The Jain Concept Of Sallekhana : A Loss Or a Gain ?

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Abstract

The Concept of Sallekhana is an important contribution of the Jainas to biosocial ethics. Sallekhana is facing death by an ascetic or a layman voluntarily when he is nearing his end and when normal life is not possible due to old age, incurable disease etc. after subjugation of all passions and abandonment of all attachment. To begin with, it must be stressed that the vow of Sallekhana as propounded by Jainism is not suicide. It can be called voluntary death or passionless death. Its main objective is to make thin the passions that disturb equanimous state of the soul. The vow has psychological religious and spiritual significance. Psychologically, the individual is to fight against the feeling of grief, fear, anguish etc.

It is a vow to be adopted for seeking liberation of the soul from the body as a religious duty. The basic concept underlying the vow is that man, who is the master of his own destiny, should face death in such a way as to prevent influx of new karmas.

The object of the present paper is to give a brief outline of the Jaina concept of Sallekhana and evaluate it in the light of contemporary discussion.

Some has criticized this vow. Externally, critics might identify it with suicide. But one must not be misguided by external procedure of its observance. It is no doubt fasting unto death. But, considered philosophically, the man observing Sallekhana is definitely gaining from spiritual point of view, particularly in the special situation in which he is put. The problem of voluntary death can be viewed from different aspects- the factors of intention, situation etc. In my view, the observance of this vow is a conscious and well-planned penance for self-realization. However, if Sallekhana is considered only as a ritual or a tradition without consideration of noble intention, although there may be external accomplishment, spiritually there will be no gain.

In short, Sallekhana is preparedness to be fearless in the face of impending death. It is death through Samadhi.

Introduction

Jaina religious system represents sramana current of thought, which lays adequate emphasis on practicing asceticism. As a system of philosophy, Jainism can be characterized as ethical realism in which right conduct is an essential condition for spirituality. It is important to develop an attitude of mind which brings about restraint, self-discipline and non-attachment. Focus is on equanimity of thought and conduct. Fasting, meditation and other austerities are the part of Jaina way of life. Penance occupies a unique place in Jainism. Perhaps, in the world religions, none parallels Jaina religion in the practice of penance, which is for spiritual purification.

Sallekhana, which is fasting unto death, is the intense penance which is undertaken by the aspirant at the last moments of his life. In Indian tradition, voluntary death such as practices of Sati etc. are not new phenomena. Some religions do not advocate voluntary deaths. In Christianity the commandment is ‘Thou Shall not kill, neither thyself nor another.’ Medical termination of life is the discovery of 21st century. In Jainism sacrifice of one’s life has never been criticized. Of course it should be for a good cause. Obviously when the cause is one’s own spiritual good, it is advocated.

The object of the present paper is to give a brief outline of the conception of Sallekhana as recognized in Jainism and evaluate it in the light of contemporary discussions on it.

Jaina Ethical Code and Sallekhana

Jaina ethical code is intended to discipline the body and the mind, to create an awareness of the higher values of life. There are many different kinds of vows to be followed by a householder and an
ascetic. In Jainism, which is an ethical system par excellence, the highest importance is attached to passionlessness. Jain tradition teaches not only the art of living but also the art of dying. When a layman, or an ascetic, is faced with death under certain circumstances, the vow of Sallekhana is prescribed. Its main objective is to make thin the passions that disturb equanimous state of the soul. Sallekhana is also called Santhara in Jainia tradition. The term Sallekhana is a technical Jaina term which means ‘Facing death by a person voluntarily when he is nearing his end and when normal life according to religion is not possible due to old age, incurable disease, severe famine etc., after subjugation of all passions and abandonment of all worldly attachments, by observance of austerities, gradually abstaining from food and water, and by simultaneous meditation on the real nature the self, until the soul parts from the body”. (1)

In the Jaina text it is said, “Sallekhana is giving up the body by fasting when there is an unavoidable calamity, in order to observe the discipline of religion.” (2)

Let us analyze the full implications of the vow. It is clear that this vow is to be practised when one is too old to be able to live a normal righteous life. So, when a person becomes a burden to society, without any possibility of reciprocating the good, then he should decide to end the life by fasting unto death. One has to face death willingly and die a detached death, which is peaceful and holy. The absence of passions and attachment, besides confessions for one’s faults and forgiveness of all offences against oneself, make a person fit for Sallekhana. In short, when a person ‘embraces voluntary death at the end of his life by observing progressive withdrawal of food and drink and spends his last moments in contemplation, putting aside all worldly attachments, sorrow and fear, such type of death is known as Sallekhana. It is called Samadhi Marana or sublime death.’ It is clear that Sallekhana is a well ordered voluntarily chosen death, which is not inspired by any passion whatsoever. Sallekhana is considered as an educative vow by a Jaina Acharya. (3) It educates the individual for the exalted path of spirituality. Both a householder and an ascetic can resort to it. It prepares an individual to meet death peacefully and also prospects of his life after death are improved. One who adopts Sallekhana is a spiritual aspirant. All the afflictions are conquered by the aspirant and, as a result of mental and spiritual poise, the soul is purified and elevated. The mind is full of joy. There is no feeling of unhappiness, which is present at the time of ordinary death, and the resulting ‘distress’ is conspicuous by its absence.

In the Jaina scripture (4), we find a detailed discussion about how should a wise man face death when it is nearing. It is stated that there are two ways of facing death: death with one’s will and death against one’s will. Death against one’s will is that of ignorant men and death with one’s will is that of wise men... When death comes at last, the fool trembles in fear and dies, dies the death against his will. Wise man’s death is with one’s will… full of peace and without injury to any one. It is the death of the virtuous who control themselves and subdue their senses with an undisturbed mind. According to Umaswami, the vow of Sallekhana should be adopted most willingly or voluntarily when death is very near. (5) Thus when the body is to perish due to any of the causes mentioned above, a course of planned death is appreciated. It implies courage to face death without fear. When it is felt that one’s body is of no further use, the vow of holy death has been suggested in Jaina scriptures. It may be noted that the body is to be protected so long as it is useful for the attainment of the goal. It is made clear that this vow is not meant for those persons who are in good health and are not faced with any sudden cause of death.

Circumstances for Adopting Sallekhana

The sets of circumstances when this vow is advised to be taken are as under:

1. Condition of extreme calamity, natural or otherwise
2. Famine
3. Very old age.
4. Terminal illness.

The philosophy underlying this concept is one’s body is mortal; hence the ritual of holy death as it is called is to be performed. This kind of ‘sacred death’ is peculiar to Jainism. The aim is self-realization. The pure self is to be realized and its energy is to be channelised in the direction of the attainment of the highest ideal of liberation. So this kind of death has moral justification. It is said, ‘Among the austerities, fasting is the most conspicuous. The Jainas have developed it into a kind of art. They have reached a remarkable proficiency in it… more important is fasting unto death. Jainas have worked out a scientific
analysis of *sallekhana*. (6)

Some times, *sallekhana* is interpreted, though not quite correctly, as death by slow starvation. This vow is taken with the object to accomplish what is known as ‘*Samadhi Marana*’, or peaceful passing away, or ‘*Pandit Marana*’, the wise man’s demise which is desired by a pious person. Rationale behind it is that one who is born, cannot escape death: he or she must die some day. Those who identify the soul with body, for them, the fear of death is the greatest fear. But those who believe in the immortality of soul and liberation from the round of rebirth as a possibility can face inevitable death heroically without loosing their mental equilibrium. The vow of *Sallekhana* is nothing but a course of discipline intended to prepare a person for such ennobling parting.

A comprehensive analysis of *Sallekhana* is found in the Jaina text *Ratnakarandaka sravakacar* by Samantabhadra, “prior to the adoption of the vow one should give up all love, hatred and attachment to possessions, with a pure mind, and obtain forgiveness of one’s relations while also forgiving them oneself. One should give up grief, fear, anguish, attachment and keep oneself engaged in meditation. Then he should give up gradually food, then liquid and even water. During the observance of the vow one should not commit any of the transgressions, entertaining a desire to live, or wishing for speedy death, exhibiting fear etc.” (7)

**Sallekhana and Suicide**

This kind of death has been misunderstood sometimes. Nowadays, it has raised many problems, legal and moral. It is said everyone has right to live but not to end life. In this connection perhaps we may agree with a social philosopher when he said, that ‘man is born free, however he is everywhere in chain’. A fundamental question whether *Sallekhana* is to be described as a form of suicide, and as such unjustifiable, has been raised by some. Radhakrishnan makes mention of it as a form of suicide. (8) However, a better understanding of the Jaina concept of *Sallekhana* would reveal that it is not a form of suicide. Rather, ‘it is a means for self-realization. It is meant to free oneself from the bonds of the body, which are no longer useful. The practice of the self-control in the process is the gain for the soul. As *Sallekhana* is not destruction of life out of passions, it is not motivated by any desire which characterizes suicide. The analysis of the Jaina concept will demonstrate that *Sallekhana* is not loss for the soul, as it is not an act of suicide. If we examine the situation giving rise to suicide, and intentions and psychology of the persons committing suicide and the other practicing *Sallekhana*, the distinction between the two becomes clear. There is nothing common between the two, except physical death. In the case of suicide, death is brought about by objectionable means, harmful to individual and society.

When a person commits suicide following characteristics are present:

1. Ambivalence, or a desire to die which simultaneously creates a conflict in the mind.
2. A feeling of hopelessness with inability to handle the problem on hand.
3. Physical or psychological feelings of exhaustion, frustration, or both.
4. There is presence of anxiety, tension, depression, anger or guilt.
5. Mental disorder and perverted attitudes.
6. The situation causing agitation seems to be unavoidable.
7. Feeling of fear or any passion leading to loss of interest in life.

In short, in suicide, death is brought about secretly and suddenly by means of an offence. (9) In Jaina text, practices, which may be called suicides, are described - such as “those who use weapons, throw themselves into the fire and water … are liable to be caught in the wheel of *samsara*”. (10) Fasting unto death, if based on force, is against the spirit of non-violence - the basic tenet of Jainism. Jaina religion forbids all kinds of purposeless violence. Consequently, except fasting unto death, all other methods of voluntary chosen death are forbidden in Jainism.

**Sallekhana and Euthanasia**

*Sallekhana* is not a sudden death. *Sallekhana* is not suicide. It is also different from euthanasia, which is also a kind of intentional killing. Euthanasia is defined as the act of killing a person painlessly for reasons of merely suffering from an incurable disease. It may have medical grounds. But, as regards intention, there is a difference. *Sallekhana* can be called an act of ‘self-offering’. Its basis is fearlessness. Death is not forcibly invited and this
makes it clear that there is fundamental difference between suicide and Sallekhana. The situation in both is different. Suicide results from passions but in case of Sallekhana, passions are subjugated. The means adopted are also different. As regards results or consequences, in Sallekhana there is definitely gain, while in suicide there is loss.

**Summary**

To Sum up:

The peculiar points to be noted in case of Jaina concept of Sallekhana are:

1. It is that intense penance which is undertaken by a person at the last moments of his life.

2. The undertaking of the penance at the time of death contains full reviewing of whole past activity with the purpose of weakening the bonds of worldly attractions and one’s body so as to have the best form of peaceful and perfect happy ending. At this time, no excitement is felt, no pain is experienced, but under perfect self control, complete ecstasy is enjoyed and one breathes one’s last happily under saman. (9)

3. Thus, as is said, Sallekhana is voluntary death without feeling pain of any sort.

4. The person controls all his passions and abandons all worldly attachments, observes all austerities, gradually abstains from food and water and lie down quietly, meditating on the real nature of the soul until the soul parts from the body.

5. The basic concept underlying it is that man is the architect of his own destiny and he should face death in such a way as to prevent the influx of new karmas and liberate the soul from bondage. Penance is capable of burning old karmas, reducing them to ashes.

6. “Those who adopt the vow immediately become self-reliant and self composed and they cease to be agitated by personal considerations and suffering, and rise above the longings of the flesh. The soul is lifted…To be able to control one’s conduct at the moment of death is the fruit of asceticism. (12) The state of mind of the person who performs Sallekhana is free from fear, grief, regret, affection, hatred etc., and he is prepared to embrace death with strength of mind and enthusiasm.

7. There is repentance for the sins committed.

Thus one should acquire mental-spiritual poise before adopting the vow. Finally, remembering the divine enlightened souls he would drop the physical body. (13)

Apparently, this process seems to be a process of inviting death but it is not suicide, though it is true that the person accepting this vow is all the time trying to gradually invite death. The aim is to get conquest over passions to remove attachment, aversion etc. It is his choice when preservation of the body is impossible. Spiritually, there can be no other better way than accepting death voluntarily. Therefore it is a gain in a way. Death is a loss but it is of secondary importance. Observing Sallekhana is definitely a gain from the spiritual point of view, particularly in the special situation in which it is put. ‘The observance of the vow is a conscious and well planned penance for self realization.’ (14). However, if Sallekhana is considered as only a ritual or a tradition without noble intention, although there may be external accomplishment, there will be no gain spiritually.

Coming to Sallekhana in practice, historically, on the basis of inscriptions evidences, many have been said to attain Samadhi by practicing Sallekhana. Chandragupta Maurya, it is well known, practised it and attained Samadhi. It is significant to note that in 2002, in different states of India, about sixty Jainas are reported to have followed Santhara.

**To Conclude:**

In my view, Jainism approves of Sallekhana. It is a step towards self-realization. It is meant to free oneself from the bonds of body and to attain self-absorption, the perfection of the soul by soul.

It is clear that intention behind this vow is not to waste time in fruitless activities for the sake of prolonging the existence of the body, which has to be given up sooner or later. Hence the attachment towards it is given up, with the result that an individual performing Sallekhana meets the inevitable death as a conqueror. Not surprisingly, it is said to be a spiritual welcome to death. This is not yielding to death but a way of meeting the challenge of death adequately. (15) It has a religious cause and spiritual value.

It would be appropriate to end the paper by a note made by Justice Tukol-, “Death by Sallekhana according to spiritual rules is the victory of the soul over karmas and consequential infirmities of the mind.
and body which worldly existence might have brought into being. It is an act of fulfillment”. (16). Who can say that it is a loss?

REFERENCES
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