

## Five Great Vows (Maha-vratas) of Jainism

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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.

Violence of every type should be completely forbidden. Mental tortures by way of harsh words, actions, and any type of bodily injuries should also be avoided. Even thinking evil of some one 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 the living beings according to their senses.

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

- Living being with five senses - humans, animals, birds, heavenly and hellish beings
- Living being with four senses - flies, bees, etc.

- Living being with three senses- ants, lice, etc.
- Living being with two senses - worms, leaches, etc.
- Living being with one sense - plants, water, air, earth, fire etc.

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 a 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 the 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.

### **Truth (Satya):**

Anger, greed, fear, and jokes are the breeding grounds of untruth. To speak the truth requires moral courage. Only those who have conquered greed, fear, anger, jealousy, ego, and frivolity can speak the truth.

Jainism insists that one should not only refrain from falsehood, but should always speak the truth, which should be wholesome and pleasant. One should remain silent if the truth causes pain, hurt, anger, or death of any living being.

Truth is to be observed in speech, mind, and deed. One should not utter an untruth, ask others to do so, or approve of such activities.

### **Non-stealing (Achaurya or Asteya):**

Stealing consists of taking another's property without his consent, or by unjust or immoral methods. Further, one should not take anything which does not belong to him. It does not entitle one to take away a thing, which may be lying, unattended or unclaimed. One should observe this vow very strictly, and should not touch even a worthless thing, which does not belong to him. When accepting alms, help, or aid one should not take more than what is minimum needed. To take more than one's need is also considered theft in Jainism.

The vow of non-stealing insists that one should be totally honest in action, thought, and speech. One should not steal, ask others to do so, or approve of such activities.

### **Celibacy / Chastity (Brahmacharya):**

Total abstinence from sensual pleasure and the pleasure of all five senses are called celibacy. Sensual pleasure is an infatuating force, which sets aside all virtues and reason at the time of indulgence. This vow of controlling sensuality is very difficult to observe in its subtle form. One may refrain from physical indulgence but may still think of the pleasures of sensualism, which is prohibited in Jainism.

Monks are required to observe this vow strictly and completely. They should not enjoy sensual pleasures and pleasure of all five senses, ask others to do the same, nor approve of it. There are

several rules laid down for observing this vow for householders. They should not have any physical relationship other than own spouse. The relationship with your own spouse should be of limited nature.

### **Non-attachment / Non-possession (Aparigraha):**

Jainism believes that the more worldly wealth a person possesses, the more he is likely to commit sin to acquire and maintain the possession, and in a long run he may be unhappy. The worldly wealth creates attachments, which will continuously result in greed, jealousy, selfishness, ego, hatred, violence, etc. Lord Mahavir has said that wants and desires have no end, and only the sky is the limit for them.

An attachment to worldly objects results in the bondage to the cycle of birth and death. Therefore, one who desires of spiritual liberation should withdraw from all attachments to pleasing objects of all the five senses.

Monks observe this vow by giving up attachments to all things such as:

- **Material things:** Wealth, property, grains, house, books, clothes, etc.
- **Relationships:** Father, mother, spouse, children, friends, enemies, other monks, disciples, etc.
- **Pleasure of Five Senses:** The five senses are touch, taste, smell, sight, and hearing.
- **Feelings:** Pleasure and painful feelings towards any objects.

They have the equanimity towards music and noise, good and bad smells, soft and hard objects for touch, beautiful and dirty sights, etc. They do not eat food for taste but for survival with the intention to continue to progress spiritually and ultimately to attain liberation.

Non-possession and non-attachment are to be observed in speech, mind, and deed. One should not possess, ask others to do so, or approve of such activities.

Jainism has laid down and described in much detail these five great vows for the path of liberation. These are to be observed strictly and entirely by the monks and nuns. Partial observance is laid down for the householders with additional seven vows.