

# The Nonviolent Jain Tradition:

## Unique Features and Common Values

THE JAIN RELIGIOUS TRADITION is firmly rooted in *ahimsa* (nonviolence). It enjoins its followers to adjure violence in word, thought and deed and refrain from resorting to coercion, intolerance, possessiveness, untruth and lustful desires. It is a path of peace and purity and forbids the use of violence even in self-defense. Revenge or hatred has no place in it. It exhorts all human beings to show tolerance towards those who hold different views or believe in different modes of worship. Diversity is a natural phenomenon and Jainism teaches us to 'live and let live.' It naturally looks on other religious traditions with respect and considers the act of disparaging or ridiculing them an act of great sin. The principle of *ahimsa* in its totality which, the Jains adore and abide by scrupulously, admits of no contradictions, disputation, censure or ill-speaking. It is an ancient tradition that dates back to the period of the beginning of human civilization and follows the teachings of 24 *Tirthankaras* – literally 'ford builders' or 'most perfect sanctified souls' or 'spiritual leaders' – the last and most significant of whom was Lord Mahavira, a contemporary of Lord Buddha. Lord Rishabh or Adinath was the first *Tirthankar* of the present cycle of time known as *Avsarpini* in the Jain terminology.

Unlike other religious traditions, it has had a history of peaceful co-existence since time immemorial. It is perhaps the only living tradition in the world which enjoys the distinction of having a history sans blood. The Jains have never fought a battle to protect their religion or to expand its 'empire' or to wipe out those who disagreed with its beliefs or opposed it. It is worthwhile to examine its nonviolent history and precept of tolerance towards all. It always puts emphasis on *samyak gyan* (right knowledge), *samyak darshan* (right perception or philosophy), and *samyak charitra* (right character) and advocates a feeling of friendship towards all living creatures including animals, birds, insects, even plants and vegetation, which according to it also have souls (*jiva*) just as human beings do. A religion which exhorts its followers to show compassion towards all living beings including the microbes that live in the air and plants that grow on this planet must regard all other faiths as manifestations of different facets of the same truth. The most sacred and significant religious festival of the Jains is *samvatsari*. It is the holiest day for them. They observe a fast on that day and abstain from all forms of violence. *Samvatsari* is followed by a day of forgiveness (*kshamat kshamana*) when the Jains are supposed to ask all living beings for forgiveness and also forgive them all for their acts of omission and commissions. "Friendship towards all" is the guiding principle of Jainism. Interreligious dialogue is in consonance with the spirit of this principle.

The word "enmity" is a taboo among the believers of this tradition. Every evening and morning a Jain *shravak* (votary) or a Jain ascetic reviews his actions and if he discovers that his utterances or actions lacerated or hurt the feelings of someone or that he thought ill of someone or was angry with him or her because the latter did him

immense harm or was opposed to his interests, he must invariably ask for his or her forgiveness and purge his heart of the stain of anger and hatred, notwithstanding the fact that the living being of whom he thought ill was an offender. Mahavira, the last *Tirthankar*, says, “all living beings want to live, hence no living being, whatsoever great or small it may be, should be killed.” He further says, “one may defeat a thousand foes a thousand times in a battle, but is the conquest of the self alone that transcends all.” These words of Lord Mahavira match the words of Jesus Christ when he says, “He who taketh his spirit is greater than he who taketh a city.” Since the Jain religious tradition regards all living beings equal and grants them a right to live, most Jains adhere to vegetarianism.

The Jain tradition has many sources within their religion that promote religious harmony. Some of these have been elucidated in the foregoing pages while describing its attitude towards other faiths. The quintessence of the Jain tradition lies embedded in its principle of total commitment to nonviolence. The concept of nonviolence is enunciated in the Gita, a Hindu sacred text, which permits the resort to violence for the sake of upholding one’s duty. Other religious traditions do permit the use of violence to defeat forces of wickedness, but the Jain religious tradition, like those of Christianity and Buddhism, believes in forgiving one’s enemy.

The most significant feature of Jainism is its philosophy of *anekant*, which explains that an object has many facets. The method of propounding this doctrine is known as *syadvad*, which tells us that we must not regard a facet of truth as complete truth. The truth is that an object has infinite characteristics. *Gyan* (knowledge) is also truth in itself. It is true or untrue only in relation to something. The word *syat* which means “it may be or may not be or it may also be” is a method of elucidating complete truth. *Syadvad* owes its origin to the view that an object has many facets and has infinite qualities. *Anekant* is also known as the theory of non-absolutism. If someone insists that what he has comprehended is absolute truth, he is mistaken. Such assertions encourage dogmatism and fanaticism.

For example, an earthen pot may be an earthen pot or it may be something different, i.e. mere earth. The atoms of earth are transformed into many other things. The shapes undergo incessant transmutations, metamorphosis and transformations. The basic element is the same which manifests itself in different forms. The right perception is the hallmark of Jainism. If we call a particular thing true or false outright, it is a violation of the Jain tenets. The Jains, therefore, always talk in the language of *syadvad*, i.e., “may be or may not be or may also be.” The doctrine of *Anekant* (truth is many-sided) is explained through *syadvad*. We have a parable to illustrate *anekantvad*. Six people of India who were born blind wanted to know what an elephant looks like. They had heard a lot about it. They decided to find out the truth themselves by actually touching it and experiencing it individually. One of them touched the tail of the elephant and pronounced the judgment that it was like a snake. The second blind man touched its trunk and said it was like a serpent. The third man touched the body and reached the conclusion that the elephant was like a wall. The other who touched his ears and legs thought that it was like a winnowing fan or a pillar. Everyone of them was right and everyone of them was wrong. No one of them was able to realize the size or shape of the

elephant in its entirety. They could perceive it only partially. The Jains say that it is impossible for a man to perceive the whole truth unless he has conquered all his base desires, i.e. *kama* (sexual lust), *krodh* (anger), *maan* (pride) and *lobh* (greed). Once a person has annihilated his bad *karmas* he becomes an *arhat*. He attains to the state of *kevalya* (omniscience) and is able to know the truth in its entirety. The parable of the elephant shows us that there is no need for us to quarrel over divergent views and that everyone is right in the way he has perceived the truth. The principle underlines the scope of the Jains' friendly relations among different religious groups.

As has already been explained, the Jain religious tradition is rooted in the equanimity of mind. To achieve it, one has to show a feeling of friendship not only towards human beings but also towards animals, birds, bushes, trees and even the smallest possible invisible creatures. These conceptions stem from its principle of *ahimsa*. Jainism is only a way of living and no *Tirthankar*, including Lord Mahavira, ever used the term "Jainism." It stresses a person's conquest over his or her desires. The word "Jain" (the conqueror) began to be used as an epithet for its followers in the course of its evolution. The 24 *Tirthankaras* are also known as *Jinas*. Nowhere in the Jain sacred text which consists of five lines occurs the word "Jain." Nor does the name of a *Tirthankar* figure in it. It is also not a prayer in its strict sense. It only pays one's obeisance to the five kinds of pure souls.

I reproduce the most sanctified Jain text for the benefit of the promoters of peace and interfaith harmony. It is known as Navkar Mantra:

I pay obeisance to *arhats*

(those who have destroyed all their bad *karmas* – a subtle matter said to be accumulated on account of one's evil desires and evil deeds in thought, word and deed).

I pay obeisance to *sidhas*

(fully liberated souls)

I pay obeisance to *acharyas*

(preceptors)

I pay obeisance to *upadhyayas*

(teachers)

I pay obeisance to any pure or ascetic irrespective of the faith to which he or she may belong.

The last line encourages the followers of the Jain religious tradition to transcend the narrow bounds of sectarian considerations and bow before any pure soul. This is enough to prove that the Jain religious tradition is an ideal forum for an interfaith dialogue. It is the only tradition in the world that believes that any person belonging to any tradition can achieve salvation or what we call *moksha* (liberation). Unlike others, it believes that it is not necessary for a person to become a Jain in order to attain to the state

of *arhat* – or emancipation or *mukti* or salvation. All that is required is for someone to achieve purity in its true form.

The other sources within our tradition that promote interreligious amity and world peace are the principles of *ahimsa* (nonviolence) and *aparigrah* (non-possession). *Ahimsa paramodharma* – nonviolence is the highest form of religion – is the essence of Jainism. Mahatma Gandhi was so impressed by the cult of nonviolence as propounded by Lord Mahavirat that he pledged himself to observe the vow of nonviolence scrupulously all his life and used it as a powerful weapon to force the British to give freedom to India. The concept of nonviolence as preached by Jainism does not mean merely abstaining oneself from killing. Some people mistake it for non-killing which is absolutely wrong. *Ahimsa* is much more than avoiding physical violence. I would like to reproduce briefly the episode from the life of a great King Prasenjit who grew disillusioned with the materialistic power that he wielded as a king. He renounced his kingdom forever when his son was a child and became a Jain monk. The Jain scriptures give a vivid account of his spiritual pursuits. He was a contemporary of Lord Mahavira.

He went to a forest and began to perform *tapasya* (undergoing religious austerities and self-denial). He remained in a state of meditation for most of his time. Once some members of his erstwhile kingdom passed through that forest and saw him standing motionless in a meditative posture. Seeing him, a member remarked, “Look at this foolish man! He has renounced his kingdom leaving his child to the mercy of a few wicked courtiers. They are now plotting to kill him and usurp the throne.” When Prasenjit heard these words, he flew into a rage. At the same time he still stood motionless, giving the impression that he was calm and devoid of passions. The other members of that group admired him and spoke highly of his spiritual achievement. They went to Lord Mahavira – the 24<sup>th</sup> *Tirthankar* – and reported that Prasenjit looked very calm and was absorbed in meditation. Out of curiosity they asked the Lord, “Which heaven will his soul land in if he dies instantaneously?” (According to Jains there are twelve heavens and each heaven in a corresponding degree has great comforts than the one that precedes it). Omniscient Mahavira said, “At the moment he is engaged in a fierce battle with his kith and kin. If he dies his soul will go to the seventh hell. (The Jains believe that there are seven hells, each is correspondingly more painful than the one that precedes it). Prasenjit neither raised an army nor killed anyone physically. But in a state of anger he had fought a battle mentally and thus incurred bad *karmas*. This episode illustrated the profoundness of the Jain concept of *ahimsa* in word, thought and deed. Even if a person thinks of murdering someone, according to the Jain view, this amounts to virtual killing. This is why the Jains believe in the dictum *vasudhev Kutumbakam* (the whole world is a family) and consider violence even for a just cause unethical, sinful and contemptible.

The other Jain principle that makes us immune to any kind of hostility is *aparigrah* (non-possession). The Jains regard renunciation as an act of the highest form of religion. The Jain ascetics renounce property, money, belongings and even clothes. Acquisition of wealth or objects is considered irreligious. The Jain ascetics are supposed to possess nothing save clothes of books that they can carry over their shoulders. The

Digambar Jain tradition forbids even the use of clothes, hence the ascetics initiated into its order move about in the nude. All worldly conflicts, be they political, social or even religious, originate in one's attachment to ideas and objects. The principle of *aparigrah* is an ideal of excellence which every Jain is exhorted to follow to some degree. The Householders are asked not to possess wealth beyond a certain limit. *Aparigrah* puts an end to class struggle and conflict relating to the equitable distribution of resources. Mahavira goes to extent of saying that a person who does not share his resources with others cannot attain to *moksha* (liberation). These conception underlying the Jain scriptures inspire Jain *sharvaks* to undertake journeys into interfaith. The Jain religious tradition is ideally suited for an interreligious encounter.

Another important feature of Jainism is that, like Buddhism, it does not believe that God is a creator and that He rules the universe. The Jain believe that this universe is governed by laws of nature. There is no institution like God and all *Jivas* (souls). Each *Jiva* (soul) has the capacity to achieve liberation, i.e. freedom from the cycle of birth and death. Every *Jiva* can become God. By God the Jains mean a perfect soul that has conquered the self by destroying all the accumulated bad *karmas* and attained to the state of *kevalya* or omniscience. There are five stages of knowledge, i.e. *mati gyan* (knowledge possessed from birth), *shruti gyan* (knowledge acquired through listening to others), *avadhi gyan* (limited knowledge of the past and future), *man paryav gyan* (knowledge that enables a person to read anyone's mind) and *kevalya gyan* (omniscience). Through purity of emotions one can attain to these stages of knowledge and ultimately one become a *kevali* (omniscient). Only those who are able to annihilate all their bad *karmas* attain to the state of *kevalya*. Those who attain to the fifth stage of knowledge become *arhats* or gods. The concept of one God is not acceptable to Jainism. It gives all *jivas* the right to become Gods or supreme sanctified souls or perfect souls. Another important feature of the belief is that *arhats* cannot absolve certain jives of their sins. Every *jiva* has to endeavor individually for liberation or *moksha*. Thus the Jain view is that every *jiva* has the potential to become God. One's eternal soul is the maker and shaper of one's fate.

Another important feature of Jainism is its cosmology. The noted Jain scholar Dr. Nathmal Tatia says,

The Jaina view of the soul's beginningless karmic interaction with the material world has given rise to a philosophical tradition with an abiding interest in natural sciences. Umasvati's description of the infernal, middle and celestial regions, which may be read as mythical, symbolic descriptions, follow the demands of karma. Thus, we see that the internals are not punished by an outside force; they inflict pain on one another.

Despite what would now be seen as scientific inaccuracies and myths, there is a notable degree of correct observation and astonishing insight into the natural world. The careful cataloguing of species on the basis of sensory complexity, reproductive methods and the possession of a brain are in tune with the logic of modern biological taxonomy. The concept of a universe teeming with submicroscopic living bodies and of infinitesimal units of matter that make up the basic building blocks of the cosmos reveal an intuitive grasp of physical world. At the other end of the scale, the Jain concept of a universe with

concentric rings of islands and oceans, so vast they are beyond imagining except with elaborate mathematical metaphor, has echoes of planetary, solar and galactic systems. The description of the calculation of the *rajju*, the unit of cosmic measurement, reveals that the Jain mathematician were struggling with concepts that were counterparts of the “light year” of modern science. The sheer scale of the Jain vision of time and space, a vision that include the notion of infinity, is a tribute to the sophistication and insight of these great thinkers and mathematicians. There is also imbedded in this vision the idea of time and space as co-existents, something later identified by Einstein.

Now I come to the question as to how cross-traditional tolerance, respect and spiritual awareness can be developed. Since Jain religious tradition makes it mandatory for its followers to refrain from ridiculing, belittling and disparaging other traditions in thought, word and deed, it gives no basis for conflict with other faiths. There are many ways to achieve the goal of reconciliation. The first and foremost prerequisite for the fulfillment of this dream is the creation of a friendly environment. It makes it necessary for other religious groups to break the barriers of isolation, avoid confinement to their dormitories and throw open the gates of their temples, churches and synagogues to the followers of all other faiths. It has been observed that the main cause of religious conflict is the lack of interaction, ignorance, misunderstanding and narrow-mindedness. We must endeavor to change our outlook on religious beliefs. All major religions embody the ethic of tolerance. What is essential is putting this idea into practice. Frequent interfaith meeting will go a long way toward ending suspicion, mistrust, hatred and alienation. It is a pity that despite the unanimous acceptance of the doctrine of universal brotherhood by all faith, all major wars have been fought ostensibly to protect these faiths. Religion is what we do. It needs no protection. It is an ideal which has to do with the mind of man rather than the rituals he practices. All religious leaders should agree to pledge themselves to adhere to a code of conduct based on the principles of mutual respect, tolerance, and non-interference in one another’s religious affairs. Much will depend on the religious leader’s attitude and outlook. If they want they can be instrumental in realizing a dream of cross-cultural and cross-traditional tolerance.

His Holiness Ganadhipati Tulsi, formerly head of Terapantha Svetamber Jain sect, has launched a bold initiative to bring all religious leaders to a common platform. He started the Anuvrat movement in 1949 which has now veritably emerged as a platform for not only interreligious encounters but interfaith unity and religious reconciliation. *Anu* (basic), *vrat* (vow), i.e., Anuvrat, expects individuals and organizations to rise above sectarian concepts by accepting a few small vows. These vows, if truly followed, can usher in an era of reconciliation, dialogue and friendship.

I sum up my article with the hope that more and more people in different paths throughout the world will come to know of the singularly unique features of Jainism, i.e., *ahimsa* (nonviolence) and *aparigrah* (non-possession) and will extend their support to the Anuvrat movement, a Jain peace movement, which can emerge as a tool to bring about interreligious harmony and universal brotherhood. The dream of achieving the goal of a nonviolent, socio-political order can come true if people volunteer to observe anuvrats (small vows) in their life, if not *mahavrats* (great vows) which are set apart for those who

renounce the world and become ascetics. We can thus transmit and develop cross-traditional tolerance, respect and spiritual awareness and save this from devastation.