

Ahiṃsā and the Question of “Just War”

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The image of the Jainas throughout their long history has been associated with the doctrine of ahiṃsā, and the Jainas themselves have ardently adhered to the observance of the practice in their day-to-day life. The fact that even in contemporary society where material culture is all-pervasive, Jaina mendicants, who scrupulously adhere to their vow of nonviolence, still number over 2000 monks and 5,000 nuns, a large number indeed considering the very small size of the Jaina community, testifies to the continued total dedication to the ideal of ahiṃsā. Lay Jainas as well abjure all forms of intentional violence and reduce the necessary amount of violence associated with their occupations to the absolute minimum. Without such dedication, ahiṃsā itself would remain either a fond memory of a lost golden age or an unachievable future goal.

Fundamental to Jain principle of ahiṃsā is the belief that each living being possesses an individual soul. This soul is characterized by consciousness, undergoes continuous changes between various grades of purity and impurity, ignorance and omniscience. The Jainas conceive that a soul takes up a new body after death of its present body according to its volitional activities. This is accomplished by the soul drawing toward itself a subtle kind of matter (*karma*), which then envelops it and defines for the soul the new kind of body it will receive. The volitional force driving the soul is what determines the state in which the soul finds itself. If the soul becomes subject to

attachment and aversion, the soul gets tainted by himsā and thus becomes harmful to itself and others. If the soul maintains detachment and compassion, the soul is characterized by ahimsā and thus non-injurious to others around itself.¹

The orientation of the Jaina discussion on ahimsā, therefore, proceeds from the perspective of one's own soul and not so much from the standpoint of the protection of other beings or the welfare of humanity as a whole. The Jainas rightly claim that compassion toward other living beings is not possible without realizing the value of self, the source of all spiritual wisdom. That is why the Jainas uphold the maxim, "First knowledge then compassion. Thus does one remain in full control. How can an ignorant person be compassionate when he cannot distinguish the good from the evil?"²

The Jainas seem to be unique in believing that even animals, like humans, possess mind and the five senses, and are capable of spiritual sensibilities. A beautiful story about an elephant narrated in the Jaina scriptures illustrates the awareness and moral capacity ascribed to animals by the Jainas. This is the tale of an elephant, who was the leader of a large herd that was caught in a huge forest fire. All the animals of the forest ran from their haunts and gathered around a lake so that the entire area was jammed with beings, both large and small. After standing there for quite sometime, the elephant lifted his leg to scratch himself, and immediately a small hare ran to occupy the spot vacated by his raised foot. Rather than trampling the helpless animal, however, the elephant's mind was filled with great compassion for the plight of his fellow creature; indeed his concern for the hare's welfare was so intense that he is said to have cut off

*'apradurbhāvaḥ khalu ragādīnām bhavaty ahimsēti/
teṣāṃ evotpattiḥ himsēti jīnāgamasya saṃkṣepaḥ//*

(Assuredly the nonappearance of attachment and other passions is ahimsā, and their appearance is himsā. This is a brief summary of the Jaina doctrine.) See *Puruṣārthasiddhyupāya* of Amṛtacandra Sūri, v. 44. Sanskrit Text and English translation by Ajit Prāsada (Lucknow: 1933).

² *paḍhamam nānam tao dayā, evam cittaḥ savvasamjāe.* See *Daśavaikālika Sūtra*, iv.

forever his associations with future animal destinies. The elephant stood with one leg raised for more than three days until the fire abated and the hare was able to leave. By then, however, the elephant's whole leg had gone numb and, unable to set down his foot, he toppled over. While maintaining the purity of his mind, he finally died and was reborn as prince Megha, son of King Śreṇika, the ruler of Magadha. Subsequently, he became an eminent Jain monk under Mahāvira.³ This story is a perfect example of the choice that one may make in understanding a good or evil act. The elephant had the option of simply trampling the hare but refused to do so, preferring to act as would a morally and non-violently inclined human. Such non-violent behavior was crucial to the spiritual progress of the elephant's soul in its subsequent life.

In Jainism the awareness of ahiṃsā is a constant concern for the individual, involving total mindfulness in mental, oral and physical activities. Ahiṃsā, therefore, is a creed in its own right; identified with its own spiritual impulses and informing all of one's activities. It may truly be called a way of personal discipline.

This discipline is followed to varying extents by the members of the Jaina community as expressed by two explicit schemes of vows and restraints called major vows (mahāvratā) and minor vows (aṇuvratā) applicable to the mendicants and the lay people respectively.⁴ The commitment of Jaina mendicants to the principle of ahiṃsā is absolute since they are required to renounce their social involvement and rely for their legitimate needs on the voluntary support of the laypeople. The mendicants thus became embodiment of ahiṃsā and the exemplars of that ideal for the lay people—who accept a great many grades of

³ S. Bharilla (ed.), *Jñātadharmakathāḥ*, Prakrit Text (Pathardi, 1964), chapter 1, pp. 180-187.

⁴ For a detailed description of the Jaina vows, see P. S. Jaini, *The Jaina Path of Purification* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), pp. 157-185.

nonviolence allowing them to gradually progress toward the state achieved by the mendicants. However, there are certain basic expectations of them. In order to be considered as Jaina, they must refrain from *saṃkalpaja himsā*, that is engaging in intentionally planned and carried out violence or injury, such as the intention with which a hunter might stalk his prey; uphold their commitment to vegetarianism;⁵ and adopt a proper means of livelihood so as to restrict the extent of himsā. The Jaina lawgivers drew up a long list of professions that were unsuitable for the Jaina lay person.⁶ Certain Jaina texts forbade, for example, animal husbandry and trade in alcohol or animal byproducts, leaving only such professions as commerce, arts and crafts, clerical and administrative occupations. In all these activities, some degree of violence was inevitable. The Jainas could engage in such activities provided they behaved with scrupulous honesty and utmost heedfulness. Injury done while engaged in such activities was considered *arambhaja-himsa* (occupational violence), which could be minimized by choosing a profession like business that was reasonably free from causing harm, as indeed, Jainas have traditionally done. Military service, for example, was not generally expected of Jaina laymen, a fact that allowed them to observe their precept of ahimsā and follow it within the narrow sphere as laid down in their religious law.

It is apparent that Jaina lawgivers defined the meaning of intentional himsā with great care and expressly forbade it to all Jaina believers but gave Jaina laymen dispensation with regard to certain types of violence associated with their legitimate

⁵ Jainas extended their dietary restrictions to various types of vegetable life as well. In their attempts to categorize those types of plants that could be consumed with relatively less harm, the Jainas developed a whole science of botany that was unique in Indian religious history. For a list of plants and substances forbidden to devout Jainas, see R. Williams, *Jaina Yoga: A survey of Medieval Śrāvakācāras* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), pp. 110-116.

⁶ For a list of occupations forbidden to Jaina layman, see R. Williams, *Jaina Yoga: A survey of Medieval Śrāvakācāras*, *op. cit.*, pp. 117-122.

occupations. There remained, however, a certain grey area that could not be so explicitly characterized as either expressly evil or provisionally acceptable. This is the area known as the "just war" or violence in defense of one's property, honor, family, community, or nation. In this matter, the individual had to take into account not only the duties to himself but to society as a whole. The duty of Jaina mendicant in this case was quite clear: he must not retaliate in any way and must be willing to lay down his own life in order to keep his vow of total nonviolence. For a Jaina layman, however, appropriate conduct is not so clear cut. There were always situations in which violence would be a last resort in guiding the interests of himself and his community. The Jaina lawgivers of medieval times accorded with customary Hindu law in these matters. Somdeva (c. tenth century), for example, stipulated that "only a king should strike down those enemies of his kingdom who appear on the battlefield bearing arms, but never those people who are downtrodden, weak, or who are friends."⁷

For a religion that expected so much from its followers in terms of keeping the vows of ahimsa, such perfunctory advice on the legitimacy of Jaina participation in warfare must be considered a serious oversight. Nevertheless, there are indications both in canonical scriptures (some portions of which may go back to 500 BCE) and in much later narrative literature that the Jaina lawgivers were concerned about this problem and recognized the contradictions inherent in the expression, "just war."

One attempt to resolve this problem is indicated by the term *virodhi-himsa*: that is, countering violence with violence. The Jainas allowed that such violence could be justified, albeit as a final resort, for the Jaina layman whose conscience demanded that he defend his rights or for one who was called upon to fight by his king. However, as the following narrative will show, the

⁷ *Yasastilaka-campū*, (Bombay: Nirnaysagara Press, 1903), pp. ii, 97.

Jainas neither glorified the bravery involved in such violence nor held forth the prospect of birth in heaven to the protagonists, whether winner or loser.

The first story is the tale of Bahubali, who is placed by the Jainas at the beginning of the present time-cycle, which ushered in human civilization.⁸ During this golden age, Ṛṣabha, the first of the twenty-four *Tirthaṅkaras*, had just appeared in the world and introduced both the secular laws legislating the conduct of society as well as the monastic laws governing the pursuit of salvation. When Ṛṣabha renounced the world to become the first Jaina mendicant of this age, his eldest son, Bharata, claimed kingship over his entire domain. But the younger son, Bāhubali, claimed title to a share of the kingdom and refused to submit to the rule of his elder brother. Disregarding the principle of ahimsā, he challenged his brother to face him and his army on the battlefield. Bharata recognized that his duty as a king compelled him to force the submission of his insubordinate brother, and war seemed unavoidable.

The king's advisors, alarmed at the prospect of mass carnage, proposed single combat between the two brothers as a means of settling the dispute. The brothers agreed. In a wrestling combat that followed, Bāhubali defeated his brother Bharata and attained a decisive victory. At this point, one would have expected that Bāhubali would cap his triumph by proclaiming himself king. But the Jaina texts maintain instead that he was overcome by great remorse for having humiliated his brother and instantly awakened to both futility of sovereignty and bonds of possessions, which have blinded him to the true nature of the soul. To the great astonishment of the spectators and the defeated king, Bāhubali discarded his royal insignia and renounced the world and declared himself a Jaina monk. The storytellers relate

⁸ For accounts of Bāhubali and Bharata, see Pannalal Jain, ed. *Ādipurāṇa* of Jinasena (Varanasi:1963): chapter 36; Helen M. Johnson trans., *Trīṣaṣṭīśalākāpuruṣacarītra* (*The Lives of Sixty-three Illustrious Persons*) by Hemacandra, vol. I (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1962).

that Bahubali stood steadfast in meditation at that very spot for so long that creepers grew over his body and anthills formed at his feet. Bahubali thus became omniscient and continues to be revered by the Jaina community as the first man of this age to have attained emancipation from the cycle of birth and death; colossal images of him in meditational posture are worshipped to this day.

The Jainas drew several morals from this story that are relevant in guiding Jaina laymen in determining their proper duty when confronted by an adversary in battle. First, it was maintained that valor was preferable to cowardice: Bahubali was right in standing up for his familial rights to a share of the domain, but Bharata was also correct in attempting to maintain the territorial integrity of his realm. The king's ministers were also right to reduce the necessary violence to an absolute minimum by proposing single combat between the two brothers rather than involving both armies in the dispute. But the Jainas ultimately maintained that the victory of Bahubali would not have truly settled anything for, had he succeeded to kingship as he was entitled, a new cycle of violence would certainly have ensued on the part of the loyalists of the vanquished monarch. This would have proved the truth of Jaina maxim that all possessions are evil, for true nonviolence cannot be practiced either by an individual or by a society that craves possessions and must therefore fight to acquire, augment, and protect its wealth. Total nonviolence is possible only when possessions are relinquished, as was so admirably demonstrated by Bahubali's renunciation of the world after his victory. Thus, again is upheld the Jaina belief that only the valiant and the self-denying can pursue nonviolence to its fullest extent, not the cowardly or the covetous.

For the layman who was unable to forsake all possessions but was nevertheless keen to minimize his himsā, the Jainas introduced a precept called *parigraha-parimāṇa* (voluntarily setting a limit on one's possessions) and included it as the last of the five *anuvratas* (minor vows). A Jaina layman wishing to take

this vow was asked by a mendicant to set specific limits on his possession of such temporal items as gold and silver, real estate, grain, and furniture, and to vow not to acquire amounts in excess of this limit. He was further encouraged to lower these limits by a certain amount each year in emulation of total non-possession (*aparigraha*) of the mendicant. In demanding that an advocate of *ahimsā* should renounce all properties in excess of one's legitimate needs, the Jainas were showing great insight into the possibility of building a society that practiced minimal *hiṃsā*. It must still be said, however, that the Jainas lacked either the vision or the organization to translate this precept into a general social philosophy. It is much to the credit of Mahatma Gandhi, who was undoubtedly influenced by several devout Jainas,⁹ that he espoused a philosophy founded upon *ahimsā* and *aparigraha*.

A second memorable story appears in the canonical *Bhagvati-sūtra*, which purports to preserve the words of the last Jaina *Tirthaṅkara*, Mahāvīra. There Mahāvīra was asked about a war between Koṇika, the emperor of Magadha during Mahāvīra's time, and a federation of eighteen independent kings that had reportedly left 840,000 men dead. Mahāvīra's disciple specifically wanted to know whether it was true that all those men would be reborn in heaven because they had perished on the battlefield. In answer to this question, Mahāvīra declared that only one man out of this large army was reborn in heaven, and only one reborn as a man, all the rest ended up in hell or in the animal realms.

Contrary to the widely held belief that death on the battlefield is almost equal to holy martyrdom, the Jaina answer as put in the mouth of Mahāvīra shows extraordinary courage of their conviction that death accompanied by hatred and violence can never be salutary and must therefore lead to unwholesome rebirths. Mahāvīra's answer to this question is truly memorable

⁹ See correspondence between Mahatma Gandhi and a revered Jaina saint Śrīmad Rājacandra as given in the *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (Government of India Publications: 1958-75) Vol. 32, pp. 601-602.

and departs drastically from the traditional belief of Hindus, as recorded in *Bhagavad-Gītā*, where Kṛṣṇa, the incarnation of God Viṣṇu tells Arjuna, who was hesitant to participate in the war, that death in battle leads to heaven:

Hato vā prāpsyasi svargam, jitvā vā bhokṣyase mahīm/
tasmād uttiṣṭha Kaunteya, yuddhāya kṛtaniścayaḥ//¹⁰
(Slain, you will attain heaven, conquering you will enjoy earth.
Therefore, rise, O Arjuna, resolved to do battle.)

To return to our narrative, Mahāvīra then proceeds to tell the story of two fortunate soldiers.¹¹ The man who ended up in heaven was a Jaina named Varuṇa, who had taken the *aṇuvratas* of the layman before he was drafted by his king and sent to the front. Prior to his departure, however, Varuṇa vowed that he would never be the first one to strike anyone; he would always wait until he was struck first before attacking. Armed with bow and arrow, he took his chariot into battle and came face to face with his adversary. Varuṇa declared that he would not take the first shot and called on his opponent to shoot. Only after his opponent's arrow was already on its deadly flight did he let fly his own arrow. His enemy was killed instantly, but Varuṇa himself lay mortally wounded. Realizing that his death was imminent, Varuṇa took his chariot off the battlefield and sat on the ground. Holding his hands together in veneration to his teacher, Mahāvīra, he said:

Salutations to Mahāvīra, wherever he may be, who administered to me the layman's precepts. Now the time has come for me to face my death. Making Jina Mahāvīra my witness, I undertake the total renunciation of all forms of

¹⁰ *Bhagavad Gītā*, ii, 37.

¹¹ See *Bhagvatī-sūtra (Viyāhapannatti)*. VII, 9 (#302 ff). Summary by Jozef Deleu, Tempelhof (Rijks University of Gent), 1970.

violence, both gross and subtle. May I remain steadfast in maintaining absolute detachment from this body.¹²

Saying thus, he pulled out the arrow and, his mind at peace, died instantly and was reborn in heaven. The second man, a friend of Varuṇa, was himself severely wounded in the battle. Even so he followed after Varuṇa in order to help him in his resolve and witnessed his peaceful death. He died soon afterwards in the same fashion and was reborn as a human being.

Thus, the Jainas are clear in their belief that a wholesome rebirth is assured only to those who die a peaceful death and who renounce all hostility and violence. Without achieving these qualities, no amount of valor on the battlefield guarantees even true temporal victory, let alone improvement in one's spiritual life. This does not mean that the Jaina lay adherent is a total pacifist, however. A layperson, as we saw above, is given the option of countering an armed adversary in kind, with the reminder that it is proper for a Jaina not to be the first to strike. The combatant would also be asked to bear in mind the Jaina doctrine of *anekāntavāda* (multiple perspectives), which allows the Jaina to recognize the validity of his adversary's point of view as well. By enabling him to recognize an area of common ground between himself and his opponent, a Jaina would, therefore, be able to avoid confrontation and try reconciliation, and resort to warfare only out of dire necessity. The Jainas thus appear to have outlined a path of nonviolence that would allow the lay adherent to conduct his daily life with human dignity while permitting him to cope with the unavoidable reality of the world in which violence is all-pervasive.

The Jainas would be the first to admit in accordance with their own doctrine of *syādvāda* (qualified assertions) that other religions too might discuss some of these same issues. But what distinguishes the Jaina conception of nonviolence from that found in other world religions is that it is truly a personal way of

¹² *Bhagvatī-sūtra*, VII, 9, #302 ff. (Suttāgame, ed. by Pupphabhikkhu. Gudgaon-Delhi, 1953).

religious discipline.¹³ It forbids the taking of all life, however, that might be justified or excused in other religions and warns that nothing short of hell or animal rebirth awaits those who kill or who die while entertaining thoughts of violence. Killing, even in self defence or for the "right cause" would lead to rebirth in hell. For example, in the Jaina *Rāmāyaṇa*, the "good brother" Laxamaṇa goes to the very same hell as does the wicked Rāvaṇa, whom he "justifiably" destroyed in an heroic manner.¹⁴

Jaina commitment to ahiṃsā and a desire for a peaceful world may be measured by the following lines from the religion's most solemn prayer which every Jaina hopes to uphold while breathing his or her last moments of life:

khāmemi savva-jīve, savve jīvā khamantu me/
metti me savva-bhūesu, veraṃ majjha na keṇavi//¹⁵
(I ask pardon of all creatures, may all of them pardon me.
May I have friendship with all beings and enmity with none.)*

¹³This perspective, however, does allow the Jaina to sacrifice his own life in order to guard and nurture his soul. This is technically known as *sallekhanā*, literally meaning "thinning one's own body and passions." The basic justification for *sallekhanā* is that a person who has conscientiously led a holy life has earned the right to die in peace in full possession of his faculties, without any attachment, including attachment to his own body. In this way, the soul may remain unaffected by the injuries (hiṃsa) inflicted upon it by attachment and aversion and may meet its corporeal death in perfect peace with itself and the world. For further discussion about *sallekhanā*, see P. S. Jaini, *The Jaina Path of Purification*, op. cit., pp. 227-233.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.314, fn 62.

¹⁵ Quoted from *Pratikramaṇa sūtra*, 49, in R. Williams, *Jaina Yoga* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 207.

*The above is excerpted from "Ahiṃsā: A Jaina Way of Spiritual Discipline," published in *Collected Papers on Jaina Studies* by P.S. Jaini (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2000).