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Speak Up

CĀTURMĀSA IN JAIN RELIGIOUS TRADITION: A SACRED JOURNEY OF SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE

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Jainism is a religion of discipline, compassion, and spiritual awakening. At the heart of its ethical vision lies the principle of *ahimsā*, which extends reverence to every living being, irrespective of its size or form. This commitment to non-violence is reflected not only in moral teachings but also in the daily conduct of Jain practitioners. One of the finest expressions of this ideal is *Cāturmāsa*, the four-month monsoon retreat observed annually by Jain male and female ascetics.

Usually, Jain ascetics lead an itinerant life, continuously travelling from place to place without attachment to any residence. However, during the rainy season they voluntarily suspend their wanderings and remain at one location. This observance arises from the awareness that the rainy season brings forth innumerable insects, plants, and microscopic organisms, making travel likely to result in unintended violence. Thus, *Cāturmāsa* is a profound expression of compassion and restraint, transforming a seasonal necessity into an opportunity for spiritual growth and religious instruction.

The term *Cāturmāsa* literally means "four months" (*catur* = four; *māsa* = month). Traditionally, *Cāturmāsa* starts from the full moon of *Āṣāḍha* (*Āṣāḍha Śukla Caturdaśī*), although the exact observance may vary slightly among Jain traditions.

More than 2,500 years ago, Mahāvīra proclaimed that "*life exists not only in the animal and plant kingdoms but also in the elements of earth, water, fire, and air*" (Āyāro 1.176). Indeed, a survey of the Jain Āgamas reveals that the entire corpus of Jain literature is deeply concerned with the protection and preservation of living beings, from one-sensed to five-sensed organisms. The *Ācārāṅga Sūtra*, one of the oldest Śvetāmbara canonical texts, repeatedly emphasizes careful movement and vigilance so that even the smallest living beings are not injured. The very first chapter of this text is entitled *Śastra-parijñā* (Understanding the Weapons). This chapter explains in detail that the true 'weapons' are inner passions such as attachment (*rāga*) and aversion

(*dveṣa*), and it teaches the path of guarding oneself against these inner causes of violence. During the rainy season, countless microscopic and small living beings emerge in abundance. To avoid causing harm to these life forms, Jain ascetics, who are dedicated to spiritual advancement, suspend their regular wandering (*vihāra*) and remain in one place throughout the season.

Similarly, the *Daśavaikālika Sūtra* instructs ascetics to exercise exceptional caution during the rainy season, when countless living organisms emerge. The *Kalpasūtra*, particularly in its *Paryuṣanākalpa-Samācārī* section, records the regulations governing monastic residence during the monsoon retreat. The text also elaborates about the movement of the ascetics in this *Cāturmāsa*: An ascetic who receives alms in his hands is not permitted to go to a householder's home to obtain food or water when it is raining or misty, even if it is only drizzling or only fine mist particles come into contact with his body (*Kalpasūtra* 253, 255). It also says: If the ascetic carries alms pots, he is permitted to go out during a light drizzle only after properly covering his body with cotton or wool and covering his alms pots and broom with a cloth. Similarly, for Digambara ascetics, if rain or muddy conditions make it likely that seeking alms would harm living beings, they refrain from going out for food and instead observe a fast.

Thus, *Cāturmāsa* is not a later social custom but an integral component of the Jain monastic code established to preserve the supreme value of non-violence.

Rooted in the Jain principle of *ahiṃsā* (non-violence), observance of *Cāturmāsa* begins with the commitment to minimize harm to the countless living beings that flourish during the rainy season. By remaining in one place, ascetics reduce inadvertent violence while dedicating themselves to meditation, scriptural study, austerities, and self-discipline. For householders, these days offer a unique opportunity to strengthen their spiritual practice through increased participation in religious activities. It also deepens the relationship between the monastic community and lay followers, creating an environment conducive to spiritual learning and moral development. Through practices such as self-study (*svādhyāya*), repentance (*pratikramaṇa*), fasting (*tapa*), self-restraint (*saṁyama*), and disciplined conduct, devotees seek to advance on the path toward self-realization and liberation.

FESTIVITY OF CĀTURMĀSA

Although *Cāturmāsa* is a time of spiritual practice, austerity, and self-discipline, it is also a season of religious festivals and community celebrations that bring the Jain community together in faith and devotion. During these four months, temples and *upāśrayas* (ascetic shelters) become vibrant centres of worship, scriptural study, devotional singing, and religious discourses. The presence of ascetics provides devotees with opportunities to receive spiritual guidance, undertake vows, and participate in collective religious activities.



Among the most significant festivals observed during *Cāturmāsa* is *Paryuṣaṇa* and *Daśalakṣaṇa* the most auspicious and vibrant festival in the Jain calendar. In the *Paryuṣaṇa*, Śvetāmbaras observe it over eight days, while Digambaras celebrate the *Daśalakṣaṇa*, a ten-day festival dedicated to contemplation of the ten supreme virtues (*daśa-dharma*), including forgiveness, humility, self-restraint, and renunciation. These festivals emphasize introspection, fasting, scriptural recitation, meditation, introspection, and universal forgiveness. In this *Paryuṣaṇa*, Śvetāmbara *Mūrtipūjaka* (image-worshipping) read *Kalpa Sūtra* and Śvetāmbara *Sthānakavāsī* (non-image-worshipping) reads *Antaḥkṛddasāṅga Sūtra*. On the other side, Digambara tradition recites the ten chapters of *Tattvārthasūtra* in the ten days of the period of *Daśalakṣaṇa*.

Cāturmāsa also includes numerous celebrations by recitation of sacred texts like *Bhaktāmara Stotra*, and other hymns, special *pūjās*, *janma-kalyāṇakas* of Tīrthaṅkara Mahāvīra, processions, cultural programmes, youth camps, and community service activities. Many householders undertake special vows, observe fasts, perform charitable acts, and support religious institutions through donations and voluntary service. Another important aspect of this festive season is the celebration of *Kṣamāvaṇī*, when devotees seek and grant forgiveness by expressing "*Micchāmi Dukkaḍaṃ*", asking pardon for any harm caused knowingly or unknowingly. This practice reinforces harmony, compassion, and the spirit of reconciliation within the community.

Thus, while *Cāturmāsa* is fundamentally a season of spiritual discipline, its festivals transform it into a vibrant period of collective devotion, ethical renewal, and communal harmony. The festivities are not merely occasions for celebration but serve as powerful means of reinforcing the Jain ideals of *ahiṃsā*, *saṃyama*, *tapas*, *svādhyāya*, and *kṣamā*, inspiring both ascetics and householders to progress on the path of spiritual purification and liberation.

Let us use these auspicious months of *Cāturmāsa* to purify our souls and imbibe the virtues taught by the *Tīrthaṅkaras* with a calm, humble, and forgiving mind.

I am concluding my words with:

khāmemi savva jīve, savve jīvā khamantu me |
mettī me savvabhūesu, veraṃ majjhaṃ na keṇāi || (Āvaśyakasūtra 4.22)

I ask pardon of all living creatures, may all of them pardon. I approach all beings with affection and enmity toward none.
