



Vegetarianism - A Synonym for Ahimsa?

These days it appears that we have mistaken Ahimsa as a synonym for Jainism and Vegetarianism as a synonym for Ahimsa. Hence a person, who is vegetarian considers himself or herself a true Jain; and thus has the right to condemn anyone who is not a vegetarian!!!

Let us first examine who Jains are: "Jains are followers of JINA, the conqueror of inner enemies". These inner enemies are anger, greed, pride and deceit. These arise out of attachment (Rāga) leading to greed and pride, and aversion (Dvesha) leading to deceit and anger.

Now let us examine some fundamental teaching of Jainism:

Ahimsa (Non-violence), Anekāntavāda (Multiplicity of viewpoints), Syādvāda (Relativism, Satya (Truth), Achaurya (Not stealing) and Aparigraha (Non-possessiveness).

Ahimsa or Non-violence is just one part of the Jain teachings and is based on love and kindness for all forms of life, as Jains believe that all life forms (Plants and animals) are equal, have souls and are capable of attaining salvation.

How do we define Ahimsa? It has been pointed out in Jain scriptures that even the thought of evil is as bad as the action resulting in injury. It takes non-violence to its highest form in thoughts, words and deeds.

The killing, which is done through the careless activity of thought, speech and body, is violence.
- Tattvārtha Sutra of Umāsvāti

Ahimsa is disciplined behavior towards every living being
- Dashvaikalika Sutra (6/9)

Absence of violence of any sort towards all beings at all times is Ahimsa.
-Yogasutra

Ahimsa is not to be practiced at the physical level only but at a mental one as well. In other words, 'Man' (mind), 'Vachan' (speech), or 'Kaya' (body) states. Even hurting someone's feeling is Himsā. In fact, in its absolute definition,

'Violence is the presence of evil thoughts, feelings or attitude'.

A vivid definition of Ahimsa, but unfortunately we find it missing from the actual conduct preached and practiced today.

The followers of Jainism today are lost in rituals like taking a vow of not eating after sunset, not eating meat and some vegetables, not eating at all on some particular days of the month or the year, etc. Even the monks encourage these rituals. There is hardly any serious effort towards disciplining the feelings,

thoughts and attitudes. Cheating, bribing, smuggling, tax evasion, amassing wealth by foul means is as common with Jains as with others. They forget that once the mind is disciplined, the physical activities would automatically follow.

As we insist that the next generation Jains must be vegetarian, they are going to question us: Is vegetarianism just a physical act or a reflection of our deep understanding of Ahimsa? Are we really compassionate to all forms of life including our fellow human beings? Are we honest and truthful in all our dealings? Are we working towards conquering our anger, greed, ego and deceit? Are we truly better human beings because we are vegetarians? ... And then there is the question of silk clothing and leather goods, milk and yogurt, and oh yes, our so called 'Jain menu' which has so many inconsistencies that it has left us open for ridicule.

Vegetarianism is not a big problem in our community. Majority of Jains, are vegetarians any way. However anger, greed, deceit, ego, dishonesty, mental abuse are still quite prevalent in our society and are major problems. How often do we address these issues? Are we diverting attention from the real problems by over emphasizing a minor issue? Young Jains are not blind to this. Let us do something about it before they write us off as hypocrites.

Being a vegetarian makes perfect sense for our health and there is nothing wrong in promoting it. But when Ahimsa (and for that matter Jainism) starts and ends with vegetarianism, we must all be alarmed. Certain organizations are using Jain community as a perfect platform to propagate their viewpoint. Many on their data have questionable accuracy.

As it is said "too much of anything is not good", over emphasis on vegetarianism at the exclusion of other great principles of Jainism, in my opinion not only is misleading, but also undermines other valuable teachings of the Tirthankars. We must stress all the principles of Jainism equally including Ahimsa, with vegetarianism as just one method to practice Ahimsa.

Here are some of the other ways to practice Ahimsa, as suggested by the young Jains in our pathshala:

- Not to engage in gossip, or not to talk bad about anybody
- Refrain from anger and jealousy towards others
- Cooperate rather than compete
- Think well rather than bad about others
- Minimize your wants and desires - don't be greedy
- Increase your knowledge of nature to enable you to respect it
- Do not waste food - Take as much as you can eat
- Use energy wisely - Turn lights off when you leave the room.
- Paper is made from trees - every paper wasted is an unnecessary loss of life
- Do not tease or intentionally hurt someone's feelings.