

An Ethic for Living

Summary: Jains speak of “Three Jewels” that serve as their standard for a good life: right vision, right knowledge, and right conduct. Right conduct is often expressed through five basic vows: nonviolence, truth, never stealing, chastity, and nonattachment.

The Jain tradition speaks of the “Three Jewels” that constitute its highest aspirations: *Samyak Darshana*, right faith or right vision; *Samyak Jnana*, right knowledge or understanding; and *Samyak Charitra*, right conduct. How can faith, knowledge, and conduct be brought into harmony with one another and realized in everyday life?

Here Jains begin with the five basic vows: *ahimsa*, nonviolence; *satya*, truth; *asteya*, not taking that which is not freely given; *brahmacharya*, chastity; and *aparigraha*, nonattachment/nonpossession. Commitment to these vows must be “threefold”: in past, present, and future; in thought, deed, and speech; and with care to transgression by doing, commissioning, or passively approving of an act. In fact, perpetually harboring negative thoughts is much worse than an isolated impulsive action. These five vows form the basis of the “great vows” of the Jain renouncers as well as the ethical life of the laity.

To practice *ahimsa* is to minimize one’s violent impact on the universe. For Jains, one practical application of this principle is a vegetarian diet. While lay people are permitted to harm creatures with one sense, such as plants, in their diet monastics try to avoid even this.

Commitment to *satya*, truth, recognizes the importance of speech as an “act” that can do great harm or violence.

Asteya, nonstealing, also has a broader meaning—not taking what is not freely given. For many Jains today, it has also been interpreted as a commitment to justice between rich and poor.

Brahmacharya, chastity, involves the recognition that the soul seeking freedom must not be continually distracted by the seeking of pleasure. For laity this means fidelity and moderation within marriage, while for monastics it means complete celibacy.

Aparigraha means not clutching possessively because cultivating attachment to worldly objects, and even to people, binds the soul to the cycle of birth and death. It is the principle of nonacquisition/nonpossession. The Digambara “sky-clad” monks give up everything, even clothing. However, lay Jains also recognize that the will to possess and own leads to greed, jealousy, selfishness, and violence. Nonattachment does not mean giving up love, but rather giving up the possessiveness mistaken for love. Love should be balanced and constant, rather than a volatile force that turns life into a sequence of extremes. Together, the cultivation of these ethical commitments enables the soul to achieve right faith, right knowledge, and right conduct.