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# Views on Suicide in Buddhism: Some Remarks\*

*Martin Delhey*

## Introduction

“There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide.” With this sentence the famous French novelist Albert Camus opens his philosophical essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*.<sup>1</sup> Of course, one may very well doubt whether this statement, radical as it is, is correct. But it is hard to deny that it is difficult to find any other phenomenon that is as closely related to the question of the meaning of life as suicide. Therefore, any investigation of the views on suicide held by the adherents of any particular religious or philosophical tradition needs to take the central tenets of that worldview itself into account. And at the same time research done in this field may help us understand the unique features of the tradition as a whole.

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\* The following three publications are not taken into consideration in this article, since they came to my hands only after its completion: Koike Kiyoyuki, "Suicide and Euthanasia from a Buddhist Viewpoint: On Nikāya, Vinaya Piṭaka and the Chinese Canon," *Indogaku chibettogaku kenkyū (Journal of Indian and Tibetan Studies)* 5/6 (2001/2002), 144–90; Liz Wilson, "Human Torches of Enlightenment: Autocremation and Spontaneous Combustion as Marks of Sanctity in South Asian Buddhism," in *The Living and the Dead: Social Dimensions of Death in South Asian Religions*, ed. idem (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003), 29–50; Christoph Kleine, "Sterben für den Buddha, Sterben wie der Buddha: Zu Praxis und Begründung ritueller Suizide im ostasiatischen Buddhismus," *Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft* 11 (2003), 3–43. — I am indebted to Professor Dr. Lambert Schmithausen and Professor Dr. Michael Zimmermann for some very helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.

<sup>1</sup> Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (New York: Vintage International, 1991), 3.

However, not only the question whether life has a meaning but also the question whether it has intrinsic value inevitably arises whenever someone thinks seriously of ending his own life prematurely. Does the mere fact of being and remaining alive carry much weight? Are there superior values, which can make it preferable to choose death?

Another question results directly from the very nature of suicide and may therefore be addressed to all religious and philosophical traditions alike: Has suicide to be valued in the same way as the killing of others, since it too aims at the extinction of a life? Or has suicide to be judged differently, because by committing it one does—at least immediately—only harm to oneself?

Suicide by its nature is a borderline case among the acts of killing, for in committing it one is both the culprit and the victim at the same time, with the victim undergoing the act of killing without any external use of force. Consequently, there seems to be no reason to presuppose any similarity of moral judgment regarding the killing of others and suicide in any religious tradition. Rather, it is the unique features of the respective worldview as a whole that will determine whether the answer will be in the affirmative or negative. The Roman Catholic Church, for instance, holds that suicide is like any other act of killing in being a violation of the Fifth Commandment. But at the same time it is explicitly stated that this judgment results from the fact that man is the owner of neither other peoples' lives nor his own life. In either case the statement applies that human life is sacred and remains under the sovereignty of God, who is its creator.<sup>2</sup> As is well known, it is exactly such an idea of a creator god that Buddhism in nearly all its varieties has rejected in the most rigid manner.

How, then, has Buddhism resolved the problems mentioned above in its long history? If we turn our attention to the primary sources, we are faced with the difficulty that there are, to the best of my knowledge, no independent treatises dealing exclusively with the problem of suicide. And even works that devote whole chapters to a discussion or accounts of suicide are extremely rare. Most of the relevant material, scattered

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<sup>2</sup> See §§ 2258–80 of *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, <http://www.vatican.va/archive/catechism>.

over many different kinds of texts from different periods and schools and written in many different languages, contains merely short episodes or statements. Quite naturally, one is on account of these difficulties inclined to seek for answers in the secondary literature. Unfortunately, the problem of suicide in Buddhism has long been treated only rarely and cursorily in scholarly literature—at least as far as Western language publications are concerned. But judging from the fast-growing number of scholarly articles on this and such related topics as euthanasia, things seem to have changed in recent years. Still, up to the present day no monograph dealing exclusively or for the greater part with suicide in Buddhism has been published. Moreover, some of the contributions to the field, especially the recent ones, tend to generalize conclusions, mainly or exclusively on the basis of some very well-known primary sources on suicide (e.g., the instances found in the Pāli canon together with interpretations of them in post-canonical Theravāda texts), which are only representative of one of the many varieties of Buddhism. Further, the hypotheses that come out of these investigations sometimes seem not to have been suggested even by those few texts that have been taken into consideration.<sup>3</sup>

In view of the situation sketched above it becomes clear that no definitive answers to our questions can be expected within the framework of this article. Rather, the following remarks on aspects of the history of suicide in Buddhism will serve the following purposes: First of all, from selected sources representing different kinds of Buddhist literature and Buddhist worldviews, it will be shown how problematic it seemingly is to draw conclusions that apply to all kinds of Buddhism from the investigation of only one or two different

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<sup>3</sup> The present writer intends to publish a monograph investigating exhaustively the ethics of suicide during the first thousand years of Buddhist history. — Much of the relevant secondary literature in Western languages will be mentioned in the notes throughout this article. For further references see Damien Keown, "Buddhism and Suicide: The Case of Channa," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 3 (1996): 9–10, n. 2; Damien Keown, "Buddhism and the Dilemmas of Death: A Bibliographic Introduction," *Buddhist Studies Review* 14-2 (1997): 177–81. I have abstained from citing and discussing secondary literature written in Japanese, but some of the relevant publications will be found by consulting the scholarly contributions referred to in the notes.

varieties of Buddhism or kinds of Buddhist texts, since there seem to be marked differences in the views on suicide expressed in the heterogeneous source material. Secondly, I shall draw attention to some sources that have been neglected or virtually disregarded so far. Thirdly, in the end of this article I shall venture to formulate some working hypotheses, which seem to suggest themselves after a preliminary examination of the sources selected for the present purpose.

One more point remains to be clarified before starting the historical sketch. Among Buddhists and scholars alike different views prevail concerning the question which phenomena may be labeled as suicide and which of them do not belong to this category. For present purposes I would like to adopt the classical definition of suicide formulated by the famous French sociologist Émile Durkheim, which runs as follows: “The term suicide is applied to all cases of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act of the victim himself, which he knows will produce this result.”<sup>4</sup> As Durkheim explicitly states, this definition includes cases of self-sacrifice, a phenomenon that, needless to say, also figures prominently in Buddhist legends and many Mahāyāna texts. It seems to me that there are good reasons for following this approach for the investigation of suicide in Buddhism: First of all, I agree with Durkheim that including the ends to which someone chooses death in the definition for suicide is problematic. It is often very difficult to determine them; moreover, one can be motivated to end one’s own life with more than one aim in mind. Secondly, the fact has already been alluded to that the hierarchy of values in Buddhism is one of the questions that will be elucidated in the present study. It is self-evident that cases of self-sacrifice can be as instructive for clarifying this point as other cases of suicide.

## Selected Aspects of Suicide in Buddhist History

This sketch proceeds more or less chronologically. Therefore first of all the Basket of the Discipline (*Vinayapiṭaka*) and the sermons of the

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<sup>4</sup> Émile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, trans. John A. Spaulding and George Simpson (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), xlii.

Śrāvakayāna<sup>5</sup> will be dealt with.

*The Basket of the Discipline*

As is well known, the *Vinayapiṭaka* has been handed down to us in quite a few different recensions, and at least significant parts of the sermons of conservative Buddhism are available in more than one recension.<sup>6</sup> In the following pages attention will mainly be drawn to the canonical sources handed down by the Theravāda tradition, but some major deviations in the corresponding materials of other schools will also be dealt with.

In the *Vinayapiṭaka* there are four rules for monks relating to offenses that entail irrevocable exclusion from the order (*pārājika*). The third of these four offenses is homicide, and it is the passage that contains the corresponding rule together with commentarial passages on it that is especially important for the problem of suicide.<sup>7</sup> There are some philological problems in the wording of the rule, and the recensions of the different schools differ slightly. But it seems to be beyond doubt that, notwithstanding different interpretations that have been favored by some scholars, the act of suicide itself is not forbidden in this rule.<sup>8</sup> Rather, it is the act of instigating others to commit suicide and the act of killing someone on demand that is equated with murder and consequently entails exclusion from the order, at least if these acts

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<sup>5</sup> In this article, the term Śrāvakayāna, “vehicle of hearers”—along with the term conservative Buddhism—will be used in exactly the same sense as the better known, but pejorative appellation Hīnayāna.

<sup>6</sup> An overview of the extant sources can most conveniently be gained by referring to Oskar von Hinüber, *A Handbook of Pāli Literature*, paperback edition, Indian Philology and South Asian Studies 2 (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2000), §§ 10–128 (for the texts of the Theravādins); Thomas Oberlies, “Ein bibliographischer Überblick über die kanonischen Texte der Śrāvakayāna-Schulen des Buddhismus (ausgenommen der des Mahāvihāra-Theravāda),” *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens* 47 (2003): 37–84 (for the recensions of the other schools).

<sup>7</sup> Vin III 68–86.

<sup>8</sup> This observation was already made by Étienne Lamotte in *Le Traité de la Grande Vertu de Sagesse*, vol. 2, *Chapitres XVI–XXX*, Bibliothèque du Muséon 18 (Louvain: Institut Orientaliste, 1949), 740–1, n. 1.

are successful.<sup>9</sup>

It may also not be out of place to remark that originally there seems to have existed a rule that served as the direct precursor of this rule regarding homicide<sup>10</sup> and that did not contain any allusion to suicide. Nevertheless, the wording of the *pārājika* rule is definitely very old.

The canonical commentarial passages, in which this rule is embedded, however, are certainly later than the rule itself. But even in them no rule prohibiting the monks from committing suicide can be detected, at least as far as the Pāli recension is concerned. To be sure, there is a report of a monk who throws himself off a cliff. Another man is hit by him and dies, while the monk himself survives. On this occasion the Buddha declares that a monk is not allowed to “throw himself off.”<sup>11</sup> But, in the first place, this is only stated to be a minor offense. Secondly, the comparison with the case reported immediately after this incident shows clearly that the monk’s act counts as an offense not because he has acted aggressively towards his own self, but because he has caused the death of another person by behaving carelessly and in a way that potentially endangers other people.<sup>12</sup>

However, the commentary contains another passage in which the Buddha criticizes a series of incidents that include not only consensual mutual killing and killing on demand but also killing oneself without being assisted by another person.<sup>13</sup>

It has been suggested that suicide proper has not been treated as *pārājika* (and not as an offense at all), simply because due to the death of the culprit there is no one left to be punished.<sup>14</sup> But this interpretation

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<sup>9</sup> Vin III 73, 10–6.

<sup>10</sup> See Oskar von Hinüber, *Das Pātimokkhasutta der Theravādin: seine Gestalt und seine Entstehungsgeschichte*, Studien zur Literatur des Theravāda-Buddhismus 2, Abhandlungen der Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur: Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaftliche Klasse, Jg. 1999, Nr. 6 (Mainz: Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur; Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1999), 41–5.

<sup>11</sup> Vin III 82.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Harvey has rightly suggested this. See Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 289–90.

<sup>13</sup> Vin III 71, 16–28.

<sup>14</sup> See Harvey, *Buddhist Ethics*, 289; Karma Lekshe Tsomo, *Into the Jaws of Yama, Lord of Death: Death and Identity in China and Tibet*, Ph.D. dissertation

becomes improbable in view of the fact that even nonfatal suicide as such is nowhere in the Theravāda *vinaya* treated as an offense.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, it seems that apart from the Buddha's criticism in one of the commentarial passages mentioned above suicide is not dealt with in a way that suggests its equation with murder.

Much work remains to be done in analyzing the other recensions of the *vinaya*. Suffice it here to make some stray remarks. In one passage of the *vinaya* of the Sarvāstivādin, the question is asked whether there is the possibility of a homicide committed by a monk not entailing irrevocable exclusion from the order. The question is answered in the affirmative with explicit reference to suicide.<sup>16</sup> In still another place of this recension the story of a monk is told who suffers from some ailments. He comes to the conclusion that it makes no sense for him to stay alive and that it is better to kill himself by jumping into a deep pit. He does so but survives, because he lands on a jackal in the pit. Since the jackal dies as a consequence of his act, a doubt arises in the monk and he asks the Buddha whether he is guilty of an offense. The Buddha answers that this is not the case, but he also states that henceforth no monk should commit suicide for minor (!) reasons.<sup>17</sup>

While suicide as such is excluded from punishment in the Theravāda and Sarvāstivāda *vinayas*, the *vinaya* of the Mahīśāsakas adds precisely such a rule regarding suicide. But it is significant that even in this version suicide is—at least as far as the punishment it entails is concerned—not equated with the offense of killing others. Rather, it is declared to be a “grave transgression” (\**sthūlātyaya*).<sup>18</sup>

This text also contains an account of two very sick monks that are

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(University of Hawaii, 2000), 179.

<sup>15</sup> Harvey comes to this conclusion, too (Harvey, *Buddhist Ethics*, 290). Moreover, he remarks that violations of *vinaya* rules seem not to guarantee freedom from punishment simply because they are unsuccessful. But it seems that Harvey is not aware of the fact that these observations render his suggestion cited above rather improbable.

<sup>16</sup> T 23.382a1–2: 問頗比丘奪人命不得波羅夷耶。答有。自殺身無罪。

<sup>17</sup> T 23.436c12–7.

<sup>18</sup> T 22.7c5; cf. Paul Demiéville, “Le bouddhisme et la guerre: post-scriptum à l’*Histoire des moines-guerriers du Japon* de G. Renondeau,” *Mélanges publiés par l’Institut des Hautes Études Chinoises* 1 (1957): 350, n. 1.

advised by some of their brethren to terminate their suffering by killing themselves, since due to their moral behavior in this life they would certainly be reborn in heaven. Both refuse to follow this proposal by referring not only to the Buddha's ban on suicide but also to the fact that thereby they would bereave themselves of the opportunity to acquire further merit by moral behavior. Some lay followers who have been mauled by robbers are similarly advised. They, too, reject this suggestion, but they do not refer to the rule enunciated by the Buddha, which, as a *vinaya* rule, only holds good for monks. Rather, they state that the very suffering endured in this life would "teach them to cultivate the deeds of the way."<sup>19</sup>

The passages dealt with in the preceding paragraph contain, notwithstanding the fact that they are taken from the *Vinayaṭīkā*, which is mainly preoccupied with questions of a legal nature, some elements concerning Buddhist ethics and spirituality. This gives me the opportunity to turn attention to the canonical sermons, which principally deal with these matters.

#### *The sermons of the Śrāvakayāna*

In the *sūtras* a few texts can be found that contain negative statements on suicide.

A passage contained in the *Dīghanikāya* is especially interesting in this regard.<sup>20</sup> Here the question is posed why ascetics that lead a moral life do not simply kill themselves if there really is a yonder world and a reward for good deeds, as the Buddhists and followers of many other religious currents believe. For, thanks to the merit acquired by virtuous behavior, they would be guaranteed the transition to a better existence. The answer is that virtuous ascetics regard their life as meaningful. Firstly, they want to make use of this life for acquiring further merit. Secondly, they want to benefit other living beings by staying in this world. In my opinion, this text condemns suicide in quite strong terms, since it is stated that committing suicide would lead to disaster. This

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<sup>19</sup> T 22.8a6–26; cf. Demiéville, "Le bouddhisme et la guerre," 350–1, n. 4.

<sup>20</sup> DN II 330–2.

statement is further emphasized by the drastic simile of a pregnant woman who wants to give birth to her child prematurely by slashing open her belly. Naturally, this deed merely results in the death of both mother and child.

The passage mentioned above only deals with ascetics that have a good chance to be reborn in a heavenly world, that is, with persons who are, although virtuous, not released from rebirth. To what extent does this also apply to an *arhat*, namely, to the Buddhist saint who after death will enter *nirvāṇa*? The first reason given against suicide, that killing oneself prevents one from accumulating further merit, does not hold good for a person already released. For merit (*puṇya*), at least in this early period of Buddhism, only serves to effect a better position within *samsāra* after death. As against this, the second, altruistic reason could very well be extended to *arhats*. At any rate, the paracanonical text *Milindapañha* (Questions of [King] Menander), rejects the suicide of an *arhat*, and in doing so uses a simile that clearly reminds one of a similar expression found with regard to virtuous ascetics in general in the canonical passage of the *Dīghanikāya*<sup>21</sup> dealt with above: “. . . the *arhats* shake not down the unripe [fruit]; being wise, they await the time of its maturity.”<sup>22</sup>

And along the same lines, the *Milindapañha* refers to another canonical utterance, attributed among others to the *arhat* Śāriputra, that runs as follows: “I do not long for death; I do not long for life; but I await my time, as a servant his wages.”<sup>23</sup> We can here overlook the fact that the comparison to the wages of a servant seems to suggest that a released person regards the hour of death as a gladdening event, for in any case the verse seems to imply that causing one’s own premature death is inappropriate.

Can we in view of these facts safely conclude that the suicide of an *arhat* was deemed inappropriate in early Buddhism? It seems that we

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<sup>21</sup> DN II 332, 4–5.

<sup>22</sup> Mil 44, 33–4.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 45, 3–4: Hermann Oldenberg and Richard Pischel, eds., *Theragāthā*, 2nd edition with appendices by K. R. Norman and Ludwig Alsdorf (London: Pali Text Society, 1966), v. 1003; K. R. Norman, trans., *Elders’ Verses I: Theragāthā* (London: Pali Text Society, 1969).

cannot do so, since in the old *sūtras* not less than three cases of disciples of the Buddha who enter *nirvāṇa* after committing suicide are reported.<sup>24</sup> This being the case, it has to be considered whether these monks attained salvation in spite of, because of, or quite independently of their suicide.

First the case of the monk Godhika may be discussed:<sup>25</sup> It is reported that he had attained a “temporary release of mind” six times, but he always had lost this state shortly afterwards. When he was in this state for the seventh time, he decided in view of the previous incidents of regression, to “take the knife,” that is, to stab himself to death, and acted accordingly.

It is difficult to arrive at an appropriate understanding of this story, which was as a matter of fact a point of controversy between the different post-canonical schools of Indian Buddhism. It is especially difficult to determine whether Godhika had attained release when he came to his decision and committed suicide or whether he became an *arhat* only afterwards in the moment of death. At any rate, it seems to be perfectly clear how Godhika’s suicide is viewed in the corresponding sermon, since the Buddha utters after this incident a verse, which runs as follows: “Such indeed is how the steadfast act: They are not attached to life. Having drawn out craving with its root, Godhika has attained final Nibbāna.”<sup>26</sup> I fail to see how this statement could be interpreted as anything other than as strong approval of the way in which Godhika acted.<sup>27</sup> Note that in this verse only the non-clinging to life is

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<sup>24</sup> These cases have been dealt with very often in secondary literature. For references and some new remarks (also on the commentarial tradition regarding these cases) see Lambert Schmithausen, “Buddhism and the Ethics of Nature: Some Remarks,” *The Eastern Buddhist*, n.s., 32-2 (2000), 37. Only rarely have the recensions of these stories transmitted in other Śrāvakayāna schools than the Theravāda been given due consideration.

<sup>25</sup> SN I 120–2, cf. G. A. Somaratne, ed., *The Saṃyuttanikāya of the Suttapiṭaka*, vol. 1, *The Sagāthavagga* (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1998), 264–9. The latter edition presents a more reliable text than the older one cited before. — For the sake of convenience the three monks will be designated by the Pāli form of their names throughout this article.

<sup>26</sup> Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 2000), 212.

<sup>27</sup> Strangely enough, Damien Keown asserts that the Buddha does not comment on

mentioned, while in Śāriputra's utterance cited above the importance of the non-clinging to death is equally stressed.

The other two cases reported in the canon differ fundamentally from the story of Godhika, since the suicides of the monks are not motivated by the fact that they repeatedly fall back from an attained spiritual state. Rather, they seem to be mainly driven to suicide by the fact that they suffer from a grave, probably even incurable disease.

In contrast to the case of Godhika there is with regard to Channa,<sup>28</sup> the first of the remaining two monks, no reason for doubting that he already was released from rebirth when he decided to commit suicide, although the Theravāda tradition later stated the contrary. Recently, Damien Keown<sup>29</sup> has argued that the Buddha in the corresponding sermon does not judge Channa's behavior as being free from fault. But even if this is right, there remains the fact that the Buddha nowhere in the sermon deems Channa's suicide to be problematic.

Obviously the monk Vakkali has, like Channa, committed suicide after attaining salvation—at least according to the wording of the Pāli canon<sup>30</sup> and according to the Mūlasarvāstivāda recension.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, the following fact is especially remarkable: In both recensions mentioned, the Buddha, having heard about the suicidal intentions of Vakkali, assures this monk of the fact that his death would have no bad consequences. Only afterwards does Vakkali stab himself to death. It is quite obvious to me that this disciple is even encouraged by the Buddha to kill himself. It seems to be hardly imaginable that the author of this sermon would have attributed such an encouragement to the Buddha if he were convinced that the suicide of the *arhat* was morally wrong.<sup>32</sup>

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Godhika's suicide at all. See Damien Keown, "Buddhism and Suicide: The Case of Channa," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 3 (1996): 16–7. It should be noted that this assertion is far from being irrelevant to Keown's line of argument, since he wants to show that the suicides of the three disciples are not condoned and probably not even exonerated.

<sup>28</sup> SN IV 55–60; MN III 263–6, no. 144.

<sup>29</sup> Keown, "Buddhism and Suicide," 8–31.

<sup>30</sup> SN III 119–24.

<sup>31</sup> T 2.346b–347b.

<sup>32</sup> According to Keown, the Buddha's assurance that Vakkali's death will have no bad consequences does not imply that his suicide is condoned or exonerated. See

However, a third recension of this sermon, which can be found in the Chinese *\*Ekottarikāgama*,<sup>33</sup> differs considerably. According to this version, Vakkali is not in a state of release while committing suicide; on the contrary, after inflicting on himself the lethal wound, he comes to the conclusion that he has acted wrongly and that he will suffer bad consequences as a result. But immediately afterwards he attains salvation at last and enters *nirvāṇa* after his death. This recension needs—and deserves—to be further examined. For the time being, one can only safely conclude that taking one's own life before being released is deemed to be wrong and to lead to undesirable results in the next life, though these can be prevented by attaining salvation at the moment of death.

This discussion of passages relevant to the topic of suicide in the early Buddhist texts has, preliminary as it may be, hopefully shown that it is impossible to detect a uniformly negative view on suicide in the canonical texts. Rather, it seems that different views on suicide are expressed. They seem to differ not only according to the person and circumstances involved in each case but also according to the text passage or recension under consideration.

Even the death of the Buddha can be considered as a kind of suicide.<sup>34</sup> At least it is stated in the reports of the Buddha's last days that he announced his own death three months before his passing into *nirvāṇa* and that he “gave up his life forces” after this announcement.<sup>35</sup> In this context it is not out of place to mention that a Buddha conversely can prolong his stay in this world for a huge amount of time if he wishes to do so. He obtains such supernatural powers by mastering certain meditative exercises.<sup>36</sup>

Before the developments that took place in post-canonical times are

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Keown, “Buddhism and Suicide,” 16–7. But this interpretation is rendered improbable, to say the least, by the fact that the Buddha quite obviously has heard about Vakkali's intentions before making his statement.

<sup>33</sup> T 2.642b–3a. Possibly this recension belongs to a Mahāsāṅghika group; see the references in Oberlies, “Bibliographischer Überblick,” 72, n. 169.

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, Étienne Lamotte, “Religious Suicide in Early Buddhism,” *Buddhist Studies Review* 4-2 (1987): 107–8.

<sup>35</sup> DN II 106.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* 103.

treated, one further point, which in my opinion has been rather neglected up till now, should be mentioned. In two different sermons<sup>37</sup> it is stated that there have been monks who took their own life simply out of disgust for their bodies. One of these narrations reappears in the canonical commentarial passages on the *vinaya* rule regarding homicide, where it is followed by a definite statement of disapproval from the mouth of the Buddha.<sup>38</sup> However, it will be seen later on that such motivations behind suicide reappear more than once in Buddhist sources, and sometimes even in contexts that imply approval, at least under certain conditions; medieval sources from China even present reports of suicide like the one above in texts that claim to report historical facts. One could regard this as a radically escapist strain of Buddhist thought. At all events, it seems to be clear that at least in canonical times—and also in most varieties of later Buddhism—suicides like the foregoing instances happened without the approval of the mainstream.

#### *Post-canonical developments*

It has become clear by now that the canonical sources present a complex and quite ambiguous picture regarding the views on suicide. The following remarks are intended to show that at least two of the post-canonical Śrāvakayāna schools dealt with the materials they inherited in a way that resulted in markedly different opinions held with respect to suicide. First of all, the only extant school of conservative Buddhism, the Theravādins, will be considered. In a text only regarded as canonical by a part of the Pāli school of Buddhism, the *Milindapañha* already mentioned above, quite obviously a very critical attitude to suicide prevails. In the first place, the *vinaya* rule already discussed above, according to which it is forbidden to “cast oneself off,” is understood as a blanket ban on suicide. Moreover, in support of the rejection of suicide the altruistic reason is given that virtuous ascetics can, by continuing their life on earth, benefit other living

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<sup>37</sup> SN IV 60–3; MN III 267–9, no. 145; SN V 320–2.

<sup>38</sup> Vin III 68–71.

beings.<sup>39</sup> Finally, it is stated at another—probably older<sup>40</sup>—place in the text that released persons do not kill themselves even if they suffer physical pain, because they do not feel any attraction or aversion anymore and because they desire neither death nor life.<sup>41</sup> Thus it is assumed in this text that the spiritual accomplishment of released persons entails endurance of all kinds of pain.

Later the eminent Theravāda scholar Buddhaghosa (ca. 400 AD) even went so far as to regard the fact that Channa was not able to bear his pains as proof of his being a common man, that is, someone who had not yet attained any certainty regarding the salvific truths at all.<sup>42</sup> In Buddhaghosa's view, all three monks only attained the state of being an *arhat* during the interval between the act of suicide and its fatal consequence. While Vakkali<sup>43</sup> allegedly committed suicide because he wrongly believed himself to be an *arhat*, Godhika<sup>44</sup> did so simply in order to die while in a state of worldly meditative attainment, thereby gaining rebirth in the Brahma heaven. Moreover, according to this commentator, Godhika also suffered from a disease, although there is not the slightest hint of such in the canonical Pāli text. Buddhaghosa's interpretations of the canonical stories are far from suggesting themselves, and are quite obviously put forward because in the Theravāda tradition the views on suicide had changed by late canonical or post-canonical times.<sup>45</sup>

In the important *vinaya* commentary called *Samantapāsādikā*<sup>46</sup> a quite negative attitude to suicide again makes itself felt. The *vinaya* rule

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<sup>39</sup> Mil 195–7.

<sup>40</sup> See Hinüber, *Pāli Literature*, §§ 175–9.

<sup>41</sup> Mil 44–5.

<sup>42</sup> Spk II 371–3.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. 313–5.

<sup>44</sup> Spk I 182–5.

<sup>45</sup> For a fuller treatment of the discrepancies between the three canonical sermons on the one hand and Buddhaghosa's commentaries on them on the other, see Per-Arne Berglie and Carl Suneson, "Arhatschaft und Selbstmord: zur buddhistischen Interpretation von *cetanābhabba* / *cetanādharman* und *attasaṃcetanā* / *ātmasaṃcetanā*," in *Kalyāṇamitrārāgaṇam, Essays in Honour of Nils Simonsson*, ed. Eivind Kahrs (Oslo: Norwegian University Press, 1986), 31–6.

<sup>46</sup> Sp 467. This work is attributed to Buddhaghosa, but there are good reasons to doubt his authorship. See Hinüber, *Pāli Literature*, § 224.

that prohibits throwing oneself from a precipice is similarly interpreted as in the *Milindapañha*. Even voluntary fasting unto death, which of course can hardly lead to endangering another person's life unintentionally, is explicitly included in this prohibition. Regarding this form of suicide a few exceptions are admitted, though. In this casuistry the question whether one suffers from an incurable disease plays a major role, but it is also considered whether the continuation of eating could distract one from the gain of spiritual progress.<sup>47</sup>

The sources of the post-canonical Pāli tradition discussed above have received quite a lot of attention. It is true that the Theravāda school is the only extant tradition from among the schools of conservative Buddhism. But one should not forget that there were other schools that played a very important role in Buddhist history, for instance, the Sarvāstivādins. When one examines some of their relevant texts, one gains a fundamentally different picture regarding the views on suicide.

The Sarvāstivādins held that there are different types of *arhats*. According to them, some *arhats* can fall back from their state of being released. They state that Godhika was one such *arhat* at the moment of committing suicide. By killing himself, he prevented himself from falling back from the attained salvation. The Sarvāstivādins even recognized a whole category of *arhats* who commit suicide.<sup>48</sup> Such persons may, for instance, kill themselves because they are tired of sense objects or because they are afraid of losing their state if they fall ill.<sup>49</sup> Still another group of *arhats* has, according to the Sarvāstivādins, a similar ability to one ascribed to the Buddha: They can shorten their natural span of life by a special kind of supernatural power. In this context, the view of some masters is cited according to which these released beings end their lives prematurely, because they feel disgust towards their own bodies, which they regard as “containers of poison.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> For details see Damien Keown, “Attitudes to Euthanasia in the Vinaya and Commentary,” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 6 (1999): 267–8.

<sup>48</sup> See, for example, *\*Mahāvibhāṣā*, T 27.319c8–10.

<sup>49</sup> *\*Nyāyānusāriṇī*, T 29.710a20–c6; my attention has been drawn to this source by an unpublished lecture on Buddhism and violence held by Lambert Schmithausen.

<sup>50</sup> *\*Mahāvibhāṣā*, T 27.656c15–8.

In view of this obviously quite positive attitude towards religious suicide, it seems to be impossible that the Sarvāstivādins regarded suicide as being intrinsically wrong from the standpoint of morality, since the *arhat* is depicted as a man who has become virtually incapable of committing deeds that are morally wrong.

Significantly, the Sarvāstivādins were of the opinion that the killing of living beings, or even any harmful or beneficial act, derives its character of being *karmically* relevant from being directed towards *other* living beings. This standpoint prevents suicide from being included in the category of *karmic* acts constituted by killing. However, in the *\*Tattvasiddhi* by Harivarman, an adherent of another school of conservative Buddhism refers to the very problem of suicide in order to prove that the question whether an act is harmful or beneficial to other living beings *cannot* be the only criterion for arriving at a judgment regarding the *karmic* unwholesomeness of an act.<sup>51</sup> Harivarman himself flatly rejects this opinion and utters a similar view as the Sarvāstivādins hold, although he is not an adherent of this school.<sup>52</sup>

The remarks contained in the preceding paragraphs may be sufficient for the present purpose of conveying a first impression of the diverging opinions on suicide in the Śrāvakayāna schools. But before turning to another variety of Buddhist texts, two more remarks may be added.

First of all, it should be noted that in post-canonical works quite often the view that suicide by starvation, entering into fire and the like is a means of gaining rebirth in heaven is severely criticized.<sup>53</sup> This does not, however, necessarily imply that suicide prevents one from being reborn in heaven.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> *\*Tattvasiddhi*, T 32.294c27–9.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, T 32.295b15–22. For further references regarding the question of karmic unwholesomeness dealt with in the preceding lines, see Lambert Schmithausen, “Religionen und Bioethik: 2. Buddhismus,” vol. 3, *Lexikon der Bioethik*, ed. Wilhelm Korff et al. (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1998), 186–7, and Schmithausen, “Ethics of Nature,” 45–6 and n. 96.

<sup>53</sup> See, for example, *Yogācārabhūmi* T 30.636b28–c2: D. T. Suzuki, ed., *Tibetan Tripiṭaka (Peking Edition)* (Tokyo, Kyoto: Tibetan Tripiṭaka Research Institute, 1955–1958), vol. 111, sems tsam Zi 154b1–2; T 30.612c8–14: *Ibid.*, vol. 110, sems tsam Zi 89b5–7.

<sup>54</sup> See tale no. 24 in Kumāralāta’s *Kalpanāmaṇḍitikā dṛṣṭāntapaṅkti*, T 4.280c–2a;

Finally, I would like to refer to another discussion contained in the \**Tattvasiddhi* by Harivarman, because it contains an important hint under what circumstances suicide could be regarded as admissible by many Buddhists of that age. This discussion<sup>55</sup> deals with the question whether one can only fall back from meditative states, as Harivarman believes, or also from salvation. Once again, the adherent of the latter opinion refers to the problem of Godhika's suicide and continues with this statement: "If he had fallen back from a meditative attainment, he should not have killed himself. For in the Buddha's teaching it is liberation that is held in esteem, not meditation."<sup>56</sup> In other words: It is not worth killing oneself for the sake of a meditative attainment, but if one has to weigh life against salvation, the latter does prevail.<sup>57</sup> It is, by the way, significant, that Harivarman himself cannot resist this argumentation. Therefore, he takes pains to explain how falling back from his meditative attainment prevented Godhika from gaining salvation while in this meditative state.<sup>58</sup> Thus ultimately even Harivarman's position amounts to saying that Godhika committed suicide for the sake of salvation.

#### *Narrative literature*

The fact that the edifying narrative literature of Buddhism was popular in the Śrāvakayāna as well as in the Mahāyāna gives us the opportunity to discuss some of these sources here before turning to an examination of Mahāyāna texts proper.

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cf. Jean Filliozat, "The Giving Up of Life by the Sage: The Suicides of the Criminal and the Hero in Indian Tradition," in *Religion, Philosophy, Yoga: A Selection of Articles by Jean Filliozat* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1991), 154–5.

<sup>55</sup> \**Tattvasiddhi*, T 32.257c10–258b1.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., T32.257c14–16: 若退禪定者不應自害。以佛法中貴解脫不貴定故。

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Schmithausen, "Ethics of Nature," 35–6 and n. 47 (on behalf of Professor Schmithausen, I would like to correct the following misprints: 偽 has to be read as 爲 in both citations, and 貴 should be corrected to 珍貴 in the second one). See also the *Sūtra of the Wise and the Foolish* (*Xian yu jing* 賢愚經, T 4.380a17–20), where it is stated that it is better to abandon one's own life than to violate the precepts of moral conduct, because moral conduct (*śīla*) is an essential part of the way to salvation.

<sup>58</sup> \**Tattvasiddhi*, T 32.257c16–7; cf. *ibid.*, T 32.358c4–12.

The literary genre of Buddhist narratives from India can broadly be divided into two categories: apart from the *jātakas*, which are preoccupied with the Buddha's former existences, there are the other *avadānas* that in a similar way narrate the destiny of all kinds of other persons, for instance, released disciples of the Buddha or hungry ghosts (*preta*).

As is well known, the *jātakas* abound in stories relating the Bodhisattva's acts of self-sacrifice. Among these narratives, those cases of suicide that obviously have been committed for altruistic reasons are especially famous. Often the immediate aim of these self-sacrificial acts consists in saving the lives of other living beings. When, however, the Bodhisattva as a hare offers his body to an ascetic who lives with him in the wilderness in order to provide him with food, the self-sacrifice serves to further the spiritual progress of another living being, since it is intended to prevent the ascetic from returning to society after finding nothing to eat. But there are also cases of self-sacrifice that are not—at least not immediately—committed towards altruistic ends. Among them may be reckoned ones in which the Bodhisattva sacrifices himself merely in order to hear a verse of the Dharma. Probably most, if not all, of the cases of self-sacrifice in the *jātakas* can be explained as serving to illustrate virtues like compassion, liberality or the firm determination to attain Buddhahood. But this problem will be referred to again later on.

While these deeds of the Bodhisattva have always received much attention in secondary literature on Buddhism, cases of suicide that can be found in narratives belonging to the second category mentioned above have, to the best of my knowledge, virtually been ignored.

In order to illustrate that these sources do not deserve such neglect when the subject of suicide in Buddhism is addressed, a few remarks restricted to only one of these sources, the *Avadānaśataka* as transmitted in its edited Sanskrit recension,<sup>59</sup> may be offered.

One of the narratives contained therein<sup>60</sup> relates the story of a

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<sup>59</sup> The Chinese version of the *Avadānaśataka* (T 4, no. 200) differs considerably from the edited Sanskrit text. For the limited purposes of this article it may be disregarded.

<sup>60</sup> Avś II 52–9 (No. 80 [Virūpā]).

woman who wants to kill herself because of her ugliness and because her husband is ashamed of her. The Buddha comes into her presence as she is about to perform this deed and prevents her from doing so. Quite obviously this suicide attempt is viewed as problematic, because it is committed in a state of despair. Maybe the fact that from the Buddhist viewpoint it is a mundanely, not religiously motivated suicide also counts for something.

However, another narrative of the *Avadānaśataka*<sup>61</sup> contains the story of one of the Buddha's disciples who wants to commit suicide because he is making, in spite of all his efforts, no spiritual progress. Once again the Buddha prevents him from doing so. Therefore, even despair with regard to spiritual failure does not count as a legitimate reason for killing oneself. A further consideration may lie in the fact that the disciple wants to kill himself under the best conditions that can be imagined, namely, as a monk in the Buddha's order while the latter is still alive.

In this connection attention should be drawn to another story from the same work, one in which suicide attempts are judged completely differently. This narrative<sup>62</sup> deals with a young Brahmin called Gaṅgika, who also lives during the lifetime of the Buddha and wants to become a member of his order. His parents, however, refuse to give him the necessary permission to do so. Gaṅgika repeatedly tries to commit suicide in order to get the opportunity to become a monk and disciple of the Buddha in his next life and thereby to make use of this extraordinarily rare and precious chance to make spiritual progress. He receives much praise for his behavior, among others from the Buddha himself.<sup>63</sup> This narrative was, by the way, long ago mentioned by

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid. 133–46 (No. 92 [Sthavira]).

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. 179–85 (No. 98 [Gaṅgika]).

<sup>63</sup> Jean Filliozat, "Self-Immolation by Fire and the Indian Buddhist Tradition," in *Religion, Philosophy, Yoga: A Selection of Articles by Jean Filliozat* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1991), 104, groups the story of Gaṅgika together with the two stories mentioned in the preceding paragraphs and views all of them as indicating that "an impulsive attempt against the bodily life is seen by Buddhism as a misfortune for the one who commits it." He obviously regards the fact that Gaṅgika's suicide attempts are not successful because he has become invulnerable thanks to a good deed performed in a former life as proof of his view. Filliozat's interpretation cannot be

Speyer, who cites it as an example of the fact that the widespread Indian belief according to which one can determine one's own future destiny by the thoughts and wishes at the hour of death can play a major role in the decision to commit suicide.<sup>64</sup>

The story of the buffalo<sup>65</sup> may serve as a last example drawn from the *Avadānaśataka*. During the Buddha's lifetime there was a very strong and extraordinarily malicious buffalo, which used to hunt down any man he scented. Finally the Buddha approached and tamed him, after terrifying him with lions, which he had created supernaturally. After the Buddha has preached to him in a few words the salvific truths and "has reminded him of his birth"—that is, presumably, that he explained to him the causes and circumstances of his present existence as a buffalo—the buffalo starts crying. Now the Buddha utters these words: "What shall I do now for you, who have been born as an animal, who have fallen into an inopportune existence? Why do you cry futilely? Come, make your mind trustful with regard to the Victorious One (i.e., the Buddha), who is endowed with great compassion. Having here turned away from your animal existence, you will then attain rebirth in heaven!"

After hearing these words, the buffalo feels disgust towards its own body and fasts to death. After that the animal is reborn as a god in heaven, as foretold by the Buddha. Soon after his rebirth the former animal descends to earth in order to receive instructions from him. He thereupon attains a spiritual breakthrough, namely, a vision of the Four

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discarded outright. The fact that Gaṅḡika was praised for the way in which he acted, however, renders Filliozat's hypothesis rather improbable.

<sup>64</sup> See Jakob S. Speyer, *Die indische Theosophie: aus den Quellen dargestellt* (Leipzig: Haessel, 1914), 275–7. Speyer also points out that this belief can be detected in some of the stories in which the Bodhisattva commits suicide for altruistic reasons. As an example, he mentions the story of King Padmaka, which is also contained in the *Avadānaśataka*; see *Avś* I, 168–72 (No. 31 [Padmaka]). I have not yet examined this topic in any greater detail, but it seems to be clear that there are more interesting cases of suicide committed under the influence of such a belief in Buddhist narrative literature. There even seem to be examples that—unlike the stories of Gaṅḡika or Padmaka—are hardly justifiable from the standpoint of Buddhist dogmatics. See, for example, the story of Śaḍḍanta as cited by Jampa L. Panglung, *Die Erzählstoffe des Mūlasarvāstivāda-Vinaya* (Tokyo: The Reiyukai Library, 1981), 44.

<sup>65</sup> *Avś* I, 331–5 (No. 58 [Mahiṣa]).

Noble Truths. According to my understanding there can be hardly any doubt that the buffalo's suicide is a direct result of the Buddha's admonition.<sup>66</sup> It seems that the main reason why the Buddha instigates the buffalo to take its own life is the fact that according to Buddhist dogmatics an animal is, in contrast to a god, not capable of the insight necessary for the vision of salvific truths. Thus it seems that once again life is discarded for the sake of spiritual progress.

At least one other factor deserves to be mentioned here: In this story rebirth in heaven and, in contrast to another, otherwise similar story,<sup>67</sup> even the vision of the salvific truths are regarded as a *karmic* result of the fact that the suicide was committed in the state of believing confidence (*prasāda*) in the Buddha. For the first time in the present paper the phenomenon of devotional Buddhism is encountered. The term *prasāda* implies, apart from confident belief, the idea of mental clearness. And it seems to be this combination of believing confidence in the Buddha and a serene mental state that is responsible for the favorable state attained after death.

### *Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism*

In order to discuss some of the attitudinal developments regarding suicide that took place in Mahāyāna Buddhism, once again the *jātaka*

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<sup>66</sup> I fail to understand the way in which Padmanabh S. Jaini deals with this story as well as with a similar one also taken from the *Avadānaśataka*. See Padmanabh S. Jaini, "Indian Perspectives on the Spirituality of Animals" in *Collected Papers on Jaina Studies*, ed. idem (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2000), 258–9. One may very well argue about why exactly the animals commit suicide but one cannot, without giving any reasons, simply ignore the very fact of voluntary fasting unto death, as Jaini does. By doing so he arrives at an interpretation of these stories (ibid., 263) regarding the spirituality of animals which would hardly have been possible, had he taken the facts of suicide into account. While Jaini sees the story of the buffalo as an example for the fact that "an animal displayed an almost human faculty for understanding . . . profound expressions of Dharma," the Buddha's verses and the suicide of the buffalo rather seem to indicate that no significant spiritual progress can be made while being an animal. It is more their faculty of developing *belief* in the Buddha and his words than a faculty for *understanding* salvific truths that makes possible a change of their future destiny for the better.

<sup>67</sup> Avś I, 289–94 (No. 51 [Kṛṣṇasarpa]).

stories need to be considered. Were the narratives of self-sacrifice meant as practical instructions to be followed by the Buddhist audience? As long as these stories were told in an environment marked by conservative Buddhism, this question did not rise, since the career of the Bodhisattva was not yet regarded as a path to be taken by the masses. The situation changed when Mahāyāna, which is mainly characterized by the Bodhisattva path it propagated, thought to be superior to the way practiced by ancient and conservative Buddhists, emerged. It is an essential part of the new ideal that one extends boundless compassion and that one develops the virtue of liberality to the point of perfection. Insofar as, according to the Buddhist worldview, it is one's own life that is dearest to oneself, giving up that life could serve as the best proof of the perfection of these two virtues. However, it seems that significant progress has recently been made with regard to the interpretation of the stories of self-sacrifice. By applying methods of literary studies, it has convincingly been shown that at least a significant number of the stories involving the self-sacrifice of a Bodhisattva, that is, a Buddha in one of his former existences, were not primarily written to praise these deeds or even to recommend their imitation. Rather, the stories of gifts of the body in a former life served, by way of comparison, as a means of glorifying the gift of dharma granted by the Buddha in his last existence.<sup>68</sup> If, however, these altruistic self-sacrifices are interpreted in terms of religious dogmatics, they serve the purpose of accumulating immeasurable merit, which is necessary for attaining the new soteriological goal of Buddhahood. Anyway, there have been voices in Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism that rather warned against imitating these deeds. Śāntideva (eighth century), for instance, repeatedly sets limiting conditions for the practice of self-sacrifice. It should not be practiced by the beginner or when the recipient of the gift of the body is unworthy (as it is very often the case in the *jātakas*).<sup>69</sup> Moreover, some of Śāntideva's statements may imply

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<sup>68</sup> See Reiko Ohnuma, "The Gift of the Body and the Gift of dharma," *History of Religions* 37-4 (1998): 323–59.

<sup>69</sup> See Louis de La Vallée Poussin, "Suicide (Buddhist)," vol. 12, *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1921), 24–6, where, mainly or exclusively, relevant passages in Śāntideva's

that he tends to stress the importance of cultivating the mental attitude of giving one's flesh rather than to recommend the actual practice of self-sacrifice.<sup>70</sup>

The situation in India may have been similar with regard to another type of self-sacrifice that is met with in some Mahāyāna *sūtras*: self-immolation by fire in honor of the Buddha and his teaching.

### *Medieval China*

In China the situation seems to have been different. Beginning from the fifth century AD reports emerge—which are at least partly trustworthy—of a large number of self-immolations by fire as acts of worship. These accounts of suicide are contained in collections of biographies of monks and nuns.<sup>71</sup> Although the suicides reportedly were committed with explicit reference to Indian texts, it seems that specific features of the ancient and very different Chinese culture and developments that had taken place in the earlier history of Chinese Buddhism played a major role on their own. However, it may be noted that we also have reports according to which monks killed themselves for other reasons already mentioned in the Indian texts, for example, for altruistic reasons or out

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*Śikṣāsamuccaya* seem to be utilized, and Reiko Ohnuma, “Internal and External Opposition to the Bodhisattva's Gift of His Body,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 28-1 (2000): 43–75, where passages from the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* are cited. The latter article also discusses many other critical voices detectable in ancient Indian Buddhist sources.

<sup>70</sup> See, for example, P. L. Vaidya, ed., *Bodhicaryāvatāra of Śāntideva*, Buddhist Sanskrit Texts 12 (Darbhanga: The Mithila Institute of Post-Graduate Studies and Research in Sanskrit Learning, 1960), V 9–10, where Śāntideva states that the perfection of giving is nothing but mind. Passages like this one may be responsible for the fact that Albert Schweitzer regarded not only early Buddhist but even Mahāyāna Buddhist Ethics as “Gedanken-Ethik”; see Albert Schweitzer, *Die Weltanschauung der indischen Denker: Mystik und Ethik*, reprint of the second edition (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1982), 81 and 95–100.

<sup>71</sup> The oldest sources extant in its entirety are: *Biqiuni zhuan* 比丘尼傳 (*Biographies of Nuns*, T 50, no. 2063) by Baochang 寶唱 (502–557) and *Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳 (*Biographies of Eminent Monks*, T 50, no. 2059) by Huijiao 慧皎 (497–554). For further sources see James A. Benn, “Where Text Meets Flesh: Burning the Body as an ‘Apocryphal Practice’ in Chinese Buddhism,” *History of Religions* 37-4 (1998): 296–7, n. 7.

of disgust with one's own body or life in general.<sup>72</sup>

However, Fazang's (643–712) commentary<sup>73</sup> on the *Fanwang jing* 梵網經, a very influential code of behavior for followers of Mahāyāna probably written in China,<sup>74</sup> regards this kind of suicide motivated by disgust as a transgression, albeit as a minor one. In contrast, suicide committed out of hatred counts as a heavier offense. But especially noteworthy is the fact that this commentary—not without referring to a relevant passage in the root text, though—also accepts in explicit terms meritorious kinds of suicide, namely, those that are committed for the sake of the Buddhist teaching or for altruistic reasons. This subtly differentiated evaluation of suicide is made possible on the basis of the view expressed in this text that killing stands as a grave offense depending on conditions, which include among others—similar to statements from Indian texts that have already been mentioned above—that the homicide is directed against others. Thus, Fazang categorizes suicide as one of the forms of killing that does not fulfill all necessary conditions for being rejected categorically.

Still, rather critical voices are not missing among Chinese Buddhists.

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<sup>72</sup> The cases of suicide in Chinese Buddhism have been treated in quite a lot of Western-language scholarly publications. Yün-hua Jan, “Buddhist Self-Immolation in Medieval China,” *History of Religions* 4-2 (1965): 243–68, presents a good overview of the manifoldness of motives. Further, the older contributions by Filliozat, “Self-Immolation by Fire,” 91–125, and Jacques Gernet, “Les suicides par le feu chez les bouddhistes chinois du Ve au Xe siècle,” *Mélanges publiés par l'Institut des Hautes Études Chinoises* 2 (1960), 526–58, are often referred to in this context. Newer publications include Benn, “Where Text Meets Flesh,” 295–322; Ku Cheng-mei, “A Ritual of Mahāyāna Vinaya: Self-Sacrifice,” in *Buddhist Thought and Ritual*, ed. David J. Kalupahana (New York: Paragon House, 1991), 159–71. Finally, John Kieschnick, *The Eminent Monk: Buddhist Ideals in Medieval Chinese Hagiography*, Studies in East Asian Buddhism 10 (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), deserves special mention, because Kieschnick focuses his attention on the sources themselves that contain, among other things, the reports of suicide and tries to determine the intention behind their compilation and their *Sitz im Leben*.

<sup>73</sup> *Fanwang jing pusa jie ben shu* 梵網經菩薩戒本疏, T 40.610b17–25. Attention has already been drawn to this source in Schmithausen, “Religionen und Bioethik: 2. Buddhismus,” and Schmithausen, “Ethics of Nature,” 46, n. 96. Furthermore, my remarks on this text are largely inspired by an unpublished lecture on Buddhism and violence held by Lambert Schmithausen.

<sup>74</sup> See Christoph Kleine's references in n. 9 of his contribution to this volume.

Suffice it to mention two examples: Yijing (635–713), the famous pilgrim to India, flatly rejects self-immolation by fire and other kinds of self-sacrifice of a Bodhisattva, but, interestingly enough, only if they are committed by monks or nuns. He substantiates his view by referring to the rules of monastic law and by stating that suicide would deprive one of the opportunities to continue spiritual practice. As for lay Bodhisattvas, he explicitly allows at least altruistic self-sacrifice. Other forms of religious suicide, which he has observed in India, he totally rejects as non-Buddhist and as acts of delusion.<sup>75</sup>

Furthermore, it is reported that the Chinese emperor Gong of the Jin dynasty (r. 419–420) refused to kill himself because this would have destroyed his chance to be reborn as a man.<sup>76</sup>

### *Pure Land Buddhism*

Before concluding the historical sketch with some remarks on present-day incidents of, and views on, suicide, it may not be out of place to present some observations on one more variety of historical Buddhism: Pure Land Buddhism. As is well known, this idiosyncratic form of Mahāyāna Buddhism has its roots in a cult centered on the Buddha Amitābha, which, though it already existed in India, is of greater importance in the East Asian cultural sphere. According to this teaching, Amitābha has already essentially paved the way to salvation for other living beings by creating, by his merit, a pure land, which one can enter after death and which will be the ideal environment for attaining ultimate salvation. In China and more especially in Japan, there gained ever more ground a tendency that minimized and finally wholly negated living beings' own contribution, that is, the necessity of good works and spiritual effort. The doctrine was shaped that instead of

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<sup>75</sup> *Nanhai jigui neifa zhuan* 南海寄歸內法傳, T 54.231a–c; Junjiro Takakusu, trans., *I-tsing: A Record of the Buddhist Religion as Practised in India and the Malay Archipelago (AD 671–695)*, 1896 (Reprint, Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1966), 195–8.

<sup>76</sup> Erik Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China: The Spread and Adaptation of Buddhism in Early Medieval China*, reprint, with additions and corrections, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1972), 158.

one's own efforts the "other power," namely, the salvific work of Amitābha, is what can and has to be relied upon. In Japan, some even denied the soteriological relevance of the central practice of this school, the invocation of the Buddha Amitābha's name, because it would be a violation of the principle of "other power."

At any rate, it becomes obvious that under these circumstances the attainment of salvation at the time of death, or at least the certainty of gaining salvation after death, virtually goes without saying. And this seems to have led to a great number of suicides among the followers of this school. Earlier on in China, the anecdote of a lay follower of the patriarch Shandao (613–681) was transmitted, according to which he threw himself from a large tree with fatal results, after his master had assured him that rebirth in the pure land would be certain if he chanted the name of Buddha Amitābha.<sup>77</sup> Furthermore, there are reports from the Japanese Middle Ages that numerous followers of this doctrine drowned themselves in rivers or in the ocean. However, it seems that in most cases precautions were taken that allowed the process of drowning to be interrupted as soon as the suicide lost his concentration, equanimity and determination.<sup>78</sup> These cases clearly show that at least a part of the followers of Amitābha deemed a further factor necessary for the attainment of the pure land, namely, the state of mental equilibrium in the hour of death.<sup>79</sup> Also relevant is the report that disciples of the itinerant preacher Ippen (1239–1289) committed suicide at the death of their master hoping to accompany him to the pure land. Another disciple of this teacher was quick to state that those disciples forfeited rebirth in the pure land, because they had followed their own desires in killing themselves, that is, had violated the necessity of entrusting themselves completely to Amitābha's will and power.<sup>80</sup> Notwithstanding

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<sup>77</sup> T 50.684a15–9. Cf. Jan, "Buddhist Self-Immolation," 250. Jan's rendering of the source deviates slightly from my understanding of the Chinese wording.

<sup>78</sup> Carl B. Becker, *Breaking the Circle: Death and the Afterlife in Buddhism*, (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993), 138–9.

<sup>79</sup> The crucial importance of the mental state at the hour of death for evaluating the success of suicide in this variety of Buddhism is clearly stressed by Becker (*Ibid.*, 139–40).

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 139. Earlier, but nearly identical versions of the passages cited from Becker's book can be found in Carl B. Becker, "Buddhist Ethics for the New Century:

the fact that many more cases of mass suicides from Japanese history are reported, it is obvious that even in the doctrine of Pure Land Buddhism suicide was not necessarily regarded as a fast and safe way to paradise.

*Suicide in modern times*

The self-immolations by fire in an earlier period of Chinese Buddhism have already been dealt with above. In addition, it should be noted that this practice seems never to have died out; there are reports of incidents of this kind both from late Qing and Republican China, although it is not quite clear how often such self-immolations occurred.<sup>81</sup> At any rate, it seems to be clear that this practice received new impetus in the course of the dramatic events that took place in Vietnam during the 1960s.<sup>82</sup> The year 1963 alone witnessed eight of these incidents, and even now new reports of self-immolation in Vietnam (and also in other countries) continue to come in. But in the case of the Vietnamese self-immolators a very special motive comes to the fore, namely, suicide as an act of

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Suicide and Euthanasia,” *The Pure Land: The Journal of the International Association of Shin Buddhist Studies*, n.s., 6 (1989): 153–5; and Carl B. Becker, “Buddhist Views of Suicide and Euthanasia,” *Philosophy East and West* 40 (1990): 548–50.

<sup>81</sup> See Holmes Welch, *The Practice of Chinese Buddhism 1900–1950*, Harvard East Asian Studies 26 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 325–8. Similar reports from earlier twentieth-century Vietnam are not missing. Surprisingly enough, even in Thailand, which is a Theravāda Buddhist country, incidents of such a kind seemingly occurred. See Heinz Bechert, *Buddhismus, Staat und Gesellschaft in den Ländern des Theravāda-Buddhismus*, vol. 2, Schriften des Instituts für Asienkunde 17-2 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1967), 199–200.

<sup>82</sup> The best scholarly treatment of the revival of these practices known to me can be found in Bechert, *Buddhismus, Staat und Gesellschaft*, 2:347–51; see also *ibid.*, 338 and Heinz Bechert, *Buddhismus, Staat und Gesellschaft in den Ländern des Theravāda-Buddhismus*, vol. 3, Schriften des Instituts für Asienkunde 17-3 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1973), 552–4 (where a German translation of Thich Quang Duc’s letter announcing his intention to burn himself can be found). See also Sallie B. King, “They Who Burned Themselves for Peace: Quaker and Buddhist Self-Immolators during the Vietnam War,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 20 (2000): 127–50; Sallie B. King, “Self-Immolation, Buddhist,” vol. 2, *Encyclopedia of Monasticism*, ed. William M. Johnston (Chicago and London: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 2000), 1143–4.

protest against the suppression and persecution of Buddhists. This motive is, to the best of my knowledge, only rarely documented in premodern Buddhism,<sup>83</sup> and may be rather inspired by Mahatma Gandhi, who repeatedly used fasting unto death as a means of exerting political pressure. These self-immolations and many suicides that were committed in traditional Mahāyāna can at least be regarded as sharing the common feature of being enacted for the sake of the Buddhist religion. The political character of present-day self-immolations can already clearly be detected in the first of these public self-immolations by fire, which was committed in June 1963 by the monk Thich Quang Duc. This act was performed shortly after, and as a reaction to, a massacre committed against peaceful Buddhist demonstrators in South Vietnam. These events had been preceded by years of repression against Buddhists under the regime of President Diem, which was dominated by Catholics and supported by the United States of America. The pictures of this burning monk traveled around the world, and it is generally assumed that the first wave of self-immolations played a crucial role in the fall of the government of South Vietnam later that year.

Reportedly, Thich Quang Duc remained immobile in the lotus position during the whole process of burning to death without showing any signs of excitement or pain. This remarkable fact reminds us of the ideal repeatedly mentioned above that the suicide is to remain in a balanced state of mental calmness and equanimity at the hour of death.

Also remarkable is the fact that in the views of Thich Quang Duc and other Vietnamese Buddhists the willingness to accept self-immolation as a legitimate practice coexists with the ideal of a

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<sup>83</sup> There seems to be at least one trustworthy case of fatal suicide by starvation committed for this motive in sixth-century China; see Jan, "Buddhist Self-Immolation," 252. Also relevant are the suicides of Tibetan followers of Chinese Buddhism in eighth-century Tibet and of Japanese Nichiren Buddhists in the seventeenth century; see Paul Demiéville, *Le concile de Lhasa: une controverse sur le quiétisme entre bouddhistes de l'Inde et de la Chine au VIII<sup>e</sup> siècle de l'ère chrétienne*, vol. 1, Bibliothèque de l'Institut des Hautes Études Chinoises 7 (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale de France, 1952), 41–2 and 179–80; Jacqueline Stone, "Rebuking the Enemies of the Lotus: Nichirenist Exclusivism in Historical Perspective," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 21-2/3 (1994): 245.

completely non-violent struggle. Obviously this is not regarded as a contradictory attitude. This is another similarity to Gandhi's views.

Thich Quang Duc is held in reverence by Vietnamese Buddhists up to the present day. He is regarded as a Bodhisattva; even a cult of his relics has arisen. The monk Thich Nhat Hanh, who, with the exception of the present Dalai Lama, probably is the most popular Buddhist master in the West nowadays and who was already a prominent figure in Vietnam during the 1960s, has more than once expressed his admiration for Thich Quang Duc's self-sacrifice. He along with many of his fellows regards this deed as a compassionate act, because it was motivated by love, by the wish to draw the attention of the world to the sufferings endured by the Vietnamese people, and by the desire to effect by peaceful means a change of attitude in the governments of South Vietnam and the United States of America.<sup>84</sup> Furthermore, he and others stress the fact that these acts of self-immolation by fire are not to be regarded as suicides, since they are not acts of destruction.<sup>85</sup> While it has become clear that Nhat Hanh's attitude towards at least some of the self-immolations is rather positive, it is rather difficult to say to what extent the many acts of self-sacrifice performed in imitation of Thich Quang Duc's example received his and other Vietnamese Buddhist leaders' approval.<sup>86</sup>

The influence of Nhat Hanh's views is not confined to Vietnamese Buddhism, he being one of the leading representatives of "Engaged Buddhism," a movement that is spread across many different countries and Buddhist denominations. This movement can roughly be characterized by the view that the Buddhist teaching has to be interpreted in terms of a demand for an active moral engagement within society which takes worldwide ecological, economic, social and

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<sup>84</sup> See, for example, Thich Nhat Hanh, *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), 106; Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1997), 81–2.

<sup>85</sup> See, for example, Thich Nhat Hanh, *Vietnam*, 106–7; Ngoc Phuong Cao, "Days and Months," in *The Path of Compassion: Writings on Socially Engaged Buddhism*, ed. Fred Eppsteiner, rev. 2nd ed. (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1988), 168.

<sup>86</sup> See King, "They Who Burned Themselves," 134; Bechert, *Buddhismus, Staat und Gesellschaft*, 2:349.

political interrelations into account. However, within this movement, whose scope is somewhat difficult to delimit, voices critical of the Vietnamese self-immolations can be heard.<sup>87</sup>

It seems that the views regarding suicide held by Tenzin Gyatso, the present Dalai Lama, again do not lend themselves readily to being regarded as flat approval or denial.<sup>88</sup> On the one hand, he states that “suicide is described as being extremely harmful.”<sup>89</sup> And in the context of euthanasia and assisted suicide one of the arguments against these he gives is that generally it is preferable to eradicate one’s own negative karma by means of the sufferings endured while still in this life.<sup>90</sup> Furthermore, he points to the fact that in the case of adepts that have received a Tantric initiation the fault of killing a divine being applies.<sup>91</sup> On the other hand, he repeatedly stresses the importance of the state of mind in which the suicide is committed. He does so, as a matter of fact, with particular regard to the Vietnamese self-immolators. According to him, anger would be faulty. If, however, the suicide is committed in the spirit of altruism—for example, to render service to the Buddhist

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<sup>87</sup> See, for example, King, “They Who Burned Themselves”; Inge Sterk, “Kritische Betrachtung der Selbstverbrennungspraxis in Vietnam,” in *Rundbriefe zur buddhistischen Sozialethik* (Salzburg) 7 (1994): 1–7; on King’s position see also Kenneth Kraft, “New Voices in Engaged Buddhist Studies,” in *Engaged Buddhism in the West*, ed. Christopher S. Queen (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 489–90, 504–5. The Theravāda monk and scholar Walpola Rāhula, who may also be regarded as an “Engaged Buddhist,” concedes that self-immolations like those of Thich Quang Duc are heroic acts, but he stresses that they are not in accord with the Buddha’s original teaching. Nevertheless, even Rāhula regards killing oneself as being better than killing others. See Walpola Rāhula, “Self-Cremation in Mahayana Buddhism,” in *Zen and the Taming of the Bull: Towards the Definition of Buddhist Thought*, ed. idem (London: Gordon Fraser, 1978), 114.

<sup>88</sup> In addition to the materials cited below I also have utilized the following source for coming to a preliminary understanding of the Dalai Lama’s position: “Praktizieren Sie die Essenz des Buddhismus! S.H. der Dalai Lama antwortet auf Fragen,” *Tibet und Buddhismus* 51 (1999): 7.

<sup>89</sup> Dalai Lama XIV, *The Dalai Lama at Harvard: Lectures on the Buddhist Path to Peace*, trans. and ed. Jeffrey Hopkins (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 1988), 114.

<sup>90</sup> Dalai Lama XIV, *Ancient Wisdom, Modern World: Ethics for the New Millennium* (London: Abacus, 2000), 159–60.

<sup>91</sup> Dalai Lama XIV, *Dalai Lama at Harvard*, 114.

teaching and to the people of Vietnam—a different situation presents itself.<sup>92</sup>

However, radical opposition to suicide is found among present-day Buddhists. The Malaysia-based Theravāda monk K. Sri Dhammananda, for instance, states: “Taking one’s own life under any circumstances is morally and spiritually wrong.”<sup>93</sup> The view held by Daisaku Ikeda, the president of Soka Gakkai International, seems to be similarly strict. In the context of euthanasia he states that it is “good to prolong life for whatever period is possible”<sup>94</sup> and that “one must regard one’s own life with the same maximum respect that one must give the life of another person.”<sup>95</sup> As for the self-sacrifice of Vietnamese Mahāyāna-Buddhists, he opines that, besides political reasons, the alleged Śrāvakayāna teaching that “the flesh is fundamentally unclean” has also to be held responsible for leading to these events. What is envisioned as the true teaching of Mahāyāna by Daisaku Ikeda is elucidated by the following statement of his, which at the same time gives one of the reasons why he has come to strictly reject suicide: “. . . life itself is of value without equivalent, and above this value it is doubly precious because the Buddha nature is latent in it.”<sup>96</sup> At another place Ikeda attacks Pure Land Buddhism as being “suspect,” since its teachings at least indirectly stimulated many people in twelfth-century Japan to commit suicide.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 196. In view of this citation it seems that Sallie B. King’s (see King, “Self-Immolation, Buddhist,” 1144) statement that the Dalai Lama rejects self-immolation as being incompatible with the Buddhist doctrine of non-violence does not get at the whole truth. Indeed, on another occasion King herself utters some doubts regarding the Dalai Lama’s position on self-immolation; see King, “They Who Burned Themselves,” 146–7.

<sup>93</sup> K. Sri Dhammananda, *What Buddhists Believe*, 5th ed., exp. and rev. (Taipei: Buddha Educational Foundation, 1993), 240.

<sup>94</sup> Arnold Toynbee and Daisaku Ikeda, *Choose Life: A Dialogue*, ed. Richard L. Gage (London, Kuala Lumpur, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1976), 154.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 155–6.

<sup>97</sup> See Bryan Wilson and Daisaku Ikeda, *Human Values in a Changing World: A Dialogue on the Social Role of Religion* (Secausus, NJ: Lyle Stuart Inc., 1987), 31 and 326–8. I have not tried to investigate the opinions held by present-day Japanese Pure Land Buddhists regarding suicide. One source which deals with suicide and

## Conclusion

It has, hopefully, become sufficiently clear that the views on suicide in history and modern times differ considerably according to the period and variety of Buddhism examined. Moreover, it has to be stressed once again that only some of the sources relevant to this problem have been examined, and this, above all, in a preliminary fashion. Finally, a whole assortment of factors that may be influential in shaping views on suicide have been virtually disregarded in this article. Suffice it to give only two examples: To what extent is the view on suicide determined by the means used for taking one's own life? To what extent have views on suicide that can be detected in Buddhist texts been influenced by other religions? Despite these shortcomings, which are unavoidable when dealing with such a complex and scarcely researched matter as suicide in Buddhism I do not want to restrict myself to stating the mere fact that suicide has been viewed very differently throughout Buddhist history. Rather, I venture to formulate the following working hypotheses:

1. Suicide seems to be equated with the killing of other living beings rather rarely in the history of Buddhism. A host of explicit statements in this regard supports rather the assumption that more often a view is held according to which suicide does not fulfill all the requirements that are needed to judge it in the same way as killing other living beings, precisely because it does no—at least no immediate—harm to others. Moreover, it is very difficult to account for the multitude of suicides described in a rather approving way in a great variety of Buddhist texts without assuming that suicide and killing other living beings were often viewed differently.

2. If my hypothesis presented above is correct, it naturally follows that a position according to which life is considered as sacred and as a basic value in Buddhism is not in accordance with most of the ways in which suicide is dealt with in Buddhist texts. Among Western experts in

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euthanasia in a somewhat ambivalent way has come to my notice: *Jodo Shinshu Handbook for Laymen: A Translation of Jinsei no Toi*, compiled by Education Department Jodo Shinshu Hongwanji-ha, 2nd ed. (Kyoto: Hongwanji International Center, 1983), 224.

the field of Buddhism it is especially Damien Keown—a scholar whose merits in the investigation of Buddhist ethics can hardly be overstated—who holds the view sketched above.<sup>98</sup> One of the most important reasons Keown gives for his view of the sanctity of life is the ancient Indian doctrine of non-violence towards living beings (*ahiṃsā*).

However, in my view it is the way in which this doctrine seems to have developed that possibly presents one of the reasons why often only the killing of others has been condemned outright. It must be granted that the question how the doctrine of *ahiṃsā* developed still has no generally accepted answer. But it seems that both the idea that victims could take revenge against culprits in the afterlife and the Golden Rule were important factors in the earliest history of this doctrine.<sup>99</sup> Neither view does lend itself readily to an incorporation of suicide into the doctrine of *ahiṃsā*. And this fact may have exerted some influence even after less archaic and more sophisticated reasons for the necessity of *ahiṃsā* were developed.

At any rate, it should be recalled that the sister religion of Buddhism, namely, the markedly ascetic Jain Faith, even combines a much stricter interpretation of the doctrine of *ahiṃsā* with a remarkably positive attitude to a certain form of religious suicide: voluntary fasting unto death.

3. Even arguments against taking one's own life that can be described as more or less ethical in character but which do not directly touch on the character of suicide as an act of killing seem to be met

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<sup>98</sup> See Damien Keown, *Buddhism and Bioethics*, reprinted with a new preface and minor alterations (London & New York: Macmillan/St Martin's Press, 2001), 44–5; Damien Keown and John Keown, "Killing, Karma and Caring: Euthanasia in Buddhism and Christianity," *Journal of Medical Ethics* 21 (1995): 265–9. For earlier criticism of this position see Roy W. Perrett, "Buddhism, Euthanasia and the Sanctity of Life," *Journal of Medical Ethics* 22-5 (1996), 309–14; Schmithausen, "Religionen und Bioethik: 2. Buddhismus," 185; Schmithausen, "Ethics of Nature," 38; Pinit Ratanakul, "Review of *Buddhism and Bioethics* by Damien Keown," *Bioethics* 10-3 (1996), 250.

<sup>99</sup> See Lambert Schmithausen, "A Note on the Origin of *Ahiṃsā*," in *Harānandalaharī: Volume in Honour of Professor Minoru Hara on His Seventieth Birthday*, ed. Ryutaro Tsuchida and Albrecht Wezler (Reinbek: Dr. Inge Wezler Verlag für Orientalistische Fachpublikationen, 2001), 253–82.

with rather rarely, although they may have had great influence. In this context the argument that suicide prevents one from performing more good deeds and furthering the welfare of other living beings, has to be especially mentioned.

4. Quite obviously, in many varieties of Buddhism the question whether and to what extent suicide has a positive or negative effect on the attainment of the ultimate soteriological goal is especially important for evaluating suicide. In Śrāvakayāna, for instance, this aim is final extinction; in Pure Land Buddhism rebirth in Amitābha's paradise, which is hardly attainable, if at all, by one's own spiritual efforts. The Bodhisattva, finally, strives for Buddhahood and wants to save all living beings. Since the accumulation of merit is necessary for reaching these aims, suicide can be useful, when merit is acquired by it. From some point on, the worshipping of the Buddha was regarded as meritorious, which means that self-immolation performed towards that end may very well have fit into this picture. However, many other acts of self-sacrifice committed by Bodhisattvas can be linked directly with the ethics of compassion that is fostered by these beings, so that it is not necessary to explain them by recurring to the relevance that acquiring merit has for salvation.

5. Also, the mental attitude at the time of committing suicide seems to be regarded in most cases as an important factor. A serene and concentrated state of mind is called for. Confident belief (*prasāda*) in a Buddha seemingly implies such a state. In the case of an *arhat*, suicide is committed in a state of complete release from attraction, aversion and delusion. However, according to some, this very nature of an *arhat* can prevent suicide or render it superfluous.

In the cases in which it is rebirth, and not *nirvāṇa*, that follows on a self-inflicted death, a further question deserves to be investigated: What bearing does the ancient Indian belief have that it is the thoughts and wishes at the hour of death rather than the karma accumulated during a whole lifetime that is crucial in determining future destiny?

6. The suicide of monks and nuns can be prevented by a rule of the monastic code or by an interpretation of such a rule in terms of a prohibition.

7. What is difficult to judge is suicide motivated by disgust. But it

seems that it is mainly radically escapist tendencies in the history of Buddhist thought, ones not accepted by many or even by the vast majority of Buddhists, which have to be held responsible for the occurrence of this phenomenon.

8. In dealing with contemporary Buddhist attitudes, we have recognized that teachings like Tantric views or the doctrine that the Buddha-nature is present in each living being, which arose only in later periods of historical Buddhism, can provide for further arguments in the debate on suicide. These questions could not be dealt with in any greater detail in this paper. The same holds good for the problem of how far Western values have influenced positions taken towards suicide in Buddhist modernism.

## Abbreviations

- Avś Jakob S. Speyer, ed., *Avadānaçataka: A Century of Edifying Tales Belonging to the Hīnayāna*, 2 vols., Bibliotheca Buddhica 3 (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1992). Original edition published 1902–1906.
- DN Thomas W. Rhys Davids and Joseph E. Carpenter, eds., *The Dīgha Nikāya*, 3 vols. (London: Pali Text Society, 1890–1911).
- Mil V. Trenckner, ed., *Milindapañho*, 3 vols. (London: Pali Text Society, 1880).
- MN V. Trenckner and Robert Chalmers, eds., *The Majjhima-Nikāya*, 3 vols. (London: Pali Text Society, 1888–1899).
- SN Léon Feer, ed., *The Saṃyutta-Nikāya of the Sutta-Piṭaka*, 5 vols. (London: Pali Text Society, 1970–1976). First published 1884–1898.
- Sp Junjiro Takakusu and Makoto Nagai, eds., *Samantapāsādikā*, 7 vols. (London: Pali Text Society, 1924–1947).
- Spk Frank L. Woodward, ed., *Sāratthappakāsinī*, 3 vols. (London: Pali Text Society, 1929–1937).
- T Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎, and Watanabe Kaigyoku 渡辺海旭, eds., *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新修大藏經, 85 vols. (Tokyo: Taishō issaikyō kankōkai, 1924–1932).
- Vin Hermann Oldenberg, ed., *The Vinaya Piṭakam: One of the*

*Principal Buddhist Holy Scriptures in the Pāli Language*, 5 vols.  
(London: Williams and Norgate, 1879–1883).

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