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Life, Liberty And Pursuit Of Happiness In Jainism'

by Duli Chandra Jain

Life, liberty and pursuit of happiness are the fundamental rights of all human beings. According to Jainism, these are the fundamental rights of all living beings. Religion helps us define the kind of life, the kind of liberty, the kind of happiness and to find the way to pursue them. Thus religion is the science of living.

The definitions of life, liberty and happiness emerge from our outlook towards life (DARSHAN), from our knowledge of ourselves and of our surroundings (JNAAN) and from our life experience (CHAARITRA). Jainism says that our perception, knowledge and activities of life should be proper; they should be rational (SAMYAK). This rationalism is extremely essential in view of the fact that there are contradictions and conflicts in the real world. One individual's liberty may infringe on others' freedom. One person's fulfillment of his/her dreams may cause inconvenience to others. The law that a motorist should drive within the speed limit may be interpreted as an infringement on his/her personal freedom but pedestrians on the road might be run over by the motorist's driving at high speed. A person may refuse to fasten his/her seatbelt on a plane but in the case of turbulent weather, he/she may become a missile causing injury to others.

The above examples illustrate that whatever seems desirable from one person's viewpoint may not be so from another's viewpoint. In many instances, there are no clear or definite answers to problems. Accordingly, Jainism preaches the principle of multiplicity of viewpoints (ANEKAANTAVAAD), or relativism (SYAADAVAAD), which can be applied to resolve such conflicts. It says that we can only know the relative truth. We have to look at things from a variety of viewpoints and then arrive at a judgment. We should try to study the problems from others' viewpoints as well. We should try to avoid conflicts of interest. This principle also applies to our beliefs and concept of religion. No book contains the absolute truth, no guru knows the absolute truth, and no teacher gives absolute knowledge. Jainism does have the concept of omniscient

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(KEVALI) masters who realize the absolute truth. However, at present there are no omniscient persons here on earth. So relativism teaches us to repudiate blind faith. It tells us to study and experience nature (things and events) around us and form our own concept of life, liberty and happiness. Simultaneously, the principle of multiplicity of viewpoints teaches us to make a sincere effort to investigate a given situation or problem from our own viewpoint as well as from others' viewpoints, and then decipher what is desirable and what is undesirable. We should consider the consequences of our actions on others as well before taking any step. Thus the principle of multiplicity of viewpoints is an instrument for our practice of nonviolence. It teaches us how to define life, liberty and happiness and how to pursue them.

Each individual has a certain outlook toward life. He/she has some perception of self and the knowledge of his/her surroundings. These develop through our life experience. When I was young, I was taught NAMOKAAR MANTRA, certain prayers and the names of twenty-four TEERTHANKARS. I was also taught that as Jains, we must go to the temple to pray and worship every day before taking our first meal, we should study the scriptures and attend religious discourses. We should drink water strained through thick cloth. We should not kill any insects or hurt any living beings. We should take only vegetarian foods and we should not eat any food containing cereals after sunset. We should abstain from gambling, alcohol and drugs. We should celebrate religious holidays such as the festival of spiritual awareness (PARYUSHAN), the birth of Bhagwaan Mahaveer (MAHAVEER JAYANTI) and the festival of lights (DEEPAVALI, MAHAVEER NIRVAAN DAY). I followed the above practices willingly and derived much pleasure from them. These helped me form my own ideas about good life and happiness. All of us who have grown up in India have learned and experienced these things. We should devise some means for providing such education and experiences to our children in this country. It is our duty. It should be part of our religious practice. Of course, youngsters who are intelligent and who are exposed to an alien culture will question the rationale behind our religious concepts and practices. Jainism stresses rationalism and we should have no problem in presenting a wholesome picture of our religion that does not contradict common sense. However, this is possible only if we give up some traditional practices, which in fact, violate the spirit of Jainism.

When I was in the second or third grade, I started going to the Jain religious school (PAATHASHAALA). There I was taught the principles of the

Jain religion. In grade school, I learned mathematics, science, history, geography, languages and principles of other religions. I started forming ideas about life, liberty and pursuit of happiness. I am still changing and modifying those ideas. I am sure each one of us has gone through the same process. Jainism says that we all modify our concepts to suit our changing personality (DRAVYA), environment (KSHETRA), time (KAAL) and experience (BHAAV). Even then, in that small village in India, my teacher, Pandit Daya Chandra Jain Shastri, taught me that our practices of religion, like the stream of fresh water, have to change according to the circumstances and time. However, we should modify them in conformity of the basic principles of Jainism.

In some cases, our view of religion changes substantially with our understanding of reality and with our experience. In my early years, I believed that whatever is written in the Jain scriptures is true and it is the word of TEERTHANKARS. Now I understand that the scriptural knowledge was transferred from one generation to the next by word of mouth for years and later the scriptures were put into writing. I learned that because of karmas we go through the cycles of worldly existence, life and death. We have to reap the fruits of our actions. We can improve material status of our present and future lives, eventually get rid of all karmas and attain salvation by praying, worship, study of scriptures, fasting, pilgrimages, charities, etc. Now I understand that physical involvement in the practice of religion without proper perception and knowledge does not lead to spiritual advancement. Jainism says that rational perception and rational knowledge must accompany our conduct. We must understand what we practice. A religious practice or an act of charity, which is performed with the desire of material gains, involves greed, intrigue, pride and even anger. It violates the spirit of religion.

As our level of knowledge of science, history, geography, philosophy, religions, etc., expands, many questions come to our minds. Hinduism and some other religions believe in 'as you sow so you reap'. According to some, God punishes and rewards us for our deeds. In Jainism, does karma play the role of God? Some religions say that God can forgive our sins. Can we get relief from the past karma? A person can accumulate wealth and means of comfort and luxury by indulging in unscrupulous business practices. Is this a 'good life'? Is this due to the consequences of 'good' past karmas? We do accumulate undesirable karmas by indulging in corrupt practices. Can the consequences of these undesirable

karmas be avoided by charitable contributions? Such important questions come to the minds of those who study Jainism. They arose in my mind too. In my mind, trading Almighty God for inanimate karma did not make sense until I had discussions with Pandit Phool Chandra Jain Siddhaantaacharya whom I consider the greatest exponent of the Jain theory of karma. Our discussions improved my understanding of the theory of karma. Material karmas result from our feelings and emotions, which are known as abstract karmas. Further, the fruition of karmas influences our feelings and emotions. This is stated by Acharya Kundkund in PANCHAASTIKAAYA SAAR in the following words:

BHAAVO KAMMA NIMITTO, KAMMAM PUN BHAAVAKAARANAM HAVADI.

We can control and modify our emotional states and thus change the consequences of our past karmas. Further, it is the happiness of our inner self which counts and which is the result of our karmas. Material gains may not be the result of the 'good' karmas associated with our souls, because in many instances they do not lead to real happiness. Mere physical acts performed without rational thinking and knowledge help very little as far as spiritual advancement is concerned. If performed with a desire for material gains, they cannot be considered part of religion. Thus religious practices such as worship, fasting and charities, performed for show or for gaining social status, cannot expunge any undesirable karma. The Jain theory of karma also supports the concept of the independence of each individual soul. It obviates the need for dependence of soul on any superhuman entity. It seems to be closer to modern science than any other philosophy involving the concept of soul and God. It stresses that a soul can have control over karmas and follow the path to spiritual progress.

From the above discussion emerges the Jain concept of life, liberty and happiness. The goal of life according to Jainism is spiritual progress and not just material existence. Jainism preaches the ultimate independence of soul. It stresses the equality of all living beings. The concept of liberty extends to all beings. Jainism says that no individual or book dictates us to have faith. Each individual is free to determine what is right on the basis of his/her observation and experience. Every individual is free to think for himself/herself, and form his/her ideas about life, liberty and pursuit of happiness. This approach toward life is called rationalism (SAMYAKTVA). Our experience is that emotions and actions such as delusion, anger, pride, intrigue, greed, hurting others' feelings, telling a lie and possessiveness constitute mental violence. They lead to

unhappy feelings. This is true of all people, rich or poor. Thus happiness consists of avoiding physical and mental violence. In fact, feelings of anger pride, intrigue and greed hurt our conscience. They involve violence of self and are the root causes of misery in life. They cause the influx of undesirable karma, which adversely influence our present and future. In sum, to attain true happiness in life, we have to rise above materialism, we have to think beyond our selfish interests, we have to look at things from others' viewpoint also, we have to foster the feelings of selfless sacrifice and help humanity at large. This is the message of religion. Evidently, Jainism is a religious system for independent, intelligent and rational people of all times.

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Non-possessiveness - The Key To Genuine Peace Of Mind

From the article 'Non-possessiveness (APARIGRAH):
A Medicine For The Ailing Environment',
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The primary goal of man is to lead a healthy and happy life. Many individuals relate happiness to material possessions and think that possessing things such as a big house, expensive cars and fancy clothes, leads to happiness. But it is just a mirage. In reality, contentment and non-possessiveness bring genuine happiness and peace of mind. A mad pursuit of money and materials results in disquietude and worries. Most rich individuals appear to have little time to enjoy what they possess. Further, they have deep concern for maintaining their lifestyles.