

# The Jaina Path of Purification

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*to the Memory of My Parents*

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of *sāmāyika*, a layman indeed becomes an ascetic." Or again: "He who practices *sāmāyika* is like a monk over whom clothes have been draped."<sup>52</sup> This is high praise indeed for one who has not actually taken the *mahāvratas*. 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 *pratyākhyānāvāraṇa* 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  
samāhimaraṇaṇi ya bohilāho ya/  
mama hou jagadabandhava  
jīṇavaṇa tava caraṇasaraṇena//*<sup>53</sup>

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

52. "sāmāiyammi u kae samaṇo iva sāvaḥ havi jamhā/ eeṇa kāraṇaṇaṇaṇa bahuso sāmāiyam kujjā." Quoted in *JY*: 133 (from *Āvaśyaka-niryukti*). Compare: sāmāyike sārāmbhāḥ parigrahā naiva santi sarve pi/ celopāsṛṣṭamunir iva gr̥hī tadā yāti yatibhāvam// *RŚr*: iv, 12.

53. NNP: 89.

O holy Jina! friend of the entire universe,  
let these be mine,  
For I have taken refuge at your feet.

### Sallekhanā: The Holy Death

The third line of the prayer just quoted, "Death while in meditation" (*samādhi-maraṇa*), expresses a rather extraordinary aspiration which may truly be said to be held by every Jaina. Indeed, all Indian religions consider the last moments of a person's life to be of utmost importance in determining the condition of his subsequent incarnation. Many Hindus, for example, believe that one is reborn in a state reflecting his strongest attachment at the moment of death. Hence they may name their children after certain divinities, hoping that, should one's last thoughts fall upon these beloved family members, the names will remind him or her to concentrate instead upon the gods and thus gain rebirth in heaven. Buddhists have developed several rituals which aim to give a certain amount of influence over one's destiny; these pertain not only to the time just prior to death, but also to the so-called *antarā-bhava* (Tibetan *bar-do*),<sup>54</sup> or "intermediate state" between leaving one body and assuming another. Both Hindu and Buddhist approaches to this problem involve "outside help"—divine intervention or the efforts of a tantric master, respectively.

For Jainas, who have emphasized the importance of control over the life-to-life transition far more than any other Indian school, the process depends completely upon the aspirant himself. By dying in meditation he is able to choose the precise circumstances of his end. The point is to meet death with all of one's faculties functioning properly, in a state of complete awareness and freedom from infractions against whatever *vratas* have been undertaken. If, for example, a person allows his vows to fall into disuse

54. See *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya*: 120-127 (III, k 10-16); Evans-Wentz 1971: 85-196.

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 *sallekhanā*; following this procedure is strongly recommended for mendicants and forms an important goal among numerous laymen as well.<sup>55</sup> (The latter may often choose to take the *mahāvratas* 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 Śreṇika,<sup>56</sup> a contemporary of Mahāvīra 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

55. Āśādhara goes so far as to declare that even lay discipline is fully completed only by *sallekhanā*: *samykṭvam amalam amalāny aṇuṇaśikṣāvratāni maraṇānte/ sallekhanā ca vidhinā pūrṇaḥ sāgāradharmo 'yam// SD: i, 12.*

56. See Seniya in Mehta 1970-1972: II, 856-857; *UP: lxxiv, 388-452.*

term *sallekhanā* applies here in the sense of "properly thinning out (the passions and the body)."<sup>57</sup> Jaina lawbooks list four situations in which *sallekhanā* can be performed: (1) *upasarga*, an unavoidable calamity (for example, captivity by an enemy) that makes keeping one's vows impossible; (2) *durbhikṣā*, a great famine, during which there is no way to obtain acceptable food, much less to do so in the proper manner; (3) *jarā*, 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 *vratas*; (4) *niḥpratīkārā rujā*, a terminal illness from which death is imminent.<sup>58</sup>

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 *sallekhanā*, 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 dispassionate mindfulness.<sup>59</sup> 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.<sup>60</sup>

57. *upavāsādibhiḥ kāyaṃ kaṣāyaṃ ca śrutāmṛtaiḥ/ saṃlikhya gaṇamadhye syāt samādhimaraṇodyamī// SD: viii, 15.*

58. *upasarge durbhikṣe jarasi rujāyāṃ ca niḥpratīkāre/ dharmāya tanuvinmocanam āhuḥ sallekhanām āryāḥ// RŚr: v, 1.*

59. *syān matam ātmavadhaḥ prāpnoti, svābhisandhipūrvakāyurādinivṛtteḥ. naiṣa doṣaḥ, apramattatvāt. "pramattayogāt prāṇavyaparopāṇaṃ hīṃsā" ity uktam. na cāśya pramādayogo 'sti. kutaḥ? rāgādyabhāvāt. rāgadveṣamohāviṣṭasya hi viṣaṣāstrādyupakaraṇaprayogavaśād ātmānaṃ ghnataḥ svaghāto bhavati. na sallekhanām pratipannasya rāgādayaḥ santi tato nātmavadhadoṣaḥ. 55: §705. On the legal aspects of *sallekhanā*, see Tukoḷ 1976.*

60. For a few records of *sallekhanā* at Shravanabelgola, see inscription nos. 67, 118, 258, 389 in Narasimhachar 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.<sup>61</sup>

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.<sup>62</sup> 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

61. ahaṃ bhaṃte, apacchimamāraṇaṃṭiyasaṃlehaṇājhūsaṇā-ārāhaṇāsamae . . . ṇissallo hoṇa . . . jāvajjivāe . . . savvaṃ asaṇaṃ paṇaṃ khāimaṃ sāmaṃ cauvvīhaṃ pi āhāraṃ paccakkhāmi . . . carimehiṃ ussāsaṇissāsehiṃ vosirāmi . . . *Suttāgame*: II, App. III.

62. jīvitamaraṇāsamaṃ bhayamitrasmṛtinidānanāmānaḥ/ *sallekhanāticārāḥ pañca jinendraiḥ samādiṣṭāḥ*// *RŚr*: v, 8.

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 *mahāvratas* 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

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.<sup>63</sup>

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.<sup>64</sup> 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

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 yater dharmo ciram abhyastino 'stravat/ yudhīva skhalato mṛtyau svārthabhraṃśo 'yaśaḥ kaṭuḥ// SD: viii, 17.*

or similarly exalted abode, and that within a very few lifetimes they will gain incarnation in the presence of a Tirthaṅkara, thus being enabled to complete the path which they have so bravely followed.

It is possible to recount any number of well-known cases involving Jainas who crowned a highly spiritual life with the consecrated act of *sallekhanā*; indeed the death of *ācārya Śāntisāgara*, 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-dāśāḥ)*,<sup>65</sup> which comprise the seventh *aṅga* of the Jaina canon; it recounts the career of *Ānanda*, a lay disciple of *Mahāvīra* who attained all eleven *pratimās* and finally undertook *sallekhanā*. *Ānanda'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.

Vāñijagrāma,  
householder  
s man, with  
He possessed  
safe place, an-  
stocked estate  
e divided into