Jain Death Care and Funeral Guidebook

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Jain Death Care Guidebook Overview

As in the case of all religions and belief systems, death holds a great deal of significance in Jainism and is practiced diversely in the United States. Ways to care for and honor the dead depend on family traditions, individual religious beliefs, and situational circumstances. It is important that those who are practicing Jain death care feel empowered to hold a funeral that reflects the wishes of the deceased and the family. Death care is highly personal and individualistic within Jainism, and the diversity of the traditions are apparent in community death practices. It can be helpful to consult a Jain priest or religious chaplain who can help connect those close to death and their families to resources for Jains experiencing loss. A religious professional or funeral director can also help the family determine what kinds of personal elements they would like to include or not include in a funeral.

This guide is intended to be an overview of potential options and resources to help Jains prepare for death, care for the body, plan a funeral, and process their grief and mourning. It is not comprehensive and is not intended to be followed exactly. Please feel free to take any parts that feel meaningful and helpful and leave behind those that do not serve you. The process of death can be an overwhelming and difficult time, and this guide is one resource intended to help people navigate it.

For more information on how to hold an independent or home funeral, please visit the Home Funeral Alliance at Home Funeral Alliance.

Jainism and Beliefs Surrounding Death

The word Jain means “one who conquers the evil within one’s self”. Jainism centers the values of non-violence, unattachment, and humility in their religious belief system. Similarly to Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism, Jainism teaches that death is a natural step in the cycle of life. Jains believe in reincarnation which follows the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Therefore, death is not seen as an end, but as a transition period into a different life. The kind of life someone will be reborn into is determined by the karmic merit accrued in one’s previous life. Jains don’t believe in an ultimate creator God or supreme divinity, but rather, they believe that the most noble pursuit is to live a moral life which respects all living beings. Jains hope to eventually be liberated from the cycle of life by living rightly and learning to be a more compassionate being. This will liberate them from the cycle of reincarnation and allow them to attain moksha - the freedom of the soul from cycles of rebirth.

Jains, like Hindus, believe that the soul is called atman which translates to “one’s true self”. This idea of self is different from the body or physical self as well as the ego and mind. Atman is what continues on to be reincarnated to the next life and will eventually be liberated.

Jains often take vows of non-violence which prohibit them from causing any harm to any living being. This includes becoming vegan or vegetarian as not to consume animal products. Sometimes, this vow includes refraining from consuming root vegetables which destroy the ecosystem of the soil they are grown in when they are pulled out of the ground and harvested. Jains are typically not allowed to drink alcohol and often commit to a life of celibacy or sexual abstinence. Many of these principles of non-violence and sustainability are incorporated into Jain funerals and deathcare.

Resources For Jain Theology on Death:

- Jainism Introduction | Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology
- Jainism | Definition, Beliefs, History, Literature, & Facts | Britannica
- Why Don’t Jains Eat Root Vegetables? - Arihanta Institute

Preparing For Death

The religious beliefs of Jainism can help inform best practices for preparing them for the transition to death. When Jains are facing death, they typically use it as an opportunity for spiritual reflection. They may do this by reciting certain prayers, mantras, or studying specific teachings presented in scripture. Jains may wish to refrain from taking medications that contain animal products, and they might request to be cared for by a doctor of the same gender, if possible. It is common for Jains to wish to be surrounded by family and friends as they near death. Contacting a religious chaplain or Jain priest can be helpful during this time. They will be able to support the dying person and their family in performing any specific rituals and ceremonies they would like. The dying person may also reflect on their lifetime and express wishes and hopes for their next life. Spending time with a person who is dying and providing comfort, empathy, and a listening ear are good ways to support them through the transition.

Some very devout Jains will wish to take part in a fasting ritual at the end of their lives. The vow is called sallekhanā, and is taken in order to free the soul from the attachments that tether it to the cycle of reincarnation. A person who takes this vow does not eat or drink anything until death. If a dying person wishes to take part in this ritual, a trusted authority in the Jain community should be contacted to help facilitate the sallekhanā.

Resources on How to Prepare for the Death of a Jain and Provide Spiritual Comfort:

- Surviving Images: Visualizing the Jain Fast Until Death | Center for the Study of World Religions
- Care for Jain Patients
- Jain Funeral Procedures Salgia Final

Caring for the Body

Following the Death

When caring for Jains who have died, families and religious professionals may perform rituals that are rooted in the qualities of simplicity, respect, and brevity. After the moment of death, a close family member may wish to close the eyes and mouth of the deceased. Jain funeral rites take place promptly after the death, so the body typically remains in the home until then.

Vidhi services are rituals that are performed throughout the entire deathcare process in Jainism and Hinduism. They begin after death, and don't conclude until the mourning period has ended. The rituals include certain prayers, body preparation and anointing, and funeral proceedings.

The family might perform a ritual cleansing of the body and anoint it with sandalwood powder and ghee on the forehead, hands, and feet. The cleansing is usually done by members of the same sex as the deceased and is done with the utmost care. After the cleaning, the body is then either dressed in nice clothes (a modern tradition) or wrapped in a white sheet called a kafan to signify purity (traditional method). A strand of sandalwood mala beads are usually laid around the body as well. Someone may anoint the forehead of the deceased with essential oils and sandalwood perfume. It is important that no fresh flowers are used to decorate the body, as it violates the principles of harming living things.

Immediately after death there is a prarthana sabha, which is a period of time that the family can come to pay their respects to the body and offer their condolences to the family. During the prarthana sabha, family members might read devotional prayers and recite relevant scripture.

The body is typically kept at the family home before the funeral, as Jainism encourages cremations to happen within 48 hours of the death. Because Jain funerals typically happen between 24-48 hours after the death, embalming is not necessary. For general information about how to care for the body in a private residence consult the Home Funeral Alliance Guidebook which can be accessed at Home Funeral Alliance.

Jain Cremations

Because of the environmental implications and a desire for simplicity, cremation is the preferred choice for Jains. The body holds no significance in the religion other than to house the soul, and Jains believe that the soul departs from the body immediately upon death. Part of Vidhi services dictate that ashes should be spread somewhere in a flowing body of water like a river. Cremations are prompt and usually take place immediately following the funeral service.

Environmentally Friendly Disposition

Because Jains are not usually embalmed, they are able to choose a variety of environmentally friendly disposition options. Options like human compositing and water cremation allow the body of the deceased to be converted into nutrient rich fertilizer. The fertilizer can then be used to grow trees, plants, and gardens or donated to conservation projects. Organ donation and the donation of a body to science are also meaningful ways for Jains to give to humanist causes. For more information on how to hold Jain funerals that are environmentally friendly, consult the resources below on human composing and water cremation. Combining eco-friendly disposition practices with the Jain faith can be a meaningful way to honor a person who was fond of the environment and nature.

Resources on Body Care and Disposition Practices:

- Jain: Final Rites
- Organising a Jain funeral – Heena Modi
- Honouring The Departed: A Guide To Funeral Vidhi Services
- Human Composting and Water Cremation
    - Our Model | Recompose
    - Human Composting: How it Works and Where It's Legal
    - Alkaline Hydrolysis - Cremation Association of North America (CANA)
    - Water Cremation (Aquamation): The Complete Guide to Alkaline Hydrolysis - US Funerals Online

Jain Funerals

Funeral Arrangements

Jain funeral services are typically short and simple, keeping in mind the values of impermanence and humility. When starting to plan a funeral, it may be helpful to reach out to the deceased's religious community for support. Contacting a Jain priest or religious chaplain might be helpful in determining what kind of funeral best suits their needs.

On the day of the funeral, the body will be transported in a casket to the location of the funeral. Unless there are specific requests otherwise, the casket is usually left open during the funeral service so guests might pay their respects. Sometimes, a container of rice is kept on a table near the casket so mourners can sprinkle a handful of it on the body as a sign of respect. Also on the table, a special lamp called a deevo is lit. The wick is dipped in ghee to symbolize divine purity. The lamp burns until the disposition occurs. A photograph of the person may also be placed on the table.

Funeral Service Customs

During the service, a series of stavans are recited. Stavans are spiritual hymns and songs that are important pillars in the liturgical tradition of Jainism. Oftentimes, particular stavans are selected for a funeral service because of their content which is relevant to the mournful circumstances. Other prayers and passages from Jain scripture which resonate with the family of the deceased may also be read. Those who were close to the deceased will read eulogies or other statements that express their affection and grief for the person who has died. At the end of the funeral, the navkar mantra is recited by all of the mourners, and they are given a final opportunity to pay their respects to the body. The ceremony is a final chance to honor the deceased and wish them a peaceful transition after death.

Funeral Attire

It is inappropriate to send flowers to a Jain funeral because they are seen as violating the Jain principle of non-harm. There will also not be any natural flowers displayed at the service. Unless the family states otherwise, guests can expect to

dress modestly in dark clothing or in traditional white Jain attire. No head covering is typically required for funeral attire.

Resources on Jain Funerals:

- Jain Funeral Procedures Salgia Final
- Jain Cultural Services
- Jain: Final Rites

Jain Mourning Period and Grief

Different mourning practices may be more suitable than others for different families mourning the loss of a Jain. Some may want to spend time surrounded by family and loved ones while others might prefer private mediation and spiritual reflection. While there is no right or wrong way for Jains to mourn their dead, Jainism has some traditions that are intended to support the mourners in their time of grief.

Sometimes after the funeral, a family will wish to host a traditional funerary meal called Chaas Pivanu. The family of the deceased will arrange this meal either at a restaurant or have it catered in a different location (outside, at the family home, etc.). The meal will likely be vegan and will also not have root vegetables in it. At Chaas Pivanu, people might read more selections from scripture and offer reflections and other significant memories. It is a time for the family and friends to mourn together as a community and support each other in their time of grief.

A typical Jain mourning period lasts for thirteen days. During this time, mourners may refrain from cooking, cleaning, and going to work to allow themselves time to grieve their loss. It is a kind gesture to support the family during this time by offering emotional support, helping with daily tasks of living, and providing comfort. On the thirteenth day, a prayer service called Therhavin is held. This marks the official end of the Jain mourning period.

On the first anniversary of the death, the family might hold a celebration in which they gather the community to pray, eat, and celebrate the life of their loved one. To express condolences for the family, phone calls and visits are appropriate. Empathic gestures, small acts of kindness, and a willingness to listen are all ways in which people can express support for a grieving family.

Resources on Jain Grieving and Mourning:

- The Significance of the 13-Day Mourning Period: What Friends Need to Know
- Hinduism: Periods of Mourning | eCondolence.com
- Honouring The Departed: A Guide To Funeral Vidhi Services

Complete List of Online Resources

National Home Funeral Alliance

- Home Funeral Alliance
- State Laws:
    - Home Funeral Alliance State Laws

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- Jainism | Definition, Beliefs, History, Literature, & Facts | Britannica
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    - Our Model | Recompose
    - Human Composting: How it Works and Where It's Legal
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