

UNITY OF LIFE

FROM AN ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVIST'S point of view, how influential is religion? For many years debates have swirled around the Biblical position on alleged human superiority over other creatures; and upon the issue of whether Christ and Buddha each consumed the flesh of animals, exhorting their followers to do so, as well; or whether Judaism was originally a faith characterised by, among other things, vegetarianism, kosher habits (thought initially as a means of minimising the inevitable suffering of animals) coming only later. Religious debate has haunted Hinduism as well, where, in India, the cow, though deemed sacred, continues to be slaughtered.

But what distinguishes Jainism, a religion that grew up in India many thousands of years ago, from any other religion, is its original and lasting emphasis upon principles that today would be best described as ecological, not least among them *ahimsa*, loosely translated as 'nonviolence'. The question posed throughout this groundbreaking book is to what ends, and by what means, today's Jains might adapt the code of ancient biological stewardship inherent in Jain traditions and make it work for the twenty-first century.

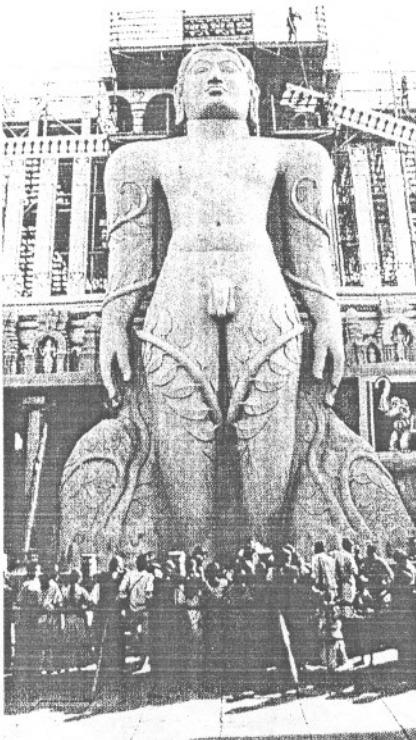
The Jains have managed to achieve a collective restraint that is, today, somewhat legendary, though not apocryphal. One of the oldest texts of Jain literature, the *Acaranga Sutra*, identifies the interdependency of all beings: "You are the one whom you intend to kill, you are the one you intend to tyrannise."

Diet, physical movement, occupation, intention, willpower, possessiveness were comprehensively psychoanalysed by Jain monks for the purpose of achieving that human state of salvation which, in the case of the Jains, equates with the salvation of others. The means by which one achieves such a state is fiercely restrictive, a set of great and small vows that are acutely responsive to the vulnerability and neurological sophistication of all other beings on this planet.

Gandhi himself was greatly influenced by the Jains. His interpreta-

Michael Tobias celebrates a religion for our time.

Jainism and Ecology: Nonviolence in The Web Of Life
Ed. Christopher Key Chapple
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Statue of Lord Bahubali, Jain festival, India
PHOTOGRAPH: JOERG BOETHLING/STILL PICTURES

tion of *ahimsa*, and the methods of nonviolence he adopted would liberate his nation from the British. But, in fact, the Jains had been utilising their ethical traditions to transform the world around them for thousands of years. Environmental crisis is not a new thing. Mahavira himself (an elder contemporary of Buddha and the founder of the Jain tradition) was confronted by many of the same problems individuals in communities face today. India's population was already relatively teeming 2,500 years ago. There were wars. Animals were slaughtered. Trees cut down. Streams polluted. People maltreated one another.

Mahavira spent his adult life walking from village to village in northern India promoting peace, and detailing the biological heritage of the Indian sub-continent. But what especially marks the ancient Jain progressiveness is its insistence on tolerance for other viewpoints, as well as its plant- and animal-rights-based vegetarianism. All creatures, down to the tiny atom, and the dewdrop, were considered sacred, inviolate, valuable unto themselves, irrespective of human feeling or perception of value. This was and remains a revolutionary perspective.

Ultimately, it is the Jain ideal of compassion that will challenge readers of Chapple's elegant collection of assembled essays. Scholars, lay practitioners, monks and nuns are represented in this volume. Each addresses the incredible opportunity that Jain thinking provides all of us. A tradition of environmentalist sensitivity and commentary that continues uncannily to mirror many of today's burning ecological issues, such as biodiversity hotspots and environmental justice. Not surprisingly, it is impossible to be a true Jain, in the sense that even the Jain Digambara monk, walking naked his whole life from village to village, essentially possessionless, still harms — just by being alive. It is a contradiction, to be sure. Life is death, eventually. Our intestines, eyelashes, armpits, are battlefields. But such bacterial riddles — true though they be — do not impede the Jain ideal, which has played out in surprisingly effective ways. Jains, who number at least ten million, represent a vast wealth of ecological good sense. From political mediation to pension and profit-sharing plans; from reforestation programmes to animal sanctuaries, the Jains have got it right. It is certainly not surprising that the Editor of Resurgence was himself a Jain monk. Those who are unfamiliar with Jain tradition will be astonished by this book. Jains themselves will only be further fuelled and refreshed. •

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