

My Lords, Hon Members, Distinguished Guests, Ladies & Gentlemen.

Jai Jinendra!

I'm delighted to add my welcome, to you all, to this magnificent House of Commons. For fifteen years we have been celebrating Ahimsa Day here each year, in October, to coincide with the birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi.

This year there is a difference. Two years ago, on 28th September 2014, the thirty or so UK Jain Organisations voted for the Institute of Jainology to lead them in matters of government and community. As part of that, I am pleased to tell you that we have recently formed the Jain All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG).

This year, Ahimsa Day is the first event under the auspices of the APPG. Many of you will have noticed the small changes we have made to the invite.

I know most of you are new to APPGs, and indeed many have asked why we set one up in the first place. This may be a good time to explain! An APPG is a grouping of parliamentarians from both houses, and all parties, who are interested in a special interest, like Jainism. We were aware that all other major faiths, other than Jainism, have an APPG and we were keen to bring our faith in line.

There are a number of causes a Jain APPG can support. Firstly, it can be used to raise awareness of topics important to Jainism. For example, it's very important for Jains to have representation at national events. This shows our commitment, faith and loyalty to the British Monarchy. We are therefore working with the APPG to get formal invites to the State opening of Parliament, the Monarch's Official Birthday celebrations and Remembrance Day.

Secondly, we are aware that currently there are no 'Jain' parliamentarians. I personally look forward to the day, as I am sure we all do, that we can welcome a Jain MP or Lord to this event. And finally, we need to ensure that Jainism is visible to parliamentary leaders in the work that they do on reviewing and passing legislation (for example on animal rights or the environment), and where there are large Jain communities in their constituencies.

Jainism for many of you is the faith you practice daily. There are many here to whom it's new and I wanted to say a few words about its history and practice. Jains can trace their religion to Mahavir, the last Tirthankara and teacher, some 2,600 years ago, and earlier to the 23 other Tirthankaras before him.

This ancient faith has many similarities with Buddhism, and indeed Mahavir and the Buddha were contemporaries in what is now the modern state of Bihar. Jains live by the cause and effect' rules of karma. This applies to all living beings, including insects and plants. Therefore, their principal tenet – and the name of today's event – is Ahimsa, or non-violence in thoughts, words or deeds.

Jainism believes that each living being (from bacteria to plants, animals and humans) contains an individual soul that is trapped in a cycle of reincarnation due to its karma. Through penance, this karma can be eliminated leading to liberation (moksha).

Many Jains aspire to monasticism, whereby they can spend their lives living in non-violence, compassion and tolerance. If they choose to live as lay-people, it's usually following a profession that does no harm to the environment or their fellow living beings.

Today's Ahimsa Day is an opportunity to look at the world through the eyes of Jains and to also honour somebody who through their actions has embodied the principle of Ahimsa.

I am excited that we have got the Jain APPG set up and look forward to its events. In the coming 12 months, we have two events planned – today's Ahimsa Day and in early March a celebration of Mahavir's Birthday where we will present a Jain Lifetime Achievement Award.

Many of you will have seen Gareth Thomas here, and I am delighted to introduce him to you as the Labour MP for Harrow West and now a Shadow Minister and the Jain APPG Chair. He has two able deputies in Mr Bob Blackman, Conservative MP for Harrow East; and Mr Mark Williams, Liberal Democrat MP for Ceredigion.

The APPG Secretary is Mr Stephen Twigg, Labour MP for Liverpool, West Derby, and the Treasurer is Mr Steve Reed, Labour MP for Croydon North.

I do hope that after the event, you take the opportunity to meet them.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for coming to this Ahimsa Day, I have great pleasure in handing over to the Jain APPG Chair, Mr Gareth Thomas.