

## ARTICLES

# Jain *Dhyāna*: A Beginner Approach

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In the spring semester 2024, the author traveled to India via a grant from the Kundakunda Study Jainism Abroad Scholarship to explore Jainism's teachings on *dhyāna*, or meditation. The current paper synthesizes the author's conversations about *dhyāna* with Jittubhai Panditji of the Digambara tradition and Dr. Acharya Shri Vijay Nandighosh Suri of the Śvetāmbara. These interviews, conducted in person during the trip, reveal a broad range of commonalities in approaches to teaching meditation to beginners but also differences regarding views on the relation between the mind and the self.

Meditation is an integral part of achieving spiritual progress in Jainism. Meditation has become a hypernym encompassing many types of religious and non-religious practices. Even within religious traditions, there exist various approaches to a similar goal. A revered Jain scholar from the 5th century, Ācārya Haribhadrasūri, describes Jain *dhyāna* (meditation) "as the practice where the practitioner's mind engages only in auspicious activities and noble thoughts. The practitioner stays focused like a lamp with steadfast flame and is now capable of experiencing the subtle with insightful thinking."<sup>1</sup> Additionally, the *Āvaśyaka-niryukti* from the Jain canonical literature, states that "forty eight minutes one point positioned consciousness is meditation (*dhyāna*)."<sup>2</sup> While these definitions provide insight on what occurs during *dhyāna*, there are multiple approaches to how one reaches the focused state and attains the desired experience. The major difference in Jain *dhyāna* practices among communities appears to be inclusion or exclusion of the *manas* (the sensory or perceiving mind) in the definition of the self during beginner practice.

While in the Digambara Jain tradition, as taught by Jittubhai Panditji, the mind is eliminated from the definition of self when performing *dhyāna*, in the Śvetāmbara Jain tradition, as taught by Dr. Acharya Shri Vijay Nandighosh Suri, the mind is initially understood to be part of the self when performing *dhyāna* but is eventually eliminated from the self over

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<sup>1</sup> Haribhadrasūri, *The Yogabindu of Ācārya Haribhadrasūri*, trans. K. K. Dixit (Lalbhai Dalpatbhai Bharatiya Sanskriti Vidyamandira, 1968), verse 362.

<sup>2</sup> *Āvaśyaka Niryukti*, in *Āvaśyakaniryukti with Haribhadra's Commentary*, edited by Āryaraksitavijaya (Ahmedabad, 2013), 1463.

time. There does, however, appear to be a consistent pattern in how Jain meditation is taught at the primary level with commonalities in the basic principles that are prioritized and the order in which they are introduced. Additionally, there is a common thread in the style of teaching, which relies heavily on anecdotes and stories to illustrate concepts.

The current paper synthesizes my conversations about *dhyāna* with Panditji and Acharyaji. I approached both individuals with a similar method, as an outsider to the Jain tradition who was interested in learning more about *dhyāna*. Much of the information presented was consistent between the two individuals and should be understood as deriving from both. In the case that a particular concept was specifically presented by one individual, specification is provided. Both Panditji and Acharyaji frequently used illustrative metaphors and similes to explain Jain concepts. These concrete examples are designed to facilitate understanding of more abstract philosophical ideas. As such, these metaphors and similes constitute a key pedagogical tool in communicating *dhyana* to beginners.

## The Interviewees

In spring semester 2024, I traveled to India via a grant from the Kundakunda Study Jainism Abroad Scholarship to explore *dhyana*. As part of my study, I interviewed Jittubhai Panditji and Dr. Acharya Shri Vijay Nandighosh Suriji and I asked them to teach me about *dhyāna* as they would a beginner. All meetings were in person and both Panditji and Acharyaji took a structured approach in educating me about *dhyāna* while also allowing for traditional question-and-answer style interviews. I met with Panditji for approximately ten sessions which lasted three to five hours and with Acharyaji for approximately five sessions spanning two to three hours.

Jittubhai Panditji is from the Digambara Jain tradition and resides in Pandharpur, India of which he is a native. Panditji participates in conducting various *dhyāna* retreats and education sessions in various parts of India and the United States. Dr. Acharya Shri Vijay Nandighosh Suriji is a known scholar of Jainism and author of multiple publications including *Jain Dharma Vigyana ki Kasoti par ya Vigyana Jain Dharma ki Kasoti par*.<sup>3</sup> He was promoted to the rank of ācārya of the Tapā Gaccha sublineage (samudāya) of Ācārya Nemisūri in 2008.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Nandighosh Suriji, *Jain Dharma Vigyana ki Kasoti par ya Vigyana Jain Dharma ki Kasoti par* (Bharatiya Prachin Sahitya Vaigyanik Rahasya Shodh Sanstha, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Ellen Gough, *Making a Mantra: Tantric Ritual and Renunciation on the Jain Path to Liberation* (University of Chicago Press, 2021), 148.

## Meditation and Happiness

The initial concept that is explained to an outsider to the religion is the purpose of Jainism, to attain constant and *satya* (true) *sukha* (happiness). Within *sukha*, Jains have three categories that are *asatya* (untrue), related to the senses, the mind, and external factors. Sensory happiness was most extensively discussed and relates to the happiness that is experienced through the senses. The example used by Jittubhai Panditji was eating a sweet treat, which is enjoyable for most people; however, this *sukha* is not everlasting. This model was further used to illuminate that happiness comes from the *jīva* (soul). The tongue individually is thought to be incapable of feeling happiness, because if a sweet is put on the tongue of a corpse, there will not be happiness. Likewise, when eating the treat, it is not experiencing happiness. The idea that only the *jīva* is disposed to feeling *sukha* is regularly reiterated and is central to understanding *dhyāna*. Four integral components were described to make up *dhyāna*: *dheya* (what we are focusing on), *dhyāta* (person performing *dhyāna*), *dhyāna* (the actual method), and the fruit of meditation, which is a happiness not reliant on the senses.

Another central concept emphasized early on is the *ratnatraya* or “three jewels” of Jainism, correct view, correct knowledge, and correct conduct. Correct view consists of faith and acceptance of the *jīva*, correct knowledge encompasses undoubting knowledge of the Jain fundamentals, and correct conduct is behavior consistent with the five vows of Jainism. The five vows include non-violence, truth, non-stealing, chastity, and non-possessiveness. For *śrāvakas* (householders), the vows are followed partially and known as *aṇuvratas* (minor vows). For ascetics, the vows are known as *mahāvratas* (major vows) and are observed more strictly and often entail complete abstinence. The three jewels must exist simultaneously to fully experience the benefit of *dhyāna*. One who undertakes the major vows will have the potential to gain the complete benefit of *dhyāna*, but those who take on the minor vows can still experience benefits.

## The Philosophical Context

While each of the components described are interrelated in multiple ways, the first element of *dhyāna* discussed is the *dheya*. To gain a full understanding of the *dheya*, the Jain beliefs around existence are elucidated. Jains believe that the universe does not have a start and end and is not dependent on a creator. The belief that any *jīva* is dependent on another *jīva* is thought to obstruct *sukha*. Origination, destruction, and permanence explain the state of existence in Jainism. The story used by Panditji to elucidate these concepts was that of a man’s gold pot being melted into a gold crown for his son. As a result, his son is happy while his daughter is upset; the man, however, is unphased. The man is not impacted because he understands that the pot underwent destruction, but the gold was permanent. Thus, from his point of view, nothing had changed. These three concepts additionally clarify

*anekāntavāda*, which describes the relativity of views. One situation led to the rise of varying reactions from different people. Both the constant and changing exist simultaneously, but most individuals focus on the changing perspective. Accepting the constant view allows a degree of freedom from both *duḥkha* (sadness) and *sukha*, as seen by the reaction of the father.

Related to the relativity of viewpoints, permanence and impermanence allow for a deeper understanding of change. Permanence and impermanence are present in every object. Although all things change, fruit was used as a template to understand these ideas by Panditji. When fruit is unripe, it possesses color, taste, smell, and texture. As the fruit ripens, it still has color, taste, smell, and texture, albeit the specific descriptions are changing. All things have color, taste, smell, and texture, even if these are imperceptible. When applied to humans, the *jīva* is permanent while the body is impermanent. This idea goes back to the previously introduced concept of the experiences of the *jīva* being separate from the senses and emphasizes the separation between the *jīva* and the body.

Providing a broader perspective are the notions of *dravya* (substance), *guṇa* (characteristic), *paryāya* (change or mode). Origination and destruction occur within the category of *paryāya* and make up the changing perspective. Applied to living organisms, the number of senses that a being is interpreted via *paryāya*. However, from the eternal view, the *guṇas* of the soul include lack of beginning, lack of end, and the lack of senses, as for all the *dravyas*. This understanding forms the base for *ahiṃsā* (non-violence) since each living being is the same as a human, as the same basic characteristics are shared among beings. Fundamentally, it/he/she is not different from a human, so humans will not commit violence against it. Humanness, however, provides the ability to understand *dharma* (religion). If *dharma* is not recognized, the differences which exist due to *paryāya* from the changing point of view are futile. While these elements contribute to understanding the *dheya*, a person in a state when *guṇas* and *paryāyas* are the same is known as *siddha*, which is the goal of Jainism, and *dhyāna* is a means of attaining this state.

The composition and existence of objects does not explain how the universe functions, Jainism elucidates this through the six substances or *dravyas*: soul, matter, motion, rest, space, and time. Panditji provided examples of each of these, which will be listed along with explanations. The soul substance or *jīva* is that which possesses consciousness and knowledge. There are infinite *jīvas*. Matter is that which has a touch, taste, smell, and color. There are also infinite material particles. Motion is the medium by which motion occurs. An example of this is a fish swimming in water; the fish swims because it wants to swim, the water is simply a medium, and the fish cannot swim without water. Rest is the medium by which lack of motion, or rest, occurs. An example of this is a weary traveler stopping for shade under a tree; the

traveler is stopping because he wants to, and it is the medium of rest that allows him to stop. Space is empty space, but each object still takes up space by itself. There is one medium of motion, one medium of rest, and one space. Time or passage of time allows change, and there are countless moments. Time is auxiliary in growing from young to old, but it is not the cause.

Each of the substances can be categorized in different ways, such as *jīva* and *ajīva*, meaning sentience (i.e., soul) and insentience (non-soul). Sentience refers to anything that has knowledge and consciousness while the insentient category lacks these characteristics. Thus, insentience includes matter, motion, rest, space, and time. The *jīva*, from the eternal point of view, has knowledge and happiness. From the changing point of view, the *jīva* has changing amounts of knowledge and happiness due to impurities. *Ajīva* has touch, taste, smell, and color from the eternal point of view, but the type of touch, taste, smell, and color differ from the changing point of view. Another categorization is that which has a form, i.e., can be touched, tasted, smelled, and has a color, and that which does not have form. Thus, matter is in the former category, and soul, motion, rest, space, and time are in the latter.

Establishing how the universe functions and its existence allows for insight into the *dheya* by resolving the *jīva*, which is the *dheya* of *dhyāna*, from other subjects. While many *dheyas* have form, the *jīva* is formless. It is akin to empty space; it takes the shape of the body it is put into, but unlike the *dravya* of space, it has knowledge. The characteristic of knowledge is to know and the characteristic of other *dravyas* is to be known. Knowledge allows for the understanding of surroundings and self. If this was not the case, there would be dependence, which is not a characteristic of the *jīva*. Instead, the *jīva* possesses independence and is free from the senses and external dependency. For humans to gain independence, they must understand that they have a *jīva* that retains this *guṇa*.

## **Differing Understandings of the Relationship between the Meditator and the Object of Meditation**

Although the *dheya* and *dhyāta* can be considered separate, they can also be considered the same *dravya* when the meditator (*dhyāta*) is the *jīva* and the object of meditation (*dheya*) is also the *jīva*. This is the point where differences begin to arise in *dhyāna* practice. If the *dhyāta* and the *dheya* are the same, it could be said that liberation has already been achieved. Thus, some proponents advocate for considering the *dhyāta* to be the *jīva* attached to the mind and the *dheya* as solely the *jīva*. The aforementioned approach was supported by Acharyaji, while Panditji supported that the *jīva* should not be considered attached to the mind during *dhyāna*. In analyzing these differences, it must also be considered that the *jīva* and the mind are in different *dravyas* and thus constitute different categories. Practicing as if the *dhyāta* and the *dheya* are the same could allow a stronger understanding of liberation. However, even proponents of combining the two categories will

agree that there is a strong bond between the *jīva* and the body for people. Human experience supports this because, for example, if one falls and scrapes their arm, they feel pain. Regardless of this acknowledgement, with respect to the practice of *dhyāna*, there are differing views on how one should approach the *dhyāta* regarding whether the *dhyāta* should be viewed as linked to the mind, but the goal of *dhyāna* is the same in all cases.

To be clear, mind and soul are fundamentally different in the Jain system. The mind does not possess consciousness in and of itself, nor is it capable of this attribute. Solely the soul can possess consciousness. Further, the mind is not considered to be permanent as it is known for its thoughts, which are fleeting and impermanent. This contrasts with the soul, which is permanent. According to Jain belief, souls are not produced or destroyed; they exist with no end or start. The thoughts that arise from the mind are additionally dependent on the senses. The soul, on the other hand, is independent. The attributes of consciousness, permanence, and independence, which are exclusive to the soul, are commonly mistaken as also being characteristics of the mind. This is especially true in the scientific approach, which attributes consciousness to the mind. The conflation between soul and mind is further heightened for inexperienced practitioners because the soul does not have a physical form, thus they may latch on to the mind as a means of understanding the soul.

Establishing a separate dominion for the mind and the soul for a *dhyāna* beginner can allow for a clearer understanding of the soul or *jīva*. The three major features of the *jīva* also contribute to understanding the *dheya*, *dhyāta*, and the fruits or outcomes of meditation, since these concepts are interlinked. Thus, it is necessary to recognize the difference between the *jīva* and the mind for *dhyāna*. However, in practice, separation of the mind and *jīva* can be difficult, particularly for beginners originating in a non-Jain context that does not differentiate between the two. Thus, from the perspective of a practitioner who is novel to this division, it may be beneficial to conceptualize the mind and *jīva* as linked and gradually begin to separate them as one gains a better understanding of the *jīva*. While this is an option, it is fundamentally contrasting with the Jain system, and one would only be practicing pure *dhyāna* when they can separate the mind and *jīva* in practice.

Although this approach of connection may work for some, considering the mind and *jīva* as separate from the beginning may be more beneficial for others in the longer term. Avoiding the conflation between the two would allow for practicing in a manner that is clear on all aspects of the *jīva* and therefore clear about *dhyāna*. Rather than attempt to combine the two, separation between the *jīva* and the mind from the beginning could allow for a purer *dhyāna*. Though the separation may require additional practice and be slightly more demanding, it would diminish the risk of conflating the two such that they can no longer be separated. Furthermore, this would be a more

accurate way of performing *dhyāna* as the purpose of *dhyāna* is centered around understanding the *jīva* and essentially separating the *jīva* from the impurities that it is attached to.

To achieve the fruits of *dhyāna*, practitioners must remove all karmic influences through practice, so that only the *jīva* remains. Attaching the mind to the *jīva* does not allow for the separation of the *jīva* and may in fact be counterproductive as it attaches an additional auxiliary to the *jīva*. The attachment of the mind and *jīva* may be valuable for some beginners but may lead to further complications and confusion as one reaches more advanced stages of practice.

## The Method of Meditation

Succeeding the establishment of the *dheya*, the method of *dhyāna* is expounded beginning with the seven *tattvas* (principles). The *dravyas* allow individuals to understand what they are not, and the *tattvas* allow for understanding of what they are. The seven *tattvas* include: sentience (*jīva* or soul), insentience (*ajīva* or non-soul), influx (of karma), bondage (of karma to the soul), stoppage of karma, separation of karma, liberation. *Jīva* here is understood in the same manner as previously described. *Ajīva*, however, represents the karmic body, which is the accumulation of *karma* to a *jīva*. Next is the *karmic* influx caused by deeds, which can be broken up into good and bad, or pure. Good and bad both lead to bondage, while purity leads to liberation. Pure *karma* occurs with passionless activities, which do not pollute the *jīva* and do not contribute to the accumulation of *karma*. Bondage is the attachment of *karma* to the karmic body. Stoppage is the stopping of karmic influx and separation is the removal of remnant *karma*. Ultimately, when all *karma* is removed, the karmic body ceases to exist and liberation is reached. These *tattvas* are conceptualized through the analogy of a mind in a boat that develops a hole through which dirty water enters the boat. The mind eventually plugs the hole and removes the remaining water. The boatman represents the *jīva*, and the dirty water entering the boat represents *ajīva*. The entering of the water is influx, and its accumulation is bondage. The plugging of the hole represents stoppage, and the removal of the water is analogous to separation. The final state when there is no more water in the boat is akin to liberation.

These six principles were also demonstrated through the example of milk. To run a milk factory, it is necessary to understand what pure milk is (representing soul) versus what is not pure (representing non-soul). Then the cause of the impurity (representing influx) must be found, and how the milk and impurity combine (representing bondage). Subsequently, it must be learned how to stop impurity from forming (representing stoppage), and then how remaining impurity can be removed (representing separation), so that the result is pure milk (representing liberation). The process of *dhyāna* conducts stoppage and separation leading to liberation. When *dhyāna* is

performed, there is no addition to the karmic body, and *karma* is shed. The use of multiple examples to explain the *tattvas* reflects their centrality in Jainism and additionally clarifies the importance of *dhyāna*.

Since the goal of Jainism is to reach liberation, which occurs after shedding the karmic body, the vows that one takes can impact the progress that one makes. The minor vows taken by housemakers do not allow for one to completely prevent addition to the karmic body. Since laypeople are still participating in daily affairs, they accumulate *karma*. However, they can strive to accumulate good karmic influence rather than bad. This understanding of liberation is related to the Jain cosmology, which divides the universe into different parts. The top of the universe is where the *siddhas* reside. Below that is a place of happiness and peace that is home to celestial beings. Next is the realm where humans reside, which is understood as the Earth and can encompass the planets. At the bottom of the universe is a hellish realm where the hell beings reside. Through the accumulation of good *karma*, laypeople can enter the realm of celestial beings, which is a place of happiness and peace in Jain cosmology. A person who accumulates bad *karma* will have to enter the hellish realm. While the celestial realm is a desirable goal for some laypeople, residence there is not permanent, unlike the apex where *siddhas* reside permanently. Thus, the goal for Jain monks is better described as reaching the abode of the *siddhas* by attaining liberation.

The major vows taken by monastics, which call for abstinence in many regards, can aid the process of working towards this goal. By choosing not to engage in activities that lead to the accumulation of good and bad *karma*, monks do not participate in worldly matters. Their actions are passionless; thus, they contribute only to pure *karma*. To attain liberation, one would need to take the major vows to prevent the accumulation of additional *karma*. While *dhyāna* allows for stoppage and separation, to attain the goal, one must also prevent influx and bondage. The combination and implementation of all seven *tattvas* is required to gain the true fruit of *dhyāna*.

Although descriptions of the fruit, which is liberation, are scattered throughout the discussion, it is understood as achieving true and constant happiness. This is the state when the karmic body is shed and only the *jīva* exists. When an individual reaches this state, they reside at the top of the universe with other *siddhas*. There can, however, be three major obstacles in achieving the final stage. Namely, lack of determining the correct knowledge, doubt within knowledge, and lack of establishing the correct *dheya* and correct *dhyāna*. These hurdles can be overcome with the previously discussed concepts and practice. One may also encounter other obstructions; however, by returning to the *jīva* and the understanding that every individual can attain *moksha*, one can pass these barriers and effectively practice *dhyāna*.

## Conclusions

*Dhyāna* is an integral part of Jainism as it is a method of performing stoppage and separation, thus contributing to achieving liberation. Achieving liberation, however, requires more than *dhyāna* practice alone. One must implement the *ratnatarya* and focus on all seven *tattvas* to reach the final goal of Jainism. For beginners in Jain *dhyāna* practice, there are key concepts that must be understood before one can gain the complete benefits of performing *dhyāna*. These components are intertwined and allow for clarification on the *dheya*, *dhyāta*, *dhyāna*, and fruit of *dhyāna* in a somewhat simultaneous fashion. Understanding of the *jīva* is central to not only *dhyāna* practice, but also other key tenets of Jainism, such as non-violence. Understanding these key tenets and following the five vows can further one's progress towards liberation. Although there are slightly different approaches to *dhyāna*, they all seek liberation and implement the same fundamental principles of Jainism. Therefore, these variations should not deter practitioners and should not be considered philosophical differences as they do not cause significant apparent variations in practice.

Prior to conducting the interviews with Panditji and Acharyaji, I had a weak understanding of Jain *dhyāna*, largely from information that I had picked up in my coursework. Previously, I had not been enrolled in any courses that were dedicated to exploring Jainism. Despite my lack of background in Jain studies, the use of metaphors and similes by both Acharyaji and Panditji allowed me to quickly learn about *dhyāna* fundamentals by bridging familiar ideas with novel ones. Both interviewees often used examples that were purposefully simple to be understandable to learners of various contexts. The use of such pedagogical strategies thus constitutes an important method for making *dhyāna* accessible even to beginners in Jain traditions.



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