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Vakkali Sutta

Discourse on Vakkali | S 22.87

Theme: Sexuality, suicide & sainthood

Paraphrased translation by Piya Tan ©2003

1 Introduction

1.1 The story of Vakkali is found in the Vakkali Sutta (S 22.87), the Apadāna (Ap 2:465 f), the Aṅguttara Commentary (AA 1:248-251), the Dhammapada Commentary (DhA 25.11/4:118 f), the Thera, gāthā Commentary (ThaA 2:146-150), and the Visuddhi, magga (Vism 4.45/129). Unlike the Saṃyutta account and its commentary, the other Commentaries make no mention of Vakkali's killing himself with a knife.

The Saṅghāṭi, kaṇṇa Sutta (It 3.5.3) is also related to Vakkali's case, that is, of someone who is deeply attached to the Buddha, filled with sensual lust. No matter how closely he follows the Buddha, even holding on to the hem of his robe, he, lacking right mindfulness, will not awaken to true reality.¹

1.2 The Saṃyutta episode of Vakkali's suicide is identical to that of the monk Godhika (**Godhika Sutta**, S 4.23), both occurring at Kāla, silā (Black Rock) on the side of Isigili (today, Sona Hill).² Godhika's reason for suicide, however, was his falling away (6-7 times) from temporary release of mind due to his sickness.³ So when he attained release of mind, he committed suicide to gain liberation.⁴ Vakkali, however, apparently tried to kill himself out of his chronic depression.

However, the Commentarial accounts do not say that he committed suicide (an account that could have spilled over from the Godhika story). The Commentaries only say he was merely contemplating suicide, when he leaped into the air out of faith and joy on seeing the Buddha (that is, his hologram) before him. It is said that he then gently moved downwards and settled on the ground, fully rejoicing in the Buddha. Understandably, he is declared to be the foremost of those monks who have faith (A 1:24) [see DhA account below, SD 8.8(1)].

1.3 The climax of the Vakkali Sutta is the Buddha's declaration, "Vakkali, one who sees the Dharma sees me; one who sees me, sees the Dharma" (*Yo kho vakkali dhammaṃ passati so maṃ passati; yo maṃ passati so dhammaṃ passati*)⁵ [§2]. The Saṃyutta Commentary explains: Here the Blessed One shows himself as the Dharma-body, as stated in the passage "The Tathāgata, the great king, is the Dharma-body" [untraced]. For the nine-fold supramundane Dharma [4 paths, their fruits, nirvana] is called the Tathāgata's body (SA 2:314). **Bodhi** thinks that the Commentary has misquoted the reference to a statement in **the Aggañña Sutta** (D 27)⁶ that says:

¹ See It 92/3.5.3/90-92 (SD 24.10a).

² On the location of these places, see S Dhammika, 1999:97 (map). This spot gives a panoramic view of the other hill crests: Vulture's Peak, Vebhāra, Paṇḍava and Vepulla (M 3:68 f).

³ "Temporary release of mind," *sāmayika ceto, vimutti*, which SA explains as the mundane meditative attainments (*lokiya samāpatti*), i.e. the absorptions 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 (the humours of) wind, bile and phlegm (SA 1:183). On humour-related illness, see **Sivaka S** (S 36.21), SD 5.6, **Samaṇa-m-acala S 1** (A 4.87.5/2:87), SD 20.14, and **(Samaṇa) Sukhumāla S** (A 5.104/3:131).

⁴ S 4.23/1:120-122 (SD 61.16); SA 1:183; DhA 1:431-433.

⁵ Cf **Saṅghāṭi, kaṇṇa S** (It 92/3.5.3/90-92), SD 24.10a. Cf also "He who sees dependent arising, sees Dharma": **Mahā Hatthi, padopama S** (M 28,28) + SD 6.16 (5). See Harvey 1995a:231-234.

⁶ S:B 1081 n168.

He whose faith⁷ in the Tathagata is firm, rooted, established, unshakeable by any recluse or brahmin, any deva or Māra or Brahmā or anyone in the world, can truly say: “I am a son of the Blessed One, an offspring born from his mouth, born of the Dharma, created by the Dharma, heir to the Dharma.”

Why is that?

Because, Vāseṭṭha (and Bhāradvāja), this designates the Tathagata: “The body of the Dharma”⁸ or “the body of Brahmā”⁹ or “one who is Dharma” or “one who is Brahmā”.¹⁰ D 27,9/3:84)

The close connection between these two passages centres around wise faith (*saddhā*) which is Vakkali’s strongest spiritual faculty (*indriya*). The Buddha in fact declared Vakkali to be the foremost amongst the monks who have faith (*etad-aggam saddhā’dhimuttānam*).¹¹

1.4 The conclusion of the Sutta [§39 f] is important in countering the wrong view that some form of “unsupported” (*apatiṭṭhita*) consciousness remains after the passing away of an arhat (as proposed, for example, by Peter Harvey, 1995a:208-210). As soon as Vakkali and Godhika¹² die, Māra on both occasions looks for their rebirth-consciousness (*paṭisandhi,citta*), but fails to do so, since they are “unestablished” or “unsupported” (*appatiṭṭhita*), that is, find no footing for a new life. It is clear here that the death-consciousness (= rebirth-consciousness) does not survive in an “unestablished” or “unsupported” condition, since the texts (here and at S 1:122)¹³ state that with the passing away of the arhat, consciousness, too, ceases.¹⁴

⁷ “Faith,” *saddhā*. There are 2 kinds of faith (*saddhā*): (1) “rootless faith” (*amūlika,saddhā*), baseless or irrational faith, blind faith. (M 2:170); (2) “faith with a good cause” (*ākāravati,saddhā*), faith founded on seeing (M 1:320,8 401,23); also called *avecca-p,pasāda* (S 12.41.11/2:69): *avecca* (fr *aveti*, “he goes down to, understands”), “having understanding, penetrated) + *pasāda*, clear brightness, satisfaction, faith. “Wise faith” is syn with (2). *Amūlika* = “not seen, not heard, not suspected” (V 2:243 3:163 & Comy). Gethin speaks of two kinds of faith: the cognitive and the affective (eg ERE: Faith; also Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, 1963:387): “Faith in its cognitive dimension is seen as concerning belief in propositions or statements of which one does not—or perhaps cannot—have knowledge proper (however that should be defined); cognitive faith is a mode of knowing in a different category from that knowledge. Faith in its affective dimension is a more straightforward positive response to trust or confidence towards something or somebody...the conception of *saddhā* in Buddhist writings appears almost, if not entirely affective, the cognitive element is completely secondary.” (Gethin 2001:107; my emphases).

⁸ “The body of the Dharma,” *dhmma,kāya*, a term that reflects such statements as “He who the Dharma sees me; he who me sees the Dharma” (S 3:120) and “seeing the recluses...this is the highest blessing” (Sn 16). The Buddha made the first statement to Vakkali who had joined the Order because he was physically attracted to the Buddha. Vakkali was “seeing” merely the external conditioned form of the Buddha. The true “seeing” is the understanding of the nature of true reality, ie the vision of the 4 truths or the 3 characteristics (DhsA 350). See S:B 1081 n168; Gombrich 1992a:165; Harrison 1992; Collins 1993a:356 n9.2.

⁹ “The body of Brahmā,” *brahma,kāya* (D 3:84; J 1:95). Here *brahma* is an adjective commonly found in the early Suttas to mean “divine, perfect, excellent, supreme, holy,” as in *brahma,cakka*, “the divine wheel” (M 1:70; A 2:9); *brahma,cariya*, “the holy life” (D 1:84; sv PED); *brahma,jāla*, “the perfect net” (D 1); *brahma,daṇḍa*, “the supreme penalty” (V 2:290; D 2:154); *brahma,yāna*, “the way to the highest good; the best vehicle” (S 5:5; J 6:57); *brahma,-vihāra*, “the divine abode” (D 2:196, 3:220; Tha 649; Dha 262; Vism 295 ff).

¹⁰ “One who is Brahmā,” *brahma,bhūta*. See eg Sn 1065a.

¹¹ A 1:24; Sn 1146; also Divy 49; VbhA 276; Vism 1:129.

¹² S 4.23.19/1:122.

¹³ See also **Parivāraṃsana S** (S 12.51/2:80-84), SD 11.5.

¹⁴ See also S:B 421 n314 where Bodhi disagrees with Harvey’s view.

It is probable that Harvey arrived at his thesis from translating *appatiṭṭhita* as “unsupported” rather than “unestablished,” which would then not support his thesis. Here, it helps to think in Pali, rather than in English.

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SD 8.8(1)

Vakkali Thera Vatthu

The Story of the elder Vakkali | DhA 25.11/4:118 f¹⁵

Theme: Vakkali’s arhathood

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1 It is said that, one day, after Vakkali, born of a brahmin family, had reached manhood, he saw the Teacher enter Sāvattḥī for alms and was at once captivated by his physical perfection. Desiring to be near the Teacher so as to be able to constantly gaze at his beauty, Vakkali became a monk.

Neglecting to recite the teachings or to meditate, he spent his whole time standing near the Teacher so that he could gaze at him.¹⁶ The Teacher remained silent waiting for Vakkali’s wisdom to ripen.

2 When the Teacher knew that the elder Vakkali’s wisdom had ripened,¹⁷ he admonished him thus,

“Vakkali, what is there in looking upon this putrid body?¹⁸

Vakkali, **he who sees the Dharma sees me; he who sees me see the Dharma.**”¹⁹

3 But in spite of the Teacher’s admonition, the elder Vakkali could not let the Teacher out of his sight. Finally, the Teacher thought,

“Unless this monk receives an existential shock,²⁰ he will never come to understand.”

4 Now the rains-retreat was near, and on the rains-entry day, the Teacher, leaving for Rājagaha, dismissed the elder Vakkali with the words:

“Go back, Vakkali! Go back, Vakkali!” (*apehi Vakkali, apehi Vakkalīti paṇāmesi*)

5 “Now for the period of three months, I’m unable to see the Teacher in his presence. What is the use of my living any longer? I will throw myself down from a cliff.”

6 And with that thought, he climbed Mount Vulture Peak.

7 The Teacher, knowing that Vakkali was weary of the world, thought,

“If this monk receives no comforting from my presence, he will destroy his predisposition to the attainment of the path and the fruits.”

¹⁵ This story is derived from **Vakkali S** (S 22.87/3:119-124), SD 8.8 (below). For other versions of Vakkali’s story [1.1].

¹⁶ According to **Saññoga S** (A 7.48) lust arising through just such an action of contemplating on the physical features of another. (A 7.48/4:57-59), SD 8.7

¹⁷ *Ñāṇa,paripākaṃ*. The Buddha, seeing Vakkali’s predisposition, knows that in the ensuing events, he will change for the better.

¹⁸ *Kin te vakkali iminā pūti, kāyena diṭṭhena*. Cf Mātali’s description of the human body at S 932 (SD 86.4) + SD 54.21 (2.1.1.3). Cf **Khajjanīya S** (S 22.79): “I am being devoured by form” (*rūpena khajjāmi*) (S 22.79/3:87), SD 17.9.

¹⁹ *Yo kho vakkali dhammaṃ passati so maraṃ passati; yo maraṃ passati so dhammaṃ passata*. On the fuller version of this key statement, see (1.3).

²⁰ “Shock,” (*saṃvega*), usually tr as “a sense of spiritual urgency.” Burlingame uses a similar tr (DhA:B 3:263).

8 Then, he sent forth a radiant image of himself for Vakkali himself to see. The moment the monk saw the Teacher, the weight of sorrow that had oppressed him vanished.

9 Then the Teacher, as though filling the dry bed of a lake with a flood of water, caused great zest and joy to arise in the monk, and pronounced the following stanza: [4:119]

10 Full of joy and faith in the Buddha's teaching, the monk
Will reach the place of peace, the happiness of the stilling of the formations. (Dh 381)

11 Having pronounced this Stanza, the Teacher stretched forth his hand to the elder Vakkali and said,

12 Come, Vakkali! Fear not, look at the Tathāgata!
I will lift you up like (one lifting) an elephant sunk in the mire.

Come, Vakkali! Fear not, look at the Tathāgata!
I will free you just as the (eclipsed) sun is freed from Rāhu's maw.

Come, Vakkali! Fear not! Look at the Tathāgata!
I will free you just as the (eclipsed) moon is freed from Rāhu's maw.

13 The elder Vakkali thought,
"I have seen the one with the 10 powers,²¹ and he speaks to me, saying, 'Come!'"

14 He at once experienced profound joy. He thought, "How shall I go?"

15 And standing there on the cliff, on hearing the first line of the stanza, though he saw no path, he leaped up into the air before the one with the 10 powers.

As he hovered in the air, pondering on the stanzas uttered by the Teacher, he completely suppressed his zest and attained arhathood together with the analytical knowledges (*paṭisambhidā*).

16 Then, praising the Tathagata, he descended to the ground and stood before the Teacher. On a subsequent occasion, the Teacher placed him as the foremost amongst those inclined to faith (*saddhā-dhimutta*).

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Vakkali Sutta

Discourse on Vakkali

²¹ "The one with the 10 powers," *dasa,bala* or more fully *dasa,bala,ñāṇa*. The 10 powers are: (1) knowledge of the possible and the impossible (*thānāṭhāna,ñāṇa*), such as in the analysis of karma (M 57, 135, 136), and the possibility regarding the realm, circumstances, time and effort, all of which would impede or reinforce the result; and also the cause of karma, etc; (2) knowledge of the result of karma (*kamma,vipāka ñāṇa*); (3) knowledge of the way leading to all destinies and goals (*sabbattha,gāminī,paṭipadā*); (4) knowledge of the world with its various elements (*nānā,dhātu ñāṇa*) (M 115,4-9/3:62 f); (5) knowledge of the different dispositions of beings (*nānādhimuttika ñāṇa*); (6) knowledge of the maturity level of beings in terms of faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration and wisdom (*indriya,paropariyatta ñāṇa*) (Vbh §§814-827); (7) knowledge of the defilements, cleansing and emergence in the cases of the meditations, liberations, concentrations and attainments (*jhān'ādi,sarīkiles'ādi ñāṇa*); (8) knowledge of the recollection of (his own) past lives (*pubbe,nivāsānussati ñāṇa*); (9) knowledge of the passing away and arising of beings (according to their karma) (*cutūpapāta,ñāṇa*); (10) knowledge of the destruction of the mental defilements (*āsava-k,khaya ñāṇa*) (M 1:69; A 5:33; Vbh 336). See **Mahā Sīhanāda S** (M 12,9-20/1:69-71) for details.

S 22.87

1 Thus have I heard.

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

Vakkali is ill

2 Now at that time, the venerable Vakkali was dwelling in a potter's shed,²² sick, suffering, gravely ill.²³

3 Then the venerable Vakkali addressed his attendants:

"Come, avuso [brothers], approach the Blessed One, pay homage to him in my name with your head at his feet, and say, 'Bhante, the monk Vakkali is sick, suffering, gravely ill. He pays homage to the Blessed One with his head at his feet.' Then say, 'It would be good, bhante, if the Blessed One would visit the monk Vakkali out of compassion.'"

4 "Yes, avuso," the monks replied, and they approached the Blessed One, paid homage to him, sat down at one side.

5 Sitting thus at one side, those monks conveyed the venerable Vakkali's message to the Blessed One. The Blessed One consented by his silence.

The Buddha visits Vakkali

6 Then the Blessed One, having dressed himself and taking robe and bowl, visited the venerable Vakkali. [120]

7 The venerable Vakkali saw the Blessed One coming in the distance and stirred on his bed.²⁴

8 Then the Blessed One said this to him:

"Enough, Vakkali, do not stir on your bed. There are these seats spread and ready,²⁵ I will sit down there." The Blessed One then sat down on the spread seat.

9 Seated thus, the Blessed One said this to the venerable Vakkali:

"I hope you are bearing it, Vakkali. I hope you are getting better, and your pains are abating, not rising; that their abating is evident, not their rising."

"Bhante, I cannot bear it; I am not getting better, and my pains are not abating, but rising; their rising is evident, not their abating."

10 "I hope then, Vakkali, that you are not troubled by remorse and regret."

"Indeed, bhante, I have a lot of remorse and regret."

²² "Potter's shed," *kumbhakāra, nivesana*, which Comy glosses as *kumbhakāra, sālā* (SA 2:313). *Nivesana* usually translates as "house," sometimes as "settlement".

²³ Comy: After the Invitation ceremony (*pavāraṇā*) of the rains retreat, the elder Vakkali while on his way to see the Blessed One fell seriously ill in the middle of the town. He could not walk, and had to be carried on a litter to a potter's shed (SA 2:313). In his Thera, *gāthā*, however, he is said to be suffering from "colic" (a stomach ailment due to "wind") (Tha 350), which ThaA says is caused by insufficient food (ThaA 2:148).

²⁴ "Stirred," *samadhosi = samacopi* (from *sañcopati*, he moves, stirs). Some say that he was shaking from a violent fever but Comy says that he was showing respect by making a movement. It is said that even one who is very ill should show respect to a senior by a gesture of rising (SA 2:313).²⁵ Comy says that in the Buddha's time, a seat was always ready in a monk's quarters in case the Teacher visits (SA 2:314).

²⁵ Comy says that in the Buddha's time, a seat was always ready in a monk's quarters in case the Teacher visits (SA 2:314).

11 “I hope, Vakkali, that you have nothing for which to reproach yourself in regard to moral virtue.”
“I have nothing, bhante, for which to reproach myself in regard to virtue.”

12 “Then, Vakkali, if you have nothing for which to reproach yourself in regard to moral virtue, why are you troubled by remorse and regret?”

“For a long time, bhante, I have wanted to come and see²⁶ the Blessed One, but I do not have enough strength in my body to visit the Blessed One to see him.”

Seeing the Buddha

13 “Enough, Vakkali! What is there to see of this foul body?

One who sees the Dharma sees me; one who sees me, sees the Dharma.²⁷

In seeing the Dharma, Vakkali, one sees me, and in seeing me, one sees the Dharma.

14 What do you think, Vakkali: is **form** permanent or impermanent?” [121]

“Impermanent, bhante.”

“Is the impermanent suffering or happiness?”

“Suffering, bhante.”

“Is what is impermanent, suffering and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: ‘This is mine; this I am; this is my self’?”

“No, bhante.”

14.2 “What do you think, bhikshus, is **feeling** permanent or impermanent?

“Impermanent, bhante.”

“Is the impermanent suffering or happiness?”

“Suffering, bhante.”

“Is what is impermanent, suffering and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: ‘This is mine; this I am; this is my self’?”

“No, bhante.”

14.3 “What do you think, bhikshus, is **perception** permanent or impermanent?

“Impermanent, bhante.”

“Is the impermanent suffering or happiness?”

“Suffering, bhante.”

“Is what is impermanent, suffering and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: ‘This is mine; this I am; this is my self’?”

“No, bhante.”

14.4 “What do you think, bhikshus, are **mental formations** permanent or impermanent?

“Impermanent, bhante.”

“Is the impermanent suffering or happiness?”

“Suffering, bhante.”

²⁶ “Come and see the Blessed One,” *Bhagavantam dassanāya upasaṅkamitu, kāmo*. Evidently, the emphasis here is on the seeing of the Buddha in a physical sense.

²⁷ *Yo kho vakkali dhammam passati so maraṃ passati; yo maraṃ passati so dhammam passati*. **Attha, sālinī** remarks that “seeing is not by the eye but by insight” (DhsA 350). SA: Here the Blessed One shows himself as the Dharma-body, as stated in the passage “The Tathāgata, the great king, is the Dharma-body” [untraced]. For the nine-fold supramundane Dharma [the 4 paths, their fruits, nirvana] is called the Tathāgata’s body (SA 2:314). Bodhi thinks Comy misquoted the reference to a statement in **Aggañña S** (D 27) (S:B 1081 n168). See (1.3) above.

“Is what is impermanent, suffering and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: ‘This is mine; this I am; this is my self’?”

“No, bhante.”

14.5 “What do you think, bhikshus, is **consciousness** permanent or impermanent?

“Impermanent, bhante.”

“Is the impermanent suffering or happiness?”

“Suffering, bhante.”

“Is what is impermanent, suffering and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: ‘This is mine; this I am; this is my self’?”

“No, bhante.”

15 “Therefore, bhikshus,
any kind of **form** whatsoever,

*whether past, future or present,
internal or external,
gross or subtle,
inferior or superior,
far or near—*

one sees all form as it really is with right wisdom thus:

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

15.2 Any kind of **feeling** whatsoever,

*whether past, future or present,
internal or external,
gross or subtle,
inferior or superior,
far or near—*

one sees all form as it really is with right wisdom thus:

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

15.3 Any kind of **perception** whatsoever,

*whether past, future or present,
internal or external,
gross or subtle,
inferior or superior,
far or near—*

one sees all form as it really is with right wisdom thus: *‘This is not mine; this I am not; this is not my self.’*

15.4 Any kind of **mental formations** whatsoever, *whether past, future or present,
internal or external,
gross or subtle,
inferior or superior,
far or near—*

one sees all form as it really is with right wisdom thus:

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

15.5 Any kind of **consciousness** whatsoever,

*whether past, future or present,
internal or external,
gross or subtle,
inferior or superior,
far or near—*

one sees all form as it really is with right wisdom thus:

'This is not mine; this I am not; this is not my self.'

16 Seeing thus, a well-taught noble disciple becomes

revulsed with	form,
<i>revulsed with</i>	feeling,
<i>revulsed with</i>	perception,
<i>revulsed with</i>	mental formations,
<i>revulsed with</i>	consciousness.

Being (thus) revulsed, (his lust) fades away.

Through the fading away (of lust) [that is, dispassion], (his mind) is freed.

When it is freed, there comes the knowledge: 'Freed!'

He directly knows:

'Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, done what is to be done, there is no more of this state of being.'

Vakkali at Kālasilā

17 Then the Blessed One, having given this advice to the venerable Vakkali, rose from his seat and left for Vulture Peak Hill.

18 Then, not long after the Blessed One had left, the venerable Vakkali addressed his attendants thus:

"Come, avuso, lift me up on this bed and carry me to Kāla,silā [Black Rock] on the Isigili slope.²⁸ How can one think of dying among the houses?"

19 "Yes, avuso," the monks replied and, having lifted up the venerable Vakkali on the bed, they carried him to Kālasilā on the Isigili slope.

The two devatas

20 The Blessed One spent that night and the rest of the day on Vulture Peak Hill.

21 Then when the night was far spent, two devatas²⁹ of exceeding beauty, lighting up the whole of Vulture Peak Hill, went up to the Blessed One. Having gone up to the Blessed One, and after paying him homage, stood at one side.

22 Standing thus at one side, one of the devatas said this to the Blessed One, "Bhante, the monk Vakkali is intent on liberation."³⁰

23 The other devata said this to the Blessed One,

²⁸ This is the place where the monk Godhika committed suicide, too (**Godhika S**, S 4.23/1:120-122). See Intro above.

²⁹ *Devatā*. Here referring to a god of the Sense-world. It is a general term referring to divine beings, however, sometimes with a broader meaning. **Culla Niddesa** defines *devatā* as those who are commonly regarded (in the Buddha's time) as being "worthy of gifts" (*devatā as ye yesaṃ dakkhiṇeyyā te tesaṃ devatā*), ie ascetics, domestic animals (elephants, horses, cows, cocks, crows), physical elements (fire, stone, etc), lower (earth-bound) gods and high (celestial) gods (Nc 308). The *Vimāna Vatthu* Comy simply defines it as a male god, a Brahma, or a female god (*devatā ti deva,putto pi Brahmā pi deva,dhitā pi vuccati*, VvA 21).

³⁰ "Intent on liberation," *vimokkhāya ceteti*. In the SD series, we render *vimutti* as "freedom," *vimutta* as "freed," and *vimokkha* as "liberation." On *vimutti* and *vimokkha*, rendered as "liberation" and "deliverance" respectively, see S:B 1081 n170.

“Surely, bhante, he will be well freed.”³¹

24 This is what the devatas said to the Blessed One. Having said this, they paid homage to the Blessed One and, keeping him on their right, disappeared right there.

25 Then when the night has passed, the Blessed One addressed the monks thus:

“Come, bhikshus, go and visit the monk Vakkali and say to him: ‘Avuso Vakkali, listen to the word of the Blessed One [122] and the two devatas. Last night, avuso, when the night was far spent, two devatas of exceeding beauty went up to the Blessed One, lighting up the whole of Vulture Peak Hill. They went up to the Blessed One, and after paying him homage, stood at one side.

Standing thus at one side, one of the devatas said this to the Blessed One:

“Bhante, the monk Vakkali is intent on liberation.”

The other devata said this to the Blessed One: “Surely, bhante, he will be well freed.” And the Blessed One says to you, avuso Vakkali, “Fear not, Vakkali, fear not! Your death will not be a bad one. Your demise will not be a bad one.””

26 “Yes, bhante,” the monks replied, and they went up to the venerable Vakkali and said to him, “Avuso Vakkali, listen to the word of the Blessed One and the two devatas ... ”

Vakkali’s suicide

27 Then the venerable Vakkali addressed his attendants:

“Come, avuso, lower me from the bed. How can one like me think of listening to the Blessed One’s teaching while seated on a high seat.”³²

28 “Yes, avuso,” the monks replied, and they lowered the venerable Vakkali from the bed.

29 “Last night, avuso, two devatas of exceeding beauty went up to the Blessed One. One of the devatas said this to the Blessed One: ‘Bhante, the monk Vakkali is intent on liberation.’

The other devata said this to the Blessed One: ‘Surely, bhante, he will be well freed.’ And the Blessed One says to you, avuso Vakkali, ‘Fear not, Vakkali, fear not! Your death will not be a bad one. Your demise will not be a bad one.’”

30 “Well then, avuso, pay homage to the Blessed One in my name with your head at his feet and say, ‘Bhante, the monk Vakkali is sick, suffering, gravely ill. He pays homage to the Blessed One with his head at his feet.’ Then say,

‘Form is impermanent: I have no doubt about this, bhante, I do not doubt that whatever is impermanent is suffering. I do not doubt that in regard to what is impermanent, suffering and subject to change, I have no more desire, lust nor affection. [123]

‘Feeling is impermanent: *I have no doubt about this, bhante, I do not doubt that whatever is impermanent is suffering. I do not doubt that in regard to what is impermanent, suffering and subject to change, I have no more desire, lust nor affection.*

‘Perception is impermanent: *I have no doubt about this, bhante, I do not doubt that whatever is impermanent is suffering. I do not doubt that in regard to what is impermanent, suffering and subject to change, I have no more desire, lust nor affection.*

‘Mental formations are impermanent: *I have no doubt about this, bhante, I do not doubt that whatever is impermanent is suffering. I do not doubt that in regard to what is impermanent, suffering and subject to change, I have no more desire, lust nor affection.*

³¹ “He will be well-freed,” *svimutto vimuccissati*, lit “he will be freed as one well freed”. That is to say, he would attain the fruit of rathood (SA 2:313).

³² Here is an interesting case where we see the Buddha being respected as the Dharma, or that the Dharma is regarded with the same respect as or higher than the Buddha.

Consciousness is impermanent: *I have no doubt about this, bhante, I do not doubt that whatever is impermanent is suffering. I do not doubt that in regard to what is impermanent, suffering and subject to change, I have no more desire, lust nor affection.*³³

31 “Yes, avuso,” the monks replied, and then they left.

32 Then, not long after those monks had left, the venerable Vakkali used the knife.

Māra fails to find Vakkali’s consciousness

33 Then the monks went up to the Blessed One *and related what had happened.*

34 The Blessed One then addressed the monks thus:

“Come, bhikshus, let us go to Kālasilā on the Isigili slope where the son of family Vakkali has used the knife.”

“Yes, bhante,” those monks replied.

35 Then the Blessed One, together with a number of monks, went to Kāla,silā on the Isigili slope.

36 The Blessed One saw in the distance the venerable Vakkali lying on his bed with his shoulder turned.³⁴ [124]

37 Now on that occasion a mass of smoke and darkness was moving to the east, then to the west, to the north, to the south, upwards, downwards, and to the directions in between.³⁵

38 The Blessed One then addressed the monks thus:

“Bhikshus, do you see that mass of smoke and darkness moving to the east, then to the west, to the north, to the south, upwards, downwards, and to the directions in between?”

“Yes, bhante.”

39 “That, bhikshus, is Māra the bad one seeking the consciousness of the son of family³⁶ Vakkali, wondering, ‘Where now has the consciousness of the son of family Vakkali established itself [for rebirth]?’

But, bhikshus, with consciousness unestablished, the son of family Vakkali has attained nirvana.”³⁷

³³ This sentence seems to imply that Vakkali thinks he is already an Arhat; cf my tr of **Chann’ovāda S**, M 144,7) n, SD 11.12. Apparently, like Channa (M 144,12 n), SD 11.12, Vakkali felt great pain after cutting his throat. Comy: “The elder overestimated himself. As he had suppressed the defilements by concentration and insight, he did not see himself assailed by them and so thought that he was an arhat. Disgusted with his unhappy life, he cut his throat (*kaṇṭha,nāḷa*) with a sharp knife. Just then, great pain arose in him. Realizing he was still an ordinary person, he took up his main meditation object, examined it with knowledge (*ñāṇa*) and attained arhathood just as he died.” (SA 2:314). As such, he dies a “same-header” (*sama,sīsī*, cf SA 2:273; AA 4:6). Cf

S:B 1082 n172 where Bodhi doubts Comy’s accuracy here. It is interesting to note here that while both Vakkali and Channa each cut their throat (*kaṇṭha,nāḷa*, SA 2:314; *kaṇṭha,nāḷi*, MA 5:82), Godhika was said to have cut his wind-pipe (*gala,nāḷi*) (SA 1:183). Bodhi however uses “jugular vein” throughout (eg S:B 1082 n172).

³⁴ “With his shoulder turned,” ie with twisted shoulder. He had been lying on his back when he took the knife, but because he was accustomed to lying on his right side, he had turned to his right and had so remained (SA 2:315).

³⁵ *Tena kho pana samayena dhumāyitattaṃ timirāyitattaṃ gacchat’eva purimaṃ disaṃ gacchati pacchimaṃ disaṃ gacchati uttaraṃ disaṃ gacchati dakkhiṇaṃ disaṃ gacchati uddhaṃ gacchati adho gacchati anudisaṃ.* (S 1:122 = 3:124).

³⁶ “Son of family,” *kula,putta*, alt trs “clansman, noble youth.” It is interesting that the Buddha refers to Vakkali posthumously as *kula,putta* instead of *bhikkhu*. It should be noted that only Buddhaghosa (the author of DhA) refers to Vakkali as *thera* (elder) throughout, but the Buddha often refers to young monk from good families as “son of family” (*kula,putta*). Vakkali was probably in his early 20s. Pukkusāti is similarly referred to as *kula,putta* in **Dhātu Vibhaṅga S** (M 140). On other terms denoting “young,” see **Sigāl’ovāda S** (D 31,1.2/3:180) n, SD 4.1. See SD 44.10 (2.2.1).

³⁷ “Consciousness unestablished” (*apatiṭṭhita viññāna*). Māra is looking for Vakkali’s rebirth-consciousness (*paṭi-sandhi,citta*), as he has elsewhere found in the case of dead people (**Brahma Nimantanika S**, M 49,5/1:327 @ SD 11.7; cf S 4:38 f). But here he fails to find it, because it is unestablished (*appatiṭṭhita*), ie finds no footing for a new

— evaṃ —

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life. It is clear here that the death consciousness (= rebirth-consciousness) does not survive in an “unestablished” (*apatitthita*) condition, since the texts (here and at S 1:122) state that with the passing away of the arhat, consciousness, too, ceases. See also **Parivāraṃsana S** (S 12.51/2:80-84), SD 11.5. See (1.4).

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