (S.I.121). This is a clear sign that acts are evaluated on their determining motives and not on their surface appearance.

The third method of combatting physical pain, according to the Canon, is to reflect upon (*samanupassati*) the Buddha’s teaching (dhamma). Presumably, this takes away the mental anguish associated with physical pain, as this is the purpose of his teaching. In the case of the layman, Anāthapiṇḍika, however, it also relieves the physical pain<sup>21</sup>: his reflection upon right knowledge (*sammā-ñāṇa*) and right release (*sammā-vimutti*) re-

sults in immediate (*thāna*) subsidence (*paṭipassambhati*) of his pain. This account would at the same time seem to be describing his transition to *sotāpanna* status, since he is classified by the Buddha as such after his death.

In each of these suicide cases (with the exception of Godhika, who is a *sāvaka* already) the person anticipating his own death receives systematic instruction on dhamma, either from the Buddha or one of his disciples, such as Sariputta. We suggest that such instruction takes place for the following reasons: Firstly, to serve as an antidote to their suffering, as we have just seen. Secondly, in order to ensure that they have a proper grasp of doctrine respective to each individual's own level of spiritual development. It is noteworthy that instruction follows a catechising procedure: a series of questions intended to elicit the right answers. The content of the teaching invariably concerns the doctrines of impermanence (*anicca*) or no-self (*anattā*) or both. Why these particular doctrines? Not only do they represent the consummation of the Buddha's teaching but they also have a special relevance to the person about to encounter his own death. The precise relevance can be gleaned from a passage occurring in the Channa story, in which the Buddha states that "whoever lays down this body (*kāya*) and grasps after (*upādiyati*) another body, is to be blamed (*sa-upavajja*)." (M.III.266; S.IV.59), which means that his (suicidal) act carries bad kammic consequences. Therefore, we can surmise that the instruction that the body *qua* the *khandhas* is impermanent and without self helps to counteract any tendency to grasp after a new body. The concept of body (*kāya*), here means not just the idea of taking up a new corporeal form but all the attendant features of its senses and the hold they exert over the individual. Since the suicide act is technically the last deed an agent performs, the spirit in which it is performed is absolutely crucial. Already, within the Canon itself, the last mental image before death is said to play a critical part in determining the nature of rebirth for those who are reborn (cf.M.III.103).

Death itself is always a key event in the round of rebirth, as it is the point of transition from one body to another. Nevertheless, death in itself is not a deed, and can carry no kammic consequence of itself; it is simply the turn-style or customs area through which the traveller passes on his journey from one

existence to another. This point is made clear in a sutta from the *Samyutta Nikāya* (S.V.369–70): A devoted lay-disciple, Mahānāma, asks the Buddha what would happen to him if he met an untimely death, like a sudden accident of being run-over or crushed during a procession (this illustration has an uncanny resemblance to our contemporary car accident). Would it make any difference to his posthumous destiny? The Buddha assures him that he has nothing to fear in such an eventuality, provided that his mind (*citta*) is practiced in the dhamma, since the body's (*rūpa-kāya*) very nature is mortality but the mind (*citta*) is quite distinct and separate. To illustrate his point, the Buddha compares the mind and body to a clay pot and the oil in it: when cast into a deep pool of water, the pot breaks up and disappears, but the oil rises up to the surface.

Thus, death as a physical event has no special significance of its own. It merely provides corroboration of the empirical truth that all created things must come to an end. Establishing this point helps us to appreciate why it is that suicide per se need not be a blameworthy act. The body is merely the receptacle or bearer of the *citta*, and is composed of disposable material, with its own form of built-in obsolescence. This does not mean to say that one should dispose of it before its time, for that is to betray a misunderstanding of its proper purpose, which is to allow for one's own spiritual development and to assist others—as the *Pāyāsi Sutta* avers. But, should the body reach that condition or point at which it can no longer perform these functions—as in the case of an incurable malady or illness—then death becomes little more than *de jure* confirmation of a *de facto* situation. The key issue is not the dying but the motivation accompanying the dying.

Finding out whether a person whose death is imminent is fitted for the event comprises the third reason for instruction being given. Here, instruction provides an opportunity to find out whether the person has any negative kammic residue (*apāpika*) which can be absolved by confession. There is a set procedure followed in these stories: the Buddha questions the person with the words: “have you any anxiety (*kukkuccam*) or remorse (*viṃpatīsāra*)?” and “have you anything to blame (*upavādati*) yourself with in regard to morals (*sīla*)?” The bhikkhu Chaṇṇa, for one, has no confession to make, claiming that he

has nothing to reproach himself for, since when he was healthy he had always served the Buddha eagerly (*mānapena*-M.III.264). In his service of the Buddha, he therefore seems to have fulfilled the requirement, of assisting others, laid down in the *Pāyāsi Sutta*. Vakkali, on the other hand, does have something to confess. He tells the Buddha that one remaining “anxiety” and “remorse” dominated him before the Buddha came to visit him: a longing to see the Buddha face to face. In the context of his reply, the Buddha is supposed to have made one of his most famous utterances: “He who sees the dhamma sees me, and he who sees me sees the dhamma” (S.III.120). A third example is the bhikkhu Assaji, who confesses that his own failure to realize samādhi has become to him a source of personal anxiety (S.III.124). The terms “anxiety” (*kukkuccam*), “remorse” (*vippatisāra*), and “moral blame” (*upavājja*) together represent the notion of a “bad conscience,” and to die with a bad conscience is kammically lethal. But the individuals, in these cases we have cited, either have been or are absolved of any traces of bad conscience or unfulfilled opportunities, and can therefore confront the experience of death unafraid (*abhaya*). We notice that they are vindicated: firstly, by the verbal confirmation of the Buddha, who pronounces them “blameless” (*anupavājja*); and secondly by the manner of their destiny: the three bhikkhus become *parinibbuta*, and the *upāsakas*, Anāthapiṇḍika and Dīghāvu, become, respectively, a deva in the Tusita heaven (*qua sotāpanna*) and an *opapātika* (*qua anāgamin*).

Let us briefly summarise the main findings of this paper. Suicide need not necessarily be regarded as wrongful in Buddhism, since the body is prospectively dead anyway. We have seen that this was over-literally interpreted by certain zealous monks, however, who took their own lives as a result of dwelling too much on the principle of unloveliness (*asubba*); unwittingly they transgressed against the spirit of the middle way. The wrongfulness or not of the matter turns—as ever in Buddhism—on the question of motivation and circumstance: if the motivation is grasping (*upādāna*) or craving (*taṇhā*) after a new milieu of existence, as in the case of the Buddhist laymen who longed for an early realisation of heavenly delights, then the act proves counter-productive. But if this body has lost its essential usefulness—and Buddhism seems to recognise that such cir-

cumstances do sometimes exist—then the body can be relinquished; provided, that is, it is understood that all bodies are intrinsically impermanent and bankrupt of self and that, consequently, no body one may inhabit will be implicitly different from the present one. Buddhism therefore is not coterminous with stoical behavior, but recognises that there are conditions and situations too oppressive to be endured.

We should like to close on two features which have, for us, proved the most fruitful and thought-provoking results of this enquiry. Firstly, the canonical material provides evidence that there existed in early Buddhism a rudimentary form of catechism and confessional procedure for those, as it were, on their death-beds. This anticipates the later pre-mortem rites that have become such a pronounced feature of Buddhist belief and practice. Secondly, we may remind ourselves that one of the arguments invoked against suicide is the “altruistic” case: existence within the body is for the welfare of others as well as for oneself. Let us make a note of the fact that this outward-looking value judgment occurs within the setting of Pāli Buddhism.

## NOTES

1. The doctrine of suicide in Jainism is treated in the *Āyāra-aṅga* and the second (*Āurapachchakkhāna*) and fourth (*Samhāra*) *Painna*. The legends of slow-suicides by Jain tīrthaṅkaras and others are related in the *Kappa Sutta* (Parśva & Ariṣṭanemi), the *Bhagavatā Sutta* (Khandaga the monk) and the *Ovavāya Sutta* (Ambada the layman). An analysis of the texts has recently been performed by Colette Caillat, “Fasting unto Death according to the Jaina Tradition,” *Acta Orientalia*, vol. XXXIII, 1977. pp. 43–66.

2. *Kāya* is the Pāli word for “body” in its most general and fundamental sense. It is a term of central soteriological importance in the sense that it is the name for the five *khandhas* or constituents of individuality taken collectively. All *khandhas* are subject to the “three marks” (*ti-lakkhana*) of existence and this explains why the body (*kāya*) is viewed as inherently bereft or bankrupt, as we try to show in this paper. Other Pāli words sometimes translated “body” are: *rūpa*, denoting the physical, corporeal body as distinct from the mental (*nāma*) factors also included in the concept of *kāya*; hence we have *rūpa-kāya*. *Sarīra* is the word for body mainly in the context of corpses and of relic-worship. *Deha* is a term with an allied meaning to *sarīra*, but used less in Pāli than Sanskrit.

3. The relationship of *nāma-rūpa* and *viññāṇa* is discussed comprehensively in *The Dynamic Psychology of Early Buddhism*, R. Johansson (Scandinavian Institute of Asian Studies Monograph Series No. 37, 1979). He states: “Viñ-



*nāna* may become conscious of body through stimulation but it also creates body through *mano* or *saññā* . . . . These *viññāna*-processes create a new material person. This is possible, because conscious processes and corresponding material processes are only different aspects of the same reality" (p. 33). In further support of Johansson's point we may cite S.III.152: "the uninstructed person creates and continues to create the body" (*assutavā pu-thujano rūpaññeva abhinibbattento abhinibbatteti*).

4. See, for instance, *Bhg. G.* XIII.31, XV.7.

5. "It is not killed when the body is killed" (*na hanyate hanyamāne śarīre*)—op.cit. II. 20; "this embodied being is in anyone's body beyond killing" (*dehī nītyam avadhyo 'yam dehe sarvasya*)—II.30.

6. P. Kane *A History of Dharmaśāstra*, vol. 1 p. 8.

7. S.B.E. vol. XXV. p. 204. This particular ascetic rite, known as *mahā-prasthāna* (the great departure), is also alluded to in the *Jābala Up.* (5) and the *Āpastamba* (II.9.23). Maybe S.V.361 is a reference to it as well.

Cite H. Cakrabarti, *Asceticism in Ancient India*, Calcutta, 1973. p. 77.

8. The earliest-known interdiction against suicide occurs in the *Rg Veda*: "One desiring heaven should not die before the appointed span of life is at its end" (*na purāyusaḥ svaḥkāmi preyāditi*)—. A verse from the *White Yajurveda* (*Vājasaneyi Saṁhitā*, 40.3) which refers to those who "kill the self" is, I think, erroneously construed by Cakrabarti (op. cit., p. 77) to mean straightforward suicide. It is plain from the context that "self" is here referring to "Ātman," the soteriological objective (cf. also I.B. Horner's comment, *Book of Discipline* pt. 1, p. 117, fn. 3). Traditionally, in Hindu culture, a person's suicide has a polluting effect on relatives and other householders, rendering them impure (Gautama, XIV.12); at the same time self-inflicted death is recognised as a legitimate kind of punishment for certain crimes (see *Āpastamba Dharma*, S.I.9.25). The one renowned exception to the interdiction placed on suicide in Indian culture is, of course, the custom of *satī* (widow-burning). This custom appears to have a very specific socio-economic purpose, relating predominantly to the *kṣatriyas* in the Hindu community. It ensured, for example, that others could not usurp the rights to property and inheritance by marrying the widows of powerful men. See A.L. Basham, *The Wonder that was India*, Fontana edit. 1971, pp. 188–190.

9. For the theory of *paccekabuddhas* as forerunners of Buddhism, see my Doctoral Thesis, "The Origins of the Paccekabuddha Concept," University of Lancaster, 1980.

10. The principal version of the Buddha's hesitation to teach occurs at Vin.I.5ff. See also D.II.36–9, M.I.167–9, S.I.136–38.

11. D.II.112f.

12. J.VI.479ff. See *The Perfect Generosity of Prince Vessantara*, M. Cone and R. Gombrich, Oxford, 1977, for an up-to-date translation of this *Jātaka*.

13. *Jātakamāla*, ch.I. See also *Suvarānabhāsottamasūtra* (trnsl. R. Emmerick, Luzac, 1970) ch.XVIII; *Saddharmapundarika sūtra* (trnsl. H. Kern, S.B.E. vol. XXI.) ch.XXII.

14. cf. "La mort volontaire par le feu et la tradition Bouddhique Indienne," J. Filliozat, *Journal Asiatique* 1963.

15. We read elsewhere (A.V.108ff) that the Buddha teaches combining the practice of *asubha-bhāvāna* and *ānāpānasati samādhi*, together with other practices, as a form of curative treatment for illness. It is to be noticed that nine out of the ten components of this treatment (see below, n. 20) represent facets of asceticism or world rejection, *ānāpānasati*, situated at the end of the list, comprises the exception. We are therefore prompted to view *ānāpānasati* as the countervailing, balancing factor, judiciously placed alongside the others to inhibit their possible morbidity-promoting effects.

16. Black Rock (*Kālasilā*), an aspect of Mount Isigili, Rājagaha, was a place associated with ascetics and ascetical suicide according to the Buddhist scriptures. A special feature of Black Rock was a precipice which formed an ideal place for suicide by casting oneself over. See D.II.116, M.I.92, S.I.120, III.120, Vin.II.76.

17. viz. *attānaṃ jīvītā voropenti* (they deprive themselves of life)—Vin.III.68.

18. Regulations and practices regarding medicine and medical care are the subject of the sixth section of the *Mahāvagga* (Vin.I.199–252).

19. According to the *Khandhavagga* of the *Saṃyutta* (III. 1–188), suffering (*dukkha*) arises because a person identifies or equates his self with the *khandhas*. This identification is described as a process of clinging (*upādāna*) and attachment (*rāga*). Emancipation (*vimutti*) begins when a sense of disgust (*nibbinda*) at the body (i.e., *khandhas*) causes the attachment to break down.

20. Another version of the Godhika story appears in the *Dhammapada* Comy. (I.431ff).

21. See also A.V.108ff., where the Buddha is said to claim that the monk Girimānanda's sickness (unstated) will immediately be cured by *hearing* teaching on the ten ideas (*dasasaññā*) of impermanence (*anicca*), no-self (*anattā*), the unlovely (*asubha*), the wretched (*ādīna*), abandonment (*paḥāna*), absence of attachment (*virāga*), cessation (*nirodha*), rejection of worldly-pleasure (*sabba-loke anabhirata*), the impermanence of all constructs (*sabba-saṅkhāresu anicca*) and meditation on breathing (*ānāpānasati*). Elsewhere (S.V.79), Mahākassapa experiences *instant* recovery from an illness when he hears teaching on the seven "limbs of enlightenment" (*bojjhaṅgā*).