

# Views on Ahimsā, Compassion, and Samyaktva in Jainism

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Ahimsā appears to be the central theme of Mahāvīra's teachings. As Padmanabh S. Jaini has observed, there is a "preoccupation with ahimsā" within Jainism, for no other religious tradition "has carried it [ahimsā] to the extreme of the Jainas. For them it is not simply the first among virtues but the virtue..."<sup>1</sup> Although in most other religious traditions violence is usually associated with causing harm to other living beings, Jaini has noted that "for Jainas, however, it [himsā] refers primarily to injuring oneself—to behavior which inhibits the soul's ability to attain *mokṣa*."<sup>2</sup>

This focus on one's own spiritual progress as an important motivating factor for observing ahimsā has been mentioned by other authors as well. For example, Ronald Huntington, the late professor of religion and and the co-director of Albert Schweitzer Institute at Chapman University, has written that Jainism "expands Albert Schweitzer's famous concept of reverence for

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<sup>1</sup> Padmanabh S. Jaini, *The Jaina Path of Purification* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), p. 167.

<sup>2</sup> The reasoning is that intentional harm to other living beings is motivated by passions (*kaṣayas*), which cause the binding of unwholesome varieties (*pāpa prakṛtis*) of karmic matter to one's own soul. These karmas cause rebirth in undesirable states of existence that are characterized by a preponderance of suffering and prolong the soul's journey in *saṃsāra*. Jaini, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

life into reverence for the entire universe" and that it "has affinities with Gandhi's non-violent campaigns of *satyagraha* (truth-force)" and with the writings of St. Francis of Assisi. He concludes that "it would be entirely wrong, however, to see ahimsā in any sentimental light. The Jain doctrine of non-injury is based on rational consciousness, not emotional compassion; on individual responsibility, not on a social fellow-feeling. . . . The motive in Jainism is self-centered and entirely for the purpose of individual *kaivalya*. And yet, though the emphasis is on personal liberation, the Jain ethic makes that goal attainable only through consideration for others."<sup>3</sup>

In other writings however, a different view of ahimsā and compassion in Jainism has been expressed. For instance, in an essay entitled "Environmental Wisdom in Ancient India" L. M. Singhvi describes the "ecological philosophy of Jainism" as being "virtually synonymous with the principle of ahimsā." He states:

Compassion and reverence for life are the sheet-anchor of the Jain quest for peace, harmony, and rectitude, based on spiritual and physical symbiosis and a sense of responsibility and restraint. The term ahimsā is stated in the negative (a = non, himsā = violence), but it is rooted in a host of positive aims and actions which have great relevance to contemporary environmental concerns. It is a principle of compassion and responsibility. . . . Compassion and non-violence are the basis of the ancient Jain scriptural aphorism *Parasparopagraha jivānām* (all life is bound together by the mutual support of interdependence.)<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>R. Huntington, "Jainism and Ethics," [www.chapman.edu/schweitzer/huntington.html](http://www.chapman.edu/schweitzer/huntington.html) (December 15, 2001). The essay was intended to be a chapter in a textbook of world religions that he was preparing at the time of his death. It appears on The Albert Schweitzer Institute's website via a link called "Readings on Reverence for Life."

<sup>4</sup> Singhvi at <http://www.ecomall.com/greenshopping/castgreen.htm>.

A similar view of ahimsā and compassion is found on a web page of Jain pilgrimages: “Jainism has become synonymous with ahimsā. Ahimsā (non-violence) occupies the supreme place in Jainism. . . . Compassion (*dayā*) is the guiding force of non-violence. It is the positive way of life. It has been assigned an equally high place in Jainism— ‘*Dayā dharma kā mūla*’ (Compassion is the basis of religion).”<sup>5</sup>

These writings are reflective of different views regarding compassion in Jainism. In writing about Jain views of ecology in the West, Anne Vallely has observed that “in the diaspora community . . . asceticism is being de-emphasized so that teachings of compassion and non-violence are no longer anchored to a renunciatory worldview. Jain teachings are being redefined according to a different ethical charter altogether—one in which active engagement in the world is encouraged.”<sup>6</sup> Is this diversity of opinion indicative of a shift in thought regarding compassion itself? In this regard, it would be instructive to examine views regarding compassion that are found in some classical Jain texts that emphasize renunciation and asceticism.

First, let us examine statements in the *Tattvārthasūtra* (*TS*), a text accepted by both Śvetāmbaras and Digambaras. In *TS* 6.12, compassion (*anukampā*) is listed as one of the causes of the influx of *sātā-vedanīya karma* (the *karma* that causes pleasant bodily feelings), along with giving (*dāna*), asceticism with attachment (*sarāga-samyama*), concentration (*yoga*), equanimity (*kṣānti*), and purity or freedom from greed (*śauca*).<sup>7</sup> Here, and in other

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.jainpilgrimages.com/general/mahavir.htm> (December 15, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> Anne Vallely, “From Liberation to Ecology: Ethical Discourses among Orthodox and Diaspora Jains,” in Christopher Key Chapple (ed.), *Jainism and Ecology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 193-216.

<sup>7</sup> Muni Shri Mishrimal Maharaj (trans.), *Karmagrantha* of Devendrasūri, 6 vols. (Beawar, Rajasthan: Shri Marudharakesari Sahitya Prakashana Samiti, 1974-1976): 1.55. Here compassion is associated with the binding of *sātā-vedanīya karma*.

passages related to compassion, the commentators gloss *anukampā* as "dayā" or "*ghṛṇā*," "compassion, pity, sympathy, or tenderness towards others." Compassion is "*maitrī*," or "friendliness towards others." A compassionate person is one whose heart is full of the feeling of kindness for the afflictions (*pīḍā*) of others, as if this suffering were one's own. Another interpretation of compassion, that of giving to others, is offered by the Śvetāmbara commentator Siddhasenagaṇī. "When one gives food, water, clothing, utensils, shelter, and so forth to the afflicted, the poor, and beggars who have not renounced the household life, and to mendicants as well, there are fruits in the form of disassociation of various types of karmic matter. This brings about knowledge, faith, and conduct. Or, giving is showing compassion. It is viewing the suffering of others as if it were one's own. *Dāna* is giving away with the intent or wish of showing kindness or giving assistance to others."<sup>8</sup>

Compassion is discussed by the commentators in association with *TS* 1.2, where *samyak-darśana* is defined as "belief in substances as they really are." Here, four indicative signs of *samyak-darśana* are listed as *praśama* (calmness), *saṃvega* (uneasiness with worldly existence), *anukampā* (compassion), and *astikya* (belief in the existents such as the soul, non-soul, and so forth). Since compassion is associated with a proper view of reality (*samyaktva*), it is not surprising that *kāruṇya* is listed among the contemplations (*bhāvanās*) that strengthen all five vows (*TS* 7.6 = *SS* 7.11). This *sūtra* reads: "Friendliness (*maitrī*) towards all living beings, delight (*pramoda*) in the distinction and honor of others, compassion (*kāruṇya*) for the afflicted (*kliṣyamāna*), and equanimity (*madhyastha*) towards the ill-mannered [should be contemplated]."

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<sup>8</sup> Umāsvatī, *Tattvartha Sūtra* with *Svopajña-bhāṣya* and commentary by Siddhasenagaṇī, 2 vols.. (Devachanda Lalbhai Jain Pustakodddhar Fund, Series nos. 67 and 76, 1926-30): 6.13.

Here, in the *Sarvārthasiddhī* (SS) the Digambara commentator Pūjyapāda defines *kāruṇya* as “a disposition (*bhāva*) to render assistance (*anugraha*) to the afflicted or those who suffer pain or anguish due to the rise of *asātā-vedanīya karma*. He concludes that “He who conducts himself in this manner is able to practice non-violence and other vows to perfection.”<sup>9</sup>

Thus, according to the commentators on the *Tattvārthasūtra*, compassion may be expressed either passively or actively: by viewing the suffering of others as if it were one’s own or by rendering assistance to those who are afflicted. The definitions for compassion in these commentaries are similar to those in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: (1) Compassion is suffering together with another, participation in suffering, fellow-feeling, sympathy. It is (2) the feeling or emotion, when a person is moved by the suffering or distress of another and by the desire to relieve it; pity that inclines to spare or to succour.<sup>10</sup>

Compassion is discussed in a variety of texts in the context of appropriate mendicant and lay conduct. Regarding mendicant conduct, *Ācārāṅga-sūtra* 11.6.5.2 states “A saint, with right intuition (*samyak-darśana*) who cherishes compassion for the world, in the east, west, south, and north, should preach, spread, and praise (the faith), knowing the sacred lore.”<sup>11</sup> *Uttarādhyayana-sūtra* 21.13 says that “A monk should have compassion (*dayāṇukampā*) on all beings, should be of a forbearing character, should be restrained and chaste, and abstaining from everything sinful; he should live with his senses

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<sup>9</sup> See S. A. Jain (trans.), Pūjyapāda’s *Sarvārthasiddhī* (Madras: Jwalamalini Trust, 1960, Reprint 1992), p. 195.

<sup>10</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, (Clarendon Press, second edition, 1989).

<sup>11</sup> Herman Jacobi (trans.), *Jaina Sūtras*, part 1: Translation of the *Ācārāṅga-sūtra* and *Kalpa Sūtra* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1884; reprint Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1989), p. 60.

under control."<sup>12</sup> In the Digambara *Ātmānuśāsana*, unlimited compassion (*karuṇāpara*) is listed among the fruits of practicing severe austerities.<sup>13</sup> Here, one is urged to follow the path of compassion, self-control, renunciation, and equanimity.<sup>14</sup> "When the shore of the ocean of the cycle of existence is close by, the fortunate man has aversion to sense-gratifications, has renounced all possessions, subjugates the passions, has tranquility, vows, self-control, practice of self-contemplation, pursuit of austerities, duly ordained mental activity, devotion to the Jinās, and compassion (*dayālutā*)."<sup>15</sup> And in discussing religious virtues in the *Praśamaratiprakaraṇa*, Umāsvāti states, "Compassion is the root of sacred doctrine (*dharma*). A person who is devoid of patience (*akṣamavān*) does not show compassion. Therefore, one who is devoted to patience attains the highest *dharma*."<sup>16</sup>

In some of the Śrāvakācāra texts, which detail appropriate conduct for laity, compassion is listed as one of the qualities of an observant layperson (*śrāvaka-guṇa*), specifically in the context of *samyaktva* and in observing various lay vows.<sup>17</sup> For example, Samantabhadra defines abstention from eating after dark (*rātri-bhojana*) as abandoning food by night out of compassion for

<sup>12</sup> Herman Jacobi (trans.), *Jaina Sūtras*, part 2: Translation of the *Uttarādhyana-sūtra* and *Sūtrakṛtāṅga Sūtra* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1895; reprint Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1989), p. 109.

<sup>13</sup> Jacobi (trans.), *Ācārāṅga-sūtra*, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

<sup>14</sup> Jacobi (trans.), *Ācārāṅga-sūtra*, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

<sup>15</sup> Jacobi (trans.), *Ācārāṅga-sūtra*, *op. cit.*, p. 224.

<sup>16</sup> Yajñeshwar S. Shastri (trans.), Umāsvāti's *Praśamaratiprakaraṇa*. L.D. Series, 107 (Ahmedabad: L. D. Institute of Indology, 1969), p. 168.

<sup>17</sup> "This *guṇa* . . . is of the very essence of Jainism and needs no comment." See R. Williams. *Jaina Yoga: A Survey of Mediaeval Śrāvakācāras* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 269.

living beings (*jīva-dayā*).<sup>18</sup> The Digambara author Āśadhara, in his *Sāgara-dharmāmṛta*, declares that “compassion is the root of the whole sacred doctrine.”<sup>19</sup>

It is clear from examining selected passages in classical Jain texts that compassion is associated with appropriate conduct for both mendicants and laity. Is it possible, then, for actions undertaken by those who lack *samyak-darśana*, in other words, by those who hold a false view of reality (*mithyādr̥ṣṭi*), to be informed by compassion, as understood in these textual sources? This question is addressed by the Digambara author Vidyānanda in his commentary on TS 1.2. He writes that the qualities of *saṃvega* and *anukampā* are not possible for those who have the wrong views or *mithyādr̥ṣṭi*. Although I have been unable to locate a similar statement on this matter in the Śvetāmbara commentaries, there is a passage in the Śvetāmbara *Daśavaikālika-sūtra* that reflects a similar point of view: “First knowledge, then compassion, those who observe total restraint [i.e., mendicants] live thus.”<sup>20</sup> Therefore, according to these sources, humans, heavenly beings, and five-sensed rational animals who have attained a proper view of reality can have, and do have, compassion for others, as understood in Jainism.

Although the Jain doctrine of ahimsā is based on rational consciousness or a proper view of reality (*samyaktva*), compassion is an appropriate expression of this spiritual progress. While it is true that spiritual progress entails individual responsibility, this does not preclude a “social fellow-feeling” of compassion. And while the ultimate goal may be individual

<sup>18</sup> *Ratna-karaṇḍa-śrāvakācāra* – v.21, as cited in Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

<sup>19</sup> *Sāgara-dharmāmṛta* i.4, as cited in Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

<sup>20</sup> Kastur Chand Lalwani (trans.), *Daśavaikālika-sūtra* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1973), p. 10.

*kaivalya*, spiritual progress need not be attained through total isolation from other beings in the world.

The objects of one's compassion, or the ways of expressing compassion, undoubtedly have changed over the centuries in accordance with social conditions of the times. But whether acts of compassion are manifested in speaking out against animal sacrifice in Vedic ritual practices of ancient times, or in persuading others to refrain from killing animals for food or sport, or in activities associated with animal welfare and the environment in modern times, this ethical value has been an aspect of *ahiṃsā* throughout the history of Jainism. One of the best expression of this sentiment is in the practice of *sāmāyika*--the attainment of equanimity--which a Jaina aspires to achieve.

Friendship towards all beings,  
Delight in the qualities of virtuous ones,  
Utmost compassion for afflicted beings,  
Equanimity towards those who are not well-disposed towards me,  
May my soul have such dispositions as these forever.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> As translated in Jaini, *op. cit.*, p. 224.