

On Samlekhanā or Suspension of Aliment

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SAMLEKHANĀ or suspension of food and drink with a view to face death peacefully, undisturbed by worldly thoughts, is an important item of the Jaina code of spiritual discipline. We propose to consider the rational aspects of this dogma and also refer to a similar practice in Brāhmaṇism and Buddhism.

Life and will to live without any ulterior purpose and end have very little significance for the spiritual aspirant. Hedonistic ethics which sets forth pleasure as the end of life has not carried conviction to serious contemplative thinkers. It fails to draw the line of demarcation between life of the brute and life of the man. Apart from the question whether the world abounds in pleasure or pain, the aspirant for perfection is not satisfied with the present set up in spite of his capacity for amelioration. It is the presupposition of all religions that human life is susceptible to infinite improvement which reaches consummation in infinite perfection in every dimension. Life is thus a means for this consummation. When by age, disease and decrepitude of powers, a human being finds himself incapable of spiritual and moral advance and the physical existence becomes rather a handicap, a Jaina is asked to strive to get rid of this handicap by *samlekhanā* or suspension of food and drink till death.¹ It is misery in excelsis to

1 *Tattvārthabhāṣya*, VII. 17

become a burden on society without the capacity for contribution to the general weal. The Jaina in this situation adopts a course of graduated suspension of food and medicine with a view to shuffling off the mortal coil. He believes that the cessation of the present state of degradation entailed by loss of powers will lead to another spell of existence endowed with fresh vigour, strength and renewed opportunity for progress.

This tenet and practice of the Jaina religious ethics has become a source of controversy. The Jaina will not put an end to the life of another creature even when its life has become a source of unbearable misery. The act of mercy of Mahatma Gandhi who expedited the death of a calf by injection of poison in order to relieve it of the painful existence shocked the conscience of many an adherent of the cult of non-injury (*ahimsā*). A Jaina will not take exception to any remedial measure to alleviate the pain of the suffering creature. But death as the ultimate remedy will not commend itself to him. He will prefer to remain indifferent. But then, is he not open to the charge of injury to life, when he does demand to put an end to his own existence which has become a gratuitous burden? Is it anything short of suicide which involves injury to life, though one's own. The Jaina answers the dilemma by a counter-dilemma. Is the motive behind this religious suicide, *saṃlekhanā*, desire to get rid of pain? If so, it must be as reprehensible as a heinous crime and sin. But if the motive is not a device of escapism but a desire to get rid of disability, it must be construed in a different light. When physical disability entails spiritual and moral bankruptcy, the life has forfeited its moral justification. It is not fear of pain which inspires this extreme step, but fear of moral degradation or stagnation. In life there is either a move forward or a move backward and nothing stationary. The Jaina religious aspirant, therefore, takes steps to get release from the moral stagnation bound to lead to moral degradation. And it will not be fair to charge him with the guilt of committing suicide. When life becomes a drag and hindrance to the pursuit of self-purification, if has lost its significance. In Jaina ethics, therefore, the practice of *saṃlekhanā* is not prompted by motive of cowardice which fears pain and suffering. But it is motivated by the desire for renewal of life with fresh opportunities for self-amelioration by means of moral and spiritual purification.

The practice of suicide in extreme straits was also sanctioned in Brāhmaṇical ethics. But it is now forbidden probably owing to the abuse it gave rise to. Bhavabhūti, the Indian poet of Brāhmaṇical

persuasion, correctly stresses the purpose and justification of life to consist in the opportunity it affords for self-purification (*taportham āyuh*).²

There is a passage in Ācariya Buddhaghosa's *Samantapāsādikā*³, the *Atthakathā* on the Pāli Vinaya Piṭaka, where the question of the suspension of food and drink by a Buddhist monk is discussed and approved. Should a monk stop taking food and medicine if he is afflicted with long-drawn disease and finds his body incapable of surviving even if carefully tended and nourished, and his attendants tired and exhausted? The answer is in the affirmative. A monk is also allowed to stop taking food and medicine if he finds his disease acute and is convinced of the impossibility of survival and the attainment of spiritual elevation appears to him as a *fait accompli*. Even a monk who is not sick is permitted to do so provided he has developed detachment from fear of the world and considers begging of food as hindrance and handicap and desires to apply himself exclusively to meditation. Here meditation is the *vis a tergo* which compels him to suspend world by activities. The relevant text embodying the verdict runs as follows :

Yassa pana mahā-ābādho cirānubaddho, bhikkhū upatthahantā kilamanti jigucchanti “kadā nu kho gilānato muñcissāmā” ti attīyanti. Sa ce so “ayaṃ attabhāvo paṭijaggiyamāno pi na tiṭṭhati, bhikkhū ca kilamanti” ti āhāraṃ upacchindati, bhesajjaṃ na sevati vaṭṭati. Yo pana “ayaṃ rogo kharo, āyusaṃkhārā na tiṭṭhanti, ayaṃ ca me visesādhigamo hatthapatto viya dissatī” ti upacchindati vaṭṭati yeva. Agilānassā pi uppanna-saṃvegassa āhārapariyesanaṃ nāma papañco, “kammaṭṭhānameva anuyuñjissāmi” ti kammaṭṭhānasīsenā upacchindantassa vaṭṭati.

In modern times, Mahatma Gandhi gave a new meaning to this practice of fast unto death. He undertook such fasts for self-purification and acquiring spiritual strength. Injustice of any kind is not to be tolerated. But injustice cannot be removed by another sort of injustice. Violence, according to the Mahatma, is a form of injustice and as such is not to be resorted to for the removal of injustice in any field of life, social, political or moral. One has to set an example of non-violence and self-purification for convincing the aggressor of the

2 *Mālatīmādhava*, I. 7.

3 Pp. 463-4, Nālandā Edition.

injustice of his actions. And Mahatma Gandhi adopted fast unto death in order to cleanse himself of all ill-will—patent or latent—against the enemy, and effect change of heart of the aggressor. The old principle of *Samlekhana* thus found a new exponent in Mahatma Gandhi in the context of modern problems, national and international.

