

Shraman Bhagavan Mahavira and Jainism

By: Dr. Ramanlal C. Shah

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Jainism

Jainism is one of the greatest and the oldest religions of the world, though it is not known much outside India. Even in India, compared to the total population of India, Jainism at present is followed by a minority of the Indian population amounting to about four million people. Yet Jainism is not unknown to the scholars of the world in the field of religion and philosophy, because of its highest noble religious principles.

Though followed by relatively less people in the world, Jainism is highly respected by all those non Jainas who have studied Jainism or who have come into contact with the true followers of Jainism. There are instances of non Jainas in the world who have most willingly either adopted Jainism or have accepted and put into practice the principles of Jainism. Though a religion of a small minority, Jainism is not the religion of a particular race, caste or community. People from all the four classified communities of ancient India; Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra have followed Jainism. In the principles of Jainism, there is nothing which would debar a person of any particular nation, race, caste, community, creed, etc., from following Jainism. Hence Jainism is a Universal Religion.

The followers of Jainism are called Jainas. The word "Jaina" is derived from the Sanskrit word "Jina." One who follows and worships Jina is called a Jaina. Etymologically "Jina" means the conqueror or the victorious. Those who have conquered all their passions and have attained perfect liberation of their soul from the cycle of birth and death are called "Jina."

A "Jina" whose spirituality leads and guides his followers is called "Tirthankara." According to Jainism the time is cyclic. One cycle of time, consisting of six parts of ascendance and six parts of descendance, has more than millions of million years, and in one such ascendance or descendance of cycle, there are twenty four such Tirthankaras. In the present cycle of time, the first Tirthankara is Bhagavan Rishabhadeva or Adinatha and the last Tirthankara is Bhagavan Mahavira.

The Jaina Concept Of Soul

In order to understand fully the Jaina concept of the soul and the process of attaining emancipation of the soul from the cycle of birth and death, i.e., Moksha, it is essential to know the form and nature of nine elements, viz., Jiva, Ajiva, Punya, Papa, Asrava, Samvara, Nirjara, Bandha and Moksha, which are explained in much detail in the Jaina scriptures.

According to Jainism, the universe is composed of six substances, viz., Jiva (the Conscious), Pudgala (Matter), Dharma (which helps motion), Adharma (which helps to rest), Kala (Time) and Akasha (Space). Of these six substances, Pudgala, Dharma, Adharma, Kaia and Akasha are grouped under Ajiva, the unconscious. Thus, the universe is composed of two main substances, Jiva and Aiiva.

Of all the substances, Jiva is the most powerful substance. It is consciousness which is the essence of the soul. Souls are of two classes: Emancipated (Mukta) and Embodied or Worldly (Baddha or Samsarin).

Jainism believes that there is life not only on this earth, but also on other planets and even beyond the solar system, i.e., in the whole universe. The Jaina concept of the Cosmos is given in detail in the Jaina scriptures.

Jainism believes that the universe is without a beginning and without an end. The universe has always existed and will exist forever. There is nothing but infinity, both in the past and in the future. However, the universe is continuously undergoing countless changes. These changes are effected by the powers of the six substances, but in essence there is permanence in these changes, because the substances have three vital characteristics, viz.

Utpada (Origination)

Vyaya (Decay)

Dhrauavya (Permanence)

Jainism believes in plurality of soul, i.e., every living being has a soul. Not only human beings and animals, even trees, plants, bacteria and microscopic viruses have souls. There is life even in mud, water, air, fire and light, which we cannot see with the naked eye or with the most powerful microscope. Jainism has classified 8.4 million different species of life in the universe.

All living beings, whether big or small, has a soul. All souls are equal. The soul is independent, eternal, immortal and invisible. It cannot be cut, it cannot be burnt, it cannot be melted, and it cannot be dried up. At the end of life the body dies, but not the soul. The soul transmigrates to another life. It moves from life to life and expands or contracts according to the size of the body of the living being. The soul thus keeps on transmigrating from life to life, unless and until it liberates itself from the cycle of birth and death. When it attains liberation or salvation, i.e., Moksha or Nirvana, it has never to enter again into the cycle of birth and death. In order to achieve this highest goal of Moksha, Jainism explains the Law of Karma and shows the Path of Moksha.

The Law Of Karma

The world is full of joy and sorrow. Some people are happy and some are unhappy all throughout their life. Some people are happy or unhappy for some time. A child is born without eyes and ears, A man saves his life miraculously in a plane crash. A saint is murdered. A murderer enjoys all his life without being detected. When we ponder over all such and so many other incidents happening around us, we are puzzled. We ask ourselves, "Is there justice in this world? If there is, why should such things happen in this world? Is not God cruel and unjust? Is there any rule or law which decides all these things?" To this Jainism answers, "Yes. There is a law which decides and explains all these things. It is the Law of Karma (i.e. The Law of Deeds or Actions)."

According to Jainism, the Law of Karma leads us to believe in the theory of rebirth, which explains all that is inexplicable about such incidents.

With this Law of Karma, Jainism explains why there are joys and sorrows, happiness and unhappiness, prosperity and adversity, equalities and inequalities in the world; why one person is

rich and the other is poor; why one is intelligent and the other is dull; why two persons do not have similar face, figure, voice, fingerprints, etc.

According to Jainism there are eight types of Karma and whatever happens to any living being at any time is due to the nature and intensity of the relevant Karma, either as result of an old Karma of the previous or the present birth or is due to a new Karma which is being produced. These eight types of Karma are

1. Jnanavaraniya (Regarding Knowledge)
2. Darshanavaraniya (Regarding Faith)
3. Vedaniya (Regarding Experiences)
4. Mohaniya (Regarding Attachment)
5. Aayu (Regarding type of Life and Age)
6. Nama (Regarding different physical and other attributes)
7. Gotra (Regarding Family)
8. Antaraya (Regarding obstacles in different activities of life).

Of all these Karmas, it is most difficult to conquer the Karma of attachment because of anger, ego, infatuation, greed etc. When the body dies the soul transmigrates to another life with the remaining Karma.

Jainism believes that the soul is an independent and the most powerful substance and therefore the soul itself can liberate itself from the bondage of Karma. This could be done by adopting the right path of liberation or the path of Moksha.

The Path Of Moksha

Right Knowledge, Right Faith, and Right Conduct are the three most essentials for attaining Moksha, liberation.

In order to acquire these, one must take the five great vows:

1. Ahimsa (Non injury)
2. Satya (Truth)
3. Asteya (Non stealing)
4. Brahmacharya (Celibacy)
5. Aparigraha (Non acquisition)

Among these five vows "Ahimsa" is the cardinal principle of Jainism and hence it is called the highest religious principle or the cornerstone of Jainism.

Ahimsa (Non Injury)

Bhagavan Mahavira has said that all living beings desire life and not death. Therefore no one has a right to take away life of any other being. Therefore killing of life is the greatest sin. There are people who believe in not killing human beings, but they do not mind animals being killed. According to Jainism, killing of animals is also a great sin. Jainism goes still further and says that there is life in trees and plants, and there is life in air, water, mold etc., and all living beings have an equal right to exist. Therefore we should not kill life of even lower or lowest state. Life is dearer to everyone and therefore we must have respect for life. Not only "Live and let Live" but "Live and help others in living" should be our principle. Just as a head of the family looks after the welfare of the family members, a human being, who enjoys the highest place in the evolution of life, should look after the welfare of the other lower living beings.

Jainism further says that sometimes you may not kill a living being, but may speak something which may hurt the feelings. Sometimes you may not kill a living being, but you may think of killing it. Therefore you also commit sin when you speak hurting words or the moment you start thinking of killing some life. Hence, according to Jainism, the sin is committed not only by action, but by speech and by thought also, which again is threefold. i.e.,

1. you may commit sin yourself or
2. you may ask someone to commit sin on your behalf or
3. you may support or praise the sin committed by someone.

Hence one should refrain from committing this nine fold sin.

The universe is full of living beings, big and small, and therefore it is impossible to exist without killing or injuring some of the smallest living beings. Some lives are killed even when we breathe or drink water or eat food. Therefore, Jainism says that minimum killing should be our ideal. Moreover, it is more serious where killing is done intentionally or through indifference. Therefore great care should be taken in all our daily activities so that minimum violence is committed by our deeds, speech and mind.

In the universe, there are different forms of life, such as human beings, animals, insects, trees and plants, bacteria, and even still smaller lives which cannot be seen even through the most powerful microscope. Jainism has classified all the living beings according to their sense organs, i.e., having five senses, four senses, three senses, two senses and one sense. It is more serious if life of the highest form is killed. Therefore Jainism preaches strict vegetarianism and prohibits flesh eating.

Jainism firmly believes that life is sacred irrespective of caste, color, creed or nationality and therefore not only physical or mental injury to life should be avoided, but one should have all possible kindness towards all the living beings. This should be the spirit of Ahimsa.

Satya (Truth)

To speak truth requires moral courage. Only those who have conquered greed, fear, anger, jealousy, ego, vulgarity, frivolity etc., can speak the truth when required. Jainism insists that one should not only refrain from falsehood, but should always speak the truth which should be wholesome and pleasant.

Asteya (Non Stealing)

The vow of Non Stealing insists that one should be honest and should not steal anything or rob others of their wealth, belongings, etc. Further, one should not take anything which does not belong to him. It does not entitle one to take away a thing which may be lying unattended or unclaimed. One should observe this vow very strictly and should not touch even a worthless thing which does not belong to him.

Brahmacharya (Celibacy)

Total abstinence from sex indulgence is called Brahmacharya or Celibacy. Sex is an infatuating force which obscures the right path of Moksha and sets aside all virtues and reason at the time of indulgence. This vow of controlling sex passion is very difficult to observe in its subtle form, because one may refrain from physical indulgence but may still think of the pleasures of sex. There are several rules laid down for observing this vow, both for monks and for householders.

Aparigraha (Non Acquisition)

Jainism believes that the more a person possesses worldly wealth, the more he may be unhappy and the more he is likely to commit sin, physical and mental, because worldly wealth creates attachments which would continuously result in greed, jealousy, selfishness, ego, hatred, violence, etc. Bhagavan Mahavira has said that wants and desires have no end and only the sky is the limit for them.

Attachment to worldly objects results in the bondage of the cycle of birth and death. Therefore, one desirous of spiritual liberation should withdraw from all attachments to the pleasing objects of all the five senses.

This Jaina principle of limited possession helps in equitable distribution of wealth, comforts, etc., in the society. Thus Jainism helps in establishing socialism, economic stability, and welfare in the world.

Jainism has laid down and described in much detail these five great vows for the path of Moksha. These are to be observed strictly and entirely by the monks and nuns. Partial observance is laid down for the householders with additional seven vows. There are other thirty five rules of conduct laid down for the householders.

In addition to these five great vows, Jainism has laid great stress on the following four reflections (Bhavana), and ten fold code of conduct.

Four Reflections:

Amity (Maitri)

Appreciation (Pramoda)

Compassion (Karuna)

Equanimity (Madhyastha)

Ten fold Code of Conduct:

1. Forgiveness
2. Humility
3. Straightforwardness
4. Truthfulness
5. Purity of mind
6. Control of senses
7. Penance
8. Renunciation
9. Greedlessness
10. Chastity

Jainism has thoughts of the gradual evolution of the soul and has described fourteen stages (Gunasthana) for the liberation of the soul. With the help of the above mentioned vows and virtues a soul can gradually liberate itself and attain Nirvana,

Anekantavada

The principle of the Anekantavada or Syadvada is a very valuable contribution of Jainism to world thought. This doctrine is also known as the theory of Relativity or the Philosophy of Non absolutism or the philosophy of Relative Pluralism. This principle teaches us how to realize truth in its varied aspects.

Bhagavan Mahavira has said that every substance has infinite attributes or qualities and different attributes may be seen through different angles. Just as a coin has two sides or a prism has many sides, similarly, every substance or situation has many aspects which could be seen from more than one side. A man may be son of a father and father of a son or he may be someone's

brother or nephew or uncle or brother in law, or grandfather or grandson and so on. The town in which you stay is in the south for the people of the north and is in the north for the people of the south and so on. Therefore every substance or situation should be looked from different angles in order to realize the truth underlying its different aspects. It helps us to understand the view points of others. If a person ignores various other angles or view points of an object or situation, and sticks to one particular angle or view point, he will never realize truth in its varied aspects.

Thus, Anekantavada teaches us that the kingdom of truth can be reached through different ways. It also teaches us that we should not impose our own thoughts or views on others, but should try to reconcile with the thoughts or view points of others. This principle, therefore, if earnestly put into practice shows us how to remove our short sighted, selfish and partial outlook. It shows us how to remove discord and disharmony and establish concord and harmony in life, by being catholic and tolerant in our outlook and attitude towards others.

The principle of Anekantavada should be applied to every field of life. It shows us how to respect candid opinions of all free thinkers of the world, and, therefore, the roots of modern democracy could be traced in this Jain principle. It establishes unity in diversity. It promises reconciliation of divergent or conflicting statements, thoughts, ideologies, systems, religions etc. The principle of Anekantavada, therefore, can be a great instrument to peaceful co existence and unity in the world.

Thus Jainism believes in the right faith, right knowledge, right conduct, non injury, truthfulness, non stealing, celibacy and non adultery, non acquisition of wealth, amity, appreciation, compassion, equanimity, forgiveness, humility, straightforwardness, purity of mind, control of senses, mercy, penance, renunciation, greedlessness, chastity, respect for other's view points, etc.

In short Jainism has advocated for all the best virtues required for peaceful and happy living for all the living beings and also required for the liberation of the soul from the cycle of birth and death. Jainism has thought of every possible situation in life, has elaborately analyzed them and has guided the followers of all categories towards the right path.

Let us end with one of the daily prayers of Jainism:

I forgive all the living beings and let all the living beings forgive me. I have amity with all and enmity with none.

Let all the living beings be happy. Let all the living beings be busy in making others happy. Let the evils disappear from everywhere and let the whole world be happy.