

LESSON 23

SPIRITUAL DEATH SALLEKHANA

Sallekhana is voluntarily accepted spiritual death when sadhus or sadhvis as well as shrawakas and shrawikas realize that the life is very near to death due to the old age, incurable disease, severe famine, attack from the enemy or wild animal, etc. Accepting to perform Sallekhana is a very special vow. The principle behind this vow is that a person while giving up this body is in complete peace of mind, calmness, and has lots of patience and no hatred or attachment to anything and is without any fear at all by this way he not only prevents the influx of the new karmas but also purges the old karmas which are attached to the soul.

Sallekhana is also known by the other names like Samnyas-marana, Samadhi-marana, Santharo, etc.

All sadhus or sadhvis and many shrawakas and shrawikas have prepared themselves for Sallekhana and at the time when death is closure they decrease or nullify their passions and also give up whatever little attachment they may have to worldly matters. The sadhus or sadhvis give up attachment if at all to their teachers, like acharyas, upadhyays or even other sadhus and sadhvis while shrawakas and shrawikas to their family members, their belongings and friends and society, and gives up enmity, and possessiveness etc.

Usually this vow is undertaken under the supervision of sadhus and sadhvis but when they are not there then it may be taken under the supervision of learned shrawakas or shrawikas and if nothing else then vigilant family members.

A householder, who accepts this vow with pure mind, gives up the friendship, enmity, and possessiveness. He should forgive his relatives, companions and servants or acquaintances and should ask for the pardon of all the past unpleasant deeds against them. He should confess honestly with his preceptor all the sins committed by him or sins which he asked others to commit or sins he encouraged others to commit. During the period of this vow he should eliminate from his mind all the grief, fear, regret, affection, hatred, prejudice, passions, etc., to the fullest extent.

An approximate assessment of the remaining span of the life is necessary in order to adjust to the nature of the fasting. Initially, he should gradually give up the solid food and take the liquids only and ultimately give up the liquids and take only the boiled water and fast according to his capacity. He should also give up all the passions and mental weaknesses. He shall engross in spiritual activities like reading religious books, chanting religious hymns, listening to recorded sermons, and in the meditation, etc., without paying attention to the body. He should endure all the hardships, but if he falls ill or for any other reason can not maintain the peace of mind, then he should give up Sallekhana and resume taking foods and other activities.

To successfully observe this vow an ascetic or householder should select such a place where the government does not object to such vow and people have the respect and

understanding for such decisions. Such a precaution is necessary to ensure the external peace and the internal tranquility during the period of the vow.

Most people are not familiar with Jain practice which had been going on for thousands of years so they confuse Sallekhana with the suicide. They do not realize that suicide in eastern philosophy is described as Atmaghata or Atmahatya (self-destruction) and not Sallekhana. Both are different though end result is death in both. Suicide is a tragedy of one's own making due to being a victim of his mental weakness or of the external circumstances which he is not able to circumvent. The disappointments and frustration in the personal life, emotional or sentimental breakdown in married life or love-affairs, unexpected and unbearable economic loss in the trade or business, sudden and heart-breaking grief due to the death of the nearest and dearest, appearance of the disease which is incurable or socially reprehensible, sudden development of the depression, public disgrace or dishonor of one's self or the family, an unexpected shock due to the failure to fulfill an ambition and many other unusual factors may be regarded, either individually or cumulatively, as causes drive an individual to commit suicide under the effect of a sudden impulse.

On the other side in Sallekhana none of the above psychological or sociological circumstances are present while adopting this vow or in its fulfillment. The sole intention of the person adopting this vow is spiritual and definitely not temporal. The adoption of the vow is preceded by purification of the mind by the conquest of all the passions by practicing for a few years. This vow is performed in front of family members, society members in joyful atmosphere. The person adopts this vow to be liberated from the bondage of karma, which are responsible for cycle of rebirths in different states at a time when this body is no more useful to perform spiritual activities. Again, contrary to the suicidal, there is no desire to put an end to life quickly by some violent or objectionable means. There is no question of escaping from any shame, frustration or emotional excitement. There is no intention to harm oneself or any member of one's own family.

The atmosphere around and about the dead body is the one of good venerations. There is neither sorrow nor mourning. The occasion is treated as a religious festival with pujas, bhajans and recitation of religious mantras. There is no place for grief but there is joy. Many admire the spiritual heights reached by the departed and the new inspiration and devotion is awakened by this supreme event.

To explain the misunderstanding of the Western writers who have stated that Sallekhana is a suicide by starvation, Justice T. K. Tulok in the opinion wrote, "They are born and brought up under a religious philosophy which speaks of the world as the creation of God and that death by fasting, though, in accordance with the principles of an ancient religious philosophy which does not recognize any creator-God, is self-destruction against the will of God. They don't seem to have paid any attention to various points of distinction between Sallekhana and suicide."

In conclusion, there is nothing in common between a suicide and Sallekhana except that in both cases there is a death. In the case of suicide, death is brought about by

objectionable means because harm is caused to one's own body and to interests and feelings of the relatives and friends. In Sallekhana death is embraced with a very peaceful, tranquil process maintaining the peace of mind all along for everyone involved.

It is impossible for each and everybody to adopt the vow of Sallekhana because it requires the devotee to possess an unshakable conviction that the soul and the body are separate. The vow is adopted by a person who has purified his mind and body by austerity, repentance and forgiveness; has freed himself from all the passions and the afflictions; and has ceased to have any attachment for the friends and relatives. He greets the death with joy, and tranquility.

For whatever reasons, lapses may happen while observing this vow. The following are common examples:

- 1) Desiring worldly status like becoming a king, president or prime minister of the country or wealthy after death,
- 2) Desiring to become a divine personality after death,
- 3) Desiring prolonged life with the view of becoming popular,
- 4) Desiring early death, in order to cut short the physical or mental sufferings,
- 5) Desiring sensual pleasures of the world.