

The Professor's Installation Address

Members of the Jaina community, especially local leaders Sashi Jain, Anand Bhansali. Sapan Bafna, Dean Dipak Jain, Samanijis, President Rosenberg, Dean Furton, leaders of FIU, colleagues, friends, and students:

I think I can speak for everyone at FIU in expressing sincere gratitude to the Jain community for its generosity, to Acharya Mahaprajna, one of the greatest Jaina teachers of our time, for his blessing this venture, and to His Holiness the Dalai Lama for inspiring it.

It is with a deep and accurate sense my own shortcomings that I accept this endowed professorship named for one of humanity's most profound religious teachers: the Jina, Bhagwan Mahavir.

Today we call the teachings of Mahavir "Jainism," a religion of some 10 million adherents, mostly in India and now found across the globe, including here in Florida. While small, Jainism's influence has been great and, one hopes, will expand its reach as more and more people come to know about its principles and practices. And the vision behind this professorship, to make these much-needed teachings more widely understood and appreciated, is a goal shared by the university and the community.

While studying classical Indian philosophy and religion in graduate school at Temple University, my major professor to whom I still owe

much, the late Dr. Bibhuti S. Yadav, always insisted that one could not understand Buddhism or Hinduism without understanding Jainism, and vice-versa. In fact, these three great Indian traditions developed in dialogue with one another. We read about Jainism in Buddhist sutras, and we find Hinduism in Jaina texts. Spirited and animated, these dialogues were always respectful and could well model contemporary interreligious discourse, and this is one contemporary application of Jainism that is especially relevant for a pluralistic world in which religious interactions are more often condescending or hostile than respectful.

When I first came to FIU fifteen years ago, one of my first collegial friends was Jai Navlakha, director of the school of computer science. Having exchanged familial visits and after traveling together to Israel, Jai first raised the possibility of bringing Jain teachers from India to broaden our curriculum in the Department of Religious Studies, of which I was then chair. The idea gained momentum, and a few years later my successor as chair, Dr Christine Gudorf, who has been hugely supportive, met with Mr. Sashi Jain to discuss affiliating with the Jain Vishwa Bharati Institute in Rajasthan, and since then we have sent a number of our students to India to learn about Jainism, and reciprocally we have hosted two Jain nuns who have taught in our department. Samani Charitra Prajna and Samani Ummata Pragya are a visible and valued presence on our campus, and it is through their tireless and cheerful efforts that student interest in nonviolence, meditation and vegetarianism have been kindled. They have taught courses and guest lectured in many more, expanding both our

diversity and our consciousness. And our Program in the Study of Spirituality has brought Dr. Dipak Jain of Northwestern University's prestigious Kellogg School of Management twice to lecture of spirituality and entrepreneurship, thanks the samanīs' suggestion.

About a year ago, the nuns asked me how to more deeply cement the institutional links between FIU and Jain Vishwa Bharati Institute and solidify the educational mission they have so gracefully borne the past five years. Out of this emerged the vision for an endowed professorship, the first in the College of Arts and Sciences, eventually leading to an interdisciplinary center. We are here this afternoon to celebrate the realization of the first phase of this vision, an event blessed by Acharya Mahaprajna and by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, as well as by all of you present here today.

Mahavir taught four principles that are every bit as relevant today as they were when he enunciated them more than two millennia ago: nonviolence or ahimsa, non-greed or aparigraha, respect for all forms of life, and anekantavada, which today we might call religious pluralism.

Most everyone in the West associates nonviolence with India, largely due to Mahatma Gandhi's influence. But few know that ahimsa originated in Jain tradition, and that the Buddha learned it there. Many centuries later, Gandhiji learned it from his Jain neighbors in his home state of Gujarat, and applied it to the Indian freedom struggle. And from Gandhi, ahimsa inspired Dr Martin Luther King as well as

His Holiness the Dalai Lama. So from this numerically small religion, a huge idea with global impact has emerged.

At a time when economic crisis engulfs our planet, Mahavir's teaching of aparigraha or non-greed is sorely needed, and I anticipate a day in the not too distant future when Jain business ethics is incorporated into our MBA curriculum. Similarly, global ecological consciousness has been fertilized by Jainism's principle of respect for all life, with the understanding that objects we might consider inanimate also have jiva or life. During the past decade, quite a bit has been written about Jainism and the environment, and this facet of Jain wisdom accords perfectly with FIU's values and mission.

Finally, there is the subtle concept of anekantavada, which I mentioned earlier. According to this idea, any truth claim is a facet of the total truth, a perspective. There is the well-known parable of the blind men and the elephant: A wise man (the Jain version; in the Buddhist version it is a king) brings an elephant into his audience hall and asks five men, upon touching the pachyderm, what it was that they felt. One man touching the tail proclaims it to be a broom. Another, feeling the leg, asserts it is a tree. Yet another, touching the tusk, proclaims it to be a sword. The five blind men resort to quarreling over the nature of the object they had touched. But due to his omniscience, kevalajnana, the wise man knew the elephant to be an elephant, and also knew that from the standpoint of each of the blind men, their premature conclusions were not without basis. Each claim was true inasmuch as the specific part of the elephant indeed

has the qualities shared with the broom or the tree; however, only the king could see the entire elephant. The philosophy of anekantavada likens all of our religious claims to the assertions of the blind men. Each claim is true from a particular standpoint, or anekant, and the goal of Jain philosophy is to clarify those standpoints from which varying claims about truth might be valid, that reality itself has a multiple nature. Or, as my Professor Yadav used to put it, “My statement is true in so far as it affirms, and it is false insofar as it negates.” Such an approach to truth is veritable medicine for today’s religious wars and conflicts, and we envision the Bhagwan Mahavir Interdisciplinary Center for Religious Pluralism to help dispense this sorely-needed medicine.

Jainism is an integral and indispensable part of Indian culture, philosophy and religion. In today’s globalized world, I would take this idea a step farther. Jainism is the heritage of all the world. From Mahavir to the Buddha to Gandhi to King to the Dalai Lama to all people for whom peace matters, ahimsa is our heritage. For all in the world who would seek to curb excessive greed, aparigraha is a valuable resource. For the very many of us who love our planet, respect for all life is essential. And for those of us who can see that religions and cultures must interact respectfully and even affectionately, anekantavada is critical.

As Acharya Mahaprajna has written: “If there is not anekanta, then ahimsa cannot be developed... Conflicts arise when we insist on our facet of truth to the exclusion of other facets. Understanding any idea

or religion or ideology to be just that, a facet, is the doorway to peaceful co-existence.” And as His Holiness the Dalai Lama’s personal secretary wrote to the President of FIU last year: “As you probably know, His Holiness has been stressing the importance of the need for understanding the world’s great religions and their roles, especially in today’s increasingly global world. In our deeply interconnected world, understanding and appreciation of diversity of religions is critical in fostering a culture of genuine tolerance and peaceful coexistence.”

These are Jain values, for sure. But they are also universal values, values on which our university and our Jain benefactors stand united. Whatever role I can play in making Jainism better known and appreciated, I am eager. But even more, whatever we as a university, as a learning community, can do to promote nonviolence, non-greed, respect for all life, and genuine pluralism, we are grateful – but these are, after all, our values and our shared mission - FIU, the Jain community, the world as a whole.

As the first Bhagwan Mahavir professor, I will endeavor to solidify relations with Jain Vishwa Bharati Institute and other academic bodies around the world that are involved in teaching and research about Jainism. Toward this end, we are putting up a website – mahavir.fiu.edu - to facilitate exchanges among these institutions and with interested persons. At FIU, we will work toward infusing thematic courses with Jain content. In the Department of Religious Studies, a Jain perspective will enhance such courses as World

Religions, Religion and the Environment, Women and Religion, Meditation and Mystical Traditions, Religion War and Peace, Religions of India, and so on. As Director of FIU's Program in the Study of Spirituality, we will educate our constituency about Jainism by presenting an annual Jain Studies lecture in consultation with the community. I plan to invite Professor Padmanabh Jaini to deliver the inaugural address next year around Mahavir Jayanthi time.

Our vision is broad. Through the Bhagwan Mahavir Interdisciplinary Institute for Religious Pluralism within the School of International and Public Affairs, a Jain perspective will be brought to students in International Relations, Sociology, Women's Studies, Political Science, Asian Studies and throughout the social sciences. Given the resources, this Institute will facilitate student and faculty exchanges and organize lecture tours at North American universities for leading scholars from India. We will send American students to India and we will welcome Indian students at FIU. We will reach out to community interfaith groups and religious organizations to ensure Jainism's place at the dialogical table. We will develop curricula about a Jain perspective on religious pluralism for secondary schools, public and private. In short, we plan to enhance academic attention and public appreciation of the Jain values we have been discussing today. With the combined resources of the Jain community and FIU, as they say, the sky is the limit.

Thank you, friends, for this great opportunity. I believe I may safely speak for my university in committing ourselves to the values you have brought into the world.