

Svadhyaaya: Jain Education for Adults in North America

Summary: Without the rich lay-monastic interactions available in the Indian Jain context, Jain practitioners in America have invented new ways to preserve their traditions. Throughout North America Jains have formed svadhyaaya (study groups) and invited scholars from abroad to discuss the scriptures.

Jain immigrants to this country absorbed a basic knowledge of Jainism from the Jain culture that surrounded them during their childhood in India. As adults in the United States, however, Jains realize they must take a more active approach than they would in India if they wish to gain an extensive knowledge of their religion. As a result, in several cities Jain adults have formed *svadhyaaya* (study groups). *Svadhyaaya* groups meet in family homes or Jain centers to read and discuss commentaries on Jain scriptures written by Jain scholars and monks. Unlike their children, these adults can take advantage of the wealth of Jain literature written in Indian languages.

Another resource for Americans is the increasing number of visiting Jain scholars invited from India to speak to audiences of Jain adults in the United States. Again, the language (usually Gujarati or Hindi) and the cultural context of these speakers—while a barrier for Jain youth in America—are ones with which the adult Jains can readily identify.

It is interesting to note that widespread interest in *svadhyaaya* groups and scholarly discourses is unique to the American context. In India, where lay people typically have daily interaction with monks and nuns, Jains attend the discourses of these renunciants. However study groups with members actively discussing issues (rather than passively listening) are rare in the Jain mainstream in India. By contrast, in the absence of monks and nuns in the United States, Jain adults have taken the responsibility for their religious education into their own hands.