

Jainism And Vegetarianism

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Vegetarianism is understood with different significations in different contexts, but, viewed in the back-ground of Jainism, it amounts to using a strictly vegetarian diet either in the procurement or in the constitution of which no harm or injury to apparently living beings is involved directly or indirectly. It is closely linked up with three fundamental principles of Jainism: *Ahimsā* or Non-injury, *Samyam* or Self-control and *Tapas* or Austerity.

Ahimsā is the basic principle on which the Jaina moral code is built. In simple words, 'Live and let live' is the creed of Jainism. As every one of us wants to live, enjoy pleasures and escape pain, so every other living being wants to live, enjoy comforts and avoid pain. If we want to exercise our right to live, we must concede the same right to others as well. It is a simple moral law of reciprocity. Naturally man has no right to slaughter animals for his food or for his pleasure, If he does so by his superiority in the cadre of biological evolution, his action is not justifiable in any way. And if he wants to lead a life of justice and equity in society, he must have the highest respect for the entire animal world, nay the sanctity of life as such. This necessitates that he must take to a vegetarian diet.

Man is endowed with the faculty of discrimination between right and wrong, just and unjust, and fair and unfair. His superiority as man depends on his ability to exercise this faculty with the utmost sincerity. As an enlightened member of society he cannot afford to arrogate to himself privileges and prerogatives which are not available to others. An individual cannot enjoy any rights without the responsibilities accruing from them : in fact, every respectable citizen has more duties than rights. He is expected to lead a life of self-control. Such a self-control, according to Jainism, amounts to various kinds of restrictions in the matter of food, in acquiring possessions, and in the enjoyment of pleasures. Moderation is the first step on the path of self-control. By observation, the Jaina teachers have concluded that animal food not only involves destruction of life but it is also stimulative to the animal passions, and every one, therefore, who wants to lead a sober, sensible and religious life should live on a vegetarian diet.

Austerities of various kinds are prescribed in Jainism, and a pious Jaina is expected to observe different austerities such as fasting, eating less than one's

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fill, putting restrictions on the use of certain items of food, and renouncing delicacies : in fact, he is to eat to live but not live to eat. Of course these austerities are intended only for those who are sufficiently advanced on the path of religious life.

This doctrine of non-injury has led the Jaina Teachers to study in detail the whole range of the animal world and to classify the various living beings under different grades according to their development and sense-faculties. This was a practical necessity. If injury to living being is to be avoided gradually, it was necessary to study what the various living beings are and how they stand graded. Living beings fall into two broad classes, *Trasa* or mobile and *Sthāvara* or immobile. *Trasa* beings are those which possess two, three, four and five sense-organs. *Sthāvara* beings are those which have only one sense-organ, namely, that of touch, and they are of five kinds : earth-bodied, water-bodied, fire-bodied, air-bodied, and vegetables. Jaina Teachers had realized long back that plants had life, and they had treated them as one-sensed beings.

When the Jaina Teachers studied the animate world in such detail, complete abstinence from injury to beings, in a strict sense, was practically impossible. Naturally every individual could not avoid injury to living beings in an absolute sense. The religious devotees, according to Jainism, are broadly divided into two groups, namely, monks and householders, again with various stages in themselves. A monk observes the vow of *Ahimsā* in a very strict sense : in fact, he is not liable to any injury to living beings, even in their potentiality, in his diet. To put it plainly, he does not use in his food seeds which are capable of growing into plants. Thus a monk avoids all kinds of harm to living beings, both *Trasa* and *Sthāvara*.

The case of a house-holder is slightly different. He has social obligations and practical duties. Naturally according to his religious stage, he does his best and avoids injury to *Trasa* beings. It is not always possible for him to avoid injury to *Sthāvara* beings. But even there he is ever struggling to see that he minimizes harm unto *Sthāvara* beings. Naturally in his diet he does not use such fruits, roots and green vegetables as contain living organisms.

The above details make it abundantly clear that Jainism not only insists on strict vegetarian food, but even there those items of vegetarian stuff which involve harm unto subtle organisms are also to be avoided by a pious Jaina. Apart from its religious aspect, vegetarian food has its value in various ways. It is only a strict vegetarian that can assure himself that he is a cultured citizen who is not living at the cost of any other life in this commonwealth of animate beings. Further, the vegetarian diet is conducive to a dispassionate and balanced mind and a detached

and equable attitude. It is thus the baser emotions and lower instincts are sublimated resulting in nobler virtues of universal kindness, equality, and brother-hood.

It is admitted by all that nowhere else, as in India, has the doctrine of Ahimsā, universal non-injury or non-violence, had so great and long continued an influence on national character. It is therefore, in the natural course of our national history and heritage that outstanding men and women of our land should adhere to vegetarianism, both in public and private, so that they might create a kindlier atmosphere round about them and prove themselves standards of high thinking and plain living.

