

Death in the Jain Agamas: An Exploration and Personal Reflection

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The Jain canonical literature is well-known for its extensive and detailed categorization of the esoteric elements of religion, such as expounding on 156 different types of karma. In this brief paper, I share some of the fascinating categorizations around the subject of death and include some personal reflections.

After finishing *ayukarma*¹ (age-determining karma), the soul separates from the body. This is *maran*² or death. Anybody who is born certainly has to die. Arihantas, Tirthankaras, and persons who have exhausted all eight karmas³ do not have to be born again – after death, they become siddhas.⁴

After birth, we are on a journey – long or short, eventful or boring, full of pain and pleasures, turmoil and peace, but always travelling inexorably, one moment at a time, to our final destination – *maran* – death. It is a journey for which a GPS does not have the coordinates. No-one can tell us: “you have reached your final destination.” But the Jain literature does provide some hints, as will be described later.

An ordinary person cannot stop his death. Very few of us seem emotionally and mentally able to cope with the thought of our eventual death. But remember that nobody—nobody—can save you from death. There is no way out of death. It is the final exit – the end of life.

If death is 100% certain, then why spoil it by crying, fighting, fearing, and wasting time, energy, and money for a few more moments of life? If there is a way or technique to die only once and become immortal forever, then no matter how hard that path may be, is it not worth investigating and better than dying many many painful deaths in the future?

There is such a technique in Jain dharma, called *sallekhana*, also known as *santhara*, *sakaam maran*, *anshan* or *samadhi maran*. All of these essentially refer to death while in a meditative state. The common view in Jain dharma is that the painful experiences of innumerable births and deaths are far worse than the few discomforts and bearable pain that one feels in *samadhi maran*.

¹ Neither diacritics nor devanagari script are used in this paper. Transliteration closest to the pronunciation is given.

² *Maran* is commonly used in Jain scriptures, equivalent to Sanskrit *mṛityu*. Both *maran* and *mṛityu* are used interchangeably.

³ These are the eight basic karmas known to most Jaina, as opposed to the more extensive 156-fold classification mentioned earlier.

⁴ Jain dharma says that we reincarnate immediately after death, so there is no need for rituals. Hindus believe that it takes 12 to 13 days to sever the connection between the body and family. Some Buddhists believe in the state of bardo where the being lingers for 49 days after death.



“A sinner, though he may be a monk, will not escape hell; but a pious man, whether monk or householder, ascends to heaven.” (Uttaradhyayana Sutra 5:33)

In the Uttaradhyayana Sutra, two types of death are mentioned in *gaatha* 5, parts 2 and 3: death according to one’s will and death against one’s will.

Death against one’s will, or *akaam maran*, is the death of an ignorant man, and it is the common form of death, happening many times in a soul’s journey. Death with one’s will, or *sakaam maran*, is the death of wise persons, and under the best circumstances, happens only once because there is no new birth or death.

Samadhi Maran starts by gradual fasting, carried out in strict accordance with ritualistic prescriptions and under the close supervision of a monk. It is recommended under four circumstances:

1. *Upasarga* – captivity by enemy, which makes the keeping of one’s vows impossible.
2. *Durbhiksha* – a great famine, where there is no way to obtain acceptable food.
3. *Jara* – old age. Inability to walk or do anything without help and severe senility.
4. *Nitipratikaaraa Ruja* – Terminal Illness in which death is unavoidable and imminent.

According to Amolak Rishi ji, there are 17 types of death; these are described in *Ashtapahud* of Acharya Kundakundaji.

1. *Bhaktapratyakhyan Maran*: Gradually reduce eating three types of food, then eventually taking vows to stop eating food until death while in *dharma dhyana*.
2. *Ingit* or *Itvara Maran*: withdraw conscientiously from taking of food while restricting one’s movements to a delimited area. They do not ask for any help or service from anybody. They die while doing pure meditation (Acharanga Sutra 1-7-4, p.72)
3. *Padopagamana Maran*: stop taking food, medicine, stop any movement of the body, stay in one place and die while meditating.
4. *Pandit Maran*: having correct knowledge, faith and character, meditating all the life, and dying in samadhi in dharma dhyana. They will go to the higher heavens.
5. *Kevali Maran*: after attaining *kevala jnana*, gradual withdrawal from all food, water, etc., while doing *shukla dhyana* on the way to *moksha*. The *aghaatiyaa* karmas are destroyed simultaneously at the time of death in the fourteenth *gunasthana*.

Note that Moksha is guaranteed only in *kevali maran* – in the other four, moksha is a possibility, but also the higher heavens depending on one's state at death.

In these types of “good” death, no living being is affected in any violent manner. In this death, there is inner peace in the mind of a person who is doing *santhara*. This is a noble and sacred act and most certainly not suicide.

Additionally, there are 12 types of *akaam* or *baala maran*, for people engrossed in sense pleasures, ignorant people who die without their free will. They do *aarta dhyana* (meditation on desires) and *raudra dhyana* (thinking of violence and other sins). Their death is spoiled, and they may go to hell or become *tiryanch* (animals).

6. *Anuvichi maran*: as ayukarma finishes, a person's life span decreases and person dies without doing anything constructive for family or society. Essentially, wasting or fading away while continuing to live a normal life.

7. *Tadbhava maran*: losing connection with the present body; death in sleep, under the influence of drugs or anaesthetics; crib death

8. *Avadhi maran*: terminal illness causing shorter lifespan

9. *Baala maran*: suicidal death by taking poison, in fire or water, jumping from heights, hanging oneself, suicide by weapon. These kinds of people do not possess correct knowledge, vision, or conduct and definitely end up in hell.

10. *Balan mrityu*: falling away from religious vows and dying without dignity.

11. *Adyanta maran*: same kind of death in two different lives because of bad vices and *vasanas* carried over from previous lives.

12. *Pramaad mrityu*: dying because of mistakes, stupidity, and carelessness. They will receive the Darwin award in hell.

13. *Vashaarta mrityu*: dying due to uncontrolled senses, including gluttony, diabetes, sexually-transmitted diseases, excessive sex, anger leading to heart problems, idiot laughing to death, any crazy death.

14. *Gruddhaprustha mrityu*: warrior's death while protecting family or country. Jains are not in accord with the Hindu view (especially pronounced in the Bhagavad Gita) that such persons go to heaven.

15. *Sashalya maran*: dying in delusion, death due to wrong drugs or misdiagnosis, dying on the operating table or dying due to accidents with sharp instruments or blades.

16. *Vipranamrutyu*: death forced on a person due to bad character, going against religion, *sati* death on a funeral pyre, honour killing, suicide bombing. Here, the soul goes into a limbo state and may enter *pishacha yoni*.

17. *Balak Maran*: dying at a young age or dying without getting correct knowledge. Children unknowingly do many violent acts and therefore may have to go to lower life forms for many lives.⁵

To improve the chances of having a good death, every householder should enter into *sagari* (temporary) *santhara* every night with this mantra:

aahaar sharir upadhi pachakhu paap athaar

maran pau to osire jioo to aagaar

In the morning, after saying three Namokar Mantra, *sagari santhara* is released and the person goes back to normal living.



I have been fortunate to experience a few good deaths. In 1975, there were two *santhara* in Maharashtra. A gentleman in a town called Yeola remained in the state of *santhara* for 71 days. In a village called Kundevadi, a lady had *santhara* for 60 days. Both exuded peace and tranquility. In their presence, one felt as if one could conquer death.

In May 1978 when I was preparing to return from a visit to India, my mother requested me to stay for another month, as she sensed something. I agreed. She passed away on June 28th, 1978 while doing many *pachakhan* and *vrata*. Along with us, she chanted in the Rajasthani vernacular: “Arihanta Siddha Sahu, Dhyana Lagau, Moksha Me Jau, Pachchi Nahi Aau”, which roughly translates as “I am meditating on Arihanta, Siddha, and Sadhus; I am going to Moksha; I will not be reborn.” She died peacefully and happy.

In December 2010, we went to India to see my ill elder brother. He had severe osteoporosis that had resulted in a broken right leg as well as both arms. He was unable to move on his own and was in excruciating pain. At that time, he asked his family’s permission to take *santhara*. They agreed, and a *sadhviji* in town initiated him into *santhara*. His *santhara* lasted two days in Kopargaon, Maharashtra. His life had not been the easiest one, but he made peace with his life, himself and with his impending death. The family did not engage in unnecessary rituals afterwards.



⁵ Note that death in childhood is also a matter of karma from past lives.

The Jaina literature provides a detailed description of some of the impending signs of death. It is well known in the Eastern esoteric tradition that approximately six months prior to death, the *prana*, or one of the five external vital airs, starts to leave the body. Many of the signs described below are manifestations of withdrawal of one or more of the five external pranas or five internal pranas, as well as the 72,000 esoteric *nadi* through which they flow. They are also related to the ancient science of *samudrika sastra*, or divination by signs on the body, as well as *jyotisa*.⁶

1. If one cannot see the eyebrows, tip of nose, or tip of tongue, that person may die after 9 days.
2. After bathing, the whole body will be wet but the face dries up. This person may die within 15 days.
3. If the ear lobes become very thin, tip of the nose bends, eyes become white, forehead becomes black, nose becomes red, hair on the upper lip starts falling out, lips become white, then the person may die within 3 days.
4. No taste for food or water, palms and soles of feet become red, nails become black, person gets more angry, yellow chest, white thighs, throat is blue or red, nose has folds, hand-lines become faint, hands and feet become cold, and the head become hot – death is very near for this person.
5. If the natural colour of the skin changes, eyes get turned up or around, joints become very flexible, eyes sink in head, tongue gets pulled back in mouth – then death is nearby.
6. If half the body is cold and the other half is hot, then a person may die within 7 days.
7. Cut in the tongue, words not spoken properly, no light in the eyes – then death is very near.
8. Bend the middle finger, palms down with remaining fingers straight. Try to lift the ring finger. If you cannot lift it, your remaining life is long. If you can lift it, then death is in the near future.
9. Signs of short life:
 - cannot see the crescent moon
 - no appetite without disease
 - without disease, a person's appetite increases tremendously
 - person of good character suddenly becomes characterless

⁶ Commonly thought of as its sister science, *hasta samudrika sastra*, or the art of hand analysis.

- person of bad character suddenly becomes of good character

10. Place pure clean water in a big plate. After the water is still, let the sick person see the reflection of sun in the water. If he sees the whole sun, he has long life. If the reflection appears shorter in the South, 6 months of life remain. If the reflection appears shorter in the North, 3 months of life remain. If the reflection appears shorter in the West, 2 months of life remain. If the reflection appears shorter in the East, 1 month of life remains. If many suns are visible, or holes in the sun, then 10 days of life remain. If the sun looks like the moon, 15 days of life are left. If the sun looks like it is covered by fog, the person may die the same day.

11. Close both ears with the fingers. If you do not hear the inner sound (*anahata nada*), then life will be short.

12. If even after much effort one cannot put 3 fingers (index – middle – ring) in the mouth, and if half the body is cold and half is hot, the 1 week of life remains.

13. Passing urine, feces, semen (in case of men) and sneezing at the same time – one year of life is left.

This has not been an academic or scientific study, but rather a brief introduction to the concept of death as reflected in the Jaina Agamas. Jaina literature is vast, and much of it is inaccessible, either by virtue of language or simple unavailability. I hope that it has stimulated your curiosity to learn more about this fascinating subject.

References

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