



Are we Going on the Right Path?

I like the theme of the upcoming JAINA convention in Chicago, 'Practicing Jainism in the 21st century'. First because it emphasizes the practice of Jainism in daily life; secondly as it implies to view it in the context of present time and space. I believe that any tradition, value or religion withers away if not put into practice in day-to-day life. I also believe that these traditions, values and beliefs must be examined from time to time, through evaluation and analysis. We most certainly should avoid dogma, blind faith and absolutism, especially in the name of Jinvani.

Mahavirswami's teaching was passed through several generations of disciples verbally. After several hundred years when monks realized that they were forgetting what was taught to them and also realizing that disagreements that surfaced on the teachings of Mahavirswami, led to the writing and compilation of Agams and other literature. First recension - 226 BC, Second - 374 AD to 387 AD, and third in Valabhi - 527 AD, 1000 years after Mahavirswami's Nirvana. Although all Shwetamber scholars accept either 32 or 45 Agams as direct teachings of Mahavirswami, many differences are unresolved. Differences enough to split Jainism into separate sects. Digambers, on the other hand, consider all Agams to be extinct. Even Shwetamber scholars believe that the 12th Ang Agam containing 14 purvas became extinct in 474 AD. Don't get me wrong. In my belief, in the absence of Mahavirswami himself, Agams are the closest things to his teachings. I accept them as the best reference to understanding the essence of Jainism. However, I personally have difficulty accepting them as direct word of Mahavirswami ('Jinvani'). The other problem is, that until recently, most Agams were not translated and hence unavailable to the general public. Many of the monks wrote books in common languages, however they propagated their own views on the name of 'Jinvani'. Thus an average Jain (that I have come across) has many misconceptions.

Then there is a question on the significance of Mahavrats and Anuvrats and many other traditionally accepted codes of conduct. I believe that Mahavrats and Anuvrats are just a set of tools to reach our ultimate goal and not a goal in itself! . There are many paths to reach the same goal; different people can view the same path differently. Mahavirswami understood this and hence he gave us the philosophy of Anekantavad and Syadvad. Let me clarify that I am not against Mahavrats or anuvrats. If carried out in its true spirit, even today they offer one of the best tools to one's upliftment. However, blind following of rules and gross codes of conduct laid down by many of our so called 'spiritual leaders' have perpetuated ignorance and dogmatism among Jain societies like the one I come from. There was an over abundance of vow takers and people with lots of food restrictions, people regularly visited temples and sat for Samayik daily. And yet I have never seen greater anger, ego, deceit and greed in any other society. Bribing and tax evasion still is a common practice. I even heard a Jain monk, say in public that if a government levies excess taxes, it is the duty of its subjects to protect their wealth, even through black-marketing! We are paying too much attention to external things, like what not to eat or building temples and inventing new rituals and pujas, while what we should be concentrating on is, educating and disciplining our minds! We have learned to be vegetarians but never understood the true meaning of universal love and compassion for all. We were asked to give up some foods but never understood the meaning of non-attachment that can lead to equanimity and balance in our lives. If we cannot practice understanding and tolerance for differing views, what good is the knowledge of Anekantavad? We have achieved gross conduct, but zero discipline of the mind! Our old

(Jain) educational system has failed. (I apologize for coming across so judgmental - especially when my own knowledge of Jainism, at best is very limited). The point is we need to re-evaluate our approach to Jain education and Jain practices.

What is the Solution?

I like the three tools Acharya Haribhadrasuri described in Darshanshastra (750 AD) for reaching our ultimate goal.

A) Develop disinterest in satisfying the desires of our five senses (control over passions)

B) Eliminate 'Kashay' - anger, ego, deceit and greed from our day-to-day lives

C) Fill your basket with good virtues. This is done through developing a vision to look for some good virtue in others.

Don't you think these three internal tools can take us far closer to our goal, faster than all the external tools combined?

Wouldn't that also make us an exemplary Jain for our next generation to follow?

Being involved in education, I want to make sure that no youth is turned away from Jainism the way I was turned off in my youth.

I prefer to concentrate on explaining the philosophy very clearly. Once people understand the principles, its significance and its applicability, the conduct becomes automatic in every part of their lives (and not the other way around). In my opinion, vows should not be given (or taken blindly), they manifest automatically as a result of a proper understanding of our soul and its ultimate goal.

"A person performing penance with a desire of fame or worship does not achieve a genuine penance; so penance should be observed without pomp and show, and one should not flaunt or praise it". - Saman Suttam

I personally feel that we need to re-think where we are going and where we should be going. We need to learn, not what to think but how to think. Once our goal is clear, we can choose a path that makes sense to us. The key is to be an active participant (not just a spectator) in one's journey towards upliftment.

I accept that this is just one opinion and one approach. There are many who may have different approaches. So think before accepting or rejecting any approach.