

# Great Vows (Mahavratas) of Ascetics

## Five Great Vows

Right knowledge, right faith, and right conduct are the three most essentials for attaining liberation in Jainism.

In order to acquire these, one must observe the five great vows:

1. Non-violence - Ahimsa
2. Truth - Satya
3. Non-stealing - Achaurya or Asteya
4. Celibacy/Chastity - Brahmacharya
5. Non-attachment/Non-possession - Aparigraha

Non-violence (Ahimsa) Among these five vows, non-violence (Ahimsa) is the cardinal principle of Jainism and hence it is known as the cornerstone of Jainism. Non-violence is the supreme religion (Ahimsa parmo dharma). It is repeatedly said in Jain literature; "Do not injure, abuse, oppress, enslave, insult, torment, torture, or kill any creature or living being."

According to Jainism all living beings, irrespective of their size, shape, or different spiritual developments are equal. No living being has a right to harm, injure, or kill any other living being, including animals, insects, and plants. Every living being has a right to exist and it is necessary to live with every other living being in perfect harmony and peace.

Nonviolence in Jainism is not a negative virtue. It is based upon the positive quality of universal love and compassion. One who is actuated by this ideal cannot be indifferent to the suffering of others.

The violence of every type should be completely forbidden. Mental tortures by way of harsh words, actions, and any type of bodily injury should also be avoided. Even thinking evil of someone is considered violence in Jainism.

Practically, it is impossible to survive without killing or injuring some of the smallest living beings. Some lives are killed even when we breathe, drink water, or eat food. Therefore, Jainism says that minimum killing of the lowest form of life should be our ideal for survival.

In the universe, there are different forms of life, such as, human beings, animals, insects, plants, bacteria, and even smaller lives, which cannot be seen even through the most powerful microscopes. Jainism has classified all living beings according to their senses.

The five senses are touch, taste, smell, sight, and hearing.

- Living being with one sense - plants, water, air, earth, fire, etc.

- Living being with two senses - worms, leaches, etc.
- Living being with three senses- ants, lice, etc.
- Living being with four senses - flies, bees, etc.
- Living being with five senses - humans, animals, birds, heavenly and hellish beings.

It is more painful if a life of the higher forms (more than one sense) is killed. Hence Jainism allows laypeople to use only vegetables as food for survival. All non-vegetarian food is made by killing a living being with two or more senses. Therefore, Jainism preaches strict vegetarianism and prohibits non-vegetarian foods.

Jainism explains that violence is not defined by actual harm, for this may be unintentional. It is the intention to harm, the absence of compassion, unawareness, and ignorance that makes an action violent. Without violent thought, there can be no violent actions. Non-violence is to be observed in action, speech and thought. One should not be violent, ask others to do so, or approve of such an activity.

To be continued...