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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

**SELF-WILLED DEATH: AN ASPECT OF EUTHANASIA IN BUDDHISM**

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**ABSTRACT**

Euthanasia has long drawn history in the western philosophical tradition. The practice of euthanasia had been regarded as ethically and morally defamable, though eminent philosophers like Socrates and Plato spoke in favour of it. Self-willed death in Indian culture is almost equivalent to euthanasia in western culture. In spirituo-religious practice, self-willed death held a position of high esteem. In Buddhism a monk must be indifferent towards life and death. A monk or follower was explicitly told that he would not commit self-immolation in order to reach nirvana sooner. In spite of these strong strictures against self-immolation, Buddhist monks used to put an end to their lives wilfully only to get enlightened. The stories relating to self-willed deaths of Vakkali, Godhika, Chhana, Siha and Sappadasa amply testify our view. The paper seeks to explore the relationship between euthanasia and self-willed death with special reference to Buddhism.

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**INTRODUCTION**

The word "euthanasia" comes from the Greek 'eu' and 'thanatos'. It means "happy death" or "good death". It has come to mean the intentional ending of one's own life only to get rid of suffering--that is to say, mercy killing. Euthanasia now generally means an act or method of causing death painlessly so as to end suffering. In the Greek and Roman antiquity euthanasia was an accepted practice, though its nature and practice were different. But there were many prominent thinkers who were against the very concept and practice of euthanasia. The Pythagoreans opposed it as they believed in the human soul, and hence the artificial termination of life was a violation of God's commands. There was also a group of physicians, headed by Hippocrates, who was not in favour of using deadly drugs: "I will not give a drug that is deadly to any one if asked (for it), nor will I suggest the way to such a counsel."<sup>1</sup>

The Stoics endorsed euthanasia when a person's life was no longer in accord with his or her individual felt needs and self-knowledge. The Stoic philosopher Zeno found the means of suicide to get rid of unbearable pain in the leg. ".....the stoic founder, Zeno, committed suicide in his old age prompted the agonizing pain of a foot injury."<sup>2</sup> Socrates, Plato have strongly supported euthanasia. While Aristotle opposed it as it deprived the state of its productive members and the very act was cowardly. During the Second World War the German chancellor Hitler did a sabotage in the name of euthanasia. But at present it is legally approved in some countries like Netherland, Belgium, Australia.

From the above discussion we come to know in brief the meaning of the word euthanasia and its western application. Now let us draw the attention to the application of the word euthanasia from the Indian point of view. We should try to prove whether euthanasia or its homogenous kind was at all prevalent in the ancient Indus tradition. We could find indication of euthanasia or some equal kind of death and its application, though the word euthanasia is not directly used in Indian culture. Such kind of death is stamped as self-willed death. So we should also try to realize the word euthanasia in the context of Indian ideology.

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Now let us discuss how the relation goes on in between the term euthanasia and self-willed death. The ground of euthanasia is larger than that of self-willed death. Euthanasia is applied either with consent or dissent of an individual, whereas in case of self-willed death the willingness gets much priority.

We observe various aspect of self-willed death in Indian concept, like -Atmaghata or Atmahatya (death by suicide), Sahamarana or Sahagamana or Anvarohana (the burning of a widow on the death of her husband), Virgati (heroic death at war), Icchamrtya or Icchamarana (death at will), Mahaprasthan (embracing death through final journey), Prayopavesa (death by solemn fast), Samadhimarana (death while in meditation or in a yogic posture), Sallekhana (death through wilfull fasting).

The above discussed various aspect of death in brief are found in the Indian thought and culture. We should bound our concourse in this regards mainly on the ground of Buddhism. Let us discuss the different ways of self-willed death in Buddhism.

Non-violence in Buddhism has been given much priority. Buddha himself was a strict follower of non-violence. This is why any kind of killing is forbidden in Buddhist philosophy. Buddha has spent his life in finding out the causes of sorrow, sickness in this material world. He has appear as if as a saviour of the people.

Self-willed death in Buddhism has come into vogue by the Buddhist sannyasis (hermits). Although in the third chapter of Vinaya-Pittaka (Parajika) Buddha has preached his follower not to destroy their life. It has been considered ominous. But some Buddhist monks being frustrated with their meditative life destroyed their live. Again meditative monks become dubious to the object of their determined lives. They satisfy themselves on the thought that the destruction of the mortal body is essential for their enlightenment. Thus many of the Buddhist monks choose the way of self-willed death to avoid such perilous way. Buddha instructed all the monk that they will be expelled from the Buddhist monastery if anyone is found to provoke someone to put an end to life in this way. He advised his followers to die a normal death, not to accept the way of self-willed death. In Parajika Buddha instructed: "whatever monk should intentionally

deprive a human being of life or should look about so as to be his knife-bringer, or should praise the beauty of death, or should incite (any one) to death.....he also is one who is defeated, he is not in communion.”<sup>3</sup> He wants his followers not to incite common people to self-willed death. In this context his advice is-“Life is precious and death for every living being. Judging from your own life’s valuelessness don’t kill and don’t let kill.”<sup>4</sup>

But the self-willed death has been approved for those Buddhist monks who have been leading life through intolerable anguish. Such as the self-willed death Chhana, Vakkali, Godhika is worth mentioning.<sup>5</sup> Chhana and Vakkali committed suicide by cutting their throat to get rid of unbearable physical pain. Godhika on the other hand decided to die wilfully when he failed again and again to gain Nirvana. So that he could do it in the next life with resolute attention. The death of Vakkali and Chhana is said to have been pardonable to Buddha. But as to the death of Godhika Buddha did not have conveyed any opinion.

On the other hand Siha was distressed at not having obtained spiritual progress even after seven years of endeavour. She wanted to die through hanging. But when the rope was tied round her neck, she was turning her thought towards enlightenment as was her former habit. She attained arhatship, and at this very moment the rope loosened from her throat and fell. Another monk Sappadasa was overpowered by passion and never obtained concentration. This distressed him so much that he was about to commit suicide with a razor or a sword when he suddenly realized the inward vision.<sup>6</sup> The discussion above shows that except on some ground, self-willed death has not been approved in any way or any argument in Buddhist philosophy.

Many of the physicians of the India were Buddhist monk. This physician could use and administer poisonous medicine in course of their medical practice. Thus we can presume that physician assisted suicide was current among the Buddhist monk. But the Buddhist monk had to perform some discipline. Specially those who were monks and physicians has some restrictions relating to the act of abortion and they are not allowed to approve or incite death and even to administer life killing medicine<sup>7</sup> So physician assisted suicide in Buddhist philosophy is not permissible.

The saint of New Buddhism believed in abandoning one’s existence as the best sacrifice for to burn one body as an offering is certainly more meritorious than to kindle lamps at shrine. The stories of a future Sakyamuni who gave his body to feed a starving tigress and the

legend of Bhaisajyaraja, who filled his body with all sorts of oil and set it on fire are worth recording in this connection.<sup>8</sup> The Pratyekabuddhas, like Sakyamuni, decided for themselves when the time came and, rising a few cubits above the ground, burned themselves. Though Santideva in his *Siksa-Samuccaya* is to show that the sacrifice of one body is not in accordance with a wise estimate of the spiritual needs of a beginner.

But it was perhaps in accordance with the principles of New Buddhism that self-surrender culminating in voluntary death has been held in honour in various Buddhist countries. In China and Japan the subject of self-willed death gradually getting acceptability among the latter all Buddhist monks irrespective of their well and unwell health. At present Dalai Lama, a religious teacher has concentrated on the matter of self-willed death. He says, “in the event a person is definitely going to die, and he is either in great pain or has virtually become a vegetable, and prolonging his existence is only going to cause difficulties and suffering to others, the termination of his life may be permitted.”<sup>9</sup>

## NOTES AND REFERENCE

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