

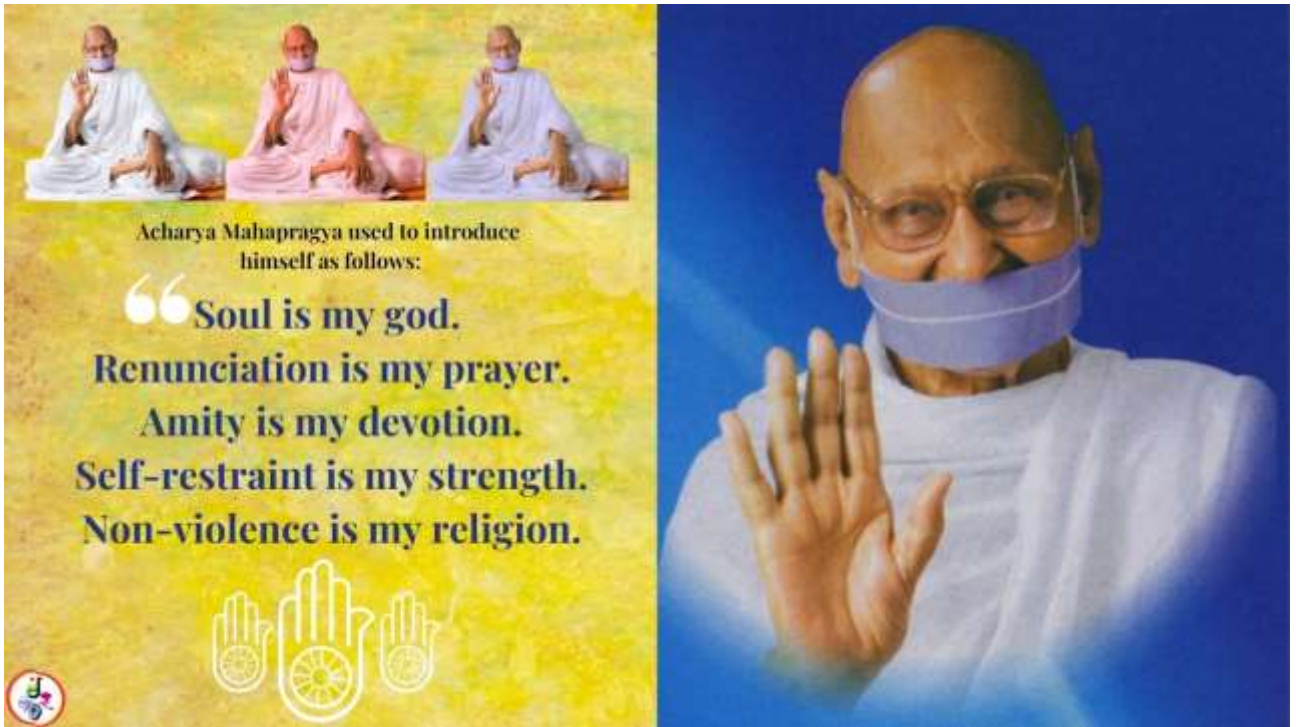
Life and Legacy of Acharya Mahapragya

By Kishor B Shah

Acharya Mahapragya (14 June 1920 – 9 May 2010) was the tenth Acharya – the supreme leader of the Jain Shvetamber Terapanth sect, whose life was a journey to wisdom and a testament to the power of meditation and the importance of understanding one’s own inner world.

He was completely devoted to his Guru – Acharya Tulsi and has been described as:

- “a spiritual leader, outstanding philosopher, practitioner, and thinker who inspired intellectuals and common men alike”.
- “Meditative yogi, monk, thinker, writer, researcher, dedicated disciple of his Guru, a nonviolence marcher, and effulgent soul”.
- “Living Mahavir of this age”. “Messiah of humanity”.
- “A highly revered saint who enlightened the whole world by his profound knowledge intuitive insight and wisdom”.
- “The gem that spread the values of Jainism and Indian culture throughout the world”.
- “Mahapragya was an encyclopaedia of knowledge, a scholar of Jain religious texts who contributed greatly to the understanding and dissemination of Jain philosophy and way of life”.

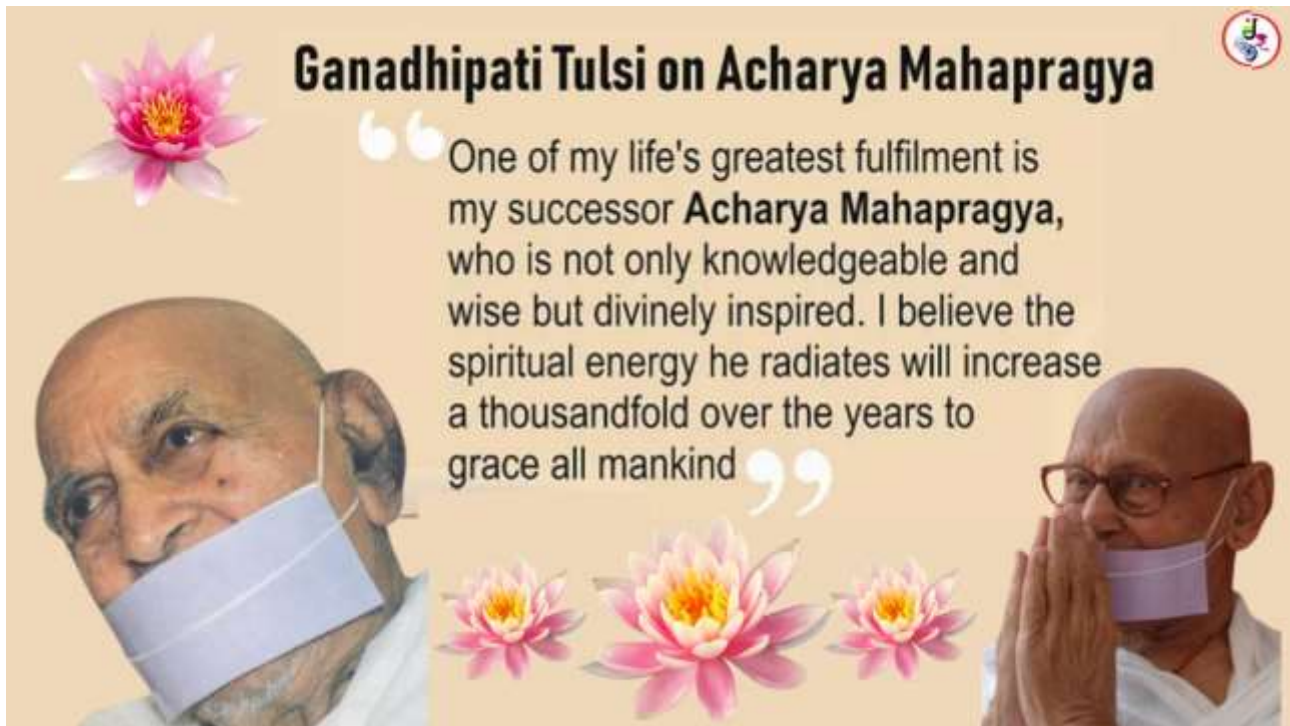


Early Life

Acharya Mahapragya was born on 14 June 1920 to Tola Ram Choraria and Baluji in the small village of Tamkor in Rajasthan, India. He was named Nathmal by his family, who were a Jain Shvetamber Terapanthi Agrawal family. Sadly, when he was only two and half months old, his father passed away. His mother, who raised him very caring and affectionately was very pious and devoted her spare time to spiritual matters. She also used to recite religious songs, which greatly influenced the young child.

The young Nathmal did not have an opportunity to receive formal education as the village did not have a school and also lacked basic amenities such as electricity and roads. He was spiritually inclined from a very young age. On 29 January 1931, in the town of Sardarsahar, Rajasthan and at the tender age of 10, he was initiated as a monk by Acharya Kalugani – the eight Acharya of the Jain Shvetamber Terapanth sect. He was known as Muni Nathmal and became a disciple of Muni Tulsi – later to be Acharya Tulsi.

The effectiveness of the guru-disciple relationship in Indian tradition is reflected by the wisdom of the young disciple in that, without any formal schooling he mastered subjects such as History, Philosophy, Logic, Grammar, Physics, Ayurveda, Politics, Economics, and social sciences. Under Acharya Tulsi's tutelage he studied Jain scriptures and became a scholar of Jain Agamas par excellence. He was proficient in Hindi, Sanskrit, Prakrit and Rajasthani languages and literature, and later in life learned English.



Acharya Tulsi and his favourite disciple -Muni Nathmal were a formidable combination. Acharya Tulsi – the Guru was a strict disciplinarian and an excellent spiritual administrator, his disciple developed into a scholar, a profound researcher, a philosopher and above all, a muni who was totally dedicated to his Guru. Muni Nathmal, through his devotion established an incomparable rapport with his Guru. Acharya Tulsi also recognised the exceptional talents in his young disciple and placed heavy responsibilities on him:

- In 1955 Acharya Tulsi nominated Muni Nathmal as the Chief Secretary of the Terapanth organisation.
- On 4th February 1979 he was appointed successor-designate to Acharya Tulsi and was given the title of Yuvacharya Mahapragya.
- On 18th February 1994 Acharya Tulsi relinquished his post, and Yuvacharya Mahapragya became Acharya Mahapragya. This happened for the first time in history that during the lifetime of one Acharya, the Yuvacharya was made as the Acharya and the residing Acharya relinquish his position. A holy ceremony followed in Delhi on 5th February 1995 when he was formally pronounced as the tenth Acharya of the Terapanth sect.

Acharya Tulsi proclaimed Acharya Mahapragya to be “one of (my) greatest achievement in life”. Acharya Mahapragya made sure that all Acharya Tulsi dreams came true. He was the torch bearer of some of the most successful projects initiated by Acharya Tulsi, including:

Anuvrat Movement

Acharya Tulsi launched the Anuvrat Movement in March 1949. Initially, the aim of the movement was to rid the then society of corruption and immorality, rampant since India’s independence from British Rule and to divert humankind from the path of destruction that had led to the nuclear bombings of Japan. To Acharya Tulsi, a religion without morality was

like a corpse devoid of soul. The movement initially listed small vows (or lesser vows) of non-violence and a code of ethics, which many people from different faiths agreed to observe.

As the movement grew, it was apparent it needed an authoritative philosophical basis. Acharya Mahapragya as Muni Nathmal, with his in-depth knowledge of ancient and modern schools of thought played a pivotal role in Anuvrat Movement by putting it on a foundation of social philosophy. His seminal book – '*Anuvrat Darshan*' established Anuvrat as a philosophy of self-restraint and life.

Acharya Mahapragya led the movement for more than two decades after succeeding Acharya Tulsi and made it popular not only in India but internationally. The movement is universal and is not based on any sect or religion. It is a way of life to improve one's own quality of life, harmonising it with all living beings. Its relevance to contemporary times can be appreciated by examining its small vows to protect the environment and to avoid waste, misuse and pollution of nature. The movement continues to inspire people to practice purity and self-discipline in their personal life.

Preksha Dhyana

It seems that after thousand years of emancipation of Bhagwan Mahavir, there was a turning point in the history of Jaina meditation. The discipline of Jaina meditation lost the proper vigour, and it was weakened. After fifteen hundred years the nature of the meditation has been changed radically. Ancient system of the Jaina meditation disappeared, and a new system came into light being influenced by Hatha Yoga. Later, Acarya Haribhadra, Hemacandra, Subhacandra and Pujiyapada also contributed to the development of Jaina meditation, but it could not regain its original stature. In the last five hundred years even the prevalent discipline of meditation became almost extinct. Situation became so worse that Jaina followers could not even remember the existence of Jaina meditation.

Acharya Tulsi questioned the disappearance of meditation practices in Jainism after the time of Bhagwan Mahavir and assigned his young protegee (Muni Nathmal at that time) to investigate this phenomenon and to revive it for modern times.

Acharya Mahapragya spent over twenty years studying Jain Agamas, ancient scriptures, Yoga science, biology, modern physics, naturopathy and Ayurveda and formulated the Preksha Meditation System in 1970. In canonical literature there are two terms implying meditation- *vipasyana* and *preksha*. The term '*vipasyana*' is already popular in Buddhist meditation system. So, Acarya Mahaprayga selected the term '*preksha dhyana*' to give a modern definition to Jaina inspired meditation.

The word Preksha derives from the root '*iksa*', which means 'to see'. When prefixed by '*pra*', it means to '*perceive clearly and profoundly*'. Here, '*seeing*' does not mean external vision, but careful concentration on subtle consciousness by mental insight. Preksha Dhyana is therefore a '*concentration of perception*' that transcends thought and achieves the state of impartiality and equanimity, a state which Jains constantly strive for. In Preksha, there are no divisions such as attachment and aversions, like or dislike.



Although Preksha Dhyana derives from ancient texts of Jainism, it is not religion specific, is compatible with scientific rationalism, and can be practiced by anyone.

It has spiritual as well as physical benefits and is complementary to the Anurvat movement in that its practice makes the observation of the vows a matter of routine without any specific efforts.

On 3 March 1977, Acharya Mahapragya started a special practice of meditation and spiritual exertion for nine months before commencing Preksha Dhyana training camps. Thereafter, he conducted hundreds of camps for training in Preksha Dhyana, with many still running across the globe. Research, training and studies in Preksha Dhyana continues to be an important activity for Jain Vishva Bharati University, India

For his efforts of many years in this matter, Acharya Tulsi conferred the title of *Jain Yoga Punruddharak (Resurrector of Jain Yoga)* to Acharya Mahapragya.

In his book, '*Yatra ek akinchan ki*', he expressed his desire for all his birthdays in future to be commemorated as '*Dhyana Diwas*' as he was so greatly convinced about the essence of meditation and its need. He stated unambiguously that whilst knowledge enriches us about the outer world, meditation only can enrich us about the inner world, and without the latter, the former is meaningless. He used to wake up at 4.00am and begin his day with meditation.

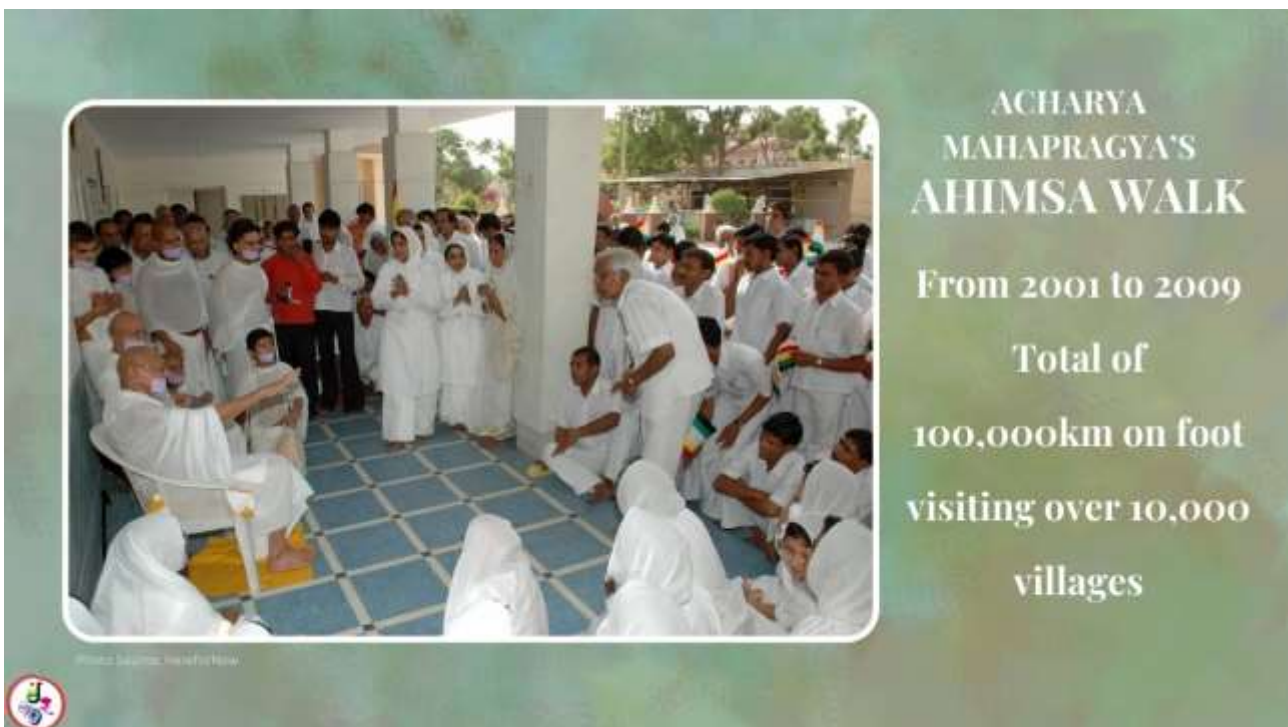
Ahimsa Yatra

The world's problems of intolerance, communal violence, terrorism, poverty, pollution conflicts arising from globalisation, increasing lust for power and wealth greatly touched Acharya Mahapragya and at the age of 82 years on 5 December 2001, at Sujangrah, Rajasthan, India, he commenced his 'Ahimsa Yatra', probably his most acknowledged contribution to Ahimsa. The main objective of the Ahimsa Yatra was to focus the public

attention on the message of Ahimsa and the need to transform negative emotions and thoughts into positive ones.

From 2001 to 2009, he traversed over 100,000 km on foot, visiting over 10,000 villages, spreading the message of non-violence, harmony, tolerance and peace. Followers referred to him as Gurudev – the Godly Teacher. Acharya Mahapragya's discourses, which were often shown live on TV, created awareness on non-violence, unemployment eradication, living a life free from drug addiction, healthy living and harmonious social and personal lives. He implored people to accept four principles in their life:

1. I will believe in human unity
2. I will not resort to quarrels and conflicts on the basis of caste and sectarian issues.
3. I will try adopting integrity on my personal life as far as possible.
4. I will try to remain free from drug addiction.



The villages and towns visited by him become centres of training in non-violence and holistic development, with over 40,000 volunteers returning to carry on working in the villages.

In 2002, during the communal riots in Gujarat, during his visits to these strife-torn region, he exhorted people to eschew violence, greatly contributing to creating a state of normalcy, peace and harmony in the region.

The Ahimsa Yatra made Mahapragya a national hero. With his deep sense of understanding of national affairs and without drawing much media attention, he worked hard to resolve issues in Kashmir and Punjab as well as in Gujarat. He was frequently consulted on social and political issues by the Government and other institutions.

Inspired by the Ahimsa Yatra, the then President of India, Dr Abdul Kalam, as well as other prominent politicians met Acharya Mahapragya to discuss the adoption of Ahimsa as a national policy.

The Ahimsa Yatra ended on 4 January 2009; at the same place it had commenced – Sujangrah.

Agam Sampadan

In 1955, Acharya Tulsi, together with other scholarly monks and nuns commenced the research, translation and annotation of the 32 Jain Agamas, with Acharya Mahapragya as the Chief Editor. Their joint efforts over a span of nearly 40 years helped ensure the permanent preservation of thousands of years old canonical scriptures. Acharya Mahapragya's contribution to this historic endeavour was outstanding, as it attempted to render the obscure literature comprehensible, interesting and embellish it with scientific outlook acceptable to lay people. He uncovered numerous Agam mysteries, presenting root philosophies as well as Mahavir's philosophy and vision in the commentaries.

“ Our desires should be such that in order to fulfil them, no one has to suffer. Most people want to experience their destiny but do nothing to build one. People expect auspicious outcomes but do not perform such actions. They do not want inauspicious outcomes but perform such actions. This dichotomy is a fascinating tale of our times.

The purpose of religion is improving the present, transforming the present life for the betterment of self and mankind

Truth is beyond space and time. One who does not yearn for truth, will be trapped within space and time and become dogged.

The religion which does not bring about a change in a man's life, which does not impart peace to him, deserves to be thrown into the river Ganges rather than carried on as burden on one's shoulders. Rituals or idol worship alone are not enough unless one's conduct also gets transformed. Religion is not confined only to temples, mosques, or churches, but extends to the man's day-to-day living as well.

I believe in that religion which has moral values at its foundation and spirituality at its peak. I don't believe in that religion that doesn't have moral values and spirituality. I accepted that religion which made me physically, mentally, emotionally healthy. Religion is beyond rituals. Religion has the ability to solve our problems if you believe in pure religion. ”

Wisdom of Acharya Mahapragya

Jeevan Vigyan – Science of Living

In 1979, Acharya Mahapragya conceived the idea of 'Science of Living' at Jain Vishva Bharati, Ladnun, Rajasthan, which focused on value-based education and moral education to ensure overall growth of students. Many schools made this effective system part of their curriculum, as it generated surprising results in minimising stress, promoting efficiency in studies, better concentration and memory.

Ahimsa Samvaya

Acharya Mahapragya's vision of unifying the forces of Ahimsa at a global level culminated in the establishment of Ahimsa Samvaya in 1999. Ahimsa Samvaya is a forum to unite forces of peace and non-violence with mutual understanding and love.

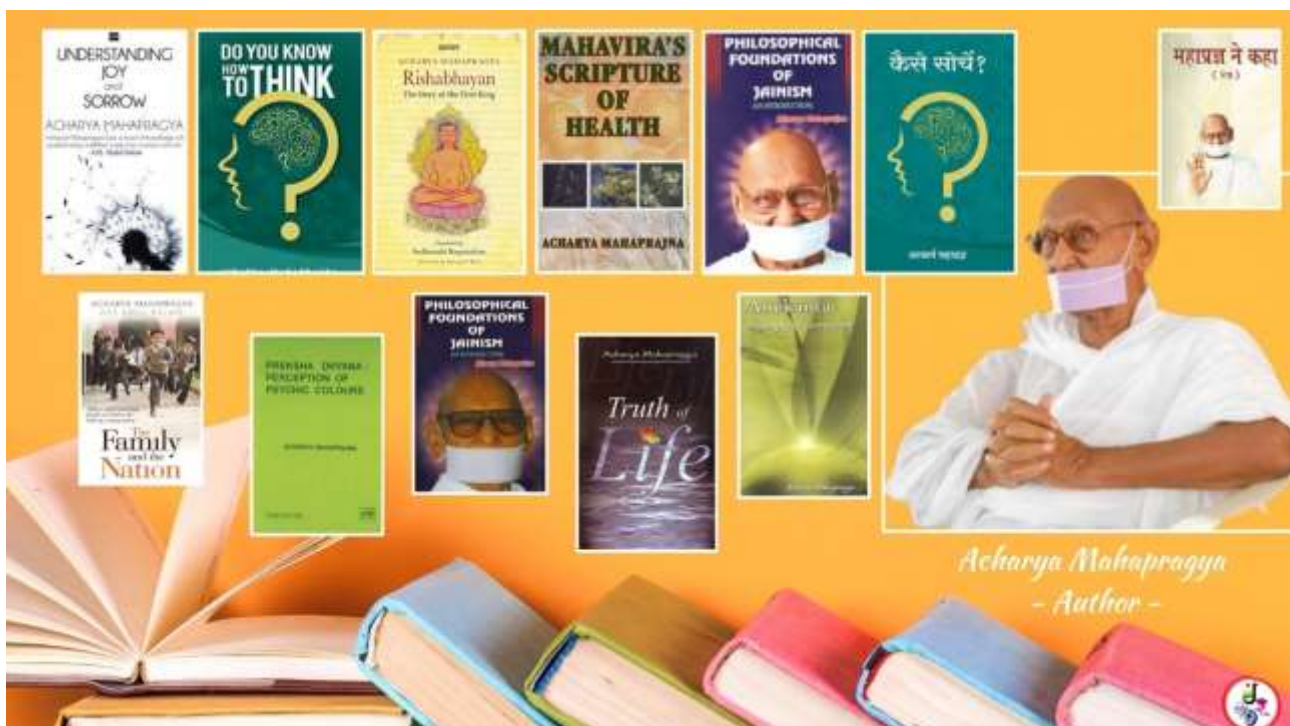
Jain Vishva Bharati University.

Acharya Mahapragya was instrumental in the establishing of Jain Vishva Bharati University at Ladnun, Rajasthan in 1991, under the spiritual patronage of Acharya Tulsi. Mahapragya served as the Anushashta – spiritual head of the university from 1995 till his death. During his tenure, he encouraged and furthered the university's objective to revive truths and values hidden in ancient Indian traditions in general and in the Jain tradition in particular. The university continues to thrive, teaching degree courses leading to Bachelors and Masters degrees.

Sahitya Srijan – Acharya Mahapragya Writings

Acharya Mahapragya was an eminent scholar, with insightful knowledge of Jain scriptures – Agamas, Buddhist scriptures – Tripitakas, Vedic scriptures – Vedas and Upanishads, other ancient and modern scriptures as well as modern psychology & schools of thought.

Mahapragya started writing at the tender age of 22 years only and during his lifetime wrote more than 300 books, all of which have a unique combination of simplicity in expression and originality. It has been stated that “these books were not written by a thinker, but a seer possessing an extraordinary extrasensory perception, which can change a person or world by reducing suffering and thereby give a new direction to humanity”.



His works cover topics like meditation and spirituality, the mind, the human psyche and its traits, the roots of emotions and their manifestation through behaviour, Mantra Sadhana, Yog, Anekantavada, non-violence, Jain philosophy, and history. His most noteworthy achievement was to consolidate the Jain concepts of karma and human behaviour with the views of modern biology in areas such as genetics, various techniques of meditation and their effects on the psyche, physiology, hormonal influences, the endocrine system, and the nervous system.

His writings on economics provided a paradigm shift through which one could build a peaceful society free from exploitation.

He was a poet by nature, with the capacity to compose verses spontaneously in various Indic languages including Sanskrit, Prakrit and Hindi. His compositions like '*Sambodhi*', '*Ashruvina*', '*Mukulam*', '*Atulatula*' etc in Sanskrit and '*Rishabayana*' in Hindi are considered as epic poems.

Mahapragya also wrote extensively on the lives and philosophies of Acharya Bhikshu and Acharya Tulsi, including Shraman Mahavir, his biographical work on Mahavir. His numerous capacious books on Jain philosophy provide new insights into Jain beliefs and vision. In '*Jain Darshan – Manan & Mimaansha*' he expounded many facets of the Jain belief system via a detailed interpretation. He revived a very old tradition of enabling the understanding of ancient Jain literature by writing a Sanskrit commentary – '*Bhashya*' - on Acharang Sutra, which is the first Anga of the Shvetamber Jain Agamas and considered one of the oldest and most difficult & incomprehensible Jain scriptures.

Fortunately, many of his books have been translated into other languages including English. Acharya Mahapragya wrote with great clarity. One of his translators once remarked, "between one full stop and the next sentence, a kingdom can be built".



Acharya Mahapragya in his own words

"I am an ascetic. I enjoy the boundless grace of Gurudev Shree Tulsi. My asceticism is not bound by inert rituals. My faith is in that asceticism which is not lifeless. I have faith in that asceticism which is a veritable ocean of joy. I have faith in that asceticism which has a perennial source of energy.

I follow a tradition but do not treat its dynamic elements as static. I derive benefit from out of the scriptures, but do not believe in carrying them as a burden.

The insight I have gained does not admit of separation between the past and the present. The two are integrated in it. In my consciousness there is no bondage of 'yours and mine.' It is free from it. My spiritual practice does not 'worship' truth, it subjects it to minute surgery.

The only mission of life is boundless curiosity to know truth. That is precisely my asceticism. It is not an external accoutrement. Like a seed it is sprouting out of my inner being".



Acharya Mahapraya passed away on 9 May 2010 at 2.52pm in Sardarsahar, the place where he was initiated as a monk. As a prominent Jain philosopher and spiritual leader, he left a lasting impact on the world. His deep spiritual insights, profound teachings and practical wisdom will continue to inspire people for years to come. His teachings highlight non-violence, interfaith dialogue, holistic well-being, and his vision for a peaceful society free from evils will forever resonate with those seeking a more compassionate and harmonious world. His contributions to meditation practices, social welfare programs, and spiritual education have left a lasting legacy. His many books offer profound insights into Jain philosophy, meditation, and practical wisdom for leading a balanced life.

His legacy as a Jain philosopher and spiritual leader continues to be influential, promoting harmony and well-being on both individual and societal levels.

Researching this article has inspired and motivated me to read more books by Acharya Mahapragya and I sincerely hope, it inspires you too, after reading the article.