

Jainism, Life, and Environmental Ethics

Christopher Key Chapple, Loyola Marymount University

For the Jain tradition, the term used to describe the soul is *jiva*, a term derived from the Sanskrit root *jiv*, which means “to live.” This term differs rather significantly from the Hindu word for soul, *atman*, which derives from the root word “to breathe” and the Buddhist term *pudgala*, which refers to the individual or ego. The ideas regarding the life force or soul of Jainism carry several characteristics which distinguish this concept from its counterparts in other Indian traditions. The concept of soul in Jainism holds profound implications for human agency and environmental ethics.

Perhaps the earliest notice given of the Jain interpretation of soul can be found in the *Acaranga Sutra*, a text that has been dated to the 4th century B.C.E. In this passage, one can almost hear the cries of all living beings:

All beings are fond of life.
They like pleasure, they hate pain,
They shun destruction.
They like life and long to live.
To all, life is dear (I:2:3).¹

From this text, we learn that the Jains did not see this life force as limited to human form. In fact, living forms can be found in the earth, in water, in fire, and in air itself, taking the shape of large rocks and in microscopic particles circulating in the wind. The text proclaims: “There are living beings living in the earth, living in grass, living on leaves, living in wood, living in cowdung, living in dust-heaps” (I:1:4).² This definition of soul or living being announces an omni-presence of life and soul. In later cosmological texts, this life exists from the lowest regions of hell up to the abode of liberated beings (*siddhaloka*). Jainism also proclaims a fourteen step teleological journey for the soul, whereby it perceives the true nature of reality, seeks purification through assiduous ethical practices, and eventually attains release.

The History of Jainism

Jainism arose from the pre-history of India. From archaeological remains, we know that Jainism provided among the first monumental art beginning in the third century B.C.E., with images of the Jina predating those of the Buddha.³ From Greek texts, we know that Alexander encountered the Jains along with the Brahmins. The early geographer Megasthenes (ca. 350-290 B.C.E.) notes that the Garmanes (Jains) “live in forests, subsisting on leaves and wild fruits... abstaining from wine and the delights of love... women as well as men study philosophy.”⁴ From the dating of the *Acaranga Sutra* at 300 B.C.E. or earlier⁵ and lists of lineages within this text that go back several generations, it can be surmised that the Jain tradition began to take shape as early as the eighth century B.C.E., making it one of the world’s oldest continuously practiced religious traditions.

In a search for the founders of this faith, we are pushed back into pre-history and hence legendary accounts. The putative founder, Rshibha or Adinath, according to Jain accounts given in the *Adipurana*, a ninth century text of the common era, lived several

thousand years ago. To him Jains credit the establishment of law, agriculture, marriage, and religion. The largest stone statue in the world carved of a single rock celebrates the spiritual heroism of his son, Bahubali, in the sacred pilgrimage town of Sravanabelgola in Karnataka, South India. Twenty three great teachers or Tirthankaras follow after Rshibha, revising and updating Jainism when necessary. The existence of the last two can be confirmed. Mahavira Vardhamana, also known as the Jina, was a contemporary of the Buddha. Buddhist texts externally confirm his life. Jains consider Mahavira to be the twenty fourth and most recent of the great teachers. The *Acaranga Sutra* tells his story and lists predecessors back to Parshvanatha, deemed to be the twenty third Tirthankara. It seems that both taught about the nature of the soul, its repeated rebirth within the round of existence or *samsara*, the need for strict ethical practices, and the possibility of spiritual liberation, referred to in Jainism as *kevala*.

Mahavira, according to all accounts, promulgated the Jain faith primarily in northeastern India, particularly in Bihar, Orissa, and the area eastern Uttar Pradesh around Varanasi. In approximately 300 B.C.E., a terrible famine struck India. Some members of the Jain community endured this tragedy, but many others moved to the west and south of India, where the monsoon had not failed. This group of Jains then lost touch with the original followers, and two distinct traditions arose: the Svetambara (those who remained in the north and moved west) and the Digambara (those who moved south). The two groups developed several differences, including variant stories of the life of Mahavira, distinct canonical traditions, a dispute over the necessity of nudity, and differing attitudes regarding the spiritual potential of women. In brief, the Svetambaras claim that Mahavira left home after his parents died to renounce the world and had been a married man, that nudity, although practiced by Mahavira, is not necessary for liberation, and women have the potential to achieve *kevala*. The Digambara claim that Mahavira had never married, that his nudity was intentional and required for liberation, and that women must wait for another lifetime as a man before they can ascend to the state of *siddha*.⁶

On matters of the soul, both Svetambara and Digambara Jains look to the fifth century author Umasvati as the primary authority. Umasvati composed a concise text, the *Tattvarthasutra*, that encapsulates core Jain teachings. Although each developed separate commentarial traditions, they agree on the core fundamentals. Innumerable souls or life forces (*jiva*) exist. They have always existed and will continue forever. They were not created by anyone. No one controls these souls. Each soul authors its own destiny. The nature of the soul is energy, consciousness, and bliss (*virya*, *caitanya*, *sukha*). Consciousness includes both perception (*darsana*) and knowledge (*jnana*). Energy allows the soul to “bring about modifications in the functions of the karmic matter drawn to the soul... to engage in giving (*dana*), obtaining (*labha*), enjoyment (*bhoga*) and repeated enjoyment (*upabhoga*) of worldly objects.”⁷ Depending on past behavior, the soul attracts particles or atoms of variously colored karma that tint and taint the soul. If one commits an act of violence, then the karmic color darkens and thickens, covering one’s true nature. If one practices meritorious behavior, then the karma lightens and even disperses. The spiritual journey requires a systematic process of purgation, shedding off karma and entering into increasing levels of purification. Padmanabh Jaini makes the point that the soul is real, bound by karma, and changeable.⁸

Because the karmic material that shrouds the soul authentically alters its state of being, it is important to note traditional Jain categories to describe karma. All forms of karma prevent the soul from attaining final liberation. The spiritual quest entails a systematic expulsion (*nirjara*) of all karma. Thirty types of karma (with additional subcategories) obstruct the soul in four destructive ways and must be expelled willfully. Four types of karma may be deemed neutral, and remain even with the purified person until the final liberation from the body. The destructive karmas fall into four groupings as follows:

1. Delusional: engendering false views and incorrect conduct, leading to anger, pride, deceit, and four types of greed: unrelenting, inciting greed in laypeople, inciting greed in monks, and smoldering lethargy. Delusional karmas also result in vicious laughter, pleasure, displeasure, sorrow, fear, disgust, and the three types of sexual craving (a man for a woman, a woman for a man, and man for a man/woman for a woman).
2. Ignorant: incorrect function of senses and the mind; faulty reasoning; lack of intuition; lack of empathy; inability to adopt a universal view.
3. Obscured: malfunctioning of the eyes; malfunctioning of the other senses; mistaken notions; failure to perceive universal wisdom.
4. Lack of energy.

The neutral karmas include the process of sensation, one's name and form, the length of one's life, and one's family group.⁹ Depending upon the experiences that have preceded one in this lifetime and in prior lifetimes, one or more of the above destructive karmas may prevail.

Reincarnation of the soul plays a powerful role in explaining the nature of karma and providing incentive for self-correction. The Jains hold that the soul has been snared in a process of birth, death, and rebirth since beginningless time. In one famous story, the King Yasodhara goes through several incarnations in rapid succession: as a king, as a goat, as a chicken, and finally as a monk, in order to learn the lessons of nonviolence.¹⁰ In another story, a brother and sister unwittingly commit incest leading to a raucous round of harmful consequences through various births until both take up the monastic life.¹¹ These stories not only entail human and animal incarnations, but also refer to life endured as an insect, a micro-organism (*nigoda*), a flaring fire, and even a rock.

In medieval Jainism, duration of life span and various other qualities were specified for different classes of souls. Santi Suri, a Svetambara Jain philosopher of the 11th century of the common era, wrote that hardened rock can endure as a single soul for twenty-two thousand years; water souls for seven thousand years, wind souls for three thousand years, trees for ten thousand years, and fire for three days and three nights.¹² According to the Jain theory of souls, each of these classes of beings, from the four elements up to micro-organisms and plants, possess the sense of touch. The next most complex form of life adds the sense of taste, and includes conches, worms, and leeches. As the insect realm becomes more complex, differentiating into centipedes, bedbugs, lice, ants, and other creepy crawlers, a third sense appears: smell. The fourth sense, sight, can be found in scorpions, bees, locusts, flies, gnats, mosquitoes, moths, spiders, and grasshoppers, who exhibit a lifespan as long as six months. In the top category reside the five-sensed beings, further divided into those who can hear and those who can hear and

think (sometimes counted as a sixth sense). These include animals and humans, as well as the denizens of the seven hells and the nine heavens.¹³ Each of the souls encased in any one of these forms will eventually move on to another home.

Humans only earn a maximum of seven consecutive births as a human being, after which one must take another life form. If one has been extremely vicious, then one might descend to one of the hells. If one has been virtuous, then one might ascend to one of the heavens. Otherwise, one might endure birth as any of the vast variety of beings listed above. According to the Jain theory of karma, during the last third of one's life one's future birth becomes scripted. With this in mind, Jains from the age of 50 become even more scrupulous about their diet and daily, in hopes to ensure an auspicious rebirth for the soul.

The Practice of Jain Ethics

This brings us to a discussion of the role of ethics in the Jain tradition. From earliest times, datable at least to Parshvanath, Jains have advocated the practice of nonviolence or *ahimsa*, for the purpose of purifying one's soul. By observing an ethical life, one actively restructures one's karma, expelling dark materiality and cultivating light. By the time of Mahavira, five foundational vows were to be observed by all Jains appropriate to their status, lay or monastic: *ahimsa* (nonviolence), *satya* (truthfulness), *asteya* (not stealing), *brahmacarya* (sexual restraint), and *aparigraha* (non-possession). For laypeople, these vows have scripted expected norms of behavior in the Jain community: vegetarian diet, honesty, faithfulness in marriage, and donations to religious persons (monks and nuns) and organizations such as temples and Jain organizations. Additionally, several occupations are not suitable for Jains, such as the manufacture or sale of weapons or meat.

For monks and nuns, these vows become increasingly rigorous. These individuals are forbidden from preparing food, because of the potential harm caused in the process of collecting, chopping, and cooking of grains and vegetables. Food must be freely given by lay supporters, and ideally one given food in small amounts by many different families in order not to cause a disproportionate burden to only a few households. This guards the purity of the monk or nun, and also benefits the families who, by donating food, cleanse their own karma. As a practice of truthfulness, monks and nuns regularly confess their shortcomings, asking forgiveness for even the smallest of infractions. Touching between genders is strictly forbidden. Monks and nuns possess only a change of clothing and own no shoes. When they take their final vows, they forgo all motorized or mechanical forms of transit, even bicycles. They periodically remove the hair from their heads to discourage lice, and bathe infrequently, and then only with very meager amounts of water, if they use any water at all. In the Digambara tradition, the most advanced monks give up all clothing and remain naked until death. In this state, they avoid harming the insects who could be trapped in their robes, they avoid harm to the cotton that would need to be woven for their garments, they take nothing at all from the environment to clothe themselves, have no shame about their sexual organs, and do not even possess a bowl for eating food, taking donations of food directly into their hands.

These vows bring the mendicant closer to the purified soul, dispelling karma and revealing increasing energy, consciousness, and bliss.

In addition to the five great vows, monks and nuns also adopt five rules of conduct (samiti) that heighten mindfulness of the soul in one's life and the life of others minute by minute. These five are care in walking, care in speaking, care in accepting things from others, care in picking up and putting down things, and care in the performance of excretory functions.¹⁴ The adoption of these observances makes nearly every movement an occasion for reflection on the status of one's soul.

Engaging the Jain Soul in Environmental Ethics

The Jain tradition challenges many traditional categories and conceptions regarding the human person and ethics. First, it exhibits a radical pluralism. Innumerable souls take seeming countless forms. Second, it suggests a radical egalitarianism. Each soul has endured countless births in a variety of different forms of life.¹⁵ Each human knows innately how it feels to be an animal, how to be a member of the other gender, how to feel empathy even with the earth itself. Third, this tradition evokes images of the solitary hero. Each of the Tirthankaras forged a life of privation through which they gained great spiritual strength, serving as a model for later practitioners. Their spiritual liberation was achieved without the help of others, and, once liberated, they are able to inspire others but are not able to directly provide aid or succor to others.

If we examine the three soul qualities of Jainism: pluralism, egalitarianism, and individualism, we confront a religious system quite markedly different from those that emphasize monism (such as Brahmanical Hinduism) or monotheism (Judaism and Islam) or trinitarianism (Christianity) or even harmony (Confucianism and Taoism). How then, might Jainism contribute to the conversation of environmental ethics?

A renewed sense of connectivity with others arises as one enters into the Jaina spiritual journey. For Jains, this journey requires care in all inter-personal and animal relationships, to be enacted through adherence to the vows of nonviolence, truthfulness, not stealing, sexual restraint, and nonpossession. The sense of community and personal responsibility in this tradition leads to the development of not only a normative ethics that may be universally applied, but is also leads in many cases to the cultivation of a personal ethics in keeping with one's individual tastes and inclinations. In Jainism, this concept of "others" extends beyond the human realm to animals and to plants and insects. Non-violence requires a careful consideration of how one's actions affect not only the human order. In traditional Jainism, vegetarianism, periodic fasting, vows of stability (limiting the extent of one's travel), and in some instances the donning of a face mask and the use of broom to sweep one's path constitute adaptive ethical responses that exceed what would normally be expected under the general requirements of normative ethics. Particularly for laypersons, the application of the Jain ethical code requires imagination and creativity. Jains in the pharmaceutical industry, for instance, have developed animal-friendly testing to minimize harm and suffering. Many Jains in America, aware of the peril to the well-being of animals caused by factory farming, have eschewed dairy products that otherwise would be consumed in more cow-friendly India.

The list of ethical issues to be considered in Jainism includes topics not generally taken into account when thinking about the “good life” in Europe and America.

Jainism’s unique cosmology gives cause for Jains to think deeply about their role in such environmental issues as industrial pollution and global warming. Jains state that the waters and the air contain life, in addition to the living creatures that dwell therein. Hence, pollution deemed harmful in either element must be mitigated, not only for the sake of human health, but also for the sake of the life that thrives in air and water. Similarly, global warming will not only cause great disruption for humans but will displace and perhaps decimate countless species, the most famous at present being the polar bear. Given human complicity and causality in regard to climate change, Jains would have a double incentive for taking action: protection of humans and protection of other life forms.

The Jain definition of soul puts life in the recesses of the earth, in the waters of lakes and oceans, in the very air itself. In order to preserve the well-being of our own soul, Jainism suggests that steps must be taken to protect the lives of all beings. With disregard and perhaps intentional harm, karma accrues that deprives the human being of energy, of happiness, even consciousness itself. By respecting life in its human and non-human forms, the soul embarks on a steady course of self-purification that benefits all beings.

¹ Herman Jacobi, tr. *Jaina Sutras, Part One*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1884, p. 19.

² *Ibid.*, p. 8.

³ Pratapaditya Pal, *Liberating Victors*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

⁴ *The Geography of Strabo*, translated by Horace Leonard Jones (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1930), 103, 104.

⁵ Paul Dunda, *The Jains* Second Edition (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 23.

⁶ For the distinctions between these two groups, see Dundas, pp. 76-85 and Padmanabh S. Jaini, *The Jaina Path of Purification* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), pp. 38-41.

⁷ Jaini, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

⁸ Jaini, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

⁹ Summary reinterpreted from Jaini, pp. 131-133.

¹⁰ See Hardy’s translation in Phyllis Granoff, ed., *The Clever Adulteress* (Ontario: Mosaic Press).

¹¹ See chapter by Phyllis Granoff in *Religious Traditions of India in Practice* (Princeton University Press).

¹² Santi Suri, *Jiva Vicara Prakaranam along with Pathaka Ratnakara’s Commentary*, edited by Muni Ratna Prabha Vijaya, translated by Jayant P. Thaker (Madras: Jain Mission Society, 1950), p. 34.

¹³ As summarized in Chapple, “The Living Earth of Jainism and the New Story,” in Christopher Key Chapple, editor, *Jainism and Ecology: Nonviolence in the Web of Life*

(Cambridge: Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 128.

¹⁴ John Cort, “Green Jainism?” in Chapple, p. 83.

¹⁵ Paul Dundas carefully notes that according to Jain lore, some souls are incapable of liberation (p. 105). It is also instructive to remember that, according to the tradition, the last person to attain final liberation was Jambu. Mahavira had eleven principal disciples. All attained liberation after twelve years of practice except for Indrabhuti Gautama and Sudharman. Gautama attained liberation on the day Mahavira’s death and then lived as a kevalin for twelve years, dying at age 92 but not teaching. After Mahavira’s death, Sudharman became the administrative head of the Jain community and taught for twelve years. He then attained kevala and passed away at age 100. His disciple, Jambu, taught for eight years. He then in turn achieved kevala and passed away in the 64th year after Mahavira’s death, “the last person in this time cycle to reach moksha” (Jaini, p. 46).