

Ahimsa: Reverence for Life

Summary: Since all beings (humans, animals, and plants) in Jainism have a soul, the concept of ahimsa (nonviolence) is central to the tradition. The concept of ahimsa informs every aspect of Jain practice, behavior, and life. As a result Jains are vegetarians, and Jain monks and nuns often take precautions to avoid stepping on or injuring insects.

The belief that all life has a soul has great implications for Jain ethical practice and behavior, inspiring the ethic of ahimsa, literally “nonviolence,” that has become associated with the Jain tradition. Even though Jains are strict vegetarians, they also avoid, as much as possible, eating vegetables like the potato that are not the fruit of a plant, but are the whole organism. In addition, Jain monks and nuns will often carry with them a variety of brooms, taking special care not to heedlessly crush tiny insects as they sit or walk; some will even wear a white cloth mouth-covering to avoid inhaling microscopic organisms. And Jains traditionally avoid farming and other occupations that may involve the unwitting destruction of life.

The reverence for all life forms comes from the realization that human beings share the spectrum of life with other creatures. An ancient Jain text, the Uttaradhyayana, tells the story of a Prince who saw an ascetic from the window of his palace and was suddenly aware of his own past lives and filled with the urge to renounce worldly wealth and seek liberation. He said:

“As an antelope, I have, against my will, been skinned, caught, bound, and fastened in snares and traps, and frequently I have been killed.

As a fish I have, against my will, been caught with hooks and in bow nets; I have therein been scraped, slit, and killed, an infinite number of times.

As a bird, I have been caught by hawks, trapped in nets, and bound with bird-lime, and I have been killed, an infinite number of times.

As a tree I have been felled, slit, sawn into planks, and stripped of the bark by carpenters with axes, hatchets, an infinite number of times.

As iron I have been malletted, cut, torn and filed by blacksmiths, an infinite number of times. . . .”