

*Questions & Answers:*

## **Jain Teachings: In The Context of Modern Times<sup>1</sup>**

*by Duli Chandra and Sunita Jain*

**Q:** Does the Jain concept of individual freedom imply that we have the freedom to do whatever we wish?

**A:** We have to bear in mind that freedom imposes an important responsibility on us. My freedom should not infringe on the rights of other individuals. My freedom should not interfere with the right of other animals to survive. My thoughts, speech and actions should not hurt others' feelings. Otherwise, I would be committing violence. Our words and deeds should be such that we minimize the violence of others' feelings. All of us, adults as well as youngsters, should make a sincere effort to minimize the violence of each others' feelings. This will generate trust among us. Then the problems of generation gap, of communication, of growing up in a multicultural environment, will have a minimal untoward impact on our well-being. We have to have faith in our youngsters and our youngsters should have similar faith in us. This belief in nonviolence will produce harmony, happiness and peace of mind in families and in society. We should also remember that we are all human and we are apt to make honest mistakes of judgment.

**Q:** People use phrases like 'traditional versus new values', 'Western versus old Eastern orthodox', 'society that is morally different from Indian'. Are not these realities of present times?

**A:** Regardless of these slogans, all cultures teach the same morality. Physical and mental violence, untruth, greed and the like are deemed immoral in any system, old or new, Western or Eastern.

**Q:** Jainism says that the ultimate goal of each individual soul is salvation – freedom from the bondage of karma. Does this imply that we should renounce all worldly pursuits and follow the path to spiritual progress?

**A:** Jain sages have divided the society into four segments: Monks (SADHUs), nuns (SADHVIIs), laymen (SHRAAVAKs) and laywomen (SHRAAVIKAs). Monks and nuns follow the path to spiritual development to a greater extent than householders. Nevertheless, householders are an essential component of society. All members of society are expected to fulfill their responsibilities towards each other with the best of their abilities. This is beneficial for all.

**Q:** If everybody followed the Jain teaching of non-possessiveness (APARIGRAH), how could modern science and technology develop?

**A:** As Jainism supports the concept of freedom of all individuals, it also supports the ideal of the prosperity of all individuals of the world. It does not prevent us from making progress in the fields of science and technology for the benefit of all people of the world.

In TATTVAARTH SUTRA, Acharya Umaswati has written:

PARASPAROPAGRAHO JEEVAANAM:5-21:

The role of all living beings of the universe is to help each other. We must endeavor to help all of humanity. Dr. A. N. Upadhye has written,<sup>2</sup> "The second virtue which Jain ethics lays stress on is good neighborliness. One should speak the truth and respect the right to property. Thus one becomes trustworthy of society, and at the same time creates an atmosphere of security for others. One's thoughts, words and acts must be consistent with each other. Further, they must create an atmosphere of confidence. A reciprocal sense of security must start with the immediate neighbor and then be gradually diffused in society at large, not only in theory but also in practice. These virtues can lead to coherent social and political groups of worthy citizens who yearn for peaceful coexistence with the well-being of the entire humanity in view." Thus the Jain teachings do not impede progress. Our concept of non-possessiveness (APARIGRAH) entails that in our endeavors, we do not look for our own interest only. We should consider the overall impact of our actions on the environment, including all living and non-living entities.

**Q:** Does it mean that we can accumulate a lot of material wealth?

**A:** It depends upon how the wealth is accumulated. Jainism teaches us to minimize physical and mental violence. It says that we should not indulge in passions such as greed, intrigue, untruth, ego and pride. We should not mislead or exploit others. We should bear in mind that virtues like nonviolence, truth and forthrightness bring mental peace and happiness. If our pursuit of materials leads to physical or mental suffering, or if it causes us to lose our peace of mind, it becomes violence. Thus we have to strike a balance between our mental happiness and the pursuit of money and material. In businesses and jobs, we should be impelled by the desire to help our fellow beings. We should work for the good of all people. This is the kind of sacrifice our culture of nonviolence entails.

**Q:** What if one makes a considerable amount of money and donates a portion of it for worthy causes? Is it not APARIGRAH?

**A:** According to the Jain theory of karma, it is our thoughts, feelings and passions, which lead to the influx of good or bad karma. If one indulges in greed, untruth, intrigue and deception in making money, one acquires bad karma (PAAP). Obviously, the consequences of such karma cannot be avoided

merely by donating some money. Further, donations made for name and fame do not bring any good karma (PUNYA).

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