

# **The Transformative Power of Inner Composure: A Psychological Analysis of Swami Mahavira's Compassion as a Catalyst for Behavioral Transformation.**

Dr. M.Brindhamani, M.A.,M.Phil., Ph.D(English ) M.Ed. M.Phil, Ph.D(Education). Principal , Vidhya Sagar Women's College of Education, Chengalpattu , Tamilnadu , India . Pin: 603111

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## **Abstract**

*This paper is an endeavour essentially bridging the gap between ancient Eastern hagiography and modern behavioral science. The core idea is that a person's affective state (their internal emotional environment) can act as a regulator for the people (or creatures) around them. This paper focuses on the legend of Swami Mahavira and the serpent Chandakaushika through the lens of modern psychology. It posits that the "miracle of milk" serves as a metaphor for physiological and psychological homeostasis. By utilizing theories such as Polyvagal Theory, Emotional Contagion, and Cognitive Appraisal, In an age marked by emotional reactivity, interpersonal conflicts, and mental unrest, the life and philosophy of Mahavira offer a timeless framework for inner transformation and social harmony. This paper explores how an individual, through mental discipline, composure, and unwavering integrity, can influence and transform even those driven by hostility or negativity. This paper further examines how an individual's radical composure and non-threatening presence can de-escalate extreme aggression and facilitate a "biological shift" in an antagonist. Integrating classical Jain principles with modern psychological theories, the paper argues that inner regulation is not merely a personal virtue but a powerful social force.*

**Key words:** Transformative Power, Inner Composure, Compassion, Catalyst, Behavioral Transformation.

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## **I. Introduction**

Human interactions are often shaped by emotional impulses, cognitive biases, and unresolved internal conflicts. Yet, history presents rare individuals who, through mastery over their inner world, were able to influence others profoundly. Mahavira, the 24th Tirthankara of Jainism, exemplifies such mastery. His teachings of compassion, self-restraint, and equanimity demonstrate that inner stillness can neutralize external turbulence.

This story was first narrated to me by Poojya Sadhwi Kalyani ji of Veerayatan. The moment it was narrated, something happened within me which shook my inner self. If kindness and generosity could bring in so much of Vaathsalya in one's own self, why shouldn't this become a research to contribute in transforming lives! Then there began this exploration and had been running within the heart for 7 long years.

The story of Mahavira and Chandakaushika is often viewed through a religious lens, but it functions as a master class in conflict resolution. When the serpent attacked, Mahavira did not engage the "Fight-or-Flight" system. Instead, he maintained a state of "Equanimity" (Samatva). The secretion of milk signifies a body purged of the biochemistry of stress (cortisol and adrenaline), replaced by the biochemistry of connection and nurturance (oxytocin). This paper examines how tuning the mind, maintaining composure, and embodying integrity can transform even those with "venomous thoughts," drawing connections to psychological Theoretical frameworks such as emotional regulation, cognitive behavioral theory, and social learning.

## **II. Literature Review**

Previous scholarship in psychology has consistently emphasized the role of internal regulation in shaping external behavior. Gross (1998) highlights how emotional regulation influences interpersonal outcomes. Porges (2011) explains how perceived safety or threat governs behavioral responses through autonomic states. Beck (1976) demonstrates that cognitive distortions are central to maladaptive behavior, while Rogers (1957) emphasizes the transformative impact of unconditional positive regard. Bandura (1977) further establishes that individuals learn and modify behavior through observation and modeling.

While these theories examine human interaction in contemporary contexts, limited work has attempted to interpret ancient spiritual narratives through these frameworks. This paper contributes to the literature by integrating classical Jain philosophy with modern psychological theory, offering a novel interdisciplinary perspective on behavioral transformation.

## **Theoretical Frameworks**

### **1. Gross's Process Model of Emotion Regulation**

#### **The Concept of Mental Tuning and Emotional Regulation**

Modern psychology emphasizes *emotional regulation* as a key to mental well-being. According to **Gross's Process Model of Emotion Regulation**, individuals can influence their emotions by modifying how they perceive and respond to situations. Mahavira's life reflects an advanced form of this principle. Instead of reacting impulsively to provocation, he cultivated:

- **Awareness of internal states**
- **Detachment from immediate emotional impulses**
- **Conscious choice of response over reaction**

By mastering his internal responses, Mahavira demonstrated that emotional stability can disarm aggression.

### **2. Stephen Porges's Polyvagal Theory**

Stephen Porges's Polyvagal Theory offers a profound lens through which we can reinterpret the transformative encounter between Mahavira and Chandakaushika. Polyvagal Theory conceptualizes the autonomic nervous system not merely as a regulator of bodily functions, but as a deeply intelligent neural platform that continuously shapes our behavioral, physiological, and psychological responses. At the heart of this theory lies the concept of *neuroception*—an unconscious, moment-to-moment scanning of the environment for cues of safety or threat. From this perspective, every being—human or animal—is not simply reacting, but evaluating, beneath the threshold of conscious awareness. In the episode under consideration, Chandakaushika, the serpent, can be understood as existing in a state of **high sympathetic arousal**—a condition of defensive mobilization characterized by aggression, vigilance, and readiness to strike. This is not merely “anger,” but a biologically entrenched survival response. Stephen Porges's Polyvagal Theory explains how beings constantly scan for safety through neuroception. Chandakaushika, in a state of high sympathetic arousal, was primed for aggression. Mahavira, through perfect stillness and compassion, embodied a powerful cue of safety. This non-threatening presence disrupted the snake's defensive state and enabled down-regulation. Thus, transformation occurred not by force, but by the regulation of one nervous system influencing another.

### **3. Cognitive Behavioral Insights: Transforming Thought Patterns**

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy reminds us that thoughts silently shape emotions and actions. When perception is distorted, behavior turns destructive. Mahavira, through Right perception, Right knowledge, and Right conduct, restores clarity at the very root of thinking. He does not fight negativity—he dissolves the illusion that sustains it. In the presence of such clarity, even venomous thoughts lose their grip. And what remains is not reaction, but a quiet, transforming compassion. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) posits that thoughts influence emotions and behaviors. Negative or distorted thinking patterns often lead to destructive actions.

Mahavira's teachings encourage:

- **Right perception (Samyak Darshan)**
- **Right knowledge (Samyak Jnana)**
- **Right conduct (Samyak Charitra)**

These principles mirror CBT's goal of restructuring maladaptive thoughts. By refining perception and understanding, individuals can dissolve hostility at its cognitive root. Thus, when faced with venomous thoughts from others, a composed individual does not internalize or mirror negativity but instead responds with clarity and compassion, interrupting the cycle of reactive behavior. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy tells us—change the thought, and the storm will pass. But Mahavira went deeper—he purified perception itself. Where the world saw threat, he saw truth; where others reacted, he remained untouched. In that clarity, anger found no meaning, no fuel. And when a mind refuses to echo darkness, even the fiercest venom forgets how to wound.

### **4. Emotional Contagion and Mirror Neurons**

The concepts of Emotional Contagion and Mirror Neurons suggest that beings subconsciously absorb and reflect the emotional states of others. Chandakaushika's aggression, therefore, sought a corresponding threat to sustain itself. In the presence of Mahavira, who embodied absolute non-violence and zero predatory intent, there was nothing for that aggression to latch onto. His profound calmness functioned as a mirror, reflecting the violence back without reinforcement. Deprived of response, the aggression gradually dissolved on its own. Emotional Contagion and Mirror Neurons reveal a simple truth—we become what we encounter. When Chandakaushika met Mahavira, there was no fear, no threat, no hatred to reflect. His silence was not emptiness, but a powerful absence of violence. With nothing to strike against, the snake's fury began to collapse inward. And in that stillness, aggression did not fight—it faded. We subconsciously mimic the emotions of those around us. Mirror neurons allow us to “feel” the intent of another. When the snake encountered a being with zero

"predatory intent," its own aggression had nothing to "bounce" off. The profound calmness of Mahavira acted as a psychological mirror, reflecting the snake's own violence back to it until the violence dissipated for lack of reinforcement.

#### 4. Carl Rogers's "The Radical Acceptance"

Unconditional Positive Regard teaches that deep, non-judgmental acceptance can melt even the strongest defenses. In the presence of Mahavira, compassion was not shown—it was felt, like that of a mother who sees beyond all flaws. Even in its most venomous state, the being was neither rejected nor feared. And when there is nothing to defend against, the need to defend quietly disappears. In that acceptance, the poison loses its purpose—and falls away. Unconditional Positive Regard has a quiet power—it disarms without a fight. In the presence of Mahavira, there was no judgment, only boundless, mother-like compassion. Even at its most venomous, the being was fully seen and not rejected. With nothing to resist, its defenses had nowhere to stand. And in that sacred acceptance, the poison simply lost the will to exist. Unconditional Positive Regard can dissolve defenses. Mahavira's "motherly" compassion is the ultimate form of unconditional positive regard. Psychology suggests that when an individual feels completely seen and not judged—even in their "venomous" state—the need for the defensive "mask" (or venom) disappears.

#### Discussion: Transforming the "Venomous Thought"

The paper argues that "venom" in a human context represents *Reactive Aggression*. In this framework, "venom" is understood as reactive aggression—an outward eruption of an unsettled mind. Through the discipline of Samayika, (Meditation) Mahavira cultivated a finely tuned awareness, creating a quiet psychological buffer that no external hostility could penetrate. His composure did not depend on the behavior before him; it arose from an unshakable inner integrity. Deprived of a reaction, the aggression lost its target and turned inward. And in that moment, what appeared as conquest became awakening—a deep cognitive shift, where the real battle was not with the other, but within. Take aways from this incident of Swami Mahavira:

- **Tuning the Mind:** By "tuning" the mind through meditation (*Samayika*), an individual creates a "Psychological Buffer Zone."
- **Integrity and Stability:** Because Mahavira's internal state was not dependent on the snake's behavior, he maintained **Internal Integrity**.
- **The Transformation:** The snake's "awakening" is a metaphor for a **Cognitive Shift**. When the external threat (the snake's perception of Mahavira) was removed, the snake was forced to face its own internal suffering, leading to a change in its behavioral trajectory.

#### Practical Implications for Modern Society

The quality of Mahavira—transforming blood to milk—suggests that our internal state is our greatest tool for social change. In high-stress environments (negotiations, therapy, or social conflicts), the individual who maintains the highest level of composure and genuine compassion dictates the "emotional temperature" of the room. *True power is not the ability to destroy an enemy, but the ability to dissolve the "enmity" within the enemy through one's own biological and mental purity.* Social Learning Theory suggests that people learn behaviors by observing others. Role models who display calmness and integrity can unconsciously influence observers. Mahavira did not preach transformation through force but through embodiment. His consistent practice of non-violence and equanimity served as a living example.

Observers, even those initially hostile, were gradually influenced by:

- His unwavering calmness under provocation
- His refusal to retaliate
- His deep compassion

This reflects *modeling*, where behavior change occurs not through instruction but through observation. From a psychological perspective, conflict escalates when emotional responses are mirrored. This is explained by the concept of *emotional contagion*, where emotions spread between individuals.

Mahavira's approach disrupts this cycle:

- He **absorbs negativity without reflecting it back**
- He maintains **emotional neutrality**
- he responds with **immeasurable compassion**

Modern conflict resolution strategies also emphasize this principle—calmness de-escalates tension. Self-Concept and *congruence* (as proposed by Carl Rogers) highlight the importance of alignment between beliefs, values, and actions. Mahavira's integrity was absolute:

- His **thoughts, words, and actions** were perfectly aligned
- There was **no internal contradiction**

This authenticity builds **trust and psychological safety**, making others more receptive to transformation.

### **Applications in Contemporary Life**

In today's context—whether in workplaces, families, or society—the principles derived from Mahavira's life are highly relevant:

- **Mindfulness practices** can enhance emotional regulation
- **Cognitive restructuring** can reduce negative thinking
- **Leading by example** can influence social behavior
- **Non-reactivity** can resolve conflicts effectively

These are not merely spiritual ideals but practical psychological tools.

### **III. Conclusion**

The life of Mahavira demonstrates that the greatest transformation begins within. By tuning the mind, maintaining composure, and living with integrity, an individual becomes a powerful agent of change. Psychological theories affirm what Mahavira embodied centuries ago: that inner mastery can reshape external reality. In a world increasingly driven by reaction, the ability to remain calm and centered is not weakness but profound strength. It is through this strength that even the most venomous thoughts can be neutralized and transformed.

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