

## **Suicide by Fire: How the Indian Ascetic Kalanos Was Mistaken for a Buddhist**

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**ABSTRACT**—Suicide by fire is well documented in later Buddhist texts, especially from China, but it is not attested in South Asian sources for early Buddhism. Greek sources tell us that the Indian ascetic Kalanos committed suicide by fire while travelling with Alexander the Great. In a recent edition of this journal (JOCBS 8, 2015), Georgias Halkias argued that Kalanos may have been a Buddhist monk. However, the evidence he adduces does not establish this. On the contrary, the Greeks described Kalanos in a way that is very much unlike that of a Buddhist renunciant. It remains the case that suicide by fire is not an early Buddhist practice.

**KEYWORDS:** Indian asceticism, Indo-greeks, Pali Suttas, suicide

The gymnosophist Kalanos (Καλανός, c. 398–323 BCE)—an Indian ascetic who travelled in the entourage of Alexander the Great (356–323 BCE)—committed suicide by fire in c. 323 BCE in Susa, near the modern Iran/Iraq border. Although he is not known from Indian sources, Kalanos made quite an impression on ancient Greek writers, several of whom recorded or recounted details of his life and fiery death.

A 2015 article by Georgios T. Halkias posits that Kalanos was in fact a Buddhist monk. If Halkias is correct, this would advance by many centuries the date at which the practice of suicide by fire was recorded in the Buddhist community, bringing the practice to a century or two after the Buddha, within the scope of what is considered “early Buddhism”. Kalanos preceded by three centuries the Indian ascetic Zarmanochegas (Ζαρμανοχηγιάς, c. 1st c. BCE) who burned himself to death in Athens in 19 BCE, and who is sometimes identified as Buddhist, though with little reason.<sup>1</sup> The first reliably attested suicide by fire by a Buddhist was the monk Fayu 法羽 (d. 396) in China.

I do not believe Halkias makes his case. The supporting arguments are merely general background context, while the specific descriptions of Kalanos and his actions do not sound like those of a Buddhist monk. Halkias repeatedly mentions these details without noting that they are not what we would expect from a fully ordained monk (Skt., *bhikṣu*; P., *bhikkhu*).

This is especially relevant given that some of those who consider themselves Buddhists are still burning themselves to death today. These horrific acts are undertaken within a religious context which, drawing on certain later texts and historical practices in Buddhism, treats suicide by fire as a noble sign of spiritual fortitude, and grants a special significance to the “message” that they send. I want to show that there is no evidence for the practice of suicide by fire in early Buddhism.

For the purpose of this article, I am taking “early Buddhism” as the Buddha’s life and a couple of centuries afterwards, during which period the portions of the Canon known as “early Buddhist texts” were compiled. As a Pali specialist, I refer primarily to Pali texts and to Chinese and other parallels where relevant, in the understanding that, for the most part, these texts were held in common among the early Buddhist community.

Halkias uses the word “self-immolation”, which stems from the Latin *immolo*, after the practice of sprinkling a sacrificial beast with salted flour. From the beginning until today, it carries a sense of the sacred. It is a word whose purpose is to dignify, and hence it prejudices the discussion. In this article, I will avoid using this term, preferring literal descriptions such as “suicide by fire” or “burn oneself to death”.

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<sup>1</sup> Halkias cites Banerjee (2009: 23) who reconstructs his name as \**śramaṇa-ācārya*, which he says is “a Buddhist teacher”. However, this is not clear to me at all. While both the Sanskrit words *śramaṇa* and *ācārya* are indeed used in Buddhism, as they are in other Indian traditions, I am not aware of their use in such a compound. An internet search for the term only gives results for Halkias’ article.

## Monastic suicide in the early Buddhist texts

First, I need to discuss the cases that speak of monks deliberately taking their own life, so as to show that they differ from the case of Kalanos. The first precept of Buddhist ethics prohibits the taking of any life, so it comes as a surprise to see a number of cases where suicide was considered to be “blameless”. The texts discussing monastic suicide in the early Buddhist tradition are well known, and a cursory survey is sufficient for our purposes.

The relevant cases have been studied in the light of their Chinese parallels in a series of articles by Bhikkhu Anālayo (2010, 2011, 2012). These studies confirm that the accounts given in the Chinese sources are generally similar to the Pali ones. There are few differences relevant to our current topic, except that they tend to confirm that the suicides were carried out only by those who were already considered arahants.<sup>2</sup>

Monastic suicide may happen either by “using the knife” or by a mental determination. The Pali commentaries explain “using the knife” as slitting the jugular vein.

In the first category, we find the case of venerable Channa, who was afflicted with such a severe illness that he wished to take his own life.<sup>3</sup> Sāriputta tried to stop him, offering any support he might need. Channa told Sāriputta that he would use the knife “blamelessly” (*anupavajjam channo bhikkhu sattham āharissati*). When he had done so, the Buddha affirmed that at the time of death, Channa would not be reborn, signifying that he was already an arahant or perfected one.

The case of venerable Vakkali is similar.<sup>4</sup> Again, in the throes of an agonising terminal illness, he used the knife and the Buddha declared that his consciousness was not established anywhere, for he had already attained *nibbāna*.

The story of venerable Godhika is somewhat different.<sup>5</sup> Godhika is frustrated with his meditation: he repeatedly reaches a temporary liberation of mind (i.e., *jhāna*), then falls away from it. In despair, he contemplates suicide, and eventually inflicts the knife. Again, the Buddha declares that his consciousness

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<sup>2</sup> But see Wynne 2022, in this issue of the journal.

<sup>3</sup> MN 144 (M III 263ff), SN 35.87 (S IV 56ff); cf. SĀ 1266.

<sup>4</sup> SN 22.87 (S III 120ff); cf. SĀ 1265, EĀ 26.10.

<sup>5</sup> SN 4.23 (S I 121ff); cf. SĀ 1091, SĀ<sup>2</sup> 30, Derge Kangyur 4094.

has not been established. The Sutta does not say why he kept falling away from meditation, or why it was so frustrating for him. The commentary, however, says that he was chronically ill (*therassa kira vātapittasemhavasena anusāyiko ābādho atthi*), and this seems like a reasonable explanation.

Godhika's case can be compared with that of venerable Sappadāsa, who contemplated suicide after twenty-five years of monastic life, having failed to achieve even a moment's peace of mind.<sup>6</sup> In his case, however, in the extremity of despair, he realised the Dhamma and continued to live.

In addition, there are a few other cases where an arahant appeared to know when their life was drawing to an end and made a dignified exit by a purely mental volition. It is not explained how exactly they knew that it was time to die, but presumably it was a form of meditative insight.

The most spectacular such case was venerable Dabba Mallaputta, who informed the Buddha that it was time for him to become fully extinguished. He then sat in meditation, flew into the air, and self-combusted, leaving no trace behind. The Pali text takes pains to point out that this was a function of his meditative practice of the "fire element" and was not a conventional flame or funeral pyre.<sup>7</sup> It is, therefore, quite different from the practice of burning oneself to death on a funeral pyre.

Anālayo (2012: 162) notes that the verse portion, which is the core of these texts, does not mention Dabba's astonishing demise, but rather uses the going out of a flame as a metaphor for *nibbāna*. It is common in Buddhist texts for a prose narrative to develop around an earlier verse, providing a dramatic and literal envisaging of the metaphor. Anālayo suggests that such may be the case here. In another article, he points out that the few mentions of "attaining the fire element" in the Pali Canon stem from later passages in the Nikāyas or the Vinaya (Anālayo 2015: 29ff). So while the story of Dabba's spectacular demise belongs in the scope of what is considered to be the early Buddhist texts, it appears to be from a late stratum within such texts, potentially dating a century or so after the Buddha.

The Buddha's own death is a more complex case.<sup>8</sup> The lengthy narrative of the *Mahāparinibbānasutta* (DN 16) speaks both of the Buddha mindfully relinquishing the "life force", and also of him suffering a severe illness. He

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<sup>6</sup> Thag 6.6 (p. 44).

<sup>7</sup> Ud 8.9f (pp. 92–93); cf. SĀ 1076.

<sup>8</sup> See the recent discussion of the Buddha's last meal in Masefield & Revire 2021.

did not use any physical means to die, nor is there a clear and deliberate meditative display such as in the case of Dabba. Nonetheless, it does seem as if there was a degree of intentionality in that, recognising that his time was finished, he decided to go with dignity.

Halkias adduces the Buddha's death in support of his argument, saying that he "is reported by some influential recounting to have ended his own life by auto-cremation" (2015: 178). But the early sources are clear that the Buddha's body was burned in a pyre after his death. For most of us, the distinction between burning a body *before* or *after* death is crucial. The vagueness of his allusion leaves open the possibility that he is referring to later developments in China, as Anālayo suggests (2015: 29, n. 7), but in that case it is clearly not pertinent to a discussion of early Buddhism.

All the cases of "blameless" suicide found in early Buddhist literature, then, appear to share two features in common. The person is at the end of their natural term of life; and they have reached the state of an arahant, one who has completed the path and has no prospect for further spiritual progress.

It is the latter point that explains the oddly permissive attitude of early Buddhism in these few cases of monastic suicide. One of the reasons that Buddhism holds human life so precious is that it allows us to make good choices and progress on a spiritual path from suffering to peace. An arahant has already completed this process, so for them, the value of life lies not in their own further development, but in the good they can do for others. Merely lying on a deathbed in agony does no good for anyone.

### **The mishandling of Buddhist sources**

If Kalanos were a Buddhist monk who lived a hundred years or so after the Buddha, then he would have been familiar with the teachings in the early Buddhist texts. That is what he would have studied, and how he would have framed his practice. Yet while Halkias quotes liberally and directly from the Greek sources, he rarely refers to early texts, and when he does so it is often through secondary sources.

For example, he alludes to "references in the Pali scriptures to 'an ill-defined category of ascetics (*yogins*, *yogāvacaras*, later *yogācāras*)'" (2015: 171), citing an article by Jonathan Silk (2000), who in turn was citing Louis de La Vallée Poussin (1869–1938). Rather than relying on the report of a report, a simple search of the Pali Canon would have shown him the references. It turns out these are of interest for his thesis, for the terms occur in the *Milindapañha*, the only canonical record of a dialogue between an Indian Buddhist monk and a Greek king.

A similar vagueness in sources appears when he speaks (2015: 171) of how the *Visuddhimagga* mentions certain ascetic *bhikkhus* who were “rag-robe wearers” (*paṃsukūlikas*) or “open-air dwellers” (*abbhokāsikas*). I will not list all the citations from the Pali Canon here, as the term *paṃsukūlika* occurs over a hundred times, and *abbhokāsika* over twenty. Were he truly a Buddhist monk, Kalanos would certainly have known of these practices from their canonical sources. Yet Halkias prefers to cite from a text that stems from a later school (i.e., the Theravada), and, being composed by Buddhaghosa approximately in the 5th century CE in Sri Lanka, dates several centuries later and is 4,000 kilometres distant.

These details may be trivial in themselves, but they point to a larger problem. The article by Halkias demonstrates a lack of familiarity with actual Buddhist monastic practices in early South Asia.

### **The case for Kalanos as a Buddhist monk**

Halkias’ argument rests on a pattern of association and plausibility, rather than any specific evidence. His article is discursive, and while the material he covers is interesting, I find it hard to discern exactly the exact reasons he has for positing Kalanos as a Buddhist monk.

So far as I can tell, the substance of Halkias’ argument is as follows.

- Alexander encountered the Indian ascetic Kalanos following his unsuccessful invasion of the Indian subcontinent, which was halted at the Beas River in modern Himachal Pradesh.
- Archaeological records confirm the presence of Buddhists in the area close to this time.
- The ancient Greeks were aware of the Indian categories of the *śramaṇas* and *brahmaṇas*, who they called gymnosophists.
- Kalanos is identified as a *śramaṇa*, as were the *bhikṣus/bhikkhus*.
- Some gymnosophists might have been been *bhikṣus/bhikkhus*.
- Some *bhikṣus/bhikkhus* undertook severe ascetic practices.
- Some *bhikṣus/bhikkhus* in the canonical texts apparently committed suicide.

- Those *bhikṣus/bhikkhus* displayed fortitude in the face of death, as did Kalanos.
- Suicide by fire is attested in later forms of Buddhism, especially in China.

In all this there seem to be no direct evidence, or compelling inference, from which to conclude that Kalanos was indeed a Buddhist monk.

Halkias’s point about ascetic practices is particularly unclear to me. I think he wants to suggest that since we can see a general undertaking of ascetic practices within the Buddhist community, it is no great stretch to extend this to suicide by fire.

But this would be an extraordinary leap. The ascetic practices of a Buddhist monk are for the most part fairly mild. The rag-robe practice does not mean that you just wear a robe like a loin-cloth. It means that you gather discarded cloth from various sources, and as Halkias cites from the *Visuddhimagga*, “throw away the weak parts, and then wash the sound parts and make up a robe” (2015: 171). What results is just a robe made up of patches from different sources. As for living in the open air, speaking as someone who has actually done this as a monk, it is basically a camping trip. It is fun as long as the weather is fine, which is why it is forbidden during the rainy season. Nowhere in the early Buddhist texts is setting oneself on fire, or anything vaguely like it, regarded as an “ascetic practice”.

Even in such general matters, Halkias (2015: 170) over-interprets his evidence in his search for support for his thesis. He notes a Greek report of some ascetics who:

were naked or nearly so, living mainly out in the open air, and women could practise with them without intimate cohabitation (*Strab.* 15.1.70).

He apparently takes this as a reference to Buddhist monks, pointing out in passing that there were already women in the early Buddhist Sangha. This is true, but it is also true of several other ascetic orders, including the Jains and Ājīvikas. It is certainly misleading to cite as authority a later Greek source (composed by Strabo in the 1st century BCE) to the effect that the Brahmins “did not communicate the knowledge of philosophy to their wives” (Halkias 2015: 171), for there are numerous Upaniṣadic dialogues between Brahmin men and women, such as the discussion on matters of deepest wisdom between Yājñavalkya and his wife Maitreyī (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 2.4.1ff), or the philosophical debate between Yājñavalkya and Gargī (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 3.6.1ff).

The other descriptions are equally unpersuasive. Buddhist monastics are not “naked or nearly so” but are required to be “well-covered” (P. *suppaticchanna*) in public (Vinaya, *Sekhiya* 3). While it is equally true that *bhikkhus* sometimes lived in the open air, this was a special and limited ascetic practice. They lived “mainly” in monasteries.

This shows the manner of argumentation that Halkias employs. He adduces bits and pieces of vaguely-related information about Buddhism, while not acknowledging that the details of his Greek sources do not sound Buddhist at all. At best, they describe behaviours commonly found in many ascetic communities in South Asia at the time, such as the simplicity of possessions.

### **What kind of person was Kalanos?**

As to the character of Kalanos, the main account is from Strabo (Στράβων; 64 or 63 BCE–c. 24 CE), who sourced it ultimately from Nearchos (Νέαρχος; c. 360–300 BCE), who was the admiral of Alexander the Great and, according to Halkias, a “reliable historian” (2015: 172). It is apparently Nearchos who said that Kalanos was a sycophant for Alexander, lacking self-control, a “slave to his table” who followed Alexander seeking benefits for himself and his family.

Halkias, however, rejects the account of this reliable direct witness, arguing that these are “hardly the aspirations we would expect of a professional renunciant who had completed no less than 40 years of asceticism” (2015: 173). Actually, longstanding “professional renunciants” do this kind of thing all the time. The only reason to reject Nearchos’ description, therefore, would seem to be because it does not fit the narrative. We are told that Alexander bestowed gifts on Kalanos’ children before departing Taxila. Halkias says this was a regular custom, quoting a remark by Porphyry (c. 234–305 CE, *de Abst.* 4.17) to the effect that in ancient India the king provides for the children of ascetics, while relatives take care of the wife. But it is not a practice that I am familiar with, and I do not believe it is attested in any Buddhist texts of the period. Generally speaking, a king would have a duty to honour and respect ascetics, but not specifically to give gifts to them or their children. Most likely, Alexander simply gave an endowment to Kalanos’ children as a personal favour. This is far from the only case where the Greeks describe Kalanos in terms that sound unlike that of a Buddhist renunciant.

Let us begin with the obvious: an army is no place for a monk. It is a confessable offence for a *bhikkhu* as we know it from the extant Pali Vinaya



tradition to even go and see an army without good reason (*Pācittiya* 48). Even if they have a reason, they must not stay with the army more than two or three days (*Pācittiya* 49), within which time they must not go to any troop review or battle formation (*Pācittiya* 50).<sup>9</sup> If Kalanos was truly a Buddhist monk, he would have seemingly broken all these rules continually.

Further, it is said that Kalanos gave his horse to the Macedonian general Lysimachos (Λυσίμαχος; c. 360–281 BCE) before his suicide (Halkias 2015: 164, n. 5). Again, at least in the Pali tradition, Buddhist monks are prohibited from owning animals including horses,<sup>10</sup> and from riding cattle and by implication other animals.<sup>11</sup> There is also the case of the monk Usabha who went for alms round on an elephant but later felt ashamed of his actions.<sup>12</sup>

As another example of behaviour improper for a Buddhist monk, while Kalanos was staying with the king “he changed his dress and altered his way of life” (Halkias 2015: 173). However, monks generally keep the same number of robes for the season no matter what the circumstances are. It is not clear what “altered his way of life” means, but it seems to imply that he no longer behaved in a manner befitting an ascetic.

In justification for this, Kalanos explained he had completed the forty years of observance he had vowed. This is not an authentic Buddhist practice; monastic vows were generally taken for life in the ancient period. This was a distinctive difference between Buddhist renunciants and non-Buddhist ascetics, as pointed out by King Pasenadi in the *Majjhimanikāya*:

It happens, sir, that I see some ascetics and Brahmins leading the spiritual life only for a limited period: ten, twenty, thirty, or forty years. Some time later—nicely bathed and anointed, with hair and beard dressed—they amuse themselves, supplied and provided with the five kinds of sensual stimulation. But here I see the mendicants leading the spiritual life entirely full and pure as long as they live, to their last breath.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *Pācittiya* 48–50 (Vin IV 105ff).

<sup>10</sup> DN 2. 45.13 (D I 64).

<sup>11</sup> *Khandhaka* 5. 9.3.4 (Vin I 191).

<sup>12</sup> *Theragāthā* 2.39 (p. 25).

<sup>13</sup> MN 89. 10.3–5 (M II 121).

Kalanos is thus clearly following the practice of non-Buddhist ascetics. For a Buddhist male or female renunciant, vows may be renounced anytime, but there is no established practice of undertaking them for a set period (at least, not at such an early date).

In yet another odd detail, before ascending the pyre, Kalanos is said to have cast his hair on the fire before his students (Halkias 2015: 173). Buddhist monastics shave their hair, and they do not ascribe any spiritual significance to it. This is more suggestive of an order that grew matted hair or some other style that bore spiritual significance, else why make such a public show?

Speaking of which, if Kalanos did have monastic students, he is certainly not fulfilling his teacher's duty towards them. A teacher is supposed to set a good example, not renounce his oaths, seek favours from a king, and set himself on fire.

As to why Kalanos was travelling with the Greeks in the first place, Halkias says that it was by request of Alexander himself, who was impressed with the fortitude of the *śramaṇas* (Halkias 2015: 172). Public shows of extreme endurance (*tapas*) were a characteristic of non-Buddhist ascetic orders such as the Jains, who practiced the kinds of superficially impressive feats of endurance that the Buddha himself dismissed as “self-mortification, which is painful, ignoble, and pointless”.<sup>14</sup>

Halkias says that Kalanos attained psychic power (*siddhi*) of foreknowledge through such practices. But foreknowledge is not among the standard psychic abilities of early Buddhism. Foreknowledge was, rather, associated with the *Ājīvikas*, who held a doctrine of hard determinism (*niyati*), where all things were fixed and predestined. The Buddha rejected such fixed notions of the future, emphasising that the time to come is shaped by the choices people make.

The Buddha could hardly have been clearer about his opinion of ascetics who used psychic abilities for worldly ends.<sup>15</sup> This, as we know from the *Dhammapada* commentary, was occasioned by a contest in Rājagaha (modern Rajgir), where various ascetics competed for the prize of a sandalwood bowl by flying in the air.<sup>16</sup> Unwilling to let non-Buddhists win, the monk Piṇḍola

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<sup>14</sup> SN 56.11. 2.3.

<sup>15</sup> *Khandhaka* 15. 8.2.17ff (Vin II 111ff).

<sup>16</sup> One of the other contestants, according to later Pali sources, was Pūraṇa Kassapa, a leader of the *Ājīvikas*. Following his humiliation at the contest, he committed suicide by tying a pot around his neck and drowning himself (Dhp-a III 208f; see Burlingame 1921: 42).

Bhāradvāja proceeded to fly up and get it, following which he did three victory laps of Rājagaha. The Buddha was not shy to make his feelings known.

How on earth can you, Bhāradvāja, exhibit a demonstration of superhuman powers to layfolk for the sake of a miserable wooden bowl? It is like a woman who exhibits her private parts for the sake of a miserable coin. [...] Whoever should do so has an offence of wrong conduct.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, according to our sources, Kalanos used non-Buddhist practices to achieve a power for non-Buddhist ends.

In addition, Kalanos is recorded as bidding farewell to his students, but not to Alexander. Instead, he enigmatically promised to “meet him in Babylon in a year” (Halkias 2015: 174). This is understood as a prophecy of Alexander’s death, which did indeed follow a year later in Babylon. Students of history will be familiar with such “predictions”. They usually turn out to be a sign that the text was written or revised later to insert the prophecy after the events had taken place. Historians do not naively accept such accounts as evidence of psychic abilities.

More to the point, what kind of Buddhist monk would say such a thing? He could not have been an arahant, for an arahant is not reborn anywhere. From a Buddhist perspective, Alexander was an aggressive warlord directly responsible for countless deaths and unending suffering in pursuit of purely worldly goals. Wherever he is going in the next life, it is not somewhere a Buddhist would want to be.

Kalanos’ final words sound even less like a Buddhist monk. When approaching death, the Buddha and other Buddhist renunciants would reflect that all things, not just oneself, were impermanent, and their passing was a natural process that must be accepted. Kalanos, on the other hand, boasted of a glorious death like Herakles, “for when this mortal frame is burned the soul will find the light” (Halkias 2015: 175).

Herakles (Ἡρακλῆς) was a Greek demi-god who, according to some mythical sources, died by voluntarily ascending a funeral pyre so that his mortal portion could be burned away and the immortal portion ascend to heaven. Halkias points out the implausibility of Kalanos comparing himself

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<sup>17</sup> Vin II 112.

to Herakles (2015: n. 32). He passes over, however, the equally unlikely idea that a Buddhist monk would believe that a funeral pyre would provide release for the soul. Let us be generous and assume that the reference to a “soul” is a misunderstanding by Greeks unfamiliar with the Buddhist concept of not-self (Skt., *anātman*; P., *anattā*; Halkias 2015: 177, n. 36). It is still in no way a Buddhist idea that liberation is found in fire.

### Why did Kalanos kill himself?

This highlights the fundamental problem in considering the extreme act of burning oneself to death as a public spectacle: why? Kalanos’ last words indicate that he believed he was going to thereby attain liberation.

This question is discussed in the *Pāyāsisutta* (DN 23). Attempting to prove to the monk Kumāra Kassapa that there is no afterlife, the chieftain Pāyāsi argues:

I see ascetics and Brahmins who are ethical, of good character, who want to live and do not want to die, who want to be happy and recoil from pain. I think to myself, “If those ascetics and Brahmins knew that things were going to be better for them after death, they’d drink poison, slit their wrists, hang themselves, or throw themselves off a cliff”.<sup>18</sup>

To this Kumāra Kassapa replies with the simile of a foolish pregnant woman whose husband died. Desperate to establish the sex of her unborn child in order to secure her inheritance, she took a knife and cut open her belly, which only resulted in the deaths of both herself and her child. He explains:

Good ascetics and Brahmins do not force what is unripe to ripen; rather, they wait for it to ripen. For the life of clever ascetics and Brahmins is beneficial. So long as they remain, good ascetics and Brahmins make much merit, and act for the welfare and happiness of the people, for the benefit, welfare, and happiness of gods and humans.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> DN II 330.

<sup>19</sup> DN II 332.

This is the voice of the Buddha's followers: gentle, reasonable, sensible, always thinking of the greatest good for everyone.

There is another strand to this, for some Greek authors indicate that deteriorating health was the motivation. Kalanos was, it seems, over 70 when he joined with Alexander, and by the time he was 73, "his health became delicate, though he had never before been subject to illness" (*Diod. Lib.* 17.107; cited in Halkias 2015: 174). Remember that by this time, he had been with Alexander for three years, during which time they had travelled the 3,500 kilometres from the Beas River to Susa in modern western Iran.

He told Alexander that he should take his own life lest he "change his former mode of living" (*Arr. Anab.* 7.3.1; cited in Halkias 2015: 174). We have already heard that he had changed his way of living, and the meaning here is as unclear as it was then. Perhaps, as Halkias suggests, he could no longer meditate. Caution is warranted, though, because there seems to be no real evidence that Kalanos was an adept of meditation. There were plenty of ascetic orders that did not meditate, such as those devoted to self-mortification.

Here Halkias draws parallels to the canonical instances of suicide. As usual, he cites from secondary studies rather than primary sources, and ends up being vague and not especially accurate. He speaks of "Buddhist ascetics who didn't wish to fall into disturbing psycho-physical states because of their deteriorating health" (2015: 175). But as we have seen, the cases of "blameless" suicide were already arahants, so psychological distress was not a question.

It is also misleading to equate these cases with Kalanos, a strong and moderately elderly man whose good health was starting to decline. They were at death's door. Kalanos was not; he was merely concerned that his failing health would interrupt his practice.

Halkias quotes a Greek historian who speaks as if burning oneself to death due to declining health was a regular practice among Indian ascetics.

Onesikritos explains that the gymnosophists regard disease of the body "as most disgraceful, and he who apprehends it, after preparing a pyre, destroys himself by fire; he (previously) anoints himself, and sitting down upon it orders it to be lighted, remaining motionless while he is burning".<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> *Strab.* 15.1.65; cited in Halkias 2015: 174.

Illness of the body is not regarded as shameful in any way in Buddhism, but rather is a natural and expected part of life. No early Buddhist text suggests that suicide by fire is an appropriate response to getting sick. The Buddha himself fell ill several times. His advice to those of advancing age was simple:

Though my body is ailing, my mind will be healthy.<sup>21</sup>

If Onesikritos (Ὀνησίκριτος; c. 360–290 BCE) is accurately describing any Indian ascetics, they were not Buddhists.

### **Kalanos' ascetic prowess**

The equanimity and stillness that Kalanos seems to have maintained on the pyre made a deep impression on the Greek witnesses and commentators. Some thought it was glorious, others vainglorious, but all were struck.

It is hard not to compare this with the indelible image of the Vietnamese venerable Thich Quang Duc (釋廣德; 1897–1963) sitting immobile while engulfed in flames as he protested the administration of the then-president Ngo Dinh Diem on June 11, 1963. But it would be a mistake to assume that all monks have such fortitude. In 2013, the young Sri Lankan ultra-right nationalist monk Indarathana set himself on fire in protest against *halal* slaughter and the conversion of Buddhists by non-Buddhist movements in Sri Lanka.<sup>22</sup> Horrifying footage of the event shows him pouring fuel over himself, lighting it, and then lurching about in shock like a burning zombie. There was nothing dignified or spiritual about it. Driven by hateful views, and despite the attempts of others to stop him or save him, he ended his young life pointlessly.

To endure with calm and fortitude in the face of such pain is extraordinary. But we cannot conclude with Halkias (2015: 175, n. 31) that such figures must therefore have mastered deep states of *samādhi*. There were many ascetic orders, such as the Jains, who did not practice *samādhi* in the Buddhist sense, and yet who developed an astonishing ability to withstand pain. Indeed, one of the foundational insights that led to the Buddha's awakening was that extreme self-mortification of the body is an obstacle to *samādhi*.

Halkias rejects the identification of Kalanos as a Jain, arguing that Jains did not light fires, so as to avoid harming insects even inadvertently. This is

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<sup>21</sup> SN 22.1 (S III 1).

<sup>22</sup> See: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-22677058> (accessed on September 5, 2022).

perfectly reasonable. But if we are to reject his identification as Jain because his actions are unlike those of Jain ascetics, we must also reject his identification as Buddhist because his actions are not like those of Buddhist renunciants.

However, Buddhists and Jains were not the only ascetic orders in ancient India. The Ājīvikas, for example, were at the height of their success around the time of Alexander, and they were well known for their ascetic practices. Many details associated by the Greeks with Kalanos and other ascetics would fit well with what little we know of the Ājīvikas, thanks to A.L. Basham (1951).

- They were a widespread and popular *śramaṇa* movement (p. 145).
- They were influential among kings in the period concerned (pp. 146ff).
- Their practices made them appealing to warriors (p. 132).
- They often, but not always, went naked (pp. 107ff).
- Their practices included self-mortification by fire (p. 110).
- They practiced austerities that impressed the public (pp. 109ff).
- They were sometimes said to be licentious (pp. 124ff).
- Their doctrine of predestination made prophecy a central part of their religion (p. 127).
- They practiced ritual suicide, albeit not by fire (p. 88, pp. 127ff).

Regarding the last point, while I cannot find any reference to Ājīvika suicide by fire, the element of fire does play a role in their ritual suicide. According to the *Bhagavatisūtra*—a Jain text whose highly polemical and not particularly reliable account dates from perhaps the 5th century CE—one of their leaders, Makkhali Gosāla, became so angry with the Jain leader Mahāvīra that he reduced two of his disciples to ashes with his psychic powers derived from *tapas*. Turning his power on Mahāvīra himself, it is said to have backfired (literally), and Gosāla became stricken with a delirium, consumed by a fire strong enough to consume all the sixteen nations (Basham 1951: 60ff).<sup>23</sup> The

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<sup>23</sup> Similarly violent expressions of psychic power due to hate are recounted of non-Buddhist ascetics in MN 56 (M I 378).

more regular form of ritual suicide consisted of abstaining from drink, until “a mass of fire arises in his body, and he burns up his body with his own heat” (Basham 1951: 128). While these accounts do not depict the literal practice of ascending a funeral pyre, they are no more distant from the account of Kalanos than are the Buddhist canonical references.

As far as I am aware, we do not have direct evidence of Ājīvika presence as far west as modern Punjab at such an early date. Yet their presence is attested in Gujarat during the Mauryan period, so we know that they had spread far to the west by then. Somewhat later, in the Kushan period, an image in the Greco-Indian style from Gandhāra seems to show an Ājīvika ascetic beside a Buddhist monk.<sup>24</sup> The Buddhist site at Harwan in contemporary Kashmir, dating from around the 2nd century CE, contains tiles with what appear to be naked Ājīvika ascetics, perhaps a remnant from a pre-Buddhist use of the site.<sup>25</sup>

Indeed, the Delhi-Topra edict of Aśoka, which mentions the Ājīvikas, is not so very far from the Beas River where Alexander turned back: a scant 250 km, or about a week as the ascetic walks. So it would be no great stretch for a wandering Ājīvika ascetic to have made it far enough to the North-West to have created a stir among the Greeks with his public displays of austerity and prophecy.

I am not trying to prove that Kalanos was an Ājīvika, merely to show that it is easy to form a hypothesis by assembling a bunch of seemingly plausible points of similarity between one ascetic and another. Perhaps Kalanos was simply a Brahmanical wanderer (Skt., *parivrājaka*; P., *paribbājaka*), or belonged to one of the many other, even less well-documented, ascetic orders.<sup>26</sup> Equally, he could have simply been an unaffiliated ascetic or holy man, with no allegiance to any school. In any case, as with all the other details that we have seen, there is nothing in this that proves, or even substantially supports, the hypothesis that Kalanos was a Buddhist renunciant of any kind.

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<sup>24</sup> See Jones 2022: fig. 7.5. The relief is kept at the Freer-Sackler Gallery at the Smithsonian National Museum of Asian Art in Washington DC: <https://asia.si.edu/object/F1949.9a-d/> (accessed on November 15, 2022).

<sup>25</sup> See Kaw Kher, Chapter 2, “Spread and Transition: Evidence of Ajivika cult in Kashmir”.

<sup>26</sup> Pali Suttas at AN 5.294–302 (A III 276f) list the following ascetic orders, for many of which we know very little but their names: *nigaṇṭho ... muṇḍasāvako ... jaṭilako ... paribbājako ... māgaṇḍiko ... tedaṇḍiko ... āruddhako ... gotamako ... devadhammiko*.



## Other explanations

Now, perhaps I am being too scrupulous. After all, the real lives and behaviours of Buddhist monks do not always mirror the idealised descriptions of the texts. Speaking as a *bhikkhu* myself, few things could be more obvious.

But there must be *some* basis for an argument. If Kalanos clearly said he was a Buddhist monk, I would be inclined to take him at his word. But he does not. Not a single one of the Greek accounts cited by Halkias identifies him directly as a Buddhist, or mentions a single distinctively Buddhist teaching or any feature at all that is uniquely Buddhist.

On the contrary, in virtually every instance where we learn something specific about Kalanos he does not sound like a Buddhist renunciant at all. Even the defining incident of suicide by fire is unlike the canonical sources in almost every respect: Kalanos is no arahant, he is not at death's door, and he kills himself with a physical fire.

Perhaps, then, it is the Greek sources that are confused. We cannot expect them to know all the details of the different ascetic orders. They may have simply described things inaccurately. And to be sure, there are instances where they disagree, several of which are noted by Halkias.

We cannot have our cake and eat it. If the Greek sources are reliable, we should take them seriously and not cherry-pick what suits our narrative. If they are not reliable, then there are no grounds for a novel thesis that would rewrite Buddhist history. And if they are partly reliable and partly unreliable, we need to establish independent grounds for distinguishing which portions to rely on before considering how they affect the argument.

## “Luminous encounters”

In modern times, hundreds of Buddhists have burned themselves to death throughout the world. This article was prompted by the latest such tragedy, a protest against climate change. Right now, the next self-immolator is having suicidal thoughts and is considering whether to go ahead. And those who are Buddhists may well do so in the future in the belief that it is a practice of ancient and spiritual meaning. They are, in all likelihood, reading articles and social media posts where people repeat arguments that directly or indirectly pave the way for more suicide.

The fact that some Buddhists commit suicide by fire does not mean it is an established “Buddhist” practice. Buddhists are people and they do all kinds of things, many of them quite stupid. Suicide by fire occurs globally among people of all different backgrounds, and many of them, including Buddhists, look to their own scriptures and traditions for justification.

The modern spectacle of suicide by fire as a political protest has no grounds in early Buddhism. Yet the evolution from there to here is a gradual one. Were it true that Kalanos was a Buddhist monk, it would push the origins of this practice much closer to the time of the Buddha, and potentially, establish it as a genuine practice of early Buddhism.

As we have seen, this is not the case. Rather, while ostensibly building a historical argument, Halkias displays an uncomfortable tendency to romanticise suicide by fire. The title of his article describes the gruesome act of burning oneself to death as a “luminous encounter”. One section is headed “An incandescent liberation” (2015: 172), another “Ablaze in honour of the Buddha” (2015: 175). These phrases are not in his sources; he is describing things as he sees them, not as his sources tell him.

Buddhism teaches us that the human state is precious and that no matter what, we always have the chance to do better. Suicide achieves no spiritual end and has no worth or place in any spiritual path. As a political protest, it is rightly ignored and dismissed by decision-makers, who do not and should not make decisions based on such extreme and destructive behaviour.

To burn oneself to death is not a “radical form of self-transcendence” (Halkias 2015: 182). It is an agonising and fruitless display, a waste of a life, and a sign of a disturbed and despairing mind. Let us please stop romanticising suicide by fire.

## ABBREVIATIONS

Pali Sutta references use primarily the numbering of SuttaCentral: <https://suttacentral.net/>, followed by the volume and page number of the Pali Text Society editions (in parentheses). Translations from Pali are my own. Pali abbreviations follow the system of the *Critical Pali Dictionary*.

EĀ = *Ekottara-āgama*

SĀ = *Samyukta-āgama* (main version)

SĀ<sup>2</sup> = *Samyukta-āgama* (first partial translation)

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