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**Opening Extract from...**

# Nine Lives

In Search of the Sacred in Modern India

Written by William Dalrymple

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## THE NUN'S TALE

Two hills of blackly gleaming granite, smooth as glass, rise from a thickly wooded landscape of banana plantations and jagged palmyra palms. It is dawn. Below lies the ancient pilgrimage town of Sravanabelagola, where the crumbling walls of monasteries, temples and *dharamsalas* cluster around a grid of dusty, red earth roads. The roads converge on a great rectangular tank. The tank is dotted with the spreading leaves and still-closed buds of floating lotus flowers. Already, despite the early hour, the first pilgrims are gathering.

For more than 2,000 years, this Karnatakan town has been sacred to the Jains. It was here, in the third century BC, that the first Emperor of India, Chandragupta Maurya, embraced the Jain religion and died through a self-imposed fast to the death, the emperor's chosen atonement for the killings for which he had been responsible in his life of conquest. Twelve hundred years later, in AD 981, a Jain general commissioned the largest monolithic statue in India, sixty feet high, on the top of the larger of the two hills, Vindhyagiri.

This was an image of another royal Jain hero, Prince Bahubali. The prince had fought a duel with his brother Bharata for control of

his father's kingdom. But in the very hour of his victory, Bahubali realised the folly of greed and the transience of worldly glory. He renounced his kingdom and embraced instead the path of the ascetic. Retreating to the jungle, he stood in meditation for a year, so that the vines of the forest curled around his legs and tied him to the spot. In this state he conquered what he believed to be the real enemies – his passions, ambitions, pride and desires – and so became, according to the Jains, the first human being to achieve *moksha* or spiritual liberation.

The sun has only just risen above the palm trees, and an early morning haze still cloaks the ground. Yet already the line of pilgrims – from a distance, tiny ant-like creatures against the dawn-glistening fused-mercury of the rock face – are climbing the steps that lead up to the monumental hilltop figure of the stone prince. For the past thousand years this massive broad-shouldered statue, enclosed in its lattice of stone vines, has been the focus of pilgrimage in this Vatican of the Digambara, or Sky Clad Jains.

Digambara monks are probably the most severe of all India's ascetics. They show their total renunciation of the world by travelling through it completely naked, as light as the air, as they conceive it, and as clear as the Indian sky. Sure enough, among the many ordinary lay people in lungis and saris slowly mounting the rock-cut steps, are several completely naked men – Digambara monks on their way to do homage to Bahubali. There are also a number of white-clad Digambara nuns or *matajis*, and it was in a temple just short of the summit that I first laid eyes on Prasannamati Mataji.

I had seen the tiny, slender, barefoot figure of the nun in her white sari bounding up the steps above me as I began my ascent. She climbed quickly, with a pot of water made from a coconut shell in one hand, and a peacock fan in the other. As she climbed, she gently wiped each step with the fan in order to make sure she didn't stand on, hurt or kill a single living creature on her ascent of the hill: one of the set rules of pilgrimage for a Jain *muni* or ascetic.

It was only when I got to the Vadegall Basadi, the temple which lies just below the summit, that I caught up with her – and saw that despite her bald head Mataji was in fact a surprisingly young and

striking woman. She had large, wide-apart eyes, olive skin and an air of self-contained confidence that expressed itself in a vigour and ease in the way she held her body. But there was also something sad and wistful about her expression as she went about her devotions; and this, combined with her unexpected youth and beauty, left one wanting to know more.

Mataji was busy with her prayers when I first entered the temple. After the glimmering half-light outside, the interior was almost completely black, and it took several minutes for my eyes fully to adjust to the gloom. At the cardinal points within the temple, at first almost invisible, were three smooth, black marble images of the Jain *Tirthankaras*, or Liberators. Each was sculpted sitting Buddha-like in the *virasana samadhi*, with shaved head and elongated earlobes. The hands of each *Tirthankara* was cupped, and they sat cross-legged in a lotus position, impassive and focused inwards, locked in the deepest introspection and meditation. *Tirthankara* means literally 'ford-maker', and the Jains believe these heroic ascetic figures have shown the way to Nirvana, making a spiritual ford through the rivers of suffering, and across the wild oceans of existence and rebirth, so as to create a crossing place between *samsara* and liberation.

To each of these figures in turn, Mataji bowed. She then took some water from the attendant priest and poured it over the hands of the statues. This water she collected in a pot, and then used it to anoint the top of her own head. According to Jain belief, it is good and meritorious for pilgrims to express their devotion to the *Tirthankaras*, but they can expect no earthly rewards for such prayers: as perfected beings, the ford-makers have liberated themselves from the world of men, and so are not present in the statutes, in the way that, say, Hindus believe their deities are incarnate in temple images. The pilgrim can venerate, praise, adore and learn from the example of the *Tirthankaras*, and they can use them as a focus for their meditations. But as the ford-makers are removed from the world they are unable to answer prayers; the relationship between the devotee and the object of his devotion is entirely one way. At its purest, Jainism is almost an atheistic

religion, and the much venerated images of the *Tirthankaras* in temples represent not so much a divine presence as a profound divine absence.

I was intrigued by Mataji's intense dedication to the images, but as she was deep in her prayers, it was clear that now was not the moment to interrupt her, still less to try to talk to her. From the temple, she headed up the hill to wash the feet of Bahubali. There she silently mouthed her morning prayers at the feet of the statue, her rosary circling in her hand. Then she made five rounds of the *parikrama* pilgrim circuit around the sanctuary and, as quickly as she had leapt up the steps, she headed down them again, peacock fan flicking and sweeping each step before her.

It was only the following day that I applied for, and was given, a formal audience – or as the monks called it, *darshan* – with Mataji at the monastery guest house; and it was only the day after that, as we continued our conversations, that I began to learn what had brought about her air of unmistakable melancholy.

'We believe that all attachments bring suffering,' said Prasannamati Mataji, after we had been talking for some time. 'This is why we are supposed to give them up. It is one of the main principles of Jainism – we call it *aparigraha*. This was why I left my family, and why I gave away my wealth.'

We were talking in the annex of a monastery prayer hall, and Mataji was sitting cross-legged on a bamboo mat, raised slightly above me on a low dais. The top of her white sari was now modestly covering her plucked head. 'For many years, I fasted or ate at most only once a day,' she continued. 'Like other nuns, I often experienced hunger and thirst. I tried to show compassion to all living creatures, and to avoid all forms of violence, passion or delusion. I wandered the roads of India barefoot.' As she said this, the nun ran a hand up the hard and callused sole of her unshod foot. 'Every day I suffered the pain of thorns and blisters. All this was part of my effort to shed my last attachments in this illusory world.'

'But,' she said, 'I still had one attachment – though of course I didn't think of it in that way.'

'What was that?' I asked.

‘My friend, Prayogamati,’ she replied. ‘For twenty years we were inseparable companions, sharing everything. For our safety, we Jain nuns are meant to travel together, in groups or in pairs. It never occurred to me that I was breaking any of our rules. But because of my close friendship with her, I formed not just an attachment, but a strong attachment – and that left an opening for suffering. But I only realised this after she died.’

There was a pause, and I had to encourage Mataji to continue. ‘In this stage of life we need company,’ she said. ‘You know, a companion with whom we can share ideas and feelings. After Prayogamati left her body, I felt this terrible loneliness. In truth, I feel it to this day. But her time was fixed. When she fell ill – first with TB and then malaria – her pain was so great she decided to take *sallekhana*, even though she was aged only thirty-six.’

‘*Sallekhana*?’

‘It’s the ritual fast to the death. We Jains regard it as the culmination of our life as ascetics. It is what we all aim for, and work towards as the best route to Nirvana. Not just nuns – even my grandmother, a lay person, took *sallekhana*.’

‘You are saying she committed suicide?’

‘No, no: *sallekhana* is not suicide,’ she said emphatically. ‘It is quite different. Suicide is a great sin, the result of despair. But *sallekhana* is as a triumph over death, an expression of hope.’

‘I don’t understand,’ I said. ‘If you starve yourself to death, then surely you are committing suicide?’

‘Not at all. We believe that death is not the end, and that life and death are complementary. So when you embrace *sallekhana* you are embracing a whole new life – it’s no more than going through from one room to another.’

‘But you are still choosing to end your life.’

‘With suicide, death is full of pain and suffering. But *sallekhana* is a beautiful thing. There is no distress or cruelty. As nuns our lives are peaceful, and giving up the body should also be peaceful. You have the Tirthankaras names on your lips, and if you do it slowly and gradually, in the prescribed way, there is no pain; instead there is a gentle purity in all the privations.’

‘At all stages you are guided by an experienced *mataji* or guru. Everything is planned long in advance – when, and how, you give up your food. Someone is appointed to sit with you and look after you at all times, and a message is sent out to all members of the community that you have decided to take this path. First you fast one day a week, then you eat only on alternate days: one day you take food, the next you fast. One by one, you give up different types of food. You give up rice, then fruits, then vegetables, then juice, then buttermilk. Finally you take only water, and then you have that only on alternate days. Eventually, when you are ready, you give up that too. If you do it very gradually, there is no suffering at all. The body is cooled down, so that you can concentrate inside on the soul, and on erasing all your bad karma.

‘At every stage you are asked: are you prepared to go on, are you sure you are ready for this, are you sure you don’t want to turn back? It is very difficult to describe, but really it can be so beautiful: the ultimate rejection of all desires, the sacrificing of everything. You are surrounded, cradled, by your fellow monks. Your mind is fixed on the example of the *Jinas*.’

She smiled: ‘You have to understand that for us death is full of excitement. You embrace *sallekhana* not out of despair with your old life, but to gain and attain something new. It’s just as exciting as visiting a new landscape or a new country: we feel excited at a new life, full of possibilities.’

I must have looked surprised, or unconvinced, because she stopped and explained what she meant using the simplest images. ‘When your clothes get old and torn,’ she said, ‘you get new ones. So it is with the body. After the age of thirty, every year it becomes weaker. When the body withers completely, the soul will take a new one, like a hermit crab finding a new shell. For the soul will not wither, and in rebirth you simply exchange your torn and damaged old clothes for a smart new suit.’

‘But you could hardly have felt excited when your friend left you like this.’

‘No,’ she said, her face falling. ‘It is hard for those who are left.’

She stopped. For a moment Mataji lost her composure; but she checked herself.

‘After Prayogamati died, I could not bear it. I wept, even though we are not supposed to. Any sort of emotion is considered a hindrance to the attainment of Enlightenment. We are meant to cultivate indifference – but still I remember her.’

Again her voice faltered. She slowly shook her head. ‘The attachment is there even now,’ she said. ‘I can’t help it. We lived together for twenty years. How can I forget?’



Jainism is one of the most ancient religions of the world, similar to Buddhism in many respects, and emerging from the same heterodox classical Indian world of the Ganges basin in the early centuries BC. Like Buddhism, it was a partly a reaction to Brahminical caste consciousness and the readiness of the Brahmins to slaughter huge quantities of animals for temple sacrifices – but the faith of the Jains is slightly more ancient, and much more demanding than Buddhist practice. Buddhist ascetics shave their heads; Jains pluck their hair out by the roots. Buddhist monks beg for food; Jains have to have their food given to them without asking. All they can do is to go out on *gowkari* – the word used to describe the grazing of a cow – and signal their hunger by curving their right arm over their shoulder. If no food comes before the onset of the night, they go to bed hungry. They are forbidden to accept or in any way handle money.

In ancient India, the Jain monks were also celebrated for their refusal to wash, and like the Coptic monks of Egypt, equated a lack of concern for outward appearance with inner purity. One early inscription at Sravanabelagola admiringly refers to a monk so begrimed with filth that ‘he looked as if he wore a closely fitting suit of black armour’. Today the monks are allowed to wipe themselves with a wet towel and to wash their robes every few weeks; but bathing in ponds or running water or the sea is still strictly forbidden, as is the use of soap.



Unlike Buddhism, the Jain religion never spread beyond India, and while it was once a popular and powerful faith across the subcontinent, patronised by the princes of a succession of Deccani dynasties, today there are only four million Jains left, and these are largely limited to the states of Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Karnataka. Outside India, the religion barely exists, and in contrast to Buddhism, is almost unknown in the West.

The word Jain derives from *Jina*, meaning liberator or spiritual conqueror. The *Jinas* or *Tirthankaras* – ford-makers – were a series of twenty-four human teachers who each discovered how to escape the eternal cycle of death and rebirth. Through their heroic *tapasya* – bodily austerities – they gained omniscient and transcendent knowledge which revealed to them the nature of the reality of the great theatre of the universe, in every dimension. The most recent of those, according to the Jains, was the historical figure of Mahavira (599–529 BC) – the Great Hero – a prince of Magadha, in modern Bihar, who renounced the world at the age of thirty to become a wandering thinker and ascetic.

Mahavira elaborated to his followers a complex cosmological system that the Jains still expound 2,600 years later. Like other Indian faiths they believe in an immortal and indestructible soul, or *jivan*, and that the sum of one's actions determines the nature of your future rebirth. However, the Jains diverge from Hindus and Buddhists in many ways. They reject the Hindu idea that the world was created or destroyed by omnipotent gods, and they mock the pretensions of the Brahmins, who believe that ritual purity and temple sacrifices can bring salvation. As a Jain monk explains to a group of hostile Brahmins in one of the most ancient Jain scriptures, the most important sacrifice for Jains is not some *puja* or ritual, but the sacrifice of one's own body: 'Austerity is my sacrificial fire,' says the monk, 'and my life is the place where the fire is kindled. Mental and physical effort are my ladle for the oblation, and my body is the dung fuel for the fire, my actions my firewood. I offer up an oblation praised by the wise seers consisting of my restraint, effort and calm.'

Crucially, the Jains differ from both Hindus and Buddhists in their understanding of karma, which for other faiths means simply

the fruit of your actions. Jains, however, conceive of karma as a fine material substance that physically attaches itself to the soul, polluting and obscuring its potential for bliss by weighing it down with pride, anger, delusion and greed, and so preventing it from reaching its ultimate destination at the summit of the universe. To gain final liberation, you must live life in a way that stops you accumulating more karma, while wiping clean the karma you have accumulated in previous lives. The only way to do this is to embrace an ascetic life and to follow the path of meditation and rigorous self-denial taught by the *Tirthankaras*. You must embrace a life of world renunciation, non-attachment and an extreme form of non-violence.

The soul's journey takes place in a universe conceived in a way that is different from any other faith. For Jains, the universe is shaped like a gigantic cosmic human body. Above the body is a canopy containing the liberated and perfected souls – *siddhas* – who, like the *Tirthankaras*, have escaped the cycle of rebirths. At the top of the body, level with the chest, is the celestial upper world, the blissful home of the gods.

At waist level is the middle world, where human beings live in a series of concentric rings of land and ocean. The central landmass of this world – the continent of the Rose Apple Tree – is bounded by the mighty Himalayas, and set within ramparts of diamonds. At its very centre, the *axis mundi*, lies the divine sanctuary of the *Jinas*, Mount Meru, with its two suns and two moons, its parks and woods and its groves of wish-granting trees. Adjacent to this, but slightly to the south, lies the continent of Bharata or India. Here can be found the great princely capitals, surrounded by ornamental lakes blooming with lotus flowers.

Below this disc lies the hell world of the Jains. Here souls who have committed great sins live as hell beings in a state of terrible heat, unquenchable thirst and endless pain, under the watch of a group of malignant and semi-divine jailers, the *asuras*, who are strongly opposed to the dharma of the *Tirthankaras*.

In this world, there are no creator gods: depending on its actions and karma, a soul can be reincarnated as a god, but eventually,

when its store of merit is used up, the god must undergo the agonies of death and fall from heaven, to be reborn as a mortal in the middle world. The same is true of hell beings. Once they have paid through suffering for their bad actions, they can rise to be reborn in the middle world and again begin the cycle of death and rebirth – depending on their karma, as human beings, animals, plants or tiny unseen creatures of the air. Like the fallen gods, former hell beings can also aspire to achieving *moksha*, the final liberation of the soul from earthly existence and suffering. Even the *Tirthankara* Mahavira, the Great Hero himself, spent time as a hell being, and then as a lion, before rising to be a human and so finding the path to Enlightenment. It is only human beings – not the hedonistic gods – who can gain liberation, and the way to do this is completely to renounce the world and its passions, its desires and attachments, and to become a Jain ascetic. As such, the monk or nun must embrace the Three Jewels, namely right knowledge, right faith and right conduct, and to take five vows: no violence, no untruth, no stealing, no sex, no attachments. They wander the roads of India, avoiding any acts of violence, however small, and meditating on the great questions, thinking about the order and purpose of the universe, and attempting to ford the crossing places that lead through suffering to salvation. For the Jains, then, to be an ascetic is a higher calling than to be a god.

It is a strange, austere and in some ways very harsh religion; but that, explained Prasannamati Mataji, is exactly the point.



At ten o'clock each day, Prasannamati Mataji eats her one daily meal. On my third day in Sravanabelagola, I went to the *math* or monastery to watch what turned out to be as much a ritual as a breakfast.

Mataji, wrapped as ever in her unstitched white cotton sari, was sitting cross-legged on a low wooden stool which itself was raised on a wooden pallet in the middle of an empty ground-floor

room. Behind her, her fan and coconut water pot rested against the wall. In front, five or six middle-class Jain laywomen in saris were fussing around with small buckets of rice, dal and masala chickpeas, eagerly attending on Mataji, whom they treated with extreme deference and respect. Mataji, however, sat with eyes lowered, not looking at them except glancingly, accepting without comment whatever she was offered. There was complete silence: no one spoke; any communication took place by hand signals, nods and pointed fingers.

As I approached the door, Mataji signalled with a single raised palm that I should remain where I was. One of the women explained that as I had not had a ritual bath, and had probably eaten meat, I must stay outside. Notebook in hand, I observed from the open door.

For an hour, Mataji ate slowly, and in total silence. The woman waited for her to nod, and then with a long spoon put a titbit of food into her cupped and waiting hands. Each morsel she then turned over carefully with the thumb of her right hand, looking for a stray hair, or winged insect, or ant, or any living creature which might have fallen into the strictly vegetarian food, so rendering it impure. If she were to find anything, explained one of the laywomen, the rules were clear: she must drop the food on the floor, reject the entire meal and fast until ten o'clock the following morning.

After she had finished her vegetables, one of Mataji's attendants poured a small teaspoonful of ghee on to her rice. When a woman offered a further spoonful of dal, the slightest shake of Mataji's head indicated that she was done. Boiled water was then poured, still warm, from a metal cup into the waiting bowl of Mataji's hands. She drank some, then swirled a further cupful of it around in her mouth. She picked her teeth with her finger, and washed water around her gums, before spitting it out into a waiting spittoon. After that, she was finished. Mataji rose and formally blessed the women with her peacock fan.

When the full ritual of the silent meal was finished, Mataji led me to the reception room of the monastery guest house. There she sat herself down cross-legged on a wicker mat in front of a low writing

desk. On this were placed the two volumes of the scriptures she was currently studying, and about which she was writing a commentary. At a similar desk at the far end of the room sat a completely naked man – the maharaj of the *math*, silently absorbed in his writing. We nodded to each other, and he returned to his work. He was there, I presumed, to chaperone Mataji during our conversation: it would have been forbidden for her to stay alone in a room with a male who was not her guru.

When she had settled herself, Mataji began to tell me the story of how she had renounced the world, and why she had decided to take the ritual of initiation, or *diksha*, as a Jain nun.



‘I was born in Raipur, Chattisgarh, in 1972,’ said Mataji. ‘In those days my name was Rekha. My family were wealthy merchants. They hailed from Rajasthan but moved to Chattisgarh for business reasons. My father had six brothers and we lived as a joint family, all together in the same house. My parents had had two boys before I was born, and for three generations there had been no girls in the family. I was the first one, and they all loved me, not least because I was considered a pretty and lively little girl, and had unusually fair skin and thick black hair, which I grew very long.

‘I was pampered by all of them, and my uncles would compete to spoil me. I was very fond of *rasgulla* and *pedha* [milky sweetmeats] and each one of my uncles would bring boxes for me. If I had gone to sleep by the time they returned from their warehouse they would wake me to give me the sweets, or sometimes a big pot of sweet, syrupy *gulab jamun*. Every desire of mine was fulfilled, and I was everyone’s favourite. Nobody ever beat or disciplined me, even in jest. In fact I do not remember even once my parents raising their voice, still less hitting me.

‘It was a very happy childhood. I had two best friends, one was a Jain from the rival Svetambara sect, the other a Brahmin girl, and their parents were also textile merchants. So we would

all play with our dolls, and our families would get their tailors to design elaborate saris and *salwars* for them. When we were a little older, my uncles would take us to the movies. I loved Rekha, because she had the same name as me, and Amitabh Bachchan because he was the number-one hero in those days. My favourite movie was *Coolie*.

‘Then, when I was about thirteen, I was taken to meet a monk called Dayasagar Maharaj – his name means the Lord of the Ocean of Compassion. He was a former cowherd who had taken *diksha* when he was a boy of only ten years old, and now had a deep knowledge of the scriptures. He had come to Raipur to do his *chaturmasa* – the monsoon break when we Jains are forbidden to walk in case we accidentally kill the unseen life that inhabits the puddles. So for three months the maharaj was in our town, and every day he used to preach and read for all the young children. He told us how to live a peaceful life and how to avoid hurting other living creatures: what we should eat, and how we should strain water to avoid drinking creatures too small to be seen. I was very impressed and started thinking. It didn’t take long before I decided I wanted to be like him. His words and his teachings totally changed my life.

‘Within a few weeks I decided to give up eating after the hours of darkness, and also gave up eating any plant that grows beneath the earth: onions, potatoes, carrots, garlic and all root vegetables. Jain monks are forbidden these as you kill the plant when you uproot it – we are allowed to eat only plants such as rice which can survive the harvest of their grain.

‘When I also gave up milk and jaggery – two things I loved – as a way of controlling my desires, everyone tried to dissuade me, especially my father, who once even tried to force-feed me. They thought I was too young to embark on this path, and everyone wanted me to be their little doll at home. This was not what I wanted.

‘When I was fourteen, I announced that I wanted to join the Sangha – the Jain community of which my maharaj was part. Again my family opposed me, saying I was just a young girl, and should

not worry about such things. But eventually, when I insisted, they agreed to let me go for a couple of weeks in the school holidays to study the dharma, hoping that I would be put off by the harshness of the Sangha life. They also insisted that some of the family servants should accompany me. But the life of the Sangha and the teachings I heard there were a revelation to me. Once I was settled in, I simply refused to come back. The servants did their best to persuade me, but I was completely adamant, and the servants had to go back on their own.

‘Eventually, after two months, my father came to take me home. He told me that one of my uncles had had a son, and that I was to come home as there was to be a big family function. I agreed to come, but only if he promised to bring me back to the Sangha afterwards. My father promised to do so, but at the function all my relations insisted that I was too young, and that I should not be allowed to go back. I stayed with my family for one month, and then insisted that they return me. They refused. So for three days I did not eat – not even a drop of water. The atmosphere at home was very bad. There was a lot of pressure and everyone was very angry, and they called me stubborn and uncaring. But eventually, on the third day, they gave in, and did return me to the Sangha.

‘They stayed in close touch, sending money and clothes, and paying for me to go on pilgrimages. They knew my guru would take good care of me, and I think in some ways they were pleased I had taken a pious path; but in their hearts they still didn’t want me to take full *diksha*. I, on the other hand, was happy in the Sangha, and knew I had taken the right path. When you eat a mango, you have to throw away the stone. The same is true of our life as *munis*. No matter how attached you are to your family and to the things of this world, whatever efforts you make, ultimately you have to leave them behind. You simply cannot take them with you. However powerful you are, however knowledgeable, however much you love your mother and father, you still have to go. Worldly pleasures and the happiness of family life are both equally temporary. There is no escape. Birth and death are both inevitable; both are beyond our control.

‘Like a small child who goes to school and then grows up to become an adult; or like a small mango that gets bigger and bigger, changes its colour and becomes ripe; so ageing and death are innate in our nature. We have no choice. Each of us is born, goes through childhood, becomes an adult, ages and dies. It’s a natural process and you can’t go back, at least until your next life. The only thing is to accept this, and to embrace the Jain path of knowledge, meditation and penance as the sole way to free yourself from this cycle. It’s the only way to attain the absolute.

‘After spending some time with the Sangha I felt I had understood this, and that I was living in the best way I could. The more you lead a good life, the clearer and sharper your thoughts on such things become – you begin to be able to cut through the illusions of the world, and to see things as they really are. Suddenly it seemed to me that, though I loved my family, they were only really interested in making money and displaying their wealth – many lay Jains are like this, I fear.

‘If you close the door, you cannot see; open it a little and all becomes clear. Just as a burned seed does not sprout, so once you renounce the world you will not be sucked into the whirlpool of *samsara*. I was quite clear now that what I was doing was right. I also found that following this spiritual path brought happiness in this life – something I had not really expected.

‘For me, the Sangha was itself like a rebirth, a second life. I felt no real homesickness, nor any wish to return to my old life. The gurus taught me how to live in a new way: how to sit as a Jain nun, how to stand, how to talk, how to sleep. Everything was taught anew, as if from the beginning. I felt happy in this new life; I felt sure I was on the path to salvation, and was no longer being distracted by the outside world. I knew I had done the right thing, and even though I didn’t want to hurt my family, I was only sad that I had already wasted so much of my life.

‘I really had no time for worrying, anyway. Our guruji made sure we were totally occupied with lectures, study, classes and travel. All the time, in between days of walking, our lessons in Sanskrit and Prakrit were continuing. I found I loved Sanskrit – I loved its



complexity and perfection – and after a while I was good enough to read some of our Jain literature and scriptures in the languages in which they were written. We are encouraged to carry on studying and gaining in knowledge until we can get rid of the last delusions of *samsara*. Twenty-four years I have been studying now, and I still have a lot to learn.

‘In those early days, we also began to learn how to meditate. Our guru trained us to get up at 3 a.m., and on the days we were not travelling, we would spend the early morning – the most peaceful time of the day – in meditation, striving for self-knowledge. We were trained to think of the twenty-four *Tirthankaras*, to visualise them, and to contemplate within our hearts their attributes, their lives and the decisions they had made. We were shown how to sit in a full lotus – the *padmasana* – with our eyes closed. My ability grew with my studies: first I studied the Sanskrit scriptures, then during the meditation I would recollect what I had read, and attempt to visualise what I had studied. Like a spider making a cobweb, with meditation you need patience to keep building. Once you know all about the *Tirthankaras* it is not difficult to picture them. It is like a child learning to cycle: as you cycle, you master the art, until eventually you hardly notice that you are cycling at all. But as with the bicycle, the first steps can be very hard, and very disheartening.

‘Learning the scriptures, learning Prakrit and Sanskrit, learning to meditate, learning to accept *tapasya* – it is all a very slow process. When you sow a seed, you have to wait for it to grow and become a tree and bear fruit – a coconut palm will not fruit for many years. It is the same with us. There is a lot of time between sowing the seed and reaping the produce. You do not sow the seed and expect to get the fruits the next day. With our *tapasya*, with the deprivations we experience, you do not expect to get immediate rewards, or even necessarily to get the rewards at all in this life. You may only get the rewards many lives into the future.

‘Like the *Tirthankaras*, you should have faith in the Jain path: faith is everything. For without the spiritual knowledge that the Jain faith contains you can never attain liberation. Spiritual knowledge is like ghee in the milk: you can’t see it, so initially

you just have to trust that it is there. Only if you learn the proper techniques can you reap the full benefits of the milk's potential: you must learn the way of splitting the milk into curds, then how to churn the curds and finally how to heat the butter to get ghee. The sun is always there, even if the clouds are covering it. In the same way, the soul is trying to reach for liberation, even if it is encumbered by sin and desire and attachments. By following the Jain path you can clear the cloud, and learn the method to get the ghee from the milk. Without the Jain dharma you are a soul tormented and you cannot know any lasting happiness. But with a guru to show you the right path, and to teach you the true nature of the soul, all this can be changed.

'By following the Jain dharma, by living a life full of good deeds, you can gradually erase your bad karma. And, if you are lucky, and steadfast in your pursuit of this goal, you can finally achieve *moksha*.



'At the end of two years with the Sangha,' continued Prasannamati Mataji, 'I finally made up my mind that I would take *diksha*. That November they plucked my hair for the first time: it's the first step, like a test of your commitment, because if you can't take the pain of having your hair plucked out you are not going to be ready to take the next step. That day, I performed a fast, and that evening one of the senior *matajis* of the Sangha applied the ash of dried cow dung. This acts as a sort of natural antiseptic if you bleed, as well as stopping the hand from slipping during the plucking.

'I had very beautiful long thick hair, and as I was still very young my guru wanted to cut it with scissors then shave my head with a razor, so as not to inflict such pain on me. But I insisted, and said there was no going back now. I was a very obstinate girl: whatever I wanted to do I did. So they agreed to do what I wished. I think everyone was rather amazed at my stubbornness, and my determination.

‘The whole ritual took nearly four hours, and was very painful. I tried not to, but I couldn’t help crying. I didn’t tell my parents about my decision, as I knew they would try to stop me, but somehow they heard, and came rushing. By the time they arrived, the ceremony was almost over. When they saw me with a bald head, and scars and blood all over my scalp where my hair had once been, my mother screamed, and my father burst into tears. They knew then that I would never turn back from this path. After that, whenever the Sangha would arrive at a village, the maharaj would show me off: “Look, he would say. This one is so young, yet so determined, doing what even the old would hesitate to do.”

‘It was about this time that I met my friend Prayogamati. One day, our Sangha happened to walk into her village, and as her father was a rich merchant, who lived in a very large house, they invited us to stay with them. Prayogamati was the same age as me, fifteen, a beautiful, fragile, sensitive girl, and she came down every day to our room to talk to us. We quickly became very close, talking late into the night. She was fascinated by my life in the Sangha, and I had never met anyone who seemed to understand me the way she did, someone who shared all my beliefs and ideals. She was about to be engaged to the son of a rich diamond merchant, and the match had been arranged for her, but she told me that she was really much more interested in taking *diksha*. She also knew that her family would not allow her to do this.

‘After a week, we left the village, setting off to the next town on foot before dawn. That evening, Prayogamati borrowed some money from her mother, saying she wanted to go to a circus. Instead, she took two outfits from her room, and jumped on a bus. Late that night she found us and asked the maharaj to accept her. Her family realised what had happened, and her father and brothers came and begged her to return, but she refused and our guruji said it was up to her to decide. From that point we were together for twenty years. We took *diksha* together, and travelled together, and ate together, and spent our monsoon *chaturmasa* together. Soon we became very close.

‘Except for the *chaturmasa*, it is forbidden for us to stay long in one place, in case we become attached to it. So most nights we would sleep in a different place and our life together was full of variety. Some nights we would stay in the house of a rich man, sometimes in a school, sometimes a *dharamsala*, sometimes in a cave or in the jungle. Jains regard it as a great honour to have us, and Hindus also come to do *darshan*. So if no Jain house is available, Hindus would always be happy to take us in. We cannot eat food cooked by Hindus, but we can take raw materials from them and cook it ourselves.

‘People think of our life as harsh, and of course in many ways it is. But going into the unknown world and confronting it without a single rupee in our pockets means that differences between rich and poor, educated and illiterate, all vanish, and a common humanity emerges. As wanderers, we monks and nuns are free of shadows from the past. This wandering life, with no material possessions, unlocks our souls. There is a wonderful sense of lightness, living each day as it comes, with no sense of ownership, no weight, no burden. Journey and destination became one, thought and action became one, until it is as if we are moving like a river into complete detachment.’



‘We lived in this manner for a full four years before the time came for Prayogamati and I to take formal *diksha* – much longer than we had hoped, or expected. But both our families said, “Let our other children get married first.” We both agreed to this, as we didn’t want to upset our parents any more than we had already. But we came here to Sravanabelagola and took a vow in front of Bahubali, promising that as soon as the family weddings were over we would take *diksha*. The wedding of my brother was in January of the fourth year, and finally, in March, the day of our *diksha* arrived.

‘Our maharaj and the *matajis* dressed up my friend and me as brides. We wore identical clothes, jewellery and *mehndi* [henna

decorations on the hands]. We even looked alike, so often people confused us. All my childhood, I never wore any jewellery, just a watch and a single gold chain around my neck. But for the *diksha*, we were dressed in jewels and diamonds then taken together in a chariot around thirteen villages near our family *haveli* at Karavali in Udaipur district. Before us went drummers and trumpeters and men clashing cymbals, and as we passed, we would throw rice and money to the crowds. Every day we would give food to the people – sometimes we would feed a whole village, sometimes we would just distribute sweets or dates and jaggery. For a whole month this continued until we were thoroughly sick of all this display. This surprised both of us, because this was a day we had longed for: for three years now we had delayed the ceremony and now it was upon us all we wanted was to get through it, and head off back on the road.

‘But the day of *diksha* itself made it all worthwhile. I really think it was the happiest day of my life. Both our parents came, and all our relatives. It was a huge public event – 20,000 people gathered, and it became impossible to control the crowd.

‘On the final day, the day of the *diksha* ceremony, Prayogamati and I both fasted: no food and not a drop of water passed our lips. We rose very early and offered food instead to our maharaj, and then we left the house and walked to the stage where the ceremony was to be held. For the previous fortnight we had gone everywhere in chariots or on the back of elephants; but now it was back to our own two feet. When we got to the stage we said prayers in praise of the *Tirthankaras*, and then we formally asked permission from the maharaj to take *diksha*. He gave his assent, and amid lots of trumpeting we were led off the stage.

‘Then came the time for saying farewell to our families. We both tied *rakhis* around our brothers’ wrists – a final expression of sisterly love – before saying goodbye to them. After that our relationship of brother and sister was supposed to end – they were to be like strangers to us. Then we said goodbye to our parents; we embraced and wished each other farewell. After this, they were no longer our parents – they were to be just like any other member of

society. We all wept, but I think our parents were also proud of us: to have a monk or a nun in the family is considered a great blessing in our community. And after all, we had left our families for several years by this stage, so it wasn't a great change for them. In their minds, we had taken *diksha* many years before.

'After the farewell, we were led off for the hair-plucking ceremony. This time we had to do it ourselves, which was much harder. After it was finished – it only took half an hour as our hair was already short – we were given a holy bath in a *shamiana* tent. We were both stripped and washed by other *matajis* in a mixture of milk, ghee, turmeric and *atta*, and then in a final bath of water. For us it was like a baptism. When we both came out, we were given robes of white cloth. Our ornaments were taken off, one by one, a symbol of our sacrifice.

'Then we were led back on to the stage, and told our new names. I was no longer Rekha; for the first time in my life I was addressed as Prasannamati Mataji. For the first time my friend became Prayogamati. Then we were both lectured by our guruji. He told us clearly what was expected of us: never again to use a vehicle, to take food only once a day, not to use Western medicine, to abstain from emotion, never to hurt any living creature. He told us we must not react to attacks, must not beg, must not cry, must not complain, must not demand, must not feel superiority, must learn not to be disturbed by illusory things. He told us that we must be the lions that kill the elephant of sexual desire. He told us we must cultivate a revulsion for the world, and a deep desire for release and salvation. And he told us all the different kinds of difficulties we should be prepared to bear: hunger, thirst, cold, heat, mosquitoes. He warned us that none of this would be easy.

'Then he gave us our water pot and peacock fan, the symbol of our commitment to non-violence, and we were led off the stage for the last time. In our new position as *munis*, we were led through crowds of people, all of whom were now asking for our blessing.

'That night we spent on the roof of the house where we were staying. The following morning, we got up before dawn and ate – we had fasted all the previous day. Then without telling anyone,

we slipped away. We looked for the signs that led towards Gujarat, and began to walk.

‘Only then did we really begin our wandering life as fully ordained nuns.’



‘Everyone had warned us about the difficulty of this life,’ said Prasannamati Mataji. ‘But in reality, we had left everything willingly, so did not miss the world we had left behind. Not at all. It is the same as when a girl gets married and she has to give up her childhood and her parents’ home: if she does it in exchange for something she really wants, it is not a sad time, but instead a very joyful one. Certainly, for both Prayogamati and me, it was a very happy period in our lives, perhaps the happiest. Every day we would walk and discover somewhere new.

‘Walking is very important to us Jains. The Buddha was enlightened while sitting under a tree, but our great *Tirthankara*, Mahavira, was enlightened while walking. We believe that walking is an important part of our *tapasya*. We don’t use cars or any vehicles, partly because travelling so fast can kill so many living creatures, but partly also because we have two legs and travelling on foot is the right speed for human beings. Walking sorts out your problems and anxieties, and calms your worries. Living from day to day, from inspiration to inspiration, much of what I have learned as a Jain has come from wandering. Sometimes, even my dreams are of walking.

‘Our guru had taught us how to walk as Jains. While walking, as well as meditating on the earth and the scriptures, and thinking of the purpose of our lives, we were taught to concentrate on not touching or crushing any living creature. You have to be aware of every single step, and learn to look four steps ahead. If a single ant is in your path you should be ready to jump or step aside. For the same reason, we must avoid standing on green plants, dew, mud, clay or cobwebs – who knows what life forms may be there?

‘Not hurting any sentient being and protecting the dharma is really the heart and soul of the dharma. We believe there is a little of *paramatma* – the spirit of God – in all living creatures, even those which are too small to see. So much of our discipline is about this: only drinking filtered water, only eating in daylight so we can really see what we are eating. At the end of each walk we do a special ritual to apologise for any creatures we have inadvertently hurt.

‘But it was while walking that Prayogamati began to realise that her health was failing. Because she had difficulty in keeping up with me, we noticed that there was something wrong with her joints. She began to have real difficulty in walking, and even more so in sitting or squatting.

‘For ten years her condition got worse: by the end, it pained her to move at all, and she had difficulty moving or sitting. Then one afternoon she was studying the scriptures in a monastery in southern Karnataka when she began coughing. Her cough had become worse and worse, and she had begun to make this deep retching noise. But this time when she took her hand away from her mouth she found it was covered in blood. After that, there was nothing more for a week, but then she began coughing up blood very regularly. Sometimes, it was a small amount – just enough to make her mouth red – at other times she would cough up enough to fill a small teacup or even a bowl.

‘I guessed immediately that it was TB, and got special permission from our guruji to let her see a doctor. Western medicine is forbidden to us, as so much of it is made by using dead animals, or by torturing animals during the testing process. But given the seriousness of the situation, our guruji agreed to let a Western doctor look at her, though he insisted that only herbal medicine could be given to her and only at the time of her daily meal.

‘Prayogamati remained very calm, and for a long time she hoped that she might still recover her health. Even when it became clear that this was something quite serious, she remained composed and peaceful. I think it was always me that was more worried. She kept assuring me that she was feeling better already and that it was nothing serious; but in reality you didn’t have to be a doctor to see that her health was rapidly deteriorating.



‘Her digestive system became affected, the bloody coughing continued, and after a while she started showing blood when she went for her ablutions too. Eventually I got permission to take her to a hospital where she had an MRI scan and a full blood test. They diagnosed her problem as Cox’s Syndrome – advanced TB of the digestive system. They said that her haemoglobin was very reduced, and her chances were not good. One doctor said that if we had come earlier they could have helped, but we had left it much too late.

‘That same day Prayogamati decided to embrace *sallekhana*. She said she would prefer to give up her body rather than have it taken from her. She said she wanted to die voluntarily, facing it squarely and embracing it, rather than have death ambush her and take her away by force. She was determined to be the victor, not the victim. I tried to argue with her, but like me, once she took a decision it was almost impossible to get her to change her mind. Despite her pain and her illness, she set out that day to walk a hundred kilometres to see our guru, who was then in Indore, staying at the Shantinath Jain temple.

‘We got there after a terrible week in which Prayogamati suffered very badly: it was winter – late December – and bitterly cold. But she refused to give up and when she got to Indore she asked our guruji’s permission to begin the process of embracing *sallekhana*. He asked Prayogamati if she was sure, and she said yes. When he learned that she would anyway probably not have very long to live, he gave his assent.

‘Throughout 2004, Prayogamati began gradually reducing her food. One by one, she gave up all the vegetables she used to eat. She began eating nothing at all on several days of the week. For eighteen months she ate less and less. Normally *sallekhana* is very peaceful but for Prayogamati, because of her illness, her end was full of pain.

‘My job was to feed her, and look after her and read the prescribed texts and mantras. I was also there to talk to her and give her courage and companionship. I stayed with her twenty-four hours a day, and took the leadership of her *samadhi*. Throughout she

tolerated everything, all the pain and discomfort, and stayed completely calm – such calmness you can hardly imagine! I always enjoyed her company, and always learned from her, but never more than towards the end. She showed how it is possible to keep quiet and smilingly show acceptance no matter how much you are suffering. Such a person will not be born again.

‘By September 2005 she was bedridden, and I remained continually by her side for three months, until the beginning of December. By this stage she was eating only five things: pomegranate juice, milk, rice, mung dal and sugar. Every day she would eat a little less. In the last weeks she was given protein injections by a Jain doctor, but she was very weak. She had to summon all her strength to perform the observations that have to be followed during *sallekhana*. Despite not eating, and hardly drinking, her body had somehow swelled up because of the disease, and she continued to lose a lot of blood every time she performed her ablutions. At the end, she was also running a terrible fever of 105 degrees, and was covered in sweat. In the afternoon she would feel cold; in the evening she would burn. I asked the doctors, what is the reason for this? They did some tests and said that she had caught malaria as well. They gave her some injections, but it didn’t really help.

‘During these last days our guruji was not there – he had gone away for a function. So for the last days I was the only person she knew in that temple, though many *munis* were there to sing and chant and support her.

‘The next day the fever was still there. Again the doctor came, and she asked for some food, but she could not stand – in fact she could not even open her mouth. He advised her to drink half a glass of milk, and this she took. For some reason she wanted to clean her teeth, but she didn’t have the strength, and the doctor advised her to rest. She was very frustrated by this.

‘Just after 1.30 p.m. I went to take my food, and was just about to start eating when Prayogamati cried out loudly. I rushed to look after her – it was clear her condition was not good at all. There was no one around except a boy at the gate, so I sent

him off for the doctor. When I came back, I held her hand and she whispered that she wanted to stop all remaining food. Her suffering was too much for her now. She said that for her death was as welcome as life, that there was a time to live and a time to die. “Now,” she said, “the time has come for me to be liberated from this body.”

‘By that time, our guruji had returned, and he gathered the community. By early afternoon all the gurus and *matajis* were there guiding her and sitting together around the bed. Others came to touch her feet. The room was full of people, and so was the veranda outside. Everyone was chanting the *namokara* mantra, singing *bhajans* and *kirtans* and reading the Jain texts which explain the nature of the soul. Everyone was there to support Prayogamati, to give her courage as she began to slip away.

‘Around 4 p.m., the doctor said he thought she was about to die, but she held on until 9 p.m. It was very peaceful in the end. It was dark by then, and the lamps were all lit around the room. Her breathing had been very difficult that day, but towards the end it became easier. I held her hand, the monks chanted and her eyes closed. For a while, even I didn’t know she had gone. She just slipped away.

‘When I realised she had left, I wept bitterly. We are not supposed to do this, and our guruji frowned at me. But I couldn’t help myself. I had followed all the steps correctly until she passed away, but then everything I had bottled up came pouring out. Her body was still there, but she wasn’t in it. It was no longer her.

‘The next day, 15 December, she was cremated. They burned her at 4 p.m. All the devotees in Indore came: over 2,000 people. It was a Sunday. The following morning, at dawn, I got up and headed off. There was no reason to stay.

‘It was the first time as a nun that I had ever walked anywhere alone.’



The following day, after she had finished her breakfast, I went to say goodbye to Prasannamati Mataji.

'Her time was fixed,' she said quickly reverting to the subject of Prayogamati, like a pigeon returning to its coop. 'She passed on. She's no longer here. I have to accept that reality. All things decay and disappear in time.'

Mataji fell silent, apparently lost in thought. There was a long pause. 'Now my friend has gone,' she said eventually, 'it is easier for me to go too.'

'What do you mean?'

'I have seen over forty *sallekhanas*,' she said. 'But after Prayogamati's, I realised it was time I should set out to that end as well.'

'You mean you are thinking of following . . .?'

'I am on the path already,' said Mataji. 'I have started cutting down the food I eat. I have given up milk or curds, salt and sugar, guava and papaya, leafy vegetables and ladies' fingers. Each month I give up something new. All I want to do now is to visit a few more holy places before I go.'

'But why?' I asked. 'You are not ill like she was. Isn't it an absurd waste of a life? You're only thirty-eight.'

'I told you before,' she said. '*Sallekhana* is the aim of all Jain *munis*. It is the last renouncement. First you give up your home, then your possessions. Finally you give up your body.'

'You make it sound very simple.'

'When you begin to understand the nature of reality, it is very simple. It is a good way – the very best way – to breathe your last, and leave the body. It is no more than leaving one house to enter another.'

'Do you think you will meet her in another life?' I said. 'Is that it?'

'It is uncertain,' said Mataji. 'Our scriptures are full of people who meet old friends and husbands and wives and teachers from previous lives. But no one can control these things.'

Again Mataji paused, and looked out of the window. 'Though we both may have many lives ahead of us, in many worlds,' she

said, 'who knows whether we will meet again? And if we do meet, in our new bodies, who is to say that we will recognise each other?'

She looked at me sadly as I got up to go and said simply. 'These things are not in our hands.'