



# Anekant Education Foundation

*education@anekant.org*  
*http://www.anekant.org*

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## Jain Education for the Digital Age

Any tradition, value or religion withers away if not put into practice in day-to-day life. I believe that these traditions, values and religious 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 GOD. Recent world events emphasize more than ever the applicability and significance of Jain principles of Ahimsa (non violence), Anekant (non absolutism) and Aparigraha (non attachment) in achieving world peace. However, less than 1% of world population even knows about Jainism! Even among Jains, limited knowledge has led to faulty interpretations and misconceptions that have led to blind following of mere rituals. This creates a special challenge for educators involved in teaching Jainism to the digital generation.

Some one may question why should there be any difference in teaching Jainism today; Jainism has been taught and practiced for many generations so why change anything now? We can hide our head in sand and say “everything we know about Jainism is based on 'Jinvani' given to us by a 'kevaljnani' hence it is perfect and can not be modified". This kind of blind following perpetuates ignorance and hence falls under the definition of violence. In my opinion, this kind of dogmatic thinking is the cause of decline in Jain practice as well as in proper understanding of Jain philosophy. As a result, we have achieved gross conduct but zero discipline of mind!

As a pathshala coordinator, I constantly evaluate different educational methods. It was established early on that we were not interested in producing large herds of Jains who are bound by rules and rituals and follow them blindly like lifeless puppets. I feel that the educator’s responsibility is to plant a seed in a pot and nurture it. However as the plant starts growing we need to remove the boundary of the pot at let it take firm rooting in the outside world. We need to train leaders who apply this great philosophy in their daily life and become exemplary citizens. They take Ahimsa beyond vegetarianism and let it manifest in active service that helps uplift humanity. They take Anekantavad and champion problem solving through effective conflict resolution. They take ‘Parasparopagraho Jivanam’ for protection and flourishment of all creatures around us in an environmentally friendly world. To help bring out these qualities in the digital generation, our vision has to be broad and open-minded. Through analysis and observations, we have found that many of the old methods just don't work. The digital generation does not accept anything blindly. Instead of lectures and memorizing sutras as it was done in the past, we now use multimedia presentations and discussions. We concentrate on philosophy and its applicability in day-to-day life instead of mere rituals. All our prayers are transliterated and are taught with meaning, as well as we have put them to music in western notations, so children can go home and practice them on their musical instruments. We use stories that are pertinent today and to which children can relate to, rather than Jain stories from past to teach a value. We use games, quizzes and case studies with great success. One of the new topics, added this year "What Jainism means to me and how do I communicate this with others" has created a lot of excitement among students. Taking a cue from the advertising industry, we use every technology available to us to get our message across. We are currently in the process of implementing "Backward design" for our new curriculum. What is backward design? Most teachers pick up a book and then start teaching from chapter one onwards. In backward design, we first establish the objectives that we want to accomplish. Then we establish an

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evaluation procedure to measure the level of success. Only then, we develop material necessary to accomplish our objective. It is rather lengthy process but has shown great initial success.

There are two challenges in establishing these changes.

1. Resistance from the "traditionalist" (for the lack of better word) in the organization. This can drain you dry and requires tremendous amount of patience and commitment.
2. Material development. There is almost no material available to teach in this manner, so we have to develop our own. I have gained lot of valuable information through quarterly discussion with parents and students.

Despite of these challenges, I think this is a necessary step in continuing Jain education for generations to come.

We must teach the next generation of Jains that Jainism is not to be practiced at the physical level only but at a mental one as well. Once understood in modern context, it will automatically raise the curiosity of people who have active interest and dedication towards reviving lost values which would not only be of benefit to them but also to humanity.