THE DEATH DIET
WHEN VEGETARIANISM ISN’T NON-VIOLENT ENOUGH TO SHED THOSE EXTRA KARMAS

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For Cesar
who told me to go back to school
instead of teaching windsurfing
and sailing in the USVI

veni
vidi
PAU
Suicide

There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest—whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories—comes afterwards. These are games; one must first answer.

Albert Camus, Opening to The Myth of Sisyphus

The ancient Jaina practice of fasting to death (sallekhanā or santhāra) has come under scrutiny in modern India since Section 309 of the Indian Penal Code forbids an attempt to commit suicide and section 306 prohibits its abetment. In most Indian states those fasting have been force-fed and their fast prematurely terminated, but a few states are exceptional and grant those observing sallekhanā special status. Individual states have varying interpretations of the national law, forcing many Jains to conduct the ancient, spiritual austerity in secret. The question has thus arisen: how and with what evidence, when sallekhanā is considered to be in violation of Section 309 of the Indian Penal Code by multiple Indian states, do Jains contend that it is not suicide?

Suicide is a universal phenomenon understood and evaluated in a variety of ways in different times and places. Suicide literally means “self-killing”, so even though every culture may not view the ethical and moral ramifications of the act in a similar fashion, most agree on what it means to kill one’s own self. However, there are cases where intentional self-killing is not considered suicide.

Psychologists, sociologists, philosophers and religious authorities have unique perspectives regarding the voluntary termination of one’s own life. Sociology is concerned with
the phenomenon on a more grand, and population-encompassing level while the field of psychology focuses on the prevention of suicide with regards to individuals. Philosophical speculation of the subject primarily revolves around the ethical implications of self-killing. Religions, unlike the disciplinary fields that seek to understand suicide, have created rules regarding its morality.

**Perspectives from Psychology**

Musings on suicide, while an ancient topic of discourse, began in the modern fields of psychoanalysis and psychology with Freud (whose life ended, somewhat ironically in the context of this discussion, through euthanasia). He develops his views concerning the “death drive”, or *thanatos*, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Freud speculates that a deep, human urges draws us to seeking out the simpler times we knew as children. This, he says, is due to “a powerful tendency inherent in every living organism to restore a prior state” (italicized by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 76).

Freud surmises that the force controlling the “ego drive” is the “death drive” and that “the entire life of the drives seeks to procure death” (Freud, 79). If each person’s deepest drive is for an ending to life, why is that we strive so hard for its preservation? The answer is simple. The “sexual drive”, or *eros*, which pushes for a continuance of life, defeats the self-destructive “ego drive” in our existential struggle, and life is preserved.

Freud’s concept of *thanatos* ties in with his views on repetition compulsion. He observed that people will over and over again seek painful experiences, similar to ones rooted in their past, and is baffled by why people are “driven to repeat the repressed matter as an experience in the present, instead of remembering it as something belonging to the past” (Freud,
People are constantly forced to repeat unpleasant experiences, and thanatos is the human drive to return to a more basic state and end the cycle of suffering. The ideal for the psyche is to exist a basic, simple, and infinitely stable state and overcome the propelling self-preservation of eros. By Freud’s analysis death provides the only chance of getting there. Death presents the person overwhelmed by thanatos the most primeval place that can be reached. This concept parallels the supposedly primal instinct to return to the womb as the place of ultimate safety and neurotic surrender. But what could offer even more stability than the prenatal condition? Freud answers this to take the prior state restoration model a step further. Rather than unconsciously wishing for a return to the first place of experience, a neurotic individual overcome by thanatos wants to go to a place before even that, a state of quality-free non-existence.

Recent work in the field of psychology concerns itself less with such specific and grandiose models for the problem of suicide and addresses the issue with more critical and term driven analyses. Contemporary psychology centers on the prevention of suicide, not the phenomenon in and of itself. It takes a more practical and pragmatic approach, on the individual level, using variables and terminology to construct theoretical persons who are likely to commit suicide.

In *Psychology of Suicide*, Edwin Shneidman, the late clinical psychologist and preeminent suicidologist, lists numerous risk factors linked to suicide such as anti-social behavior, social isolation and poor impulse control, as well as a history of suicidal behavior or tendencies. (Shneidman, *Psychology of Suicide*, 56-75). Those who kill themselves are typically assumed to be socially isolated, impulsive and prone self-destruction. Their methods will be quick, in an effort to cope with and subsequently end mental anguish.
By synthesizing the work of Freud with the modern prevention therapy and theories a picture of a somewhat disparate individual arises. This seemingly paradoxical person unconsciously seeks a return to stability while simultaneously exuding poor impulse control, anti-social behavior, and social isolation. The latter, Freudian neurotic seems like a melancholic philosopher, too smart for his own good, while the former fits the description of an angry-teenage loner. One might argue that the neurosis explicated by Freud is present in the teenage, but modern psychology does not seem to interested in drawing this conclusion. A person who exhibits characteristics blending the psychoanalytic and prevention methods does not seem to exist.

I propose a synthesis of Freud’s work with that of modern therapy, which allows for two suicidal figures standing in juxtaposition to one another. The less complicated individual, at least on paper, is the angry and impulsive person who, if they do commit suicide, will end his or her life with little or no foresight. This person, in a moment of heightened emotional agony, seeks a quick fix, and finds it in self-killing. The Freudian neurotic typically does not partake in such rash action. This person is suicidal in a different way, and he or she plans committing suicide after long, reflective deliberation on the unsatisfactory and unstable nature of their life. He or she retains no doubts that this life need not be lived any longer. If something better awaits, wonderful, but if not, so be it. Unconcerned with what lies beyond death, the Freudian neurotic has become convinced that non-existence is preferable to living.

**Sociological Perspectives**

The critical study of suicide as a social phenomenon begins with Durkheim. Although his primary aim is sociological insofar as he seeks to quantify suicide, he nevertheless provides
definitions regarding causes, motives, and the act itself that came to inform future study in the field. Indeed, he begins his *Suicide* with a discussion on the difficulty of defining suicide.

Since the word ‘suicide’ recurs constantly in the course of conversation, it might be thought that its sense in universally known and that definition is superfluous. Actually, the words of everyday language, like the concepts they express, are always susceptible of more than one meaning, and the scholar employing them in their accepted use without further definition would risk serious misunderstanding. Not only is their meaning so indefinite as to vary, from case to case, with the needs of argument, but, with classification from which they derive is not analytic, but merely translates the confused impressions of the crowd, categories of the very different sorts of fact are indistinctly combined under the same heading, or similar realities are differently named.

Durkheim, *Suicide*, pg. 41

He states “suicide is applied to all cases of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act of the victim himself, which he knows will produce the result” (Durkheim, *Suicide*, 44). By positive act Durkheim means doing something to oneself, such as taking pills or slitting of the wrists. He explains a negative act by providing the example of intentional death brought about by the refusal to take food. Durkheim refers to the person committing suicide as a “victim”. He writes that suicide is desperate, happens in a single moment, and we may conclude from his descriptions that suicide typically involves some violence. He also argues that suicide is an entirely individual act, with the “victim” receiving no aid from others. So for Durkheim suicide is most often a desperate, quick, and violent dispatching of one’s own self, with no outside assistance.

Durkheim’s research and methods spawned a sub-school of sociology in the early and mid-twentieth century that carried on his legacy of investigating the social phenomenon of suicide. Like their predecessor, however, those conducting research were less concerned with
defining suicide and the ethics of it, but were more interested in the act as it manifested itself across society (i.e. social causes of suicide on a pan-social scale). Nevertheless, they provide evaluations of the act that build on Durkheim’s *Suicide*. Maurice Farber and Maurice Halbwachs are both sociologists contributing to the sub-school of “suicidology”. Farber argues “suicide is an action that takes place in sadness and desperation. It inflicts grief and remorse upon survivors. It deprives us of valuable members of society. It ranks high among the killers of man and is in face one of the most frequent killers of young adults” (Farber, *Theory of Suicide*, 3-4). Farber obviously does not hold the act of suicide in high regard and states that it “involves a conscious, deliberate attempt to one’s life quickly” (Farber, 4). He further argues that “to be classed as a suicide, a person must intend to kill himself, and he must actually do so” (Farber, 7). Halbwachs believes “suicides are always explained by social causes” and attributes most cases to “manic-depressive psychosis” (Halbwachs, *Causes of Suicide*, 11). It is clear that the general trend in sociology, building on the extant work of Durkheim, is that suicide is negative, quick, and most probably a response to overwhelming mental dis-ease. It must once again be stressed that the person committing the act of suicide is seen to be a “victim”.

Japan receives special attention from sociologists as a result of possessing a much higher suicide rate than any other nation. This is perhaps due to the fact that Japan “does not condemn suicide for religious reasons” (Becker, *Aging, Dying, and Bereavement in Contemporary Japan*, 93). With an incredibly low birth rate and an overwhelmingly top-heavy age pyramid, the country faces a crisis regarding its elderly. Over 20 percent of the population is over age 65 (Becker, 91). Although plenty of young people take their own lives, the majority of suicides are contained within the upper echelons of the age pyramid.
Recently Japanese elders are finding rather creative and socially acceptable ways to end their lives. “Unintentional drownings”, most likely familial cover-ups for suicides, frequently cause death (Becker, 95). Dubbed “suicide forest”, Aokigahara sits at the base of Mount Fuji. Empty and sometimes occupied nooses swing from the trees and grisly scenes abound in a place that 50 to 100 people annually choose as the location to end their lives (VBS.TV staff). Pokkuri temples are appearing throughout Japan, serving as a place for those elderly unwilling to kill themselves to pray to the Bodhisattva Kannon for a quick death (Stone and Walter, Introduction to Death and the Afterlife in Japanese Buddhism, 19).

**Philosophical Perspectives**

Sociological research into suicide addresses the causes and ramifications with regards to society and psychology seeks methods of prevention applicable to individuals. Western philosophers from ancient Greece up to post-war Paris were more concerned with the ethical implications of suicide, whereas contemporary philosophers primarily seek to define it.

Plato depicts Socrates dialecticizing the ethics of suicide in the *Phaedo*. Socrates views life as a gift from the gods and killing one’s own self as a slap in the divine face. For man to willingly give up his life is for him to forsake the wonderful boon of partaking in humanity. In the Platonic scheme, the soul can only access the realm of Forms, and therefore perfect knowledge, after and before death in a sort of repeated purgatory (since Plato believed in reincarnation). The dilemma for the philosopher, Socrates believes, is to desire revelation of the pure Forms, knowing admittance is granted only after death, but being unable to commit suicide for quicker access since this is the ultimate sin. Interestingly, like the father of psychoanalysis, the father of Western philosophy took his own life. Although some argue that Socrates’ drinking
of the hemlock did not constitute suicide, others, such as Friedrich Nietzsche believe his motives were purely self-destructive.

Nietzsche argues that Socrates wished to die before even receiving his sentence from the Athenian government. For the German philosopher the emergence of dialectics proves Greek culture’s deterioration. Before the famous philosopher, Greeks knew concepts such as good, bad, justice, and bravery *a priori* and without any need for further explanation, but their culture fell into degeneration and a character like Socrates became necessary. In fact the philosopher’s dying words “To live – that means to be a long time sick: I owe a cock to the savior Asclepius”, reference the cock that a person would pay Asclepius for curing a sickness (Nietzsche, 39). Socrates essentially says that life is an illness that death cures.

In his posthumously published essay *On Suicide*, David Hume argues that suicide is not ethically reprehensible. He states, “if suicide be criminal, it must be a transgression of our duty either to God, our neighbour, or ourselves” (Hume, *On Suicide*). Hume believes that if suicide does not usurp an individual’s duty, it may be considered ethical.

For Kant ethics are a matter of categorical duty and obligation. Moreover, obligation arises out of what is required of a rational agent and this part of what is packed into his notion of a categorical imperative. In short, the categorical imperative holds that for an act to be truly ethical, it should be the ideal act to occur in all instances where it may be applied. Kant believes that the act of suicide arises from an instinct of self-love and self-preservation, but since killing oneself is the ultimate form of non-self-preservation a rational agent could not sanction this action because he or she could not will it without contradiction. How is suicide self-love or self-preservation? Since a person does not want to suffer, and feels that suicide can free them from
grief, he or she is deluded into thinking self-destruction is self-preservation. The person thinks that ending the current state of agony will somehow usher in a tranquility to be enjoyed. Even though the act ends existence, the suicide believes he or she may recover following the escape from an unsatisfactory situation.

In *The Myth of Sisyphus* Albert Camus describes modern life as an absurd endeavor. The mundane pursuits of modern man ultimately lead to nothing, and his existence is comparable to the Greek myth of Sisyphus, the man damned by the gods to an eternal chore of rolling a great stone up a hill which, whenever pushed to the apex and just before going over, rolls back down the slope again. The French philosopher holds that there is no real end to man’s constant undertakings, his striving is in vain. Upon realizing this though, “modern man” continues his pursuit, aware his striving is in vain, and this Camus argues, is absurd. The only real tonic for absurdity is suicide, but modern man pushes forward anyway, aware that his existence is absurd, very much like Sisyphus, rolling the rock up the hill only to watch it go back down.

Contrary to the often violent nature perceived in suicide, contemporary philosopher Daniel Hill points out, in the same vein as Durkheim’s “negative act”, that “although it is necessary for suicide that one kill oneself, it is possible to kill oneself from refraining from doing something. For example, by refraining from eating one can kill one’s self. But it seems that it is a necessary condition of one’s killing oneself that one be actively refraining rather than simply neglecting” (Hill, *What is it to commit suicide?*, 194-195). He has said that suicide means one kills oneself, but he has not stated that killing one’s self means that one has committed suicide. In fact he later argues, “killing oneself is not sufficient for committing suicide” (Hill, 196). Hill also states that, as far as intention is concerned “the intention is that [the person] kills himself, and the intention that his self-killing be quick” (Hill, 198). Hill’s own definition of suicide rests
heavily on primary intention, insofar as he states that for self-killing to be considered suicide, the person’s primary intention must be to end his or her life. So, in his view, a kamikaze pilot or suicide bomber would not be committing suicide, since the primary intention is not to end his own life. A final, important argument to note from Hill is the he believes “it is necessary for me to commit suicide that I have to intend that I kill myself under the description ‘myself’” (Hill, 201). Gavin Fairbairn defines suicide as “an act, whether of commission or omission, and whether performed by himself or others, by means of which an individual autonomously intends and wishes to bring about his death” (Fairbairn, Contemplating Suicide, 84). Glenn Garber defines suicide as “doing something that results in one’s death in the way that was planned, either from the intention of ending one’s life or the intention to bring about some other state of affairs (such as relief from pain) that one thinks it certain or highly probable can be achieved by means of death” (Garber, Suicide: Right or Wrong? 155). Both Fairbairn and Garber’s definitions place great emphasis on the intent of the person committing suicide.

Suicide is not necessarily quick. As Durkheim, and to an extent Hill, noted, negative actions may be taken in order to commit suicide. The example given by both is refraining from eating food; essentially starving to death. Furthermore, it cannot be argued that suicide must necessarily involve violence because of the ambiguity of the term “violence.” While one person may state that intentionally overdosing on heroin or barbiturates is violent, another may argue that it is not, and it is because of this inability to establish universal consensus with regards to violence that it cannot be considered a factor in suicide.

It has been established what suicide is “not necessarily”, so from the definition presented, what can suicide be said to necessarily involve? There is a consensus among those examined that suicide always involves the intent to bring about one’s own death, but where do
opinions differ? Could there be cases where a person deliberately ends his or life that some maintain are not instances of suicide? Society paradoxically views the person who commits suicide as both a “transgressor” and a “victim.” I define suicide as the only act in which the transgressor is the victim, and the primary intent is to bring about one’s own death.

**Perspective from Religions**

Excluding extra ordinary cases where the act of suicide is seen as heroic, such as the practice of ritual suicide in Japan\(^1\) or the teachings of the Confucian philosopher Mencius\(^2\), the killing of one’s self is condemned by society. Although Judaism seems to condemn suicide with the commandment “Thou shalt not kill” there are moments where Biblical characters take their own lives. For example, King Saul, when an armor bearer refuses to kill him after he has mortally wounded, intentionally kills himself by falling on his own sword.\(^3\) The most famous instance of suicide of Jews occurred a few miles to West of the southern tip of the Dead Sea at the mountaintop fortress of Masada. During the twilight of the Jewish revolt that saw the destruction of Herod’s temple in 70 CE, a pocket of rebels called the Sicarii fled to the mountaintop fortress and holed up inside. The Roman Legion X *Fretensis* laid siege to the place, intent on smashing the final resisters. When they finally breached Masada, the legionnaires were in for a grisly site.

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1. The literature on *seppuku*, or *harākiri*, is vast. This is the form of ritual suicide in Japan, typically undertaken by warrior samurai, in which a man disembowels himself with a small knife in an effort to preserve his honor in the face of shameful defeat.
2. Mencius believed that suicide was acceptable in order to preserve righteousness Gaozi, Book One, 10
3. 1 Samuel 31:4-6; 1 Chronicles 10:3-7
Now for the Romans, they expected that they should be fought in the morning, when, accordingly, they put on their armor, and laid bridges of planks upon their ladders from their banks, to make an assault upon the fortress, which they did; but saw nobody as an enemy, but a terrible solitude on every side, with a fire within the place, as well as a perfect silence. So they were at a loss to guess at what had happened [...] they came within the palace, and so met with the multitude of the slain, but could take no pleasure in the fact, though it were done to their enemies. Nor could they do other than wonder at the courage of their resolution, and the immovable contempt of death which so great a number of them had shown, when they went through with such an action as that was.

*The Works of Josephus*, The Wars of the Jews, Chapter 9, Book 7

The Latinized and Jewish complier of history of Judaism in antiquity around the beginning of the Common Era Josephus gives the only account of the event. He included a description of what happened in his chronicles. How the man could have known what occurred in a place with no survivors is up for debate, but perhaps the description of the scene by the Roman soldiers provided enough information that his imagination needed only to fill in small details.

They then chose ten men by lot out of them to slay all the rest; every one of whom laid himself down by his wife and children on the ground, and threw his arms about them, and they offered their necks to the stroke of those who by lot executed that melancholy office; and when these ten had, without fear, slain them all, they made the same rule for casting lots for themselves, that he whose lot it was should first kill the other nine, and after all should kill himself. Accordingly, all these had courage sufficient to be no way behind one another in doing or suffering; so, for a conclusion, the nine offered their necks to the executioner, and he who was the last of all took a view of all the other bodies, lest perchance some or other among so many that were slain should want his assistance to
Christian scripture never explicitly condemns suicide. Judas Iscariot, the destined betrayer of Jesus Christ and a villain of the Gospels is depicted as killing himself (although it should be noted that in another place he is described as falling and having his intestines inexplicably burst out). Following Judas’ death Jesus refers to him as “the son of destruction”, but this probably entails more cosmic implications, rather than mundane ones concerning suicide.

Although scripture leaves something to be desired with regards to the morality of suicide, the Catechism produced by the Second Vatican Council addresses the issue explicitly. The Catholic Church bans both the killing of one’s own self as well as aiding in another’s endeavor to do so. The catechism declares, “suicide is contrary to the love for a living God” (Catholic Church. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2281). Dante places suicides in the seventh circle of Hell in his *Divine Comedy*, doomed to spend eternity as conscious trees, with horrible harpies infesting their boughs (*Inferno*, Canto XIII).

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4 Matthew 27: 5 records Judas hanging himself, Acts 1:18 records his intestines bursting out, and Jesus refers to him as “son of destruction” in John 17:12
The Islamic attitude mirrors that of the Platonic position expounded in the *Phaedo*. A human life is among the greatest gifts offered by God and should not be forsaken. A verse appears in the Qur’an that seems to ban suicide, but its meaning changes depending on one reads it. Verse 4.29 may be translated as either “do not destroy yourselves” or “do not destroy each other”. The meaning varies depending on the *tafsīr* (interpretation of the reader) so it is left somewhat ambiguous as to whether suicide is forbidden according to the Qur’an. The Hadith however, which is as much a part of the Muslim canon as the Qur’an, is explicit on the subject.

The Sahih al-Bukhari Hadith quotes the Prophet Muhammad forbidding suicide several times. He says “whoever commits suicide with piece of iron will be punished with the same piece of iron in the Hell Fire” (2.446) and the next Hadith follows with “he who commits suicide by throttling shall keep on throttling himself in the hell fire (forever) and he who commits suicide by stabbing himself shall keep on stabbing himself in the hell fire” (2.446). Another prohibition of suicide appears in the same Hadith three times verbatim and declares “if somebody commits suicide with anything in this world, he will be tortured with that very thing on the Day of Resurrection” (8.73, 8.647, 8.126).

Since suicide is a quality of the human condition, it is not only addressed by the Abrahamic religions. The three major *dharma* religions that originated in India, those being Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism, address the issue as well, and devote more attention to it than their Mediterranean and Near-Eastern counterparts.

Indian philosophy asserts that each person is essentially trapped in *samsāra* (cyclical existence) and that the body is merely a finite vessel for the transmigrating ātman (self). When a person dies, he or she is simply reborn into a new body according to the karma accumulated
across incalculable lives lived by the ātman. Suicide, with the intention of ending one’s own life, would ultimately serve no purpose in the Indian scheme of things since the act will accrue negative karma and the ātman will carry any feelings of dissatisfaction into the next life.

Various Purāṇas and both Hindu epics, the Mahābhārata and Rāmāyana, contain multiple examples in which a person intentionally ends his or her Earthly life to attain some goal. A kind of heroic suicide appears frequently and first in the most ancient Hindu texts, the Vedas. A warrior, whose body dies but the transmigrating ātman still lives, yokes himself to a heavenly chariot, which he drives through the sun, becoming a yogayukta. This yogayukta death provides the basis for the ideal death sought by the heroes of the Mahābhārata. The Pāṇḍavas, protagonists of the epic, set off for heaven with their wife Draupadī in the Mahāprasthānika Parvan (The Book of the Great Journey, i.e. death) towards the story’s close with the aspiration of yoking themselves to heavenly chariots to break through the sun. Only the brother Yudhiṣṭhira survives to the journey’s end, at which he point he gives up his Earthly body to mount his chariot and pass through the sun to heaven. Bhūriśravas, Droṇa, Kṛṣṇa, and Bhīṣma die in a similar fashion. The final section of Vālmīki’s Rāmāyana, the Uttara Khaṇḍa (Last Section), relates the somewhat disturbing episode of the Queen Sītā’s departure from the world. After facing a trial by fire and subsequent banishment to the forest by her husband Rāma, Sītā prays to her mother, who is the Earth itself, to receive her, causing the ground to open and swallow the queen up. The woman presumably ceases to exist the moment she disappears, but her ātman remains, melding with her terrestrial mother.

The Bhāgavata Purāṇa begins at the close of the events of the Mahābhārata and the

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5 David Gordon White analyzes this literary phenomenon in-depth in Chapter Two of his book Sinister Yogis.
start of the Kali Yuga, the degenerate age in which, according to Hindu astrology, we currently reside. At the opening of the Pūrana, in the first book, a king, Parikṣit, survives a supernatural, prenatal attack, thanks to the grace of the god Kṛṣṇa. Following his birth, however, a Brahmin put a curse on the man – that he should one day be fatally bitten by a snake-bird – and the king grew up fearing its fruition.

Years later, while hunting, Parikṣit came upon a meditation hut by the banks of a river. Famished, he went inside and found a holy man with matted hair and tattered clothes deep in meditation. Despite the ascetic’s entranced disposition, the king implored him for refreshments. When he received no reply or acknowledgement of any kind from the other man Parikṣit grew angry, threw a dead snake over the meditator’s shoulder in order to frighten him whenever he eventually came around, and departed from the hut. The holy man’s son heard of the subsequent distress experienced by his father upon finding a lifeless serpent on his shoulder, grew angry, and in a rage placed a curse on the already cursed Parikṣit. In seven days the king would received a fatal bite from a snake-bird.

Accepting his fate, the king said goodbye to all loved ones and retired to the banks of the Gaṅgā. Beside the sacred river Parikṣit resolved to stop the intake of food and water and devote all his thoughts to the Kṛṣṇa until his material body died (Bhāgavata Purāṇa, Book 1, Chapter 19, Verse 5). For the purpose of filling the king’s mind solely with thoughts of God until his demise, the sage Śuka told him stories of the object of his devotion, and these tales of Kṛṣṇa make up the rest of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa.

The Śiva Purāṇa relates one of the most famous myths in India featuring self-sacrifice, a story with an impact that continued into modernity. At the request of Brahmā, the Great
Cosmic Goddess takes on a human body as Satī, the daughter of Dakṣa, a lesser-creator god of the Vedas. She takes human form under the stipulation that should Dakṣa ever insult her, she will cast off her earthly skin and immediately return to the heavens. As the girl grew up her father’s possessiveness of her increased. When, as a fully-grown women, she married the god Śiva her father nursed a great jealously toward his daughter’s spouse. Śiva was unsavory at best. He smeared his body in ashes, spent most of his time in funeral grounds among jackals, hyenas and carrion birds, and a retinue of ghosts, ghouls and wild animals followed him everywhere.

Following their marriage, Satī moves with her new husband to his hermitage home hidden high in the Himalayas in Mount Kailasha. After some time she receives an invitation from her father to a mahāyajña (great sacrifice) at his palace. Śiva’s name is conspicuously missing form the invitation. Satī implores him to go, but he refuses, unwilling to attend a yajña without the hospitality of its benefactor. He insists she go, however, and she departs with her husband’s ghoulis retinue in tow.

Upon arrival to her father’s palace, Satī finds a sacrificial fire lit for every god except for one. Her husband, the most powerful of all the gods, has not received a sacrifice. Satī inquires to her father as to why her husband is not the recipient of any honors, and the two launch into a heated argument regarding the merits of Śiva.

Satī realizes that by insulting her husband, Dakṣa dishonors her. At the moment of this epiphany, the Great Goddess channels the yogic power within her human body and invokes Agni, the Vedic fire god, and she bursts into flames. On Mount Kailasha Śiva hears word of the fate of his wife. Enraged he rips out two locks of hair and violently flings them upon the mountainside. The explosive collision produces two terrible gods who immediately travel to the
palace and slaughter all inside. Dakṣa himself is decapitated, and a somewhat forgiving Śiva later replaces his head with that of a goat’s.

Drawing its name from the myth, self-immolation received praise historically in the form of satī (the burning of a widow on the funeral fire of her husband), although the practice is said to have ceased since the last recorded case in 1987 in Rajasthan. Excluding myth and satī, however, on a practical level suicide is frowned upon in Hinduism. The Vasiṣṭha Dharmasūtra states that anyone who commits suicide is to be denied funerary rites and that anyone who fails in the attempt must undergo a humiliating twelve-day penance (Vasiṣṭha Dharmasūtra, Book 23, Chapter 14, Verse 19). Kautilya also condemns the act in his Artha Śāstra (Thakur, The History of Suicide in India, 53). The Īśa Upaniṣad comments on the issue of suicide, stating “sunless are those worlds and enveloped in blind gloom where to all they in their passing hence resort who are slayers of their souls” (Īśa Upaniṣad verse 3). Various minor texts and commentaries condemn suicide as well (Thakur, 56-60). The concept of ahimsā (non-violence) that pervades Hindu scripture and thought formally stands in opposition to self-destruction. There are, however, cases of non-satī suicides that received historical praise. For instance, the Rājatarāṅginī, the chronicler Kalhaṇa’s history of Kashmir, is littered with instances of pṛyopaveśa, a voluntary fast to the death undertaken by Brahmans, usually as a form of political protest. From Kalhaṇa’s description of the practice, it seems that it received limited legal protection and even special regulation in ancient Kashmir.

Indian Buddhism, a form which for all intents and purposes no longer exists, but from which all other Buddhisms descend, praises specific instances of self-sacrifice. For example, in the Jātakamālā the future Buddha allows a starving tigress to eat him, however this story does not reflect the larger trend of early Buddhism (Thakur, 109). In the Suttavibhaṅga section of the
Pali Canon’s Vinaya Piṭaka (the oldest rules for monks and nuns), the Buddha lists suicide among other offenses that merit an instant deordination. A group of monks are overcome with disgust towards their bodies after meditating upon the unsatisfactory nature of corporealism. Meditation on the body with regards to it composite parts of blood, semen, pus, feces and bile is a common trope in the early Buddhist literature. These monks decide that they do not wish to reside in such unsavory vessels any longer and resolve to dispatch with their lives through quick, violent means.

At one time the enlightened one, the lord, was staying at Vesālī in the pavilion of the Gabled Hall in the Great Wood. At that time the lord talked in many ways to the monks of the subject of [mediation on] the impure [nature of the body], he spoke in praise of the impure, he spoke in praise of the developing (contemplation of) the impure, he spoke thus and thus in praise of taking the impure as a stage in meditation. Then the lord addressed the monks thus:

“I wish, monks, to go into solitary retreat for a half-month; I do not wish anyone to come up to me except the one who brings my alms-food.”

“Very well, lord,” the monks answered the lord, and accordingly no one went up to the lord except the one to take him alms-food. Then the monks said: “The lord has talked in many ways on the subjects of the impure, he spoke in praise of the impure, he spoke in praise of developing (the contemplation of) the impure, he spoke in praise of taking the impure as a stage in meditation.” These (monks) dwelt intent upon the practice of developing (contemplation of) the impure in its many different aspects; (but) they were troubled by their own bodies, ashamed of them, loathing them. It is as if a woman or a man when young and of tender years and fond of ornaments, having washed (himself and his) head, should be troubled, ashamed, full of loathing because of the carcase [sic] of a snake or of a dog or of a man hanging round the neck—even so, those monks who are troubled by their own bodies, ashamed of
Māra, the lord of death, comes to Migalaṇḍika and praises him, since he says the “sham recluse” is helping those cross to the other side (i.e., die) who have not yet crossed.

Migalaṇḍika proceeds to go around and deprive scores of monks of their lives under the delusion that is helping them. Ānanda, the Buddha’s right-hand man, informs his secluded master of the man’s deadly activities, and the Buddha responds by giving a teaching to his monks.

Then the lord, for this reason, in this connection, having had the company of monks convened, asked the monks:

“Monks, is it true, as is said, that monks by themselves deprived themselves of life, and (also) deprived one another of life, and having approached Migalaṇḍika, the sham recluse, spoke thus: ‘Be so good your reverence, as to deprive us of life; this bowl and robe will become yours.’”

“It is true, lord.”

The enlightened one, the lord, rebuked them, saying: “Monks, it is not becoming for these monks, it is not seemly, it is not fit, it is not worthy of a recluse, it is not right, it should not be done. How can
these monks by themselves deprive themselves of life…how can they say…‘this will become your bowl and robe?’ Monks, this is not for the benefit of non-believers…and thus, monks, this course of training should be set forth:

Whatever monk should intentionally deprive a human being of life [including taking his own life], or should look about so as to be his knife-bringer, he is also one who is defeated [i.e. dismissed from the saṃgha], he is not in communion.”

*Vinaya Piṭaka, Suttavibhaṅga, Pārājika,* Chapter 3,

An abolition of suicide is the logical end to even a rudimentary understanding of Buddhist philosophy. In the first noble truth the Buddha declares that life is *duḥkha* (suffering). He also prescribes a way to end this *duḥkha*, that being to follow his eightfold path, which does not include suicide as a means to end suffering. Finally, in Buddhist as well as Indian thought (in general), persons are reborn following death. For the Buddha then, suicide would accomplish nothing. It would simply be a minor event in continuing stream of existence, and it would not end suffering. Suffering would only be generated by suicide in the friends and family of the victim, and since Buddhism strive to reduce suffering, it must be concluded that it would be fundamentally opposed to killing oneself.

Jainism developed in the same cultural milieu as Buddhism and upanishadic Hinduism, and although its numbers dwindle now (around 4 million) in ancient India it often competed with Buddhism for cultural dominance. The religion is divided into two major sects, Śvetāmbara and Digambara. They derive their names from the garb of their mendicant ascetics; the former are “white-clad” because their monks and nuns wear white robes, and the latter are “sky-clad” for, although their nuns don white raiment, Digambara monks renounce clothing and go through the
world nude. Although Digambara’s are frequently labeled the more conservative of the two (because their monks are extreme enough to renounce clothing and since they do not believe women may be liberated from samsara, the endless cycle of death and rebirth), in their various āgamas (religious texts) either of the two may variously appear to be more “conservative”.

One concept agreed by both sects to be the core teaching of Jainism is that of ahimsā (non-violence). Lay Jains typically practice ahimsā at its most basic level by practicing vegetarianism. Jains ideally apply of ahimsā in all aspects of life, but as members of society there are times when they are unable to live without some violence, no matter how minute. Jain ascetics are as actionless (akriya) as much as possible in order to inflict the least amount of hiṃsā, thereby reducing their overall inflow of karmas.

Since violence constitutes the least desirable kind of act a person can perform according Jain dharma, and action contains some level of violence, suicide generates self-destruction in more ways than one. Not only are any negative emotions carried on to the next life with the ātman, but the person killing his or herself accrues great amounts of negative karma as a result of the violence involved in suicide, as well as the delusion that one is one’s own body and will die when it does. From a Jain perspective, bringing about one’s own death by non-action is not thought to be suicide. Jains view death through voluntary inaction as paramount among any meritorious endeavors a person may undergo. This seems to beg the question, for how can Jains condemn suicide, but advocate a form of self-killing. Do they consider a death brought about by voluntary inaction suicide, and if not, why not? When is suicide not really suicide?
Sallekhanā

The most excellent of men describe the giving up of the body on the arrival of unavoidable calamity, distress, senescence and disease, with a view to increase of spiritual merit, as sallekhanā.

Ratnakaranḍakaśravākācāra; The Householder’s Religion

The legendary history of the sallekhanā-vrata goes back as far as the 3rd Century BCE when the founder of the Mauryan empire and grandfather of Aśoka the Great, Candragupta, died from the fast in a place called Śravaṇa Beḷgoḷa. Legend holds that he traveled south from his capital in Ujjain with a retinue of thousands of monks and laypeople with the Jaina ācārya Bhadrabāhu. There, Candragupta, Bhadrabāhu and their massive entourage are said to have ceased the intake of food of water and starved to death in the baking sun. No other stories concerning the death of this colossal figure of Indian antiquity exist, and there are numerous other records of the life of Candragupta, the man for whom Kautilya’s famous Arthaśāstra was allegedly written. Conversely the other part of the life of Candragupta that remains unknown is his origin. Where the man came from is unknown, and there are legends ranging from the future emperor working as a stableboy in north-central India, to meeting Alexander the Great in Taxila as a youthful student and being inspired to rule his own empire. The life of Candragupta before becoming emperor is not detailed for different reasons than that of his death; his childhood and adolescence were simply irrelevant at the time. All that mattered was that he was emperor. The

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6 When referencing premodern events, cosmology or philosophy, I will use the word “Jaina” since this is the word that appears in all ancient Jain texts. When referencing the religion or its followers in modernity, I will use the term “Jain”, since this is the vernacular usage of the term in contemporary India.
most important part of the story of his death is not the man, but rather the practice itself—Sallekhanā.

Sallekhanā is the Jaina practice of fasting to death in an effort to free the jīva (soul). Frequently translated as “voluntary death”, the word is combination of the Sanskrit word sat (being or existent, and in the case of the etymology of sallekhanā, body) and lekhana (scratching or scraping). So sallekhanā is scratching or scraping out the body to free the jīva. This is the only etymology offered in any descriptions of the practice in secondary sources. However, I propose to offer a different explanation of the word’s meaning.

The verb likh refers to writing. In ancient India scribes wrote on palm leaves with a stylus and they used no ink. Words were literally “scratched” onto the soft surface of the leaf. So writing and scratching were synonymous with another in this context. For this reason lekhana also means to make a line. From this “making of a line”, which is of course by nature skinny, I believe lekhana received one of its other meanings—to make thin or reduce corpulancy. Monier-Williams cites the term’s first appearance as in the 3rd or 4th century BCE medical text Suśrutasamhitā where it was employed as “a kind of enema for reducing corpulancy.” So sallekhanā is not scratching the sat away, it is making the sat thin. Sallekhanā is reducing the body. When the word took on its connotation as a fast to the death is unknown, but it literally means an extreme diet with no reference to the demise of the practitioner. In his commentary on the Tattvārthasūtra (TVS; the only pan-sectarian text in Jainism, considered authoritative by both Svetāmbaras and Digambaras, attributed to an Umāsvāmi and originating in the second century CE), the Sarvārthasiddhi, Pūyjapāda alludes to this understanding of the word by writing “to make the body and the passions thin is sallekhanā.”
Since sallekhanā appears to be a case of self-destruction, one might naturally ask how starving to death frees the jīva. Although intentionally and slowly destroying the body in order to free the jīva an extreme form of tyāga (renunciation) would seems to exist solely as a practice reserved for ascetics, Jain laity and renunciants alike undertake the sallekhanā-vrata (sallekhanā vow). That laity and even women may undertake such an austere vow is unique to Jainism among contemporary Indian religions.

**Jīva or Ātman**

The concept of jīva, translated in Jaina literature as “soul”, in Jainism is markedly unique and distinct from other conceptions of the ātman (self) or, in the Buddhist tradition, anātman (no-self) in Indian thought. The Jaina soul differs greatly from a Western, Abrahamic, and, dare I say, Platonic concept of the soul. Unlike in the West, where the soul possesses some imprint of the individual, the Jaina jīva is entirely without particular qualities. The jīvas in existence are numerically distinct, but qualitatively identical. The only difference between my soul and your soul is that they are different from one another. Aside from this they possess no variation. When person dies, the jīva trapped in his or her body transmigrates to a new individual, so in sallekhanā for instance, the body of the practitioner dies, but the animating subject, the jīva, lives on.

Jains maintain that souls bear the nature of “introspection.” Their only reason for existence is to look back on themselves. Upon liberation from samsāra (Jains view cyclical existence in a fashion in keeping with other Indian belief systems) the jīna (liberated being; the term from which Jainism draws its name) spontaneously appears in Siddha Lokha (the realm of

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7 Jīva also means “individual” which has a further connotation for the Jaina soul insofar as it is possessed by a particular, living body.
accomplished beings) where it dwells for eternity in a state of kaivālya (blissful introspection on
the jīva, literally “the place of isolation”). Composed entirely of distinct, liberated jīvas, Siddha Lokha sits above the mundane world of samsāra in Jaina cosmology. Once a jīva looks in on itself it never leaves this state and knows only bliss in the timeless state of kaivālya. Attaining this state is the goal of all Jains, and they use the same term as Hindus for release from samsara - moksa. Only the accumulation of karmas, a necessary result of existence in samsara, prevents the jīva from becoming a jīna, achieving mokṣa and entering into the state of kaivālya. The jīva is and has always been perfect.

Jains purport that the jīva is a material thing, on the same plane of reality as trees, atoms, and elephants, however they maintain that its purity keeps it ultimately separate and untainted by gross substance. In his second century CE Samayasāra (SS) the Digambara (although he is revered by both Śvetāmbara and Digambara Jains) ācārya Kundakunda explains the nature of the jīva at length.

The pure soul should be known as without taste, color and smell, beyond perception though the senses, characterized by consciousness, without sound, cannot be apprehended though a symbol or sense organ, and whose form or shape cannot be portrayed. In the pure soul there is no color (varṇa), no smell (gandha), no taste (rasa), no touch (sparṣa), no form (rūpa), no body (ṣarīra), no shape (samsthāna), and no skeletal structure (samhanana). The soul has no attachment (rāga), no aversion (dveṣa), no delusion (moha), no influx of karmic matter (āsrava), no karma, and no quasi-karmic matter (nokarma). It has no class of potency of karmic matter (varga), no types of karmic molecules (varganā), no aggregates of karmic molecules (spardhaka), no ego-consciousness of different types (adhyatmāsthāna), and no karmic manifestations (anubhāgasthāna). There is no yoga activity (yogasthāna), no bondage (bandhasthāna), no fruition (udayasthāna), and no variations according to the method of inquiry into its nature (mārgaṇāsthāna). The pure
soul has no place for duration of bondage (sthitibandhasthāna), no emotional excitement (samklesasthāna), no self-purification (viśuddhisthāna), [and] no self-restraint (samyamlabdhisthāna). It has no classes of biological development (jīvasthāna), and no stages of spiritual development (gunaṣṭhāna), as all the above-mentioned attributes are manifestations of material conditions.

(2.11-2.17)

The TVS provides a detailed examination of the jīva’s substantial qualities. The text states, “lifeless matter, motion, non-motion, and space are substances, and jīvas are also substances. They [substances] are eternal, have fixed number, and are quality-less. [When in combination, however] substances have qualities”(5.1-5.4). The TVS tells us that there is “mutual, [prisoner-like] confinement of jīvas,” alluding to the fact that all embodied beings are trapped in samsāra together and that “the mark [of a jīva] is fitness and application” in the shared experience of cyclical existence.

From the Jaina perspective, jīva are composed of infinite “soul units”, eternal, fixed in number, and without any additional qualities apart from their inherent nature of introspection (5.7-5.8). They exist as pure, unchanging substances and, although a part of the material world, essentially free from it. No matter how much karmic accumulation binds the jīva to samsāra, the jīva itself remains pure. An allegory for this is that of a glass case if placed over a burning lamp. Over time the glass will become stained and sullied, but if one wipes away the

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8 Dharma and adharma are translated as motion and non-motion respectively. Jaina metaphysics are unique in this usage of the terms, by classing them among the substances, or pudgala, in their cosmological scheme.

9 All translations given with footnoted text are my own- ajīvakāyā dharmādhammākāśapudgalāḥ(5.1) dravyāṇi jīvāś ca(5.2) nityāvasthitānyarūpāṇi ca(5.3) rūpiṇaḥ pudgalāḥ(5.4)

10 parasparopagraho jīvāṇam (5.21)

11 upayogo laksanam (2.8)
soot and grime, one observes that the flame unchanged and continuing to burn as brightly as before. The TVS alludes to this metaphor by stating that the \( jīva \) is \“like the light of a lamp, [and it] assumes the size of the body it happens to occupy by means of the contraction and expansion of its space units\” (5.16). For this reason, the Jains claim, the \( jīva \) may fully occupy either an infinite or an infinitesimal space with no change in density.\(^{12}\)

The sixth century CE (although some date him as recently as the 11\(^{th}\) century) Jaina philosopher and spiritual exegete referred to interchangeably as Yogindu or Yogindra places strong emphasis on the distinction between \( jīva \) and body in his \textit{Paramātmaprakāś} (PP). In this text Yogindu attempted to synthesize various Indian religious traditions to create one cohesive understanding of existential entrapment and liberation from death and rebirth. He writes, \“there is a great different between wise and an ignorant muni, the wise knows the \[jīva\] as separated distinct from the body and wishes to abandon [the body] even\” (2.86). In his modern commentary on the PP A.N. Upadhye explains Yogindu’s views on the body as a shell that keeps the \( jīva \) trapped as a result of human ignorance. His summary showcases the culmination of Jaina perspectives on the worthlessness of the material body with regards to the imprisoned \( jīva \).

Everything here is ephemeral: it is of no use to pound the husk; even the body does not accompany the soul; the mind, therefore, should be directed to the pure path of liberation without any attachment for relatives and residence. Temples, (images of) gods, scriptures, teachers, holy places, Vedas and poems and the tree that has put forth flowers: all this shall be the fuel (in the fire of time). Excepting one \textit{Brahman}, (i.e. Paramatman) the whole world is earthly

\(^{12}\) This claim, that the \( jīva \) may occupy any space and maintain a constant density, created one of the primary sources of criticism of Jaina philosophy in medieval India. Śankara was among the critics of this theory.
It follows that a corporeal death bears no real implications. All jīvas in samsāra have been trapped in countless infinite bodies since beginningless time. No particular body possesses any more value than any other. Just like a tissue gets cast aside after it serves its purpose, a body loses its utility once it becomes frail and cumbersome. When a pair of glasses breaks or is lost, the owner buys a replacement. The jīva is like the owner of the glasses, replacing each old body without incident. The person, the owner, the sentient onlooker, cannot die in a permanent way.

Karma

Jaina views on karma are also quite unique within the Indian dharma traditions. Their theories on the matter are peculiar to their philosophy in a fashion similar to that of their concept of soul. Jains advocate the idea that karma is a material thing; it physically attaches to a pure soul and sullies it.

The Jaina philosopher Akalaṅka wrote a commentary on the TVS. Jains typically consider Akalaṅka to be their greatest logician in their tradition. The dates for him go back as far as the fifth century, but he certainly lived more recently, since he criticizes the fifth century Yogacāra Buddhist philosopher Dharmakīrti. According to legend Akalaṅka converted to
Jainism from a high-caste Hindu family, most likely Brahmin, but most of his critical works attack the Buddhist logic typical at the dawn of medieval India.

In the TVS Umāsvāmi argues that material particles of *karma* are attracted to the jīva by a person’s passions, and that this binds the soul to the body (8.2-8.3). His commentator Akalaṅka further explains this by stating that when material *karma* particles bind to the soul they are in a state of potentiality (8.2.9). He argues that after binding they will morph into one of the various *karmic* categories. These categories include a person’s level of spiritual maturity, station in life, and intelligence among other things. Umāsvāmi also explains the various types of *karmas* and their affects on the body, determining such factors as a person’s birth, appearance, and predispositions. Further, *karmas* may “mature” or “ripen” (8.22). This maturation, or ripening, “causes the karma to fall off the soul” (8.24).

The SS points out the inevitability of a soul becoming ensconced behind the accumulation of *karmas* from countless lifetimes.

A man, living in a place full of dust with oil applied on his body, exercises with weapons like [a] sword, dagger, etc., pierces and slits clusters of trees such as palm *tamāl*, plantain, and bamboo, and breaks up animate and inanimate objects; think about the real reason why he attracts dust particles onto his body while performing such destructive activities. The stickiness of oil applied on his body is the reason for him attracting dust particles; know for sure that this attraction is not due to his bodily actions. In the same way, a wrong believer, while engaged in various activities, attracts karmic dust due to the dispositions like attachment.

(8.1-8.5)
Action done in an ignorant way, essentially an attached way, leads the soul to attract karmic particles. Kundakunda clarifies this point - “in the same way, a right believer, while engaged in various activities, does not attract karmic dust due to the absence of dispositions like attachment” (8.10). From the Jaina perspective the karmas’ attraction and subsequent binding to the soul leads to continued rebirth. For Kundakunda “bondage takes place due to your own disposition” (8.26). He argues that “just as a man, bound in shackles, cannot get rid of the bondage merely by worrying about it, similarly, a man cannot get liberated from karmic bondage merely by worrying about it” (9.4). Action necessarily attracts karmic particles, so an austerity involving a lack of action, such as sallekhanā, greatly reduces the inflow of karmas.

If a person wishes to get liberated he or she must act. A conscious effort must be made to rid the soul of its accumulated karmas as well as prevent the inflow of new ones. For the Jain, however, before this effort can even happen a person must possess correct knowledge regarding jīvas and karma. Once an individual realizes why karmas are flowing in, he or she may begin to stop the process, and move closer to liberation. Ritual action, with the correct intention, leads to punya (spiritual merit). Believers take the idea of karmas attached to the jīva quite literally and methods for shedding them sometimes echo certain tantric methods for spiritual acquisition insofar as the ritual itself provides the sole means to the end. I came to India in 2012 for a program that aimed to inform Western academics about Jainism, and got the opportunity to observe Jainism put into practice.

I observed ritual for punya and karma shedding taken to the extreme at a Jain mandir situated on the rocky peak of a mountain barely outside Jaipur. Getting to the temple was an austerity in and of itself. About 25 of us were squeezed into a bus stripped of all windows and doors. The man at the wheel proved that death defiance among Indian bus drivers isn’t limited to
flatland as he charged up the mountainside that must have had a grade of 60 degrees. I think that was the only time I found myself reciting Jaina mantras to the liberated ones. The mandir was a gorgeous, marble behemoth obtrusively perched on the dust-blown summit, making the ride worth the risk. Jain mandirs are spectacular as a rule since Jains are almost exclusively members of the upper class and temple building brings vast amounts of punya to the benefactors. Even the smaller ones are bursting with intricately carved pillars of marble and breathtaking mosaics of colored glass and tiny mirrors.

We arrived as dusk fell over Rajasthan, barely catching glimpses of Jaipur below as all the buildings faded from perceptibility and thousands of glimmering yellow lights took their place. The men standing watch at the temple entrance were less than courteous, but allowed us entrance into the grand marble enclave of the mandir’s main hall. The ascetics were functioning as priests, leading individuals or groups of no more than three from room to room, quietly uttering something under their breaths to the various statues throughout the complex. They were performing rituals for their benefactors, so that the latter might accrue punya and shed karmas. One person stuck out in particular; an adolescent boy, maybe 16-years-old, absent-mindedly following an ācārya with his mother in tow. He had a good reason for being absent minded. His cell phone transfixed him, and the messages his friends were sending him obviously could not wait. As the ācārya completed a ritual, the teenager sensed the man brushing past him to go to a new destination, and the boy turned and followed, without ever looking away from his phone. But it made no difference. The ritual was done for the boy’s benefit, and cell phone or not, he would certainly reap the benefits. This incident is rather exceptional, however, and action on the part of individual still takes precedent over strictly ritualistic means of dissolution of karma with
Jains placing more spiritual value on an act intended to shed *karmas* as the gravity of the austerity increases.

With regards to a shedding of *karmas*, as well as reduced overall inflow, Yogindu explains in the PP, “the muni who gives up *parigraha* [possessiveness], and establishes himself in *Samabhava* (equanimity, evenness of mind) destroys his previously-acquired Karmas and stops the inflow of new ones” (2.39). A state of mind that pursues new endeavors and possessions accumulates further karma. He also advises that a soul should not “regard [its] house, family, relations, body, or friends as [its] own; they are merely the product of [its] Karmas” and that “by thinking of [its] house, relations, and the like, [it cannot] get Moksha” (2.123, 2.124). Yogindu advises that the only way to *mokṣa* is through performance of *tapas* (ascetic practice, the word means “heat” and refers to the spiritual power or, sometimes literally, heat that comes from austere observances).

The TVS commends *tapas* as a method for spiritual growth as well, although unlike Yogindu, Umāsvāmi does not explicitly state the term. The *tapas* invoking sutra of the TVS states “austerities wear off karma as well as inhibiting it” (9.3). From this it logically follows that the greater the austerity, the greater the effect produced with regards to wearing off and inhibition of karma. Ideally then, the more difficult austerity would lead to the greatest spiritual reward.

**Ahiṃsā**

The most important Jaina teaching, for Jains, is unquestionably the one of *ahimsā* (non-violence). Buddhism adopted this ideal millennia ago, but only after Jainism established *ahimsā* as the essential ethical prerogative. This is why Jains do not eat any meat. They eat no
tubers, onions, or any other rooted edible, because pulling the thing out of the ground could kill small insects and microorganisms. Male Dīgambara renunciants carry a peacock-feather duster to wipe every spot before they sit so they do not risk crushing living beings. Some Śvetāmbara ascetics will wear a muhpattī (cloth mouth-shield) to avoid the inhalation of small, living things when breathing. Any contribution to or partaking in violence results in a strong inflow of negative karmas. All actions entail some level of violence, no matter how small, so only by refraining from activity of any kind, such as undergoing sallekhanā, can a person totally stop all violent acts.

Gandhi befriended a Jain who, the Jains say, influenced his own championing of ahimsā. I once even heard it said that since Gandhi got the idea for non-violence from a Jain, and Martin Luther King Jr. drew inspiration from the Mahātma, that the American Civil Rights Movement can thank Mahāvīra for its success. I must point out that as ridiculous and insensitive in an innocently ignorant way this claim is, it typifies the current that runs through all Jains. If the world adopted ahimsā the positive effects would never stop. We need only look at the popular movements of the twentieth century advocating non-violence as proof.

A popular story illustrates how Jains see themselves in contrast to beings that do not subscribe to their form of non-violence. Various humanoids are walking at the trunk of and climbing in the boughs of an immense tree, one whose branches sag with an abundance of fruit (usually mangos, depending of the story teller). The color of the characters’ skin varies, with the most violent possessing a black skin, and the practitioner of ahimsā bearing white skin. The skin color of the others ranges along the visible spectrum, with the color becoming lighter as a being’s propensity for violence decreases.
All the men are hungry and desire fruit. The man with black skin declares that they should chop down the entire tree and get all the fruit they want. The next man, whose skin is blue, says, “No. Let’s just cut off one branch and eat the fruit growing on it. But let’s cut the biggest one, to guarantee the largest yield.” The man with brown skin says, “No. We do not need to cut off the biggest branch to satisfy our need. We can cut a smaller branch from the tree and eat the fruits that grow on it.” The red-colored man argues that, rather than cut down the tree or branches from it, they should climb the boughs of the tree, pulling off bunches of fruit to satisfy their cravings. The man in their group with yellow skin asks, “Friend. Why should we take so much fruit when we need so little? I agree with you that we should refrain from any cutting of wood, but rather than pulling off larges bunches of fruit, let us just pluck the fruits we need.” Finally the last man, the one whose skin in white, who stood without speaking or interrupting the whole time says in a quiet voice, “We should eat only the fruits that have fallen to the ground so that we do no violence to the tree. Only the fruits that the tree no longer needs are acceptable to take.” This final speaker, the one with white skin, is the example of ideal Jaina ahimsā. Coincidentally, the grounds of a Jain quasi-ashram I once stayed at in Varanasi are full of mango trees. The mangos ripened while I was there, and for three days I watched workers climbing the trees to pluck and throw down hundreds of mangos. Those that were not eaten in the kitchen that served only Jain food, that is the ones we did not need, were given to the employees to sell in the market for their own profit.

Ahimsā dominates the practice of sallekhanā. Since all actions attract karmas to the jīva, an inherent violence underlies anything active a person does. The only way to stop this inflow is to cease everything. Fasting is only one factor in sallekhanā, which, aside from
meditation on tīrthaṅkaras and jīnas and chanting sacred obeisance, ideally involves an end to all activity.

**Sallekhanā**

In a fashion similar to the discussions on souls and karmas, sallekhanā receives ample attention from pan-sectarian Jaina texts. Considered the highest vow and a heroic way to die, Jains see the person who takes death into his or her own hands as courageous.

The TVS declares, “one, near death, whose life is spent should [undergo] sallekhanā” (7.17). Nathmil Tatia, the eminent scholar of Jainism, who translated the TVS in order to make Jaina philosophy more accessible to an English speaking audience, translates the sutra less literally and in context-“the householder should become a practitioner of the penitential rite of emaciation of the passions by a course of fasting which spans a number of years and ends in death” (7.17). Tatia also summarizes commentaries on the sutra by writing, “The rite of fasting to death is undertaken only when the practitioner perceives clear signs of approaching death or feels his utter incapacity to fulfill his religious vows. He does not undertake the vows out of passion or deluded belief. He finds joy is such fasting and meets death fearlessly […] It is not suicide because it is undertaken without duress or passion. To commit suicide is to kill oneself out of anger agony, malice or frustration, whereas fasting to death purges the soul of its passions and perversities by conquering the fear of death” (Tatia, 179).

In the PP, Yogindu remarks on a sort of metaphysical and spiritual fast that one may always engage in. He states that “one who remains engrossed in the Self, is on fast each day; but one whose mind is attached to or thinks of external objects, seems to be dying of hunger.

\[13\text{ māraṇāntikīṃ saṃlekhanāṃ joṣitā}\]
all the time” (2.36). **Sallekhanā** represents, for the Jain, the ultimate fast, since it includes both the mental fast Yogindu mentions, as well as a real, corporeal fast.

The *Ratnakaraṇḍaśrāvakācāra* (RKŚ) devotes 14 sutras to an explanation of the **sallekhanā-vrata**. This text treats **sallekhanā** as a form of asceticism and even states, “to be able to control one’s conduct at the moment of death is the fruit (culmination) of asceticism” (123). This treatment of **sallekhanā** appears in a text for laypeople, because the vow taker suddenly achieves the highest asceticism, but only for a very short time since the vow entails renouncing the physical body to the point of its total destruction. A person can live his or her entire life as a lay Jain without the rigor that the ascetics are associated with, but still take this heroic death at the end of life, to potentially reach spiritual equilibrium with those who have devoted their existence to renunciation. In antiquity only ascetics took the **sallekhanā** vow, but in modernity it seems as though lay householders account for all the **vratacārin**s. I once inquired to my Jain hosts in India as to why none of the contemporary ācāryas, the ascetics, undergo **sallekhanā**.

“Mr. Grimes, of course our Jain ācāryas take **sallekhanā**,” I was told, “But they do so in seclusion. No one is coming for **punya**. He is going to the forest and he is taking **sallekhanā** there.” No proof exists for this argument, but intuitively it does not seem so farfetched that the ascetics, used to a solitary life, choose to voluntary end their existence away from the company of others.

The RKŚ goes on to explain the levels of the fast’s progression: “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 five-fold obeisance mantra” (127-128). Certain things are not allowed by vow takers, such as “entertaining a desire to live,
wishing for [speedy] death, displaying fear, desiring to see or to be remembered to friends, looking forward to future sense-enjoyment [in the life to come]” (129). The \textit{sallekhanā-vratacārin} gives up all attachments step by step, with water as the final relinquishment. At that point inevitable death alone remains. The TVS lists similar prohibitions, which are “hope for a longer life, hope for a shorter life [that is, wishing for death to arrive sooner in the fast], attachment to friends, clinging to pleasures, and craving for reward” in the next life, granted for undertaking the austerity of \textit{sallekhanā} (7.32).

This begs the question, for how can a person who desires nothing want to undergo such a fast in the first place? The answer is simple. At the beginning of the fast, the \textit{sallekhanā-vratacārin} obviously possesses both the desire to die and the desire for \textit{mokṣa}, or they would never seek out their own death. In the course of the austerity, the faster ideally reaches a point where he or she no longer craves anything, even \textit{mokṣa}. In this state of non-craving the actor is finally free from the bonds tying him or her to the body. When the person attains liberation from \textit{samsāra}, that individual resides in such an elevated spiritual state of non-attachment that \textit{mokṣa} itself carries no appeal, since cravings of all kinds already ceased. In an interesting twist, when the ultimate goal is arrived at, the passionless \textit{sallekhanā-vratacārin} who set off on the path to it does not care. If the participant did care at that final moment preceding release, if he or she felt a sense of accomplishment or selfish joy, \textit{karmas} would flow in and attach to the \textit{jīva}, and a new body would be taken up following death, rendering the fast useless.

\textit{Śravaṇa Beḷgoḷa}

The legend of Candragupta and Bhadrabāhu ending their lives at \textit{Śravaṇa Beḷgoḷa} served as the catalyst necessary to cement the place as the ideal location for Jaina ascetics to
voluntary terminate their earthly bodies. Characterized by its two hills, the site exists in modern day Karnataka. Indeed, “pious saints and nuns of later times [beginning in the 7th century] probably felt that the place chosen by Bhadrabāhu, one of their great predecessors, should be the place where they should end their lives too (Settar, Inviting Death, 95). Ritual-death began to represent the height of Jaina asceticism.

Although the legendary history of Śravaṇa Belgoḷa begins with the first Mauryan emperor, its recorded history can be traced from an inscription on a rock-bed dating to about 600 CE. This inscription tells of an ācārya who “chose this high peaked mountain to terminate his life […] and] the history of Śravaṇa Belgoḷa begins with the voluntary termination of the life of a monk” (Settar, 4). His aim, and that for upcoming generations of voluntary deaths on the hills of Śravaṇa Belgoḷa, was for a goal variously described as samādhi, mokṣa and nirvāṇa. The supposed end result of performing sallekhanā was liberation from rebirth and an eternal exaltation of the jīva. Settar expands to note “the death by samādhi chosen by the pious was believed not only to liberate them from worldly woes, but also to ensure them a place in heaven. They are supposed to have reached the heavenly terrace (svargāgra), the abode of heaven (svargālaya), the world of the gods (suraloka), or of Indra (Indraloka), or a place at the feet of God or Lord Indra (surapāda or Indrapāda etc.). In other words, they were believed to have attained the status of the siddha, and become the Perfect (siddhastha).” (Settar, 95). The desire of ancient Jaina ascetics to enter into the abode of God begs a puzzling question. Why were members of a supposedly radical atheistic dharma seeking company with God as their ultimate goal? The PP of Yogindu already showed the level to which a Jaina writer would consider other beliefs valid, but he did this only to strengthen his own model for mokṣa. He allows theistic

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14 Settar, who was an at historian at Karnatak University’s Institute of Indian Art History, published a voluminous study on the memorials at Śravaṇa Belgoḷa and what they described.
means, for an atheistic Jaina end. It is curious then that ancient Jaina ascetics instead sought a theistic end through atheistic-Jaina means.

**Ritual**

Voluntary death at Śravāṇa Belgoḷa followed highly ritualized models. Although in modernity any case of a Jain fasting to death is termed *sallekhanā*, in ancient India there were multiple ways that only differed slightly to ritualistically end one’s own life. Scattered throughout the site are inscriptions and carvings that memorialize those who ended their lives on the barren hills here centuries ago. There are pillars topped with images of *sallekhanā-vratacārins* offering obeisance to a guru or *jīna*. Inscribed into giant boulders in a manner similar to the famous Ashoka edicts are descriptions of “heroic deaths” of men who thinned themselves to the point of breaking. Praises to self-mortifying saints of old cover columns, also topped with images like those on the pillars, from top to bottom.

By reading the inscriptions at the Śravāṇa Belgoḷa, Settar compiled information on each of the death rituals practiced there. Interestingly the term *sallekhanā* “is used[,] but very sparingly in the records of Belgoḷa. It does not appear before the 12th century [or] after 1432 A.D. We encounter it only five times during the three hundred years of the history of this centre” (Settar, 96). Of the over 40 types of death, the voluntary termination of life through fasting is considered a *pandita-maraṇa* (wise death). The various *maranas* falling within this category practiced at Śravāṇa Belgoḷa include *bhaktapratyākhyāna-maraṇa* (fasting until death under full protection and care of others), *inginī-maraṇa* (fasting until death with only self-help), and *prāyopagamana-maraṇa* (fasting until death denying even self-help) (Settar, *Pursuing Death*, 11). *Bhaktapratyākhyāna* breaks down even further to include five more types of death. There
are also *samādhi-maraṇa* (meditating until death), *paṇcapada-maraṇa* (chanting until death), *ārādhanā-maraṇa* (death after the attainment of wisdom), and finally, *sallekhanā-maraṇa* (death through emasculation of the body). These various ways of dying seems at first glance to possess stark differences, but they were actually nearly identical to one another. The contrast between, for example, a *paṇcapada-maraṇa* and *samādhi-maraṇa* is one of emphasis. An ancient *vratacārin* undergoing a *samādhi-maraṇa* aimed to die while in a state of *samādhi*, but the ritual leading up to his demise included chanting obeisance to the five great beings, that is, he chanted the *pāṇca* (five) *pada* (word). Similary, a *vratacārin* who focused his attention on the fivefold mantra still meditated, and ideally chanted while in a state of *samādhi*. When any ascetic became too weak to chant or meditate, he still heard chanting all around him until the moment of death. And both the man undergoing *paṇcapada-maraṇa* and the other man simultaneously undergoing *samādhi-maraṇa* refrained from food and water. In this way they both also died by *sallekhanā-maraṇa*, but the emphasis of their ritual was on a particular practice, rather than the renunciation of sustenance itself. One of the site’s plaque’s epigraph notes a case of an ascetic who meditated on the *paṇcapada* while observing the *sallekhanā-vrata* for twenty-one days.

All these forms of ancient Jaina ritual-death included complex, highly ritualized conventions. Each path, once chosen, was implemented upon the *vratacārin* by a guru.

The enlightened followed the path of *ārādhanā* [religious practice] laid down for *sanyāsa* [renunciant] and observed the *munivratas* [vows of silence], taking care not to violate the monastic norms (*siddha-samaya* of the *sangha*). They got themselves introduced to the scripture of *sanyasana* (*sanyasya-śāstra-kramāt*), and meticulously observed the rules laid down in the *Jaināgama* [Jaina scriptures], depositing concentration at the feet of their teacher. After seeking permission of the leader of the *gaṇa* [group], Śrītamuni [the *sallekhanā-vratacārin*] selected the path most conducive for his salvation. The
leader obviously did not have the right to deny the meditator his right to die; but, in order to test his determination and sincerity, he often exercised his privilege to dissuade the aspirant by explaining to him the severity of the samādhi process [that is, sallekhanā]. Śrītāmuni’s reply, on such an occasion, was typical of one who was determined to die. He said—“Oh lover of Dharma…You being the most enlightened, you are aware of the duties of the pious” and pleaded with his teacher to introduce him to the art of meditation which was to enable him to liberate himself from his body.

Settar, Inviting Death, 128

Even by the height of self-mortification at Śrāvaṇa Belgoḷa, with the numerous forms of ritual-death undergone by means of starvation, sallekhanā already served as an umbrella term (even if used very sparingly, as mentioned on the last page). Sallekhanā emerged in the modern Jain community as the term used whenever the specific death ritual undertaken falls into an ambiguous gray area, which includes every contemporary case. The term comprises the only surviving label for the various rituals, even though its usage in ancient times was almost non-existent.

Demise of the demises

In the first century of its recorded history over seven hundred men voluntarily ended their lives by fasting at Śrāvaṇa Belgoḷa (Settar, 8). They chose that place because of the hostile conditions present there. Each renunciant wished to shed his body, which he believed was the source of all pain. As time went on, word spread of the pious men heroically terminating their own lives on these remote hills and pilgrims slowly began to come and pay their respects to
the ascetics. By the 10\textsuperscript{th} century Śravaṇa Belgoḷa served as a major pilgrimage destination, and its remoteness shrunk with each passing decade. The “victorious” deaths of the ascetics led to their undoing. Victory defeated them. The place came to represent the end of a pilgrim’s journey rather than the beginning of life’s final journey. Affluent laity erected stone monuments to celebrate their trips to Śravaṇa Belgoḷa and the new role of the twin hills soon eclipsed the fasting ascetics (Settar, 19). Royalty and powerful laity even erected monuments to praise their undertaking of the \textit{sallekhanā-vrata}, when they took no such vow (Settar, 21).

Temples sprang up all over the site and at the close of the 10\textsuperscript{th} century the colossus of Bāhubali was erected. Śravaṇa Belgoḷa no longer served as the ideal location for ascetics voluntarily terminating their lives, and those renunciants remaining after this period of transformation ended up serving more political and bureaucratic roles than religious ones. No monks ended their lives on the two hills in the 10\textsuperscript{th} or 11\textsuperscript{th} centuries (Settar, 30). Ritual-death, at least publically, shifted from an ascetic practice to one primarily done by both male and female laity (Settar 63-70). The practice slowly disappeared from history after the 11\textsuperscript{th} century and exists only as a blurred memory of the past. It almost certainly continued, but as a result of the notoriety Śravaṇa Belgoḷa received, which ultimately served to eliminate its role as the place to undergo a terminal fast, those ending their lives voluntary probably did so in secret. \textit{Sallekhanā} was not a novelty, and those doing it probably had no interest in receiving throngs of gawking strangers in their final hours. In the twentieth century, almost a millennium later after the practice went underground, \textit{sallekhanā} resurfaced into a modern world and an Indian nation state that classified the act as mere suicide. This time it would not be the ascetics’ spiritual victory to defeat Jaina ritual-death, but a national law.
The national law cited in order to bring cases of *sallekhanā* to trial is Section 309 of the Indian Penal Code. The wild and fascinating chain of events that eventually led to the existence of this section began with the British East India Company’s assessment of the Hindu practice of *satī* (self-immolation of a widow on her husband’s funeral pyre) in the latter part of the eighteenth century. As Company rule expanded out from Bengal and pushed further into north-central India, British officials started to step on the toes of those the contemporary British described as being the traditional landlords and tax collectors—the Brahmins. Those Brahmins holding sway around the ancient and holy Hindu city of Varanasi were especially problematic for the Company.

*Take up the White Man’s burden--
Send forth the best ye breed--
Go bind your sons to exile
To serve your captives' need;
To wait in heavy harness,
On fluttered folk and wild--
Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
Half-devil and half-child.*
Jonathan Duncan, the Company Resident\textsuperscript{15} at Varanasi (then Benaras), wrote in a letter to the Governor General in Council at Parliament on the 1\textsuperscript{st} of May, 1788 to complain about the local Brahmins. According to Duncan, the Brahmins convinced the local people, through fear of forced suicide, to stop working, stop paying taxes and rent to the Company. They also removed guards over the crops, allowing Company property to be stolen.

Besides getting in the way of revenue collection, the East India Company wished to outlaw suicide for another reason: satī and any other form of “sacrifice” abhorred them. Sir Charles Ware Malet, the Resident at Poona, called the practice a “shocking ceremony of self-devotion” (BPP, 1821 XVIII:297). Instances of satī directly influenced the East India Company’s perspective regarding suicide among the Hindu residents in their lands. Jon Duncan even remarked in the same letter from 1788 referenced above that the locals of Varanasi were “addicted to suicide” (BPP, 1821 XVIII:302).

The Company desired to end practices among the Hindu community involving suicide in the form of “widow burning.” Regardless of its candidness or lack thereof, the perspective of the Company officials was the driving force behind the early creation of laws for British lands in India. Their desire to outlaw satī was both pragmatic and moral; pragmatic in the sense that they did not want to Brahmins using the practice as leverage to influence to local people and frustrate Company interests, and moral in the sense that they were horrified by the idea of a widow burning herself alive.

\textsuperscript{15} The Company Resident was the main representative for the East India Company in a particular region. He oversaw all Company interests inside the jurisdiction assigned to him and his voice and opinions were the ones heard by Parliament back in London.
The standardized justice the East India Company officials were lobbying for would eventually come in the form of the Indian Penal Code. Ironically, its implementation would coincide with the Company’s demise. The Code’s initial inception, however, only had anything to do with India entirely by accident.

The dawn of the nineteenth century was a time of rapid change within the Indian subcontinent. The Charter Act of 1813 set aside a lakh (100,000) of rupees in order to promote “specifically Indian forms of learning”, but in an farcical move, simultaneously opened British India to missionaries for the first time, whose only interest in native languages involved converting those who spoke them to Christianity (Michael S. Dodson, Orientalism, Empire, and National Culture, pg. 72). This opened the floodgates, allowing opinions to spill in from all directions regarding how the Company should appropriate the money. Political and social theorists of all stripes debated specifically over whether newly established institutions should promote strictly Anglican and European modes of scholarship and ideas, embrace traditional, Indian systems of learning, or seek hybrid curricula of the two. The debate over education set the standard for allowed Anglicization of the people of India.

James Mill, a colleague of Utilitarian Jeremy Bentham and the father the philosopher John Stuart Mill, was especially critical of vernacular Indian languages and literature and their appropriation into English sponsored educational institutions. Mill believed Indian civilization was in a less advanced stage of progress than his English one and that it could “thus be entirely remade into an advanced, modern civilization by means of rational education policies and sound governance” (Dodson, 67). In his History of British India Mill presents a scathing critique of South Asian culture that make the message of Kipling’s poem White Man’s Burden look like one of universal altruism and tolerance.
A colleague, friend, and peer of James Mill and protégé of Jeremy Bentham was the Lord William Bentinck, who served as Governor-General of India from 1828 to 1835. Before leaving for India in December 1837, Bentham’s inner circle gave him a farewell dinner at the house of the classical historian and Utilitarian political radical George Grote (Stokes, pg. 51). With Bentinck, Bentham’s ideas traveled directly to the head of East India Company authority. Bentham gave to Bentinck the idea that Indian judicial reform could only come about with a Code of law and reforms in the subcontinent began almost immediately upon the Lord’s arrival. It was the Benthamite Governor-General, who in 1832, began the discussion with the Supreme Government in India regarding the necessity of an entirely codified law for all of India (Stokes, 189). Bentinck’s influence on the Indian Penal Code does not find limitation merely with regards to the laws as a whole, because the man’s actions had direct a ramification that may have led to the inclusion of Section 309. In 1829, with Regulation XVII of the Bengal Code, Bentinck banned satī. His creation of this legislation never would have occurred without the influence of the Hindu reformer Ram Mohan Roy.

With regards to Section 309 of the Indian Penal Code, Mohan Roy’s importance lay in his advocacy of English in Indian educational institutions, his opposition to satī, and his correspondence with Bentham, the Utilitarian philosopher. I already pointed out that Roy’s fight against the practice of satī directly influenced Lord Bentinck’s 1829 order forbidding the practice, and his correspondence with Bentham no doubt helped the already budding Utilitarian ideas in Bengal to bloom. A letter to Roy from Bentham directly evokes the need for judicial codification.
For these many years the grand object of [James Mill’s] ambition has been to provide for British India, in the room of the abominable existing system, a good system of judicial procedure, with a judicial establishment adequate to the administration of it; and for the composition of it his reliance has all along been, and continues to be, on me. What I have written on these subjects wants little of being complete; so little that were I to die tomorrow, there are those who would be able to put it in order and carry it through the press. What he aims at above all things is—the giving stability and security to landed property in the hands of the greatest number throughout British India—and for this purpose, to ascertain by judicial inquiry, the state of the customs of the people in that respect. For this purpose a great increase in the number of judicatories, together with the oral examination of all parties concerned, a recordation of the result will be absolutely necessary; the mode of proceeding as simple as possible, unexpensive and prompt, forming in those respects as complete a contrast as possible with the abominable system of the great Calcutta Judicatory; natives of unmixed blood and half-caste, both of whom could serve of moderate salaries, being on my system, as much employed as possible.


Bentham’s final sentence, referring to “natives of unmixed blood and half-caste” receiving “moderate salary” within his system is reflective of the egalitarian ideal the Utilitarians were attempting to bring to India. Roy’s collaboration with the man no doubt impacted the former’s civic battles, including the fight against satī. Roy’s advocacy of English helped set the stage for the promotion of a secular renaissance of sorts that sought to educate the Indian intelligentsia in Indian and Anglican ideas in an English academic curriculum.

It was within this increasingly dynamic milieu that the Scotsman Thomas Babington Macaulay, a student of Bentham and the elder Mill like his peer Bentinck, began the codification
(a term he coined) of law he believed India needed. Like Bentinck, Bentham wielded significant influence over Macaulay, and the man composed the Penal Code in response to the echoing influence of his guru. British India provided the place Macaulay could put their Utilitarian theories into practice.

Upon arrival in India, Macaulay naturally sided with Bentinck’s politics and staunchly advocated that only English should be taught in Company-funded schools. His infamous “Minute on Indian Education” offers an acerbic and quite ill-informed critique of traditional Indian literature that, the following year, must have sent James Mill to his grave smiling. His presentation epitomizes the contemporary idea of a “white man’s burden” when he argues that the English “have to educate a people who cannot at present be educated by means of their mother-tongue” (Macaulay, Minute on Indian Education). For Macaulay, only an Anglicization of India would usher in the intellectual and judicial changes he so strongly felt they needed.

The laws in India at the time, unlike in England, changed almost constantly, and Macaulay was free to put his utilitarian theories into practice. The late Cambridge historian Eric Stokes elaborates on the influence of early-nineteenth-century-English political theories on India:

The missionaries of English civilization in India stood openly for a policy of “assimilation”. Britain was to stamp her image upon India. The physical and mental distance separating East and West was to be annihilated by the discoveries of science, by commercial intercourse, and by transplanting the genius of English laws and English education. It was the attitude of English liberalism in its clear, untroubled dawn, and its most representative figure in both England and India was Macaulay.

Stokes, xiii-xiv
Although Macaulay came to India shortly following the implementation of the Charter Act of 1833 which he helped create (the very same year H.H. Wilson left India for Oxford), his Penal Code would not go into effect for nearly three decades because “however favored by local circumstances, the reform movement in India depended upon the influence of contemporary England, for it was in England that liberalism as a name and a force was emerging” (Stokes, xv-xvi). Macaulay spent only three and half years in India, but his legacy there continues. When he left in January of 1838 India was still Company land and English interests there were solely economic. It would take the chaos of the Indian Mutiny and the fear it inspired in the Crown to make the Indian Penal Code law in 1860. Following the Indian Mutiny, Company rule in South Asia ended when the empire took full control of the subcontinent.

The laws Macaulay sought to codify had to be secular in nature, with no reference to God or religion of any kind. If they referenced a particular faith, they ceased to provide the kind of universal law that functioned regardless of cultural context that the Utilitarians envisioned. Bentinck’s 1829 order banning satī or any law specifically aimed at a religious practice simply could not find accommodation within a universal codification of justice. I believe Macaulay sought a way incorporate legal precedence against such an act within his Code. Infanticide, which the British found as equally heinous as satī, violated a prohibition of suicide, since it was induced, intentional drowning. But how could Macaulay keep widow immolation outside the law without explicitly banning it in his universal code? The solution was to declare an attempt to commit suicide as well as abetting an attempt illegal in Sections 309 and 306 of the Indian Penal Code respectively. Macaulay found a way to outlaw satī without jeopardizing the ubiquitous propriety he aimed to establish through judicial codification.
Although the Penal Code is entirely secular, “the avowed intention of the colonial state was to administer Hindu law to Hindus and Islamic law to Muslim, reserving English law for the British and Company servants in India” (Buckingham, To make the precedent fit the crime, 190). Indeed, “the Code was to replace a patchwork of Muslim and Hindu laws overlaid with a mixture of transplanted English laws and East Indian Company regulations to ensure, as much as possible, a singular standard of justice” (Wright, Macaulay’s Indian Penal Code: Historical Context and Originating Principles, 22). Although their intentions could have been noble, “the British in India did not understand Indian culture as well as they believed, and their application of law was determined more by misunderstanding and pragmatism than any grand plan” (Buckingham, 191). The legacy left by this British grouping of India into either “Hindu” or “Muslim” carried over to the modern state of India. The Penal Code itself remains secular, but the Constitution retains the Hindu-Muslim distinction.

The Constitution of India essentially defines all major religions originating in South Asia as “Hindu”. According to Article 25 (2)(b)(II) of the Constitution of India “the reference to Hindus shall be construed as including a reference to persons professing the Sikh, Jaina or Buddhist religion, and the reference to Hindu religious institutions shall be construed accordingly.” The Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 further subjects those religions originating in South Asia to traditional brahmanical law regarding marriage while Muslims, Christians and Jews receive legal precedent allowing them to follow their own traditions.
Although Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism are separate religions with unique traditions and customs, under Indian national law they are subject to the same regulations as Hindus and are without special status.

The legal precedent to consider Jains as Hindus leads many contemporary Jains to feel that the Indian court system is free to violate their rights. The question regarding the legality of sallekhanā is one that comes under heavy fire and scrutiny, since to the outsider it appears to be suicide, and thus in violation of Section 309. Suddenly in post-2000 India a wave of media attention focused on sallekhanā swept across the country, especially in the state of Rajasthan. It seemed as though the practice was experiencing a resurgence not known since the days of ritual-death Śravaṇa Belgoḷa (although this is not necessarily the case, as it could be that reports were simply lacking while adherents to the sallekhanā-vrata were not).

In the latter part of 2006 several sallekhanā cases in Rajasthan received international press coverage. First the BBC reported that the fast of Vimla Devi led to “to a petition in the state's high court by critics who say the practice is similar to suicide” (BBC, Dispute as woman fasts to death, Sept 29, 2006). Rajasthani lawyer Nikhil Soni filed a public interest litigation (PIL) petition with the goal of forcing Devi to stop fasting. Soni’s petition would have had an

Section 2
(1) This Act applies -
(a) to any person who is a Hindu by religion in any of its forms or developments, including a Virashaiva, a Lingayat or a follower of the Brahmo, Prarthana or Arya Samam,
(b) to any person who is a Buddhist, Jaina or Sikh by religion, and
(c) to any other person domiciled in the territories to which this Act extends who is not a Muslim, Christian, Parsi or Jew by religion, unless it is proved that any such person would not have been governed by the Hindu law or by any custom or usage as part of that law in respect of any of the matters dealt with herein if this Act had not been passed.
effect on another sallekhanā adherent, Kaila Devi Hirawat. The incident received enough attention in India for the international press to pick up the story, giving sallekhanā an exposure never received by it before. The Chicago Tribune reported on the fast of Devi Hirawat as it occurred:

[Devi Hirawat’s] fast has landed her in the middle of a controversy pitting the freedom of religion guaranteed by the Indian Constitution against a law banning suicide. Human-rights activists sued last month to have such fasts declared illegal. Jain leaders, a powerful group in India, say the constitution protects the fasts and people have the right to decide to die with dignity.

The argument also has led to a debate over the right-to-die issue in India, where euthanasia is banned and suicide is a crime. People who try to kill themselves are jailed. Hunger strikes—a common form of protest—are allowed to go only so far. But if someone fasts to the point of danger, that person is sent to the hospital, given a feeding tube and slapped with a criminal charge.

_Chicago Tribune_, Jains deny rite takes life in vain, Oct 15, 2006

To the surprise of the Jain community, the Rajasthani high court accepted the petition filed by Soni and asked “the Jain community to prove that these fasts [were] legal. The lawsuit aimed to stop the fast of the aforementioned Vimla Devi Bhansali, 61, who started fasting Sept. 14[, 2006] after being diagnosed with liver and brain cancer” (Chicago Tribune). Simultaneous with the filing by Soni of the PIL petition aimed at the two women in Jaipur, a male, Jain scholar in the Rajasthani city of Ajmer announced he had begun a fast to death (The Times of India, Now, a Jain scholar on terminal fast, Sept 30, 2006). It seemed that Jains would continue to publically fast in Rajasthan, regardless of any court decision. Rajasthan was the site of much international attention 20 years previously in 1987, when the last reported case of satī occurred.
Since the attention *sallekhanā* received in 2006, numerous cases continue to come to light throughout north-central India, especially in Rajasthan and Mumbai. The PIL that put *sallekhanā* “in the eye of the storm” continued to receive media attention years later, and in an op-ed piece in *The Times of India* speculating on the legality of the fast continued since “one of the concerns raised in the petition was that it is old people who usually resort to santhara [*sic*] - and allowing an elderly person to suffer without medical assistance, food and water is inhuman” (*The Times of India, Is santhara against the law?* March 20, 2010). In 2009 over 20,000 people came to witness the fast of 60-year-old Jain monk and questions regarding legality continued to stir because Jain advocates of the practice argued “Articles 25 and 26 of the Indian Constitution protect all religious practices, unless otherwise prohibited by law” while opponents claimed that an attempt to commit suicide was illegal regardless of religious precedent. (*The Times of India, More Jains embracing ancient santhara ritual,* March 18, 2010).

*Sallekhanā*’s violation of Section 309 or lack thereof remains a legal gray area, since many claim that the practice is protected by the Constitution. The question of precedence of conflicting national laws is thrown back and forth. The fact that religious fasting to death receives so much scrutiny, and along with hunger strikes, is ideally not allowed to continue to its desired end is especially ironic for India. The country’s independence arguably could never have happened had it not been for the highly publicized hunger strikes of Mohandas Gandhi. One might even suggest that the high courts and state governments of India are obligated to pay homage to fasting and the power it gave them before they dish out punishments to those undergoing the same practice.

Despite repeated challenges to Section 309, the law still stands. For instance, P.Rathinam vs Union Of India declared that Section 309 of the Penal Code is “unconstitutional and hence
void” and “deserves to be effaced from the statute book to humanize [India’s] penal laws” because of being in conflict with Section of 21 of the Indian Constitution, which guarantees a “right to live” and by default, the court decided, a “right to die”. Despite this verdict by the Supreme Court of India, Section 309 remained in the Penal Code. In 2011 the Delhi High Court responded to a PIL petition seeking decriminalization of Section 309 filed by the Mental Health Foundation of India by stating that “the provision is ultra vires of the Constitution and violative of Article 21 in it” (The Hindu, Attempt to suicide to be decriminalized, Sept 23, 2011). By the end of 2011, twenty five of the twenty nine Indian states had agreed to a proposal to decriminalize suicide, but the law still stands (The Times of India, Attempt to commit suicide may cease to be crime soon, Sept 22, 2011; The Indian Express, 25 states agree: suicide attempt should not be punishable by law, Sept 22, 2011).

Jains must continue to grapple with what they see as a two-fold discrimination. They are considered “Hindu” under the Indian constitution and they must constantly defend the practice of sallekhanā against those who contend it constitutes suicide, which remains a violation of the Penal Code. Modern Jains-men, women, Śvetāṃbara, Dīgaṃbara, lay and monastics alike all agree that sallekhanā is not suicide.
“We Jains say…”

Mahavir Parshwanath did not want to get married. He knew marriage would only lead to an increase in attachments, and as a devout Śvetāmbara Jain, he wanted to avoid anything that allowed for the inflow of karmas. Asceticism provides the only way for a grown man to stay unmarried and remain in the Jain community. But Mahavir faced a dilemma. He felt his calling and raison d’être was graphic design, and no world-renouncing ācārya would devote his time to anything as mundane and worldly as that. So the option of donning the white robes and plucking out all his hair was off the table. How then could Mahavir remain a lay Jain and never marry?

Jain marriages are arranged, and in many cases the potentially betrothed meet one another in the company of their respective families so that the parents may decide if the marriage is in their and their child’s best interest. Mahavir is a shy man, even bordering on timid. His voice is sometime barely audible and very delicate features give him an air that is reminiscent of a songbird, which is appropriate considering his slender, beaklike nose. Each time his family met with a potential suitor and her parents Mahavir’s demeanor shifted entirely. He was rude, haughty, loud, and anything but an ideal candidate for marriage. After his appalled parents walked away from a third such meeting they realized what their son was up too. “If you do not behave yourself from hereon out,” they told him “you will ordain.”
He married the next woman he and his parents met with. She travelled from Calcutta, across India to Rajasthan, to marry him. Jainism takes many forms depending on where it is in India, and in the region of Bengal, where Jains are far less represented than in places like Rajasthan, Gujarat, and Uttar Pradesh, she frequented the local Shiva16 mandir everyday for darśana (literally looking at the mūrti, or living image of the god, and having him look back at her as a form of devotional worship). Jains do pūja (devotional worship that varies in style depending on the region, religious tradition, person, and/or god) to images of the tīrthaṅkaras but their practice varies greatly from Hindu devotion insofar as the statue is simply an image and they worship in veneration and homage to great, now departed, beings who serves as a source of spiritual inspiration. This is the only kind of pūja Mahavir and his family ever do. His wife, however, coming from a place with an extremely low number of Jains such as Calcutta, did pūja to the Hindu god Shiva, and she possessed no doubts as to the divinity of the mūrti. The stone was Shiva and when she did darśana they looked directly into one another’s eyes.

When she arrived in Rajasthan, in a new house and the member of a new family, she continued to go to the Shiva temple everyday. When her mother-in-law, Mahavir’s mother, found out about this she was furious. She told her son to tell his new wife to stop, but he did not, as he felt it was according to her karma which actions she took. In a typical Indian household, when a daughter marries, she moves into the home of her new husband. When a son marries, he moves nowhere, and stays in his parents’ house with his new wife. In Mahavir’s house there were four generations under one roof. He may not have felt the need to interfere with his wife’s Shiva devotion, but his mother was free to wield her influence since her new daughter-in-law

16 I have chosen to write the typical English spelling “Shiva” rather than the Romanized, Sanskrit “Śiva” with the diacritic mark over the “s” in order to give a more realistic, and less detached reading of this contemporary story. Note that Mahavir and his wife refer to the god by his Hindustani name-Śiv-dropping the final –a.
was never far away. She convinced her that worshipping this Hindu god “was not the right thing
to do,” and since then no member of Mahavir’s house has thrown a flower mālā at an image of
Shiva or had a Brahmin priest put a tilaka on their forehead.

In this conservative Jain household Mahavir grew up, taking all the Jain values and
austerities to heart. Even after several years of marriage he and his wife have no children and
say they never plan on being parents. I would not be surprised to hear their marriage has never
been consummated. Although eventually forced to wed, Mahavir still keeps his attachments to a
minimum. I visited his home briefly twice and in the latter visit I was lucky enough to talk to
him sallekhanā. We specifically discussed the practice’s relation to suicide.

Mahavir believes there is a marked distinction between suicide and sallekhanā. For him
sallekhanā is a “process of detachment” for a person to “connect and find and look for some
higher goals.” Suicide on the other hand is “is a very momentary thing” and sometimes presents
itself as “the fastest way to run away from things.” He described sallekhanā as

more of a spiritually guided process from within. It has to come
from within. It’s a whole state of mind, and it’s a gradual state of
mind. It is not easy. It’s easier to take a pill, take a drink, and end
it. But sometimes sallekhanā can be very painful. So to be able to
go through that whole rigor of sallekhanā is very different from
suicide I feel. Of course there could be pain in certain processes
that people might decide to do, but still it will be much shorter.
Like somebody, you know, sallekhanā, has started fasting. So it
could last from a few hours to days, even months. So that’s not an
easy process.

Mahavir also pointed out that sallekhanā aids in the shedding of karma, something
crucial for Jains hoping to achieve mokṣa. He argues that sallekhanā is “a whole process of
detachment it’s a part of shedding karma, because of detachment to the material world, or to a
relationship, or to yourself, or to a thought process, or to anything for that matter.” Mahavir also stressed that the practitioner of sāllekhanaṇā realizes that he or she is not the body, but something more; the deathless jīva. The a Jain, a corporeal death is a mere transition and nothing more, so starving oneself to death does not constitute killing one’s own self.

The next day I visited the Sanganer mandir of the Dīgaṃbara sect of Jainism. The temple complex sits on the edge of Jaipur, within 20 kilometers of the Pink City, and according to inscriptions final construction occurred in the 10th century. Inside the complex’s red exterior is an atrium open to the sky (this is appropriate considering that Dīgaṃbara literally means “sky-clad”) that holds a marble sanctum sanctorum in the center. When I walked into this smaller building, as my eyes adjusted to the light, I made out the shape of a small man crouched on a sort of granite stage in front of the statues of the tīrthankaras. His hands were clasped together as if in prayer as he muttered quiet mantras. I quickly realized he was clad in sky like the atrium I had just exited. He was a Dīgaṃbara ascetic. Sitting to his right was the peacock-feather duster Dīgaṃbara ācāryas use to wipe off any space they sit on, to ensure that any small insects will be pushed aside unharmed. After his pūja he turned to leave, and as he walked through the door to the brightly lit atrium he became of silhouette, feather-duster in hand to complete the image, that reminded me of the depiction Jains sometimes use for jīnas who have attained mokṣa to leave this world and enter into a perpetual state of kaivālya. The convention is to cut out a section of a flat piece of metal to create the shape of man with large, protruding, almost Martian ears, creating the effect that this person, whoever he was, has now gone and left behind only a memory.

I followed the old, naked man outside. He must have been over a foot shorter than me and his body appeared worn out like elephant skin from what might have amounted to decades in
the hot, desert sun. Delighted to talk to me about Jain dharma, he entreated me to follow him to the quarters the temple kept for him. When I asked him about sallekhanā, I questioned him most of all about the benefits of actionlessness. “Every action is violent,” he told me. “Every action in Jainism has some kind of activity that is bad.”

“Is sallekhanā ātmahatyā?” I asked him. “Is sallekhanā suicide?” He saw no connection between the two since, from his perspective, the action of suicide accumulates karmas, whereas the actionlessness of sallekhanā sheds them. I asked him “Do you need to ask permission to do sallekhanā? How do you know it's the right time?”

“I asked for the 12-year sallekhanā from my guru,” he told me, “but he refused. I am not prepared for that right now.” This naked Digambara ācārya added to a confusion I already had when he told me he asked his guru for permission to undertake the sallekhanā vow. This is certainly how the ancient texts and inscriptions at Śravana Belgoḷa say the ritual begins. I met an old Brahmin emeritus professor in Jaipur whose guru was a Jain ācārya. This Brahmin asked if he could begin sallekhanā, but his guru refused to give him permission. Instead he told him he could begin the twelve year vow, a vow I can find no textual mention of, but one that all Jains are aware of. This is a vow in which a vratacārin slowly reduces attachments over a twelve-year period, and after this is time is up they begin the sallekhanā fast to the death. These men confused me because Jains in Delhi informed me that beginning a fast required no such permission. Then I had an epiphany; in modernity there is no text all Jains adhere to or some rule they all must follow. They act according to whatever their particular community dictates. Despite the efforts of some to create one Jain identity (this is the reason so many Jains have the surname “Jain”; they, or an ancestor, took the name as a sign of solidarity), the small religion contains as many variations as any other, whether due to sect, region, accepted teachings,
political ideology, or social standing. The Jains in Calcutta are not like the Jains in New Delhi, who are not like the Jains in Hyderabad, who are not like the Jains in Jaipur. But despite these sectarian and regional differences I started to find one thing all Jains could agree on. *Sallekhanā* is not suicide.

The Jain program that brought me to India in 2012 afforded me the opportunity to speak with Jains about *sallekhanā*. Before traveling with my Jain hosts to Rajasthan I spent time investigating Jainism and *sallekhanā* in New Delhi. The lodgings provided for us in Delhi were rooms for patients of a hospital functioning solely for the treatment of Jain patients. The grounds were not limited to the hospital however, and included a large, albeit Spartan dining rooms, meeting rooms, lodgings for the many workers, and a marvelous, but somewhat small, marble temple under renovation. Our rooms were essentially cement boxes (but with an amenity much coveted in a Delhi June, air conditioning) and just behind them was a large community field. Unlike most of Delhi, the field appeared to be cleared of all rubbish, but upon closer inspection one would notice the bottles, scraps of paper, sections of styrofoam, and all manner of other garbage pressed up against fence lining the space. Larger bits of discarded items might have been cleared away, but the field was littered with tiny bits of broken glass. Most were too small to penetrate the skin, but once when some of us in the program played soccer with the local boys my friend came away with a big chunk of glass protruding from his foot. In this field toddlers and little boys and girls would dash about freely, falling and tackling each other at every turn. It was a young, American mother’s worst nightmare. But in India nobody cares. If you step in glass, you step in glass. That’s life. You probably won’t, but if you do, *c’est la vie*. Every evening local children would run around while their mothers watched and adolescent boys would play cricket or soccer. These same mothers would come onto the grounds of the Jain complex
multiple times each day to get the potable water that was offered free of charge. So each evening the laughter of children, the voices of the mothers speaking Hindi, the splashing of too-fast-flowing water that inevitably pours out just when someone turns on the tap, the crack of the bat followed by the cries of the boys, the growling from some of India’s countless pariah streetdogs, the crackling of the vendors cooking food in a trashcan just beyond the complex walls, the caws of a massive raven, the faint screeches and hornblows from distant tuk-tuks and cars, the ringing of a bell around some wandering cow’s neck, the cling-clang of bicyclists ringing their handlebar chimes, the cry of a peacock standing on top of nearby building, the whooshing sound of the workers rubbing wet marble on the new temple carvings and the clang of dishes coming from countless kitchens mingled in the thick, smoggy, Delhi air as the oven-dry heat finally began to let up for the night. With all the cacophony of a New Delhi dusk reverberating off the concrete walls of our lodgings, I sat down with Sadhvi Jain, a member of the Śvetāmbara sect, to talk about sallekhanā.

Sadhvi carries herself with a regal but sharp and perceptive humility. She exhibits that quiet dignity that is so characteristic of all Indian women, who can stand beside piles of refuse in brightly lit saris, clean and without sweat in 100 degree weather, heads held high with piercing dark eyes that showcase a cool and collected mind. Sadhvi possesses an edge generated by her feminist awareness. In a society where women are typically wont to roam the streets only in the company of a male chaperone, Sadhvi’s feminist beliefs and the frustration arising from her situation, that is, a married woman in India, are rare and quickly apparent if you are lucky enough to have a candid conversation with her. She holds nothing back. “Do you love your husband?” I once asked her. “No,” she replied, but immediately qualified her answer to say “at
least not the kind of way you’re thinking about. It's a different kind of love. It's a familiar love. Its what’s needed.”

Sadhvi is the mother of two sons, for whom she says she will not arrange marriages. She does not want to contribute to another girl going through the hardship she lived when forced to move out of her parents’ house to essentially become the slave of her in-laws. Sadhvi is remarkably liberal in an India society typified by conservatism and traditional values. Male and female traditionalists are visibly shaken up when Sadhvi makes a rare feminist or “progressive” statement, but their shock is minimal. Jains are educated people, and know that to keep their religion alive they must adapt to changes in the world, especially those that appear unstoppable, such as the education of women.

I asked Sadhvi if sallekhanā is ātmahatya (suicide). “No.” she answered.

See, uh, ātmahatya is actually a violent death for a reason like, uh, you’ve, you’re disappointed with something. Something hasn’t happened the way you wanted it to, or you’re in a bad relationship. You know, something like that is actually causing you a lot of mental agony and that’s when you decide to kill yourself. But, sallekhanā is not like that. Sallekhanā is when you’ve lived your life fully and there’s nothing left for you do, so its time to move to another body.

She also pointed out, like Mahavir and the Digambara ācārya in Jaipur, that sallekhanā is crucial to the shedding of karmas. “Suicide is violent taking of life before its time,” she told me, “and before you’ve achieved something. As a Jain it would mean you’re accumulating a lot of karma, which is unnecessary. You’re not solving any issue, you’re only compounding it by committing suicide.”
Sadhvi, in line with the trends of contemporaneous cases *sallekhanā*, believes that the act is reserved almost exclusively for the elderly. When I asked her what *sallekhanā* is she also gave me a description of who undertakes the fast.

Usually happens when you feel you cannot be a contributing member of society anymore. [It] means that you’re too old to even move and you’re actually a burden on your family. And also, you’ve lived your life fully so there’s nothing left more you to do. So you feel that its time to move on. And you know you decide, consciously make that decision that its time for me to move on and so I go away. But its also not like you destroy yourself like in suicide, its not violent. It’s a very slow death which you begin by reducing your intake of food and very slowly cutting it down, cutting it down, cutting it down ‘til you no longer eat food and you survive on water for some time, and then you just pass on.

Unlike the Brahmin with the Jain guru and the Digambara ācārya, both in Jaipur, Sadhvi did not feel any precedent existed for asking permission from a guru to undertake the fast. She recalls one woman in particular who “sought her family’s permission. That’s where you need permission from, not from any saint or anything. And when her family said, ‘ok, we are ready to allow you to go,’ then she undertook *sallekhanā*.” Sadhvi also saw an old man undergoing *sallekhanā*, “about ninety, ninety-five years old and with several grandchildren. I think even a great-grandchild. Again, he was ill and he had nothing left to live for he felt. He’d seen several generations of his family well off and everything. And then, his wife had also died several years ago. He was very lonely and he just simply decided that he didn’t want to live anymore and he undertook. I saw him a few days before his death.”

The very next day those of us in the program were informed we were granted a very rare and special treat. Ācārya Vidyanan, the highest-ranking ācārya of Digambara Jainism agreed to
give us an audience at his residence in New Delhi (although technically not his residence, since as a renunciant he has given up all possessions even clothes; the center is more like a place that exists and should he wish to live there he may, but it was built for his benefit with the feigned intention of being used for something other than his lodging). The building sits in a non-descript New Delhi neighborhood, with no fanfare or signs designating who resides within. The grounds are humble by suburban American standards, but the vibrant green of the lawn and freshly cut grass are rare in the dry, urban capital. The building with ācārya Vidyanan’s quarters, library and study is two-storied, square, gray-bricked, and quite plain. When facing the building, to its right is a small, chapel-like chamber, housing a statue of the legendary Pārśvanātha, the first of the 24 tīrthaṅkaras.

After taking off our shoes and entering the main building, we are immediately ushered up a claustrophobia-inducing flight of stairs and shown down a hall to an open door. We walk into a chairless, carpeted room, where two naked men are sitting on a small wooden stage in front of the beaming professor at a Delhi Sanskrit university who arranged the meeting and who is joined by his two teenage daughters. Ācārya Vidyanan sits by the window. His skins falls down his torso in folds and his left leg is bent with the knee pointed at the ceiling while his right thigh embraces the ground, his foot locked into the left side of his groin. Beneath his ancient-bald-head (hairless since Jain ascetics pluck out all their hair as an austerity) two eyes stare down a raptor beak, unfocused and seemingly uncaring. He emits the air of apathy so characteristic of Jain renunciants, male and female. From his disposition, it seems as if he may not even be aware of our shuffling into the room.

Ācārya Vidyanan’s associate looks to be in his early thirties, much younger than his 89-year-old guru, and his unique appearance strikes me immediately. Atop his head sits a full head
of hair and on his face grows a thick, although still rather short, black beard. He may have given up all possessions, even clothing, but for whatever reason never pluck out his hair. Later I am told this is because he had not yet received full *dīkṣa* (initiation), and that when he finally does he will give himself a painful haircut. Unlike his hawk-beaked guru, he watches us with eagle eyes as we pass him one by one.

When the time for questions comes, the head of our program calls me to the feet of the guru and I am allowed to question him in Hindi about *sallekhanā*. I ask him the same question I ask everyone; if the ancient practice is *ātmahatya*. He contends that the two are absolutely distinct by arguing that passions drive the former while a freedom from passions qualifies the latter. He believes “*sallekhanā* and suicide are not the same. To reduce your passions you must send your thoughts in the Lord (*bhagavan*) or in your supreme self is *sallekhanā*. And not doing so, increasing the passions, is death, is suicide. So when you die you are actually increasing your passions.” I found it odd that a Jain *ācārya* would prescribe meditation on *bhagawan*, a term which may both be used as an honorific for a person or to refer to God. He also stated, “when you die you should be immersed in the recitation of contemplating on the name of your Lord (*bhagawan*).” This ambiguity of terminology evinces the influence over millennia of Indian āstika religions (those which take the Vedas as authoritative) on the nāstika dharmas (those which do not take the Vedas as authoritative, Buddhism and Jainism; the term does not include Islam or the Sikh religion because they are relatively recent phenomena in South Asia).

Since *Ācārya* Vidyanan is the guru to many, and, at the time, arguably the most important teacher in the Digambara sect, I especially want to know his take on asking permission to begin fasting to death. “You don’t need the permission of the holy teacher or the family but you must inform them that now you are starting the fast. You must inform them so that they know and
they may support your practice.” But when does one fast, I wondered. “When should you undergo sallekhanā?” The guru answered “when you have the energy to take a spoon of water you don’t observe sallekhanā, but when you feel you have difficulty doing that, satisfying your needs then you start taking the vow of sallekhanā.” Ācārya Vidyanan means that only the very weak, which often also means the very old, should undergo sallekhanā. If a person is healthy enough to function he or she should not begin a fast to the death. I was later told that Ācārya Vidyanan was in the fifth year of the twelve-year vow. In less than eight years he would stop eating an drinking, irrespective of whether or not he could lift a spoon of water.

The opinions of male gurus were in no short supply, but I wondered what the female renunciants, the mātājis, thought about the practice. I traveled to Hastinapur in central Uttar Pradesh, legendary capital of the Kauravas in the great epic the Mahābhārata, to have an audience with a Digambara mātāji almost as old as Ācārya Vidyanan and her group of nuns.

The trip to the city of the Kuru dynasty began long before the sunrise. Myself and the rest of my delirious, sleep-deprived group were unceremoniously herded onto a bus outside the Jain compound we had began to develop an affinity for and driven off into the predawn New Delhi streets. I fell asleep the moment I sat down, and when I woke up and took in my bizarre surroundings it took me a moment to realize I wasn’t dreaming.

There are several Jain centers in Hastinapur and they all have rides. Rides? Yes, rides. For instance, the temple complex immediately adjacent to the one occupied by the nuns has a train ride for small children. But the hottest setup in town was without a doubt, Mātāji’s. The nunnery doubled as a religious theme park. Throughout India there are these religious theme parks complete with rides, robot shows taking their plots from mythology, and moving,
mobilized mūrtis. This was my first exposure to one of these “theme parks” and I felt like I wandered into Oz and the man behind the curtain would pop out at any moment and tell me this is one big haux.

The “theme” of this particular place is Jain cosmology and philosophy. Our hosts first led us to the room of anekāntavāda. Anekāntavāda, which literally translates as no-one-side-ness, is the Jain philosophical position that makes ahimsā function even intellectually. The idea is that all philosophical perspectives, typically ontological, epistemological and teleological ones, are valid from a certain point of view. Which kinds of philosophical dispositions most often treated in this system are important, because Jains are of the opinion that their ethical code sits above any other. Ironically, the putting of ahimsā into cognitive practice involves a championing of Jain non-violence, as well the creation of a philosophical perspective accepting all others as valid, but creating a catch 22 through doing so. Anekāntavāda attempts to bring all systems into the fold, but while accepting the validity of all arguments, endorses only the Jain ones as correct.

There is a scheme of seven ways of showing an argument to be valid, called syādvāda. So inside the anekāntavāda room were seven mirrors, each bent in a different way to produce a unique funky reflection. This first “ride” disappointed in the realm of thrills, but putting a Jain twist on the classic hall-of-mirrors created a whole new zaniness.

I walked back outside where the sun already baked down at over 100 degrees Fahrenheit, and it wasn’t even 10 AM. The grounds spread out rather far and the boundaries were hard to make since the swimming mirages blotted out anything in the distance. We walked to the next destination over a wide pathway of yellow bricks, which were appropriate considering this place
evoked images of a lost ancient city that brings the xanthic ruins of Persepolis to mind together with Oz.

Hordes of wily monkeys followed us, darting from rooftops and retreating into whatever scarce shadows they could find. One streaked into our midst to snatch a banana from a woman behind me, biting and scratching her in the process. The nasty little bastards were not advocates of ahimsā.

As we strolled across the grounds I noticed a large area under construction. It appeared to be mandir-to-be, one thing the site curiously lacked, but I never received a straight answer as to its purpose. A teepee, bamboo structure surrounded the site, and its top rose high above the unfinished building’s apex. Jain flags haphazardly flew from various stick poles jutting out in no particular direction. Next to piles of dirt, wood and bags of dry plaster pushed up against the confusing mound stood a trippy statue of a four-trunked India, an image found throughout India. He faced the next “ride.”

We stopped in front of the wildest conglomeration of structures I have ever seen. A skinny, telescoped tower oppressively stood in the center. Emanating from this point were over a hundred metal boxes resting on marble pillars about four feet tall. Inside each box was a marble statue of a jīna, about a foot tall. A moat encircled the entire layout, and monkeys swam in the water after leaping in from the marble wall surrounding it. This was a not-to-scale map of the Jain universe, Jambudvīpa (Jambu island). The pillar in the center represents Mount Meru, the holy center of the cosmos in Jainism and Hinduism. Jain families were packed into gondolas to the point of overflowering and taxied around the circumference of the moat in a ride reminiscent of “It’s a Small World” at Disney World. It's a small universe after all.
Doing an about face, we headed back towards the hall of anekāntavāda mirrors and massive a marble monolith, awkwardly jutting up from the Spartan landscape. It was another model of the Jain cosmos, specifically the various realms inhabited by all the beings in samsāra. On top of a frustrum, that is, a triangle with its top cut off, sits a hexagon. The image evokes a headless man, standing with his feet spread to shoulder width and hands on his hips. This encompasses all the inhabited realms, with the lower frustrum containing all the hell and animal realms, the upper hexagon with all the heaven realms, the skinny center where the two shapes meet represents the human realms, and above the entire cosmic man, not included on this marble building, is siddha lokha, the realm of the liberated jīnas.

Entering the structure, we found it to be hollow. Shooting up, through the center to the roof six stories up, was a glass pillar and behind that were a staircase and an incredibly unsafe-looking elevator. The center-piece held kitch-cartoonish-plastic models of hell beings torturing blood-covered people, holding their hands up and their mouths open to evoke a sense of agony, depictions of heaven beings sitting on their thrones and elegantly carved garden swings, and a small collection of humans who must have been residents of our world. I made it to the sixth floor where the golden statues of the 24 tīrthaṅkaras sat behind the glass but walking up the stair was unnerving. The whole building seemed incomplete, there were about 30 of us slowly shuffling up and down, and due to the shape of the universe, the walls allowed for more or less room on each level. I left samsāra due to acrophobia.

Following the 430 AM wakeup and whirlwind tour of the universe, everyone in our group struggled to keep their eyes open and form coherent thoughts. But the fun continued. Like prized spoils of war being presented to a king, our hosts led us into the compound’s main hall where a group of already seated Jains looked on approvingly. After sitting we noticed the
seven or eight empty chairs facing us from the other side of a long, svastika embroidered table. Within moments of our derrières plopping into the chairs a group of women with no hair silently ushered in to fill the places positioned across from us.

These were Digambara nuns and they wore thin, white raiment, taking cares to ensure their hoods did not fall and expose their smooth scalps. Seemingly unaware that others were present, their eyes darted around the room suspiciously, never falling into another’s line of vision. The eldest member of the group’s lower lip protruded out and hanged, as if shot up with novacaine. She craned her next first to the extreme left, then the extreme right, as if taking cares to not look at anyone in attendance. This woman, who bore a strong resemblance to a cronish, cartoon snapping turtle, gave a talk about her area of expertise, the cosmos (not surprising considering the “rides” offered). Had I not been so tired I might have been more keen to listen to her describing how there are houses and palaces on the sun and how, despite what modern astronomy tells us, it is actually closer to Earth than the moon.

Her encore was to summon three young girls to dance, who were evidently not doing such a great job, since another nun was moving their arms and legs in correct form when she detected an error and picking them up and moving them when she perceived they were out of line. This nun, the only one present with a full head of hair since she had not yet received full dīkṣa (initiation), then spontaneously cried out on the microphone that we should all dance, so I found myself participating in the most bizarre dance party to ever occur.

The nightmare featured one final act, but it was a tame one. Only one male ascetic sat amongst the mātājis. Hairless, he wore orange robes and big, orange hat that gave him the
appearance of some kind of wizard. He introduced the next speaker, the runner-up in rank at the complex, and she spoke on what I wanted most to hear about *sallekhanā*.

I arranged to meet with *mātāji* two after lunch, when most everyone in India was on siesta, to talk about *sallekhanā*. Dodging monkeys in a landscape as hot as the sun (which makes sense considering my new-found knowledge regarding its cosmic proximity) I made it to her chambers. Sadhvi Jain accompanied me. The nun with hair translated for her elder ascetic. I asked Mataji “Does someone need permission to start to fast?” Rather than answer directly, she instead told me of the four conditions that need to be met to begin *sallekhanā*.

“Four conditions are there in this *sallekhanā* can be taken,” the translator said, “When one person is fully old. Now he or she is not having any desire, any wish he will live long now. In that condition when somebody is having acute disease, when there is no hope for what his life is living now. Otherwise some calamity, some sudden calamity comes and there is not chance for having the life saved. And in the time of famine.” Why should someone take *sallekhanā* I wondered, even if a person met one of these four conditions?

This is for the person who is not having any hope of the life. One day he or she has to die. That is very definite. It has become definite that he or she will die then she will think “I will leave my body gradually, peacefully and without any stings in my heart, without any passions in my heart.” So to decline those passions, to decrease the passions to sensual pleasures, to have all these…to weaken all these bondages he gradually gives up the edibles, and then gradually he adopts the death. He adopts the death. That is called “holy death”. One is to die, that is very sure. No science can protect anybody. When the life is coming to the end he or she has to die, certainly he or she has to die. But is called the death by, I can say, a victorious matter. To have the death in a victorious manner. To win the death. That is called “to win the death.”
While Mataji spoke, the head of the program hosting entered the room. When she mentioned *santhāra* he fired something off at her in Hindi and an intense debate ensued. I asked Sadhvi what they were discussing and she told me they disagreed over the meaning of *santhāra*. I chose not to use this word in the context of my discussion on *sallekhanā* because of the controversy surrounding its meaning in the Jain community. Typically, and this is by no means a blanket generalization, Śvetāmbara use only the term *sallekhanā* in reference to a terminal fast, while Digambara separate the practice itself from the moment of death and final release, which they designate *santhāra*. However some Digambaras refer to the entire fast as *santhāra*, and some Śvetāmbaras do as well. Furthermore, some Digambaras never use the term *santhāra* at all.

Discussing the matter with Mataji adds a whole new layer to the debate. As an orthodox Digambara Jain, she does not believe women can achieve liberation. They should strive to collect enough good *karmas* and shed enough negative ines so they can be reborn as a man. Women, for Mataji, may undergo *sallekhanā*, but *santhāra* is possible only for men. When Sadhvi heard this she launched into the nun as well, asking her how she could allow herself to not only believe something as absurd as that (Sadhvi believed) but to devote her life to that system. Mataji’s answer was careful and disappointing. “This is what our Jain ācāryas have said.” “That is what your Digambara ācāryas have said,” Sadhvi retorted.

Despite difference with regards to the liberation of women, or the meaning of the terms *sallekhanā* and *santhāra*, Śvetāmbara and Digambara Jains agree on the general reasons for undergoing *sallekhanā*. Even if the fast does not directly result in the liberation of the
practitioner’s jīva, the punya (spiritual merit, essentially good karma) accumulated by the
austerity is significant; so much so that others may benefit merely from being in the presence of
a sallekhanā-vratacārin. In a manner similar to the tradition at ancient Śravana Belgoḷa,
contemporary Jains undergoing sallekhanā received great renown for their spiritual merit and
well-wishers flock to see and be inspired by them.

Sallekhanā, unlike suicide, is an event involving the entire Jain community that the
adherent is a member of. Some texts state that one wishing to undergo the fast must ask his or
her guru for permission. Acarya Vidyanan, however, contends that “you don’t need the
permission of the holy teacher or the family but you must inform them that now you are starting
the fast. You must inform them so that they know and they may support your practice. Mahavir
Parshwanath believes “many times they would probably ask to find out if the person is really
ready for it. So it could be because of that. That is somebody has a little weakness, might give in,
and it shouldn’t end up breaking a vow.” Informing the family prior to the act, or asking
permission are certainly not characteristics of a typical suicide.

Sadhvi Jain remarked that “when somebody is taking sallekhanā, and you know that
person has taken sallekhanā you go and visit that person. The whole community comes to visit
and derive benefit, some punya out of it, of seeing such a great soul who can undertake that kind
of a fast.” The reason for this is that “normally you don’t want to let go of life, but here are
people who are willing to give it up, so that’s a very great penance in a sense. So you visit those
people and you derive some kind of benefit out of it; some kind of inspiration from it.”
Parshwanath elaborated on visiting those undergoing sallekhanā.
What happens, being a normal part of the community, the family or whoever, would wonder why you have stopped eating, so they try to force you to eat. They have to say it so that people have an understanding about it. And then sometimes while someone is doing it there could be a lot pain, so they could be assisting in going through that make. Or they could make the whole environment a little more spiritual, more bhajans and more of these things, so that the whole thought process, the bhāva within you, stays elevating.

The *Chicago Tribune* reported in the story on Devi Hirawat that visitors streamed into the homes in celebration of those Jains fasting to death, and that advertisements and news stories in Jaipur praised them.

The spiritual value derived from the practice of *sallekhanā*, not only from those practicing it, but from the community as well, serves to further separate it from suicide in the eyes of contemporary Jains. They consider the *sallekhanā-vratacarīn* to be at the apex of spiritual aspiration and accomplishment. The actions of the faster, or, ideally, lack thereof, from the perspective of those supporting them, seem to bear little resemblance to the action of suicide.

Both clauses of the definition of suicide given before, that the transgressor is seen as the victim and that the primary intention is to bring about one’s own death, fail to quality *sallekhanā* from a Jain perspective. The transgressor, the person undergoing a fast to death, is seen as a hero by his or her community, not a victim. Also, the intention is not to bring about a final death, in the same way that a person committing suicide desires to achieve, for the *sallekhanā-vratacarīn* wishes merely to move on to a new body and progress spiritually, not cease existing altogether. True suicide, true destruction, is more or less an impossibility.
Near the walled Pink City in Jaipur, on the other side of a non-descript wall pressed up against a neighborhood street, a crowd gathers before dawn every morning and leaves after dusk. At first glance this crowd seems rather mundane. Besides their obvious shared poverty nothing seems out of the ordinary. Do a double take though and something will stick out; or perhaps, lack the ability to stick out. All of these people are missing a limb or more. This is a crowd of amputees.

Jaipur Foot, as the place is called, supplies the impoverished with prosthetic limbs. Because they use cheap materials, they are able to charge only a fraction of the sometimes tens-of-thousands-of-dollars pricetags that Western medical facilities sell titanium and other alloy limbs for. The destitute waiting patiently pay only about 10 dollars for their new arms and legs. Most of the employees here are amputees themselves, grateful beneficiaries of the institution.

A Doctor Mehta founded Jaipur Foot in 1975 to commemorate the 2,500th anniversary of Mahāvīra’s nirvana. This doctor is very tall and soft spoken; his features are chiseled and sharp, giving him a regal air. He stares at the ground as his employees and beneficiaries sing his praises, ashamed of what he feels is undeserved attention. Beyond India, Jaipur Foot has supplied prosthetics in dozens of countries, and over a million people wear their artificial limbs. The institution is the largest non-profit organization supporting the disabled in the world.
Besides supplying those in developing nations with new limbs, the prosthetics have been fitted in contemporary warzones in places like Afghanistan and Pakistan. The reach of their altruism is great and growing.

The group derives it mission from the non-violence of Jain and Gandhian ethics. *Ahimsā* drives the machines and the arms of the workers shaping and attaching the artificial limbs. High-impact plastic and leather straps effectively replace bone, cartilage, muscle, arteries and ligaments. Jaipur Foot seeks to save lives that might otherwise be destroyed.

This place, the biggest altruistic institution on Earth, is funded mostly by Jains in order the put Jain teachings into practice. The same people paying Jaipur Foot’s bills are visiting the residences of *sallekhanā-vratācārins* to pay homage and receive *punya*. How could those contributing to the preservation of life actively support its destruction as well? Would they fund an organization that saves the lives of untouchable but celebrate the suicides of the members of their communities?

Of course not. The extreme non-violence that Jaipur Foot so beautifully utilizes logically finds its end in non-action, and doing nothing necessarily leads to death. An embodied *jīva* is an imprisoned *jīva*, and the body must die for it to travel up through the cosmos to rest in *kaivalya* in the realm of *Siddha Lokha*.

Obviously Jaipur Foot has not taken *ahimsā* to its logical extreme, or they could not have produced such a vast number of artificial limbs in the past few decades. But the intention behind the inception of the institution finds its source in the same place as the person undergoing *sallekhanā*. A reduction in violence will help the world. Jaipur Foot picks up the pieces of
violence in a sense, with the hope that perhaps one day, an organization like theirs will only be
needed by people have who lost limbs to unavoidable disease, not war and malnutrition.

But that day is far off and may never come at all, so Jaipur Foot will continue to produce
hundreds of prosthetics a day and their benefactors, the ones hoping for an end to all forms of
violence, even the most minute, will continue to visit the homes of those that are starving
themselves to death for spiritual inspiration and merit. Because in the eyes of those that nearly
worship nonviolence, no act is more worthy of praise and admiration than sallekhanā.
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