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Ahimsa in Jainism

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Jainism

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Ahiṃsā (Sanskrit : अहिंसा, Prakrit : अहिंसा) means “non-violence”, “non-injury” or absence of desire to harm any life forms. Ahiṃsā is the fundamental principle of Jainism forming the cornerstone of its ethics and doctrine. Vegetarianism and other non-violent practices and rituals of Jains flow from the principle of Ahiṃsā. According to Adian Rankin, the concept of Ahiṃsā is so much intertwined with Jainism that it conjures up images of ascetics who cover their mouths and sweep the ground before them with small brushes to avoid injuring the most minuscule forms of life and Jain-owned animal sanctuaries where even the sickest, most deformed birds and beasts are protected and cherished. These overt manifestations of an ancient faith challenge the comfortable - and near-universal - assumption of human precedence over other creatures.[1]

The Jain concept of Ahiṃsā is quite different from the concept of non-violence found in other philosophies. In other religious traditions, violence is usually associated with causing harm to others. On the other hand, in Jainism, violence refers primarily to injuring one's own self – behaviour which inhibits the souls own ability to attain mokṣa or liberation.[2] At the same time it also means violence to others because it is this tendency to harm others that ultimately harms ones own soul. Furthermore, the Jains have extended the concept of Ahiṃsā not only to humans but to all animals, plants, micro-organisms and all beings having life or life potential. All life is sacred and everyone has a right to live fearlessly to its maximum potential. The living beings do not have any fear from those who have taken the vow of Ahiṃsā. According to Jainism, protection of life, also known as *abhayadānam*, is the supreme charity that a person can make[3].

Ahiṃsā does not merely indicate absence of physical violence, but also indicates absence of desire to indulge in any sort of violence.[4] This Jain ideal of Ahiṃsā profoundly influenced Mahatma Gandhi, through his friendship with the Jain scholar Shrimad Rajchandra that it formed a basis of his satyagraha (truth struggle) against colonial rule and caused him to rethink many aspects of contemporary Hindu practices.[1] While Jainism is not a proselytizing religion and as such has no organised system of advocating its doctrine, Jains have been forefront in strongly advocating vegetarianism and non-violence through ages.[5] Ahiṃsā being central to the Jain philosophy, Jain Ācāryas have produced, through ages, quite elaborate and detailed doctrinal materials concerning its various aspects.

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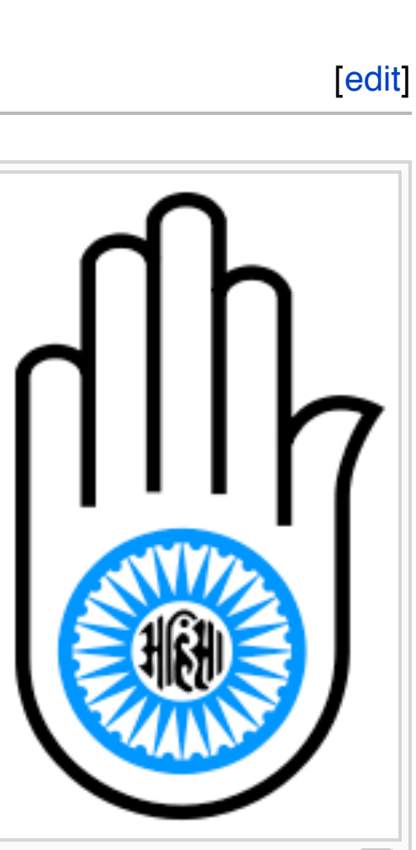
The vow of non-violence [edit]

Ahiṃsā is formalized into Jain doctrine as the first major vow of the ascetics and first minor vow of the laity.



The hand with a wheel on the palm symbolizes the Jain Vow of Ahiṃsā. The word in the middle is "ahimsa". The wheel represents the dharmacakra which stands for the resolve to halt the cycle of reincarnation through relentless pursuit of truth and non-violence.

The Vow of Ascetics [edit]

The Jain monks and the nuns undertake five major vows known as Mahāvratas at the time of their ordination to monkhood, out of which Ahiṃsā is the first and foremost. Jain monks and nuns must rank among the most “non-violent” people in the world. A Jain ascetic is expected to uphold the vow of Ahiṃsā to the highest standard, even at the cost of his own life. The other four major vows – truthfulness, non-stealing, non-possession and celibacy – are in fact extension of the first vow of complete non-violence[6]. According to Amṛtacandra Sūri:

> “All sins like falsehood, theft, attachment and immorality are forms of violence which destroy the purity of the soul. They have been separately enumerated only to facilitate their understanding”
>
> - *Puruṣārthasiddhyupāya* 4.42.

Ascetic Practices for adherence of Ahiṃsā

The ascetic practices of total renunciation of worldly affairs and possessions, refusal to stay in a single place for a long time, continuous practice of austerities like fasting etc. are geared towards observance of ahiṃsā. The Jain mendicants abide by a rigorous set of rules of conduct, where they must eat, sleep and even walk with full diligence and with an awareness that even walking kills several hundreds of minute beings. They generally brush the ground clear of insects before they tread; some wear a small mask to avoid taking in tiny insects; some monks do not wear even clothes and eat food only when it is not prepared for themselves. The observation of three guptis or the controls of mind, speech and body and five samiti or regulation of walking, speaking, begging of food, keeping items and disposal of items are designed to help the monks in observing the vow of ahiṃsā faultlessly. In fact entire day of a Jain monk is spent in ensuring that he observes his vow of ahiṃsā through mind, body and speech faultlessly. This seemingly extreme behaviour of the monks comes from a sense that every action, no matter however subtle, has a karmic effect which can bind soul and inhibit liberation, especially those that result in *hiṃsā*.[7]

The Vow of the Laity [edit]

A Jain layman, on account of his household and occupational compulsions, is unable to adhere to the five major vows of ascetic. Hence he observes aṇuvrata or minor vows which although are similar to the major vows of the ascetics are observed with a lesser severity. It is difficult to avoid some violence by a lay person to single-sensed immobile beings in the process of occupation, cooking, self defense etc. That is why he vows not to kill without a necessary purpose and determined intention, a moving sentient being, when it is innocent. Tying up, injuring, mutilating, burdening with heavy load and depriving from food and drinks any animal or human being with a mind polluted by anger and other passions are the five aticāra or transgressions of the vow of Ahiṃsā.[8] However, it is to be understood that ultimately, there is limited spiritual progress and no emancipation unless the major vows are adhered to.

Laity Practices for adherence of Ahiṃsā

Jainism is perhaps the only religion in the world that requires all its adherents to follow a strict vegetarian diet.[9] Vegetarian food that also involves more harm to the living beings such as roots, bulbs, multi seeded vegetables etc are avoided by strict Jains. The importance of Ahiṃsā manifests in many other ways in the daily life of Jains. For a layperson it means participating in business that results in least amount of violence to living beings. No furs, plumes or silk are worn. Use of leather is kept to a minimum and must in any event be from naturally dead animals. Food is usually eaten during the day unless unavoidable, since there is too much danger of injuring insects in cooking at night. The Jain will not use an open light nor leave a container of liquid uncovered lest a stray insect be destroyed; even with this precaution, liquids are always strained before use.[9] Through the ages Jains have sought to avoid occupations that unavoidably entail injury, and this accounts for the disproportionate number who have entered banking, commerce and other mercantile trades.[9]

Jain Concept of Ahiṃsā [edit]

While Jainism enjoins observance of total non-violence by the ascetics, it is often argued that the man is constantly obliged to engage in destructive activities of eating, drinking, breathing and surviving in order to support his body. According to Jainism, life is omnipresent with infinite beings including microorganisms pervading each and every part of universe. Hence it may still be possible to avoid killing of gross animals, but it is impossible to avoid killing of subtle microorganisms in air and water, plant life and various types of insects that may be crushed by walking. It would thus appear that the continual likelihood of destroying living organisms would create an inexcusable burden on the ascetics trying to follow the Jain path of total renunciation and non-violence.

However, the Jain conception of Ahiṃsā is quite different than what is commonly understood by violence. The violence is defined more by the motives and the consequences to the self rather than by the act itself. Furthermore, according to Jain Scriptures, destruction of less developed organism brings about lesser karmas than destruction of developed animals and karmas generated in observance of religious duties faultlessly disappears almost immediately. Hence, it is possible to observe complete non-violence with right knowledge, even when some outward violence occurs to living beings in the course of performing religious duties by observing carefulness and pure mental disposition without any attachment.

Hierarchy of Living Beings on basis of Senses [edit]

Jainism divides living beings on the basis of sensory organs (indriya) and vitalities or life force (praṇa) existing in such beings. Accordingly, higher the number of senses and vitalities a being has, the more is its capacity to suffer and feel pain. Hence according to Jainism, violence to higher sensed beings like man, cow, tiger and like who have five senses and capacity to think and feel pain attracts more karma than any violence to lesser sensed beings like insects, or single sensed beings like microbes and plants.[10][11] Hence Jainism enjoins its adherents to completely avoid violence to higher sensed beings and as far as possible minimize violence to single sensed beings.

Carefulness [edit]

According to Jainism, a monk who is careless in his activities is guilty of violence irrespective of whether a living being remains alive or dies; on the other hand, the person who is ever vigilant and careful in observing the samitis experiences no karmic bondage simply because some violence may have taken place in connection with his activities.[12] Carefulness came to be seen as a defense for the monks against violence in Jainism. One of the most famous passages in the *Uttradhayana Sūtra* describes Mahāvīra continually exhorting his chief disciple Gautama “to be careful all the while” [13] lest the opportunity to destroy all the karmas and achieve perfection in this lifetime may be lost forever on account of carelessness. Tattvārthasūtra defines hiṃsā or violence simply as “removal of life by careless activity of mind, body and speech.” Thus action in Jainism came to be regarded as truly violent only when accompanied by carlessness.

Mental States and intention [edit]

Paul Dundas quotes Ācārya Jinabhadra (seventh century), who shows that the omnipresence of life-forms in the universe need not totally inhibit normal behaviour of the ascetics:[14]

> “It is the intention that ultimately matters. From the real point of view, a man does not become a killer only because he has killed or because the world is crowded with souls, or remain innocent only because he has not killed physically. Even if a person does not actually kill, he becomes a killer if he has the intention to kill; while a doctor has to cause pain but is still non-violent and innocent because his intention is pure, for it is the intention which is the deciding factor, not the external act which is inconclusive.”

Thus pure intention along with carefulness was considered necessary to practice Ahiṃsā as Jains admitted that even if intention may be pure, careless activities often resulted in violence unknowingly.}}

Significance of true Knowledge [edit]

The Jains also considered right knowledge as a prerequisite for practicing Ahiṃsā. It is necessary to know what is living and what is non-living to practice Ahiṃsā faultlessly. A person who is confused between Living and non-living can never observe non-violence. *Daśavaikālika Sūtra* declared:

> “First knowledge, then compassion. Thus does one remain in full control. How can an ignorant person be compassionate, when he cannot distinguish between the good and the evil?” – DS iv

It further declares –

> “ Knowledge of living and non-living alone will enable one to become compassionate towards all living creatures. Knowing this all aspirants, proceed from knowledge to eternal virtues. What can an ignorant do ? How does he know what is noble and what is evil?" [15]

The knowledge is also considered necessary to destroy Karmas. Samaṇ Suttaṁ declared -

> “The ignorant cannot destroy their Karmas by their actions while the wise can do it by their inaction i.e. by controlling their activities because they are free from greed and lustful passions and do not commit any sin as they remain contented.” (165)}}

Anekantavada - The non-violence of mind [edit]

Main articles: Anekantavada and Syadvada

Anekantavada is the principle of relativity of truth or the doctrine of multiple aspects.[16] Jains hold that truth is multifaceted and has multiple sides that cannot be completely comprehended by anyone. Anekantavada describes the world as a multifaceted, ever-changing reality with an infinity of viewpoints relative to the time, place, nature and state of one who is the viewer and that which is viewed. What is true from one point of view is open to question from another. Absolute truth cannot be grasped from any particular viewpoint alone, because absolute truth is the sum total of all different viewpoints that make up the universe. Because it is rooted in these doctrines, Jainism cannot exclusively uphold the views of any individual, community, nation, or species.[17] It recognises inherently that other views are valid for other peoples, and for other life-forms. This perception leads to the doctrine of syadvada or sevenfold predication stating the truth from different viewpoints. Anekantvada is the doctrine and Syadvada is its expression. According to Jaina philosophers all important philosophical statements should be expressed in this sevenfold way in order to remove the danger of dogmatism (ekanta) in philosophy.[18]

The concept of syadvada allows the Jains to accept the truth in other philosophies from their perspective and thus inculcating a tolerance for other viewpoints. Anekantvada is non-absolutist and stands firmly against all dogmatisms, even including any assertion that only Jainism is the right religious path. [9] It is thus an intellectual Ahimsa or Ahimsa of mind. [1] In Anekantvada, there is no "battle of ideas", because this is considered to be a form of intellectual himsa or damage, leading quite logically to physical violence and war. In today's world, the limitations of the adversarial, “either with us or against us “ form of argument are increasingly apparent leading to political, religious and social conflicts. Even the mounting ecological crisis is linked to adversarialism, because it arises from a false division between humanity and "the rest" of nature.

Various aspects and consequences of violence [edit]

Ācārya Amṛtacandra has described as to how the consequences of violence (karmas attracted) differ from person to persons for similar and different types of acts:

- A small violence may bring serious consequences to one person, while to another person grievous violence may bring about lesser consequences. For instance, a person hunting and killing only one small animal suffers severe consequences while a person who is building a temple or hospital, suffers milder the karmic consequences even though such a building results in killing of many animals.[19]
- Even when violence is jointly committed by two persons, the same act may result in severe consequence for one person and mild consequence for another person. This may happen in case where one person is the leader and planner of violence who binds severe karmas, while another who is simply a follower binds much lesser karmas.[19]
- One who actually does not commit violence may be responsible for hiṃsā while one who actually commits violence is not responsible for hiṃsā. For instance, a burglar who fails in his robbery is still a felon but a diligent surgeon who is trying to save a patient is not responsible for violence even if a patient dies during the surgery.[19]
- Persons who have not committed violence may become responsible for violence committed by others. This may happen when a violence which is carried out by someone is approved and instigated by someone else.[19]
- Ahiṃsā often gives result of hiṃsā to one and hiṃsā may sometimes give result of Ahiṃsā to another. For instance, one person saves another from oppression by use of violence and hence enjoys consequences of Ahiṃsā although resorting to violence, while another does not act to save someone wishing that the other person is not saved and thus suffers the consequences of violence although he may have not actually done anything.[19]

Dravya hiṃsā and bhāva hiṃsā [edit]

Jaina Conception of hiṃsā [edit]

While the Jain ascetics observe absolute non-violence, so far as a Jain householder is concerned, the violence is divided as follows :-

1. **Sankalpinī hiṃsā or intentional violence** – Intentional violence knowingly done is the worst form of violence and is a transgression of the laypersons vow of violence. Examples of sankalpinī hiṃsā are killing for hunting, amusement or decoration, or butchering for food or sacrifice or killing or hurting out of enimity, malice or mischief. sankalpinī hiṃsā has to be totally renounced by a householder.[20]
2. **Virodhinī hiṃsā or Self defence** - Virodhini hiṃsā is committed for self-defence of self, property, family or country against violent attackers, robbers, or dacoits. A householder tries to avoid hiṃsā at all cost, but in such cases it may be unavoidable and hence should be non-vindictive and kept to barest minimum.}}[20]
3. **Āṛambhinī (Graharambhi) hiṃsā or domestic or household violence** – This violence is unavoidable committed in the course of preparing food, household cleanliness, washing, construction of houses, wells etc.[20]
4. **Udyoginī hiṃsā or Occupational Violence** – This violence is connected to occupational undertakings like agriculture, building and operating industries etc.[20]

> While sankalpinī hiṃsā has to be avoided at all costs, the other three types of hiṃsā although unavoidable in some cases, should not exceed the strict requirements of fulfilling the duties of a householder. Furthermore, they should not be influenced by passions like anger, greed, pride and deceit or they take the character of sanpalkinī hiṃsā.[20]

Ways of committing Violence [edit]

It would be wrong, however, to conclude that ahiṃsā only prohibited physical violence. An early Jain text says: "With the three means of punishment – thoughts, words, deeds – ye shall not injure living beings." [9] In fact, violence can be committed by combination of the following four factors[21] :

1. The instrumentality of our actions. We can commit violence by either through
   a. body i.e. physical action,
   b. speech i.e. verbal action, or
   c. mind i.e. mental actions
2. The process of committing violence. This includes whether we
   a. only decide or plan to act,
   b. make preparations for the act e.g. like collecting necessary materials or weapons, or
   c. actually begin the action
3. The modality of our action, including if we
   a. we ourselves commit violence,
   b. we instigate others to carry out the violence, or
   c. we give our silent approval for the violence
4. The motivation for action. This includes which of the following negative emotions that the violence is motivated by.
   a. Anger
   b. Greed
   c. Pride
   d. Manipulation or deceit

Thus violence is committed by a combination of any one element of the above four factors. Due to this, there are 108 ways with which the violence can be committed.

The Rationale of Non violence [edit]

According to Jainism, the purpose of non-violence is not simply because it is a commandment of a God or any other supreme being. Its purpose is also not simply because its observance is conductive to general welfare of the state or the community.[20] While it is true that in Jainism, the moral and religious injunctions were laid down as law by Arhats who have achieved perfection through their supreme moral efforts, their adherence is just not to please a God, but the life of the Arhats has demonstrated that such commandments were conductive to Arhat’s own welfare, helping him to reach spiritual victory. Just as Arhats achieved spiritual victory by observing non-violence, so can anyone who follows this path.[20]

Another aspect that provides a rationale to the avoidance of hiṃsā is that, any acts of hiṃsā results in hiṃsā to self. Any act of violence though outwardly is seen to harm others, harms the soul of the person indulging in the act. Thus by an act of violence, a soul may or may not injure the material vitalities known as dravya praṇa of someone else, but always causes injury to its own bhāva praṇa or the psychic vitalities by binding the soul with karmas. It would be entirely wrong to see Ahiṃsā in Jainism in any sentimental light.[9] The Jain doctrine of non-injury is based on rational consciousness, not emotional compassion; on responsibility to self, not on a social fellow feeling. The motive of Ahiṃsā is totally self-centered and for the benefit of the individual. And yet, though the emphasis is on personal liberation, the Jain ethics makes that goal attainable only through consideration for others.

Furthermore, according to the Jain karmic theory, each and every soul, including self, has reincarnated as an animal, plant or microorganism innumerable number of times besides re-incarnated as humans. The concept of Ahiṃsā is more meaningful when understood in conjunction with the concept of karmas. As the doctrine of transmigration of souls includes rebirth in animal as well as human form, it creates a humanitarian sentiment of kinship amongst all life forms.[22] The motto of Jainism - *Parasparopagraho jīvānām*, translated as: “all life is inter-related and it is the duty of souls to assist each other”- also provides a rational approach of Jains towards Ahiṃsā.

In conclusion, the insistence of Ahiṃsā is not so much about non-injury to others as it is about non-injury and spiritual welfare of the self. The ultimate rationale of Ahiṃsā is fundamentally is about karmic results of the hiṃsā on self rather than the concern about the well being of other beings for its own sake.[23]

Fruits of non-violence and violence [edit]

Main article: Karma in Jainism

According to the Jain scriptures, the result of the observance of Ahiṃsā is good health, a strong body, and a strong constitution in the future life. There would be happiness, comforts, long life, a good name, handsome features, and an enjoyable youth.

The results of killing would be the opposite of these things, such as lameness, incurable disease, separation from friends and relatives, sorrow, short life, and after that, an incarnation in a low state (animal or hell). According to Hemacandra, diseases like leprosy and loss of limbs are the consequences of inflicting violence.

Misconceptions on Non-violence [edit]

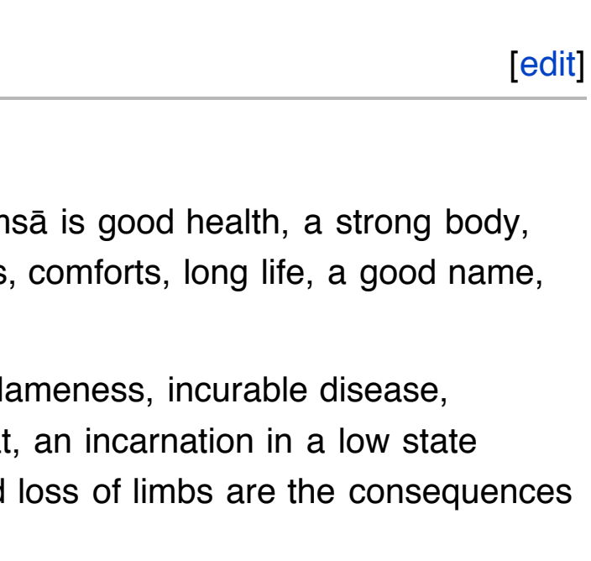


illustration of the Asvamedha Sacrifice in Ramayana by Sahib Din, 1652. Kausalya is depicted slaying the horse (left) and lying beside it (right)

The Jain Scriptures discuss the misconceptions that are harboured in case of Ahiṃsā. They often opposed the Vedic beliefs in sacrifices and other practices that justified violence in various ways. Ācārya Amṛtacandra’s Puruṣārthasiddhyupāya and Ācārya Hemacandra’s Yogaśāstra discusses these wrong beliefs at length to alert the Jain laity on such wrong beliefs. Following are such misconceptions that a Jain layman was advised to avoid.}}

Animal sacrifices [edit]

Vedics believed that animals were created for yajna (sacrifice) and hence it was not considered a slaughter, as it elevated not only the person making the sacrifice, but also the animals. This belief was denounced by Hemacandra that those who mercilessly kill the animals under the pretext of offering the oblations to gods or for the sake of sacrifices are condemned to most terrifying existence in hells. Amṛtacandra also condemned this practice by stating that it is a misconception to hold that Gods are pleased at sacrifices of living beings and there is no wrong in committing hiṃsā for the sake of religion.

Worshipping violent gods [edit]

Jain Ācāryas like Hemacandra, Somadeva, Jinasena also decried the worship of violent vedic Gods who demanded sacrifices of animals and glorified the killing of enemies. Ācārya Hemacandra says –

> “It is a matter of great grief that the gods who wield weapons such as bow and arrows, mace, disc, trident etc. are worshipped as true gods.” }}

Oblations to forefathers [edit]

Hemacandra discusses the Vedic beliefs of offering oblations to dead ancestors to please and satisfy their souls by sacrificing various animals. This was decried by Hemacandra as thus –

The Vedic practice of offering sacrifices of animals to dead ancestors was also condemned by Jain Ācāryas.

Glory of death on the battlefield [edit]

The Hindu belief that the death in battlefield resulted in rebirth in heavens has been recorded in Mahabharata where Krsna tells Arjuna :

> "Slain you will attain heavens, conquering you will enjoy earth;
> Therefore rise, O Arjuna, resolved to do battle"
>
> -Bhagavad Gita ii 37

However according to Jainas death accompanied by hatred and violence can never lead to heavens. According to a story in Bhagavati Sūtra, all the 840,000 soldiers who perished in a war between Konika, the Magadhan emperor and other kings, were either reborn in hell or as animals. Only one person who maintained equanimity in the midst of death in battlefield was reborn in heaven.

Other wrong beliefs [edit]

Additionally Amṛtacandra discusses the following wrong beliefs:

1. Animals should not be killed for guests or persons deserving respect as often advocated in certain scriptures.
2. It is also a wrong belief that wild animals that kill many other animals should be killed. This is often justified in the name of hunting of ferocious animals like tigers for sport.
3. Another wrong belief forwarded to justify killing of ferocious animals is that, these kill many lives and accumulate grave sins and hence killing them is an act of mercy. According to Jainism, killing can never be an act of mercy.
4. It is also a misconception to believe that it is advisable to kill those who are suffering so that they may get relief from agony. These sorts of arguments are forwarded to justify killing of those animals that may have become old or injured and hence have become commercially useless.
5. Other wrong beliefs are killing those who are in state of happiness or those who are in meditation under wrong belief that the mental state at the time of death will be perpetuated in future lives.
6. It is also a wrong belief that killing of self and others is justified as the soul that is imprisoned in the body will be permanent released and achieve salvation.

Non-violence and vegetarianism [edit]

Main article: Jain vegetarianism

Origins and evolution of Ahimsa [edit]

Ahiṃsā, an important tenet of all the religions originating in India, is now considered as an article of faith by the adherents of the Indian religions. However, not much is known about the historical origins of ahiṃsā and as to how it became widespread and got deeply entrenched in the Indian philosophy. Scholars speculate that the doctrine of ahiṃsā was probably first developed amongst the native non-Aryan people in around third millennium BCE and was adopted by the brahamanas during the later Upanishadic period under the influence of sramanas. The Vedas, the manusmriti, the Dharmasutra and Mahabharata contain many references on killing and slaughter of animals for sacrifices, oblations to dead ancestors, and as well as for various other occasions. However, as the doctrine of karma gained acceptance in the Hindu belief, the tenet of ahiṃsā also gained prominence. Later Hindu scriptures condemn the slaughter of animals, upholding ahimsa as one of the highest ideal. Bal Gangadhar Tilak has credited Jainism with cessation of slaughter of animals in the brahamanical religion. Not surprisingly, some scholars have traced the origin of ahiṃsā to Jainas and their precursor, the sramanas. According to Thomas McEvilley, a noted Indologist, certain seals of Indus Valley civilization depict a meditative figure surrounded by a multitude of wild animals, providing evidence of proto yoga tradition in India akin to Jainism. This particular image might suggest that all the animals depicted are sacred to this particular practitioner. Consequently, these animals would be protected from harm. This might be the first historical evidence of the practice of ahiṃsā.

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