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Santhārā - Jaina Practice of Fasting unto Peaceful Death is not a Suicide

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Santhārā is a Jain technical word which means the voluntary, step by step termination of body with full awareness, wisdom and insight. The 24th Tīrthānkara Mahavira was great religious preacher who not only paved the path of leading an artistic life by implementing the great and small vows but also showed us the path of ending the life journey very artistically through the process of Santhārā. The basic concept underlying the vow of Santhārā is that a man who is the master of his own destiny should resolve himself/herself to follow the best method of leaving the body. Santhārā is considered as the king of all the vows and it is the highest spiritual vow rather than the ritual.

The Jaina Practice of *Sallekhana*

Sallekhana or Holy Death can be seen as an integral part of the Jaina Path. Stated baldly, it is the gradual fasting till death of an aspirant seeking liberation (*moksa*) within the Jaina tradition. The practice originally was done principally by mendicants at their own discretion. However, through the evolutionary development of the practice, restrictions were put in place, no doubt in part to help regulate its expanded usage by laypersons as well. Within the tradition four reasons or circumstances are mentioned that qualify for permission to begin the *sallekhana* process. First, someone who has contracted a terminal illness and whose death is imminent (*nihpratikara ruja*) may perform *sallekhana*; second, a person who will likely be unable to perform one's vows due to dwindling capacities from advanced years (*jara*), i.e., immobility, poor eyesight, forgetfulness, mental incompetence, etc. can start to fast till death; third, when there is a great shortage of

acceptable food (*durbhiksa*), such as during a famine, a person can stop eating; and fourth, when a person is thrust into a terrible calamity (*upasarga*) where one will compromise one's vows (e.g., severely wounded in battle or captured by the enemy), fasting to death is also permissible.

The Jainas distinguish between pure or acceptable grounds for initiating a process that will eventually end one's life, practiced by a wise man (*pandiyā*) and that act or process that ends of life that is impure or unacceptable and done by a fool (*bala*). In regards to the latter expression of suicide, Mahavira is unwavering in his condemnation of suicide that is brought about by drowning, burning, poisoning, use of a weapon, jumping off a cliff. Presumably one reason for this condemnation is the inherent violence in these acts, not only to oneself, but also to the other living beings might be harmed by one's violent act. Additionally, these latter types of acts involve extreme passion that again "contaminates" the purity and spiritual merits of the action. In contrast *sallekhana* does not harm another being; in fact, it can and should be considered a supreme act of nonviolence, as one is no longer harming another being through the process of harvesting, storing, cooking, and consuming food. Further, *sallekhana* requires dispassion on the part of the person who is allowed to engage in the process. Part of the screening process by the religious supervisor involves deciding whether the practitioner is truly ready to take on the long process of fasting to death and has had enough experience with fasting through his/her life to deal with the pain involved. Usually the process first involves cutting down on food gradually until one is eventually only consuming water every day. It is not meant to be a radical or swift exit, but rather a ritualistic, and solemn spiritual practice. Depending on the aspirant's physical and mental condition, it can take weeks, even months to perform before death.

In terms of what the Jainas would call "spiritual advancement," there is a wide range of individuals who partake in the practice. Some laypersons may take the vow of *sallekhana* (*sallekhanavrata*) long before they would actually commit to the practice, in the chance they might become ill or near death suddenly and then at least fast their last days, retake the five sacred vows, and confess to their harmful deed and repent, and finally die in a meditative state. But others, particularly mendicants or monks who have advance along in their spiritual quest, may approach and experience the process in a much more detached and embracing fashion.

Importance of *Santhārā*

It is a religious fast unto death on the pretext that when all purpose of life have been served, or when the body is unable to serve any purpose of life. Acharya Samantbhadra in his text, *Mṛityu Mahotsava* highlights the essence of *Santhārā* with the following sūtra:

Taptasya tapasashcāpi pālitasya vratsya ca.
Pathitasya srutasyāpi phalam mṛtyu samādhinā.

It means all religious observances, fastings and austerities would be unavailing, if at the last moment of life, at the time of approaching death, if one does not undertake *Santhārā*. It is not only the spiritual welcome to death, but also a way of meeting the challenge of death undauntedly. This happy embracement of death has been calculated to carry the spiritual dispositions to the next birth. Such a kind of peaceful spiritual death cannot be regarded as the

suicide at any cost because here we have a logic and spiritual reason behind the acceptance of Santhārā.

It is very often seen that the self has more attachment with one's own body; he cares for it with all hooks and crooks. But during Santhārā period, the practitioner realizes that body and passions are the main causes of inflow of karmas. So prior to the acceptance of the vow, one is required to give up all feelings of hatred, companionship and worldly attachments with a pure and calm mind. He/she should obtain permission from the Guru and householders from their nearest relatives and ask forgiveness from one's kinsmen and from others with all humanity at the same time forgiving them sincerely. Death by Santhārā according to scriptural rules is the victory of the soul over karmas and other infirmities of the mind and body.

This systematic process of Samādhi Marana influenced even Vinoba Bhave to such an extent that once he commented I wish to die according to the Jain system of peaceful death. So Santhārā is a Jain religious injection essential for shedding of karmas and purification of soul. So such an auspicious death can never be compared with suicide. Sri Ravi Shankar comments that those people who are not familiar to Jaina vows, views, various practices and rituals claim that Santhārā is suicide. A man of less intellect only commits suicide to get rid of one's physical diseases, mental disorders and other unfavourable situation that is why, it is rightly said that "Suicide is the temporary solution to the permanent problem." While a man of intellect observes Santhārā to get rid of bhava vyadhi i.e. wandering disease which is material cause of all the problems. So let us proceed to explain the difference between the Santhārā and Suicide through the table.

Difference Between *Santhārā* and Suicide

<i>Santhārā</i>	Suicide
1. <i>Santhārā</i> is a Jain technical word which means facing Peaceful Death through Fasting by an ascetic or a householder voluntarily and step by step termination of body with full awareness, wisdom and insight.	Suicide (<i>ātmaghāt</i> or <i>ātmahatyā</i> (self-destruction) is killing oneself by means employed by oneself and it is normally a misfortune of one's own making. A victim of suicide is either a victim of his/her mental weaknesses or of external circumstances, which he is not able to circumvent.
2. The main intention behind this spiritual practice is the attainment of self-realization through the shedding off karmas and to stop the wandering in the cycle of birth and death.	The main intention of committing suicide is to escape from the consequences of certain acts or events; disgrace, agony, punishment, social stigma or tyranny of treatment etc.
3. It is purely spiritual and religious practice of Jaina philosophy.	The kind of death is far away from religious or spiritual considerations.
4. It is simply the internal austerity of thinning the passions and the external austerity of	It is an emotional immaturity being the most powerful factor compelling a man to choose

reducing the diet and an auspicious way of achieving death.	suicide as the only solution to seemingly insurmountable difficulties.
5. A person abide by the vow of <i>Santhārā</i> is not afraid of leaving the body just as the traveller leaves an hotel without a thought. He courageously and bravely faces death just as the warrior in the battlefield.	A man committing suicide fears from the life situations and elopes from it cowardly unable to handle and face the situations and approaches different deadly means to end oneself.
6. When the body does not cooperate to help in living meaningfully any more, the person should resolve for <i>Santhārā</i> . As per the Jaina religion the body is called a boat, the soul is a boatman, the worldly existence is an ocean which the great sages cross over through the pious practice of <i>Santhārā</i> .	But in suicide, the body is healthy, all the organs of the body are well functional and some unfavourable situation which he/she feels to be incapable of facing it courageously, ends one's life merely to elope from the life situations.
7. <i>Santhārā</i> is undertaken with positive thinking and perfect understanding of the purpose of human life.	While suicide is the result of negative thinking and deluded world view towards the purpose of human life.
8. In many cases of <i>Santhārā</i> , many mysterious incidents occur. Moreover a shower of incense of saffron (<i>kesar barsaat</i>) is experienced due to purity of soul.	Whereas in suicide due to absence of such purity, no such mysticism takes place.
9. The observer achieves extra sensory knowledge and foretells that I am going to take birth in a particular realm.	The agent of suicide doesnot achieve such outstanding knowledge.
10. By confessing one's sins frankly and honestly before guru, he repents for all the misdeeds performed in the present life.	No such confession and repentance before guru for any act committed during the life.
11. The agent of <i>Santhārā</i> does not adopt any external weapons/aids for self-killing but he withdraws himself from food and water intake knowing clearly that body is no more assisting in digesting the food and water.	The common methods adopted by the agent for committing suicides are, jumping from heights, jumping in wells or deep water, jumping or lying down before a running train, shooting, hanging, poisoning by use insecticide or other drugs, burning oneself with the use of kerosene or petrol or the use of electrical wires (live) etc.
12. It is done patiently and by minimising the attachment and aversion towards all the nearest and dearest family members and towards one's possession.	Whereas in suicide, both the reasons attachment and aversion, are available and it is done in impatience.
13. Practice of <i>Santhārā</i> is based on the Double-effect theory. The death is exactly an incidental product that accompanies the spiritual purity through the elimination of	It is not based on such theory but it is a sort of pessimistic thought process leading towards the painful death.

<p>karmas exactly as chaff is an incidental growth accompanying the corn which is the essential product of the seed.</p>	
<p>14. Man of <i>Santhārā</i> has an eye on his upward journey (liberation) and does not think of the external objects i.e., worldly pleasures. He should protect his body for annihilating the past karmas.</p>	<p>But it is not the case with the suicide, as it is done when the person is unable to enjoy the worldly pleasures and such an act leads to the bondage of new <i>karmas</i>.</p>
<p>15. The ācārya (spiritual mentor) in a Jain sect is the responsible authority who decides when and under which situations one should be allowed for such a great vow.</p>	<p>Here man committing suicide is morally responsible for his /her act. He/she themselves decide under which situations it is to be committed.</p>
<p>16. <i>Santhārā</i> is adopted by monks and nuns after the due permission of guru before the huge audience with the positive mind of forgiveness and compassion towards all. Lay persons have to acquire permission from their guru and as well as from relatives.</p>	<p>Suicide is committed without such permission of parents, his /her, consent and is done with impure mind set, with feelings of negativity, in mental stress and tension, emotional excitements and in isolation.</p>
<p>17 There is a systematic methodology of <i>Santhārā</i> in canonical literature which takes the life span of twelve years of gradual limitation of food, water etc. and minimisation of passions.</p>	<p>It is an instant death committed out of passionate mental state by adoption of questionable devices at once.</p>
<p>18. The seven conditions under which a person can adopt <i>Santhārā</i> are, 1. incurable disease, 2. old age, 3. If human, infernal, animals cause <i>upasarga</i> (hardships), 4. when a favourable situation are present before the monk for deviation from conduct, 5. due to calamity if pure means of acquiring alms becomes impossible, 6. in furious forest if monks seeks no secured place, 7. the visual power, hearing power decreases and legs do not help in walking, <i>Santhārā</i> can be adopted.</p>	<p>Whereas suicide is committed instantly due to the disappointment and frustration in personal life, emotional or sentimental breakdown in married life or love affairs, unexpected and unbearable economic loss in trade or business, sudden and heart breaking grief brought on by the death of the nearest and dearest, appearance of some disease which is incurable or socially reprehensible, sudden development of melancholia or depression either due to heredity or other hidden causes, public disgrace or dishonour of one's self or the family, an unexpected shock due to failure to realize an ambition and many other unusual factors may be regarded, either individually or cumulatively, are causes driving an individual to commit suicide.</p>
<p>19. <i>Santhārā</i> is adopted voluntarily with high spirit of self-awareness, self-confession, self-repentance, leading towards the self-</p>	<p>Although it is also adopted voluntarily but with high level of negativity committed out of emotional immaturity and in psychological</p>

purification.	depression leading towards the self-destruction.
20.It is also claimed by the scholars that <i>Santhārā</i> is parallel to the practice of passive euthanasia. Jainism, as it is basically a non-violent religion is in opposition with this kind of mercy killing or death through euthanasia.	As euthanasia is a kind of suicide,whether it is active or passive ways of attaining death, is actually a violent act and a kind of murder even not permitted by IPC too.

There is thus radical difference between suicide and *Santhārā* as regards intention, situation, means adopted and the consequences of death. So it should be clearly kept in mind, that since the milk of a cow and milk taken out of the particular plant '*dhatūra/cactus*' seems equal, but one is nectar i.e. nourishes the body, the other is poison which destroys the body i.e. takes away the life. Likewise there is a great difference between suicide and *saṃlekhanā*.

The court ruled Monday 2015 that Santhara was not an “essential tenet” of Jainism and held it akin to suicide. Here it is essential clarify that Mahavira had far insight in propagating any practice. He was well aware of the fact that in the era of the fifth epoch the physical strength and stamina of the body will deteriorate gradually so he gave the freedom that one should undergo any spiritual activity after testing one’s own capacity. So in all the prescriptions and injections of the vows, he gave freedom of choice as quoted in canons as follows, *jahasuham devanupiya*. Although the vow of *Santhārā* is an essential part of jain religious practice, still one should judge one’s own discretion while undertaking any practice. So all the jains have their own freedom of choice to abide by this vow of *Santhārā* whenever he/she feels fit for to practice this vow of worldly detachment through self-detachment.

Conclusion:

In nutshell,it can be concluded that it is a well-planned spiritual death inspired by the highest ideal of self-realization to ward off further entanglement in the bondages of karmas. As per the judge claim that there is no proof of the practice of *Santhārā* before the independence. There are hundreds of instances of *Santhārā* have been recorded in the inscriptions found in different parts of the State of Karnataka and collected in twelve volumes of *Ephigraphia Carnatica* published by the state government and many scriptural and documental evidences are authentic sources to prove logically the age old ancient tradition of *Santhārā* being practiced in the court as.

It is emphatically denied that *Santhārā* is a voluntary suicide. Sallekhana (*Santhārā*) is arbitrarily equated with the offence of suicide or Sati or euthanasia by IPC. It is submitted that a voluntary fast unto death is an act of self-destruction, which amounts to “suicide”, which is a criminal offence and is punishable under section 309 by Rajasthan Court. But there is a radical difference between the *Santhārā* and suicide, Sati Pratha and Euthanasia, so it cannot be equated in any way with the above mentioned concepts philosophically, conceptually, and conventionally. I am very much convinced with the view of Abhishek Singhvi’s view presented logically and strongly claiming rectification of the High Court Jaipur judgement, published in Times of India, entitled *Santhārā is not Suicide* dated on 28.8,2015.

Moreover the tradition of *Sati Pratha* which is radically different from *Santhārā* from all angles of human understanding. The emerging concept of euthanasia needs to be further studied as few Western and Eastern scholars both relate it with the passive euthanasia but it is not so because the intention behind the vow of *Santhārā*, the situation, the means adopted and the consequences of death everything must be taken into the consideration before arriving at final judgement. So the need of the hour is to reinvestigate the entire procedure of pious death of *Santhārā* comprehensively. Moreover the case history study of the persons who have undergone such a practice of pure meditation and self-introspection with Supreme forgiveness towards one and all must be taken into consideration for better clarification of the fact.

Thus the basic concept of undertaking the vow of *Santhārā* as *Samādhi Marana* is that a man who is the master of his own destiny should resolve himself to follow the best method of leaving the body happily, peacefully and artistically. It can be finally concluded that *Sallekhana* is a retreat to peace in true sense, to be yourself entirely free from all distractions for pure contemplation and introspection. It is a noblest way to die in the pursuit of immortality.

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