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Jainism

Its Message and Practice

PREFACE:

Jainism is a religion of purely human origin and is preached and practiced by one who has attained perfect knowledge, omniscience and self-control by his own personal efforts and has been liberated from the bonds of worldly existence, the cycle of births and deaths. Such human beings are considered Gods of Jainism. The concept of God as a creator, protector, and destroyer of the universe does not exist in Jainism. Also the idea of God's reincarnation as a human being to destroy the demons is not accepted in Jainism. In summary Jainism does not believe in creator God, but it is not an atheistic religion because it believes in many Gods who are self realized individuals and who have attained liberation.

In ancient times it was known by many names such as Saman tradition, or the religion of Nirgantha, or Jina. Literally Jina means a conqueror, that is, one who has conquered the worldly passions like desire, hatred, anger, greed, and pride by one's own personal efforts. Jina is a human being and not a supernatural being or an incarnation of an all mighty God. All human beings have the potentiality to become Jina. Some of the Jinas establish religious order, they are known as Tirthankara and there exist the spiritual lineage of the twenty-four Tirthankars of whom the ascetic sage Mahavir was the last.

FOUNDER:

Jainism is eternal but from time to time various prophets known as Tirthankar revives its philosophy. About 2600 years ago Bhagwan Mahavir or Vardhaman (599 to 527 BC), the twenty fourth and the last Tirthankara of this era revived the Jain philosophy preached by his predecessor Bhagwan Parshva (950 to 850 BC) in India. He expanded the code of conducts and implemented daily rites for his followers applicable to his time. The present Jain scriptures reflect only his teachings.

Mahavir was a prince and his childhood name was Vardhaman. Being son of a king, he had many worldly pleasures, comforts, and services at his command. But at the age of thirty, he left his family and royal household, gave up his worldly possessions, and become a monk in search of a solution to eliminate pain, sorrow, and sufferings from life.

Mahavir spent the next twelve and half years in deep silence and meditation to conquer his desires, feelings, and attachments. He carefully avoided harming or annoying other living beings including animals, birds, insects, and plants. He also went without food for long periods. He was calm and peaceful against all unbearable hardships. During this period, his spiritual powers fully developed and at the end he realized perfect perception, perfect knowledge, perfect power, and total bliss. This realization is known as kevaljnana or the perfect enlightenment.

Mahavir spent the next thirty years traveling on bare feet around India preaching to the people the eternal truth he realized. The ultimate objective of his teaching is how one can attain total freedom from the cycle of birth, life, pain, misery, and death and achieve the permanent blissful state of one's self. This is also known as liberation, nirvana, absolute freedom, or Moksha.

At the age of 72 (527 BC), Bhagwan Mahavir attained nirvana and his purified soul left his body and achieved complete liberation. He became a Siddha, a pure consciousness, a liberated soul, living forever in a state of complete bliss. On the night of his nirvana, people celebrated the Festival of Lights (Dipavali) in his honor. This is the last day of Hindu and Jain calendar year known as Dipavali Day.

In summary Jainism existed before Bhagwan Mahavir and his teachings were based on those of his predecessors. Thus, unlike Bhagwan Buddha, Mahavir was more of a reformer and propagator of an existing religious order than the founder of a new faith. He followed the well-established creed of his predecessor Tirthankara Parshvanath. However, he did reorganize the philosophical tenets to correspond to his times.

PHILOSOPHY:

Primarily Jainism assumes that the universe, with all its components, is without a beginning or an end, being everlasting and eternal. The wheel of time incessantly revolves like a pendulum. In the first half circle from the descending to the ascending stage where human prosperity, happiness, and life span increases and in the second half circle from the ascending stage to the descending stage where prosperity, happiness, and life span decreases.

Mahavir explained that from eternity, every living being (soul) is in the bondage of karmic atoms known as karma and is in ignorance about its true nature. We continuously accumulate new karma by our vices (anger, ego, deceit, and greed) and by our actions of body, mind and speech. Under the influence of karma, the soul is habituated to seek pleasures in materialistic belongings and possessions. This is the deep-rooted cause of self-centered violent thoughts, deeds, anger, hatred, greed, and such other vices. This results in further accumulation of karma.

The doctrine of karma occupies a significant position in the Jain philosophy. It provides a rational and satisfying explanation to the apparently inexplicable phenomena of birth and death, happiness and misery, inequalities in mental and physical attainments, and of the existence of different species of living beings. It explains that the principle governing the successions of life is karma. Our actions of body, mind, and speech bind us.

One can get rid of karma and attain liberation by simultaneously following the path of right faith (samyak-darshana), right knowledge (samyakjnana), and right conduct (samyak-charitra). The proper knowledge of the six universal substances (six Dravya) and the nine fundamental truths (nine Tattva) is called right knowledge and true faith in that knowledge is called right faith. The right conduct includes nonviolence, self-purification, compassion, penance, austerity, and meditation.

THE SIX UNIVERSAL SUBSTANCES ARE:

<i>Soul or Consciousness</i>	<i>Jiva</i>	<i>Living substance</i>
<i>Matter</i>	<i>Pudgala</i>	<i>Non living substance</i>
<i>Medium of motion</i>	<i>Dharma</i>	<i>Nonliving substance</i>
<i>Medium of res</i>	<i>Adharma</i>	<i>Nonliving substance</i>
<i>Space</i>	<i>Akasa</i>	<i>Nonliving substance</i>
<i>Time</i>	<i>Kal or Samay</i>	<i>Nonliving substance</i>

THE NINE TATTVAS (PRINCIPLES) ARE:

<i>Jiva</i>	<i>Soul or living being (Consciousness)</i>
<i>Ajiva</i>	<i>Non-living substances</i>
<i>Asrava</i>	<i>Cause of the influx of karma</i>
<i>Bandha</i>	<i>Bondage of karma</i>
<i>Punya</i>	<i>Virtue</i>
<i>Papa</i>	<i>Sin</i>
<i>Samvara</i>	<i>Stoppage or arrest of the influx of karma</i>
<i>Nirjara</i>	<i>Exhaustion of the accumulated karma</i>
<i>Moksha</i>	<i>Total liberation from karma</i>

Jainism strives for the realization of the highest perfection of man, which in its original purity is free from all pain, suffering, and the bondage of birth and death.

ETHICAL CODE:

The supreme ideal of the Jain religion is nonviolence (Ahimsa), equal kindness, and reverence for all forms of life in speech, thought, and action. Above all it is a religion of love and compassion to all living beings. At the heart of right conduct for Jains lie the five great vows:

<i>Nonviolence (Ahimsa)</i>	<i>Not to cause harm to any living beings</i>
<i>Truthfulness (Satya)</i>	<i>To speak the harmless truth only</i>
<i>Non-stealing (Asteya)</i>	<i>Not to take anything not properly given</i>

<i>Chastity (Brahmacharya)</i>	<i>Not to indulge in sensual pleasure</i>
<i>Non-possession/</i>	<i>Complete detachment from people, places, and material</i>
<i>Non-attachment (Aparigraha)</i>	<i>things</i>

These vows can not be fully implemented without the acceptance of a philosophy of non-absolutism (Anekantvad) and the theory of relativity (Syadvad). Monks and nuns follow these vows strictly and totally, while the common people follow the vows as far as their life styles will permit.

AHIMSA (NON-VIOLENCE):

"Ahimsa parmo dharmah" (Non-violence is the supreme religion).

Ahimsa is a principle that Jains teach and practice not only towards human beings but also towards animals and all nature. The scriptures tell us: "Do not injure, abuse, oppress, enslave, insult, torment, torture or kill any creature or living being."

The teaching of ahimsa refers not only to wars and visible physical acts of violence but to violence in the hearts and minds of human beings, their lack of concern and compassion for their fellow humans and for any other living being. Ancient Jain texts explain that violence (Himsa) is not defined by actual harm, for this may be unintentional. It is the intention to harm, the absence of compassion that makes action violent. Without violent thought there could be no violent actions.

In a positive sense ahimsa means caring for and sharing with all living beings, tending, protecting and serving them. It entails universal friendliness (maitri), universal forgiveness (kshama) and universal fearlessness (abhaya).

ANEKANTAVADA (THE DOCTRINE OF MANIFOLD ASPECTS)

The concept of universal interdependence underpins the Jain theory of knowledge, known as anekantavada or the doctrine of manifold aspects. In this ever changing universe (reality) there exist an infinity of viewpoints depending on the time, place, nature and state of the one who is the viewer and that which is viewed. Anekantavada means multifaceted view points.

This leads to the doctrine of syadvada or relativity, which states that truth is relative to different viewpoints (nayas). What is true from one point of view is open to question from another. Absolute truth cannot be grasped from any particular viewpoint alone because absolute truth is the sum total of all the different viewpoints that make up the universe.

Because it is rooted in the doctrines of anekantavada and syadvada, Jainism does not look upon the universe from an anthropocentric, ethnocentric or egocentric viewpoint. It takes into account the viewpoints of other species, other communities and nations and other human beings. Non Possessions or Non-acquisitiveness. Accumulation of possessions and enjoyment for personal ends should be minimized. Giving charitable donations and one's time for community projects generously is a part of a Jain householder's obligations.

It is this sense of social obligation born out of religious teachings that has led the Jains to found and maintain innumerable schools, colleges, hospitals, clinics, lodging houses, hostels, orphanages, relief and rehabilitation camps for the handicapped, old, sick and disadvantaged as well as hospitals for ailing birds and animals.

Wants should be reduced, desires curbed and consumption levels kept within reasonable limits. Using any resource beyond one's needs and misuse of any part of nature is considered a form of theft. Indeed, the Jain faith goes one radical step further and declares unequivocally that waste and creating pollution are acts of violence.

Jainism is unique in allowing the very spiritually advanced person to hasten his own death by certain practices (principally fasting) under specified circumstances.

Thus, the principles of Jainism, if properly understood in their right perspective and faithfully adhered to, will bring contentment and inner happiness and joy in the present life. This will elevate the soul in future reincarnations to a higher spiritual level, ultimately achieving Perfect Enlightenment, reaching its final destination of Eternal Bliss, ending all cycles of birth & death.

DENOMINATIONS AND MAJOR SECTS:

Mahavir attracted people from all walks of life, rich and poor, kings and commoners, men and women, princes and priests, touchable and untouchable. Mahavir proclaimed that in the matters of spiritual advancement, both men and women are on an equal footing. Many women followed Mahavir's path and renounced the world in search of ultimate truth and happiness. The most significant contribution of Jainism in the social field was the establishment of social equality among the four classes (Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra) including untouchables prevalent in the society.

He organized his followers, into a four-fold order, namely monks (Sadhu), nuns (Sadhvi), laymen (Shravak), and laywomen (Shravika). This order is known as Jain Sangh. There are about six to eight million Jains live almost exclusively in India. About 100,000 Jains live in North America and other countries.

A few centuries after Mahavir's nirvana, the Jain religious order (Sangha) grew more and more complex. There established two major sects. In the Digambar sect monks wear no cloths, while the Svetambar monks wear white cloths. Fundamental views of both sects on ethics and philosophy are identical.

Each major sect has many sub-sects including idol and non-idol worshipping sects. Later generations saw the introduction of ritualistic complexities, which almost made Jainism a ritualistic religion.

JAIN SCRIPTURES:

Bhagwan Mahavira's preaching was orally compiled by his immediate disciples in Jain scriptures known as Jain Agam or Agam Sutras, which consist of many texts.

These Agam Sutras were not documented in any form but were orally passed on to the future generations. In course of time many of the Agam Sutras have been memorized and some were modified. About one thousand years later the memorized Agam Sutras were recorded on leafy papers (Tadpatris). Svetambar Jains have accepted these Sutras as an authentic version of Bhagwan Mahavira's.

The Agam Sutras teach great reverence for all forms of life, strict codes of vegetarianism, asceticism, nonviolence, and opposition to war.