

# So You Want to Kill Yourself?

by Piya Tan

Throughout my life as a monk and as a full-time lay Dharma teacher, I have heard people tell me they want to kill themselves. Let me relate a typical occasion when this happened. This is really worth talking about because it shows how Buddhism can help us understand and prevent suicide without blaming anyone.

Recently an old secondary school friend, a Christian (but an open-minded one), who was dealing with an at-risk school-boy, phoned me up to talk with this boy, who had been getting himself ever deeper into trouble, so that he was heading for “structured environment” (that is, a boy’s home).

In the course of our conversation, the boy, thinking he had no way out of his predicament, resignedly and quietly said, “I think I want to kill myself!” I have heard this many times before. Those who say they want to kill themselves are unlikely to do so; maybe they are simply asking for help.

Still, it is always vital to listen to what he is trying to say. The worst thing to say at a such moment is “It’s all right!” It is NOT at all right when someone says he is thinking of killing himself. We just have to keep on asking WHY until we have a good idea of the thoughts behind the words.

But familiarity with the boy’s case allowed me to take a short-cut. I reflectively asked him,

“So you think killing yourself will end your problems?”

“Yes! After we die, there is nothing what!”

“You think so? Look at a plant; it dies, but a seed grows into a new plant very much like it. The plant keeps on growing. It is ‘reborn’ again and again. If the soil is bad, there’s not enough sunlight, not enough water, the plant grows poorly.

But right now the plant is not doing well because it is not properly cared for. However, if the gardener takes good care of it, weeding it regularly, giving it enough sun, watering it, and so on, it would grow into a beautiful and healthy plant.

You are that plant; the gardener is your mind and your actions.”

As I talked I am reminded how difficult it would be for a God-believer like my friend to counsel the boy. If he were to say, “You *cannot* kill yourself because God created you,” or some argument along that line. If the boy were to simply admit, “I do not believe in God,” that would be the end of that help-line. Or worse, he might blame God for all his problems.

There is another problem: how do we know that karma and rebirth actually work. All we have as unawakened beings is the Buddha's word, or more exactly, what we find in our scriptures. In the Suttas, we of course, have unequivocal and numerous statements reportedly by the Buddha himself that he has direct experience of these truths, and he is awakened, too.

As unawakened beings, we can say that such teachings as karma and rebirth are skillful means that inspire us to do good rather than evil. I find it very much easier to work with the ideas of karma and rebirth because KARMA deals with our behavior and REBIRTH gives us hope.

God is an idea of a supreme being outside and above ourselves. The notion of relying on an external being, especially a story-being, is not really empowering. This is like imagining we have a fairy god-mother always ready to help and protect us. If we are stuck with this notion, then we have what psychologists call a dependence problem: we will always need the group; we will be dependent on a father-figure; we will never really grow up.

My point is that it is more empowering to tell people they can help themselves. We disempower ourselves when we lose ourselves in thoughts of our past, or when we are dragged into speculating about the uncertain future. Only the NOW can empower us, only WE can empower ourselves. This is the heart of Buddhist social work and mental health.

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