

Mahāvīra, Anekāntavāda, and the World Today

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The canonical literature (*Āgama*) of the Jains is the primary source for the teachings and philosophy of Mahāvīra following his attainment of *kevalya* (infinite knowledge). One of the forms in which Mahāvīra's teachings and philosophical insights are presented in the *Āgama* is his response to the questions frequently posed to him by his disciples, mendicants and the householders. A series of such questions and responses appearing in the *Bhagvatī Sūtra* later on became the basis for the evolution of what has come to be known as *anekāntavāda* (the Jain doctrine of many-sided reality).¹ Take for instance Mahāvīra's responses to the following questions posed by Indrabhūti Gautam—one of the twelve *Gaṇadharas* and the principal disciple of Mahāvīra; Jayanti—a devoted and inquisitive śrāvikā and sister of King Shatānika; and Somil—a dedicated and learned śrāvaka.

Gautam: Is the soul permanent or impermanent?

Mahāvīra: The soul is permanent as well as impermanent. It is permanent with respect to its substance (*dravya*), which is

¹ The word "Anekānta" was not used by Mahāvīra and does not appear in the *Āgamas*. Siddhasena Divākara may have been the first Jain ācārya to use this word. See Ācārya Mahāprajña, *Anekānta: Reflections and Clarifications* (Ladnun: JVBI, 2001), p. 9.

eternal. It is impermanent with respect to its modes (*paryāya*) or forms which originate and vanish.²

Jayanti: Of the states of slumber and awakening, which is desirable or better?

Mahāvira: For some souls, the state of slumber is better, for others the state of awakening. Slumber is better for those who are constantly engaged in sinful activities, and awakening or consciousness for those who are engaged in meritorious deeds.³

Somil: Are you one or many?

Mahāvira: I am one, two as well as many. I am one in respect of substance. However in respect of knowledge and intuition, I am two. I am many in respect of ever-changing states of consciousness.⁴

Several thousand questions were asked of Mahāvira. Questions pertained not only to the nature of soul (*jīva*), but also to the nature of matter (*ajīva*). Take for instance the following.

Gautam: Is the nature of matter eternal or changing?

Mahāvira: It is eternal as well as changing. From the perspective of substance, it is unchanging and eternal. From the perspective of its attributes and modes it is constantly changing as manifested by the different colors, smells, tastes, etc.⁵

Gautam: Does being change into being? Does non-being change into non-being?

Mahāvira: Exactly so.

Gautam: Does such a change occur owing to some effort or spontaneously?

² *Bhagavati Sūtra* (Ladnun: Jain Vishva Bharati, 1994): 7/58, 59.

³ *Bhagavati Sūtra*, *op. cit.*, 12/53, 54.

⁴ *Bhagavati Sūtra*, *op. cit.*, 14/4/3.

⁵ *Bhagavati Sūtra*, *op. cit.*, 19/219, 220.

Mahāvira: It is effected by effort and also occurs spontaneously.⁶

What do we learn from the above conversations, especially from Mahāvira's responses to the various questions? Through his responses, Mahāvira demonstrated the complex and multiple aspects of reality. A definitive or a simple response of choosing the "either" "or" would not have allowed him to explain the complex nature of reality with many sides to its existence. As an omniscient being--with infinite knowledge at his disposal--Mahāvira recognized that truth or reality can be experienced but cannot be expressed in its entirety through the medium of language. Moreover, it is important to note that Mahāvira did not propound the truth. Rather, he was interpreting it through his infinite knowledge and omniscience. Even the *kevalin* or omniscient do not have the capacity to express in words the reality in its myriad dimensions due to the limits of language. Elsewhere, Mahāvira underscored this fact, "Where there is truth, from there language returns, neither intellect, nor thoughts nor even the mind goes there."⁷ For example, we can experience the sweetness of sugar, but we cannot totally express the sweetness through language.

While operating within the limits of language and seeing the complex nature of reality with its multiple aspects, Mahāvira used the language of *naya*. *Naya* (partial expression of truth) enables us to comprehend the reality part by part. There are two kinds of *naya*—*nischaya naya* and *vyavahāra naya*. *nischaya naya* enables us to understand the reality from the view-point of the substance without denying the existence of modes. *vyavahāra naya* allows us to comprehend the reality from the perspective of its attributes and modes but doesn't deny the existence of

⁶ *Bhagavati Sūtra*, op. cit., quoted from Ācārya Mahāprajña, *Anekānta: Views and Issues* (Ladnun: JVBI, 2001), p. 21.

⁷ *Savve sarā nīyattanti! Takka Jatha na vijjayi! Mayi tattha na gahiya! Ayāro Sūtra* (Ladnun: Jain Vishva Bharti, 1981): 5/123-125.

substance. Take for instance a gold necklace. From the perspective of *nischaya naya*, it is matter in the form of gold. From the perspective of *vyavahāra naya*, it is a necklace. Both statements are true because relative to the necklace, gold is the substance and necklace is its mode. However, from the perspective of substance the gold necklace is matter and gold is its mode. Therefore, to have an overall view of reality it is essential to understand the co-existence of both the *nayas*. In other words, to recognize the many facets of the reality we must consider it both in terms of the eternal and unchanging substance and in terms of modes which are infinite, transient and changing. Thus, reality is both permanent and changing.

The millennium following Mahāvira was known as the age of canonical texts and literature. This was followed by a period of philosophical writings during which Jain ācāryas felt a serious need to construct new terminology for explaining the significance of the *nayas* to contemporary world. In large part such an initiative was inspired by the necessities of the time, which was characterized by ongoing philosophical and logical debates about the nature of reality often giving rise to competition and engendering conflicts among the debaters. In such an environment, major Indic traditions attempted to explain the efficacy and validity of their own points of views about the nature of reality. For example, Vedantins accepted that Brahman is absolutely unchangeable and eternal whereas *māyā* is unreal and changing. According to Buddhists, whatever is real is momentary, just as the cloud. Nothing is permanent. So according to the Vedantins, the Buddhists were wrong, and vice versa.

During the first century of the Common Era, Ācārya Umāsvāti (also known as Umāsvāmī) undertook the task of defining the reality in the *Tattvārtha Sūtra* (*That Which Is*) on the basis of Mahāvira's teachings. He articulated three levels for the

understanding of reality: permanence, origination, and cessation.⁸ Advancing on this idea further, Ācārya Siddhasena Divākara came up with the new terminology, *anekanta*, to help reconcile the apparently opposing perspectives on the nature of truth and reality. He connected this with Bhagavāna Mahāvira's conversations with his disciples in the *Bhagvatī Sūtra*. His major works on the explanation of *anekānta* and *naya*, which continue to inspire Jain practitioners and scholars today, are *Sanmati Tarka* and *Nyayāvātara*. In these magnificent treatises, he provides a critical assessment of several systems of thought with references to different *nyayas*. He observed, "I bow to Anekāntavāda because without this we cannot understand the reality."⁹

The term *anekānta* consists of two words "*anek*" (more than one) and "*anta*" (qualities, attribute or ends). When we say that an object has infinite attributes, we are actually saying that an object is capable of undergoing infinite modifications. *Anekānta* signifies the interdependence of substance and modes.¹⁰ It is not possible to have the existence of only substance or only mode. Reality is made up of both substance and mode, permanence and change. Therefore, every mode is as much a part of reality as the substance is. Thus substance and modes cannot be separated from one another. In fact, the two cannot exist without one another.¹¹ Modes and qualities reside in substance and we recognize the substance because of its qualities and modes. *Anekāntavāda* allows us to overcome the apparent internal contradictions between eternal and non-eternal, substance and mode and helps us recognize their interdependence on one

⁸ "*utpāda-vyaya-dhauvyayaktaṃ sat*" Tattvārtha Sūtra 5/29. (Gujarat: Sri Jain Sahitya Samati, 1977).

⁹ Sanmati Tarka, 3/69 (Bhartiya Gyan Peeth, 1971).

¹⁰ Sanmati Tarka, 1/14, *op. cit.*

¹¹ Sanmati Tarka, 1/12, *op. cit.*

another for existence. Ācārya Umāsvāmī, Siddhasen Divākara, Śāmantabhadra and Akalaṅka were some of the pioneers in the application of the *nayas* to the different philosophical problems of their time. Subsequently, this process was carried further by many ācāryas, including Vidyānandin, Haribhadra, Mānikyanandin, Vādideva sūri and Hemachandra.

The application of *anekāntavāda* to our day-to-day life can allow us to reconcile the multiple views of reality. At any given point of time, it is not possible to explain or express the infinite attributes and modes that an existent (*sat*) has. Following Mahāvira, Jain ācāryas used the language of "*syat*." The word "*syat*" is not an expression of doubt or skepticism. Rather, it stands for multiplicity or multiple possibilities.¹² It allows us to logically express or determine the nature of modes from different perspectives. That is why the term *syādvāda* includes the manifestation of the substance and modes in conditional dialectic form. The format of conditional dialectic is three dimensional- existence, non-existence, inexpressible. For example, X is X from the perspective of its own existence. X is not Y from the perspective of Y's existence. Y's existence shows X's non-existence. Now if we have to talk about X's existence and non-existence simultaneously, then we have to use the expression "inexpressible." It shows that existence and non-existence are both real but it is not possible to express them together. Ācārya Akalaṅka held that an affirmation of one's own nature and the denial of alien nature are very essential to recognize and understand every individual's existence. Such an approach helps us to recognize the other individual from the point of his or her nature. This perspective is central to *anekānta* which enables us to understand reality in a deeper sense--the same person has his/her own existence and non-existence on behalf of his/her multitude qualities. For instance, a person who is a good teacher is also a good piano player. When he is teaching

¹² See Akalaṅka, *Tattvārtharajvartika*, 4/42 (Bhartiya Gyan Peeth, 1999).

the class he is a teacher not a musician but when he plays his piano he is a musician but not a teacher. However, a person has many qualities but it is not possible to identify and express all the qualities at the same time. At any given time, one specific quality becomes primary and rest are considered secondary. Therefore, existence (being) and non-existence (not being) are often comprehended in terms of their varying and changing qualities.

According to Jaina philosophy no new substance will originate and no substance will terminate completely. In the beginning less and endless notion of time, there are infinite substances undergoing infinite modes. Substances goes through constant change. What we see with the naked eye are multifacets of modes that a substance undergoes. Therefore, reality cannot be expressed in just one way (*ekānta*) there are multiple aspects to it. The application of the philosophy of *anekānta* enables us to understand the various dimensions of truth, to reconcile sometimes seemingly contradictory views, and facilitates an attitude of respect for other peoples' point of views.

Today we live in a world which is highly diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, culture and language. Similarly, peoples' approaches to understanding reality are very varied. The approach aided by *anekānta* allows us to be more understanding of other peoples' views. Understanding, however, does not always mean agreeing or compromising with one's own values and beliefs. Therefore, an *anekāntika* (a person who recognizes multiple aspects of reality) is by nature more tolerant than *ekāntika* (a person who understands reality from only one perspective and sees things in an absolutist way) individual and is able to maintain his or her values. Imagine the impact of the philosophy of *anekānta* on the world we live in today. If all people begin to show tolerance for other people's views (even if they do not agree with them), the possibility of conflicts will reduce, tensions will not occur, and wars may be avoided.

The very recognition of and respect for others will help us envision and create a nonviolent world order. To conclude with

the view of Ācārya Mahāprajña, *anekānta* is not only a philosophy but also a manual for good life.¹³ Such an approach to reality encourages us to keep our minds open, and discourages us from adopting an absolutist thinking. This in turn helps us in overcoming the egotistic thoughts which usually originate in an environment where one considers one's view superior to those of others. An approach imbued with *anekāntavāda* spawns tolerance, equanimity, fraternity, love and compassion—all essential for a nonviolent world order. Thus, in this sense, *anekānta* is also an essential precondition of *ahiṃsā*. Conversely, a person of compassion and nonviolence alone can practice *anekantavāda*. In the latter sense then, *ahiṃsā* becomes a precondition for *anekāntavāda*. The application of the philosophy of *anekānta* to the larger world will help us advance toward a peaceful, harmonious, and nonviolent world. Such attitude will certainly decrease enmity toward others and promote increasing degree of amity among human beings.

¹³ Ācārya Mahāprajña, *Anekānta The Third Eye* (Ladnun: JVBI, 2001).