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THE SACRED END: EXPLORING THE ETHICAL PRACTICE OF *SALLEKHANĀ* IN JAINA TRADITION

Introduction

Since the inception of philosophical enquiry, philosophers have been long engaged in the pursuit of answers to fundamental questions pertaining to the origin of universe, the nature of man, the concept of God, meaning of life, and the phenomenon of death. Among various philosophical inquires, one of the most profound and unsettling question that humans have sought to explore is the concept of death and the life after. Recognising the inevitable nature of death, many world religions have contemplated the challenges associated with accepting death with courage and approaching it with grace and acceptance. However, no philosophical tradition has examined the challenge of embracing death with such depth and equanimity as Jainism, which is one of the ancient philosophical traditions in India. Over its extensive historical timeline, Jainism has seen both periods of prosperity and decline. Yet, for several thousands of years it has remained a living religion and a way of life in India.[1] Furthermore, Jains believe that the exact time of the origin of Jainism has yet to be ascertained.[2] The term *jaina* is derived from the noun *jina,* which implies conqueror, specifically the one who has conquered passions and desires.[3] At the core of Jaina philosophy lies strict code of conduct, known as vows (*vrata*), meant to be followed by both ascetics (*sramana*) and laypersons (*śrāvaka*).[4] Among the vows, the five major ones (*pañcamahāvratas)* are *ahimsā* (nonviolence), *satya* (truth), *asteya* (non-stealing), *brahmacharya* (celibacy), and *aparigraha* (non-possessiveness).[5] Supplementing these vows is the vow of *sallekhanā*, which is also the last of all vows. Also known as *saṁthārā* or *samadhi-marana*, it is a centuries old religious ritual of starving till death, and it is the ideal form of death

[1] N. Shah, *Jainism: The World of Conquerors*, vol. 1 (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, 1998).
[2] A. K. Chatterji, *A Comprehensive History of Jainism (Up to 1000 AD)* (Calcutta, India: Firma Private Ltd., 1978).
[3] M. Hiriyana, *The Essentials of Indian Philosophy* (1949).
[4] Umāsvāti, Devanandī, Siddhasenagaṇi, and Nathmal Tatia, *That Which Is: Tattvārtha Sūtra* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011).
[5] C. Sharma, *A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 2013).

in Jainism.[6] Stated otherwise, it is a practice of voluntary fasting unto death performed by the most devout Jains.

Sallekhanā serves as a means to shed accumulated *karma* which inevitably leads to rebirths. This purificatory act is performed by withdrawing all mental and physical activities. Rooted in the Jaina principles of *ahiṃsā* (nonviolence), *aparigraha* (non-attachment), and *moksha* (spiritual liberation), *sallekhanā* helps in the attainment of equanimous death (*samadhi-marana*) and ultimately, spiritual upliftment and liberation (*moksha*). Jaina philosophical tradition emphasises that death should be accepted as an inevitable aspect of life and approached with courage and spiritual clarity that demands rigorous ethical preparation, mental equanimity, and philosophical understanding. Devout Jaina, irrespective of their gender, embraces death by practicing *sallekhanā* where one confronts final moments of life with grace, fortitude, and a deep sense of mindfulness. Historically, numerous artefacts and evidence highlight this traditional way of dying practised by many revered Jaina saints and rulers with great devotion, leaving behind several accounts substantiating its sanctity and significance. And even at present, *sallekhanā* continues to be practiced within Jaina communities, albeit in a more restricted and closely monitored manner. However, there is no reliable data about the total number of Jainas who voluntarily decide to undertake *sallekhanā* every year.[7] Furthermore, to understand this practice thoroughly, it is important to differentiate it from other alternative forms of voluntary death, such as suicide and euthanasia. Unlike suicide, often seen as an act of despair, escapism, and mental distress, in both religious and secular perspectives, *sallekhanā* is a rational, wilfully chosen, and premediated act which is undertaken with clear mind and spiritual intent.[8] Similarly, unlike euthanasia, whether active or passive, *sallekhanā* does not involve any external or artificial intervention to intentionally terminate life. It is a self-intended voluntary process of gradually giving up sources of mental and physical nourishment in such a way that it is never intended to hasten death. Rather, it is seen as a praiseworthy act of embracing the final chapter in the story of existence in accordance with the Jaina code of conduct.

While *sallekhanā* has evolved from a practice primarily pursued by ascetics (*sramana*) to one that is undertaken by devout laypeople as well, the status of *sallekhanā* has become

[6] Whitny Braun, "Sallekhanā: The Ethicality and Legality of Religious Suicide by Starvation in the Jain Religious Community," *Medicine and Law* 27, no. 4 (2008): p. 913–924.
[7] Manisha Sethi, "Ritual Death in a Secular State: The Jain Practice of Sallekhanā," *South Asian History and Culture* 10, no. 2 (2019): 136–151, https://doi.org/10.1080/19472498.2019.1609261.
[8] Dr. Kumari Bharti, "*Right to Religious Die in India's Jain Concept: Sallekhanā*," IJARIIE 5, no. 3 (2019): 845, ISSN (O) 2395-4396, https://www.ijariie.com.

more complex in contemporary times. First, according to critics, *sallekhanā* contradicts the sanctity-of-life argument, which is interpreted as an absolute commitment to the preservation of life. Stated otherwise, this argument emphasises that life has an intrinsic value, and one has the moral obligation to preserve it.[9] However, Jaina canonical texts assert that *sallekhanā* does not undermine the sanctity-of-life but reaffirms it by ensuring that life should be lived and concluded in accordance with the Jaina normative ideals. Contrary to viewing *sallekhanā* as a transgression of the sanctity-of-life principle, it can be understood as the 'zenith of fulfilment,' viz., an expression of reverence for life through a peaceful and intentional departure from the physical world. Secondly, changing societal norms and disruptive changes in modern medical sciences have also influenced how and when *sallekhanā* is undertaken. The recent deliberations of *Sallekhanā* pay great attention to major bioethical principles such as autonomy, beneficence, and non-maleficence, and insist that an impeccable fidelity to ethical standards is mandatory throughout the process of *sallekhanā*. Lastly, though for nearly two millennia the practice went uncontested,[10] recent legal challenges and public debates have brought this practice under rigorous moral scrutiny. This move has forced the Jaina community to articulate and defend the significance of *sallekhanā* in the contemporary world. This paper posits that *sallekhanā* is a unique nonviolent, ethical, and spiritually uplifting practice that is fundamentally distinct from other forms of voluntary end-of-life practices. By examining historical contexts, philosophical underpinnings, and ethical considerations associated to the contemporary practice of *sallekhanā*, the research intends to reveal that having control over one's own death and embracing it with grace demands profound moral strength and exceptional degree of courage. Hence, *sallekhanā*, when undertaken in accordance with the Jaina normative guidelines, serves not as an escape from life; rather it turns out to be an exceptionally graceful culmination of life lived in pursuit of spiritual ideals.

Understanding Sallekhanā*: Meaning and Practice*

In addition to proposing the Five Cardinal Vows (*pañcamahāvratas*), such as nonviolence (*ahiṃsā*), truth (*satya*), non-stealing (*asteya*), non-attachment (*aparigraha*), and chastity (*brahmaćarya*) as the primary code for a moral life, Jainism gives great importance to virtues of

[9] Helga Kuhse, *The Sanctity-of-Life Doctrine in Medicine*: *A Critique* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).
[10] Whitny Braun, *op. cit.*

renunciation *(tyāg/vairagya)* and self-disciple *(tapas)*.[11] Among the list of vows undertaken by devout followers, *sallekhanā* stands out as a unique and profound practice symbolising the ultimate act of renunciation, detachment, self-disciplining, and spiritual purification. The *Tattvārtha Sūtra* (9.19) states that "*sanjñi-praṇidhāna-virati-vyutsargaḥ saṃlekhanaṃ*," i.e., *sallekhanā* is a spiritually elevated, ethically grounded, and consciously embraced practice of abandonment (*vyutsarga*) of the body through meditation (*sāmāyika*), resolution (*praṇidhāna*), and renunciation (*virati*) by the one who is conscious (*sanjñi*).[12] The term *sallekhanā* is derived from Sanskrit roots, namely, *sal* which signifies "properly" or "correctly," and *lekhanā* which denotes "thinning out". Accordingly, the term implies a gradual "thinning out" of the physical body and mental passions *(kaṣāya)*[13] such as attachment *(rāga)*, aversion (*dveṣa*), desires (*kāma*), and karmic accumulation for the purification of soul (*jivā*)[14].

This practice of dual thinning process is central to its philosophical and ethical justification, and hence it is uniquely distinguishable from other fasting traditions or end-of-life practices associated with voluntary death. The person who adopts *sallekhanā* practices detachment from all relationships and possessions and accepts death with equanimity. Additionally, mental fortitude and purification is achieved through practices such as forgiveness (*kṣamā*), introspection (*pratikramaṇa*), and focusing on spiritual goals rather than physical suffering.[15] Grounded in the Jaina doctrine of mind-body dualism, the practice underscores the primacy of mental discipline in spiritual progress. In this context, it can be asserted that *sallekhanā* is primarily a practice of internal purification rather than mere physical austerity. When an individual attains inner stability and prepares the mind for spiritual liberation (*moksha*), the physical aspect of renunciation *(tyāg/vairagya)* becomes a natural, and less arduous, consequence. Ultimately, in Jainism, every vow (*vrata*) or ascetic discipline is not merely a bodily act but a spiritual exercise, where the conquest of the self lies in the mastery of the mind rather than the endurance of the body.

Sallekhanā, furthermore, represents both an unparallelly autonomous acceptance of one's death and the highest form of austerity and spiritual maturity. Unlike the common perception of death, *sallekhanā* is viewed as an ideal way of

[11] Umāsvāti, Devanandī, Siddhasenagaṇi, and Nathmal Tatia, *op. cit*.
[12] Umāsvāti. *That Which Is: Tattvārthasūtra*. Translated by Nathmal Tatia. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1994. See Sūtra 9.19, p. 209.
[13] Umāsvāti, Devanandī, Siddhasenagaṇi, and Nathmal Tatia, *op. cit.*
[14] Shailendra C. Palvia, "The Art of Dying: Jain Philosophy of Sallekhanā," *The South Asian Times*, November 9–15, 2019, https://www.TheSouthAsianTimes.info.
[15] Shailendra C. Palvia, *op. cit.*

transiting from life to death while maintaining mental equanimity and spiritual focus. In other words, aligned with Jaina metaphysical and ethical doctrines, *sallekhanā* is seen as a conscious and peaceful transition from life to death. Jaina philosophy perceives death not only as an inevitable part of existence but as a passage, a means of moving from one life to the next, determined by one's karmic state. Although the death of a being who is born is certain, the manner of one's death can influence the soul's future trajectory. In this regard, it is wrong to believe that *sallekhanā* is the end of life. Rather, it is considered as the most refined approach to death while ensuring that soul (*jivā*) remains in a state of peace, devoid of anger, fear or regret.[16] Unlike other forms of voluntary death, it is undertaken with full awareness and spiritual intent, respecting the autonomy and dignity of an individual.[17]

The *Uttaradhyayana Sūtra* asserts that the "one who dies with a pure mind, free from attachment and aversion, is not bound by new karmas, and attains a higher state of existence." [18] Therefore, an individual practicing *sallekhanā* does not accumulate new *karma* during final moments but allows soul to progress towards liberation (*moksha*). Similarly, from the perspective of austerity, *sallekhanā* is the pinnacle of all vows in the life of an Jaina follower. It perfectly aligns with the *pañcamahāvratas* (five great vows) and the concept of *tri-ratna* (three jewels) of Jaina ethics. One undertakes the vow of *sallekhanā* at the time of one's death with joy,[19] as it involves the culmination and protection of all the vows one has observed throughout one's life. All austerities observed by the follower aims to stop the influx of new karma (*samvara*) and destroy the existing karma (*nirjarā*), ultimately leading to liberation (*moksha*). *Sallekhanā* minimises the bondage of karma with soul (*bandha*) and this final practice significantly influences the soul's next birth.[20]

Jaina canonical texts enumerate seventeen types of death.[21] Among the seventeen, only three kinds of deaths, namely, i) *sallekhanā* under the supervision of *niryāpaka*, ii) *sallekhanā* only by self-help in the absence of *niryāpaka*, and iii) *sallekhanā* by denying even self-help, have been praised by the *tīrthankars*. This is because, *sallekhanā* will be regarded as the "perfect death" if and only if it is embraced by a

[16] P. S. Jaini, *The Jaina Path of Purification* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).
[17] P. Dundas, *The Jains* (London: Routledge, 2002).
[18] H. Jacobi, ed., Uttarādhyayana Sūtra, in *The Jaina Sutras, Part II: The Sacred Books of the East*, vol. 45 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1895).
[19] Umāsvāti, Devanandī, Siddhasenagaṇi, and Nathmal Tatia, *op. cit.*
[20] P. Dundas, *op. cit.*
[21] Ācārya Sivarya, *Bhagvati Ārādhanā: Ācārya Aparājit Sūri Rachitā, Vijayodaya Ṭīkā tathā Hindī Ṭīkā Sahit*, ed. and trans. Kalasacandra Śāstrī (Phaltan: Hiralal Khusalcand Dosi, 1990), p. 49.

courageous and disciplined Jaina follower.[22] *Sallekhanā* can be undertaken by both householder (*sādhaka*) and ascetics or monks (*ārādhaka*)[23] provided they adhere to all the prescribed stages. The *Tattvārtha Sūtra* asserts that a layperson or *sādhaka* can initiate into *sallekhanā* only after being introduced to twelve vows.[24] In other words, observing the twelve vows, i.e., five *anuvrata*, three *guṇavrata* and four *śikṣāvrata*, serves as the preliminary preparation for getting initiated into *sallekhanā.* However, as ascetics, who are integral to Jaina *āśramite* tradition and faithful followers of its rules and rituals since their formal initiation, are considered eligible to undertake *sallekhanā* at the right moment in their spiritual journey. Although this vow is accessible to all Jaina followers, it is not to be undertaken by anyone at any time, for its observance is governed by specific conditions and appropriate circumstances. Only individuals who are near to the end of their natural life because of old age, terminal illness, event of severe famine, or extreme asceticism are eligible for undertaking *sallekhanā*. However, the decision to embrace this solemn vow is guided by spiritual counsellors (*niryāpaka*) and the Jaina ethical doctrines. The *niryāpaka* offers support and helps *kṣāpaka* (one who seeks *sallekhanā*) to prepare and accept *sallekhanā* whole-heartedly. However, it is mandatory that while undertaking this vow the *kṣāpaka* should be in a sound state of mind, free from external coercion and undue influence, and impeccably capable of committing to this vow voluntarily.

The voluntary nature of the decision to undertake fasting till death by ensuring that the candidate is in a sound state of mind, free from any coercion, and not under the influence of any factor that invalidates the decision, vindicates that the person who embraces *sallekhanā* is not attempting to escape life, but confronting and accepting it with conviction, clarity, and courage. Given that the instinct for 'survival' is fundamental to all living organisms, the voluntary choice to undertake *sallekhanā* represents a deliberate act that transcends the primary biological imperative of self-preservation. Stated otherwise, while the instinct for self-preservation is an inherent aspect of all living organisms, *sallekhanā* stands as a profound departure from this basic disposition. It represents a deliberate choice to transcend the basic biological drive for survival, an act that may appear counter-intuitive from a purely material or physiological standpoint. Accordingly, the decision to embrace death consciously challenges the innate drive for survival that characterises all forms of life on this planet. In this regard,

[22] Kokila H. Shah, "The Jain Concept of Sallekhanā: A Loss or a Gain?" (Paper presented at the National Seminar on Bioethics, January 24–25, 2007).
[23] Umāsvāti, Devanandī, Siddhasenagaṇi, and Nathmal Tatia, *op. cit.*
[24] *Ibid.*

sallekhanā must be understood not merely as a voluntary act of cessation of life, but as an ethical and spiritual affirmation and transcendence. It is a voluntary and conscious renunciation of bodily existence when the body no longer serves as an effective instrument for spiritual practice.

Such a mindful decision, by its very nature, require immense courage and composure. These are the qualities which distinguishes *sallekhanā* from other forms of voluntary death such as suicide, which is often marked by emotional turmoil, mental distress, and existential despair. Furthermore, what sets *sallekhanā* stand out from others is the context in which it is undertaken. It is not a private, opaque, and impulsive act; rather a holistic deed which involves the collective support of spiritual counsellors, family members, and wider Jaina community. This participatory involvement validates the "public" and "transparent" nature of the vow and guards it against potential misuses, misrepresentations, and misinterpretations. Additionally, it transforms *sallekhanā* from being a solitary act to shared ethical and religious event, emphasising both "individual agency" and "collective responsibility". As a result, s*allekhanā* does not attract the blame of challenging the sanctity of life but appears to be reaffirming its worth and inviolableness by approaching it with awareness, courage, equanimity and spiritual integrity.

Sallekhanā and Voluntary Death: A Cross-Religious Perspective

Historically, one of the central themes of discourse of religious and philosophical traditions across the world has been the concept of death and the human engagement with its inevitability. Among various responses, the notion of voluntary death, i.e., consciously choosing to die in accordance with spiritual insights and ethical principles, has evolved multiple conceptualisations across various traditions. The concept of voluntary death constitutes a deeply complex and contested domain that reflects a wide range of interpretations on the interrelationship between life, death, and spirituality. Precisely, the idea of voluntary death invites metaphysical, ethical, and spiritual inquiries that transcend boundaries between life and death, autonomy and surrender, and violence and transcendence. Within the multifaceted spectrum of religious perspectives, *sallekhanā* occupies a philosophically unique and ethically rich form of voluntary death, blending metaphysical detachment with disciplined spiritual practice. Furthermore, it stands distinct from other philosophical traditions due to

its emphasis on spiritual purification and nonviolence. Although parallels can be drawn between Jaina vow of *sallekhanā* and forms of voluntary death in other philosophical traditions, a closer examination would reveal its significant uniqueness in committing itself to metaphysical foundations and ethical justifications. Stated otherwise, while the concept of voluntary death is found in other traditions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam, *sallekhanā* stands philosophically distinct from other religious practices of voluntary death, in both its intent and execution.

The concept of *mahāprasthanā*, often translated as the "great departure," is a well-known form of voluntary death in Hinduism. The term *mahāprasthanā* derives from its Sanskrit roots, namely, from "*mahā*" which implies "great," and "*prasthanā*" which denotes "journey or departure."[25] The word *mahāprasthanā* signifies the ultimate renunciation of all material and physical aspects of life to embark on a spiritual journey towards liberation (*moksha*). The practice of *mahāprasthanā* involves relinquishing all worldly possessions, responsibilities, and desires, and making a transition from the temporal to the external. The *Manuṣmṛti* advocates that when an ascetic (*yati*) suffers from an incurable disease or terminal illness, he should start walking towards the North-East direction while sustaining himself of air and water, and removing impurities from his mind, body, and speech until his physical body finally sinks to the rest[26]. The journey of *Pandavas* in the *Mahābhārata* serves as a symbolic representation of this practice. The philosophical underpinnings of this practice align with the broader metaphysical framework of Hinduism, where life is seen as a transient phase and death is considered not as an end but a transition to another state of existence. When compared with *sallekhanā*, it is evident that both *sallekhanā* and *mahāprasthāna* are rooted in religious frameworks and share certain thematic elements, such as the renunciation of material possessions, the aspiration for inner purification, and the acceptance of death as a means to attain spiritual elevation. However, *mahāprasthāna*, particularly as depicted in the *Mahābhārata*, does not represent an explicit or tangible account of death in the manner that *sallekhanā* does within Jaina praxis. In contemporary contexts, *mahāprasthāna* has largely assumed a symbolic rather than a literal significance, often serving as a metaphor for spiritual departure. However, *sallekhanā* retains its literal observance and involves a clearly defined set of ethical and ritual practices

[25] "Mahaprasthana," *Wisdom Library*, accessed April 3, 2025, https://www.wisdomlib.org/definition/mahaprasthana.
[26] G. S. Nene, ed., *The Manusmrti: With the 'Manvartha-Muktavali' Commentary of Kullūka Bhaṭṭa with the 'Maniprabha' Hindi Commentary by Pr. Haragovinda Śāstrī* (Varanasi: The Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, 1970), p. 289.

that guide the individual toward the purification of the soul at the time of death.

Another concept in Hinduism which is linked to the concept of voluntary death is *prāyopaveśa*[27], which bears a degree of conceptual similarity to *sallekhanā* in Jainism. Sir Monier-Williams defines *prāyopaveśa* as "abstaining from food and awaiting in a sitting posture the approach of death".[28] It is a conscious, deliberate and spiritually motivated act of fasting unto death by elderly ascetics who have fulfilled their familial and social duties[29]. Unlike suicide or euthanasia, *prāyopaveśa* is a gradual and disciplined process aiming at achieving spiritual goals. Similar to *sallekhanā*, it is permitted only under stringent conditions, for instance when an individual has fulfilled all the personal and societal duties, has been going through terminal illness or extreme disability. *Mallinātha* asserts that *prāyopaveśana* may be undertaken by any aspirant, male or female, regardless of temporal circumstances or social classification (*varṇa*), including *brāhmaṇa, vaiśya, kṣatriya*, and *śūdra*.[30] While there are certain similarities between *prāyopaveśana* and *sallekhanā*, the two practices are not identical. Both represent voluntary and individual choices, and may be undertaken by either men or women. However, notable differences distinguish them in terms of context, intent, and procedural framework. *Prāyopaveśana* may be adopted by an individual who is in sound physical health and has fulfilled all obligations in life. However, *sallekhanā* is typically embraced in circumstances involving old age, terminal illness, or when an individual's life span is nearing its natural end. Moreover, *sallekhanā* is a rigorously guided religious undertaking. It involves the oversight of a qualified spiritual authority and the process is deeply embedded within the institutional and ethical structure of the Jaina way of living. In contrast, *prāyopaveśana* is not necessarily supervised by any religious authority, nor does it follow a standardised ritual protocol. It is more autonomous in nature and lacks the formalised communal and spiritual oversight that characterises *sallekhanā*.

Furthermore, other philosophical and religious traditions such as Islam and Christianity offer distinct perspectives on the notion of voluntary death. Within the Islamic tradition, suicide and all forms of voluntary death are strictly

[27] Rishabh Gandhi and Dr. Sukdeo Ingale, "Bioethical and Jurisprudential Perspectives on the Right to Die with Dignity in India," *African Journal of Biological Science*s 6, Special Issue 4: p. 5488–5495, https://doi.org/10.33472/AFJBS.6.Si4.2024.5488-5495.
[28] Monier Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (1894; repr., London: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 70.
[29] Patrick Olivelle, *The Samnyasa Upanisads: Hindu Scriptures on Asceticism and Renunciation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).
[30] G. R. Nandargikar, ed., *The Raghuvaṃśa of Kālidāsa, with the Commentary of Mallinātha*, 4th ed. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1971), p. 256.

prohibited[31]. Life is regarded as a sacred trust (*amānah*) from God, and its termination lies solely within the divine prerogative, as affirmed in the *Qur'ān* (6:151).[32] The *Qur'ān* explicitly forbids the taking of one's own life or aiding in another's death. As stated in the *Qur'ān*: "Nor can a soul die except by Allah's leave,"[33] and it underscores the Islamic belief that any form of voluntary death constitutes a rebellion against the will of Allah. This strict theological stance stands in stark contrast to the Jaina vow of *sallekhanā*. While Jainism emphasises the spiritual agency of the soul and its progressive detachment from karmic bonds, Islam, even in the face of extreme suffering, insists on complete submission to the divine will. It can be asserted that from both metaphysical and ethical perspectives, the Jaina practice of *sallekhanā* and the Islamic view of death are fundamentally irreconcilable. Like Islam, Christianity considers "the value of human life, as a creation of God and a gift in trust, is beyond human evaluation and authority".[34] From this perspective, human beings are regarded not as owners but as stewards of their own bodies and souls, bearing responsibility and accountability to God for the life entrusted to them.[35] One of the Ten Commandments in the Old Testament categorically admonishes about safeguarding life by prescribing "Thou shalt not kill".[36] It may be inferred from the command that one is disallowed to take the life, be it of one's own or that of others. Within the Christian tradition, suicide is regarded as a grave sin, as it involves transgressing the divine commandment and violating the sanctity of life. However, Christianity affirms the act of sacrificing one's life in pursuit of a moral ideal or higher purpose, particularly when undertaken in devotion to God or in alignment with the divine will.

In Christian thought, voluntary death, if undertaken on higher moral grounds and pure spiritual reasons, is often regarded as a praiseworthy act. Similar acts fall in the category of "supererogatory acts," i.e., acts that exceed ordinary moral obligations and eligible to be esteemed heroic within the religious and social community. Drawing upon the Hellenistic philosophical traditions, Christianity distinguishes between three primary forms of love: *amor*

[31] David Lester, "Suicide and Islam," *Archives of Suicide Research* 10, no. 1 (2006): p. 77–97.
[32] Maulana Muhammad Ali, *English Translation of the Holy Quran: With Explanatory Notes* (UK: AAIIL, 2011), p. 825.
[33] The Holy Kur'an: *English Translation of the Meaning and Commentary*, revised ed., ed. and rev. by The Presidency of Islamic Researches, IFTA, Call and Guidance, Sura 3:145, p. 184.
[34] "Roman Catholic Bioethics," in *The Cambridge Textbook of Bioethics*, ed. Peter A. Singer and A. M. Viens (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 436–441.
[35] K. M. Wildes and A. C. Mitchell, eds., *Choosing Life: A Dialogue on Evangelium Vitae* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1997).
[36] *The Holy Bible: Containing the Old and New Testaments*, King James Version (Nashville: National Publishing Company, 1961), p. 73.

(carnal love), *philia* (paternal love), and *agape* (self-abnegating love). *Agape*, the highest and most selfless form of love, is characterised by self-sacrifice, self-abnegation and self-denial. Within this framework, the voluntary offering of one's life for the fulfilment of divine will or the service of others is viewed as the most sublime expression of spiritual integrity. In this context, *agape* becomes closely associated with voluntary death as the embodiment of the highest spiritual and ethical ideal. For instance, Jesus Christ exemplifies the classical instance of a supererogatory act, wherein he willingly accepted his impending death with full awareness, offering his life voluntarily in pursuit of a higher spiritual purpose. A comparative analysis of the Christian understanding of voluntary death and the Jaina practice of *sallekhanā* reveals a fundamental divergence in their respective conceptions of death. In Christianity, death is commonly viewed as the soul's passage from the constraints of the physical body to an eternal abode, often associated with divine judgment and salvation. On the other hand, Jainism conceives voluntary death—particularly through *sallekhanā*—as a crucial stage in the soul's metaphysical progression toward *moksha*, i.e., liberation from the cycle of birth and death. Despite these metaphysical differences, both traditions regard voluntary death as a supererogatory act, the one which surpasses basic moral obligations, and ascribe it high spiritual and ethical worth.

Sallekhanā vs. Suicide and Euthanasia: Ethical Distinctions

Sallekhanā has been a topic for comprehensive moral deliberations and constant legal debates. Among other issues, it attracts several critical questions such as does *sallekhanā* undermine the intrinsic value of life? Is it morally justifiable to glorify religious death? Is the practice of *sallekhanā* guarded against religious freedom? Whether *sallekhanā* qualifies as a form of suicide or euthanasia? This section attempts to elucidate the distinction between *sallekhanā* and suicide and euthanasia by analysing its underlying nature, intentions, psychological states, and ethical considerations across various philosophical frameworks. Suicide is understood as "killing oneself by means employed by oneself".[37] It is also defined as "the act of voluntary and intentional self-destruction".[38] In English, it is primarily differentiated from the terms such as self-sacrificing, aid-in-dying, martyrdom, self-deliverance and various other terms.[39] The term "suicide" in Sanskrit is

[37] Justice T. K. Tukol, *Sallekhanā Is Not Suicide* (Ahmedabad: L. D. Institute of Indology, 1976), p. 70.
[38] *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 21 (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica Ltd., n.d.), p. 532.
[39] Margaret Pabst Battin, ed., *The Ethics of Suicide: Historical Sources* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 7.

known as "*ātmāhatyā*", where the word "*ātmā*" means the "self", "soul" or individual essence of a person and the word "*hatyā*" means "killing" or "murder". Together these terms denote killing of the "self" or "self-murder". In a broader sense, it refers to an act of taking one's own life. With regard to the definition of suicide mentioned above, the following observations can be drawn: (a) suicide is a human act; (b) it is a sudden act of death; (b) it is a voluntary or conscious act where the decedent wishes to be dead and undertake the necessary actions to carry out that wish; (c) the goal of the action is to die, rather than self-harm or self-mutilation; (d) the action challenges the core idea of the sanctity of life; (e) the motivation behind the act of suicide may have to be interpreted by others with the help of evidences such as suicide note, spoken testimony, or retrospection of victim's intention.[40] All these characteristics underscore the inherently negative dimensions of the act of suicide, rendering it indefensible from ethical, legal, and philosophical standpoints.

The question whether *sallekhanā* is an act of suicide has been raised by many. Furthermore, there remains a lot of unclarity about the prevalence of the practice of *sallekhanā* among the Jaina community, for no official data is found available on the total number of Jaina followers who practice *sallekhanā* every year. However, the continued observance of this vow even today substantiates its moral acceptance and distinctiveness from an act of suicide. Although both *sallekhanā* and suicide are voluntary death, the physical body is respectfully and peacefully left in *sallekhanā*; whereas it is suddenly and disrespectfully abandoned in suicide. Suicide is attempted under the influence of mental passions (*kaṣāya*) such as anger, depression, despair, agony, attachment, and aversion, that lead to a "fool's death"[41]. However, *sallekhanā* is a "passionless end," for it is done without passion or emotional turmoil of any kind. It is seen as a wise or holy death, which requires courage, and one should be prepared to embrace it at the end of one's life. In Jainism, a death by suicide, which is an "an impure" death, leads to the influx of karma (*āsrava*), resulting in bondage (*bāndha*) and rebirth at a lower level of existence (*gati*)[42], however, a peaceful, detached, and passionless state of mind helps in stopping or preventing the influx of karma (*samvara*) and shedding or destroying the existing karma (*nirjarā*). In Jainism, *sallekhanā* is seen as an ultimate way of getting closer to spiritual upliftment at the end of one's life by liberating oneself from

[40] Edwin S. Shneidman, "Psychological Aspects (1)," in *International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, vol. 15, ed. David L. Sills (New York: Macmillan and Free Press, 1968), p. 385.
[41] Margaret Pabst Battin *op. cit*, p. 47.
[42] ibid, p. 47.

the attachments (*parigraha*) and mental passions (*kaṣāya*). Death by *sallekhanā* is to be seen as an ultimate expression of devotion towards the Jaina doctrine of nonviolence (*ahimsā*) and non-attachment (*aparigraha*). In other words, *sallekhanā* can be seen as a perfect way to conclude one's own life by respecting not only the quality and sanctity of life but honouring death as well. While both *sallekhanā* and suicide are forms of voluntary death, the former is an act of courage but the latter is an act of cowardice, which is both morally and legally unacceptable. Thus, *sallekhanā* cannot be termed as "suicide" as it is an act of courageous individual who peacefully plans religious death and acknowledges it with full joy, consciousness, and calmness of mind.

Furthermore, a similar comparison can be made between the Jaina practice of *sallekhanā* and Euthanasia. The term euthanasia, which implies a form of voluntary death, is derived from the Greek roots "eu" (εὖ) which means "good" and "thanatos" (θάνατος) which denotes "sleep."[43] Accordingly, the term refers to the act of intentionally ending one's life with dignity to alleviate suffering. Euthanasia can be defined as "bringing about of a gentle and painless death for a person suffering from a painful and incurable illness, or extreme old age etc."[44] Euthanasia can also be understood as an ability "to die with dignity at a moment when life is devoid of it".[45] It is a voluntary choice, "both on the part of the owner of this life and on the part of doctor who knows that this is no longer a life".[46] In this regard, the definitions mentioned above highlight the following characteristics: (a) euthanasia is a form of voluntary death; (b) it denotes humane killing of persons; (c) the process of euthanasia maintains dignity of life; (d) it intends to ease the suffering of the patient; (e) it is a mutually consensual decision between the involved individuals, namely, the afflicted and physicians; (f) it entails considerations within legal framework; and lastly (g) it is not endorsed by any religion. Unlike suicide, euthanasia is practiced with good intent while upholding the principles of biomedical ethics such as autonomy and beneficence.[47] By respecting the autonomy of the subject, it allows one to make an informed, conscious, and voluntary decision to end life. Similarly, the principle of beneficence is upheld since euthanasia aims at alleviating suffering when no curative options remain available. Distinguishing it from suicide,

[43] "*Euthanasia*," Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, accessed April 11, 2025, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/euthanasia.
[44] A. P. Cowie and A. S. Hornby, eds., *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*, 4th ed., 4th impression (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 411.
[45] John Ambrose Perry and Erna Perry, *Face to Face: The Individual and Social Problems* (Boston: Educational Associates, Brown and Company, 1976), p. 151.
[46] *Ibid*. p. 515
[47] Tom L. Beauchamp and James F. Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 7th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

which is often regarded as an impulsive and self-destructive act which is frequently associated with psychological distress, impaired judgement, and emotional impulsivity, euthanasia involves preserving individual's autonomy, valuing the quality of life, maintaining compassion and care, and upholding ethical and legal guidelines.

Similar to suicide, a question is also raised whether *sallekhanā* constitutes a form of euthanasia. The foundational nature of euthanasia, particularly passive euthanasia, aligns with *sallekhanā* as both allows gradual relinquishment of bodily sustenance, resulting into natural deterioration of the physical body, and ultimately, to death. However, euthanasia lacks religious endorsement, for it is not supported by religions such as Islam, Christianity, and Hinduism.[48] Unlike *sallekhanā*, death by euthanasia is not considered as spiritual event or holy transition. Stated otherwise, while *sallekhanā* is practiced from the spiritual upliftment point of view, euthanasia is practiced purely from the personal and medical point of view. *Sallekhanā* manifests a fundamental difference from euthanasia in so far as the former is an act of "self-sacrifice" which is essentially founded on courage and fearlessness, whereas the latter is largely an act of "self-interest" when one finds a way to end one's personal pain, suffering, or loss of dignity. Critics argue that the euthanasia is a form of self-interest where an individual prioritises one's own personal wishes and physical and emotional wellbeing by choosing death as a means to escape a state of constant misery. Following the Jaina perspective, it can be asserted that only cowards, who are not ready to accept the bitter fruits of their own *karma*, choose to die voluntarily by euthanasia. *Sallekhanā* or *samādhi-maraṇa* is for the brave who readily accept the inevitable nature of death and focus on shedding the past *karmas*. However, the result of euthanasia is a spiritually unrewarding death while that of *sallekhanā* is spiritually rewarding one. Therefore, while suicide and euthanasia may also involve voluntary death, they differ substantially in intent, process, and philosophical grounding from the practice of *sallekhanā*. It is thus evident that *sallekhanā* cannot be equated with either suicide or euthanasia.

Conclusion

[48] Mousumi Kalita, "Euthanasia: A Comprehensive Analysis on Indian Perspective," *Law and World* 10, no. 32 (2024): 20–37, https://doi.org/10.36475/10.4.2.

Sallekhanā, the practice of fasting unto death, is a form of voluntary death embraced by devout followers of Jainism. It marks the culmination of all the vows (*vrata*) that are to be followed by both laypersons (*śrāvaka)* and ascetics (*sramana*) regardless of their gender. The practice signifies a mode of transition from the present life to a more elevated existential state through the conscious acceptance of the inevitability of death. It is considered as the final act of renunciation (*tyāg*), undertaken by individuals who have consciously prepared themselves to transcend the worldly existence and embrace death with equanimity. Drawing impeccable conceptual support from the Jaina ethical tradition, *sallekhanā* is practiced with full consciousness. It is initiated only after diligent deliberation of the intent and careful assessment of the soundness of the aspirant's mental disposition so that autonomy of persons is respected, and the targeted greater welfare is assured. When viewed through the prism of biomedical ethics, therefore, *sallekhanā* demonstrates deep conformity with normative principles of respect for autonomy of persons, non-maleficence and beneficence.[49] According to the Jaina tradition, s*allekhanā* facilitates purification of the soul through a deliberate disengagement from the body, which is characterised by dignity and equanimity, and furthermore, extolled by the adherence to the principle of nonviolence. This process aims to minimise physical suffering and psychological distress, while ultimately striving toward spiritual upliftment and liberation (*moksha*). While *sallekhanā* has been revered within the Jaina communities for centuries, it has become a major topic for contemporary ethical debates and legal discourses. Critics often equate it with suicide or euthanasia arguing that *sallekhanā* represents a form of self-inflicted death that violates the principle of sanctity of life along with other established legal and ethical frameworks.

However, such interpretations often overlook the fundamental theosophical distinction between *sallekhanā* and other forms of voluntary death. Unlike suicide, it is undertaken with complete mental clarity, detachment, support from community members, and spiritual preparedness. Similarly, unlike euthanasia, it is self-initiated gradual process of voluntary withdrawal from nourishment, guided by spiritual convictions rather than external determinants. *Sallekhanā* is an act of profound courage, where one consciously accepts death, transcends the innate biological instinct of self-preservation, and heroically takes control over one's own end of life with profound serenity, unfathomable determination, and

[49] Nisha Daga and G. K. Joseph, "Big Data and Bigger Dilemmas: Ethical Concerns of Data in Healthcare," *2024 IEEE 7th International Conference on Multimedia Information Processing and Retrieval (MIPR)*, San Jose, CA, USA, 2024, 681–84. https://doi.org/10.1109/MIPR62202.2024.00117.

unruffled tranquillity. Although death has always been an unsettling subject for humanity across centuries, Jainism challenges this ever-haunting predicament by heroically embracing it by introducing s*allekhanā* as the hallmark of victory over the dread and the pathway to spiritual elevation.