Jainism: Inspiration and Insights for Obesity Care

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Jain philosophy is respected across India, and its precepts are appreciated by non-Jain persons as well. We herein discuss how Jain philosophy can be used as inspiration and motivation for obesity management (Table 1).

JAIN PHILOSOPHY

Jainism is an Indic religion based upon the three pillars of *ahimsa* (nonviolence), *aparigraha* (nonhoarding), and *anekantavada* (acceptance of multiple forms of thought). These three pillars can be achieved by the *triratna* (three jewels). These principles – *samyak darshan* (right faith), *samyak gyaan*, (right knowledge), and *samyak charitra* (right conduct) guide one to *moksha* (liberation). Right conduct has been elaborated as the five great vows – *ahimsa* (nonviolence), *satya* (truth), *asteya* (not stealing), *brahmacharya* (celibacy/abstinence), and *aparigraha* (non-hoarding or nonpossession). Following these principles helps one find the *tirtha* (ford or crossing place), which allows one to achieve liberation[1,2].

Jain philosophy revolves around the clear distinction in the nature of the soul and non-soul entities. This principal guides towards the potential for liberation within every soul, distinct from the physical and mental elements that bind it to the cycle of birth and rebirth. On recognizing this separation, one can progress spiritually and attain *samyak darshan* (self-realization), which marks the beginning of the aspirant's journey towards liberation. On similar lines, the journey of weight loss and weight regain is interlinked and one can attain "metabolic" or "bariatric" freedom through self-realization and lifestyle modification.

Table 1. Jainism and Obesity Care

Jain precepts	Obesity care
The three pillars	
• *Ahimsa* (nonviolence)	• Treatment without side effects
• *Aparigraha* (nonhoarding)	• Limit consumption
• *Anekantavada* (acceptance of multiple thoughts)	• Multifactorial pathophysiology, multifaceted treatment in team work
The three jewels	
• *Samyak darshan* (right faith)	• Focus on long-term outcomes
• *Samyak gyaan* (right knowledge)	• Self-management, self-care
• *Samyak charitra* (right conduct)	• Behavioral/lifestyle optimization
The five vows	
• *Ahimsa* (nonviolence)	• Moderation
• *Satya* (truth)	• Monitoring
• *Asteya* (not stealing)	• Limit consumption
• *Brahmacharya* (not cheating)	• Avoid cheat days/ indulgence
• *Aparigraha* (not hoarding)	• Limit consumption
Approach to salvation	
• *Shram* (hard work)	• Lifestyle optimization
• Guidance from *Tirthankaras*	• Adherence to prescribed therapy
• Each person to find his/ her own path	• Person-centered care

JAIN SYMBOLISM

The Jain symbol (Fig. 1) is a congregation of various symbols, each having a deeper meaning. This symbol was adopted by all sects of Jainism while commemorating the 2500th anniversary of the nirvana of Lord Mahavira.

The raised hand means stop. The word in the center of the wheel is *"Ahimsa"*, which means nonviolence. Between these two, they remind us to stop for a minute and think twice before doing anything. This gives us a chance to scrutinize our activities to be sure that they will not hurt anyone by our words, thoughts, or actions.

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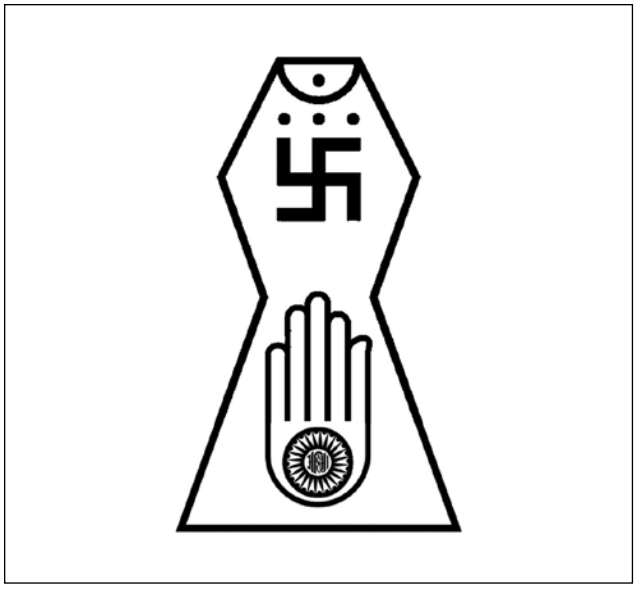


Figure 1. The Jain symbol.

One is also not supposed to ask or encourage others to take part in any harmful activity. The wheel in the hand shows that if we are not careful and ignore these warnings and carry on with violent activities, then just as the wheel goes round and round, we will go round and round through the cycles of birth and death. This can be extrapolated to mindful eating or else one will go round and round to develop obesity.

The four arms of the *swastika* remind us that during the cycles of birth and death we may be born into any one of the four destinies: heavenly beings, human beings, animal beings (including birds, bugs, and plants), and hellish beings. Our aim should be liberation and not rebirth. To show how this can be done, the *swastika* reminds us that we should become the pillars of the fourfold Jain Sangh, only then can we achieve liberation. The four pillars of the Jain Sangh are *sädhus*, *sädhvis*, *shrävaks*, and *shrävikäs*. This means that first; we should strive to be a true *shrävak* or *shrävikä.* When we are able to overcome our social attachments, we should renounce the worldly life and follow the path of a *sädhu* or *sädhvi* to be liberated. This concept helps one to resist social or hedonistic cues for overeating.

The three dots above the *swastika* represent the three jewels of Jainism: *Samyak darshan* (right faith), *samyak gyaan* (right knowledge), and *samyak charitra* (right conduct). We should have all three: right knowledge, right faith, and right conduct together, only then can we achieve liberation. Likewise, one can achieve liberation from obesity with right knowledge about different food products. The three Ds: Discipline, dedication and devotion can help us achieve *moksha* from obesity.

At the very top part of the Jain Universe symbol is a small curved arc. This arc represents the abode of the *Siddhas*. It is known as the *Siddhashila.* It is the final resting place of the liberated souls.

The dot represents a *siddha*. To achieve this stage, a soul must destroy all attachments to food and derivatives. Every living being should strive for this state of salvation or liberation from obesity.

JAIN DIETETICS

Jain diet is an extension of the principle of *ahimsa* aiming to minimize harm to plants, insects, and animals. Jainism promotes a strict lacto-vegetarian diet. No meat, fish, poultry, or eggs are allowed. Milk and dairy products can be consumed 48 minutes after heating. Honey is a strict no as its collection harms the bees and their habitat. Root vegetables and tubers, such as garlic, onion, carrots, and potato are excluded so as not to injure small insects while harvesting them. Vegetables, which have a higher chance of harboring microorganisms, such as cauliflower, brinjal, and broccoli are not preferred.

Fermented foods like bread, wine, beer are avoided as the process involves growth of microorganisms. Similarly, foods that contain multiple seeds like figs are to be avoided as they contain multiple lives. Overall, Jain aristology is like a divine dine aiming to achieve the right balance between palate and pancreas.

Jainism promotes the periodic practice of fasting. This fasting is akin to the intermittent fasting of modern day, which has shown to be of great benefit in losing weight. The practice of not eating after sunset until sunrise the next day (*chauvihar*) aligns with the circadian rhythm and improves medical outcomes. Mindful eating and eating in moderation are the basic principles of Jainism.

SUMMARY

The role of various religious teachings and practices in metabolic management has been discussed earlier[3-6]. The salutogenic philosophy of Jainism, however, has not been highlighted in this context. This is a humble effort at integrating the principles of modern weight and glucose management with timeless, time-tested, and time-honored precepts of Jainism. We hope that this editorial will spur discussion and duologue, and thereby enhance delivery of obesity care to all.

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