Renewing and Re-igniting Hope in our Times and the Role of Religions, Religious Leaders and Believers: a Jain Viewpoint

Marie-Hélène Gorisse
Dharmanath Assistant Professor in Jain Studies
(University of Birmingham)

There is a crisis and decline of hope among people today.

Religions provides powerful assistance to rekindle this hope. Religions offer narratives that situate human life within broader conceptions of what exists. They provide meaningful frameworks for understanding fundamental questions about existence, suffering, and mortality.
Jainism is a Shramanic religion. As we have seen in the previous presentation by Vibhuti Mehta, this means that Jains believe that each of us undergo an endless series of rebirths and that our true self is not our current transitory embodiment, but something more fundamental, to which each of us is yet to be fully awakened. As such, there is a sense of dissatisfaction with the world as we experience it, but this dissatisfaction reveals a deeper optimism. There *is* a way out of this unsustainable and painful way of being, and it is our goal to achieve liberation from it. Jain Sacred Scriptures contain the teaching of the liberated being Mahāvīra, who preaches the path towards such liberation. Here, religion gives the believers a first general sense of hope, because there is an accessible path to overcome suffering, and because we have a sense of purpose as we realise that we are all permanent divine-like entities part of a meaningful framework.

From the Jain perspective, therefore, the rooted sense of dissatisfaction that many of us experience today is natural and can be overcome. But how? How can Jain teachings concretely help us? Here, correct religious practice is not only about understanding dogmas. It is also not the mere performance of appropriate rituals. All these can only help in a limited way, while correct religious practice consists more essentially in actively shaping one's inner world. Here, it is worth noticing that, unlike religions in which divine grace provides hope, the Jain emphasis is on individual spiritual effort. This means that, even though the liberated beings are important models to be worshiped, and even though their teaching are crucial guides for proper behaviour, hope is primarily situated in one's own capacity for moral and spiritual development. A metaphor that will help understand how this personal development comes to fruition is that of a musician. Imagine someone who wants to become a piano player. They need knowledge of the correct way to put their fingers on the keyboard to produce the intended sounds. They also need to have a sense of these intended sounds and of the specific results they want to produce with them. Finally, they need continuous practice to embody this knowledge, so that this becomes second nature and not a broken-winded, over-thought, process. These three aspects, namely, knowledge of the specifics, intuition of the goals, and constant practice, adapt constantly according to one’s progress. It is in the same dynamic that

the Jain path to liberation consists of right faith, right knowledge, and right practice.[1] In this picture, hope is the certainty within us, despite adversary situations and despite evidence to the contrary, that it is in our control to act as the pure soul that we are, that a melody will emerge.

In his *Theology of Hope* (1964), Jürgen Moltmann[2] reconceptualised eschatological hope, i.e., the hope that we can reach liberation, as not merely future-oriented but as transformative in the present. Since their origin, South Asian religions such as Jainism are uniquely well-built for such an understanding of hope. These religions teach me that it is *in the present* that I must embrace the long and constant transformation of becoming who I really am and of acting accordingly. As such, hope in Jainism is not merely an emotional state to be desired but a natural outgrowth of right knowledge, right faith and right practice. It is not based on external intervention but on self-transformation through disciplined exercise *as per* the doctrine of karma. Ultimately, as Mehool Sanghrajka pointed in his inaugural address, it is the elimination of a specific type of negative karma that transforms one's perspective from despair to hope.

At an everyday life level, Jain religious practices provide steady guidelines to help me deconstruct a harmful focus on myself as an embodied character who craves more possessions, more power, and who dreads their loss. Decline of hope regularly comes from a wrong sense of what my goal is. This is the role of religion to help us recalibrate this goal. Practising Jainism, learning from Jain spiritual leaders, discussing with lay Jains, make each of us realise that accumulating health and power is not what ultimately counts. This realisation is both invaluable and challenging, as one must constantly go against the tide of an accumulative society. This is notably why non-possession (*aparigraha*) is such a central vow in Jainism, and this is why I speak of a constant exercise. So Jainism is a religion that not only promotes core qualities but also provides the means to cultivate them. Through rules of conduct, through meditative exercises, or through devotional praises, Jain religious practices help each of us to keep a mind set on the spiritual progress of overcoming this wrong sense of ego. At the heart of a materially unstable society, this refocus on what is really meaningful preserves us from the fear of losing what is not. It also shows that a lot of what constitutes social reality consists in projections of people's fears stemming from fundamental misidentifications. And fundamentally, it teaches us that we need not worry, that what really matters is stable.

Here, Jain Scriptures notably promote meditative practices that are helpful to quieten destructive passions (*kaṣāya*) like anger, pride, deceit and greed.[3] Meditative practices help extirpate mental habits, develop mindfulness, and foster virtues as forbearance (*niṣprakampa*), compassion (*karuṇa*) and equanimity (*samatā*). Like in other shramanic religions, different types of meditative practices are especially beneficial depending on one's personal stage of spiritual growth. One of the earliest developments on meditative practices

[1] *Tattvārthasūtra*, *That Which Is*, v. 1.1. The path to liberation is right faith, right knowledge and right conduct (*samyag-darśana-jñāna-cāritrāṇi mokṣa-mārgaḥ*). Translated by Nathmal Tatia in *That Which Is*. New York: Harper Collins. 1994.

[2] Moltmann, Jürgen. *Theology of Hope*, 1964.

[3] Respectively *krodha*, *māna*, *māyā*, and *lobha*.

is to be found in the canonical *Samavāyaṃga Sutta*[4] that enumerates twenty-five reflections (*bhāvanās*) designed to foster the five great vows (*mahāvrata*) of non-violence, truth, non-stealing, celibacy, and non-possessiveness.[5] This helps the monk and the nun gain self-discipline and strengthen their right conduct. In the final session, Jinesh Sheth will focus on four *bhāvanā*s more specifically designed to help dealing *with others*. There are also twelve contemplations (*anuprekṣā*) that help cultivate a pessimistic attitude towards the aspects of the world from which we need to get detached.

In this framework, the practice of equanimity (*samāyika*) has a special status.[6] It is the first daily duty of the monastics, and it can be seen as a temporary actualisation of the entire ascetic life. Equanimity is the practice of standing motionless for 48 minutes while reflecting on the temporary nature of all experiences, both pleasant and unpleasant. There, a sense of goodwill to all creatures is developed as the passions and negative mental traits are suppressed. Equanimity is that state in which the ascetic is the same towards himself and another, to his mother and to all other women, to pleasant and unpleasant things, to honour and disrespect. The regular practice of equanimity notably transforms one's relationship with suffering inasmuch as it quiets down the destructive passions. In contemporary societies, this is especially efficient to overcome one's stress and to foster appeased perspectives in which one's hope is not challenged anymore. Note that within Jain metaphysics, hope (*āśā*) is typically understood as a form of attachment that can bind the soul to worldly existence, since it represents the desire for future acquisitions or outcomes. As such, it is among the psychological states that should be moderated or transcended for spiritual advancement. In this presentation, I have not focus on this type of hope, but on a more general positive aspiration which is at the core of practical Jainism.

The practice of repentance (*pratikramaṇa*) also is essential in the management of hope, as it reminds us that the journey is not that of continued perfection, but that of continued attempts, each at our respective levels. Indeed, we all fail at some points to be the best versions of ourselves, and it is important to have the conceptual tools to include these moments, their recognition and acceptance, in order to be able to move forwards within one's path without losing hope. In Jainism, *pratikramaṇa* is not only repentance, but also self-introspection. It is a high point of the festival of Paryuṣaṇ for the Śvetāmbara, respectively Daśalakṣaṇ for the Digambara, during which it is practised as a group activity that includes the recitation of liturgic texts. Repentance is also one of the six daily duties of the monastic and is regularly considered as the essence of Jainism.

Next to grounding hope in right faith, knowledge and conduct by means of different practices, some of which we have just seen, Jain holy teachers also developed the doctrine of non-one-sidedness (*anekāntavāda*). This doctrine offers a powerful intellectual resource for re-igniting hope, as it teaches that reality is complex and can be approached from numerous perspectives. Suffering intensifies when one becomes fixated on a singular absolutist view. Conversely, by recognising that there is a multiplicity of viable perspectives, one recognises

[4] *Samavāyaṃga Sutta*, Scripture on Combinations, v. 25.1 Edited by Muni Nathmal with an introduction by Acarya Tulsi in *Anga Suttāni*. Ladnun: Jain Viswa Bharati. 1974.
[5] Respectively *ahiṃsā*, *satya*, *asteya*, *brahmacarya*, and *aparigraha*.
[6] For more on the history of meditation in Jainism, see Samani Pratibha Pragya's PhD dissertation. *Prekṣā Meditation. History and Methods*, SOAS, 2015.

that current difficulties represent only one perspective among many, thereby creating intellectual space for hope to flourish.

An important theme running through these discussions is that at the core of Jain teaching lies an urge to overcome passivity. Decline of hope today is very much linked with being a passive witness to situations on which I have little to no grasp. Religions invite us, and help us, to reach summits. But these summits are not brought to us. Each of us must concretely engage in the journey. The bare event of becoming a genuine actor in our life is an essential trigger to recover hope.

Finally, a major source of loss of hope is the feeling that we are alone. Here, religion contributes as it is not only an individual phenomenon. Through religion, I overcome isolation, as my sense of purpose is universal, I share it with other believers. In Jainism, each of us is a permanent divine-like soul. This concerns not only people from all faiths and cultures, but also animals, up to the tiniest bacteria, as well as plants, extending the sense of kinship to all living beings, as we will further appreciate in the last lecture by Jinesh Sheth.

Before we conclude, these different trends are implemented in Jainism thanks to a well-structured community. Jain institutions function also as social networks offering mutual aid, support systems, and communal resources. One aspect of this on which I want to focus is the role of the monastic community. Religious leaders serve as mediators between the divine and human realms. In Jainism, there are no priests, but there is an inextricable link between the lay community and the monastic one. Monks and nuns, who have chosen a life of renunciation, are seen more advanced on the way to liberation than householders. They are respected for this and for the fact that they are learned, in such a way that they are well posited to give spiritual and worldly advice. In return, the lay community provides them with food and services, as monks and nuns are not allowed to cook, nor to have any possession. Next to accompany the believers during significant life transitions, members of the monastic community give pastoral care through counselling, visitation of the sick, or support during life crises. In the next presentation, Samani Amal Pragya will share with us concrete examples in which this monastic presence helped re-igniting hope for believers.

To conclude, there is a loss of hope today. Now, throughout history, religions have legitimised or challenged political authorities and economic arrangements. They have motivated social movements advocating for both conservation and transformation of existing orders. The crisis and decline of hope among people today seem to suggest that this role is still a significant one religions have to play, and I am confident that today's dialogues contribute to enhance our mutual awareness of the ways in which our different faiths are already raising to the challenge.