

LESSON 19

ACHARYA HEMCHANDRA

Acharya Hemchandra was born in 1088 A.D. in the caste of Modha Vanik (merchant) in the town of Dhandhuka, sixty miles from the city of Ahmadabad in Gujarat State. His parents were Chachadev and Pahini. When Pahini was pregnant, she had a beautiful dream. She narrated her dream to Acharya Devasuri, who was in Dhandhuka at that time. The Acharya said that Pahini was to give birth to a son who would make great progress in the areas of spiritual knowledge, intuition, and conduct. Upon his birth, the child was named Changdev.

The next time Acharya Devasuri was in Dhandhuka, he saw Pahini carrying her son. He said to Pahini, "Let me take care of this brilliant son. He is destined to be a great spiritual leader." However, he could not convince her to give her son to him. The Acharya kept pursuing her and reminding her that her son would become a famous monk and would glorify the Jain order. Again, he requested that she should sacrifice self-interest and love for the child for the good of the people. Ultimately, Pahini let the Acharya take her son with him.

He initiated Changdev into monkhood and named him Somachandra. The disciple was very intelligent and soon mastered various philosophies, logic, scriptures, Nyaya, grammar, etc. At the same time, he cultivated excellent virtues like forbearance, tolerance, holiness, simplicity, discipline, chastity, and generosity. Somachandra was incomparable in administration and efficiency. Acharya Devasuri made Somachandra an Acharya when he was only twenty-one years old. At that time, he was given the name Hemchandra Acharya.

The fame of Hemchandra's efficacy and knowledge gradually spread everywhere. The noble culture was on the rise in Gujarat due to the ability of Hemchandra and the cooperation of King Siddharaj of Gujarat. Kumarapal succeeded King Siddharaj. Hemchandra had predicted seven years earlier that Kumarapal would be the king. In addition, the Acharya had once saved Kumar pal's life. Therefore, Kumarapal considered Hemchandra his spiritual teacher (guru) and benefactor. Kumarapal gave him exceptional honor and sought his advice in the shaping of his kingdom in Gujarat. In a very short time, Gujarat became a center of non-violence, learning, and good culture.

Hemchandra did not only think of the development of his own career, but always thought of universal welfare. In spite of this, some Brahmins were very jealous and they tried to disgrace Hemchandracharya and Jainism. Some Brahmins approached King Kumarapal and said, "Hemchandracharya is a very egoistic person and he does not respect Hindu Gods." King Kumarapal was not ready to accept these views about his spiritual teacher, Hemchandracharya. The Brahmins requested King Kumarapal to invite Hemchandracharya to come to the temple of Lord Shiva. The purpose of this was to humiliate Hemchandracharya because they thought he would not go to the temple of Lord Shiva and bow down to Lord Shiva. When Hemchandracharya came, King Kumarapal said, "We will go to the temple of Lord Shiva." He accepted the offer without any hesitation. The Brahmins were happy in their mind thinking that they would be able to

make their point today and glorify their religion. Yet, they were wrong. They underestimated Hemchandracharya. To the surprise of the Brahmins, Hemchandracharya bowed down in front of Lord Shiva and said,

***“Bhavbijankura janana Ragadyaha Kshayamupagata Yasya;
Brahma Va Vishnurva Haro Jino Va Namastasmāi.”***

“I am bowing down to that god who has destroyed passions like attachment (Raga) and hatred (Dvesha), which are the cause of worldly life, whether he is Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva, or Jina.”

This showed that indeed the Acharya was a genius and had a broad-minded attitude based on basic Jain principles. Under Hemchandra’s influence, King Kumarapal accepted Jainism. He prohibited violence and the killing of any animal in his kingdom. King Kumarapal made many laws that nurtured the Jain religion. Vegetarianism was found not only in the Jains, but also in all the people of Gujarat. Jainism became the religion of the region.

Hemchandra composed several literary works that included many verses. The Acharya was the first one to put non-violence on a political platform. He was the architect of the greatness and unity of Gujarat. In the field of metaphysics, he was a Yogi. His work Yoga-Shastra, a treatise on yoga, is very famous. People called him ‘Kali-Kal Sarvajna’ meaning ‘all-knower in the dark period’. He died in 1173 AD at the age of eighty-four. The Jain culture still shines brightly in Gujarat, due to the influence of the literary works contributed by the great Acharya Hemchandra.

Key message:

Acharya Hemchandracharya was the spiritual teacher of King Kumarapal of the state of Gujarat. It is because of Hemchandracharya that Kumarapal accepted Jainism and became a Jain. It is because of this reason that Jainism and vegetarianism flourishes well in the state of Gujarat. Hemchandracharya has composed many literary masterpiece works and has written treatise on many original Jain texts and Agamas.