

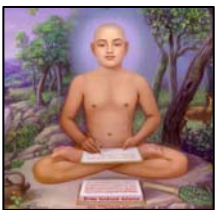
# Knowledge: More Than Just A Trivial Pursuit

By Ashik Shah

This issue of the newsletter is a celebration of knowledge. The very term knowledge (or “*gnan*”) has a variety of meanings. Is this word *gnan* about information, or is it about wisdom? What is the difference between them? I do not really wish to enter into a semantic argument about the meaning of words, but really want to capture the *bhava*, the inner feeling. After all, Young Jains’ approach to dharma is about learning it, living it and sharing it.

When discussing any aspect of the dharma, it is essential that we keep in mind its ultimate purpose, and this means its efficacy in the path to *moksha*. We often hear the idea that striving for knowledge is a good thing. Despite the everyday common expression that “ignorance is bliss”, spiritual traditions suggest that *gnan* will lead to *moksha*; infinite, eternal, abundant bliss.

What do we commonly consider religious knowledge to be? It might be: verbatim recital and perfect pronunciation of the sutras; understanding of the proper performance of any related ritual; it might be an ability to clearly explain the key concepts of the dharma with key references from the scriptures; or the ability to reel off all the various categories of life forms or of karmas. We certainly respect as knowledgeable or learned those who are endowed with the aforementioned.



So, knowledge is good, yet there are several clarifications which we must consider. Let us contemplate what the great Digambar Acharya Kundakunda says:

*‘One who is devoid of true realisation (samyaktva), but who may know the scriptures in many ways, Remains lost in the cycle of rebirth, as if his efforts are in vain.’<sup>1</sup>*

If one who is so learned can still not attain liberation, then we must wonder why. The verse itself provides an answer: if such a learned person is bereft of true understanding, then *moksha* is not attained. The word used is *samyaktva* (*samyak darshan*) and it is this insight, experience of the soul, which is essential for *moksha*.

In his *Atma Siddhi*, **Shrimad Rajchandra** writes: *Bandha moksha chhe kalpana, bhakhe vani main*

*Varte mohaveshaman, sushkagnani te ain<sup>2</sup>*  
*“Those who describe the concepts of bondage and moksha as illusory*  
*And conduct themselves in delusion are termed dry philosophers.”*

This verse is about people who are very well versed in the abstract philosophy of the Jain dharma and can cite texts and concepts written from a highly philosophical viewpoint. This viewpoint is known as the *nishchaya naya*, and can be considered absolute or transcendental truth. However, merely mouthing statements from this viewpoint, when still subject to delusion, is a tremendously grave spiritual mistake.

For example, when we become very learned, we might become recognised for that learning and be praised. When we have not overcome delusion, then it is almost inevitable that we will become proud of our learning, so much so that we will not be open to truth, and may not accept truth, all for the sake of our pride. Such delusion and such pride truly trivialise the pursuit of knowledge. The story of Acharya Sagar shared by the Samanijis (page 26) considers the pride which arises from knowledge. We warn all participants in Young Jains’ Jain Dharma Training program (page 8), and certainly warn all who wish to present, about such pride.

Pride is one of the passions (*kashayas*), which ultimately arise from *mithyatva* (delusion), which is chiefly manifested as misunderstanding our true nature and falsely identifying ourselves with the body. This all leads to Karmic bondage, inimical to our quest for the path to *moksha*.

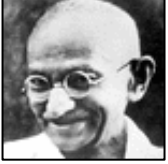


Let us look at another story from our tradition which challenges the idea of learning. There was a monk who could not remember any philosophical teachings, so that his guru instructed him to have no attachment (*rag*) and aversion (*dvesh*), by giving him the following mantra: “*ma rusha, ma tusha*,” meaning “no anger, no pleasure.” Unfortunately, he could not remember even this, and began to say “*mashtush*.” “*Mashtush*” can be broken down into *mash* (black gram) and *tush* (husk), which reminded the disciple of the distinction of the soul from the body. He went on to attain self-realisation and then *moksha*.

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It seems that even the illiterate can attain *moksha*! When Gandhiji was in South Africa, he wrote a series of questions to Shrimad Rajchandra to clarify his doubts and one was on this very subject. Their exchange of letters follows:



**Gandhiji:** “Is it true that an illiterate person can attain *Moksha* by devotion alone?”



**Shrimad Rajchandra:** “Devotion is the cause of wisdom. Wisdom is the cause of *moksha*. One without knowledge of letters is known as illiterate, but it is not the case that they cannot have devotion. The soul is by nature conscious knowledge alone. With the strength of devotion, knowledge is purified. Pure knowledge or wisdom is the cause of *moksha*...There is no such rule that knowledge of language is the cause of *moksha* and that those without it will not attain *moksha*.”<sup>3</sup>

For us to attain *moksha* requires inner purity, free from delusion and the passions. If knowledge is to take us to *moksha*, it must purify and help us overcome delusion and shed karma.

Having thrown some challenges about the concept of knowledge, let us reinstate it!

What is knowledge? *Gnan* can be straightforward knowledge or information; it can be the state of self-realisation, or *samyak darshan*; it can be an aspect of the innate characteristic of the soul known as consciousness, *upyoga*, or *chaitanya*. *Samyak gnan* is one of the three jewels, a constituent of the path to *moksha*: *Samyak darshana – gnana – charitrani moksha margaha*.<sup>4</sup>

The great Shvetambar **Acharya Hemachandra** defines *samyak gnan*: “The wise define *samyak gnana* as the understanding, either in detail or in brief, of the seven *tattvas*.”<sup>5</sup> This does not mean simply reciting a list of the *tattvas* (the fundamentals/principles), but actually understanding them: appreciating the distinction between soul and matter (e.g. body) and the karmic relationship between them. *Swadhyay* (study) is one of the internal *tapas* (austerities), which in turn are considered the cause of *nirjara* (the shedding of karma). When we form a circle for spiritual study,

or read and contemplate texts for ourselves, this is called *swadhyay*. The aim is to bring about a better understanding of the nature of the self, the *atma*.

When we know the self, we will experience our innate bliss, the exact opposite of suffering. Acharya Hemchandra says: “Suffering, which exists due to ignorance of the self (*atma agnan*), is removed through knowledge of the self (*atmagnan*). Without knowledge of the self, it is not possible to eliminate suffering, even through severe austerity.”<sup>6</sup> Severe austerity (e.g. fasting) is compared to knowledge of the self, self-realisation, the key step in the path to *moksha*, eternal bliss and freedom from suffering. While austerities are essential to the practice of dharma, with self-realisation, *atmagnan*, they will lead to *moksha*. Acharya Kundkunda says: “One who is bereft of self-realisation (*samyaktva*), may even conduct the most arduous austerities, but will not gain any spiritual benefit even in a billion years.”<sup>7</sup>

This discussion seems to challenge conventional perceptions of both external practice (austerity) and learning. However, the aim is not to suggest that they are unimportant, for all aspects of religious practice are fruitful and worthy of respect. True understanding makes them effective in the pursuit of the bliss of *moksha*.



We have considered the words of noble souls from all parts of the Jain tradition, and they all indicate the same idea. *Gnan* is at the heart of the dharma, in the form of experience of the soul, *samyak darshan*, self-realisation: it enhances the effectiveness of actions and ensures the purity of learning. The insights of these self-realised saints (*gnanis*), personifications of truth (*satpurush*), rescue us from the trivial pursuit of worldly pleasure and ennoble our quest for true happiness with the blessing of true wisdom, *gnan*. ■

See also the Sweet Harmony column, pg. 17.

<sup>1</sup> Ashtapahuda, Dansanapahuda verse 4.

<sup>2</sup> Atma Siddhi, verse 5

<sup>3</sup> Shrimad Rajchandra" Letter no. 530, Question 24, Page 430.

<sup>4</sup> Tattvartha Sutra, verse 1

<sup>5</sup> Yogashastra, verse 1, 16.

<sup>6</sup> Yogashastra, verse 4, 3

<sup>7</sup> Ashtapahuda, Dansanapahuda verse 5