Traditional Jainism NOT Enough: Jain Education That Listens

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There is a growing concern that youths in this country raised on Jainism are losing their learned principles or possibly trading them in for ones in their immediate environment. This phenomenon encompasses everything from dating and marrying outside the Jain (or Indian) community, to drug use, social, political, and moral views that confuse many parents because they may differ from their own views. First-generation parents suffer from the fear that their children will lose their culture, heritage, religion, and language. Their fear is very real and understandable, and they have tried to combat it, but their methods so far have been only partially effective.

The idea up until now has been to educate and swamp children in Jain teachings, but my question at this point is how much good has that really done? My generation, the second-generation of young adults from the time they go to college and onward are facing many struggles. Many times we may not know how to deal with them in a Jain or Indian way as our parents may want us to do simply because we are not equipped with that knowledge. Parents get upset because they think that we just deal with things in an American way. Well it is hard for youths to create the balance between Indian and American cultures, and when religion enters the picture the situation becomes even more complex.

Teaching just the basic principles of Jainism is like learning science. We do it because we have to, we memorize the facts and store them away for later. However, because we are not tested on them, we forget them even quicker than we forget science. My point is that we need to apply Jainism to daily life, as we apply learned science principles in the laboratory. Things make more sense when we can see that a real world application is possible. Obviously all of this boils down to communication and the lack of it in the Jain community- that means in the Jain family and in the society. If you want your child to live a Jain way of life, to make decisions about life based on Jainism, then you have to look at the life and environment of your child and teach your child how to deal with life using Jainism.

The solution to this dilemma about how to pass on things such as religion and culture is quite simple. However, carrying out this task is extremely difficult, requiring qualities such as courage, dedication, time, and commitment to the youth. There is one individual that I know of at this time that possesses all of these qualities. He has made Jainism a way of life for himself, and that is what he is trying to teach young adults around this country. I am sure that many people know him, his name is Pravin Shah from Raleigh, N.C. For those centers that have benefited from his knowledge, you know what I mean. The kind of impact that his type of teaching has is like no other for the youth. He knows a great deal about Jainism and that along with his knowledge about the current issues makes him the ideal individual to teach the children today. For those centers that have not benefited from his presence, they should make the arrangements to have him come and share his knowledge.

Pravin Shah visited the Atlanta Jain Society about one year ago, and I can honestly say that I learned more about Jainism and how to make it a part of my life in terms of dealing with political, social, and moral issues in both a religious and real world way than from any other visiting individuals. His goal is to teach youths ages 15 and up about the basic fundamentals of Jainism.
and how to apply them to the world. He has a two day format for the youth program. The first day he teaches youths about the basic principles and ideas of Jainism. The second day he allows youths to ask any and all questions that they want to. When he came to Atlanta, the youth raised questions about abortion, suicide, the death penalty, homosexuality, heterosexuality, and many more. Pravin uncle addressed each and every question, first from a religious perspective and then from a householder stage perspective (householder stage = our stage in life today).

He understands the importance of communication and how necessary it is within the Jain community. I think that he also understands that it will do no good to teach Jainism to the youth without also discussing other issues such as the ones mentioned above. These issues can and need to be addressed by parents first and foremost, but also by learned individuals within our communities. By learned individuals I do not mean guru’s and swami’s from India, because they cannot relate to the youth in this society as well as Pravin uncle.

Pravin uncle’s method is more effective than the guru’s and swami’s etc... that have visited for two simple reasons. First, he can relate to youths in a way that would be impossible for someone who does not live here on a day to day basis to do so. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly is that he utilizes the interactive model of teaching and communication which is the best model to use in a learning environment. Interactive communication has to do with questions and answers, debates and discussions, and open-mindedness. It is not of the lecture format where the audience has very little input in terms of discussion. Our parents and elders can relate to the scholar’s from India better than the youth can possibly because of language difficulties, and probably because of conceptual differences that exist between those raised in that culture as opposed to this one.

The thing that appeals to me the most about Pravin Uncle as an educator is that he takes Jainism beyond just a religious identification for people, he deals with it in such a way that it becomes easy to see how Jainism actually has a place in daily life. His workshops are not just about Jainism, they are about life and how difficult it is for my generation to achieve a balance of cultures because we are in essence the test generation by being the first American born and or raised Jains. A generation gap will continue to exist, but Pravin uncle is trying to bridge that gap by communicating with youths and young adults about their concerns. Those individuals that know him will tell you that he is sincere in his efforts and that they have continued to benefit from his knowledge and valuable resources even after the workshops are over.

The bottom line is that communication is difficult especially between parents and their children and between the religious community and its members. By communicating and keeping an open mind we will be keeping the door to gaining more knowledge open, and educating oneself and others is what life should be about. I believe that that is precisely what Jainism is about: the acquisition of more and more knowledge that will ultimately deliver us from the life/death cycle to moksha.

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