

## Religious Practices and Mental Health: With Reference To Jainism

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### ABSTRACT

*Religion has always played an important role in Society. But with the rapid changes in social ethos due to the advancements in science and technology have been a challenge to the psychological and emotional well-being of human beings. Though the comforts seem to be increasing, medicine is offering more comfort and fighting diseases man is not happy in the true sense. Though it is understood that happiness is a state of mind and relative in nature, it is becoming more and more transient too. Man tries to find solace in material comforts but is failing miserably. Of major concern for doctors is, the rising levels of stress and the failure to cope with it. There is an alarming rise in the levels of stress and the number of people affected by it. It is like a phenomenon which is affecting the human populace of the world irrespective of age, caste, creed, color and social strata.*

*It is in such moments that one could find some peace in religious beliefs and practices. Though some of the religious practices may not have a logical explanation, and may even be superstitious, we cannot discard them all as worthless. There are some practices which contribute to the emotional and psychological stability of human beings. Especially for fighting stress and the resultant complexities of life, there are many rituals prescribed by all the religions.*

*This paper is going to concentrate on some of the rituals described in Jainism which could address this matter. The religious tenets and practices outlined in Jainism have a strong scientific basis and therefore very successful in meeting the demands of the dynamic life styles of the modern world, especially in facing stress created due to various reasons.*

**Keywords:** Mental health, stress, religious practices, Jainism.

### INTRODUCTION

The richness and strength of Indian civilization comes from the birth and co-existence of the numerous religions, cultures, languages, social groups and communities. The lines dividing the existence of one religion or culture and the entry (onslaught) of a new one are so faint and blurred that it is almost impossible to decide when a new religion was born or got shelter on this land. But it is a fact that, for many centuries, all the various schools of thought, religious or otherwise, have co-existed, whether peacefully or under duress. It is this multi-cultural element that gives this country the strength to face fresh onslaughts in the modern world too.

Amongst many other religions, India has the pride of place of being the place of birth for another great religion of the world – Jainism.

The antiquity of Jainism has been debated and discussed by many scholars like Jacobi, Zimmer, Furlong and many others. But what cannot be disputed is the strength of the teachings of this great religion.

While most of the other religions of the world seem to have some powerful God-symbols, and the religion itself structures around one or many such figures of power, Jainism sets itself apart by having the 'Tirthankaras' as their path-guides. The entire philosophy of Jainism is

based on the teachings of 24 *teerthankaras*. *Tirthankara* literally means ‘those who will help you cross the river’. Many people have made the mistake of declaring Bhagawan Mahaveer, the 24<sup>th</sup> *Teerthankara*, as the person who gave birth to this religion but it is a proven fact that with 23 *teerthankaras* before him this was a religion which was already well-established, with its roots dating back to the Vedic and pre-vedic period (Jacobi, 1895) However, Bhagawan Mahavir gets the credit for having restructured the religious tenets to suit the contemporary needs and also initiate a renaissance of the religion. Today, this religion and its precepts and practices are being discussed due to the efforts made by Bhagawan Mahavir. Contemporary outlook toward religion is imperative if any religion has to survive.

Religion has always played a very important role in society and politics. In fact, the resurgence of Jainism is also attributed to the fact that the existing *Brahminical* Codes had become intolerable (Stevenson, Sinclair, 1915). However; I am not interested so much in the birth or propagation of the religion itself as much as in the effect of the practices in this religion on the individual and the society.

Of late, we notice a shift in the outlook towards a good life. It is not just a good standard of living that people are interested in anymore; they are discussing the quality of life too. Major changes in the quality of life of individual seem to have occurred in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century with the onset of industrialization. It is a well-known fact that industrialization brought with it many challenges for a peaceful human living. Lives may have become easier and longer due to the technological advancements but the quality was something which left wanting for more. Advancements in Science and technology have been instrumental in bringing many changes in the ordinary lifestyle of man. But these changes in lifestyle have not necessarily converted to happiness and peace. All over the world there seems to be an interest in understanding what religion and religious practices could do to enhance the quality of life, and bring happiness and peace to man’s life. What is, many a times, seen with skepticism and cynicism has now been grudgingly accepted as the truth. Thanks again to science and the spirit of scientific enquiry that various experiments conducted to prove the effects of religious practices have been instrumental in getting it the necessary acceptance in this world which considers science and technology as GOD!

According to University of Missouri researchers despite differences in rituals and beliefs among the world’s major religions, spirituality often enhances health regardless of a person’s faith. They believe that health care providers could take advantage of this correlation between health – particularly mental health – and spirituality by tailoring treatments and rehabilitation programs to accommodate an individual’s spiritual inclinations. (University of Missouri, 2012) “In many ways, the results of our study support the idea that spirituality functions as a personality trait,” said Dan Cohen, assistant teaching professor of religious studies at MU and one of the co-authors of the study. “With increased spirituality people reduce their sense of self and feel a greater sense of oneness and connectedness with the rest of the universe. What was interesting was that frequency of participation in religious activities or the perceived degree of congregational support was not found to be significant in the relationships between personality, spirituality, religion and health.” (University of Missouri, 2012) My concern is with the effect of the modern living styles on the mental health of an individual which in turn affects group living too, whether it is in work-spaces or in the family.

Modern man seems to be afflicted with a condition of the mind, in response to the external stimuli, called stress, which seems to be categorized as a disease, and not just a disorder. It is believed to be the one major reason for deaths too. If not for investigating the reasons for death at least for understanding what disturbs human mind and how to handle these disturbances which lead to death is important.

Religion or spirituality may have therapeutic implications for mental health. Randomized trials indicate that religious interventions among religious patients enhance recovery from anxiety and depression. Psycho-educational groups that focus on spirituality can lead to greater understanding of problems, feelings, and spiritual aspects of life. (SimonDein, 2010)

Specifically, I am going to concentrate on some of the effects of spiritual practices espoused in Jainism. Many a times it may appear as if I am not just talking about Jainism but about any other religion of the world.

Before going ahead it is important to mention here that like other schools of thought and religion, in Jainism too we believe that any succor can be gained only by the guidance and message ordained by the Guru. The path can be shown only by the Guru. There will be plenty of self-help books, teachers, to show the methodology but ultimately it is the doer and the way it is done which will decide whether you get the desired results or not. Also, these are not one time acts there has to be continuity in practicing these methods.

Jainism is known for the timeless teachings of Non-violence, Truth, non-stealing, Celibacy and Non-possession or non-greed. The basic tenets of Jainism stand on the Three Gems - The right vision, the right knowledge and the right conduct. At a time when the world is becoming increasingly materialistic, competitive, unsettled due to rising desires bordering on greed, these simple tenets act as light-houses for the lost souls. These teachings are more relevant now than ever. Hence, whether you are a believer or not, it will be advantageous for all to know what this religion has to give to the world today.

## RELIGIOUS RITUALS

Ritual is often described as a symbolic expression of actual social relations, status, or the role of individuals in a society. According to Hans Penner ritual is also described as referring to a transcendent, numinous (spiritual) reality and to the ultimate values of a community. (Encyclopaedia Britannica)

The performance of rituals is an integral part of all religions. Rituals are stylized and usually repetitive acts that take place at a set time and location. They almost always involve the use of symbolic objects, words, and actions. (Anthro.palomar.edu, 2009)

The practitioner finds hope and comfort in the practices and rituals of their religious beliefs. Although religion and spirituality are different, the rituals of religion may be an avenue to the spiritual connectedness with self, others, and God and help with questions of suffering or an afterlife. Rituals alone can become mechanical but with faith they can give shape to the more abstract beliefs one holds. The practice of a particular ritual can be the means that we outwardly express an inner belief or prepare our hearts and minds to inwardly accept a divine intervention. Rituals can point to the sacred, the holy, the transcendent.

Hans Penner says that rituals have been known to possess some unique characteristics beyond being just sacred or profane. It is further characterised by 1. A feeling or emotion of respect, awe, fascination, or dread in relation to the sacred. 2. It is dependent upon a belief system that is usually expressed in the language of myth and 3. It is symbolic in relation to its reference. Agreement on these characteristics can be found in most descriptions of the functions of ritual. (Encyclopaedia Britannica)

I will give a brief overview of the basic rituals associated with Jainism which have provided relief to people. I would like to make it very clear here that practicing the rituals do not remove the situations of crisis or conflicts from life but they only provide the necessary mental strength and courage to face them. They calm the mind and make it capable of thinking, such that you develop the capacity to solve problems.

Like many other major religions of the world the Jains too believe that the soul, in its pure form, has infinite perception, infinite knowledge, infinite vigor, and is non-attached. But the soul in its worldly form is unable to realize these features because it is covered with the layer of Actions or *Karmas*. The *karmas* are mainly motivated by four passions (*Kashäy*): anger, ego, deceit and ego. *Tirthankars* have expounded many ways to free ourselves from these four *Kashäy* or passions and, as a result, attain *Moksha* (salvation). One of the ways is practice of six *Ävashyak* or Essential rites. By practicing these six essential rites with true feeling, one will be able to free him/her-self of passions which will ultimately help in spiritual progress.

These six essential rites, to be practiced daily, are:

1. *Sämäyik*, the practice of equanimity (meditation)
2. *Chaturvimsati-stava*, reciting verses in praise of the twenty four *Tirthankars*
3. *Vandanä*, reverence for the mendicant teachers
4. *Pratikaman*, Atonement (for transgressions)
5. *Kayotsarga*, abandonment of the body (attained by standing or sitting motionless for various length of time)
7. *Pratyäkhyäna*, renunciation (of certain foods, indulgences, or activities, for a specified period).

In addition, Digambers<sup>23</sup> have developed a list of practices quite similar to these six essential rites:

1. *Devpujä*, worship of the *Tirthankars*; which in fact covers the *Sämäyik*, *Chaturvimsati-stava*, and *Vandanä* of the Svetambar Sect
2. *Vartta*- the exercise of an honest livelihood
3. *Dän*, charity (giving alms to mendicants or people in real need)
4. *Svädhyaäy* - study of the scriptures
5. *Samyam*- self-discipline while carrying out the partial vows (*anuvrata*)
6. *Tap*, austerities which includes *Pratikraman*, *Pratyäkhyäna*, and *Kayotsarga*.

But there are many similarities in the ritualistic practices of the two sects.

## Prayers

The most basic form of establishing a communion with God is by chanting, repeating HIS name. Though universally they may be called as prayers, specifically they are called the *Mantras*. It is understood by all that Word and thought are two sides of the same coin. One follows the other. They supplement and complement each other. Each is incomplete without the other. The name of the LORD and its repetition is considered to be the simplest and the most powerful of religious practices. All religions of the world prescribe to this form of ritual.

Unlike other religions, Prayers of Jainism are associated with the powers of the *Tirthankaras* and not with any GOD. For the Jains *tirthankaras* appear to be the form of GOD because of the qualities that they possess, the most important being the power to give up the pleasures of the world and escape the cycle of life and death by their penance.

All Jains start the day with prayers. One prayer dedicated to all the *Teerthankaras*, one for forgiveness and one for the well-being of all. But apart from this there are specific prayers

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<sup>23</sup>Jains are divided into two main sects – Svetambers and Digambers.

dedicated for specific needs and requirements which are recited under special circumstances. It is the Guru who tells the seeker of solutions or path, which Mantra is to be chanted, how many times and under what conditions, for optimum benefit.

Known as the very spine of the path of spirituality, the chanting of *Mantras* brings changes at the physical, mental and emotional levels. Basically it helps in regulating breath. In a mantra, there is a communion amongst the word, emotion and vibration. It is critical for the *mantra* to be accompanied by the force of emotions which signifies involvement, concentration, devotion and belief for it to be effective. A *mantra* chanted devoid of emotions is useless. Neither will all the mantras help us all the time. Just by reading a book and chanting a *mantra* also does not reap the desired benefits. The person has to learn chanting the mantra with the right emotions, from the Guru. The vibrations then created, give us the desired succor.

All the mantras have their genesis in *OM*. It is the seed-letter. All the latent powers of our thought reside in this one word.

### ***The Navkarmantra***

The *navkar mantra*, the greatest mantra of Jainism, is the most powerful mantra. It is one mantra which activates all the parts of the diaphragm. While pleading with the Lord to release us from the sins of our profane acts, it is dedicated to all the sages, seekers of truth, teachers, All the other mantras in Jainism are born out of this one *mantra*. It is believed that 84 lakh mantras have been created out of this one *mantra*. *Om, Hrim, Shri, Arham* etc. are all considered to be the seed-letters.

The beauty of this *mantra* is that it can be chanted any time and in any situation, birth, death, marriage, house-warming, before we start an important work, to be rid of fear etc. It is ordained with the adjective and the power of being a *mahamantra*(the greatest mantra).

Apart from this, *Mantras* have been created by the gurus to attain the path of peace, ease the tensions of daily life, relieve anger, keep fear away, relieve depressions and sorrow, enhance the power of the mind, keep away all disturbances, to avoid the bad effects of the planetary movements etc. There is a clear structure for the time and the method for chanting the mantras. But it is compulsory to get the *mantra* as a blessing from the guru.

*Mantras* were originally created only in Sanskrit and Prakrit but of late translations are available in Hindi to make it easy for the devotees to chant them.

It is not necessary that only the mantras are chanted. These *mantras* are associated with some other physical forms of worship. These could be in the form of fasting, feeding the cow, feeding the poor, a pilgrimage, worshipping a specific God or *Teerthankar* etc. This is done to increase the power of the worship which in turn will help in alleviating the problems or disturbances or the troubles.

### **Fasting**

Another important ritual in Jainism is Fasting. In the Indian spiritual thought Fasting is a penance. It is divine light and fire. Like fire, Penance has the power to burn the distortions and disturbances of our mind and soul and infuse new power and strength. It is a powerful tool for purifying the mind and soul. All the major religions have elucidated this ritual.

Jainism has some unique forms of fasting which can be taken-up according to the capacity of the individual. There are two types of fasting: (1) External; (2) Internal

***External Fasting:*** There are six types of External Fasting:

- I. *Anshan* (fasting)

- II. *Oonodari* (eating less than needed to satisfy hunger)
- III. *Bhikshachari* (begging and eating)
- IV. *Rasparityag*(renouncing taste)
- V. *Kayaklesh* (physically straining the body by doing different types of yogic exercises,
- VI. exposing the body to heat, rain, wind etc., not beautifying the body)
- VII. *Pratisanleenta* (purgation)

**Internal Fasting:** There are 6 types of Internal Fasting:

- I. *Prayashchit* (atoning for the lack of control and mistakes made)
- II. *Vinay* (humility)
- III. *Vaiyavrutty*(serving the guru, monks, poor, diseased, helpless)
- IV. *Swadhyaay* (study of the scriptures)
- V. *Dhyaan* (meditate)
- VI. *Vyutsarg* (renounce the worldly comforts)

It will be difficult to give the details of each one of these penances. It is however clear that Fasting is not taken only at the physical level or in the sense of not eating. It has a wider and deeper connotation which encompasses the physical and mental realms of the human being.

Depending on the nature of the disturbance being faced by the person one of these forms of penance is combined with the chanting of mantras. The mantras are carefully chosen to address the cause of the disturbance. The devotee who practices it feels that the problem has been solved because of following the rituals but when you look at it scientifically it is clear that these rituals address the mental disturbances. All these rituals are targeted at controlling the mind and making it calm.

In majority of cases stress is induced because of social reasons. Extra marital affairs, greed, marriage, family obligations, inter-caste marriages form the major reasons for mental disturbances.

When a woman, who had recently lost her husband, came to me with the problem of hypertension and sleeplessness, in the course of our discussion it became clear that she is under a lot of stress because she has three daughters who are yet to be married. I told her to chant the *paisathiya mantra*<sup>24</sup> for 15 minutes and feed rice and jaggery to the cow<sup>25</sup>, every day. On doing this she started getting the results by the fourth month. Her blood pressure stabilized and she started sleeping well too. One of her daughters got a good job and within one year all of them got married too. The belief in the rituals which she did with honesty and purity made her mind calm and with time all the problems got sorted out slowly. She developed patience and resilience because of the rituals. In another instance, a young man was under terrible stress and depression because he was not getting married. His mother died and his other brothers and sisters got married. He was now 42 years old. He seemed to have rejected many suitable proposals earlier. Apart from counseling him and making him face the realities of the impossibility of his marriage at this age I asked him to meditate a hymn dedicated to Parswanath with beads twice a day. Over a period of one year, gradually, there was a change in him. The change came when he realized that he has to reconcile with the

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<sup>24</sup>A sacred hymn dedicated to the 24 *teerthankaras* which creates a vibration when repeated. The Guru decides the number of times it has to be repeated.

<sup>25</sup>Cow is revered as mother in the Indian Spiritual ethos and feeding it is believed to provide liberation from problems.

realities of life and accept that he will not get married. Another married lady came to us with the grievance of constant headache which was not getting cured by the doctors. They could not trace the reason too. She was in severe pain. She was asked to chant the *Logassmantr*, *navkar mantra* and *paisathiyachand*, 27 times each and along with 108 beads chant “*omsririshabhadevayanamah*” twice every day. In six months she was free from the headaches. She says she feels relaxed now. The only explanation for this phenomenon is that the chanting of the mantras created a vibration within the lady and due to the regulated breathing the intake of oxygen increased which together resulted in the relief.

It is important to be able to identify the root cause of the problems and then suggest a remedy. Even though there are specific prayers prescribing relief for specific problems they have to be combined with some other rituals too. All this is done by sheer intuition and a thorough knowledge of the scriptures. Constant meditation helps us in developing this intuitive ability.

Any religion is a bundle of practices and precepts and one can touch the higher levels of spirituality only by climbing the initial stairs of these practices. Bringing out a common code is difficult because practicing religion is a very personal thing. The results will vary from person to person. To that extent it may not be even called a science. But at the basic levels the results / outcome of some religious practices are uniform for all people. Eg. Chanting, meditating, group singing, fasting etc. But there again the ‘how’ is critical and this may bring in some changes to the results and the outcomes.

This is a much debated area which is yet to be explored scientifically. If studies are to be believed, all over the world such experiments are being conducted to find out the efficacy of this system. It is true that it may not be possible to completely cure physical ailments, but, then, these systems can bring succor in the form of mental peace and stability in the face of difficult time. This is something which is worth exploring.

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