

## CHAPTER 20

# The Dialectic of Violence in Jainism

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Jainism, whose adherents are referred to as Jains or Jainas, originated in India prior to the rise of Buddhism. According to the tradition, the 24th great teacher of Jainism, Mahavira Vardhamana, was a contemporary of the Buddha, continuing the work of the 23rd Tirthankara, Parshvanatha, who predated him by about 200 years. The teachings of these two men are summarized in two texts that date from approximately 300 BCE, the *Acaranga Sutra* and the *Kalpa Sutra*, which set forth the basic metaphysics and stories that have helped shape the later tradition. Around this same time, the faith divided into two groups, the Svetambara and the Digambara, who continue to differ on issues of gender and clothing. The Digambara requires total nudity for its advanced monks and believes that a woman must be reborn as a man to achieve final liberation, whereas all Svetambara monks and nuns wear white garments and believe that the 19th Tirthankara, Mallinatha, was a woman. Both sects hold to the principles put forth in Umasvati's *Tattvarthasutra* (ca. 450 CE) and agree on the basic premise of the faith: the centrality of nonviolence (*ahimsa*) as the sole means to liberate the soul (*jiva*) from bondage (for a general overview of Jainism, see Jaini 1979; Dundas 1992; Long 2009).

## Doctrinal Nonviolence

From the earliest teachings of Jainism, we come to understand the world as a collection of souls, with life lurking in quite unexpected places. According to the *Acaranga Sutra* (AS), Mahavira himself probed into the nature of life and discovered it in lichen, as well as in the earth, water, fire, and air: "There are living beings living in the earth, living in grass, living on leaves, living in wood, living in cowdung, living in dust-heaps" (AS I:1.4; Jacobi 1968: 8). Mahavira stated that all living beings must be protected: "All breathing, existing, living, sentient beings should not be slain, nor treated with violence, nor abused, nor tormented, nor driven away. This is the pure, unchangeable,

eternal law” (AS I:4.1; Jacobi 1968: 36). He was particularly critical of those who eat meat or use and abuse animals in any way:

Some slay animals for sacrificial purposes, some kill animals for the sake of their skin, some kill them for the sake of their flesh, some kill them for the sake of their blood thus also for the sake of their heart, their bile, the feathers of their tail, their tail, their big or small horns, their teeth, their tusks, their nails, their sinews, their bones; with a purpose and without a purpose. Some kill animals because they have been wounded by them, or are wounded, or will be wounded ... The one who comprehends and renounces these sinful acts does not injure them. Knowing animals, a wise person should not act sinfully towards animals, nor cause others to act so, nor allow others to act so. (AS I:1.6; Jacobi 1968: 12)

According to Mahavira, the greatest person protects animals, gives shelter to animals, and encourages others to renounce all acts of violence toward animals: “A great sage, neither injuring nor injured, becomes a shelter for all sorts of afflicted creatures, even as an island that is never covered with water” (AS I:4.5; Jacobi 1968: 61). The commitment to nonviolence goes beyond that found in any other proclamation, secular or sacred:

Knowing and renouncing severally and singly the actions against living beings, in the regions above, below and on the surface, everywhere and in all ways – a wise person neither gives pain to these bodies, nor orders others to do so, nor assents to their doing so. We abhor those who give pain to these bodies. Knowing this, a wise person should not cause any pain to any beings. (AS I:7.1; Jacobi 1968: 64)

The avoidance of meat or fish becomes paramount to monastic life:

A monk or nun should not accept food which has been prepared by the householder [who has acted] sinfully towards all sorts of living beings; for such food, whether it be tasted or not, is impure and unacceptable ... (AS II:1.1; Jacobi 1968: 91)

A monk or a nun on a begging tour should not resolve to go to a festival ... when they know that there will be served up chiefly meat or fish or roasted slices of meat or fish. (AS II:1.4; Jacobi 1968: 97)

In several verses, monks and nuns are urged to exert great care not to cause injury even to the microbes in the air, a practice assisted by the wearing of a mouth covering.

The basic teachings of nonviolence were conveyed by the founding teachers (Tirthankaras) to communities of monks, nuns, and laypersons. Throughout Jaina history, the adherence to nonviolence has served as the litmus test for all community decision making. Monks, nuns, and laypeople all seek advice from the religious preceptors (*acaryas*) who have dedicated their lives to teaching.

## An Ontology for Understanding and Avoiding Violence

In order to effectively practice this faith, long lists were put forth by succeeding generations of scholars, detailing the nature and duration of specific life forms. In order to

prevent harm to life, one needs to know life in all its various manifestations. Monks, nuns, and laypersons are hence equipped to move through life with the knowledge that surrounds us in every action. It is also considered acceptable to inflict a little injury or hurt to life, as it is unavoidable; with every step we take, with every morsel of food or sip of water we ingest, we are causing a sensation of pain to the life present in the earth beneath our feet, to the nutrition that sustains us. Santi Suri, a Svetambara Jain philosopher of the eleventh century CE, wrote that hardened rock, which is conscious and feels through the sense of touch, can endure as a single soul for twenty-two thousand years; water souls for seven thousand years, wind souls for three thousand years, trees for ten thousand years, and fire for three days and three nights (Suri 1950: 20–35). Like rock, water, fire, air, and plant souls all possess consciousness through the sense of touch. The next most complex form of life adds the sense of taste, and includes conches, worms, and leeches. As the insect realm becomes more complex, differentiating into centipedes, bedbugs, lice, ants, and other creepy crawlers, a third sense appears: smell. The fourth sense, sight, can be found in scorpions, bees, locusts, flies, gnats, mosquitoes, moths, spiders, and grasshoppers, who exhibit a lifespan as long as six months. In the top category reside the five-sensed beings, further divided into those who can hear and those who can hear and think (sometimes counted as a sixth sense). These include animals and humans, as well as the denizens of the seven hells and the nine heavens (Chapple 2002: 128). Each of the souls encased in any one of these forms will eventually move on to another home.

Each time one commits an act of violence, a particle of karma, considered to be sticky and colorful, attaches itself in subtle form to the soul, further occluding its energy, consciousness, and bliss and further ensnaring a person in the cycle of life, death, and rebirth (von Glasenapp 1942: 47–67). Unlike Buddhism and most schools of Hinduism, karma in Jainism manifests as a physical presence, not merely as an abstraction. The Jaina lifestyle requires a scrupulous attention to the avoidance of all possible forms of violence. This commitment to nonviolence is further supported by adherence to the following vows: truthfulness, abstention from stealing, celibacy for monks and nuns and fidelity in marriage for laypersons, and nonpossession.

In order to advance on the path of purification, one must adopt a lifestyle of great rigor. Hence, Jains will adhere not only to vegetarianism, but will also attempt to follow a code of kindness to others and the avoidance of professions that lead to violence. Historically, Jains have served as artisans, jewelers, publishers, and lawyers (Jaini 1979: 171–2). The most renowned Jaina occupation, merchant, carries with it one major stipulation: Jains may not buy or sell products that include animal products or promote harm to animals in any way. Additionally, Jains fast regularly (generally twice a month and for a longer stretch in the early fall festival of Paryusan), eschew even seed-bearing vegetables in their later years, take meticulous care not to leave leftover food which will generate bacteria doomed to a short lifespan, and aspire to end their life consciously while conducting a final fast (Jaini 2000; Chapple 2010).

Jaina texts are very specific about forms of violence to be avoided. Neither animals nor humans are to be bound, beaten, mutilated, overburdened, or deprived of food or drink (Williams 1963: 67–71). Violent animals such as tigers or eagles should not be killed to prevent them from killing others; “slaughter for the purpose of extirpating evil

is as senseless as cutting down a tree with an axe to make it grow" (Williams 1963: 65). Jains also object to mercy killing. The idea that it is better to kill one large animal to spare the lives of many smaller animals is countered with the argument that large animals harbor innumerable microbes and parasites whose lives would be destroyed. The Jains have been famous for their criticisms of and successful campaigns against animal sacrifice.

The Jaina worldview, with its analysis of life forms and long list of precepts and practices designed to prevent injury to all forms of life, is unparalleled in human history. Not only do Jaina monks and nuns exert great care to do a minimum of harm to life by keeping their possessions to a minimum, wearing a face mask, and sweeping the path in front of them of insects before they walk, members of the lay community will also take vows of a similar nature for a limited time, and make overall lifestyle choices guided by an ethics of nonviolence.

Jaina individuals, as they age, adhere to a progressively stricter vegetarian diet, eliminating even seed-bearing foods in the final decades of life, in anticipation of attaining an auspicious rebirth. Following a vegetarian diet is the single best way for an individual to reduce greenhouse gases, due to the tremendous amount of water and petroleum needed for meat production and distribution. Contemporary Jains cite their vegetarianism as an appropriate response to the current problem of ecological and environmental degradation. In particular, diaspora Jains have organized workshops on environment and ecology that emphasize the direct connection between nonviolence and the well-being of the Earth. The Jaina Associations in North America (JAINA), a voluntary consortium of the more than 60 Jaina centers in the United States and Canada, maintains a permanent committee on this topic (Vallely, in Chapple 2002: 206–13).

The Jains eschew extraordinary means to avert death (Chapple 2010). Their conscience on dietary and end of life issues puts them at the forefront of environmental and healthcare ethics. In the United States, an overwhelming percentage of healthcare expenditures are exhausted to keep people alive for their final six months. By simply accepting and embracing death, anxiety on the part of the person and his or her relatives and a fair amount of medically induced violence can be prevented and huge sums of money may be preserved. Physicians within the Jaina community, though they adhere to standard medical practice wherever they practice, sometimes will advise and support "letting nature take its course" rather than recommending surgery or other means to extend life (see Chapple 2010: 206). Religious authorities (*acaryas*) within the faith often refer to the undying nature of the soul as they convey these teachings to their monastic and lay followers.

## Surviving Violence

Throughout their history, Jains have often been reviled for their staunch adherence to the nonviolent way of life. Many of the early Buddhists converted from Jainism, attracted by the Buddha's less rigorous Middle Path. In medieval Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, the Jains were a flashpoint for controversy. Repression of Jainism occurred in Madurai in

the eighth century, resulting in the murder of many Jaina monks by Hindu devotees to Siva. Many Hindu temples in the south even today include murals depicting “the massacre by impaling of eight thousands Jains for having taken Shiva’s name in vain” (Dundas 1992: 109). It is not uncommon to witness a modern Sikh, Christian, or even a Hindu in India suppress a sneer when talking about the rigors of Jaina asceticism. Furthermore, lawsuits have been brought against the Jaina community for their practice of fasting to death, which many religions consider to be a form of suicide and hence unethical.

Other competing religious movements have been resisted by the Jainas. When Tantra reached its ascendancy in the eighth century, the Jaina philosopher Haribhadra put forth a stark criticism of Tantric practices in the *Yogadrstisamuccaya*, decrying their licentiousness (*avedyasamvedya*) (Chapple 2003: 75–86). A couple of centuries later, Somadeva’s *Yasatilaka* excoriated Tantra, warning Jainas away from its allure (Handiqui 1949: 188–216). Islam and Jainism have had a long history of conflict and difficulty. Although the emperor Akbar looked favorably on individual Jainas and was moved by the monk Hiravijaya in 1547 to proclaim the banning of animal slaughter during the Paryushan, his grandson Aurangzeb, while governor of Gujarat in 1645, “desecrated and turned into a mosque an ornate temple to Parshvanatha,” reminding the “Jains of their powerlessness in the face of a dominant Islam” (Dundas 1992: 147).

## Many-sidedness, Perspectivalism, and Provisionality

This brings us to the issue that has sometimes been referred to as “intellectual nonviolence.” In light of its radical difference from other worldviews, largely due its unique cosmology and rigorous ethical lifestyle, Jainism developed an accommodationist philosophical method that acknowledges the views of others yet provides a rationale to allow Jainas to maintain their own view and lifestyle in light of this profound difference. These philosophical strategies in some ways bolster the Jaina view by on the one hand affirming Jaina principles while on the other acknowledging that not everyone can or must hold the Jaina view. Hence, Jainas seek, perhaps, to avoid the violence of holding an exclusivist claim on truth while still proclaiming their own view superior. This approach includes a proclamation that there can never be only one way to observe a phenomenon or a situation. Known as the doctrine of “many-sidedness” (*anekanta-vada*), it acknowledges the “emergence, perishing, and duration” of all things (Long 2009: 142).

In an attempt to describe and capture this flow of continual change, Umasvati’s *Tattvarthasutra* lists seven viewpoints (*naya*): specific qualities, generic qualities, self-referring aspects, present state or condition, primary name, related names, and functional name (Long 2009: 144; Tatia 1994: 23–7). This assemblage of qualities describes phenomena within reality in a manner that might be deemed “perspectivalism.”

Jaina philosophy also suggests that reality itself is subject to refinement and reinterpretation through seven possible relations (*syadvada*): that an object or condition might be true, that it might be false, that aspects of it might be simultaneously authentic and false, that it is inexpressible, that it is true and inexpressible, that it is false and

inexpressible, and that it can be simultaneously authentic, false, and inexpressible (Chapple 1993: 85–98). This teaching puts forth the notion that the world only exists dependent on particular conditions that are of course subject to change. This analysis may be referred to as “provisionality.”

These three teachings – many-sidedness, perspectivalism, and provisionality – provide a prism through which multiple accounts of reality might be maintained: all things are complex and can be described in different ways and reside within a world wherein the truth, even if obtainable, remains inexpressible.

This seemingly open approach to truth taught by Jaina philosophers, however, never allows compromise when the discussion turns to the hallmark Jaina nonviolent worldview and ethic outlined above. In fact, the premises of many-sidedness, perspectivalism and provisionality are used by scholars such as Haribhadra Yakini Putra (ca. 750) to demonstrate the sole validity of the Jaina teachings on soul, karma, and the need for nonviolence. He argues that Hindus are too committed to the existence of a singular overall monistic consciousness or Brahman. Their view falls, in his words, into the heresy of eternalism. He states that the Buddhists, through the doctrines of momentariness (*ksana*) and emptiness (*sunya*) fail to see the reality of suffering that prompts an individual to seek purification. The Buddhist view, in Haribhadra’s eyes, falls into the heresy of nihilism (Chapple 2003: 60–3). On the one hand, the seeming openness of Jaina philosophy at face value might be seen as expressing a philosophy of “live and let live.” However, it is used to criticize the Buddhists and Hindus and particularly the Tantrikas for a host of perceived philosophical and practical errors.

## A Dialectic Conversation between Violence and Nonviolence

This brings us to the question of the dialectic. In many ways, as mentioned above, Jainism stands apart from other faiths. Its practices require what seem to many to be extreme behaviors. Its vegetarianism can become an exclusionary form of behavior, making it impossible for Jainas to fraternize with carnivores. The Jaina refusal to participate in violent professions has created, in the eyes of some, an insular wealthy community. The Jaina practice of fasting to death is seen by many as highly distasteful. By setting themselves apart due to dietary, occupational, and ritual customs, the Jainas risk always being the exotic other, easy to identify and ridicule. From the very beginnings of the tradition, the *Kalpa Sutra* narrates various abuses heaped upon Mahavira as he sat naked in silent meditation. Though some contemporary writers may praise Jaina religiosity (Mehta 2004), this is often done while simultaneously putting the radical aspects of Jainism on display.

The self-denial of food in the name of nonviolence may be construed by a nonadherent to the faith as a form of violence to one’s own body. As narrated by Anne Valleley (2002), the austerity (*tapas*) of fasting has been recommended to remediate a host of ills, from physical problems to psychological disorders, with mixed results. Even the cherished tradition of fasting to death (*sallekhana/santhara*) has been publicly criticized within India by many Hindus and Christians and modern secular Indians as an act of self-cruelty, though from the Jaina perspective it constitutes the ultimate purification.

Mahatma Gandhi endured great criticism from the Jaina community when he authorized the euthanasia of a suffering cow. The many animal shelters in India operated by Jainas have provoked great lamentation from animal activists such as Michael Fox of the Humane Society, a staunch believer in interventionist veterinary medicine (personal communication). Within the Jaina community itself, as mentioned above, many people are rethinking milk and milk products as a primary food source, which would overturn hundreds of years of tradition and culinary habits. Ironically, the faith best known for its commitment to nonviolence seems to stoke a heated debate on a variety of issues.

Many Jainas claim that their tradition is the most ecologically friendly religion due to its protection of animals and care not to hurt any being possessing more than the sense of touch. However, the Jaina involvement with marble mining and its transport, as well as Jaina involvement with a variety of heavy industries (including automotive), would require a broad impact analysis to be fully in accord with best environmental practices (Chapple 2002). Although mining is allowed because it is deemed in Jainism to survive by taking the lives of one-sensed beings such as plants and minerals, the extent to which the harm done by mining may be disproportionate to the original intent of allowing its practice must be taken into account. Similarly, John Cort has pointed out that some reforestation projects at Jaina pilgrimage sites have restricted the livelihood of subsistence herders (Cort 2002). Treading the path of nonviolence in the industrial age is fraught with complexity.

## Conclusion

The Jaina biological analysis of reality and careful attention to right livelihood can serve to inspire deep reflection on the impact of one's work upon the world. The Jaina philosophy of many-sidedness, perspectivalism, and provisionality requires a thoughtful look at each and every circumstance. The Jaina worldview emphasizes interconnectedness. Jainas search out and identify and set aside acts of violence. As a result, Jainas generally will not participate in warfare, will not take up employment that entails killing, will maintain a vegetarian diet, and advocate for others to adopt vegetarianism.

The Jaina view sees an object or situation not only for what it is but for what it has been in a past life and will become in a future life. This outlook can help encourage a broadening of the contemporary definition of human rights. Each individual has been born as many different beings, whether elemental, microbial, flora, or fauna. Each person carries this history and connection with past lives. By taking this possibility into account, legal rights, from a Jaina perspective, would need to be extended to soil and waters and animals, all of which might be seen as past or potential human beings. Dada Vasvani, a Hindu spiritual leader, who like Gandhi has been deeply committed to the practice of nonviolence, has suggested that the eighteenth-century revolutions in the United States and France proclaimed the liberation of the human person (then defined as a landowning white man), the nineteenth century proclaimed the liberation of slaves, the twentieth century the liberation of women, and that the twenty-first century must be dedicated to the liberation of animals and the earth (Vasvani 2009).

Jainism sets forth a gentle path designed to identify and ameliorate violence. Through their extreme practices Jainas have managed to form cohesive communities of monks, nuns, and laypersons for more than 2,500 years, remaining a conscience to the world in regard to the enactment of nonviolence.

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