

PATHWAYS of GREEN WISDOM

Discovering Earth-Centred Teachings in Spiritual and Religious Traditions



Edited by Santoshan (Stephen Wollaston)

BOOK EXTRACT

Chapter from

Pathways of Green Wisdom:

Discovering Earth-Centred Teachings in Spiritual and Religious Traditions

Fifth title in the low-cost GreenSpirit Book Series

Edited by Santoshan (Stephen Wollaston)

The Relevance of Jainism

Aidan Rankin

J*ai Jinendra*. I begin with this popular Jain greeting, which can also be used by non-Jains and non-Indians, like me, when addressing Jain friends. The phrase means 'Hail to the Conquerors'. At first glance, this might look militaristic, but in fact it is exactly the reverse. For the Jain, conquest is an internal process of discipline and overcoming the negative aspects of the self.

The Jain path is a process of spiritual growth, in which the individual 'soul', or *jiva*, evolves usually over many lifetimes into an enlightened being (*kevalin*), for whom the concerns of the material world have become meaningless. Jain conquest involves peeling away layers of illusion: fictitious needs and wants; competition; the accumulation of possessions; political power and all the trappings associated with attachment to temporary 'things' rather than larger eternal truths. Thus the Jain hero, like the existentialist but at a more profound level, can see 'beyond good and evil'. He or she can also see beyond the will to power, which is the most destructive form of attachment. The wish to exercise power, to dominate other human beings or living creatures, is the ultimate expression of spiritual indiscipline and lack of inner conquest.

Jainism therefore points towards withdrawal from worldly power, and this includes an active commitment to nonviolence (*ahimsa*). The Jain must therefore aim to avoid damage to other life forms and ecosystems. For the ascetic or *muni*, who has withdrawn from the world, this means a rigorously eco-centric lifestyle in which consumption is kept to a bare minimum. The lay Jain must also learn to live within Nature's limits and keep his or her 'ecological footprint' as light as possible. This is not only a moral and social good, but essential to personal salvation. As Mahavira, the founder of modern Jainism whose Sanskrit name means 'Great Hero', told his followers: "Non-violence and kindness to living beings is kindness to oneself. For thereby one's own self is saved from various kinds of sins and resultant sufferings and is able to secure one's own welfare."

Sustainability and Transcendence

The Jain tradition therefore identifies the pursuit of a 'sustainable' way of life, as we would now call it, with the quest for self-knowledge, self-mastery and the transcendence of ordinary reality to achieve *moksha*: liberation or enlightenment. This overtly spiritual goal is distinct from the mainstream green agenda, which is political and social and so rooted in, or at least deeply involved with, worldly concerns.

Nonetheless, concern with the individual learning to live in a sustainable way and modify his or her behaviour dovetails nicely with the element of rational self-interest in green philosophy. One of the aims of green education is to persuade people that reducing consumption is in their own long-term interests as well as those of the planet. Many greens would include amongst those long-term interests a spiritual dimension, for green thought challenges the division between social and spiritual realms.

Jainism's emphasis on the value of the individual matches another broad area of ecological thinking, the practical emphasis on each individual being able to make a difference, however large the problem. Politically, this green principle contrasts with the top down approach of state socialism, which assumes that government is the agent of change and that the individual counts for little. It contrasts equally with the right, which puts 'tradition' or 'the nation' above the public or individual good, and with the cult of neo-liberal economics, which favours big impersonal corporations over human communities and a fundamentalist approach towards 'market forces'. At a spiritual level, the Jain quest for personal enlightenment is a challenge to the authoritarian, hierarchical structures often associated with organised religion.

Commitment

There are Jain scholars and spiritual teachers, and there are Jain ascetics – monks and nuns – who are looked upon as sources of wisdom. Indeed every Jain aspires to become an ascetic, if not in this incarnation, then in the next, and Jains may take ascetic vows at any stage in their lives from childhood to old age. But in Jainism, ultimately everyone is his or her own guru. Hierarchy and power relationships are irrelevant and distracting, because of the irrational attachments they generate. They also bear no true relationship to Jain philosophy.

All Jains are committed to achieving whatever they can for themselves in the spiritual arena, without either competing with others or submitting uncritically to external authorities. Uncritical submission is the opposite of Jainism, because clear mindedness and detachment from external influence are preconditions of *moksha*.

Jains are very modest about their faith tradition, preferring to live it out as best they can rather than proselytise or blow their own trumpet. Often, they seem content to be mistaken for Hindus, which has misled many observers, including some Indian politicians, into treating Jainism as a branch of Hinduism. This modesty, even reticence, has been a necessary survival mechanism for Jains, who have been a perpetual minority in an overwhelmingly Hindu Indian society and who have adapted in turn to Muslim Emperors and Christian colonialists. It is also an attractive trait that denotes true humility.

Jains do not presume to impose their ideas on others, because they are too concerned with leading ethical lives themselves. At the same time, they will sometimes reveal a certain surprise that ecologically minded Westerners, in particular, are only now arriving at truths which Jainism understood millennia ago. Jains will remind us, gently, that they have been vegetarians for three thousand years, indeed much longer, and that their diet arose from an ecological consciousness.

Holistic World View

Jainism recognised thousands of years ago that all life is interconnected, whether human or nonhuman, on Earth or in the wider universe. This is an idea that Western science is only beginning to appreciate. The linear world view, which sees history, science and time itself as in terms of an inexorable forward motion, a route march of 'progress', has long prevailed in the West and reached its zenith in the industrial era. Yet it is increasingly clear that technological advancement does not necessarily civilise human beings. It is a double-edged sword that can make life more pleasurable and humane, but is equally capable of contributing to a new barbarism.

Economic growth is based on the idea of inevitable progress and a sense that resources are infinite, that the Earth is a form of gigantic and continually replenishing larder, to be plundered at will. This approach, although avowedly rationalist, quickly becomes a form of magical thinking. Neo-liberal economists speak of the 'hidden hand' with an almost superstitious reverence. Marxist thinkers still speak of the 'historical inevitability' of capitalism's demise, and do so with greater credibility in an age of financial crisis, austerity and plutocracy. Even so, the linear view of progress and growth has proved to be at variance with observable truth. Resources can now be seen to be finite and the impact of uncontrolled development has created an ecological crisis, not least in emergent economic giants such as China and India. The idea of limitless economic expansion, at any environmental or human cost, has given rise to immense global inequities, to political turbulence and war, and to a growing sense of moral and spiritual unease.

One of the green movement's original aims was to replace the linear view with a more holistic consciousness, reconciling humanity with 'the rest' of Nature. This holistic sensibility has always existed in Jainism. Jains have never held a linear view of time and history, seeing them instead as a limitless series of cycles, akin to the downward and upward movements of a wheel, respectively called *avarsapini* and *utsarpini*. The present encounter between Eastern and Western philosophies therefore comes as no surprise to a Jain. Increasingly, thoughtful men and women in the West are questioning the certainties associated with 'progress' and growth and drawing on Eastern – especially Indian and Chinese – wisdom in their critique of science, health care (physical and mental), politics and economics. For Jains, this 'marriage of East and West' is not viewed as the reconciliation of opposites but as the completion of a circle.

The entire structure of Jainism can be perceived as cyclical and holistic. It is a rational faith based on intellectual insights familiar to the Western humanistic tradition, reflecting the conclusions and speculations of the most recent generation of physicists. Jains believe, for example, that energy can neither be created nor destroyed and that the universe is eternal and so does not have a creator. Jainism is, therefore, a nontheistic religion, which does not depend on a Creator God as the point of origin and point of return. Gods and goddesses, and other heavenly beings, are recognised in Jainism. They are often adopted by Jain communities because they have local associations or represent principles within Nature. Deities from the Hindu pantheon have thus been drawn into Jain mythology and ritual. Sarasvati, for example, the goddess associated with learning, the search for self-knowledge and the benevolent healing power of water is revered by Jains as well as Hindus. In the Indic religions, crossing through water from one shore to another is a frequent metaphor for emerging from ignorance to knowledge, understanding and enlightenment. Jains make particular use of this imagery in their description of the spiritual quest, with the far shore identified with liberation. In Jain culture, education has always been highly valued, with the pursuit of knowledge regarded as both a duty and right. For them, the image of Sarasvati symbolises that pursuit.

Jains hold to their own vision of the truth, but practised 'inter-faith dialogue' many centuries before that phrase was coined. As such, they see no harm in accommodating and responding positively towards the wider Hindu culture, whether rooted in the oral traditions of the Vedas, for example, or devotion to the Goddess or Divine Mother in her many and varied manifestations.

The cosmology of Jainism acknowledges the atomic make-up of matter and the existence of sub-atomic particles. It sees the universe as being in a state of permanent flux, at one level eternal, at another constantly evolving and renewing itself. The principles of continuity and change therefore complement each other, rather than being in opposition as (for instance) in Western politics. Equilibrium, be it personal, social or cosmic, depends on a balance of these two principles. Such balance is viewed as essential to spiritual development. This idea overlaps strongly with the green critique of economic growth and consumer culture, since these are manifestations of ecological and spiritual imbalance.

Role Models

Jainism has an intellectual and scholarly aspect, but also assumes devotional forms through temple worship and *puja* or ritual. Many Jains worship images, intricate sculptures and paintings with an iconic status, a bridge between the sacred and the mundane. Most of these images depict the twenty-four Tirthankaras, outstanding human beings who have become exalted souls. Tirthankara means 'path-finder' or 'ford-maker', one who points the way towards enlightenment. Jains do not regard the Tirthankaras as divinities but as exemplars or role models, from whom they draw inspiration when they meditate.

Mahavira (599-527 BCE) is the last of the twenty-four Tirthankaras. A contemporary of the Buddha, he organised the Jain sangha, or community, into its present four-fold aspect: male ascetics, female ascetics, laymen and laywomen. This arrangement – complementary roles rather than a hierarchy – survives to this day. Mahavira's doctrine was the 'whole way', perhaps in contrast to Buddha's Middle Way. He affirmed the spiritual – and social – equality of the sexes, the irrelevance of ethnicity or caste to spiritual development, nonviolence and the sacredness of all life and the centrality of the individual's spiritual consciousness.

Emphasis on the role of the individual makes Jainism a natural bridge between Eastern and Western schools of thought. For the goal is not the obliteration of the self, as in some Buddhist schools. Nor is it the union of *atman* and Brahman – individual and collective consciousness – as in Vedanta (the 'end of the Vedas') and many other Hindu teachings. In Jainism, the soul incarnates until it realises its 'supreme self'. This retains its individual identity, and yet "is not long nor small nor round nor triangular nor quadrangular nor circular; ... does not have a body, is not born again, has no attachment and is without gender" (*Acaranga Sutra*, 5th-1st centuries BCE).

Jainism in its present form was given shape by Mahavira, as a contrast to the hierarchical Vedic system that had fallen under the rigid control of the priestly and warrior castes. Early Vedic practices included animal sacrifice, which followers of Jainism rejected as *himsa* or injury to life, a form of spiritual vivisection. Mahavira's doctrine drew upon a far more ancient spiritual tradition and so historical record merged into myth. The twenty-third Tirthankara, Parshva, probably lived in the 7th or 8th century BCE, but there is little record of his predecessors. Rishava, the first ford-maker (sometimes called Rishabha or Rikhava), has all the trappings of a mythical ancient lawgiver, and is also mentioned in some Hindu texts.

What seems apparent, however, is that a powerful strand connects the modern Jains with the ancient faith of the Indus Valley, the civilisation supplanted and absorbed by the hierarchical Vedic system. This complex civilisation, as Aldous Huxley wrote in 1936, survived for many centuries without recourse to organised violence: "No weapons have been found in its buried cities, nor any trace of fortification. This fact is of the highest significance. It proves that it is possible for men to enjoy the advantages of a complex urban civilisation without having to pay for them by periodical mass-murders."

Archaeological evidence suggests that a vegetarian diet and extensive yogic practice as well as a pacifist and ecological ethos were prevalent in the Indus Valley. These features point towards a belief system that had many points in common with that of the Jains today.

Conclusion

Jainism is a complex, sophisticated philosophy, but in its perception of *jiva* or 'soul' in all life forms, as well as mountains, streams and rock formations, it has continuity with the earliest forms of human spiritual awareness. There are between five and ten million Jains today, most of them in India, but with strong communities in East Africa, North America and the UK. They do not seek converts and shy away from anything that looks like proselytising. Yet they see their faith as a body of wisdom from which the wider world can draw. Gandhi certainly did so; for Jain teachings powerfully influenced his politics of nonviolence. The Jain *dharma* (cosmic order and philosophy of life) unites the ancient and modern worlds in a critique of violence in all forms, physical, mental and ecological. As such, it is part of the green movement's spiritual inheritance.

* * *

References

Acaranga Sutra quotation from Dundas, Paul, *The Jains* (second edition), Routledge, London 2002. Loosely translated as 'The Book of Good Conduct', the *Acaranga Sutra* is in two volumes and based on the teachings of Mahavira.

Huxley, Aldous, *The Case for a Constructive Peace*. Originally written in 1936 (publisher unknown) and now re-published on the website of the Peace Pledge Union: www.ppu.org.uk/e_publications/huxleycase1.html.

Kinsley, David R., *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London 1986.