



Guest Lecture

## Natural versus Unnatural Death Debates: The Case of Sallekhanā and VSED Compared

Prof. Claire Maes

(Asian Orient Institute, Indology Department, University of Tübingen)

Mon., 16<sup>th</sup> Jan.

16:15-17:45 Hrs.

Voßstr. 2,  
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Jains have a wide constellation of different types and lengths of fasts. Within this constellation, *sallekhanā*, or the soteriological practice of fasting to death, is the *summum bonum*. While the rite went uncontested for over two millennia, in recent years it became a matter of the courts. Declaring death by *sallekhanā* as an unnatural death, the Rajasthan High Court criminalized the practice as illegal on 10 August 2015. Soon after the Supreme Court of India stayed the ban on *sallekhanā*. While the final ruling is still pending, the Rajasthan Court case brought to the foreground pertinent questions around fasting and the ethics of dying. Is, for instance, *sallekhanā* a form of suicide? Or also, does the support of a *sallekhanā*-aspirant constitute assisted suicide?

In this lecture, I aim to shed new light on the ethical question of *sallekhanā* and suicide by bringing the practice into conversation with the practice of 'Voluntarily Stopping of Eating and Drinking' (VSED), an end-of-life option, available in various countries for competent adults, to hasten the end of life by consciously choosing to not eat and drink.



**Claire Maes** studied Indian Languages and Cultures at Ghent University, Belgium, and Indian Philosophy at the University of Mysore in India. She earned her Ph.D. degree in 2015 from Ghent University with a dissertation that examines the influence of Jain thought and practice on the Buddhist monastic community in early India. Soon after, she joined the University of Texas at Austin where she worked for several years at the Asian Studies Department, first as a postdoctoral fellow of The Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation Program in Buddhist Studies, and subsequently as a Sanskrit lecturer. Since September 2021, she is an assistant professor at the Department of Indology at the University of Tübingen, Germany. Her principal research topics are the Jain understandings of what constitutes a good death and the development of the Buddhist monastic community in ancient India. In addition, given the importance of preserving the history of the COVID-19 pandemic, she also analyses the effects of the pandemic on the religious practices and the public discourse of some Jains.