

Reverence for all Life-forms: A Jain Approach to Sustainability

Samani Pratibha Pragma

Jains abide by the doctrines imparted by the *Jina*, the spiritual victor, that reverence for all life forms is essential for existence of oneself and the universe. The non-anthropomorphic approach of reverence for all is at the heart of Jaina ahimsa. The core precept of Jain Dharma is *Ahimsā* which is inclusive of “benevolence for all living beings as the highest virtuous tenet”.¹ It is argued that the praxis of *Ahimsā* plays a key role for sustainability because the guidelines of *Ahimsā* are not restricted only to non-killing and non-destroying, but the utopian goal of co-existence or oneness with all life forms. Thus, unity of mind and empathetic approach is at the core of its ideology. The principle of *Ahimsā*, compassion and kindness is only possible through awareness of all living beings.

The first chapter of *Ācārāṅga-sūtra* (4th c. BCE) enables the understanding of different states of soul, which is very important from the standpoint of environmentalism. The principle of equality and comparison of the weal and woe of others with those of oneself are powerful remedies for the indiscriminate pollution and destruction of the environment. According to Jain philosophy, living beings are divided into six categories, namely: 1. earth-bodied (*pṛthavī-kāya*), 2. water-bodied (*apa-kāya*), 3. fire-bodied (*tejasa-kāya*), 4. air-bodied (*vāyu-kāya*), 5. plant and vegetation-bodied (*vanaspati-kāya*) and 6. the mobile-bodied (*trasa-kāya*). Out of these the six classes of beings, the five immobile (earth-bodied, etc.) and the mobile (two-sensed to five sensed etc.) present the whole web of life forms. When I and You have the similar type of existence we can feel empathy but the existence which is endowed with only one sense is difficult to identify the resemblance and the feeling of compassion. It is possible through the knowledge of preceptors *Jinas*, who had seen the world with in the light of their omniscient knowledge (*kevala-jñāna*). Therefore, it is possible to accept life forms in environment which can extend the understanding of non-violence.

¹ Pannavana-sūtra 2.1. “*Ahimsāsavva bhūya khemamakari*”.

Ahimsā in its broadest interpretation is justified by having respect for all life forms. Awareness and restraint towards the six life-forms pave the way towards sustainability as the law of interdependence govern the universe. The low forms of life need our assistance for their survival. The variation in development from one sense to five sense is noticeable. When we humans have the same type of existence, we can express our responsiveness but the existence which is endowed with only one sense is difficult to or should it be express or acknowledge their existence. It is only possible through the knowledge of preceptors who had seen the world with the light of their omniscient knowledge (*kevala-jñāna*) through direct perception.

An ancient Jain scripture Dasvekālika-sūtra 4th c. CE proclaimed “every conscious being aspires to live and be free from pain or suffering”.² Furthermore, utility of human life should neither be a pursuit of limitless consumption nor unrestrained hedonism. The power and pleasure seeking mentality results in personal gratification at all costs and being indifferent to others / environment. The Essence of human life should be an opportunity to nurture unconditional compassion and reverence towards all life forms, at all times during our journey on this planet. With this ultimate goal, Mahavir, the 24th ford-maker (*Tirthankar*) explicitly states, “**one whom you intend to kill is none other than yourself**”. When we have a spiritual insight that you and I are equal, only then empathy begins. Only after becoming aware of the six categories of living beings and praxis of compassion towards them starts, will a sustainable solution to the current global environmental crisis commence.

As per Jain environmental view, it is stated that our life is not an isolated island, but we are part of a whole web. Famous Jain philosopher Umaswati in 3rd c. CE, in his Sanskrit work the Tattvārtha-sūtra articulates the relationship between these forms of life as “all souls render service to one another”.³ In other words, all life is independent & **inter-dependent**. All souls are similar in their intrinsic nature and qualities; thus the difference is merely due to the karmic burden. The differences are generally related to the outer body, and external situations, which should not negate the dignity of consciousness which is a ball of bliss each one deserves to experience.

² Dasvekālika-sūtra, 5. Savve Jīvā vi icchani jīvium na maijjīum.

³ Tattvārtha-sūtra, 5.21. “*parasparopagraho jāvānāma*”

This ancient treasure of Jain wisdom is reframed in the modern context to resolve current world issues by Acharya Tulsi (1913–1997). In 1949, Acharya Tulsi gave a model of eleven small vows related to self-transformation which is known as Anuvrat movement.⁴ His slogan was, ‘self-restraint is life or survival’. Vows are an important part of ancient religious culture and even today they are regarded as a potent personal force. Small challenges & restraints strengthen individual willpower and pave the way to sustainable development. History illustrates that able & dynamic religious leaders can achieve social transformation en masse and motivate the society to walk with them on the righteous path.

Sustainability of Human race

The first four vows of Anuvrat are guiding principle for survival of human race and sustainable development. Today’s world is torn by self-violence and violence to others.

1. I will not wilfully kill any innocent creature.
 - I will not commit suicide.
 - I will not commit foeticide.
2. I will not attack anybody.
 - I will not support aggression.
 - I will endeavour to bring about world peace and disarmament.
3. I will not take part in violent agitations or in any destructive activities.
4. I will believe in human unity.
 - I will not discriminate on the basis of caste, colour etc., nor will I treat anyone as an untouchable.

Acharya Tulsi had carefully seen violence at individual level. Some suicidal cases are personal but some related to other as well. Violence is not acceptable even if towards one’s

⁴ **Anuvrat code of conduct:** (1) not to intentionally kill moving, innocent creatures; not to commit suicide and not to commit feticide; (2) not to attack anybody; not to support aggression; to endeavor to bring about world peace and disarmament. (3) not to take part in violent agitations or in any destructive activities; (4) not to discriminate on the basis of caste, color etc., not to treat anyone as an untouchable; and to believe in human unity (5) to practice religious toleration and not to rouse sectarian frenzy; (6) to observe rectitude in business and general behavior; not harm others in order to serve any ends and not to practice deceit; (7) to set limits to acquisition; (8) not to resort to unethical practices in elections; (9) not to encourage socially evil customs; (10) to lead a life free from addictions; not to use intoxicants like alcohol, hemp, heroin, tobacco etc.; (11) to be alert to the problems of keeping the environment pollution-free; not to cut down trees and not to waste water.

own self. From time to time violence occurs due to fanaticism, racism, extremism and prejudice. Cultivation of strong belief in human unity is possible through practice of small vows.

Sustainability of Natural resources

All natural resources are finite and therefore we all need to set personal boundaries of consumption which must be governed by self-restraint. Even today Jains have continued to show respect for the sustainability of the natural environment. In December 1988 the first International Conference on Peace and Nonviolent Action (ICPNA), was organized at Ladnun, Rajasthan under the leadership of Acharya Tulsi. The theme of the conference was ‘unifying forces of peace and nonviolence’. Since then a series of eight ICPNA conferences had organised at different parts of the India. In 1990 an international Jain delegation presented HRH Prince Philip, President of the World Wide Fund for Nature, with the *Jain Declaration on Nature* which said; “The ecological philosophy of Jainism which flows from its spiritual quest has always been central to its ethics...”. There are also countless examples of Jain running shelters for abandoned and injured animals and birds. Many Jain householder follow their personal rules for daily consumption of water, food (strictly vegetarian), clothing and other gadgets.

11. I will always be alert to the problems of keeping the environment pollution-free.

- I will not cut down trees.
- I will not waste water.

Sustainability of Business

The guidelines of Anuvrat to abstain from economic violence is through an understanding of personal need and an explicit demarcation between need and greed. To serve the wellbeing of fellow humans and the environment, an ethical perspective of professional conduct is vital. Today we need development of “green economy” which befits the green movement. Jain concept of *Aparigraha* is absolutely pertinent in creating an ethical finance mindset and showing how sustainability can be incorporated into financial management by promoting restraint of greed and excesses.

6. I will observe rectitude in business and general behaviour.

- I will not harm others in order to fulfil my selfish needs.

- I will not practise deceit.

Sustainability of Religion

Religion plays a pivotal role for inculcation of the value of tolerance. When inter-religious literacy spreads and develops a strong worldview of understanding, then violence amongst different religious followers should become unthinkable. THUS, in bringing about an epoch of peace between all religions, Anuvrat proclaims:

5. I will practise religious tolerance.

- I will not rouse sectarian frenzy.

In conclusion, any form of violence always breeds more violence in turn. If we minimise violence in our personal life, less violence will come to us. This is the crux of *Ahimsā* and philosophy of Anuvrat. It is imperative for us to rebuild the fabric of love and peace amongst us and for our future generations. We must therefore, teach our young about reducing wastefulness and to care for all forms of life. In this manner we can handover the legacy of nature in secure hands.

Sustainability is a nexus. As Umāsvāti proposes the theory of interdependence and Acharya Tulsi prescribes the application of restraint for sustainability within different realms. This implies that sustainability of one demands the sustainability of the other. If natural resources sustain, human race will survive. Survival of human race is a prerequisite to sustain religion. Religion if defined as peace-venturing epitomises sacredness. This is repackaged by Acharya Tulsi with the philosophical and ideological background of Anuvrat Movement to say **self-restraint is life**.

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