

JAINA DHARMA: A LITTLE KNOWN FAITH FOR DEEPER UNDERSTANDING AND ENRICHING LIFE

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The primary aim in jotting down a few introductory notes on Jaina Dharma is one of discovering *what is true and holy* (*Vatican II, Nostra Aetate 2*) in it for mutual enrichment. Reading and understanding life from a perspective other than our own, does create a helpful atmosphere for Interreligious and cultural dialogue. The goal of life that we all cherish seems similar but the path that we undertake to achieve that goal varies. The religious consciousness of the Jains varies considerably from all other faiths, especially from the Semitic religions. The root of non-violence and renunciation in India could be traced to the Jaina and other sramana religious traditions of India. Rooted in Indian cultural ethos also means *sharing* their elements enshrined in the various ritualistic and faith traditions of India. Jaina way of life offers an opening for such an understanding and osmosis. By opening ourselves to such an osmosis 'we are opening ourselves to God' (*John Paul II in his address to the Pontifical Secretariat for Non-Christians, 28 April 1987, n. 38*) and to 'God's ongoing dialogue with humanity' (*GC 34, Our Mission and Interreligious Dialogue, n. 133*). India has never been the same as it is claimed now. It was Buddhist and Jain at one time before it is called *Hindu* India. The following pages might evoke ideas similar to and/or different from one's own approaches and understanding of reality and life. But they are for our mutual enrichment.

Dharma, a word synonymous with *Religion*, in Jainism has two broad meanings: one is generic in usage and the other, technical and specific to the use of the term. *Dharma* in technical sense is the basis for dynamism in life, helps movement or motion and, as such, it is opposed to *adharma*, stillness or rest. They are the media or the occasioning cause for motion and or rest respectively, just as water is helpful for a fish to move about. No other system of thought in India has convinced these two terms in such a fashion as in Jaina system. It is possible that these two terms that

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signify *life* (movement) and *death* (stillness) have later acquired *moral* connections.

The generic term Dharma has two levels of meaning: one is metaphysical and the other, ethical and moral. Our behaviour cannot be isolated from our vision about reality and truth (meta-physical beliefs). Acarya Samantabhadra says that without knowing the *real* nature of things (which is permanency in transitoriness), all moral distinction between the antithesis of bondage and liberation, virtue and vice, heaven and hell, pleasure and pain will be blurred. The ultimate aim of logic and reasoning is the realization of this relation between metaphysics and ethics.

The Jaina *vision* and *way of life* brings about this relation between the two. It is the *vision* that gives purpose to one's life. Morality is that which unites all individuals as society. Tattvarthasutra (I.1), a major work accepted by all the sects in Jaina community, points out that Dharma constitutes *vision, knowledge, and conduct of life*. They are the *inseparable path* to liberation, just as adding goodness to faith, and knowledge to goodness in order to share in divine power and nature (2 *Peter 1:5*). This comprehensive and accommodative vision and the way has been lived and taught by the Jaina masters and seers (*Tirthankaras* and others), handed down by them to the posterity through scriptures and their traditions, and accepted by the Jaina community as normative to their life.

In order to understand the goal of life (liberation or *Moksa*, understood as perfect knowledge, faith, strength, and bliss) one has to be conversant with the *essence* of reality. The process of achievement of this goal, understood as the *Journey of the Soul towards its End*, is usually outlined in the seven fundamental principles (*sapta tattva*). It could be described in a simple way. A conscious living being (*Jiva*) gets entangled and bound by the non-conscious matter (an *Ajiva*) through passionate activities of attachment and aversion. Subsequently, there is the inflow (*asrava*) or accumulation of a subtle thing called *karma* and the consequent bondage (*bandha*) by such karma. From now on, the process of liberation takes place. The living being, once bound, has to check the inflow (*samvara*) of karma through meritorious deeds like taking the vows and adhering to certain other virtuous actions. This leads the living being finally to the shedding (*nirjara*) of the entire karma by means of penance, etc. This complete annihilation of karma is described in several ways as *Moksa* or *Mukti* or liberation.

The conscious being Jiva or the Self is essentially a *spiritual* entity endowed with apprehension and knowledge. It is similar to the *temple of God and of the Spirit* (2Cor. 6:16). But unfortunately all are born in and under sin (original sin or the fruit of karma in the previous birth), and sin brought death along with it (Rom. 5:12). Sin and the consequent death of the soul are the results of our actions. Hence bound by karma (an equivalent to sin and death), the soul (*antaratma*) remains co-extensive with the body (*bahiratma*) and becomes the agent of action and the enjoyer of the fruit of its own actions. Jiva thus passes through births and deaths before it could achieve its final liberation, as though the dead will be raised to eternal life some day (1 Cor. 15:20-22). This happens not because of any external agency but by the individual's personal effort.

The traditional Jaina view does not accept *grace of God* or help from any external agency (as Christians believe: *the Lord will save his people - Psalms 34:22; saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus - Acts 15:11*) for achieving the final end. If at all there is, it is for the Jains only from a conventional or practical point-of-view and *not really*. Their *Tirthankaras* are perfected beings and spiritual ideals, and as such they are only *pathfinders*. The Jaina invocation (the *Navkar* mantra) includes all such *pathfinders*, both transcendent and immanent deities, such as the masters and heads of the congregations (*acharyas*), the spiritual teachers (*upadhyayas*), and the spiritual practitioners in the universe (*sadhus*). Any one could achieve this goal by one's efforts.

There is a clear distinction between the empirical and the transcendental self. From the empirical point of view, the self (Jiva, which is purely spiritual) is associated with non-self (Ajiva or material), becomes the agent of actions, experiencing pain and pleasure. From the transcendental point of view the self is nothing to do with matter. It is perfected with infinite knowledge, vision, strength and bliss, known as the four-fold perfection (*anantacatusaya*). The invaluable nature of Jiva (or life) is such that once it is lost there is nothing that one can give to regain it (Mark 8:36-37). What distinguishes the self (Jiva) from the non-self (Ajiva) is consciousness. Jiva is a representative term that embraces all types of living organisms in the universe, including elemental bodies, with one to six senses. That is the reason why the Jaina attitude towards and the practice of non-violence are not confined merely to the world of the *humans* but includes all forms of life.

Jaina philosophy expounds the reality and nature of sin, a rebellion against oneself, one's true nature (in Christianity, it is a *rebellion against God - Deut 9:7*). Jiva (life), due to contact with Ajiva (non-life) is active. The very union of the two seems to take away one from the *Path*. Due to the various activities (*yoga*) of the agent (living organism) the invisible and subtle karmic particles flow into the soul, blurring it or causing damage to its four-fold pure and perfect nature, just as the mirror is smeared by dust. This blurred state is called *bandha* and it is a beginningless relation between the soul and non-soul (including matter). The force that binds the soul with karma is the four basic passions (*kasaya*) namely, anger (*krodha*), pride (*mana*), deceit (*maya*) and greed (*lobha*). Bondage due to passions leads one to births and rebirths. From the Jaina ethical point of view, it is wrong-belief (*mithyadarsana*), vowlessness (*avirati*), negligence (*pramada*), passion (*kasaya*) and activities (mental, vocal and physical activities - *yoga*) that cause the bondage. It is due to this sin of *bondage* the intangible pure soul gets obliterated and becomes tangible as humans, plants, animals, and the like.

The fundamental cause for misery and happiness is *karma* and *karma* can be meritorious or harmful. The former leads to happiness and the latter to misery. But an individual prefers good (*subha*) to bad (*a-subha*) actions from a *practical* (*vyavaharika*) point of view because good actions or being virtuous lead one to happiness and good reward. All evil doers will face punishment (*God's judgement of reward or punishment - Romans 2:6-8; Psalms 28:4*). But the Jains believe, according to the real (*niscaya*) point-of-view, that all activities whether good or bad lead the person to bondage. Hence there is the need for *detachment* and to transcend both good as well as bad deeds. It is *karma* that determines the quality and the type of life in the series of births: knowledge, perception, feeling, family, body, etc.

But this does not deprive a person from *being free*. Law of Freedom is the *Law of the Spirit*. No one can take away this freedom from the human heart because it is this that sets a person free from sin and death (*Romans 8:2*). It is by one's free will and effort (*new karma*) that one could attain the goal of life. The Jaina masters have shown the path of *new karma* that puts a total stop to the damage done to the self by past acts. Liberation is the *state of being free* from all karma, but through a series of new efforts and discipline. Thus the power and the intensity of karma can

be completely annihilated by oneself through a slow climbing of the ladder of several spiritual stages, known as the *pratimas and gunasthanas*. Jaina religion is called sometimes the *Religion of Self-help*.

The principles that are discussed above are basic to Jaina Dharma. One needs to be conversant with this basic conception because everything for the Jains (*attitude and response to life and environment*) is founded on this. We could find similarities in concepts and in their explanations in other religious and philosophical traditions too. Discussing any theme in Indian systems might sound *philosophic* but these basic principles have larger implications on life, the truth about pain, sorrow and suffering, sinfulness and injury to the self and others, knowledge and renunciation, etc.

The following are some of its implications for life:

(1) Jiva, understood from its *real point of view* as pure and perfect, is the philosophical foundation and basis for equality and respect for *all* living beings. This truth is enshrined in the dictum, 'as the nature of this (i.e. man) is to be born and to grow old, so is the nature of that (i.e. plants) to be born and to grow old' (*Acaranga Sutra, 1.1.5.6*). Non-violence and Vegetarianism have their roots in such as these sayings. The wickedness of the humans and of the earth in the Bible is traced to the spread of violence everywhere and all were evil in God's sight (*Genesis 6:11; Ezekiel 8:17*), and all human transactions led to violence and sin (*Ezekiel 28:16*). This is true until now. War and violence will remain until when humanity realizes this simple but basic truth about the *sacredness* of all living beings.

(2) Every organic life is concerned about its liberation. Hence the *cause* of bondage and the *means* of liberation are *common* for all living beings. The world has to apprehend that sinful acts towards one another set a block to the achievement of such liberation. 'For the sake of the splendour, honour, glory of this life, for the sake of birth, death and final liberation for the removal of pain, man acts sinfully towards earth, or causes others to act so, or allows others to act so. This deprives him of happiness and perfect wisdom' (*Acaranga Sutra, 1.1.2.3*) and 'man that does not comprehend and renounce the cause of sin...is born again and again in manifold births, experiences all painful feelings' (*Ibid. 1.1.6, 7*).

(3) The Jaina scriptures are particular in expounding the truth about suffering caused by selfishness and indiscriminate acts, the real causes of

sin: 'The (living) world is afflicted, miserable, difficult to instruct and without discrimination. In this world full of pain, suffering caused by their different acts, see the benighted ones cause great pain' (*Acaranga Sutra. 1.1.2.1*). The Jaina masters point out another truth about life: 'All beings are fond of life, (they) like pleasure, dislike pain, shuns destruction, like life, long to live. To all life is dear' (*Ibid. 1.2.3.4*). And hence if *himsa* is injurious and painful to one, the same will be painful to another because all beings hate pain. 'Know and realize that they all desire happiness. By hurting these beings, you harm your own soul...(*Sutrakrtanga 1.7.1-2*). Therefore one should not kill them (*Ibid. 1.11.9*). And this is the quintessence of wisdom (*Ibid. 1.11.10*), the *maxim* of general application (*Ibid. 11.2.80*). From a Christian perspective it might sound like this: God commanded the earth to produce all forms of life and it was done. And God was pleased with what he saw (*Genesis 1:24-25*). This is the basis for any *environmental theology*. Non-violence or non-injury to life is based on the *principle of mutuality or reciprocity*: 'As it would be unto thee, so it is with him whom thou intendest to kill... In the same way (it is with him) whom thou intendest to punish and to drive away' (*Acaranga Sutra 1.1.5.4-6*). We all owe to the same source and to the same destiny.

(4) Though life is dear to all living beings there cannot be *undue* attachment to it. Attachment to life sets a block to the goal to be achieved. Attachment to oneself provokes disregard and injury to others. The spirit of detachment or renunciation is the gateway to liberation: 'Life is dear to many who own fields and houses. Having acquired dyed and coloured (clothes), jewels, earnings, gold, women, they become attached to these things. And a fool who longs for life and is worldly minded, laments that (for these worldly goals) penance, self restraint and control do not avail will ignorantly come to grief' (*Acaranga Sutra. 1.2.3.3-5*). Injury is caused by attachment and greed. Hence non-attachment or non-grabbing (*aparigraha*) becomes a key (virtue) to liberation. Jaina spirituality and ethics points out repeatedly that any amount of gold will not satisfy a person who is greedy of riches and wealth. Violence and other sinful acts are born out of greed and it could destroy persons, their belongings, their identity and cultures. As property is an extension of a person, usurping it unjustly from the other would amount not only to hampering his/her growth but also denying oneself the means of liberation.

(5) Comprehension of the truth about life, namely pain and sorrow, naturally leads one to renunciation: 'the pain of mundane existence is observed so keenly and it is considered to be the true knowledge' (*Acaranga Sutra*, 1.2.6.2). The course of the world (regarding evil) is observed carefully and a truth is born out of experience, namely, 'misery brings forth evil consequences' (*Ibid.* 1.3.2.1) and one has to cease from violent acts. But it is impossible to shun birth and the subsequent pain and misery. And hence the sramana religions (Jain, Buddhist) offer *religious life or a life of self-denial and renunciation* as the best alternative: 'Perceiving the truth, they chose religious life with a desire of a pious end' (*Ibid.* 1.5.5.1). 'Knowing pain and pleasure in all their variety and seeing his life not yet decline, a wise man should know *'that'* to be the proper moment (for entering a religious life)' (*Ibid.* 1.2.1.5). Every religious history has gone through a transformation or passage of time (like the time of *St. Francis of Assisi* in Christian life history) considering poverty and simplicity of life as a real alternative to power, pomp and glory. It is a challenge even today.

(6) The true path is the path of *knowledge*. It is being *mindful* of the processes of mental, vocal and bodily actions (namely karma), their root causes and their effects. Whether one is a religious or not, one should follow this path of knowledge. The truth about knowledge (*Sutrakrtanga*, II.3.37) is that which finally leads one to the highest good, namely, liberation. This is similar to the *wisdom personified as God* in Christian tradition (*Proverbs 1:20*), characterized by sound judgment and intelligence, and apparent in the creative works of God (*Proverbs 3:19*). The *wise* are in the hands of God (*Eccl. 9:1*) and they have respect for wisdom and learning. And it is the *knowledge about the truth* that will set people free. Mahayana Buddhist tradition attaches much importance to *prajna* or *Buddha's wisdom* and equates it to Nirvana.

(7) Since both good as well as bad actions are the cause for bondage, freedom from karma is possible by ceasing from activity (at the least, harmful to one's own and to others) and ceasing from passions. The discovering one is awakened and ceases to act...seeing that acts will bear fruit, the knower of the sacred lore parts from (karma) (*Acaranga Sutra*, I.4.4.3). Those who engage in works and are held in worldly bondage do not know the law, which leads to liberation (*Sutrakrtanga*, I.10.16). The sinners cannot annihilate their works by new works; the pious annihilate

the works by abstention from works (*Ibid.* 1.12.15). But complete renunciation of action is impractical, nay, impossible. *Bhagavad Gita* says that at no time a person is inactive. Hence it would suggest a *disciplined* action for the *wise* (4.18-20), unattached to its fruits (2:47-48). One is not to get attached even to *worklessness*. Thus proposing a new trend of thought *Gita* worked through greater reconciliation between the *sramana* and the *brahmana* traditions.

(8) Despite this trend, the Jaina renouncer tradition insists on the complete abandonment of act as one of the ways to get rid of *karma*, the others being *carefulness* and resolving to tread the path of virtues *without passionate attachment*. Complete abandonment of action is considered even today an extreme form of Jaina asceticism, known as *holy death* or *Sallekhana*. The fourteenth and the last stage in the spiritual ladder (*gunasthanas*) is the status of a *perfected being abandoning action* (*a-yoga kevalin*). Some of the rules for the Jaina monks and nuns pertaining to food, movement, etc. reflect an attitude of carefulness and detachment (*Acaranga Sutra* 1.7; II.1-7). But there are other instances where *pious acts* are exalted as means of attaining liberation: 'Turning from worldly life they reach the goal by pious acts; by their pious acts they are directed towards (liberation) and they show the way to others' (*Sutrakrtanga* 1.15.10). But Jaina scriptures repeatedly point out that complete freedom is beyond good and bad acts.

(9) As indicated earlier, Jainism is said to be the *Religion of Self-help* or *Self-will*: 'Man, thou art thy own friend, why wishest thou for a friend beyond thyself' (*Acaranga*, 1.8.3.4). Each one has to exert oneself in the rule of truth in order to overcome the evil one: 'Misery is produced by one's own works, not by those of somebody else (viz. fate, creator etc.)' (*Sutrakrtanga*, 1.12.11). 'Mother, father, daughter-in-law, brother, wife and sons will not be able to help me, when I suffer from my own deeds' (*Ibid.* 1.9.5; *Uttaradhyayana Sutra*, 6.31) because 'the doer of the acts must suffer for them' (*Sutrakrtanga*, 1.9.31). Hence it becomes a challenge for the aspirant to overcome the power of *karma* by his or her own insight and pure conduct. 'No one can escape the effects of their own actions' (*Uttaradhyayana Sutra*, 4.3.) because 'the *karma* follows the doer' (*ibid.*, 13.23). One has to reap the fruits of one's own action. Every action has to be realized, and thus annihilated. The fruits that are not matured will stick to the person till they are matured. This is the logic behind the whole

theory of the cycle of births and deaths (*karma samsara*). Jaina dharma, as a religion without a creator, redeemer God, places the entire *justification* on the individual, the doer and the enjoyer of the fruits of action. In this, even gods are not spared! This is very different from the Semitic view, where God plays a vital role in the lives of people and saves them.

(10) *Moksa* or *Nirvana* for the Jains is both immediate and eschatological: it is immediate in the sense that one can enjoy the fruits of complete annihilation of karma here and now. It is eschatological in the sense that the effort at annihilating karma is continued also in the future course of lives and events. In both ways *Nirvana* is final and complete.

Every religious system has a way of understanding, life and environment. *Karma* is the central theme for understanding *dharma* in all Indian religions. Hence *karma-samsara* is part of India's cultural ethos. There could be, and there are reasons for focusing on karma in Indian situation. But the spiritual masters are aware of the freedom of the individual, the power of self-will and self-effort. Karma as a *logic of cause and effect* is not, therefore, entirely pessimistic. Those who are critical of karma do not see this logic. Self-determination and self-discipline too arise out of the same consciousness of karma (call for action) that once determined a person's life. All efforts are for the sake of achieving fresh results. Humanity's future rests on *New Karma* or selfless action.