

आत्महत्या आणि आत्मार्पण
(Suicide and self-sacrifice)

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Veer Savarkar left his mortal coil on 26 February 1966 in the highest Yogic tradition by way of *prayopaveshan* (giving up food and water unto death). He did this with a sense of deep contentment at having fulfilled his worldly duties. In an article published in the Marathi monthly, *Sahyadri* (July 1964), Savarkar had spelt out the difference between suicide and self-sacrifice. Given below is an English rendering of Savarkar's article. Today, on the anniversary of the *atmarpan* of Veer Savarkar , we pay our homage.

धन्योऽहम् | धन्योऽहम् | कर्तव्यं मे न विद्यते किञ्चित् |

धन्योऽहम् | धन्योऽहम् | प्राप्तव्यं सर्वमद्य संपन्नम् || ¹

(Blessed am I, blessed am I, I know of no duty now,
Blessed am I, blessed am I, I have fulfilled what I wished to achieve)

Those who bring about their own death because they are fed up with life for some reason and whose death does not result from illness, accident or some such unavoidable circumstance are said to have committed suicide. In several societies, this is counted as a punishable offence. Without going into the theoretical distinction between 'soul' and 'life', in practice the act of taking one's own life is counted as suicide. However, in some instances, the voluntary act of taking one's own life which would otherwise qualify as 'suicide' is not considered as such; it is variously described by Sanskrit words such as *atmarpan* (self-sacrifice), *atmavisarjan* (self-immersion) and has been spoken of glowingly since ancient times. How has this distinction come about? Why has human society not considered certain types of suicide as punishable offences, has instead looked upon them as hallowed and glorious? The reason for this should be clear from some examples that I have given below. It is possible that in giving these examples, there are some deficiencies in my arguments in the present circumstances. Old age and illness have confined me to bed. As such, I have neither strength nor desire nor do I feel the need to look up the relevant reference books while giving these examples. I have relied solely on my memory while giving them. I am certain that minor deficiencies such as may exist shall not detract from the final conclusion that I seek to draw from these examples.

Prominent examples

1. Let us first consider the case of Kumārila Bhatta, the celebrated *Mimamsak* and confirmed champion of Vedic ritualism. In order to refute Buddhist philosophy by logic and argument, he first made a deep study of the *Tripitaka* and other Buddhist scriptures, adopted Buddhist practices and lived the life of a Buddhist. He then embarked on his life-mission of demonstrating the folly of these teachings. He participated in debate and discourse and re-established the primacy of Vedic *Mimansa* throughout Bharat. When he finally felt that he had successfully fulfilled his life-mission. He decided to seek penance for reading and abiding by non-Vedic and profane Buddhist scriptures, albeit done to secure victory for the Vedic religion. Hence, he pledged to reduce his body to ashes by offering himself to the holy fire rather than await a natural demise. Accordingly, he lit a pyre and entered it. His body was reduced to ashes in the leaping flames. But this glorious act of martyrdom has not been described as 'suicide'; rather it has been glowingly referred to in history as *agnidivya* (penance by fire) or *atmarpan* (self-sacrifice)

One can likewise give the example of Jagadguru Sri Adi Sankaracharya. In the course of his victorious nation-wide march for the spread of *Advaita* philosophy, he reached Kamrup or present-day Assam, he successfully debated with proponents of the *Shakta* school of philosophy. Unable to digest his victory, some hotheads of the *Shakta* school tried to poison him. This adversely impacted his health. Nonetheless, he continued his victorious march to Kashmir, successfully concluding it. In Kashmir he established his fourth principal seat. His great mission of establishing seats of *Advaita* philosophy in four corners viz. Sringeri, Dwarka, Puri and Kashmir was thus complete. It is well-known that Sri Sankaracharya was in the prime of his youth at that time. Nonetheless, his ingrained renunciant bent of mind, best expressed by his aphorism “यदहरेव विरज्येत् तदहरेव प्रव्रजेत् | गृहात् वा वनात् वा” (“Renounce the world as soon as you feel detached, be it at home or in the forest”), coupled with his poor health, the immense satisfaction gained from the writing of the *Mahabhasya* and other books, and the founding of aforementioned four seats, led him to be overcome with the desire to end his earthly life and become one with the Supreme *Brahman* in a spirit of total self-satisfaction.

Hence, in keeping with the tradition of past *yogis*, he decided to enter a cave. Inside the cave, he assumed a *yogic* posture and had his disciples roll a huge boulder to close its mouth. Jagadguru Sankaracharya thus ended his own life in a spirit of supreme satisfaction. While there is something common in what is called willful ending of one's life or the offence of suicide and this type of *yogic* self-sacrifice, Jagadguru Sankaracharya's entry into the cave of death is rightly referred to in history not as 'suicide' but as 'self-sacrifice'. Our ancient history is replete with such examples of great *yogis* entering the cave of death. Let us now turn to similar examples of self-sacrifice from relatively recent chapters of our history.

2. A similar tale is narrated in relation to the well-known Vaishnava *acharya* from Bengal, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu or Gaurang Prabhu as he is endearingly called. Spreading the message of total devotion to Sri Krishna, he would wend his way through various towns leading huge multitudes of devotees engrossed in the collective singing of *bhajans*. Chaitanya Mahaprabhu would dance away totally immersed in the spirit of *bhakti*. Having thus flooded the whole of Bengal with *bhakti*, he finally made his way to Jagannath Puri. While leading a throng of devotees on the seashore, he saw the blue ocean and overcome by sublime devotion took it to be the manifestation of the dark-blue Sri Krishna. An irresistible urge to become one with his Lord prompted him to leap into the vast ocean all the while chanting “O Krishna! O Shyam! O Shyam!!” He thus committed self-sacrifice. This act has been termed in history as ‘*jalasamadhi*’ (water immersion) or *atmarpan* (self-sacrifice) and not as ‘suicide’.

3. The tale of Dnyaneshwar is well-known in Maharashtra. While still in his youth, this genius wrote *Dnyaneshwari* and *Amrutanubhav*, two books that can be called the pinnacle of the temple of philosophy. With a feeling of deep contentment of having thus completed his life-mission, he ended his earthly journey when he was not yet thirty years old. A state of *samadhi* may not be final and irreversible in *yogis* who can enter that state. A yogi who has entered a state of *samadhi* is capable of reversing it as well. He can re-enter the material world after a short period. But Dnyaneshwar did not choose to enter a state of temporary *samadhi*; rather he decided to enter such a state permanently. His elder brother and *guru* Nivruttinath gave his consent to Dnyaneshwar’s decision. Accompanied by the singing of *bhajans* by scores of saints, Dnyaneshwar voluntarily entered his final resting-place which he had himself built and assumed a *yogic* posture. Nivruttinath himself sealed the final abode. Dnyaneshwar thus entered final *samadhi*.

Though the acts of deliberately taking away one’s own life and entering a state of *samadhi* are outwardly similar, saints and commoners unanimously pronounce that Dnyaneshwar entered *samadhi* or that he did self-sacrifice, not that he committed suicide.

5. Similar is the case of Samartha Ramdas’ self-sacrifice. Samartha Ramdas took upon the rooting out of foreign invasion as his life-mission. He kindled the fire of *dharmayuddha* (righteous war) in the Hindus of Maharashtra and built a formidable organization by dint of his penance. Imbued with the same zeal, Chhatrapati Shivaji rattled the thrones of various Moslem chiefs and emperors. When Shivaji thumbed Aurangzeb himself and established a sovereign Hindu State, Hindu Flag and Hindu Throne at Raigad, Samartha Ramdas was beside himself with joy at this glorious Hindu victory. Having thus experienced the unimaginable success of his pledge, the 80-year old Samartha Ramdas felt that his life-mission was now complete. Just then, the terrible news of Shivaji’s passing away reached him. “Our king has left us” he exclaimed sorrowfully. Soon thereafter, Sambhaji Raja impulsively arrested several prominent lieutenants of Chhatrapati Shivaji and put many of them to death. Brothers became enemies in *swarajya*. Sambhaji himself sat at the foot of Sajjangad (Ramdas’s abode)

and insisted on meeting him. Sensing that Sambhaji who had harmed his father's trusted lieutenants could very well harm his mentor, Samarth Ramdas declined to come down the fort on health grounds and instead sent a letter as a gesture of blessing. In this famous letter, Samarth Ramdas appealed to Sambhaji to remember Shivaji's personality, valour and perspicacity; stake his life to strike the *mlecchas* and maintain and expand the Maratha Empire. Aurangzeb who was incensed at the news of a sovereign Hindu Empire was planning to personally attack the Marathas. Hearing this ominous news, Samarth Ramdas felt that his old and frail body was now incapable of meeting this new challenge. Thinking that the Almighty had desired to bless him with the founding of an independent Hindu state and that the new generation ought to rely on their own valour and the grace of Almighty to solve their problems, Samarth Ramdas resolved to end his earthly life by fasting unto death. He called his disciples and expressed his resolve to renounce his body as it had fulfilled its mission. Consoling his grieving disciples that he would forever live with them and guide them through his *Dasbodh* (his famous literary work), he seated himself and accompanied by *Ramdhun*, gave up food and water. Legend has it that at the conclusion of the *Ramdhun*, Samarth Ramdas was blessed by the *darshan* of Sri Rama himself and he surrendered his frail body at the lotus feet of the Lord.

The willful termination of a life that has fulfilled its mission and is now a mere burden to self and society is the common factor in 'suicide' and '*atmarpan*' (self-sacrifice). Yet, no one says that "Samarth Ramdas committed suicide". "Samarth fasted unto death; he did self-sacrifice" has been the verdict of history.

6. Similar are the legends associated with Eknath and Tukaram. Eknath's health deteriorated after a lifetime spent in writing several excellent books and spreading *Haribhakti*. He started feeling that the Lord probably did not desire any further service from him. Despite a transient flicker of recovery in his sick body, he resolved to end a burdensome existence. With immense satisfaction, he performed a ritual bath in the river Godavari in Paithan and entered the waters. His act of entering the water has not been vilified as 'suicide'; rather it has been glorified to the extent that the site of his self-immersion is considered sacred.

Later, Sant Tukaram visited this sacred site in Paithan. Sant Tukaram was well aware of the legend of Eknath's self-immersion. Having completed his life-mission of spreading *bhakti* by his mid-life, Tukaram intensely desired to meet his Lord. Having resolved to end his earthly life, he visited the residents of his Dehu town one by one and bid farewell. Singing his valedictory *abhang*, he told those assembled that he was going to his native village and this was thus their last meeting. He went to the bank of the river Indrayani and felt that the Lord had come in his aerial vehicle to take him away. One version has it that like Eknath before him, Tukaram too entered the waters of the Indrayani in a state of pure bliss. Others say that he physically sat in the Lord's airplane and went to heaven.

The inference from both versions is that Tukaram felt that his earthly life had been blessed and that he renounced this world to become one with the Lord in a spirit of deep contentment. Hence Tukaram's renouncing of his material existence has not been termed as 'suicide' but has been glowingly referred to as 'self-sacrifice'.

From the few examples given above, one may conclude that not all acts of willful termination of one's life are condemned as 'suicides'. Those who end their

lives in a spirit of frustration, dissatisfaction or discontentment and cannot live happily even though they so wish are said to have committed 'suicide'. But those who happily end their lives with the blessed sense of having fulfilled their life-mission or objective are said to have committed self-sacrifice. Though this changing and evolving earthly world can never be said to have achieved perfection, blessed souls voluntarily end their lives with the realization that they have nothing left to achieve or fulfill. They merge their mortal life into the immortal Universal Life. As the *Yogvasishtha* says:

अंतरिक्तो बहिरिक्तो रिक्त कुम्भरिवाम्बरे
अंतःपूर्णो बहिःपूर्णो पूर्ण कुम्भरिवार्षवे

(An empty pot is in reality filled with the sky, a pot immersed in the sea has sea both within and without; it is hence full within and without)

With a feeling of self-satisfaction at having largely perfected their life-mission and rather than let their body become a burden to self and society, such souls renounce their bodies by entering a cave or fasting unto death or entering fire or water or enter a state of *samadhi*. Though their act may be grossly referred to as 'willful termination of life', it is only fitting that it should be referred glowingly as 'self-sacrifice'.

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धन्योऽहम् | धन्योऽहम् | प्राप्तव्यं सर्वमद्य संपन्नम् ||

¹ Quotation from the *Avadhoot Upanishad*. It is also the 94th *shloka* of *Panchadashi* (*Trupti-deep*).