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ARTICLES

The Jain Life of Principle

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Jains live according to the core values of ahiṃsā, anekāntavāda, and aparigraha, which all follow the logic of karmic causality. These principles together offer contemporary society the tools needed to reverse course and address the many harms that currently afflict it. Understanding the law of karma supplies the framework for conscious action. Ahiṃsā establishes the moral foundation of non-harm. Aparigraha ensures that we live lives full, not of possessions, but of compassion and generosity. The principle of anekāntavāda leaves the individual open-minded and undisturbed by the views of others, increasing both the ability to learn and the ability to teach. The Jain life of principle is a worthy ideal to which we all might aspire.

If there is one thing that can be safely said it is that our society has observed a steady decline in our times. The benefit of this is that the need for change has become self-evident. There are many perceptible paths towards this change, but it is with a transformative effort in mind that Jainism is here discussed and dissected. Some readers may be familiar with Jainism in a religious context, while others may have never heard of it at all. However, that shall not prevent the scrutiny and sharing of a set of principles of thought and conduct by which one may relieve and even reverse this trend of deterioration present in our society. Even in such an age as this, Jainism, as both a way of life and as the practice of a set of principles, is applicable to and can improve our daily lives.

What is Jainism? Jainism, although often portrayed in a religious light, is better seen as a practice—a practice by which one works towards freeing oneself from the vicious karmic cycle to which we are all subject. Those who succeed in overcoming the karmic cycle are called Jinas (conquerors) and the practice of Jainism is simply the practice of one who attempts to become a Jina. Something worth observing here is the level of personal responsibility inherent in the Jain tradition: individuals are unequivocally responsible for the liberation of their own souls, and this is the biggest task of their existence.

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Jainism is essentially a non-theistic tradition that does not quibble over divine or mundane but is chiefly concerned with enlightenment and the corresponding liberation from the karmic cycle. Within the Jain tradition the thing closest to "worship" is the reverence expressed to the Tīrthaṅkaras as beings who have achieved enlightenment and show the way for others. Although the Jains show honor to those who tread the way, supplication and prayer are activities that do not fit the framework of such an instrumentalist mode of thought. Even in the worship that practitioners extend to the Tīrthaṅkaras there is no expectation of aid or sudden illumination; they are simply honoring the progress one practitioner has made towards enlightenment.

The Jain practitioner is not burdened with multiple sets of prayers nor required to worship a deity; instead, the task they have is to live a life focused on the four principles. The four principles are as follows: karmic causality, ahiṃsā or non-harm, anekāntavāda or non-absolutism, and aparigraha or non-attachment. These four principles form the backbone of Jain thought, and the observation of these principles entails one's practice as a Jain. Ahiṃsā, anakāntavāda, and aparigraha are principles intended towards thought and conduct while the law of karmic causality is the framework these principles operate under.

Karma and Ahiṃsā

Karmic causality is the realization or assumption that everything in the universe is karmically connected and that every recorded action has a karmic effect that will inevitably occur in this lifetime or the next, thus ensuring the continued entrapment of the soul within the cycle of rebirth. The Jains have an analogy for this. In this analogy the soul is said to resemble a clean bowl floating on the surface. As the bowl floats along it attracts little pieces of metal and dirt. As it gets heavier and heavier it gets dragged deeper and deeper and for it to rise back to the top it must shed the mud and metal particles attached to it. In the same way, the human soul becomes burdened by the karma of various activities, it sinks deeper into the karmic pool and will no longer be free to float at the top.

Now, given that liberation from karma is the end goal of Jainism, actions that increase karma are contrary to the tradition while actions that reduce it are encouraged. This has overarching implications when examining our own conduct, especially as the Jains embrace an extremely "chronic perspective" on karma with its effects possibly lasting hundreds or even millions of rebirths. This theory of causality is also partially responsible for the active role that Jains have played in environmental and ecological initiatives, and it is thanks to this theory of karmic causation that the concept of non-harm or ahiṃsā becomes so relevant, especially as this theory is not solely limited to animals and humans but involves all karmically affected beings, including plants and rocks.

Ahiṃsā is the responsibility of the practitioner to avoid harming life forms, this applies not only to physical harm, but also to ethical and moral wrongdoings. "Ahimsa has been emphasized to an extraordinary degree within the Jain tradition, to the point that it has become synonymous with it."[1] The implication of karmic causality is that Ahimsa reaches not just into our physical day-to-day interactions with each other and our surroundings, but also into the bubble of slow destruction that has surrounded our environments, ecologies, and countries. Karmic causality extends not only into the physical world, but, most importantly, into our minds. For the Jains, even small violences within the thoughts of one's mind are to be controlled and quieted—not to do so is not to hold oneself to the proper standard. Ahiṃsā is both a gradual principle that, in a ripple effect, continues to impact family, friends, co-workers, etc. However, it is enacted, first and foremost in the way one treats and perceives one's self. In other words, ahiṃsā begins in the mind of the practitioner.

Of course, ahiṃsā is a difficult thing to practice in this modern era, and practitioners must go to great pain to avoid using products or services that bring undue harm to plants, animals, or ecological systems. Furthermore, it can be difficult to look at ahiṃsā as an idealized state that will never be fully obtained, while using it as foundation for one's spiritual practice, but ahiṃsā may be the most important practice in the Jain tradition. As the Jain saying goes, "Ahimsa Paramo Dharmah," which translates to, "Non-violence is the supreme way."[2]

At first sight, the principle of ahiṃsā may appear to be an unreachable ideal, especially in terms of today's lifestyles. However, the important thing to keep in mind here is that Jainism is a gradualistic approach to liberation and as such its principles are also gradualistic. There are two stages of progression through the principle of ahiṃsā. The first stage involves taking actions and embracing thoughts that avoid harming other souls, whether they be animal, human, or plant. The second stage entails loving other souls and actively allowing that love to express itself in your thoughts, words, and actions. Following the principle of ahiṃsā does not mean you are immediately beholden to completely change your lifestyle, but neither should you ignore its condition and neglect it further. As S. Jain insightfully states in his article "The Environmental Doctrines of Jainism," "the most common form of violence being ignored is overburdening the helpers, dependents, animals and natural resources and not giving them their food, clothing, shelter and compensation due to them."[3]

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1 Wiley, "Views on Ahimsa, Compassion and Samyaktva in Jainism," 15.

2 Jain, *Jain Way of Life*, 3.

3 Jain, *Environmental Doctrines of Jainism*, 16.

Ahiṃsā is the response the Jains have formulated in answer to the question of how to treat their world. Taking little steps to reduce the suffering that you inflict on other beings is only the beginning. The dedicated practitioner of Jainism takes the stance that he is responsible for the alleviation of all the harm suffered by the entire world and, according to Jain thought, the simplest way to relieve other souls is to consume less yourself.

Aparigraha

Aparigraha, which translates to non-attachment or non-possessiveness, represents the personal responsibility of the practitioner to their environment and to themselves. Excessive consumption is inherently contrary to the practice of Jainism, as consumption causes one to become attached and can lead one to greed and desire for more. There is a clear delineation made in Jain tradition between using and consuming. Kamla Jain states it best in her book, *Aparigraha: The Humane Solution*, where she says, "The term 'consumerism' is derived from 'consume' which literally means 'to exhaust', 'to waste', 'to destroy by wasting'; this literal meaning of the term throws light on its negative implications. The term 'consume' should be differentiated from the term 'use' which has a positive implication."[4] This is especially relevant to the lifestyles of today, because living in an age of consumerism makes it frighteningly apparent how uncontrollable those urges to consume can be. Feeding these urges results in the over-burdening of the environment, the community and one's own karma. As S. Jain observes "Aparigraha is thus an effective measure to strengthen and facilitate the observance of the vow of Ahimsa."[5] Relinquishing these urges or controlling them allows the environment to flourish freely and harmoniously and this is both the accomplishment and way of the Jain practitioner.

Of course, controlling desires and not allowing them to influence one's level of consumption and possession can be easier said than done, nor is the expectation one of complete renunciation. Again, Jainism incorporates a gradualistic approach to this principle, with levels of renunciation available to both ordained and lay-practitioners. At higher levels practitioners begin to forgo the use or consumption of clothing, food, and even water. For the rest of us it behooves us to dwell upon and consider, both the consequences and implications, before acquiring a new possession or following an impulsive desire. If upon consideration it is found to cause harm to other beings, then the practitioner's adherence to his vow of ahiṃsā will, of necessity, cause him to refrain from acquiring that thing or executing that action. As Yogendra Jain expresses, "If you ultimately feel that you own nothing and no one,

4 Jain, *Aparigraha: The Humane Solution*, 7–8.

5 Jain, *Environmental Doctrines of Jainism*, 43.

you will not trample the ecology on which our survival depends."[6] Following this path the Jain paves a road that allows others to remain undisturbed and ensures that the practitioner will himself remain unattached and unimpeded on their way to liberation.

Anekāntavāda

As we make our way through the world we are drawing on an endless number of assumptions and perspectives. It is almost a given that we will end up acquiring a degree of attachment and familiarity with specific perspectives and ideas, while others will be avoided or rejected. Both truth and reality are mental constructs upon which humans have very little mastery as we are only capable of expressing a small portion of each and, in recognizing this, the Jain principle of anekāntavāda declares that each perspective is a small part of a greater whole. There is a common fable that illustrates this where five blind men touch an elephant on separate parts of its body. When they gather and attempt to explain to one another the physical nature of the elephant they are all found to have different answers, because each touched only a single part of the elephant. In a similar fashion, we humans all have a single perspective on the whole of truth and thus we should embrace and respect the perspectives of others.

Anekāntavāda, put simply, is mental non-possessiveness, although it translates literally as non-onesidedness. Ensuring that the practitioner does not become too attached to his own thoughts and practices allows for continued spiritual development. Whereas, if the practitioner develops attachment to his own ideas and practices, he commits a kind of intellectual violence, i.e., he remains beholden to his attachments, blinded to the perspectives of others and intolerant of their views. For our purposes we may regard anekāntavāda as a safeguard to the vow of ahiṃsā or even a form of mental ahiṃsā. John E. Cort visits this subject in his article, "'Intellectual Ahiṃsā' Revisited: Jain Tolerance and Intolerance of Others," when he states that, "Just as all living beings are to be treated with respect and non-violence, so the Jains adopted the stance that the perspectives of all living beings are to be treated with respect and non-violence—in this case, intellectual non-violence."[7]

These four principles form the foundation for the practice of Jainism and the incorporation of these principles into our daily lives is both possible and advisable. Understanding the law of karma will supply the individual with the framework necessary to hear a conscience that is too often lost amid the endless texting, scrolling, and other noise. Actively making decisions based on karmic merit allows the practitioner to step away from the arbitrary condemnations and judgements of society. Aparigraha ensures that we live

6 Jain, *Jain Way of Life*, 3.

7 Cort, "'Intellectual Ahiṃsā' Revisited: Jain Tolerance and Intolerance of Others," 1.

lives full, not of possessions, but of clarity, compassion, and generosity. Observing the principle of anekāntavāda leaves the individual open-minded and undisturbed by the views of others, increasing both the ability to learn and the ability to teach. Truly, I too aspire to be such an individual.

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