

Jainism Says: Spiritually Navigating the Current COVID-19 Pandemic

Question: What is the Jain philosophy regarding such events? What can we do in the present moment? What can we learn that will help us now and in the future?

Answer: The worldwide coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has had a substantial impact on every aspect of our lives. There are a lot of questions on everyone's mind about the current situation. The intent of this blog is to provide the Jain philosophy to enable us to spiritually navigate this situation. We will discuss the five samavāya, what we can do now, and spiritual learning for our way forward.

Many of us might feel various emotions like stress, fear, anger, anxiety during these times of uncertainty. But we don't want to stay there too long because it reduces our spirituality and the power to do the right thing. We want to raise our spirituality and inner strength by leveraging our religious understanding, faith, and values to move to more positive emotions like compassion, peace, hope, optimism.

There are various theories that have been propounded to explain the occurrence of events. According to Jain philosophy, a situation develops, or an event happens because of five reasons operating simultaneously known as Five Samavāya.

Five Samavāya

Samavāya is the name of the group of five causes that are associated with every situation or event that occurs in the universe or in our life. It gives the connection between action and causes. Without a cause, no action can take place. These five causes have a deep connection for all events that take place in the universe. The events may be positive or negative. The five Samavāya are:

1. Time (Kal)
2. Intrinsic nature (Swabhav)
3. Predestination (Niyati, Bhavitavyata or Honahar)
4. Instrumental cause (Nimitta)
 - a. External Nimitta – External Cause or Circumstances
 - b. Internal Nimitta – Internal Cause, which is maturing our previously acquired Karma
5. Determination, Self-Effort or Freewill (Purushartha)

The Jain philosophy views and reveals the importance of each Samavāya and this group of causes are always present when an event happens in the universe or in our life. Next, let's understand each Samavāya in detail before looking into these factors for this COVID-19 situation.

1 - Time (Kal)

Time gives the sequence to whatever happens in-universe. Time is a controlling principle and it plays an important role in all events/situations. The results of our work, consequences of our karma, situations, or events do not occur before their due time. And when the time has occurred, we cannot stop the situations or events from happening.

If we sow seeds today, they do not give fruits right away. The seed cannot neglect the temporal limitation set out by time for its transformation into a tree. The Karma that is bound to the soul due to activities may not immediately manifest their fruits as soon as they are bound. The fruits of Karma appear at a specific time depending on the nature of the Karma itself.

When we understand the time factor, we learn to be patient, optimistic, and hopeful.

2 - Intrinsic nature (Swabhav)

Every substance has its own intrinsic nature and that defines its characteristics, potential limitations, or potential effects. And the nature of the substance is not to be confused with the behavior or character traits of individuals.

Let's look at few examples to understand the intrinsic nature - only females can get pregnant and not males, apple seeds grow apples and not oranges, certain seeds don't sprout no matter what, humans can meditate, not animals. In matters like these, individual inherent nature plays an important role and it cannot be overlooked.

When we understand the nature factor, we have acceptance of the effects or limitations based on intrinsic nature.

3 - Predestination (Niyati, Bhavitavyata or Honahar)

There are many words used for this concept, such as niyati, destiny, and fate. Predestination means that there are certain things that are predetermined and unalterable in this world. In these situations, whatever has been destined will take place. Whatever must happen keeps happening. In this process, change cannot be made despite our best efforts.

For example, even if we make all possible efforts, we cannot prevent the aging process or may not be able to save someone's life.

When we understand the predestination factor, we gracefully and peacefully accept things that are out of our control.

4 - Instrumental cause (Nimitta)

For Nimitta, there are external and internal causes and they always go together. External nimitta could be living beings, objects, situations, or events and they act as a catalyst. And internal nimitta is the fruit or consequence of our previously acquired Karma.

Let's look at an example of an individual winning a lottery to understand the nimitta concept from both perspectives, internal and external. The lottery ticket being sold at a store is an external nimitta or a catalyst and winning a lottery is an internal nimitta or fruit of previous karma.

When we understand the external and internal nimitta causes, we know that our karmas have consequences. And external causes are just a catalyst for our karma to come into action and not be blamed.

5 - Determination, Self-Effort or Freewill (Purushartha)

Purushartha or freewill is our power to choose our response in any given situation. We have a choice, no matter the situation. In that choice and self-effort, lies our opportunity to progress spiritually, improve, and learn from the situation. A classic example of Purushartha is Gandhiji's efforts towards getting independence for India.

When we understand the importance of self-effort and free will, we can face any situation with courage, growth mindset, and focus on things that we can control. Our spirituality is our response to what happens in life.

(To be continued...)

