

Navpada Āyambila Oli – The Penance for Self-Cultivation

By Parveen Jain

The followers of the Jain tradition observe Navpada Āyambila Oli, also called Navpada Oli in short, two times every year. Each observation lasts for nine days. The dates are based on the Jain lunisolar calendar, called Vīra Nirvāṇa Saṁvat calendar. The first Navpada Oli is in the Jain calendar month of Caitra (Gregorian March-April), and the second Navpada Oli is in the Jain calendar month of Āśvina (Gregorian September–October), each starting on the seventh day of the lunar calendar month and ending on the fifteenth day – the full moon day.

The purpose of observing Navpada Oli, like most other Jain festivities, is to eradicate any spiritual maladies one might have collected in the previous six months. These specific times were historically chosen because generally, the associated seasons were considered to be the periods where one is most prone to be afflicted by behavioral maladies related to personal conduct. The spiritual maladies comprise those arising from the conduct of hurtful acts against others, overindulgence in materialistic activities, tendencies such as the use of inappropriate speech, carelessness in treating other living beings, mental vicissitudes, and so on – all of which are deviations from the basic Jain teachings.



The practice of Navpada Oli observation consists of reflecting on and, by worshipping, showing reverence to Navpada – the nine (*nava*) most revered entities (*padas*) for the Jains (Ācārya Sūshīlasūri 1985). The nine reverent and aspirational entities are: the five most esteemed spiritual beings (*arihanta*, *siddha*, *ācārya*, *upādhyāya* and *sādhu*), the three most important virtuosities (*samyag-darśana*, *samyag-jñāna* and *samyag-cāritra*), and one most effective spiritual practice (penance or *tapas*).

The abovementioned nine revered entities are worshipped over a nine-day period – one each day.

Each of the revered entities (*padas*) have corresponding virtuous characteristics ranging in numbers from eight to seventy. The practitioners recite, venerate and contemplate over those virtuous characteristics, one-by-one, each day, corresponding to the *pada* being venerated that day, with the objective of cultivating their own lives with the same virtuous characteristics. The recitation and veneration (worshipping) could be in solitude, silently in mind, or by chanting and practicing in a group depending on individual and group desires.

On days one to five, the first five *padas*, one each day, are observed for reflecting on and worshipping the five most revered entities known as *pāñca-parmeṣṭhī* in the Jain tradition:

1. *Arihantas*: Enlightened souls (*jīvas*) who are still in living body after having attained omniscience (supreme wisdom and clairvoyance) by destroying all of the evil karmas that cause karmic impurities (Jain 2019, 207)—knowledge-inhibiting (*jñānāvaraṇīya*), perception-inhibiting (*darśanāvaraṇīya*), delusion-causing (*mohanīya*) and hinderance-causing (*antarāya*) karmas—by eliminating the delusional passions of anger, ego, greed and deceit with personal restraint, penance and austerities.

There are twelve virtuous characteristics (*pada guṇas*) associated with *arihantas* that the worshippers contemplate on.

2. *Siddhas*: Supreme liberated soul – the enlightened souls (*jīvas*) who have achieved omniscience and left their body to attain the ultimate liberation, that occurs after culmination of the lifespans of the *arihantas*.

There are eight virtuous characteristics (*pada guṇas*) associated with *siddhas* that the worshippers contemplate on.

3. *Ācāryas*: Highest level of learned mendicants – preceptors – who have become leaders of their respective mendicant clans and spiritual communities.

There are thirty-six virtuous characteristics (*pada guṇas*) associated with *ācāryas* that the worshippers contemplate on.

4. *Upādhyāyas*: Learned mendicants of spiritual knowledge who have become teachers of their respective mendicant clans.

There are twenty-five virtuous characteristics (*pada guṇas*) associated with *upādhyāyas* that the worshippers contemplate on.

5. *Sādhus*: Monks and nuns – the male and female ascetics.

There are twenty-seven virtuous characteristics (*pada guṇas*) associated with *sādhus* that the worshippers contemplate on.

On days six to eight, the next three *padas*, one each day, are observed for reflecting on and showing reverence to the three most important virtuosities known as the Three Jewels of Jain Dharma. This troika of virtuosities is essential to making any progress towards the ultimate objective of the Jain perseverance – *mokṣa* or the ultimate salvation.

6. *Samyag-darśana*: Enlightened (*samyag*) perception (*darśana*) – this is the most fundamental virtuosity in Jain tradition, and it involves delusion-free understanding of the soul-body relationship, and adoption of the same in one’s lifestyle.

There are sixty-seven virtuous characteristics (*pada guṇas*) associated with *samyag-darśana* that the worshippers contemplate on.

7. *Samyag-jñāna*: Enlightened (*samyag*) knowledge (*jñāna*) – correct, unabridged and unbounded understanding of unequivocally everything in the universe and beyond.

There are fifty-one virtuous characteristics (*pada guṇas*) associated with *samyag-jñāna* that the worshippers contemplate on.

8. *Samyag-cāritra*: Enlightened (*samyag*) conduct (*cāritra*) that is guided by the five basic vows of nonviolence, non-stealing, truthfulness, non-possessiveness, and respectable living with carnal restraint, that is instilled with personality attributes of friendship (*maitrī*), compassion (*karuṇā*), elation (*pramoda*) and equanimity (*madhyastha*) – all manifesting in the form of righteous living.

There are seventy virtuous characteristics (*pada guṇas*) associated with *samyag-cāritra* that the worshippers contemplate on.

On the ninth day, the final *pada* is observed by reflecting on and showing reverence to *tapas* – the most effective and essential spiritual exercise in Jain dharma.

9. *Tapas* (penance or austerity): *Tapas* is extremely important in Jain Dharma for developing sensory restraint and mental control. It is one of the most benevolent spiritual practices for self-cultivation and spiritual advancement.

There are fifty virtuous characteristics (*pada guṇas*) associated with *tapas* that the worshippers contemplate on.

Āyambila: One of the most important pursuits in Jain perseverance consists of penance and austerity for subduing one's desires and developing restraint over one's behavioral tendencies by controlling the sensory and mental wanderings. This is practiced for molding one's conduct toward righteousness. Among the five senses of touch, taste, smell, sight and hearing, the sense of taste is considered to be one of the hardest ones to restraint. That is why, the penance of fasting has always been an important practice among Jains. A form of fasting, known as *āyambila*, is fervidly practiced during Navapada Oli. *Āyambila* is an observance of penance entailing consumption of food only one time – around the regular lunch time – during a day (twenty-four hours period) without any interest in how it tastes or smells. The food is prepared with no vegetables or fruit, no dairy products, and no fats – it primarily consists of grains and/or lentils cooked with minimum amount of just a couple of spices which are used from medicinal considerations and not for the taste. In general, the practitioners, on their own will, without any external coercion, consume just enough food to live through the day while paying little attention to their appetite and none to their pallet. Generally, their consumption is well below their normal routine. The practitioners in older days, and those who are strict adherents in the present day, prepare the food in the ways that require minimum preparation efforts and involve minimum harm to any living beings such as insects.



Thus, one can see that Navpada Āyambila Oli cultivates positive and vibrant emotions through remembrance and worshipping of the most important and revered entities of Jain dharma – *arihanta*, *siddha*, *ācārya*, *upādhyāya* and *sādhu*. At the same time, the observance inspires the practitioners towards righteousness by rekindling the values associated with the troika of virtuosities of *samyag-darśana*, *samyag-jñāna* and *samyag-cāritra* – the

Three Jewels of Jain Dharma. Finally, the observance enlightens the practitioner about the value of penance and austerities (*tapas*), and empowers them to realistically experience its value by actually conducting the penance of *āyambila*.

All in all, for Jains, Navpada Āyambila Oli is an extremely rewarding and stimulating spiritual exercise. It is a prideful event for the practitioner's family and other community members. Many times, the practitioners are earnestly felicitated with fanfare for their efforts, because in Jain Dharma, one earns good karma with earnest felicitation (*anumodanā*) of those who are involved in spiritual perseverance and other good deeds. Thus, Navpada Āyambila Oli is inspirational not only for the practitioners themselves, but also for those around them.

Bibliography

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