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Speak Up

DHARMA: A JOURNEY WITHIN

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Dharma is not a robe we wear or a mantra we chant. It is not a checklist of rituals, nor a shadow of societal orthodoxy. Dharma is the subtle breath beneath all this; the journey inward, the realization of the self that has remained buried under layers of borrowed identity. In the context of Jainism, this truth is both liberating and revolutionary. The path to liberation, to *mokṣa*, doesn't depend on external performances – it begins with the quiet awakening of perception.

There's a profound teaching in Jain thought: even an animal, untouched by scriptural wisdom or sacred ceremonies, can attain *samyak darśana* (right perception), the clarity of truth. Meanwhile, a person who reads scriptures daily, diligently follows rituals, and performs acts that the world applauds as "religious" might still remain spiritually blind. This isn't a rejection of practices but a redirection of focus. Rituals may help refine the lens, but if we don't know what we're looking at, they remain empty gestures. Dharma isn't about what surrounds us; it's about what pulses within.

In our pursuit of spirituality, many of us become so attached to the outer scaffolding of religion that we forget to look at its core. We memorize verses, we dress the part, we attend the rituals, but all the while, the one performing these acts remains unexamined. Jainism gently challenges us here. It doesn't ask, "What have you done today for religion?" It asks, "Do you know who is doing it?" This isn't a philosophical sleight of hand; it's the very essence of Dharma. To study scriptures, yes. To question, yes. But above all, to observe the self with honesty, with clarity, with compassion.

There's an old story, deceptively simple and quietly brilliant. Ten men boarded a boat. Before setting off, they counted themselves ten in total. But when they arrived on the opposite shore,



each man took turns counting, and every time it was only nine. Confusion turned into panic. Grief poured in. They were certain someone had been lost in the journey. They cried, searched everywhere, and got worried. And all along, each one forgot the same thing: to count himself. A wise passer-by listened to their dilemma, smiled softly, and counted them. Ten. Perfect. Complete. No one was missing – only forgotten.

That story holds an entire universe within it. We laugh, but we've all lived it. We count responsibilities, relationships, goals, ideals, and expectations. We count the world. And yet, in all that tallying, we forget the one doing the counting. We forget ourselves. Dharma tells us not to because the minute we leave ourselves out of the spiritual equation, we are lost, no matter how well we follow the rituals and things.

Dharma is not performance. It is remembrance. It is growth. It is peeling away borrowed beliefs, societal validation, and even inherited notions of holiness. It is turning toward the self that has watched it all quietly, waiting to be known. And knowing yourself isn't just a poetic idea, it is the deepest realization: I am the soul. I am the knower. This body, though it belongs to me, is not me in the truest sense. Dharma reveals this silent truth layer by layer, breath by breath.

You don't need to be born into a temple, surrounded by rituals and chants, to begin this journey. You only need the willingness to look inward, deeply, and without distraction. Scriptures offer guidance, yes. *Svādhyāya* is essential, yes. But even these noble acts are only stepping stones; they are not the goal. The real Dharma is the moment you stop looking for yourself in the stories of others and begin writing your own. It is not built on the foundation of fear or obligation, but on curiosity and stillness. It doesn't judge you for not knowing, it welcomes you for wanting to. And when you begin to know yourself not in the way society names you, but in the way your consciousness reveals itself, you begin to feel the quiet heartbeat of Dharma.

So, one should not mistake religion for repetition, or Dharma for dogma. Let Dharma be your mirror, not your mask. Strip away what is learned and lean into what is true. Because remembering yourself is the beginning of clarity, and clarity is the soul of Dharma.
