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Speak Up

NON-VIOLENCE: THE PATH OF MINDFUL SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS

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Every living being is constantly engaged in actions, and every action produces consequences – good or bad – depending on the intention, intensity, and awareness with which it is performed. From the moment we wake up in the morning, we engage in numerous actions, some consciously and others unconsciously. In our daily lives, we rarely perform a single action with complete attention. Instead, we often combine several actions at once. While drinking tea or eating a meal, for example, we may talk to someone, think about something else, or scroll through our phones. In doing so, we neither fully experience the taste of what we are consuming nor pay complete attention to what we are seeing or reading on the screen. We move through these actions almost mechanically, without being fully present in them.

As we continue to act amid such distractions, our awareness gradually becomes fragmented, and our level of consciousness diminishes. Although some people are able to maintain the same degree of attention and intensity throughout an action, many gradually lose awareness as they proceed. The ability to remain fully aware of what we are doing, therefore, requires conscious effort.

This question of conscious effort has also been central to the modern spiritual quest. From the beginning of the twentieth century, numerous spiritual organizations and movements emerged across the world to guide people seeking to develop their inner or spiritual selves. Despite their diverse philosophies and practices, many of them ultimately converge on a simple principle: the development of consciousness requires self-effort. In this respect, Jainism and Buddhism stand out among the world's early religious traditions for placing particular emphasis on individual effort as a means of cultivating awareness and attaining higher states of consciousness.

A few days ago, I went out for tea with some friends. After placing our order, our conversation turned to the idea of self-effort. I asked one of my friends, who is Jain, “Do you evaluate yourself?” She replied, “24 by 7.” With that, our conversation ended and we went our separate ways. Yet her answer stayed with me. It kept returning to my mind and prompted me to explore the idea of mindfulness in Jainism.



“Mindfulness” has become a popular term across the world. It refers to the practice of cultivating self-awareness in every step, every breath, and every action. Whatever you do, you are encouraged to do it with your whole mind, with complete presence. You can drink a glass of juice, eat a snack, or go for a morning jog, whatever the activity, you do it with full awareness. Mind your sip. Mind your step. Mind your chew. What surprised me was that this seemingly modern approach to mindfulness is remarkably close to a practice described in Jain philosophical texts composed nearly two thousand years ago. One might ask: How can that be? The answer is simple: it is there, explicitly and systematically.

As everyone knows, Jainism places non-violence, or *ahimsā*, at the heart of its philosophy. But what does non-violence actually mean? How does one become truly non-violent?

The common understanding of non-violence is simply not to harm another living being. Jainism, however, takes the principle much further. It does not limit non-violence to one's relationship with other beings; it directs the practitioner inward, toward the self. The practice of non-violence begins with learning not to harm oneself – not merely physically, but through one's thoughts, speech, emotions, desires, and actions.

This is not a passive practice, nor is it merely an ideal to be imagined. It is a continuous process of developing self-awareness. Every movement made with the intention of avoiding harm becomes an opportunity to cultivate consciousness. Every action performed with care strengthens awareness. As this awareness deepens, one gradually develops a more refined understanding of oneself and of the world around oneself. In Jain philosophy, the culmination of this development is the highest form of knowledge, or omniscience (*kevalajñāna*).

In this sense, non-violence is mindfulness. Non-violence is a path toward higher consciousness and, ultimately, toward freedom from harm to oneself and others. To begin living a life rooted in *ahimsā* is to begin a journey toward inner clarity, equanimity, and bliss. When one truly practices non-violence, every movement is made with care, every thought is observed, and every action is performed mindfully.

If the body is the object of study, the mind that governs it becomes the subject of inquiry. When the mind itself becomes the object of study, our attention turns toward self-consciousness. As we direct the mind inward, the inner self gradually becomes the subject of contemplation. Eventually, even the inner self becomes the object of study, and consciousness turns toward its highest potential – the ultimate intelligence. This is the path that Jainism offers: a gradual purification of the self from the bondages accumulated through countless cycles of life, ultimately leading the soul toward becoming a Jina – one who has conquered the inner passions and attained liberation.

There is a saying: all rivers run to the sea. In much the same way, every action prescribed for a Jain practitioner ultimately flows toward the same destination: non-violence, mindfulness, self-realization, and, finally, the highest state of bliss and knowledge.
