



Significance of Aparigraha

I am often asked by the youth that among the three fundamentals of Jainism; Ahimsa (non-violence), Aparigraha (non-possession/non-attachment) and Anekant (non-absolutism), which is the most important one, and why?

Most adult Jains are quick to answer “Ahimsa Paramo Dharma” – Ahimsa is the most important one. Many books have been written and sermons delivered on the importance of Ahimsa. In fact, in Jain conduct, Ahimsa is the only one that generally gets any attention; sadly though, less in spirit and more in gross codes of conduct. We have reduced Ahimsa to vegetarianism or even further to not eating certain foods etc...

In my opinion, Ahimsa, Aparigraha and Anekant are like three legs of a three legged stool. The most important one is the one that is missing, because that sure will tip you over! In my observation of Jain ‘Shravak’ societies in India as well as in the USA, both Anekant and Aparigraha seem to be missing or at best very weak. I have already discussed Anekant extensively in my previous writings, so I will limit this discussion to the significance of Aparigraha.

As we open the discussion of Aparigraha, the first thought comes; for the spiritual upliftment of our soul, we need our body and it needs to be maintained, fed, sheltered, protected, educated etc... For all this we need many physical substances and for that we need money, hence we need a good job, and to go to work we need transportation –perhaps a car, for that we need more money. So on and so on... This means that as a shravak it is impossible for us to free ourselves off all the possessions This being the case, why is there a discussion on this subject?

Mahavirswami said “Parigraha seve attai karanti prananam behanan” Meaning, because of parigraha humans kill other lives. Parigraha is the primary cause of all violence. In fact, true Ahimsa can not be achieved without Aparigraha.

Although, total non-possession is not possible for a shravak/shravika, limiting possessions is possible. More importantly, non-attachment is an essential discipline for a shravak or shravika. Once we develop the spirit of non-attachment, it will automatically manifest itself in all our practices. Now how does one achieve that?

Before we discuss how to free ourselves from Parigraha, let us first look at the types of Parigraha as described in our scriptures. 1. Attachment to body. 2. Attachment to physical substances.

1 Attachment to body: Let us first understand that according to Jain scriptures, there are 8.4 million species in this world, which are well taken care of, by nature. They are sheltered, fed, nurtured and allowed to grow. Humans appear to be the only species that is not satisfied with the bounty of nature. As a result they desire to control even nature itself. causing significant imbalance in the nature. They constantly fear for their safety, their life and that of their loved ones, with very little regard for anyone beyond their immediate ‘circle’.

2. Attachment to physical substances (Padarth). This typically arises out of our Kashay – especially greed and ego. We tend to run after being ‘better than others’. “Keeping up with the Jones” is a common phenomenon deeply rooted in our social structure. We believe that this will give us happiness, and yet in most cases it leads to unhappiness, stress, strained relationships and poor health. In fact all of our miseries are rooted in Parigraha.

The spirit of non-attachment is the way toward achieving Aparigraha.

Aparigraha for the layperson is commonly understood to mean 'limiting one's possessions'. One must be careful here not to get caught up in just the physical act of vow taking, in giving up this or that. It may be the beginning but until we understand and develop the spirit of non-attachment, physical act alone may be of little help!

Knowledge of Jain Tatva teaches us that only the soul is permanent and all matter is impermanent. Even the body is impermanent. What takes birth must ultimately die and yet the soul is immortal. Understanding the transient nature of things helps us reduce our attachment to our body as well as all the physical substances around us. Jainism does not demand that a layperson renounce everything; However, the spirit of not attachment automatically leads a layperson to set limits to his/her desires and wants so that they do not keep on acquiring and accumulating more than they need. When this spirit of non-attachment reaches a higher level, an individual renounces everything and becomes an ascetic. (Just changing clothes does not make one a Sadhu!) Aparigraha also explains the benefits of reducing one's attachments to persons, places and things. For example, things such as, the inner enemies of anger, greed, ego, deceit, and delusion are also considered attachments. Non-attachment leads to the Purification of Soul by 'stopping the influx' of Karmic particles to it and allowing them to 'shed'. Thus, non-attachment is essential to attain Moksha, the liberation of our Soul.

The practice of non-attachment also creates equanimity in our lives leading ultimately to greater harmony and peace.