

The Buddha's attitude towards suicide

Excerpt from **SD 61.16: (Māra) Godhika Sutta, an arhat's rebirth-consciousness cannot be found** © Piya Tan 2024.

1.1.1 Sutta summary

The (Māra) Godhika Sutta is a Saṃyutta account of the monk Godhika, living at the black rock on the Isigili slope outside Rājagaha, who got into the temporary freedom of mind 6 times, but failed to gain arhathood. On the 7th attempt, he killed himself just when he has attained it and attained final nirvana. When Māra noticed Godhika was going to kill himself, he tried to induce the Buddha to stop Godhika (so that Godhika would live on unawakened and so be under Māra's power). When the Buddha and the monks arrived to see Godhika's body, the Buddha declared that the consciousness of an arhat who has attained nirvana cannot be found since it is "unestablished."

3.2.1 Taking life, even one's own, is wrong

3.2.1.1 First of all, it should be stated that the Buddha and early Buddhism are clear on their attitude towards suicide: it is a destruction of life, including one's own, and as such a moral wrong and against the Vinaya and the precepts. **The 3rd Pārājika rule** unequivocally forbids monks from suicide, even to condone it, thus:

Yo pana bhikkhu sañcicca manussa, viggahaṃ jīvitā voropeyya satth'ahāraṃ vāssa pariye-seyya maraṇa, vaṇṇaṃ vā saṃvaṇṇeyya maraṇāya vā samādapeyya ambho purisa kim tuyh'iminā pāpakena dujjīvitena? mataṃ te jīvitā seyyo ti, iti citta, mano citta, saṅkappo aneka, pariyāyena maraṇa, vaṇṇaṃ vā saṃvaṇṇeyya maraṇāya vā samādapeyya, ayaṃ pi pārājiko hoti asaṃvāso.

Whatever monk should intentionally deprive a human being of life, or seek a life-taking weapon for him, or should utter praise of death, or should urge him towards death, saying, "Good man, what use to you is this miserable life? Death is better for you than life," having such thoughts in mind and such intentions in mind, in many ways, should utter praise of death, or should urge him towards death, he too becomes **defeated**, not in communion.

(V 3:73,10-16)

It should be noted here that "monk" here means "a living monk" since the rule cannot be broken by a dead monk. It should thus be understood that the rule is still relevant to discourage other monks from committing suicide.

It has also been argued that the phrasing of the Pārājika rule above does not include an arhat committing suicide. An arhat is not reborn. An unawakened person, even a monk, will be reborn, and will have to face the karmic consequences of his suicide. Instead of suicide, such a monk could have made use of his renunciant life to resolve his difficulties (such as by way of spiritual counselling and proper meditation), and live his monastic life fully.

For the laity, there is **the 1st precept**, that against killing or destroying life,¹ human or non-human. This is part of the 5 precepts of *natural morality*, that is, they are karmically potent. Breaking any of them—killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying and intoxication—means that we will have to bear the karmic consequences, whether we "take them up" or not, whether we are "Buddhist" or not.

¹ "Life" is defined as *pāṇa*, "the breath," ie, a breathing being with a mind; hence, "killing." In Pali, is *pāṇātipātā*, *pāṇa* (Skt *prāṇa*, "life") + *atipāta* ("letting fall"). It includes praising death and letting die when we are able to prevent it.

3.2.1.2 As a rule, any Vinaya precept that is in some way an extension of any of the 5 natural precepts—against killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying and intoxication—is karmically potent as well as regarded as a breach of the Vinaya. This is clear in the case of a suicide (like Godhika, Channa and Vakkali) who died as arhats. In other words, they have attained nirvana and will not be reborn. Hence, they are beyond karma and the Vinaya rules no more apply to them.

3.2.2 The suicide arhat is blameless

3.2.2.1 The Chann'ovāda Sutta (M 144 = S 35.87) relates the events connected with the suicide of the monk **Channa 2** [3.1.2], who, like Godhika, was ill and struggled with his meditation to attain arhathood. Channa seemed to suffer the most of the 3 suicides mentions. Channa describes his unbearable agonies in graphic terms (M 144,7-11). Despite counselling by both Sāriputta and Cunda, and Sāriputta's offer to provide Channa with proper food, suitable medicine and an attendant, Channa declined them, since he had no need of them. His only regret was that, as a disciple, he had been unable to attend to the Buddha, his teacher.

Soon after Sāriputta and Cunda left, Channa committed suicide.

3.2.2.1 When Sariputta informed the Buddha of Channa's suicide, the Buddha replied that Channa did not commit any offence or do any wrong:

Sāriputta, when one lays down the body and takes up a new one, then I say one is blameworthy.

This did not happen with the monk Channa:

the monk Channa used the knife blamelessly (anupavajja).²

Thus remember this, Sāriputta."

(M 144,27/3:266 = S 35.87/4:60), SD 11.12

The fact that Channa is not reborn means that karma does not arise in him. Since his consciousness is unestablished, there is no one to take any blame for any offence. The same applies to any arhat.

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

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² Ie, without being reborn. Alt tr "The monk Channa is blameless in using the knife" (*anupavajjo channo bhikkhu sattham āhāresi*) (M 144,27/3:266) or "the knife was used blamelessly by the monk Channa" (*anupavajjam channena bhikkhunā sattham āharitam*) (S 35.87,27/4:60). See Intro (3).