

London, Oshwal Centre, Potters Bar, 14 June 2013
 Catholics and Jains: Practice of Non-Violence as contributor to peace

Prof. Dr. Nalini Balbir
 University of Paris-3 Sorbonne-Nouvelle, France

Practice of Non-Violence and Peace: the Jain perspective

Excellencies,
 Ladies and gentlemen,

Ahiṃsā paramo dharmah - ‘Non-violence is the supreme law’. This statement has become the Jain motto. Let us see what it means exactly and how it can be helpful in today’s world.

In English or other European languages a word with ‘non-’ has a restrictive meaning as it implies only the negation of the concept. ‘Non-violence’ could mean pacifism, which is already something valuable and important, but it has some idea of not acting which makes it limited. The Indian word *ahiṃsā* has much more to it. It means not killing, not injuring, not hurting, not destroying life. In the strict understanding, it means not practicing violence directly, not encouraging someone else to practice it, and not accepting silently the performing of violence. This applies in three modes: in act, in speech and in thought. Practising *ahiṃsā* implies acting on oneself, expressed by the term *saṃyama* – self-control. Controlling oneself is not giving free course to one’s passions, desires, ego, thus, not considering other living beings as existing just to satisfy one’s passions, desires or ego; in the end it means letting them live. *Ahiṃsā* also means acting so as to give safety or protection. So *ahiṃsā* is not the passive behaviour of people satisfied in observing what is happening around them, but the positive and constructive behaviour aiming at promoting others’ life and well-being through gentleness, friendship, and peace. Hence it is a form of compassion – *karuṇā* or *dayā*. The central duty of all Jains is that of *pratikramaṇa* – ritualized confession and repentance of lapses. The keynote of this ritual is that the mind is pervaded by the feeling of *ahiṃsā*. This is best expressed in the famous verse:

‘I ask pardon of all living creatures, may all of them pardon me, may I have friendship with all beings and enmity with none’.

*khāmemi savva-jīve savve jīve khamantu me
 metti me savva-bhūesu veraṇ majjha na keṇavi.*

This forceful statement renewed by its regular utterance is probably one of those best explaining how positive a concept *ahiṃsā* is for the Jains. As one of their authors says, it is a combination of various attitudes:

“*maitrī* – friendship, the non-infliction of suffering,
pramoda – joy, affection combined with respect for the virtuous,

kāruṇya – compassion resulting in help procured to those who are in need of it, and *mādhyasthya* – impartiality, that is neither repulsion nor anger in regard to those who are devoid of virtues”.¹

Such a state of mind is considered as the best protection against evil.

Ahiṃsā is a concept shared by all Indian religions. But none of them has given so much importance to it as Jainism, since its origin in the 6th-5th cent. BCE. If it has become of so wide application, it is because it is founded in theory on a deep analysis of all that exists – of reality – and included in a well-structured system. ‘All living beings wish to live, none wishes to die’, as a Jain text says. Among world religions, Jainism is certainly the one which deserves to be credited for its exploration of the notion of life and of how far it goes. Foreign travelers have often singled out the fact that Jain monks are afraid of killing minute beings, and they have sometimes smiled with contempt at their keeping with them the whisk-broom and the mouth-cloth. Rather, one should realize that this is a symbolic manner of expressing acutely that we are surrounded by life all over, that this life deserves respect and is always endangered by our behaviours. In their early scriptures, Jains have described the world of living in details, almost in scientific terms. For instance, they have thus recognized five types of living beings depending on the number of sense-organs they possess, and classified them accordingly - from plants to animal species and human beings, or have devised other types of classifications as well. They are well aware that all beings do not have the same innate abilities, and that some of them have more than others. This investigation is based on observation and ethology, and some of its features have been recognized as valid by modern scientists as well. Recognizing that the world around us is full of life is something which is not done by all religions – where anthropocentrism prevails: human beings are superior to animals, form a category basically different from them, and, thus, have the right to destroy them, by eating them for instance. When Jains of Gujarat came in contact with Christian missionaries in the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, this is one of the main differences between Jains and Christians that they took note of. Accepting that the principle of life extends to beings other than humans implies that all of them are interdependent – *parasparopagraho jīvānām* is an other Jain motto, and that the well-being of one category has an impact on the well-being of another one. In brief, that nature (including plants and animals) is not there to be used or abused – because the destruction of nature means the destruction of man. Thus Jain thought, taking into account biodiversity, addresses issues which today are addressed by ecology. As the Jains say, all souls are like oneself. Destroying other souls affects them as well as one’s own. This is their forceful message.

Jainism encourages rational thinking. This is encompassed in the fundamental concept of the ‘three jewels’ (*triratna*), which are ‘right faith, right knowledge and right conduct’ (*samyag-darśana, samyag-jñāna, samyak-cāritra*). They are listed in this sequence on purpose: first, there has to be an initial act of believing in a system of values and a global apprehension of it, then comes the detailed analysis of these values and concepts, and then the application of these values. Having both the intuition or awareness and the intellectual knowledge are necessary prerequisites to act properly. Only if we accept and know what is life, can we put into practice the value of *ahiṃsā* in our daily life. As an old

¹ Somadeva, quoted by Williams, *Jaina Yoga*, p. 71.

scripture says ‘first knoweldge, then compassion’. The empathetic relation to what exists cannot exist without knowing what reality is. Led to its extreme, it means impossibility of action – and indeed one of the terms used in the scriptures, *ārambha*, literally meaning undertaking, in fact amounts to aggression or violence. Restrictions and limitations are more numerous for the ascetic segment of the community, the monks and the nuns, than for the laity. Otherwise it would lead to a dead end. Acting is thus recommended, provided it is done in full watchfulness. One of the most negative terms is carelessness – *pramāda*. This may be responsible for non-voluntary violence done ‘spontaneously’, out of rashfulness and without full thinking. Thus Jainism has shaped a full system of restraints or precautions which are ways to observe *ahiṃsā* at the maximum level for the ascetic. The life of the Jain laity is also framed by complex sets of regulations made to encourage *ahiṃsā*, which address all the possible areas of their daily life: profession, diet, behaviours towards animals, limitation of acquisitions and possessions.

The doctrine of pluralism (*anekāntavāda*) is another original and basic idea of Jainism that is connected with *ahiṃsā*. It has a necessary role (of application) in non-violence. Favouring onesidedness (*ekānta*), the Jains say, other philosophical systems encourage oppositions and conflicts, as accepting only one point of view means refusing the others and paving the way to intolerance. The non-absolute views of pluralism tend to the ideas of relativity and coexistence which create an awareness of reconciliation, a positive aspect of nonviolence and conflict-free society. In the terms of one Jain spiritual leader:

Anekanta has a comprehensive viewpoint about the avoidance of opposition. One of its canons is : There is nothing in the world like total opposition or total non-opposition. Similarly total difference and total non-difference are not true. Underneath opposition and difference are hidden non-opposition and non-difference respectively, and vice versa. If we see only opposition and difference, we encourage violence. If we see only non-opposition and non-difference, we destroy the belief in usefulness and imperil practical behaviour. Therefore, the solution to the problem of violence lies in viewing opposition/non-opposition and difference/non-difference dyads relatively and in trying to integrate and reconcile them. On this basis alone can the principle of coexistence be implemented.²

In their scriptures the Jains generally adress individual ethics. Prescriptions are for the monk, the nun, the layman or the laywoman to conduct their life, achieve spiritual progress and ultimately final liberation, whereby one is free from karman, suffering and rebirth. Thus one gains individual peace. Collective ethics of the society is not explicitly addressed. In fact, the idea is that, as all beings are interdependent, the progress of everyone results in the progress of all. If *ahiṃsā* is practised individually in all its aspects, it produces a general improvement which has consequences on everyone. Hence, education in non-violence is required, so that it becomes something natural in each and everyone instead of being only a method of crisis management, and results into an overall change in society in the end. Acquiring knowledge and expertise in various areas are one aspect of education, but they should not be the only one. Methods aiming at one’s self-development and a balanced brain should also be multiplied. Such an education as encouraged by Jain religious teachers involves training in yoga and various innovative

² Acarya Tulsi on Non-violence and peace.

forms of meditation, such as *prekṣā-dhyān*. The aim is to favour a serene state of mind where benevolence and sympathy replace anger, feeling of ego, deceit and greed – the four main passions. This, in fact, is a development of what is already provided for in the traditional ethical system. Among the six necessary duties that practising Jains perform daily or at regular intervals is the one called *sāmāyika* – equanimity. It refers to ‘the process of becoming one, of fusion of the activities of body, mind, and speech with the soul, and the practice designed to achieve this end’.³ Indeed, training in such techniques can be hoped to kill fanaticism and all kinds of fundamentalism at their roots. Men convinced of the value of *ahiṃsā* in all its aspects will promote the values of fraternity, dignity, brotherhood and humanity. If such training is part of education at the roots and is done with reference to behaviours in daily contexts, it will become a trend that will pervade the whole society and may prevail at all levels.

Now, the distinct ethos shaped by the classical Jain tradition for the laity does not address issues and modes of life for today’s world. An instance of an attempt at producing a code of conduct adjusting to the requirements of 20th century concerns is the so-called Aṇuvrat movement initiated by the late Acharya Tulsi of the Terāpanth in 1949. The aim of this initiative is to build a non-violent society and to promote positive values. It is not a mere chance that this initiative came to existence after the terrible devastation of World War II and after India gained its Independence, from a leader who has always been committed to contemporary concerns and interfaith dialogue, especially with Buddhism. Here are the prescriptions of this new code. It is also closely connected with Gandhian ideology and practice:

1. I will not willfully kill any innocent creature.
 - I will not commit suicide.
 - I will not commit feticide.
2. I will not attack anybody.
 - I will not support aggression.
 - I will endeavour to bring about world peace and disarmament.
3. I will not take part in violent agitations or in any destructive activities.
4. I will believe in human unity.
5. I will not discriminate on the basis of caste, colour, sect etc., nor will I treat anyone as an untouchable.
6. I will practice religious tolerance.
 - I will not harm others in order to serve any ends.
 - I will not practice deceit.
7. I will set limits to the practice of continence and acquisition.
8. I will not resort to unethical practices in elections.
9. I will not encourage socially evil customs.
10. I will lead a life free from addictions.
 - I will not use intoxicants like alcohol, hemp, heroin, tobacco
11. I will always be alert to the problems of keeping the environment pollution-free.
 - I will not cut down trees.
 - I will not waste water.

We notice prescriptions that relate to our theme. An innovative feature, the practice of dharma is directed not towards attaining happiness in the life hereafter, but towards

³ Williams, *Jaina Yoga*, p.131-132.

solving the present-day life problems which cause conflict and violence etc., in human relations. Acarya Tulsi, one of the most prominent Jain religious teachers of our times, advocates that democracy is not sufficient – what we need is ‘paxocracy’, a government having complete faith in non-violence. In order to achieve it, a relative and balanced transformation of the three constituents - individual, economic management and social order - can alone establish a healthy and non-violent society. Organizational changes in the society are one aspect, and they may create better conditions, but the individual’s state of mind and attitude towards others and towards life have to change also. Coexistence is one of the keywords for maintaining peace.

But is all this sufficient to guarantee peace or world peace? Unfortunately, the answer is too clear. Promoting the value of *aparigraha* – that is restricting acquisition and the sense of property can be achieved at an individual level. But the world is divided into states with boundaries, and the struggle for water – one of the main issues in our time – or for land is unavoidable when so many people are afflicted by poverty and lack satisfaction of their basic needs. Such struggles, as we know, often involve conflicts which are not solved peacefully, ending in violence. (Unfortunately, even among Jains we see dissensions about the ownership of pilgrimage places, for instance, occasionally resulting into local violence). Not to say that it is a fatality. But thinking that individual practice of non-violence is THE solution for achieving peace at a world level may seem as an utopia, even if it undoubtedly contributes to significant progresses. Factors of war are expansionism, the tendency of some countries to impose their political system and life style on others and projects of proselytization. Ways to remove these factors have to be found if we want to prevent war and establish world peace. To remove them we have to understand how they have played a role in the past. Thus learning world history and exploring how the relations between states have given birth to wars, or, in some cases, have been appeased so that a war could be avoided, is also relevant. Only then can disarmament offer a solution. There have been progresses in today’s world. One reason for the idea of building a united Europe was to avoid ever again the reproduction of the immense trauma caused by World War II, and we see that regular and numerous conferences or dialogues at various levels are meant to cool the burning issues and to defuse explosive crises. At the same time, no country freely gives up institutions or military equipment made for self-defence – involving actually violence. Technology and research focus more on means for violence than on methods to instil principles and practices of non-violence. We also have to think about the ideas of community, nation and patriotism, about their meaning, relevance and relative importance compared to the humanity or manhood we all share. As the Sanskrit phrase goes – ‘it is the earth that is our family’ (*vasudhaiva kuṭumbakam*).

REFERENCES

Gandhi, *An autobiography : the story of my experiments with truth*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1957.

Acharya Mahaprajna, *Democracy: Social Revolution through Individual Transformation*. Ladnun: Jain Vishva Bharati, 1994.

Tara Sethia (ed.), *Ahiṃsā, Anekānta and Jainism*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2004.

Acharya Tulsi, *Anuvrat: A Pathway to Nonviolent Social Order*. Compiled and translated by Prof. R.P. Bhatnagar, Ladnun: Jain Vishva Bharati, 1998.

Anuvrat-Anushasta Tulsi, Acharya Mahaprajna, Sadhvi-Pramukha Kanak Prabha, *A New Light on Global Crisis* (Parliament of World Religions Centennial Celebrations 28th August, 1993 – 4th September, 1993, Chicago, USA), Ladnun: Jain Vishva Bharati, 1994.

R. Williams, *Jaina Yoga. A Survey of the Mediaeval Śrāvaka-cāras*. London, 1963, reprint Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1983.