

Jainism Says...

Q. Is it okay to drink alcohol according to Jainism? What is Jainism's guidance on occasional, social drinking or once in a year?

Youth and Parents frequently ask this question. Drinking of all forms (occasional, social, at parties, happy hours) are widely proliferating among Jain youths and adults in the Western world in many places. The intent of providing information here is to empower individuals to make their own decisions and be able to defend their decision. Once we have the information and clarity behind guidance provided by the religion then we can use our own wisdom to take the decisions that are right for us.

Bottom Line Up Front: Jainism Principle/Outlook on Alcohol Consumption

According to Jainism, alcohol consumption of any kind is not allowed. Jainism has never allowed any exceptions either, like allowing occasional or social drinking. This kind of position has protected the Jain societies (to a certain extent) from the negative implications that have resulted and/or can result from alcohol consumption. Now let's explore the reasons/logic behind this position.

Ingredients and Process of Alcohol Production

From an ingredients perspective, beer, for example, is made from four basic ingredients: Barley, water, hops, and yeast. The basic idea is to extract the sugars from grains (mostly barley) so that the yeast can turn it into alcohol and CO₂, creating beer. The process includes malting, mashing, boiling, and fermentation. The entire process takes a few weeks to produce the final product. There are no animal products in the ingredients, except fermentation which includes innumerable bacteria that is similar to making yogurt, dosa/idli or dhokla batter.

From a production process perspective, some beers and wines go through a process of filtration called 'fining' using animal-derived products like fish gelatin or isinglass (produced from the swim bladder of fish) or plant-derived products like Irish moss. Even though the fining agent is removed before consumption, the process involves himsa when using animal-derived products. Most breweries do not reveal if they do or do not use animal products in the processing of their beers/wine, however, there are some exceptions.

Primary reason against alcohol consumption

The most important reason against alcohol consumption is the effect of alcohol on the mind and soul. In Jainism, any action or reaction that alters or impacts our mind is violence/himsa towards our own self, which is a five-sense human being. Violence to other five sense beings or to our self is the same violence. In fact, our mental state is more Kashayaful when we hurt ourselves than others.

Alcohol affects our mind, which affects our Samyaktva (Right Faith and Right Knowledge) and negatively affects our spiritual progress. Spiritually successful life is about being aware from

moment to moment and making mindful choices every moment. Any food that affects or has the potential to affect our mind is absolutely prohibited in Jainism.

Alcohol severely deteriorates our decision-making capability, degrades our judgment to decide right from wrong, loosen inhibitions and leads people to speak and act in ways that are harmful to themselves and others. At that moment, we lose spirituality that we might have acquired with numerous practices over a long period of time.

Additionally, there are seven major addictions (maha-vyasan) defined in the Jain literature. Jain laypeople should not indulge in those addictions and alcohol is one of them.

1) Non-vegetarian diet (mansahaar), 2) Alcohol (daaru), 3) Gambling (jugaar), 4) Stealing (chori), 5) Illicit relation with somebody who is not your spouse (para-stri-gaman), 6) Relation with a prostitute (veshya-gaman) and 7) Hunting (shikaar). These activities have the potential to become addictive and habitual with severe negative implications. And if these addictions become habitual necessities of the body then one experiences severe withdrawal symptoms when trying to give up any addiction.

So, to be clear, it is not only the product that is wrong but primarily it is the characteristics of the product and the way it affects the mind that is harming us.

Effect of Alcohol on our health/body

Alcohol is a poison for the body. It is associated with a variety of negative effects on health (contributing to liver damage, obesity/diabetes, heart health, etc.). In this sense, it is harmful first to our mind, and also to our body. Abusing alcohol means that we are polluting the home of our soul.

Occasional or Social Drinking

The characteristic of alcohol is that it slows down our thinking. Alcohol changes the way we think and feel, and hence influences the way we act. Of course, the impact of alcohol increases with the amount consumed. How many people just have one drink occasionally their entire life and never indulge in more? How many people started with one drink and now drink often? There may be such people, but they are very rare.

Jainism has never allowed exceptions like allowing one drink or social drinking because of the negative implications to the society and people going in the wrong direction. Once there is leeway, people get the tendency towards drinking and it can become a problematic situation. And when something becomes part of the culture then it takes time to overcome it. When we allow an exception to such rules then people will find ways to exploit it.

Overcoming External Factors and Belief Systems

There are always going to be external factors that come into play like social pressure, peer pressure, desire to fit in, that's the way to make friends, that is what all my friends do, that's what the majority of people at work do, we feel out of place if we don't drink, we are drinking to socialize, we are drinking to relax and the list can go on and on. These are all the factors that

people do face in current times. But we need to be aware and mindful of what we are doing and why.

Also, we need to recognize widely spread belief systems related to alcohol consumption like drinking is normal, drinking doesn't do any kind of damage, drinking is required for parties and to enjoy. There are many such beliefs/misconceptions in the society that will continue to exist and change with time. For example, party should be all about how good the food was, parties rotate around food, food is wasted instead using the next day, weddings have to be gala or it's no celebration, one must travel to many places to experience life, one should have kids to complete their life, one should try non-vegetarian food once to explore taste and experience, pictures or likes on social media is an indicator of a good life or self-worth and list can go on and on. We all face such belief systems in various aspects of our lives day in and out, however, we need to recognize and challenge any such belief systems. And we need to create our belief system based on our own values and principles.

There are plenty of studies that have found that drinking leads to anti-social behavior, abuse, violence, crime, blackouts, falling into dangerous situations, increased aggression, sexual assault, domestic violence, addiction as well as increasing the risk of self-harm and suicide. We should have complete clarity within us about the choices we make, reasons for those choices and a full understanding of the consequences of those choices for us.

Saying no to drinking and going against the majority requires courage. We need to internalize our belief system such that we can defend our decision, find strength internally do what's right for us and especially not get influenced by any of the external factors.

Recommendations for Way Forward:

So, now you have the information, think about this information, do more research, create your own belief system, decide what is right for you and what is good for you long-term.

There are numerous famous teetotalers (nondrinkers) to take inspiration from (see lists in references below). Drinking is not a requirement to be socially successful. Just as smoking or taking drugs is not a requirement, one can choose to avoid alcohol. Also, for social situations, there are non-alcoholic beers available for people who choose not to drink.

Use your own wisdom and make your own decision keeping your goals, purpose and the aim of spiritual growth/religion at the forefront.