4. JAINISM

Chapter Overview

Chapter 3 introduced and explicated the living religion Hinduism. Even though the great majority of religious Indians follow the sacred paths of Hinduism, Mother India also counts among her children several other religions not grounded in the Vedas. Jainism is one of these. The goals of Chapter 4 are these:

1. To describe the uniqueness of Jainism and its distinctiveness from Hinduism
2. To explain three major animating principles of Jainist belief, specifically, **ahimsa**, **aparigraha**, and **anekantwad**
3. To help the reader understand why the chapter’s subtitle be careful all the while! captures much of the spirit of Jainism

Not surprisingly initial Western observers described Jainism very negatively. This gentle religion which reverences life of all kinds, teaches nonviolence and fair judgment, was charged as having an empty heart primarily because it espouses no belief in a Creator (or first cause) and no belief in a personal savior. Today however Jain is assessed far more justly and its importance for today’s ecological situations is becoming more and more appreciated.

Tirthankaras and ascetic orders

Mahavira, The Great Hero, is Jainism’s major teacher, a contemporary of the Buddha in the sixth century B.C.E. The **Tirthankaras** are considered by Jains to be other great teachers who are honored through images—all of which look alike! This expresses the conviction that all perfect souls are alike in appearance. Jainism is fascinating to study because as an ascetic path, it is practiced in its fullest by monks and nuns. Some of the extremes to which adherents will carry the principle of nonviolence include wearing a gauze mask over the face to avoid inhaling insects and other organisms. Such practices make vivid and unforgettable examples of the wide variety of religious practices found in the world’s religions.

Jain nuns and monks are celibate. They fast, do penance, and learn to endure hardships with indifference. The text points out that one sect, the **Digambaras**, wear no clothes to demonstrate their innocence and their lack of attachment to material goods (even clothing). The **Svetambaras**, by way of contrast, believe that wearing white robes is an acceptable practice that does not interfere with one’s personal purification.

An interesting exercise for students of world religions is to imagine that they are Jain nuns or monks. What are some of the hazards they must avoid in order to practice nonviolence? When one considers that microorganisms permeate air, land, and water, even the simplest daily activities can have serious consequences for the devout Jain. One must be careful about where one walks, bathes, breathes, and eats.

One may push students even further in the exploration of Jain principles to encourage them to relate Jainism to modern ecological theories, and environmental crises. Many scientists recently have argued much the same theories that ancient Jains proposed—that all forms of life are interdependent and that every action has an effect on the ecosystem.

Western students meet classical Eastern themes in their study of Jainism in its concepts of: ahimsa, the principle of nonviolence; aparigraha, non-attachment to things and people; and anekantwad, the avoidance of anger and judgmentalism. Moreover, Jainism offers an interesting way of religious life for students to imagine. It can be fascinating for someone to stop and think about the many microorganisms her or his daily routine might destroy. Also, the severe ascetic practices of Jain monks and nuns provide stark examples of the austerity required by some religions. And the serene expressions of some Jainist religious sculptures demonstrate the serenity that has attracted its followers.
Although Jainism is an ancient religion of India, it holds a modern relevance in its gentle warnings of the importance of caring for all life. This religion quietly foreshadows some of the significance and impact that our beliefs and daily habits can have on global survival.
Freeing the soul: the ethical pillars

Jain, at its heart, is a religion of great hope. It expresses belief in Jiva, which is the individual’s higher consciousness or soul, which has the capacity to save itself. Like Hinduism, Jain maintains belief in samsara, the cycle of death and rebirth (reincarnation) until liberation is achieved. One who attains the highest purity in their being is called Jina, winner, the word from which JAIN is derived.

Origins and view of karma

Jainism grew as a reaction against the religion of Indian Brahmins whose formality and emphasis on orthodox ritual gave way to a form of compassion and concern for all creatures that permeated daily routine. Jainism began as a movement for monks and nuns and later spread to lay people. Many occupations are frowned upon by Jains because of the harm they cause other creatures. For example, becoming a butcher would involve causing the death of many innocent animals. Shoemakers, too, would have to rely on the use of animals for hides. Jains believe the killing of these creatures brings much karma upon the worker. (This point is worth exploring further with students. Jain understands karma in a much different way than Hinduism. Jain karma expresses the belief that karma is subtle matter that accumulates and clings to us as we think and act.) Even farming, with the yearly tilling of the soil, would cause harm to insects and organisms. The aforementioned characteristic of Jain can be expressed as a very strict form of the sanctity of life ethic.

Ahimsa, aparigraptha, and anekantwad, and other characteristics

In addition to finding an ethical occupation, Jainism emphasizes three major teachings about the purification of the soul (jiva). Ahimsa teaches that all life in all forms is valuable and therefore should not be destroyed or injured. Recognized as a virtually impossible ideal for humans, ahimsa also teaches that although human life is inevitably destructive, its ultimate aim is to cause as little harm as possible to other creatures, including other persons. Ahimsa extends to thinking and speaking as well because abusive words and negative thoughts can harm others. Jain would not agree with the well-worn ditty Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me. Aparigraptha teaches that through non-attachment to both things and people, one kindles the way to inner peace. It is notable that Jainism teaches that this non-acquisitiveness is not only the way to inner liberation, but is also valuable for the world as well. Jainism teaches that if more people limit their needs and desires, then fewer demands will be placed on the environment. The third great teaching of Jainism is anekantwad, relativity loosely translated. This teaches that it is important to avoid polarized issues and judgmentalism. In other words, anekantwad instructs followers to cultivate open-mindedness, and to be sensitive to the truth that the issues can be seen from many different angles. Because truth has many facets, the enlightened person is responsive to the subtleties of existence. A summary of this belief system would be:

*The principles of Jainism teach the followers not to hurt other beings, to harness the desire for possessions and people, and not to hate or be judgmental.

* Jain advocates no belief in a Creator; rather, Jains believe that the universe has no beginning and no end. One's life is the result of one's own deeds and by one's own rightly oriented efforts a person can purify and liberate their soul.

*Jain is an incarnational religion and prizes human incarnation especially. This is considered to be the highest form of incarnation and therefore one's time in this special mode should not be wasted but used to the utmost.

*Jain is a religion, which centers on ethos, living rightly in other words.
*Everyday spiritual life for most Jains involve six important duties: meditation, praise of the Tirthankaras, veneration of teachers, reconciling with others over moral transgressions, indifference to the body, renunciation of certain activities and foods.

*For most of its history, Jain survived as a small minority within Hindu India; however, today, it has been carried to the outside world.

**Key Terms**

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