to the Memory of My Parents
of sāmāyika, a layman indeed becomes an ascetic." Or again: "He who practices sāmāyika is like a monk over whom clothes have been draped." This is high praise indeed for one who has not actually taken the mahāvrata. And yet it is warranted, from the Jaina perspective, for such an individual has had at least some taste of the tranquillity and bliss which prevail once the pratyākhyaṇā-varaṇa passions (those which prevent an aspirant from taking the great vows) have been overcome. This sublime experience will sustain him even when he returns to his family and to the bustle of everyday life, drawing him again and again to the inner refuge he has discovered. Thus the very austerity which makes the mendicant path seem so difficult initially tends at last to become its primary attraction; by moving towards full-time practice of sāmāyika, the layman may find peace in the midst of whatever worldly problems surround him. Clearly, then, the purpose of this ritual goes beyond mere temporary attainment of equanimity; it aims, finally, at leading the layman voluntarily and irrevocably into the vows and life of an ascetic.

The sāmāyika is concluded with the universal prayer of the Jainas:

Dukkhakkhavo kammakkhavo
samāhimaraṇan ya bohīlāho ya/
mama hou jagadabandaḥava
iṁuvarata tavavaranasaṃpana// 53.

Cessation of sorrow,
Cessation of karmas,
Death while in meditation,
The attainment of enlightenment;

52. "sāmāyīyammi u kae sāmaṇo iva sāvao havai jamhā/ eena kāraṇeṇaṃ bahuso sāmāyāyaṃ kujjā." Quoted in JY: 133 (from Āsāyaṇa-nirākāra). Compare: sāmāyike sārambhāḥ parigrahaḥ naiva saññi sarve 'pi/ cetoparāśaṃmunit
iva griha tadā yāti yatibhāvam// RSr: iv, 12.

53. NN: 89.
due to the onset of infirmity or senility, he will pass his final hours in asamyama, nonrestraint; such an unfortunate circumstance, it is believed, will adversely affect his next birth.

Having spent a lifetime in pursuit of proper conduct (cāritra), it behooves a Jaina to prevent the process of aging from undermining his practice. Thus he may seek death in the holy manner called sallekhana; following this procedure is strongly recommended for mendicants and forms an important goal among numerous laymen as well.55 (The latter may often choose to take the mahāvrata during performance of this final ritual.) In every case, Jaina teachers are careful to stress the need for “pure means” in undertaking a “controlled” death. They object strenuously, for example, to the sort of practice described in certain Hindu scriptures wherein yogins of young age and good health are voluntarily entombed while in meditation, hoping to please their gods and attain endless bliss by this “self-offering.” Jumping from holy peaks or disappearing into the sea while in deep trance are similarly decried. Though Jainas are willing to ascribe good (spiritual) motives to individuals who commit such acts, they nevertheless consider these forms of suicide to be absolutely improper and to lead one only to rebirth in hell. Jaina tradition is adamant on this point; even the famous King Śrenika,56 a contemporary of Mahāvira and a great patron of Jainism, is said to have fallen into a hellish destiny when, after having been imprisoned by his son, he took his own life in an “impure” manner.

There is only one way, then, that a Jaina can legitimately attain samādhi-maraṇa: by gradual fasting, carried out in strict accord with ritual prescription and in most cases under the close supervision of his mendicant teachers. The term sallekhana applies here in the sense of “properly thinning out (the passions and the body).”57 Jaina lawbooks list four situations in which sallekhana can be performed: (1) upasarga, an unavoidable calamity (for example, captivity by an enemy) that makes keeping one’s vows impossible; (2) durbhikṣa, a great famine, during which there is no way to obtain acceptable food, much less to do so in the proper manner; (3) farā, old age, defined by the onset of such problems as blindness, inability to walk without help, or senility, any of which make one likely to fall away from his vrata; (4) niḥpratikāra nujā, a terminal illness from which death is imminent.58

Any one of these situations can be considered grounds for undertaking a fast unto death, but it is almost always the third or fourth that lead an aspirant to perform this sacred ritual. For Jainas the essential difference between a “pure” and an “impure” suicide is that the latter always involves an increase in the passions, hence it cannot be a holy death. But in sallekhana, it is said that one does not actively engage in any destructive, passion-tinged activity; he merely withdraws conscientiously from the taking of food, doing so in a gradual manner which never disrupts his inner peace or dispersions mindfulness.59 Whether or not this distinction can be justified, there is no doubt that over the centuries many Jainas of both sexes have in fact fasted to death, invariably secure in the belief that theirs was a noble and sacred act; hundreds of inscriptions all over India record and glorify such cases.60

55. Āśādharma goes so far as to declare that even lay discipline is fully completed only by sallekhana: samyktvam amalam amalany anuguṇasikṣavyatā marāṇante/ sallekham ca vidhīnā pūrṇāḥ sāgārādhamro ‘yam// SD: i. 12.
57. upavāsādibhūḥ kāyam kaśāyam ca śrutāṃtaitah/ samākhya gaṇaṃadhye sāyā samādhiranahaparṇah // SD: viii. 15.
58. upasarga durbhikṣe jārasī rujāyati ca niḥpratikāre/ dharmāya tānuvācanaṃ abhū sappālimhān arāyā// RSR: v. 1.
59. syāṁ matam ātmavadhāh pārṇāti, svabhavāṇāpi avkāyatā niścayānīrtye tathā naiśa doṣaḥ, apramattatvāt, “pramattayogāt prāṇayapaśapāpanaṃ hiṁsā” ity uktam. na cāsya pramādyayo 'sti. kuiḥ? rāgāyabhāvāt, rāgādevaṃbhaṃvāt, hi vaṣāsūrātaparapāropapāpanaṃ hiṃsā//
60. For a few records of sallekhana at Shravanabelagola, see inscription nos. 67, 118, 258, 389 in Narasimhačārā 1923.
It has been seen that sallekhanā is most often undertaken by mendicants; even so, it has been common enough among laymen to be properly regarded as a significant aspect of lay ritual. Any Jaina facing death or an unavoidable falling away from his vows can approach a teacher and express the wish to embark upon this sacred path by saying:

Please instruct me, sir. I have come forward to seek ... sallekhanā, (the vow of) which will remain in force as long as I live. I am free of all doubts and anxieties in this matter. I renounce, from now until the moment of my last breath, food and drink of all kinds. 61

If the teacher agrees to administer the vow of sallekhanā, he first informs the aspirant that the vow will not be properly kept if it is tainted by any desires pertaining to rebirth (wishing to go to heaven, and so on), to the extension of the current life-span, to a rapid death (if the aspirant is unhappy or in pain), or to the prospect of sensual pleasures in the future which were not attained in this life. 62 Such bartering of penances for worldly gain or pleasure (known as nidāna) is viewed with the greatest repugnance. Although mundane benefits are said to accrue automatically to the performance of virtuous deeds, performing such deeds in order to obtain these benefits can only be counter-productive; Jainas at all levels of spiritual development are warned against doing so. Even the wish to be reborn as a Tirthankara would be, strictly speaking, a form of nidāna.

The Jaina must turn away from the results of his deeds, renouncing these “fruits” as he does everything else. Having understood this admonition, the aspirant receives the vrata and then proceeds to engage in confession (pratikramaṇa), self-censure (ālocanā), and the ritual of forgiving and asking forgiveness discussed earlier. He next embarks upon a program of gradual renunciation with regard to eating. The teacher, judging his ability to withstand hunger and thirst, stipulates a certain amount of food and water to be allowed at the outset, then sets down the extent to which this should be decreased each day. Eventually the intake of solid food is reduced to nothing; the aspirant then subsists on liquids of a progressively less sustaining nature, for example, from milk to fruit juice to plain boiled water. It is at the “water only” stage that a layman, perceiving that his death is near, often takes the mahāvrata as noted above.

In ancient times it may well have been permitted for any Jaina to initiate the sallekhanā fast on his own, but the practice seems to have come under greater ecclesiastical supervision in the postcanonical period. Today only a mendicant is normally given this freedom; lay aspirants must first receive the vow of sallekhanā from a member of the clergy (except in the rare circumstances of calamity or famine referred to earlier). If the layperson is too ill to move, a monk comes to his bedside to administer the vow. Jainas are quick to point out the difference between such a practice and that of the common suicide, wherein a person tells no one of his deed and commits it in secret.

Occasionally, it may happen that a supposedly “fatal” illness undergoes remission or complete cure during the course of progressive fasting. In such cases the vows which have been taken cannot be rescinded; the aspirant must continue to take no more food per day than his current allotment for as long as he lives. This possibility explains the usual practice of refraining from a vow of total fasting until such time as death is clearly at hand.

A prolonged and eventually terminal withdrawal from food may strike the reader as a very unpleasant process. It must be borne in mind, however, that those who follow

61. aham bhante, apacchimamāraṇaṃtyaṃsaṃplehaṇājītāṇā-rājaḥnāsaṃmae ... gissalo hoṭṭa ... javallāvā ... savvaṃ asaṇaṃ pānaṃ khaśmaṃ sāmaṃ caubhivhaṃ pi āharaṃ pacakkhaṃi ... carimehiṃ ussāsaṇiṣāsahīṃ vissarāmi ... Suttāgama: II, App. III.
62. jvīlamāraṇaṃsaṃ bhayamitraśūnantsidannānāmāh/sallekhanācāraḥ paṅca jinendrāḥ samāditāh// RŚr: v. 8.
such a course will have already gained extensive experience of fasting during their prior religious practice, hence will be able to tolerate the rigors of sallekhanā with their contentment and mindfulness undisturbed. Indeed, a request to undertake this holy fast is not granted lightly; part of the teacher’s role is to determine whether a given individual has in fact attained the level of discipline and spiritual development required.\(^{63}\)

The fasting is done either at one’s home or in a special fasting hall where certain mendicants reside. In either case, though the aspirant remains in virtual seclusion, his act is in a real sense a public one; the family has given its consent, and every person in the local community is aware of what is happening. In conjunction with sallekhanā, there is renunciation of all possessions and associations; thus one is left totally free of worldly concerns and spends his final hours silently repeating the namaskāra mantra or perhaps listening to it being chanted by others. In this way, it is hoped, he will draw his last breath fully conscious and uttering the names of the holy beings in whom he has taken refuge since the day of his first awakening (samyak-darśana).

Jainas believe that the entire spiritual life of a layman (and, to an even greater extent, of a mendicant) is in fact preparation for such a sacred death. Any person who might waver on this occasion and revert at the very last to a state of nonrestraint (desire) is compared to a warrior who, after years of practicing for battle, flees at the moment when he must actually face it.\(^{64}\) Those who do pass away in the proper manner are considered to be close to salvation. It is said that their next birth will be in a heaven or similarly exalted abode, and that within a very few lifetimes they will gain incarnation in the presence of a Tīrthankara, thus being enabled to complete the path which they have so bravely followed.

It is possible to recount a number of well-known cases involving Jainas who crowned a highly spiritual life with the consecrated act of sallekhanā; indeed the death of Ācārya Śantisāgara, with which this book begins, is perhaps the most celebrated modern example. But there is one story that stands apart from all others. This forms the first of the Ten Lectures on the Religious Profession of a Layman (Upāsaka-daśāḥ),\(^{65}\) which comprise the seventh aṅga of the Jaina canon; it recounts the career of Ananda, a lay disciple of Mahāvīra who attained all eleven pratimās and finally undertook sallekhanā. Ananda’s life has long been regarded as a model to be emulated by all Jaina laymen; the fact that he renounced great wealth to follow the Jina’s path has an especially strong impact upon a community whose members are so often affluent. In addition to illustrating the proper approach to lay practice and setting forth the benefits which result therefrom, this story provides a great insight into the kind of relation that has traditionally existed between layman and mendicant. Thus it serves as an appropriate conclusion to this discussion of lay ritual in Jainism.

\(^{63}\) “It is not unusual to see one of them (as I have) freely choose to die in the way characteristic of the Jainas, ending a life of austerities by abstaining from food altogether. Nevertheless, it is a way of life that many aspire after eagerly; postulants beseech the Master to admit them to it; relations and friends add their entreaties on the applicant’s behalf.” Renou 1953: 124.

\(^{64}\) nṛpasyeva yātṛ dharmaś ca irām abhyastino 'stravatā yuddhāraka skhalato mṛtyau svārtahābhṛmāṇo 'yaśaḥ kaṭuḥ// SD: viii, 17.