

HIA

# *Ahimsā, Anekānta and Jainism*



*edited by  
Tara Sethia*

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and Jainism*



# Foreword

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For all of our inventive elegance, remarkable dreams and undying capacity to share, to love, to learn from our mistakes, we humans continue to rain down upon one another and the earth at large a colossal burden which, tragically, is often the very sum of our existence.

This onus emerges in the very guises of much that is characterized by progress and development, not least of which are the consumption of fossil fuels, the desiccation of coral reefs, our collective decimation of tropical and temperate forests, and the cruel obliteration of 45 to 50 billion farm animals per year worldwide. At the same time, our species has consigned to oblivion an accelerating circle of victims, be they the tens-of-thousands of plant, animal and insect species we are driving extinct, the 800 million humans who are hungry, or the other two billion people who are below the poverty line.

Politically, we have witnessed countless forms of tyranny, prejudice, and the use of malevolent force against indigenous peoples, women, children, ethnic minorities, and whole nations. Since the time of the European Renaissance, it is estimated that some 250

million people have been murdered. Civil wars continue to erupt. And the recent terrorism and grievous hostilities in the Persian Gulf merely reflect long-time trends in the name of "Just War" which must connote, surely, the most ambivalent of recommendations for our species.

Yet, there are other norms, deep-seated behavioral and spiritual paradigms which cry out for altogether different interpretations and conclusions, and which go to the heart of the human potential. One such tradition is Jainism, whose most recent sage, Mahāvīra, died in c. 527 B.C.E., leaving a seminal legacy—of *ahimsā* and *anekānta*.

That legacy is the subject of this remarkable collection of thirteen essays beautifully edited by Dr. Tara Sethia. These essays contain piercing and prescriptive approaches to grappling, according to Jain tradition, with current geopolitics, particularly in the wake of terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. How can traditions of nonviolence, in any ethical community, find pathways that are likely to make a difference, soften human callousness, inspire an awareness of the spectacular possibilities of reconciliation, grace under pressure, and unconditional love? Countering seemingly impossible odds, what fonts of practical wisdom and spiritual ballast—what emotional anchors—might be gleaned from the limelight of nonviolence and tolerance that are at the core of perennial Jain emphasis?

In addressing a host of tantalizing Jain clues to human salvation and the global amelioration of suffering, the contributors to this impressive volume have unearthed a continual appeal that has worked for the Jains for millennia and could work for others. Presenting from Sonya Quintanilla's insights into the early *Ardhaphalaka*

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sect of Jains, a community that appears to have embraced all religious traditions and assimilated the best they had to offer, to Satish Kumar's important message to politicians: "Wars start in our minds and in our speeches;" to Christopher Chapple's reminder that Jains have long emphasized personal responsibility for other species and the environment, this is a groundbreaking volume that should be required reading for every course in political science, comparative religions, peace and nonviolence, and environmental studies.

Jain tradition never compromised with respect to its monks and nuns (approximately 7,000 today)--they wander from village to village, speaking the gospel of nonviolence, refraining from all thoughts and actions that might carry even the slightest possibility of violence. Strict vegetarians, these mendicants obtain their food by passive begging. Possession-less, their goal is nothing more than a humble, personal contribution to a peace-loving world; the awakening in others of Jainism's most universal calling, to use P. S. Jaini's translation, "I ask pardon of all creatures, may all of them pardon me. May I have friendship with all beings and enmity with none."

Meanwhile, the millions of lay followers of these mendicants are not expected to give up everything. Rather, they are exhorted---by gentle example--to set the daily pace of societal change, as Mahatma Gandhi did (he was greatly influenced by several Jains throughout his life). The transformation in the secular world involves the limiting of one's possessions (*parigraha-parimāṇa*), the stunting of occupational violence (*ārambhaja-himsā*), and the adoption of vows (*vrata*) that would embrace the universal truth, starting one person at a time, of a Jain

antidote, exquisitely expressed by the ancient Ācārya Umāsvāti, which holds that "nonviolence is unlimited, tolerance unconditional, and reverence for life supreme" (*Tattvārtha Sūtra*). Moreover, this emblematic context for all of Jainism is further underscored by its ecological anthem, a message that resonates today like never before, namely, "*parasparopagraho jīvānām*," suggesting ecological interdependence among all living beings.

These are extraordinary challenges to life in modern times. But they are exactly what we need if all life is to survive in a sea of stormy volition and skewed evolution. This book is a most welcome addition to the literature of life-support that can make a difference.