

The Concept of Suicide in Theravada Buddhism

Nuriani¹, Junaidi², Haudi³, Kabri⁴, Panir Selwen⁵

^{1,5}STAB Bodhi Dharma, Indonesia

²Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Ayutthaya, Thailand

³STAB Dharmawidya, Indonesia

⁴STIAB Smaratungga, Indonesia

nuriani@bodhidharma.ac.id, junaidi@ibsc.mcu.ac.th, haudi@stabdharmawidya.ac.id, kmbrata@gmail.com,

panirselwen@bodhidharma.ac.id

Abstract

This study aims to describe the topic of suicide in the perspective of Theravada Buddhism using the literature review method. There are people holding the view of annihilation (vibhava-taṇhā) or craving for nonexistence, and they believe that suicide is the final solution to end the suffering. But The Buddha never taught to avoid suffering by committing suicide, and it will, for sure, not lead to liberation. Committing suicide will cause another chain of suffering and rebirth in the lower realm, even fall into endless cyclic existence (saṃsāra). That is why it goes “against the stream” of Buddhist moral teaching. The suicide was wrong because of the presence of desire or aversion accompanied by delusion (moha). The five precepts of the lay people (pañcasīla) and the pāṭimokkha of the monastic order, especially in the section of parajika, have clearly mentioned about the commitment to avoid killing. The idea of killing and suicide are inconsistent with the first precept of Pancasila and the Third precepts of patimokkha. The concept of suicide is inconsistent with Buddhist ideas in the precepts for monks, nuns, and laypeople, that is why we have to understand hiri and otappa, so that we have strong life guidelines in carrying out our daily life processes.

Keywords

suicide; precepts; theravada
buddhism



I. Introduction

This paper would like to take a deep look on the topic of suicide in the perspective of Theravada Buddhism and its relations with the precepts of monks, nuns, and lay practitioners. The precepts (known as sīla) are devised by the Buddha and His community 2600 years ago, this paper will see its relevance to the value of modern time.

Many westerners have found that the way Buddhism responds to many problems of life is very refreshing, especially the perspective concerning life and end-of-life care decision.

The precepts are not only a set of rules to tell Buddhist followers about what should and should not be done. The precepts have a deeper meaning, by looking at the deeper level of the precepts, we will see how the idea of committing suicide is inconsistent with the precepts.

There are precepts observed by monastic, which is monks and nuns, and precepts observed lay practitioners. The Patimokkha, also known as Vinaya, is a set of rules based on the Vinaya Pitaka.

The precepts observed by lay practitioners also known as five precepts (pañcasīla), which is the most basic Buddhist code of ethics. Those precepts mentioned clearly about avoiding killing, not only about avoiding killing every living thing like animals, plants or

other people but also commit suicide. so, to speak, committing suicide is also an action of killing which is considered as a transgression of the precepts mentioned above. Suicidal behavior is often encountered in many media. It happened in every county. Many people asked why that behavior arises. And why religion cannot control people who have suicidal thoughts? Meanwhile every religion and belief have given orders or prohibitions for suicidal behavior, so we still see many suicide cases happening around us. In this journal the author will share what the impact of suicide is and what religious leaders must do in order to convince their people not to commit suicide. The attachment between suicide and religion is actually something that can happen.

In Buddhism Suicide is tantamount to wasting a very rare opportunity that has been obtained in our life, namely being born as a human. In connection with the above concepts, in Buddhism there is no eternal punishment for committing suicide. Despite knowing the concept of rebirth, suicide is still not justified.

In Godhika Sutta in the Samyutta Nikaya and Commentary on the Dhammapada Buddha explained Let alone life in Heaven, even the attainment of an Arahant ship that is far greater than that (which is the ultimate goal for every Buddhist) can be attained by someone who has attempted suicide. Buddhism rejects the existence of a supernatural power which has the authority to predetermine the fate of a being; to act out the drama of this life full of suffering. Humans, and other creatures, are not just "life stage actors" who are bound by a contract with the Director to act out scenes of suffering on the stage of the world drama that he created. Every creature is the absolute owner of their own life.

II. Research Method

This research aims to explore the causes of suicide from a Buddhist perspective to get solutions for preventive measures. This study of suicide in Theravada Buddhism uses the literature review method. According to [3], literature review is an important tool as a contact review, because literature is very useful and very helpful in providing context and meaning in the research that is being carried out and through this literature review, researchers can also state explicitly and readers know why the issues being discussed and must be investigated, both in terms of the subject to be studied and any environment in terms of the relation between the research and other relevant research.

III. Result and Discussion

3.1 Respecting Life

In our world today, we are facing more and more problems and difficulties, such as climate change, pollution, oppression, sexual abuse, exploitation of the natural resources, domestic violence, alcoholism, suicide, and many more.

There are so much suffering caused by wars and conflicts, due to wrong perception, delusion, hatred, and greed. The endless war has caused so many innocence lives, and the escalated conflicts have led to killing each other, thinking that, in order to survive one has to kill the others.

The bioethical literature assumed the doctrine of the sanctity of life by claiming that all human lives are of equal intrinsic value, except in cases of the act of self-defense. That is why it is always intrinsically wrong to kill.

Life is precious, Buddhists believe that we need to cultivate compassion and loving kindness. That is why the Buddhists are trying many ways to protect the lives of people,

animals, and plants. The way of compassion and loving kindness is the way of Ahimsā (nonviolence, non-injury, and non-killing). It is one of the most important tenet of Buddhism, Hinduism, and also Jainism.

The Five Precepts (pañcasīla), also known as moral guidance of virtuous conduct, is also part of the nonviolence. The first precept, which is the abstaining from killing (Pāṇātipātā), has been rephrased by Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh into “Reverence for Life”.

Buddhism views on precepts are a set of guidelines to help human beings to train their mind, including the manifestation of verbal and physical behavior along the path to liberation. The Five Precepts is the most basic moral prescription in Buddhism, which is generally known as rules of training (sikkhāpada).

The first precept, namely abstinence from killing (pāṇātipātā) also has a very deep understanding, that not only kills living beings, but also truly understands the people around them so as not to hurt their feelings and cause someone's death. destroying the fate of others so as to make them stressed, crazy or commit suicide. so in this case it must be understood that the act of killing is not only using weapons or objects that physically injure someone, but words and actions must be properly guarded.

Human rebirth is considered very precious. Buddha once told a story about a person threw a yoke with a single hole, floating on the vast ocean. There was a one-eyed turtle that will popped up once every 100 years, and the chance for the neck of that one-eyed turtle to poke into that yoke is very low.

The Great Master from Tibet, Pabongka Rinpoche, emphasized that when one has gained the optimum human form, it is a waste if one does not use it well. The human form is hundred thousand times more valuable than any wish-granting jewel.

The precious human life form is mentioned clearly in the Sutra and the advice from Pabongka Rinpoche. The first precept of The Five Precepts is reverence for life, so (1) when people choose to commit suicide, that is due to lack of understanding about the importance of respecting life.

All phenomena in this world are subjected to change. Human sufferings is caused by disturbing emotion that is constantly rising and falling. Suicide is related to the three universal characteristics, which are Impermanence (anicca), Suffering (dukkha), and Selfishness (without an eternal core) (anattā). There are people holding the view of annihilation (vibhava-taṇhā) or craving for nonexistence, which they believe that suicide is the final solution to end the suffering.

According to the Buddhist view, in the Kodhana Sutta, Avyakata Vagga, Aṅguttara Nikāya VII, the Buddha identified the tendencies that lead to suicide as mental imbalance. There are some people in society and other things make them low self-esteem, easily disappointed, and hopeless. Usually people who commit suicide do not understand the Buddha's teachings about suffering.

And the target for killing living beings apart from other living beings also includes ourselves. where the culprit will be reborn in the lower realms as it is written in the Jātaka Aṭṭhakathā: 'a being who commits suicide with a weapon, drinks poison, hangs his neck, plunges into a cliff out of anger, will be reborn in hell and other lower realms.

Therefore, we should as good Buddhists, from now on, equip ourselves with strong faith according to the teachings that have been taught by the Buddha, so that we do not fall into suffering.

3.2 The Direction of Liberation

The teaching of the Buddha is also known as “Dharma Vinaya”. Dharma is the teaching or the truth, and Vinaya is the discipline. The monks and nuns observed a set of rules called pāṭimokkha in Pali or Pratimokṣa in Sanskrit. There are several schools of Buddhism, they have the similar substance of Vinaya with minor differences.

Pati means personal, and mokkha means liberation. To practice pāṭimokkha means to go to the direction of liberation, the end of cyclic existence. The practice of pāṭimokkha is to give rise to mindfulness, so the basic of pāṭimokkha is mindfulness. If a person being mindful of the great suffering caused by killing, then one will give rise to strong determination to refrain from killing at the same time to save all living beings.

The basic code of monastic discipline of Theravada Buddhism is pāṭimokkha, consisting 227 rules for fully ordained monk, and 311 for fully ordained nuns. The most important part of the pāṭimokkha is called Parajika (the four defeats). When one transgress these four parajika then he will be defeated, means being expelled immediately from the life of monastic.

The Buddhist ethics encourage all practitioners to overcome greed (rāga), hatred (dveṣa), and ignorance (moha), which are also known as the three poisons. Buddhist practitioners cultivate the state and traits of mind that lead to happiness and spiritual freedom of oneself and others. That is why it is clearly stated that (2) The Buddhist ideas of the importance of respecting life is reflected clearly in the precepts for monks, nuns, and laypeople.

The Buddha never taught to avoid suffering by committing suicide, and it will, for sure, not lead to liberation. Committing suicide will cause another chain of suffering and rebirth in the lower realm, even fall into endless cyclic existence (saṃsāra).

There is another example in sutta which is aimed to a monk, killing a fellow human being or encouraging others to commit suicide is a Parajika offense; a gravest mistake (garukapatti) which caused him to leave the congregation. This is an incurable error (atekiccha), which means that throughout this present life, he is no longer entitled to become a monk. He is one who has been defeated in the pursuit of true liberation. In other words, in this present life, he cannot possibly attain any holiness. though in another lives it will get an opportunity opens up for him. We might ask whether suicide violates the Dhamma?

The answer is: clearly violated. Let alone attempting suicide, even "thinking" of harming himself is a violation of the Dhamma. Any action by speech, mind or body that gives rise to greed (lobha), hatred (dosa) and delusion (moha); all violate the Dhamma.

In Dhammapada 235 Buddha said “Now you are like a dry and withered leaf, the messengers of the king of death (yama) are waiting for you. You have stood at the threshold of departure, but you do not have provisions for the journey later”. So it means that as a creature given the opportunity to live, he must respect the opportunity of his life and do not waste the life as a human that he gets

3.3 The Consequences of Unattractiveness

The fully ordained monks and nuns take a commitment to practice in a way which accord to their precepts that also known as pāṭimokkha, based on the canonical texts in the Vinaya.

Vinaya is a set of rules and explanations about the consequences for violating those rules. There are certain part of the rules which are considered as an ethical guidelines, where others are aimed to maintain the operational of organization and to uphold the reputation of the community.

Parajika is the most important part of pāṭimokkha, if it is violated then a monk or nun will be automatically falls from monkhood immediately.

The four Parajika for monks are:

1. A bhikkhu who is engaging in any sexual intercourse, even with a female animal, he is defeated and no longer in affiliation.
2. A bhikkhu who is taking what is not given also is defeated and no longer in affiliation.
3. A bhikkhu who is intentionally deprive a human being out of his life, search for an assassin for him, or praise the advantages of death, or incite someone to die, he also is defeated and no longer in affiliation.
4. A bhikkhu who is without direct knowledge claims a superior human state, a truly noble knowledge and vision, he also is defeated and no longer in affiliation.

The third possible transgression for monks and nuns are intentionally bringing about the death of a human being. There was a time when Buddha spoke to the monks in many ways about unattractiveness (asubha-bhāvanā). The monks developed the mind of unattractiveness in many aspects, and later on, as a consequences, they became troubled by their own body, ashamed of them, disgusted with them, and then they took their own lives, or took the lives of one another.

Having knew about the incident, Buddha criticized them by saying that it's not suitable for monks, it's not proper, it's not worthy of an ascetic, it's not allowable, it should not be done. The new rules of Vinaya being set up: "If a monk intentionally kills a human being or seeks an instrument of death for him, he too, is expelled and excluded from the community".

There was a dialogue between Payasi and Maha-Kassapa in Payasi Sutta. Payasi hold a view that there is no after-life and the act in this life bear no consequences beyond death. Maha-Kassapa counter the argument by giving an illustration where a pregnant mother is anxious about the gender of the child in the womb, she then cut open the womb herself and by which, she killed herself and the unborn child. Maha-Kassapa would like to emphasized that premature death should be considered a wrong view.

There are many Buddha's teaching which emphasized on awareness of and the preparation for death as a guiding principle. Contemplating about death is a very challenging practice for many people. Human being is the only creature who have the knowledge that they shall die one day. The practice of contemplating on death is for advanced practitioners to develop non attachment to body, so one can face death with a peaceful mind.

Therefor in daily life, if hatred, greed, and delusion arise in the mind, then life becomes unhappy. So the shackles of suffering are within us and it is we ourselves who should cut and eliminate these shackles of suffering. Look at yourself that when there is a rejection of reality, complaining, anger, hatred, resentment, then suffering will arise and when there is a feeling of ungratefulness, not enjoying and appreciating what has been achieved, want something excessively, then there we feel unhappy. Especially when the mind is filled with fear, worry, anxiety, and other negative emotions, our lives are far from happy. That is the manifestation of hatred, greed, and delusion as the fetters of our suffering.

3.4 The Precepts Lead to Confidence

The Buddhist believe that life is precious. That is why there is no reason to destroyed it, since all things are impermanent. All actions bear consequences, everyone must take full responsibility of their own actions.

The very foundation of ethics in Buddhism is the five precepts or the five rules of training (pañcasikkhapada). The Buddhist ethics sometimes have been compared with the 10 commandments in Christianity and also code of ethics of Confucianism.

Ancient India has many religious sects, most of them acknowledged the five precepts to a certain degree. The Buddha has devised the five precepts and emphasized on the last precept which is "I undertake the training-precept to abstain from alcoholic drink or drugs that are an opportunity for heedlessness". It is an effort to give rise to mindfulness.

To practice the precepts means to give rise to mindfulness and awareness. With these energies, one can practice better. The Buddhists assert the view of karmic retribution. This is the very foundation of the precepts. When a person acting according with the precepts then he will lead to confidence and lack of fear.

The first precept of lay people is abstention from killing living beings, it is the way to build a good character by avoiding to harm oneself and others. The precepts of abstention from killing living beings is formulated and understood as "undertaking". The great King Asoka has become the role model of nonviolence, and within the next few thousand years, several kings from Ceylon also prohibited the killing of animals.

Taking life involved all living beings which have the life-force. Killing a human is considered blameworthy. The five factors are involved are a living being, the perception of a living being, a thought of murder, the action of carrying it out, and the death as a result of it. Another one is the way of the action, which is carried out by either one's own hand or by instigation, by missiles, by slow poisoning, by sorcery, or by psychic power.

The term of Buddhist precepts (Buddhist ethics) is sila. It is a code of conduct with principal of nonviolence and commitment to what is wholesome. There are two essential aspects of sila that is right performance (caritta) and right avoidance (varitta).

Both precepts for lay and monastics are voluntarily agreed to be observed and from time to time they have to reaffirm their purity by reciting the precept regularly. All types of precepts are to cultivated restraint of the senses as a means to achieve liberation. That is why Buddhist precepts is based on voluntarily self-restraint that goes along with the principle of nonviolence.

Sila is the first aspect of Buddhism which includes mind that is built up by avoiding bad thoughts, bad words and bad deeds. Thought must relate to the observance of the rules which contribute to the pure observance of the precepts.

Sila is an attempt to free someone from all the roots of evil, namely: hatred (dosa), greed (lobha) and delusion (moha). It is a movement of the mind (cetana) that is self-controlled so as not to violate the rules and norms of goodness relating to inner cleansing, as well as the rules determined by society and tradition.

It is necessary to know that the characteristics of people who practice the precepts are: their attitude and behavior are polite and orderly and have a calm appearance and the function or use of the precepts, is to destroy evil or correct wrong actions, and maintain / maintain virtue and maintain good deeds in everyday life. If we look at the precepts in general, then we will be able to see its form or pattern as an effort that requires "cleansing", both inner cleansing and outer cleansing.

3.5 Indubitable Suicide Cases

There are at least 3 stories related to suicide in the the Pali Sutta of Theravada, the first one is Vakkali, the second one is related to Godhika, and the last one is about Channa. All of them were about committed suicide due to many reason such as serious illness or failure in the practice, and then they were seeking a release by slitting their wrist.

There first story related to Vakkali, who was very sick and gravely ill. When Buddha came to visit him, he expressed his long time wish to meet the Buddha. There was an attachment to physical body of the Buddha. During that time, Buddha gave a strong teaching by saying “Enough, Vakkali! Why would you want to see this rotten body?”

The advice for Vakkali became a phenomenal teaching which Buddha emphasized that, when one sees the teaching (Dhamma) he sees the Buddha and vice versa. The later part of the sutta mentioned that Vakkali slit his wrist (commit suicide) and then the Buddha confirmed Vakkali’s liberation or attainment of Nibbana.

It was very clear that Vakkali were not Arahant until the event of his death. The last part of the sutta recorded that the Buddha pronounced his attainment of total liberation.

The second story is about Godhika, who failed in many attempts of practice. He then decided to end his life by slitting his wrist. Buddha announced that Godhika was wise and no longer longing for his own life, having plucked out craving, root, and all, and he is extinguished, he won’t return for any future life.

The last story is about Channa who was very sick and being visited by Mahacunda and Sariputta. They offered him help, but Channa refused. He then slit his wrist and ended his life. Sariputta went up to the Buddha to ask about Channa’s next life, but Buddha did not answer directly. Instead, he announced that the action of Channa was blamelessly.

The stories above were derived from the Pali Sutta, Buddha announced that these cases were blamelessly due to their attainment of liberation, even though there were difficulties in them before committing suicide. Even though those actions were not criticized by the Buddha, it does not mean that Buddha agreed with the actions.

From the three stories related to suicide in the Theravada Pali Suttas, of course we have doubts about the Buddha's statement, is it true that the translation or meaning is like that? whether there may be errors in drawing conclusions about the meaning and understanding that should be. In some Pali texts the author sees the discrepancy of the statement written in the suttas, is it true that the three events above do not contain bad karma, even the Buddha announced that the three people who had committed suicide had attained the level of perfection. It is even said that Buddha announced that these cases were blamelessly due to their attainment of liberation, even though there were difficulties committing suicide. meanwhile on the other hand the Buddha once taught about the division of kamma based on time in producing results. There is kamma that gives effect in the present lifetime (ditthadhamma vedaniya-kamma), and there is also kamma that gives no effect because the time period for producing an effect has expired (ahosi-kamma).so who will responsible for his actions if the suicide incident does not produce bad karma then all humans will choose suicide as the end of the sad story, does it?

Of course this is a misunderstanding of the meaning expressed by the Buddha. in this paper the author would like to invite all readers to review all the writings that are read either from the holy book or from any channel. take a good meaning to make it a life lesson, not spreading the wrong issue that results in the destruction of knowledge.

IV. Conclusion

The wisdom of the Buddha’s teaching has been travelling for many centuries. The teaching of avoiding harmful actions, purify the body and mind, these are the teaching of all Buddhas. To commit suicide is considered as a harmful action toward oneself. That is why it goes “against the stream” of Buddhist moral teaching. The suicide was wrong because of the presence of desire or aversion accompanied by delusion (moha).[30]

The concept of ahimsa or nonviolence has been one of the pivotal ideas in the Indian society even before the Buddha attained enlightenment. The Buddha also supported the idea of nonviolence.

One of the reasons that the Buddha devised the precepts for lay people and pāṭimokkha for the monastic is its foundation in the nonviolence, the ethical guidelines, and to maintain the operational of organization at the same time to uphold the reputation of the community.

The five precepts of the lay people (pañcasīla) and the pāṭimokkha of the monastic order, especially in the section of parajika, have clearly mentioned about the commitment to avoid killing. The idea of killing and suicide are inconsistent with the first precept of Pancasila and the Third precepts of patimokkha.

There are several interesting cases in the Sutta which mention about suicide by the monks, even though the Buddha did not criticize the action, since they have attained the arahant a moment before their action of suicide. The Buddha announced their total liberation from samsara. We cannot surmise that the Buddha supports such kind of action.

The Jataka stories also recorded how the previous Bodhisattvas voluntarily surrender his or her own life in an act of self-sacrifice for the welfare of others. This is considered as an altruistic motive and not self-centered by the Mahayanist.

To conclude this paper, I would like to give a summary of my points as below:

- 1) When people choose to commit suicide that is due to lack of understanding the importance of respecting life.
- 2) The Buddhist ideas of the importance of respecting life is reflected clearly in the precepts for monks, nuns, and laypeople.
- 3) The third possible transgression for monks and nuns is intentionally brings about the death of a human being.
- 4) The first precept of lay people is abstention from killing living beings.
- 5) Buddhist precepts is based on voluntarily self-restraint that goes along with the principle of nonviolence.

Therefore, the concept of suicide is inconsistent with Buddhist ideas in the precepts for monks, nuns, and laypeople. And as a person who follows the teachings of the Buddha it is necessary to understand the causes that can directly help the realization of the precepts are: Otappa, which is the inner feeling of being afraid to do evil, Hiri, the inner feeling of being ashamed to commit a crime. So that we have strong life guidelines in carrying out our daily life processes.

4.1 Postscript

Suicide is an intriguing topic for many people in the modern times. At one hand the Buddhist precepts clearly forbid the act of killing, including committing suicide. On the other hand, Buddha somehow did not condone the act of suicide of several monks.

The wisdom of the Buddha is deep, and sometimes it is not easy to fathom. We need more time to digest the sutra that has been passing down to us, especially the ancient language of Pali that already translated into English.

The long discussion between Theravada and Mahayana somehow continues in a beautiful way rather than a heat-up discussion. The idea within the Mahayanist about the highest offering performed by the previous Bodhisattvas as a heroic act and altruist mean to practice the perfection of giving.

They agreed that seeking liberation by alleviating the physical suffering will cause more suffering, this is what we called cyclic existence, the action makes them fall into the

lower realm instead of higher realms. The death itself is the most important even in the round of next rebirth, so every act bears its consequences.

The Buddha has taught the method to calm down our body, feeling, mind, and phenomena which is recorded in the sutta of mindful breathing and the foundation of mindfulness. The practice of mindfulness of breathing can become a foundation to take care of our emotions and perceptions.

It can also be concluded that suicide is a cowardly act to avoid and end the problems in life that are being faced. A person will not commit suicide if his mind is calm and pure. If one dies with a confused and frustrated mind, it is unlikely that one will be reborn in a better condition.

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