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# Reverence for All Life: Animals in the Jain Tradition

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## REVERENCE FOR ALL LIFE

### *Animals in the Jain tradition*

Christopher Key Chapple

**A**nimals have always been revered in Jainism and the scriptures demonstrate a deep compassion for them. Jain concern for animals goes far beyond vegetarianism. For centuries, Jains have protected and cared for animals.

Animal symbols and stories pervade the Jain tradition. When searching for words to describe Mahavir as he prepared for his state of liberation, early Jain authors turned to animal metaphors:

His senses were well protected like those of a tortoise; he was single and alone like the horn of a rhinoceros; he was free like a bird; he was always waking like the fabulous bird Bharunda; valorous like an elephant, strong like a bull, difficult to attack like a lion (Kalpa Sutra, Jacobi, p. 261).

In fact, most of the great Jain teachers or Tirthankaras can be recognized on the basis of their animal associate. For instance, the first great teacher, Rsabha, is generally represented with a bull; the second, Ajita, with an elephant; the third, Sambhava, with a horse, and so forth.

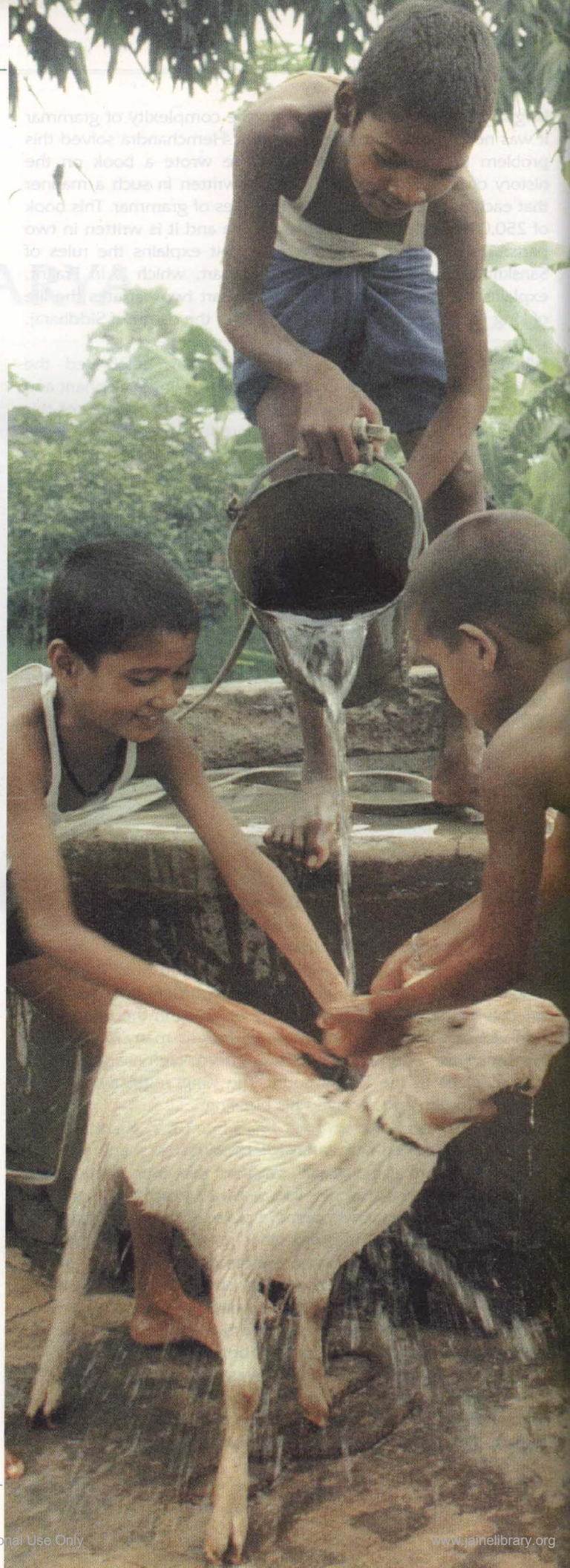
The prominence of animal imagery in the story tradition corresponds to a special care not to harm animals inspired by the Jain ethic of nonviolence or ahimsa. From the earliest texts of Jainism, we find animal treatment discussed in great detail:

Some slay animals for sacrificial purposes,  
 some slay animals for the sake of their skin,  
 Some kill them for the sake of their flesh,  
 some kill them for the sake of their blood;  
 others for the sake of their heart, their bile,  
 the feathers of their tail, their tail, their big or  
 small horns, their teeth, their tusks, their  
 nails, their sinews, their bones; with a  
 purpose and without a purpose.  
 Some kill animals because they have been  
 wounded by them, or are wounded, or will  
 be wounded.

He who injures these animals does not comprehend and renounce the sinful acts; he who does not injure these, comprehends and renounces the sinful acts.

Knowing them, a wise man should not act sinfully towards animals, nor cause others to act so, nor allow others to act so (Acaranga Sutra 1:1.6). Because of this concern from not injuring animals, Jains developed a unique science of life that differentiates distinct levels of sophistication among animal forms.

According to Jainism, 8,400,000 different species of life forms exist. These beings are part of a beginningless round of birth, life, death and rebirth. Each living being houses a life force or



jiva that occupies and enlivens the host environment. When the body dies, the jiva seeks out a new site depending upon the proclivities of karma generated and accrued during the previous lifetime. In instances of virtuous action, an animal may improve its prospects for a higher life form. If the animal has been vicious, then it will probably descend in the cosmic order, either to a lower animal form or to the level of a micro-organism (nigodha) or an elemental body dwelling in the earth or in liquid form or in fire or in air.

The taxonomy of Jainism places life forms in a graduated order starting with those beings that possess only touch, the foundational sense capacity that defines the presence of life. These include earth, water, fire, air bodies; micro-organisms; and plants. The next highest order introduces the sense of taste; worms, leeches, oysters and snails occupy this phylum. Third-order life forms add the sense of smell, including most insects and spiders. Fourth-level beings, in addition to being able to touch, taste and smell, can also see; these include butterflies, flies, and bees. The fifth level introduces hearing. Birds, reptiles, mammals and humans dwell in this life realm.

Jain cosmology consists of a storied universe in the shape of a female figure. The earthly realm or middle world (manusya-loka) consists of three continents and two oceans. The animals listed above, including humans, can be found here. Additionally, depending upon their actions, animals may be reborn in one of eight heavens or seven hells. If animals perform auspicious deeds they might be reborn in heaven.

In order to enhance one's spiritual advancement and avoid negative karmic consequences, the Jain religion advocates benevolent treatment of animals. The monks and nuns are not allowed even to lift their arms or point their fingers while wandering from village to village; according to the Jina, "This is the reason: the deer, cattle, birds, snakes, animals living in water, on land, in the air might be disturbed or frightened" (Acaranga Sutra, Jacobi, 145). In passage after passage, the Jaina teachers exhort their students, particularly monks and nuns, to avoid all harm to living creatures. The speech, walking, eating, and eliminatory habits of the Jain monks and nuns all revolve around a pervasive concern not to harm life in any form. Ultimately, the

ideal death for a Jain, lay or monastic, is to fast to death, consciously making the transition to the next birth while not creating any harm to living beings.

Manifestations of this concern for nonviolence can be found in the institutions of the pinjrapole or animal hospital, founded and maintained by the Jain community most prominently in western India. Geographer Deryck Lodrick described perhaps the most famous pinjrapole as follows: "In the heart of Old Delhi... opposite the Red Fort and close to the bustle of Chandni Chowk, is a pinjrapole dedicated entirely to the welfare of birds. Founded in 1929 as an expression of the Jain community's concern for ahimsa, the Jain Charity Hospital for Birds' sole function is to treat sick and injured birds brought there from all over the city ... The hospital, located inside the premises

of a Digambara Jain temple and supported entirely by public donations administered through the temple committee, receives some 30 to 35 birds daily. Most of these are pigeons with wounds or fractures incurred in the city's heavy traffic, although diseases ranging from blindness to cancer are treated by the hospital's resident veterinarian. All birds, both wild and domestic, are accepted for treatment by the hospital with the exception of predators, which are refused on the grounds that they harm other creatures and thus violate the ahimsa principle. Incoming birds are treated in the dispensary on the second floor of the hospital (the first contains the staff quarters and grain store) and are placed in one of the numerous cages with which this level is lined. As birds improve they are taken to the third floor, where they convalesce in a large enclosure having access to the open sky ... When birds die in the hospital, they are taken in procession to the nearby Jumna and are ceremoniously placed in the waters of that sacred river." (Lodrick, 1981, 17).

This Pinjrapole, in the centre of one of Delhi's busiest areas, boasts outstanding architecture and stands in many ways as a national monument to the Jain commitment to non-violence.

The origins of the Jain pinjrapole are somewhat difficult to trace. It could have developed in the early phases of Jainism (Asoka's inscriptions in the third century B.C.E. show similar concerns for animal welfare) or during the apex of Jainism, which lasted from the fifth to the thirteen centuries. In the state of Gujarat a succession of kings gave state patronage to ▶



Samavasarana painting

Courtesy: *The Peaceful Liberators, Jain Art from India*

Jainism, such as Mandalika of Saurashtra in the eleventh century, and Siddharaja Jayasimha, King of Gujarat, and his son and successor, Kumarapala in the twelfth century. Kumarapala (1125-1159) declared Jainism the state religion of Gujarat and passed extensive animal welfare legislation.

In one sense however, this seems like a work of great benevolence. In the movie *Frontiers of Peace* produced by Paul Kueperferle, one can witness directly the pain and suffering endured by some of the animals housed in Jain shelters. Some are grotesquely misshapen by old injuries and others seem to writhe in anguish. By the standards of Western veterinary medicine, these animals should be "put down", that is, killed to spare them their misery. However, for two reasons this would be unacceptable from the perspective of the Jain theory of karma. First, the person who would perform or approve of the killing would incur an influx of black, negative karma. This would bind to his or her life force (jiva) and further impede progress toward spiritual liberation (kevala), the state in which all karma is expelled. Second, it would do a disservice to the animal. Each life force earns its status due to past actions. As cruel as it might sound, the present predicament according to the karmic view holds that the animal deserves its suffering. It is acceptable and meritorious for someone to alleviate the suffering, which helps counteract negative karma on the part of the helper.

But if one has done all that can be done to make an animal comfortable, then one has no further obligation, and particularly must not prematurely kill the animal. If so, then the perpetrator of the killing will thicken and darken his or her karma, as stated above, and the killed animal would necessarily have to endure an eventually torturous further life to finish the atonement process.

**Conclusion**

We have surveyed various aspects of the relationship between humans and animals in the Jain religious tradition. Jainism proclaims a biological and psychological continuity between not only the animal and human realm, but sees insects, micro-organisms, and life dwelling in the elements as part of the same continuum. The Jain tradition developed a code of ethics that requires its adherents to avoid violence to all these life forms to the degree possible depending upon one's circumstances. All Jains are expected to abstain from animal flesh. Jain laypeople are expected to avoid professions that harm animals directly or indirectly.

Jain monks and nuns strive to minimize violence to even one-sensed beings and take vows to not brush against greenery or drink unfiltered water or light or extinguish fires. Perhaps more than any other religion in human history, the Jain faith seeks to uphold and respect animals as fundamentally and really not different from ourselves.

But at the same time, Jainism, with few exceptions, avoids sentimentalizing animals. Ultimately, the reason one respects animals is not for the sake of the animal, but for the purpose of lightening the karmic burden that obscures the splendor of one's own soul. Seen positively, every act of kindness toward an animal releases a bit of karma. But the approach is more on the lines of a *via negativa*: by avoiding a potentially damaging entanglement with an animal, one can ward off a potential blot on one's core being.

In conclusion, Jainism sees animals as former or potential human beings, paying for past sins yet capable of self-redemption. Human birth is considered to be the highest birth, as it is the only realm through which might enter final liberation or kevala. However, the best possible human life, that is, a life directed toward the highest spiritual ideal, takes the protection of animal life very seriously. The *Acaranga Sutra* (1.5.5) states that as soon as we intend to hurt or kill something, we ultimately do harm to ourselves by deepening and thickening the bonds of karma. According to Jainism, the best life pays attention to animals, not in a sentimental way, but in a way that gives them the freedom to pursue their own path, to fulfil their self-made destinies, and perhaps enter themselves into the path of virtue. 🙏

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Lord Mahavir's mother Trishala had many dreams based on animals when he was in the womb