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SUICIDE, can be defined as the act of intentionally causing one's own death. As the *Kodhana Sutta* (A. IV, 97) explains, even though beings love themselves most, spurred on by anger some will go so far as to commit suicide, using a sword or taking poison, jumping from a mountain or hanging themselves. Not only anger can be a driving force for suicide, but also excessive affection and attachment. In the *Piyajātika Sutta* the Buddha, in order to illustrate how affection (*piya*) will result in sorrow, recounted a past event in which a woman's relatives wanted to separate her from her husband against her will and marry her to someone else (M.II, 109). In despair, the husband killed his wife and himself, in the deluded hope that the two of them would in this way at least be able to remain together after death.

Such attempts to 'solve' a particular problematic situation by committing suicide are misdirected, since

they attempt to redress at the physical level a situation that needs to be addressed at the mental level. The common act of committing suicide is under the influence of aversion, attachment and delusion, negative emotional forces that will adversely affect the circumstances of the next rebirth and thereby worsen the situation, instead of improving it.

From the perspective of the four noble truths, the common worldly case of suicide is an expression of craving for non-existence (*vibhava taṇhā*) and hence a factor leading to the arising of *dukkha*, not to its cessation. Not only that, but the common case of suicide can also be under the influence of craving for existence (*bhava taṇhā*). Only too often the suicide, though convinced that he or she has no alternative to this act of self-destruction, at the same time entertains fantasies of timely rescue and intervention by others. Thus both these modes of craving can be present in the mind of the same prospective suicide, being but alternative modes of the same operational mechanism of craving, which in turn is based on the illusion of a self. As the Buddha pointed out in the *Pañcattaya Sutta* (M. II, 233), the attempt to annihilate one-self is still in bondage to a sense of self comparable to a dog moving in circles around a post to which it is bound.

In relation to the more specific case of spiritually motivated suicide, the *Pāyāsi Sutta* (D. II, 330) presents the dilemma why accomplished practitioners, if they really knew that after death happiness lies in store for them, do not commit suicide right away in order to quicken their reaping of such pleasant results. In his answer to this dilemma, the monk Kumāra-Kassapa explained that the continuity of life of accomplished spiritual practitioners constitutes a source of increasing merit for themselves and at the same time is of much benefit for others. To untimely hasten the end of such a life by suicide would be, according to the simile given by him, like a pregnant woman taking a knife and cutting open her belly in order to know if her baby was male or female, thereby foolishly destroying the embryo and herself. The reply and simile offered in this context by the monk Kurmāra-Kassapa indicate that from the early Buddhist perspective for someone spiritually accomplished to commit suicide is a foolish act, since it will be depriving the practitioner and others of the benefits that a well conducted spiritual life holds in store for both (*Miln.* 196).

Another passage of interest in the present context is the *Puṇṇovāda Sutta* (M. III, 269), which reports the Buddha asking the monk Puṇṇa how he would react if people were to abuse, hit, injure or even kill him. In reply, Puṇṇa stated that he would consider himself fortunate even if he were to be killed by others, since while other monks, disgusted with their body and lives, had resorted to suicide, here he was getting the same without even needing to go seeking for it. This reply by Puṇṇa shows that the idea of suicide by monks was not as uncommon as one might believe. In fact, among ascetics and wanderers in ancient India the idea of spiritual suicide was often deemed to be an expression of spiritual accomplishment.

The case of monks resorting to suicide, to which Puṇṇa referred in his reply to the Buddha, could well be the mass suicide of a group of newly ordained monks reported in the *Vinaya* and the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* (Vin. III, 65 and S. V, 320). This group of newly ordained monks had engaged with too much fervour in contemplating the unattractiveness of their own bodies, with the result that they felt disgusted and ashamed of their own bodies. In the end, a considerable number of them committed suicide or got someone else to assist them in killing themselves.¹¹

This event was the cause for the Buddha to lay down the third *pārājika* rule against killing a human being. In his formulation of this rule (Vin. III, 71) he pointed out that it is 'not fitting' (*akappiyaṃ*) and 'not to be done' (*akaraniyaṃ*) for monks to commit suicide, to kill each other, or to request someone else to kill them. His formulation makes it clear that even though the *pārājika* rule itself refers only to causing the death of another, which also includes inciting someone else to commit suicide (Vin. III, 73), the case of committing suicide oneself would also come in for his criticism as something 'not fitting' and 'not to be done'.

The issue of suicide comes up again in the *Vinaya*, which reports the Buddha to have categorized the attempt to commit suicide by jumping from a cliff as a *dukkata* offence (Vin. III, 82). A close inspection of the formulation of this rule indicates that the *dukkata* is not for the act of attempting suicide as such, but for the act of jumping from a cliff. In the case leading to this rule this aspect was indeed the problem, since the suicide had jumped on someone else, causing the

latter's death but surviving himself. The next story found in this part of the *Vinaya* applies the same ruling to the act of throwing down a stone from the same cliff with the result of unintentionally causing the death of someone below. This corroborates that the suicidal intention in the first case was only incidental to the rule. The commentary (VinA. II, 467), however, understands the rule about jumping from a cliff to cover attempts at suicide in general, explaining that even stopping to eat so as to end one's life is only allowable under specific circumstances.

Apart from this account of mass suicide, the discourses have also recorded several individual instances of suicide. According to the *Godhika Sutta* (S.1, 120) the monk Godhika committed suicide because on six successive occasions he had attained and again lost "temporary liberation of the mind", an expression which according to the commentary (*Spk.* 1, 182) refers to a "mundane" attainment, i.e. some concentrative attainment. The commentary explains that his repeated loss of the attainment was due to illness. According to a statement made by the Buddha after the event, Godhika died as an arahant.

The *Vakkali Sutta* describes the monk Vakkali, gravely ill, being visited by the Buddha and receiving a short instruction on the nature of the five aggregates from him. A little later on Vakkali committed suicide (S.II1, 123). In this case too, the Buddha explained that he had died as an arahant.

According to the *Channovāda Sutta*, the monk Channa was also gravely ill. Being visited by Sāriputta and Mahā Cunda, he had announced his intention to commit suicide while at the same time giving to understand that he believed himself to be an arahant. Sāriputta's reaction in this situation is telling, since he immediately offered his personal services in order to prevent Channa from committing suicide. This reaction clearly indicates that to commit suicide was not an act generally approved of among the early Buddhist community. Once Channa had committed suicide, Sāriputta went to inquire about his fate from the Buddha. Here too the Buddha declared Channa to have died as an arahant. The way he answered Sāriputta's question suggests that Channa could have been an arahant already at the time of making his declaration to Sāriputta (M. III, 266 and S. IV, 59).

In regard to all these three cases, the commentaries explain that each time realization of arahant-hood took place at the moment of death itself (*MA*. V. 83; *SA*. I, 184 and *SA*. II, 314). According to their explanation, Vakkali and Channa had still been worldlings at the moment of intending to commit suicide. Even though it is difficult to come to a definite conclusion about what actually happened at that time, the commentarial explanation seems somewhat contrived. Underlying the commentarial gloss on these suicide cases could be the idea that an arahant cannot commit suicide. In fact, an arahant committing suicide would be about the only conceivable case where those, who otherwise are the paradigm for proper behaviour, undertake something which is not to be emulated by others. Moreover it could also be objected that the discourses quite explicitly state an arahant to be unable to deprive a living being of life (e.g. *D*. III, 133), though again it is not clear how far this would also include suicide. The *Dhammapada* commentary (*DhpA*. II, 258), however, in relation to another attempt at suicide, quotes the Buddha to have declared that an arahant does not 'use the knife', a saying which however is not preserved in the Pāli discourses themselves.

The discourses not only report these three cases of 'successful' suicide, they also have preserved two suicide cases not less successful, though in both cases the suicide survived. One of these cases concerned the nun Sīhā who, for seven years having tried to overcome sensuality without success, tried to commit suicide by hanging herself. At the moment when she was just about to kill herself with the rope around her neck, she attained awakening (*Thig*. 81). The second case concerns the monk *Sappadāsa*, so called because on an earlier occasion he had already tried to commit suicide by getting a poisonous snake to bite him (*DhpA*. II, 256). On a later occasion he tried to do the same by cutting his throat, (*Thag*. 407-409) the reason in his case being too the inability to calm his mind. Razor in hand and ready to die, he instead attained awakening.

A final case to be mentioned in this context occurs in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, which reports the Buddha to have given up his life deliberately.² According to his own statement in the same discourse, he did this even though he would have been able to live for a considerably longer period. Evidently this act of deliberately letting his life end cannot have taken place with an unwholesome state of mind. Though it

would not seem proper to speak of the Buddha committing 'suicide', this passage does leave some room for an arahant to take the deliberate decision to let life come to an end.

Not only did the Buddha give up his last life deliberately, but according to later Buddhist tradition in his former lives he also had been willing to sacrifice his own life. The *Jātakamālā* Sanskrit work of the Northern Tradition, reports the bodhisatta in a previous life committing suicide in order to prevent a hungry tigress from eating her own cubs.³ According to the Pāli collection of Jātaka tales, in another former life as a hare, the Buddha too had been willing to sacrifice his own life for the sake of others (*J*. 111 55, no. 316).

The *Jātaka Nidānakathā* (*J*. I, 31) reports also another bodhisatta attempting suicide by self immolation. According to its account, Maṅgala Buddha in a former life tried to burn himself in order to worship the *cetiya* of a past Buddha. Similarly the 22nd chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra* reports the *bodhisatva Priyadarśana* burning himself as an incense offering for the Buddha.⁴ Suicide by self-immolation has continued throughout Buddhist history, a famous case being a monk burning himself on the market place of Saigon in Vietnam on the 5th of October 1963.

Whatever may be the motivation behind such acts, from the perspective of the early discourses it would seem that the human birth, with all its limitations, provides a precious opportunity to practise the path to liberation. To cut short this opportunity before having made proper use of it to its fullest potential is, to use the Buddha's own words, an action that should not be done (*Vin*. III, 71).

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Anālayo

References

- 1 Here it needs to be pointed out that the Buddha had not instructed them directly to undertake this meditation. A close reading of the passage show that he had only spoken in praise of such meditation in general, before retiring into solitary retreat. Thus possibly the monks had engaged on their own in this type of meditation, without having received proper instructions and without being supervised, which then led to the fatal results.
- 2 D. II, 106: *sato sampajāno āyu-sāṅkhāraṃ ossaji*
- 3 J.S. Speyer: *The Jātakamālā*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1971, pp 2-8.
- 4 Bunn Kat et al.: *The Threefold Lotus Sutra*, Tokyo: Kosei, 1993, p. 304.

SUKHA is a Pāli term whose meaning ranges from 'pleasant' feeling to a 'happy' state of mind. As a qualification of feeling, *sukha* occurs frequently in the Pāli discourses, forming part of a distinction of feelings into three mutually exclusive types (*M. I, 500*): pleasant (*sukha*), painful (*dukkha*) and 'neutral' (*adukkhamasukha*).

Pleasant feelings can be of a 'worldly' (*sāmisā*) or an 'unworldly' (*nirāmisā*) nature. While 'worldly' manifestations of pleasant feelings arise in relation to sensual pleasure, 'unworldly' pleasant feelings arise during absorption (*jhāna*), and 'more unworldly than unworldly' pleasant feelings (*nirāmisānirāmisatara*) stand for the pleasure experienced by *arahants* when

reviewing their mental freedom from defilements (*S. IV, 235*).

This distinction of pleasant feelings into worldly and unworldly types reflects their potential relation to the underlying tendency to lust (*rāgānusaya*). This underlying tendency will be activated and strengthened by engaging in sensual types of pleasure (*M. III, 285*), whereas unworldly types of pleasant feelings do not activate this underlying tendency. The propensity of pleasant feelings to result in the arising of lust and craving may well be the reason why pleasant feeling, distinguished into worldly and unworldly types, features in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* as one of the objects recommended for the development of mindfulness (*M. I, 59*).

The distinction into worldly and unworldly manifestations is however not the only way of carrying out an analysis of pleasant feelings. Pleasant feelings can also be distinguished into bodily (*kāyika*) and mental (*cetasika*) types. A discourse in the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* (*S. V, 209*) associates feelings of *sukha* arisen through bodily contact with the 'faculty of pleasure' (*sukhindriya*), and feelings of *sukha* arisen through mental contact with the 'faculty of joy' (*somanassindriya*). Though later developments of Buddhist philosophy show a growing tendency to use *sukha* predominantly for bodily feelings and to reserve *somanassa* for its mental counterparts, in its use in the discourses the term *sukha* comprises both bodily and mental feelings.¹ The same usage can also be found in the *Abhidhamma*, the term *sukha* being used in the *Dhammasaṅgānī* and the *Vibhaṅga* to refer to mental feelings (*Dhs. 17* and *Vibh. 85*).

The basic distinction between worldly and unworldly pleasant feelings recurs also in relation to the complementary usage of the term *sukha* as 'happiness'. A recurring emphasis on this distinction can be seen in a set of analytical schemes applied to *sukha*, most of which revolve around the basic difference between worldly (*sāmisā*) and unworldly (*nirāmisā*) types of happiness, highlighting the same by contrasting the happiness of lay life (*gihisukha*) to the happiness of the life of one gone forth (*pabbajitasukha*), sensual happiness (*kāmasukha*) to non-sensual happiness (*nekkhammasukha*), happiness related to attachment (*upadhisukha*) to happiness free from attachment (*nirupadhisukha*),

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