



ISJS NEWSLETTER

Vol#07 | Issue#12 | No.01 | December 2024

Speak Up

WHY DO I WORSHIP?

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The International Summer School for Jain Studies 2023 had a participant named Patricia from Brazil working on materialism in Jainism. Her topic was strikingly unusual and it struck me how a philosophy that believes in the dichotomy of soul and matter can have materialistic features. In order to carry out her research and while looking at me flocking to the temple every day, she asked me a simple question – why do I worship? And it got me thinking.

Philosophers have long debated the existence of an entity that cannot be perceived through the senses, proposing various theories that describe this being as omnipotent, omnipresent, or omniscient. They argue that such an entity must exist because we exist, either as the entire universe or as a force that governs it from outside. Jainism, however, suggests a different perspective: such an almighty could be a human who has attained a supreme state by following a specific path laid out by predecessors. This implies that not just one, but all living beings have the potential to reach this ultimate position. Imagining this scenario can be challenging unless one believes in the scriptures or uses logic to understand how a human can attain a permanently blissful state.

It is often easier for people to blame an external entity for their miseries rather than take responsibility for their actions and make significant life changes. It makes me wonder if an almighty existed for real, what would they do for us – fulfill our desires by making it rain, eliminating enemies, providing food, or creating a parallel universe? Essentially, humans often desire an omnipotent servant who caters to their wishes and has the power to create, provide, or destroy which influences devotees to worship that entity.

Jina, the spiritual victor, contrasts this by being a non-interfering entity. Jina only guides the path to liberation by exemplifying it, reducing dependency on him. Jina possesses virtues that make him an entity without fulfilling worldly desires. Those three virtues are detachment, omniscience,



and propagation of the good. None of these virtues create, destroy, or interfere in the lives of the living beings. The Jina is a part of the Jain metaphysics. Jains perceive the universe as composed of such powerful substances that operate autonomously. Each substance has unique characteristics and collectively contributes to the universe's functioning. A Jina is considered an integral part of this universe, acting indifferently and without interfering in its operations.

Interestingly, despite being omnipotent, a Jina does not intervene in the lives of other beings. He does not create the substances nor set them into automatic operation. As a living entity, a Jina coexists with other substances and beings, forming part of the infinite unity of the universe making him a part of reality. This aligns with the definition of a substance characterized by origination, destruction, and permanence (*utpāda-vyaya-dhruvya*). The autonomous nature of both Jina and the universe allows for the universe to function automatically.

Patricia's question was valid here – why do I worship? The answer to this question is in the following verse from the 5th-century Sanskrit commentary on the *Tattvārthasūtra* called the *Sarvārthasiddhi*:

mokṣamārgasya netāraṃ bhettāraṃ karma bhūbhṛtām |
jñātāraṃ viśvatattvānām vande tadguṇa labdhaye ||

Here, the first part of the verse *mokṣamārgasya netāraṃ* means the leader of the path to liberation – *hitopadeśī*, secondly *bhettāraṃ karma bhūbhṛtām* means the destroyer of the karma-mountains – *vītarāgī*, and lastly, *jñātāraṃ viśvatattvānām* means knower of the elements of the world – *sarvajña*: these are worshiped to attain the similar attributes.

The reason for me to worship a Jina is simply to attain these attributes in myself. When I look at the idol of the Jina, it demonstrates that an eternally blissful state is achievable, that it is possible to eradicate all my karma, and that omniscience is eventual.

Going to the temple reminds me that I have the capability to attain these virtues and helps me work towards accomplishing them.
