HOW NOT TO BE

Views on suicide have changed through centuries. Most ancient civilizations condemned suicide in general; however at the same time they allowed for certain exceptions in more or less rigorous terms. Somehow, with the advent of Christianity, the act of suicide came to be regarded as a heinous crime or a great sin so much so that a suicide, if he failed in his attempt, was punished by the law, and if he succeeded, his corpse was denied the usual funeral services (Thakur 1963; Choron 1972). Recently, suicide is viewed less as a crime and more as an aberration of mind, or as an act of a psychotic or neurotic patient. In other words, suicides now-a-days are treated as sick or mentally ill rather than as criminals or sinners. This trend in the recent literature on suicide—whether it is produced from a sociological or psychiatric or purely humanitarian point of view — is so predominant that often one comes across several holistic pronouncements on what 'suicide' is. Often one finds an author crystallising his insights into aphorisms of the following form: "Suicide is an action that takes place in sadness and desperation." (Faber 1968: 3). "In its last analysis, every suicide is a problem in mental disease". (Hoffman 1928: 12). "Suicide is the cruelest repentance in deed for a crime committed in thought." (Flescher, 1971: opposite p. 1). "The suicidal gesture is thus a cry not only in distress, not only a cry for help, not only a prayer, but it is a pleading: I want to live; help me find a way to live." (Menninger 1969: 71) "Suicide and neurosis are both childish forms of reaction to a childish overestimation of motives, humiliations and disappointments. And so suicide represents — like neurois and psychosis — an escape by antisocial means from the injustices of life." (Adler, 1967: 121).

All these and other such 'suicide is' formulae reflect a tendency on the part of the writers to view suicide as a categorical phenomenon with set causes and motives and with a similar outcome. These writers speak of suicide as if they

were talking of some concrete substances like, for example, peanuts with fairly regular tangible characteristics. I find it very hard to capture the phenomenon of suicide in a nut-shell, let alone condemn or judge 'it' once and for all. To my mind, suicide is a general, very general name given to a family of events alike only in one, perhaps central, aspect such as a person willfully and knowingly putting an end to his life, but events which are otherwise diverse, sometimes enormously wide apart in almost everything else, such as the causes, the motives, the rationale, the state of mind of the prospective suicide, the methods employed and the effect on the survivors.

In the following paper I shall describe a unqiue type of suicide in India and shall discuss its characteristics in the light of the present day theories about what 'suicide' is. I shall try to see to what extent we can apply the criteria and conclusions of today's socio-phychiatric analyses and on what basis we can judge the acts as morally good or bad. In the end, I shall attempt to extend the conclusions drawn from the cases discussed to more familiar cases and pose a question about the general attitude towards suicide and suicide prevention.

The form of suicide that I am going to describe is unique in its motives, its method, and its effects. It was and is practised by great philosophers, saint-poets or Yogis, i.e., persons who have mastered the Yoga which is a science of mental and physical discipline. This form of putting an end to one's worldly existence is called *mahā-samādhi* or simply *samādhi* if the context is clear. Before going further, a brief note on the word *samādhi*. It is a Sanskrit word and is the name of the last of eight stages of self-discipline according to the science of Yoga. It is often translated with the phrase 'the Yogic trance'. It is a stage where a Yogi, by controlling his breath, diminishes his oxygen intake much below that of the normal human requirements and stays in a very calm, serene and supposedly blissful state of mind. This state can last for hours together and can be acquired by anyone with enough practice and observance of a few dietary rules. The

Yogi can attain this state of mind and body at will and also can come back from this state of acute concentration to the normal state of a layman. In the Yoga tradition it is regarded as a blissful state of mind which unites the individual mind with the cosmic reality and so is practised recurrently by the Yogis. This is to say that it does not automatically lead to death. However, since it is mainly a matter of strong will-power and practised breath-control, which help to minimize physical functions, this very method is sometimes used by the Yogis to leave this world, or as the Indians say, to cast off their bodies.

From the above description it should be clear that the method of a Yogic *samādhi* is very different from other familiar methods employed by suicides. The methods we usually hear of are shooting, hanging, drowning, stabbing, jumping off high places, or using gas, poison, drugs, sleeping pills and so forth. All these are, what I shall call for want of a better term, 'external' methods. They all require external objects such as weapons, ropes, poisons, pills etc. or are dependent on external surroundings such as a high mountain, a waterfall, a running train, and so forth. The Yogi's method requires no such external aids or objects. It is essentially an internal process, a matter of strong will and supreme breath-control.

For the above reason, this method is very much outside the reach of suicide prevention centres. If a man wants to shoot himself and you are convinced that he is out of his mind, you can try to talk him out of it and when he finally gives away his pistol, half your battle is won. If a man wants to jump off a cliff and kill himself, you can try to somehow take him to a less dangerous place and your chances of saving his life are better. But if a man does not depend on any of such external or violent measures, and simply controlling his breath breathes his last, there is not much you can do. This method is not like a hunger-strike or fasting till death comes, for you can forcibly make a hunger-striker eat food and make him live. However, intake of food is no impediment to the procedure of the final *samādhi*.

There are records of people who have taken the final *samādhi* that note that they do not abstain from the normal intake of food on the day when they start their last exercise. (Rolland 1965, 168-9). This method is not like a hunger-strike also in that it does not emaciate the body gradually until it falls off. It is much quicker than that, mostly a matter of hours.

Perhaps one can think of more drastic methods of suicide prevention such as not allowing the Yogi to concentrate enough or to force an oxygen mask on his nose. I am not certain that these methods of preventing this form of suicide can work; but the main question is, is anyone entitled to prevent one who wants to leave this world and leave it so peacefully?

The question of suicide prevention is a complex one, and it is generally centered around rationales concerned with the prospective suicide's loss of reasoning powers, his loss of moral sense or responsibility for his actions, and so on. There is also a direct line of reasoning that judges the act of suicide itself as 'bad' or morally wrong or harmful either to the agent or to others. I am not at present concerned with either defending or refuting these usual rationales behind the existence of suicide prevention centres. I would rather like to suggest that the above-mentioned rationales are essentially dependent on the agent's or the critic's interpretations of the concept of death itself. Since these latter, as I shall show below, fall into a wide range of different and sometimes extremely opposite characterizations of death, the final judgment about the worth of the suicidal act, about the degree of rationality or responsibility involved is bound to be at best very tentative.

When one talks about suicide in general and suicide prevention in particular, one is often launched into a discussion of the causes or motives behind this group of actions and one finds it very hard to pass a judgment on 'suicide' as a *kind* when the analysis of the varied causes and manifold motives is not yet quite satisfactory. However, very often in discussions of sociology, psychology or even philo-

sophy one finds only certain motives of suicide brought into focus, and an analysis of only a few motives leads people to characterize suicide as a *category* of behaviour falling under general headings such as 'cowardice' (Aristotle), 'escape from responsibility' (Socrates), 'self-punishment' (Flescher), or 'escape from an intended murder of others' (Stekel), or even 'a cry for help' (Shneidman and Farberow). Again I would like to point out that such characterizations tend to overlook the possibility that there might be cases or forms of suicide that do not spring from motives suitable for the above descriptions, and therefore, may not necessarily be judged as wrong, or bad, or harmful.

The apparent causes of day-to-day suicides are generally given as follows: ill-health and pain, unhappy love affairs, loneliness, marital strife, financial calamity, humiliation, remorse and so forth. The analysis of these causes leads to a search for the individual's ultimate motives. For these 'causes' by themselves are not sufficient factors that necessarily turn a person into a suicide. Many more people overcome the above-mentioned circumstances or simply learn to live with them. There are very few who actually put an end to their lives in these circumstances. The motives are supplied by the writers as explanations of why certain people kill themselves under certain circumstances. The postulated motives range from Freud's all-encompassing 'death-drive' to Menninger's trio of a wish to kill, a wish to be killed, and a wish to die. (Menninger 1938) Freud's notion of a 'death-drive' has very little explanatory value since he asserts that every man possesses it. For then the question of why only some men commit suicide under certain circumstances is simply raised one step further, and we ask instead why it is that only in some persons this death-drive is triggered under certain circumstances. I shall not discuss this notion any further. Menninger's analysis is more perceptive, because ample evidence is found from the suicidal notes and the verbal testimonies of the people who have committed or failed in suicide respectively (Shneidman and Farberow 1957)—evidence that corroborates the view that in many cases people wish to kill someone else and,

when they are unable to do so, they kill themselves as a revenge on the other person; or that they misidentify their own unwanted nature as 'the bad guy' and in a schizophrenic fit, kill themselves in killing the unwanted part of their personality. This speaks for the first two motives of Menninger's trio. As for the third element in his exposition more analysis is needed. A wish to die *per se* means as little to a layman as Freud's death-drive. Since our common belief is that our life is the dearest thing to us, one fails to understand why someone would wish to die. Besides, the meaning of death is not identical to all people. People have different conceptions of what death is going to be like. To take two extreme cases, some believe in the immortality of the soul and in life in some conscious form even after death, whereas others believe in total annihilation after death. It is not clear whether a wish to die in prospective suicides means a wish to go from this birth into a further birth or a wish to end the existence altogether. What is perhaps more important is that one cannot say for sure that either one of the above conceptions of death *necessarily* prompts or precludes a wish to die. There are instances of believers of immortality either defending or denouncing suicide. The belief in an afterlife can help to reduce the fear of death by likening it to a sleep and thus promote a wish to die under certain trying circumstances; but at the same time, belief in an afterlife coupled with a belief in the Day of the Judgment may induce fear of the future punishment for one's sins and work against a wish to die. The same is true of the belief in annihilation after death. Some scholars trace the suicides committed by Buddhist monks in Vietnam to their belief in the total annihilation as an ultimate state. But this belief in itself is no guarantee of a decisive wish to die. Hume believed in no afterlife, and furthermore, he defended suicide on other rational grounds (Hume 1965), but his belief did not promote in him a suicidal wish to die. It might seem that an overwhelming realisation of life's worthlessness or meaninglessness gives rise to a wish to die. This might be so in some cases, for often when we realize the futility of some activities, we try to put an end to them. But even this

realisation need not *necessarily* lead to a wish to die. For a brilliant argument leading from the absurdity of life to the decision to live, one has only to read Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus.*

One last point about the wish to die. That a suicide had a wish to die is almost always established in a retro-active analysis of his performance. However, as I said before, a wish to die *per se* does not appear to be either a necessary or a sufficient factor in order for someone to commit suicide. A potential suicide may only be motivated by a wish to kill plus a mistaken notion of identity and may not really wish to die. On the other hand a person in acute suffering may wish to die and yet not commit suicide. This being the case, one wonders whether the wish to die is not simply a misnomer for a fact that a person has committed suicide.

In short, although Menninger's threefold analysis has more explanatory power than a mere postulation of a death-drive, it still leaves many suicidal cases unexplained, or, what is the same thing, lists them under the mysterious wish-to-die category. The wish to die *per se* is mysterious becaue it is on par with the death-drive. To postulate a wish to die is not enough to explain the final motive behind a case of suicide; it is rather like admitting one's incapability to analyze further. However, even if the wish to die is interpreted as a means rather than the end, i.e., even if the suicidal act is analyzed with reference to a wish to die *in order to* achieve a further end (e.g. avoid misery or shame, to save one's country, to satisfy honour or to hasten the joys of the next life etc.), this category becomes such a mixed bag that again a 'wish to die' loses any real *explanatory* power in the analysis of the suicidal act. Unlike a-wish-to-kill and a-wish-to-be-killed the third wish simply encompasses whatever remains unaccounted for without an insight into the suicide's state of mind at the last moment. This can be seen from a further discussion of the case of the *mahā-samādhi* of a Yogi. The first two motives, i.e., a wish to kill or a wish to be killed are, as I shall show below, inapplicable in the case

of a Yogi; so by elimination his case would fall under the wish-to-die category. However, as we shall see, the details of this kind of suicide present a picture so utterly different from the usual cases in Menninger's third category that the wish-to-die is of little help by way of explanation of the Yogi's final motives.

As I said before, a Yogi does not wish to kill anyone nor does he wish to be killed in the ultimate sense. For he believes in the following characteristics of the Self or the Soul which is the life-principle in every living being: "The one who thinks that the Self is the killer or the one who thinks that the Self is killed, they both do not undersand. The Self does not kill, nor is he ever killed." (The *Bhagvad-Gītā* 2.19) "O Arjuna, how can the man kill anyone or have anyone killed when he knows that the Self is indestructible, everlasting, unborn, and immutable?" (Ibid. 2.21). In other words, the Yogi believes that Death does not mean destruction of the Self nor does suicide mean one's act of destroying one's Self. Death for the Yogi is simply a recurrent point in the indefinite journey of the individual Self through various births towards the ultimate Self-realization which is the same as becoming one with the cosmic reality or the *Brahman*. A practical consequence of these beliefs about the nature of Self and Death is that a Yogi, by definition must have his passions mastered before he can rightfully be called a Yogi. He must not be motivated to do anything because of anger, fear, hatred and the like. The Yogi tries at and attains the equanimity of mind (comparable to a Stoic's ideal) in states of pleasure and pain. Normal passions leave him unperturbed. He has no ill-will for others or for himself. Therefore, when a Yogi enters into a last *samādhi*, his act cannot be said to spring from either a wish to kill (hatred) or a wish to be killed (guilt/shame/remorse). The presence of either one of these wishes is flagrantly contradictory to the character of a Yogi by definition, and therefore we can safely exclude all cases of suicide prompted by either one of these wishes as outside of our present discussion.

What then is the motive of a Yogi in entering into the last *samādhi*? In answer to this question I shall draw my evidence from various records of the lives of men who have adopted this method of leaving the world. Mostly the records state that 'the fulfilment of life's mission' was the decisive reason in cases of this type. The Yogi does not have to be of a particular age in order to decide in favour of a final *samādhi*. Many decide at a ripe age, over seventy or so, but some others who have performed remarkable works during a very short time have decided to end their life at a very early age. To give two well-known examples of the latter type, Swāmī Vivekānanda ended his life on July 4th, 1902, at the age of thirty-nine years. In this short span he had produced voluminous contributions to philosophy in eight volumes of about 530 pages each. In 1893 he attended the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago where he was acclaimed as the most inspiring speaker on the philosophy of Vedānta and Hinduism and was the only one to receive a spontaneous standing ovation from the audience (Rolland 1965, 33). In 1897 he founded a religious Order called the Ramakrishna Mission in the form of monasteries which has now branches all over the world including Europe and North America. One can find little reason to dispute his contention that his life's mission was fulfilled at the age of 39. Similarly, Jñānadeva, a saint-poet and philosopher of the 13th century, lived only for twenty-two years and wrote two remarkable works on the philosophy of Vedānta. Both these works are in verse, and are considered to be unparalleled in their explanatory worth and originality of thought. Jñānadeva was the founder of the Bhakti movement in the province of Mahārāṣṭra — the movement that preaches salvation to anyone regardless of his caste, to anyone who simply learns to worship God in any form at all. He considered "his life's mission fulfilled" (Dandekar 1969: 9) and therefore put an end to his life by entering into the state of *samādhi* in the year 1297 A.D.

These and other instances recorded elsewhere attest to the conclusion that when a Yogi decides to enter into the last *samādhi*, he does so only with a 'full' life and pacified mind.

It is a decision taken when he is of sound mind; he cannot otherwise achieve the requisite concentration of mind to exercise the supreme control over his breathing. The decision is not carried out in secrecy, for there is no stigma attached to this type of self-chosen death. It is essential to note here that this type of self-chosen death is one of the forms of suicide that are allowed only as exceptions even in the Indian tradition and that both the present-day law of India and the ancient and medieval law-writers denounce other forms of suicide in strong words. Both the authorities denounce death chosen to avoid responsibility, or chosen out of revenge, anger, extreme pride, affliction or fear (Thakur 1963, Chapter III).

It should also be noted that this form of ending one's own life in *samādhi* is different not only from the common and more familiar forms of suicide, i.e. out of pain, grief or fear etc., but also from other institutionalized forms of suicide like *Satī* (sometimes spelt as *Suttee*) practised in India before the eighteenth century or Hara-kiri practised in Japan. The Yogi's final *samādhi* is extremely non-violent as compared to the widow-burning in *Satī*, and the belly-cutting in Hara-kiri. Unlike in Hara-kiri, the Yogi does not end his life *in order to* achieve revenge, or to prove his innocence of an alleged crime, or to demoralise an opponent. The Yogi's *samādhi* is essentially an *individual* act, not directed towards or against anybody or any institution. Unlike the widow in Satī, the Yogi does not believe that he will gain any additional merit by ending his life in this manner, nor does he believe that there is any demerit in dying a natural death. He believes in the law of Karma, therefore believes in a fixed amount of action that he must fulfil in accordance with his life's duties, and, sometimes when the duties get fulfilled ahead of time as it were, he chooses to end the present form of existence. The duties may also be fulfilled until death comes naturally, as in the case of some Yogis, and they do not enter *samādhi* to end their life if they believe that their work is yet to be done. Unlike *Satī*, the Yogi's *samādhi* is not a form of suicide forced upon him by the society in any sense, and hence no Yogi is either obliged to enter a

final *samādhi or* to abtsain from entering it. There is no special valour associated with this end nor is there any stigma attached to it. However, once the Yogi decides to choose this death, people would not try to obstruct him physically. There are records (Dhere, Sood, Ramana Souvenir etc.) that people who have grown fond of the Yogi's bodily existence and are attached to his person try to express their sorrow, argue with him about the necessity of his decision and even beg him to extend his life, but the records invariably talk of the Yogi's instructing people in the immortality of the soul and preparing their minds for the inevitable.

The performance of a *maha-samādhi* is generally not a secret or concealed one; but it is not a spectacular or dramatic deed either, and so it is not given commercial publicity. Usually the disciples, the attendants or the neighbours are present. The Yogi performs his normal duties of the day, gives his last advice to the pupils, bids them farewell, then sits on the ground in the cross-legged position or lies down, and closing his eyes, enters into the state of *samādhi* as described before. His breathing goes slower and slower until he breathes his last.

Since the Yogic *samādhi* has no strings attached to it of any good or bad passions, it cannot be described as 'cowardice', or 'sublimation of guilt', or 'a cry for help'. As for the question of its moral quality or harmfulness to the society or the individual: the Yogi is considered to be beyond the moral 'good' or 'bad' by the Indian tradition. This is so because, by definition, he has attained that state of mind where normal pleasure or pain leaves him undisturbed. He is also not bound by any duties towards any family, because by tradition, when he attains this state of mind, he has no longer one family as his own; he considers the whole of humanity as his family. Hence whatever contributions he makes to the society are considered to be not his duties which the society has a right to claim, but rather as his gifts to the society for which the society can only be grateful. Due to these considerations the Indian tradition does not consider the Yogi's *mahā-samādhi* 'harmful' to the society. It

cannot be considered to be even indirectly harmful to the society in the manner of the Roman philosophers who committed violent suicides, provoked an irresistible fascination for like suicides among their followers, and were indirectly responsible for the mass suicides that followed their suicide. There are no instances of mass suicides following a *samādhi* of a Yogi. This is again for the apparent reasons: the Yogi's belief in the accomplishment of his *own* duties in accordance with the law of Karma and his preaching others to be thoughtful and to carry on their appointed tasks in due manner. Since the Yogi's *samādhi* is not a 'public' act (like a soldier's sacrifice in a battle or a monk's burning himself in protest of war), it has no violent effects of arousing similar emotions in the survivors. Those who have witnessed the acts of *samādhi* have written about their feeling of deep sorrow at the loss of a great mind. But at the same time they speak of it as a beautiful, serene and inspiring experience which teaches them a lot about death, deliberation and the Divine.

This should also clarify why I call this a unique form of suicide as regards the effect on the survivors. Normally we think of the suicide of someone as a traumatic experience for his survivors. "Suicide is an action that takes place in sadness and desperation. It inflicts grief and remorse upon survivors." (Farber 1968, 3) In fact Shneidman notes this as one of his reasons to justify suicide prevention. "A third reason has to do with the dyadic nature — the interpersonal and social nature of the suicidal act.... The point I am making is that the suicidal act is not an act of one individual. A person has a right to kill himself; but his potential survivors have their rights too, specifically they have a right to lead lives unstigmatized by the suicidal death of that person. When someone talks about his right to kill himself, it is possible to speak also about the rights of the potential widow and children." (Shneidman 1969: 23-4) This point does not arise in the case of a Yogi, because as I said, he has no immediate family, therefore no social responsibilities to be fulfilled except for his self-appointed tasks

for which society can only be grateful. His survivors do not feel ashamed or self-critical in any sense ('what did I do wrong?'), because the Yogi's decision is no secret, it is taken by himself, individually, and is not influenced by any factors other than his conception of his life's mission and its accomplishment.

At this point one can possibly raise the question of justifying the Yogi's decision to end his life, especially if he is young and talented. "A further argument is that many people have gifts and talents that can benefit society." (Choron 1972; 61). This is an interesting point, because it bears upon the rights and duties of an individual. First, I shall explain the notions of rights and duties as they are conceived in the Indian tradition and then come back to their general discussion. The Indian tradition prescribes four stages of life which roughly correspond to the student-stage, the householder-stage, the forest-dwellers stage and the ascetic's or the *Saṁnyāsin*'s stage. A person has certain rights and duties in the first three stages of life and is expected to fulfil them. In the last stage of life, when he gets initiated into the life-style of an ascetic, he is no longer bound by the layman's rights and duties. He then renounces all his worldly acquisitions, even his relationship with his family, and spends his time mostly in metaphysical discussions, meditation, and spiritual instruction. Therefore when such a person chooses the Yogic *samādhi* as his end, it is clear that the society has no right to expect more from him, nor is he avoiding any responsibilities. On the whole, these four life-stages are prescribed for every person in the same temporal order. However, sometimes persons of exceptional abilities are allowed to enter the fourth stage at any age. Such was the case of young *Saṁnyāsins* such as Vivekānanda. Once they are initiated in the *Saṁnyāsa* and have proven their worth as Yogis, they are also exempted from the rights and duties of a layman. Hence their decision is not considered to be an evasion of responsibility.

Generally, the life-style of a Yogi can be compared to the life-styles of great humanitarians like Albert Schweitzer

who, although they are not obliged by any duty, consider it as one of their 'ultra-obligations' (a term I borrow from Russell Grice, 1967) to serve humanity and accomplish their self-assumed task with just as much devotion and conviction as one would have in doing his duty. The Yogi, when he works for the people, does so, not because he is asked to, but because he feels that he has to. And similarly for his decision to leave this world.

So far I have described the unique phenomenon of a Yogi's final *samādhi*, and I hope my discussion brings out its special features as regards the motives, method, the state of mind corresponding to it, and its effect on the survivors. In considering the moral worth of the act, I have also pointed out why the Indian Tradition regards this as an acceptable form of ending one's worldly existence, and why it does not consider the Yogi either as a criminal or a mental patient. It simply respects the Yogi's decision on the strength of his character and his contributions to the society and allows him to pass away peacefully.

The instance of a Yogi's *samādhi* may seem too remote to bear any relevance to the question of the moral attitude towards suicide. But in fact, it is not so remote. As I said before, Yoga is no mystery, and we already witness more and more people in several parts of the world effectively learning and practising this science of self-discipline. The method of ending one's life by choosing to hold one's breath, although not frequently employed, seems to have been known from quite ancient times, not only to the Indians but to others as well. Diogenes Laertius in his work on the ***Lifes of Eminent Philosophers*** (Tr. Hicks 1958) records that at least two Greek philosophers, namely, Diogenes, the Cynic, (*Ibid.*, VI, 76-77) and Zeno, the Stoic, (*Ibid.*, VII, 28-30) died of their own accord by holding their breath. Even in modern times, there seems to be no adequate reason to doubt that will-power can control one's bodily functions to a great extent. So we can see how the issue of a Yogi's *samādhi* can be generalized, so as to include any strong-willed person who intentionally puts an end to his life.

It may appear that the doctrine of rebirth or of Karma plays an important part in the Yogi's decision to depart by entering the *mahā-samādhi*. This doctrine is no doubt present in the background of the cases I have discussed so far. However, it is not crucial to my generalized argument. Because, as I have already pointed out, not all those who believe in Karma or rebirth choose to enter *samādhi*, nor again, all who die intentionally by holding their breath need to believe either in Karma or in rebirth. The most important factors seem to be the concept of a self-assumed mission and the conviction of having fulfilled that mission. Granting that both these are highly subjective matters, one cannot deny that there are people of worthy talents who are the best judges of their own work. Here again, one's natural reaction would be to say, "Well, if one feels that one has done one's job, then let him sit back and enjoy! Why does he need to end his life?" However, this is a question of personal attitude. I think one can appreciate the feeling that at a certain age in life, a self-appointed and well-executed death might itself appear to be the best form of rest.

Nor does this feeling have to be prompted merely by sorrow, suffering or depravity. People who have enjoyed their life heartily can just as well feel that now is the time to go, peacefully and without fuss. We hear about several Cynics who 'went out with a cosmic laugh'. (*Xenakis* 1973: 9) Demonax, for example, on reaching a hundred said, "Ah, I am too old", then starved himself to death. Similarly in India, King Śūdraka is reported to have enjoyed a life of ten days after he reached a hundred and then he chose to enter fire. "*labdhvā cāyuḥ śatābdaṁ daśadinasahitaṁ śūdrako 'gniṁ praviṣṭaḥ*" (*Mṛcchakaṭika* 1.4). Kālidāsa too, in a laudatory tone depicts the kings of the Raghu clan as leading a full, many-splendoured life which would be self-controlled to the very end. "They studied in their childhood, sought pleasures of the senses in their youth, lived like hermits in their old age, and, in the end, cast their bodies off by means of Yoga." (*Raghu-vaṁśa* 1.8) Similar concepts of a full life and a self-chosen death may be adopted by

anyone else with equal conviction and a fully thought out sense of moral responsibility.

In the case of more secular instances, perhaps the question of saving a life that can be useful to the society can be raised once again. However, I doubt how much right society can claim over a person when that person has already contributed to his own satisfaction and feels that his role is well-played. I allow that this kind of fulfilled feeling is comparatively rare, but we cannot deny the possibility or the fact that there are people who feel this way and that even a third person may share their feeling of a good job being well done. Then, provided the person wants to put an end to it all, I wonder how much 'right' we have in claiming his talents for the society. Sure, we will feel sorry that he will leave us, that the society will no longer benefit from his experience, and so on. But these feelings are, in a way, selfish. They do not reflect as much on the prospective suicide's 'moral failure' or anything of the kind. I think that one cannot talk about suicide in general. One can talk better about this or that case of suicide. There are no fixed rules as to how much a person owes to the society before he can take his leave finally. Hence the argument about the loss of the future benefits to society is not a very convincing argument against all types or cases of suicide.

If death is inevitable, then whether it comes now or later, whether one waits till it comes, slowly and perhaps painfully, or whether one facilitates one's own journey towards it by choosing a self-appointed hour, manner and place, why should we judge one as typically better or worse than the other? It seems to me that what we could do for the benefit of those who want to live as well as those who do not is to understand the diverse possibilities of ending one's life by choice and try to lessen the stigma attached to the word 'suicide'. In the enthusiasm to save life in any form at all, let us not forget the possibility that suicide can sometimes serve as a practical and respectable way to end life, and in fact, as in the case of a Yogi, it may even prove to be

a truly inspiring event to educate people in the beauty of life and death.

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CORRECTION

In the July 1977 issue of this Quarterly read after the second line in paragraph 2 on page 606 the following:

'conditional apology unless one already knows what is. .'

— Editors.
