Jainism in 21st Century
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Jainism has been a prominent religion for ages because of its emphasis on self-purification. Lord Mahavir’s main teaching is ‘Soul is pure and immortal, everything else is situational and temporal’. So, the primary goal of Jainism is Soul purification in order to attain Liberation from the cycle of birth and death. This teaching which was further collaborated by great Gandharas made Jainism more effective right from the beginning. The greatness of Jainism lies in its profound principles like Ahimsa, Aparigraha, and Anekantvad. Our Gandharas and gurus prescribed rituals like Pooja, Samayik and Pratikraman so that the principles are easily followed and practiced in our life. The rituals were very useful and practical when we lived in the vicinity of a temple or Upashraya, and the economy was more agricultural - which is obvious from the Atichar sutra of the Sanvatsari Pratikraman. Now in this information age, these rituals which have been more tradition-bound need be re-engineered to make them reason-bound so that the millennial generation can understand them, accept them, practice them and propagate them. In this age of smartphones, we should apply our great principles in a manner which is not only spontaneous in practice but is also more effective in transforming our lives. We can make Jainism more vibrant if the principles are applied in our day-to-day life not just confined to temple, Upashraya, home and kitchen-what to and not to eat.

Let’s start with Pooja and Darshan. The goal here is not just performing worship with material things. We are supposed to contemplate on the life and virtues of our Tirthankara, get inspired to bring those virtues in our life, and to pray for the grace of God so that we progress in the journey toward becoming like them. So, while performing Pooja and darshan, we must find time to contemplate on our master’s virtues. And, of course, we need to have such moments of contemplation/meditation in mornings as well as evenings, and whenever we have free time during day time even if we cannot go to the temple.

We all do a Samayik, whenever we get time, and this is performed at home or Upashraya by seating at one place for 48 minutes. This is a great ritual which provides an opportunity for Svadhyay - silent moments from a busy life to study and contemplate about the soul and the purification means as stated in the scriptures. The other underlying but less talked about the meaning of Samayik comes from the word Sama which means equanimity – meaning to assert that ‘I am Pure Soul and all beings also have Pure Soul like mine’. They behave differently to us because of our Karmic relationships. Our goal is to be free from these Karmic chains by minimizing (negative) karmas. Here is a way we can perform a dynamic Samayik which will minimize negative karmas. Any person who comes to our mind ‘we
should say internally he/she is a pure soul’. Let’s say my boss at work is always mean to me. Whenever he/she comes to my mind, I must say in my mind ‘he is a Pure Soul, he is a deliverer of the results of my past karmas’. So, I should not have harsh feelings about him. Suppose, at night a neighbor’s dog barks and disturbs our sleep, instead of being angry at the neighbor and a dog, we should say ‘they are pure souls’. Any person (or beings) we think about or come in contact with, we should look upon them as Pure Soul just like ours. When we make this Pure Soul assertion before we meet or work with anyone, our relationships tend to be cordial. I reckon this is easily said than done. However, once we make this habit of conditioning our mind, we minimize negative karmas and experience tranquility in dealing with all kinds of people and situations. This would result in a meaningful and transformative Samayik.

Ahimsa of Jainism is the foundation for the way of living. Over the centuries, people found applying the principles not easy, so gurus introduced a ritual of Pratikraman. What is Pratikraman? It means ‘coming back to the Soul’. It is a procedure prescribed to purify our soul from transgressions we committed to other beings. Normally we perform it in evenings to repent for such transgressions done during the day. How many of have time to do it daily? So, most of us do it once on Sanvatsari. Even in the once-a-year Pratikraman most of us sit there and listen to the recitation of sutras – which have profound meanings, but most of us do not understand the meaning. Even those who understand the meaning do not have time to contemplate and follow what the Sutras say.

In order to comprehend a concept of a Dynamic Pratikraman let’s take a real-life example. You are at a party and you notice that coffee fell on your dress and it got soiled. You will right away go to a washroom and clean it. If you wait for hours or days, or months it gets worse. Unfortunately, we do not apply the same logic when we commit transgressions. In the true Pratikraman, we are supposed to repent and ask for forgiveness during the evening or periodic Pratikraman; How can we make a Pratikraman dynamic for the coming generation? We can do it by making it real time and spontaneous. Here is how.

‘Any time we realize we did something wrong, the same moment, we should ask for forgiveness’. For example, you lied to your spouse for some reason; the moment you realize you lied, you ask for forgiveness in your mind. Here are some 21st century real-life transgression instances; while driving car you see bugs being killed, or you may hit a deer; getting angry with a spouse or a child or an employee; hurt someone’s feelings knowingly or unknowingly; spraying insect-killer when we have ants in our home; having a lust while watching Miss Universe Pageant; making false entries in the tax filing, etc. The moment you realize you did something not right, you ask for forgiveness in your mind. In the evening, you can spend a few minutes contemplating all the wrong things you did during the day, and ask for forgiveness and pray to get strength so you don’t commit such
transgression again. In the morning again, you charge your mental battery by asserting that
‘Today I don’t want to commit any transgression in thought, word or action; and if I do, I will
ask for forgiveness at the moment of realization.’ If you make this as a habit, your
Pratikraman will happen spontaneously. If you practice this dynamic Pratikraman, it will
become your second nature resulting in permanent peace and tranquility.

Let’s understand Aekantvad – relativity. This means there are more than one sides of Truth.
This should help in resolving all conflicts in an amicable manner to create a harmonious
environment. We must dynamically apply the principle of Aekantvad while solving
business and social issues. During the past few decades, Svetambara and Digambar have
been fighting for Sametshkhar and other tirthas. We, the new younger generation – mostly
the Jain diaspora, who have stayed united, should take a lead in pushing unity between two
sects in India. This will only succeed if we profess that we – all sects are followers of the
same Mahavir who gave us Aekantvad. Unless we put it in practice Jainism’s claim and
fame for the Aekantvad will look like hypocrisy. The International Alumni Association
of Mahavir Jain Vidyalay set a prime example by serving all Jains while the Mother institution
in India serves only Svetambara Murtipoojak.

Jainism was born as a dynamic way of living for all people. For example, Lord Mahavir
preached in the people’s language Prakrit instead of Sanskrit - the traditional scriptural
language. The emphasis was on the way of living not a language. Now, most of the middle
class as well as well-to-do Jains send their children to English medium schools even in India.
Outside India, the younger generation is all English speaking anyway. Most of the young
people are losing interest in rituals and are more interested in understanding principles,
their meanings and applying them in day to day life. We can engender their interest and
make them more involved if our rituals were conducted in a spoken language like English or
Gujarati. Since we should not lose the original language used by our Gandhars, in the
interim, we should perform rituals in Prakrit supplemented with English meanings.

The ideas presented in this essay may sound radical. The goal of this essay is not to preach
but stimulate a discussion on how the Jainism can be made vibrant and dynamic for coming
generations. With the grace of our Tirthankara and gurus, I am hopeful that the right
approach will emerge to accomplish this goal. I ask for forgiveness - Michchhami Dukkadam,
if I have transgressed Kevali’s intent and words.

Jai Jinendra!