

Jaina Asceticism - An Appraisal

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Asceticism as a religious creed has been in vogue in India from time immemorial. It has virtually permeated through all chief systems of philosophy and religion. Jaina asceticism has its own peculiarities. It is somewhat rigorous in comparison to others.

In Jainism, the ascetic is referred to as *śramaṇa*. The term '*śramaṇa*' is derived from the root '*śrama*' while signifies performing hard austerities. The Prākṛit term '*samana*' also stands for *śramaṇa*. It is derived from the root '*sam*' which means quieting the senses¹. In Jaina literature, Lord Mahāvīra is widely mentioned as '*samaṇe Bhagavaṁ Mahāvīre*'. The terms *samana*, *bambhana*, *māhaṇa*, etc. are used in the Jaina texts basically in the same sense. Jaina ascetics are also called *niggaṇṭhas* meaning one having no ties with the outside world. Having renounced the world and its interests forever, the ascetic is also designated as *anāgāra* in Jaina literature.

Asceticism is the by-product of an attitude of mind which denounces and denies all worldly pleasures. This world is supposed to be a hurdle in the attainment of the spiritual perfection and therefore attachment and inclinations to the worldly objects is to be given up to secure the spiritual consummation.

According to asceticism, desires are the worst enemies of human beings. They never die² and hence, are insatiable by their very nature. Even if one enjoys the whole earth with all its products, his thirst never ceases. They are the only fetter which bind us to the world. The only way of redemption from the desires is to abandon them, to renounce them. The shedding of worldly desires and earthly possessions is designated non-attachment or renunciation forms the corner-stone of asceticism. Renunciation however, does not so much consist in shunning physical contact with external objects than in avoiding infatuation with them. Renunciation in Jainism is more mental than merely physical. The ascetic has to cease to desire³ objects of sense.

Annulment of desires is possible by removing ignorance and acquisition of right knowledge. It is ignorance which generates attachment to the world which is

inherently bad and clouds the real nature of soul. Worldly attachments cause the influx of *Karma-pudgala* into the *Jīva* which in turn bring about delusion about the intrinsic reality of *Jīva*, which in its pure form is endued with *ananta-catustaya* and cause bondage. According to Jainism, perfection is not something external to be imparted to the *Jīva* in bondage. For attaining perfection, one needs to get rid of ignorance or delusion caused by *Karma-pudgalas*. So, knowledge alone can help to renounce desire. The Jaina ascetic renounces the world from the religious motive of achieving the soul's perfection and in this great effort, he has to take to the life of self-abnegation and austerities. Renunciation leads to the stoppage of further accumulation of *Karmas*, i.e., *samvara* and self-mortification to the shedding of all *Karmas* already accumulated, i.e., *nirjarā*. The ascetic practices thus frees the permanent essence, the *Jīva* from the changing trammels of matter. So the road to final deliverance is characterized by right knowledge, right faith, right conduct and austerities⁴. By knowledge he knows things, by faith, he cherishes belief in them without attachment, by conduct he gets freedom from *Karma* and by austerities he achieves purity⁵. *Mokṣa* in Jainism means annihilation of all *Karmas*⁶ which are the product of passions. So *Karma* is sought to be removed in the Jaina concept of *Mokṣa* and to remove *Karma*, passions have to be done away with.

The whole apparatus of monastic conduct in Jainism, is meant for cleansing *Jīva* from the *Karmic* impurity. While the monastic discipline lays down the common course of dispensing with *Karma-pudgala*, austerity proves to be more effective in tackling the problem of bondage. So the Jaina ethics and asceticism are the logical consequences of its theory of *Karma*. Ethics finds itself at peak of its practice in asceticism and asceticism is the culmination of Jaina ethics.

The Jaina asceticism consists of non-violence, self-control and austerities.⁷ In the rules of conduct for the Jaina ascetics, observance of the five *mahāvratas* is of foremost importance. The ascetic has to observe these vows in their entirety and quite rigourously. The concept of non-violence in Jainism is very significant and unique and underlies all other *vratas*, rules and practices of the Jaina ascetic. The ascetic has to abstain from violence to the six ordus of creatures⁸ in thought, word and deed⁹ and by himself, by restraining others from indulging in violence and by not approving of such others actions¹⁰. This is a very centralized concept of non-violence, found in Jainism only. For the effective practice of these *vratas*, the ascetic has to follow the monastic discipline of observing *guptis*, *samitis*,

dharma, anuprekṣā, caritra and *tapas*. Practice of all these aid in the attainment of *Mokṣa* from the *Karmic* bondage.

Samyama and *tapas*, i.e., self-control and austerities, constitute the negative and positive aspects of virtuous or religious life respectively and aim at the same ultimate object of emancipation of soul from the world of transmigration and misery. Self-control denotes repression of the chief impulses of *rāga* and *dveṣa* which are the cause of influx of *Karma-pudgala* in *Jīva* and the resultant bondage. This is achieved by the pursuit of rigid and hard ascetic life. The Jaina ascetic is enjoined to abide by the 28 *mūlaguṇas* to attain soul's emancipation. The perfect asceticism consists in the said course of conduct ever intent on knowledge preceded by faith.¹¹

Tapas meaning austerities signifies painful experiences borne voluntarily with a religious motive to suppress desires. So *tapas* is practised only to achieve renunciation. It consists of a hard and painful course of action such as fasting, less eating, renouncing certain delicacies, mortification of the body, confession of sins, penance, etc. Practice of these has the effect of cutting off *Karma*¹², the sole cause of bondage. *Tapas* help both in the process of *saṁvara* as well as in *nirjarā*.

After initiation in the order Lord Mahāvīra himself practised self-mortification for twelve years and bore all sorts of hardships. He later discarded even clothes and became naked. Since then *acelakatva* became a necessary condition of non-attachment or renunciation. It is supposed to be the excellent type of Jaina asceticism. An ascetic is said to adopt a form similar to that in which he is born¹³. Nakedness is the ideal extension of the vow of non-attachment. This is why nakedness is enjoined in Śvetāmbara texts also.¹⁴

But *acelakatva*, however, connotes a deeper meaning than what is literally derived. The term '*acela*' has two meanings. One is naked. This is possible to adopt only in places of seclusion. Another meaning is scantily clothed, which is perhaps enjoined while in *saṅgha*. Keeping in view the two meanings aforesaid, nakedness seems to denote a state of non-return to attachment to worldly objects. Absolute non-attachment is the essential condition of Jaina asceticism and all the rules and practices enjoined for an ascetic tend to be subservient to that essential condition. Even the things or outfits possessed by the ascetic are only the *dharmopakaraṇa* necessary to the performance of religious duties and never his properties.

The rules with regard to food etc. for the Jaina ascetic is also rigorous. The ascetic has to beg his food as begging is an essential condition of renunciation. The ascetic has to beg only such foods which are not expressly prepared for him.¹⁵ He avoids impure and unacceptable food¹⁶ and receives only so much as is sufficient for the sustenance of his life merely.

The ascetic has to remain wandering from place to place except while observing *cāturmāsa* during the rains. This is also permissible only to avoid injury to living beings and seeds which are originated at the time.

The Jaina ascetic is ordained to practise several austerities among which fasting assumes special importance. It is the most potent means of self-realisation. Fasting in its most extreme form results in *sallekhanā* which is also designated as *Samādhi-maraṇa* or *Samnyāsa-maraṇa*. It is practised in the last moments of the ascetic's life and consists in voluntary submission to peaceful death by overcoming the cardinal passions and attachment to the world. The rigorous asceticism thus practised by the Jaina ascetics is, however, only a mean to an end and not an end in itself.

Asceticism primarily consists in the denial of natural desires with the sole purpose of attaining some ideal set for life. But the customs pertaining to diet, robe, dwelling, etc. connected with the ascetic mode of life also play a significant part in ascetic life. They in their true forms become a means of self-discipline. But devoid of this ascetic motive proper, the customs become completely irrelevant and useless.

Customs ordinarily have the tendency to symbolization and conventionality. The shaving of head, peculiar clothing or even nakedness etc. are mere symbols which were once the expression of an attempt at self-mortification. Fasting etc. aimed at controlling the senses. Even self-torture was intended to distract the thoughts from the external objects. All customs, thus are originally aids in the achievement of the spiritual purpose, which when conventionalized, loose the core spirit behind them. The core ascetic motive in non-attachment and divested of it, customs become irrelevant and meaningless.

So the outward marks of the ascetic have no value of their own, except in so far as they serve the religious purpose. Asceticism should not therefore be identified with some of the outward formalities. In the Jaina scriptures, the external marks of the ascetics are interpreted only as their distinguishing characteristics, useful for religious life.¹⁷ The *Tīrthaṅkaras* have already declared that it is the right

faith, right knowledge, right conduct and penance which are the true cause of liberation and not the outward marks.¹⁸

The underlying conception of asceticism remains always the achievement of deliverance from *Samśāra* through renunciation and austerities. Without renunciation asceticism can not be a way of life for the ascetic. The religion of asceticism aims at establishing the reign of righteousness. The monastic rules are only the means. Religion always seeks to realise the spirit within. The spirit behind asceticism is renunciation. One who possesses nothing dwells happily.¹⁹

The prime need of the hour today is to inculcate this ascetic value of renunciation to save the humanity from the greatest catastrophe of annihilation which is lurking overhead in the present array of people and nations for establishing the supremacy in power and pelf over the other. Jaina ascetics, aptly called *Tīrthaṅkaras* are compared to boats which take those who adhere to their culture safely across the ocean of life. So the ascetic ideal of renunciation need to be reinforced in the society to lead them to righteousness, and the Jaina order can play a vital role in this respect.

References

1. "Samayāye samaṇo hci", *Uttarādhyayana-sūtra*, 25. 32.
2. "Ichhā u āgāsasamā anantiyā", *Ibid*, 9. 48.
3. "Evaṃ sasaṅkappa vikappaṇāṃsu sañjāyāi samayabhuvattṭhiyassa. Atthe asaṅkappayao taose pahiyaye kāmgūṇesu taṇhā." *Ibid*, 32.107.
4. "Nāṇaṃ ca damaṇaṃ ceva carittaṃ ca tavo taḥā. Es bhagutti panatto jīṇehiṃ varadaṃsihiṃ." *Ibid*, 28. 2.
5. "Nāṇeṇa jāṇai bhāve daṃsaṇeṇa ya saddahe. Caritteṇa nigīṇhāi taveṇa parisujjhaī." *Ibid*, 28. 35.
6. "Kṛtsnakarma vipramokṣo mokṣaḥ." *Tattvārtha-sūtra*, 10. 2.
7. "Dhammo maṅgala mukkiṭṭhaṃ ahiṃsā sañjamo tavo." *Daśavaikālika*, 1. 1.
8. "Chajjivakāye (Puḍhavikāiyā, āukāiyā teukāiyā vāukāiyā vaṇassaikāiyā, tasa-kāiyā) asamārabhantā." *Uttarādhyayana-sūtra*, 12. 41.
9. "Tiviheṇaṃ maṇeṇaṃ, vāyāe, kāeṇaṃ....." *Ibid*.
10. "Neva sayāṃ..... samārambhejjā, nevaanṇehiṃ samārambhāvejjā. Nevaṇṇe..... samārambhaṃ tevi..... samaṇujāṇejjā." *Ācārāṅga*, 1/1/6/116.
11. "Caradi ṇibaddho ṇiccaṃ samaṇo ṇāṇammai dansaṇamuhammi. payado mūlagūṇesu yaṃ jo so paḍipunṇa sāmaṇṇo." *Mūlācāra*, 1. 14.

12. "Jadhajādarūva dharo." *Pravacanasāra*, 3. 4.
13. Vide *Ācārāṅga-sūtra*, 1. 9. 1.
14. *Ibid*, 1. 6. 2. 3.
15. "Phāsuyaṃ parakaḍaṃ piṇḍaṃ paḍigahejja sañjaye." *Uttarādhyayana*, 1. 34.
16. Vide *Ācārāṅga-sūtra*, 1. 8. 1. 19.
17. Vide *Uttarādhyayana* (*Kesigoyamijjaṃ*).
18. "Paccayattham ca logassa nāṇavihavigappaṇaṃ.
Jattattham gahaṇattham ca loge liṅgappaoyaṇaṃ.
Ahabhave paiṇṇā u mokkhasabbhūyasāhaṇe.
Naṇaṃ ca daṃsaṇaṃ ceva carittarṃ ceva nicchaye." *Ibid*, 23. 32-33.
19. "Suhaṃ vasāmo jīvāmo jesim mo natthi kiñcaṇa." *Ibid*, 9. 14.

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