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The Foundational Teachings and Ethical Principles of Jainism

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Abstract

Jainism, one of the oldest living religions of India, offers a unique spiritual and philosophical outlook centered on non-violence, truth, and the liberation of the soul. Distinguished by its emphasis on ascetic discipline and ethical conduct, Jainism presents a path of spiritual purification that is rooted in self-control, compassion, and detachment from material desires. The foundational teachings of Jainism revolve around the concepts of *Ahimsa* (non-violence), *Anekantavada* (non-absolutism), and *Syadvada* (the doctrine of conditional predication), which together form a framework for understanding truth, morality, and coexistence. Ethical principles, including the Five Great Vows (non-violence, truthfulness, non-stealing, celibacy, and non-possession), provide a practical guide for both ascetics and laypersons to cultivate inner harmony and spiritual progress.

This paper explores the philosophical underpinnings and ethical principles of Jainism, analyzing their relevance in both historical and contemporary contexts. It examines how Jain teachings shape daily conduct, social harmony, and ecological awareness, while also highlighting their contribution to interfaith dialogue and global peace. By focusing on the foundational aspects of Jain thought and practice, the paper emphasizes Jainism's enduring significance as a tradition that advocates for spiritual liberation through self-discipline, compassion, and ethical living.

Keywords: Jainism, Ahimsa, Anekantavada, Ethical Principles

Introduction

Jainism is one of the most ancient religious traditions of India, with origins that trace back to the pre-Vedic era, long before the emergence of organized systems of philosophy. Unlike other religious paths that rely heavily on divine revelation or a central deity, Jainism emphasizes self-realization and the cultivation of inner purity through strict ethical discipline. The religion is centered on the belief that every soul is inherently pure and possesses infinite knowledge, bliss, and power, but remains bound by karmic impurities that obscure its true nature. The ultimate aim of Jain practice is to liberate the soul (moksha) by gradually eliminating karmic bondage through right faith (samyak darshana), right knowledge (samyak jnana), and right conduct (samyak charitra). Collectively known as the "Three Jewels" or Ratnatraya, these form the core foundation of Jain philosophy and serve as guiding principles for both monks and lay followers. Unlike many other traditions, Jainism does not consider liberation a gift from a creator deity; rather, it is a state attained through personal effort, austerity, and ethical discipline.



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The ethical dimension of Jainism is its most defining feature, manifesting through a rigorous framework of non-violence, truth, self-restraint, and detachment. The Five Great Vows (Mahavratas) followed by ascetics—non-violence (Ahimsa), truth (Satya), non-stealing (Asteya), celibacy (Brahmacharya), and non-possession (Aparigraha)—are central to the path of liberation. Laypersons practice these vows in a moderated form (Anuvratas), enabling them to live ethically while engaging in worldly responsibilities. Jain teachings also stress the importance of intellectual humility and tolerance through the doctrines of Anekantavada (non-absolutism) and Syadvada (the theory of multiple viewpoints). These principles encourage recognition of the relativity of perspectives, fostering harmony and dialogue in diverse societies. The relevance of these teachings extends beyond spirituality, as they inform Jainism's strong ecological consciousness and non-violent lifestyle, particularly through strict vegetarianism and sustainable living. In the modern era, the foundational teachings and ethical principles of Jainism continue to inspire movements of non-violence, environmental ethics, and global peace, demonstrating their timeless significance.

Historical Origins of Jainism

Jainism is one of the most ancient spiritual traditions of India, with roots that predate the Vedic religion and the emergence of Hinduism and Buddhism. Scholars suggest that the origins of Jainism can be traced back to the pre-historic period when ascetic movements flourished in the Indian subcontinent. Unlike Vedic traditions, which emphasized rituals and sacrifices to deities, Jainism focused on individual self-discipline, austerity, and the pursuit of liberation (*moksha*) through personal effort. The religion traces its teachings to a long lineage of enlightened teachers known as *Tirthankaras* (ford-makers), who are believed to have guided humanity toward liberation by reviving the eternal truth. Jain texts record 24 Tirthankaras in the present cosmic cycle, beginning with Rishabhanatha (Adinath) and culminating with Vardhamana Mahavira, who is regarded as the 24th and last Tirthankara. Mahavira, a contemporary of the Buddha (6th century BCE), is often credited with systematizing Jain philosophy, codifying its ethical principles, and establishing monastic communities. His life of renunciation, penance, and non-violence became a model for Jain ascetics and lay followers alike.

While Mahavira's influence was pivotal in shaping Jainism into a distinct religious identity, it is important to note that Jainism does not consider him its founder. Instead, it views him as a reformer and teacher who reestablished eternal principles that had been taught by earlier Tirthankaras. Archaeological evidence, such as seals from the Indus Valley Civilization, suggests possible continuity of ascetic practices and non-violent traditions that resonate with Jain ideals. By the time of Mahavira, Jainism had become an organized religious community with a strong ascetic tradition and a code of conduct for householders. The religion spread across different regions of India, receiving royal patronage from dynasties such as the Mauryas, Guptas, and later



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rulers in Karnataka and Gujarat. Over centuries, Jainism evolved into two major sects—Shvetambaras (white-clad monks) and Digambaras (sky-clad monks)—each with slight variations in practice and interpretation, but united in their core philosophy. The historical origins of Jainism thus highlight its deep antiquity, its independent growth alongside other Indian traditions, and its enduring role as a religion of asceticism, non-violence, and spiritual liberation.

Core Philosophical Concepts

The philosophical foundation of Jainism rests on a comprehensive view of reality and a disciplined path to liberation. At its core lies the belief that every living being possesses an eternal soul (*jiva*) with inherent qualities of infinite knowledge, bliss, and power. However, the soul remains bound by *karma*, which in Jain philosophy is not merely a moral concept but a subtle form of matter that attaches to the soul due to one's actions, thoughts, and passions. Liberation (*moksha*) is attained when the soul is freed from all karmic bondage, allowing it to exist in its pure, enlightened state. To achieve this, Jain philosophy prescribes the *Ratnatraya* or Three Jewels—Right Faith (*Samyak Darshana*), Right Knowledge (*Samyak Jnana*), and Right Conduct (*Samyak Charitra*). These three principles work together to guide individuals on the path of self-purification, ensuring clarity of belief, accurate understanding of reality, and ethical behavior aligned with non-violence and detachment. The Three Jewels emphasize that liberation is not dependent on divine grace but solely on personal effort, discipline, and moral integrity.

Another hallmark of Jain philosophy is its pluralistic and tolerant outlook, expressed through doctrines such as *Anekantavada* (the theory of non-absolutism) and *Syadvada* (the doctrine of conditional viewpoints). *Anekantavada* teaches that reality is complex and multifaceted, and no single perspective can capture it fully. This principle encourages intellectual humility and acceptance of multiple viewpoints, fostering harmony in human interactions. *Syadvada*, closely related, emphasizes conditional predication, suggesting that any statement about reality is only true under certain conditions and contexts. Together, these doctrines reflect a philosophy of openness, tolerance, and critical thinking, setting Jainism apart as a rational and inclusive tradition. Ethical principles also form an inseparable part of Jain philosophy, particularly the Five Great Vows (*Mahavratas*) for ascetics and their lesser counterparts (*Anuvratas*) for laypersons, which include non-violence, truth, non-stealing, celibacy, and non-possession. These philosophical concepts are not abstract theories but practical guides that shape the daily lives of Jains, promoting non-violence, compassion, and ecological responsibility. Collectively, they define the Jain worldview as a path of self-realization, ethical discipline, and liberation rooted in a profound respect for life and truth.

The Three Jewels of Jainism (Ratnatraya)

Right Faith (Samyak Darshana)



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In Jain philosophy, the first and foremost jewel of liberation is Right Faith (Samyak Darshana), which forms the foundation for spiritual growth and ethical living. Right Faith refers to a clear, unwavering conviction in the truths revealed by the Tirthankaras—the enlightened spiritual teachers of Jainism. It means developing a deep trust in the eternal principles of Jain philosophy, such as the existence of the soul (jiva), the law of karma, and the possibility of liberation (moksha). Unlike blind belief, Right Faith is based on inner conviction, rational understanding, and personal experience. It requires one to overcome delusions (mithyatva) and distorted perceptions that bind the soul to worldly attachments and suffering. A person endowed with Right Faith shows reverence toward the enlightened ones (Arihantas), omniscient beings (Kevalins), liberated souls (Siddhas), spiritual teachers (Acharyas), and the scriptures (Agamas). Such faith brings mental clarity, reduces doubts, and strengthens the seeker's resolve to follow the spiritual path. Without Right Faith, both Right Knowledge and Right Conduct remain incomplete, as true conviction is essential for consistent spiritual practice. Thus, Samyak Darshana acts as the gateway to liberation, aligning an individual's outlook with truth, non-violence, and compassion.

Right Knowledge (Samyak Jnana)

The second jewel, Right Knowledge (Samyak Jnana), represents correct understanding of reality, free from doubt, illusion, and misinterpretation. According to Jain doctrine, knowledge is considered of utmost importance because ignorance is seen as a primary cause of bondage and suffering. Right Knowledge is not merely intellectual information; rather, it is the accurate comprehension of the nature of substances (dravya), their qualities (guna), and their modifications (paryaya). Jainism recognizes five types of knowledge: sensory knowledge (Mati Jnana), scriptural knowledge (Shruta Jnana), clairvoyant knowledge (Avadhi Jnana), telepathic knowledge (Manahparyaya Jnana), and omniscience (Kevala Jnana). Among these, the first two are accessible to ordinary beings, while the others are attained by advanced spiritual aspirants. Right Knowledge is distinguished from wrong knowledge by its clarity, non-contradictory nature, and alignment with reality. For instance, understanding the principle of ahimsa (non-violence) as universal truth prevents one from harming living beings, consciously or unconsciously. Equally important, Right Knowledge works hand-in-hand with Right Faith, since knowledge without faith may remain theoretical, while faith without knowledge risks becoming dogmatic. Together, they illuminate the path, guiding the aspirant toward detachment, discipline, and awareness.

Right Conduct (Samyak Charitra)

The third jewel, Right Conduct (Samyak Charitra), is the practical application of faith and knowledge in daily life. It involves living according to Jain ethical principles and gradually purifying the soul from karmic impurities. Right Conduct requires the practice of vows (vratas)



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and restraints (samyamas), which vary depending on whether one is a monk (sadhu) or a lay follower (shravaka). Monks are expected to follow the five great vows (Mahavratas): non-violence (ahimsa), truthfulness (satya), non-stealing (asteya), celibacy (brahmacharya), and non-possession (aparigraha). Laypersons, while unable to practice these vows in their absolute form, observe them as smaller vows (Anuvratas), along with supplementary ethical practices. Right Conduct emphasizes discipline of body, speech, and mind, ensuring harmony between thought, word, and action. Its ultimate goal is to weaken passions such as anger, pride, greed, and deceit, which are the root causes of karmic bondage. When practiced sincerely, Right Conduct transforms moral values into spiritual progress, enabling the aspirant to move closer to moksha. In essence, Right Conduct is the culmination of Right Faith and Right Knowledge, where conviction and understanding manifest as righteous living. The three jewels together form a unified path, where faith inspires, knowledge clarifies, and conduct actualizes the journey toward liberation.

The Five Great Vows (Mahavratas)

Ahimsa (Non-violence)

The first and most fundamental Mahavrata in Jainism is **Ahimsa (Non-violence)**, regarded as the cornerstone of the entire faith. Ahimsa extends beyond physical non-violence to include abstaining from harm in thought, word, and deed. It emphasizes compassion and reverence toward all forms of life, from the tiniest microorganisms to the largest beings. For Jain monks and nuns, this vow is practiced in its absolute form, requiring extreme vigilance to avoid harming even invisible life forms, such as by filtering water, walking carefully, or avoiding root vegetables. For laypersons, the vow is practiced in a limited manner, such as refraining from intentional violence, adopting vegetarianism, and cultivating kindness. The principle of Ahimsa not only shapes ethical behavior but also reflects the Jain metaphysical belief that violence binds the soul with negative karma, obstructing liberation. By practicing Ahimsa, aspirants gradually weaken passions like anger and cruelty, nurturing peace, empathy, and spiritual purity.

Satya (Truth)

The second vow, **Satya (Truth)**, enjoins individuals to always speak the truth that does not harm others. In Jainism, truth is not only factual correctness but also speech that is beneficial, kind, and purposeful. Monks are expected to refrain from any form of falsehood, exaggeration, slander, or speech that may incite violence or hatred. Lay followers observe this vow by avoiding lies, deceit, or harmful language in their daily lives. Satya complements Ahimsa, since untruth can cause injury and suffering, making truthfulness a form of non-violence in speech. The vow also requires silence in cases where speaking the truth might harm others, highlighting the ethical subtlety of Jain discipline. Practicing Satya cultivates trust, integrity, and self-control, leading to



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harmony in relationships and communities. More deeply, it aligns the aspirant's words with reality, reducing inner conflicts and supporting spiritual progress toward liberation.

Asteya (Non-stealing)

The third vow, **Asteya (Non-stealing)**, emphasizes refraining from taking anything that is not willingly offered by its rightful owner. This principle goes beyond theft in the ordinary sense to include dishonesty, exploitation, unfair trade, or even the desire for what belongs to others. Jain monks and nuns strictly observe Asteya by depending only on alms given voluntarily, without asking or showing desire for particular items. Laypersons practice this vow by avoiding fraudulent practices, corruption, and misuse of resources. Asteya reflects the Jain philosophy that attachment to material possessions and the exploitation of others strengthen karmic bondage. By practicing non-stealing, individuals cultivate honesty, fairness, and detachment, which in turn support a more just and compassionate society. The vow also reminds aspirants that true wealth lies not in external possessions but in inner virtues and spiritual progress.

Brahmacharya (Celibacy)

The fourth vow, **Brahmacharya (Celibacy)**, requires the complete renunciation of sensual pleasures, particularly sexual activity, for monks and nuns, while lay followers are expected to observe fidelity within marriage and moderation in desires. Brahmacharya is viewed not merely as physical abstinence but as a broader discipline of controlling passions, curbing attachment, and channeling energy toward spiritual advancement. For ascetics, strict celibacy ensures that no karmic bondage arises from indulgence in sensuality, enabling greater focus on meditation and self-realization. For householders, it translates into moral restraint, responsible relationships, and limiting indulgence in worldly pleasures. The vow of celibacy underscores the Jain belief that uncontrolled desires and passions bind the soul, while their mastery purifies consciousness. Practicing Brahmacharya strengthens willpower, clarity, and inner peace, leading the aspirant toward detachment and liberation.

Aparigraha (Non-possession)

The fifth vow, **Aparigraha (Non-possession)**, teaches renunciation of attachment to material wealth, relationships, and even ideas or opinions. For monks and nuns, this vow is absolute, requiring them to renounce all possessions except the bare essentials necessary for survival. For laypersons, it involves limiting desires, reducing excess accumulation, and practicing generosity. Aparigraha reflects the understanding that possessions create attachment, which in turn fuels greed, jealousy, and violence. By reducing possessions and desires, one minimizes karmic bondage and creates space for inner freedom. In the modern context, this vow also promotes sustainable living and ethical consumption, resonating with ecological balance and simplicity. Aparigraha thus fosters detachment, contentment, and self-discipline, reminding aspirants that true liberation cannot be attained through external accumulation but only through spiritual



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purification. Together, the five Mahavratas serve as guiding lights in the Jain path, leading the soul gradually away from bondage and toward ultimate liberation (moksha).

Ethical Principles for Laypersons (Anuvratas)

In Jainism, the ethical framework is not limited to ascetics who renounce worldly life but extends to laypersons (*shravakas* and *shravikas*) who actively participate in society while pursuing spiritual growth. Since the Five Great Vows (*Mahavratas*) practiced by monks and nuns demand a level of renunciation that is not practical for householders, Jain philosophy prescribes a moderated version of these vows known as the *Anuvratas*. These vows allow lay followers to live ethically while fulfilling their responsibilities toward family, profession, and society. The *Anuvratas* include: *Ahimsa Anuvrata* (limited non-violence), *Satya Anuvrata* (truthfulness), *Asteya Anuvrata* (non-stealing), *Brahmacharya Anuvrata* (chastity or sexual restraint), and *Aparigraha Anuvrata* (non-possession). While ascetics are expected to practice absolute non-violence by avoiding harm even to microscopic organisms, laypersons follow a more practical approach, refraining from intentional violence and adhering to a vegetarian diet. Similarly, truthfulness obliges them to avoid lies, deceit, and harmful speech, while the vow of non-stealing requires honesty in all forms of economic and social dealings. Chastity for laypersons typically means fidelity within marriage, whereas non-possession encourages them to limit material desires and cultivate detachment, reducing attachment to wealth, luxury, and property. In this way, the *Anuvratas* provide a balanced framework that allows spiritual progress while accommodating worldly life.

Beyond the five basic *Anuvratas*, Jainism prescribes additional vows and disciplines to strengthen ethical living and cultivate mindfulness in everyday conduct. These include the *Gunavratas* (supplementary vows), which restrict unnecessary travel, encourage moderation in consumption, and prevent harmful actions, as well as the *Shiksha-vratas* (disciplinary vows), which serve as preparatory practices for ascetic life. Examples include vows of limiting one's area of activity, restricting indulgence in luxuries, and dedicating time to meditation, fasting, or charitable acts. Collectively, these vows guide laypersons in practicing restraint, fostering compassion, and aligning their lives with spiritual ideals without requiring total renunciation. Importantly, the *Anuvratas* are not merely individual ethical rules but contribute to social harmony and ecological awareness. By practicing non-violence, limiting possessions, and adopting vegetarianism, Jain laypersons promote sustainable living and minimize harm to the environment. These vows also cultivate virtues such as honesty, humility, and self-discipline, ensuring that worldly success does not overshadow spiritual aspirations. Thus, the ethical principles for laypersons serve as a bridge between worldly life and the ultimate goal of liberation. They allow individuals to remain engaged in society while gradually advancing on the spiritual path, reflecting Jainism's practical and inclusive approach to ethical living.



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Conclusion

The study of Jain philosophy and its ethical framework reveals a profound spiritual path centered on self-discipline, non-violence, and liberation of the soul from karmic bondage. The Three Jewels (Ratnatraya)—Right Faith, Right Knowledge, and Right Conduct—form the foundation of this path, ensuring that spiritual progress is guided by conviction, understanding, and righteous living. Building upon this, the Five Great Vows (Mahavratas)—Ahimsa, Satya, Asteya, Brahmacharya, and Aparigraha—provide practical disciplines that regulate behavior, purify the mind, and minimize harm to all forms of life. These principles, while deeply rooted in ancient scriptures, remain timeless and universally relevant, offering solutions to contemporary issues such as violence, exploitation, overconsumption, and environmental degradation. The vows not only cultivate personal virtues like honesty, compassion, and self-restraint but also foster social harmony, justice, and ecological sustainability. Furthermore, Jain teachings emphasize that liberation (moksha) is attainable through individual effort, by gradually shedding ignorance, passions, and attachments that bind the soul. The ascetic ideals serve as the highest model, while the lay practice of smaller vows allows householders to integrate spirituality within worldly responsibilities. Ultimately, Jainism presents a holistic philosophy that harmonizes metaphysical insights with practical ethics, guiding individuals toward inner purity and universal compassion. By practicing the Three Jewels and the Five Vows, aspirants move closer to self-realization, embodying a way of life that transcends cultural and temporal boundaries. In an age marked by conflict, consumerism, and ecological crisis, the Jain path stands out as a beacon of non-violence, restraint, and spiritual freedom, reminding humanity that true progress lies not in external conquest but in conquering one's own inner weaknesses and striving for liberation through harmony with all beings.

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