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Speak Up

WHAT JAINISM IS NOT

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When people first encounter Jainism, they often associate it with a few well-known ideas such as non-violence, renunciation, fasting, and ascetic practices. While these are important aspects of the tradition, they do not present the complete picture. As a result, Jainism is sometimes misunderstood as a religion that focuses solely on self-denial, withdrawal from worldly life, or the pursuit of individual liberation.

In reality, Jainism is one of India's oldest spiritual traditions and an important component of Śramaṇa culture. It offers profound teachings on life, consciousness, ethics, and the nature of reality. Jainism is much more than a set of rituals and religious beliefs. It is a holistic way of life that aims at individual transformation through the principles of right faith, right knowledge, and right conduct. To truly understand Jainism, it is important to move beyond common misconceptions and recognize its fundamental teachings, as well as their lasting relevance to both individual and social life.

- **Not a religion of blind faith**

  One of the most common misunderstandings about religion is that it requires people to accept teachings without questioning them. Jainism takes a different approach. It encourages reasoning, observation, and critical inquiry. Right faith in Jainism is not blind belief but a thoughtful conviction that arises from understanding. Individuals are encouraged to examine the real nature of true scriptures and true spiritual teachers carefully. Mahāvīra emphasized the principle of *paṇṇā samikkhae dhammaṁ* in the *Uttarādhyayana Sūtra*, highlighting the importance of examining the Dharma through wisdom and understanding rather than accepting it blindly.

- **Not based on a creator God**

  Unlike traditions that believe in a supreme God as the creator and controller of the universe, Jainism holds that the universe is eternal and operates according to its own natural laws. It has neither a beginning nor an end and does not depend on a creator for its existence. Jainism, however, does recognize the concept of God in the form of perfected souls. It teaches that every soul has the potential to attain this state by completely shedding its

karmic bondage and realizing its inherent qualities of infinite knowledge, perception, bliss, and energy. Such liberated souls, known as Siddhas, are revered as supreme beings and ideals of spiritual perfection, rather than as creators or controllers of the universe. This understanding places the responsibility for spiritual progress on the individual, emphasizing self-effort, personal responsibility, and right conduct rather than dependence on divine intervention or the grace of a creator God.

- **Not only about non-violence**

  Jainism is often recognized primarily for its emphasis on *ahiṁsā* (nonviolence). Although nonviolence is its central principle, Jainism encompasses much more. It also emphasizes truthfulness, non-stealing, self-restraint, compassion, humility, forgiveness, and respect for all living beings. Together, these values promote ethical conduct, spiritual growth, and inner transformation. Nonviolence, therefore, should not be viewed as an isolated virtue but as an integral part of Jainism's broader ethical and spiritual teachings, which encourage individuals to lead lives of harmony, responsibility, and self-realization.

- **Not an escape from life**

  Jainism places great importance on renunciation, but renunciation does not mean abandoning responsibilities or withdrawing from society. Rather, it involves reducing attachment, exercising restraint over desires, and cultivating self-discipline. An individual can lead a responsible family life, contribute meaningfully to society, and fulfill worldly obligations while remaining grounded in Jain values. The objective is not to reject life but to live it with wisdom and ethical awareness. By gradually overcoming excessive attachment, individuals can cultivate inner peace, balance, compassion, and spiritual growth. The *Sthānāṅga Sūtra* emphasizes both worldly and religious responsibilities. It recognizes that an individual has duties not only toward oneself and one's family but also toward the village, city, nation, religion, and the religious community. Thus, Jainism encourages a balance between spiritual aspirations and social responsibilities, reminding individuals that personal spiritual progress and contributing to the welfare of society can go hand in hand.

- **Not a religion of fatalism**

  Karma is one of the central doctrines of Jainism, closely linked to the principle of personal responsibility and self-effort (*puruṣārtha*). According to Jain philosophy, individuals experience the consequences of their own actions, whether good or bad. No external power or divine intervention can erase karmic consequences or relieve individuals of responsibility for their actions. Therefore, Jainism does not advocate fatalism or passive acceptance of destiny. Instead, it emphasizes that through awareness, self-discipline, right understanding, and ethical conduct, individuals can influence their future and work toward spiritual liberation. Human beings are not helpless victims of fate; they have the capacity to transform themselves through conscious choices and sustained effort.

- **Not an exclusive path to truth**

  Unlike traditions that claim exclusive access to truth, Jainism promotes an inclusive approach through the principle of *anekāntavāda*. It recognizes that reality is complex and cannot be fully understood from a single point of view. Different perspectives may reveal different aspects of reality. This does not mean that all viewpoints are equally valid, but it encourages intellectual humility, respect for differing opinions, and meaningful dialogue. This spirit of openness is also reflected in Jainism's understanding of spiritual progress. The path to liberation is open to all, regardless of birth, social status, or position. Every soul has the potential to attain liberation through its own efforts and spiritual development. Thus, Jainism offers a path that values both diversity of thought and the spiritual potential of every individual.

- **Not only for ascetics**

  Jainism is often associated with ascetics who practise rigorous discipline and renunciation. While ascetics undoubtedly occupy an important place within the tradition, Jain teachings are not meant for them alone. In fact, the Jain community has traditionally been organised as a fourfold order (*caturvidha saṅgha*), comprising laymen (*śrāvakas*), laywomen (*śrāvikās*), male ascetics (*sādhus*), and female ascetics (*sādhvīs*). The presence and interdependence of these four constituents demonstrate that Jainism is not an ascetic-centred tradition alone, but a spiritual path designed for all sections of society. Accordingly, Jainism offers practical ethical and spiritual guidance for householders as well.

  Through right conduct, self-restraint, compassion, and mindful living, laypersons can make meaningful spiritual progress while actively participating in family and social life. The *Nandīsūtra* even acknowledges the possibility of attaining liberation while remaining in the state of a householder (*gṛhastha liṅga*). Although the disciplines and responsibilities of householders and ascetics may differ, the ultimate goal of self-purification and spiritual development remains accessible to everyone.

- **Not merely a path to personal liberation**

  Mokṣa, or liberation from the cycle of birth and death, is the ultimate goal of Jainism. However, its teachings also have profound implications for individual and social life. Principles such as *ahiṁsā* (nonviolence), *anekāntavāda* (respect for multiple perspectives), and *aparigraha* (non-possessiveness) promote peaceful coexistence, respect for diversity, environmental responsibility, and compassion toward all living beings. In a world increasingly challenged by violence, intolerance, excessive consumption, and environmental degradation, these principles offer valuable insights for addressing contemporary concerns. Thus, while Jainism places liberation at the center of its spiritual philosophy, its ethical teachings also provide guidance for building a more compassionate, responsible, and harmonious society.

The broader vision of Jainism

Jainism, when understood in its true spirit, emphasizes inner transformation rather than the conquest of others. It teaches that the real struggle is not against others but against one's own anger, pride, deceit, and greed. Rather than seeking happiness through the accumulation of possessions, it encourages individuals to reduce their desires and attachments. Similarly, instead of imposing beliefs, Jainism promotes understanding, dialogue, and respect for diverse perspectives.

Jainism is not merely a religion to be practiced on special occasions, it is a path to be understood, experienced, and lived. Its teachings encourage individuals to cultivate self-awareness, responsibility, compassion, and inner freedom. These principles make Jainism not only a profound spiritual tradition but also a meaningful guide to life in the contemporary world.

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