



# Karmic Footprints: The Ecological Consciousness of the Jains

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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For a member of the Jain faith, the complex of ideas we now call ecological consciousness, environmentalism, green awareness et al, are far from being new discoveries or acute social observations. They have been part of the philosophy and practice of Jainism for millennia and are 'givens' of Jain life and thought. In other words, what is surprising to Jains is our surprise, in the West, at the effects of human behaviour on the environment, that our individual and collective actions have consequences for all of nature. And nature, a Jain takes for granted, includes ourselves, for humanity is part of the natural world rather than above or beyond it. How could a supposedly rational society such as the West's have been so blind to the obvious for so long?

Separation between humanity and the rest of nature is viewed by Jains as the cardinal human error, the delusion on which is based a false way of living that leads to pollution of the air and water, and climatic disruption. Shakespeare's Macbeth spoke of the dangers of 'vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself' (1) and threatens the destruction of self and others. In the ecological and spiritual context, such vaulting ambition defines humanity's present relationship to nature: a dysfunctional, exploitative relationship that has disrupted the Earth's ecosystems and that threatens our quality of life and perhaps our viability as a species. This relationship is based on an illusion of superiority and domination, a misuse of our intelligence, a lack of awareness. It is based on a failure to recognise our limitations as well as our power, our destructive, as well as creative, potential.

The series of environmental disasters that together point towards ecological crisis arises from a misunderstanding of the nature of power, confusing it with domination and force, with competition and exploitation rather than the ultimately much stronger forces of co-operation and solidarity. Pollution and poisoning of the Earth, and with it human beings, stems from the same spiritual malaise that leads to increasingly gross inequalities, global and local, a foreign policy based on invasion and conquest and an economics based on continuous and unchecked consumption, in which 'resources' are assumed to be limitless despite clear and mounting evidence to the contrary.



Jainism's purpose, as a spiritual path, is to enable the human individual to realise his or her full intelligence and strip away the illusions of materialistic attachments and 'vaulting ambitions' of a destructive and superficial nature. Jainism means the 'religion (or way) of the conquerors' and the true Jain is one who has conquered him- or her- self. This conquest is identical with realising the true self, which is free from attachment and so has true power, rather than delusional trappings. The starting point of Jainism is the individual. Each life is considered to be unique; this does not just mean human life, but every life form including the supposedly most elementary living systems – which we now know to be at least as complex and intricate as our own, and often indispensable to our survival.

Jainism is part of the eternal tradition ('sanatana dharma') of Indic philosophy. However it is quite distinct from the Vedic or Hindu tradition, as it has evolved in modern times. This is because Jains reject social or spiritual hierarchy, and because it stresses the survival – and full realisation – of the individual sensibility rather than its union with a universal or cosmic consciousness. Jains also reject the idea of formal priesthood. Their ascetic men and women set an example of the ideal way of life, and dramatise Jain principles by taking them to their logical conclusion. But they cannot compel conformity and obedience. As Kanti Mardia, a Jain scientist, has suggested, each Jain is his or her own guru, and the spiritual quest is akin to the processes undertaken by the researcher in a laboratory (2).

This is a telling analogy, because it reminds us that within the Jain 'dharma' (tradition, way, eternal truth) there is a thread linking the most ancient wisdom with the most modern scientific insights. As an uninterrupted tradition, Jainism has absorbed and built upon the animist insights of archaic religion, which are reflected in the beliefs and practices of many indigenous peoples today. The term 'animist' is derived from the Latin word for soul, 'anima'. It describes a consciousness of the spirit, soul, or life force in animals, plants, trees, rocks, streams, mountains as well as human beings, and a recognition of continuity between all living systems. Time is perceived as cyclical rather than exclusively linear (as it has been to the western 'progressive' mindset) and there is a sense that all life forms are mutually dependent and interlinked. The latter understanding is often expressed through a reverence for or worship of the animals on which human survival depends, because they are part of the creative cycle. Frequently there are concepts of reincarnation – or more accurately the transmigration of souls – across the artificial boundaries of species.

'Archaic' in this context has far from pejorative connotations. On the contrary, archaic faith traditions reflect a more advanced understanding of the cosmos than much of the 'progressive' consciousness of modernity. Their awareness of humanity's connections with other species has had to be rediscovered, slowly and painstakingly, through evolutionary theory and genetics. Equally, their understanding of the links between living systems is being revisited, at both scientific and socio-political levels, as we begin to awake from our delusions of human grandeur.

Jain dharma contains all of these archaic insights. They were attained through intuition by a non-literate people, but refined by Jainism's highly literate, scientific and rational culture. Thus the Jains understood through inquiry and deduction that the universe is teeming with life. From this, it follows that there are subtle connections between living systems of which we must be constantly aware if we wish to live in balance with ourselves and our world. Jains became aware, many centuries before western physics, that energy can neither be created nor destroyed. The universe is eternal, constantly renewing itself and passing through upward and downward cycles ('utsarpini' and 'avasarpini') lasting for thousands of millions of years. Jain dharma regards spiritual intuition and scientific reason as intimately linked, somewhat like the right and left hemispheres of the brain or the principles of yin and yang in Daoism. Each, without the other, loses touch with the underlying reality and becomes atrophied or corrupted.



As an eternal tradition, Jainism has no founder, merely a series of twenty-four 'Tirthankaras', literally 'ford-makers' or 'path-finders', exemplary individuals who point the way to enlightenment. The last of these, Mahavira (599-527 BCE), whose name means 'Great Hero', was a contemporary of Gautama Buddha and defined organised Jainism as we understand it today. The basis of Mahavira's teaching is 'Parasparopagraho Jivanam': 'All Life is Interconnected'. It follows that 'Non-violence and kindness to all living beings is kindness to oneself', and conversely that 'You are that which you intend to hit, injure, insult, torment, persecute, torture, enslave or kill'.

Supporters of the western ecology movement in its various permutations would recognise 'green' principles in this insight, grounded in spiritual awareness and scientific reason. Mahavira, after all, makes an explicit connection between exploitative relationships of all types, whether among human beings, or between humanity and other species or the natural world, which is relegated to a system of resources to be 'conquered' and consumed. The principle of interconnection informs the Five Vows ('Vratas') undertaken by Jains. These are adhered to by ascetics in a literal way, as the 'Mahavratas', or Greater Vows, whereas lay men and women observe them as 'Anuvratas' (Lesser Vows) and use them as guidelines on which to base their lives. There are references to the Vows in many Jain texts, but are explored in particular detail in the *Acaranga Sutra*, or 'Book of Good Conduct' (3). The *Acaranga* is the oldest Jain document, probably composed in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE, and it sets out clearly the philosophy of non-violent living associated with the Jain dharma. The Vows are as follows:

- 'Ahimsa': Non-violence; abstention or minimisation of anything that causes injury to life, human or non-human;
- 'Asteya': Abstention from theft; avoidance of exploitative relationships of all kinds;
- 'Satya': Truth; the understanding of what is real, as opposed to illusory attachment;
- 'Brahmacharya': Chastity; avoidance of promiscuity, sexual exploitation and the 'objectification' of fellow-humans (male or female);
- 'Aparigraha': non-possessiveness; reduction of consumption; reduction of 'carbon footprint'.

The Vratas provide a framework for ecological living of the kind which Western greens are only slowly groping towards. They are themselves interconnected, for they acknowledge that consumption and materialism are forms of 'himsa', doing harm to humanity and nature, but above all to the inner self. The Vratas connect all forms of exploitation – ecological, economic and sexual – and point us towards non-exploitative forms of living which are profoundly green in character. Yet the Jain understanding that all life is interconnected, and that 'right livelihood' means sustainable living, is grounded in a spiritual perspective that departs radically from much of Western green thinking.

From the Jain standpoint, the basic unit of life is the 'jiva'. This is not a 'soul' in the way this term is conventionally understood, but a unit of pure, uncorrupted consciousness that comes into being spontaneously, that is, it is neither created nor destroyed. It also vibrates spontaneously and so comes into contact with 'karma' (which means action and arises through activity of all kinds). As a result, it is enmeshed in the wheel of 'samsara', the cycle of birth, death and rebirth that continues until enlightenment is achieved. The samsaric cycle is familiar to students of Hindu or Buddhist teachings, as is karma, but in Jainism there is a crucial difference. For karma is not merely the cosmic law of cause and effect. It is a physical process, by which particles of subtle matter attach themselves to the jiva by a process known as 'asrava', or karmic inflow. Karmic particles impose limits on the jiva's consciousness, obscuring its understanding of what is real. They also weigh it down, literally, and trap it in the 'Lokakasa', or 'inhabited universe'. The jiva is alive, whereas the gross matter surrounding it – a physical representation of karma – is 'ajiva', or lacking in sentience.



The spiritual quest is therefore the journey of the jiva back to its point of origin: pure consciousness. This is a journey that can take aeons and can involve passing through many embodiments, human and non-human, on earth, other worlds or even parallel universes. The ultimate aim is to achieve 'Moksha', or liberation from all physical constraints, within another universe, the 'Siddha Loka', or place of liberated souls. This contrasts with the western green vision in both its spiritual and political guises. Whereas the change of consciousness sought by western greens celebrates the sacred within nature more than beyond it, Jains seek ultimate liberation from all natural processes, as well as the false materialistic worldview that leads to exploitation of nature.

How can we reconcile the green goal of re-engagement with nature with the Jain goal of world-transcendence? The answer probably lies in the method advocated by Jains for reducing karmic influence. At individual and social levels, this involves reducing consumption, abstaining from harmful acts and rejecting philosophies that lead to exploitation and domination. The karmic footprint is identical with the ecological footprint. It follows that there is a connection between the reduction of carbon and the reduction of karma, that the way towards spiritual enlightenment is sustainable living and co-operation with natural processes.

In Jainism, human beings are special only in that they possess a type of intelligence that can lead them to spiritual liberation. However this intelligence can lead us to the nadir of destructiveness as well as the zenith of creativity: we can create concentration camps as well as great works of art, invent nuclear weapons as well as cures for disease. Human intelligence gives us responsibilities to fellow humans and all beings, without which any idea of rights becomes meaningless.

The Jain way of life aims as far as possible to reflect these deep ecological concerns. Those who have taken ascetic vows are expected to abandon personal possessions entirely and live only on donations from lay Jains. They eat only to satisfy basic needs and practise 'Iryasamiti' or 'Careful Action'. This means that they are required to examine every planned activity for evidence of harm to fellow creatures, and to avoid all actions deemed likely to cause preventable harm. The most powerful popular image of the Jain is the ascetic man or woman with a mouth covered by a length of cloth and carrying a small brush. The brush is for the ascetic to sweep the ground when walking, so that small life forms are left uninjured by human footsteps, whilst the covered mouth protects against the harmful effects of breath.

Such actions are the nearest any human being can come to 'pure' Ahimsa. In renouncing possessions and acquisitiveness, they are taking the vow of Aparigraha to its logical conclusion, which is also Ahimsa, because non-consumption is the same as non-injury to the Earth. The purpose of ascetic practice is two-fold. First, it is an exercise in self-conquest as a path to enlightenment and release from karma. Secondly, it is an example of the conscious use of human intelligence to minimise harm to all life, played out dramatically to inspire lay men and women and remind them of their true priorities in life. Lay Jains regard the ascetic's life as the ideal of ethical and rational human existence. Even the most conventionally successful and wealthy among the laity admire ascetics above all other categories of human being. They hope that they will be able to take the Greater Vows at some stage in their lives or in a future incarnation. The fact that asceticism is seen as the highest stage of human development enables lay men and women to put all their mundane material concerns and narrow personal ambitions into perspective. And a sense of perspective is arguably the first step towards ecological living.

Few Jains are able to become dedicated ascetics, although some do so for limited periods in their lives. However, lay people practice Iryasamiti as far as practically possible. They are expected to be ecologically attuned, and to integrate that awareness into their daily lives and long-term plans. The Jain diet is vegetarian, to avoid the infliction of pain and death on





sentient creatures for human pleasure. It is considered a duty to minimise waste, unnecessary travel, possessions and consumption. Therefore, it is not unusual to find wealthy Jains who lead simple, unassuming lives. Charitable giving and philanthropy are powerful traditions, with endowments bestowed on schools, universities, hospitals and the famous 'panjrapura' (animal sanctuaries). Ahmedabad, in Gujarat, is one of India's best known centres for these sanctuaries. Even the sickest and most injured birds and beasts are nursed and cared for in the interests of Ahimsa and the sanctity of life.

Jains who have come to Britain and other western countries have retained their ecological consciousness. They are unlikely to proclaim their ideas loudly or immodestly and they most certainly do not seek converts. Yet a concern with the natural world, with ecological and social justice, often plays a prominent part in their lives. In London, for example, a young Jain businessman called Mahersh Shah has founded a catering service called Shambu's Kitchen, which provides and publicises healthy and tasty cooking that leaves a low ecological (and karmic) footprint. He and other Jains support animal sanctuaries in the UK, notably Hugletts Wood Farm in East Sussex, which operates on the principle of compassion for all life. Funds are raised at Jain temples to support Hugletts Wood and similar causes. Writer and broadcaster Satish Kumar comes from a Jain family and took ascetic vows for several years as a young man. He edits the Devon-based *Resurgence* magazine, which focuses on holistic and environmentally sensitive living.

Recently, Dr Atul Shah, a prominent Jain scholar and activist, has founded a company called Diverse Ethics, which advises businesses, public institutions and the not-for-profit sector on diversity issues. Atul's ethos goes beyond quotas and box-ticking to an understanding that human and ecological diversity are interlinked. Therefore, diversity programmes make sense only as part of a broader culture of respect, which includes environmental awareness. This way of making connections is profoundly Jain in character, but can be successfully applied to a Western multicultural setting.

Jain dharma extends the concept of society to include fellow creatures, plants and the various ecosystems of the planet that support life. What better starting point is there for those of us – of all faiths or none – who seek a more balanced relationship between the rest of nature and humankind?

### Notes

- (1) Macbeth, Act 1, Scene VII
- (2) Mardia, K.V. (2002) *The Scientific Foundations of Jainism*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, pp4-5
- (3) The best translation of the *Acaranga Sutra* is that of the nineteenth century German Indologist Hermann Jacobi, published by Clarendon Press, Oxford, in 1884. A full version is available on the Internet Sacred Text Archive. <http://www.sacred-texts.com/jai.index.htm>. Note that Jacobi refers to Jains as 'Gainas', a variant spelling/pronunciation.

### Recommended resources

- Mardia, K.V. (2002) *The Scientific Foundations of Jainism*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass
- Rankin, A. (2006) *The Jain Path: Ancient Wisdom for the West*, Winchester/Washington DC: O Books
- Shah, A.K. *Celebrating Diversity: How to enjoy, respect and benefit from Great Coloured Britain*, Stowmarket: Kevin Mayhew Ltd

### Websites



<http://www.diverseethics.com>, the website of Diverse Ethics, Consultants in Diversity and Ethics (accessed June 2008)

<http://www.huglettswoodfarm.com>, the website of Hugletts Wood Farm, 'a farm animal sanctuary in the UK that operates a dedicated Cow Protection Program... the only Vegan farm in the UK that runs a Sanctuary.' (accessed June 2008)

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<http://www.resurgence.org>, the website of *Resurgence* magazine