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Speak Up

SAPTA-VYASANA-TYĀGA: ETHICAL ABSTINENCE FROM SEVEN VICES FOR SOCIAL HARMONY AND PEACE

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Jain ethics is not merely a collection of personal rules; it is a holistic way of life aimed at cultivating restraint, compassion, and inner purity while ensuring harmony within society. For laypersons, Jain thinkers have outlined clear guidelines that help individuals live responsibly and contribute to collective wellbeing. Among these, the principle of *sapta-vyasana-tyāga*, ethical abstinence from seven vices or addictions, serves as a practical moral compass. These prohibitions are not arbitrary; they are rooted in the Jain understanding that harmful habits disturb social order, intensify passions, and perpetuate conflict. By abstaining from gambling, meat eating, alcohol, making relations with prostitutes, hunting, stealing, and adultery, individuals safeguard both their spiritual progress and the peace of the community.

Let us now look at these seven addictions in detail and explore their relevance, not only for personal discipline but also for fostering social harmony and peace in today's world.

1. Dyūta-kṛīḍā (Gambling)

Gambling is condemned in Jain ethics as a destructive pastime because its impact extends far beyond the individual. It fosters greed, deceit, and reckless behavior, often resulting in financial ruin, broken families, and social unrest. Communities affected by gambling face rising conflicts, mistrust, and exploitation, which erode the foundations of social harmony. Jainism advises ethical persons to refrain from gambling not only to avoid personal loss but also to preserve peace within families and society. True wealth, according to Jain thought,



lies in self-control, honesty, and equanimity—not in chance or speculation. By abstaining from gambling, individuals contribute to a culture of trust, stability, and collective wellbeing.

2. Māṃsa-bhakṣaṇa (Meat Eating)

The consumption of meat is considered a grave violation of non-violence (*ahimsā*), the cornerstone of Jain philosophy. Eating flesh directly supports the killing of living beings, contradicting the principle of compassion. Jain ethics urges laypersons to abstain from eating meat and suggests choosing a vegetarian lifestyle. It is not only a moral act but also a spiritual discipline that nurtures empathy and respect for all forms of life.

3. Madya-pāna (Alcohol Consumption)

Alcohol is prohibited because it clouds the mind, weakens self-restraint, and fuels passions. Jain texts warn that intoxication leads to negligence (*pramāda*), which is the root of many ethical lapses. An ethical person is expected to remain alert and mindful, qualities incompatible with intoxication. Interestingly, abstinence from meat and alcohol also appears in the eight fundamental virtues of householders, underscoring their centrality in Jain lay ethics.

4. Veśyā-gamana (Making Relations with Prostitutes)

Engaging in sexual relations with prostitutes is considered a vice as it commodifies intimacy and exploits vulnerability. Jain ethics upholds chastity (*brahmacarya*) as a virtue, even within marriage, discouraging such acts for both men and women. Beyond spiritual distraction, making relations with prostitutes raises social concerns—fuelling exploitation, trafficking, poverty, and eroding the dignity of human relationships. Thus, Jain teachings emphasize chastity not only for spiritual purity but also for protecting society's moral fabric.

5. Śikāra (Hunting)

Hunting is strictly prohibited in Jainism as it involves deliberate violence against animals and disregards the sanctity of life. Often pursued for pleasure, hunting is ethically problematic. Jain ethics teaches that every living being, however small, has a soul worthy of respect and hunting disregards this aspect of Jainism. From an ecological perspective, hunting disrupts ecosystems, destabilizes food chains, reduces biodiversity, and threatens



survival of interconnected species. Hunting has caused extinctions, habitat loss, and ecological imbalance. By rejecting hunting, Jainism safeguards spiritual purity while promoting environmental sustainability and compassion for all living beings.

6. Steya (Stealing)

Stealing violates trust and justice, harming both society and the individual. Jainism teaches that nothing should be taken without the owner's consent. Theft not only causes material loss but also corrupts character, fostering deceit and greed. Socially, it weakens harmony and trust within communities. The principle of *aparigraha* (non-possessiveness) reminds us that ethical living requires honesty, respect for others' property, and freedom from greed.

7. Para-strīgamana (Adultery)

Adultery, or having sexual relations with someone other than the spouse, is considered a serious vice. For men, this means establishing relations with someone other than his wife; for women, establishing relations with someone other than her husband. Such acts betray trust, destabilize families, and intensify passions. Jain ethics views adultery as a grave obstacle to spiritual progress, urging laypersons to cultivate fidelity and restraint.

The seven abstinences outlined in Jain ethics are not relics of the past. They remain profoundly relevant in modern society, where gambling, substance abuse, exploitation, violence, theft, and infidelity continue to cause suffering. By abstaining from these vices, laypersons safeguard not only their own spiritual journey but also the wellbeing of their families and communities. Jainism does not prescribe these abstinences as mere prohibitions; they are part of a larger vision of ethical living. Each abstinence protects the individual from passions that disturb inner peace and hinder liberation. Together, they form a framework for cultivating discipline, compassion, and responsibility.

To discuss these *sapta-vyasanās* is to remind ourselves that ethics is not abstract philosophy, it is lived practice. Gambling, meat eating, alcohol, making relations with prostitutes, hunting, stealing, and adultery are not just personal choices; they have social and spiritual consequences. Jain ethics calls upon laypersons to take responsibility for their actions, recognizing that every choice either binds or liberates the soul.

In a world often driven by indulgence and desire, the abstinences from *sapta-vyasan* offer a counterbalance. They encourage us to live with restraint, to honor the dignity of all beings, and to cultivate purity of mind and conduct. By following these guidelines, one not only avoids harm but also nurtures virtues of compassion, honesty, and self-restraint and can live ethically in society while progressing steadily on the path of liberation.

Jain ethics reminds us that true freedom lies not in indulgence but in discipline, not in desire but in detachment. These seven abstinences affirm the timeless wisdom of Jain philosophy, a wisdom that continues to illuminate the path of ethical and spiritual living today.

