

# THE JAIN RELIGIOUS TRADITION

□ S.L. Gandhi

The Jain Religious Tradition to which I belong is firmly rooted in ahimsa (nonviolence). It enjoins its followers to abjure violence in word, thought and deed and refrain from resorting to coercion, intolerance, possessiveness, untruth and lustful desires. It is a path of peace and purity and forbids the use of violence even in self-defence. Revenge or hatred has no place in it. It exhorts all human beings to show tolerance towards those who hold different views or believe in different modes of worship. Diversity is a natural phenomenon and Jainism teaches us to 'live and let live'. It naturally looks on other traditions with respect and considers the act of disparaging or ridiculing other religious traditions an act of great sin. The principle of ahimsa in its totality which the Jains adore and abide by scrupulously, admits of no contradictions, disputation, censure or illspeaking. It is the most ancient tradition that dates back to the period of the beginning of human civilization and follows the teachings of 24 Tirthankaras-literally 'ford builders' or 'most perfect sanctified souls' or 'spiritual leaders'-the last and most significant of whom was Lord Mahavira, a contemporary of Lord Buddha.

Unlike other religious traditions, it has had a history of peaceful existence since time immemorial. It is perhaps the only living tradition in

the world which enjoys the distinction of having a history sans blood. The Jains have never fought a battle to protect their religion or to expand its 'empire' or to wipe out those who disagreed with its beliefs or opposed it. In order to answer the question 'How does your tradition regard other religions?' it has become imperative for me to throw light on its nonviolent course of history and precept of tolerance towards all. It lays emphasis on 'samyak gyan' (right knowledge), 'samyak darshan' (right perception or philosophy), and 'samyak charitra' (right character) and advocates a feeling of friendship towards all living creatures including animals, birds, insects, even plants and vegetation which according to it also have souls (jiva) just as human beings. A religion which exhorts its followers to show compassion towards all living beings including the microbes that live in the air and plants that grow on this planet must regard all other faiths as mere manifestations of different facets of the same truth. The Jains have only one festival in a year which is known as 'samvatsri'. It is the holiest day for them. They observe fast on that day and abstain from all forms of violence. Samvatsri is followed by a day of forgiveness (kshamat Kshamana) when the Jains are supposed to ask all living things for forgiveness and forgive them all for their acts of omissions and commissions. 'Friendship towards all' is the guiding principle of Jainism. Interreligious dialogue is in consonance with the spirit of this principle.

The word 'enmity' is a taboo among the believers of this tradition. Every evening and morning a Jain shravak (votary) or a Jain ascetic reviews his actions and if he discovers that his utterances or actions lacerated or hurt the feelings of someone or that he thought ill of someone or was angry with him or her because the latter did him immense harm or was opposed to his interests he must invariably ask for his or her forgiveness and purge his heart of the stain of anger and hatred notwithstanding the fact that the living being of whom he thought ill was an offender. Mahavira, the last Tirthankar says, "All living beings want to live hence no living being, how soever great or small it may be, should be killed." He further says, "one may defeat a thousand foes a thousand times in a battle but it is the conquest of the self alone that transcends all." These words of Lord Mahavira match the words of Jesus Christ when he says, "He who taketh his spirit is greater than he who taketh a city." Since the Jain religious tradition regards all living beings equal and grants them a right to live, most Jains adhere to vegetarianism. The Jain tradition has

many sources within their religion that promote interreligious dialogues. Some of these have already been elucidated in the foregoing pages while describing its attitude towards other faiths. The quintessence of the Jain tradition is epitomized in its principle based on its commitment to complete nonviolence. The concept of nonviolence as enunciated in the Geeta, a Hindu sacred text, allows for the violence resorted to for the sake of upholding of one's duty. The other religious traditions do permit the use of violence to defeat the forces of wickedness but the Jain religious tradition like that of Christianity believes in forgiving one's enemy and showing compassion towards him.

The most significant source of interfaith dialogue in the Jain religious tradition is its philosophy of anekant which explains that an object has many facets. The method of propounding this doctrine is known as syadvad which tells us that we must not regard a facet of truth as complete truth. The truth is that an object has infinite characteristics. Gyan (knowledge) is also truth in itself. It is true or untrue only in relation to something. The word 'syat' which means 'it may be or may not be or it may also be' is a method of elucidating complete truth. Syadvad owes its origin to the view that an object has many facets and has infinite qualities. It is embedded in relativity.

For example an earthen pot may be an earthen pot or may be something different, i.e. mere earth. The atoms of earth are transformed into many other things. The shapes undergo incessant transmutations, metamorphoses and transformations. The basic element is the same which manifests itself in different forms. The right perception is the hallmark of Jainism. If we call a particular thing true or false outright, it is a violation of the Jain tenets. The Jains, therefore, always talk in the language of 'syadvad' i.e. 'may be or may not be or may also be'. The doctrine of Anekant (truth is many sided) is explained through syadvad. We have a parable to illustrate 'anekantvad'. Six people of India who were born blind wanted to know what an elephant looked like. They had heard a lot about it. They decided to find out the truth themselves by actually touching it and experiencing it individually. One of them touched the tail of the elephant and pronounced the judgement that it was like a snake. The second blindman touched its trunk and said it was like a serpent. The third man touched the body and reached the conclusion that the elephant was like a

wall. The others who touched his ears and legs thought that it was like a winnowing fan or a pillar. Everyone of them was right and everyone of them was wrong. No one of them was able to realize the size or shape of the elephant in its entirety. They could perceive it only partially. The Jains say that it is impossible for a man to perceive the whole truth unless he has conquered all his desires, i.e. Kama (sexual lust), Krodh (anger), maan (pride) and lobh (greed). Once a person has annihilated his desires he becomes an arhat. He attains to the state of 'Kevalya' (omniscience) and is able to know the truth in its entirety. The parable of the elephant lets us know that there is no need for us to quarrel over divergent views and that everyone is right in the way he has perceived the truth. This principle underlines the scope of Jains friendly relations among different religious groups.

As has already been explained the Jain religious tradition is rooted in the equanimity of mind. To achieve it one has to show a feeling of friendship not only towards human beings but also towards animals, birds, bushes, trees and even the smallest possible invisible creatures. These conceptions would guide interreligious encounters. Jainism is only a way of living and no Tirthankar including Lord Mahavira ever used the term 'Jainism'. It stresses a person's conquest over his or her desires. The word 'Jain' (the conqueror) began to be used as an epithet for its followers in the course of its evolution. The 24 Tirthankaras are also known as Jinas. Nowhere in the Jain sacred text which consists of five lines occurs the word 'Jain'. Nor does the name of a Tirthankar figure in it. It is also not a prayer in its strict sense. It only pays one's obeisance to the five kinds of pure souls.

I reproduce the most sanctified Jain text for the benefit of the promoters of peace and interfaith dialogues of the world. It is known as

### **NAVKAAR MANTRA**

I pay obeisance to arhats

(those who have destroyed all their bad Karmas-a subtle matter said to be accumulated on account of one's evil desires and evil in thought, word and deed).

I pay obeisance to sidhas

(fully liberated souls)

I pay obeisance to acharyas

(preceptors)

I pay obeisance to upadyayas  
(teachers)

I pay obeisance to any pure soul or ascetic irrespective of the faith to which he or she may belong.

The last line encourages the followers of the Jain religious tradition to transcend the narrow bounds of sectarian considerations and bow before any pure soul. It is enough to prove that the Jain religious tradition is an ideal forum for an interfaith dialogue. It is the only tradition in the world that believes that any person belonging to any tradition can attain to the state of salvation. Unlike others it believes that it is not necessary for a person to become a Jain in order to attain to the state of arhat - or emancipation or mukti or salvation. What is needed is the purity in its true form.

The other sources within our tradition that promote interreligious amity and world peace are its principles of ahimsa (nonviolence) and aparigrah (non-possession). 'Ahimsa paramodharma' -nonviolence is the highest form of religion is the essence of Jainism. Mahatma Gandhi was so impressed by the cult of nonviolence as propounded by Lord Mahavira that he pledged himself to observe the vow of nonviolence scrupulously all his life and used it as a powerful weapon to force the Britishers to give freedom to India. The concept of nonviolence as preached by Jainism does not mean mere abstaining oneself from killing. Some people mistake it to be non-killing which is absolutely wrong. Ahimsa is much more than avoiding physical violence. I would like to reproduce briefly the episode from the life of a great king Prasenjit who grew disillusioned with the materialistic power that he wielded as a king. He renounced his kingdom even when his son was a child and became a Jain monk. He was a contemporary of Lord Mahavira.

He went to a forest and began to perform tapasya (undergoing religious austerities and self-denial). He remained in a state of meditation for most of his time. Once some members of his erstwhile kingdom passed through that forest and saw him standing motionless in a meditative posture. Seeing him, a member remarked, 'Look at this foolish man! He has renounced his kingdom leaving his child to the mercy of a few wicked courtiers. They are now plotting to kill him and usurp the

throne'. When Prasenjit heard these words, he flew into a rage. Ostensibly he still stood motionless giving the impression that he was calm and devoid of passions. The other members of that group admired him and spoke highly of his spiritual achievement. They went to Lord Mahavira the 24th Tirthankar and reported that Prasenjit looked very calm and was absorbed in meditation. Out of curiosity they asked the Lord; If he dies instantaneously which heaven will his soul land in? (according to Jains there are twelve heavens and each heaven in a corresponding degree has greater comforts than the one that precedes it). Omniscient Mahavira said, 'At the moment he is engaged in a fierce battle with his kith and kin. If he dies his soul will go to the sevanth hell. (The Jains believe that there are seven hells, each is correspondingly more torturesome than the one that precedes it). Prasenjit neither raised an army nor killed anyone physically. But in a state of anger he had fought a battle mentally and thus incurred bad Karmas. This episode illustrates the profundity of the Jain concept of ahimsa in word thought, and deed. Even if a person just thinks of murdering someone, according to the Jain view it amounts to virtual killing. This is why the Jains believe in the dictum 'vasudhev kutumbakam' (the whole world is a family) and consider violence even for a just cause unethical, sinful and contemptible.

The other Jain principle that makes us immune to any kind of hostility is 'aparigrah' (non-possession). The Jains regard renunciation as an act of the highest form of religion. The Jain ascetics renounce property, money, belongings and even clothes. Acquisition of wealth or objects is considered irreligious. The Jain ascetics are supposed to possess nothing save clothes or books that they can carry over their shoulders. The Digambar Jain tradition forbids even the use of clothes, hence the ascetics initiated into its order move about in the nude. All worldly conflicts, they may be political, social or even religious, originate in one's attachment to ideas and objects. The principle of aparigrah is an ideal of excellence which every Jain is exhorted to follow in some or the other degree. The house holders are asked not to possess wealth beyond a certain limit. Aparigrah puts an end to class struggle and conflict relating to the equitable distribution of resources. Mahavira goes to the extent of saying that a person who does not share his resources with others cannot attain to moksha (liberation). These conceptions underlying the Jain scriptures inspire Jain shravaks to undertake journeys into interfaith. The

Jain religious tradition is ideally suited for an interreligious encounter.

Now I come to the question as to how cross-traditional tolerance, respect, and spiritual awareness can be developed. Since my religious tradition makes it mandatory for its followers to refrain from ridiculing, belittling and disparaging other traditions in thought, word, and deed, it gives no scope for its being in conflict with other faiths. There are many ways to achieve the goal of reconciliation. The first and foremost prerequisite for the fulfilment of this dream is the creation of a friendly environment. It makes it necessary for other religious groups to cut the barriers of isolation, avoid confinement to their dormitories and throw open the gates of their temples, churches, and synagogues to the followers of all other faiths. It has been observed that the main causes of religious conflict is the lack of interaction, ignorance, misunderstanding and narrowmindedness. We must endeavour to bring about a change in our outlook on religious beliefs. All major religions embody the ethic of tolerance. What is essential is putting this ideal into practice. Frequent interfaith meetings will go a long way in putting an end to suspicion, mistrust, hatred and alienation. It is a pity that despite the unanimous acceptance of the doctrine of universal brotherhood by all faiths, all major wars have been fought ostensibly to protect these faiths. Religion is what we do. It needs no protection. It is an ideal which has to do with the mind of man rather than with the rituals he preaches. All religious leaders should agree to pledge themselves to adhere to a moral code of conduct based on the principles of mutual respect, tolerance, non-interference in one another's religious affairs. Much will depend on religious heads' attitude and outlook. If they want they can be instrumental in realizing a dream of cross-cultural and cross-traditional tolerance.

Acharya Tulsi-Head of Terapantha Swetambar Jain sect has launched a bold initiative to bring all religious leaders on to a common platform. He started the Anuvrat Movement in 1949 which has now veritably emerged as a platform for not only interreligious encounters but interfaith unity and religious reconciliation. Anu (atomic), vrat (vow) i.e. anuvrat expects individuals and organizations to rise above their sects by accepting small vows. These vows, if truly followed, can usher in an era of reconciliation, dialogue and friendship.

I sum up my article with the hope that more and more people in

different parts of the world will come to know of the singularly unique features of Jainism, i.e. ahimsa and non-possession and will extend their support to the ANUVRAT MOVEMENT, a Jain peace movement, which can emerge as a tool to bring about interreligions harmony and universal brotherhood. The dream of achieving the goal of a nonviolent socio-political order can come true if the people volunteer to observe anuvrats (small vows) in their life if not mahavrats (great vows) which are set apart for those who renounce the world and become ascetics. We can thus transmit and develop cross-traditional tolerance, respect and spiritual awareness and save this earth from devastation.

