

Ahimsa, Jainism, and the Covid Pandemic - Part 2

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One of the earliest of the Jain scriptures, *Tattvarthadigama Sutra*, mentions: “Pure concentration is of four types: absorption in the different attributes of the soul, absorption in one aspect of the soul, concentration upon the subtlest movements in the soul and the total absorption of the soul in itself.” (Radhakrishnan and Moore, 260)

It is evident that this teaching stipulates that subtler and subtler levels of pure concentration are needed in the process of enlightenment and ‘vulgar’ concentration is radically different from ‘pure’ concentration. Jainism never loses an opportunity to emphasize the connection between attention and behaviour. “Where attention goes, energy flows.” This resonates with Patanjali’s teaching of how the flow of attention along the higher psychic centres elevates the levels of consciousness experienced by the human mind.

Gandhi, Raychand, and Jainism

It is well-known that Mahatma Gandhi made the principle of *ahimsa* one of the pillars of his political philosophy of non-violence in India’s struggle for independence from British rule. There is considerable evidence that Jainism played a major role in his spiritual evolution and his later dietary experiments resonate with many Jain practices. In his autobiography, we find numerous examples for this. One chapter in particular is titled ‘Raychandbhai’ and it is worth taking a closer look.

On his return from England where he had just completed his law degree, Gandhi relates in this chapter of his shock at the news of the death of his mother. “My grief was even greater than over my father’s death. Most of my cherished hopes were shattered. But I remember that I did not give myself up to any wild expression of grief. I could even check the tears and took life just as though nothing had happened.”

But something did happen. The shock was too much and Gandhi needed urgent spiritual counsel. Raychandbhai was this counsel. In his memoir, Gandhi introduces Raychandbhai as a poet who was a jeweller by profession. One gets the impression that he was a good friend, more knowledgeable in spiritual matters than Gandhi, and as someone who gave him occasional advice. But this is not the case. It is more accurate to say that the psychological relation between Raychandbhai and Gandhi was more of a *guru* (spiritual teacher) and *shishya* (spiritual student). Gandhi discloses this relation by denying it. “Though I could not place Raychandbhai on the throne of my heart as *Guru*, he was on many occasions, my guide and helper.”

So who was Raychandbhai? Lakshminandan Mehta (later known as Shrimad Rajchandra or Raychandbhai by Gandhi) was born on 9 November 1867 and died on 9 April 1901 at the young age of 33. As a Jain scholar, he seems to have mastered both *ahimsa* and *avadhana*. The latter skill was demonstrated on many occasions by his remarkable feats of memory. Gandhi describes his first meeting

with him and how he tested this extraordinary power. “He was not above twenty-five then, but my first meeting with him convinced me that he was a man of great character and learning. He was also known as a *shatavadhan* (one having the faculty of remembering or attending to a hundred things simultaneously). I exhausted my vocabulary of all the European tongues I knew and asked the poet to repeat the words. He did so in the precise order in which I had given them. I envied his gift without, however, coming under its spell. The thing that did cast its spell over me I came to know afterwards. This was his

Vivekachudamani, the eighth century philosopher Shankaracharya writes, “Three things are rare indeed and are due to divine grace: human birth, longing for liberation and the protecting care of a perfected sage.”

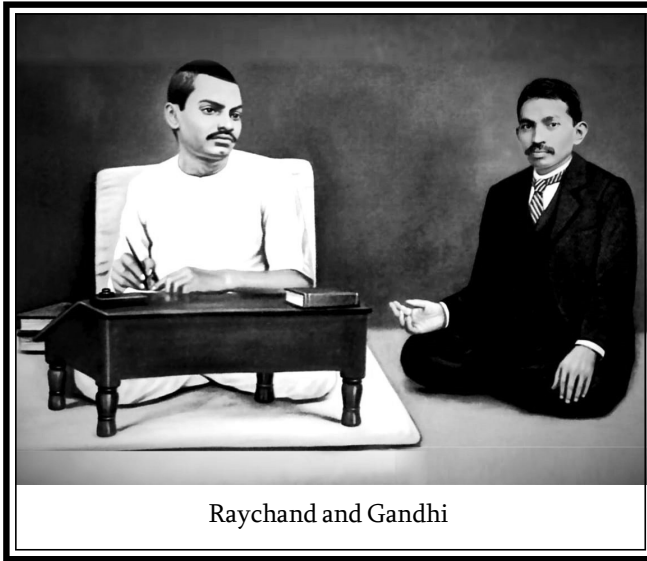
Given the common theme of reincarnation that underlies Jainism, Buddhism, and Hinduism, we see that human birth is a tremendous opportunity to aspire for enlightenment. It is not meant for sensual indulgence. Swami Vivekananda elaborates, “Very few men can eat a meal with the same gusto as a dog or a wolf. But all the pleasures of the dog or the wolf

have gone, as it were, into the senses. The lower types of humanity in all nations find pleasure in the senses, while the cultured and the educated find it in thought, in philosophy, in the arts and sciences. Spirituality is a still higher plane. The subject being infinite, that plane is the highest, and the pleasure there is the highest for those who can appreciate it.”

Human birth is therefore seen as a divine gift, an adventure for the exploration of one’s own mind and its possibilities, an opportunity to aspire for the goal of liberation from the cycles of

birth and death. By all accounts, Raychandbhai was not only erudite, but also a teacher of the highest order, a “perfected sage”.

The power of memory has always been extolled as a sign of spiritual development both in the Jain and Hindu traditions. Patanjali speaks of how attention focused on subconscious contents of one’s own mind leads to a knowledge of previous lives. The terse



Raychand and Gandhi

wide knowledge of the scriptures, his spotless character, and his burning passion for Self-realization. I saw later that this last was the only thing for which he lived.”

The last two sentences are significant. The extraordinary zeal with which Gandhi pursued his spiritual goals seems to be rooted in the exemplary life of Raychandbhai. The “burning passion for self-realization” is no easy acquisition. In the opening verses of the

aphorism doesn't give any further details. But a demonstration of it seems to have occurred in the life of Raychandbhai. At the age of seven, he began to remember his earlier lives. When a relative died, he inquired into the meaning of death. "Then I went secretly to the cremation ground and climbing a Babul tree I saw the whole process of cremation of the dead man's body and I felt that those who burnt him were cruel. A train of thoughts started on the nature of the death and as a result I could recollect my previous lives." (Salter, 131)

Apart from the short chapter titled 'Raychandbhai', we find no further mention of him in Gandhi's autobiography. We should remember that Gandhi wrote his autobiography while in prison, as a means of diverting his mind from the filth of his surroundings. He was recalling incidents of thirty years ago. Going back thus in time, it is significant that Gandhi met Raychandbhai before his life-changing trip to South Africa and we now know, there was extensive correspondence between the two during these times. Gandhi discloses his admiration in this way. "I have since met many a religious leader or teacher. I have tried to meet the heads of various faiths, and I must say that no one else has ever made on me the impression that Raychandbhai did. His words went straight home to me. His intellect compelled as great a regard from me as his moral earnestness, and deep down in me was the conviction that he would never willingly lead me astray and would always confide to me his innermost thoughts. In my moments of spiritual crisis, therefore, he was my refuge." (Gandhi, 74)

In 1929, the collected writings of Raychandbhai were published in Gujarati and Gandhi wrote the preface. He again

recalled the impact the Jain made on him. "There was magic in his eyes. They were very sharp; there was no confusion in them. Concentration was engraved in them. ... His appearance was that of a calm and quiet person. His voice was so sweet that no one would get tired of listening to him. ... Inner joy was pictured on his face. He had such a command over language that I do not remember he had ever to search for words while expressing his opinion." In the same preface, he acknowledges that it was from Raychand that he learned to look upon all the castes with an equal eye. Raychand taught him, he recalls, that "he must also possess the qualities of other castes, learning hard work from the Sudra, fearlessness from the Kshatriya, a love of learning from the Brahmin."

While in South Africa, Gandhi wrote to Raychand and asked him his numerous spiritual questions. Raychand answered with patience and at length. "Spiritual equanimity was the essence of self-realization. Anger, conceit, deceit, and greed were its adversaries. God was not a physical being; he had no abode outside the self. God was emphatically not the creator of the universe. All the elements of nature such as atom, space, etc., are eternal and uncreated. They cannot be created from substances other than themselves. ... We may make thousands of permutations and combinations of material objects, but it is impossible to create consciousness." (Guha, 86)

It is this central thesis that God is not an extra-cosmic deity surveying the affairs of men, but rather is the innermost soul of every being that is at the heart of the Jain doctrine. Many erudite works of philosophy thus classify Jainism as atheistic. This, in some ways, is an error. Jainism is more consonant with Advaita

Vedanta in the sense that it believes in the divinity of the soul. The advaita 'joke' that "I was an atheist until I realized that I was God" reflects (in a humorous way) the underlying philosophy of both Jainism and Advaita Vedanta.

In May 1901, while in South Africa, Gandhi learned that Raychandbhai had just died at the early age of thirty-three. He read about this in a newspaper that arrived in the post from India. He set the paper aside and tried to resume his work, but could not. Raychand was his spiritual guru. When Gandhi was mourning the loss of his mother, Raychand was there to console him. When he was failing as a barrister in Bombay, Raychand was there to indicate the larger purpose of life. When he was the target of racial violence in South Africa, Gandhi wrote to him and found spiritual consolation and direction. He learned from Raychand how to combine work in the secular field along with spiritual contemplation, the ideal set forth in the *Bhagavad Gita*. When Christian friends in South Africa were trying to convert Gandhi, he "advised him to stay within the Hindu faith, yet remain open to the teachings of the other religions."

Thus we see Gandhi's religion was a healthy mix of Jainism and Hinduism, along with beneficial teachings of Buddhism, Christianity and Islam that he had learned from his vast network of associates and friends and Raychand in particular. One central idea of Jainism though took firm root in Gandhi's psyche. This is the idea that the control of the mind can be gained by the control of the tongue. Thoughts and emotions are invisible forces that swirl in the realm of the mind. They seem to be difficult to control. But what we eat is visible and since what we eat influences what we think, Gandhi adopted a dietary

approach in his spiritual journey. He even wrote small books and articles about vegetarianism and how it can improve health and spiritual life. These have been compiled into his "health guide."

The control of the tongue as a means to control the mind is found in all three religions: Jainism, Buddhism, and Hinduism. Fasting as a means to exercise control over the tongue leads to an increase in the power of will. This is well known in *Raja-yoga*. It is common knowledge that Gandhi appealed to this practice on numerous occasions. The control of the tongue is related to the control of speech and according to Shankara, the control of speech is the first step towards enlightenment. In *Vivekachudamani*(367), we find the verse:

*Yogasya prathamam dwaram
vangnirodhoaparigraha/
Nirasha cha niraha cha
nityamekantasheelata//*

"The first doorway of yoga is control of speech, non-possession, entertaining no expectations and a reflective life of solitude."

Thus, the control of the palate has many dimensions that ultimately lead to enlightenment. The control of food is only the first step.

Food and Jainism

"We are what we eat" is a general maxim that we hear every day. It may be more accurate to say, "We are what we ate." But the Sanskrit word for food is *ahara* and several celebrated philosophers both in Jainism and Hinduism differ about its meaning. From an immediate perspective, we can take it to mean physical food and perhaps this is the most expedient understanding in the wake of the

current pandemic. “Eating habits of humans have not only caused preventable epidemics but they have caused an array of ailments in every one of our body systems. Environmental sustainability can be achieved in part through eating plants instead of animals. Certainly we eat far more animal products than is good for us, and consuming much less meat of better quality from sustainable sources is highly recommended by most nutritionists and environmentalists.” (Reddy and Saier, 2020)

These are the conclusions of modern medical experts and microbiologists. They also underscore that instead of changing our habits to subdue the pandemics, “we have learned to live with them rather than eliminate them.” But we can change our eating habits through proper education.

Vinoba Bhave interprets *ahara* through the framework of the five elements of antiquity: earth, water, fire, air, and ether. Physical food (or the “earth principle”) is only one fifth of our daily requirements. The body needs a healthy daily dose of water, sunlight, fresh air, and the experience of the open sky (ether). Bhave makes an interesting connection between the open sky and the intake of food. “It is my experience that someone who lives under the open sky needs fewer calories in food. ... the open sky was my number one article of food. Number two is fresh air; number three is sunshine. Number four is water, plenty of water, a little at a time but frequently. Water gives one great vitality. Solid food comes last, it is the least important. The most important is to live under the open sky.” (Bhave, 244)

The emphasis on water in Bhave’s explanation is supported by the latest medical research. The human brain is eighty percent water and studies have shown that

the average adult does not drink enough water. “Dehydration was shown to accelerate the brain shrinkage that occurs with aging and dementia.” (Mosconi, 38)

From the standpoint of mental health, both individual and collective, what we eat or drink determines our mental moods. One need not be a medical expert to understand this. Still, recent research shows that fried food, fast food, high-fat dairy and meat contribute considerably to the early onset of neurodegenerative diseases like Alzheimer’s.

Other researches have shown a correlation between children’s diets and their performance in school. So we cannot dismiss this teaching about the virtue of a vegan diet too quickly. However, this is too narrow an interpretation on the meaning of *ahara* or food. The restrictive interpretation that *ahara* refers only to physical food can also be found in Ramanuja’s qualified non-dualism (or *Vishishtadvaita*). We thus find many Hindu and Jain sects going to great lengths as to what to eat and what not to eat, what is pure and what is impure.

Shankaracharya on the other hand, interprets *ahara* as all that is taken in through all of the senses including the mind. Through dietary restrictions, we may control what we ingest through our mouth. But according to Shankara, a similar alert mindfulness must persist for all the sensory apertures. In the *Atharva Veda*, we find this amplified in the following verse:

*Bhadram Karnnebhiih Shrnnuyaama
Devaah |Bhadram Pashyema-
Akssabhir-Yajatraah |Sthirair-
Anggais-Tussttuvaamsas-
Tanuubhiih |Vyashema Deva-
Hitam Yad-Aayuh |*

The meaning is this. “May we hear what is beneficial with our ears. May we

see what is beneficial with our eyes. May we enjoy life allotted to us by speaking pleasantly, with our bodies strong of limb.” In other words, the principle of *ahimsa* applies to all the sensory apparatus and not just to what we eat or do not eat.

Commenting on these differences, Swami Vivekananda writes “The manipulating and controlling of what may be called the finer body, that is to say, the mind, are no doubt higher functions than the controlling of the grosser body of flesh. But the control of the grosser is absolutely necessary to enable one to arrive at the control of the finer. The beginner, therefore, must pay particular attention to all such dietetic rules as have come down from the line of the accredited teachers. But the extravagant, meaningless fanaticism which has driven religion entirely to the kitchen, as may be noticed in many of our sects - without any hope that the noble truth of that religion will ever come out into the sunlight of spirituality - is a peculiar sort of pure and simple materialism.”

Ahimsa and the Future

The oldest temples ever constructed on this planet were the Jain temples. Their colossal size, the attention to microscopic detail, sensuous statues that adorn them, all point to a remarkable age of human history. From Kashmir to Kanyakumari, these majestic monuments embody in sculpture the spiritual aspiration of humanity. The modern man is apt to look at the past with some intellectual arrogance but only the meditative mind can empathize with that ancient culture and marvel at the heights they reached in human consciousness. The anthropologist and the archeologist are likely to look at these

times through a Judaeo-Christian lens and thus classify Jainism as ‘atheistic’. But the Jains did not need an Abrahamic god to derive their system of ethics and religion. Nature in general, and human nature in particular, explained it all. Their veneration of the great teachers of the past, the *tirthankaras*, resonates with our modern scientific temperament. We build on the wisdom gained from the past. This echoes the famous saying of Isaac Newton: “If I am able to see this far, it is because I was standing on the shoulders of giants.”

Indeed, the *tirthankaras* were giants and the ornate Jain temples represent them as such. The numerous Jain temples scattered around India suggest a connection between sculpture and the spiritual journey (*sadhana*). As stone can be chiseled into artistic perfection, so also can the human being be transformed into a perfect soul through spiritual practice (*sadhana*). Thus, austerity and renunciation form the foundation of Jainism.

Human beings are not the rulers of this planet. Mother Nature reminds us of this every day. If we are short-sighted and do not change our ways, we may bring about the extinction of our own race. But planet earth will continue. So we must admit that we are co-inhabitants of this planet and must live in mutual respect, not only among ourselves, but also with the environment. The only way forward is to learn from the mistakes of the past.

The first *Tirthankara* of the Jain religion, Adinatha, is said to have attained enlightenment on the Shatrunjaya Hill near the town of Palitana in Western Gujarat state in India. Today, it is a major pilgrimage city for the Jains and it proclaims to be the only city on earth, which is totally vegetarian. It has outlawed the buying or

selling of any meat, eggs, or fish as well as any industries related to this. This in itself is an astonishing achievement in the modern world and shows an awakening of consciousness.

So what is the way for the future? Some say that pandemics are here to stay. We cannot all be walking around in hazmat suits fearful of viruses lurking around. That is impractical. Reddy and Saier make the following observation. “We can expect far more serious epidemics and pandemics in the near future, as many viral and other pathogenic vectors are made homeless due to the loss of virtually all wild animals, resulting from hunting, deforestation, environmental degradation, and anthropization. Human consumption of animals has enormously increased the risk of selecting for viral mutations and genetic recombination in the viral genome, allowing adaptation to humans. Slaughtering of wild animals and consumption of endangered animals should be banned altogether and strictly enforced around the world. Illegal sales of exotic wild animals and their meat are prevalent, even in the USA, and these practices may become sources of future epidemics.”

Thus, we stand at a critical point of human history. By changing our present behaviour, we can change the trajectory of the planet for the better. The point of this paper is not that we must all become Jains. It is to resurrect a forgotten truth and underline the principle of *ahimsa* as it applies today. It is to indicate that the Covid crisis and pandemics in general, along with the related problem of climate change can be confronted head on and solved through a change in global dietary behaviour.

The pandemic has also brought about another possibility. We can now envision

a de-centralized nation and dismantle mega-cities and replace them with networks of “smart villages” connected digitally through the computer. This is now possible and will also lead to a healthier planet. Any future pandemic will be easier to contain with such a framework. It will also increase the length of life in more ways than one. There will be less (or virtually no) commuting time. Air pollution will decrease. Cottage industries can be developed. Along with lengthening of life, we need to also increase the quality and this can only be done by promoting a life of the mind, by fostering art, science, culture, and spirituality. As it is now, we have increased the lifespan of individuals in ‘developed’ nations but not increased the quality of their mental life.

The principle of *ahimsa* or non-violence has now entered into a global consciousness and thoughtful people everywhere are seeing the value of this philosophy. If the twentieth century brought about an end to imperialism, the twenty-first century can herald a new age of global co-operation and mutual respect. The pandemic has already shown that this is possible. We can all learn from each other. This is not merely a pompous platitude or a corny cliché. Our survival depends upon it. It is true that new forms of colonialism are emerging and there are gross inequalities in the global vaccination program. We must take steps to correct this. We must realize that we have no choice but to mobilize our collective wisdom for the greater good. Martin Luther King Jr. forcefully warned us in his last speech in Memphis: “It is no longer a choice between violence and nonviolence in this world; it’s nonviolence or nonexistence. That is where we are today.” (King, 360) ☸