

A Gem From The April 1983 Issue:

What I Like About Jainism

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Insightful and novel views of a visionary! - DCJ

Everyday, young people like myself are questioned about whether they follow some religion. In the case of Jains, we are then asked how we practice Jainism, why we follow it and what is its role in our daily lives. No matter how clearly and eloquently we answer our friends' questions; usually they persist in asking more until they feel that they have proven the 'superiority' of their beliefs. **Well, I can honestly say that I do not feel that my religion is 'better' than anyone else's. But I do not think that this makes me any less of a believer in its principles.** On the contrary, I think that this is one aspect of practicing Jainism: to respect the beliefs of others and to appreciate their good deeds without regard to any motivations. Indeed, this is one of the things that I like about Jainism; this 'freedom' it gives its followers, the understanding it promotes and the love of mankind it thereby fosters.

Time changes the world we live in. Nature changes, political systems change, people's attitudes change, scientists make discoveries, and philosophers make great observations. But among all this flux, should religion remain constant, unyielding to these natural forces? The answer to this question, as I understand Jainism, brings out another one of the aspects of our religion that I like. I do not think that Jainism says that we should accede to all the old ideas. On the other hand, I think that we are allowed to make our own rational decisions, based on what is correct morally and what we know about our world today. This does not mean that we should abjectly throw out all the old teachings; instead, we should try to learn about them and respect them just as we do any other religion's tenets, and then choose to follow those aspects which may be applicable to our lives individually.² Certainly, Jainism's fundamental principle of nonviolence is as practicable today as it was centuries ago. But this does not mean that we laymen should all walk around wearing

¹ Late Dr. Ahamindra Jain wrote this article when he was a student at MIT.

² Remember, Indian religions are individualistic.

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breathing masks to avoid swallowing bacteria from the air; we should apply our beliefs to our particular lifestyles as best as we can. By secluding ourselves from the rest of the mankind, can we really help others? Or is one blindly pursuing idealistic goals in a materialistic fashion?

The fact that Jains do not believe in any supreme being who rewards or punishes us has a very significant effect on the way we practice our religion. It helps us in the consideration of reality and in application of our beliefs, and obviates the necessity of quibbling over insignificant details.

It leads us to some more important questions: What is happening to our world today and how does our religion tell us to act in the face of world's problems? Well, even in this 'land of prosperity', people are hungry or perhaps worse, suffering the indignity of having to rely on others for their subsistence. People have been forced to sacrifice some of their self-esteem, having been told even by their President that they are not trying hard enough to feed themselves. On the international front, we are threatened by megatons of nuclear weapons poised to destroy the world. But what does all this have to do with Jainism? Shouldn't we just go about 'practicing' our religion by ourselves and keep politics and the rest of the society separate? No!! I see our religion as having the capacity to stand out from others because of one aspect of our principles, the understanding of others' viewpoints that Jainism promotes. What has caused the conflict between men, which leads to cutthroat competition for wealth (and jobs) and on a grander scale to arms buildups? It is the failure of human beings to accept their fellow men as equals, and then to recognize their equal right to nature's resources, without regard to race, religion, education or position in society.³ We are all people who breathe the same air. Thus Jainism does not take away the right of other people to believe what they wish. Instead, it says that we should try to view situations from others' aspects also and even accept their ideas if we see them rational and within the framework of our basic principles. This is the very definition of understanding as well as being its most useful application.⁴ Thus Jainism tells us to love all our neighbors on earth **as equals**. Wouldn't it be wonderful if people come to see our religion as one that not only promotes understanding in theory, but also whose

³ This is writer's interpretation of non-possessiveness (APARIGRAH). - DCJ

⁴ This is writer's concept of achieving rationalism (SAMYAKTVA) through relativism (SYAADAVAAD). - DCJ

followers practice this concept in their lives? But how do we practice ‘understanding’? Most obviously by treating all the people we encounter in our lives fairly and without prejudice on the basis of race or belief. Let us not think evil of any group of people or of any nation. Others will learn from our example. This will prove to be an important step towards solving many of the problems that confront modern society.

All the aspects of Jainism that I like, its flexibility and subsequent adaptability to changes, the understanding between men it promotes and its potential to have a possible effect on society, can be put into practice in my opinion, by each and every Jain by just following a very simple procedure. ***We keep in mind the fundamental tenets of Jainism: nonviolence and viewing the situations from others’ aspects.*** Then we consider each of our daily actions with these principles in mind. When confronted with choices, we apply ‘common sense’ to decide which will foster harmony and understanding, and then act accordingly. When we see someone who appears different in some ways, we instead consider that person as another member of human race, just like ourselves. Perhaps our religion will retain its significance by playing this role of bringing peace and harmony on earth. For me, these are the aspects that make Jainism different and unique and thus special to me.

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Einstein’s Religion

Some Quotations from ‘Albert Einstein: The Human Side

About the pursuit of materialism, Einstein writes, “I, too, was originally supposed to become an engineer. But I found the idea intolerable of having to apply the inventive faculty to matters that make everyday life even more elaborate – and all, just for dreary money-making.” (page 17)

“The most important human endeavor is the striving for morality in our actions. Our inner balance and even our very existence depend on it. Only morality in our actions can give beauty and dignity to life.

“To make this a living force and bring it to clear consciousness is perhaps the foremost task of education.

“The foundation of morality should not be made dependent on myth nor tied to any authority lest doubt about the myth or about the legitimacy of the authority imperil the foundation of sound judgment and action.” (page 95)