

THE ART OF LIVING CALLED JAINISM

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Although like every religion, Jainism too talks about the other world, the heaven and hell, transmigration of soul resulting in innumerable cycles of birth and death into different species, and ultimately the attainment of emancipation, the stage from whose bourne no traveller ever returns, yet its study would show that it is indeed concerned with the world in which we live and lays stress on what may well be called the art of living.

Non-Violence as the cardinal principle: Jainism proclaims 'Ahimsa Parmodharma' i.e. Non violence is the greatest religion. When we talk of non-violence, naturally it pre-supposes the existence of a society where non violence is to be practised. It cannot obviously be meant for a solitary life like that of Robinson Crusoe. So when it says that non violence is the greatest religion, clearly it takes into account the world where we live along with others and sets before us a norm of behaviour. Jainism proclaims that non-violence is the real thing and all other qualities of human behaviour like truth, non-possession, non-stealing, observance of celibacy etc. are meant for the up-holding of that one cardinal principle of Non-violence, just as there is a hedge for the protection of a central plant in a farm. Indeed this principle is not confined to a particular country or state. It

knows no boundaries of geography, language, caste, creed or colour. It embraces the whole world into its domain. Not only the human life, it covers even the animal and plant life into its fold. Such a vast notion of non-violence is given by Jainism.

Finer nuances of Non-violence: Many people would think that non violence refers to a physical act, where one is prevented from taking up arms against a sea of troubles. True it lays emphasis on the bodily activity and lays taboo on violence, but it does not remain only upto that. Non violence is extended to speech and even thinking. It means that if one thinks in mind that he wishes to hurt somebody, although he neither speaks nor acts, nonetheless he has committed an act of violence, which is considered as much sinful as if he has really hurt somebody physically and is therefore liable to as much punishment as if he has committed the final act. So naturally the stress is on a clean and pure mind devoid of all evil thinking. This is an answer to those who consider non violence as a negative quality, although even as a negative quality it has a great importance in the world torn by strife and conflict at every step, where “ignorant armies clash by night”. As E.M. Forster says that non-violence is the first step of behaviour. ‘How can I love my neighbour who has smashed my window pans by throwing a stone?’ he asks. He concludes that the universal love may be a very great virtue in itself, but for all practical purposes, it is tolerance i.e. non violence, which enables us to live in peace in this world. But as has been discussed, non-violence is a positive state of mind, made pure by rooting out passion of attachment and antagonism, which in Jain terminology are known as absence of ‘rag’ and ‘dwesh’. Only when one is free from the slightest trace of passion can one attain emancipation called ‘Kewalya Jnan’. It may be added here that in the beginning, Jainism was known as ‘Nigganth’ i.e. without any burden of possession, but later on it was thought that absence of possession only did not make for salvation. So long as the mind was not clean and pure, nobody could hope to attain salvation. So purging of all kinds of passion ‘calm of mind’ was Jainism. What a concept of the art of living in the world!

All souls are equal: The outward and inward behaviour of non violence is guided by the thought that all living beings are equal inasmuch as they all possess soul. All souls are equal. The apparent differences that we come across into this world are due to the deeds committed by beings

in different births. Shorn of all impure deeds, all souls shine into pristine glory. As such when all living beings are equal we must have a sense of respect for all of them and give credence to their views, for no one can claim that he is the sole repository of truth, which has many facets. If a person has seen or experienced only a part of truth or a facet of truth, he cannot say that he has understood the whole truth. So Jain philosophy is based on the fact of equality and respect for others. In Jain terminology, this is known as Anekantwad. In fact it can be termed as a great effort at comprehension and synthesis.

Catholicity of approach: In keeping with its philosophy, and in consideration of bigotry prevalent in the world, Jainism has blazed a new trail even in its highest prayer called 'Navkar Mantra'. In this prayer, there is no invocation of gods, there is no personality cult; there is only the worship of good qualities. Whosoever possesses them must be paid homage irrespective of the fact whether he is a Jain or Non-Jain. Jainism clearly proclaims that there are emancipated souls who did not have the label of Jainism on them. In fact if a person is clean and pure of mind and in this field has achieved the highest eminence, he is 'Siddha' i.e. he possesses the qualities of godhood and is therefore to be worshipped. Thus Jainism presents an example of broad-mindedness so rarely to be found in the religions of the world. Perhaps on account of this broad-mindedness, Jainism could manage to survive in India whereas Buddhism, similar to Jainism in many respects, was completely rooted out of its land of birth. This charitable frame of mind can also be observed in Jain libraries called, 'Granth Bhandars' where books belonging to other religions and even secular books are to be found rubbing shoulders with the books on Jainism. And these books have been helpful in reconstructing the history of India and providing the much needed missing links.

Emphasis on right knowledge and right conduct: In accordance with the emphasis it lays on behaviour in this world, Jainism believes that God is but perfected human being. It says that every living being has in it the potential of attainment of godhood one day. In this there is no preference or prejudice, no difference of caste, creed or colour, country or sex, nobility or poverty, high and low. The only condition for attainment of godhood is that one should be completely free of impure mind, which can

be gradually cultivated by disciplining the mind by having true faith, true knowledge and true conduct. One may start as 'Bahiratma' i.e. person given to enjoyment of worldly and sensual pleasures, and not caring for spiritual life. But slowly, he would know the difference between worldly joys which are momentary and abiding inward happiness. The moment he becomes conscious of this difference and starts meditating on it, he becomes 'Antaratma' i.e. one given to thinking of the reality, which would lead him to know that soul is the real thing, and poverty and riches health and illness, joy and misery, etc. are the result of 'karmic matter' attaching to the soul. The moment this 'karmic matter' is removed by self discipline, the soul will become Perfection Incarnate, which state is known as 'Parmatma' i.e. godhood. Thus this salvation can be achieved not by blessings and boons showered by divine powers, but by strict self effort born of right knowledge and right conduct combinedly. There is an elaborate discussion on how the soul can progress in fourteen different stages. One who has attained, say the 8th stage or step can fall down to the first step if he does not remain ever vigilant in his behaviour which essentially emanates from the mind. Thus with so much stress on one's behaviour, will it be too much to say that Jainism is a guide to the art of living.

Strict norms of conduct : The followers of Jainism have been organized into four sections consisting of 1) monks, 2) nuns, 3) laymen and 4) lay women. In Jain terminology, they are called Sadhu, Sadhvi, Shravik and Shravika. All combined are known as 'Chaturdik Sangh i.e. fourfold organisation, which is considered sovereign in religious matters. No one section can dictate to the other, and if one section goes astray the others can correct it. In other words, there is no system of priesthood, in which there can be and is exploitation of the lay men for vested interests. In Jainism, if a monk goes astray, he is declared 'bhrasht' or fallen down and is ostracised. Elaborate rules have been prescribed for two main sections, and non observance of those rules renders one liable to earn the epithet of 'bhrasht'. Of course, the rules laid down for the monks and nuns are much more rigorous than those prescribed for laymen and on account of greater discipline of body and mind, they are given greater respect. A study of these rules demonstrates that it is expected of laity to lead a life which assures peace to one and all in society. The guiding principle underlying all these rules is the spirit of non violence. A glance at

the rules will show that they set an ideal norm of human behaviour. For example, it is expected of a layman to make and observe vows of acquiring spiritual knowledge, render service to the virtuous, behave in a simple and clean manner, give veneration to the spiritual teachers, not amass too much money and whatever money is earned for leading comfortable life should be earned by just means, should study the nature and cause of transmigration of souls and desist from leading a sinful and sensual life, should not indulge in a job involving cruelty, must have an alert mind and not blindly follow another, should lead a virtuous life as laid down in the scriptures, be generous and charitable, observe penance for the sake of disciplining the mind and must curb the tendency of the world being too much with him. All these guiding rules in brief lay stress on knowing oneself and not get absorbed in the worldly matters. This is the way of renunciation, it is true, but it is this way of giving rather than grabbing that can lead to a life of harmony and peace in the world. Similarly elaborate rules have been prescribed for the monks, which are stricter, meant to enforce non violence in the highest possible manner. These rules have many sub rules, and in one virtue of 'sheel', there are as many as 18000 norms laid down to be observed by different categories of followers.

Spirituality: In brief there is no area of human behaviour which has been left untouched. True the goal of all discipline has been described as 'Atma kalyan' i.e. emancipation of the soul from the worldly bondage, but the implications of observance of the discipline is peace and harmony in the world, the origin and end of which we are unaware, and is shrouded in mystery. And therefore, for making it a livable place, all that we can do is to ensure that there is no misery and pain. After all who can prove the existence of hell and heaven. So let us endeavour to make this very world inhabited by such people who are given to spiritual life. Jainism thus can more aptly be described as 'A Guide to the Art of Living'.

