

LORD MAHAVIRA AND HIS MESSAGE

Lord Mahavira – the twenty-fourth Tirthankara of the nonviolent *jainist* tradition - was a contemporary of Lord Buddha. Though Jainism is an ancient religion and is said to have been in vogue thousands of years ago, it gained momentum and popularity with the advent of Lord Mahavira in 599 BCE. In the twentieth century it came to prominence when Mahatma Gandhi used ahimsa as a powerful weapon to gain political freedom for India. He wrote in his autobiography that the use of nonviolence as a political instrument was influenced by the revered Jaina layman Raychand Bhai, one of the three persons – Tolstoy, Ruskin and Raychand Bhai who left an indelible impression on his mind. A Tirthankara in the Jaina faith is considered to be an omniscient being (*kevali*) who has conquered the self by annihilating four destructive types of karma. In the Acharanga Sutra it has been stated that Mahavira wore the armour of total abstinence from sinful actions, remained unruffled by hardships, stood motionless in meditation and moved ahead cheerfully despite stumbling blocks till he achieved *kevalya* (perfect knowledge).

He was born in a small town called Khstriya Kundapura in Bihar (India). The name of his father was Siddhartha and that of his mother was Trishla. His message of ahimsa came at a time when sacrificial violence (sacrificing animals at the altar of a deity) was at its peak. He condemned the killing of innocent animals and said that all *jivas* (living beings) are equal and have a right to live. Killing even small insects and microbes is a sinful act. He exhorted his followers to practice ahimsa in word, thought and deed. According to him mere refraining from physical violence is not *ahimsa* (nonviolence). We must avoid mental and verbal violence as well, which according to him are more devastating and more sinful than physical violence. Mahavira was named Vardhamana in the beginning of his life. It is said that the coffers of king Siddhartha began overflowing with gold coins, diamonds and other jewels soon after the birth of the prince in the royal family. So he came to be known as Vardhamana meaning “increasing.” Later, on account of his fearlessness and heroic acts, he was named Mahavira (the great warrior).

Among the Jains Lord Mahavira occupies the same exalted status as is held by Lord Krishna among the Hindus, Lord Buddha among the Buddhists, the glorious Zoroaster among the Parsis, the noble self-sacrificing figure of Lord Jesus among the Christians and the great prophet Mohammed among the followers of Islam. Mahavira’s message of Ahimsa for universal peace continues to reverberate throughout India even after 2533 years of his death.

Mahavira was a little older than Buddha but from his day to the present, the Jains, who now number more than ten millions, have kept steadfast to the doctrine of Ahimsa and have given up meat-eating and are thoroughly vegetarian. It must be remembered that Jainism is one of the most ancient nonviolent traditions – which did not begin with Lord Mahavira but is believed to have been there from time immemorial. He was the last of the Tirthankaras. There had been 23

Tirthankaras before him. The first Tirthankara was Lord Risabha. A detailed description of his divine status is found in the Hindu Puranas as well, especially in the Shrimad Bhagavatam Purana. This proves that Jainism is not a new institution; it is very old. The antiquity of this religion is proved by the mention of the first Jain Tirthankar in the Hindu scriptures of very old time. The Jains believe that the 24 Tirthankaras appear in definite and exactly fixed places with the two cycles of time known as *avasarpini* (descending curve of time) and *utsarpini* (ascending curve of time) which govern the rise and fall of civilizations on this planet which in the Jaina terminology is identified as Bharat Kshetra. It is a part of Jambudvip comprising seven continents. In its center lies Mount Meru. Each cycle of time has six segments. Each segment of the descending period begins with the best possible condition but successively becomes worse till it reaches its nadir. At the start of *utsarpini* (ascending curve of the cycle of time) social condition is at its worst, but becomes better as we pass from one segment to the other. The Jains believe that the first of the Tirthankaras of the descending curve of time is always born in the third segment (*araa*) and the first Tirthankaras of the ascending cycle of time is also born in its third segment (*araa*). Lord Mahavira was born in the fourth segment (*choutha aara*) of the current descending curve and we are living in the fifth segment (*pancham aara*) at present.

Mahavira's life was not different from that of a prince of that period. But the Jains believe that though he lived in a palace, married a beautiful princess called Yasoda and had a daughter from her, he lived dispassionately and was aware of the vain samsara all the time. Deep in his heart he had decided that he would renounce the world and embark on the ascetic path. But he postponed his decision till the death of his parents. At the age of 28th he wanted to be an ascetic, but his elder brother didn't permit him, so he stayed with him for two more years and ultimately renounced the world at the age of 30.

For twelve years he wandered into the region of the savage tribes, endured atrocities perpetrated on him by them and exposed himself to the inclemency of the weather. He undertook long fasts and subjected himself to self-mortifications. His only objective was to unravel the truth. His quest was over when he attained *kevalya* (omniscience) – the perfect clear knowledge about the nature of samsara (universe). He spent the rest of his life preaching and inspiring people to live the good life embedded in self-restraint and ahimsa.

Mahavira was the embodiment of truth rather than a historical hero. Our devotion to him is devotion to truth, for he himself devoted his entire life to the search, attainment and dissemination of truth. It was he who propounded the great philosophy of *anekantavada* which is capable of synthesising the diverse currents of thought in the world. We will not be able to appreciate him correctly as a great prophet of *ahimsa* (nonviolence), and *anekantavada* (non-absolutism) until we have tried to practice the two ideals in our own lives. His principle of *anekanta* (truth can be approached from many sides) has in it the potential for reconciliation and peaceful coexistence.

He led a life of “renunciation.” Although “renunciation” is generally taken to be antagonistic to “active life,” Mahavira’s mode of practicing renunciation was not a way of passivity, nor was it quietism or fatalism. On the contrary, his path involved vigorous spiritual endeavour and perpetual striving for self-purification. That is why he preached “active renunciation” and stood foremost amongst those who have infused Indian life with the spirit of great endeavour (*purusharth*)

His philosophy of life is based on realism, and as such it illustrates both the aspects of truth – the eternal as well as the topical. The truths revealed by him, therefore, are of great significance for the present age of stark reality. The ideals of freedom, relativity, coexistence, harmony, and equality have already been recognized as universal values today. To this current of thoughts, let us add one more current so that it might assume the proportions of a mighty current to vitalize human life with the spirit of *ahimsa* and *anekanta*. This, indeed, will prove beneficial and blissful to all of us.

Viewing the truth from the angle of the vision of its result, he said, “The basic problem is that of violence”. Looking at it from the viewpoint of its origin, he said, “The basic problem is that of the *kasayas* (passions).” *Kasaya* means tainted consciousness and tainted mind. Mind tainted with attachment is filled with the emotion of love whereas one tainted with aversion is filled with hatred. Love, in its turn, produces avarice. An avaricious mind becomes deceitful, lustful and possessive. A mind tainted with aversion takes pride in riches, caste, power, beauty etc. An egotistic mind becomes prone to anger and hatred. It feeds the fire of conflict.

He said that nonviolence is conducive to the good of all living beings. All are benefited by it. It is most propitious to the Homo sapiens which lead a social life. The more a man resorts to violence to solve social problems, the more he does harm to his own self and contributes to social unrest. Violence and acquisitiveness or possession go hand in hand. His disciple the Ganadhara Gautama once asked Mahavira: “Lord! Can man attain enlightenment (*kevalya*)?”

Mahavira said, “Yes, he can”.

Gautama: “Lord! how can he do so?”

Mahavira: “By renouncing violence and possessiveness”.

Gautama : “Can man be spiritually disciplined?”

Mahavira: “Yes, he can”

Gautama : “Lord! how can he do so?”

Mahavira : “By renouncing violence and possessiveness.”

Possessiveness and violence, according to Mahavira, are inseparable. Today, when violence is used against power and wealth, we think violence is on the increase. In the language of Mahavira, this is violence against violence. Modern thinkers have begun to endorse his view that we can put an end to violence only by putting an end to the monopoly of power and wealth. It can be eradicated only if monopolization of material resources is stopped and wealth is equitably distributed. Modern political thinkers take a different view of things. They believe that violence can be stopped only through the use of force. But experience so far has shown that force has failed to stop violence and people have now begun to think that it cannot succeed unless it is supported by a favourable public opinion. The only graceful way to escape reactive violence is to willingly put a limit to possessiveness. The natural consequence of this self-discipline will be an equitable distribution of possessions on the planet.

Mahavira did not ever acquiesce in the usurpation of the freedom of man. Usurpation of freedom amounts to violence. Violence in its turn creates problems and misery. He propounded the principle of self-discipline in order to free mankind from this misery. He said, "One should discipline oneself. Self-discipline is undoubtedly most difficult. He who has disciplined his own self will certainly be happy here and hereafter. It is better if he controls himself through self-restraint and penance. It is not good for him to be governed by others under the threat of imprisonment and death." Mahavira never considered nonviolence separate from freedom and freedom from self-restraint and penance.

As soon as man begins to look at the world through the perspective of *ahimsa*, equality of all souls which is generally veiled is perceived. Gautama asked Mahavira, "Lord! Are the souls of an elephant and a tiny insect equal?" He replied, "Yes, Gautama, the souls of an elephant and a tiny insect are equal. The body of an elephant is huge and that of an insect tiny. The difference in the size of their bodies doesn't affect the equality of their souls. One who confuses the innate qualities of the souls with their external differences such as bodies, sense-organs, colour and form, caste etc. cannot be a votary of nonviolence. A nonviolent man is he who finds all souls to be equal in spite of external differences."

He who does not believe in the innate equality of all the souls presumes himself to be superior to others and others as inferior to himself or vice versa. He either hates others or thinks himself to be hated by others. He either intimidates others or feels himself being intimidated by others. These complexities of inferiority and superiority create inequality. Where there is inequality, people resort to violence. The principle of equality does not disturb social behaviour. On the contrary, it makes social life smooth and correct. In day-to-day life the more the human behaviour is permeated with equality, the more love is engendered. Love, in its turn, makes social organization run smoothly and reduces violence. We lose sight of the equality of all souls under the pressure of changing situations and the confusion created by externalities. Lack of self-control creates an inegalitarian mentality. Mahavira said, "O man! you have been passing through the cycle of various births from eternity in the course of which you were born as

mother, father, son or brother etc. of each living being. Then, who will you treat as your friend or foe, high or low, beloved or despicable? You are not born only now, hence do not adopt a short-sighted view of things from a timeless perspective. Your soul is eternal and therefore you should try to experience the relationships between all souls. Try to control your mind by practicing concentration. By doing so, you will attain equality at all levels of principle, nature and mind. Once you attain equality, you will attain *ahimsa*. Where there is equality, there is *ahimsa* (nonviolence). Both are proportionate to each other. Equality means equanimity which excludes love and hatred, attachment and aversion, inclination and disinclination. The behaviour of an individual, whose conscience is entrenched in equality or equanimity is always important. In the same way a society based on egalitarianism is free from all sorts of discriminations. Mahavira said, “Nobody likes suffering. Therefore don’t inflict suffering on anybody. This is nonviolence, this is equality. It is enough for you to understand this. To understand nonviolence in order to understand equality and vice versa is the *summum bonum* of all knowledge.”

Mahavira was not a philosophical thinker, but he had attained the state of *kaivalya* and realized the truth in its entirety. A philosophical thinker does not command a spiritual vision. He formulates his views only with the help of *sruta jñana* (empirical knowledge) and thinking. After having experienced the truth Mahavira said, “He who does not see, does not look within, does not see himself, cannot realize the self. His knowledge depends on others. It is attained either on the basis of *srutajñana* (empirical knowledge), or through *matijñana* (articulate knowledge derived through the sense-organs and the mind). It is not in the form of innate knowledge. A man who has no direct knowledge of the self cannot practice righteousness. His behaviour cannot be free from attachment, aversion, and delusion. There can be no salvation (*moksha*) except through righteous conduct. *Moksha* can be achieved only after attachment and aversion have been completely annihilated. One who has not destroyed carnal desires cannot attain *nirvana* (liberation). The first step in the journey to *nirvana* is spiritual vision or self-knowledge. Mahavira said, “Perceive and discover the truth. Do not depend only on what I say but develop your own spiritual vision.”

Mahavira’s message for the world torn by strife, hatred, violence and discord is most relevant. It is like a soothing balm that relieves a man of severe ache. If humanity can follow the path of nonviolence shown by Lord Mahavira, all our turbulence will come to an end. I pay my solemn obeisance to the great soul who radiated love and compassion and showed the humanity the key to happiness.

Dr. S.L. Gandhi