Chicago Jains Celebrate Ancient Ritual of Repentance and Non-Harm

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By Brianne Donaldson.

In the dimly lit basement of the Jain Society of Metropolitan Chicago last Thursday, 17 September, two hundred children, teenagers, and young professionals sit down upon the floor slowly, careful not to squash any insects. The gesture is largely ceremonial, as there are not many insects inside the meticulously clean and modern educational hall, which has been transformed for the night into a ritualized space for reverent self-reflection.

These second- and third-generation Jains braved Thursday’s sudden downpour to celebrate the annual ritual of Pratikramaṇa, meaning to “turn back” and consider any harmful thoughts or actions of the past year. A few of the guests tentatively hold a small hand broom, typically used by the monks and nuns of the Jain tradition, to sweep the ground clear of bugs and microscopic life. Most hold a white cloth in their right hand—called a muhpatī—to cover their mouth when speaking, so to be mindful of damaging or excessive speech. Taking care when sitting serves as a reminder that daily actions, however simple, can negatively affect other life forms; and in causing harm to them, we harm ourselves.

The two-hour prayer is mostly in English—the first language for most of these Jains—punctuated by short communal verses in Prākrit and Sanskrit. One floor above, approximately 1300 more Jains—men packed into one hall, women crowded into another—recite the full three-hour prayer in its original languages. According to Vipal Shah, the Society’s secretary,
upwards of 3,000 community members recited the Pratikramaṇa throughout Thursday’s celebration.

Jainism is an ancient Indian tradition centered on the principle and practice of ahiṃsā—meaning nonharm in thought, speech, and action—toward all life forms. This includes people, plants, animals, and even organisms living in air, earth, and water. While it is easy to dismiss this ethical ideal as impossible, Jains believe that awareness and attention is the first step toward minimizing their impact.

There is no deity in the Jain philosophical system, but a series of twenty-four teachers in every epoch who have neutralized their harmful impact through understanding and teaching the true nature of reality. This truth affirms the presence of a core life force, or jīva, in every existent entity, each on its own path through many lifetimes and life forms, toward the ultimate goal of fully perceiving the multi-faceted universe.

Pratikramaṇa marks the culmination of Paryuṣana, the highest holiday in the Jain tradition.[1] The eight-day festival coincides with the rainy season in India when itinerant Jain monks and nuns settle in one place for the duration of the monsoons, allowing people to come near and learn from them. Paryuṣana is a period when lay Jains—who are busy raising families, and going to school or work—can become like a monk or nun for a short time.

One of the preeminent expressions of monastic self-control and awareness is fasting, and many Jains voluntarily fast from some form of activity such as video games, driving, speaking, or food. While the vast majority of Jains practice compulsory vegetarianism on a daily basis—also eschewing eggs and root vegetables—a small handful of Jains give up food altogether and take only water, anywhere from 2 to 30 days during Paryuṣana, which will be the subject of the next installment in this series.

Whatever activity a lay Jain undertakes, the aim is to deepen their practice of the five main vows of Jain ethics for a limited time. As mentioned, the first of these vows is ahiṃsā, or non-harm, and the remaining four are all in service to the first: truthfulness to self and others (satya), non-stealing (asteya), sexual restraint (brahmācarya), and non-possessiveness of material goods (āparigraha). Each of these vows acknowledges mental and physical activities that can lead to injuring one’s self or others.
The Pratikramaṇa rite is remarkably expansive, enumerating the 8.4 million kinds of life forms described in ancient Jain texts, and the linkage between right knowledge of the world, and right action within it. In the verses pertaining to conduct, the recitation leader articulates very specific violations such as not inspecting the floor before setting a heavy object down and killing living beings, eating food prepared in a cruel way, needlessly confining animals and birds, exaggerating for personal gain, speaking truth that causes pain, excesses of travel or real estate ownership or profits in business, working in jobs that uproot plants and pollute the environment, disclosing someone’s secrets, or manipulating with flattery, among many other possible faults.

On behalf of the group seated upon the shadowed floor, the leader reads aloud, “If I have committed any of above lapses mentally, verbally, or physically; have asked others to commit them, or have praised those who commit them, I repent and ask for forgiveness. I pray that my faults be dissolved.” The voices affirm in unison “tassa micchāme dukkaḍam,” meaning roughly, “May my missteps be without effect.”

As the prayer concludes, the darkened quiet gradually erupts in chatter and laughing, as the slate is wiped clean for a new year of careful living. One woman leans against her friend’s shoulder, telling her, “I just pressed re-set on my intentions and I get to try the next year again.” Ravi, a trader in Chicago, remarked, “[Pratikramaṇa] helps me think about what it means to be a good person in my job,” explaining his own efforts to collaborate with others rather than criticize, not trying to scam the market, not seeking ever-expanding profit. Two elementary-aged girls race by, after handing their folded muhpatīs to their father, shouting, “Girls are the coolest!” to a shifty threesome of boys gathered in the hallway flanked with posters depicting the different types of living beings, a handmade collage of candy without animal-products, and a series of photos against nuclear war.
Beneath all of these ideals is the very real destruction and suffering of animals, plants, ecosystems, and people. And yet the group is not at all somber. Although the monsoons are half a world away, the rains have come here as well, washing away last year’s mistakes. The crowd hums with an elusive contentment that belies their belonging to ideas and practices that disappear beyond the history books of India and the world, ideas still being recited by the hundreds of members upstairs.

In this suburban temple, a new generation of Jains re-imagine their past within the present, translating ancient practices into their contemporary Chicago lives. None of them seems to bear a heavy-shouldered burden of saving the earth or fighting systemic oppression. The roots of violence for a Jain do not begin in abstract systems, but in the failure to recognize the force of life within oneself, and in every living being, that demands its due. Scanning the ground for insects before sitting is a small remedy for this neglect; a concrete act of careful, daily, awareness that shapes all the decisions that will come after.

Jainism is comprised of two major sects. Paryuṣana is celebrated by the Śvetāmbara majority. The Digambara minority celebrates Daśa-Lakṣaṇa-Parvan. In the U.S., both communities frequently share the same space and these festivals overlap in meaning and timing.

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