

The Directors of the Institute of Jainology and Distinguished Guests

It is my great pleasure to accept this Ahimsa award. My special thanks to the Institute of Jainology for considering me worthy of this award. Amongst the previous recipients of this award are the Dalai Lama and Nelson Mandela. These individuals are giants of our times and they have changed the course of human history. I pay my humble respects to them.

The concept of Ahimsa or non violence is a jewel which Jainism propagates. The greatest good a Jain can do is called, ' Abhay Daan '. This means giving someone protection from the fear of death. When I was about 10, my brother I were throwing stones at a dog barking at us, one stone hit the dog. It made that painful noise and I realised that my action had hurt it. It was an incident which bugged me a lot and I resolved from then on that I will protect all living beings which are at our mercy to the best of my ability.

There was another incident that troubled me a lot. A group of older children had come across a tortoise and were hitting it with a hammer to try and break its shell. We humans can be so insensitive to other living beings. Jain's believe that this human form of life that we have possess is priceless. It is very rare to get a human birth. There are 6,400,000 forms of life and our next birth will depend on our deeds in this present life. It is therefore imperative that we do as much Ahimsa as possible now. Time is at a premium as there is no certainty of how long we will live.

There is a poem I would like to read:

You pass through this world but once, if there is any good you can do, or any kindness that you can show to any human being, dumb animals and birds, you may do it now and not defer it, for you will not pass this way again!

Let us ask ourselves how much Ahimsa we are practicing in our daily lives. So here is an example: Say you have a bumble bee in your room and it is trying to get out, you are in a hurry to get to work. Would you take a few minutes to open the door or a windows to let it out? This small act of compassion will encourage you to look around and feel for millions of animals who suffer at the hands of human beings. Sometimes we have mice in our homes, how many of us think immediately of putting poison traps? Can we not treat them as guests and have them caught in a safe trap which would not harm them and then release them in a field?

How strong is our faith in Ahimsa? Mosquitoes are a big problem in some countries, it is in their nature to bite but it is not up to us to kill them. Yes protect yourself as much as you can but don't harm them! This is compassion in action. When the first Europeans came to India in the 17th century they documented the amazing phenomena of a race of people who were vegetarian and amongst them were Jains who were seen with their arm stretched out for blood sucking small insects to feed on!

Many great thinkers and philosophers of the time brought the Indian ideal of Ahimsa back to Europe. Many animal welfare as well as vegetarian movements were started at the time. It was the English vegetarians who had been inspired by India, who by a strange coincidence inspired Mahatma Gandhi when he came to London in 1888. Gandhiji's first public speech was as a secretary of the Bayswater branch of the vegetarian society. His early ideas were formed by coming in contact with people like Anne Basant, Madame Blavatsky and Henry Salt, all of whom were vegetarians and radical thinkers of the time. Here we have to give credit to Gandhiji's mother who insisted that he take a vow not to eat meat. The vow was given by a Jain monk. Gandhiji's mother's priorities were obvious. Even though he was going to a totally different country there was no compromise on the principal of vegetarianism.

These days parents say: Since our son or daughter is going to University we have not insisted on them being vegetarian! We should in fact tell our children that whatever the circumstances don't eat meat. Nothing will happen to them. God will look after them.

65 billion animals are killed worldwide every year for meat. All marine life from fish, turtles to dolphins and whales has been decimated. Huge trawlers are sweeping the bed of the sea killing indiscriminately. Coral Reefs and Mangrove forests are disappearing. Animals are hunted; tens of thousands are exported to other countries in appalling conditions for meat.

There are countries where dogs, horses and whales are killed for meat. From animals performing in circuses to donkeys and horses treated with utmost cruelty as beasts of burden. We fail god's creatures that are at our mercy. The experiments that are carried out on animals in the name of science can bring tears to your eyes.

Human beings crave for peace but inflict so much pain on animals. As Jains, we should be in the forefront in the battle to reduce animal suffering. How many of us support League against Cruel Sports, Compassion in World Farming, and hundreds of other organisations working day and night to reduce the suffering of animals? Hens are kept in small cages, pigs are confined in small crates, millions of male chicks are suffocated as they are no use to the egg industry, male calves are killed or brought up for beef as they are no good to the dairy industry. It is due to this reason that more and more people are going Vegan.

There are hundreds of animal sanctuaries in UK run by people who have given up everything, to look after the animals. They are always struggling financially. Do we support them? Our Ahimsa is the Ahimsa of the brave not of cowards. Before fox hunting was banned, brave people used to go and disrupt the hunt and many times they were badly beaten but they never gave up. How many of us make a special effort to persuade people to give up meat eating? Do we impress upon our children and grand children that whatever happens even if you have to starve you should not eat meat? Do we ensure that we avoid all products in which animals have been abused? Do we avoid leather goods such as shoes, sofas? Do we buy shares in

enterprises which exploit animals; do we insist on going only to vegetarian restaurants? Do you go and feed stray animals or birds?

Let me tell you an interesting story. Ken Livingstone decided to get rid of pigeons from Trafalgar square and banned any one from feeding them. There are volunteers who go and feed them even today. Just consider their compassion, are they not Jains? I am urging everyone to become proactive. Ask yourself what you will do for compassion from today.

Every animal welfare activity should be getting Jain support. We have to have the generosity of mind. For 20 years we have been supporting an animal sanctuary in Burwash, Sussex. When we first went there it was on the verge of closing down. We urged the owners not to close. They said they would need at least £700 every month. We said we would send them that amount even though we were not sure where the money would come from. In the 20 years since we have been supporting this Sanctuary we have never had any great difficulty in collecting that amount, in fact we even support many other sanctuaries.

Ahimsa is the central pillar on which Jainism stands and as long as we practice Ahimsa, Jainism will thrive and prosper. Someone has said, ‘ Kutch Baat He Ayse Ke Hasti Mit Ti Nahi Hamare’ .

There is something about Indian civilisation unlike many other civilisations which have disappeared in the course of History. Though it is the oldest civilisation it remains vibrant and very much alive. The secret behind its survival is Ahimsa. God protects those who protect others. So let us resolve to bring about a world in which animals will have fundamental rights and all forms of animal abuse will cease. Let us change the human/ animal relationship from abuse to compassion. Let us be the change that we want to bring.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank my wife Pratibha and my daughters Jyoti and Janaki and all the family members for their support.

Nitin Mehta MBE
House of Commons
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