

## ARTICLES

# Jainism beyond Jainism: Jain Contributions to Animals Ethics and Ecology

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Keywords: Jainism, animal ethics, ecology, veganism

<https://doi.org/10.12794/journals.suijs.v1i2.302>

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*Samyak: An Undergraduate Journal of Jain Studies*Vol. 1, Issue 2, 2025

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Jainism's core value of non-harm is undeniably rooted in its ascetic philosophy. Its asceticism is, in turn, rooted in its specific metaphysical, cosmological, and religious doctrines regarding the nature of souls, karmic bondage, and liberation. The benefits of non-harm, however, are widely relevant to all people. This essay argues that Jainism contributes significantly to secular discourses on animal ethics and ecological sustainability. Its ability to communicate its core message in both religious and secular contexts is part of its strength.

The Jain principle of *ahiṃsā* (non-violence) and its accompanying practices—particularly radical veganism and intentional elimination of harm—offer a provocative ethical framework for having contemporary conversations even with people unfamiliar with Jainism. This essay argues that Jainism's practical and philosophical ideals, though ascetic in origin, provide actionable insights for non-Jains seeking greater ethical consistency. Jainism's uncompromising commitment to minimizing violence against all life challenges the moral compass that prioritizes humans alone. By examining Jain dietary laws and ecological mindset, I will demonstrate how these principles can inform secular movements without requiring religious adherence.

## Religious Rationale for the Jain Diet

Jainism's approach to non-violence extends far beyond passive avoidance of harm—it demands proactive, daily choices to minimize suffering in every possible form. At the core of Jainism and its practices is the path to *mokṣa*, the liberation or release of the soul from its karmic cycle.<sup>1</sup> This cycle is one of constant rebirth due to the karma the soul has attracted during its chain of existences.<sup>2</sup> Karma is attracted to the soul regarding all action—karma does not cloak itself in just a negative connotation, as karma can be the result of

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<sup>1</sup> Pāṇiker, *Jainism: History, Society, Philosophy, and Practice*, 11.

<sup>2</sup> Pāṇiker, *Jainism*, 11.

“good” and “bad” deeds. To truly reach spiritual liberation one must practice an ascetic lifestyle to eradicate all karma, and only then can practitioners rid themselves of the ties to this world and transcend the human condition.

Practicing this lifestyle means recognizing the world is full of living beings, *jīvas*, which are souls bound by the karmic cycle.<sup>3</sup> The body that holds the soul is a result of past actions committed. As the goal is to ultimately shed this shell, Jains recognize every living being is seeking liberation and this influences their path of non-violence. There is a state of equality between all souls, not influenced by the bonded matter that carries it. Part of this ascetic lifestyle calls Jains to purify their being, shed their ignorance and attachment, and practice many ascetic concepts like meditation, dietary restrictions, confessions, penances, etc.<sup>4</sup> All of these are practiced prevent further accumulation of karma and “burn that which has already accumulated.”<sup>5</sup>

In conjunction with their dietary restrictions is the view of *ahiṃsā*, non-violence towards every living being. *Ahiṃsā* prevents even the most minute action that could possibly harm an animal. Thus, promoting many of their dietary laws, Jains are vegetarians or vegans, meaning animals are strictly prohibited from being consumed. Other categories of food like root vegetables or honey are also restricted, as harvesting root vegetables kills the plants and harms soil organisms, and the retrieval of honey may harm bees or do other damage to the ecosystem. These combined practices result in an extraordinarily strict way of living that promotes the wellbeing of every living creature on the planet. Though strict, this concept may be of benefit to people unfamiliar with Jainism.

### **The Relevance of Jain Dietary Practices outside Asceticism**

A vegan or vegetarian diet is not exclusive to those who are living an ascetic life. Other countries see this phenomenon as people have decided meat consumption conflicts with their moral compass or harms the environment to an extent that becomes uncomfortable. This is reflected in many vegetarian diets that renounce forms of meat but can compromise on certain dairy products and animal by-products.<sup>6</sup> While some may choose the path of a monk or nun, others seek ways to practice non-harm in worldly life. This is heavily represented in the practices of laypeople, individuals who are not ordained but may still follow ascetic lifestyles, especially regarding diet. While it tends to vary between households, these lifestyles tend to be less strict while still adhering to their religious practices regarding the shedding of karma.

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<sup>3</sup> Pániker, *Jainism*, 12.

<sup>4</sup> Pániker, *Jainism*, 14.

<sup>5</sup> Pániker, *Jainism*, 14

<sup>6</sup> Cort, “Singing the Glory of Asceticism: Devotion of Asceticism in Jainism,” 723.

Many non-Jain North Americans, in contrast, have adopted an ideology of over-consumption and free reign over their diets. Often there is little to no consideration behind what is being consumed and what has suffered to be prepared on the plate. As of May 2025, over 19 billion animals have been slaughtered in the United States alone, chickens, turkeys, cows, etc.<sup>7</sup> Philosophical contemplation over the ethical decisions behind these trends are rare as we often overlook their suffering. Subsequently society tends to ostracize people who may need or choose a restricted diet. The extent of Jain restrictions should not obscure their value; instead the dedication of Jains should open up larger conversations about more deliberate practices reflecting our shared responsibility in society. Humans are long past their days of hunting and gathering, opening the doors to this conversation over multiple forms of food consumption. This feature of the human experience is constantly taken for granted as we fill the lines at fast food restaurants and support products that harm animals by the thousands daily. The Jain ascetic view provides a lifestyle of the upmost respect for our planet. The idea of taking responsibility for each of our actions need not be esoteric or other-worldly. While devotion to the upmost degree is not required, it may assist in creating more conversations about ethics and the state of our treatment of other living beings.

## Religious Background for Animal Ethics and Ecology in Jainism

Proceeding on from Jain dietary functions are its rooted ethical relations to animals and subsequently all living beings. Firstly, we must define what *ahimsā* really means, which is usually translated to non-harm or non-violence.<sup>8</sup> Jain non-violence delegates that no injury, killing, harming, or damaging can come to living beings as the Jain adherent is required to treat “all beings as he himself would be treated.”<sup>9</sup> There are two consequences to consider when discussing the effects of harming a living being, as Irina Aristarkhova discusses:

1. “That one’s harmful action aimed at another life disrupts the essential life force/soul, *jīva*, that connects and is common to all living things and creatures.”<sup>10</sup>
2. “That the harmful action adheres karmic matter onto oneself in a manner that holds one to the endless circle of life.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> “2025 U.S. Animal Kill Clock,” <https://animalclock.org/>.

<sup>8</sup> Aristarkhova, “Thou Shall Not Harm All Living Beings: Feminism, Jainism, and Animals,” 639.

<sup>9</sup> Aristarkhova, “Thou Shall Not Harm,” 639.

<sup>10</sup> Aristarkhova, “Thou Shall Not Harm,” 639.

<sup>11</sup> Aristarkhova, “Thou Shall Not Harm,” 639.

Thus, careful consideration arises from all who seek to reach mokṣa and arrive at the end of their karmic cycle. Careful consideration through every action is asked of the Jains as they navigate their daily lives. Some forsake many comforts to commit to this path. A moment to admire this commitment may be owed. Furthermore, there are three different paths of harming that any Jain needs to be aware of to lead an ethical lifestyle as identified by *Ācārāṅga Sūtra*:

1. “Direct harm: killing animals for food, clothing, sacrifice” among any other action that has the slightest possibility to promote the harm of a living thing.”<sup>12</sup>
2. “Through indirect harm: by acquiring and consuming products that abetted, even if unknowingly, someone else to kill or harm animals.”<sup>13</sup>
3. “Finally, humans harm animals by not preventing others from harming them and by not helping animals that have been already harmed.”<sup>14</sup>

Some of these requirements require strong will and the ability to question normalized practices. These strengths enable not only individual growth, philosophically and spiritually, but open doors that are not conveniently opened. By this I mean the true amount of effort we must allocate to recognize our debt to the world that supports us. While these claims may seem extreme to a common passerby, this almost analytical critical thinking allows for more connectedness with our environment.

This is not passivity, as Jains are extremely proactive in stopping the accumulation of more karma and the harming of creatures through these methods and awarenesses.<sup>15</sup> As all living beings are walking towards liberation; people essentially are harming themselves when they bring about the destruction of a body consisting of a soul. Through this line of thinking, anyone can proceed with a more thoughtful view towards our world, tailored to its wellbeing instead of our convenience.

Once again, we are brought to consider Jain tradition in relation to non-Jain communities in a place like North America. Jain practices perhaps only seem extreme or outlandish because we have made an equally extreme view commonplace, namely that humans are at the top of the food chain, consequently affirming our right to subjugate animals or plants to our will

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<sup>12</sup> Aristarkhova, “Thou Shall Not Harm,” 639.

<sup>13</sup> Aristarkhova, “Thou Shall Not Harm,” 639.

<sup>14</sup> Aristarkhova, “Thou Shall Not Harm,” 639.

<sup>15</sup> Aristarkhova, “Thou Shall Not Harm,” 640.

if benefit is received. This anthropocentric ideology has planted almost irretrievable seeds in the minds of many Americans as we continue to justify the harming of animals for our own gain or entertainment. Animals are murdered by the thousands daily to provide material for fast food chains to keep up with our indulgent tendencies, hunting can be considered a sport as weapons of destruction are boasted for aesthetic purposes, and more. Similar to the above discussion over Jainism's strict dietary laws, its take on animal ethics also has much to offer non-Jains. These practices not only satisfy religious doctrines but introduce philosophical perspectives to those who might never consider questioning prevailing tendencies.

### **The Connection beyond Jainism**

This framework as analyzed above offers Jains their pathway to spiritual liberation while benefiting the quality of life of all who participate or consider the ethics behind these decisions of ascetic living. Through Jainism's dietary practices and its care towards living beings and the environment, it is obvious that while these practices may relate to a bigger religious picture, they also provide the basis for a philosophical way of living that places responsibility in the user's hands. Sitting idly by while one makes decisions absent from ethical thinking has proven to be threatening.

This raises the question: what form can these practices take in a secular context? Jains may be renowned for their extreme ascetic lifestyle, but their principles potentially provide a groundwork for those who are willing to have more ethical conversations outside of religious adherence. Irina Aristarkhova cites Kelly Oliver, who says: "We need to move from an ethics of sameness, through to an ethics of difference, toward an ethics of *rationality* and *responsivity*."<sup>16</sup> This quote critiques the state of modern thinking that encourages people to brawl it out for their own survival whether that be in capitalist or ecological systems. This drove humans to science and technology to coerce the environment to better fit our extravagant needs.<sup>17</sup> "This manipulation has brought about a disruption of the entire complex of life systems. The florescence that distinguishes these communities in the past is now severely diminished. A degradation of the natural world has taken place."<sup>18</sup> Our connection to other living beings has seen a drastic loss of humanity as we progress century by century.

Christopher Chapple calls for a new worldview in his article, "The Living Cosmos of Jainism: A Traditional Science Grounded in Environmental Ethics," suggesting that our disconnect with Earth renders us in desperate need of new insights. These insights can directly be related to Jain practices

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<sup>16</sup> Aristarkhova, "Thou Shall Not Harm," 641.

<sup>17</sup> Chapple, "The Living Cosmos of Jainism: A Traditional Science Grounded in Environmental Ethics," 218.

<sup>18</sup> Chapple, "The Living Cosmos," 218.

as these support and encourage the betterment of tomorrow every day. Consistently trying to bridge the gap between humans and nature, Jains have many philosophical calls to action that are dared to be referred to as a necessary conversation across the globe.<sup>19</sup> Through Jain ethics can we start to rid ourselves of anthropocentric views that subjugate nature to human dominion.<sup>20</sup> The Jain culture of environmental ethics seeks not only to offer a path to mokṣa but also to repair the damage that has been done by uniting every living being and pursuing the responsible action, or restraints on action, required to promote a better tomorrow full of ethical awareness.

## Conclusion

Jainism requires a heavy toll to ultimately reach the end goal of spiritual liberation—it asks for an ascetic practice beyond that of common devotion and responsible action. Nonetheless, through strict dietary requirements and profound environmental ethics, Jainism can contribute to a secular discussion with those not looking for strict religious requirements. Contemporary outlooks, specifically in North American households, hold that the environment and its inhabitants exist to benefit humankind. As such, the ethical discourse over our treatment of the planet and its creatures needs a new perspective, one that Jain culture can provide. We need an outlook of ethical mindfulness, not only for one's own growth but for that same care in the preservation of the environment, to begin to prohibit the suffering of animals for our pleasure or convenience. Maybe through conversations such as in Jain philosophy can we communicate better to breach ignorance and proceed towards a better tomorrow.

Published: October 01, 2025 CDT.



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<sup>19</sup> Chapple, "The Living Cosmos," 219.

<sup>20</sup> Chapple, "The Living Cosmos," 219.

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