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Abstract and Keywords

Jainism shares the soteriological orientation of the Vedic systems and Buddhism, thereby blurring, as these systems do, the line drawn in the West between “philosophy” and “religion.” This article focuses on those dimensions of Jainism of most interest to philosophers in the West—ontology, epistemology, logic, linguistics, and ethics—setting aside such dimensions as ascetic practice, meditation, and ritual activity, though with the understanding that these “religious” dimensions of the tradition are of vital importance to the Jains themselves, and important constituents of the total environment in which Jain philosophical reflection has occurred.

Keywords: Indian philosophy, Jainism, ontology, epistemology, logic, linguistics, ethics

THOUGH less known in the West than Vedānta and Buddhism, the contributions of Jainism to Indian philosophy are both extensive and profound. Perhaps its most striking departure from these traditions rests with its defense of a **thoroughgoing metaphysical realism**, in contrast with the idealism predominant in, for example, Advaita Vedānta and Yogācāra Buddhism. Sharing the soteriological concerns of these two traditions, many of Jainism's criticisms of them are based on the perception that idealism is detrimental to spiritual practice. As in most systems of Indian philosophy, Jain philosophical activity is carried out in the service of the pursuit of *mokṣa*—spiritual release and liberation from *saṃsāra*, the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.

In terms of the traditional taxonomy used to categorize the various Indian schools of philosophy, Jainism is classified, along with Buddhism and the Lokāyata or Cārvāka system of materialism, as a *nāstika* or “heterodox” system, due to its explicit denial of the authority of the Veda. Among the standard list of six “orthodox” or Vedic systems of philosophy, Jainism most closely resembles the Sāṃkhya and Yoga systems, particularly

with regard to the strong dualism of spirit and matter that these systems affirm. It differs from these two systems with its distinctive affirmation of the material nature of karma.

Possibly the most distinctive Jain contribution to Indian philosophical discourse is the pluralistic ontology that is affirmed in its “many-sided doctrine” or “doctrine of nonabsolutism” (*anekāntavāda*) and the corresponding relativistic epistemology affirmed in its “doctrine of perspectives” (*ṇayavāda*) and its doctrine of conditional predication or “maybe doctrine” (*syādvāda*). This complex of doctrines is seen by contemporary Jains as an extension into the intellectual realm of the principle of nonviolence (*ahiṃsā*). This, however, is a relatively recent interpretation of what were originally polemical doctrines.

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Intellectual History

The earliest extant Jain texts, which form the basis of the subsequent intellectual development of the tradition, are the canonical *Āgama* literature of the Śvetāmbara sect of Jainism. The oldest texts of this collection contain materials dating back to the third or second centuries BCE, and possibly earlier, though the bulk of them seem to have been composed in the early centuries of the Common Era. These texts present themselves as containing the teachings of Mahāvīra, who lived, according to Jain tradition, from 599 to 527 BCE. Because he is presented in both Jain and Buddhist sources as a contemporary of the Buddha, however, recent scholarship, which suggests a somewhat later date for the Buddha than the dates given by Buddhist traditions—perhaps as late as the fourth century BCE—requires a similar readjustment of the period of Mahāvīra's life.

Mahāvīra, an epithet meaning “Great Hero,” can be regarded as the founder of the Jain tradition in only a limited sense. Though he is the founder of the community and the tradition as it exists today, he is regarded by Jains as only the most recent in a series of twenty-four *Tīrthaṅkaras*, or “Ford-makers”—enlightened beings who appear periodically in the world to create a crossing or “ford” (*tīrtha*) over the waters of rebirth. At least one Ford-maker prior to Mahāvīra—his immediate predecessor, Pārśva, the twenty-third Ford-maker—is accepted by modern scholarship as an actual historical figure. The first Ford-maker, Ṛṣabha, is held by some Jain scholars to be the Ṛṣabha mentioned in the *Rg Veda*.

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Mahāvīra emerged from the same northern Indian ascetic culture of the mid-first millennium BCE that produced the Buddha and the *Upaniṣads*. Jain literature presents a picture of the life of Mahāvīra with a number of similarities to that of the Buddha. Both are depicted as members of the ruling Kṣatriya *varṇa*, or Warrior class, who give up lives of privilege and power in search of wisdom and spiritual liberation. Both renounce the world to take up the lifestyle of a wandering ascetic. Although the paths they take and will ultimately recommend to their followers are distinct, both are presented as achieving the goal of liberation and as attaining a state of perfect enlightenment. And finally, both establish communities of male and female ascetics with broader communities of male and female lay supporters.

(p. 161) By the fifth century CE, and for reasons that remain somewhat obscure, Mahāvīra's community had split into two sectarian divisions—the Śvetāmbara, or “white-clad” Jains, whose male and female ascetics wear simple white garments, and the Digambara, or “sky-clad” Jains, whose male ascetics wear nothing at all. Although the Digambaras reject the authority of the Śvetāmbara canon because it depicts Mahāvīra as engaging in activities that they believe inappropriate for an enlightened being, there are remarkably few philosophical differences between these two Jain traditions. Both groups accept the authority of the *Tattvārthasūtra*, or “Text on the True Nature of Reality.” This central text for Jain philosophy was composed by Umāsvāti, a figure of the second or third century CE who seems to have predated the division of the Jain community into its Śvetāmbara and Digambara sections. The *Tattvārthasūtra* has been commented upon by both Śvetāmbara and Digambara scholars over the centuries, and is the closest thing available to a universally accepted foundational Jain text. Essentially, it is a summary of the philosophical teachings scattered throughout the Śvetāmbara canon. Despite considerable internal diversity regarding ritual, ascetic practice, and monastic organization, the Jain tradition has been remarkably uniform with regard to issues that are of interest to philosophers, perhaps because of widespread acceptance of Umāsvāti's text.

A distinctively Digambara bent toward mysticism, however, emerges within the writings of Kundakunda, who may have lived as early as the fifth or as late as the eighth century CE. As shall be seen below, Kundakunda, a highly regarded *ācārya*, or teacher, of the Digambara tradition develops a distinctively Jain version of the “two truths” doctrine articulated in the Buddhist tradition by Nāgārjuna and in Vedānta by Śaṅkara. Departing somewhat from the metaphysical realism insisted upon by the rest of the Jain tradition, Kundakunda develops what could broadly be called a gnostic stance toward the Jain spiritual path, emphasizing the realization of the true nature of the soul or *jīva* over ascetic practice as the true means to liberation. This emphasis places him closer to Buddhist and Vedāntic understandings of liberation, one could argue, than Jain thought normally goes. It should be added, though, that in practice, Kundakunda's followers are no less committed to asceticism than are other Jains. Kundakunda's writings, particularly his *Pravacanasāra*, or “Essence of the Doctrine,” and his *Samayasāra*, or “Essence of the

Soul," continue to exert a strong influence among Digambara intellectuals, especially in the modern period, in which his thought has experienced something of a resurgence.

Another important Digambara figure of the early Common Era is Samantabhadra, whose *Āptamīmāṃsā*, or "Analysis of the Nature of the Authoritative Teacher," is central to understanding the doctrine of conditional predication, applying it to a variety of topics that were current in Samantabhadra's time (roughly the fourth or fifth century ce). Finally, Akalaṅka (c. eighth century ce) is renowned for his critique of the work of the Buddhist logician, Dharmakīrti (c. seventh century ce).

The Jain doctrines of relativity are further developed by the Śvetāmbara thinkers, Siddhasena Divākara (c. fifth century ce) and Haribhadrasūri (c. eighth century ce). In particular, Haribhadrasūri is associated with the accommodating attitude toward non-Jain systems of thought that contemporary Jains see these (p. 162) doctrines as expressing. Additional renowned intellectuals of the Śvetāmbara tradition include Hemacandra (1089–1172 CE) and the relatively recent Yaśovijaya, who flourished in the seventeenth century.

Jain Ontology: The Nature of the Soul and *Anekāntavāda*

According to Jain ontology, the fundamental categories of being are soul (*jīva*), matter (*puḍgala*), space (*ākāśa*), time (*kāla*), the principle of motion (*dharma*), and the principle of rest (*adharma*). Soul is sentient and nonmaterial. Matter is nonsentient and, of course, material. Space, time, and the principles of motion and rest are neither sentient nor material.

Besides being sentient, soul is characterized by infinite knowledge (*jñāna*), bliss (*sukha*), and energy (*vīrya*). Souls are also many, their number corresponding to that of the number of living beings in the universe. The number of souls, though it is not, strictly speaking, infinite, is virtually infinite. Because knowledge is one of its essential traits and because it is not one, but many, the soul, as conceived in Jainism, is close to the *puruṣa* concept of the Sāṃkhya and Yoga systems.

In Sāṃkhya and Yoga, however, the soul, or *puruṣa*, finds itself bound to the cycle of rebirth because it has mistaken the qualities (*gunas*) of matter or nature (*prakṛitī*) for its own. It has misidentified itself with the world of matter.

In Jainism, however, the soul, or *jīva*, is bound to the cycle of rebirth because tiny, subtle particles of matter (*puḍgala*) have actually embedded themselves within it. This subvariety of matter, called *karma*, is the cause of the *jīva*'s bondage to *saṃsāra*, and it is this karmic bondage that Jainism, as a spiritual path, seeks to overcome.

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The *jīva* itself, according to Jainism, is not a material substance. But it does have a few qualities in common with matter, such as extension in both time and space and the ability to bond with karmic matter, that make the Jain conception of the soul distinctive among the schools of Indian philosophy.

In terms of temporal extension, the *jīva* is infinite, having no beginning or end. In terms of spatial extension, the soul takes on the shape of the body it currently occupies. This is sometimes compared with the light from a lamp that takes the shape of the room in which it is located. The *jīva* expands or contracts to fill its physical container.

The ability of the *jīva* to bond with karmic matter is compared to a cloth that becomes sticky when wet. It thus attracts dust, which is comparable to karmic matter. The water that wets the cloth, giving it its stickiness, is compared to the passions. The passions are deformations of the essential nature of the *jīva*, which, again, is intrinsically conscious, blissful, and energetic. The passions are evoked by experiences, which arise due to the karmic particles that have previously bonded with one's soul. Passions attract karmic particles of various kinds into the soul—the kind (p. 163) of particle depending on the kind and the intensity of the passion in question. Karmic particles are compared to seeds, which ripen and bear fruit at a given time, depending on what kind of seed they are and the condition of the spiritual “soil” in which they are planted. The “fruit” that the seed bears takes the form of a particular kind of experience. Experiences are pleasant, painful, or neutral, and evoke corresponding passions of attraction, aversion, or indifference. The passions, in turn, attract more karmic particles, or seeds, and the entire process repeats itself.

The goal of Jainism, as a spiritual path, is to purify the soul of karmic matter, to clean away the karmic “dust” that obscures the true nature of the soul, thus allowing the soul to shine forth in its intrinsically omniscient, blissful, and energetic nature. Ascetic practice is essential to this process, in order both to calm the passions, thus preventing further karmic influx, and to “burn off” the existing karmas already abiding in the soul.

Karmic matter is of various kinds, and an extensive Jain technical literature has emerged that divides this matter into various categories, based on its effects, and that goes into considerable detail regarding what these effects are, what kinds of actions cause them to be bound to the soul, and what one must do to rid oneself of them. In terms of the rebirth process, the most important karmic effects are those that determine the type of body the soul will inhabit in a given lifetime, what status it will have in the cosmic and social scheme of things, and how long its lifespan will be. The most destructive karmas are those that obscure knowledge, for these prevent one from understanding the true nature of reality and acting upon it, thus enabling one to fall even deeper into bondage.

Jain “karmic realism” has had a profound effect on the subsequent development of the Jain philosophical tradition, given it the sharply realist bent mentioned earlier. Due to karma being not simply the inevitable result of earlier actions, as in most of the Vedic systems of thought, or a kind of psychic energy that needs to be worked out, as is often found in Buddhist thought, but an actual, physical substance that has bonded with the

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soul, the emphasis of Jainism has overwhelmingly been ascetic practice—what one must do, and avoid doing, in order to reverse the process of karmic bondage. Philosophical claims are thus evaluated in terms of their ability to support spiritual practice. Idealistic tendencies that downplay the reality of the material world—views collectively called in the Jain tradition by the pejorative term *māyāvāda*, or “doctrine of illusion”—are rejected as undermining practice. A realist doctrine is affirmed instead, which seeks to account for all the dimensions of experience without relegating any to the realm of illusion.

At its most systematic, this realism is expressed in the “many-sided” doctrine, or *anekāntavāda*: the doctrine of the irreducible complexity of reality. According to the Jain critique of Vedānta and Buddhism, each of these systems clings, respectively, to a one-sided conception of reality as characterized by either permanence or impermanence. The Jain view, however, is presented as one that includes the fundamental insights of both traditions. According to the Jain view, reality is characterized by both permanence and impermanence, for both of these aspects of reality are disclosed in our experience of existence. To reject the ephemeral as illusory, as Advaita Vedānta does, for example, in favor of that which is permanent, or to reject continuity as illusory, as Buddhist schools of thought do, in favor of a view of reality as fundamentally impermanent, is, according to Jain thought, to take a biased and partial perspective. Our experience is characterized by continuity and change, by permanence and impermanence. Our conception of reality should therefore be able to accommodate both. According to the Umāsvāti, “Origination, cessation, and persistence constitute existence.”¹ Karmically determined states come and go, but the essential nature of the *jīva* remains.

Jain Epistemology: *Nayavāda*

The epistemology that develops from this understanding of reality as irreducibly complex is one that has enabled Jain philosophers to take stances toward other schools of thought that are both strikingly charitable and yet deeply critical. To continue with the theme of permanence and impermanence, Vedānta and Buddhism are both valid and true conceptions of reality, from their respective points of view (*nayas*). Haribhadrasūri, in his “Collection of Views on Yoga” (*Yogaḍṛṣṭisamuccaya*), is thus able to make charitable assertions about these and other rival systems reminiscent of the claims of modern or “neo” Vedāntins, such as Sri Ramakrishna and Mahatma Gandhi, that the world's religions are all true, or that they are so many paths to a common goal or destination:

The highest essence of going beyond *saṃsāra* is called “*nirvāṇa*.” The wisdom gained from discipline is singular in essence, though heard of in different ways.

“Eternal Śiva, Highest Brahman, Accomplished Soul, Suchness”: With these words one refers to it, though the meaning is one in all the various forms.²

Haribhadra depicts non-Jain systems, such as Vedānta and Buddhism, as well-intentioned attempts to achieve the common goal of *nirvāṇa*. Wisdom is to be respected, whatever its source, and in whatever terminology it is expressed.

At the same time, their approach allows the Jains to affirm that their system alone is the most comprehensive, and so the most true, incorporating, as it does, the essential truths of all the others. Hemacandra, employing the same approach in his revealingly titled “Ripper Apart of Other Systems of Thought” (*Anyayogavyavacchedika*), writes:

Being contrary to one another, the other systems are partial and mutually exclusive.

But your system [Mahāvīra's] is impartial, desiring all perspectives in their totality.³

(p. 165) Other systems, such as Vedānta and Buddhism, are depicted by Hemacandra as partial, favoring their particular insights into reality as characterized by either permanence or impermanence, unlike the impartial and more complete Jain system.

The epistemology of multiple perspectives (*nayavāda*) is intimately connected to the claim, made in the earliest extant Jain texts, of Mahāvīra's omniscience. Recall that according to Jain ontology, the *jīva* has infinite knowledge as one of its inherent qualities. This knowledge is obscured by the presence of knowledge-obscuring karma. But once a spiritual aspirant begins practicing ethical restraint and ascetic disciplines, these karmas begin to drop away, and the pure knowledge that is the soul's intrinsic nature begins to shine through in stages. One begins with the mundane forms of knowledge, which the *Tattvārthasūtra* characterizes as “empirical” (*mati*) and “linguistic” (*śrutā*). These refer, respectively, to the knowledge gained through the senses and through linguistically based concepts—the latter including both the knowledge received through the verbal testimony of another and the knowledge arrived at through logical reflection. As the knowledge-obscuring karmic matter is expelled from the *jīva*, one also develops clairvoyance (*vadhi*) and, at a more advanced stage, telepathy (*manaḥparyāya*). When all the karmic material is gone, and the intrinsic nature of the *jīva* is fully revealed, one experiences *kevalajñāna*—“unique” or “absolute” knowledge—which is defined as perfect omniscience.⁴

The Jain claim of absolute omniscience for enlightened beings, or *jinas*, such as Mahāvīra, has been a controversial one in the history of Indian philosophy, for the other systems of thought have not made such claims for their founding figures. The Buddhists do designate the Buddha as *sarvajña*, or “all-knowing.” But they qualify this claim with the explanation that the Buddha knows all that needs to be known in order to bring beings to *nirvāṇa*. He knows everything that he needs to know to save suffering beings. But he does not know, literally, everything. But this is precisely the claim that the Jains make for *jinas* such as Mahāvīra.

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This claim of omniscience for Mahāvīra is foundational for Jain perspectivalism because it is this claim that enables the Jain view not to lapse into a debilitating form of relativism. The views of various systems are all partly true, but a standard for evaluating *how* true they are, and in what senses, exists in the form of Mahāvīra's teaching.

In order to illustrate this point, Jain philosophers often invoke the story, the oldest extant version of which is actually found in a Buddhist scripture, of the Blind Men and the Elephant.

According to this famous story, a group of blind men come upon an elephant and begin to debate its nature. Being blind, each man grasps a particular part of the elephant and bases his assessment on that particular part, combined with his own past experiences. One man, grasping the trunk, claims that the elephant is like a (p. 166) snake. Another, feeling its side, says that the elephant is like a wall. Yet another, feeling a leg, says that the elephant is like a tree trunk. The one who grasps the elephant's tail claims that it is like a broom hanging from a ceiling, while the one who grasps a tusk finds it to be like a spear. And the one who grasps an ear says that the elephant is like a large winnowing fan.

Hearing such divergent descriptions and finding them to be unlike what his own experience reveals to him, each blind man begins to argue with the others until they are about to come to blows. Finally, a person who can see comes upon them and gently tells them that they are all partially correct and partially incorrect, for the elephant does have all of the characteristics that the blind men are ascribing to it, but it is reducible to none of them. Only a sighted person is capable of perceiving the entire elephant in its true, complex nature and explaining to the blind men how they are each partly right and partly wrong.

On a Jain interpretation, the blind men represent the adherents of the various rival systems of Indian philosophy, disputing with one another about the ultimate nature of reality. Is it permanence? Is it impermanence? The elephant is reality itself. And the person who can see is Mahāvīra, the enlightened *jina*, whose omniscience enables him to perceive the true nature of reality and assign each of the partial perspectives expressed by the other systems of thought to its proper place in the total scheme of existence. It is the absolutist affirmation of the omniscience of the *jina* that makes logically possible the nonabsolutist interpretation of non-Jain systems of thought.

Jain Logic and Linguistics: *Syādvāda*

An important implication of the Jain epistemology of multiple perspectives, each of which corresponds to a different aspect of reality (as affirmed in the Jain doctrine of the irreducible complexity of existence), is that all philosophical claims, in order to fully capture the truth, must be qualified. The Jain conception of language is not, as one finds

in some forms of Vedānta and Buddhism, one that it is wholly inadequate for capturing the nature of reality. Nor, on the other hand, do the Jains hold the view of the Mīmāṃsakas that the Sanskrit language corresponds perfectly to the realities it describes. The predominant Jain view is that language can describe reality in a provisional way, and that this ability can be enhanced through the proper qualification of one's claims. One cannot capture reality perfectly with language. But one can approach this goal by conditional predication.

What this means, essentially, is that proper philosophical discourse involves the specification of the perspective (*naya*) from which one's claims are made: the part of the elephant that one is grasping at a particular moment in time, to continue with the elephant metaphor. From one point of view, it is true that reality is characterized (p. 167) by permanence. From another point of view, it is true that reality is characterized by impermanence. The simple, unqualified or absolute claims that “reality is characterized by permanence” and that “reality is characterized by impermanence” are partially true and partially false: true to the degree that each captures a facet of the total complexity of reality, as it is disclosed in our experience, and false to the degree that it denies the truth of its contrary. But the qualified statements, “reality is, in one sense, or from one point of view, characterized by permanence” and “reality is, in yet another sense, or from yet another point of view, characterized by impermanence” are literally and absolutely true, so long as one specifies the senses in which they are true in terms that are logically compatible with the overall worldview of Jainism. The intrinsic nature of the soul, for example, is permanent, while the karmic states that it undergoes are impermanent.

The Jain expression of this principle is the doctrine of conditional predication, or *syādvāda*. The third-person singular, optative tense form of the Sanskrit verb “to be” is *syāt*, which, in ordinary discourse, would mean, “it may be,” “it could be,” or “it should be.” In Jain technical usage, however, this verb becomes a *nipāta*, or particle, meaning, “in some sense,” or “from a certain point of view it is the case that....” In order for a philosophical claim to be properly true, it needs to be made *syāt*—in a certain sense, or from a certain point of view—rather than absolutely.

According to the Jain logicians, there are seven possible truth-values that a claim can possess, once one allows for the various points of view from which it can be made:

- (p. 168) **1.** In a certain sense, or from a certain point of view (*syāt*), the claim is true.
2. In a certain sense, or from a certain point of view (*syāt*), the claim is false.
3. In a certain sense, or from a certain point of view (*syāt*), the claim is both true and false.
4. In a certain sense, or from a certain point of view (*syāt*), the truth of the claim is inexpressible (i.e., it is neither true nor false).
5. In a certain sense, or from a certain point of view (*syāt*), the claim is true and its truth is inexpressible.

6. In a certain sense, or from a certain point of view (*syāt*), the claim is false and its truth is inexpressible.

7. In a certain sense, or from a certain point of view (*syāt*), the claim is both true and false and its truth is inexpressible.

The first four truth-values are more or less intuitive, and analogous to a similar fourfold model of truth developed in the Buddhist tradition. The latter three constitute all of the possible logically nonredundant combinations of the first four.

With *syādvāda*, Jain philosophers are able to take the substantive claims made by various systems of thought and analyze them into their constituent truth values, showing them to be merely relative assertions of the truth as understood by the Jain tradition.

Syādvāda as Intellectual *Ahiṃsā*?

The central ethical principle of Jainism is *ahiṃsā*. This term, often translated as “nonviolence,” actually has a far more holistic meaning beyond the simple avoidance of physical harm that the English word “nonviolence” suggests. *Ahiṃsā* means the absence of even the desire to do harm in thought, word, or deed. Though critics of Jainism have at times suggested that *ahiṃsā* is a negative virtue, implying an attitude of indifference toward other beings—simply not harming as opposed to actively helping—this is not the predominant view within the Jain community, where *ahiṃsā* is often described in terms of compassion for all living things. The observance of *ahiṃsā* is the basis of most of the strict ascetic practices for which Jain monks and nuns are known, and for the moral rules governing lay activity as well. It is the cardinal virtue of Jainism and a central emphasis of even the earliest Jain scriptures, attributed to Mahāvīra himself.

The emphasis on *ahiṃsā* in one's speech does lead to rules governing the speech of ascetics, such as when the canonical *Daśavaikālikasūtra* enjoins ascetics not only to tell the truth, but also to avoid speaking harshly, even if one's words are true.⁵

Though it might be quite natural to see *syādvāda* as having evolved from such injunctions, the extensive polemical use to which it is put by traditional Jain logicians—even by the relatively charitable Haribhadrasūri—suggests that, historically, it has been more of a polemical tool evolving out of the distinctive, pluralistic conception of reality entailed by the worldview of early Jainism as expressed in the *Tattvarthasūtra* and the Śvetāmbara canon.

Contemporary Jains, however, do see in *anekāntavāda*, *nayavāda*, and *syādvāda* a powerful logical tool for expressing an open and pluralistic attitude in philosophical and religious discourse—for showing that the views of others have truth and value, while at the same time not compromising the truth and value of one's own perspective. And non-

Jain authors have also begun to look seriously at these doctrines for their possibilities as tools for developing a logically rigorous philosophy of religious pluralism.⁶

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Notes:

- (1.) Umāsvāti, *Tattvārthasūtra* 5:30. Translation by Tatia.
- (2.) Haribhadrasūri, *Yogaḍṛṣṭisamuccaya* 129–130. Translation by Chapple.
- (3.) Hemacandra, *Anyayogavyavacchedika* 30. Translation mine.
- (4.) Umāsvāti, *Tattvārthasūtra* 1:9–30.
- (5.) *Daśavaikālikasūtra* 7:2–3, 11, 13.
- (6.) See, for example, Sharma 2001 and Long 2007.

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