

AN INSIGHT TO THE ETHICAL TEACHINGS IN JAINA PHILOSOPHY AND ITS RELEVANCE IN TODAY'S WORLD

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Abstract

The Moral principles of Jainism indicate that this philosophy represents the practical application of an ideal life. The systematic moral discipline laid down by Jaina Philosophy lights up one person from the common level and makes him enabled of knowing and practicing truth through a highly moral and spiritual course of conduct. Jainism is said to be based on the three basic principles known as **Ratnatrayī** or the “Three Gems viz. right belief, right knowledge and right conduct. Jainism is a system that has taken up the path of non-violence for ages and is still applying this ideal to mankind’s practical life in the contemporary age. It lays emphasis on the practice of the principles of non-violence in every individual from which it is evident that its ultimate goal is the well – being of mankind and social improvement. Through this paper a modest effort is made with the objective of having an insight towards the ethical lessons prescribed in Jaina Philosophy.

Ethical knowledge is the base of humanity. It is the root of human value. Today, when the mind set of people has been polluted of illegal activities, the question– what is morality is surprisingly found to be forgotten by the society. The human race has remarkably become crooked, engulfed in unlawful deeds like injustice, enmity, malice etc. Here comes the relevance of the

discussion on ethical knowledge most befittingly during this time in the world. The endless treasure of vast knowledge that had once been designed by the ancient Indian *R̥ṣis* (monks), enlightened with the incessant worship of wisdom, is considered an invaluable asset in the field of world ethical knowledge through the ages.

The vast Vedic literature, *Itihāsa*, *Parāṇa*, *Darśana* etc. is seen to be an enormous treasury of Ethics, of which, even if a part can be ingrained into the human life, it can be elevated from an ordinary to extraordinary. Through this paper a modest effort is being made to have an insight towards the ethical lessons prescribed in *Jaina Philosophy*.

Before we start our discussion on Ethics, it is necessary to have a brief idea about some aspects like- what is Ethics? What kind of study comes under its sphere? etc. The word '*ethics*' is derived from the Greek adjective '*ethica*' which comes from the substantive '*ethos*'. '*Ethos*' indicates customs, usages or habits. Ethics is also called '*Moral Philosophy*'. Customs are not merely habitual ways of practicing. They are ways approved by the society. '*Ethics*' thus literally means the science of customs or habits of people. Habits are the expression of fixed disposition of the will or character. Character is the permanent habit of willing, the inner bent of the mind, which is expressed in habitual conduct. Character is the inner counterpart of conduct, which is its outer expression. Thus, Ethics is the science of human character and conduct. It evaluates the desirous deeds and customary actions of persons considering what is right and what is wrong. It determines the character of human being and considers its virtuousness or viciousness. Ethics is the science of morality or of moral evaluation of the voluntary actions of people. It seeks to determine the supreme ideal involved in human conduct. It teaches people to pass correct moral judgements on human conduct, considering it as right or wrong, with reference to the supreme ideal of human life. Ethics may therefore be defined as the science of best conduct. It is the science of supreme ideal involved in human life. Mackenzie defines Ethics

as- “the study of what is right or good in human conduct” or “the science of the ideal involved in human life.”¹

Ancient Indian Śāstras, specially the Upaniṣads as well as the other texts of Indian Philosophy which are the rich treasure house of ethical wisdom recognized all over the world, are seen to have contributed immensely in this aspect. Indian Philosophy, enriched with the incessant stream of wisdom has been furnishing the light of true knowledge through the ages. Among the schools of Indian Philosophy, Jainism is one of them, which according to the historians is very antique. According to some scholars, it started during the time of the Vedas. References are found in the Vedic Mantras to Ṛṣabha and Ariṣṭānemi, the two Jaina Tīrthāṅkaras (saints or fore finders), the former being the founder of Jaina Dharma of the present age. Jainism was taught by 24 Tīrthāṅkaras. Ṛṣabha was the first and Vardhamāna Mahāvīra, a contemporary of Buddha, who belonged to the clan of Licchavis of Vaishali, was the last. Jainism has come from the word ‘jina’ which, derived from the Sanskrit root ‘ji’ (to conquer) means one who has successfully subdued his passions. It essentially means the conquest of one’s own self in bondage. Vardhamāna (599 B.C- 527 B.C) was called the ‘Jina’, meaning the spiritual conquer; or Mahāvīra, the great hero, just as Siddhārtha was called Buddha, the awakened, after his illumination.

The distinct feature of Jainism, as indicated by its very name, is to be found in its practical teachings and the foremost feature of the discipline it prescribes is its extreme severity. Jainism is seen not to have insisted on enlightenment or on conduct alone, but on both. To these it adds right faith (*Samyak Darśana*), right knowledge (*Samyak Jñāna*), and right conduct (*Samyak Cāritra*) as the ‘Three Jewels’ (*tri-ratna*) or the three precious principles of life.² Of these three, Right faith is unshaken belief in the Jaina scriptures and the teachings of the Tīrthāṅkaras. Right conduct is the most important part of the discipline as it is through activity that one can get rid of *Karma* and can reach the goal of life. It is translating into action

what one has learnt and one believes to be true. And right knowledge is an understanding of the principles of Jaina Philosophy and religion. Jainism differs from other traditions in this ground that all three must be practiced at the same time if an individual is to be liberated. *Bhakti* or devotion alone is not enough, nor is *Jṣāna*. The *mokṣa-mārga* or path to liberation, according to Jaina Philosophy is a threefold one.

Jainism is known for its three major concepts or practices—*Ahiṃsā*, asceticism and *Anekāntavāda*. Of the different virtues those are to be cultivated by the Jainas, *Ahiṃsā* occupies the foremost place. The doctrine of *ahiṃsā* is no doubt very old in India, but the way in which it is made to spread over the whole code of conduct is specifically Jaina. The doctrine of *Ahiṃsā* or non-violence is central to Jaina ethical thought. In Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan's view, "The Jainas were the first to make *Ahiṃsā*, non-violence into a rule of life."³ Literally the word *Ahiṃsā* means 'non injury' where 'injury' should be understood as comprehending injuring in thought, by word or by act. It signifies that one should live without harming others even in the least. *Ahiṃsā* is the doctrine of non-violence, non-injury or non-killing. It is rejoined repeatedly in Jaina literature. The *Ākārāṅga Sūtra* states that, "Knowing the course of the world, one should cease from violent acts," and that following the Jaina's example, "... should not kill, nor cause other to kill, nor consent to the killing of others." One should do no injury to one's self, nor to anybody else..."⁴ Furthermore *Ahiṃsā* is to be applied even to one's enemies. Thus, "when men rise up in enmity and wish to fight, it is not cowardice, say the wise, to refuse the challenge. Even when enemies do utmost evil, it is right to do no evil in return."⁵

The exceptional quality of Jainism lies in the urgency with which it prolonged the practice of *Ahiṃsā* to all forms of life. As one verse asserts, "The Arhats and Bhagavats of the past, present and future, all say thus : "all breathing, existing, living sentient

creatures should not be slain, nor treated with violence, nor abused, nor tormented, nor driven away."⁶ Another verse depicts the 'great sage' as one who neither injuring or injured, becomes a shelter for all sorts of afflicted creatures, even as an island, which is never covered with water.

The importance of *Ahimsā* is found to be revealed in its being the initial one of the five **great vows** taught by Mahāvīra. The first great vows runs thus : I renounce all killing of living beings, whether subtle or gross, whether movable or fixed. Neither shall I myself kill living beings, nor cause others to do so, nor consent to it.⁷ In order to aid the devotee for the fulfilment of such a vow he should meditate on five things—"carefulness of speech, carefulness of mind, care in walking, care in lifting as well as laying down things, and thorough perception to one's food and drink."⁸ By meditating on these one who is freed from bonds called '*Nigrantha*' (freed from bonds) becomes careful in his walk instead of being careless, and searches into his mind, searches into his speech before speaking. Becomes careful in laying down his utensils of begging and doesn't eat and drink without inspecting his food and drink.⁹ From such teachings the phenomenon comes that is seen today in India of the white-clad Jaina monk percolating the water before he drinks it and sweeping the walk in front of him while he goes along. The other four vows are : 1) I disclaim all vices of lying speech arising from anger or greed or fear or mirth. I shall neither speak lies, nor cause others to speak, nor consent to the speaking of lies by others. 2) I forsake the taking of anything not given, either in a village or a town or a jungle, either of little or much, of living or lifeless objects. I shall neither take myself that is not offered, nor cause others to accept, nor consent to their taking. 3) I renounce all sensual pleasures. I shall not give away to sensuality. 4) I disclaim all attachments, whether little or much, living or lifeless, neither shall I form such attachments, nor cause others to do so, nor consent to their doing so.¹⁰ These vows are characterized as *Ahimsā* (not to injure any living being), *Satya* (not to utter

falsehood), *Asteya* (not to steal), *Brahmacarya* (chastity to live a celibate life), *Aparigraha* (non-greed, renunciation of worldly things).

The five vows or the principles of conduct are standards for the Jaina monks to sustain. It is of worth mentioning here that the laymen are expected to follow them also, though there are some limitations in case of the householders. In case of the layman they are the same except that the last two are replaced by the vows of chastity and contentment or strict limitation of one's wants.

That asceticism is a major emphasis of Jaina Philosophy is found to be apparent from the teachings of the Jaina scriptures. It has been found to be revealed that the special feature of Jaina ethics is its severely stringent character, because its goal is *Moksa*, which means the acquisition of infinite knowledge, infinite perception, infinite energy and infinite bliss. And the attainment of such a unique state of mind, according to Jainism, cannot be accomplished without eschewing selfishness completely. According to the Jaina point of view, an ascetic alone can follow the strict code of conduct because he relinquishes all kinds of worldly bindings. It is worth mentionable here that almost all schools of Indian Philosophy accept the principles of renunciation as a means of attaining the highest state. Detachment from all worldly objects is generally considered to be necessary for self realization. Such longing for renunciation is inspired by the intense desire of the soul to become infinite. This kind of ascetic attitude expands the soul, makes free the individual from narrow selfish desires, and leads him to the attainment of a life which is predominated by fondness and sympathy for all human beings.

In Jaina Philosophy, asceticism, as its goal, has the purification of the individual so that two results may follow. One is the attaining the state of *Kevala*. The other is to enable the individual to behold his surrounding world more vividly, to understand it more profoundly and to emphasise with it to a great depth so as to make

it a better world. The basic subject in regard to the later is that people's inner life must be cleansed and purified before he can set his external world a-right. From the Jaina point of view asceticism enables a person to have right views because he is not attached to objects and thus is not inclined on defending and preserving them.

Jainism advocates the practice of austerities throughout all if one's life and not in just the fourth stage. According to Jaina Philosophy, one must not conclude that asceticism yields a life of joylessness. Rather it leads to a state of inner serenity and calm which no external events can disturb. Further, it is not a state of cheerlessness as, asceticism is willingly, freely or joyfully practiced because one is well aware to the good results it produces and the evil conclusions indulgence leads to.

Non-violence in Jainism means restraining from all injury and violence, whether such violence pertains to the subtlest invisible living beings or to animals or to human beings. Violence does not mean bringing about only physical injury, on the contrary it includes mental and verbal injury too. After adopting non-violence, a Jaina ascetic tries his best to follow it absolutely and not to cause injury to any living being physically, mentally and verbally. Non-violence, thus requires three principles which are called the three *Guptis*. In other words, pursuance of the principles of non-violence through mind, word and deed implies three *Guptis* which are mental non-violence, verbal non-violence and physical non-violence.

It is to be remembered that the foundation of all the great vows in Jainism is the great vow of non-violence. All other moral rules are accepted only to maintain this great vow of non-violence. Uttering truth is needful because by telling lies against somebody people cause at least mental injury to him. By uttering false statements people commit verbal violence and injure the feelings of another person. In like manner stealing somebody's property, violating the third great vow in Jainism, amounts to violence. A

person whose property is stolen is mentally harmed. Non-stealing, therefore as well is based on non-violence. It is thus evident that even *Brahmacarya* is based on non-violence. Non-possession means not to possess surplus property. A person who amasses wealth deprives poor and hungry persons of their needs. Surplus wealth could be used to provide help to the needy. Thus, choosing the principle of non-violence means following a non-violent way of life.

In Jainism the conduct of ascetics must absolutely be non-violent. All the Jaina ascetics therefore are instructed to follow five Samitis, or co-rules besides the five **great vows** and the three implied rules or Guptis. Those five Samitis are : 1) Iryā Samiti, 2) Bhāṣā Samiti, 3) Eṣaṇā Samiti, 4) Ādāna Samiti and 5) Parithāpāṇikā Samiti. Iryā Samiti is the caution in avoiding injury to living beings while walking; Bhāṣa Samiti is the restraint over speech to avoid verbal injury; Eṣaṇā Samiti means the careful checking of food to assure that whatever food or drink has been offered to him was not specially prepared for him; Ādāna Nīkṣepānā Samiti covers the using of necessary articles cautiously to avoid injury to subtle lives and Parithāpāṇikā Samiti is the act of disbursing or throwing away unnecessary articles with care or caution. These five Samitis assist the ascetics in following the path of non-violence and they show that the life of an ascetic must be exemplary under all circumstances. An ascetic is to attain *Mokṣa* until and unless he rises above the worldly antimonic and practises absolute non-violence. Non-violence generally means protecting animal lives. That is why most Jaina house-holders feed birds and nurse wounded birds and animals. Non-violence is thus regarded as equivalent to pity or compassion. But the Therāpanthi sect of Jaina Śvetāmbara school gives a strange definition of non-violence and differentiates it from the protection of live. This definition must impartially be analysed since non-violence is the supreme end of morality in Jainism. So far as the ethical code of ascetics is concerned, the illustration of non-violence from the absolutistic

point of view bears special significance. It is of worth mentioning that although Jainism does not consider it necessary for the aspirant to pass through the stages of a house-holder and of a recluse (*Vānaprastha*), and instead advocates the direct adoption of an ascetic life with a view to attain *Mokṣa*, it holds that a householder can lead the life of renunciation and can prepare for asceticism partially by following the five great vows. All the sects of Jainism agree that it is necessary for the house-holders to follow the atomic vows known as *Anuvratas* to practise the life of rejection. It is to be noted that the adoption of the *Anuvratas* is in fact the training for ascetic life. *Anuvrata* means the minutest part, or atom of the great vow i.e. the *Mahāvratas*. In other words, *Anuvrata* is a simple principle based on *Mahāvratas* or the great vows.

The study above on moral principles of Jainism indicates that this philosophy represents the practical application of an ideal to life. The systematic moral discipline laid down by Jaina Philosophy lights up one person from the common level and makes him enable of knowing and practicing truth through a highly moral and spiritual course of conduct. Jainism is said to be based on the three precious principles of right belief, right knowledge and right conduct. This threefold code is known as *Ratnatrayī* or the “Three Gems”. Right belief is postulated, as without it right knowledge is not possible, nor can one pursue right conduct without conviction. Again right knowledge is the knowledge of nine categories of Jaina metaphysics, which are– 1) *Jīva* (living being), 2) *Ajīva* (matter), 3) *Punya* (merit), 4) *Pāpa* (demerit), 5) *Āśrava* (the inflow of Karma), 6) *Samvara* (self –control), 7) *Bandha* (bondage), 8) *Nirjarā* (heavenly bliss) and 9) *Mokṣa* (liberation). Right conduct, on the other hand consists in adopting those in life, which are accepted to be real and fixed. Since Jaina Philosophy recognises bondage and values the **great vows** as the sole means of attaining *Mokṣa* from bondage, the adoption of these great vows or of the atomic vows in life is credited as right conduct. To sum up, Jainism is a system that

has taken up the path of non-violence for ages and is still applying this ideal to people's practical life in the contemporary age. Notwithstanding Jainism sets down emphasis on the practice of the principles of non-violence in every individual matter, it is evident that its ultimate goal is the well-being of mankind and social improvement.

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