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### The Art of Dying:

#### Jain Philosophy of Sallekhana

The news quickly spread through the Jain diaspora that two well-known monks embraced Sallekhana in just 2 months in India. Significantly, Sallekhana is NOT similar to euthanasia or physician-assisted suicide.

It is the pious practice of voluntarily fasting to death by gradually reducing the intake of food and liquids.

*By Prof Shailendra C. Palvia*

Philosophers have differed on the subject of Life after Death or reincarnation. Aristotle holds the scientific version while Plato and his mentor Socrates believed in the religious version. Scientific premise asserts that after death, there is no life; it ends in eternal oblivion. Religious premise states that only body is no life; it ends in eternal oblivion. Religious premise states that only body or soul survives forever, soul has eternal existence through countless cycles of birth and death. Sallekhana is relevant more in the context of religious premise due to the implication of afterlife betterment.

### What is Sallekhana

Sallekhana, also known as Samadhigaman, is a controversial religious practice in which a Jain starts fasting with the intention of preparing for death. Among the many practices of Jains, such as vegetarianism, meditation, forgiveness, and fasting, Sallekhana is the most austere and it is practiced primarily by strict adherents, Jain monks and nuns. Sallekhana literally means thinning out of the body (Kaya) as well as passions (Kashaya). According to Acharya Samantbhadra in the 6th chapter of Ratnakaranda Shrvakacara: **उपसना दृष्टिक जरल तथा सप्तम दिश क्रमिकः। धम्म न त्रै विनिवेशयन्। सल्लेखनांति।**

Sallekhana is embracing the death voluntarily when both householders and ascetics foresee that the end of the life is very near either due to old age, incurable disease, or severe famine and there is no other option but to embrace death peacefully.

While observing Sallekhana, one overcomes all the passions and abandons all the worldly attachments by observing austerities such as gradually abstaining from food and water and simultaneously meditating on the true nature of the Self until the soul departs the body. The principle behind the special vow of Sallekhana is that a person – while giving up this body with complete peace of mind, calmness, and patience, without any fear at all – not only prevents the influx of the new karmas but also purges the old karmas which are attached to the soul, ultimately liberating the soul from the cycle of birth, death and rebirth. An approximate assessment of the remaining span of the life is necessary in order to adjust to the nature of the fasting. It is the religious practice of voluntarily fasting to death by gradually reducing the intake of food and liquids. This person should endure all the hardships, but if he/she falls ill or is unable to maintain the peace of mind, then he/she should give up Sallekhana and resume taking foods and other activities. Sallekhana is considered a pious death and is always voluntary, undertaken after public declaration, and never assisted with any chemicals or tools. The fasting causes thinning away of the body by withdrawing by choice food and water to oneself with full knowledge of colleagues and spiritual counsellor. In some cases, Jains with terminal illness undertake this vow with permission from their spiritual counsellor. For a successful sallekhana, the death must be with ‘pure means’, voluntary, planned, undertaken with calmness, peace and joy where the person accepts to scour out the body and focus his or her mind on spiritual matters.

After the sallekhana vow, the ritual preparation and practice can extend into years. The sixth part of the Ratnakaranda śrvakacāra describes Sallekhana and its procedure as follows: Giving up solid food by degrees, one should take to milk and whey, then giving them up, to hot or spiced water. [Subsequently] giving up hot water also and observing fasting with full determination, he should give up his body, trying in every possible way to keep in mind the Namokar mantra. During the entire process of Sallekhana, five transgressions must be avoided: (a) the desire to reborn as a human, (b) the desire to be reborn as a divinity, (c) the desire to continue living, (d) the desire to die quickly, and (e) the desire to live a sensual life in the next life. Other transgressions include: recollection of affection for friends, recollection of the pleasures enjoyed, and longing for the enjoyment of pleasures in the future.

Sallekhana is a vow available to both Jain ascetics and householder and both men and women, including queens in Jain history. The inscriptions on rocks dating back to the 7th century in South India suggest sallekhana was originally an ascetic practice which later extended to Jain householders. Its importance as an ideal death in the spiritual life of householders ceased by about the 12th century. The practice was revived in 1955 by the Digambara monk Acharya Shantisagara. It is estimated that some 200 Jains fast to death each year, many of them monks. But the fast can be ended at

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**Acharya Vidyanandaji**

Last day of Sallekhana: September 19, 2019

Acharya Vidyanandaji took samadhi at the age of 95. He was a monk of exceptional caliber, vision, knowledge, and managerial skills. Many historical and landmark projects were undertaken by him to help the Jains to come together cutting across the sectarian barriers. His command over many languages (current and ancient), depth of knowledge and great amount of research in old scripts was reflected in his actions, thinking, discourses and many books written by him.

He traveled across the length and breadth of India covering thousands of miles on barefoot including visit to ice covered Amarnath Caves in Himalayas accessible only for a few days in a year.

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**Chinmayyasasagar Muni**

Last day of Sallekhana: October 18, 2019

Chinmayyasasagar Muni Jungle Wale Baha (A forest Monk) lived deep inside forests, doing his meditation amongst wild animals. Many times wild animals were sitting around him in a calm and quite mood due to the positive power of his deep meditation[1]. On taking deeksha (embracing monkhood), the saint travelled barefoot in several places including Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Delhi, Rajasthan and Karnataka. Unlike other religious leaders who live in posh ashrams, Chinmay Sagar chose to meditate in forests so as to be accessible to everyone. He said, “Forests are open spaces and all are welcome irrespective of their religious leanings.” He tirelessly worked on several projects for betterment of humanity including helping millions get rid of their bad habits like drugs, alcohol and tobacco. His yeomen services earned him doctorates from the universities of Sri Lanka, United Kingdom and the US and visits from world leaders to get his blessings and guidance.

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any point if the person has a change of heart. Recent happenings in India confirm the continuation of this practice in spite of legal challenges.

Between 1800 and 1992, at least 37 instances of Sallekhanas are recorded in Jain literature. There were 260 and 90 recorded Sallekhanas during Svetambara and Digambara Jains respectively between 1993 and 2003. Statistically, Sallekhana is undertaken both by men and women of all economic classes and among the educationally forward Jains. It is observed more often by women than men.

Is Sallekhana similar to euthanasia, assisted death, or suicide?

Is Sallekhanas similar to euthanasia or physician-assisted suicide? Assisted death is a model that includes both what has been called physician-assisted "suicide" and voluntary active euthanasia. Physician-assisted suicide entails making lethal means available to the patient to be used at a time of the patient’s own choosing and providing the opportunity for the patient to change his or her mind up to the last moment. By contrast, voluntary active euthanasia entails the physician taking an active role in carrying out the patient’s request, and usually involves intravenous delivery of a lethal substance. Euthanasia contains a much smaller chance for mistakes and may be necessary in cases where a patient is too sick for self-administration, or no longer capable of swallowing, holding down food, or absorbing oral medication.

Sallekhana is observed by progressively reducing the body and the passions. One can argue that a person who kills himself by means like poison, weapon, hanging, drowning is swayed by attachment, aversion or ingestion. But he who practices holy death is free from desire, anger and delusion. Hence it is not suicide.

India's Supreme Court considered a ruling by Rajasthan state court that Sallekhana practice was a form of suicide and must be banned. It can be construed as an attempt to commit suicide and thus punishable under Section 309 of Indian penal code. Also those who facilitate Sallekhanas are culpable under Section 306 on account of aiding and abetting an act of suicide. The Supreme Court overruled and stayed the Rajasthan court ruling until a full hearing can be scheduled.

Essentially, these penal codes criminalize suicide. Are eastern religions being judged by the standards of Western law inherited from Britain, including the statute that makes suicide a crime? Nobody knows how the Supreme Court will ultimately rule. Jain community argued that prohibiting the practice is a violation of their freedom of religion, a fundamental right guaranteed by Article 15 and Article 25 of the Constitution of India.

Some will argue that choosing Sallekhana for death is an evil similar to sati (when a widow used to jump over the burning pyre of her dead husband). Clearly, there was no free will of the widows in such cases and they victims of the cruel tradition perpetuated and perpetuated by men.

Finally, it is important to note that 25% of Medicare’s annual spending in USA is used by the 5% of patients during the last 12 months of their lives. Religious philosophies like Sallekhanas can drastically cut down such astronomically high medical expenses in aggressive measures undertaken to prolong the lives of the dying.

Sources: Internet, Wikipedia, and ‘Aapam ke aalo mein, samadhiman ya sallekhana’ (in Hindi) by Dr. Hukmchand Bhairill.