

Is Jainism Suitable for the 21ST Century?

(A Script copy of Dr. Vastupal Parikh's speech at the University of Western Ontario, Canada, Nov. 12, 2014)

Let me start by admitting how honored I am by the invitation from one of Ontario's leading Universities, to this prestigious Annual Memorial Lecture. It is an honour one can hope for but cannot ask for.

As you know, tonight I am questioning Jainism's validity in today's world. I am asking, "**Is Jainism Suitable for the 21st Century?**" Why am I asking such a question? As a trained scientist, I am rather curious because, Jainism is more than 2,600 years old, and the 21st century is just just barely 14 -a teenager! Naturally, I am wondering if, when technology is coming up with new ideas every day, this teenager will care for any ancient ideas. Let me surprise you!

However, we must first define the two terms: **Jainism**, and **the 21st century**, before attempting to explore their match. Jainism is easy to define – we have its long history. But, how can we define our teenager century? The only sources we have so far are some conflicts, triumphs, and the world moments we have witnessed together in the last 14 years. Nevertheless, these events are already setting a trend, and future generations will use these events to remember us as a people of the 21st century.

Here are some of the trend-setting events of the last 14 years.

1. This century started with a terrorist attack on America. It killed thousands and destroyed New York's iconic twin towers
2. A recent attack on our Parliament in Ottawa
3. The abduction of 200 school girls by a militant group in Nigeria
4. Publicly beheading people, and proudly displaying this ghastly act on the web by a Jihadist group. Their ruthless advances threaten to escalate into world war III – perhaps between the two major religions – Islam and Christianity.
5. Fundamentalism and violence is rapidly rising almost all over the world.

I have been thinking and worrying about these events. This century is much troubled like a teenager, and I worry that it will continue to be on its reckless path of self-destruction. Our young men and women are increasingly disillusioned, afraid and fed up by the direction in which the 21st century is going. There are many men and women here tonight whom I would consider to be "young"**well younger than me anyway!** That's probably all of you..... Therefore, I hope that you will agree with me and my young friends, when I say

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- "WE ARE FED up with never ending wars, and violence
- WE ARE FED up with ever increasing fundamentalism
- WE ARE FED up with the traditional power politics of dominance
- WE ARE FED up with environmental degradation, and
- WE WANT to bring back an era of human happiness, social justice, and peace.

GOOD! "**We ALL ARE concerned that the direction in which we are headed today will have dire consequences.**" Whether our concerns are real or imagined, the fact is that the future looks bleak if we continue on this trajectory. But wait! There are some events that are hopeful. Events such as:

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1. Thousands of young men and women have occupied Central Square in Hong Kong to save democracy. Their sit-in is still on and is called - UMBRELLA Revolution - A replay of Tiananmen Square style massacre in Hong Kong is still possible.
2. Hundreds of young doctors and nurses have signed up, and are working with "Doctors without Borders" to serve Ebola patients in Africa. And,
3. More and more young volunteers, in almost all countries, are now joining NGOs such as Green Peace, Sea Shepherd, Save the Trees, Vegetarian Associations, Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, etc. They are struggling for social justice and rights of all living beings, and a global revolution is on its way.

Such events give me hope! I find some hope in today's young generation. And of course, **Hope is always better than fear!** Today's young men and women want change. They want to get involved to find a solution. They organize street demonstrations, occupy squares and buildings, hug trees, brave rough seas, and face bullets. They are trying various approaches to change the course of the 21st century, but get frustrated because nobody seems to care. They don't know which way to turn. Fortunately, unlike 1960's 'flower' generation, they are not dropping out! I personally feel that they are on the right path. They are not aware that they are on a spiritual path. Yes, their sit-ins, their demonstrations, their entire movement and their goals for a better tomorrow are spiritual. I believe that their whole struggle is spiritual, because it is motivated by their inner voices, the voices of their soul, their true spirituality! Let me give you an example!

I remember watching a **1989 sit-in** by thousands of Chinese youth in Tiananmen Square in Beijing. Their communist government killed hundreds of youth in that square because these youth wanted democracy. The military had even ordered a tank battalion to crush the demonstrators. However, the demonstrators were not in any mood to end their sit-in. As the tanks rolled in, a young man, with his arms spread out rushed in-front of the on-coming tank daring the driver to kill him. Surprisingly, the tank-driver slowed down and turned. The young man again ran in front of the tank. This horrifying event repeated several times until the driver just gave up and stopped.

What do we conclude from this? A young man risking certain death for democracy and freedom, and the tank driver also ready to face a firing squad for disobeying! Why? How do we explain this death wish? I think, the answer lies in the fact that both of them were following the call of their untainted, natural spirit. Theirs were spiritual acts! I feel that this was a supreme example of today's emerging spirituality.

After all, what is spirituality? Is it obeying God, scriptures, Pundit or a priest? Is it going to a temple, or a church, or a mosque? Is it the rituals we perform? What is it? Think about it! **I define spirituality simply as, "Living by the inspiration of our UNTAINTED, NATURAL SPIRIT."** Remember that, **Human spirit by its very nature is kind, compassionate, and merciful.** It is called "**Our Conscience**", but it is often suppressed by our tainted spirit that has acquired biased ideas, habits, and brain-washing. I feel that our youth want to live a peaceful and conscientious lifea life true to their natural spirit! In fact, they want the whole world to live like that. Their struggle is to usher in a new era of living by peaceful and compassionate means. I really hope and wish that this time they will succeed!

Unfortunately, their sit-ins and demonstrations alone are not enough. Their entire movement needs a unified direction. Their goal is revolutionary, but to succeed they must find a way to bring about a revolutionary change in the mindset of the entire global population – including yours and mine. They need popular support. Only then will their efforts and sacrifices make our world safe, compassionate, and conscientious.

How can they generate world-wide support? Is it possible to change the collective mindset of the masses? Or, is it just a pipe dream? Can the entire society, the entire world be turned around? My answer is yes! Yes, it is possible to change the global mindset! Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi, Christ and Mahavir – the 24th guru of Jainism, have done it. Yes it **IS** possible! We must learn from these past achievers. Mahavir discovered the technique of mass appeal and used it to turn the mindset of a very large population away from violence to create a peaceful society, some 2,600 years ago! Yes it is possible!

All these individuals turned their world around to their own spiritual calling! They each carried the torch all alone, and succeeded in changing their contemporary societies. Luckily, now, the whole generation of our youth are ready to carry the torch, and the past achievers can guide them! This is where Mahavir's knowhow and his philosophy – the philosophy of Jainism - become relevant. Let me explain how Mahavir did it. It could guide us all !

Mahavir's genius was to identify the key elements of untainted human spirit. And his technique was simply to appeal to those spiritual elements – the **CONSCIENCE** of his listeners. We do not have time to review all of Mahavir's work, but we will focus on just three key elements of human spirit that Mahavir used. Those elements became the three main principles of Jainism. They define Jainism even today. These three are known as "THREE 'R's":

The THREE 'R's of Jainism

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| R1: Respect ALL life | Non Violence (<i>Ahimsa</i>) |
| R2: Respect ALL viewpoints | Multi-faceted Truth (<i>Anekantvada</i>) |
| R3: Respect the environment | Minimising our Wants and Needs (<i>Aparigraha</i>) |

Let us examine these three 'R's ('A's) in the context of our 21st century situation.

R1: RESPECT ALL LIFE - NON VIOLENCE (AHIMSA):

Mahavir's compassion included All Living Beings! Not just humans! Furthermore, his focus was not just on our actions, it was mainly on our spirit. He maintained that **UNLIMITED COMPASSION, PERCEPTION, KNOWLEDGE, FREEDOM, and HAPPINESS** are the innate qualities of a pure soul. Our daily life must reflect those qualities even if our tainted soul has only limited amounts of those innate qualities. Mahavir defined violence in spiritual terms as:

"Any act, intentional or not, that violates our soul's innate quality of compassion, is essentially violent."
 Acharya Chandanaji and Vastupal Parikh, ***Walk With Me – The Story of Mahavir: A remarkable Revolutionary, Chapter 8, pp 95, Peace Publications, Toronto, Canada, 2009.***

Mahavir explained violence in our daily life as:

"Telling a lie is violence, exploiting other living beings is violence, depriving someone of his livelihood or legitimate rights is violence, ignoring the pain and suffering of others is violence."

"Treating other lives as inferior is violence, denying education or knowledge to someone is violence, and wishing ill of another living being is also violence."

“Similarly, poverty, child labour, and discrimination based on caste, colour or gender are all acts of social violence. A society that tolerates such behaviour against its own people or other living beings is a violent society”. *Ibid, pp.96*

R2: RESPECT ALL VIEW POINTS - MULTI-FACETED TRUTH (ANEKANTVADA)

Mahavir’s second ‘R’ is based upon the fact that all of us are born with tainted souls. (Consider: from Bible - “For All have sinned....”- Romans 3:23). Therefore, our knowledge and perceptions are also tainted and limited. These limitations allow us to perceive only some facets, while others may perceive totally different facets of the same multifaceted truth. Mahavir emphasized this by preaching that,

“ Truth is multifaceted, and no living being can perceive all its facets, therefore, rather than fighting over who is right and who is wrong; we should listen, carefully analyze different viewpoints, and try to get closer to the absolute truth”. - ANEKANTVADA

Let me tell you a story to explain *Anekantvada*. I remember the story my mother told me when I was just a little boy - **The Story of Three Blind Men and an Elephant**. When these men had an opportunity to find out what is an elephant, one man went forward and touched the elephant’s body. With joy he shouted, “Indeed, an elephant is like a wall”. The second man touched its trunk and said, “ Nay ..., it is just like the tree trunk”! “Both of you are Wrong”, shouted the third man! “An elephant is like a rope. It wiggles like a snake”.

Who was right? They all are ..., but only by their respective perceptions. No one has the whole truth. This story is repeated in Jain literature again and again.

Anekantvada is a unique Jain contribution to world peace. It fosters respect for those who hold alternate beliefs, and reduces the potential for dogmatism. It is a practical tool for inter-faith dialogue, mutual respect for differing viewpoints, and to avoid conflicts. Would you not agree with me that, understanding and use of *anekantvada* on a global scale would have avoided (and could yet avoid) all wars started in the name of religion and self-righteousness? Mahavir has used this tool to convince many a warring kings to stop war. Jains have 2600 years of peaceful history to prove that. Mahavir’s third ‘R’ is:

R3: RESPECT YOUR ENVIRONMENT - Minimizing Wants and Needs (APARIGRAHA)

Environment has now become a very fashionable term, but Mahavir was already warning people about it twenty-six centuries ago. In fact, he linked his environmental concerns with our greed and ego and asked his listeners to control their needs and wants. “Minimize your possessions (‘parigraha’), he advised.

Mahavir preached that “Air, water and our earth are all living systems. Man will abuse them at his own peril. All living systems are interdependent, and our survival depends on the survival of ALL.” (*Paraspar upgraho Jivanam*). Ego and greed motivates us to buy more, possess more, show off more, accumulate more and destroy more. In modern sense, this is consumerism. It results in industries producing more, using more resources, polluting our environment, and increasing the gulf between rich and poor people and nations.

Twenty six centuries ago when Mahavir started preaching, the world around him was full of violence, wars and animal sacrifices. Therefore, his spiritual message of three ‘R’s readily resonated with the conscience of his listeners. People joined his spiritual movement in great numbers. A transformation in the mass psyche was taking place!

Mahavir created a peaceful community of Jains by using his three 'R's. Mahatma Gandhi's genius was to use non-violence – Mahavir's first 'R' – not only to awaken millions of his countrymen, but also to touch the conscience of his British rulers. And in more recent times, Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela also used spiritual tools to galvanize their people. Their spiritual messages excited the hearts and minds of masses, and there lies the secret of their success.

Fortunately, some youth activists today have discovered this secret and have already adopted Mahavir's tools as "New Spirituality". I urge my young friends to take a note of this. Your goal is revolutionary and spiritual, but your struggle needs tools of mass appeal. Mahavir may have been first to discover and use Three 'R's, as tools for mass communication, but please do not limit these 'R's to Mahavir only. Being the innate qualities of every soul, they are universal. Feel free to adopt them to suit your message. Unlike Mahavir's time, you now have very powerful tools of mass communication. Your message, if it is right, can instantly appeal the masses in far corners of the world.

How do you know if your message is right? Just consult your conscience. If your message is in conformity with the innate qualities of an untainted soul, it must be right. If not, more introspection may be needed. You can now join the revolution to bring a better tomorrow.

A revolution without an acid test of spiritual conformity will be futile. Politicians will continue to shoot, corporations will ridicule, religious organizations will ignore you and masses will remain on the sideline.

Be proactive and lead your revolution with these tools. The consequences of doing nothing are likely to be very dire. The 21st century is your century. It will continue to be on its self-destructive trajectory without your active participation

To my friends who are not so young, I plead you to give a helping hand to your children and grandchildren. You don't have to join the street demonstrations. You can be more effective if you studied Mahavir's knowhow in greater details and informed the world about this practical alternative to the downward slippery path our world is on. Awaken your friends, neighbours, and colleagues, and pressure your leaders and politicians to support these young forerunners of the New Spirituality.

I would remind you that, just like Mahavir's time, our world today is also full of violence, wars and cruelty. In fact, our future may be even more bleak and scary. Therefore, people today may be more receptive to accept Jainism's Triple 'R's. This being a truly 'spiritual message, I will even venture to urge all the religious places – all temples, gurudwaras, mosques, synagogues and churches of the world, to adopt this message as their own, ring the bells, and preach this simple spiritual message to their followers.

In conclusion, I hope you will agree with me that "Jainism is not only SUITABLE, but is also ABSOLUTELY ESSENTIAL for the 21st century".