



**JAIN VISION TO ACTION STATEMENT**  
**Revised June 2003**

**Preamble**

The Jain philosophy is virtually synonymous with the principle of ahimsa, which runs through the Jain tradition like a golden thread. *Ahimsa parmo dharmah* ("Non-violence is the supreme religion.")

Mahavira, the 24th and the last *Tirthankara* (Path-finder) of this era, who lived 2500 years ago in North India consolidated the basic Jain teachings of peace, harmony and renunciation, shedding new light on the soul's timeless quest through the truth and discipline of ahimsa. He said:

"There is nothing so small and subtle as the atom nor any element so vast as space. Similarly, there is no quality of soul more subtle than non-violence and no virtue of spirit greater than reverence for life."

*Ahimsa* is a principle that Jains teach and practice not only towards human beings but towards all nature. It is an unequivocal teaching that is at once ancient and contemporary. The scriptures tell us:

"All the Arhats (Venerable Ones) of the past, present and future discourse, counsel, proclaim, propound and prescribe thus in unison: Do not injure, abuse, oppress, enslave, insult, torment, torture, or kill any creature or living being."

In this strife-torn world of hatred and hostilities, aggression and aggrandizement, and of unscrupulous and unbridled exploitation and consumerism, the Jain perspective finds the evil of violence writ large. The teaching of *ahimsa* refers not only to wars and visible physical acts of violence but also to the violence in the hearts and minds of human beings, their lack of concern and compassion for their fellow humans and for the natural world.

Ancient Jain texts explain that violence is not defined by actual harm, for this may be unintentional. It is the intention to harm, the absence of compassion that makes action violent. Without violent thought there could be no violent actions.

**Evidence that the World is "in agony":**

The year 2002 has arrived, yet humanity has not grown beyond warfare, resource hoarding, pollution, and species elimination. In our wake, Earth absorbs ecological strain

or catastrophes. Why does this continue, and for how much longer? We have been manipulated into believing human nature can only be one of inextricable selfishness and competitiveness. Duped into the idea we are born killers, so-called civilizations repeat cycles of material growth, consumption and decay. Having accepted this pattern as "inevitable", many believe themselves absolved from addressing injustice and evil.

### **Perceived systemic problem:**

The core global problem lies in the systemic incarnation of violence. This malaise finds expression in economic injustice, social inequality, the division of the planet into a rich North and a poor South, persistent abuse of the Earth itself, and abandonment of the shared moral / ethical principles of the world's religious traditions.

Religions have themselves too often been silent in the face of inhumanity and injustice. The ecological despoliation of our Earth owes much to a range of unfortunate but influential religious interpretations of the proper relationship of humans to nature. If we are to begin a new chapter in human-human and human-earth relations, the world's great religious communities must engage in deep reflection on their own roles as they prepare to lead the way to a better future.

### **What is the vision of what the world can be?:**

There is a way out of this narcissistic and vicious circle. Thankfully, we can realize our highest natural state, one of brilliance and bliss unbounded by time and causation.

There are five Jain principles which to a greater or lesser extent, all Jains—monks and lay people—are obliged to observe. They are non-violence, truth, non-accumulation of material possessions, right sexual relationship and gender dignity, and non-acquisitiveness. By understanding and practicing these principles in the contemporary context, society can develop a sense of reverence for all life and a sense of the sacred.

Of these principles, *ahimsa* is the foundation. A world free of violence would be a world in which justice as well as peace will flourish; and it would be a world of ecological balance and health.

### ***What could or should the world be?***

The Jain tradition embodies a millennia-long meditation on the interconnectedness of violence and the other ills that plague living beings.

Clearly, Jains understand that it may not be possible entirely to eliminate entirely the violence inherent to human nature, but they have taken extraordinary care in

analyzing the nature of human harm and prescribing methods by which humans can minimize adverse behavior.

A world increasingly understanding and embracing the principle of *ahimsa* would be a world steadily moving toward the peace, justice, and sustainability that the so many committed groups and individuals so earnestly seek.

As the great Hindu sage Mahatma Gandhi taught, "*ahimsa* limps, but it is the only way."

### ***What is the good that can be expanded or encouraged?***

There is a great hunger around the world for spiritual fulfillment. Basically, people wish to be happy and fulfilled. This basic desire needs to be nurtured and expanded so that people can find happiness in simple and elegant living. There is an innate love and adoration of nature that most human beings share. People want to be kind to animals, to plants and to people. Seeds of this kindness are within all of us. These seeds need to be watered and nurtured. The social, political and economic institutions need to take these values into account. The economy should serve people and society rather than making society subservient to the economy.

### ***What brings out our best nature?***

People like to be appreciated and praised and thanked. When we criticize and complain about others they react negatively, so negative criticism should be underpinned by appreciation, praise and thanks. This is a basic Jain principle. Herein lies the way to bring out our best nature. Even when we are confronted with opponents or the policies of politicians which we cannot accept, or the greedy business people whose actions we despise, even then, we need to approach each such situation with understanding so that people and situations can be transformed. It is easy to love and appreciate someone whom we like, but the Jain religion requires that we appreciate and love those whom we may not like or with whom we may not agree.

### ***Why is there reason for hope?***

If you look around the world, there are more and more people doing good, engaged in taking care of others, working for peace and justice; there is always more good in the world than 'evil'. This gives hope that good can be expanded and encouraged. 'Evil' is born of ignorance, so we need to bring knowledge and enlightenment in order to re-enchant everyday life. There is growing concern for a holistic, sustainable, peaceful and just world-order. The number of people joining environmental organizations is

growing. Interest in meditation, yoga, good health, organic food and communities is on the increase. These hopeful signs need to be reinforced day after day.

### **What should be done to reach the vision?**

A New World Order is struggling to be born. Interreligious dialogue and fellowship and the basic sense of interreligious unity is integral to the multi-cultural vision of this New World Order. A multi-cultural world cannot be divided or insulated by narrow walls of separation and isolation. As Dr. L.M. Singhvi has said, “Cultures are bound to interact and intermingle. There must be a meaningful conversation among them.”

The new multi-cultural world order must have a universal outlook, which perceives the essential unity of humankind (men, women and children) and shared concerns. It is not enough for us to talk about each other's theologies; we must address issues that confront society as a whole. We need a culture as well as a constitution for a new multi-cultural world order: a world-wide culture of human rights and obligations, a culture of sharing and caring; a human togetherness which should impoverish and diminish none but which will enrich and enhance us all. Without this multi-cultural vision, legal, constitutional, political, economic, and environmental dimensions, human civilization and its future will remain in peril.

From the Jain perspective, one could argue that one key to dialogue, understanding, and engagement is to be found in the recognition that the teachings of each of the world's great religious and spiritual traditions contain powerful parallels to the Jain principle of *ahimsa*. An important key to the cultivation of genuine religious and interreligious engagement with the most pressing issues lies in the discovery of *ahimsa* as a positive and richly textured virtue rather than merely a proscriptive admonition. In this shared understanding, however the shared religious principle may be named, we will find the inspiration and the energy to build a new life and a new lifestyle for the Earth community.

#### Specific actions

- Jains should commit fully to the creation of an interreligious alliance to inculcate a new culture of peace among religions. The Jain community should take the lead in the creation of an interreligious treaty of permanent peace. As Professor Hans Küng has observed, “There can be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions.”
- Jain organizations should take on the task of develop strategies for “*ahimsa* beyond vegetarianism,” taking the philosophy of “non-injury” (the core principle of Jain practice) into consumer consciousness.
- Jains should work with other religious communities and with interested organizations to outline and promote a spiritually, ethically, and ecologically grounded inter-species ethic.
- The global Jain community must reach out to religious communities similarly committed to non-violence (e.g., the Quaker and Mennonite traditions) to create an interfaith alliance for the promotion of a range of non-violent lifestyle alternatives.
- Religious communities and other concerned and committed groups should take the lead in redirecting the anti-globalization movement in a constructive direction: “from opposition to proposition.”
- Jains around the world should engage with groups and organizations committed to non-violence, recognizing a window of opportunity to change human attitudes in a dramatic way.
- Proponents of non-violence should articulate their position in new ways, making it clear that non-violence demands social justice and ecological sustainability just as surely as it calls for vegetarianism and non-injury to living things.
- The Jain community worldwide should engage with like-minded religious communities and with other groups to develop a global curriculum for schools around the world, so that a new globalization “from the bottom up” might be forged out of shared understanding of issues of economic and social justice, non-violence, and ecological responsibility.