

Fasting unto Death Holy Ritual or Suicide?

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Abstract

Jainism is characterized by non-violence (*ahimsa*). Jainism requires steadfastly observe the five vows, which include non-violence. In spite of their strict attitude against non-violence, the practice of fasting unto death or *sallekhana* is praised as holy-ritual in Jainism. Famous sociologist Emile Durkheim referred to this ritual in his work.

This presentation discusses the ritual of *sallekhana*, based on the *Tattvarth-adhigamasutra* and its old commentaries. When necessary, the typical work on the rules of layman called *Ratnakarandasravakacara* is also referred to. Firstly, I will outline the classification of death in Jainism. Death in Jainism is roughly divided into the categories “death of a wise man” and “death of a fool”. What this outline makes clear is that *sallekhana* corresponds to “death of a wise man”. Secondly, I will consider the meaning and definition of *sallekhana*. This consideration shows that the meaning of the word *sallekhana* is interpreted as “to thin the passions and the body properly”. The process of this ritual is also concretely explained. Thirdly, I will consider *sallekhana* in Jaina texts. This consideration makes clear that not only monks, but also layman are encouraged to perform *sallekhana*.

From the worldly standpoint, *sallekhana* is often seen as suicide. Therefore, finally, I will analyze the difference between *sallekhana* and suicide in Jainism. This analysis makes clear the following point. With reference to violence, Jainism regards intentions more important than results. This theory is applied to *sallekhana* to distinguish it from suicide.

Introduction

Jainism arose approximately 2,500 years ago and still survives in India. It is characterized by non-violence (*ahimsa*) and greatly influenced Gandhi’s thought. Because Jainism prohibits violence against all living things, it requires not only mendicants, but also laymen, to be strict vegetarians. Despite its strict attitude toward life, Jainism praises the practice of fasting unto death, or *sallekhana*. Famous sociologist Emile Durkheim referred to this fasting in his work¹, which is quite

1 Quoi qu’un des livres canons de la religion jainiste réproouve le suicide, lui reprochant d’accroître la vie, des

extensive but does not explain the idea behind the practice. Especially little attention has been given to Jain view that *sallekhana* is not suicide.

This study examines *sallekhana* on the basis of Jain texts. To begin with, we will outline the classification of death in Jainism; then we will examine the meaning of the word “*sallekhana*” and its position in Jainism. Finally we will take a look closely at Jain view of *sallekhana* and suicide.

1 The classification of death in Jainism

Since early times, Jainism has classified deaths in different ways. One of the oldest canons, called *Uttarajjhaya*, classified it in the following way. One is the death of a wrongdoer, which is called “undesired death (*akamamarana*)”; and the other is the death of the well-behaved, which is called “desired death (*sakamamarana*).” Wrongdoers fear landing in hell, so they die unwillingly. The well-behaved, however, have no such fear; therefore, they die willingly. Another canon calls the former “the death of a fool (*balamarana*)” and the latter “the death of a wise man (*pandiyamarana*).” After these classifications had been used for some time, more detailed classifications appeared. Most of them, however, basically depend on this classification. *Sallekhana* is included in “the death of a wise man” and suicide is included in “the death of a fool.”

2 What is the *sallekhana*?

2.1 The meaning of the word “*sallekhana*”

First we will examine the meaning of the word “*sallekhana*” on the basis of *Tattvarthadbigamasutra* (TS) of Umasvati and its commentary. TS7–22² shows that *sallekhana* continues until death; and the commentary called *Sarvarthasiddhi* (SS, the Digambara sect’s oldest commentary) explains as follows.

The word “*sallekhana*” means properly (=sal) thinning out (=lekhana) the body and the passions. Namely, *sallekhana* means thinning out in due order the internal passions and the external body by renouncing their cause.

This passage clarifies that *sallekhana* means “thinning out.” The passions this passage mentions are the four evils in Jainism, i.e., anger, pride, deceit and greed. The means of thinning out these passions is meditation, etc. The means of thinning out the body is fasting. In other words, *sallekhana* means thinning out the passions by meditation and thinning out the body by the fasting until death. Because the precise moment when *sallekhana* should be done cannot be known, a

inscriptions recueillies dans un très grand nombre de sanctuaires démontrent que, surtout chez les Jâinas du Sud, le suicide religieux a été d’une pratique très fréquente. Émile Durkheim, *Le Suicide: Étude de Sociologie*, Paris, 1912, p. 241, l. 30–p. 242, l. 1.

2 [The layman who maintains small vows also] practices *sallekhana* until his death. TS 7–22.

person usually resolves beforehand to undertake it in the future. Thus, people emotionally prepare for *sallekhana* over the years.

When it is time for someone to perform *sallekhana*, he must ask permission from the religious leader. First he must give up love, hatred and attachments. He should beg his kinsmen and others to forgive him, and should also forgive them. He also should honestly confess his past sins; then he should maintain the five great vows, the same as the mendicants, and should read (study) the canon until his death. Next he gradually changes his diet to dairy products, hot water, etc. Finally, fasting completely and reciting a mantra, he should discard his body.

2.2 *Sallekhana's position in Jainism*

An old canonical text already has adopted *sallekhana* as laymen's conduct³. Most post-canonical texts have treated it as a layman's optional vows, but some texts include it in the laymen's ordinary vows. Furthermore, a certain text states clearly that the ritual called *sallekhana* fully completes the laymen's religious discipline. Thus it is clear that Jainism recommends *sallekhana* to not only the mendicants, but also the laymen.

3 The problem of *sallekhana*: is it suicide or not?

Next, we will examine how Jain texts distinguish *sallekhana* from suicide. We will begin this examination by considering the concept of suicide in India and Jainism.

3.1 Concepts of suicide

3.1.1 The concept of suicide in India

The Hindu legal code offers the key to understanding the concept of suicide in India. These legal texts clearly show that those who commit suicide are excluded from various rituals⁴. *Arthashastra* also shows this fact⁵. These descriptions lead us to the idea that suicide was prohibited in ancient India. On the other hand, the Hindu legal code recommended dying in a ditch⁶. Some texts allow elderly people to commit suicide. Furthermore, the custom called sati has been practiced widely until modern times. Many living widows have been burnt with their husbands by the force of this custom. Moreover, Buddhist texts offer us many stories on self-sacrifice based on extreme compassion. In other words, the custom of someone ending his own life voluntarily was common in the Indian non-secular context.

3.1.2 The concept of suicide in Jainism

We will now look at the concept of suicide in Jainism. The king called Srenika often appears in Jain stories. He was the contemporary of Mahavira (Jainism's founder), and Buddhist texts called him

³ For instance, there is the story of layman Ananda in *Uvasagadasao*. He practiced *sallekhana* and is regarded as the model of a Jain layman.

⁴ Cf. *Manusmṛti* 5.89; *Yajñavalkyasmṛti* 3.6.

⁵ Cf. *Arthashastra* Chapter 4, Section 7.

⁶ Cf. *Manusmṛti* 6.31; *Yajñavalkyasmṛti* 3.55.

Bimbisara. In his last years, he was confined to the castle by his son, Ajatasatru. Because the introductory part of the *Guanwuliangshou-jing* (觀無量壽經) describes this incident, it is very famous in East Asia. Buddhist texts are vague about the cause of his death, but Jain texts state that he landed in hell by the sin of suicide. This story clearly shows that Jainism also prohibited suicide.

Furthermore, canonical texts considered suicide as “the death of a fool” (see Section 1). Post-canonical texts used the word “*atmavadhadosa*” to express suicide. This Sanskrit word consists of two words, “*atmavadha*” (suicide) and “*dosa*” (sin). Hence, it means “a sin of suicide” or “a sin caused by suicide.” This expression also clearly shows that Jainism prohibited suicide.

3.2 The distinction between *sallekhana* and suicide in Jainism

Because Jainism prohibited suicide, as stated above, it is necessary for Jains to distinguish *sallekhana* from suicide. *Ratnakarandasravakacara* (RSr) enumerated misfortune, famine, decrepitude and fatal disease as conditions under which Jainism permitted *sallekhana*. The existence of such restrictions might appear to support the Jain opinion that *sallekhana* is not suicide. In Jainism, *sallekhana* is a way for someone to control his own death voluntarily, not to break vows during his last years. Nevertheless, Jains might be blamed from the worldly viewpoint that regards all life as important. How can Jainism respond to such blame? Now we will examine this argument based on the commentary of SS, which explains as follows.

Some people might think as follows.

Objection: Since the person who practices *sallekhana* lays down his life intentionally, it will be regarded as suicide.

Answer: This is incorrect because he is not thoughtless in this action. Depriving someone of life based on a thoughtless action is violence, but a person who practices *sallekhana* is not acting thoughtlessly because he does not have desire, etc. Indeed, a person possessed by desire, abhorrence and delusions who ruins himself by using poison, arms, etc. does commit suicide. A person who is practicing *sallekhana*, however, has no such desire, etc., so he does not commit the sin of suicide.

This passage clarifies that Jains understand suicide as violence to oneself. Further, the idea concerning violence applies to suicide, which is violence to oneself. The causal relationship shown in this argument is as follows.

Case 1: A person has desire, abhorrence and delusions; acts thoughtlessly; and deprives living things of life.

Case 2: The person has no desire, abhorrence or delusions; does not act thoughtlessly; and does not deprive living things of life.

↓ Application

Case 1: A person has desire, abhorrence and delusions about himself; acts thoughtlessly; and commits suicide.

Case 2: The person has no desire, abhorrence or delusions about himself; does not act thoughtlessly; and does not commit suicide.

4 Conclusion

In this paper we have examined the practice called *sallekhana*. The following points show the difference between *sallekhana* and suicide, as seen from the view of Jainism.

- Someone who desires to practice *sallekhana* in the future should resolve to undertake it in the early stages. The religious leader's permission is necessary before performing the practice.
- The practice of *sallekhana* is permitted only in the case of misfortune, famine, decrepitude, fatal disease, etc.
- Someone who practices *sallekhana* does not ruin himself by desire, abhorrence, delusions, etc.
- The motive for and means of *sallekhana* are different from those of suicide.

The word "*sallekhana*" means "thinning out one's body," as stated above. In addition, Jain texts use the expressions "liberation from the body" and "it is necessary to throw away the body." These expressions are based on the soul/body duality. Jainism considers the soul to be imperishable and originally pure. On the other hand, it considers the body to be formed of dirty material that was drawn by acts of goodness and evil.

Though it seems like a relic of the past, *sallekhana* is still being practiced today, mainly by mendicants. Tukol [1976] introduces two cases practiced in 1973. Moreover, although not in an academic document, Sakamoto [1999] recorded the following. In 1989 in Radnun, in the Rajasthan state, an aged nun asked her religious leader for permission to perform *sallekhana*.

Abbreviations

- RSr *Ratnakarandasravakacara* (ed. by Pandit Pannalal 'Vasant' Sahityacarya, Yugavirasamantabhadragranthamala 2, Varanasi, 1972).
 SS *Sarvarthasiddhi* (ed. by Siddhantacarya Pt. Pulacandrasastri, New Delhi, 1944).
 TS *Tattvarthadhigamasutra*; see SS.

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