

Jaina: The concept of liberation

We have seen that the passions or cravings of the soul lead to the association of the soul with matter. Looking into the cause of the passions themselves, we find that they ultimately spring from our ignorance. Our ignorance about the real nature of our souls and other things leads to anger, vanity, infatuation and greed. Knowledge alone can remove ignorance. The Jainas, therefore, stress the necessity of right knowledge (samyag-jñāna) or the knowledge of reality. Right knowledge can be obtained only by studying carefully the teachings of the omniscient tīrthaṅkaras or teachers who have already attained liberation and are, therefore, fit to lead others out of bondage.

But before we feel inclined to study their teachings, we must have a general acquaintance with the essentials of the teachings and consequent faith in the competence of these teachers. This right sort of faith based on general preliminary acquaintance (called samyagdarśana) paves the way for right knowledge (samyag-jñāna) and is, therefore regarded as indispensable. But mere knowledge is useless unless it is put to practice. Right conduct (samyag-cāritra) is, therefore, regarded by the Jaina as the third indispensable condition of liberation. In right conduct, a man has to control his passions, his senses, his thought, speech and action, in the light of right knowledge.

This enables him to stop the influx of new karma and eradicate old karmas securing gradually thereby the elimination of matter which ties the soul into bondage. Right faith, right knowledge, and right conduct have therefore, come to be known in Jaina ethics as the three gems (triratna) that shine in a good life. In the very first sūtra of Tattvādhigama sūtra, Umāsvāmī states this cardinal teaching of Jainism; the path to liberation lies through right faith, knowledge and conduct. Liberation is the joint effect of these three.

Right faith (samyag darśana)—Umāsvāmī defines right faith as the attitude of respect (śraddhā) towards truth. This faith may be inborn and spontaneous in some, by others it may be acquired by learning or culture. In any case, faith can arise only when the karmas that stand in its way (i.e. the tendencies that cause disbelief) are allayed or worn out.

It should not be thought that Jainism wants its followers to accept blindly what is taught by the tīrthaṅkaras. As Maṇṇibhadra, a Jaina writer, states, the attitude of the Jaina is rationalistic, rather than dogmatic, and it is summed up in the following dictum: I have no bias for Mahāvīra, and none against Kapila and others. Reasonable words alone are acceptable to me, whose-ever they might be. The initial faith is a reasonable attitude, first, because it is based on some initial acquaintance and is proportionate to this, and secondly, because without such faith there would be no incentive to further study. Even a sceptical philosopher, who begins to study something rationally, must possess some faith in the utility of his method and the subject he studies.

Starting with a partial faith and studying further, if the beginner finds that

the Jaina teachings are reasonable, his faith increases. The Jaina claims that the more one studies these views, the greater would faith grow. Perfect knowledge would cause, therefore, perfect faith (samyagdarśana).

Right knowledge (samyag-jñāna). While faith is initially based on knowledge of only the essentials of the Jaina teachings, right knowledge is, as Dravyasaṅgraha states, the 'detailed cognition of the real nature of the ego and non-ego, and is free from doubt, error and uncertainty'. We have already seen in connection with Jaina epistemology the different ways in which correct cognition can be obtained. As in the case of faith, so in the case of knowledge the existence of certain innate tendencies (karmas) stands in the way of correct knowledge. For the attainment of perfect knowledge, the removal of these karmas should be attempted. Perfection of this process ends in the attainment of absolute omniscience (kevalajñāna).

Right conduct (samyag-cāritra)—Good conduct is briefly described in Dravyasaṅgraha as refraining from what is harmful and doing what is beneficial. In a word, it is what helps the self to get rid of the karmas that lead him to bondage and suffering. For the stoppage of the influx of new karmas, and eradication of the old, one must (a) take the five great vows (pañca-mahāvratas), (b) practise extreme carefulness (samiti) in walking, speaking, receiving alms and other things, and answering calls of nature, so as to avoid doing any harm to any life, (c) practise restraint (guṇti) of thought, speech and bodily movements, (d) practise dharma often different kinds, namely, forgiveness, humility, The value of the five great vows (pañca-mahāvratas) is recognised by the Upaniṣadic thinkers as well as the Bauddhas (who teach the Pañca-śīla). The principles of most of these are recognised also in the commandments of the Bible. But the Jainas try to practise these with a rigour scarcely found elsewhere. These vows consist of the following:

Ahiṃsā: abstinence from all injury to life—Life, as we have seen, exists not simply in the moving beings (trasa), but also in some non-moving ones (sthāvara) such as plants and beings inhabiting bodies of the earth. The ideal of the Jaina is, therefore, to avoid molesting life not only of the moving creatures but also of the non-moving ones. The Jaina saints who try to follow this ideal are, therefore, found even to breathe through a piece of cloth tied over their noses lest they inhale and destroy the life of any organism floating in the air. Ordinary laymen would find this ideal too high. They are advised, therefore, to begin with the partial observance of ahiṃsā by abstaining from injury to moving beings which are endowed with at least two senses.

The Jaina attitude of ahiṃsā is the logical outcome of their metaphysical theory of the potential equality of all souls and recognition of the principle of reciprocity, i.e., we should do to others as we would be done by. It is unfair to think that ahiṃsā is the remnant of the savage's primitive awe for life, as some critics have thought. If every soul, however lowly now, can become as great as any other soul, then one should recognise the value and the claims of every life, as his own. 'Respect for life wherever found' becomes then an irresistible duty.

The Jaina tries to perform this duty in every minute act in life, because he wants to be thoroughly consistent with the basic principle he has accepted. The Jaina also thinks, therefore, that it is not sufficient simply not to take life; one should not even think and speak of taking life, nor even permit, nor encourage others to take life. Otherwise the vow of ahimsā cannot be fully maintained.

Satyam: Abstinence from falsehood—This vow also is taken very rigorously. Truthfulness is not speaking what is only true, but speaking what is true as well as good and pleasant. Without these qualifications the practice of truthfulness would be of little use as an aid to moral progress. Because, merely speaking what is true may sometimes descend into garrulity, vulgarity, frivolity, vilification, etc. Truth set as the ideal of this vow is sometimes called, therefore, sūnṛta, to suggest the fuller meaning of truth which is also wholesome and pleasant.

It is also pointed out that for the perfect maintenance of this vow, one must conquer greed, fear and anger and even restrain the habit of jesting.

Asteyam: Abstinence from stealing—This vow consists in not taking what is not given. The sanctity of the property of others, like that of their lives, is recognised by the Jains. A Jaina writer wittily remarks the wealth is but the outer life of man and to rob wealth is to rob life. If human life is impossible without wealth in some form or other, there is no exaggeration in the Jaina thought that depriving a man of his wealth is virtually to deprive him of an essential condition on which his life depends. This vow, therefore, may be said to be logically inseparable from the vow of ahimsā, the sanctity of property being a logical sequence of the sanctity of life.

Brahmacaryam: Abstinence from self-indulgence—This vow is generally interpreted as that of celibacy. But the Jaina attaches to this also a deeper meaning that raises the standard of this vow far above mere sexual self-continentence. It is interpreted as the vow to give up self-indulgence (kāma) of every form. The Jaina, bent on self-criticism, discerns that though outwardly indulgence may stop, it may continue still in subtle forms—in speech, in thought, in the hopes of enjoyment hereafter in heaven, even in asking or permitting others to indulge themselves. For the complete maintenance of this vow one must, therefore, desist from all forms of self-indulgence—external and internal, subtle and gross, mundane and extra-mundane, direct and indirect.

Aparigraha: Abstinence from all attachment—This is explained as the vow to give up all attachment for the objects of the five senses—pleasant sound, touch, colour, taste and smell.

As attachment to the world's objects means bondage to the world, and the force of this causes rebirth, liberation is impossible without the withdrawal of attachment.

Knowledge, faith and conduct are inseparably bound up; and the progress and degeneration of the one react on the other two. Perfection of conduct goes hand in hand with the perfection of knowledge and faith. When a person, through the harmonious development of these three, succeeds in overcoming the

forces of all passions and karmas, old and new, the soul becomes free from its bondage to matter and attains liberation. Being free from the obstacles of matter, the soul realises its inherent potentiality. It attains the fourfold perfection (ananta catuṣṭaya), namely, infinite knowledge, infinite faith, infinite power and infinite bliss.