

Karmic Ecology: Lessons from the Jain Dharma

By Aidan Rankin

Why Karma Matters

One who neglects or disregards the existence of earth, air, fire, water and vegetation disregards his own existence which is entwined with them.

Mahavira, twenty-fourth Tirthankara (Path-Finder) of Jainism

No religion of the World has explained the principle of Ahimsa [non-violence] so deeply and systematically as discussed, with its applicability in life, in Jainism. As and when this benevolent principle of Ahimsa will be sought for practice by the people of the world to achieve their ends of life in this world and beyond, Jainism is sure to have the uppermost status and Bhagwan Mahavira is sure to be respected as the greatest authority on Ahimsa.

Mohandas K. Gandhi

The idea of karma as cosmic pervades Indic spiritual philosophy and is one of its distinguishing characteristics. Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs and Jains all accord high status to this concept and place it at the heart of their respective doctrine and practice. Approaches to karma vary between, and within, these faith traditions. The difference is more one of angle and emphasis than ideology. Karma influences secular values and secular men and women too, in India and outside it, often to the point of caricature and cliché. At a deeper level, there have also been calls for the ‘Christening’ or ‘re-Christening’ of karma. This can either be seen as adding a new and vital element to Christian teachings (which have roots as deep in parts of India as in Europe), or returning Christianity to its essence, its true ‘fundamentals’.

Karma *is* Indic, but it also has universal echoes. Its message of interconnectedness is given a new planetary relevance by recent trends in economics, science and communications. To this a new urgency is added by an ecological crisis that at once challenges the human imagination and exposes the limits of human possibility. Or, to put it another way, we are challenged to use our imagination to learn how to live within limits, and this is where the idea of karma can help us.

Karma itself means ‘action’. Karma Yoga in Indic spiritual practice is one of the means of achieving ‘union’ (yoga) with the divine and/or the true self. It is the ‘yoga of action’ because understanding is acquired and expressed through ‘works’ or actions rather than a simple turning away from the material world. Karma Yoga, as described by Swami Vivekananda, is a process of ‘soul-realisation’ (which is the same as ‘self-

realisation’) through learning to work for the common good without seeking material reward or social accolade:

He (sic) works best who works without any motive, neither for money, nor for fame, nor for anything else; and when a man can do that, he will be a Buddha, and out of him will come the power to work in such a manner as will transform the world. This man represents the very highest ideal of Karma-Yoga.¹

The Buddha, in this context, means an enlightened being. But for many Hindus, the Buddhism of Gautama and the Jainism of Mahavira are both systems of Karma Yoga. This is because they involve often quite strict ascetic disciplines for lay men and women as well as monastic communities. Adherents of other spiritual traditions, such as Christianity or Judaism, will immediately recognise this goal, as will many secular campaigners and volunteers, the unsung heroes and heroines or ‘little platoons’ whose activities hold movements or communities together.

Karma is action, therefore, but it is also the cosmic law of cause and effect. Every action creates its own reaction and sets off a chain of further events. Ultimately all actions are connected to each other. The Butterfly Effect, by which tiny and intricate acts can have a far-reaching ripple effect – the flapping of the butterfly’s wings affecting subtle changes in the atmosphere –, is a powerful manifestation of karma. In Indic thought, karma is frequently spoken of as a web, in which all life forms in the universe are enmeshed. That expresses part of the meaning of karma, namely awareness that all actions affect all other actions and all parts of the universe are connected to each other. From a western standpoint, that aspect of karma re-embeds humanity in the rest of nature. Human actions, individually and collectively, can profoundly affect the natural world, but are themselves part of a larger natural process.

Through karmic ‘threads’, humans are linked to everything else in the web of life and so are given equality with everything that contains life, even the smallest and – in anthropocentric terms – least obviously significant life forms. These threads cross and subvert human-made boundaries: between species; between human and human; humanity and nature, and supposedly ‘primitive’ and ‘advanced’ living systems – or human societies. All the stages of evolution are joined together through these strands of karma, making us conscious of ourselves, and our world, as but one small part of a cosmic cycle, lasting for aeons and then renewing itself.

The Indic conception of karma encourages us to take a long view of ourselves and our place in the universe. It enables to adopt an attitude of humility towards our own abilities and powers, rather than seeking to ‘conquer’ or subdue those around us, which is in karmic terms a sign of weakness rather than inner strength. An understanding of karma leads us to reflect on the *intrinsic value* of all forms of life, human and non-human. Yet by challenging our attachment to ideas of dominance, karma does not take power away from human beings, but releases us to make fuller and more creative use of our intelligence.

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Critics of karma regard it as a fatalistic doctrine and blame it for (among other things) the perpetuation of caste barriers and consequent barriers to 'development' along western lines. It is certainly true that ideas of karma, like all human ideas, can be used to underpin rigid hierarchies. In this way, ideas become institutionalised and if unchallenged, they solidify and then stagnate. As we shall see, they can then become karmic in themselves. It is equally true that karma challenges ideas of progress that have become staples of western political ideology, in both its right- and left-wing manifestations. It is this, perhaps, which is the true target of criticism. However this line of attack is rooted in misunderstanding. Awareness of karma is a tool that we can use to take control of our individual and collective destinies.

And, far from being anti-humanist, doctrines of karma affirm human intelligence. The abilities to make conscious choices about how we should live, to remember the past and plan for the future or to shape our environment are not exclusively human traits. Nonetheless, humans might be said to have strong and highly specific abilities in this area, including the capacity for philosophical speculation and scientific or spiritual insight. From a karmic perspective, such skills confer on us special responsibilities, rather than an unquestioned 'right' to subjugate other species, fellow humans or the earth's ecosystems. True use of our ability involves learning to work with the grain of nature, rather than seeing it as an enemy to be vanquished by 'progress' or as a sinister 'other', from which we need to be protected.

Karmic awareness makes us receptive to a different kind of power, based on compromise, negotiation and conflict resolution in place of adversarial political confrontation and the use of force. This process extends beyond the human realm to encompass all forms of life and the way in which we view the planet and the universe. Karmic power is a subtler power than that of the conventional western paradigm, where separation and confrontation are confused with power and strength, compromise with weakness and working with nature equated with surrender to it. This either/or mindset is rooted in the idea of separation between humanity and nature, and a linear narrative of 'progress' that removes us further and further from our natural origins.

Consciousness of karma, by contrast, makes us open to a range of viewpoints from all strands of the 'web' of life. Simultaneously, it opens to us a range of choices about how we organise our lives. These are quite different from the 'choices' afforded us by consumer culture, or the political choices between 'progressive' and 'conservative', left and right. The choices afforded by karma arise out of understanding that all life, all the 'stuff' of the universe, is connected by delicate threads. It follows that every action we take has a planetary – and cosmic – significance that invariably redounds. Seeing ourselves as part of a larger process gives us a clearer idea of our *long-range* interests and how to act accordingly.

At this level, the mental picture of karma as a web becomes incomplete, for three reasons. First, there is no Cosmic Spider exercising total control at the centre of the

web. The 'centre' is better understood as the principle of creative energy empowering the universe, or as the underlying reality or 'true self' that remains when karmic delusions (such as delusions of power or grandeur) are peeled away. Secondly, each one of us is also spinning our own karmic thread. By our actions, or sometimes our failure to act, we *accumulate* our own personal karma. Thirdly, the ultimate purpose of the Indic spiritual quest is *Moksha*, or liberation from the karmic cycle. This means escape from the karmic threads in which we have enmeshed ourselves by the false choices we have made, based on delusion, the most potent of which is the delusion that we are separate from above the rest of nature and have unlimited powers over it.

The idea of karma thus makes us aware of our limitations, as individuals and as a species, *and* offers us a way out through more conscious, rational choices about the way we live as individuals, organise our society and define our relationship to with all beings. Far from enslaving us to fate, karma enables us to take control of our own destinies. At the same time, we are invited to question constantly the motives and thought processes behind each of our actions. In much of Indic thought, the intention is at least as important as the act itself. Karmic awareness places us all on the same path towards Moksha, which is the same as the ultimate truth, or our true selves. Truth exists, but can be approached by many different paths and is lost when we attempt to impose our own 'version' of it on others (human and non-human).

In summary, the Indic conception of karma has the following relevant characteristics:

- 1.) All life is interconnected and interdependent.
- 2.) All life forms have intrinsic value.
- 3.) All actions are connected to and ultimately influence all other actions.
- 4.) Human beings are part of the web of life, not above or outside it.
- 5.) Humans have innate limitations, but also powers of spiritual and scientific insight that give them special responsibilities.
- 6.) Awareness of karma allows us to take control of our own lives – individually and collectively.
- 7.) Taking control means reconfiguring our relationships with fellow humans *and* all forms of life.
- 8.) Karmic awareness involves replacing relationships of dominance and confrontation with relationships of negotiation and mutual aid. That, in turn, offers the possibility of 'liberation' from karmic entanglement.
- 9.) Karma challenges us constantly to question our motives and intentions, and hence to respect diversity of opinion just as we respect diversity of life.

The relevance in question is to ecological consciousness. Concepts like the intrinsic value of human and non-human life, respect for diversity (cultural and ecological) and the mutual dependence of all ecosystems are the core of the Deep Ecology platform. They are the basis for an ecological critique of the dominant system of values in the 'developed' world, including the underlying concepts of development themselves.

This system of values is under increasing challenge, in large part because the effects of human activities on the environment are becoming increasingly apparent and reaching crisis point. Furthermore, the ideologies rooted in ideas of linear progress and the radical separation of 'Man' and 'Nature' look increasingly threadbare. Scientific reasoning is pointing us away from narrow, linear thinking towards a sense of connectedness. Political doctrines of left and right seem ever-more limited and outmoded, based on the same one-sided approach to problem-solving. The decline of organised religions and the parallel rise of fundamentalisms both disguise a wider spiritual quest that goes beyond the conventional areas of religious practice, in the west in particular. It overlaps with ecological awareness and the sense that materialism is 'too much' in planetary terms and 'not enough' for the fulfilment of individual human beings or humanity as a whole.

The ecological critique of anthropocentrism, or human-centredness, is balanced and complemented by the karmic critique of delusion or lack of awareness. The search for an eco-centric approach to human problems has much in common with the search for the true self at the heart of Indic spiritual practice. Nowhere is this truer, or more apparent, than in the philosophy of Jainism, which explicitly links karma to material accretions. Karma, to Jains, is a form of matter and the reduction of karma is identified with the reduction of ecological footprints, with learning to live more lightly on Earth.

This ancient doctrine profoundly influenced Mahatma Gandhi, appropriately at a personal before political level. His correspondence with a Jain friend, Shrimad Rajchandra, made him think deeply about the importance of non-violence in social and economic relationships. He remained a devout Hindu, but Jain influence made him search for the essence of Hinduism and challenge caste-based oppression and the subordination of women. These were not, in his view, part of the original Indic dharma, but corrupt institutional accretions.

In the same way, there are many areas of Jain thought resonate with today's ecology movement, as it attempts to effect a shift of consciousness and a change of practice.

What is Jainism? : A Summary

Jainism is one of the world's oldest spiritual traditions. To describe it, the Indic term *dharma* is more accurate and inclusive than 'religion'. Dharma signifies both the underlying law of the universe and the individual's path towards the truth. The idea of cosmic balance includes ecological balance. Living as if nature mattered is the starting point for Jain practice.²

The basis of Jain dharma is *Ahimsa*, or non-violence based on reverence for all living beings. It is closely related to the majority Hindu culture of India, the Vedic *dharma*, but diverges from mainstream Hinduism in its rejection of caste and hierarchy, and in its emphasis on individual responsibility as much as social justice. There are between

five and ten million Jains in the world today, mostly in India but with coherent and successful communities in many parts of the world, including East Africa, North America and Europe. They do not seek converts and are often remarkably modest about their faith and its achievements. At the same time, they do not claim ownership of 'their' dharma, but accept that everyone who attempts to live non-violently is applying Jain principles, whatever their belief system. Jains regard themselves as the keepers of a sacred flame of primal Indic philosophy, which was based on the same sense of interconnectedness of all life that we find (for example) in Aboriginal, Native American or traditional African spirituality today. Yet Jainism combines the intuitive sense of connection with a powerful tradition of rationalism and scholarship. Therefore there is no concept of division between reason and intuition or the spiritual and scientific approaches. Each is continuous from and complementary to the other.

Mahavira (599-527 BCE) is regarded as the founder of modern Jainism, or more accurately the spiritual leader who gave it its recognisable features. His name means Great Hero and Jainism itself means the faith of the Conquerors. Conquest, in this context, does not mean military or political victory or even the triumph of one world view over another. It is the conquest of the self, through the transcendence of short-term, materialistic impulses and the adoption of a long-range view, recognising that all living systems interact. The conquest of the self is held to be the realisation of the true self and its release from the karmic bonds of delusion. Mahavira, like his contemporary Gautama Buddha (563-483 BCE), abandoned a life of privilege to seek deeper insights into the nature of the universe and the underlying moral law, the dharma that unites morality and nature. He recognised the connection between all human lives and between human life and all other forms of life. He recognised as well that compassionate living was not only morally right, but the exercise of rational self-interest:

"Non-violence and kindness to living beings is kindness to oneself. For thereby one's own self is saved from various kinds of sins and resultant sufferings and is able to secure one's own welfare."

"You are that which you intend to hit, injure, insult, persecute, torture, enslave or kill."

"All breathing, existing, living, sentient creatures should not be slain, nor treated with violence, nor abused, nor tormented, nor driven away. This is the pure, unchangeable, eternal law, which the clever ones, who understand the world, have proclaimed."

The 'clever ones' in question were the preceding generations of *Tirthankaras* (path-finders or ford-makers) who have set an example of spiritual inspiration. There were twenty-three path-finders before Mahavira, who became the twenty-fourth when he attained Moksha. The Tirthankaras are not worshipped as gods, but seen as exemplars, those who point the way, a role analogous in some ways to the prophets of Judaism. They lead by example, rather than force or exhortation.

Among the best known Jain scriptures are the *Acharanga Sutra* (Book of Good Conduct) and the *Tattvartha Sutra* (That Which Is). These works are presented in the crisp style of the Indian *sutra* tradition, as verses of philosophical import that act as points of reference for those who seek guidance in their journey towards truth. The *Acharanga* is one of eleven *Angas* or 'limbs', which together form the 'body' of Jain ideas. The *Angas* were composed by learned followers of Mahavira in the centuries after his death. The *Acharanga* is the limb that refers to conduct (*acara*) and sets out explicitly the twin principles of non-violence and interconnectedness:

“That which you consider worth destroying is (like) yourself.
That which you consider worth disciplining is (like) yourself.
That which you consider worth subjugating is (like) yourself.
That which you consider worth killing is (like) yourself.
The result of actions by you has to be borne by you, so do not destroy anything.”

The *Acharanga* is regarded as the oldest written portion of the Jain canon, dated as far back as the fourth century BCE. The *Tattvartha* was composed somewhat later, in the second century CE, by the scholar and seer Umasvati. It presents in three hundred and fifty verses the Jain understanding of the nature of reality, and in particular the approach to karma which is discussed below.

The core philosophy of Ahimsa, which literally means non-violence, or abstention from harm, encourages respect for all living beings – irrespective of caste or creed, and more importantly, species. For them, human diversity is rooted in bio-diversity, and there is no difference between the two – one is an extension of the other. Each living thing (*jiva*) is unique and equally worthy of dignity and respect. As a result, Jains have been practicing vegetarians for thousands of years and have a long track record of peaceful living and conduct. Women and men are accorded equal respect and status – both the similarities between them *and* the differences are valued and cherished.

Parasparopagraho Jivanam is a Jain maxim that means that all living beings are inter-dependent. Hence we are really not individuals but indivisibles, people who are inter-connected to one another and all life forms. All too often, this is forgotten and even in our practical actions, we behave as if our actions have no impact on others. This leads to irresponsibility and recklessness. Instead, we need to encourage a culture of responsibility which recognises mutuality and enables people to see and understand the impact of their actions on others. Jains have always believed that endowed with superior intelligence and consciousness, the human being has the highest sense of responsibility and accountability to the planet. Arrogance and egoism should be replaced by humility and awe.

Other core values of Jain philosophy are *Aparigraha* (non-materialism), *Anekantavada* (respect for alternative viewpoints), *Satya* (truth and integrity), *Kshama* (forgiveness) and *Iryasamiti* (Careful Action). The focus is on the combination of the three jewels – right knowledge, right vision and right conduct – to

enable the soul to attain liberation and enlightenment. These values empower them to attain this ultimate goal.

Aparigraha literally means ‘non-possessiveness’. Although we may need material objects to live, we need not become possessive about our wealth and objects. Instead, we should live simply and in a detached way, ensuring that our energies are focused on building our own inner purity and spirit and experiencing inner fulfilment rather than the temporary pleasures which come from material possessions. Society needs to understand the limits of materialism and a culture of consumerism and greed. Materialism has a tendency to lead to selfishness and a ‘Me, I, Mine’ culture – which has no space for others, let alone any respect for their beliefs and viewpoints. Greed is a type of violence which leads to exploitation and deprives others (human and non-human) the right to a peaceful existence.

Anekantavada is a reasoned analysis of the many-sidedness of truth and its multiple dimensions and perspectives. It demonstrates that truth is relative to the perspective of the seer and so has a subjective character and is difficult to articulate objectively. It rejects absolutism and fundamentalism. Thus we should respect alternative viewpoints even when we disagree with them. Anekant promotes an attitude of tolerance, openness and co-operation, which aims to build bridges rather than walls – cohesion rather than conflict. This approach is extended beyond human concerns: each species, each ecosystem could be said to represent an element of the truth or an aspect of the whole. Anekant can be seen as non-violence of the mind, or intellectual Ahimsa. The opposite of Anekant is *Ekant*, or extremism: a one-sided world view.

Kshama encourages the active giving and seeking of forgiveness from all living beings. It accepts that none of us is infallible and giving and receiving forgiveness enables us to clear our conscience and free ourselves from anger and blame toward others. It builds a positive outlook which encourages us to seek pathways and solutions at all times to build peaceful co-existence on planet Earth.

Satya forges a path of living with integrity where our conduct is synonymous with our words and thoughts. Truth should not merely be in words but implemented in lived reality. The concept of Satya is linked to the idea of social and ecological justice. It is about searching for, and then understanding, what is real, as opposed to being blinded to the truth by attachment and delusion.

Iryasamiti is the principle that every act, however apparently trivial, has far wider implications, just as each life form, however seemingly ‘primitive’, has a particular and crucial role. The principle of Careful Action is dramatised by those Jain ascetics who wear white face masks and sweep the ground in front of them to avoid injury to even the tiniest creatures. For lay men and women, it is a Precautionary Principle that means being aware that all actions have consequences and must therefore be closely considered. Always, the potential long-term consequences of an action must be taken into account. The Seventh Generation Principle of many Native American communities would be familiar to Jains. Iryasamiti is about securing the earth for

future generations and taking account of the delicate equilibrium on which life depends.

These principles can be seen as 'limbs' or 'branches' of Jain philosophy. Ahimsa, Aparigraha and Satya are three of the Five Vows (*Vratas*) of Jainism, along with *Brhamacharya* (chastity, avoidance of promiscuity) and *Asteya* (abstention from theft, avoidance of exploitative relationships). Those men and women who become ascetics take the 'Greater Vows' (*Mahavratas*) and attempt to live out these principles in a precise form. Lay men and women embrace the Lesser Vows *Anuvratas*, or Lesser Vows. This term is arguably misleading, because the Anuvratas compel the integration of non-violence and compassion into the demands of everyday life and work.

Jainism is a non-theistic spiritual path. There is no divine First Cause, as the energy of life can neither be created nor destroyed. Instead, the universe is constantly renewing itself in a series of upward and downward cycles (*avarsarpini* and *utsarpini*), which are likened to the upward and downward movements of a wheel. The dharma is itself often depicted as a wheel that eternally revolves, whilst karma is viewed as a continually evolving cycle. Jains do not accept either the idea that 'everything is flux' or a view of the universe as static. Instead, there is a constant, creative tension between continuity and change, the success of each depending on the viability of the other. In this evolutionary process, every life form is linked, but at the same time is individual and unique. Spiritual evolution is as important as biological evolution and this is where the Jain view of karma assumes its distinctive role.

The Jain View of Karma

In the Jain tradition, as in other systems of Indic thought, the idea of karma is closely linked to the concept of *samsara*. This is another cyclical system, based on the cycle of birth, death and rebirth through which each individual life passes. The individual life in question is the *jiva*, which comes into contact with karma and so loses its self-awareness. The *jiva* is a unit of life, or 'life monad', which *transmigrates* from one life form to another until it achieves enlightenment. The process of enlightenment is another example of circularity, for it is at once a form of spiritual evolution and a return to the point of origin. Each *jiva* can reincarnate in plant or animal as well as human form, so the experience of the individual life monad can encompass the entire evolutionary process.

The concept of the *jiva* offers a broader view of the individual that crosses the borders of species and ecosystem. Connections between all lives, whether ecological or spiritual, underlie the Jain conception of karma. Unlike other Indic schools, such as Vedanta or Theravada Buddhism, the individual essence or life monad survives the process of enlightenment *as a unit* rather than merging with a cosmic whole. This reflects the respect Jains have for the diversity of life in general and the sacredness of the individual life in particular.

Karma is conceived as matter, albeit subtle matter, which exists outside the level of normal consciousness and can only be perceived by enlightened beings. Because karma is matter, its workings are described in material, even mechanistic terms as much as metaphysical language. The Jain explanation for the mechanism of karma arises from the 'Nine Reals' or *Tattvas*. These are regarded as underlying principles of how the universe operates. The *Tattvas* can be summarised as follows:

1. *Jiva*: the soul as a unit of pure consciousness or life monad.
2. *Ajiva*: all that is 'non-soul' or purely material in nature. This includes our gross or 'physical' bodies and the 'identities' we assume, our true identity being the *jiva* or inner consciousness. Karmic embodiment encases the soul in *ajiva*, which is a state of false consciousness.
3. *Asrava*: the inflow of karmic particles to the soul, making it lose awareness of its self and its clarity of perception. *Asrava* is often compared to the leakage of water into a damaged vessel.
4. *Bandha*: 'bondage' of the soul; the process by which karmic particles attach themselves and adhere to the *jiva* and exercise influence.
5. *Punya*: the principle of auspicious karma. This can be understood as 'good' karma, or positive actions which, although inherently karmic, can point the way towards enlightenment.
6. *Papa*: the principle of inauspicious karma. This can be understood as 'bad' karma, or negative actions which point towards a downward spiral or spiritual regression – or merely inauspicious rebirth and entrapment in the karmic cycle.
7. *Samvara*: the stoppage of karmic inflow. This process eventually counters *asrava*. It is achieved through heightened awareness, leading to a spiritual and intellectual discipline that eventually repels karmic particles. *Samvara* is likened to the process of repairing a damaged vessel, so that water no longer seeps in. The damaged vessel in question is the soul or life force.
8. *Nirjara*: the shedding of karmic particles. This can take place through the practice of physical austerities, or *tapas*. It can be hastened by reducing our dependence on narrowly material preoccupations. There is also a natural process by which karmic particles 'bear fruit' and fall away, since like other aspects of *ajiva*, they are finite.
9. *Moksha*: spiritual and physical liberation, or freedom from karmic bondage. In attaining *Moksha*, the true self is realised and pure consciousness is achieved. The *jiva* is released from the karmic cycle and becomes omniscient. For Jains, this is the ultimate goal of all practice. The concept of practice is much wider than one might expect, encompassing all aspects of lived experience, 'ordinary life' as much as meditation or asceticism.

In Jain cosmology, the *jiva*'s quality of pure consciousness is corrupted by the same energy that defines it as life force. As each unit of life comes into existence it moves

and its vibrations, or *aura*, attract karmic inflow. Jiva is thereby encased in ajiva; the soul becomes embodied, loses its full consciousness and has to find a way out through many rebirths. Until consciousness is reawakened, the inflow of karmic particles becomes unstoppable. They can be neutral or even auspicious, in which case they will be 'shed' as part of a natural process, but they can also be corrupting – or, as many Jains say, 'polluting', when the wrong choices are made. Five main influences shape the influence of karma:

- *Mithyatva*: one-sided or perverted world view
- *Pramada*: carelessness or indifference
- *Avirati*: lack of discipline
- *Yoga*: activity
- *Kasaya*: passions

Virati, or self-discipline, by contrast, has a positive effect on karma, helping to block its inflow and reducing its ill-effects. Passions can be overcome or controlled, and not all passions are in themselves negative, although even the most positive ones can tip into destructive mode - love into obsession which ceases to be love, faith into dogma that poisons the whole basis of faith. *Mithyatva*, the one-sided or perverted world view, leads logically towards Ekant, or extremism. It includes utopian ideologies alongside nihilistic cults, for both distort the minds of their followers and result in suffering. At root, *Mithyatva* is human arrogance, which spans the spectrum from politically correct self-righteousness to the assertion of human dominance or the supremacy of one human group over others. The practice of equanimity, benevolence towards others (human or non-human) and measured conduct lighten the karmic burden.

Karma attaches itself to the jiva in eight principal ways:

- 1.) *Jnanavarniya karma* – obstructs true knowledge. Includes the closing of the mind and the acceptance of prejudiced, one-sided opinions.
- 2.) *Darsanavarniya karma* - obstructs intuition. Includes the denial of the spiritual dimension and the value of insight.
- 3.) *Antaraya karma* – obstructs the flow of positive energy. Includes mean-spiritedness, bitterness, cynicism and inability to enjoy life. This karma perpetuates negative patterns of thinking and acting.
- 4.) *Mohaniya karma* – deluding or self-deluding karma. Perhaps the most dangerous type of karma, *Mohaniya* is associated with the conviction of absolute truth and the desire to impose that 'truth' on others.
- 5.) *Vedaniya karma* – pleasure or pain inducing karma. Includes those actions which give pleasure or positive gain to others (*sata-vedaniya*) and those which create unhappiness, pain or violence (*asata-vedaniya*).
- 6.) *Ayus karma* – life-span determining karma. The karma that determines length of life.

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- 7.) *Nama karma* – birth and physique determining karma. This includes the species or type of organism in which the soul is embodied.
- 8.) *Gotra karma* – status determining karma. Establishes the status of a human birth and the accompanying conditions for spiritual development.

These karmic categories come in two types: *ghatiya* or destructive karma, *aghatiya* or non-destructive karma. The first type, which includes categories 1-4, involves active harm, the second, which includes categories 5-8, can impede spiritual progress but need not cause active harm, indeed in some cases can do good. Category 5, *Vedaniya karma*, can point in both directions. Through spiritual – which includes ecological – awareness we can reduce karmic influences in our present lives and determine future existences.

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In the Jain dharma, although exceptions are always admitted, it is assumed that only a human rebirth can create the conditions for spiritual development, and therefore humans must strive to avoid rebirth in another form. This is not because animal (or, for that matter, plant) species are innately inferior or less truly ‘alive’, but because humans have a greater degree of *manobala*, or critical reasoning. Humans are able to evaluate situations at an intellectual as well as purely instinctive or intuitive level, to express themselves in language and abstract thought, to speculate and see beyond their immediate self-interests. These factors give them a greater innate capacity for spiritual development. They have the ability to choose to modify their actions, restrain their behaviour and think through the ethical implications of everything they do – or, just as importantly, refrain from doing.

None of this is intended to assert that humans alone have the capacity for reasoning, language or ethical judgement. From both Jain and ecological standpoints, the abilities and potential wisdom of all species are celebrated, an insight borne out increasingly by scientific evidence. Yet it must be acknowledged that humans have by far the strongest deliberate impact on the planet and have some unique abilities to reason or experience spiritual insight. These abilities give us responsibilities – to be careful in our actions, to exercise compassion and be aware of the effects, immediate and long-term, of any act we undertake. That is why human responsibilities more than balance any rights we might claim on grounds of intelligence and creativity. Such rights do not extend to exploiting or oppressing others for our own ends, for in so doing we invariably injure ourselves.

From this it follows that the human capacity to generate destructive karma is far greater than any other species or organism. Humans can reach great heights of spiritual development and even escape the cycle of *samsara*. But the same abilities allow us to fall far further and express the lowest and most negative forms of consciousness. At the individual level, this leads to inauspicious or regressive rebirth, at the collective level to the corruption and death of human civilisations – for which the system of cyclical time allows. The Jain view of karma reminds us that human intelligence does not give us the right to exercise power. Or, put another way, it

enables us to see through superficial or destructive forms of power and find real power in the exercise of restraint.

The Greening of Karma

How can we reconcile the ecological goal of re-engagement with nature with the Jain goal of world-transcendence? The answer probably lies in the method advocated by Jains for reducing karmic influence. At individual and social levels, this involves reducing consumption, abstaining from harmful acts and rejecting philosophies that lead to exploitation and domination. The karmic footprint is identical with the ecological footprint. It follows that there is a connection between the reduction of carbon and the reduction of karma, that the way towards spiritual enlightenment is sustainable living and co-operation with natural processes.

The reduction of karma is about the return of humility and a sense of wonder. It is about realising, as human beings, that we are part of something larger, not just human society itself but what could be called the 'community of all beings'. The Five Vows of Jainism are essentially about learning to find non-exploitative ways of living, co-operating with fellow human beings and accommodating ourselves to a natural world, of which we are an integral part and on which we depend. They ask us to abandon illusions of strength through force and violence, which are really signs of weakness, to learn to live with in limits because by so doing we realise our true potential.

In other words, the Jain view of karma, and karmic reduction, is a spiritual counterpart to the Platform Principles that form the basis of modern ecosophy or Deep Ecology.³ Both systems of thought emphasise the diversity of life, both cultural and biodiversity. They would extend the concepts of social justice and rights beyond the human realm to other species and natural formations. They argue that without ecological justice, just relations within humans become impossible. Both systems emphasise that humans should use their powers of scientific reason to make compromises with the rest of nature, to exercise responsibility rather than trying to conquer. Both see a connection between violence towards nature and violent, exploitative relationships between human beings. They seek a change of consciousness, based on non-violent approaches to human and environmental issues alike, because the distinction between them is abolished.

The ecological movement, in both its philosophical forms and practical manifestations, makes us ask questions about the way we live and the impact of each of the decisions we make. It asks us to question our most basic assumptions about progress. This is not so that we can attempt to recapture a lost Golden Age (which was mythical anyway), but so that we learn how to use our capacity for reason and scientific insight to beneficial and non-violent means.

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There is no contradiction between this approach and a renewed search for spiritual insight. For reason, science and observation point us away from linear, mechanistic ideologies towards a more cyclical, multi-layered view of the universe: in other words, a more spiritual view. David Bohm called this the *implicate order*, a manifold universe of which the components are united by subtle, underlying patterns instead of adversarial opposites. This view matches the Jain conception of karma, in which each action impacts on every other action and all living organisms are at once connected and unique.

The concept of karma can act as a point of reference for those who look for a more balanced, co-operative way of living and, at least as importantly, of thinking. We do not have to interpret it literally and we are certainly not required to 'become' Jains. Yet this strong and ancient current of Indic wisdom offers an alternative and ultimately more practical vision of power.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Vivekananda, Swami, 2003. *The Yoga of Action: Karma Yoga*. Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama. p.121

² I would like to thank Dr Atul Keshavji Shah, CEO of Diverse Ethics Ltd (www.diverseethics.com) for advice and support in writing this section.

³ Naess, Arne, "The Deep Ecological Movement", in Sessions, George (ed), 1995. *Deep Ecology for the Twenty-first Century: Readings on the Philosophy and Practice of the New Environmentalism*. Boston, Massachusetts: Shambhala. pp.67-8