Michaela Koveleskie

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**The Spirituality of the Vow of Sallekhana: Not All Decisions to Die are Suicidal**

In Jainism, a religion with an estimated five million practitioners world-wide and deemed the most ethical religion in the world, the ideal form of death is *sallekhana*. Sallekhana is not required of laypersons or of monastics, but is considered honorable and an act of non-violence dependent upon if certain conditions are met. Sallekhana refers to the process of death which is taken through a final vow. Sallekhana is challenging to define in brief terms as initial impressions or preconceived notions do not permeate the levels of understanding of this religious vow. Jainism places great emphasis on the importance of living through ascetic practices and in this way, the discipline needed when dying in order for continual spiritual advancement after death. Sallekhana is the practice of meditation and fasting which continues until the point of death. Sallekhana should be respected as a religious and spiritual ritual practice as it is not suicide by the definition of its characteristics. This will be proven through an analysis of the characteristic similarities and differences in beliefs associated with the Jain vow of sallekhana, and those common in suicidal actions. This analysis is needed to add to the literature surrounding the ethics of sallekhana as a religious right in the debate concerning the legality of this action if classified as suicide in a legal context. Ethical matters are coming to the front stage in India in recent years, which host the largest population of Jains throughout the world. Historically sallekhana had been accepted due to its status as a religious practice (Braun 914).

For religious constituents, sallekhana is not deemed equal with or even similar with to the act of suicide. The delineation between the two acts of self-death are quite significant especially for practitioners and those involved with the legal side of this concern. Some argue that there is a gain for the practitioner despite the obvious loss of life and others contend that it is a valid religious ritual as long as it is made on an informed basis. There is an overarching division of death in two classifications as explained by Hotta Kazuyoshi, the death of a wrongdoer, *akamarana* or undesired death and the death of the well-behaved, *sakamarana* or desired death. This is also known as *balamarana* or “the death of a fool” and *pandiyamarana* or “the death of a wise man” (216). Jain sacred texts use the word *atmavadhadosa* when referring to suicide. This Sanskrit word is another combination of two words; in this case, the two words are translated as suicide and sin. Suicide in Jainism is considered “the death of a fool” (216) and is an impure way to die. A leading clinical psychologist in the field of suicide, Edwin Shneidman described these characteristics summarized and more for completed suicides including: ambivalence, hopelessness, helplessness, frustrated psychological needs, the need to escape, and lack of peace (“10 Characteristics Common Among Those Who Complete Suicide”). It is also of value to examine our personal or legal definitions of suicide. In the United States there is no longer a legal definition of suicide as suicide is not an illegal criminal act in this country. Broader definitions will be more encompassing while narrower definitions may allow for more precise classifications of self-death as suicide.

The most important distinction that is able to be clearly seen between the two acts is the intention behind the action. The Jain understanding of *ahimsa* or non-violence helps to perpetuate this point. Ahimsa is the first of the five great vows in Jainism, and is most markedly associated with it. This dictates that no harm should come to any living thing, no matter how big or small. One interesting description of ahimsa describes the focus of violence not being actual harm but the intention to harm which is most important in determining whether an action was violent (P. K. Shah, “Five Great Vows (Maha-vratas) of Jainism”). With this explanation, sallekhana is a vow that involves the death of the one who takes it, but the intention is not to harm them, but to help them spiritually. This is because the moment of death is of great significance as this is a moment of liberation when all karma has been determined and no more karma can then accrue (Bronkhorst 104). The thoughts at the moment of death and the time leading up the physical death of the body are even more integral for the expected outcome of higher reincarnation and chance of enlightenment in future lives or at the end of that life (Bronkhorst 105).

The world in Jainism is categorized according to *jiva* and *ajiva*. Jiva refers to life, the animate, creatures, and the name of every immortal soul. Ajiva refers the inanimate. Jains strictly adhere to ahimsa in order to diminish the effects of karma. In this way, they are strict vegetarians, who oppose to eating even the roots of a plant as to not kill it. They are popularly depicted with *mupatthi* or masks covering their faces to prevent the inhalation of bugs or microscopic creatures. They are also often shown with a small broom as they sweep the ground in front of where they walk and sit as to not kill any living creatures that may be below them. In Jainism, unlike in some other Eastern religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism, karma in this instance is a sophisticated and developed belief system with karma being physical material matter that adheres itself to the soul, weighing it down with imperfections. In this way, it is of note to avoid karma altogether, any karma, good or bad will add to the soul and determine what you will be reincarnated as depending on the amount of the accumulation on the soul. The body is seen as a prison for the soul and Jains believe that karma keeps the soul trapped inside of the body (Braun 915-916).

Sallekhana also known as *santhara* and *samadhi-marana* on the other hand is viewed with respect and those who take this vow are honored and held with high esteem in the community. The rationale for this is founded upon Jain beliefs surrounding karma, the cycle of rebirth, extreme asceticism, and overall spiritual purification (Braun 915). It rests upon the belief that if one is born, death cannot be escaped and so one must die someday (K. H. Shah 52). This vow is statistically taken by more female Jains than male Jains which could have something to do with the higher spiritual status that men have in comparison with women. In essence, men are closer to attaining enlightenment due to their reincarnation as a male human which is seen as a better form of rebirth. Although we do know that up to three-hundred Jains take the vow of sallekhana each year, the numbers are unclear on exactly how many vows of sallekhana are completed annually. Sallekhana is seen as pure and is classified as “the death of a wise man.” The term sallekhana is a combination of two Sanskrit words which literally translate to “properly thinning out.” This term is interpreted in a religious context as thinning out the body and the worldly evils that exist. Both can be thinned out through the practices of fasting and meditation. This holy vow is to be taken when the body is of no more use, and the practitioner cannot advance any more spiritually in this life. The main circumstances with taking the vow described by Kokila H. Shah are: extreme deterioration, famine due to economic situation, advanced age and problems that arise in this time frame, or diagnosis of a terminal illness. In this way, it is described as a death with “moral justification” (51).

Before taking the vow, the person should give up all attachments to loved ones and worldly possessions, ask for forgiveness for their wrongdoing, forgive those that have wronged them, confess past wrongdoings, give up fear and grief, and constantly engage in meditation from this point forward (K. H. Shah 52). Kazuyoshi adds to this by specifying that the practitioner should maintain the five great vows and read and study the sacred texts up until death when the body is discarded (217). There are certain conditions for the taking of the vow of sallekhana which are described by the Steffen and Cooley and they must be: under the authority of a religious teacher or guru, present and worsening physical decline has to exist, fast is gradual decline of eating, drinking, and lastly, drinking water, performed in a set location, permission from the family and understanding of the vow and their starvation by the person doing it and the community, and death occurs while mantras are chanted (215). Many people also consult a physician especially if they have a terminal illness for an estimated time frame for their death to coincide with the length of the fast (Braun 917). The guru and practitioner decide on the length of time that the fast will take. This time frame usually ranges from a period of five to seven years on average. The time frame is shortened if there is an illness that is at an advanced stage. Even in this circumstance though, it is not meant to kill painlessly due to the existence of an incurable disease which would be defined as euthanasia (K. H. Shah 52). There is also the consideration of the practitioner being in right mind when making the decision to undertake this vow. This right frame of mind is influenced by the delineation that the vow is voluntary. Even though the process of starvation can be quite painful depending on health before the fast, it is reported that Jains feel no unhappiness at the point of death (Braun 915).

It is somewhat challenging to view sallekhana or death through a slow starvation as something other than a suicidal action. This is an especially alien idea for Westerners raised in an Abrahamic religious culture. In Abrahamic religions, the decision to die is not as prevalent and widely accepted as some examples in Eastern religions of the world. In Eastern religions, there are a myriad of examples of religious death rituals. In Chinese Buddhism, a death for the purpose of protesting injustice to develop a better society is morally acceptable. An example of this is method of monks in Tibet to protest Chinese occupation of their country through self-immolation or death by lighting oneself on fire (Steffen and Cooley 216). Yes, those who take the vow of sallekhana are making a decision to die. The main difference in the death stemming from sallekhana or a suicide is that when someone commits suicide, they intentionally harm themselves with the goal of ending their life. With sallekhana, in some respects, it is seen as less violent because practitioners are refraining from consuming food and water and hence are not killing small living creatures to the same extent as if they were trying to sustain themselves in order to continue living (Braun 915). This is another example detailing the moral superiority exhibited by those that take the vow or believe in the efficacy of it.

If we begin to examine the traits present in a typical successful suicide and those in sallekhana, we will begin to open our eyes to the main differences between these two types of self-death. Characteristics of suicide were detailed earlier and are: ambivalence, hopelessness, helplessness, frustrated psychological needs, the need to escape, and lack of peace (“10 Characteristics Common Among Those Who Complete Suicide”; K. H. Shah 52). In K. H. Shah’s article, the author states very similar aspects of a suicide and compares them with the literature about sallekhana.

The first three characteristics are ambivalence, hopelessness, and helplessness. Ambivalence is the indecisiveness of the person who is planning to kill themselves. A suicidal person typically may go back and forth with the decision to kill themselves and is not unequivocally set on their decision. In sallekhana, practitioners are not aware of when the moment will come when it would be beneficial to voluntarily die so in many cases, they prepare emotionally for sallekhana over the years until the time comes (Kazuyoshi 217). The Jain practitioner undergoes life changes leading up to the decision to take the vow of sallekhana and publicly prepares for the fast through meditation, penance, and giving up belongings and attachments. Hopelessness refers to the pessimistic feelings of expectation towards the future and the sense that nothing can be done for the betterment of the situation. In sallekhana, the vow is not pessimistic in the least. The practitioner believes that by doing this, they are seeking to learn to grow on their spiritual path and are in a process of gain for their soul. Helplessness is related to hopelessness but specifically describes the feeling that one is unable to be helped, and that there is no one who is able to benefit the situation. In suicides, this is the common feeling of being on one’s own, alone to try to fight in the world. The community trait of sallekhana demonstrates that Jains that take this vow are not alone, they are comforted and celebrated and helped by all those in their family and even the extended Jain community. Family and community members surround the practitioner during the fast and chant mantras in the final days leading up to their death.

The last three characteristics of suicide are frustrated psychological needs, the need to escape, and the lack of peace. Frustrated psychological needs are defined as exhaustion with needs not being met and the focus on one’s shortcoming and negative traits. With the preparation of taking the vow of sallekhana, Jains confess their wrongdoings, seek forgiveness, and forgive those who have wronged them. In this way, they are ridding themselves of guilt for past actions that may overshadow their spiritual path with meditation and practice. Suicidal persons also feel the need to escape their situation and see suicide as the way to leave everything behind. Through the process of sallekhana, Jains are not attempting to escape illness or old age but are consciously recognizing that as humans, death is inevitable, and when they feel it is time start over through reincarnation to achieve spiritual advancement, they will start the process of sallekhana. And lastly, a lack of peace characterized those who commit suicide, this involves constant distressing thoughts which cannot be escaped unless through the process of dying. At the moment of death and nearing the time of death in sallekhana, there is a large emphasis on the control and discipline of the mind as to not wander and peacefully accept death despite physical discomfort. If one is thinking of desires of rebirth, an end to the physical pain, rapid death, or sensual pleasures in the future, the final moments that determine liberation may be tainted (Bronkhorst 105). In order for this situation to not occur, one has to be at peace and sitting well in their spiritual practice.

Sallekhana can be termed an act of self-offering to volunteer for death which is characterized by fearlessness (K. H. Shah 52). The main difference seen by authors of these sources between sallekhana and suicide is that suicide is forcibly inviting death through violent means and weapons (K. H. Shah 52-53). Suicide is seen as coming from passions which are out of control. In sallekhana, the passions are disciplined and are not interfering parties in the voluntary process of death. K. H. Shah views sallekhana as an approved practice from the viewpoint of Jains and “a gain in a way [due to spiritual aspect]. Death is a loss but it is of secondary importance” (53).

The examination of the religious practice of sallekhana is of utmost importance in a changing and evolving world. The legal issues in the government in India and the United States help to show that this debate is not going to be over any time soon. These ethical concerns are also relevant in the Western world as recently there has been an influx of people turning to Jainism as a religion in the United States. Having learned more information and examined the cultural context of this death ritual, it appears that the significance attached to this vow differentiates it from a secular suicide. This decision is made in right mind and with everyone in the community’s approval which is quite a significant condition to touch upon. If everyone in the community did not support it, the vow could not be taken, which shows a general understanding and respect surrounding sallekhana and its perception in Jain communities. The main aspect to consider in this situation is that although from the outside looking in with no background knowledge, this vow may appear to be an act of suicide encouraged by a religion. But, as we know, things are not always as they appear.

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