In this section we shall examine other cultures and their attitude to suicide. Part 1 focuses on our own culture and antiquity, tracing various philosophical disciplines and their perception of suicide up to the 19th century. Part 2 examines modern times and legislation on suicide in various countries.

**Islam**

No religion has a more condemning attitude to suicide than Islam. Mohammed declared that God had given each man his dignity, Kismet, and that God alone determines the point in time of a person's death. One of the main credos of Islam is that the divine will is expressed in various ways, and man must always subject himself to this will. Suicide would be akin to trying to escape the divine will. Thus suicide is a very serious crime against Allah, worse than murder. Life is a gift from Allah, hence we must also accept the obligations that go with it, essentially two: gratitude for the life one has been given, and submission to Allah. Neither of these obligations will be fulfilled through suicide.

Countries with an Islamic culture generally exhibit a far lower suicide rate than the Christian world. While the suicide rate in Islamic countries is low, it rises when Moslems immigrate to Western countries, such as is the case with Turks. A definitely higher suicide rate has been found among Turks in Berlin compared to Turks in Turkey, nonetheless the Turks in Berlin have a significantly lower suicide rate than Germans in Berlin, even though the Turks have to tackle the problems arising from the clash of cultures.

**Hinduism**

The Eastern religions, primarily Hinduism, have not had the traditionally negative perception of suicide that we have in the Western world. The ancient Veda books, the holy scripts of Hinduism, permitted suicide on religious grounds. The greatest sacrifice was one's own life. On the other hand, strongly condemning attitudes against suicide can be found in the Upanishads (the Holy Scriptures). In one of the Upanishads it is said: "Whoever takes his own life shall come to the sunless areas covered by impenetrable darkness after death".

Hinduism recognized, institutionalized and accepted *suttee* (widow burning) until recently. Even if the oldest book of the Brahmins, Rig-Veda, offers no rules for *suttee*, a common tradition in the Hindu religion has been that the widow would seek death following her husband's death to guarantee blessedness for them both. According to the Hindu religion it is the "self", perhaps we in the West would say "the soul", that survives. The body perishes. A verse of the Upanishads thus says, "It is the body that dies when left by the self, the self does not die". By mounting the pyre with her
husband a widow would be able to do penance for his sins, liberate him from punishment and open the way to a better life for him and for herself as well. First the widow would have to go through a series of rituals. After the death of her husband she would have twenty-four hours to decide whether she would accept the *suttee* tradition. If she first stated her intention to do so, she would not be able to withdraw honourably. This act was highly esteemed by her fellow citizens. The tradition was banned in India and declared a criminal act in 1892. Sporadic widow burning is nevertheless alleged to have taken place even recently, particularly in rural districts.

Suicide by starvation has also been accepted by religious groups in Indian culture. Such a suicide would be called *sallekhana* and would be performed by ascetics. The hunger strike as a political weapon was developed on this basis by Mahatma Gandhi in his spiritual struggle against British rule in India. In more recent times such fasts have ended in death in several cases, partly in the battle for minority groups or the struggle against what has been perceived as political abuse. Even today threats of fatal hunger strikes are allegedly not uncommon in India.

**Buddhism**

Buddhist religion also considered suicide, under certain conditions, to be proper. A suicide could be in keeping with the tenets on human life of this religion, where needs, ambitions and strong emotions should be excluded. The best personal sacrifice may be to liberate oneself from one's own existence. It may be better to give one's body than alms. Consequently it could be more praiseworthy to burn one's own body than to light lamps on a shrine.

China accorded particular recognition of special motives for a suicide, such as a general who would commit suicide after losing a battle, a deposed statesman protesting official policy by his suicide, or a person committing suicide in memory of a deceased father or a forefather. If face had been lost through a breach of the law or a loss, suicide was an acceptable solution. If the criminal was of high rank, it would not be uncommon for the Emperor to send him a yellow silk scarf to hang himself with, thus allowing him to escape being called up for punishment, dishonour or possibly a death penalty. Many Chinese generals received a yellow silk scarf from the Emperor. Suicide as an act of revenge against a perpetrator of an offence was also a well-known phenomenon in China. Responsibility for the act would then be shifted to the other person, allowing the soul to pursue the enemy more effectively than would be possible if the person was alive.

The Buddhist attitude to suicide is nevertheless generally negative. According to Buddhist tenets, the life of man consists primarily of suffering and stress, and it is part of the duty of man to suffer this pain and suffering. A person who takes his own life to escape such suffering will find it difficult to be reincarnated.

**Confucius’ teachings**

The tenets under Confucius belong in the same region, and continue to be prevalent in Chinese culture. According to the precepts of Confucius, one may not destroy one's
body, not even hair or skin, because the body is a gift from one's parents. Based on the rigid family obligations of this philosophy, self-destructive conduct is not acceptable. Suicide is thus not permissible according to Confucius, except in certain cases where the aim is to show loyalty to the greater or smaller society one belongs to, or to one's parents.

**Japanese culture**

In Japan suicide has been more a part of the national tradition than elsewhere. The Japanese religion is based in part on Shintoism and in part on Buddhism. A Japanese will often confess to both, perhaps emphasizing one over the other depending on the stage of life he is passing through. Shintoism is a life-embracing religion, and rites in connection with birth and weddings often follow Shinto rules, while burial rites are more in the Buddhist tradition.

Japan eventually developed traditional rituals for suicide, *seppuku* and *hara-kiri*. These were practised by the highest social classes, primarily nobility and warriors (the samurai).

Hara-kiri developed around 1,000 years ago, during the initial stages of feudalism in Japan. It originated as an honourable way of committing suicide to avoid being captured. First the person would stick a short sword into the left part of his abdomen, cut to the right and withdraw it. Then he would put it into his diaphragm and cut up vertically. Finally the throat would be cut. This act was considered a form of bravery. It was also possible to be sentenced to commit hara-kiri. Thus suicide could be forced or voluntary. The forced suicide was applied to nobility, who might repair their criminal acts or loss of face with a sword. Voluntary hara-kiri would usually be carried out as an act of defiance against a master or ruler, or also as an expression of grief at the death of the master. Both forms of hara-kiri were prohibited by law in 1868, but are still practised. Hara-kiri is carried out according to a rigid ceremony, using a particular type of knife, preferably with an assistant present. I have seen patients hospitalized in emergency units at the Nippon Medical School in Tokyo after having unsuccessfully attempted hara-kiri.

Suicide carried out after the death of one's superior is called *junshi*. Junshi was carried out when a person of high status died, and the person committing junshi believed that he needed the spirit of the superior in question in his life after death. A modern example of junshi was when General Nogi and his wife committed suicide after the death of Emperor Meiji in 1912. When the Emperor was dead, life was not worth living for Nogi. It is well known that the Japanese culture has looked favourably on suicide. During the last world war it was not at all difficult for the Japanese to recruit suicide candidates for their single-pilot aircraft, Kamikaze pilots, who would ram the hostile target with themselves aboard their aircraft loaded with explosives. There were also one-man submarines, Kaiten, with the same aim.

Traditionally Japan has scored very high on the world suicide statistics. After the last world war Japan has been subjected to a substantial degree of Americanization and Western influence. An increase in the suicide rate would then be expected, as is common when two cultures clash. The opposite occurred in Japan. Admittedly the
frequency of suicides rose slightly during the first five years after the end of the Second World War, but then it fell so that the Japanese suicide rate is now on a medium international level, approximately the same level as Norway. However, there is one peculiar feature, the relative ratio between men and women in Japan is 1:1, while the rate in Western countries is 3:1 or 2:1, with a clear preponderance of male suicides. For younger Japanese women, suicide is the most common cause of death. While most Western countries have a clear overrepresentation of suicides in big cities and densely populated areas, this is not the case in Japan. The suicide frequency is highest in the countryside. Suicide among elderly people is significantly higher in Japan than in Norway. Dropping out of working life, which the Japanese so closely identify with, appears to be even harder to handle than in Norway.

"Primitive" cultures – cultural clashes

It has been claimed that there are no suicides in "primitive" cultures. This is not true. As far as we know, no culture is without suicide. In some cultures suicide is a way of expressing anger or revenge based on personal motives. The form of expression may be accurately described through stipulations in law or customs. In "primitive" cultures, the motives have often been to preserve honour and dignity, or to prove courage. Malinowski (1908) mentions one example from such a culture. A man was accused of violating one of his tribal taboos. He then climbed to the top of a palm tree, expressed his injury at such accusations, named those who had accused him, and then dived head first into the ground killing himself. Suicide was also accepted in consequence of great pain or helplessness due to age or illness. In a number of cultures suicide has also been deemed a reasonable act for a woman if her virtue was threatened or if she had been raped, or for a man if he wanted to avoid the personal humiliation of falling into the hands of an enemy. Suicide could also be an expression of unwillingness to shoulder the burden of being separated from a loved one due to death or reasons beyond one's control. Disgrace and revenge are frequent motives for suicide in "primitive" cultures. Revenge, resulting from "killing oneself over the head of another", was often imagined as perpetrated by the spirit of the dead person. In many societies, primarily nomadic or very poor ones, it is not uncommon that old members of the tribe will commit suicide to avoid continuing life as weak and pitiable creatures that are a burden on their community. Among the Eskimos, such motives appear to be quite frequent, and a person might be placed in a kayak on the ocean to sail toward the sunrise, or be left behind in the wilderness.

There are cultures where suicide has quite high status to the point that there are special divine beings for suicide. This was the case in the Aztec culture, where the Indians had a special goddess for suicide, Ixtab. She is depicted with a rope around her neck. It also appears that the suicide rate among Indians is high, but this differs from tribe to tribe.

The frequency of suicide usually rises when the "primitive" culture encounters Western culture. Such culture clashes often erode the old social norms, and lead to the abuse of alcohol and drugs, family break-ups and promiscuity. A case in point from modern times is Greenland, which now appears to have one of the highest suicide rates in the world at 127 per 100 000 persons annually. The pattern of suicides there also is completely different with respect to gender and age, as the peak is reached already
during their twenties for boys, then falls steeply, with far less clear values for girls, even if they also reach a peak during their twenties. Sociological studies show that the young Greenlander male has very little identification with the original old hunting society. However, he does not identify with the new urban society with housing in apartment blocks and work in industry either. The same development has been found among similar tribes on the American continent. Inuits in Canada have just as high suicide rate as the Greenland Inuits. In Canada a small number of Inuits have sustained themselves by hunting and fishing on a vast area of land. Society has consisted of a number of small communities around extended families. Today schooling is required, and children are sent off far away to boarding schools. The older generations speak Inuit exclusively, receiving few or no impulses from outside. Now the young generations are learning English, and radio and TV provide ample impulses.

On Indian reservations in the USA the suicide rate is also extremely high. Living on a reservation means that the entire lifestyle must be changed. Many old traditions appear meaningless. At the same time inhabitants do not have the stimulus of belonging to the surrounding society and assuming its norms. The aborigines in Australia also have a high suicide rate, which is ascribed the same causes. The high suicide rate of the "indigenous populations" was a recurring topic at the congress of the International Association for Suicide Prevention (IASP) arranged in Montreal, Canada, in the summer of 1992. Indigenous populations were also a topic at the IASP congress in Adelaide, Australia, in 1998.

CONCLUSION

We might safely conclude that suicide has occurred at all times, in all geographical regions of the world and in all cultures. The pattern of suicide to some extent appears to be culturally conditioned. What then will the future hold? Our Western culture with good welfare societies in financially well off countries has high suicide rates. The cousin of financial wealth may be emotional poverty, where the sense of belonging in a community and to a network has been eroded. There are many indications that developing countries may be entering a phase with increasing suicide rates, while family network ties in small communities are eroded along with other norms to make way for efficiency and technology. There will, unfortunately, be more than enough work for everyone working with suicide-prevention measures.
**Recommended literature:**


Farberow NL (ed): Suicide in Different Cultures. Baltimore: University Park Press, 1975

