

**Dying Wisely:
Sallekhana in Ancient and Modern Jain Practice**
By Cora Ballou

The Jain lifestyle is one of severe and constant restrictions which serve to limit the buildup of negative karma during one's lifetime. Tied to the "central and necessary moral tenet of *ahimsā*, 'non-violence'",¹ these restrictions require a state of continuous self-control in regards to actions, thoughts and sayings, which aim at a completely action-less state.² In doing so Jains hope to engender a better rebirth, and a (better) chance at reaching enlightenment (*kaivalya*). This rigorous adherence to self-control is extended to every aspect of life, including the process of death, which is especially problematic in regards to karma. Because ageing and dying can sometimes be a slow and degenerative process, Jainism has had to develop a system which would accept the unavoidability of death, while also limiting the loss of control that often accompanies infirmity. *Sallekhanā*, *santhara*, and *samādhimarana* are all terms which describe the process of ritually fasting to death that some Jains undertake at the end of their lives in response to this issue. A practice detailed in many ancient scriptures, it remains a part of contemporary Jain belief, though its ideology has come into conflict with modern day perceptions of death and suicide. In an effort to elaborate a detailed but concise description of *sallekhanā*, this paper will endeavor to juxtapose scriptural evidence of the practice with modern perceptions of it found on the Internet. Using both ancient and modern sources, the evolving understanding and practice of *sallekhanā* will be explored, concluding with a discussion on the ongoing debate regarding its association with suicide.

The Art Of Dying Wisely

Those who practice *sallekhanā* believe that by controlling the time and process of death, they can best fulfill their vow of "proper conduct" (*samyak chāritra*). Anticipating a time when infirmity would prevent them from fulfilling their duties, some Jains decide to perform *sallekhanā* so as to minimize the accumulation of negative karma, which would adversely affect future births.³ As Padmanabh S. Jaini explains,

Having spent a lifetime in pursuit of proper conduct it behooves a Jain to prevent the process of aging from undermining his practice... [by passing] his final hours in *asamyama*, non-restraint.⁴

It is believed that because fasting is understood to be a non-violent action, *sallekhanā* is therefore an ideal way to both accept the unavoidability of death, and maintain self-control until the very last moment.⁵ This idea stems from the Jain belief that there are two types of death: the "wise" death and the "ignorant" death. In the ancient Jain sacred text *Uttarādhyayana Sūtra*, the difference between these two deaths is described as a matter of will. As it explains, "...Two ways of life ending ...have been declared: death with one's will, and death against one's will".⁶ According to this text, these two types of death are differentiated by the fact that "death with one's will is that of wise men, and at best happens but once", while "death against one's will is that of ignorant men, and happens (to the same individual) many times".⁷ The "ignorant" man is

further characterized by his “cruel actions”⁸ who then “trembles in fear”⁹ once death approaches, while the wise man is described as “virtuous” and “full of peace”¹⁰ in life and in death. Therefore according to the *Uttarādhyayana Sūtra*, there is clear difference in how one can die, which is directly associated with self-control and the actions of an individual over a lifetime. Individuals “who control themselves and subdue their senses”¹¹ are more likely to achieve “death with one’s will,” characterized by a state of calmness and an “undisturbed mind”.¹² The *Uttarādhyayana Sūtra* pursues this idea by describing how one can achieve this “wise” death. According to this text, when “the right time (to prepare for death) has arrived, a faithful monk should ... suppress all emotions... and wait for the dissolution of his body”.¹³ Therefore not only is death a matter of action and state of mind during and at the end of one’s lifetime, but dying itself must be done in a specific way which involves the total mastery of one’s body and senses. Thus even in death, as in life, a “good” Jain practices complete self-control and limitation of direct action.

Though the *Uttarādhyayana Sūtra* specifically mentions monks as being capable of achieving a “death with one’s will,” other Jain texts extend this belief to include laypersons. In the *Tattvārtha Sūtra* the householder vows are enumerated, dictating the different obligations integral to a Jain lay existence.¹⁴ Found within these vows is the following edict: “the householder should become a practitioner of the penitential rite of emaciation of the passions by a course of fasting which spans a number of years and ends in death.”¹⁵ Thus once again, death and fasting are understood to be intrinsically linked, this time explicitly extending the obligation to laypersons. Therefore it is evident that Jain philosophy believes that Jain laymen and women, as well as mendicants, should embark on the process of dying through fasting. In keeping with the overarching doctrine of *ahimsā* and self-control, Jainism extends the possibility of a better rebirth (and of enlightenment) to all Jains regardless of their status. Of course, the difficulties inherent in performing *sallekhanā* would mean that the practice would be most often undertaken by mendicants, who practice severe fasting throughout their lives.¹⁶ Yet by including it in the layperson’s vows, it allows for a kind of ideal that even householders can strive for.

Nevertheless the actual physical process of *sallekhanā* remains rather vague in both the *Uttarādhyayana* and the *Tattvārtha Sūtras*. Both present a goal for those wishing to experience a “good” Jain death, but little is said on how one can actually go about achieving it. For the more practical aspects of *sallekhanā*, the *Ratna-Karandaka Śravakācāra* has served as the basis for many ancient and modern discussions on the subject. This ancient Jain philosophical text spends multiple verses explaining the process of the ritual, placing special emphasis on the mental aspects of the practice. Additionally the prerequisites for properly performing *sallekhanā* are also listed, presenting a step-by-step guide to its right practice. To begin, a person wishing to embark on the path of *sallekhanā* must give up all “love, hatred, companionship and attachment to possession,” while also obtaining “forgiveness of one’s own kinsmen ... while also forgiving them yourself”.¹⁷ This must be followed by a meeting with one’s guru, who will decide whether or not the individual is ready to adopt this final vow.¹⁸ Upon obtaining the permission of the guru, the practitioner must banish “all grief, fear, anguish, attachment, wickedness and hatred” by keeping his or her “mind pleased with the nectar of scriptures”.¹⁹ Having elaborated these preliminary steps, the texts then goes on to explain the physical aspects of the practice. The first

step is to “give up gradually all solid foods”,²⁰ before foregoing all liquids except hot water, and finally giving up water altogether and awaiting the arrival of death in deep meditation.²¹ The text stresses that throughout the process the individual must maintain a non-attached state of mind, a state which must not include “entertaining a desire to live, wishing for speedy death, exhibiting fear ...or expecting to be born with all comforts ...in the next life”.²² In analyzing this text, it is interesting to note that the ancient sources are most concerned with the state of mind of the practitioner. The fast itself appears to be almost secondary, and the reasons or expected results of *sallekhanā* are never mentioned. Though it can be assumed that dying in a ritual fast must engender less negative karma leading to a better rebirth, the text explicitly states that one must not think about this while deciding and undergoing *sallekhanā*. Yet if one must not have a goal in mind when beginning the fast, why would one embark on it in the first place? But acknowledging these thoughts would go against the Jain notion of detachment and self-control which forms the foundation of its belief system. In addition, the fast is usually a very public affair, involving family and community support,²³ a reality which also belies the notion of non-attachment found in the scriptures. Consequently this may reveal an underlying ambiguity regarding both death and its proper “practice”.

Further ambiguities are demonstrated within the *Ratna-Karandaka*, especially in regards to the conditions required for deciding to adopt “the great vow of *Sallekhanā*”.²⁴ As the text explains, a ritual death fast can only be undertaken in a time of “unavoidable calamity, severe draught, old age or incurable disease”.²⁵ Yet at the same time, it stresses that “one should try to the best of one’s ability to attain the glory of *Sallekhanā*”.²⁶ Therefore a certain tension is once again revealed regarding the motivations for performing *sallekhanā*. On the one hand, fasting until death demonstrates the ultimate “control of one’s mind and conduct”²⁷ thereby emphasizing the primacy of non-action and self-control in Jain ideology, and glorifying those who achieve this state of being. On the other hand, *sallekhanā* can only be practiced in very specific situations associated with eminent death. This may be because *sallekhanā* inherently treads a very fine line between complete adoption of Jain philosophy and the very anti-Jain action of suicide. Due to Jainism’s intense respect for life, the notion of letting a person commit suicide would be quite problematic.²⁸ Furthermore, suicide is an extremely violent action, which requires a person’s active participation in his or her own death. Actively undertaking suicide would then come into direct conflict with many fundamental Jain doctrines. It is clear that this issue preoccupied ancient Jains, who penned numerous explanations to demonstrate how *sallekhanā* differed from suicide. The *Sāgāra-Dharmāmṛta* explains the difference as residing in the individual’s state of mind. If one “becomes indifferent to his own body owing to his disability to keep up his vow, [he] will not be committing suicide”, because suicide is the act of ending one’s life “in the grip of passion like anger by means of poison and other things...”.²⁹ Consequently the difference is that suicide is associated with emotion and direct action. Therefore *sallekhanā*, which requires a peaceful mind and a lack of action, would not be considered suicide. The commentary found in the *Sarvārthasiddhi* mirrors this distinction between suicide and *sallekhanā* in its assertion that, “a person who practices *sallekhanā* is not acting thoughtlessly because he does not have desire ...a person possessed by desire does commit suicide”.³⁰ Once again the difference lies in the fact that those performing *sallekhanā* remain indifferent to the process and result of their

action, thereby differentiating themselves from those who commit suicide. Yet once again, these texts demonstrate a tension regarding the purpose of *sallekhanā*. If one is performing the fast, it is because of “his disability to keep up his vow”³¹ demonstrating a desire by the person to maintain his vow, which means they are actively participating in bringing about their own death. This issue remains unresolved, and has only become more controversial as modernity has increasingly encroached on traditional Jain lifestyles.

A Modern Way Of Dying

By looking at Internet discussions concerning *sallekhanā*, the differences between ancient and contemporary Jain life are clearly highlighted. Due to changing perceptions of death and suicide, along with the emergence of a Jain diaspora, Jain death practices have had to be updated to fit a more current cultural model. This is especially true in regards to *sallekhanā*, whose association with suicide has come to dominate discussions of the practice. For the most part it would appear that modern Jains rely heavily on the scriptural evidence when discussing *sallekhanā*. These Internet discussions often focus on justifying and validating the practice within a contemporary context. Accordingly, the scriptural/sacred basis for it is frequently emphasized. For example, in the article entitled “The Art of Dying” found in the JAINA produced Jain Way of Life Handbook, the spiritual aspect of *sallekhanā* are consistently underlined by referencing the Jain canon, and especially the *Uttarādhyayana Sūtra*.³² Other texts will simply refer to the “Jain tradition”³³, and will explain the process using the steps found in the *Ratna-Karandaka*. In almost every case though, *sallekhanā* is described as a spiritual death, or is framed within the idea that Jainism teaches the “art of dying”³⁴ (Ibid. 122; Modi, “Celebration of Death”) thereby legitimizing and justifying the practice. Discussions concerning *sallekhanā* are often underlined by the notion that those who undertake the practice are to be highly respected. One *Jainlist* message board writer explained his desire to combine *dīkshā* with *sallekhanā*, associating the act of becoming one of Jainism’s highly revered ascetics with ritually fasting to death.³⁵ Another *Jainlist* writer described how a certain Mr. Adinathan had taken the “profound decision” to undertake *sallekhanā*, before adding “I admire him and pay my obeisance at his feet”³⁶ thereby clearly demonstrating the honorability of Mr. Adinathan. For the most part, it would also appear that contemporary Jains associate *sallekhanā* with the mendicant life, where *dīkshā* is often considered a prerequisite of taking the *sallekhanā* vow. Another post writer speaking about Mr. Adinathan explains “He now awaits the arrival of a learned monk... to take the vows of a Digambara Jain monk”,³⁷ while another text describes those who perform *sallekhanā* as “votarists”, a term associated with the monastic life.³⁸ This is further supported by the fact that all of the *sallekhanā* death notices found during my research concerned only monks. For example, one *Jainlist* user began his post with “I am deeply sorry to inform you that 90 year old Acarya Shri Samymasagara...died in *sallekhanā*”³⁹, clearly demonstrating that the deceased was not only a monk, but a high level religious figure. Another typical notice is found in the August 2005 issue of the *Ahimsa Times* newsletter which announces that the “Digambar Saint Shri Meru Bhushan Ji is on a fast unto death ... since July 26th,”⁴⁰ once again clearly demonstrating the high religious status of the practitioner. This is also substantiated by Jaini who explains that in contemporary times, “only a mendicant is usually ...given the freedom [to preform *sallekhanā*]”.⁴¹ Though this does not mean that every case of modern *sallekhanā* is

undertaken by ascetics,⁴² the fact that the vow is associated the *dīkshā*, along with the examples of death notices, point to the reality that *sallekhanā* is a predominantly monastic practice.

In a clear evolution of understanding regarding the ritual, many online notices provided the individual's reason for undertaking the fast, and often these reasons did not correspond with the conditions listed in the *Ratna-Karandaka*. For example, the message board writer mentioned above, who wished to perform *dīkshā* and *sallekhanā*, began his post with the question "Is being a Jain ascetic the only way out of this quagmire of transmigration?" before declaring that "taking *dīkshā* [and *sallekhanā*] is the only practical answer to the conundrum of transmigration and all the miseries it entails".⁴³ By revealing that his intent was to end the cycle of rebirth, the writer is exhibiting a desire to achieve *kaivalya*, thereby going against the traditional motivations for the fast. Similarly the January 2005 issue of the *Ahimsa Times* reports the "infinite fast" of a Digambar monk in protest over "the illegal occupation at the fifth peak of Siddh Kshetra Girnar Ji".⁴⁴ The story further relates the monk's declaration that he will be "forced to undergo 'Upsarg *sallekhana samadhimaran*,' unless the conflict is resolved, demonstrating a very different interpretation of *sallekhanā* than that found in the ancient scriptures.

In practice the modern process of *sallekhanā* follows closely the steps enumerated in the *Ratna- Karandaka*. Death notices found on message boards usually refer in detail to the slow reduction of food and liquids undertaken by the monk, while also stressing their peaceful state of mind at the time of death. Yet because this is happening in contemporary times, some adjustments have inevitably had to be made. For example, issues regarding final testaments, "Do Not Resuscitate" forms and funeral preparations must be arranged prior to beginning the fast. In the "Art of Dying", a whole section is dedicated to enumerating pre- and post-death "practical steps",⁴⁵ while also covering the legal issues associated with *sallekhanā*. This last point is especially important in regards to the Diaspora community (i.e. those living outside of India) "where the medical, legal and political systems are more complex".⁴⁶ Furthermore, cultural sensitivities and the controversial subject of assisted suicide is a further impediment for those living outside of India. Though, as the text concedes, the "assistance from another individual... is not considered *Samlekhana [sic]*"⁴⁷ the issues regarding letting someone fast to death remain problematic in the Western world. In India, it would appear that there is less controversy over the issue, though the question regarding the difference between suicide and *sallekhanā*, and its legal ramifications, remains a hotly debated topic.

The Pursuit Of *Sallekhanā*

In searching various Jain message boards for the word "*sallekhanā*", the most popular results focused on explaining how the practice is performed and how it differs from suicide. Many posts featured articles found elsewhere on the Internet, while others were by individuals who seemed compelled to discuss the topic. In all cases the explanations ended by differentiating between *sallekhanā* and suicide, stressing the traditional and noble aspect of the former over the negative karmic effects of the latter. In addition, the amount of explanation found on the Internet seems to indicate that *sallekhanā* remains a fringe practice, with few Jains fully understanding the ideological or practical aspects. The fact that most death notices appear to be attributed to

monks also further demonstrates that few lay Jains actually perform the ritual. Most notices were many months, or even years, apart further illustrating the infrequent practice of *sallekhanā* in contemporary Jainism. Furthermore the number of posts relating to wanting to take the *sallekhanā* vow, in comparison to the number of death notices indicates that the practice remains an ideal that some Jains wish to pursue, but few achieve. Nevertheless it is clear that *sallekhanā* continues to be an accepted part of Jain ideology and practice, but takes up only a small part of contemporary Jain existence. Though it continues to be seen as a very honourable act, it is less clear whether or not Jains, especially lay Jains, are interested in pursuing this path.

Death is problematic in all religions, and is therefore often associated with a wide array of rituals. Jainism is no different in its response to death, which presents many difficulties in regards to its ideological system. Due to life's often slow ebb, the approach of infirmity can be catastrophic to even the most pious Jain. As a result, the practice of *sallekhanā* has emerged as a way to both accept death and diminish the negative karma associated with disability. Though ancient sources tend to emphasize the importance of properly approaching death, contemporary Jainism seems to place less emphasis on this, and though *sallekhanā* continues to be honoured and discussed in contemporary times, it does not appear to be frequently practiced outside of the monastic orders. The changing perceptions on death and suicide, the Diaspora community and the legal and political issues surrounding the practice, have come to affect how *sallekhanā* is viewed in contemporary Jain circles. As in the case of the ancient sources, contemporary Jains must contend with the inherent tensions in the ideology of *sallekhanā*, which stresses both detachment and attachment to the karmic effects of old age, and the conundrum of actively choosing to end one's life while insisting on its difference from suicide. Though *sallekhanā* remains an important part of Jain ideology, its shifting understanding over time demonstrates the difficulties inherent in religious practice in the emerging modern era.

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Endnotes

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- ³ Padmanabh S. Jaini, *The Jaina Path of Purification* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1979), 223-224.
- ⁴ Ibid., 228.
- ⁵ T.K. Tukol, *Sallekhana Is Not Suicide* (Ahmedabad: L.D. Institute of Indology, 1976), 88; John E. Cort, "The Svetambar Murtipujak Jain Mendicant." *Man* 26, no. 4 (1991): 655, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2803774>.
- ⁶ *Uttarādhyayana*, "Fifth Lecture", trans. Hermann Jacobi (Oxford: Clarendon, 1895), 20, verse 2, <http://www.sacred-texts.com/jai/sbe45>.
- ⁷ Ibid., verse 3.
- ⁸ Ibid., 21, verse 4.
- ⁹ Ibid., 22, verse 16.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., verse 18.
- ¹¹ Ibid., verse 26.
- ¹² Ibid., 24, verse 30.
- ¹³ Ibid., verse 31.
- ¹⁴ Umāsvāti, *That Which Is = Tattvārtha Sūtra*, trans. Nathmal Tatia (San Francisco: HarperCollinsPublishers, 1994), 169.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., 7.17 (SS 7.22), 178.
- ¹⁶ Jaini, *Sallekhana: The Holy Death*, 232.
- ¹⁷ *Ratna-Karandaka Śravakācāra*, trans. T.K. Tukol (Ahmedabad: L.D. Institute of Indology, 1976), 108, verse 124.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., verse 125.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., verse 126.
- ²⁰ Ibid., verse 127.
- ²¹ Ibid., 109, verse 128.
- ²² Ibid., verse 129.
- ²³ Jaini, *Sallekhanā: The Holy Death*, 232.
- ²⁴ *Ratna-Karandaka Śravakācāra*, 108, verse 125.

²⁵ Ibid., 107, verse 122.

²⁶ Ibid., verse 123.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Kazuyoshi Hotta, "Fasting unto Death: Holy Ritual or Suicide?" (presented at the Third BESETO Conference of Philosophy, Tokyo, Japan, January 10, 2009), 218.

²⁹ *Sāgāra-Dharmāmṛta*, trans. T.K. Tukol, 109, Canto VIII, verse 8.

³⁰ *Sarvārthasiddhi*, trans. Kazuyoshi Hotta, 218.

³¹ *Sāgāra-Dharmāmṛta*, trans. T.K. Tukol, 109, Canto VIII, verse 8.

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³⁷ Response to "Sallekhana taken by a noble shravaka" by Sreepal5058, March 9, 2009.

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⁴⁰ Ahimsa Times 62 (August 2005). Online newsletter reposted in *JainSamachar Yahoo! Group*, August 23, 2005.

⁴¹ Jaini, *Sallekhanā: The Holy Death*, 236 .

⁴² Ibid., 231.

⁴³ Manish, "Why I seek...".

⁴⁴ Ahimsa Times 55, January 2005, published online, <http://ahimsatimes.blogspot.ca/2005/01/ahimsa-times-january-2005-issue.html>.

⁴⁵ "The Art of Dying", 124.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

