

ACHARYA SHRI CHANDANAJI

A REVOLUTIONARY CHANGE IN THE JAIN TRADITION



It was late evening of August 28, 2008. I was in one of the relief camps in Saharsa District (Bihar) where millions had been affected by the floods. I had lost members of my family in the disaster, and my business and shop had been destroyed. I was completely lost, ruined and directionless. Many people were coming to our tents to console and support us. But a certain figure, peace and love radiating from her personality, came to visit us. Her presence was incredible for me. She held my hand, consoled me and said few but powerful words of courage. Those words penetrated my heart. I decided to conquer the situation and stood up with the courage to rebuild my life. Today, two years after the flood, my life is smooth again, because of the tremendous support, encouraging words and unconditional love she showered on me.

- BHOLA PRASAD
from Saharsa District, Bihar

This is the experience of not just one person, but thousands, each of whom has experienced a powerfully inspirational touch upon coming into contact with this divine soul. You can find her in the small villages of Bihar surrounded by poor, old, sick people who are in search of warmth and support in life. You can see her walking in the rubble of earthquake-affected Kutch, consoling an orphan child and providing shelter after to those who have lost their families in the devastating quake. You can also see her soliciting economically and socially unfortunate people, giving support to the down-trodden in many parts of India. A child-like face, loving eyes, giving hands, a fragile figure clad in simple white clothing. She shows love to one and all, unrestricted by boundaries, be they religious or physical. Yes, this is Acharya Shri Chandanaji, one of the greatest and the most incredible jewels in the history of the Jain world, and a soul who has encouraged, inspired and touched millions of lives through her kind words and deeds.

Acharya Shri Chandanaji is a name that personifies simplicity, courage and compassion. She is the first Jain Sadhvi to receive the prestigious title of "Acharya" in the Jain community. For millions worldwide, she is more than just a religious leader. She initiated a revolutionary chapter in the history of the Jain religion by introducing the concept of 'Compassion in Action' to the renounced community. She inspired and trained the renounced class to actively engage in social work for the betterment of humanity. She revolutionized the Jain tradition according to the needs of the time and paved the new path of Seva. Today Acharya Shri Chandanaji's simple white clad ascetics serve people absolutely selflessly in a highly professional manner. How has one soul been able to accomplish so much?

- Born on January 26, 1937, in Ahmednagar (Maharashtra), the beloved daughter of Katarji Jain family, Shakuntika, as she was then known, decided to renounce the world (accept Diksha) at the age of 14. An extraordinary journey commenced. She took a vow of silence for 12 long years. But inside, there was a great upsurge of thoughts and questions. A debate arose in the mind of Sadhvi Chandana Shriji: scriptures, beliefs, contemporary practices, and traditions were all going in different directions. A battle emerged in her mind. Which one should a Jain renunciate choose: tradition or Tirthankar Mahavir? She raised some fundamental questions:
- Why are ascetics prohibited from actively carrying out compassionate work?
 - Why do we only talk about life after death?
 - Why does religion only concentrate on individual liberation?
 - Why is the path of active 'Seva' not an integral part of asceticism?
 - Why is mankind divided on the basis of caste and sect?
 - And why aren't we putting any active efforts in finding answer to these questions?

Acharya Shri Chandanaji strongly believes that religion is not only about finding Moksha, but it is also for resolving everyday challenges and bringing peace and bliss in day to day life. She firmly maintained that tradition has restricted the illustrious philosophy and unconditional love of Tirthankar Mahavir into narrow rituals. She then decided that the universal values of unconditional love and compassion taught by Tirthankar Mahavir have to be spread to one and all. This is the journey that led to her path of Compassion in Action and selfless service undertaken by the renunciate class for the first time in the modern history of Jain tradition.

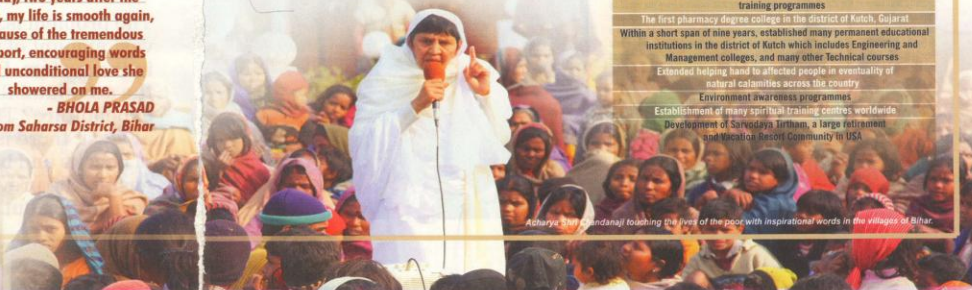
Thirteen decades ago, when Acharya Shri Chandanaji began this journey, it was almost a blasphemous act to break with the tradition. But Sadhvi Shri Chandanaji challenged the tradition and explained that religion has to be re-evaluated to be in accordance with rapidly moving society. This was a turning point in the history of Jain religion, as no renounced person had ever served lives for the cause of humanity. There was an opposition not only from the tradition but also from the followers' side. No one was ready to accept that a renounced individual can go among people, of all religions at that, and serve them rather than just preaching about being compassionate.

People said to her that the path of Seva is not conducive to liberation, that Seva is not an acceptable path for one's own spiritual development. To answer to these challenges, Acharya Shri Chandanaji explained that life is not one dimensional. Religion accepts life in its entirety. To work toward getting rid of any physical or mental suffering is true religion. Service is no different from spirituality, service is spirituality.

In 1972, Sadhvi Shri Chandanaji initiated her Seva work from the state of Bihar, the historical land of Lord Mahavir. With the blessing of Pujya Gurusdev Updhyaya Shri Amar Manji Maharaj, her mammoth task of selfless service was given the name "Veerayatan". With her incredible vision, dedication and perseverance, today Veerayatan is a world renowned leading development organization with offices in ten countries. It is a non-profit, non-governmental organization working to empower people

ACHIEVEMENTS TO DATE

- Inspirational programmes for an addiction free society, vegetarianism and lives free from anti social and criminal activities
- Openings of many schools, colleges and hostels in under privileged areas helping orphans, single parent and economically disadvantaged children
- Thousands of lives saved by medical treatment
- Performed 2,50,000 press surgeries and treated 2,50,000 epileptic cases
- Corrected 2,000 surgical cases of polio
- Immediate education in stop-gap schools for 10,000 children affected in the devastating earthquake of Kutch, Gujarat in 2001
- Countless people have become self reliant through various vocational training programmes
- The first pharmacy dispensary opened in the district of Kutch, Gujarat
- Within a short span of nine years, established many permanent educational institutions in the district of Kutch which includes Engineering and Management colleges, and many other Technical courses
- Extended helping hand to affected people in eventuality of natural calamities across the country
- Environment awareness programmes
- Establishment of many spiritual training centres worldwide
- Development of Sarvodaya Tirthans, a large retirement and Vacation Resort Community in USA



Acharya Shri Chandanaji touching the lives of the poor with inspirational words in the villages of Bihar.

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through Seva (service), Shiksha (education) and Sadhna (inner development). For the last 40 years Veerayatan has touched thousands of lives and has succeeded in bringing hope and support to countless more.

Veerayatan encompasses a wide spectrum of activities which include running hospitals, schools, colleges, and vocational training programs for underprivileged sections of society across the country. Veerayatan serves people without regard to cast, creed, race, religion, or socio-economic status. It has actively initiated emergency relief camps and rehabilitation programs in the aftermath of natural calamities like earthquakes, floods and the tsunami. Veerayatan was among the first organisations present to provide necessary relief and rehabilitation in the first few weeks following the 2001 earthquake in Gujarat, the Tsunami in 2004 and during the Surat floods 2006 and the Kosi river floods in 2008. In addition, Veerayatan has a mission of reviving humanity by facilitating inner development.

Renunciates of Veerayatan conduct special spiritual programs throughout the world to develop humanity and help them find inner peace and happiness.

Veerayatan is very effectively run under the dynamic leadership of Acharya Shri Chandanaji with an able team of dedicated Sadhvis (renunciates), honorary committee members and devoted volunteers. Operating under his visionary direction, Veerayatan creates an environment in which all people, beneficiaries, staff and volunteers feel empowered to share and serve.

This pioneering saint, who out of nothing created something unique, has made the impossible possible. The path which she has courageously initiated alone is now appreciated by many. Bestowed in 2002 with the coveted Shri Devi Ahilya National Award for her humanitarian service and animal welfare activities, Acharya Shri Chandanaji has also been recognized with the Mahavi Foundation Award, the Sant Bai Chaud and numerous other domestic and international accolades.

Acharya Shri Chandanaji has a strong bond with nature and she firmly believes that nature needs to be respected and loved because it most closely resembles the human inner world. Love for animals and nature is her passion. One can find her communicating with animals, trees and different components of nature.

Her love for creativity is another reason for the positive aura around her. The incredible hands of Chandanaji have created thousands of beautiful, artistic pieces with absolutely new vision, which people carry worldwide as gifts of love.

In places of pilgrimage, visitors are confronted by hundreds of children, old persons and unemployed youth begging for food, clothing and money. These pilgrimage places are centres of attraction for many visitors. Acharya Shri Chandanaji is of the firm opinion that if the pilgrimage places are beautifully maintained, these could become centers of motivation, inspiration and peace. She strongly believes that instead of creating temples in a village, let us make an effort to make the entire village a temple.

January 26, 2011, is the 75th birth anniversary of Acharya Shri Chandanaji. All who have experienced her divine love have an occasion to celebrate, including Sadhvis, disciples, followers from all over the world and volunteers of Veerayatan. When she was asked about the celebration, she immediately responded that Seva is my only celebration. Hence to commemorate this auspicious occasion, a mega medical camp will be held in Bihar for thousands of beneficiaries. Approximately 7500 surgeries will be performed at this memorable event. There will also be the announcements for the opening of new schools, colleges and vocational training programs nationwide. The celebration is to promote and support the removal of poverty, illiteracy and violence from the world by spreading the message of Ahimsa and Compassion worldwide. Work will commence nationwide guided by her vision that "where there is a temple there should also be a school". Acharya Shri Chandanaji's birth anniversary is an opportunity to serve and Veerayatan is a beautiful platform. All those who want to serve can join hands to spread the message of compassion and love, as the journey of compassion continues...

Deprived of education, children receive a ray of hope from Acharya Shri Chandanaji in the form of educational kits.



1. No natural calamity has more force than the unending flow of compassion and care that creates life, were the words of Acharya Shri Chandanaji when she served the affected people of Bihar floods.

2. A sufferer of Bihar floods being blessed and consoled by Acharya Shri Chandanaji.

3. An institute radiating Seva, Shiksha and Sadhna - Veerayatan, Jakhania, Kutch.

4. Thousands of underprivileged children have received here world class education and learnt to live a virtuous life at Veerayatan Vidyaapeeth Jakhania, Kutch.

5. Patients with eye disease receive the words of warmth from Mataji at medical camp held in Rajgir, Bihar.



The patients at NISM - an ultra modern eye hospital at Veerayatan, Rajgir, having their meal.

Sharing and caring were your nature since childhood. Did something inspire you down this path, or was it within you?

I have very faint memories of my childhood but I have a strong belief in previous births and believe that values are carried forward. This is the reason why I sympathize for anyone in need and have a strong urge to serve them. Just as we would desire someone to come to our service in a time of need, so we too should serve those who need us in this lifetime.

The path you chose was not of traditions but the path of Lord Mahavir's teaching. The traditional Jain community perhaps thinks differently. What difficulties did you face?

All religions have traditions and it is difficult to accept change in any tradition, because people consider tradition as the religion itself. The Jain tradition does not allow renunciates (Sadhus and Sadhvis) to personally do good deeds. But what I saw around me was living beings in pain. While studying Jain scriptures and the scriptures of other religions, I realized that Karuna (compassion) for every living thing is the supreme virtue in all religions. Tradition may not allow this, but the original thoughts of prophets like Tirthankar Mahavir is rooted in unconditional love. What kind of religion we follow that doesn't advocate for serving those in pain? I believe that a religion that doesn't address pain of others is not true religion. I could not agree with such traditions, and so chose a different path. I faced many obstacles, however, bearing those difficulties was possible. What was not possible was neglecting to follow a path of compassion, which is most needed for humanity.

At the age of 75, having achieved incredible milestones, what is left? What more do you think Veerayatan should accomplish?

In a short span of 40 years Veerayatan has touched millions of people and has changed countless lives but Veerayatan's work is like a small drop in the ocean. There are so many unresolved issues. Impoverished children, the suffering of women, illiteracy in villages, and cruelty to animals. Along with increased work in the areas of education and health care, I would also like to spread our work to serve animals. These voiceless creatures continue to suffer in record numbers, and it is our responsibility to serve all living creatures in need. Our religions aim to achieve Moksha and Swarg after death but I believe that if we focus more on solving the problems of the present life and improving the condition in which humans and animals live, the world will be a very different and better place.

What do you hope to see in the next generation of Sadhvis that have dedicated themselves to Veerayatan?

I wish that without any ego or any personal motives and expectations, the next generation of Sadhvis should selflessly do good work for more and more people. They themselves should do good work and should inspire other people to do good deeds. The Sadhvis of Veerayatan do not work to attain any particular post, position or financial gain, and I expect things to continue in this way. I expect the Sadhvis to become the divine messengers on the earth and as such, they should always be active for the betterment of this world.

Share the most memorable incident of your life.

There are many such powerful incidents that have occurred in my life, but there is one in particular that I recall with a lot of affection. It occurred a long time ago. A little girl around nine or 10 years of age was coming from the hills of Rajgir, Bihar and I too was passing from the same road. I called her. Her name was Malu. I asked, "Where are you going Malu?" She replied, "I am

going to work". I asked her, "Malu, don't you go to school?" Malu said that she didn't have a father. She added, "I have a mother and five siblings. Ma cannot earn enough to support the family so I go to work." I then asked her, how much she earned and she said, "I get around hundred rupees". I told her, "I am making a school here for poor children. Will you give me a rupee to run the school?" At this she promptly replied, "The Mataji, I will give all the money I have". This little girl, who had not studied in any school, had not heard Shashtras from any Guru, was ready to give away everything she had simply because she knew that some good work was being done for kids by Mataji. This incident, full of kindness, is one I always remember in life. The little girl's words are carved in my heart even to this date, and I think of them always when there is something to be done for someone. I put them above all Shashtras and the speeches of any great figure.

What has been your source of inspiration?

I believe that there is a little lamp of love, compassion and kindness within everybody. One can call the divinity within, and all are capable of possessing it. With the blessings of my revered teachers I tried to enhance that divinity and very humbly I can say that my Seva work is inspired through the expression of that divinity and is not the effort of any individual.

What is Moksha (liberation) according to you?

In my view Moksha is absolute freedom, liberation from all pain. Some people believe that Moksha is when one gets liberated from body. However, I feel that getting rid of pain is true Moksha. If one learns to smile, Moksha is very much present. A smile, in fact, is a way to Moksha. Laugh with open mind and heart, that joys is true Moksha.

What is your motive behind Seva?

I can't see some diseased shedding tears in pain, children living an ignored life. I can't just stop myself helping them. To serve and to help has become a part of my being.

Today human relations are passing through a delicate phase. What one must do to make human relationships stronger?

We must understand that while we give utmost importance to our individual lives, our existence itself is only possible due to the support of others. We must try to spread this message in our schools, colleges and the world around us. Our individual life is supported by trees, air, earth, sky, water, stars and infinite humans' attempts. We think that we own our life. But imagine if one day the air denies giving oxygen to us, trees and plants deny food to us, the land denies to support us, clouds hold back their water, parents withhold their love and care. What kind of life would we lead? The existence of our lives is due to this multitude of obligations. If we had a genuine sense of gratitude toward others, our relationships would be better. The tree that gave us fruit, the cow who gifted us milk, farmers who toil in the fields, women who clean, labourers who build. We must thank each and every one of them. We must show gratitude to our teachers who educate us, and parents who work tirelessly for us. If we understand this little thing of gratitude toward others, it will sweeten our relationships tremendously. We should have this gratitude for family, neighbours, society, and our ancient culture and civilisation. Gratitude is a must. We may have expectations from others, but people and nature have expectations from us also, and we must not forget this. Every morning when we get up, we should think about what others have done for us. We should then go further, and try to think about what we can do for others. This little change in attitude will change our lives and transform our relationships.

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Students of Veerayatan Institute of Pharmacy at Jakhania, Kutch follow the path of Acharya Shri Chandanaji with a dedication to serve and create a better world.