

Jainism, Us, Elephants and UUs: Anekāntavāda

By Blake Gardiner

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A while back I was on the internet reading about something, I've forgotten what, when I came upon a reference to the "Jainis principle of anekāntavāda." I don't know why that word caught my attention, perhaps - because it was so long, and I had absolutely no clue what it meant. I think at first I thought Jainis referred to the Roman God Janus, but realized that it was a different spelling. So, as I often do when something on the web gets my attention and I am not familiar with it... I clicked on the word, copied it and pasted it into a Google search.... and it returned about 18,000 hits!

Apparently the word was not as obscure as I expected. One of the first links shown was to the Wikipedia site - Which for those who may not know - is a sort of a world-wide, on-line encyclopedia of knowledge. If you have never visited Wikipedia, It sort of like a traditional encyclopedia, but throughout each article are links which take you to more information about each subject in the text, and articles related to other subjects in the article ... you can start on one subject, and end up reading about almost anything – a sort of a random stream of consciousness and ideas - it can be an adventure of ideas- traveling through volumes of random knowledge.

What followed was a very basic education about Jainism and that religion's doctrine of anekāntavāda. The concept that was actually familiar to me, although the word and its Jain origin were quite unfamiliar. It struck me that although that doctrine is about 3,000 years old; it has a close correlation to some basic ideas in Unitarian Universalist thinking.

One of the points of the UU philosophy is that, "all religions, in every age and culture, possess not only intrinsic merit but also potential value for those who have learned the art of listening (or at least reading), and the seeking of wisdom from the world's religions can contribute to our ethical and spiritual growth."

Now, before I tell you about the doctrine of anekāntavāda, I would like to give a very brief summery of the ancient Indian religion of Jainism, or the Jain Dharma, Dharma is understood as being synonymous with the English word Religion (and not a just a title character from a 90's TV sitcom.)

Let me tell you; I still know very little about Jainism. What little I have learned - is that it is one of the most ancient of the world's active religions coming from India a few centuries after the Vedic Period, and is, like Unitarian-Universalism, one of the few non-absolutist religions of the world.

For this short presentation I have eliminated most of the Hindi words, and substituted their conceptual meanings.... Mostly because I don't think I could properly pronounce most of them.

Jainism dates to at least 800 to 900 BCE, or at least 3,000 years, and pretty much took on most of its present form around the third or fourth century BCE. Reincarnation is a central Jain belief, along with a number of other tenets that I am not going to try to cover today. According to Jain beliefs; the universe was never created, nor will it ever cease to exist. They believe time and life are cyclical with progressive and regressive spiritual phases.

Jains also believe that every human is responsible for his or her actions, and that all beings have an eternal soul. They also believe that the goal of all people should be to work at achieving complete enlightenment. They believe that are special souls that have achieved enlightenment, and have therefore escaped the infinite cycle of reincarnation, and have attained transcendence or a state of higher consciousness - in which all matter, energy, time, space, causation, karma and all reality can be fully understood. These beings then become role-models or teachers for those seeking spiritual guidance.

Jains, like Buddhists, compare the process of becoming a pure spirit or soul to that of crossing a swift river. Since the Enlightened Ones have found the way to cross the river they can guide others. However, they cannot directly help others in

making that crossing, only guide them. Everyone must make their own crossing and obtain release through their own endeavors.

Jains believe all souls are equal because they all possess the potential of being liberated from the eternal cycle of death and rebirth, through reincarnation. As part of this journey, it is necessary to live, think and act respectfully and honor the spiritual nature of all living beings— and the Jain Dharma therefore requires a vegetarian lifestyle.

Jains do not believe in an omnipotent supreme-being or creator, but rather in an eternal universe governed by natural laws that make up of the universal eternal essence of the pure eternal souls of each being. Jain thought mostly concentrates on the potential of a human soul to emancipate itself into divinity after ridding itself of all weaknesses of a human being; such as pride, jealousy, fear, love, infatuation and so forth. This thinking has influenced several other religions, including Buddhism and Hinduism and Sikhism.

Now I can't tell you that I personally accept the concept of reincarnation, and the continuous cycle of rebirth. But, I can't dismiss it as a viable possibility, at least as valid as many of the possibilities regarding the immortality of the soul or spirit.

Now that I have given a quick background on the Jain religion, I would like relate one of the basic doctrines of the Jains, their doctrine of *anekāntavāda*, the word that caught my attention and started this journey of discovery.

Anekāntavāda is a fundamental Jain doctrine that states: For humans - truth and reality are always perceived differently from diverse points of view, and no single point of view is the complete truth. The idea sounds pretty familiar, and basic, doesn't it.

The concept has been illustrated for at least 12 centuries by Jains using the ancient story of the "Seven Blind Men and the Elephant," and of course, more recently by the story of the "Seven Blind Mice."[*See endnote]

The Jains actually do use the “Seven Blind Men and the Elephant” story as a practical demonstration of their doctrine of anekāntavāda.

The Jainis concept of anekāntavāda stands in contrast to most religions, most of which proclaim they have the absolute truth. In contrast the Jains believe that because everything is infinite, the qualities and modes of existence cannot be completely grasped in all their aspects and manifestations by our finite, unenlightened human perception. The Jains believe that any and all points of view can contain some part of the truth, but not the entire truth. The doctrine of anekāntavāda refers to the acceptance of this universal principle of pluralism and multiplicity of viewpoints. More simply stated it is the concept that, for humans, truth and reality are perceived differently depending on who you are, and that no single point of view reveals the complete truth.

The Jains use the parable of the Blind Men and the Elephant, to illustrate their belief that immature souls or spirits will deny various aspects of truth - deluded by the aspects they do not see or fully understand. The Jainis doctrine of anekāntavāda.

The doctrine of anekāntavāda results in the Jainis philosophy of non-absolutist and non-exclusivity. It requires its adherents to make every effort to try seeing all conflicting ideas, including religious ones, as having value and at least some validity. Jainism encourages its adherents to consider the views and beliefs of all. Anekāntavāda applies not only to religion, but to all interactions.

Jains are admonished to always remind themselves that any religion or philosophy, including their own that clings too dogmatically to its own tenets is committing an error – because of their limited points of view, and incomplete perception.

This concept struck me a great concept for a short sermon. Such a simple, and to me, logical idea, but one I think it is too often missed, or forgotten.

Perhaps Anekāntavāda and the idea it represents, as demonstrated by the tale of the Blind Men – and Blind Mice and the Elephant, from the Jain Dharma is worth a little consideration.

We will have a few moments of silent reflection, and I look forward to your comments, and I hope no difficult questions that show how limited my knowledge of the subject actually is.

*Endnote: Prior to this presentation the children present and the Fellowship were read the story of *The Seven Blind Mice* by Ed Young (Puffin Books, 1992, ISBN 0-698-11895-2)