

# Suicide: An Exploration of Early Buddhist Values

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**ABSTRACT**—Three canonical Pali Suttas tell the stories of early Buddhist *bhikkhus* who committed suicide: Channa, Vakkali and Godhika. Each text concludes that all three were arahants, but the accounts are not what they seem. Two texts treat the suicidal *bhikkhus* as unenlightened before concluding with their final Nirvana, whereas the other is deeply unorthodox. This article argues that the Suttas are not really about suicide, but rather the developing understanding of Nirvana, under the influence of non-Buddhist ideas.

**KEYWORDS:** Early Buddhism, Pali Canon, Nirvana, suicide, Vedānta

Three Suttas from the Pali Canon record the suicides of early Buddhist *bhikkhus*: MN 144/SN 35.87 on Channa, SN 22.87 on Vakkali and SN 4.23 on Godhika.<sup>1</sup> All three texts have parallels in the Chinese Canon, and all versions conclude by stating that the three *bhikkhus* had attained liberation. Most academic studies have concluded that this sets an important precedent: early Buddhism condones the suicide of arahants.<sup>2</sup> But all three texts on suicide, in

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<sup>1</sup> In the main text of this article, I follow the text numbering system of the Pali Canon for individual Suttas. All citations are from Pali Text Society (Ee) editions, cited by volume and page number in the footnotes. In the Ee, the three texts on suicide are found at MN III 263ff/SN IV 55ff, SN III 119ff and SN I 120ff respectively.

<sup>2</sup> See Anālayo 2010 and 2011, Delhey 2009, La Vallée Poussin 1921, Lamotte 1987, Wiltshere

their Pali and Chinese recensions, are more complicated than at first appears. The texts on Channa and Vakkali contain much that deviates from the conclusions, whereas the account of Godhika’s suicide is based on unorthodox meditative ideas. To understand the texts requires focusing not simply on their “enlightenment” conclusions, but also explaining the structure(s) and ideas of the texts as a whole, and in comparison with each other. A useful point of comparison is the account of Assaji’s final illness (SN 22.88), which shares important features with the three texts without recording Assaji’s death.

What follows pays little attention to what has hitherto been the focus of most academic studies on the three texts, namely, suicide as an ethical problem. Early Buddhists would obviously have been deeply troubled by any case of *bhikkhu* suicide, even if the precept not to kill applies only to killing other beings.<sup>3</sup> Strangely, however, the three texts make no serious attempt to justify suicide by claiming that this is permissible for arahants, for two texts—on Channa and Vakkali—imply that the suicidees were not arahants. But if not normative justifications of suicide, then what are they saying? A different solution, considered here, is that the texts are really about doctrinal history, or rather, doctrinal creation. This study will argue that the real focus of the three texts is the idea of final Nirvana at death, which emerged through a process of doctrinal transformation under the influence of non-Buddhist values.

### 1. Channa (MN 144, SN 35.87)

The Sutta begins with the Buddha staying in the Bamboo Grove of Rājagaha, and with two prominent disciples, Sāriputta and Mahācunda, residing on Vulture’s Peak. Sāriputta and Mahācunda visit Channa, who tells them in stereotypical terms that he is in pain, getting worse and cannot go on. Thus he has decided to commit suicide: “I will inflict the knife (upon myself), venerable Sāriputta, I do not wish to live”.<sup>4</sup> When Sāriputta asks Channa not to do this, even offering to look after him by himself, Channa says he is being well looked after and adds:

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1983; Keown (2005) differs by arguing that the accounts do not condone suicide. See also Sujato 2022, in this issue of the journal.

<sup>3</sup> See Delhey 2009: 72, n. 11. Anālayo (2010: 131) notes that suicide is a *dukkata* offence according to the Pali Vinaya (III 73), but only because by jumping off a cliff a *bhikkhu* may harm another person.

<sup>4</sup> SN IV 57: *satthaṃ āvuso sārīputta āharissāmi nāvakaṅkhāmi jīvītan ti.*

Moreover, venerable sir, for a long time I have attended the teacher quite willingly, not unwillingly, and it is appropriate, sir, that a disciple should attend the teacher quite willingly, not unwillingly. “The *bhikkhu* Channa inflicts the knife blamelessly”: remember it thus, venerable Sāriputta.<sup>5</sup>

Sāriputta then questions Channa on doctrinal points, asking if the sense faculties, the corresponding types of cognition and things cognised (*dhamma*) should be regarded in terms of “self” (“this is mine”, etc.).<sup>6</sup> Channa replies that he does not understand things in this way, but sees cessation in them and so views them in terms of “this is not mine”, etc. Immediately after this, Mahācunda gives the following teaching:

For the dependent there is trembling, but for the independent there is no trembling. When there is no trembling, there is tranquillity. When there is tranquillity, 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 falling away and arising. And when there is no falling away and arising, there is no here, yonder or anywhere in between. Just this is the end of suffering.<sup>7</sup>

Sāriputta and Mahācunda then leave and Channa commits suicide; according to the commentary, this was achieved by cutting the jugular vein.<sup>8</sup> When Sāriputta informs the Buddha and asks about Channa’s rebirth destiny,<sup>9</sup> the Buddha in turn asks Sāriputta whether Channa had declared his blamelessness to him.<sup>10</sup> Rather than affirm that Channa had stated his blamelessness, Sāriputta replies that there is a Vajjian village, Pubbavijjhana,

<sup>5</sup> SN IV 57: *api ca me āvuso satthā paricīṇṇo dīgharattaṃ manāpen’ eva, no amanāpena. etaṃ hi āvuso sāvakassa patirūpaṃ, yaṃ satthāraṃ paricareyya manāpen’ eva, no amanāpena. tam anupavajjaṃ channo bhikkhu satthaṃ āharissatī ti: evam etaṃ āvuso sāriputta dhārehī ti.*

<sup>6</sup> See for example, SN IV 58: *cakkhum āvuso channa cakkhuvīññāṇaṃ cakkhuvīññāṇaviññātabbe dhamme, etaṃ mama eso ’ham asmi eso me attā ti samanupassasi [...].*

<sup>7</sup> SN IV 59: *nissitassa calitaṃ, anissitassa calitaṃ n’ atthi. calite asati passaddhi hoti. passaddhiyā sati nati na hoti. natiyā asati āgatigati na hoti. āgatigatiyā asati cutupapāto na hoti. cutupapāte asati n’ ev’ idha na huraṃ na ubhaya-m-antarena. es’ evānto dukkhassā ti. Reading āgati- with Be instead of agati- in Ee.*

<sup>8</sup> SN-a II 373: *satthaṃ āhasesī ti jīvitahārakasatthaṃ āhari, kaṅṭhanāḷaṃ chindi.*

<sup>9</sup> SN IV 59: *tassa kā gati ko abhisamparāyo.*

<sup>10</sup> SN IV 59: *nanu te sāriputta channena bhikkhunā sammukhā yeva anupavajjatā vyākātā ti.*

where there are blameworthy families (*upavajja-kulāni*) who are friendly to Channa and “close to his heart” (*suhajja-kulāni*).<sup>11</sup> Sāriputta seems to imply that Channa was blameworthy because of the company he kept, contrary to Channa’s claim of being blameless because of willingly attending the Buddha for a long time. However, the Buddha then states that despite his blameworthy lay associates, Channa was not blameworthy in a more fundamental way:

Sāriputta, the one who lays down his body and takes up another, him I call blameworthy. But that does not apply to the *bhikkhu* Channa. “The *bhikkhu* Channa inflicted the knife blamelessly”: remember it thus, venerable Sāriputta.<sup>12</sup>

The Sutta thus ends with this strange but clear statement of Channa being blameless because he did not take up another body (*aññañ ca kāyaṃ upādiyati*). In other words, the Buddha implies that Channa was an arahant at the time of his death.

### **Analysis**

Everything in this Sutta apart from the conclusion suggests that Channa was not an arahant. At first Channa stresses his severe pain and states his wish to live no longer (*nāvakañkhāmi jīvitān ti*), and then Sāriputta and Mahācunda guide him through early Buddhist teachings; this is not a normal way of depicting an arahant. Sāriputta then asks the Buddha about Channa’s rebirth, and assumes that he is “blameworthy” (*upavajja*) because of the company he kept. In this context, Channa’s declaration of service to the Buddha can be understood as an attempt to set the record straight: claiming to have “willingly attended the Buddha for a long time” (*satthā paricīṇṇo dīgharattaṃ manāpen’ eva*), and therefore that he will “inflict the knife blamelessly” (see above), looks like a tacit acknowledgement by Channa that he was in a problematic position but tried to explain it away by virtue of his service to the Buddha. All this points towards Channa’s unenlightened and even problematic disciplinary status.

<sup>11</sup> SN IV 59: *atthi bhante pubbavijjhaṇaṃ nāma vajjigāmo. tatth’ āyasmato channassa mittakulāni suhajjakulāni upavajjakulāni ti.*

<sup>12</sup> SN IV 60: *yo kho sāriputta tañ ca kāyaṃ nikkhipati aññañ ca kāyaṃ upādiyati, tam ahaṃ saupavajjo ti vadāmi. taṃ channassa bhikkhuno n’ atthi. anupavajjaṃ channena bhikkhunā satthaṃ āharitan ti, evaṃ etaṃ sāriputta dhārehi ti.*

We should add that early Buddhist accounts of enlightenment are clear and unambiguous, and leave no room for doubt. Why was this not done here? Why not add a section in which Channa contemplates the not-self teaching and attains insight, as in one of the Chinese accounts of Vakkali's suicide (see below)? The text could easily contain such a section. The argument from silence is here important: the lack of an explicit statement of enlightenment matters. Even when the Buddha concludes by implying Channa's arahantship, it is hard to take it seriously: "being worthy of blame", which here refers to Vinaya matters, is hardly an appropriate metaphor by which to speak of rebirth in general. If the Buddha cannot even bring himself to state Channa's liberation directly, the text should be regarded as an uncomfortable fudge: despite treating Channa as unenlightened throughout, the text's conclusion implies that he was enlightened at the time of death.

***The Chinese Āgama parallel (SĀ 1266)***

According to Anālayo's translation (2010), the *Samyukta-āgama* (SĀ) version of the Sutta follows its Pali parallel closely. But it differs in several respects, the most important of which are as follows:

- The monks who visit Channa are Sāriputta and Mahākoṭṭhita, not Sāriputta and Mahācunda (2010: 126).
- Channa's statement of having completed his service to the Buddha occurs after the teachings given by Sāriputta and Mahākoṭṭhita, rather than beforehand, and differs from it, which creates a slightly different effect (2010: 129).
- Sāriputta's discussion with the Buddha about Channa's rebirth also differs, although the Buddha similarly equates being blameworthy with someone who "gives up this body to continue with another body", and defines a blameless person as "someone who has given up this body and does not continue with another body" (2010: 130).
- SĀ 1266 concludes its narrative with an explicit statement of liberation: "In this way, the Blessed One declared the venerable Channa to [have reached] the supreme" (2010: 130).

The order of narration and other features of the SĀ text result in a subtly different presentation of Channa's status. SĀ 1266 is far less equivocal than MN 144/SN 35.87, as can be seen in Channa's statement of service to the Buddha:

Venerable Mahākoṭṭhita, my service to the Blessed One is now completed, my following the Well-gone One is now completed, being in conformity with his wishes, not contrary to his wishes.  
**What is to be done by a disciple, I have now already done [...]**  
 (transl. Anālayo 2010: 129; my emphasis in bold).

Channa's statement that "what is to be done by a disciple, I have now already done", according to Bhikkhu Anālayo "involves an implicit claim to being an arahant" (2010: 131). He notes (2010: 129, n. 23) that the "expression 'having done what is to be done', 所作已作, is a standard pericope in the *Samyukta-āgama* to describe the attainment of full liberation, being the counterpart to *kataṃ karaṇīyaṃ* in Pali discourses [...]". The fact that this occurs after the teachings of Sāriputta and Mahākoṭṭhita is also significant. It reads almost as a rebuke, as if Channa is telling these two distinguished *bhikkhus* that he has completed the holy life and is in no further need of instruction. Channa's statement of having completed his service to the Buddha is notable in one more respect. In the Pali version this statement concludes with Channa's claim that he is blameless ("The *bhikkhu* Channa inflicts the knife blamelessly": remember it thus, venerable Sāriputta). But the SĀ parallel in Chinese makes no reference to Channa's blameworthiness:

**What is to be done by a disciple, I have now already done.**  
 If other disciples are to serve the teacher, they should serve the great teacher like this, in conformity with his wishes, not contrary to his wishes. Yet now my body is sick and in pain, it is difficult to bear it up. I just wish to take a knife and kill myself, [since] I do not delight in a life of pain (transl. Anālayo 2010: 129; my emphasis in bold).

The SĀ text thus makes no mention of Channa's claim to inflict the knife "blamelessly", but instead stresses how Channa had conformed to the Buddha's wishes. The section where Sāriputta raises the subject of Channa's blameworthiness, shortly after asking about his rebirth, is also different in

this respect. In the SĀ version, the Buddha prefaces his statement—about blameworthiness being due to being reborn—as follows: “A clansman with right wisdom who is rightly and well liberated [can] have families as his supporters, be intimate with families and be spoken well of in families. Sāriputta, I do not say that in this he has committed a serious fault” (Anālayo 2010: 130). In speaking of a “clansman with right wisdom who is rightly and well liberated”, the SĀ suggests that Channa is liberated.

Anālayo recognises (2010: 132) that the two versions of Channa’s suicide suggest a “degree of ambiguity, evident in the description of how the two monks who had come to visit Channa try to dissuade him from his plan”. In other words, ambiguity occurs because Sāriputta and his companion (Mahācunda/Mahākoṭṭhita) treat Channa as unenlightened. But Anālayo (2010: 132, n. 40) cites de Silva’s judgement (1987: 41) that “this episode clearly shows that Sāriputta, who was the most eminent disciple of the Buddha, and who was renowned for his wisdom, did not have vision into the mental make-up of a colleague regarding his emancipation”. Needless to say, Sāriputta is not usually presented in a foolish guise, and it is implausible to imagine that a canonical discourse would represent the second most important figure in the Canon as being deficient in terms of understanding. Instead, we should view Sāriputta as a voice of scepticism in the account of Channa’s suicide. This agrees with the Pali representation of Channa as unenlightened throughout; it is not merely Sāriputta’s judgement.

It is also important to note that SĀ 1266 makes no indication of Channa’s enlightenment before Sāriputta and Mahākoṭṭhita deliver their teachings (Anālayo 2010: 127): Channa simply complains about his pain and affirms his wish to kill himself, a position that remains the same even after Sāriputta’s teaching. Moreover, the statement “What is to be done by a disciple, I have now already done”, given in response to Mahākoṭṭhita’s teaching (Anālayo 2010: 129), is delivered in the context of his service to the Buddha, and concludes with a statement which implies that he is depressed: “it is difficult to bear it up. I just wish to take a knife and kill myself, [since] I do not delight in a life of pain” (Anālayo 2010: 129). Then, after the suicide, Sāriputta again plays the role of a sceptic by asking about Channa’s rebirth (Anālayo 2010: 130), and mentioning Channa’s problematic relationship with the laity of Pubbavijjhana (Anālayo 2010: 130).

Both texts are deeply ambiguous, in other words, even if SĀ 1266 more clearly implies Channa's liberation. What earlier source lies behind both versions of the text: an ambiguous Sutta, in which Channa's mundane status is contradicted by an enlightenment conclusion (the Pali SN text), or a similar account which contains stronger suggestions of his enlightenment (the Chinese SĀ text)? The principle of *lectior potior difficilior* ("the more difficult reading is the stronger") surely suggests that the Chinese SĀ account, with its slightly improved and clearer representation of Channa's situation, is an elaboration of a more ambiguous original similar to the Pali account. As we will now see, this tentative conclusion is supported by the presence of a similar structure in the accounts of the Vakkali's suicide.

## 2. Vakkali (SN 22.87)

This Sutta finds Vakkali staying in a potter's shed in Rājagaha, requesting that the Buddha visit him. When the Buddha arrives, Vakkali wishes to maintain the proper rules of decorum, but the Buddha tells him not to get up. The text then has a stereotypical formula, found also in MN 144/SN 35.87, indicating that Vakkali is seriously ill. The difference is that whereas Channa uses several similes describing the severity of his illness, here the Buddha asks whether Vakkali has any remorse or regret, a different way of implying that he is seriously ill, perhaps terminally so. Vakkali's regret, which he claims is not trifling, turns out to have nothing to do with virtue (*sīla*), but concerns having wanted to visit the Buddha for a long time and not being able to do so. To this the Buddha replies with an iconic statement:

Enough, Vakkali, what's the point of you seeing this putrid body?  
He who sees Dhamma, Vakkali, sees me, and he who sees me sees  
Dhamma. For, Vakkali, seeing Dhamma one sees me, and seeing  
me one sees Dhamma.<sup>13</sup>

The Buddha then leads Vakkali through the not-self teaching, asking if the five aggregates should be understood as self and so on, before concluding with the enlightenment of the *bhikkhu* who understands this. As in MN 144/

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<sup>13</sup> SN III 120: *alam vakkali, kim te iminā pūtikāyena diṭṭhena? yo kho vakkali dhammaṃ passati so maṃ passati, yo maṃ passati so dhammaṃ passati. dhammaṃ hi vakkali passanto maṃ passati, maṃ passanto dhammaṃ passati.*



SN 35.87, the not-self theme would seem to be a timely meditation on death. Vakkali, indeed, seems to find some solace in it, for when the Buddha then returns to Vulture’s Peak, he has his helpers put him on his cot and take him out to the black rock on Mount Isigili, since how can someone like him consider “making his time” inside a building?<sup>14</sup> During the night two deities visit the Buddha with messages: one says that Vakkali is “intent on release”,<sup>15</sup> the other says that “being well released, he will be released”.<sup>16</sup> The next day, the Buddha sends some *bhikkhus* to tell Vakkali what the deities said, adding this: “Do not fear, Vakkali, do not fear! Your death will not be bad!”<sup>17</sup>

When the messengers arrive Vakkali asks his attendants to take him off his cot, it being improper to listen to the Buddha’s words on a raised seat. After receiving the message Vakkali tells them to tell the Buddha that he has understood the impermanence and unsatisfactoriness of the five aggregates, and is in no doubt that he has no desire, passion or fondness for them.<sup>18</sup> As soon as the *bhikkhus* leave Vakkali “inflicts the knife”, and when the messengers report back to the Buddha, he immediately takes them back to the scene of Vakkali’s suicide. In the final scene, the Buddha asks the *bhikkhus* if they can see a dark cloud of smoke, moving here and there.<sup>19</sup> This, he says, is Māra searching in vain for Vakkali’s consciousness.<sup>20</sup> But his consciousness is unestablished, the Buddha says: Vakkali has attained final Nirvana.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>14</sup> SN III 121: *etha maṃ āvuso mañcakaṃ āropetvā yena isigilipassakālasilā ten’ upasaṅkamatha. kathaṃ hi nāma mādiso antaraghare kālaṃ kattabbaṃ maññeyyā ti*. Perhaps Vakkali’s wish to die outside explains the Buddha’s question about Vakkali having regrets about his virtue/habitual lifestyle (*sīla*): the question could refer to the fact that Vakkali has been forced to relinquish the ascetic habit of living outdoors.

<sup>15</sup> SN III 121: *ekamantaṃ ʔitā kho ekā devatā bhagavantam etad avoca: vakkali bhante bhikkhu vimokkhāya ceteti ti*.

<sup>16</sup> SN III 121: *aparā devatā bhagavantam etad avoca: so hi nūna bhante suvimutto vimuccissatī ti*.

<sup>17</sup> SN III 122: *bhagavā ca taṃ āvuso vakkali evam āha: mā bhāyi vakkali, mā bhāyi. apāpakan te maraṇaṃ bhavissati, apāpikā kālakiriyā ti*.

<sup>18</sup> SN III 122: *yad aniccaṃ dukkhaṃ vipariṇāmadhammaṃ, n’ atthi me tattha chando vā rāgo vā pemaṃ vā ti na vicikicchāmi*.

<sup>19</sup> SN III 124: *passatha no tumhe bhikkhave etam dhūmāyitattaṃ timirāyitattaṃ gacchat’ eva purimaṃ disaṃ ... la ... gacchati anudisan ti. evam bhante*.

<sup>20</sup> SN III 124: *eso kho bhikkhave māro pāpimā vakkalissa kulaputtassa viññānaṃ samannesati*.

<sup>21</sup> SN III.124: *appatitʔhena ca bhikkhave viññāṇena vakkali kulaputto parinibbuto ti*.

### *Analysis*

Correctly understood, this account does not treat Vakkali as liberated until the Sutta's conclusion. The Buddha asks Vakkali whether he has any regrets, and Vakkali states that he does (not visiting the Buddha); neither is appropriate behaviour for or with regard to an arahant. Furthermore, the not-self instruction from the Buddha looks like a guided meditation to a person in need, rather than a discussion with an arahant. What of the deities' messages to the Buddha? These could be understood to mean that Vakkali had just attained, or is about to attain, liberation. But this is not the case. The Buddha's response to them assumes that Vakkali is not an arahant, for he goes on to reassure Vakkali that "his death will not be bad", which is only plausible if the Buddha is speaking to an unenlightened *bhikkhu*. The Buddha apparently does not understand the deities' messages as statements of Vakkali's impending enlightenment. If so, we should try to see if they can be interpreted in a way which does not imply spiritual liberation.

The first deity reports that "the *bhikkhu* Vakkali is intent on release" (*vakkali bhante bhikkhu vimokkhāya ceteti ti*), and the second says that "being well released, he will be released" (*suvimutto vimuccissati*). It is important to note that derivatives of the verb  $\sqrt{muc}$  do not necessarily refer to spiritual liberation. They can even be used in the sense of being released from illness. For example, in the *Māgandiya Sutta* (MN 75), the verb  $\sqrt{pari-muc}$ —which can also refer to spiritual liberation—refers to release from leprosy (*kuṭṭhehi parimucceyya*).<sup>22</sup> With regard to Vakkali, the statement that "Vakkali is intent on release" could mean nothing more than that Vakkali will soon end his life and be "released" from pain.

The message of the second deity is more complicated. But the statement "being well released, he will be released" (*so hi nūna bhante suvimutto vimuccissati ti*) once again need not refer to spiritual liberation. It looks like an elaboration of what the first deity states: the future tense verb "he will be released" (*vimuccissati*) is a more emphatic way of stating what the first deity has said, i.e., that Vakkali "is intent on release"; both indicate something that Vakkali will achieve in the near future, that is, his own death. This leaves the adjective "well released" (*suvimutto*) as a possible indication that Vakkali has,

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<sup>22</sup> MN I 506: *tassa so bhisakko sallakatto bhesajjaṃ kareyya. so taṃ bhesajjaṃ āgamma kuṭṭhehi parimucceyya, arogo assa sukhi serī sayamvasī yena kāmaṅgamo.*

through receiving the Buddha's guidance, attained spiritual liberation. But this too is not necessarily the case.

In a number of canonical Pali texts, (*su-*)*vimutta* means concentrated or absorbed, for example at SN 46.6 (Ee V 73ff), where the definition of sense restraint (*indriyaṣaṃvaro*) includes the statement that the *bhikkhu*'s "body is still, his mind is still, well composed internally (*ajjhataṃ susaṅghitaṃ*) and well released (*suvimuttaṃ*)".<sup>23</sup> Being "well released" is here equivalent to the mind being "well composed", in other words concentrated. A similar sense of the term *suvimutta* is found in the Buddha's teaching to Sāriputta at Sn 975:

Warding off desire for these things, the *bhikkhu*, being mindful and well released in mind (*suvimuttacitto*), investigating the Dhamma thoroughly, at the right time, and being one-pointed, would dispel the darkness.<sup>24</sup>

Being "well released in mind" (*suvimuttacitto*) is here the same as being concentrated, which leads to "dispelling the darkness". Being "well released" can only be a meditative state achieved prior to spiritual liberation, in other words. Another Sutta (SN 2.2) similarly uses the compound "released in mind" (*vimuttacitto*) in the sense of a concentration that precedes spiritual liberation:

A *bhikkhu* should be a meditator, released in mind (*vimuttacitto*), if he longs for his heart's fulfilment. When he understands the rise and fall of the world, being joyful in mind (*sucetaso*) and without dependency, that (fulfilment) is his reward.<sup>25</sup>

The compound *vimuttacitto* is here equivalent to *sucetaso*: the *bhikkhu* who is "released" and "joyful in mind" is able to attain spiritual liberation. The commentary confirms that being "released in mind" refers to nothing more than meditative proficiency: "the *bhikkhu* seeking arahantship should become a meditator, he should become well released in mind".<sup>26</sup> It also interprets *vimuttacitto* in the sense of "with mind released (*vimuttacitto*) through release

<sup>23</sup> SN V 74: *tassa ṭhito ca kāyo hoti ṭhitaṃ cittaṃ ajjhataṃ susaṅghitaṃ suvimuttaṃ*.

<sup>24</sup> Sn 975 (pp. 188–189): *etesu dhammesu vineyya chandaṃ, bhikkhu satimā suvimuttacitto, kālena so samma dhammaṃ parivīmaṃsamāno, ekodibhūto vihane tamaṃ so ti bhagavā ti*.

<sup>25</sup> SN I 46: *bhikkhu siyā jhāyī vimuttacitto, ākaṅkhe ce hadayassānupattiṃ. lokassa ñatvā udayabbayañ ca, sucetaso asito tadānisaṃso ti*.

<sup>26</sup> SN-a I 104: [...] *bhikkhu arahattaṃ patthento jhāyī bhaveyya, suvimuttacitto bhaveyya* [...].

on the object of meditation (*kammaṭṭhānavimuttiyā*).<sup>27</sup> The commentary on SN 22.87 similarly assumes that Vakkali attains spiritual liberation shortly after the suicidal act of severing his jugular vein (see n. 32 below). This means that the SN 22.87 commentarial interpretation of *svimutto vimuccissati* must refer to a meditative state prior to attaining arahantship: “well released, he will be released: he will be released (*vimuccissati*) having become (meditatively) released (*vimutto hutvā*) on the meditative release (*-vimuttiyā*) leading to the fruit of arahantship (*arahattaphala-*)”.<sup>28</sup>

We should finally note that the use of the verb  $\sqrt{vi-muc}$  in the sense of being concentrated is attested in one of the most important Suttas on meditation. In the *Ānāpānasatipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, one of the practices is that the *bhikkhu* should breathe in and out concentrating (*samādahaṃ*) the mind, and should breathe in and out releasing (*vimocayaṃ*) the mind.<sup>29</sup> Being an aspect of the *bhikkhu*'s way of training himself (*sikkhati*), *vimocayaṃ* does not here refer to attaining the liberated goal.

These observations suggest that the most obvious way of interpreting the statements of the deities, given the context, is that Vakkali is determined to commit suicide (“intent on release”, “will be released”), and that as a prelude to this he has attained meditative state of ease (“is well released”) based on the Buddha’s not-self teaching. If this was not the intended meaning, the Buddha’s response to the deities would be different. The narrative demands that Vakkali is not yet liberated: he is not so when the Buddha first visits him, is still not liberated when the Buddha leaves, and must be the same when the Buddha gives the message that Vakkali’s death will not be bad. Within this narrative, the deities messages only make sense as statements of his impending suicide; if the Pali use of the verb  $\sqrt{vi-muc}$  sometimes refers to meditative release, it must have that meaning here.

Even when Vakkali tells the Buddha that he does not doubt the impermanence of the five aggregates (*rūpaṃ aniccaṃ. tāhaṃ bhante na kaṅkhāmi*), or is not perplexed about the fact that what is impermanent is unsatisfactory (*yad aniccaṃ taṃ dukkhaṃ ti na vicikicchāmi*), and further is not perplexed about the fact that he lacks passion for the five aggregates (*n’ atthi*

<sup>27</sup> SN-a I 104: *vimuttacitto ti kammaṭṭhānavimuttiyā vimuttacitto. hadayass’ anupattin ti arahattaṃ.*

<sup>28</sup> SN-a II 314: *svimutto vimuccissati ti arahattaphalavimuttiyā vimutto hutvā vimuccissati.*

<sup>29</sup> MN III 83: *samādahaṃ cittaṃ assasissāmi ti sikkhati, samādahaṃ cittaṃ passasissāmi ti sikkhati, vimocayaṃ cittaṃ assasissāmi ti sikkhati, vimocayaṃ cittaṃ passasissāmi ti sikkhati.*

*me tattha chando vā rāgo vā pemaṃ vā ti na vicikicchāmi ti*), this is not a statement of spiritual liberation. Vakkali does not actually say he is liberated, does not state anything along the lines that his “corruptions have waned away” (*khīṇāsava*), and does not even say that he has ended passion for good. Rather, Vakkali is simply affirming that he has understood the teaching and that it has had the required effect: Vakkali understood the timely meditation on not-self, and was ready to die.

The same observations made in relation to the account of Channa’s suicide apply here: a text which gives every impression that Vakkali is not spiritually liberated, before strangely ending with this conclusion, is not to be taken at face value. The implicit message would appear to be that although the *bhikkhu* in question was not liberated, for some reason or other he eventually came to be regarded as an arahant.

***Chinese Āgama parallel (1): SĀ 1265***

Two Chinese Āgama parallels to Vakkali’s suicide, SĀ 1265 and EĀ 26.10, have been the subject of detailed studies by Martin Delhey (2009) and Bhikkhu Anālayo (2011). According to Anālayo’s translation, SĀ 1265 differs in several respects from SN 22.87, the most important of which are as follows:

- Immediately after describing his pain to the Buddha, Vakkali states his wish to kill himself (ibid.: 157).
- The Buddha does not rebuke Vakkali’s wish to see this “putrid body”, and does not utter the enigmatic statement that “he who sees Dhamma sees me [...]” (ibid.).
- The Buddha’s not-self teaching to Vakkali is slightly expanded: “If one does not have greed for this body, or have desire for it, then one’s death will be good and one’s future will also be good” (ibid.: 157–158).
- The report of the first deity to the Buddha is also slightly different. It states that “the venerable Vakkali, being ill and afflicted, is giving attention to liberation. He wishes to take a knife and kill himself, as he does not enjoy living any longer” (ibid.: 158).

- The second deity says “The venerable Vakkali is already well liberated and attaining liberation” (ibid.: 158).
- The Buddha’s message for Vakkali, after the deities have visited him, is that “If greed or desire for this body do not arise in you, then your death will be good and your future will be good” (ibid.).
- The narrative of Vakkali’s death—being taken out, his conversation with other *bhikkhus*, his reception of the Buddha’s message, his response to it and so on—is expanded. For example, Vakkali kills himself while the messengers are said to still be there, and this is then reported to the Buddha (ibid.: 158–159).
- The conclusion of Māra as a dark cloud searching for the consciousness of Vakkali is essentially the same, but the narrative adds that “Vakkali had [reached] the ultimate” (ibid.: 160).

Anālayo’s comparative analysis of SĀ 1265 and SN 22.87 focuses on the fact that both the SN and SĀ “clearly indicate that Vakkali passed away as an arahant, resembling in this respect the *Samyukta-āgama* and *Samyutta-nikāya* versions of Channa’s suicide” (ibid.). Strangely, however, Anālayo is unable to explain exactly how Vakkali attained arahantship. The first deity’s message to the Buddha—“venerable Vakkali, being ill and afflicted, is giving attention to liberation. He wishes to take a knife and kill himself, as he does not enjoy living any longer”—is obviously an expanded version of the Pali parallel. But the expansion merely makes clear Vakkali’s suicidal intentions. Anālayo recognises this by noting that the “first *deva* indicates that Vakkali is ill, that he is giving attention to liberation and that he wishes to kill himself. The *deva*’s message thus appears to be that he is intending to ‘liberate’ himself from his sick and painful situation by suicide” (ibid.).

Anālayo (ibid.: 161) proposes two ways of interpreting the statement of the second deity: either it means “that Vakkali will still become an arahant, i.e., he will be liberated in a way that is well”, or “the passage could be affirming that Vakkali is already well liberated mentally and now is about to liberate himself also from his painful situation by putting an end to his life”. Anālayo does not make clear which reading he prefers, although neither makes any sense. The SĀ statement that “venerable Vakkali is already well liberated and attaining liberation” is surely a translation of something very much like the Pali *svvimutto vimuccissati*. Anālayo does not consider the possibility that the

underlying (*su*)-*vimutta* could simply mean Vakkali is in a state of meditative release, short of spiritual liberation, although he claims that this use of the verb  $\sqrt{vi}$ -*muc* as meditative release also occurs in the account of Godhika's suicide, where the compound *ceto-vimutti* occurs.<sup>30</sup>

More importantly, Anālayo does not read the deities' statements in the wider context of the narrative, which before and afterwards assumes Vakkali is not an arahant. In SĀ 1265, the Buddha concludes his not-self teaching to Vakkali with a statement that he will be reborn: "If one does not have greed for this body, or have desire for it, then one's death will be good and one's future will also be good" (Anālayo, 2011: 157–158). After he has received the two deities, the Buddha's message to Vakkali concludes in exactly the same way: "If greed or desire for this body do not arise in you, then your death will be good and your future will be good" (ibid.: 158). The messenger then delivers the same words to Vakkali (ibid.: 159), leaving us in no doubt about Vakkali's lack of liberation at this point.

To support his argument, Anālayo (2011: 160) refers back to the Pali text: "That Vakkali indeed believed himself to be liberated could be gathered from his last message to the Buddha, in which according to both versions he affirms his insight and detachment in regard to the five aggregates". As we have seen, Vakkali's statement in SN 22.87 about understanding the not-self teaching, and being in no doubt about having no passion for the five aggregates, stops short of stating his liberation. In fact, the parallel part of SĀ 1265 is much clearer about Vakkali's lack of liberating insight. It states Vakkali's last message to the Buddha, delivered to a messenger *bhikkhu* just before his suicide, as follows:

Venerable one, the great teacher well knows what is to be known, he well sees what is to be seen. Those two *devas* well know what is to be known, well see what is to be seen. Now for me there is definitely no doubt that this body is impermanent; there is definitely no doubt that what is impermanent is *dukkha*; there is definitely no doubt that it is not proper to let oneself have greed or let oneself have desire for what is impermanent, *dukkha*, of a

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<sup>30</sup> Anālayo (2010: 162): "In discourses in the Pali Nikāyas and their parallels in the Chinese Āgamas, the expression liberation of the mind (*cetovimutti*)—when occurring on its own and without the qualification 'unshakeable', *akuppa*—does not stand for the type of liberation gained through the different levels of awakening, but only for the experience of deep levels of concentration".

nature to change [...] (*similarly for feeling, perception, formations and consciousness*) [...]. The disease is now troubling my body just as before, I wish to [take] a knife and kill myself, as I do not enjoy living any longer (transl. Anālayo 2011: 159; his emphasis).

In short, Vakkali does not state that his understanding of the not-self teaching has liberated him. He says the teaching has had a different effect: it has settled his mental state, and prepared him for the final step of committing suicide.

According to Delhey (2009: 98–99) the SN and SĀ accounts “can hardly be explained in other ways than to assume that Vakkali was already an *arhat* when he killed himself. The *Samyuktāgama* recension, especially, is quite explicit in this regard”. He further claims that:

[...] it seems that the Buddha unconditionally assures that Vakkali’s death—and his fate after death as well—will be good, since he has no desire for the *skandhas* anymore. So it seems that the Buddha also confirms that Vakkali is already released (2009: 87).

The exact opposite is quite obviously the case. Assuring Vakkali that his future state will be good is an explicit statement that he will continue in the realm of transmigration. An arahant cannot have a good “fate” after death: he has no fate after death. Delhey further claims that:

[...] it is very well possible that according to the *Samyuktāgama* recension Vakkali is released right from the beginning. This assumption seems to be corroborated by another *sūtra* of the *Samyuktāgama* in which it is related how Vakkali finds release on another—and obviously earlier—occasion in his life (2009: 88).

The Pali tradition too has a canonical account of Vakkali’s liberation at an earlier point in his life, in the relatively late *Apadāna*,<sup>31</sup> but such accounts are secondary to the canonical account of his suicide. Neither the SN nor the SĀ text can be read in any reasonable way that presumes Vakkali’s liberation from the start. And as we have seen, in both versions of the story Vakkali is

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<sup>31</sup> Ap II 465ff.



not regarded as an arahant even after the Buddha has received the two deities' messages. With regard to these messages, Delhey (2009: 76–77) points out, correctly, that the first message states only Vakkali's wish to kill himself: "it becomes quite clear from the context that this expression is an allusion to his intention to commit suicide: release (*vimokkha*) means in this expression and in this text passage obviously—at least primarily—: release from his grave incurable disease by death from his own hand". But Delhey interprets the second message differently:

[...] the expression "being well-released, he will attain release" (*suvimutto vimuccissati*) [...] makes only good sense when both expressions refer to two different kinds of release which follow each other in chronological order. And in my view it is most natural to assume that these two kinds are the liberation from the fetters which bind Vakkali to *samsāra* (*suvimutto*) and, like in the term *vimokkha* used in the first part of the deities' message, liberation from his disease by death (*vimuccissati*) (2009: 77).

Just like Anālayo, Delhey is seemingly unaware of the semantic range of Middle Indic forms of the verb  $\sqrt{vi-muc}$ , and ignores the overall context in which the Buddha does not regard the messages as an indication of Vakkali's spiritual liberation. He also fails to understand the importance of the Pali commentary on SN 22.87, which reads as follows:

"He inflicted the knife". The elder was apparently overconfident—not seeing that the operation of the defilements had (merely) been suppressed, through concentration and insight, he thought "I have destroyed the corruptions, so what is the point with this miserable life? I will inflict the knife and die". He cut his jugular vein with a sharp knife. Then a painful sensation arose, and at that moment he understood that he was merely an ordinary person. But because he had not let go of his meditative object, by mastering his subject of meditation he attained arahantship and then died.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>32</sup> SN–a II 314: *satthaṃ āhāresī ti thero kira adhimāniko ahoṣi. so samādhivipassanāhi vikkhambhitānaṃ kilesānaṃ samudācāraṃ aṇassanto, khīṇāsavo 'mhi ti hutvā, kiṃ me iminā dukkhena jīvitena? satthaṃ āharitvā marissāmi ti. tikhiṇena satthena kaṇṭhanālaṃ chindi. ath' assa dukkhā vedanā uppajati. so tasmim̐ khaṇe attano puthujjanabhāvaṃ ñatvā, avissatṭhakammaṭṭhānattā sīghaṃ*

This commentary indicates what the canonical account lacks, and what it really should contain, if it wishes to make clear that Vakkali was an arahant before death: a formula stating Vakkali's liberation. Delhey's summary of the commentary unfortunately misses the point:

Buddhaghosa says in his commentary on the *Vakkalisutta* that Vakkali, while committing suicide, wrongly conceived himself to be an *arhat* without actually being one. Rather he was still a common person (*puthujjana*) at that point in time. Only immediately after cutting his throat did Vakkali realize that he had not yet been released and passed the stages of the way to salvation, so that he became an *arhat* in the last moments of his life. The problem with this interpretation is that the wording of the *sūtra* contains neither any hint whatsoever regarding the possibility of a salvific experience while committing suicide or dying, nor regarding the possibility that Vakkali wrongly conceived himself to be an *arhat* before killing himself (2009: 78; his emphasis).

Delhey is correct to point out that the Pali Sutta gives no indication of liberation at the time of suicide, which necessitates a commentarial exegesis along these lines. But he fails to note that this is the only option the commentary has, in the circumstances: if the Buddha continues to treat Vakkali as unenlightened even after the deities' messages, Buddhaghosa can only situate liberation at the time of death. Not seeing this, Delhey claims that Vakkali actually attained liberation after the Buddha's teaching to him:

[...] it is indeed somewhat unclear when exactly Vakkali attained release according to the Pali recension. It seems that he is not yet an *arhat* in the beginning of the sermon, and there is no explicit reference to his liberating experience in the later parts of the sermon. I assume, however, that he already attained release immediately, or at least shortly, after the Buddha's instruction on the unsatisfactoriness of the *skandhas*. Regarding this topic, Tilmann Vetter [2000: 234] points to the fact that the Buddha's

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*kammaṭṭhānaṃ ādāya sammasanto arahattaṃ pāpunītvā va kālam akāsi*. Reading *kaṇṭhanāḷaṃ* with Be instead of *kaṇḍanāḷiṃ* in Ee.

sermon on the five *skandhas* which can also be found in many other places of the canon “is here not depicted as directly resulting in an experience of release” and suggests that Vakkali “achieved the result a little later, when he no longer clung to the wish to see the Buddha and felt free to dispose of a body that caused him unbearable pain” (2009: 78, n. 29).

Vetter’s point about liberating conclusions to accounts of the not-self teaching merely highlights its absence in SN 22.87. Given the overall context, Delhey’s assumption “that he already attained release immediately, or at least shortly, after the Buddha’s instruction on the unsatisfactoriness of the *skandhas*” is unwarranted. The most significant fact about the Buddha’s instruction to Vakkali is its lack of a formula describing his liberation: the ease of including such a formula, and the presence of such formulae in so many other occurrences of the not-self teaching, is surely a glaring and meaningful omission, one certainly noticed by Buddhaghosa, and one which in the SN and SĀ versions agrees with the Buddha continuing to treat Vakkali as unenlightened after he has received the deities.

Delhey misses the point that the Pali commentary deals with a received tradition quite logically: if Vakkali was unenlightened after receiving the Buddha’s teaching, and was thus when the deities delivered their messages to the Buddha, and yet is somehow regarded as a liberated arahant in the Sutta’s conclusion, the moment of enlightenment can only be placed around the time of his suicide. This is exactly what another Chinese version of the Sutta states, to which we will now turn.

***Chinese Āgama parallel (2): EĀ 26.10***

According to Anālayo’s translation (2011: 164–166), the Chinese account in the *Ekottara-āgama* at EĀ 26.10 is quite different from the SN/SĀ versions of Vakkali’s suicide. Set in Jeta’s Grove in Sāvattthī, Vakkali is ill and lying in his own excrement, and states his desire to kill himself. He claims that no other disciple “liberated by faith” is superior to him, and that in this life he cannot “get from this shore to the other shore”. Vakkali’s unenlightened status is thus the initial focus of the narrative. Provided a knife by his attendant, Vakkali stabs himself but immediately realises it is “contrary to the Dharma”. But by contemplating the rise and fall of the five aggregates he attains liberation, and the account concludes by saying that he attained final Nirvana “in the

element of Nirvāṇa without remainder” (Anālayo 2011: 164–165). The account then moves slightly back in time, by stating that the Buddha heard with his divine ear that Vakkali was “seeking a knife to kill himself”. After having Ānanda gather the monks for a discourse, they go to Vakkali’s dwelling and an expanded version of the episode with Māra seeking Vakkali’s consciousness occurs. At this point the text is worth citing in full:

Then the venerable Ānanda said to the Blessed One: “May the Blessed One declare it. Where has the consciousness of the monk Vakkali become established?”. The Blessed One said: “The consciousness of the monk Vakkali is forever without attachment. That clansman has taken final Nirvāṇa. You should remember it like this”. Then, the venerable Ānanda said to the Blessed One: “On which day did the monk Vakkali attain [full insight into] the four truths?”. The Blessed One said: “He attained [full insight into] the four truths today”. Ānanda said to the Buddha: “This monk had been ill for a long time, originally he was a worldling”. The Blessed One said: “That is so, Ānanda, it is as you said. That monk had been dissatisfied with being in great pain for a very long time, yet, among disciples of the Buddha Sakyamuni, who have been liberated by faith, this person was the foremost. Though his mind had not yet been liberated from the influx of becoming, [he thought]: ‘I shall now seek a knife and stab myself’. Then, just when that monk was about to stab himself, he gave attention to the qualities of the Tathāgata. On the day when he gave up his life, he gave attention to the five aggregates [affected by] clinging: ‘This is reckoned to be the arising of form, this is the cessation of form [...]’. Then, having given attention to this, that monk [realised that] whatever is of a nature to arise is of a nature to cease. This monk has attained final Nirvāṇa” (trans. Anālayo 2011: 165–166).

This account is obviously very different from the SN/SĀ parallels, starting with its location in Sāvattihī. It is striking that the Buddha does not visit Vakkali, does not give him a not-self teaching, and does not receive any messages from visiting deities. Even more importantly, this text contains an actual account of Vakkali’s liberation, which is said to occur through contemplation immediately after the suicidal act. As a parallel to the Pali commentary, this episode can

perhaps be regarded as a late addition to the EĀ text; on the other hand, it could show that the Pali commentary reworks material of great antiquity.

Apart from its general difference from the SN/SĀ accounts, EĀ 26.10 also shares certain features in common with them. The not-self contemplation of the five aggregates, while not part of a teaching delivered by the Buddha, is once again the doctrinal focus of the story. And just as in the SN/SĀ parallels, the EĀ text has an account of Māra searching for the consciousness of the suicidee. Most strikingly, the theme of a disciple asking the Buddha about the fate of a suicidal *bhikkhu* is encountered: EĀ 26.10 uses the figure of Ānanda, of all people, to introduce a note of scepticism into the story. Ānanda's first questions the Buddha on where Vakkali had been reborn, then asks when exactly he attained liberation, and finally points out that Vakkali "had been ill for a long time, originally he was a worldling". Ānanda's scepticism goes against the text's claim that Vakkali died an arahant, and mirrors Sāriputta's queries to the Buddha after Channa's death. This section of the text thus comes close to the ambivalence of the SN/SĀ accounts. But whereas the SN/SĀ versions contrast Vakkali's unenlightened status in the main body of text with enlightenment conclusions, EĀ 26.10 contrasts a straightforward account of Vakkali's liberation with a sceptical conclusion, in which Ānanda—hardly a figure of unorthodoxy in early Buddhism—voices his doubts.

All in all, the EĀ treatment of Vakkali's suicide appears to draw from the same stock of tradition about early Buddhist suicidees, but puts the pieces of tradition together very differently from the SN/SĀ. Somehow this was not seen by Delhey (2009: 99, followed by Anālayo, 2011: 166–167) who claims the EĀ account "can best be understood as a secondary reinterpretation of the original account", i.e., "an exegetical recension of the *Vakkalisutta*" (2009: 81; his emphasis). This is surely an exaggeration. There is nothing "exegetical" about the EĀ text, which is in the old Sutta style; its account of Vakkali's liberation, although parallel to the Theravadin exegesis of Buddhaghosa, is much simpler than it and clearly belongs to the Sutta period of composition. Even if this parallel highlights a later addition to EĀ 26.10, there is no reason to regard its basic account as any earlier or later than the SN/SĀ parallels.

A final peculiar feature of the accounts of Vakkali's suicide, contained in all three versions (SN, SĀ, EĀ), is the episode involving Māra as a dark cloud searching for Vakkali's consciousness. This conclusion is extremely peculiar, just as strange, in fact, as the peculiar ending of the Pali and SĀ accounts of Channa's suicide, where blameworthiness is equated with being reborn. But the same

motif of Māra seeking a suicidee’s consciousness also occurs in the Pali account of Godhika’s suicide, the most peculiar text of all, to which we will shortly turn. Before doing this we must first consider a different text, on Assaji’s final illness, which sheds further light on the accounts of Channa’s and Vakkali’s suicides.

### 3. Assaji (SN 22.88)

So far, we have seen that the texts on Channa’s and Vakkali’s suicides are not normative endorsements of arahant suicide. If they were, we could expect them to be unequivocal in their account of these *bhikkhus*’ liberation, in a fashion similar to the EĀ, albeit without Ānanda’s scepticism. The peculiarity of the enlightenment conclusions to these texts can be seen by comparing them to a text which shares numerous points in common with them, but without actually recording the suicide of a *bhikkhu*. This Sutta (SN 22.88) deals with Assaji’s illness,<sup>33</sup> and the action once again takes place in Rājagaha: the Buddha is in the Bamboo Grove, and Assaji, ill and staying nearby in “Kassapa’s Park” (*kassapakārāme*), sends messengers to ask the Buddha to visit, out of compassion.<sup>34</sup> The Buddha visits in the evening, after emerging from seclusion, and on seeing him approach Assaji tries to get up from his cot, but the Buddha tells him not to bother. In the same stereotypical style of the texts on Channa and Vakkali, the Buddha asks if Assaji is getting better, and Assaji replies that he is not.

As in his discussion with Vakkali, the Buddha then asks if Assaji has any regret. Being answered that he does and that it is not trifling (*anappakaṃ*), the Buddha enquires if it concerns virtue (*sīla*). Assaji denies this but points out that when previously ill, he was able to repeatedly pacify (*passambhetvā passambhetvā*) his bodily “volitions” or “activities” (*kāya-saṅkhāre*), but being now unable to do so, he worries “May I not fall away”.<sup>35</sup> In using vocabulary

<sup>33</sup> On the wider context of this Sutta, see Wynne 2019: 123ff.

<sup>34</sup> SN III 124: *etha tumhe āvuso yena bhagavā ten’ upasaṅkamatha, upasaṅkamitvā mama vacanena bhagavato pāde sirasā vandatha: assaji bhante bhikkhu ābādhiko dukkhito bāḥhagilāno. so bhagavato pāde sirasā vandati. evañ ca vadetha: sādhu kira bhante bhagavā yena assaji bhikkhu ten’ upasaṅkamatu anukampam upādāyā.*

<sup>35</sup> SN III 125: *pubbe khvāhaṃ bhante gelaññe passambhetvā passambhetvā kāyasāṅkhāre vippatisārī viharāmi, so taṃ samādhiṃ na paṭilabhāmi. tassa mayhaṃ bhante taṃ samādhiṃ appaṭilabhato evañ hoti: no cassāhaṃ parihāyāmi ti.* The commentary (SN-a II 315) interprets: *no cassāhaṃ parihāyāmi ti, kacci nu kho ahaṃ sāsānato na parihāyāmi. tassa kira ābādhadosena appitappitā samāpatti parihāyi, tasmā evañ cintesi.* Reading *cassāhaṃ* with Be for *ca khvāhaṃ* in Ee (in the text and commentary).

similar to that found in accounts of the mindfulness of breathing,<sup>36</sup> the text seems to refer to Assaji's ability to attain meditative absorption through practising mindfulness of breath,<sup>37</sup> and so abide without feeling the effects of ill-health (*gelañña*). But although Assaji cannot attain absorption (*samādhi*), and is worried about regression (*parihāyāmi*), the Buddha tells him that only ascetics and Brahmins for whom "absorption is the essence" (*samādhi-sārakā*) think like this.<sup>38</sup> The Buddha duly delivers the not-self teaching, concluding with the liberation of the *bhikkhu* who understands it. To conclude the Sutta the Buddha then elaborates the not-self teaching as follows:

If he (the *bhikkhu*) feels a pleasant sensation, he understands it is impermanent, and that it is neither clung to (*anajjhositā*) nor welcomed (*anabhinanditā*) [The same is repeated for an unpleasant feeling (*dukkhaṃ*) and a neither pleasant nor unpleasant feeling (*adukkhamasukhaṃ*)]. If he feels a pleasant sensation, he feels it in a state of detachment (*visaṃyutto*) [The same is repeated for an unpleasant feeling (*dukkhaṃ*) and a neither pleasant nor unpleasant feeling (*adukkhamasukhaṃ*)].

Feeling a sensation limited by the body (*kāyapariyantikaṃ*), he understands: "I feel a sensation limited by the body". Feeling a sensation limited to life (*Jīvitapariyantikaṃ*), he (the *bhikkhu*) understands: "I feel a sensation limited to life". He understands: "With the breaking up of the body, after the consumption of life, all sensation, not being welcomed, will become cool right here".

Just as, Assaji, an oil lamp would burn dependent on oil and a wick, but when both are consumed, no longer having any fuel, it would be blown out, thus when he feels a sensation limited by the body (*kāyapariyantikaṃ*), he understands: "I feel a sensation limited by the body" [...] [The text repeats "Feeling a sensation limited to life [...] will become cool right here"].<sup>39</sup>

<sup>36</sup> DN II 291 = MN I 56: *passambhayaṃ kāyasaṅkhāraṃ assasissāmi ti* [...].

<sup>37</sup> SN-a II 315: *kāyasaṅkhāre ti assāsapassāse. so hi te catutthajjhānena passambhitvā vihāsi*. The commentary thus understands Assaji to be referring to the fourth *jhāna*, although its claim that by attaining this Assaji "pacifies" i.e., stops his breathing is of course a commentarial understanding of what attaining the fourth *jhāna* involves.

<sup>38</sup> SN III 125: *ye te assaji samaṇabrāhmaṇā samādhisārakā samādhisāmaññā, tesan taṃ samādhiṃ appaṭilabhatā evaṃ hoti: no c' assu mayaṃ parihāyāmi ti*.

<sup>39</sup> SN III 126: *so sukhaṃ ce vedanaṃ vediyati, sā aniccā ti pajānāti. anajjhositā ti pajānāti. anabhinanditā ti pajānāti. dukkhaṃ ce vedanaṃ vediyati, sā aniccā ti pajānāti. anajjhositā ti pajānāti*.

### **Analysis**

Although no final outcome is reported, the text's conclusion implies that Assaji's death is impending; this seems to be the meaning of the simile of the oil lamp exhausting its fuel. Just like Channa and Vakkali, Assaji appears to be ill and with no possibility of recovery. The Buddha's response to him is the same as his response to Channa and Vakkali, but adapted to Assaji's worries about meditative failure: he chides Assaji for valuing absorption, and duly delivers the not-self teaching supplemented by further teachings on the correct spiritual attitude to experience, apparently in relation to death.

The text does not tell us what happened to Assaji. But it is worth speculating on this absence. If it had concluded with Assaji's suicide, would his situation have been treated just like that of Channa and Vakkali, by adding an enlightenment conclusion? To be sure, Assaji does not appear to be enlightened: he is worried that he will fall away from his earlier meditative attainment. But in the case of his suicide, there would at least be some assumed meditative basis from which to fashion an enlightenment conclusion. This account therefore gives us further reason to suspect the conclusions to the accounts of Channa's and Vakkali's suicides. Since the text knows nothing of Assaji's suicide, a similar conclusion was not required, and hence is not found. The same would probably be true had Channa and Vakkali not committed suicide. The texts would probably have ended with the not-self teachings given to them: there would have been no reason to elaborate any further.

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*anabhinanditā ti pajānāti. adukkhamasukhaṃ ce vedanaṃ vediyati, sā aniccā ti pajānāti ... la ... anabhinanditā ti pajānāti. so sukhaṃ ce vedanaṃ vediyati, visaññutto naṃ vediyati. dukkhaṃ ce vedanaṃ vediyati, visaññutto naṃ vediyati. adukkhamasukhaṃ ce vedanaṃ vediyati, visaññutto naṃ vediyati. so kāyapariyantikaṃ vedanaṃ vediyamāno, kāyapariyantikaṃ vedanaṃ vedayāmi ti pajānāti. jīvitapariyantikaṃ vedanaṃ vediyamāno, jīvitapariyantikaṃ vedanaṃ vediyāmi ti pajānāti. kāyassa bhedaṃ uddhaṃ jīvitapariyādānā idh' eva sabbavedayitāni anabhinanditāni sītibhavissanti ti pajānāti. seyyathāpi assaji telaṅ ca paṭicca vaṭṭim ca paṭicca telapadīpo jhāyeyya, tass' eva telassa ca vaṭṭiyā ca pariyaḍānā anāhāro nibbāyeyya. evam eva kho assaji bhikkhu kāyapariyantikaṃ vedanaṃ vedayimāno, kāyapariyantikaṃ vedanaṃ vediyāmi ti pajānāti. jīvitapariyantikaṃ vedanaṃ vediyamāno, jīvitapariyantikaṃ vedanaṃ vediyāmi ti pajānāti. kāyassa bhedaṃ uddhaṃ jīvitapariyādānā idh' eva sabbavedayitāni anabhinanditāni sītibhavissanti ti pajānāti ti.*



#### 4. Godhika (SN 4.23)

The account of Godhika's suicide is entirely different from those of Channa and Vakkali. It is, however, similar to the account of Assaji's illness in that it concerns Godhika's meditative problems, although the Buddha strikes an entirely different tone from his response to Assaji. As we have seen, Assaji is criticised for entertaining the non-Buddhist idea that "absorption is the essence". But Godhika's meditative beliefs are even more unorthodox than this, and yet are endorsed by the Buddha. The Sutta begins with the Buddha staying at the Bamboo Grove in Rājagaha, and Godhika living nearby on Mount Isigili. Godhika is said to have "touched a temporary liberation of mind" (*sāmayikaṃ cetovimuttiṃ*), before "falling away" from it.<sup>40</sup> This happens six times; on the seventh occasion, he contemplates "inflicting the knife" on himself.<sup>41</sup>

At this point Māra enters the narrative and plays a surprising role: reading Godhika's mind, Māra tells the Buddha that a disciple is intent on death and should be stopped.<sup>42</sup> For how can a *bhikkhu* in training, unrealised but delighting in the *sāsana*, die (through suicide)?<sup>43</sup> But before anything else happens Godhika actually commits suicide,<sup>44</sup> and the Buddha addresses Māra as follows:

The wise act thus, they do not long for life; Godhika has uprooted  
thirst, along with its roots, and attained final Nirvana.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> SN I 120: *atha kho āyasmā godhiko appamatto ātāpī pahitatto viharanto sāmayikaṃ cetovimuttiṃ phusi. atha kho āyasmā godhiko tamhā sāmayikāya cetovimuttiyā parihāyi.* Both here and in the next note, reading *sāmayikaṃ/sāmayikāya* with Be instead of *sāmādhikaṃ/sāmādhikāya* in Ee; on these variants, see below.

<sup>41</sup> SN I 121: *atha kho āyasmato godhikassa etad ahoṣi: yāva chaṭṭhaṃ khvāhaṃ sāmayikāya cetovimuttiyā parihīno. yaṃ nūnāhaṃ satthaṃ āhareyyan ti?* The commentary views Godhika's plight (SN-a I.183: *tena samādhissa sappāye upakāradhamme pūretuṃ na sakkoti, appitappitāya samāpattiyā parihāyati*) in a way similar to that of Assaji (SN-a II 315: *ṭhitāya kira ābādhavasena appitappitā samāpatti parihāyi, tasmā evaṃ cintesi*).

<sup>42</sup> SN I 121: *sāvako te mahāvīra maraṇaṃ maraṇābhībhū, ākaṅkhati cetayati, taṃ nisedha jutindhara.*

<sup>43</sup> SN I 121: *kathaṃ hi bhagavā tuyhaṃ sāvako sāsane rato, appattamānaso sekho, kālaṃ kayirā jane sutā ti.*

<sup>44</sup> SN I 121: *tena kho pana samayena āyasmatā godhikena satthaṃ āharitaṃ hoti.*

<sup>45</sup> SN I 121: *evaṃ hi dhīrā kubbanti nāvakaṅkhanti jivitaṃ, samūlaṃ taṇhaṃ abbuyha godhiko parinibbuto ti.*

The Buddha then takes a group of *bhikkhus* to Isigili, where they see Godhika, who is “lying on his cot, his shoulders twisted around”,<sup>46</sup> apparently an indication that he has cut his jugular vein.<sup>47</sup> The Buddha points out a dark cloud moving all about, which he says is Māra looking for the consciousness of Godhika. Just as in the story of Vakkali’s suicide, the Buddha comments “with his consciousness unestablished, Godhika, son of good family, has attained final Nirvana”.<sup>48</sup> When Māra asks questions the Buddha about where Godhika has gone,<sup>49</sup> the Buddha elaborates his previous statement to him as follows:

That wise meditator endowed with resolve, ever delighting in meditation, exerting himself day and night, with no desire for life, he conquers the army of death and does not return to continued existence. Godhika has uprooted thirst, along with its roots, and attained final Nirvana.<sup>50</sup>

The Sutta then ends with a final verse on Māra’s plight:

Overcome with sorrow, his lute (*viñā*) fell from his armpit, and then that pathetic spirit disappeared, right there.<sup>51</sup>

### **Chinese and Sanskrit parallels**

A parallel to SN 4.23 is found in the Saṃyukta-Āgama (SĀ 1091) and has been mentioned in some publications by Anālayo (2011: 162–163; 2015: 247ff). He points out that “[u]nlike Vakkali, the monk Godhika had not been sick or in pain, but had resorted to suicide because he had several times lost a temporary liberation of the mind” (2015: 247). Given that illness is a major theme in the accounts of the Channa’s and Vakkali’s suicides, its absence in the SN/SĀ texts

<sup>46</sup> SN I 121: *addasā kho bhagavā āyasmantaṃ godhikaṃ dūrato va mañcake vivattakkhandhaṃ semānam.*

<sup>47</sup> SN-a I 183: *sattaṃ āharitaṃ hoti ti thero kira, kiṃ mayhaṃ iminā jīvitena ti, uttāno nipajjitvā satthena galanāḷiṃ chindi, dukkhā vedanā uppajjimsu.*

<sup>48</sup> SN I 122: *appatitṭhitena ca bhikkhave viññāṇena godhiko kulaputto parinibbuto.*

<sup>49</sup> SN I 122: *anvesaṃ nādhigacchāmi, godhiko so kuhiṃ gato.*

<sup>50</sup> SN I 122: *so dhiro dhitisampanno jhāyī jhānarato sadā, ahorattaṃ anuyuñjaṃ jīviṭaṃ anikāmayāṃ, jetvāna maccuno senaṃ anāgantvā punabbhavaṃ, samūlaṃ taṇhaṃ abbuyha godhiko parinibbuto ti.*

<sup>51</sup> SN I 122: *tassa sokaparetassa viñā kacchā abhassatha, tato so dummano yakkho tatth’ ev’ antaradhāyathā ti.* Reading *tatth’ ev’* with Be rather than *tath’ ev’* in Ee.

must surely indicate that it was not part of early traditions about Godhika. The Pali commentary in fact claims that Godhika had an underlying illness,<sup>52</sup> but this must be regarded as a later way of interpreting the text.

The Chinese SĀ parallel also helps confirm the correct way of referring to Godhika's meditative attainment. The Pali Text Society (PTS) edition (SN I 120–121) reads *sāmādhikaṃ cetovimuttiṃ*, which is clearly wrong, whereas the Burmese Chaṭṭhasaṅgāyana (SN I 122, Be) reads *sāmayikaṃ cetovimuttiṃ* and the Siamese Syāmaraṭṭhassa (SN I 176, Se) reads *sāmāyikaṃ cetovimuttiṃ*. Either the Burmese or Siamese edition reading make good sense: Godhika attains a “temporary” liberation of mind, a fact confirmed by SĀ 1091 (Anālayo 2011: 162, n. 36). According to La Vallée Poussin (1936), the same account is mentioned in the *Abhidharmakośa* and its *Vibhāṣa*, where it refers to Godhika's attainment of a *sāmayiki vimukti*, “a temporary or occasional emancipation”. La Vallée Poussin also draws attention to *sāmāyikaṃ pi vimuttiṃ* at AN III 349ff; the notion of a “temporary liberation” (*sāmayikaṃ [...] cetovimuttiṃ*) is also found in a couple of other Suttas, even in their PTS editions.<sup>53</sup>

### Analysis

This Sutta is striking for several reasons. Godhika is not ill but still commits suicide; his meditative beliefs are difficult to understand and certainly unorthodox; but these beliefs are endorsed by the Buddha, directly contrary to his rejection of Assaji's more orthodox meditative ideas; and finally, the conclusion is identical to the account of Vakkali's suicide, where Māra is imagined as a dark cloud searching in vain for his consciousness. The commentary supplies an interpretation of Godhika's liberation that is similar to the commentarial account of Vakkali's liberating insight: it says that liberation was achieved through paying attention mindfully to the pain which arose after severing his jugular vein, and returning to the object of meditation.<sup>54</sup> In the circumstances, this insight interpretation is even more implausible than the account of Vakkali's suicide. Instead, we must take the account at face value as the work of an unorthodox wing of the early Sangha.

<sup>52</sup> SN-a I 183: *parihāyī ti kasmā yāva chaṭṭhaṃ parihāyī? sābādhattā. therassa kira vātapittasemhavasena anusāyiko ābādho atthi, tena samādhissa sappāye upakārakadhamme pūretuṃ na sakkoti, appitappitāya samāpattiyā parihāyati.*

<sup>53</sup> MN III 110–111, AN V 139ff.

<sup>54</sup> SN-a I 183: [...] *satthena galanāliṃ chindi. dukkhā vedanā uppajjimsu. thero vedanaṃ vikkhambhetvā taṃ yeva vedanaṃ pariggahetvā satiṃ upaṭṭhapetvā mūlakammaṭṭhānaṃ sammāsanto arahattaṃ patvā samasīsi hutvā parinibbāyi.*

Godhika apparently believes that dying in a state of meditative absorption will be liberating. He must therefore have the highest possible regard for the state of meditation he has attained; his problem is that he cannot sustain it. If so, we should perhaps understand the terminology “temporary liberation of mind” (*sāmayikaṃ cetovimuttiṃ*) literally: for Godhika, the state literally is a temporary escape from *saṃsāra*, and not merely a meditative absorption short of spiritual liberation. Since all states of meditative absorption (*cetovimuttiṃ*) are temporary, why specify the point here? Godhika cannot be unhappy because his concentrated state is temporary, for this is an inescapable fact of meditative practice. His problem is rather the fading away of a state he believes is tantamount to liberation. Thus he wishes to die in the state while the attainment persists.

The appearance of Māra as a dark cloud searching for Godhika’s consciousness, which occurs also in the account of Vakkali’s suicide, reinforces the impression that Godhika’s ideas are entirely unorthodox. In fact, the idea of being unable to locate a liberated person’s consciousness at death occupies an extremely marginal position in the Pali Canon: it only occurs in these two texts. If we therefore conclude that it is a relatively late aspect of the Pali discourses, as we surely must, it should be regarded as a reworking of a more widespread early Buddhist teaching. In the *Alagaddūpama Sutta* (MN 22), the Buddha states that “Despite searching, the gods including Indra, Brahma and Pajāpati cannot find the *bhikkhu* thus liberated in mind (as follows): ‘the consciousness of the Tathāgata is supported by this’”.<sup>55</sup> This teaching states the idea of ineffability in a poetic form; but the idea of ineffable liberation in the present is a more widespread idea, famously articulated in the *Aggivaḥchagotta Sutta* (MN 72), where the Buddha applies the metaphor of a fire gone out to the person liberated in life.<sup>56</sup> It is reasonable to assume that SN 4.23 has adapted the idea of ineffability in life, and especially the idea in MN 22 of the gods being unable to find the consciousness of a liberated person, to a new end, of stating the ineffability of the liberated person at death.

SN 4.23 therefore seems to adapt an old idea to a new end based on unorthodox meditative ideas. A further feature of the text suggests that this unorthodox tradition was in conflict with the Sangha in general. This would seem to be the only the only way of explaining the curious reversal of roles played by the Buddha

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<sup>55</sup> MN I 140: *evaṃ vimuttacittaṃ kho bhikkhave bhikkhuṃ sindā devā sabrahmakā sapajāpatikā anvesaṃ nādhigacchanti: idaṃ nissitaṃ tathāgatassa viññāṇaṃ ti.*

<sup>56</sup> On the interpretation of this Sutta, see Wynne 2007: 95–96.

and Māra. The Sutta portrays the Buddha and Māra against type: it really should be Māra tempting Godhika to commit suicide, just as he tempts the Buddha to enter final Nirvana at certain points in his life. On the other hand, we should expect the Buddha to intervene and stop an “ardent meditator” killing himself.<sup>57</sup>

It is remarkable, indeed, that the Buddha’s justification of Godhika’s suicide is directly contrary to the tradition of Māra tempting the Buddha to enter final Nirvana. According to the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, when the Buddha was at Uruvelā, immediately after the enlightenment, Māra spoke to him as follows: “May, sir, the Blessed One, the Sugata, now enter final Nirvana; now is the time, sir, for the Blessed One’s final Nirvana” (*parinibbātu dāni bhante bhagavā parinibbātu sugato, parinibbānakālo dāni bhante bhagavato ti*).<sup>58</sup> But in SN 4.23 exactly the opposite happens: rather than being keen to accelerate a *bhikkhu* towards death, Māra tries to stop Godhika killing himself, whereas the Buddha does not intervene and then defends Godhika’s suicide by twice stating that the wise do not desire life. Had the Buddha followed his own advice, he would surely have entered final Nirvana immediately after the enlightenment at Uruvelā.

How is this reversal of roles to be explained? Why does the Buddha defend suicide, whereas Māra, the god of death, implores the Buddha to save Godhika’s life? Why is the Buddha for death and Māra for life? The strange form of the text, and the peculiar ideas it expresses, can only be regarded as a direct challenge to early Buddhist orthodoxy. The tradition represented by Godhika believed it better to attain final Nirvana sooner, rather than later, as soon as a temporary meditative escape from *samsāra* has been realised, apparently

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<sup>57</sup> Wiltshire (1983: 134) claims that the role played by Māra in SN 4.23 is ironic: “Māra gets very excited at the prospect that Godhika will commit suicide. He thinks that, as Godhika is only a *sekha* (trainee), he will accrue bad *kamma* (*pāpa*) from his act and fall into Māra’s hands (literally *qua* death and metaphorically *qua* apotheosis of evil). Convinced that the Buddha can do nothing to save Godhika, Māra, with his tongue in cheek, taunts the Buddha and urges him to ‘dissuade’ (*nisedha*, S I 121) his disciple from committing the fatal act”. This overlooks the changed role of the Buddha in the text, however, and nothing in the text indicates that Māra speaks “tongue in cheek”.

<sup>58</sup> DN II 112: *ekaṃ idāhaṃ ānanda samayaṃ uruvelāyaṃ viharāmi najjā nerañjarāya tīre ajapālanigrodhe paṭhamābhisambuddho. atha kho ānanda māro pāpimā yenāhaṃ ten’ upasaṃkami, upasaṃkamitvā ekamantaṃ aṭṭhāsi. ekamantaṃ ṭhito kho ānanda māro pāpimā maṃ etad avoca: parinibbātu dāni bhante bhagavā parinibbātu sugato, parinibbānakālo dāni bhante bhagavato ti. evaṃ vutte ahaṃ ānanda māraṃ pāpimaṃ etad avocaṃ: na tāvāhaṃ pāpima parinibbāyissāmi. In the Pali account (MN I 168ff), Māra does not intervene at this point to tempt the Buddha to enter final Nirvana.*

paying little heed to the important ideal of liberation in life. Where did these ideas come from?

Although the text does not elaborate Godhika's beliefs, his position seems to reflect the presuppositions of the meditative tradition articulated in the early Upaniṣads and Mokṣadharmā. According to this tradition, a meditative adept first realises the cosmic essence (Skt., *brahman*) through meditation, before finalising this attainment at death by merging into it.<sup>59</sup> In other words, the experiential anticipation of *brahman* in meditative absorption leads to a final, irreversible, release into it at death. As far as I am aware, no text of this tradition actually states that death must be attained in a state of meditative realisation. Nevertheless, we must try to understand what a realised adept of this tradition, or a neo-Vedāntic Buddhist version of it, would do if he could not stabilise a meditative attainment believed to be liberating. If this adept assumes that prior meditative realisation guarantees liberation at death, it is easy to imagine that, if the stabilisation of the meditation is proving problematic, he might well wish to proceed rapidly towards final liberation. This would explain why Godhika committed suicide whilst in a meditative absorption he considered to be tantamount to liberation.

Godhika's suicide suggests that a non-Buddhist tradition of meditation, ideologically related to the early Upaniṣads, somehow found followers among the early Buddhist Saṅgha and was at odds with the emerging mainstream. The idea of Māra searching for a deceased arahant's consciousness surely belongs here: it is part of this school of thought's distinct signature. Delhey (2009: 98) has raised the possibility that this motif belonged originally to SN 4.23, before migrating to the account of Vakkali's suicide. This is a likely scenario. But if so, we might suppose that the same applies to the enlightenment conclusion: it originated in SN 4.23 and then was added to the text on Vakkali, with the account of Channa's suicide caught up in the same development.

We have now reached a tentative solution to the problem posed by the ambiguous texts on suicide. What is at stake in the accounts of suicide is the understanding of Nirvana, prompted by the meditative pessimism of Godhika. Suicide *per se* is not the problem: when a *bhikkhu* commits suicide it is not a breach of Buddhist ethics, but simply a tragic fact of life that occasionally happens. If the account of Godhika's suicide was a polemical work of neo-

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<sup>59</sup> For a detailed analysis of this tradition and its philosophical basis, see Wynne 2007, especially the appendix to Chapter 4.

Vedāntic Buddhist meditators, we can suppose that the accounts of Channa's and Vakkali's suicides were in some way a response to it. Older stories of their suicides as unenlightened worldlings (*puthujjanas*) were adapted to the idea that they achieved arahantship at death, perhaps for a number of reasons, but motivated at least in part to the polemical account of Godhika's meditative suicide. However, the adaptation of the texts on Channa and Vakkali was done half-heartedly, without any wish to change the historical record, and the general awareness of the fact that they had not achieved enlightenment.

## 5. Suicide and the transformation of early Buddhist values

The three texts on suicide, when studied carefully as a group, are not really trying to condone suicide in certain circumstances, even if that is the logical consequence of them. The accounts of Channa's and Vakkali's suicides, in particular, fail to say how either attained liberation, and generally present both as unenlightened throughout. Sāriputta's questions about Channa (MN 144/SN 22.87) and Ānanda's about Vakkali (EĀ 26.10) can be regarded as voicing the general scepticism of the early Sangha, who doubted that they attained arahantship at death, because they knew that they had not. The idea of final Nirvana was probably added to these accounts as an afterthought, prompted by the account of Godhika's suicide, the real focus of which is the doctrine of Nirvana, rather than an ethical problem. The *Godhika Sutta* can only be regarded as a strange sort of neo-Vedāntic polemic, but even if so, it is not as unusual as it might seem. In the wider context of the doctrinal development of early Buddhism, it should be regarded as a radical version of a more general process.

We have seen that the motif of Māra seeking the consciousness of a dead arahant, found in the accounts of Godhika's and Vakkali's suicides, was most likely an adaptation of the earlier notion that the gods cannot locate the consciousness of a person liberated and indefinable in life (MN 22). To this we can add that the doctrine of ineffable liberation in life is stated as the ultimate ideal in texts which the Pali tradition presents as among its oldest records: the *Aṭṭhakavagga* and *Pārāyanavagga*.<sup>60</sup> These collections focus entirely on the realisation of Nirvana in life, and some of their individual texts even reject the idea of final release at death. This can be seen in the *Kalahavivāda Sutta*

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<sup>60</sup> On the antiquity of these collections, see Wynne 2007: Chapter 5.

(Sn 4.11). Questioned about how “form, pleasure and pain disappear”,<sup>61</sup> the Buddha describes such a state of as follows:

Neither perceiving perceptions nor misperceptions, neither without perception nor perceiving what is not: form disappears for the one who has realised this state, for conceptualisation and reckoning depend on perception.<sup>62</sup>

This enigmatic statement can be interpreted in a number of ways, but it can at least be said that the Buddha is talking about a transformed state of consciousness in life. What he fails to add is the metaphysical significance of the state: is it tantamount to liberation, and if so, what does this liberation entail? Attempting to get the Buddha to fill in this gap, his interlocutor asks the following question:

Do indeed some learned men here say that the purity of a *yakkha* is this much, or do they say it is something different from this?<sup>63</sup>

This indirect question asks the Buddha to clarify his position on liberation. But the Buddha refuses to place his statement on the “disappearance of form” within a metaphysical framework:

Some wise men here indeed say that the purity of a *yakkha* is only this much, but some of them, claiming to be experts, say there is an attainment<sup>64</sup> of that which is without a remainder of material substratum.

But understanding (this as) “dependent”, through that understanding the sage enquires into (states of) dependency. Released through understanding, he does not get involved in disputes: the wise one does not encounter existence or non-existence.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Sn 873 (p. 170): *kathaṃsametassa vibhoti rūpaṃ, sukhaṃ dukhañ cāpi kathaṃ vibhoti.*

<sup>62</sup> Sn 874 (p. 170): *na saññasaññī na viśaññasaññī, no pi asaññī na vibhūtasaññī, evaṃsametassa vibhoti rūpaṃ, saññānidānā hi papañcasamkhā.*

<sup>63</sup> Sn 875 (p. 171): [...] *ettāvat’ aggam no vadanti h’ eke, yakkhassa suddhiṃ idha paṇḍitāse, udāhu aññam pi vadanti etto.*

<sup>64</sup> I take the term *samayaṃ* as a nominal equivalent of the past participle *sameta*, which is used in the immediately preceding verses (vv. 873–874) in the sense of meet with, encounter, enter, i.e., attain, realise. A similar meaning must be understood for *sameti* in v. 877 (see note below).

<sup>65</sup> Sn 876–877 (p. 171): *ettāvat’ aggam pi vadanti h’ eke, yakkhassa suddhiṃ idha paṇḍitāse. tesam*



It is again difficult to understand the meaning of these two verses, which conclude the Sutta. The Buddha apparently regards the notion “purity”, or spiritual realisation in life, and the “attainment of that which is without a remainder of material substratum”, as forms of “dependency”. Perhaps what is meant is that the two ideas are conceptually interdependent, and closely related to the conceptual interdependence of life and death, all of which must be transcended. Whatever the case, the notion of final liberation at death is certainly rejected, for liberation means being liberated precisely from such concepts. There can be little doubt that this text rejects what was to become a standard early Buddhist doctrine: Nirvana with and without a remainder of material substratum.

The Buddha’s approach in the *Kalahavivāda Sutta* reflects the teachings of the *Aṭṭhakavagga* in general. The same approach is also found in its sister text, the *Pārāyanavagga*, as can be seen in the Buddha’s dialogue with the Brahmin Upasīva (Sn 5.7). The Buddha is asked (v. 1073) about what happens to the liberated adept who “becomes cool”, a metaphor which draws on fire imagery: “becoming cool” refers to an extinguished fire, an image which belongs to the same metaphorical world as the concept of Nirvana “without a remainder of material substratum” (*anupādisesa*), where the term *upādi* is equivalent to *upādāna*, the basic meaning of which is “basis, esp. said of a fire, = fuel” (CPD, sv. *upādi*). “Becoming cool” thus refers to being finally liberated at death, just as a fire ceases when its “material (fuel)” is consumed. But the Buddha refuses to accept the presuppositions of the question, and instead continues to consider only the ineffable state of transformation in the present:

Just as a flame thrown back by the force of the wind goes out  
and cannot be reckoned, so the sage released from the category  
“name” goes out and cannot be reckoned.<sup>66</sup>

This verse does not state the liberated person’s release from “name and form”, but rather his release (*vimutto*) from the “category name” (*nāmakāyā*). The sage is in an ineffable state beyond “reckoning” (*saṃkhā*) and cannot be

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*pun’ eke samayaṃ vadanti, anupādisese kusalā vadānā* (v. 876). *ete ca ñatvā upanissitā ti, ñatvā muni nissaye so vimamsī. ñatvā vimutto na vivādam eti, bhavābhavāya na sameti dhiro ti* (v. 877).

<sup>66</sup> Sn 1074 (pp. 206–207): *accī yathā vātavegena khitto, Upasīvā ti Bhagavā, atthaṃ paleti na upeti saṃkhaṃ, evaṃ muni nāmakāyā vimutto atthaṃ paleti na upeti saṃkhaṃ*.

defined.<sup>67</sup> As such, spiritual value is placed entirely on the ideal of living in a transformed manner. A different way of expressing this ideal is stated in the *Dhammacetiya Sutta* (MN 89) by King Pasenadi of Kosala:

Moreover, venerable sir, when I stroll about from park to park, and from garden to garden, I see some ascetics and Brahmins there who are thin, wretched, off-colour, very pale and with their veins popping out—as if not capturing the eyesight for people to see them, methinks. It occurred to me that these venerable ones clearly lead the spiritual life dissatisfied, or else some bad deed they have committed is concealed, and that is why they are thin, wretched, off-colour, very pale and with their veins popping out—as if not capturing the eyesight for people to see them, methinks. I went up to them and spoke thus: “Venerable sirs, why are you so thin, wretched, off-colour, very pale and with your veins popping out—as if not capturing the eyesight for people to see you, methinks?” And they said this: “We have jaundice, great king”. But here I see mendicants, happy and joyful, elated and exultant, clearly delighted, with satiated sense faculties, unburdened, pacified, living off the gifts of others, with minds like wild deer. This occurred to me: “Clearly these venerable sirs have gradually realised a lofty distinction in that Blessed One’s instruction [...]”.<sup>68</sup>

Quite different from the conceptual subtleties of the *Aṭṭhakavagga* and *Pārāyanavagga*, this statement describes what the doctrine of liberation in life

<sup>67</sup> For a detailed analysis of this verse and the *Upasivamāṇavapucchā*, see Wynne 2007: Chapter 5.

<sup>68</sup> MN II 121: *puna c’ aparāhaṃ bhante ārāmena ārāmaṃ uyyānena uyyānaṃ anucaṅkamāmi anuvicārāmi, so ’haṃ tattha passāmi eke samaṇabrāhmaṇe kise lūkhe dubbaṇṇe uppaṇḍuppaṇḍukajāte dhamanisanthatagatte, na viya maññe cakkhuṃ bandhante janassa dassanāya. tassa mayhaṃ bhante evaṃ hoti: addhā ime āyasmanto anabhiratā vā brahmacariyaṃ caranti, atthi vā tesaṃ kiñci pāpaṃ kammaṃ kataṃ paṭicchannaṃ, tathā ime āyasmanto kisā lūkhā dubbaṇṇā uppaṇḍuppaṇḍukajātā dhamanisanthatagattā, na viya maññe cakkhuṃ bandhanti janassa dassanāya ti. tyāhaṃ upasaṃkamitvā evaṃ vadāmi: kin nu kho tumhe āyasmante kisā lūkhā dubbaṇṇā uppaṇḍuppaṇḍukajātā dhamanisanthatagattā, na viya maññe cakkhuṃ bandhatha janassa dassanāya ti? te evaṃ āhaṃsu: bandhukarogo no mahārājā ti. idha paṇāhaṃ bhante bhikkhū passāmi haṭṭhapahaṭṭhe udaggudagge abhiratarūpe piṇḍriye apposukke pannaḷome paradattavutte miḡabhūtena cetasā viharante. tassa mayhaṃ bhante evaṃ hoti: addhā ime āyasmanto tassa bhagavato sāsane ulāraṃ pubbenāparaṃ visesaṃ sañjānanti [...]; reading paradattavutte with Be instead of paravutte in Ee.*

means in actual terms: living freely and naturally, with meditative flourishing alleviating the burdens of life. What happened to this ideal? There is a strong argument that it was subsumed in a widespread and comprehensive influence from an early meditative tradition based on early Vedāntic ideas, the same general tradition to which Godhika belonged. The formless meditations (*arūpa/āruppa*), the eight “meditative releases” (*vimokkhas*), the “spheres of totality” (*kasiṇāyatana*s) and the “cessation of sensation and perception” (*saññāvedayita-nirodha*) probably all stem from this tradition.<sup>69</sup> To this list we can probably add cosmology, the twelvefold doctrine of Dependent Origination,<sup>70</sup> the doctrine of four “foods” (*āhāra*),<sup>71</sup> and the appropriation of the deity Brahma as further influences from early Brahmanism. But the Vedāntic impact was perhaps most significant in the area of speculation on which our three texts on suicide focus: the doctrine of Nirvana. The Buddhist idea of final Nirvana at death, or “Nirvana without a remainder of (material) substratum” (*anupādisesa nibbāna-dhātu*), is not only rejected in the *Aṭṭhakavagga* and *Pārāyanavagga*, but is also formulated in a Vedāntic fashion in the *Udāna*:

Just as, *bhikkhus*, streams flow into the great ocean and rain falls down from the sky, and yet not because of this is any deficit or excess discerned in the great ocean, in just the same way many *bhikkhus* attain final Nirvana into the Nirvana realm without a remainder of substratum, and yet not because of this is any deficit or excess discerned in the Nirvana realm without a remainder of substratum.<sup>72</sup>

The image of streams running into the sea is a Buddhist adaptation of an early Brahmanical motif, stated as follows in the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* (III.2.8): “Just as flowing rivers sink into the ocean, abandoning name and form, so the wise man, released from name and form, reaches the divine person, beyond

<sup>69</sup> See Wynne 2007: Chapter 3.

<sup>70</sup> Jurewicz (2000) has shown that the twelvefold version of Dependent Origination adapts the terminology of late Vedic cosmology.

<sup>71</sup> On the later addition of the twelvefold version of Dependent Origination, and the doctrine of four foods, to MN 38, see Wynne 2018.

<sup>72</sup> Ud 5.5 (p. 55): *seyyathāpi bhikkhave yā ca loke savantiyo mahāsamuddaṃ appenti, yā ca antalikkhā dhārā papatanti, na tena mahāsamuddassa unattaṃ vā pūrattaṃ vā paññāyati, evam eva kho bhikkhave bahū ce pi bhikkhū anupādisesāya nibbānadhātuyā parinibbāyanti, na tena nibbānadhātuyā unattaṃ vā pūrattaṃ vā paññāyati.*

the other world”.<sup>73</sup> In this Upaniṣad, river imagery expresses the idea of merging into *brahman* at death, an idea which is the natural counterpart of the early Vedāntic idea that the world is created from and ultimately returns to a divine source. The logical direction of influence is from Upaniṣadic thought to early Buddhism, rather than vice versa. This does not mean that the Buddhists simply borrowed a metaphor, however. As we have seen, the very idea of final liberation at death is rejected in some of the oldest texts of the Pali Canon. This suggests that the twofold doctrine of Nirvana was created only when the Brahmanical understanding of final liberation was added to an earlier doctrine: of liberation in life, the ultimate ideal of the *Aṭṭhakavagga*, *Pārāyanavagga* and related texts (MN 22, 73, 89, etc.).

A pervasive Vedāntic influence on the early Buddhist Sangha explains how an early ideal, Nirvana in life, was reformulated in a system of Nirvana with and without a remainder of material substratum. The Vedāntic ideal of liberation at death was Buddhicised, in other words. The emergent system was symbolised by the god Brahma, who in the account of the enlightenment implores the Buddha not to enter final Nirvana yet.<sup>74</sup> At the other end of the spectrum, Māra personifies an extreme form of the Vedāntic ideal: he attempts to persuade the Buddha to enter final Nirvana immediately voices the belief that final liberation from *saṃsāra* should be realised as soon as possible. Early Buddhists belonging to the tradition related to Godhika stuck to the pessimistic meditative beliefs of this neo-Vedāntic tradition. The existence of the *Godhika Sutta* shows that this tradition was important enough to be commemorated in textual form: there was a place for it in the early Sangha, albeit as a minority grouping. The emergent mainstream, symbolised by Brahma, is better represented by the *Channa* and *Vakkali Suttas*, which were *ad hoc* responses to the *Godhika Sutta*. The account of Assaji’s final illness also looks like an attempt to put Godhika’s unorthodox meditative tradition in its place. All three texts fit more easily into the emerging Buddhist system, with their doctrinal focus on the not-self teaching and, in the case of Channa and Vakkali, the acceptance of final Nirvana only when death is imminent.

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<sup>73</sup> MuU III.2.8: *yathā nadyaḥ syandamānāḥ samudre, astaṃ gacchanti nāmarūpe viḥāya | tathā vidvān nāmarūpād vimuktaḥ parāt paraṃ puruṣam upaiti divyam ||* (ed. Olivelle 1998: 452).

<sup>74</sup> Vin I 5, MN I 168.

## ABBREVIATIONS

All Pali citations refer to Pali Text Society editions, and are either using the numbering system of the Pali Canon for the individual Suttas in the main text, or given by volume and page number in the footnotes, using the abbreviations of the *Critical Pali Dictionary*. All translations from Pali and Sanskrit are my own.

EĀ = *Ekottara-āgama*

SĀ = *Samyukta-āgama*

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