

Sermon - Ahimsa and the Jain Tradition
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“One should know only this, that non-violence is religion.”¹

There is a Jain story of an elephant living with other animals in the forest. One day, the forest caught fire. As the fire spread, the animals retreated to a smaller and smaller safe area.

Eventually, there was hardly any room to move.

The elephant felt an itch and lifted his leg to scratch.

When his foot descended, he felt something there that wasn't just the earth, and discovered that a small rabbit had curled up in the newly vacated space.

Not wanting to injure the rabbit, he held his foot up for the remainder of the fire.

Which was 3 more days.

Eventually, as the fire cleared, the rabbit moved out from under the elephant. But the elephant found he couldn't straighten his leg, and that his whole body had stiffened. He fell to the ground and died.

As a result of his compassion and kindness, the elephant was reborn as Prince Meghkumar, who became a Jain monk, in his next life.²

Jainism is an ancient Indian religious tradition, and while it has fewer adherents than Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sikhism, its philosophical influence of nonviolence is reflected in other traditions. The core religious beliefs of Jains are non-violence, the many-sidedness of reality, non-attachment), and asceticism (renunciation of worldly comforts). Followers are called “Jains,” which comes from the Sanskrit word jina meaning victor, and signifies the path to victory over the cycle of death and rebirth by living an ethical and spiritual life. There are between four and five million Jains in the world today, most in India, but Canada has one of the largest populations outside of India (3320 on Canadian census; up to 10000 by some estimates). Depending on exactly

¹ Naladiyar 14-15; quoted in World Scripture: A Comparative Anthology of Sacred Texts, p. 339

² <https://jainworld.com/education/jain-education-material/beginner-level/the-compassion-of-the-elephant/>

where you get your numbers, Jains make up roughly the same proportion of the Canadian population as Unitarian Universalists.

The Jain tradition reveres 24 saviour and teachers known as tirthankaras (Tee-tan-karas), the first lived millions of years ago according to tradition, and the last, Mahavira, the most well known, lived in the 6th century BCE, a near contemporary of the Buddha.

Non violence or Ahimsa is the first and foremost vow of Jainism, and practitioners vow not to hurt any living being by actions, words, intentions, or thoughts. Jains believe that the only way to save one's own soul is to protect every other soul. Jain monks practice ahimsa in every moment of every day, eating, sleeping, and even walking with care not to injure any living being. They eat not just vegetarian but often vegan, and avoid eating root vegetables so as not to injure the tiny life forms around the root when it is pulled up, and because sprouting bulbs are seen as living beings, too. They sweep the ground gently before stepping to protect any insects or small creatures. The other four Jain vows of satya (truth), asteya (not stealing), brahmacharya (celibacy or chastity), and aparigraha (non-attachment) are seen as flowing from and clarifying the principle of ahimsa. (The emphasis on celibacy and chastity is one of the reasons Jainism may not have as many followers as other Indian religious traditions, reducing both people born into the tradition and converts.) Laypeople support ascetics' spiritual lives and stricter vows with resources.

Buddhism and Jainism have many overlapping principles and themes, including ahimsa and meditation, with slightly different emphases, with meditation and the middle way between worldly life and asceticism in Buddhism, and stricter renunciation and practices of nonviolence in Jainism. The parallels between the Buddha's life and Mahavira's life are compelling: they were both born princes after an usual gestation and birth, with prophesies of their future roles as saviours and teachers; they both led childhoods surrounded by riches; they both married and had a child in their 20s (the Buddha a son, and Mahavira, a daughter), and left soon after for the ascetic life. They both had long journeys before reaching enlightenment and then taught others for the rest of their lives.

One story from Mahavira's life tells of his encounter with Chandkaushik, a poisonous cobra:

On a visit to the Village Vachala, mahavira learned that the people of the village lived in absolute terror of a cobra in the nearby forest.

Rather than avoiding the forest, Mahavira intentionally entered the canopy. He sat down to meditate in the snake's forest. Feelings of peace, tranquility and concern for the well-being of every living being flowed from Mahavira's heart.

Chandkaushik, on encountering Mahavira, hissed in anger.

But the snake saw no sign of fear. This angered him even further.

Chandkaushik blew poisonous venom towards Mahavira, who continued to meditate and radiate calm.

The cobra repeated this twice more, warning Mahavira and growing increasingly angry, to no avail. Mahavira's meditation continued.

Fully enraged, Chandkaushik reared his head, channelled his power, and bit Mahavira's toe.

Instead of blood, white milk flowed from Mahavira's wound.

Then Mahavira opened his eyes with calm and compassion. He looked at Chandkaushik and said, "Hey Chand, shant ho shant" and recalled the cobra's past lives to him, and then requested the cobra overcome his anger and bitterness and instead, forgive and remain peaceful. "Live and allow others to live; hurt no one; life is dear to all living beings," said Mahavira.

Aware now of his past lives and sins, and the importance of non-violence, Chandkaushik quietly retreated to his hole, living the remainder of his life in peace and without harming any of the villagers.³

As I reflect on ahimsa and the sanctity of all life, I am very aware of the ways in which I have lived ahimsa well in my life and ways I haven't.

I remember childhood worm walks in the aftermath of rainstorms, picking up the stranded and endangered worms on the sidewalks one by one and putting them back on the grass where they wouldn't be stepped on; my continued practice of catching spiders and centipedes and ants and bees, and sometimes mice, alive when they make their way inside, releasing them in what I hope will be a good habitat space outside; a long evening drive in Prince Edward County last summer when a wrong turn resulted in a 40 minute detour along a frog-ridden road, driving slowly enough to avoid the frogs, praying I hadn't hit any, but also knowing that with hundreds hopping, I well might have caused harm or death to many; eating meat for the first 21 years of my life, followed by more than 10 years of vegetarianism, and then reintroducing meat from relatively ethical sources in the last few years, and still wrestling with eating animals who have been raised and killed for my consumption; learning about the interconnectedness of trees and plants and realizing that even a vegetarian diet may disrupt relationships, communities, and take life. One repeated challenge was figuring out how to remove with minimal harm the rotating zoo of animal guests living under our house, including racoons, groundhogs, and skunks, but nonetheless feeling some sadness for them in their desperate attempts to reenter. And then there were the

³ <https://www.speakingtree.in/article/mahavira-and-his-teachings-of-ahimsa>

mercilessly fleas, so generously shared with us by the aforementioned racoon family, who I killed mercilessly, albeit with apologies at times. Unlike Mahavira, who gracefully let any and all insects feed on him, I did not endure my dozens of flea bites with tranquility and commitment to non-violence.

I have not taken a vow of ahimsa or non-violence, but I do covenant to affirm and promote our seventh principle, respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part, and feel a deep pull within my own moral centre to live a life of service rather than harm. The principle of ahimsa reminds us both that we are a part of the interdependent web, connected and worthy, and simultaneously that we are but a small part amid a myriad of other beings of worth and dignity and purpose no less important than our own.

I recognize that my examples above only scratch the surface of the impact my life and choices on others:

I may protect the spider on my kitchen window, but it's estimated that travelling by car (or any vehicle such as a bus) kills an average of 8 insects per kilometre, so that the thousands of kilometres I've travelled equates to many thousands of insect deaths.

I may protect the racoon or groundhog in my yard, but it is estimated that conventional crop farming kills as many as 7.3 billion animals each year as fields are cleared and tilled. While these estimates aren't universally accepted, they do not even account for the ever decreasing natural habitats and homes of plant and animal life that are affected by our struggling attempts to feed billions of humans. In terms of direct animal consumption, the Canadian animal kill clock⁴, which tracks animals killed for food in Canada each year, reads over 22 million so far in 2019, and increases by thousands each minute. As a meat eater, however ethically farmed, my choices increase that number.

I may carefully reuse and sort the plastics that wrap my groceries and goods into appropriate recycling bins, but some of those plastics will inevitably make their way into landfills at best, and worse, natural habitats of animals that ensnare and restrict turtle shell growth, suffocate fish and birds, and contribute to the mass of plastic larger than France in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, estimated at 80,000 metric tons and 1.8 trillion pieces.

I may speak and work for equality and justice for all people, but I have moments where my ignorance or prejudice about others' identities and choices shows up, sometimes uncomfortably in my own mind, and sometimes in an awkward moment that leaves me with a foot in my mouth.

I may choose ethically-made or second hand clothing to avoid supporting sweatshops and child labour, and I'm learning to sew and mend clothes to reduce my clothing consumption, but every time I pick up my iPhone, I endorse mining practices that

⁴ <https://animalclock.org/ca/>

irreparably harm the people and the planet, including child and slave labourers in the mines, and the civil wars funded by the profits.⁵ And the data centres that power the internet are predicted soon to have a bigger carbon footprint than the entire aviation industry.⁶ Even fossil fuel divestment, a movement intended to bring awareness and action to address climate change, has resulted in increased pressure to grow biofuels on an industrial scale, leading to the destruction of tropical forests.

In engaging with the Jain tradition and principle of ahimsa, I found myself caught in the tensions of living in a world where, as Albert Schweitzer said, “I am life that wants to live, in the midst of life that wants to live.” I am not a Jain monk. And this is by no means an exhaustive list of the ways I cause harm.

Having heard this, if you’re anything like me you’ll find yourself either in a spiral of guilt and shame and despair for the world, or rationalizing why you’re actually a good person. Oscillating: One moment avoiding, one moment campaigning, one moment despairing, one moment self-congratulating, one moment paralyzed in inaction, the next taking a break and turning off that nagging moral compass and just going with the easier choice. Instead of those familiar habits, I invite you to sit with the tension and to feel it all.

As Unitarian Universalists, we value deeds over creeds, and it is in our DNA to celebrate the human capacity to choose good; in fact, belief in human goodness was more responsible for the Unitarian departure from congregationalist Christianity than our challenge to the trinity of God and divinity of Jesus. Given our emphasis on doing and being good people, it’s easy to view ourselves generally on the moral sides of issues. Even when we don’t all agree exactly which sides are moral.

The Jain tradition has rituals of repentance and forgiveness, called pratikramana, literally meaning introspection. There are morning AND evening rituals, plus ones that happen every 15 days, every four months on the full moon, and annually. Built in is the assumption that as humans we will be imperfect.

As Unitarian Universalists, we don’t have comparable rituals of repentance. And we don’t have any required spiritual practices or rituals. We do have covenants or relationship which, at best, call us to deal with conflicts that arise between us, but very often we are better at acceptance and inclusion than we are at holding ourselves and one another accountable for our words and actions that harm. Our youth do it better, with the invitation to say a simple ‘ouch’ and then ‘oops’ when a hurt occurs. While I don’t

⁵ Daniel Cooper, 2018, You Can’t Buy an Ethical Smartphone Today, https://www.engadget.com/2018/02/06/ethical-smartphone-conscious-consumption/?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHRocHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAjrmcLRpOvyxJVwO9oxeoign6Us7g9KH-h2nqgDhQhAUsO21vU78YkfpbQBeL8agEqMq7PlpCiMep-XhHE3q-hCB8plNyFGSmsszifXLJx1mRzkhZeIRgJXxSYUnGutzATpsDBbehoyC6OjRjw3xYvhsDtdQDVfBN3ebqQ4KTvI.

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jul/17/internet-climate-carbon-footprint-data-centres>

recommend the institution of formal or required repentance rituals, or even oops and ouch for adults, I do think we all have moments of stuckness in either guilt or complacency, and that rituals might help us not just get unstuck but to heal.

We do have one song in our teal hymnal that repeats ‘we forgive ourselves and one another and begin again in love.’”

I imagine singing that song more often, perhaps even as a regular ritual; with the invitation — not requirement—. to forgiveness and reconciliation that could invite silent or shared naming of the harms we have caused intentionally or unintentionally, and recommitment to our principles and ideals.

In the midst of all the suffering in the world,
May we have the strength to turn toward the aches and tears and pain and anguish with compassion and understanding;
May we have the courage to recognize our own parts in the breaking and harming of the web, and act with this knowledge not from righteousness but humbleness,
May we have the grace to forgive ourselves and one another, and begin again in love.

So may it be.

Amen.