

ANEKANT – A ROAD MAP TO UNIVERSAL PEACE

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Concept and Meaning

The word *anekant* which means ‘many-sided’ is used to describe an object from many angles of vision to arrive at the truth. *anekantvad* means the doctrine of many-sidedness. According to Tattvartha Sutra Jainism denies absolute existence or absolute non-existence, absolute permanence or absolute impermanence and defends non-absolutism. An object has two fundamental aspects: eternal and non-eternal. It is permanent with respect to its essential substance and impermanent with respect to the modes through which it is incessantly passing. There are two fundamental and opposing views of reality: (1) only what is eternal and unchanging is real, and (2) only what is ceaselessly changing is real. Those who subscribe to the former view consider change as absolutely unreal while to those who subscribe to the latter view, change is the essence of things. The former hold that only the substance is real while the latter believe that it is only the modes that are real (5.31). From a particular standpoint an object may be permanent and from another standpoint it may be impermanent. The method of reconciling the apparently contradictory attributes in a thing from different standpoints is called *anekantvad* or *syadvada*. The philosophical standpoints are different ways of approach and observation which give only partial truths. As a matter of fact the truth is many-sided. A conflict arises when only one side of the truth is considered to be the absolute truth and one tries to impose one’s belief on others by force.

The well-known parable of six blind persons seeking to know what an elephant looks like illustrates it further. They were born blind and had no idea as to what a huge animal like an elephant looks like. They decided to know the truth by touching the elephant. One blind person touched the trunk of the elephant and said, ‘Oh! it is like a serpent’. The second blind person touched the body of the elephant and said, ‘Oh! it is like a wall. The third blind person touched the tail and said, ‘Oh! it is like a snake’. Others found it like a pillar, a winnowing fan etc. All were right and all were wrong. Everyone was partially true. The truth is relative and so vast that it is impossible for anyone to fathom its depth. Like blind persons in the above parable we have our own contradictory experiences and quarrel when our view is rejected by the other. Mahavira said that what one experiences is a partial truth but since it is one side of the truth, to contradict, disparage or condemn it is a sin. We must have reverence for different faiths since they are the different manifestations of truth.

Our Contradictory Perceptions of God Are Causing Conflicts

The reality of the universe and its creator and controller remains shrouded in a mystery even today despite the fact that more than ten thousand years have elapsed since the advent of civilization and many seers, prophets, *rishis* and *avatars* have appeared on the planet from time to time. They tried to solve the mystery but their views of God, universe and human life were contradictory. As many minds, as many views. It is impossible to achieve unanimity about the institution of God and the way to reach Him. Science has already rejected the existence of God but billions of people still believe that there is one God who controls our life on this planet. It’s a matter of

faith and personal ethic. It cannot be proved unless God Himself appears and tells the world that He is there. We do come across some people who claim either to be God's incarnations themselves or assert that they have had an encounter with God but their actions do not match with godliness. They create false illusions and promote self-aggrandisement. Many wars have been fought in the name of God but those who waged wars and perpetrated atrocities on people as agents of God were not only defeated but wiped out. Idi Amin who wrought havoc in Uganda in God's name had to flee for his life. God didn't come to his rescue. Mulla Omar and Bin Laden who oppressed the poor people of Afghanistan in the name of God are now hiding to save their lives. History is replete with such stories but the truth is that God has never interfered in man's affairs and if He really exists he might be laughing at the idiocy of his own children. The irony is that people who wage wars as agents God have never escaped death. We hear of the tragic deaths of the devotees of a particular deity they worship in the course of their pilgrimage but disasters do not dampen their fervour. They continue to generate hatred in the name of God.

Anekant as Elucidated by Lord Mahavira

Lord Mahavira the 24th Tirthankar of the Jain Religious Tradition exhorted his disciples to avoid absolutist and one-sided assertion in their exposition of the nature of an object. He advised monks and nuns to have recourse to *vibhajyavad* or the doctrine of alternatives while expounding the nature of a thing. He was opposed to the dogmatic attitude towards individual beliefs. On being asked by one of his disciples which was the better of the two states (i) the state of slumber and (ii) the state of awakening, Mahavira said:

'For some souls the slumber is commendable but for others awakening is wholesome.'

'Why is it so O Lord !?'

'The slumber is wholesome for those who are engaged in sinful activities while for the virtuous awakening is commendable.'

Mahavira didn't approve of the exclusive assertion of the wholeness of slumber or awakening. He avoided exclusiveness in answering all questions. The *anekant* approach to truth as adopted by Lord Mahavira is relevant even today. It is the only way to promote religious harmony, reconciliation and unity in diversity.

syadvad or conditional dialectics is a mode of expressing the philosophy of *anekant* (non-absolutist viewpoint). The *anekant* eye is the best way to perceive the physical as well as the subtle modes or changes occurring in the world of objects. With its help we can develop flexibility and non-dogmatic attitude towards others' viewpoints, resolve disputes and extinguish the sparks of war. It is only through the non-absolutistic approach (*anekant*) that a harmonious social climate can be created.

One of the most important achievements of the philosophical period consisted in a synthetic view of the divergent schools of philosophy and the development and extensive employment of the *anekanta* dialectic for such synthesis.

The two important questions of the philosophical debate since the times of the *upanisads* were:

1. Is it possible to know the absolute truth, the truth in its completeness?

2. Is it possible to give it a verbal expression and exposition?

The different philosophies have made out different solutions to these perennial issues of philosophy. The Jaina thinkers have also presented their own solutions. The first of these questions was answered by them through their epistemological critique, while they tried to answer the second question through their doctrine of *anekanta*. The Jains believe that it is the omniscient *jina* alone who is capable of knowing the truth in its entirety. His knowledge is absolutely perfect free from all sorts of layers of illusion. This explains why such knowledge has no obstruction or hindrance. The non-omniscient are incapable of knowing the truth in its fullness, because the knowledge of such person is imperfect, being a mixture of gnosis and nescience. With the acknowledgement of the gnosis of the non-omniscient, we simultaneously acknowledge his nescience also. In the veiled state of consciousness we find truth and untruth entwined in one. It is only the omniscient who is endowed with perfect knowledge. The expression '*kevalin*' (omniscient) can also be explained as one who is possessed of knowledge alone and nothing else. His is pure knowledge, absolutely free from nescience. From the viewpoint of knowledge all persons other than the omniscient are possessed of gnosis as well as nescience. This acceptance of the co-existence of gnosis and nescience implies that the truth in its completeness can be known only by the omniscient and not by any other person notwithstanding his being an ascetic of great repute.

In Jaina ontology two kinds of substances are accepted (1) sentient, and (2) non-sentient. Each substance is divided into infinitely infinite units, and each unit into infinitely infinite modes. All these substances with all their integral units, together with their modes in their totality, constitute the complete truth. The monist can postulate the Absolute Truth (independent of anything else), but the dualist cannot agree with him. This is the reason why the Jaina philosopher, as an upholder of dualism, explains truth on the basis of his doctrine of non-absolutism. Truth has infinite modes and the capacity of language is limited. A word can express a single mode at a single moment, and as such the speaker can, in his whole life, give expression to only a limited number of modes. It, therefore, follows that the complete truth can never be explained through words; it is only a part of truth that can be the subject-matter of linguistic expression.

The method of honestly accepting and reconciling the apparently contradictory attributes in a thing from different standpoints is called *syadvada*. In a man, we accept seemingly contradictory attributes - that is, we call him father and son, uncle and nephew, son-in-law and father-in-law, etc., - because they are reconcilable from different standpoints of different relations which he holds with different persons. Similarly, one accepts apparently opposite attributes, viz., permanence and impermanence, etc., in a thing, say a pot, because one reconciles them with one another from different standpoints. The contradiction of opposite attributes in a thing is really apparent and can be removed by viewing the thing from different standpoints. Different standpoints yield contradictory attributes which are synthesised in a coherent whole by *syadvada*. Thus *syadvada* is a method of synthesis.

Anekant : The Only Way to World Peace

Human life is marked by contradictory beliefs, ideas, thoughts and philosophies and the wonder is that despite contradictions and apparently

heterogeneous character of social life, civilization has continued to march ahead and has made tremendous progress. This has been possible on account of the non-absolutist attitudes of most of the people on this planet. Despite diversities civilizations have co-existed on account of the conscious or unconscious adherence to *anekant* by the majority of mankind.

It is impossible to wipe out a particular belief or tradition from this planet. All such attempts in the past have failed. May God make the fanatics realize that diversity is His beautiful gift and any attempt to eliminate it is the violation of God's commandment. Since only God or omniscient being knows the whole truth, any dogmatic insistence to establish the partial truth as the whole truth is unethical. We must realize that every one may be right or wrong from a particular standpoint. Instead of quarrelling we may agree to disagree and co-exist peacefully. Anekant is an undisputed approach to reconciliation and universal peace. Lord Mahavira, therefore, advised the people to look at things from the *anekant* philosophical standpoint and avoid conflicts. If the people could practise *anekant* in their daily behaviour, conflicts, wars and quarrels would disappear. The road map to universal peace lies only in *anekant* approach to solving problems.

I bow before the principle of *anekant* which forbids quarrelling on account of divergently opposed views and lays emphasis on discovering common values in all systems of thought. I bow before it because without inculcating *Anekant* attitude among the masses there can be no interaction, no dialogue and the world will come to a grinding halt. Diversity is inbuilt and innate. It cannot be abolished. This reality has to be accepted. Nothing can be said to be absolutely true and nothing is wholly untrue. *anekant* synthesizes the opposite modes of thought. Without *anekant* truth will remain illusive and will never be realized. Leave apart the question of knowing the whole truth, even the relationship between family and society can no longer be maintained. *anekant* is our real Guru who shows us the path to universal peace.

Man has been inquisitive to know the reality from time immemorial. "What is reality?" This question has been asked thousands of time in human history. Whosoever became knowledgeable, asked the above question. `Once Gandhar Gautam asked Lord Mahavira `*kim tattam*' what is reality? Lord Mahavira replied, `*upnnei*' that one is born is a reality'. But Gautam was not satisfied. If being born is a reality, the world would be over-populated. So he asked the Lord again. Lord Mahavira replied, `*vigmei va*' - to perish or to be destroyed is a reality. Gautam's doubt remained unresolved. If destruction alone is a reality, nothing will be left behind. He repeated the question. Lord Mahavira replied, `*dhuvei va*' - to remain eternal or steadfast is a reality.

Now Gautam's inquisitiveness was satiated. He was fully satisfied with the answer provided by the Lord. The truth is threefold. It consists in birth, death and eternity. The reality has three ingredients: creation, total destruction and survival. Both eternal and perishable are reality. Just as we see a pair of man and woman, we find the same in nature i.e. eternal and non-eternal. We find the opposite modes everywhere. Mere oneness is unthinkable. If there is knowledge, there is ignorance. If there is winter, there is spring. If there is day, there is night. Life goes on, on the basis of opposite modes. We need the opposite as well as homogeneous. Our entire system is regulated by contrary modes. We need both opponents as well as supporters.

The Jain philosophy of *anekant* alone can extricate the world from the mire of violence and hatred. We should always accept the fact that everything we see around us has some or the other element of truth. We cannot dismiss anything as wholly untrue. This approach will minimize violence and hatred to a great extent. It is because of the philosophy of *anekant* that the Jain *shravaks* refrain from criticizing and censuring others' viewpoints. While human history is replete with the stories of the bloodiest wars ostensibly to protect their faiths we do not come across a single war ever fought to protect Jainism. The *anekant* approach is the basis of our survival since it supports coexistence and reconciliation. The world will be a better place to live by if we can realize the truth that the diversity of beliefs in a human society is a natural phenomenon. Any attempt by a fanatic to wipe out the groups who hold different views and enforce the rule of just one faith will be met with stiff resistance and will unleash violent conflicts in all parts of this planet. We must accept diversity as a natural trait of humanity and learn to live in it. Co-existence is possible only if dogmatic insistence on a viewpoint is given up. The Jain philosophy of Anekant has in it a potential for survival into the third millennium.

Acharya Mahapragya's Statement on Anekant

I would like to conclude my presentation by reproducing the most illuminating and inspiring statement made by His Holiness Acharya Mahapragya, the most revered Jain Acharya and the Spiritual Patron of Anuvrat Movement (a Jain peace movement) on reconciliation as enshrined in the Jain Philosophy:

“It is imperative that we reflect and ponder over the two words while considering the issue of reconciliation i.e. (1) **sanyam** (self-restraint) and (2) **vitrag** (detached or dispassionate attitude). The Jains hold that since social life is governed by passions its roots lie in attachment and infatuation. By religious life we mean moving forward towards a life free from passions and desires. Enmity, opposition, conflicts and disputes result from our passionate feelings. Friendship, compassion, equanimity, goodwill and reconciliation result from our attitude of detachment and freedom from passions. The main aim of the Jain religious tradition is to develop this dispassionate attitude or the attitude free from passions. To say that ‘my religion is the best of all and I have to initiate all the people of the world into it’ is an absolutist view and it gives rise to many complex problems. It can cause not only disputes but may even create a situation leading to a world war. The Jain religious tradition teaches, ‘your religion is good and you are at liberty to say so, but to say that your religion alone is good and no other religion is as good as that of yours it is an attitude of dogmatism and fundamentalism. Insistence on this view causes hatred and sows the seeds of conflict. Lord Mahavira said, ‘those who say that a person would be liberated only if he followed someone’s faith are themselves deluded and cause delusion to others. Jainism has expounded dharma in the light of **anekant** which is embedded in the dictum’ that which you think is truth is only a part of truth. It is not the whole truth. We should try to discover an element of truth in every thought but we

should never think that this part of truth is the whole truth, the only truth.

He further states that Anekant results in a balance. It results in equality – the outlook of equanimity. It makes it clear that Anekant is not a mere philosophical standpoint but it is the philosophy of life. Anekant is accompanied by an entire code of spiritual and ethical conduct without which it cannot be explained. When people give vent to a one-sided deluded view, it creates a doubt – an erroneous angle of vision. A large number of people get entangled in it. The world is full of people who create complications and problems but those who resolve a problem are very few.”

I conclude my views with a paragraph from the commentary on the doctrine of Non-absolutism given by the editor of the English version of Umasvati’s Tattvarth Sutra published by Harper Collins in 1994 (page 139)

The philosophy standpoints have an unlimited area of application, there being as many standpoints as there are thinkers. There is no viewpoint that is perfect as there is no science that is complete. And as there can be reality that science does not encompass, so there can be problems that are not solved by philosophy which is an endless quest. The philosophical standpoints, moreover, spread over all fields of thought and language. According to the doctrine, all philosophies are imperfect although they are the glorious blocks that build the grand edifice of philosophy.

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