

AHIMSA DAY 2011: Climate Change and the Contemporary World

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My Lords, Members of Parliament, friends.

Over the past few decades, our relationship with the environment has changed enormously. In recent years, words like *tsunami* have come into our common vocabulary, and our TVs are filled, month after month, with coverage of hurricanes, earthquakes and other natural disasters.

The time has come for us to think again about how we can live more harmoniously with our planet. We may look towards science and technology to find better fuel sources, greener cars and more efficient factories, and these are important steps, but we need more. We need a fundamental redefinition of our relationship with the earth.

India in the sixth century BC is not the first place we might look for answers to these modern problems. Nor is it where the great environmental campaigners would turn to for inspiration. But history tells us that this was a time of big change and of a great reformer.

Archaeological records and hymns composed at the time show that it was at this time that iron was discovered. This allowed man, for the first time, to deforest the great forests and make way for large agricultural settlements. A time for enormous change as man went from a nomadic society, where he took little from the land and lived in total harmony with his environment, to one where he produced a plentiful excess to accumulate wealth.

The way in which this parallels much of what we are seeing in the modern world is incredible.

It was against this background that Lord Mahaveer, the last of the Jain Tirthankaras or founders lived. He preached against violence and accumulation, as the causes of sin and suffering.

Non-violence, or Ahimsa, is the fundamental basis of the Jain religion. Mahaveer is credited by modern scholars as defining life as having six forms: air beings, water beings, earth beings, fire beings, plant being and mobile beings. It is interesting to note that five out of the six forms of life relate to the earth and environment. What he was essentially telling us was that the earth is a living entity.

After 2,000 years we are finding life everywhere; from the deepest parts of the oceans where there is no sunlight, to the even the hottest of the sulphur springs in California. In essence, there is life all around us, and it is all interdependent. We too are a part of this eco-system, yet we usually live without consideration to either its needs or the effects of our actions.

Jain monks walk with a whisk broom to sweep small insects from their path, and put a cloth over their mouths to protect air beings as they speak. Such care, said Lord Mahaveer was essential if one was to consider life sacred and live in harmony with it. Even lay Jains are asked to choose livelihoods (avoiding professions such as mining or forestry), so that they do not harm the environment, and have a pure vegetarian diet for the same reason.

These measures may seem a little extreme in our modern consumer society but the cost of our need to consume more and more goods shows end.

There have been reports in the Wall Street Journal that large parts of the Indian Ocean have had great numbers of coral reefs and mangroves destroyed with dynamite for economic reasons such as fish farming, tourist beaches; and creation of shipping lanes.

The same report argues that the tsunami of 2004 caused such devastation because of this destruction, that over 230,000 people were killed as a direct result. In those areas where the coral and mangroves had not been destroyed, relatively fewer people died.

Similarly we have all witnessed people walking with hospital face masks for fear of swine flu, looked in horror at the recent earthquakes in Japan and New Zealand, and at hurricanes such as Katrina. These disasters have all hit developed economies - nature clearly does not distinguish between rich and poor, or the arbitrary lines we draw to define nations.

The science of global warming continues to state the obvious, however inconvenient. The temperature of the land and oceans of the earth have increased over the past 100 years and more rapidly in the last 30 years. Nearly all scientists agree that this is caused by increasing concentrations of greenhouse gases produced by human activities such as deforestation and burning fossil fuel- interestingly two of the activities that Lord Mahaveer warned against 2,500 years ago!

Even with current policies to reduce emissions, global emissions are still expected to continue to grow over the coming decades. The natural disasters and the changes we all see in our climate will only get worse.

Another significant factor in the equation of climate change is diet. An American Foundation, EarthSave, published a report stating that eating one pound of beef requires up to 5,000 gallons of water, and produces as much CO₂ as driving your car for three weeks. This does not include the deforestation and the vast quantities of grain required to graze cows, and the river pollution caused by the waste.

On this Ahimsa Day, we should all pause and consider the planet we will leave for our children. The questions we face are straightforward. The answers are far more complex, not least because it's politics and not science that drives our responses.

Lord Mahaveer, although the founder of the modern Jain religion, was in many respects a great environmentalist. His philosophy, summed up in two short statements, offers us all the solutions we seek;

- i. The earth is a living entity and we are interdependent. We should respect the right of all life to exist, and learn to live in harmony with it rather than exploiting it.
- ii. The earth has enough resources for all. It is accumulation by the few that is the cause of the scarcity. We should learn to live within what we need.

We hold Ahimsa Day in October, to also mark the United Nations International Day of Non-Violence on 2 October – the birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi. Therefore it is right that we should end with his most famous of quotes: “We need to be the change we wish to see in the world”

Thank you.