

Message of

Bhagavan Mahavira

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The year commencing from November 13, 1974 to November 15, 1975 was observed throughout the world as the 2500th Nirvana Mahotsava day of that great teacher, Bhagavan Mahavira, who preached the doctrines of Ahimsa, Satya, Achaurya, Brahmacharya and Aparigraha as holding the key to the spiritual advancement of an individual as also to public peace and morality. He did not preach these doctrines for the first time but merely reiterated what had been taught to humanity by his predecessors for thousands of years before him. As Dr. Hermann Jacobi has observed, "Jainism is an original system, quite distinct and independent of all others and that, therefore, it is of great importance for the study of philosophical thought and religious life in ancient India." Dr. Radhakrishnan confirms this view in one of his volumes on Indian Philosophy (Vol II Page 287) : "Jain tradition ascribes the origin of the system to Rishabhadeva (the first Tirthankara), who lived many centuries back. There is evi-

dence to show that as far as the first century B. C., there were people who were worshipping Rishabhadeva, the first Tirthankara. There is no doubt that Jainism prevailed before Vardhamana or Parsvanatha. The Yajurveda mentions the names of three Tirthankaras-Rishabha, Ajitanath and Arishtanemi. The Bhagavata Purana endorses the view that Rishabhadeva was the founder of Jainism."

Though Mahavira was a historical person, not many details of his life are available. His father Siddhartha was a King in Vaisali, part of modern Bihar and his mother was Trishaladevi. Since marvelous prosperity to the royal family and to the kingdom heralded the birth of the child who was destined to be a Tirthankara, the parents named the child Vardhamana. The child was brought up amidst royal grandeur and comfort; one would have expected him to grow to manhood with fondness for pleasures and soft comforts of palace life. That was not to be.

Vardhamana, who was subsequently named Mahavira, the great hero, on account of his remarkable deeds of prowess exhibited by him even during his childhood. He had a bent of mind which was at once philosophic and spiritual. As regards his marriage, the Digambaras and the Svetambaras differ in their traditions. While former hold that he was unmarried, the latter adhere to the view that he was married to one Yasoda and had a female child of that wedlock. Both are agreed that in the very prime of youth, he renounced the world and became a naked monk, as nudity was considered most essential for maintenance of mental detachment from all worldly objects and endurance of all bodily sufferings, paving the way for liberation. He believed that mental peace could result only from external peace by elimination of all attachments from one's mind. (swadosha Santyavihitmatma santih.)

During the period of his monkhood, Mahavira led a life of great austerity and concentrated his mind by meditation on the true attributes of a liberated soul : infinite knowledge, infinite vision or faith, infinite power and infinite bliss. Rains, storms and hunger never deterred him from the path of meditation as he felt convinced that all these afflictions pertained to the body and not to the soul which was distinct from the body. After arduous penances and undisturbed meditations for a period of twelve years, he attained Omniscience when he was deeply sunk in pure meditation (sukla dhyana) on the shore of river Rjukula on the 10th day of the bright half of the month of Vaisakha.

Omniscience dawns only on those who destroy their four destructive Karmas : Jnanavaraniya (knowledge-covering), Darsanavaraniya (perception of vision-covering), Antarayaya (the obstructive karmas) and Mohaniya (the deluding karma). He preached for 30 years and attained salvation at Pavapuri (at a distance of 27 miles from Patna) when he was deeply absorbed in Meditation in the early hours of the Divali Amavasya which is observed as a festival of lights all over India.

His message is today as practical and convincing as it was in his time. He affirmed that there are four things of paramount value which it is difficult for a living being to obtain : human birth, instruction in religion of the law of Dharma belief in the law and energy in self-control. The universe is eternal It is not created by any external agency. There is therefore none either to lift you up or throw you down. You are the architect of your fortune and your salvation.

The critics of the message of Mahavira regard it as pure atheism. The word atheism has varied in meaning. The word itself is of Greek origin, derived from the word 'theos' meaning God. Jainism does believe in the existence of soul which, in its purest state, possesses the divine attributes of infinite knowledge, infinite perception, infinite power and infinite bliss. Jainism does not believe in the existence of God as the creator of the Universe. Modern science and the well-established theories in physics and geology support the theory that the world is a natural creation with

life and matter existing in different forms. Another meaning which is ascribed to the word in India is that athiests are those who do not believe in the Vedas. There are many religions which do not believe in the Vedas since they have their own sacred literature.

So the religion preached by Mahavira is not a theistic religion but it is a religion which gives full freedom to every soul or living creature to work out its own salvation. He preached : The universe is peopled by manifold creatures, they are born in different states, climes and conditions. It is our thoughts, deeds and actions that constantly entangle us with karmas which are either auspicious or inauspicious according as our activities are pure, wicked or mixed ones. As Shakespeare has said in his Hamlet :

There is nothing either good or bad,
But our thinking makes it so.

It is "the mind that can make a hell of heaven or a heaven of hell." It is by elimination of Karmas that living beings can reach in due course a pure state and be born as human beings. The living beings are not at the mercy of any god or evil spirit but they are their own masters, working out a hell or heaven for themselves.

How do you work out your salvation ? The foundation for spiritual edifice has to be built on the practice of sound ethics. Ahimsa (non-violence) is the very life-breath of all Jain ethics. It proclaimed that Ahimsa was the supreme religion not

only because it wanted to cry halt to sacrifices of living beings in the name of religion but also to inculcate the virtue of humanism which exudes the milk of human kindness all around. Man is supreme among all the living creatures not only on account of his intelligence, knowledge and intuition but also on account of the all pervasive and protective quality of compassion. Bhagavan Mahavira has said :

Sarve praninah priyausah, sukha-
swadah dukkhapratikulah Apriyavadhah
priyajivinah, jivitukamah.

Acaranga. 2.37.

"All beings love to live long; they experience happiness; they hate misery. Since life is dear to them, they are against every kind of injury. All beings long to live."

In such a world, Himsa, or injury of any type, whether to the mind or to any of the faculties becomes inhuman, as such action is a degradation of human qualities. That is why Himsa which is born of passions like attachment, anger, greed, pride or delusion has been regarded first as injury to one's own self and next as injury to some other being. All transgressions of the vows of truthfulness, honesty, celibacy and aparigraha are the direct progeny of one or the other of passions. That is why Bhagavan Mahavira advised; "Do no injury to living beings of the six orders, abstaining from lying and from taking what is not freely given, renouncing property, women, pride, and deceit, men

should live under self-restraint.” (Uttara-dhyayana Sutra, 12.41). One should not permit or consent to the killing of living beings. A careful man will not injure living beings. In thoughts, words, and acts, one should do nothing injurious to beings who people the world, whether they move or not.

Mahatma Gandhi, who was very much influenced by the religion of Ahimsa and Truth, made Non-Violence his philosophy of life and Truth its goal. He said: “Ahimsa and Truth are so intertwined that it is practically impossible to disentangle and separate them ..Ahimsa is the means and Truth is the end. A steadfast pursuit of Ahimsa is inevitably bound to truth—not so violence. That is why I swear by Ahimsa.” In these days when violence, lying and excesses in private and public life have become the order of the day, there is the greatest need to understand and practise these doctrines in daily life.

There is dishonesty in various forms: corruption, black-marketing, adulteration, misappropriation and cheating. All these are traceable to human greed. Bhagavan Mahavira asked his followers to control greed and acquire purity of thought and action : “The more you get, the more you want; your desires increase with your means. Though two mashes would do to supply your want, still you would scarcely think ten million sufficient.” (Uttara. 8.17). There are no limits to human greed, not even the whole space of the Universe. When a person becomes its prey, he falls down to the abyss of misery

even in his attempts to reach the fringe of his ambitions.

There are two other vices in the public life of today. The difference between the West and the East in these matters is only a difference in degree. Promiscuousness in sexual matters has ruined many families and personal lives of many unmarried persons. The use of contraceptives has further added to the evil instead of solving it. Bhagavan Mahavira has said that for those who long for liberation and life according to the Dharma, there is nothing in this world which offers so many difficulties like the want of celibacy; it is only the ignorant that delight in sexual attraction. The problem of population is closely associated with the vow of celibacy. That is indeed a healthy solution. If our saints emphasised the need of education on Brahmacharya during the student days, today we are emphasising on the need of sex-education without emphasis on celibacy as essential to moral character. “If we begin to believe” says Gandhiji, “that indulgence in animal passion is necessary, harmless and sinless, we shall want to give reins to it and shall be powerless to resist it. Whereas if we educate ourselves to believe that such indulgence is harmful, sinful, unnecessary and can be controlled, we shall discover that self-restraint is perfectly possible. What formerly appeared to me to be extravagant praise of brahmacharya in our religious books seems now, with increasing clearness every day, to be absolutely proper and founded on experience.” “Brahmacharya must be observed in thought, word and deed,”

Aparigraha which requires an individual to impose voluntary restrictions on the limits on one's own earnings is based both on material and spiritual considerations. Concentration of wealth in a few hands leads to revolution against the rich; in fact it is a negation of **Samatavada** or the doctrine of equality which religious teachers, socialists and jurists have emphasised as offering the best solution for social harmony and peace. In this connection, Bhagavan Mahavira has preached the twofold path for achievement of this objective.

The first is that we should always remember that the grace of living consists in mutual help (**parasparopagraho Jivanam**). If we have to follow this advice in practice, we must help each other and that would not be possible if we live a selfish life. Einstein also said : "Man is here for the sake of other men". Self-sacrifice needs both self-restraint and self-detachment. It is our greed and our love for greater comforts than what are needed for a healthy mind and body that are responsible for the instinct of accumulation. Today, the gulf between the rich and poor has become so wide that there is rivalry between the capitalist and communist nations. That is not happy either for those countries or for the whole world in general. The doctrine of peaceful co-existence needs mutual adjustment by equitable distribution of food, clothing and shelter.

The other path is the creation of a society based on equality and tolerance.

The principle of Ahimsa which in its positive aspect stands for universal love and compassion naturally envisages a society in which all live in peace and comfort. It was **Samantabhadra Acharya** who in his book **Yuktyanusasana** said that the kind life which Bhagavan Mahavira wanted for all living beings was **Sarvodaya-tirtha**, that is, a holy message for universal peace and prosperity with mutual tolerance.

Having given to the humanity the secrets purposeful living with compassion, truthfulness, honesty, celibacy and voluntary limitations on earnings and accumulation, Bhagavan Mahavira preached the doctrine of **Syadvada** so that the followers of Jainism could avoid conflicts due to dogmatism and intolerance. **Syadvada** endeavoured to abolish metaphysical fanaticism and rejected blind ritualism.

With this ethical back-ground, if properly utilized for personal enlightenment and purification, then the path of liberation would be free from material thorns. Right Perception, Right Knowledge and Right Conduct together constitute the path of liberation. While some faiths have emphasised on devotion, others on Knowledge or Jnana and still others on Karma or conduct, Jainism considers that all the three in unison and harmony are essential for attainment of liberation. Faith without knowledge and knowledge without faith can only amount to misconceptions; conduct without the other two will be only an aimless march in the wilderness of worldly existence. All the three jewels together can form a safe

guide on the path of liberation lighting the dark corners on the way.

Right faith and knowledge will help in the cultivation of self-restraint which is the sheet-anchor for self-conquest. Bhagawana Mahavira advised his disciples : 'Subdue our Self, for the Self is difficult to subdue; if your Self is subdued, you will be happy in this world and in the next. Better it is that I should subdue my Self by self-control and penance than be subdued by others with fetters and corporal punishment.' (Uttara. I. 15, 16). He who wants to be a better man spiritually, must heed this advice and follow it in letter and spirit. We should remember that unless the ash is cleared, the bright fire within, cannot be visible and cannot give light. So also, unless we purify our thoughts and actions by self control we can never see the nature of the Self. We will ever continue to grope in the dark for light without the lamp.

The veils of Karmas make us blind to the light of infinite perception, knowledge, bliss and power which are the emiable attributes of our own Self. The veils must be destroyed by Right understanding backed up by unstinted faith. It is the passions that bind us with fresh Karmas. He who has subdued the passions will find light from his own Soul. A blurred mirror can show only a dim image; so also, a person who has become a slave to his passions like anger, hatred, attachment etc cannot experience the joy of his own Soul. By Knowledge, the Self understands the principles of Jiva and the nature of

substances; by his perception, he acquires the intense purity of his Faith; and by the Force of his Right Conduct, he can break the shackles of Karma. By austerities, he can maintain the serenity of his mind and attain to greater purity. If purity of life is reinforced by **Dharma-dhyana**, he can go nearer the goal. If you bury your mind within the Soul in you, you would have marched very near your goal of liberation.

In fine, Jainism offers a practical solution to miseries of life. Right Conduct is the stepping stone to salvation. Attain purity of mind by subduing your passions; by purity of mind, you can acquire purity of soul. It is by attaining the purity of soul that the **Atman** can become the **Paramatman**. Be free from external and internal attachments and you will see the light of liberation. You cannot acquire purity without truth and Ahimsa. You cannot get the benefit of your religion, unless you have purity within you. Without realizing the core of the religion, you cannot reach the goal. Without liberation, there cannot be eternal bliss.

It is given to everyone to be in constant search. For the avrage individual, the message of Bhagavan Mahavira is that one should create an awareness in oneself that Knowledge of the **Atman** is bliss and white ignorance only involves one into interminable transmigrations. No one is high by birth; our virtues raise us high while our vices reduce us to lower state of existence. Whether to use our

human birth for Self-elevation or demotion, is entirely dependent upon our own personal exertion, gradual advancement from the first Gunasthana to the next higher, step by step by step till we reach the fourteenth stage of final beattitude should be our constant endeavour.

The only way of progressive enhancement of consciousness is to develop a conviction about the distinction between the soul and the body, about the futility of developing the latter at the cost of the former and about the ceaseless search for the light within. Remember the most realistic following picture of a Jiva in mundane existence as drawn by a great Jaina Acharya :—

A Jiva is wandering in the garden of mundane existence; an intoxicated angry elephant in the form of Death started running after it; the Jiva also starts running; the moment it becomes exhausted by running, it hides itself in a big tree; at the root of the tree a number of creepers like **gotra**, low birth, etc have spread all round; just then, the Jiva is about to fall into a well but it catches hold of a creeper in the form of **Ayus** (life-span). Catching hold of it, it remains dangling and struggling. Just then, **micc** in the form of dark half and bright half of a month begin to bite that creeper. Serpents in the seven hells begin moving about with mouths open to eat away the Jiva. From the tree,

the juice of happiness produced by contact with sons and others begins to trickle down. The Jiva gets a strong desire to taste the juice. The bees that had gathered round about begin to bite the Jiva. Yet the Jiva begins wasting its time in tasting the juice thinking that it alone constitutes the happiness. A food gets addicted like this: while the wise men instead of spending their time getting absorbed in tasting such sensual pleasures, renounce the attachments and spend their time in difficult austerities,

These are the realities of life. Bhagavan Mahavira woke up right from his childhood and renounced all attachments, including his royal throne and its grandeur, adopted a life of stringent austerities and attained liberation. The duty of those who desire to be free from the miseries of this life is clear; Acquire Right Faith, Right Knowledge and cultivate Right Conduct and note that your salvation lies in trying to get hold of the three jewels and get light from them to guide you in life.

Jainism is a practical way of life. It does not advise every one to jump high because all cannot reach the highest rung of the ladder by a single jump. Life is a long pilgrimage attended with the dangers of a long journey. Those who are cautious and possess the eternal lamp shall alone be able to wade through safely to liberation or some other place of happiness.

