

This Blessed Life

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Our insatiable desire to accumulate and cling to things is driven by two primary factors - the fear that some day we may not have enough and by the concept that happiness comes from outside objects and ideas. Underlying both of these factors is our ignorance in recognizing things as they are. We can use contemplative mindfulness practices everyday to gain a broader perspective and lead a contented and fulfilling life.

Take a walk down the road, have a stroll in a mall, or turn on the TV and we will soon realize the power of desire. Just notice where our attention is drawn—to a sleek pair of jeans, new shoes in a store window, or the fragrance from our favorite restaurant. It is hard not be lured by all the things we can have. Today's economies work by constantly stimulating discontent within us. This discontent is one of the primary causes for us to acquire possessions. There are more fundamental causes underlying the discontent. We will examine those causes and how to deal with them.

Non-possessiveness applies to our relationship to both our outer and inner world. As we reflect on our lives in relation to non-possessiveness, we notice the tendency to cling to objects, people, thoughts and ideas. Clinging to a fixed idea or grasping for a particular experience is no different from desperately needing an iPad or a new pair of jeans. From Jain point of view, which is shared by many other philosophies, it is not the possessions or thoughts in themselves that are the issue; it is the tightness of our grip. Jain principle of non-possessiveness addresses the issue of attachment to material objects, while the principle of multi-faceted reality addresses issue of attachment to ideologies.

“Tell me what you need and I'll tell you how to get along without it.”

– Anonymous

Jain philosophy provides room for the fact that material objects are necessary for a person's living. It does not require that all material possessions be discarded as part of the householder's conduct. The issue it tries to address is the development of attachment towards them. Owning a material object is not possessiveness but it is the covetousness for these objects that is at the root of obstructing a fulfilling life.

Economic Factors

Mahavir was well aware of the fact that economic inequality and the needless accumulation of essential commodities is not only defiling one's soul, but it very much disturbs social life and leads to exploitation of living beings and natural resources. Consequently, Mahavir pronounced that the remedy for the ill of economic inequality is non-possessiveness. The methods of non-possessiveness tell us that one should keep only what is necessary for one's living and the rest

should be returned to society for its well being. Limits of wealth and essential commodities are indispensable for the development of a healthy social life. In a way, wealth is the basis of our social structure and if its flow is obstructed because of the accumulation, large segments of society remain undeveloped.

Once a famous Gandhian economist, while trying to reconcile spirituality and economics, argued that the end of human endeavor was wantlessness. Spiritualism and economics both try to attain the same end goal. A want that is satisfied economically ceases to exist; however, it gives rise to other wants. Therefore, economic activity never helps in attaining the ultimate state of wantlessness. In fact, if that were the case, economic activity will be self-destructing. On the other hand, a want that is satisfied spiritually through being content, just simply ceases to exist.

Nonviolence

The concept of non-possession is very tightly tied to the idea of nonviolence. It actually signifies that limiting desires and accumulation of wealth will give rise to nonviolent behavior. Craving and clinging for more possessions make people indulge in violence – with their deeds, words and thoughts. From this specific viewpoint, it seems nonviolence is secondary whereas non-possession is the main principle of Jain philosophy. One cannot understand Mahavir's conception of nonviolence until one comprehends the principle of non-possession. Once, Gautam, chief disciple of Mahavir asked him –

Gautam: "Can man be spiritual?"

Mahavir: "Yes, he can."

Gautam: "Lord! How can he do so?"

Mahavir: "By renouncing violence and possession."

Contemplation of Causes

If we look deeply at our desire to accumulate and maintain a grip on those accumulations, we can see the origins of these tendencies. Firstly, we feel comfortable and safe with what we know and afraid of what we don't know. This fear may cause us to falsely believe that our security is dependent on keeping what we have and there may not be enough for us in the future. This fear causes us to accumulate more.

One contemporary teacher suggests asking ourselves, "What do we want by getting what we want?" We can apply this question to almost any desire, be it material or ideological. "What do we really expect to get from eating that brownie? What do we really want from a dream car, or from making \$200,000 a year?" Our first answer might be taste or financial security. But if we keep asking ("What do we want from security?"), the answer will almost always be something like happiness, fulfillment or peace of mind. The desire for happiness is really the underpinning of all desires. Once we realize that, we're in a position to ask ourselves the deeper question: "What would it take to be happy right now, in this moment, whether or not I get what I want?" That contemplation will lead to the thought that purpose of life is to live happily and contented.

Contemplation of Fortunes

Now let's face it; the leisure and fortunes afforded by us in this part of the world are unprecedented. If we look around the world, there are over three billion people who live on two dollars a day. Not only do we have unprecedented leisure and fortunes of our time but also we are consuming at historically highest levels. So the question is – what to make of all these possessions we have and what is the right way to think about these.

The first thing is to recognize it and see for what it is. Recognize the abundant nature of our life as it is now. Motto of the consumer capitalism is to buy a whole bunch of stuff and then some more. Is this an exciting way to look at the life? Are we supposed to consume as much as we can and then leave this world? Or, perhaps there is another purpose?

In Uttaradhyayan Sutra, Mahavir talks about how rare it is to obtain a human life. We make an assumption that we got this blessed life – if we squander it we will get another chance very soon. That is not the case. Jain scriptures stipulate very low odds of getting a human life. Also, out of all human lives on the Earth, what kind of human life we got? Why do we have this blessed life? It is certainly caused by our own good deeds of the past. If we mistake our fortunes for something we “own” and is ours – this is a recipe for disappointment. We know the good fortunes are here only as long as afforded by our karma.

Contemplation of Ignorance

Let's get back to desire. There is positive desire – such as desire for enlightenment. Then there is desire born out of discontent that drives greed and fear. Fear and greed causes possession. But underlying the fear and greed is – ignorance – a lack of understanding of the true nature of things.

Let's consider why things happen to happen to us – both good and bad. Firstly, we may believe that things happen randomly and we are just victims or beneficiaries of our circumstances. This implies we have no control over any situation. Secondly, we may believe that things are done to us by some higher power. In this scenario, again, we do not exert any control over what is happening. According to the Jains, both of these are deluded views.

Jains believe that we absolutely cause what happens to us. We believe that everything happen for a cause. This blessed life didn't just happen; we created the conditions for this life in our past by working very hard. This is the view Jains hold through the theory of Karma or causality. This causality is at the root of us getting things we possess. Jains consider two main impetuses for things to happen to us – our past deeds and our good faith efforts. In the strictest sense, this implies whatever is happening to us in present is a reflection of our past – and our future is shaped by what we do in the present. Contemplating on this worldview gives us a window into the true nature of things and a different perspective on our possessions. Would we shape a better future for ourselves by clinging to what we possess, or, by letting them go?

Security born of material things is a delusion. To remove this delusion, one takes the vow of non-possession and realizes the perfection of the soul.

– Mahavir

Contemplation of Impermanence

We observe that things change constantly. Our ignorant thought is that we take things that are permanent as impermanent and take things that are impermanent as permanent. We act as if our possessions are permanent and we get disappointed when we lose what we have or when we don't get what we want.

Consider, how important is the person or object that we crave: everything will end someday – people die, things break. What are all the objects of attachment worth at "the moment of truth" or death? The prosperity we have is very tenuous; it can slip at any moment. We see this in our lives all the time – happening to us and happening to others. We cannot take our possessions, prosperity and even our own life with a sense of entitlement. Take for example the recent tsunami in Japan – people lost their lives and possessions in a split moment. We need to consider our prosperity as a means to a higher end. We have an obligation, an obligation not to just consume, but to give back. In the cosmic scale of time, there

is a very small window of opportunity for us to accomplish this. The window could close any moment in many ways - health-wise, culturally or naturally through end of life.

Contemplation of Fulfilled Desires

We need to reflect on our past to get another viewpoint on our possessiveness. Consider this – do we exaggerate positive qualities of things we are attached to; are they really worth all our troubles? How much fun is fun really, and how much is it forgetting the suffering? Do desires ever stop or is it an endless job to fulfill them? Let's look back several years and think about the possessions we desired in our lives – it might have been a new car, a better job, or a house or any number of things. Now, look at how many of these desires were actually fulfilled. Chances are we got most of what we wanted then. Let's also look at the consumer within us – and the constant barrage of things our economy wants us to acquire. In fact, we got all the things they wanted us to get – the new phone, the cars etc.

Did the things we wanted to have, and the things they wanted us to have made us happier? No. That's because happiness doesn't come from things and money. We know this. We have proof of this in our own life. The happiness we are seeking is from outside, it has to come from within.

Final Thought

Non-possession is the one of the great vows for Jain householder's code of conduct. We must observe both our possessiveness and our motivation for possessiveness with non-judgmental self-observation. The roots of attachment are planted as soon as we begin to distinguish between "yours" and "mine". Non-possessiveness simply cannot be achieved in a single leap; only a gradual step-by step ascent is possible. If we live each day with a contemplation of our fortunes, impermanence of things and our ignorance in understanding the true nature of things, it won't be long before we're living with non-possessiveness without having to think about it.

So, in the coming weeks as the deluge of advertisements bombard us with messages designed to tell us what we lack, by living in content and gratitude we can blissfully smile and breathe our way through them.



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