

CHOOSE THE GREAT ROAD

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The opinion of the Tirthankaras is that knowledge, faith and right conduct are the true causes of true liberation; never the outward marks."

"By praises and hymns one obtains the wisdom consisting in knowledge, faith and conduct."

-Uttaradhyayana Sutra

The mysteries of taking birth are as great as those which attend the death of the body. While it is clear to all that he who is born must one day die, it is not as clear to all that death is followed by birth in another body. Unless we learn to contemplate what Nitya-prabhava and Nitya-pralaya imply we cannot comprehend the emancipation of the soul into immortality; and the still more mysterious process of the raising of the body to be a temple of Light like that of the grand Tirthankara.

The Jainas celebrate Mahavira Jayanti every year. There is a difference between the compulsory birth of mortals whose Karma draws them to embodied existence and the Birth of an Emancipated Jina, the conqueror of mortality and of all limitations of body and of mind. By his Vir-the dauntless Energy that fights its way to the supernal truth-the Soul known as Mahavira reached perfection. As the last of the Tirthankaras he graciously took, voluntary Birth for helping the humanity.

What determines the voluntary incarnation of such divine men as Mahavira and his illustrious predecessors-the twenty-three earlier Tirthankaras, the first of whom, Rishabhadeva, was the founder of the Jaina School of philosophical discipline? This doctrine of a line of Divine Incarnations is to be met not only in Jainism; in other Traditions like that of "the Buddhas who have been and will be" or that referred to in the fourth chapter of The Bhagavad Gita we come upon the same teaching. It is a reasonable and convincing truth in the light of the teaching about cycles, yugas, manvantaras, and kalpas; the Greeks also had their kuklos, the Cycle of Necessity.

Now, is it not strange that the cycle which drew Mahavira to earth was also adorned by other Great Teachers-the Gautama Buddha in India, Lao-tse and Confucius in China, the last of the Zoroasters in Iran, Pythagoras in Greece, and others? The fifth and sixth centuries B.C. seem to be a very special period marked by the motion of the Chakra, the Wheel of Progress, of the ups and downs of the ever-lengthening spiral of evolution.

Can we find a definite underlying purpose of the cycle as it affected human history? It seems to us that the Age opened a new chapter, a new dispensation for those human souls who were becoming ready to tread the Path of Harmlessness, of the Tenderness, of the Inner Light.

Great Divine Men come yuge-yuge, cycle after cycle, to educate the mind of the race, to emancipate its heart from the thrall of cruelty born of hatred, which is but an expression of violence. Buddha's great statements are very well known. Lao-tse taught the Wisdom of Non-violence. "To the good I will be good; to the evil-doer I will also be good, in order to make him good." "Requite injury with kindness"; and so on. We can multiply quotations from other texts.

They all echo the Dashavaikalika Niryukti:

"Subdue wrath by forgiveness, conquer vanity by humbleness, fraud by straightforwardness, and vanquish greed through contentment."

What was the peculiar and particular contribution of Mahavira to the age to which he came? The principles He taught particularly touched the personal life so that His followers, even to-day, have rules for the conduct of life which bring them to the Path of the Inner Light, the Way to the Microcosm within the carapace of cruelty which the body is; thence to proceed to the Great Without, the Mighty Macrocosm.

To begin with, the daily prayer:

"I forgive all souls; let all souls forgive me. I am of friendly terms with all; I have no enmity towards anybody."

-Avashyaka Niryukti

This reminder at dawn and as we retire for sleep is a very salutary exercise. In the bustle of the market place we are apt to forget our prayer. Memory is at once the friend and the foe of man and we should seek the help of the following Jain text of the Yogashashtra which, daily reflected upon after the dawn prayer, will prove helpful:

"In happiness and suffering, in joy and grief, we should regard all creatures as we regard our own self, and should therefore refrain from inflicting upon others such injury as would appear undesirable to us if inflicted upon ourselves."

But a philosophical principle is essential. How can one, even one born in a Jaina family, accept and practice these ideas if his heart's faith and his mind's inclinations are wrong? Every Jaina by birth and all who follow the Jaina Discipline should perceive this:

"Right belief is conviction is one's own self. Knowledge is Knowledge of one's own self. Right conduct is by absorption in one's own self. How can there be bondage then?"

This creates and confirms self-confidence and without self-confidence we are slaves. Mortals can be divided into two groups: those who are capable of acting with a sense of responsibility to the Self within and then those who rely on others; the former are masters, the latter, slaves of life, Says the Acharanga Sutra:

"Man! Thou art thine own friend. Why wish for a friend beyond?"

But mortals are weak; their past Karma hangs round their necks as a chain which eats into the flesh; but by right knowledge it can be made a necklace of opportunities. By repentance, by chasing away from the mind ill-begotten pleasures, by teaching others, one learns to follow the commandments and to walk the Inner way. So instructs the Sutakrtanga Sutra.

May Lord Mahavira's Jayanti bring the light of knowledge to all who are longing for peace in their own hearts and for the world at large! May we all prove worthy to receive the compassion which flows from the Lotus Feet of all Tirthankaras! May Their Sight of Love fall on many!