

Destiny Or Endeavor: Mahaveer's Path(1)

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In general, people believe that our deeds determine the course of our lives. Some hold the view that our fate is sealed by our past deeds. This is fatalism (NIYATIVAAD). Some believe that accepting a certain faith or personality can change the course of their lives. Others indulge in various austerities and penance, prayers and worship, and charities and grace to improve their lives. This scholarly article presents the Jain concepts in this respect.

- D.C.J.

The nature of reality is dynamic. Reality is influenced by determinism - factors such as past karmas (PRAARABDH) and free will, including focused effort (PURUSHAARTH). Were we to believe, however, that determinism alone is the final verdict, then we would be fatalists (NIYATIVAADIs), not Jains.

On the one hand, our past karmas, which constitute our PRAARABDH or destiny, influence our lives. It is commonly perceived that we can do nothing about our past karmas. We should accept their consequences as they come, with equanimity. On the other hand, many people hold that free will coupled with focused efforts (PURUSHAARTH) determines all the events in our lives. According to Jainism, both details are relevant. Free will coupled with focused efforts towards a specific goal constitutes our present karma. Thus the course of our lives is defined by our past as well as present karmas.(2)

While experiencing the results of positive or negative karmas, we should keep our feet firmly on the ground and remember that karmas are external to the soul. Their effects are only temporary. Whether we experience pleasure or pain, it is only fleeting. Only the bliss attained by the liberated souls, who are free from all temporal bonds, is real bliss because it is invariable, irreversible and everlasting. Temporal happiness is momentary and fleeting.

Mahaveer did not believe in pure determinism - in the concept that destiny is sealed by past karmas. He believed in free will coupled with focused efforts. He did not sit idle and wait for the 'right moment' to come. He did not get a sudden flash of insight. He attained liberation through sustained endeavor in the face of great adversity. No extraneous factors were going to determine his life. He took on past karmas, and won by means of his perfect endeavor.

Each soul is master of its own fate:

Mahaveer was clear that he could not be a savior of all humankind. He could only be a catalyst in their liberation. Ultimately each soul is the master of its own fate. Mahaveer never deluded himself that he could be the causative factor in anyone else's liberation.

As a TEERTHANKAR (ford maker, spiritual victor), he was the catalyst in establishing the fourfold religious order (DHARMATEERTH) of ascetics and householders. But he realized that just like any other being, he was the master of his own future, and concentrated on his own liberation.

Mahaveer's conduct and his teachings showed us the path to liberation. He was not a philosopher in the usual sense of the word. He lived his truth. His conduct reflected his philosophy. Various schools of Indian philosophy maintain that one can achieve salvation through devotion (BHAKTIYOGA), knowledge (JNAANAYOGA) or concerted effort (KARMAYOGA). Mahaveer believed that karmas can be shed and salvation can be achieved only through rational conduct - conduct imbued by rational perception and rational knowledge. Conduct devoid of rationalism is of little avail.(3)

Mahaveer realized that each soul is a unique, separate and distinct entity. He remained in himself, thought for himself. He did not indulge in any rituals. He did not worship anyone, he did not build temples, and he did not go on pilgrimages.

Mahaveer shared his thoughts with those who were willing to learn from him. He did not seek an audience. If there were people keen to seek his guidance, he did not address them personally. He did not advise them on worldly matters. He did not indulge in predictions, did not dispense miracles, etc. His life was a study in equanimity and calm. His conduct was his precept and his teachings.

Mahaveer was not a man in a rush. His decisions were well thought out, his message was clear. Harm no one and no one will harm you. Realize the nature of reality. Learn BHED VIJNAAN, the art of discerning between the permanent and the transient, between the soul and the non-soul, between propitious and ominous.

Mahaveer's precepts include: Realize that one substance cannot do more than become a catalyst for modifications of another substance. Ultimately, modifications of each substance occur due to its own intrinsic nature - its own DHARMA. Do not run after temporal pleasures. Your stay in the present life is fleeting. A rational approach toward life is the basis for spiritual development.

Footnotes:

1. A modified version of the article 'Mahavir the Ascetic' published in Times of India on April 10, 2006 in the column 'THE SPEAKING TREE'.
2. This implies that focused effort coupled with equanimity can help us modify the fruition of karma. This is the way to achieve peace of mind. Equanimity accompanied with focused effort, including austerities such as penance and meditation, constitutes abstract karma, which leads to transformations like diminution (APKARSHAN) and mutation (SANKRAMAN) of karmas. - D.C.J.
3. Jain scriptures teach that knowledge becomes rational knowledge (SAMYAK JNAAN) upon attaining rational perception (SAMYAK DARSHAN), and conduct becomes rational conduct (SAMYAK CHAARITRA) upon attaining rational

knowledge (SAMYAK JNAAN). Acharya Umaswati, in TATTVAARTH SUTRA, states: rational perception, rational knowledge and rational conduct together constitute the path to liberation.

- D.C.J.