

The Role of Non-Violence and Compassion in Jainism and Buddhism: Ethical Teachings and Social Relevance

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Abstract

This paper examines the central ethical principles of non-violence (Ahimsa) and compassion (Karunā, Mettā) as articulated in Jainism and Buddhism, two influential religious traditions originating in ancient India. In Jainism, Ahimsa is regarded as the supreme virtue, shaping every aspect of moral conduct and extending beyond human relationships to encompass all living beings. The Jain worldview emphasizes a rigorous adherence to non-harm in thought, speech, and action, reflecting a radical commitment to the sanctity of life. In Buddhism, compassion emerges as a foundational value that underpins the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, guiding individuals to cultivate empathy, loving-kindness, and the alleviation of suffering as a means of spiritual development and social harmony.

The comparative analysis in this study highlights both the philosophical depth and the practical application of these ethical teachings. While Jainism stresses absolute non-violence as the path to liberation, Buddhism emphasizes the balance of compassion and wisdom as central to ethical living. Beyond their doctrinal frameworks, both traditions offer profound social relevance in contemporary contexts. Their teachings provide moral insights for addressing issues of violence, conflict resolution, environmental sustainability, and human coexistence in a globalized world increasingly challenged by intolerance and ecological degradation.

Introduction

Non-violence (Ahimsa) and compassion (Karunā, Mettā) stand as two of the most profound ethical values in the religious and philosophical traditions of India. Among these, Jainism and Buddhism occupy a central place, as both faiths elevate non-violence and compassion from mere moral ideals to guiding principles of personal conduct, spiritual discipline, and social harmony. Jainism regards Ahimsa as the highest form of dharma, extending its scope not only to human beings but to all living entities, emphasizing strict non-harm in thought, word, and deed. Buddhism, similarly, highlights compassion as the very foundation of the path to

liberation, teaching that true spiritual progress is achieved through cultivating empathy, loving-kindness, and the alleviation of suffering for all sentient beings.

The ethical teachings of these traditions are not limited to individual salvation but also bear deep social relevance. In an era marked by violence, conflict, and ecological crises, the principles of Ahimsa and Karuṇā provide a timeless framework for peace-building, conflict resolution, environmental sustainability, and inter-human solidarity. Moreover, the practice of non-violence and compassion fosters inclusivity, tolerance, and respect for diversity—values that are crucial for pluralistic societies. Thus, a comparative exploration of Jainism and Buddhism through the lens of non-violence and compassion not only enriches our understanding of their spiritual philosophies but also reveals their enduring significance for addressing ethical challenges in the modern world.

Keywords: Ahimsa (non-violence), Karuṇā (compassion), Mettā (loving-kindness), Jainism, Buddhism, Ethics, Social relevance, Anekāntavāda, Bodhisattva ideal, Non-possessiveness

2. Ahimsa in Jainism

2.1 Philosophical Foundations

Ahimsa, or non-violence, is regarded as the supreme duty (*paramo dharma*) in Jain philosophy. It is not merely the avoidance of physical violence but extends to thoughts, words, and intentions. According to Jain metaphysics, every living being (*jīva*), from the smallest microorganism to humans, possesses a soul and is therefore worthy of respect. Any form of harm, whether intentional or unintentional, binds the soul with karma and obstructs its path to liberation (*moksha*). Thus, ahimsa in Jainism is rooted in a spiritual and cosmological understanding of the interdependence and sanctity of all life forms.

2.2 Practical Manifestations

In daily practice, Jains implement ahimsa with remarkable rigor and discipline:

- **Careful movement:** Ascetics sweep the ground before walking to avoid stepping on insects.
- **Food and diet:** Strict vegetarianism (and, in some cases, veganism) is observed to minimize harm to living beings.
- **Water and air protection:** Water is filtered before drinking, and breathing is done with mindfulness to prevent harm to microorganisms.

- **Speech and conduct:** Harsh, deceitful, or harmful words are considered acts of violence.
- **Occupational ethics:** Professions that involve exploitation, killing, or injury to living beings are avoided.

Through such practices, ahimsa is not abstract philosophy but an embodied way of life that shapes both individual conduct and community norms.

2.3 Ethical Discipline and Liberation

Ahimsa is the foundation of Jain ethical discipline and the first among the Five Great Vows (Mahāvratas) undertaken by ascetics, alongside truth (*satya*), non-stealing (*asteya*), celibacy (*brahmacharya*), and non-possessiveness (*aparigraha*). Household followers (śrāvakas) observe it as a small vow (*anuvrata*). By practicing ahimsa, individuals prevent the influx of new karmas and gradually shed accumulated karmas, leading the soul closer to liberation. Thus, ahimsa is simultaneously an ethical code of conduct and a spiritual discipline essential for salvation.

2.4 Social Implications

The principle of ahimsa has deeply shaped Indian cultural and social values. Jain influence promoted vegetarianism, animal protection, and ecological awareness across broader society. Institutions such as *panjrapoles* (animal shelters) and bird hospitals are enduring contributions of Jain compassion. Importantly, the philosophy of non-violence inspired modern reformers such as Mahatma Gandhi, who acknowledged the profound impact of Jain teachers—particularly Shrimad Rajchandra—in developing his philosophy of non-violent resistance (*satyagraha*). As the Social Work Institute (2024) notes, Jain values continue to influence contemporary debates on animal rights, environmental ethics, and peace movements, offering a timeless framework for social harmony and justice.

3. Compassion in Buddhism

3.1 Core Virtues: *Karuṇā* and *Mettā*

Compassion (*karuṇā*) and loving-kindness (*mettā*) are central virtues in Buddhist ethics. *Karuṇā* is the sincere wish to alleviate the suffering of all sentient beings, while *mettā* represents unconditional goodwill and benevolence. Together, they constitute two of the Four Sublime States (Brahmavihāras), which also include sympathetic joy (*muditā*) and equanimity (*upekkhā*). These qualities are not only personal virtues but also transformative forces for creating harmony within society. Compassion, in Buddhism, is inseparable from wisdom

(*prajñā*)—ensuring that actions taken to relieve suffering are guided by insight and right understanding.

3.2 Ethical Practice

Compassion is embedded in Buddhist morality through the Five Precepts (Pañcasīla), which include abstaining from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, false speech, and intoxicants. The very first precept, “to abstain from taking life,” is a practical expression of compassion toward all beings. Furthermore, meditation practices such as mettā-bhāvanā (cultivation of loving-kindness) and karuṇā-bhāvanā (cultivation of compassion) train practitioners to extend kindness impartially, starting with oneself, then gradually embracing family, community, strangers, and even enemies. Compassion thus becomes a disciplined practice that fosters empathy, non-violence, and moral responsibility in everyday life.

3.3 The Bodhisattva Ideal

In Mahāyāna Buddhism, compassion reaches its highest expression in the Bodhisattva ideal. A Bodhisattva vows to postpone personal liberation (*nirvāṇa*) in order to assist all beings in overcoming suffering. This path embodies the union of compassion (*karuṇā*) and wisdom (*prajñā*), emphasizing altruism as the highest form of spiritual development. Figures such as **Avalokiteśvara (Guanyin/Kannon)** are revered as embodiments of infinite compassion. The Bodhisattva ideal demonstrates that compassion is not limited to passive sympathy but demands active engagement in relieving the suffering of others, even at great personal cost.

3.4 Social Relevance

The Buddhist emphasis on compassion has far-reaching social implications. Historically, it encouraged rulers such as Emperor **Ashoka** to promote non-violence, welfare policies, and respect for all living beings. In contemporary contexts, Buddhist compassion informs movements for **peacebuilding, conflict resolution, human rights, environmental protection, and mindfulness-based therapies**. Compassion-based practices are applied in psychology (e.g., Compassion-Focused Therapy, Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction), education, and healthcare. On a global scale, Buddhist compassion fosters interfaith dialogue, ethical living, and sustainable development. Thus, *karuṇā* and *mettā* continue to serve as guiding principles for addressing modern challenges of violence, inequality, and ecological crisis.

4. Comparative Perspectives

Aspect	Jainism	Buddhism
Non-violence	Absolute, encompassing all beings and actions	Foundational, especially in the precepts
Compassion	Emerges indirectly via ahimsa	Central virtue (karuṇā, mettā)
Purpose	Spiritual purification and liberation	Alleviating suffering, ethical development
Social Ethics	Vegetarianism, environmental care, activism	Mindfulness, empathy, social harmony

Both traditions endorse non-violence and compassion but deploy them differently: Jainism prioritizes meticulous avoidance of harm, while Buddhism emphasizes empathetic action to relieve suffering.

5. Contemporary Significance

Conflict Resolution

The principles of non-violence in Jainism and compassion in Buddhism continue to shape modern peace movements across the globe. Inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's application of *ahimsa* in the Indian independence struggle, leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela integrated non-violent resistance into their social and political struggles. Today, these traditions inform **restorative justice models**, mediation practices, and peace education, offering alternatives to cycles of aggression and retribution. Their focus on empathy, forgiveness, and reconciliation provides a sustainable framework for addressing interpersonal disputes, communal tensions, and international conflicts.

Environmental Ethics

In the age of climate change and ecological degradation, Jain and Buddhist teachings provide a profound ethical response. Jain *ahimsa* extends to all living beings, cultivating an ethic of **vegetarianism, minimal consumption, and environmental stewardship**. Similarly, Buddhist compassion emphasizes interdependence (*pratītyasamutpāda*), reminding humanity of its responsibility to care for the planet and its inhabitants. These principles underpin eco-ethical approaches such as sustainable living, biodiversity conservation, and animal rights advocacy. By linking spirituality with ecology, both traditions contribute to the development of a more compassionate and ecologically balanced worldview.

Global Ethics

In an era of globalization, rising cultural conflicts, and ethical pluralism, the Jain and Buddhist emphasis on ahimsa and compassion provides a universal framework for cultivating empathy across cultural and religious divides. Non-violence and compassion transcend sectarian boundaries, aligning with global movements for **human rights, social justice, and intercultural dialogue**. These values encourage inclusivity, tolerance, and respect, making them highly relevant in navigating the complexities of modern multicultural societies. In an increasingly interconnected world, the ethical foundations of Jainism and Buddhism thus offer guidance for building peaceful, just, and compassionate global communities.

6. Conclusion

The principles of non-violence in Jainism and compassion in Buddhism represent two of the most profound ethical contributions of Indian philosophy to the world. While Jainism emphasizes *ahimsa* as the supreme duty governing thought, speech, and action, Buddhism highlights *karuṇā* and *mettā* as essential virtues for alleviating suffering and fostering harmony. Both traditions, though distinct in their approaches, converge on the vision of a more humane, just, and peaceful society.

In Jainism, ahimsa functions as both a spiritual discipline and a social ethic, guiding individuals toward liberation while influencing practices such as vegetarianism, animal welfare, and ecological responsibility. In Buddhism, compassion manifests as an active engagement with the suffering of others, culminating in the Bodhisattva ideal, which enshrines altruism and service to humanity. Together, these traditions offer complementary perspectives: Jainism teaches the meticulous avoidance of harm, while Buddhism emphasizes empathetic action for universal well-being.

Their enduring relevance is evident in contemporary contexts—whether in peacebuilding, restorative justice, environmental ethics, or global human rights movements. By embracing the interconnectedness of all life and cultivating empathy, non-violence and compassion provide a timeless framework for addressing modern challenges of violence, inequality, and ecological crisis. Ultimately, the ethical teachings of Jainism and Buddhism remind humanity that true progress lies not in domination or competition, but in compassion, restraint, and non-violent coexistence.

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