

Sallekhana / Santhara: An art of dying is joy

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ABSTRACT: This paper tries to examine how death is viewed in Jainism though it is also defined in other religions of the world. But, in Jain tradition, it is an art of embracing death with joy. Accordingly, it was divided into 48 types of death in Jain Agamas. And the name given to this ritual is Sallekhana, which means thinning out of passions gradually which will even last for 12 years. At the final stage of death or when the death is close then Santhara is taken under two conditions. But Sallekhana is different from both suicide and euthanasia, where it is taken due to disappointment, fear, frustration, and anger. But in Sallekhana, one embraces death through meditation and fasting with one's faculties properly working and in complete awareness and ability.

KEYWORDS: Sallekhana, Santhara, Death, Suicide, and Euthanasia.

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Therefore, this research paper will try to find out the following research questions.

- What are the different types of death as mentioned in Jain Agamas?
- How it is different from death as viewed in other religions?
- What is Sallekhana and how it is different from suicide and euthanasia?
- What makes this Jain ritual unique compared to other rituals of death?

Death is identified by the terms like marana, vigama, vinasa etc. It is identified with a process in which the matter (pudgala) called anubhuyamana, would separate from the soul (atma) and then perish. The Agamas Preach that loss of life or body by itself would not complete the process of death; it is the successful destruction of ayu-karma.

All serious philosophical speculations have been revolving as such as around life as around death. The Jains are among those who paid serious thought to this subject. It is almost impossible to understand their central philosophy of life without understanding their attitude towards death. Their sharp logic identified as many as 48 types of death grouped under three categories:-

- i) Bala-marana-childish or foolish death – it includes suicide and it is rejected
- ii) Pandita-marana- wise death which testifies partial attainment and wisdom conditionally accepted
- iii) Pandita – pandita – marana ((the wisest of wise deaths)- is enthusiastically recommended.

The first begets no fruits, the second secures partial rewards and the third releases the aspirants from all bondage including the cycle of rebirth.

Further, the art of mortifying the body without troubling the soul or torturing the mind was identified by several terms each term accentuated a specified ritual content. Thus emerged the sannyasana – marana (death through renunciation), sallekhana-marana (through fasting) aradhana-marana (through worship), pancapad-marana (through prayer), pandita-marana (through knowledge or wisdom), Samadhi-marana (through meditation). Death is described as „mysterious“ because we cannot formulate a satisfactory concept of death. Some have said that what makes death especially mysterious and frightening is the fact that we cannot know what it will be like. Death is typically regarded as a great evil, especially if it strikes someone too soon. However, Epicurus and others argued death cannot harm those who die, since people go out of existence when they die, and people could not be harmed at times when they do not exist. Others have encountered that evil of death may lie in the fact that death deprives us of the goods we would have enjoyed if we had lived. Death as we understood is separation of body from soul, as cessation of life.

In dharmakatha –sutra vrtti said that Sallekhana is „The activity by which the body is weakened and passions are overcome. It is “peeling off of the passions” of the body and forfeiture of bodily strength in order to strengthen the spirit. To weaken the physical body is DravyaSallekhana, while to overcome the passions of the body is BhavaSallekhana. Since Jain thought considers the body is a prison for the soul, and the passions like

the chains that holds the soul in its prison, it is of paramount importance in Jain belief to weaken these two entities in order to liberate the soul.

Sallekhana is a continuing practice aimed at weakening the body externally and passions internally. Thus, Sallekhana can actually be an open-ended form of preparatory penance that trains the aspirant to embrace the final act of death but does not necessarily have to end in itself. Some texts state that this ritual could last for as long as twelve years. The penance in and of itself is a spiritually rewarding ritual. The goal of kasaya – Sallekhana is to free the penance performer from love (raga) and hatred (dvesa). Fasting and meditation would take the self-mortifier not only to the brink of death, but also to his spiritual goal, if he overcome the Sallekhana-aticaras before breathing his last. These acticas are: desire to live, desire to die, flight from fear, recollection of old friends and expectation of comforts as well as compensations in the next world for the suffering undergone in the present.

The positive death that result from the Sallekhana is then called santhara or Samadhi marana. The fact that the preparatory act of Sallekhana is designed to end in the death of the aspirant. Also, the option of specific periods of time in which take Sallekhana such as twelve years, twelve months or twelve weeks proves that it is an open-ended penance that is not always meant to end in death.

The Acaranga is categorical in stating that monk must gradually reduce his food intake and weaken his body in order to prepare for the end practice of Santhara when and only when he feels that his body has become incapacitated (unable) due to various reasons and he is unable to bear it any longer. According to the Acharya Samantabhadra, Sallekhana must be practiced in cases of acute affliction like famine, extreme old age and in unable diseases.

Santhara, unlike the open-ended ritual that Sallekhana can be, is the end practice of embracing voluntary death and end the life. The three types of rigor associated with the final moments of life according to Acaranga Sutra:-

- i) Bhakta -Pratyakhyana- The individual aspiring to meet death chooses a path of slow mortification. He renounces food but has the option to drink water. He may position his body in whatever posture is convenient and change as often as he desires. He is allowed to help himself and also accept help from others.
- ii) Ingini – marana – The person gives up all food and water and refuses any help from others. He may move his body but only within a restricted area such as abed.

ii) Prayopagamana – The person totally and completely gives up all foods and water and refuses help from others with the intent to expedite the dying. The person lies in one posture or pose until death.

Santhara can take place in two forms or we can say under two circumstances in emergency situations and in an unconditional form. In emergency situations a person may opt to take Santhara but then change their mind if the emergency situation is diffused. However, in unconditional form of Santhara the aspirants accepted death unconditionally after interpreting the signs of his own death known as Rista.

The rite of fasting to death is undertaken only when the practitioner perceives clear signs of approaching death or feels his utter incapacity to fulfill his religious vows. He does not undertake the vows out of passions or deluded belief. He finds joy in such fasting and meets death fearlessly. The practitioner starts by reducing his diets, fast regularly for progressively longer period, adopts the observance of the ascetic self – restraint and finally given up all food and drink to fast to death while engaged in reflections and meditations.

Tattavarta Sutra defines death as ending of the lifespan, karmically bound in the previous life, due to the wearing out of the senses and vitality. The rite of emancipation is undertaken by the householder for the attenuation of the external body and the internal passions. It is adopted with full joy and calmness of mind and not impetuously. It is not suicide because it is undertaken without duress or passion. To commit suicide is to kill oneself out of anger, agony, malice or frustration, whereas fasting to death purges the soul of its passions and perversities by conquering the fear of death.

Suicide, a baffling human phenomenon is common to all civilization of the world from time immemorial. The leading causes of suicide are disappointment, pride, anger, extreme poverty, family unhappiness etc. And repetition of the same will bring the feelings of disappointment, depression, mental and emotional conflicts drive the victim to the extreme step of suicide. A victim of suicide is either mentally weak or unable to cope up with the external circumstances. It originates from a Latin word suicida means the act of self-destructions.

Suicide means destroying one's self by means employed one's self. In Indian religion the word "atmaghata" is used in two different senses.

First, it means voluntary self-killing which is committed out of pure melancholy disappointment in love, unhappiness in one's life.

Secondly, it is used by the ancient philosophers in the sense of not caring for realization of one's own self. Suicide was viewed in different scriptures both by western and oriental philosophers:-

In Kautilya "Arthashastra" he condemns those men and women who commit suicide. To him, such kind of suicider's body be dragged by means of rope along the public road by the hands of an untouchable.

In Dharmasutras and Puranas it states that "whomever destroy their selves reach after death demon world and his relative have to perform no death rites for him".

Manu said no water is offered for the benefits of souls those who commits suicide.

Jainism and Buddhism considered suicide as a great sin and suicider is reborn as ademon.

In Western political thought thinkers like Pythagoras saw suicide as an unmitigated evil. Aristotle condemned suicide as a cowardly act. Kant deny man's right to kill himself and to him suicide is inconsistent with reason. He said the suicider should ask himself, "what would follow if everyone did what I am about to do?"

So a person who commits suicide develops a philosophy of life "realizing the worthlessness of his existence" and at last he chooses to finish himself. He questions himself - who am "I" in this world? Is it of any value.

Freud has mentioned that every being contains within itself two fundamental instincts - the instincts of life or sex and the instinct of death, that is, desire to return to the lifeless state. "In the healthy person the life instinct dominates, in the diseased the tendency towards self-dissolution."

In the philosophy of Freud, we find that through the concept of biological truth he brings into limelight the psychological concept which is connected to mythology. Freud said man comes with two types of drives, that is, Eros and Thanatos. In German language the word is "trieb" which means drive or urge. To him, in nature also we find these two types of drive one is creative and other is destructive. Thus by naming these two drives he brings into the realm of psychology. But the selection of these two names have mythological connection. In all ancient mythology particularly in Greek we find two types of God i.e., God of love and life and God of death and destruction. Former is associated with creativity and latter with destruction. In Babylonia civilization, we find one Goddess in the name of Inanna who represented both God of love and death. In Rigveda, we find Rudra and Brahma, Vishnu while former is the symbol of destruction, the latter represents creation and preservation.

In psychological world, both the drives are intertwined and interconnected with each other and unable to work separately in all activities. Like pushing injection in the body causing pain but chewing of food is destruction but it nourishes our body. So balance in life is important.

According to Durkheim suicide is a social phenomenon rather than an individual one. He spoke of three basic types of suicide -

- i) Egoistic Suicide results from the lack of integration of the individual into society. It occurs when individual has too few ties with his community.
- ii) Altruistic Suicide results from an individual over integration with the society. Customs or rules of the group demand suicide under certain conditions.
- iii) Anomic Suicide occur when the accustomed relationship between an individual and his society is suddenly shattered.

He puts all forms of religions suicide including Sallekhana into Acute Altruistic suicide. Therefore, it has failed to understand Jaina metaphysics and Religion in a right perspective.

But Justice Tukul spoke of four factors which made distraction between suicide and Sallekhana - i) Intention ii) Situation iii) Means adopted and iv) the outcome of action or its consequences.

The main intention of committing ordinary suicide is to escape from the consequences of certain acts or events, disgrace, agony, punishment, social stigma etc; while the sole intention of the person adopting the religions vow of Sallekhana is spiritual, that is liberation from the bondage of karma.

The situation under which this vow is to be adopted are a calamity, severe famine, old age or illness for which there is no remedy. While in suicide the victim is under an emotional stress. He is overpowered with the feeling of disgrace, fear, hatred. That is why ordinary suicide is violent act while Sallekhana is a non-violent, spiritual and religions vow. In suicide, the means adopted to bring about the death are weapons of offence it shows mental weakness while in the latter there no desire to put an end of life immediately by some violence.

The act of ordinary suicide causes misery to the kith and kin, while the consequences of death by Sallekhana are neither hurtful nor sorrowful to any, because adopting the vow, all kinds of ties have been terminated with common consent. The immediate consequence is one of evoking reverence for the dead and other of strengthening the faith of devotees in religion.

In case of suicides we cannot interview the victims who succeed in the act, we have to rely upon suicidal notes left and circumstantial evidences. Whereas in Sallekhana we have the opportunity to interview a person who is slowly undergoing the process of voluntary death. It is a death with dignity.

Sanskrit or derivative term. Euthanasia as benevolent, consensual termination of life by an external agent. The pre-modern meaning of euthanasia to be a good death that is self-willed and self -accomplished as a way to deal with the problems of extreme old age and illness. It makes a sharp distractions between Euthanasia and assisted

suicide and with- holding of “Life Support Systems” to terminally ill patients. Euthanasia is an act of any person including a doctor, of intentionally killing an individual who is terminally ill by giving drugs. Assisted suicide as an act of patient who receives the assistance of a doctor and takes a drug with the intention of committing suicide.

Euthanasia is a troubling word and is associated with willful act, albeit in the name of mercy, with intent to kill while the person is still in control of vital functions but fears a bleak future due to an incurable disease. Euthanasia can be of two types active and passive. In passive euthanasia, the doctor does one important thing, he lets the patient die. He does not do anything and patient dies of whatever ills already afflict him. In active euthanasia the doctor does something to bring about patient’s death, he kills him. But it raises that key issues of agency –“ who does and who should control the decisions to hasten or procure death.” March, 18 Supreme court legalizes, passive euthanasia and living will, says that right to die included as a part of right to life and right to privacy. And approved “living will” to provide terminally ill patients or those in persistent and incurable vegetative state, a dignified exit by refusing medical treatment or life support. That is right to die with dignity and lead a quality of life till end. Because passive and meaningless vegetative existence characterized by pain and suffering which puts one at the mercy of others is not considered worth living. The patient and his family members, therefore, have an option to put an end to such existence and let the person die a dignified and quick death. The rationale for euthanasia also draws from an utilitarian logic.

But it has been shrouded by debates and controversies all over the world. Like the case of Terry Schiavo(2005). The legal battle led by the then President George Bush with his “care of life” advocacy to intervene to get the feeding tubes reinserted though briefly. On March 18, 2005 the feeding tubes were removed from her body. But her parents fought to keep her alive by retaining the tube but her husband and legal guardian fought for removal so that she can die peacefully but Terry did not left any written living will. March 31st, 2005 she died a slow death by starvation.

Another case of ArunaShanbaug in India, who has been bedridden in the KEM hospital in Mumbai in a permanent vegetative state for last 38 years after a brutal sexual assault was allowed to live by Supreme Court Judgments in March 2011. The court has rejected the plea of euthanasia filed by an author friend of Aruna on the ground that.

- i) Her medical conditions do not qualify as brain dead and she breathes by her own.
- ii) Only the caretaker i. e., KEM hospital can plead for euthanasia on her behalf and she allowed to live till the natural death and such death would qualify for a dignified death.

So euthanasia even when in the framework of a right to dignified death became an emotive issue full of contradictions and irreconcilable ideological stances. Euthanasia is defined in Webster’s Dictionary as “granting painless death to a hopelessly ill patient with a non-curable disease.”

At this juncture the philosophy and supplementary practice of Sallekhana comes in i.e., holy death through fasting and meditation. Like other Indian religions, Jainism considered the last moment of man’s life is of utmost important in determining the condition of his or her subsequent incarnation. The state of Sallekhana is to meet death with all of one’s faculties properly working, in a condition of complete awareness and ability to maintain the vow that one has taken. The total fast of Santhara is performed only when death is imminent due to outside causes such as calamity, famine, infirm old age or terminal illness. Only by fasting is the death pure because the passions are being thinned out. The termination of one’s life by any other method is considered as impure because the passions are thereby increased. It is a death for which the aspirant emotionally prepares himself or herself over the years and which family and community members give support.

In the words of Socrates “what is love” spoke of man desire of life. So the meaning of eros is much deeper and wider. When one decide to destroy himself or herself then its suicide and the feeling of hatred for others is there. In Euthanasia, a sense of meaninglessness of life prevails. But in Sallekhana, life is meaningful yet the decision.

In Tattavarta Sutra we find :-

samyag-darsana-jnana-caritrani-moksha-margah. That is, through intuition, philosophy, ethical practices one can reach to the path of moksha. This is the philosophy of man and religion in Jainism whose ultimate concern is liberation of soul.

Rote hue aatehain sab,

hanste hue jojayega,

Who muquaddarkasikander

Janemankehlayega

So we can say for jains who are performing Sallekhana – Santhara to them art of dying is joy.

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