

## *Sallekhana*

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### Summary

*Sallekhana*, often popularly called *santhara*, is the holy death fast that is the ideal death for a Jaina. For more than two thousand years it has been a sacred religious ritual enjoined by the sacred Jaina scriptures and practiced by pious Jains. Mahavira, the great Jaina saint and teacher of this era, attained enlightenment after 13 years of strict asceticism when in 420 BCE, he took the vow of *Sallekhana*, thus ending his cycle of birth and rebirth and becoming a model for the Jaina community. All the sacred scriptures, including the Angas and Upangas, recommend this practice, saying, for example: "Speaking the truth, the saint who has crossed the stream of transmigration, leaves his frail body, putting an end to existence at the appropriate time. This is good, it is joyful and proper. This should be done; it leads to salvation." (*Acaranga Sutra* 1.7.6).

It is important to see that suicide and *sallekhana* are two very different things. Suicide is absolutely forbidden in Jain teaching as it is considered an act of violence and thus a violation of the vow of *ahimsa*. Fasting to death is seen as the cessation of violent acts toward the living beings that are consumed for nourishment. The meditation that one engages in while fasting simultaneously serves to purge the soul of *karma* preparing the soul for liberation.

It is also important to see *sallekhana* in the context of fundamental Jaina beliefs. As I said in the chapter on Jainism in my book, *The Indian Way*, "Jainism is a way of compassion and ascetic self-restraint designed to liberate the *jiva* or soul from the bondage of karmic matter. Jainas see the universe as a vast organism, pulsating with life. Countless billions of souls pervade the universe. Although trapped in various bodies, all are inherently pure and capable of omniscient knowledge which means that liberation is possible for all." But because liberation requires the cessation of all actions, the holy death fast is often thought of as the ultimate goal of life, for it liberates the soul from the bondage of the mind and body.

### Article

*Sallekhana*, often popularly called *santhara*, is the holy death fast that is the ideal death for a Jaina. *Sallekhana* is a technical Jaina term for the practice of facing death voluntarily by a person when he is nearing his end and when normal life is not possible due to old age, incurable disease, severe famine etc., It is done only after subjugation of all passions, abandonment of all worldly attachments, and observance of austerities. The person gradually abstains from food and water, simultaneously meditating on the real nature of the self, until the soul parts from the body.

The vow to take up *sallekhana* is to be made only after careful consideration and only as a way of seeking the liberation of the soul from the body as a religious duty. Underlying the vow is the religious teaching that man, who is the master of his own destiny, should face death in such a way as to prevent the influx of new *karmas* that would prevent liberation.

For more than two thousand years *sallekhana* has been a sacred religious ritual enjoined by the sacred Jaina scriptures and practiced by pious Jains. Mahavira, the great Jaina saint and teacher of this era, attained enlightenment after 13 years of strict asceticism when in 420 BCE, he took the vow of *Sallekhana*, thus ending his cycle of birth and rebirth and becoming a model for the entire Jaina community. All the sacred scriptures, including the Angas and Upangas,

recommend this practice, saying, for example: “Speaking the truth, the saint who has crossed the stream of transmigration, leaves his frail body, putting an end to existence at the appropriate time. This is good, it is joyful and proper. This should be done; it leads to salvation.” (*Acaranga Sutra* 1.7.6).

*Sallekhana* needs to be seen in the context of fundamental Jaina beliefs and practices. As I noted in the chapter on Jainism in my book, *The Indian Way*, “Jainism is a way of compassion and ascetic self-restraint designed to liberate the *jiva* or soul from the bondage of karmic matter. Jainas see the universe as a vast organism, pulsating with life. Countless billions of souls pervade the universe. Although trapped in various bodies, all are inherently pure and capable of omniscient knowledge—which means that liberation is possible for all. ” But because liberation requires the cessation of all actions, the holy death fast is often thought of as the ultimate goal of life, for it liberates the soul from the bondage of the mind and body.

Jainism emphasizes the importance of developing an attitude of mind which brings about restraint, self-discipline and non-attachment and focuses on equanimity of thought and conduct in order to achieve liberation. Fasting, meditation and other austerities are part of the Jaina way of life and extend to the Jaina way of dying.

The philosophy underlying this way of living and dying is that one’s body is mortal but the soul is immortal; the ritual of the holy death fast is to be performed in order to liberate the immortal soul from the mortal body. No one who is born can escape death: he or she must die some day. For those who identify the soul with body, the fear of death is the greatest fear. But those who, like the Jainas, believe in the immortality of soul and liberation from the cycle of birth and death can face death calmly and peacefully, maintaining their mental equilibrium. The vow of *Sallekhana* simply extends the Jaina way of living to the Jaina way of dying, recognizing that dying is an important part of living and should be done with the greatest of care. *Sallekhana* is, above all, a course of discipline intended to prepare a person for a noble and holy death.

A comprehensive analysis of *Sallekhana* is found in the Jaina text *RatnakarandakaSravakascharaby* Samantabhadra. There we read: “Prior to the adoption of the vow one should give up all love, hatred and attachment to possessions, with a pure mind, and obtain forgiveness of one’s relations while also forgiving them oneself. One should give up grief, fear, anguish, attachment and keep oneself engaged in meditation. Then he should give up gradually food, then liquid and even water. During the observance of the vow one should not commit any of the transgressions, entertaining a desire to live, or wishing for speedy death, exhibiting fear etc.”

In the same work Samantabhadra sets out the circumstances in which this vow is advised to be taken. They include:

1. Conditions of extreme calamity, natural or otherwise
2. Famine
3. Very old age.
4. Terminal illness.

Samantabhadra, as do other respected Jaina teachers, provides a list of guidelines to be followed in the practice of *sallekhana*. They include:

1. A person should acquire mental-spiritual poise before adopting the vow because it is to be undertaken as a great penance at the last moments of his life.
2. The undertaking of the penance at the time of death contains a full review of all past activity with the purpose of weakening the bonds of worldly attractions and one’s body so as to have the best form of peaceful and perfect happy ending. At this time, no excitement is felt, no pain is experienced, but under perfect self control, complete ecstasy is enjoyed and one breathes one’s last happily.
3. *Sallekhana* is a completely voluntary death.

4. The person controls all his passions and abandons all worldly attachments, observes all austerities, gradually abstains from food and water and lies down quietly, meditating on the real nature of the soul until the soul parts from the body.
5. Because man is the architect of his own destiny he should live life in such a way as to exhaust all previous karmas and should face death in such a way as to prevent the influx of any new *karmas*, thereby liberating the soul from bondage. The penance of *sallekhana* is capable of burning any remaining old *karmas*, reducing them to ashes.
6. In adopting the vow of *sallekhana* a person becomes self-reliant and self composed and ceases to be agitated by personal considerations and suffering, rising above the longings of the flesh. To be able to control one's conduct at the moment of death is the culminating fruit of asceticism, enabling a person to face death free from fear, grief, regret, affection, hatred etc.
7. There should be repentance for all wrongs and sins committed. Finally, remembering the divine enlightened souls he would drop the physical body and mind, allowing the soul to rise freely.

Finally it is important to see that suicide and *sallekhana* are two very different things. Suicide is absolutely forbidden in Jain teaching as it is considered an act of violence and thus a violation of the vow of *ahimsa* or non-violence. Fasting to death is seen as the cessation of violent acts toward the living beings that are consumed for nourishment. The meditation that one engages in while fasting simultaneously serves to purge the soul of *karma* preparing the soul for liberation.

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