

## The Roots of the Spirit of Nonkilling in Jainism

Jainism has in it the deep roots of the spirit of nonkilling. It enjoins its followers to abstain from killing not only humans but from all forms of life that inhabit this universe. The Jaina scriptures use the word ‘*ahimsa*’ for nonkilling. Its nearest substitute in English is nonviolence but it falls short of the profound meaning with which ‘*ahimsa*’ is interpreted in Jainism. It not only means abstinence from physical violence but also from mental and verbal violence. The seeds of violence first sprout in human mind and then they manifest themselves in either violent words or violent acts.

The word ‘Jainism’ is derived from the word ‘*jina*’ which means one who has conquered the self by annihilating all passions. A Jina is also called a Tirthankara, a builder of the ford (which leads across *samsara*, the ocean of suffering). The Jains are those who follow the path shown by the self-illuminated *jinas*. They believe that twenty four Tirthankars or *jinas* appear in each ascending and descending half of the time cycle and they have done so from time immemorial and will continue to do so. The first Tirthankar of this descending half of the present cycle was Rsabha and the last was Lord Mahavira who was born in 599 BCE and was a contemporary of Lord Buddha. In Jainism, “*ahimsa (nonviolence) is paramodharma (the highest form of righteousness)*. This sutra alone constitutes the quintessence of Jainism. It reveals the deepest roots of the nonkilling culture paving the way for the peaceful co-existence of all humans and for preserving the ecosystem on which their survival depends. Not to speak of the wanton destruction of forests, animals, birds etc. the ghastly killing of humans by humans in the name of caste, colour, creed and nationality has increased manifold. Apart from killing the members of his own species humans are killing animals and birds not only for their food but also for fun and cosmetics.

In the course of his austerities and deep meditation Lord Mahavira realized that the entire earth was nothing but a heap of *jivas* (animate beings). The earth consists of both *jivas* (sentient beings) and *ajiva* (non-sentient beings). In the course of his quest for the ultimate truth he came to the conclusion that all *jivas*, small or big, want to live, no one wants to die, so killing any of them is a sin. His compassion extends not only to humans but to all forms of life that inhabit the earth. According to him all *jivas* are equal. The Acarharang Sutra gives us a detailed elucidation of his philosophy of nonkilling. Answering a question of his disciple Jambu as to what constitutes eternal dharma (religion) he says, “*I so pronounce that all the omniscient beings of all times state, speak, propagate, and elaborate that nothing which breathes, which exists, which lives, and which has any essence or or potential of life, should be destroyed or ruled over, or subjugated, or harmed, or denied of its essence or potential.*”

*This truth, propagated by self-knowing omniscient beings, after understanding all there is in the universe, is pure, undefileable, and eternal. In support of this truth I ask you a question, “Is sorrow or pain desirable for you?”*

*If you say, 'Yes, it is,' it would be a lie, as it is against the evident reality. If you say, 'No, it is not,' you will be telling the truth. What I want to add to the truth expressed by you is that as sorrow or pain is not desirable for you, so it is to all which breath, exist, live, or have any essence of life. To you and all it is undesirable, and painful, and repugnant.*

*That which you consider worth destroying is (like) yourself.*

*That which you consider worth disciplining is (like) yourself.*

*That which you consider worth harming is (like) yourself.*

*That which you consider worth subjugating is (like) yourself.*

*That which you consider worth killing is (like) yourself.*

*The result of actions by you has to be borne by you, so do not destroy anything.*

These words of Lord Mahavira contain the roots of nonkilling. The essence of his message is that killing of any form of life is a heinous crime. He further says, “*Human race is one. No one is high or low. One is brahmana (a category of his caste in India) not by birth but by one’s profession, one is a kshatriya (warrior caste) not by birth but by one’s profession. One is vaisya (the third category caste in India) or sudra (low caste) merely on account of one’s profession. A human being should refrain from mental violence (vowing to do deliberate harm to someone, to gather destructive material or contemplating wreaking vengeance on someone), from verbal violence which includes the use of abusive words and swearing and from physical violence i.e. vowing to kill someone.*”

Mahavira believed in pure *ahimsa* and rejected the theory of killing even in self-defence. He says that killing can never be the basis of our life. It is peace which is the basis of one’s life. He has stated in these words, “*All the Tirthankars or Buddhas who were born in the past or will be born in the future have peace as their basis.*”

Defining nonkilling or nonviolence Mahavira says, ‘*ahimsa means complete absence of any thought of attachment.*’ He knew that it is not possible for a house – holder to eschew violence in its totality so he laid down for him a code of conduct based on small vows (anuvrats). Addressing his shravak (votary) Anand Mahavira says ‘*a house holder must refrain from five types violence i.e. binding an animal with a rope which is tight, using a lathi to beat someone, maiming one’s body, loading an animal heavily and depriving someone of food and water.*”

In Jainism the roots of nonkilling are very strong. If one can not abstain from violence in its totality, one can make a beginning by abstaining from deliberate violence. Sankalpja himsa (deliberate violence) is the main cause of conflict in the world. Let us at least pledge to refrain from harming any living being deliberately. We can at least refrain from killing innocent beings, Mahavira’s message of *anuvrat* (small vows) can save the world from killing.

Continuing the lofty tradition of Mahavira today is His Holiness Acharya Mahapragya, the head of Jain Svetamber Terapanth Sect and the spiritual patron of Anuvrat Movement. He has recently launched Ahimsa Samvaaya which is a forum for a dialogue and joint action plans among all practioners of ahimsa to stop killing in the world. His Ahimsa Yatra is another effective campaign to awaken the spirit of people against killing. We can fulfil our dream of a nonkilling society by joining his mission or extending support to him