

# **The Path to Liberation: From Jainism to Secular Contexts**

Ankith Desai

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

## **Abstract**

Jainism is an ancient faith tradition from the South Asian region that is practiced around the world. Jainism rests on the doctrine of non-violence (*ahimsa*) which makes up the most important belief for Jains to practice. Per the teachings of their Thirthankar Mahavira, Jains also place great importance on the ideas of the multiplicity of views (*anekantavada*) and non-possessiveness (*aparigraha*) in attempting to emulate his way of life that led him to moksha, the final release to liberation. While Jainism has the concept of liberation as an ultimate goal, it does differ from the idea of liberation in social justice movements and secular, nonreligious spaces. This examination, however, is to compare how similar the paths taken for each kind of liberation are, be it the one in Jainism or one toward secular social justice.

## Introduction

The spiritual goal in the Jain tradition is the liberation from *samsara*, the cycle of rebirth and death, that a soul otherwise continues in as a result of their actions, their *karma*. The twenty-four tirthankaras, including Mahavira, ridded themselves of such karma, actions, to break from the cycle of birth and death. As *jinās* (literally meaning “conquerors”, the word refers to liberated souls) like Mahavira have liberated themselves, the path he took in 427 BCE to reach this state of *moksha*, infinite bliss, is a prescribed one for Jains that can be seen in the practices and views of Jain ascetics and laypeople, alike.

In a western, nonreligious sense, liberation is perceived as the attainment of equal freedoms, broken away from oppression (Merriam-Webster). Social justice, precisely “the distribution of equal economic, political and social rights and opportunities to everyone,” would be a medium for people to attain equal freedoms and dismantle forms of oppression (Merriam-Webster). Thus, the nonreligious path to liberation in a western sense is this dismantling of oppressive systems that leave people disenfranchised, whether it is because of their gender, economic class, or the place they live. As a result of dismantling oppressive systems through social justice, people are enfranchised with equal distributions of rights and freedoms.

There are distinctions in how liberation is defined in nonreligious contexts and Jainism.. In Jainism, it is an emancipation from the cycle of rebirth and the attainment of ultimate bliss. In a nonreligious sense, liberation is like an emancipation from oppression and attainment of freedom. The differences lie in the Jain tradition’s importance of achieving *moksha* as the end goal of salvation, also characterized as “liberation” although different from the secular meaning. In the modern sense, striving for social justice is a path for a nonreligious liberation.

Through examining the practices and beliefs held by the Jain tradition, the path to liberation in the Jain sense can be further dissected to understand: *How the Jain path to liberation compares to the nonreligious path to liberation?* To answer this question, examples of peace resolution, sustainability, expression, and equity, as seen in Jain practices, scriptures, and in stories of Thirthankar Mahavira's life, show the path to a liberation in *moksha* that Jains follow. These findings will be compared to modern social justice ideas that lead to a nonreligious liberation that is defined differently from its meaning in Jainism.

### **I. Resolution & Peace**

The Jain tradition's non-violent teachings and practices work to establish peace, whether it is punishment and repentance or cessation of violent conflict. These practices in Jainism are also prevalent in modern social justice efforts to democratize social and political rights, irrespective of proximity to the Jain faith. Modern efforts to bring about peaceful solutions in criminal justice reform and foreign diplomacy prove similar in many ways to Jain practices. There can be many similarities drawn with and without a Jain lens on these issues.

The idea of criminal justice reform has made its way through modern discourse for a variety of purposes, be it legal proceedings or events of high magnitude. The *Black Lives Matter* movement is one example of a call for social justice and reform. Following disparate mass incarceration and failed public safety schemes, many organizations like *Black Lives Matter* lead calls to implement restorative justice, an effort to dismantle oppression caused by policing and reform the idea of punishment in seeking public safety (Hines et al, 2020). Restorative justice is a form of punishment centered around self-reflection and cognizance. In a restorative justice system, offenders are to take accountability for their actions, understand the harm caused by their actions, and attempt opportunities to rehabilitate themselves from offenders to equal citizens

(Pangandian, 2018). In Jainism, the practice of *pratikraman* also puts repentance and rehabilitation at its forefront. *Pratikraman*, directly meaning “ritual repentance,” takes accountability for a wide variety of faults one has committed in the past (Dundas 171). Pratikraman is often a mode of repenting any forms of violence one may have caused to other souls. While restorative justice is seen as a method of bettering the path to an emancipating liberation of oppressed people, *pratikraman* is a method for Jains to better their path to liberation from the cycle of samsara. Restorative justice, and the repentance model, maintains humanity to those who have wronged, and it has proven to be more effective than traditional incarceration practices (Saulnier et al, 2005). Similarly, the importance of repentance in *pratikraman* is said to shed karmic accumulation and bring a soul further in their path to liberation. Even Thirthankar Mahavir prescribed the importance of confession, repentance and redemptive penance in the *Acharanga Sutra*. Hence, the idea of punishment resolution under both, a social justice lens and a Jain lens, is of repentance and redemption.

Another facet of resolution in modern conflicts is the arising of war and global violence. Jainism has a very clear focus on the idea of nonviolence, *ahimsa*, that is to be practiced amongst humans, but even to the minutest of life forms. Hence, Jains abstain from meat, dairy, and even root vegetables due to the high density of microorganism cells present in them. This importance on non-violence does also transfer to the Jain discussion on war. The *Acharanga Sutra* does forbid ascetics from adopting war activity. Similarly, the *Tattvartha Sutra* prescribes lay people to adhere to unlimited nonviolence, tolerance and reverence of life (Sethia, 2004, page 5). Commentary by two scholars on this topic, Kim Scoog and Padmanand Jaini, differ from each other in the Jain view of war. Scoog believes lay people are allowed to partake in warfare as a last resort, with detachment from the actions and assurance that innocent lives remain protected.

Jaini opines that warfare cannot be allowed as any entertainment of violence halts a soul's spiritual progress to liberation (Sethia, 2004, page 5). Regardless of the two opinions, both of their definitions contradict modern warfare. In modern wars following September 11, 2001 in Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen, Syria, and Pakistan, it is estimated that more than 4.5 million innocent civilians have succumbed due to war (Brown University, 2023). That number does not include wars, unrelated to the 9/11 retributions, in Vietnam, Africa, Ukraine, Palestine and many more. In recent social justice, anti-war activism has also been prevalent in fighting for political liberation. Anti-war movements have long-pushed, and continue to push, for ceasefires in war zones as a prescription to ensure a lasting political liberation and resolution to conflict (Gillan, 2008). Furthermore, studies have in fact shown for cessation of hostilities and war to in fact foster political liberation and lasting peace (Karakus et al, 2023). Hence, there is a shared view on the path to liberation, depending on how that is defined, when it comes to the idea of war and retribution.

Whether conflict resolution, at a micro-level with the idea of punishment and criminal justice or at a macro-view of warfare and global peace, the Jain view and the social justice view do align. The path to liberation in moksha is one of repentance and non-violence, as is also the path to a civil and political liberation in the case made by social justice movements. Thus, there are similarities in how both paths stray from practices of retribution, and rather see the idea of rehabilitative conflict resolution as part of the paths to their respective forms of liberation.

## II. **Sustainability**

Non-possessiveness is another core basic principle of the Jain tradition that leads lay people and ascetics to remove themselves from capitalism and material wealth, to focus on a minimalistic lifestyle as they progress on their path to a spiritual liberation. These minimalistic

practices have also been popularized in modern society with ideas of sustainability as a medium of social justice in achieving better equality and social liberation for people facing negative impacts of capitalistic materialism. This regard for non-possessiveness in the Jain tradition can be seen in the lifestyles of ascetics and the practices of lay people.

Asceticism in Jainism is heavily reliant on forgoing all materialism, removing one's self from a world of capitalism, and adopting more sustainable practices. The process in which one becomes an ascetic includes forgoing all of one's belongings. As seen in *Vihara: A Path to Salvation* the life of ascetics can be seen vividly. Jain asceticism forgoes use of motor transportation and relies on walking. They also limit how much they own, as seen in *Objects of Asceticism*. Furthermore, *The Outfit of Jain Nuns* highlights the garb of monastics, and how it is limited to just a few garments, with Digambara male monks not even adorning any clothing. The lifestyles of Jain monastics is very minimalistic, and even focuses on taking actions that cause the least impact. The *Acharanga Sutra* prescribes ascetics to only consume food and water that is of excess, rather than anything specially prepared for them. As seen in *A Day in the Life of a Jain Ascetic*, Jain monks and nuns are rather removed from a capitalistic materialism. They live extremely environmentally-conscious lives in making the least impact with their actions. That lifestyle is a part of their paths to liberation as Jain ascetics. In the nonreligious sense where Jainism and asceticism are absent, these beliefs in minimalism and dissolution of capitalism are still prevalent. There are social justice movements occurring to increase walkability so that people can abandon motor vehicles and benefit their environment (Al-Ghamdi et al, 2021). People, regardless of faith belief, are choosing to walk more, instead of driving, without having any knowledge of Jain ascetics, to lower their impact on their environment. Additionally, scholars

define a “lifestyle against accumulation” that people adopt with their lifestyle choices like the clothes they wear and food they eat to limit possessions (Meissner, 2019).

The Jain way of life also has a deep focus on vegetarianism and veganism, as they are also popularized ways of life in the modern world. Jains value the importance of life as part of belief in *ahimsa*, and thus are forbidden from consuming any form of meat (Dundas 176). Many Jains often go vegan to avoid animal cruelty and other impacts caused by the production of animal products (Dickstein et al, 2021). Any form of violence committed is a hindrance in the path of a Jain to liberation, which is why many forgo meat and dairy to avoid violence committed toward animals. While the drive of the change varies, transition to vegan and plant-based lifestyles has popularized. A lot of this shift to veganism is credited to environmental concerns of dairy and meat production (Pendergrast, 2016). Between 2005 and 2007, meat and dairy production led to nearly 75% of food-related greenhouse gas emissions (Aveyard et al, 2018). These impacts alarm environmental justice efforts to also subscribe to vegetarian and vegan ways of life, as Jains do.

Although the path to a Jain liberation has been made clear with the practices of minimalism and vegetarianism, there is also a path to liberation when it comes to environmentalism. The strive for environmental justice is also a matter of social justice, in democratizing equal rights to a clean and sustainable environment for all. With environmental issues that exist, the impacts of them are not equal (Begun et al, 2016). Environmental impacts are disparate in affecting some people over others, which is why environmental work is done to ensure liberation of those people more impacted. Jains and environmental advocates continue practicing both in an effort to achieve their respective forms of liberation.

### III. Speech & Expression

. The freedom of speech and expression has been critical to the founding of American democracy, in being the United States very first amendment. It is also a method Jains have used in order to practice their religion as they progress on a path to spiritual liberation. The idea of protest and freedom of expression is a fundamental mechanism for political liberation, and a tool many social justice movements employ. The value of free expression and speech relies on the sharing of viewpoints and being non-absolute, which Jainism characterizes as *anekantavada*.

The Jain way of life in a present sense has faced various political battles in preserving many of its practices. *Sallekhana*, or fast until death, is a popular end-of-life practice amongst Jains that is continuously threatened. Although it has been viewed by critics as a form of murder or self-harm, the film *The Crow and the Palm Fruit* depicts the practice up close in an effort to disapprove these misconceptions. The film also shows the protests that Jains participated in to defend this practice and keep it legal. Jains partook in many acts of nonviolent civil disobedience and protest in order to challenge petitions aiming to rule *sallekhana* unconstitutional in India (Chase, 2022). Another prominent practice by Jains, as seen in *Vihara: A Path to Salvation* is pilgrimage to various sites, including the *Shatrunjaya* in Gujarat, India. When there were issues with the Indian government in protecting these sites from avoidable destruction, the Jain community protested to protect these pilgrimage sites. It still remained nonviolent, but also made an impact in shutting down national landmarks and busy roads. Jains have employed their speech, expression, and civil disobedience to protect practices that put them on a path to spiritual liberation like *sallekhana* and pilgrimage.

In the modern, western, sense, the idea of free speech and protest is a cornerstone of democracy and a tool employed for political liberation. In the United States, the founders



enabled a right to expression as the very first amendment in the Constitution, protecting speech, religious practice, and nonviolent protest (National Constitution Center). When various forms of oppression have continued, civil disobedience has been a primary tool to liberation. In the American Civil Rights Movement, Dr. Martin Luther King in the United States employed the right to nonviolent protest in order to emancipate people of color from unjust segregation and other kinds of oppression (Fairclough, 1986). The use of nonviolent expression was part of the path to political liberation for people of color.

The nonreligious path to liberation, as the Jain path to liberation, relies on the exchange of viewpoints, through free speech, open expression, to be voiced. Jains, as have modern activists like Dr. King, have enabled the exchange of their own viewpoint in order to be on a path to their respective liberations.

#### **IV. Equality**

Through the life of the twenty-fourth tirthankara Mahavira, along with Jain scripture, there is a case made as to the importance of establishing equality to be on the path to a spiritual liberation. The idea of equality is, in itself, defining the meaning of nonreligious liberation that modern social justice movements strive for. In the Jain sense, there are specific examples from gender to caste that show the importance of maintaining equality in one's path to liberation in *moksha*.

Mahavira lived in the 6th Century BCE, and attained liberation upon emancipating himself from the cycle of rebirth. His life is one revered by Jains as an example of a successful path to it. Jainism arose as a rejection to ideas of supremacy over others (Srinivas, 2003). Mahavira, despite being born in the venerated warrior caste, renounced it in seeking liberation (Dundas 21). In addition to refuting the idea of caste and supremacy related to it, Mahavira also

ordained a woman, Chandanbala, as one of his first disciples, in paving the way for gender equality (Sethi, 2009). Mahavira was mainly concerned with his own path to salvation, however part of that path was the renoucal of caste and acceptance of gender equality. Social justice movements have also strived for equality of women, those in poverty, and other oppressed groups in an effort to liberate them in a nonreligious sense. While Mahavira brought about these reforms in his life to ultimately reach liberation in *moksha*, nonreligious liberation of women and castes is to ultimately expand and equalize the rights of these groups.

The idea of discrimination is also one that is directly addressed in Jain scriptures. The *Dasavaikalik Sutra*, transcribed by one of Mahavira's early disciples, offers an outline on the path to spiritual liberation and attainment of *moksha*. An important line from this scripture is "Asamvibhagi Nahu Tassa Mokkho" (Dasavaikalika Sutra 9.2.22). Jain ascetic Samani Rohini Pragma translates this to "liberation is impossible for those who discriminate" (Samani Rohini Pragma, 2019). This excerpt of scripture synthesizes how critical the dismantlement of discrimination is for the path to liberation, that that path is impossible with continued discrimination. A dismantling of discrimination and unequal distribution of rights is exactly what movements of social justice strive for as nonreligious liberation, per its definition, is impossible when the political, economic, and social rights of people are discriminately distributed.

## **Conclusion**

Through examples of conflict resolution, sustainability, free expression, and equity, there are a lot of similarities in the practices and beliefs of social justice movements and the Jain tradition. The idea of liberation is very different amongst both, where it is a form of an end in Jainism, and rather a goal that continues in a nonreligious context. However, examining the four areas show that the path to both kinds of liberation has alignment in being: non-violent, non-

possessive, non-absolute, and equitable. Jain scriptures, practices, beliefs, and the life of their most prominent fordmaker Thirthankara Mahavir show this path to *moksha*. That path is able to be compared with the idea of a modern, nonreligious liberation that emancipates people that are oppressed through various social justice movements related to criminal justice, pacifism, environmental justice, civil rights, and equality. There is lots of overlap suggested between Jainism and movements of social justice showing lots of similarity. Although the idea of liberation may differ as to whether it is attainment of *moksha* or attainment of equal freedoms, it is clear that there is definite alignment on the path one takes for both kinds of them.

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## Glossary

- **Liberation (Jainism):** Transcendence of a soul to moksha by exiting the cycle of rebirth through removal of karma
- **Liberation (Secular, Nonreligious):** attainment of equal freedoms, broken away from oppression
- **Social Justice:** distribution of equal economic, political and social rights and opportunities to everyone