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## Jainism and Ecology

By Christopher Key Chapple\*

The Jaina tradition has existed in tandem with Hinduism in India since at least 800 BCE. Whereas the Hindu faith looks to the Vedas for texts and rituals and to the Brahman caste for religious leadership, the Jainas developed their own sacred texts (including the Acaranga Sutra, ca. 300 BCE) and follow the authority of itinerant monks and nuns who wander throughout India preaching the essential principles and practices of the faith. Jainas ascribe to the belief in plural life forms populating a storied universe with hell beings at the base, humans and animals in the middle region, with gods and goddesses in the upper or heavenly domains. The goal within Jainism is to ascend to the Siddha Loka, a world beyond heaven and earth, where all the liberated souls dwell eternally in a state of energy, consciousness, and bliss. Although this goal utterly removes one from all worldly entanglements, the path to reach this highest attainment entails great care in regard to how one lives in relationship to all the other living beings that surround one in the earthly realm. Hence, from the aspect of practice, Jainism holds some interesting potential for ecological thinking, though its final goal transcends earthly (or earthy) concerns.

At the core of Jaina faith lies five vows that dictate the daily life of Jaina laypersons, monks and nuns. These five vows, which inspired and influenced Mahatma Gandhi, are non-violence (*ahimsa*), truthfulness (*satya*), not stealing (*asteya*), sexual restraint (*brahmacharya*) and non-possession (*aparigriha*). One adheres to these vows in order to minimize harm to all possible life-forms. In Jainism, life is arranged hierarchically according to the number of senses a particular form possesses. For instance, life particles (*jiva*) in earth, water, fire, air, micro-organisms and plants each experience the world through the sense of touch. Worms add the sense of taste. Crawling bugs can feel, taste and smell. Flying insects add seeing. Higher level animals, including fish and mammals, can feel, taste, smell, see, hear and think. For observant Jainas, to hurt any being results in the thickening of one's karma, obstructing advancement toward liberation. To reduce karma and prevent its further accrual, Jainas avoid activities associated with violence and follow a vegetarian diet. The advanced monks and nuns will sweep their path to avoid harming insects and also work at not harming even one sensed beings such as bacteria and water.

The worldview of the Jainas might be characterized as a bio-cosmology. Due to their perception of the "livingness" of the world, Jainas hold an affinity for the ideals of the environmental movement. The Jaina vows can easily be reinterpreted in an ecological fashion. The practice of non-violence in the Jaina context fosters an attitude of respect for all life-forms. The observance of truthfulness prompts an investigation of the inter-relatedness of things; a truthful person cannot easily dismiss the suffering caused by uncontrolled waste. The vow of not stealing can be used to reflect on the world's limited resources and prompt one to think of the needs of future generations. Sexual restraint might help minimize population growth. The discipline of non-possession gives one pause to think twice before indulging in the acquisition of material goods, one of the root causes of current ecological concerns. The monks and nuns, due to the heightened nature of their daily spiritual practice, leave little or no imprint on the broader ecological system. Jaina laypeople, due to their care and attention to what in other philosophical traditions is none other than inert materiality, can use their experiences of applying nonviolent principles with a new, ecological intention in mind.

The Jainas are particularly well-suited to reconsider their tradition in an ecological light, particularly because of their history of advocacy against meat eating and animal sacrifice, as well as their success at developing business areas that avoid overt violence. However, some challenges remain. One expression of environmentalism involves tree planting projects. Though Jaina lay people might participate in such activities, their nuns and monks most likely would not plant trees because of the harm caused to the earth in the digging process. Another expression of environmentalism in India has been to establish forest preserves on property surrounding Jaina temple sites. However, this generally requires blocking access to prevent collection of fodder, resulting in a further impoverishment of struggling peasants. In addition to these questions of organic and social life, the extensive involvement of Jainas in heavy industries in India raises issues of appropriate economic activity and environmental health. These instances demonstrate the complexity of effectively applying ecological principles in a religious context.

*\*Christopher Key Chapple teaches at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. He is the author of several articles and books on Hinduism and Jainism.*

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