

*Our Religion*

From Studies In Jainism: Primer

Anil: Grandma, what is religion?

Grandma: To most people, religion means faith. People believe in things taught by their religion. However, the Sanskrit word for religion has a somewhat different meaning. The Sanskrit word for religion is DHARM. It means nature or qualities of a thing or person.

Asha: Grandma, how can religion mean the qualities of a person? If a man does bad things, can we say it is his religion?

Grandma: Children, the good qualities of a person make up his or her DHARM. We believe that man is good by nature. Doing good things is man's religion. Sometimes, a man does not understand and does bad things by giving up his true nature. This is like giving up one's religion.

Anil: This is an interesting idea. I have heard that the Sanskrit word DHARM has another meaning as well.

Grandma: Yes, the other meaning of the word DHARM is duty. Jainism says that the function (role) of living beings is to help each other. Thus helping each other is our duty (DHARM or religion).

Asha: Grandma, you said that helping each other is our duty. Being good is our religion. Why is it so?

Grandma: Let me give you a simple example. All parents love their children. All children love their parents. Our mothers and fathers do everything to make our lives comfortable. They help us to become good people. All family members love us and help us. They do not want anything in return. Thus it is our religion to be good to our parents and other family members.

Anil: This is a good idea. But why do we have to be good to other people? Why should we be kind to animals?

## Our Religion

Grandma: We do not like to get hurt. We avoid pain. We do not want to die. No living being likes to get hurt. No living being wants to die. Therefore we avoid hurting or killing people, animals and insects. We do not kill animals for food. That is why we Jains are vegetarians. This is our religion of nonviolence (AHIMSA).

Asha: Grandma, please tell us the basic teachings of the Jain religion.

Grandma: The basic teachings of the Jain religion are:

1. Nonviolence (AHIMSA)  
We do not hurt others. We do not speak of hurting others. We do not think of hurting others.
2. Truth (SATYA)  
We always speak the truth.
3. Non-stealing (ACHAURYA)  
We do not steal or take things that do not belong to us.
4. Purity of body and mind (BRAHMACHARYA)  
We keep our bodies clean and have good thoughts.
5. Non-possessiveness (APARIGRAH)  
We do not become selfish. We limit our needs.  
Children, remember, truth, non-stealing, purity of body and mind, and non-possessiveness are part of nonviolence.  
Other religions have similar teachings.

Asha: I understand why we should not hurt or kill living beings. But why do we have to speak the truth and follow other teachings of Jainism?

Grandma: Our feelings are hurt when someone tells us a lie. We do not like it when someone takes away something that belongs to us. When somebody gets angry at us, we feel hurt. When we become angry, we ourselves get hurt. We are unhappy when someone is selfish and does not care about us. This means that hurting the feelings of others is violence. Hurting our own feelings is also violence. If we want to be happy, we should avoid such violence.

Jainism says that nonviolence is the supreme religion.