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## Chann’ovāda Sutta

The Advice to Channa | M 144

= (Ovāda) Channa Sutta, The Discourse on the Advice to Channa | S 35.87

Theme: Suicide and Buddhism

Translated by Piya Tan ©2003

### 1 Monk suicides

**1.1 SUICIDE CASES.** Mention of suicide are found in the following places in the Canon:

<b>Pārājika 3</b>	Vesālī monks	Pār 3 @ V 3:68-71 ≈ S 54.9
<b>Channa Sutta</b>	the arhat Channa	M 144,12/3:263; S 35.87
<b>Godhika Sutta</b>	the arhat Godhika	S 4.23/1:120 f; DhA 1:431 f
<b>Vakkali Sutta</b>	the arhat Vakkali	S 22.87/3:119-122
<b>(Ānāpana,sati) Vesālī S</b>	monks meditating on impurity	S 54.9/5:320 ≈ Pārājika 3
<b>Piya,jātika Sutta</b>	a man who loves his wife	M 87,22/2:110 f
<b>Kodha Sutta</b>	“some kill themselves with a sword”	A 7.64/4:97; cf Vism 299

and in the Commentaries:

<b>Sappa,dāsa-t,thera Vatthu</b>	a discontented monk	DhA 8.11/2:256 ff, and
<b>Yamaka,paṭihāriya Vatthu</b>	the sectarian teacher Pūraṇa Kassapa	DhA 14.2/3:208; J 483

The first four are major cases (the first and fifth cases are almost identical) recorded in the Pali Canon involving suicide by monks, that is, those of a group of unnamed Vesālī monks,<sup>1</sup> Channa (M 3:263; S 4:55), Godhika (S 1:120 f), and Vakkali (S 3:119). The suicide of the Vesālī monks was the occasion of the Buddha’s introducing the third Pārājika rule,<sup>2</sup> that is to say:

*Yo pana bhikkhu sañcicca manussa,viggahaṃ jīvitā voropeyya sattha,hāraṃ vāssa pariye-seyya maraṇa,vaṇṇaṃ vā saṃvaṇṇeyya maraṇāya vā samādapeyya ambho purisa kiṃ tuyh’ iminā pāpakena dujjīvitena? Matan te jīvitā seyyo ti, iti citta,mano citta,saṅkappo aneka,pariyāyena maraṇa,vaṇṇaṃ vā saṃvaṇṇeyya maraṇāya vā samādapeyya, ayam pi pārājiko hoti asaṃvāso.*

Should any monk intentionally deprive a human being of life, or seek a knife-bringer for him,<sup>3</sup> or speak in praise of death, or urge him towards death, saying, “My good man, what use is this miserable life to you? Death for you is better than life,” with such a thought in mind, such intention in mind, in various ways should speak in praise of death, or urge him towards death—he is one defeated, not in communion, too. (V 3:73,10-16)

While the monk **Godhika** was at Kāla,silā (Black Rock) on the side of Isigili (today, Sona Hill),<sup>4</sup> he kept falling away from temporary release of mind due to his sickness.<sup>5</sup> So when he attained release of mind, he committed suicide to gain liberation.<sup>6</sup>

Both **Vakkali**<sup>7</sup> and **Channa**, too, were gravely ill and decided to end their sufferings through suicide. Except for Godhika’s case (whose illness is only mentioned in the Commentaries), the description of the

<sup>1</sup> Pār 3/V 3:68-71; S 54.9/5:320-322. See **The Body in Buddhism**, SD 29.6a (2.5.1).

<sup>2</sup> See Laurence C R Mills [Khantipalo], “The Case of the Murdered Monks.” *Journal of the Pali Text Society* 16, 1992: 71-75.

<sup>3</sup> That is, facilitate another’s death.

<sup>4</sup> S 4.23/1:120-122. On the location of these places, see S Dhammika, 1999:97 (map).

<sup>5</sup> “Temporary release of mind,” *sāmayika ceto,vimutti*, which SA explains as the mundane meditative attainments (*lokiya samāpatti*), ie the dhyana and formless attainments, so called because at the moment of absorption the mind is freed from the opposing states and is resolved upon its object. He fell away from this liberation on account of illness, being disposed to chronic illness due to (humours of) wind, bile and phlegm (SA 1:183).

<sup>6</sup> SA 1:183; DhA 1:431-433.

<sup>7</sup> **Vakkali S** (S 22.87/3:119-124), SD 8.8.

suffering is stock, found also in the cases of **Assaji** (S 3:124), and the laymen **Dīgh'āvu** (S 5:344) and **Anātha,piṇḍika**.<sup>8</sup>

**The Piya,jātika Sutta** (M 87), on the other hand, relates a suicide-murder by a man of Sāvattihī, who killed his wife and then himself with the view that they would not be separated (M 87,22/2:110 f).

Of all the suicide cases in the Pali Canon, **the Chann'ovāda Sutta** provides the strongest suggestion that Buddhism appear to condone suicide under special circumstances.<sup>9</sup> This seems to be the case with the Chann'ovāda Sutta in the Majjhima (M 144) and **the Channa Sutta** in the Saṃyutta (S 35.87). We shall here examine the details. The Chann'ovāda Sutta is about how the gravely ill Channa, despite the admonitions of two brother monks, takes his own life. The Buddha, however, declares that his death is “without blame” [13], since he died an arhat.

**1.2 CHANNA.** The *Dictionary of Pali Proper Names* mentions three Channas, and it is the third one we are referring to here:

- (1) The wanderer (*paribbājaka*) Channa of **the (Paribbājaka) Channa Sutta** (A 3.71/1:215).<sup>10</sup>
- (2) The Bodhisattva's erstwhile charioteer, that is, the Channa of **the (Dvi,lakkhaṇa) Channa Sutta** (S 22.90/3:132 ff) and **the Thera,gāthā** (Tha 60), who receives the “divine penalty” (*brahmā,-daṇḍa*, D 16.6.4/2:154).
- (3) The elder Channa of **the Chann'ovāda Sutta** who commits suicide (M 144/3:263 ff = S 35.87/-4:55-60).

Identical accounts of Channa's suicide are recorded the Chann'ovāda Sutta (M 144) and the Channa Sutta (S 35.87), and has a parallel account in a Chinese translation in the Saṃyukta Āgama (SĀ 1266).<sup>11</sup> All three versions locate the discourse at Rājagaha. All the accounts open by saying that Sāriputta and another monk visits the ailing Channa. While the Pāli accounts say this other monk is Mahā Cunda [§2], the Saṃyukta Āgama version says he is Mahā Koṭṭhita.<sup>12</sup> Otherwise, the Pali and the Sanskrit versions generally agree very closely, differing only in minor details.

## 2 The danger of subjectivism

A number of practitioners, teachers and scholars have given opposing opinions regarding suicide the early Buddhist in particular and Buddhism in general.<sup>13</sup> We shall here however only limit our study to the nature of Channa's suicide and topics related to it.

Let us first briefly examine the view that Channa was not an arhat when he killed himself, such as that of Poussin, who thinks that suicide does not conduce to nirvana and that no perfect saint would kill himself, “but we are confronted with a number of stories which prove beyond dispute that we are mistaken in these two important conclusions” (1922:25).

On the other hand, there is a growing number of Buddhists and scholars who believe “that there is something intrinsically wrong with the taking of one's own life (or indeed taking any life), and that motivation—although of great importance in the assessment of the moral status of actions—is not the sole criterion of rightness” (Keown 1996:12).<sup>14</sup> If a moral action is judged by its motivation alone (such as merely by “the three unwholesome roots”), this leads towards an ethical theory known as **subjectivism**,

<sup>8</sup> M 3:258; S 5:380. Almost all the cases cited in this paragraph involve the stock account for describing visits to the sick, regarded as a worthy activity for monastics (V 1:301 f, 4:88 = 115, 188).

<sup>9</sup> However, it will be apparent at the end, considering all the other evidence, that the contrary is true. Cf Keown 1996:13 f.

<sup>10</sup> DPPN errs in citing A 3:215 which should be A 1:215 (sv Channa Sutta 1).

<sup>11</sup> SĀ 1266 = T2.347b-348a.

<sup>12</sup> SĀ 1266 = T2.347b,18: [Chinese 摩訶拘絺羅].

<sup>13</sup> See Keown 1996:10-12.

<sup>14</sup> On the criterion for moral evaluation in Buddhism see Peter Harvey, “Criteria for judging the unwholesomeness of actions in the texts of Theravāda Buddhism,” JBE 1995:140-151, and also Damien Keown, *Buddhism & Bioethics*, 1995:37-64.

which holds that right and wrong are simply a function of the actor's mental states and that moral standards are a matter of personal opinion or feelings.

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

(Keown 1996:12; see 12-14 for all his arguments; also 29-31)

Harran, in her 1983 article "Suicide (Buddhism and Confucianism)" for Eliade's *Encyclopedia of Religion*, similarly says: "Buddhism in its various forms affirms that, while suicide as self-sacrifice may be appropriate for the person who is an arhat, one who has attained awakening, it is still very much the exception to the rule" (Ency Rel 14:129). More recently, **Bodhi**, in *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed 2001), notes:

If one sticks to the actual wording of the [Chann'ovāda Sutta] text it seems that Channa was already an arahant when he made his declaration, the dramatic punch being delivered by the failure of his two brother-monks to recognise this. The implication, of course, is that excruciating pain might motivate even an arahant to take his own life—not from aversion but simply from a wish to be free from unbearable pain.

(M:ÑB 1359 n1312)

### 3 Did the Buddha "exonerate" Channa?

**3.1** One of the most difficult tasks here is to explain what the Buddha means by the words "the monk Channa is blameless in using the knife" (*anupavajjo Channo bhikkhu sattham āhāresī*)<sup>15</sup> or "the knife was used blamelessly by the monk Channa" (*anupavajjam Channena bhikkhunā sattham āharitam*).<sup>16</sup> The former exonerates the actor, while the latter the action. Indeed, Wiltshire (1983) and others have suggested that the Buddha's statement is an *exoneration* with respect to suicide. "Yes, I think they do," concedes Keown,

Nevertheless, I do not think this leads to the conclusion that Buddhism *condones* suicide. Exoneration and condonation are two different things. Exoneration is the removal of a burden (*onus*) of guilt, while condonation is the approval of what is done.

(Keown 1996:18)<sup>17</sup>

**3.2** However, despite the polysemy of the key word *anupavajja* in the Buddha's statement here, the situation becomes clearer when we amplify the translation of the Pali text to reflect this polysemy: "**The monk Channa used the knife blamelessly [without being reborn] (*anupavajja*)**." Now it becomes clear that it is no more an exoneration of Channa's suicide but a clarification that he has attained liberation. In other words, Channa is blameless, not in regards to his suicide, but in that he is not reborn. In this case, the Majjhima reading brings out the point better.

**3.3** In this connection, Keown, in the conclusion to his ground-breaking paper ("Buddhism and suicide: The case of Channa") gives **five reasons against the notion that arhats are permitted to commit suicide**, the main points of which are summarized here:

<sup>15</sup> M 144.13/ 3:266.

<sup>16</sup> S 35.87.26/4:60.

<sup>17</sup> See Keown for all the arguments. He also states in his footnote: "This [that the burden of guilt in many circumstances may be slight or non-existent and of the Buddha's compassion] is similar to Christ's reason to a woman taken in adultery: in defending the women with the words 'Neither do I condemn thee,' (John 8:11) Christ is not endorsing adultery but displaying compassion for the woman who has sinned." (Keown 1996 n28).

- (1) There is no reason to think that the exoneration of Channa establishes a normative position on suicide because to *exonerate* from blame is not the same as to *condone* an act. [See the first paragraph in this section.]
- (2) There are textual reasons for thinking that the Buddha’s apparent “exoneration” of Channa may not be an exoneration after all. [See preceding paragraph, above.]
- (3) The Commentarial tradition simply rejects the idea that an arhat would take his own life. [13]
- (4) “If we assume, along with the commentary and secondary literature, that Channa was not an arhat prior to his attempt, then to extrapolate a rule from this case such that suicide is permissible for arhats is fallacious. The reason for this is that Channa’s suicide was—in all significant respects—the suicide of an *unawakened* person.” [13]
- (5) Suicide is repeatedly condemned in canonical and non-canonical sources and goes directly “against the stream” of Buddhist moral teachings. [For the reasons, see next section.]

(Keown 1996:28-31)

#### 4 Is an arhat capable of suicide?

**4.1** The Commentaries<sup>18</sup> take pains to state that Channa was still an ordinary person (*puthujjana*) when he committed suicide but gained liberation just before his death. They tacitly find it inconceivable that an arhat would commit suicide. Keown notes,

why the commentary should take such pains to establish that Channa was not an Arhat... is that the tradition simply found it inconceivable that an Arhat would be capable of suicide...by maintaining that Channa was unenlightened until the very end, the image of the Arhat remains untarnished.

(Keown 1996:27)

Indeed, the point seems very clear: why would Channa, if he were already an arhat, kill himself, since he would have already been liberated then?

(1) An arhat is incapable of deliberately harming a living being (including himself). Although neither the text nor the commentary to the Chann’ovāda Sutta mention this, it is often stated elsewhere that it is impossible for an arhat to do 5 things:

- i. deliberately harming a living being;
- ii. taking the not-given, amounting to a theft;
- iii. indulging in sexual intercourse (that is, in any sexual act);
- iv. telling a deliberate lie;
- v. storing up goods for sensual indulgence as he did formerly in the household life.

(D 33,2.1(10)/3:235)

**The Pāsādika Sutta** (D 29) gives a further set of four factors—that he is incapable of misconduct through any of the 4 biases (*agati*):<sup>19</sup>

- vi. desire,
- vii. hate,
- viii. delusion, and
- ix. fear—totalling nine things that are impossible for an arhat to do (D 29,26/3:133).

(2) Both Sāriputta [§§8-10] and Mahā Cunda [§11], are aware that Channa is unable to endure severe pains and is contemplating suicide, hence still an ordinary person, and they were moved to admonish him (MA 5:83). After Sāriputta’s admonition on the eighteen elements (*dhātu*), constituting the foundations of perception, Mahā Cunda expounds a more profound Udāna teaching:<sup>20</sup> one is dependent due to craving and views, and become independent by abandoning them with the attainment of arhathood. Inclination or bias (*nati*) arises through craving, and its absence means there is no inclination or desire (*ālaya*) for exist-

<sup>18</sup> MA 5:83; SA 2:372.

<sup>19</sup> D 3:182, 228; A 2:18.

<sup>20</sup> As at U 81; UA 398; Nett 65; cf S 12.40/2:67.

ence. The Saṃyutta Commentary says that both Sāriputta and Mahā Cunda are aware of Channa’s unliberated state (SA 2:372), clearly evident in Channa’s inability to bear the severe pains and his contemplating suicide.

(3) The Commentaries might have taken exception to suicide by an arhat for a “sectarian” reason (Keown 1996:27 f). Suicide by voluntary fasting (*sallekhanā*) is a well-known Jain practice, and suicide might also have been customary among the Ājīvikas.<sup>21</sup> The suicides of Channa, of Vakkali and of Godhika are close to the non-Buddhist practice of religious suicide, and also tends towards self-mortification, which Buddhism is clearly against. “The commentary’s rejection of suicide by arhats, therefore, may also carry an implicit rejection of Jainism.” (Keown 1996:28)<sup>22</sup>

(4) What is most striking about the Commentaries here is their “complete absence of any discussion of the ethics of suicide” (Keown 1996:28). There is no mention of even the third *pārājika* (V 3:71), which is specifically against suicide by either laity or monastics. The reason for this silence, Keown argues, is “that Channa’s suicide was not seen to raise any pressing moral issues: only if Channa was an arhat would such questions arise. By maintaining that Channa gained liberation only *after* his suicide attempt, the Commentaries neatly avoid the dilemma of an arhat breaking the precepts. [5]

**4.2** In the Buddhist context, an arhat committing suicide is clearly a contradiction in terms: if one is already truly liberated, why would one need to take one’s own life? On the other hand, there is the possibility that the rules proscribing suicide could have been made after the fact. The cases of Channa, of Godhika, and of Vakkali are special and unique cases.

## 5 Was Channa an arhat when he killed himself?

**5.1** Was Channa an arhat when he killed himself? To answer this all-important question, we have to examine the key passage in this connection:

- (a) ...the monk Channa used the knife blamelessly [without being reborn] (*anupavajja*).  
[Alternate translations: “The monk Channa is blameless in using the knife” (*anupavajjo Channo bhikkhu sattham āhāresi*) (M 144.13/ 3:266) or “the knife was used blamelessly by the monk Channa” (*anupavajjam Channena bhikkhunā sattham āharitam*) (S 35.87.26/4:60).]
- (b) SĀ 1266 = T2.348a27: [Chin 無大過故，以刀自殺].

**5.2 Bodhi** makes this important observation:

This statement [a] seems to imply that Channa was an arhat at the time he committed suicide, though the commentary explains otherwise. When the Buddha speaks about the conditions under which one is blameworthy (*sa-upavajja*), *upavajja* represents *upavadya* [“to be blamed”; see M:ÑB prec n.]. Though earlier MA explained the correct sense of *upavajja, kulāni* [“families to be approached”], here the commentator seems oblivious to the pun and comments as if Channa had actually been at fault for associating too closely with lay people: “The Elder Sāriputta, showing the fault of intimacy with families (*kula, samsagga, dosa*) in the preliminary stage of practice, asks: ‘When that bhikkhu had such supporters how could he have attained final Nibbāna?’ The Blessed One answers showing that he was not intimate with families.”

(M:ÑB 1359 n1314; my emphasis)

**5.3** However, **Keown** proposes the translation of the parallel passage at S 31.87.26/4:60 thus:

True, Sāriputta, there are these clansmen and relatives who were visited (*upavajja, kula*) [by Channa] [or, “who are blameworthy”], but I do not say he was *sa, upavajja* on that account (*ettāvatā*). By *sa, upavajja* I mean that someone lays down this body and takes up another. That is not

<sup>21</sup> With reference to Makkhali Gosāla, Poussin cites *Uvāsagadasāo*, app 2.23 and comments: “Suicide is permitted to ascetics who have reached the highest degree of perfection” (1922:25). Qu by Keown 1996:27 n51.

<sup>22</sup> Keown in 1996:28 n52 mentions Gombrich’s “The Buddha and the Jains: A reply to Professor Bronkhorst” (1994) at some length.

the case with respect to Channa. Channa used the knife without being reborn (*anupavajja*). This is how you should understand it. Sāriputta. (1996:24)

The point here is that the Buddha is not making any moral statement, “not an exoneration of suicide but a clarification of the meaning of an ambiguous word [*upavajja*] in context which has nothing to do with ethics” (Keown 1996:24).

**5.4 Analayo**, however, points out that the Āgama sentence here, [Chin 無礙故.以刀自殺 (SĀ 1266 = T2.348a27) “does not support Keown1996[:24], who suggests taking *anupavajja* in the sense of “not being reborn” (following the commentarial gloss at SA 5:82 of *anupavajjam* as *anuppattikam* and *anupattisandhikam*, instead of understanding *anupavajja* to mean “not blameworthy” (2006 ad M 3:266). Analayo’s arguments are crucial to the significance of whether Channa was an arhat when he killed himself:

The Buddha’s reply in the Pāli and Chinese versions suggests that Channa passed away as an *arahant*. According to the commentarial explanation, however, at the time of committing suicide Channa was still a worldlyling and it was only during the interval between using the knife and passing away that he developed insight and became an *arahant*.<sup>23</sup> This commentarial explanation does not seem to fit the discourse too well, as in the Pāli and Chinese versions the Buddha explicitly stated that Channa had used the knife without incurring blame.<sup>24</sup> This indicates that Channa was already blameless at the time he used the knife to commit suicide, not only when he passed away.

If events should have been as the commentary suggests, one would also be at a loss to understand why, in reply to Sāriputta’s inquiry after Channa’s rebirth, the Buddha reminded Sāriputta of Channa’s earlier declaration. Such a reminder makes only sense as a way of confirming that Channa’s earlier claim was justified. On the commentarial explanation, however, Channa’s earlier claim would have been thoroughly mistaken, as he had only been a worldlyling. If this had been the case, Sāriputta would have been quite right in doubting the outcome of Channa’s suicide, so that in such a case the Buddha should have acknowledged the appropriateness of Sāriputta’s doubts and perhaps even informed him that Channa managed to accomplish at the last minute what he had earlier mistakenly believed to have already accomplished.

Hence it seems as if the Pāli and Chinese versions of the present discourse could indeed be recording the suicide of an *arahant*. At first sight this might seem contradictory, since an *arahant* is incapable of intentionally depriving a living being of life.<sup>25</sup> However, it is not clear how far this stipulation covers suicide, as it could be intended to cover only the case of depriving another living being of life. (Analayo 2006 ad M 3:266)

**5.5 Analayo** goes on to examine the Vinaya rules related to killing and suicide. According to the third *pārājika* rule in the Pāli Vinaya, inducing another to commit suicide entails expulsion from the monastic community.<sup>26</sup> It is important to clear a misconception here, that is, despite the accounts of monastic suicides mentioned at the start of this essay, there is no Vinaya rule against a monastic committing

<sup>23</sup> SĀ 1266 at T II 348a7: [Chinese 弟所作 於自肆]

<sup>24</sup> M 144/3:266,31: *anupavajjo ... sattham āhāresi*; S 35.87/4:60,4: *anupavajjam...sattham dharitam*; and SĀ 1266 = T2.348a27: [Chin 無礙故.以刀自殺]. The wording in SĀ 1266 does not support Keown 1996:23, who suggests taking *anupavajja* in the sense of “not being reborn” (following the commentarial gloss at MA 5:82 of *anupavajjam* as *anuppattikam* and *appatisandhikam*), instead of understanding *anupavajja* to mean “not blameworthy.” (Analayo’s fn; refs normalized throughout)

<sup>25</sup> Eg D 29/3:133,14: “a monk whose influxes are destroyed is incapable of intentionally depriving a living being of life,” *abhabbo ... khīṇāsavo bhikkhu sañcicca pānam jīvītā voropetum*. An explicit statement on the issue of suicide can be found in DhA 2:258: “the Blessed One said: ‘monks, one whose influxes [āsava] are destroyed does not deprive himself of life with his own hand,’ *bhagavā ... āha: ‘na bhikkhave, khīṇāsavā nāma sahatthā attānam jīvītā voropenti,*’ a statement that does not seem to be found in the discourses. (Analayo’s fn)

<sup>26</sup> V 3:73,10.

**suicide.** The only rule against suicide by a monk is one entailing *dukkata* (wrong-doing), that is, when a monk jumps off a cliff to kill himself.<sup>27</sup>

**5.6** This *dukkata* rule is, in fact, not against a monk's attempting suicide as such, but against the act of jumping off a cliff. In the case leading to this rule (*ādi,kammika*), a monk attempting suicide had jumped off a cliff but fell on and killed someone else, while he himself survived. The next case in the same section concerns the act of throwing a stone down a cliff, as this could even kill someone below. This rule corroborates that the suicidal intention in the first case is only incidental to the rule. Analayo concludes:

Hence for an *arahant* to commit suicide in a way that does not involve jumping from a cliff would not involve a breach of the precepts, so that it might indeed be possible that an *arahant* commits suicide in a situation where due to severe and incurable illness it seems meaningless to continue living. This would entail that suicide can be undertaken even when all forms of craving, including craving for non-existence, have been eradicated.<sup>28</sup> In fact, according to the different versions of the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta*, even the Buddha gave up his life deliberately, even though he would have been able to live for a considerably longer period.<sup>29</sup> 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 end life. (Analayo 2006 ad M 3:266)

## 6 Suicide: a modern perspective

**6.0** The accounts of suicides amongst the early Buddhist monks as recorded in the Pali Canon have often been given very personal (sometimes radically personal) interpretations by some modern Buddhists and window-shoppers alike. Two such cases are worth noting: that of Giulio Evola representing the non-Buddhist sympathizer, and that of the English monk Ñāṇavīra (1920-1965). Interestingly, the former had some influence, initially at least, on the latter, as we shall see.<sup>30</sup>

### 6.1 BARON JULIUS [GIULIO] EVOLA (1898-1974)

**6.1.1** Evola was one of the most difficult and ambiguous figures in modern esotericism, was born into a devout Catholic family in Rome in 1898. After serving in the First European War (or World War I), he found himself incapable of returning to normal life. He turned to with abstract painting but by 1921 was disillusioned with the Dadaist goal of "overthrowing all logical, ethical and aesthetic categories by means of producing paradoxical and disconcerting images in order to achieve absolute liberation."<sup>31</sup>

**6.1.2** He then turned to drugs, but these experiments only aggravated his dilemma "by intensifying his sense of personal disintegration and confusion to the point where he decided, at the age of 23, to commit suicide" (Batchelor 1996:4). However, after reading a translated passage from **the Mūla,pariyāya Sutta**, he changed his mind. In this sutta translation, the Buddha exhorted the practitioner against identifying with the four elements, the various realms of existence, various perceptions, and other categories, concluding with this passage (as Evola read it):

<sup>27</sup> V 3:82,24.

<sup>28</sup> Lamotte 1987:106 suggests that "from the point of view of Early Buddhism, suicide is a normal matter in the case of the Noble Ones who, having completed their work, sever their last link with the world and voluntarily pass into Nirvāṇa." Poussin 1922:25 remarks: "the arhat ... if he is not, like a Buddha, capable of abandoning life in a quiet way, there is no reason why he should not have recourse to more drastic methods." Wiltshire 1983:137 concludes that "if this body has lost its essential usefulness ... then the body can be relinquished."

<sup>29</sup> D 16/2:106,22: *āyusāṅkhārāṇi ossaji*; Sanskrit fragment no 361 folio 166 V4 in Waldschmidt p53: *āyusāṅkhārāṇi-uts[r]jati*, DĀ 2 = T1.15c20: [Chin 捨命住壽]; T5 = T1.165a23: [Chin 放棄壽命]; T6 = T1.180c6: [Chin 棄餘壽行]; T7 = T1.191c8: [Chin 捨壽]; and the Tibetan version in Waldschmidt 1951:213,4: *tshe'i 'du byed ni spangs so*; cf also **the Divyāvadāna** in Cowell 1886:203,7: *āyusāṅkhārāṇi utsraṣṭum* (Vaidya 1999:126,11 reads *āyusāṅkhārāṇi utsraṣṭum*). See **Mahāparinibbāna S** (D 16.3.9-10/2:106), SD 9.

<sup>30</sup> For two interesting accounts, see Batchelor 1996 & Heendeniya 2003.

<sup>31</sup> J Evola, *Le Chemin du Cinabre*, Milan: Arché-Arkto, 1982:13 (passage tr in Batchelor 1996).

Whoever regards extinction as extinction, who thinks of extinction, who reflects about extinction, who thinks: “Extinction is mine,” and rejoices in extinction, such a person, I declare, does not know extinction. (Emphases added)<sup>32</sup>

This passage evidently comes from the Pali that would better be translated as follows:

He perceives nirvana as nirvana.<sup>33</sup> Having perceived nirvana as nirvana:  
 he conceives (himself as) nirvana;  
 he conceives (himself) in nirvana;  
 he conceives (himself apart) from nirvana;  
 he conceives, “Nirvana is mine”  
 —he delights in nirvana (as identity).  
 Why is that? Because he lacks full understanding, I say. (M 1,26/1:4)

Interestingly, one wonders whether this second “better” translation might have had the same effect on Evola who obviously had focussed on the word “extinction.” The point here is that, in his suffering and search, Evola has projected his own notions onto this sutta text and constructed his own meaning for it—which actually saved his life!

**6.1.3** Although deeply influenced by Buddhism as a non-theistic mystical tradition, he saw it as supporting his white supremacist notion of the “arya,” which he took both in its Buddhist sense and his own racist colouring. Understandably, he never called himself a Buddhist.<sup>34</sup> Richard Smoley, in his review of H E Musson’s translation of Evola’s *The Doctrine of Awakening*,<sup>35</sup> rings a sobering note when he says:

Buddhism is an austere, rigorous path, as Evola does not weary of telling us; and, he adds, the majority of humans are excluded from it. The Doctrine of Awakening ultimately is directed not only to males but to Aryans—a Sanskrit word that means “noble” but which also has had racial connotations in ancient as well as in more recent times. Evola uses this word often—and means it in both senses. “Not for nothing have we insisted on the ‘Aryan’ quality of the teaching under discussion,” he writes. Even apart from its distasteful associations, I find it difficult to agree with Evola’s views of the term “Aryan.”

The early Buddhist texts say the truly noble do not belong to a particular race or caste but instead are those who practice the teaching with integrity. “Not by lineage, not by birth, not by uncut hair does one become a Brahmin,” says the Dhammapada. “The one who has truth and the Dharma, the pure one is a Brahmin.” (Evola somewhat awkwardly says such texts need to be taken “with a grain of salt.”)

Evola’s combination of mystical insight with exclusivism raises a disturbing question: can one make contact with higher consciousness and still have dubious political or moral views? Disturbingly, perhaps, I believe the answer is yes. God sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust,

<sup>32</sup> J Evola, op cit, 1982:13 (passage tr Batchelor 1996).

<sup>33</sup> “Nirvana as nirvana” (*nibbānaṃ nibbānato*), lit “nirvana from nirvana.” Comy says that nirvana here refers to the 5 kinds of “supreme nirvana here and now” (*parama, diṭṭha, dhamma, nibbāna*) of the 62 grounds for wrong view listed in **Brahma, jāla S** (D 1.3.19-25/1:36-38 @ SD 25), ie nirvana identified with the total enjoyment of sense-pleasures or with each of the 4 dhyanas. Craving causes one to enjoy this state or to lust after it. Conceit causes one to pride oneself as having attained it. Views makes one conceive of this illusory nirvana to be permanent, pleasurable and as an abiding self. (MA 1:38).

<sup>34</sup> In fact, his study was merely aimed at balancing his earlier work on the Hindu Tantras, and he saw Buddhism as a “dry” and intellectual path of pure detachment” as opposed to that of the Tantras that taught “affirmation, engagement, the utilization and transformation of immanent forces liberated through the awakening of the Shakti, ie the root power of all vital energy, particular that of sex.” (1982:143, passage tr in Batchelor 1987:5)

<sup>35</sup> *The Doctrine of Awakening: A study of Buddhist asceticism*. [1948]. London: Luzac, 1951; Rochester, VT: Inner Tradition, 1996.

and the Absolute, being unconditioned, does not necessarily dictate one's behavior in ordinary life. This issue is far too intricate for me to address adequately here, but it indicates why mystical traditions have often insisted on rigorous moral and doctrinal training before opening oneself to illumination.

The Doctrine of Awakening is not a good introduction to Buddhism. It is comparatively dense and will be best understood by those who have already had some exposure to Buddhist thought. (Smoley, *Parabola*, 1998:96)

## 6.2 THE BUDDHIST MONK ÑĀṄAVĪRA (1920-1965)

**6.2.1** Ñāṇavīra was born Harold Edward Musson in Aldershot barracks, London, as the only child, and heir to coal mines in Wales. In 1940 he graduated from Cambridge with first class honours in modern languages, and also studied mathematics. Two life-changing events occurred to Musson when, while serving in the British army as a captain, he was sent to Italy. There he met Osbert Moore (who later became the monk **Ñāṇamoli**), also of the secret service, both assigned to interrogate prisoners in Italy. Secondly, he was profoundly moved by Evola's book on Buddhism, *La Dottrina del Risveglio: Saggio sull'Ascesi Buddista*,<sup>36</sup> which he translated into English as *The Doctrine of Awakening*.<sup>37</sup>



Ñāṇavīra, Ñāṇamoli and Ñāṇaponika (1950s)<sup>38</sup>

**6.2.2** After the war, Harold (the future Ñāṇavīra) returned to a bohemian life in London, and Osbert returned to the BBC. One evening, in a chance meeting in a pub, they had a long discussion, where (besides sharing a common enthusiasm for *The Doctrine of Awakening*) they found that they shared a common angst in their post-war lives and decided to take the cloth. In November 1948, they left for the Island Hermitage in Sri Lanka, where they were ordained in April the following year under the aging German monk, Ñāṇatiloka.

**6.2.3** However, over the following months and years, he became “increasingly independent in his views, both challenging the accepted orthodoxy and refining his own understanding.”<sup>39</sup> Ñāṇavīra wrote in one of his letters:

<sup>36</sup> Bari: Laterza, 1942.

<sup>37</sup> *The Doctrine of Awakening: A study of Buddhist asceticism*. [1948]. London: Luzac, 1951. Repr as *The Doctrine of Awakening: The attainment of self-mastery according to the earliest Buddhist texts*, Rochester, VT: Inner Tradition, 1996. Many reprs. See Smoley's review in prev section [5.1].

<sup>38</sup> Source: <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/9366/Nyanavira-Nyanamoli-Nyanaponika-small.jpg>.

<sup>39</sup> Batchelor 1996:3.

Quite in general, I find that the Buddhists in Ceylon are remarkably complacent at being the preservers and inheritors of the Buddha's Teaching, and remarkably ignorant of what the Buddha actually taught. Except by a few learned *theras* (who are dying out), the contents of the Suttas are practically unknown. This fact, combined with the prevailing traditional reverence for the Dhamma as the National Heritage, has turned the Buddha's Teaching into an immensely valuable antique Object of Veneration, with a large placard in front, "Do Not Touch." In other words, the Dhamma in Ceylon is totally divorced from reality (if you want statistical evidence, tell me how many English-educated graduates of the University of Ceylon have thought it worthwhile to become *bhikkhus*? [When I told him that the *pirivenas* have been elevated to universities, he immediately said, "This is the beginning of the end of Buddhism in Ceylon."])

It is simply taken for granted (by *bhikkhus* and laymen alike) that there not, and cannot possibly be, any *sekha bhikkhus* (or laymen) actually walking about in Ceylon today. People cannot any longer imagine what kind of a creature a *sotāpanna* might conceivably be, and in consequence superstitiously credit him with every kind of perfection—but deny him the possibility of existence. (Notes on Dhamma, 19 May 1963:277)

**6.2.4** By then, he was practically a self-exiled hermit (he left the Island Hermitage in 1954), living by himself deep in the virgin jungle of what is now the Bundala Forest Reserve. Despite various physical ailments (such as bursitis of both knees from prolonged sitting in meditation, rashes from insect bites, and chronic indigestion or amoebiasis), he persevered in his practice. His real problem, however, was that of satyriasis—"the overpowering need on the part of a man to seduce a never-ending succession of women."<sup>40</sup> Of this, Ñāṇavīra notes on 11 December 1962,

Under the pressure of this affliction, I am oscillating between the two poles. If I indulge the sensual images that offer themselves, my thought turns towards the state of a layman; if I resist them, my thought turns toward suicide. Wife or knife, one might say. (Anonymous 1987:216)

**6.2.5** Although he knew that the erotic disposition could be overcome by dhyana, any such attempt was prevented by his chronic indigestion, that sometimes caused him to roll in agony on his bed. In fact, a month earlier he had unsuccessfully tried to take his own life. By November 1963, he had "given up all hope of making any further progress for myself in this life"<sup>41</sup> One of Ñāṇavīra's very few close friends, the doctor Kingsley Heendeniya, writes of how he died in 1965:

This is the way Ñāṇavīra died. One evening, I saw his skin inflamed with insect bites and gave him a vial of ethyl chloride spray used those days as a local anaesthetic. He used it and obtained another from my mother. By now his sickness had worsened. He had attempted suicide twice. This time was final. He constructed a facemask with polythene and through an ingenious self-closing tube made also from polythene, inhaled ethyl chloride vapour probably after his noonday meal.

A man from the village came as usual to offer the evening dana of fluids at about 4 pm. He tapped on the door. There was no response. He then opened it and went into the room. Ñāṇavīra was "sleeping" on his bed in the position adopted by the Buddha—the lion's pose—with a polythene mask over the face. One hand was fallen with the empty ethyl chloride vial gently laid on the floor. Ñāṇavīra Thera was dead. (Heendeniya 2003:3)

<sup>40</sup> Ency Britannica 15<sup>th</sup> ed, which continues: "For the satyr the crucial part of this behaviour pattern is seduction, sexual intercourse and orgasm being secondary at best and often even being avoided. The purpose of the effort is not sexual gratification but the continual re-establishment of self-esteem. The corresponding sexual behaviour pattern in a woman is called nymphomania."

<sup>41</sup> Anonymous 1987:241.

**6.2.6** About six years before he died—on the evening of 27 June 1959—Ñāṇavīra wrote this remarkable entry in his private journal:

HOMAGE TO THE AUSPICIOUS ONE, WORTHY, FULLY AWAKENED.—At one time the monk Ñāṇavīra was staying in a forest hut near Bundala village. It was during that time, as he was walking up and down in the first watch of the night, that the monk Ñāṇavīra made his mind quite pure of constraining things, and kept thinking and pondering and reflexively observing the Dhamma as he had heard and learnt it, the clear and stainless Eye of the Dhamma arose in him: “Whatever has the nature of arising, all that has the nature of ceasing.” Having been a teaching-follower [*dhammānussarī*]<sup>42</sup> for a month, he became one attained to right view [*diṭṭhi-p.patta*].  
(Anonymous 1987:495)

In other words, he had become a streamwinner (*sotāpanna*), or at least thought that he did. It is possible that the largely self-taught monk Ñāṇavīra had mistaken the early texts on suicide as condoning it, and that, for him, as a “streamwinner,” that is, an arya or saint of the path, his suicide would not be in vain. Or, on the other hand, his bodily pains and mental sufferings had the better of him.

However, it should also be remembered that the “defeat” (*pārājika*) rule against taking life, even one’s own, was made in connection with monks committing suicide.<sup>43</sup> Did Ñāṇavīra know the Vinaya well enough (which is expected of all monastics, especially if they have observed the minimum 5-year tutelage or *nissaya*)? Or, did Ñāṇavīra, out of desperation, killed himself, perhaps when he was mentally unhinged (*ummattaka*), which would preclude him from having committed the defeat offence?<sup>44</sup>

**6.2.7** The powerfully tragic figure of Ñāṇavīra epitomizes the proverbial deeply troubled intellectually-driven ronin<sup>45</sup> who, being either unwilling or unable to work towards personal liberation, is helplessly swept away by speculative views.<sup>46</sup> As Ñāṇavīra himself claimed, “I am a born black-leg”<sup>47</sup> (1987:310). His brilliant but controversial ideas are recorded in his *Notes*,<sup>48</sup> the purpose of which was “to indicate the proper interpretation of the Suttas,” the key to which he believed he had discovered through an experience he regarded as streamwinning.<sup>49</sup>

**6.2.8** Ñāṇavīra, for example, rejected the teaching of the three-life dependent arising since, according to him, it could not be seen or realized now. In “A note on Paṭiccasamuppāda,” he says, “It is a matter of one’s fundamental attitude to one’s own existence—is there, or is there not, a *present* problem or, rather, *anxiety* that can only be resolved *in the present*?”<sup>50</sup> Interestingly, such a view reflects an annihilationist tendency popular with agnostic and materialist Buddhists, and amongst modernists who measure Buddhism against science and other religions.<sup>51</sup> Ñāṇavīra, however, should be admired for his resolve, despite his difficulties, in remaining a monk to the end: for him, it was liberation or death.

<sup>42</sup> On *dhammānussarī*, and the following term, *diṭṭhi-p.patta*, see **Kīṭāgiri S** (M 70), SD 11.1 & (**Anicca**) **Cakkhu S** (S 25.1), SD16.7.

<sup>43</sup> Pār 3 @ V 3:73,20-16. See SD 48.2 (6.2.2).

<sup>44</sup> On the precluded cases, see Pār 3.4.11 (V 3:78).

<sup>45</sup> “In feudal Japan, a lordless wandering samurai; an outlaw” (OED), here meaning “a teacherless black-leg.”

<sup>46</sup> RG de S Wettimuny was one of Ñāṇavīra’s correspondents and Wettimuny’s *The Buddha’s Teaching: Its essential meaning* (Sri Lanka 1969. Private ed 1990) is generally regarded by some as a systematic presentation of Ñāṇavīra’s views.

<sup>47</sup> He does not elaborate. “Black-leg” is a derogatory term for a person who continues working when fellow workers are on strike. Ñāṇavīra prob alludes to his being a maverick or renegade from traditional or mainstream Buddhism.

<sup>48</sup> See Ñāṇavīra 1963, 1987.

<sup>49</sup> See *Clearing the Path*, 1987:153, 495.

<sup>50</sup> 1987:21 §7 digital ed. Bodhi’s important rebuttal is found in “A critical examination of Ñāṇavīra Thera’s ‘A note on paṭiccasamuppāda’” *Buddhist Studies Review*, 1998. See also P Kearney, *Freedom and Bondage*, 1994: ch 1. <http://www.buddhanet.net>

<sup>51</sup> For further discussion, see **Dependent Arising**, SD 5.16 (9-10).

**6.2.9** Nāṇavīra is a dramatic example of a seeker, much disillusioned by the world, yet troubled by personal weaknesses (especially his sexuality). He is not alone, of course, but the pattern is clear: a brilliant but troubled young person man seeking meaning and purpose in life through monkhood. It also shows that merely meeting a good teacher is not always enough: one must also have the humility to let go of pet notions and keep up the spiritual training. Otherwise, after the initial meteor-like rise and cult admiration by the masses, one then sinks into the deep dark sky of oblivion, destroying one's talent and energy that could have been invested for better things. How self-view overpowers us!

## 7 Suicide is morally wrong

**7.1** Buddhism is opposed to suicide for various reasons. In a footnote of his paper, "Buddhism and suicide: The case of Channa" (1996), **Damien Keown** lists the following as some of the reasons why Buddhism might be opposed to suicide, which I list in full:

- (1) It is an act of violence and thus contrary to the principle of *ahimsa* [non-violence].
- (2) It is against the first precept [against harming life].
- (3) It is contrary to the third pārājika [against a monk taking life]. (Cf Miln 195).<sup>52</sup>
- (4) It is stated that "Arahants do not cut short their lives" (*na ca arahanto apakkam pātentī*). Miln 44; cf D 2:32 :: DA 810 cited in Horner (*Milinda's Questions* 1:61n). **Sāriputta** says that an arhat neither wishes for death nor wishes not to die: it will come when it comes (Tha 1002 f). [7.4]
- (5) Suicide destroys something of great value in the case of a virtuous human life and prevents such a person acting in the service of others (Miln 195 f). Wiltshire states that **altruism** is also cited in **the Pāyāsi Sutta** [D 23,12 f/2:330-332] as a reason for not taking one's life (1983:131). With reference to the discussion here (D 2:330-332) he comments, "This is the only passage in the Sutta Piṭaka in which the subject of suicide is considered in the abstract, and even then obliquely" (1983:130). [Kumāra] Kassapa states that the virtuous should not kill themselves to obtain the results of their good karma as this deprives the world of their good influence (D 2:330 f).
- (6) Suicide brings life to a premature end. As Poussin (1922) expresses it: "A man must live his allotted span of life... To that effect Buddha [sic] employs to **Pāyāsi** the simile of the woman who cuts opens here body in order to see whether her child is a boy or a girl" [ie to let things take their natural course and the practice of patience] (D 2:311).
- (7) Self-annihilation is a form of *vibhāva-taṇhā* [craving for annihilation].
- (8) Self-destruction is associated with ascetic practices which are rejected since "Buddhism had better methods of crushing lust and destroying sin" (Poussin 1922).
- (9) There is empirical evidence provided by **I Tsing** [Yijing]. Poussin notes: "The pilgrim I-ting says that Indian Buddhists abstain from suicide and, in general, from self-torture" (op cit).
- (10) As noted [in **the Chann'ovāda Sutta**, M 144.6 below], Sāriputta's immediate reaction is to dissuade Channa, in the strongest terms from taking his life. Sāriputta's reaction suggests that suicide was not regarded among the Buddhist senior disciples as an option even meriting discussion. (Keown 1996:29 n55)

<sup>52</sup> Dhammavihari writes on how the Sinhalese, Burmese and Cambodians all translate the 3<sup>rd</sup> Pārājika supplementary rule, *na ca bhikkhave attānam pāteṭabbam; yo pāteyya āpatti dukkaṭassa* (V 3:82) as "A monk should not commit suicide. He who commits suicide is guilty of a minor offence." (2000:1) However, the actual Vinaya account of the rules concerned a monk who, attempting suicide, jumped off Vulture's Peak, landed on a basket-maker and killed him, but the monk himself survived. The rule was made against monk *jumping off a high place*, which entails an offence of wrong-doing (*dukkata*). Apparently, only the Thai tr is correct here. For further discussion, see Keown 1999:267 f.

**7.2 Suicide is clearly against the most basic of Buddhist values, namely, that of life,** as enshrined for example in the very first precept and the third pārajika.<sup>53</sup> Death is one of the fundamental aspects of the most basic level of suffering (*dukkha,dukkha*). The first noble truth also implies that **death is a problem, not a solution.** The cause of the problem lies in the second noble truth, that is, craving (for life, *bhava,-taṇhā*, or for death, *vibhava,tanḥā*) and the solution is the giving up of the desire for both.

What is significant is that through the affirmation of death he has, in his heart, embraced Māra. From a Buddhist perspective, this is clearly irrational. If suicide is irrational in this sense it can be claimed there are objective grounds for regarding it as morally wrong. (Keown 1996:31)

**7.3** When discussing the question of suicide in early Buddhism, especially in regards to the death of Channa, of Godhika, and similar suicides, they should be seen as a cultural phenomenon, and not as a Buddhist doctrine. For it is evidently clear that Buddhism does not condone suicide, as clearly stated at the beginning of this essay. The deaths of Vakkali, Channa, Godhika and the unnamed 500 monks at their own hands are personal decisions, even exceptional cases, and not the rule.

Although Vakkali, Channa and Godhika die as saints, their preceding state of mind that compels them to take their own lives are not an awakened state. It is most important to understand that this preceding state of mind is *not* the cause of their attaining sainthood, although they are the preceding condition. It is like a ripe fruit that is cut off with a picker's knife, but neither the knife nor the cutting is cause of the ripening of the fruit.<sup>54</sup> On account of their spiritual cultivation, their last thought-moment is clearly free from the unwholesome roots of greed, hate or delusion, so that they die fully awakened and liberated.

**7.4** In closing this brief but exciting examination of the Buddhist attitude to life and death, we should recall Sāriputta's saintly statement in the Thera,gāthā:

*nâbhinandāmi maraṇaṃ nâbhinandāmi jīvitam* I delight not in death, nor do I delight in life;  
*nikkhipissam imam kāyam sampajāno paṭissato* I shall cast aside this body fully aware and mindful.

*nâbhinandāmi maraṇaṃ nâbhinandāmi jīvitam* I delight not in death, nor do I delight in life;  
*kālam vā paṭikaṅkhāmi nibbisam bhatako yathā* I await my time as a servant his wages.

(Tha 1002 f)<sup>55</sup>

— — —

I would like to record my grateful thanks to **Damien Keown** (Goldsmiths College, University of London & the UK Association for Buddhist Studies) for his genial and helpful online communications and his having personally mailed me his paper, "Suicide, assisted suicide and euthanasia: A Buddhist perspective." (*The Journal of Law and Religion* 13,2 1999-2000:385-406), and not the first time for showing such generosity.

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<sup>53</sup> See Piyasīlo, 1983b:3 f & Keown, 1995:44-50.

<sup>54</sup> See **The Body in Buddhism**, SD 29.6a (2.5).

<sup>55</sup> These are well quoted verses. Tha 1002 = 607; 1003 = 606, qu at SA 1:126 (on S 1:126) & UA 432 (on U 8.9); Tha 606 f qu at Miln 45 & DA 810 (with a variation). Cf Tha 20, 196 & Manu 6.45. See also **Sabba Kamma Jaha S** (U 3.1) @ SD 39.3 (1.4).

## The Advice to Channa

M 144 = S 35.87

[263] [S 4:55]

1 Thus have I heard.

At one time the Blessed One was staying in the squirrels' feeding-ground, in the Bamboo Grove, near Rājagaha.

### Channa's illness

2 At that time, the venerable Sāriputta, the venerable Mahā Cunda<sup>56</sup> and the venerable Channa were residing on Vulture's Peak.<sup>57</sup>

3 At that time, the venerable Channa was painfully ill, gravely ill. Then, when it was evening, the venerable Sāriputta [S 4:56] emerged from his retreat and went up to the venerable Mahā Cunda. Having gone up to the venerable Mahā Cunda, he said this:

"Avuso [brother]<sup>58</sup> Cunda, let us go to the venerable Channa and ask after his illness.<sup>59</sup>

"Yes, avuso," the venerable Mahā Cunda replied to the venerable Sāriputta.

4 Then the venerable Sāriputta and venerable Mahā Cunda went up to the venerable Channa and exchanged greetings with him.<sup>60</sup> When this [264] greeting was concluded, they sat down at one side.<sup>61</sup> Sitting thus at one side,<sup>62</sup> the venerable Sāriputta asked the venerable Channa this:

<sup>56</sup> **Mahā Cunda**. It is likely that this Cunda is Sāriputta's younger brother, whom Comys (eg DA 3:907; AA 3:-379; DhA 2:188; ThaA 2:18) identify with Cunda Samaṇ'uddesa, who is also once the Buddha's attendant (ThaA 3:111). Mahā Cunda is evidently a very eminent disciple, mentioned by the Buddha in the company of the two chief disciples, Mahā Kassapa, Mahā Koṭṭhita, Mahā Kaccāna, and other elders (M 118.1/3:78; A 3:335, 5:41, 157) and is one of the 80 great elders (ThaA 3:205). **Gilāna S 3** records how once, when the Buddha lies ill in the squirrels' feeding-ground near Rājagaha, Cunda visits him and they discuss the awakening-factors (*bojjhaṅga*), and the Buddha promptly recovers (S 46.16/5:81). The Saṃyukta Āgama version (in Chinese tr), however, says this other monk is **Mahā Koṭṭhita** [Chin 摩訶拘 絺羅] (SĀ 1266 = T2.347b,18). For more details, see **Pāsādika S** (D 29) @ SD 40a-6 (3).

<sup>57</sup> "Vulture's Peak," *gijjhā,kūṭa*. One of the 5 hills encircling ancient Rājagaha and a favourite haunt of those pursuing the religious life. It is so called because on its peak is a rock that looks like a vulture's head. *Cunningham's Ancient Geography of India* (ed S Majumdar, Calcutta, 1924) identifies it with modern Sailagiri (also called Giriyeek Hill), about 4 km (2.5 mi) NE of the old town. Cf S Dhammika, 1999:106 (map) which shows Giriyeek to be far to the west of Gijjhā,kūṭa.

<sup>58</sup> *Āvuso* = Amg *āuso*, derived by Leumann (*Aup Gloss*) and Pischel §396 from Ved voc *\*āyuṣvas* (Whitney §454), but phonetically ←*\*āvusso* ←*\*āyuṣvas* (CPD). Usages: (1) Common polite way of address amongst monks before the Buddha's parinirvana (V 1:9; D 2:154; M 3:247; see RO Franke, JPTS 1908:18-44 & IB Horner V:H 1:xxxvii ff), but not by the Buddha himself (AA 2:127); (2) Used by early monastics in addressing lay followers (who always address monks as *bhante* and nus as *ayye*) (V 1:84, 2:294; M 1:299); (3) Used by non-Buddhists or in addressing them (V 1:8 = M 1:170 = DhA 4:72 Upaka to the Buddha; D 2:130; M 1:372 *nigaṇṭha* addresses the Buddha; M 1:93, 108, 163, 165; S 1:149, 213; Tha 65, 1196, 1198). See CPD for details. This common mode of address is often tr as "friend(s)," which while applicable in a non-Buddhist context sounds contrived when used amongst Buddhists (where perhaps "brother" is tolerable). As such, it is best to anglicize it as "avuso."

<sup>59</sup> "Ask after his illness," *gilāna,pucchakā*, lit "questioners of the sick" (V 4:88=115, 188). This technical term refers to a person's role, reflecting the importance of caring for the sick in the early Sangha, as in the Buddha's words: "Monks, you have not a mother, you have not a father who might tend you. If you, monks, do not tend one another, then who is there who will tend you? Whoever, monks, would tend me, he would tend the sick." (V 1:301 f)

<sup>60</sup> The Saṃyukta Āgama version says that Channa, on seeing the monks approaching from afar, tries to get up from his bed as a sign of respect, but Sāriputta tells him to just stay where he is (SĀ 1266 = T2.347b,22).

<sup>61</sup> S has "sat down on the prepared seat," *paññatte āsane nisīdimṣu* (S 35.87.5/3:56). This suggests that Sāriputta and Mahā Cunda were senior to Channa. For a shorter, but happier example, see **Juṇha S** (U 4.4.5/40), SD 24.9.

<sup>62</sup> "Seated at one side," *ekam-antam nisīdimṣu*; omitted by S.

“How are you, avuso Channa? I hope you are bearing up, and getting better. I hope that your pains are subsiding, that their subsiding is evident, not their rising.”<sup>63</sup>

5 “Avuso Sāriputta,<sup>64</sup>

(1) I cannot bear it; I am not getting better; my pains are not subsiding, but rising; their rising is evident, not their subsiding.

Violent winds are cutting<sup>65</sup> through my head like a strong man cleaving it open with a sharp sword.

(2) I cannot bear it; ...

Violent pains are crushing my head as if a strong man were tightening a strong leather strap around my head as a headband.

(3) I cannot bear it; ...

Violent winds are rending my belly as if a skilled butcher or his apprentice were to carve up a cow’s<sup>66</sup> belly with a sharp butcher’s knife.

(4) I cannot bear it; ...

Violent pains are burning up my body<sup>67</sup> as if two strong men were to seize a weaker man by both arms, and burn and roast him over a pit of burning coal.

(5) I cannot bear it; I am unable to keep going, and my pains are not subsiding, but rising; their rising is evident, not their subsiding.

I will use a knife,<sup>68</sup> avuso Sāriputta. I have no desire to live.”

6 [Sāriputta:] “Let the venerable Channa not use a knife! Let the venerable Channa live! We wish the venerable Channa to live!

If the venerable Channa lacks suitable food, I will go in search of suitable food for the venerable Channa.

If the venerable Channa lacks suitable medicine, I will go in search of suitable medicine for the venerable Channa.

If the venerable Channa lacks a proper attendant, I will attend to the venerable Channa.<sup>69</sup>

Let the venerable Channa not use a knife! Let the venerable Channa live!”<sup>70</sup>

7 “Avuso Sāriputta, it is not that I lack suitable food, nor that I lack suitable medicine, nor do I lack a proper attendant.”<sup>71</sup>

<sup>63</sup> *Kacci te āvuso Channa khamanīyaṃ kacci yāpanīyaṃ kacci dukkhā vedanā paṭikkamanti no abhikkhamanti, patikkamo sānam paññāyati no abhikkamo ti*, lit “Avuso Channa, perhaps you are bearing it, perhaps you can keep going; that your pains are subsiding, not rising; that their subsiding is evident, not their rising.” This is stock. The underscored phrase lit tr “perhaps you are fit to keep going.” I have rendered this as “How are you?” and place it at the head of the sentence for the sake of idiomatic English.

<sup>64</sup> These 4 passages stock describing the pains of: the Bodhisattva, **Mahā Saccaka S** (M 36,22.2+23.2+24.2+25.-2); the brahmin Dhānañjāni, **Dhānañjāni S** (M 97,29.2-5/2:193), SD 4.9; the houselord Anātha,piṇḍika, **Anātha-piṇḍik’ovāda S** (M 143,4/3:259), SD 23.9; the monk Channa, **Chann’ovāda S** (M 144,5/3:264) = **Channa S** (S 35.87,5/4:56), SD 11.12; the monk Phaggunā, **Phaggunā S** (A 6.56/3:379 f); cf (**Chakka**) **Āsava S** (A 6.5683:389), SD 62.1.

<sup>65</sup> “Cutting,” *ūhananti*, lit “are rising upwards.”

<sup>66</sup> “Cow,” *go*, which is actually a collective term meaning, “cow, ox, bull.”

<sup>67</sup> “Burning up my body,” *kāyasmim dāho*, lit “burning in the body.”

<sup>68</sup> “Will use a knife,” (*sattham āharissāmi*), lit “I will take the knife.” This is a euphemism for suicide.

<sup>69</sup> *Sace āyasmato Channassa n’atthi paṭirūpā upaṭṭhākā, ahaṃ āyasmantaṃ Channaṃ upaṭṭhahissāmi*. Here I take *upaṭṭhahissāmi* as derived from the stem *upaṭṭhā + issāmi* (fut). It is not surprising for **Sāriputta** to do this, as besides being the Buddha’s right-hand monk, he is also one of great active compassion: see eg (**Pacchā,bhūmaka,-gāmikā**) **Deva,daha S** (S 22.2/3:5-9), SD 46.2. Comy here gives a long account on how Sāriputta helps his fellow monks with both their material needs (*āmisānuggaha*) and with the Dharma (*dhammānuggaha*) (SA 2:256 f); for tr, see Nyanaponika & Hecker, 1997: 21 f. According to the Āgamas, Sāriputta only offers medicine (SĀ 1266 = T2.-346c2).

<sup>70</sup> Sāriputta’s prompt response here reflects his clear disapproval of Channa’s intention. See Intro above, 5(10).

<sup>71</sup> SĀ 1266 = T1.347c4: Channa explains that the local lay-supporters are looking after his material needs and that a disciple is serving as his attendant.

But rather, avuso Sāriputta, long have I waited upon [honoured] the Teacher in a satisfactory [pleasing] manner, not otherwise.<sup>72</sup> For it is proper for a disciple to wait upon the Teacher in a satisfactory manner, not otherwise.

Avuso Sāriputta, please remember this: it is without blame that the monk Channa will use the knife.<sup>73</sup>

### Sāriputta's admonition: Disowning the elements

**8** [Sāriputta:] “If the venerable Channa grants us leave to do so, we would like to question the venerable Channa regarding some point to clarify a problem.” [S 4:58]

“Ask, avuso Sāriputta. When I have heard, I will know.”

**9** “Avuso Channa, do you regard

the eye, eye-consciousness and that which is cognizable through eye-consciousness, thus:

‘This is mine; this I am; [265] this is my self’?

Avuso Channa, do you regard

the ear, ear-consciousness and that which is cognizable through ear-consciousness, thus:

‘This is mine; this I am; this is my self.’

Avuso Channa, do you regard

the nose, nose-consciousness and that which is cognizable through nose-consciousness, thus:

‘This is mine; this I am; this is my self.’

Avuso Channa, do you regard

the tongue, tongue-consciousness and that which is cognizable through tongue-consciousness, thus:

‘This is mine; this I am; this is my self.’

Avuso Channa, do you regard

the body, body-consciousness and that which is cognizable through body-consciousness, thus:

‘This is mine; this I am; this is my self.’

Avuso Channa, do you regard

the mind, mind-consciousness and that which is cognizable through mind-consciousness, thus:

<sup>72</sup> *Api c'āvuso Sāriputta paricīṇṇo me sathā dīgha,rattam manāpen'eva no amanapena.* The key word here is **paricīṇṇa**, pp of *paricarati*, “he serves, look after” (with people, A 3:94; Tha 178), or “he worships” (with fire, Agni, eg *aggim paricarati*, D 1:101; S 1:166; Dh 107; J 1:494; Sn p79 = *payirupāsati*, “goes up close (to serve),” SnA 401); rendered as “worshipped” at M:NB 1115, but as “been served” at S:B 1165. Comy here glosses *paricīṇṇo ti paricarito* = “*Paricīṇṇo* mean ‘had served’” (SA 2:371). *Manāpena*, “in a satisfactory manner,” from *manāpa*, which Vibh and Comys gloss with *appeti*, to flow into, or with *appāyati*, to make full, to satisfy (Vbh 9; SA 1:78; AA 3:287). According to the Āgama version, Channa replies here that he has honoured the Buddha with what is pleasing, not with what is not pleasing, adding that he has done what a disciple should do [弟子所作, 於今已作] (SĀ 1266 = T2.348a7). Channa’s claim here of having honoured the Buddha with what is pleasing, is also mentioned earlier in §7, along with his declaration that his suicide would be blameless: *Api c'āvuso Sāriputta paricīṇṇo me sathā dīgha,rattam manāpen'eva no amanāpenena* [§7 = M 3:264,24], which in **Channa S** (S 35.87) occurs in a slightly different sequence: *api ca me āvuso sathā paricīṇṇo dīgha,rattam manāpen'eva no amanāpenena* (S 35.-87.14/4:57,23). This same expression mutatis mutandis recurs at **Samāṇa-m-acala S 1** (A 4.87.6/2:88,12 @ SD 20.-13) and **Samāṇa S** (A 5.104.3/3:131,25), in a stock passage reflecting a common behaviour of monks towards the Buddha. I have tried to reflect both senses with the alt trs. In **Mahā Vaccha,gotta S** (M 37), Vaccha,gotta uses *paricīṇṇa* as a special term or code-word for his arhathood (M 37.27a/1:497), SD 27.4.

<sup>73</sup> *Anupavajjam Channo bhikkhu satham āharissatī ti, evam etam, āvuso Sāriputta, dhārehi.* This sentence seems to imply that Channa thinks he is already an arhat, but this is argument from silence at best (see §13 & n there). On this passage, Keown remarks: “There is no logical connection between the three ideas in this passage (I have suitable food...I have served the teacher...I will use the knife) which suggests some textual interpolation may have taken place.” (1996:21). In fact, according to the Āgama version, Channa only explains that his pains are difficult to bear: “Yet my disease oppresses this body with sore pains that are difficult to bear, I wish to kill myself, I do not enjoy the arising of pain” (Analayo’s tr) [Chin 我疾病苦痛逼身, 難可堪忍, 欲自殺, 不樂苦生] (SĀ 1266 = T2.347c7). Horner in her tr of Chann’ovāda S seems to suggest that Channa regards his previous reverence for the Buddha as a justification for his suicide (M:H 3:316). See Keown’s long n on this (1996:21 n37).

‘This is mine; this I am; this is my self’?”

#### 9.2 CHANNA’S PRACTICE

(1) “Avuso Sāriputta, I regard

**the eye**, eye-consciousness and that which is cognizable through eye-consciousness, thus:

‘This is not mine; this I am not; this is not my self.’

(2) Avuso Sāriputta, I regard

**the ear**, ear-consciousness and that which is cognizable through ear-consciousness, thus:

‘This is not mine; this I am not; this is not my self.’

(3) Avuso Sāriputta, I regard

**the nose**, nose-consciousness and that which is cognizable through nose-consciousness, thus:

‘This is not mine; this I am not; this is not my self.’

(4) Avuso Sāriputta, I regard

**the tongue**, tongue-consciousness and that which is cognizable through tongue-consciousness, thus:

‘This is not mine; this I am not; this is not my self.’

(5) Avuso Sāriputta, I regard

**the body**, body-consciousness and that which is cognizable through body-consciousness, thus:

‘This is not mine; this I am not; this is not my self.’

(6) Avuso Sāriputta, I regard

**the mind**, mind-consciousness and that which is cognizable through mind-consciousness, thus:

‘This is not mine; this I am not; this is not my self.’”

### Channa directly knows cessation

**10** “Avuso Channa, what have you seen and directly known in the eye, eye-consciousness and that which is cognizable through eye-consciousness, that you regard them thus:

‘This is not mine; this I am not; this is not my self’?

Avuso Channa, do you regard the ear, ear-consciousness and that which is cognizable through ear-consciousness, thus:

‘This is not mine; this I am not; this is not my self.’

Avuso Channa, do you regard the nose, nose-consciousness and that which is cognizable through nose-consciousness, thus:

‘This is not mine; this I am not; this is not my self.’

Avuso Channa, do you regard the tongue, tongue-consciousness and that which is cognizable through tongue-consciousness, thus:

‘This is not mine; this I am not; this is not my self.’

Avuso Channa, do you regard the body, body-consciousness and that which is cognizable through body-consciousness, thus:

‘This is not mine; this I am not; this is not my self.’

Avuso Channa, do you regard the mind, mind-consciousness and that which is cognizable through mind-consciousness, thus:

‘This is not mine; this I am not; this is not my self’?”

#### 10.2 CHANNA’S PRACTICE

(1) “Avuso Sāriputta, it is through seeing and directly knowing

cessation in **the eye**, eye-consciousness and that which is cognizable through eye-consciousness, that I regard them thus:

‘This is not mine; this I am not; this is not my self.’

(2) Avuso Sāriputta, it is through seeing and directly knowing

cessation in **the ear**, ear-consciousness and that which is cognizable through ear-consciousness, that I regard them thus:

‘This is not mine; this I am not; this is not my self.’

- (3) *Avuso Sāriputta, it is through seeing and directly knowing*  
cessation in **the nose**, nose-consciousness and that which is cognizable through nose-consciousness,  
*that I regard them thus:*  
*‘This is not mine; this I am not; this is not my self.’*
- (4) *Avuso Sāriputta, it is through seeing and directly knowing*  
cessation in **the tongue**, tongue-consciousness and that which is cognizable through tongue-consciousness,  
*that I regard them thus:*  
*‘This is not mine; this I am not; this is not my self.’ [S 4:59]*
- (5) *Avuso Sāriputta, it is through seeing and directly knowing*  
cessation in **the body**, body-consciousness and that which is cognizable through body-consciousness,  
*that I regard them thus:*  
*‘This is not mine; this I am not; this is not my self.’*
- (6) *Avuso Sāriputta, it is through seeing and directly knowing*  
cessation in **the mind**, mind-consciousness and that which is cognizable through mind-consciousness,  
**[266]**  
*that I regard them thus:*  
*‘This is not mine; this I am not; this is not my self.’”*

### Mahā Cunda’s admonition

**11** When this was said, the venerable Mahā Cunda said this to the venerable Channa:<sup>74</sup>

“Therefore, avuso Channa, this teaching of the Blessed One<sup>75</sup> should be constantly considered:

‘There is wavering in one who is dependent;	there is no wavering in one who is independent.
When there is no wavering,	there is tranquillity.
When there is tranquillity,	there is no inclination.
When there is no inclination, <sup>76</sup>	there is neither coming nor going.
When there is neither coming nor going,	there is neither dying nor arising.
When there is neither dying nor arising,	there is no here nor beyond nor in between.
—This is the end of suffering.” <sup>77</sup>	

**12** Then when the venerable Sāriputta and the venerable Mahā Cunda had advised the venerable Channa thus, they rose from their seats and departed.

Then soon after they had gone, the venerable Channa used the knife.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>74</sup> SA says that Mahā Cunda, thinking, “I will make known (to him) his condition as an ordinary person,” gave the admonition (*Cunda-t,therena pan’assa puthujjana,bhāvaṃ saññāpessāmi ti ovādaṃ adāsi*, SA 2:372).

<sup>75</sup> Cf **Cetanā S 3** (S 12.40):

“But, monks, when one does not intend, and one does not plan, but one is not driven by latent tendencies, then there is no mental basis for the support of consciousness.

When there is no mental basis, there is no support for consciousness.

When consciousness has no support and does not grow, **there is no inclination**.

When there is no inclination, there is no coming and going.

When there is no coming and going, there is no passing away and being reborn.

When there is no passing away and being reborn, there ends further birth, decay-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain and despair.—Such is the ending of this whole mass of suffering.” (S 12.40.4/2:66 f)

<sup>76</sup> “Inclination,” *natī* (rare). This term usu refers to a negative state, but its sense is not restricted to that. It simply denotes “an inclination, a habit or bias”: see **Dvedhā Vitakka S** (M 19/1:115,22), SD 61.1; **Chann’ovāda S** (M 144,11/3:266,7), SD 11.12; **Cetanā S 3** (S 12.40/2:67,4), SD 7.6c; U:Be+Ce 81,7 (UA 398,18).

<sup>77</sup> As at U 81 (SD 98.1); UA 398; Nett 65; cf S 12.40/2:67.

<sup>78</sup> Comy says that the moment he cut his jugular vein, the fear of death descended on him and the rebirth sign (*gati nimitta*) appeared. Realizing that he was still an ordinary person, he was aroused and cultivated insight. Comprehending the formations, he attained arhathood and won nirvana as a “same-header” (*sama,sīsī*). (SA 2:273). This term is late, first appearing in Paṭisambhidā,magga (Pm 1.464/ch 36) & Puggala Paññatti (Pug 1.19/13), but its def is

## The Buddha “exonerates” Channa

13 Then the venerable Sāriputta approached the Blessed One, and having approached him, paid him homage and then sat down at one side. Seated thus at one side, the venerable Sāriputta said this:

“Bhante, the venerable Channa has used the knife. What is his destination, what is his future course?”

“Sāriputta, didn’t the monk Channa declare to you his blamelessness?”<sup>79</sup>

“Bhante, there is a Vajjī village called Pubba,jira.<sup>80</sup> There the venerable Channa had friendly families, close families, approachable families (as his supporters).”<sup>81</sup>

“True, Sāriputta, the monk Channa had friendly families, close families, approachable families (*upavajja,kulā ti*) [as supporters]; but, Sāriputta, [S 4:60] I do not say that he was blameworthy (*sa,upavajjō ti*) on that account. Sāriputta, when one lays down the body and takes up a new one, then I say one is blameworthy (*sa,upavajjō ti*). This did not happen with the monk Channa: the monk Channa used the knife blamelessly [without being reborn] (*anupavajja*).”<sup>82</sup>

This is what the Blessed One said. The venerable Sāriputta rejoiced and approved of the Blessed One’s word.

— evaṃ —

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found in Aṅguttara: “For him the influxes’ ending and life’s ending are (simultaneous,) neither earlier nor later” (*tassa apubbam acarimanam āsava,pariyādānañ ca hoti jīvita,pariyādānañ ca*, A 7.16/4:13; Pug 1.19/ 13). Pug defines a “same-header” as one who attains liberation at the very moment of dying (Pug 1.19/13; PugA 186 f). SA lists three kinds of “same-header”, ie one attaining arhathood: (1) having resolved to stay in one posture, when one changes that posture (*iriya,patha sama,sīsī*); (2) at the very moment a certain feeling ends (*vedanā sama,sīs*); (3) as soon as one’s illness subsides (*roga sama,sīsī*); (4) at the moment of dying (AA 4:6). SA mentions only (1), (3-4) (SA 1:183). Channa is an example of the last type of same-header.

<sup>79</sup> Comy: Although this declaration (of blamelessness) was made while Channa was still an ordinary person, his attainment of nirvana followed immediately. As such, the Buddha answered by referring to that declaration (MA 5:83). **Bodhi** disagrees with Comy and states that “Channa was already an arahant when he made his declaration” but the two elders failed to recognize this” (M:ÑB 1359 n1312). **Keown**, however, argues that “If we assume, along with the commentary and secondary literature, that Channa was not an Arhat prior to his attempt, then to extrapolate a rule from this case such that suicide is permissible for Arhats is fallacious” (1996:29). In the Āgama version, the Buddha reminds Sāriputta of Channa’s claims to having honoured the Buddha with what is pleasing (SĀ 1266 = T2.348a17). “Thus,” notes Analayo, “the Buddha’s reply in the Pāli and Chinese versions, though differing in formulation, endorses Channa’s earlier claim.” (*A Comparative Study of the Majjhima Nikāya* draft, 2006 ad M 3:266).

<sup>80</sup> S has *Pubba,vijjhana*, vl *Pubba,vicira*.

<sup>81</sup> *Channassa mitta,kulāni suhajja,kulāni upavajja,kulāni*. Apparently here (and at S 35.87.25/4:59,26), Sāriputta is pointing out that Channa has a close association with lay people and forming attachment with them. It would be difficult for such a person to attain liberation. The Āgama version says that Channa “had families of supporters, families that were very intimate, families that were well spoken” (Analayo’s tr), [Chin 有供養家, 極親厚家, 善言 語家]. See foll n.

<sup>82</sup> Alt tr “The monk Channa is blameless in using the knife” (*anupavajjo Channo bhikkhu sattham āhasesi*) (M 144.13/ 3:266) or “the knife was used blamelessly by the monk Channa” (*anupavajjam Channena bhikkhunā sattham āharitam*) (S 35.87.26/4:60). See Intro (3).

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