

# Ahimsa (nonviolence) as An Eternal Value of Life in the Jain Religious Tradition

– Dr. Sohan Lal Gandhi

Nonviolence is considered to be the greatest religion for everyone (*ahimsa parmo dharma*). It's a statement often inscribed on Jain temples. *ahimsa* is the standard by which all actions are judged. The aim is to prevent the accumulation of harmful *karma* and promote peaceful co-existence of all living beings on the planet.

For householders observing the small vows (*anuvrata*) is obligatory and they enjoin them not to kill any innocence living being. Monks have to take the greatest care of living organisms. Care means refraining from hurting, causing injury to others knowingly or unknowingly. It also means that they would neither incite anyone to kill others nor would approve the acts of killing indulged in by other living beings. Sentient entities which a monk is forbidden to harm include all human beings, animals, insects, plants, earth, fire, as well as air. Creating obstacles in another *jiva*'s (embodied soul's) spiritual progress increases one's bad *karma* and delays one's liberation from the cycle of rebirth.

Theoretically and ideally, all life forms are said to deserve full protection from all kinds of injury but this ideal cannot be completely implemented in practice. We have to make a choice to survive. We recognize a hierarchy of life, from immobile ones to mobile ones, from one sense to five senses. Higher the senses, the more a life form can be sensitive to pain. Rather than taking the flesh and blood of animals, birds or mammals which have evolved all five senses and their brain, nervous system and emotional life are so similar to ours, we should sustain our bodies with the help of the bloodless plant kingdom, which have not yet developed any of the senses of taste, smell, seeing, or hearing.

Most vegetables are harvested at the end of their natural life cycle. Many of them can be picked from trees without uprooting the whole plant. Fruits, nuts, legumes, and vegetables etc can be picked without uprooting the whole plant. Nevertheless, we realize with humility that the very fruit or leaf or grain that we find on our plate had to lose its life in order to give us life. Without the plants to which we are helplessly bound, we would not be able to survive, and therefore, to evolve.

We can see how two to five sensory *jivas* are dominated by fear, hopelessness, dearly clinging to their lives and struggling to survive; when one sees them tossing and tumbling to save their lives one drops the idea of being

instrumental in causing their agony, pain, molesting, callousness, exploiting or killing them.

That is why the Jain monks recite this blessing before their daily meals:

*aho Jinehim asavvajja vittisahuna desiya  
mukkha sahana heoosa sahu dehassa dharana*

‘O Jinas (a *jina* is an omniscient being who has conquered the self)! what a wonderful teaching you have given us! You have taught us to take only that food which is innocent, benign, and healthy, because it has not been procured through causing bloodshed. You have taught us to know why we eat to sustain the body – for one main reason i.e. to unfold our life and reach ultimate liberation. With this sense of appreciation, we eat with respect and restraint, without taking more than we need. And we say as the Native Americans did :

Dear plants, some day our bodies will return to you, to become food for the nourishment of your roots.’

In the practice of ahimsa, the requirements are less strict for the laypersons who have pledged to observe *anuvrata* (small vows) instead of the vows meant for monks and nuns. This is only a physical and superficial aspect of the concept of *ahimsa*. It has a deeper and subtler significance. Physical non-violence is observed primarily to live and let others live. True *ahimsa* requires the elevation of the pity to the level of sympathy and compassion. A person has to be sensitive to other’s pain and misery caused by other factors. He has to get rid of feelings of anger, arrogance, animosity, greed, deceit, jealousy and hostility that generate the violent instinct.

Some of the experiences in life are pleasant and are some painful. We react with love and hate, like, dislike, etc. When the outcome of the changes we want to bring about does not meet our expectations, we tend to become violent. There is nothing wrong in trying to create a change, so long as we do it calmly, without hurting others and willing to accept the results as they are.

We give an example of nonviolence from the life of Lord Mahavira – the 24<sup>th</sup> Tirthankar of the Jain religion, who was a contemporary of Lord Buddha. It was during the 11<sup>th</sup> year of his spiritual practice a god called Sangama came to know through his knowledge of clairvoyance that in one of his past lives, Mahavira’s *jiva* (soul) had done great harm to him. To wreak vengeance on him he created natural calamities in the form of torrential rains, thunder, lightning, fire in the jungle. He also created wild animals which pounced on Mahavira but Mahavira remained unruffled and calm despite immense pain caused to him. He

bore the pangs of suffering with a feeling of equanimity, free from malice. He stood in *kayotsarg* (meditative posture) firmly like a rock. He did not break down nor did he have any ill feelings for Sangam. Finally in the morning Sangam was almost exhausted, he saw tears in the eyes of Lord Mahavira. He thought he finally succeeded in defeating Mahavir. Lord Mahavir could read his mind so he said, “Sangam these tears are not from my pain or defeat. They are flowing out of compassion for the horrible bad *karma* you have caused to yourself by inflicting pain on me. This *karma* will cause great suffering to you” Such was Mahavira’s innate compassion even for the offenders. Writing about Mahavira Gandhi said :

‘I say with conviction that the doctrine for which the name of Lord Mahavir is glorified nowadays is the doctrine of *ahimsa* (nonviolence). If anyone has practiced to the fullest extent and has propagated most the doctrine of *ahimsa*, it was Lord Mahavira.’

Mahatma Gandhi was deeply influenced by the Jain philosophy. He had learnt a great deal from Shrimad Rajchandra – a spiritual leader. He had developed a capacity of positively reacting to other’s wrongs. He had to face terrible distress from the Durban whites, when he went back to South Africa. He however felt that the whites indulged in such action on account of their misunderstanding about him and therefore declined to take any retaliatory action against the offenders. In tune with that thinking, he evolved the movement of civil disobedience and nonviolent resistance to unjustifiable rules and regulations. During that movement he was careful to see that no harm was done even to his opponents. He did not want to even mentally hurt anyone. This concept of nonviolent resistance was so effective there and ultimately that very concept gained independence for India from the British Rule.

All violence starts from the thought process, which then leads to verbal violence and then eventually to physical violence. To gain victory or to live non-violent life one must look at the root cause of violence, i.e. mental violence. Mental violence takes place due to four major destructive emotions. They are anger, pride, deceit and greed. So we need to recognize these four evils and work on them. It is these destructive emotions that cause violence in the world. The Jain religion is of the view that man’s liberation depends on the suppression of these four major passions.

- By conquering anger, the soul acquires the quality of forgiveness.
- By conquering pride, the soul gains humility.
- By giving up deceit, the soul acquires simplicity and straightforwardness.
- By conquering greed, the soul attains contentment.

Furthermore, anger spoils good relations, pride destroys humility, and deceit is detrimental to friendship, while greed destroys everything. Nonviolence is born the moment these passions weaken. People often ask us as to how they can practise nonviolence.

We urge them to take these four small vows :

- I will be a vegetarian or will move in that direction by being vegetarian once a week.
- I will try to fast occasionally for good health and for inner peace.
- I will stay away from avoidable violence.
- I will begin my day with *yoga*, meditation, prayers and will introspect and review my actions before I go to bed.

These four small vows, if adhered to by people of all walks of life, can create a peaceful nonviolent world.

One who wants to follow the path of *ahimsa* should realize that the main cause of the stress or worry that grips us is the non-fulfillment of our wish or expectation. When a person's attachment to his beliefs and worldly possessions increases, he resorts to violence to preserve them or spread them.

In order to get rid of expectation or attachment, a person needs to realize that he is complete in himself as a spirit. If he considers himself as a body he would not be able to realize. As an alternative, he should realize he is better off without the thing/condition he has attachment towards.

Nonviolence is an eternal value of human life. Without it society or nation cannot sustain itself. It stresses peaceful coexistence, non-absolutist attitude towards other beliefs and persons and respect for all faiths. It is the quintessence of *ahimsa*.