

VEGETARIANISM & AHIMSA



BY KISHOR B SHAH

Although people have been following vegetarian diets since ancient times, the term 'vegetarian' was first used in 1842, shortly before the first Vegetarian Society was formed in Britain as per the Oxford English Dictionary. The term – Vegetarian – is derived from the Latin root 'vegetare', meaning 'one who abstains from the use as food of flesh, fish and fowl, with or without the addition of eggs and dairy produce'.

In the modern age, anyone who has sampled a hotel or airline menu will understand the definition of what constitutes a vegetarian diet varies by location, culture and environment. In some of these menus, meals that contain eggs, fish, or even chicken are labelled as vegetarian meals. As a result, there are many misconceptions as to what a vegetarian can eat and not eat.

The main types of vegetarianism are:

- **Lacto-ovo-vegetarian** – people who do not eat any meat and seafood but include dairy foods (such as milk) eggs and plant foods.
- **Lacto-vegetarian** – people who do not eat meat, seafood and eggs, but include dairy foods and plant foods.
- **Ovo-vegetarian** – people who do not eat meat, seafood and dairy foods, but include eggs and plant foods.
- **Vegan** – people who avoid all animal foods, including milk and dairy and only eat plant foods.
- **Fruitarian** – people who only eat fruits, seeds, grains and vegetables only.

Currently majority of vegetarians, including Jains are lacto-vegetarians. In addition, Jains are meant to avoid on Tithi days, vegetables and fruits including root vegetables like onions, garlic, and potatoes, as harvesting these plants involves uprooting and killing the entire plant, thus causing harm to countless microorganisms in the soil.

In recent years, some Jains, especially the younger generation are following a vegan diet, seeing it as the next logical step in the evolution of the religion's dietary practices.

WHY DO JAINS PRACTICE VEGETARIANISM?

Ahimsa (non-violence) and respect for all living being is at the heart of Jain ethics – Ahimsa Parmo Dharma. It is stated in our scriptures “do not injure, abuse, oppress, enslave, insult, torment, torture or kill any creature or living being”, Jainism states that all living beings, irrespective of their size, shape, or .



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.

In order to survive, violence is unavoidable. Causing harm or death to any living being clearly does not align with the core philosophy of Jainism. In order to follow the path of minimum violence to other living beings for a healthy survival, Jain scholars classified various living beings under different classes based on their level of development and faculties of sense.

According to Jainism living beings fall into two broad classes, Trasa or mobile and Sthavara or immobile. Trasa beings are those who possess two, three, four and five senses. The five senses being that of touch, taste, smell, sight and hearing. Sthavara beings are those who have only one sense namely, that of touch. Sthavara beings are of five kinds: earth-bodied, water-bodied, fire-bodied, air-bodied, and plants/vegetables. Jain scholars had realized before modern science did, that plants had life,

and hence treated them as one-sense beings. Jainism also makes a distinction between plants with one soul (jiva) and those that contain a multitude of living organisms (jivas) such as underground roots e.g. potatoes, bulbs, buds, as well as figs and fruits and vegetables with many seeds.

Thus, vegetarianism is a logical outgrowth of Jainism's principal tenet of Ahimsa and is seen as a means to living a life of compassion, non-violence and spiritual progress.

Jainism emphasises self-discipline and self-control as spiritual practices. For today's generations, there is considerable peer pressure to eat non-vegetarian and fast food. Following a vegetarian diet promotes conscious decision-making, restraint, and awareness of one's actions, fostering personal growth and self-discipline.

A well-balanced Jain vegetarian diet can provide numerous health benefits, which can contribute to improved digestion, weight management, heart health, and reduced risk of chronic diseases like obesity, diabetes, and certain cancers.

It is now well known that animal agriculture is a major contributor to greenhouse gas emissions, deforestation, and water depletion. Vegetarian diet can significantly reduce one's carbon footprint and the impact on the environment, conserving natural resources, and mitigating the impacts of climate change. This aligns with Jainism teachings of environmental sustainability and the interconnectedness of all life forms.

Jiva Daya – compassion towards all living beings is related to Ahimsa. The practice of vegetarianism has led to many in the Jain community to take positive steps to prevent violence to animals such as building of animal shelters and humane treatment of animals.



People are becoming more aware of the cruelty of the practices of the dairy industry such as cows forcefully made pregnant through artificial insemination, male calves that are routinely killed at birth, older cows that are killed once their milk production levels begin to drop. Many Jains, especially the younger generation are making a conscious decision to adopt a vegan diet as it not only supports the ethical side but also the principles of Jainism.

As dairy and milk is part of most Jains vegetarian diet, maybe Jain organisations in the UK should look at securing milk and other dairy products for its members from sources where cattle is treated in an ethical and humane manner.



FINAL THOUGHTS:

Jainism promotes Ahimsa – non-violence not only towards animals but also in interactions with fellow human beings, including in actions, speech, and thoughts.

Our scriptures state the following:

The killing, which is done through the careless activity of thought, speech and body, is violence. – Tattvarth Sutra of Umaswati

Ahimsa is disciplined behaviour 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 himsa. In fact, in its absolute definition,

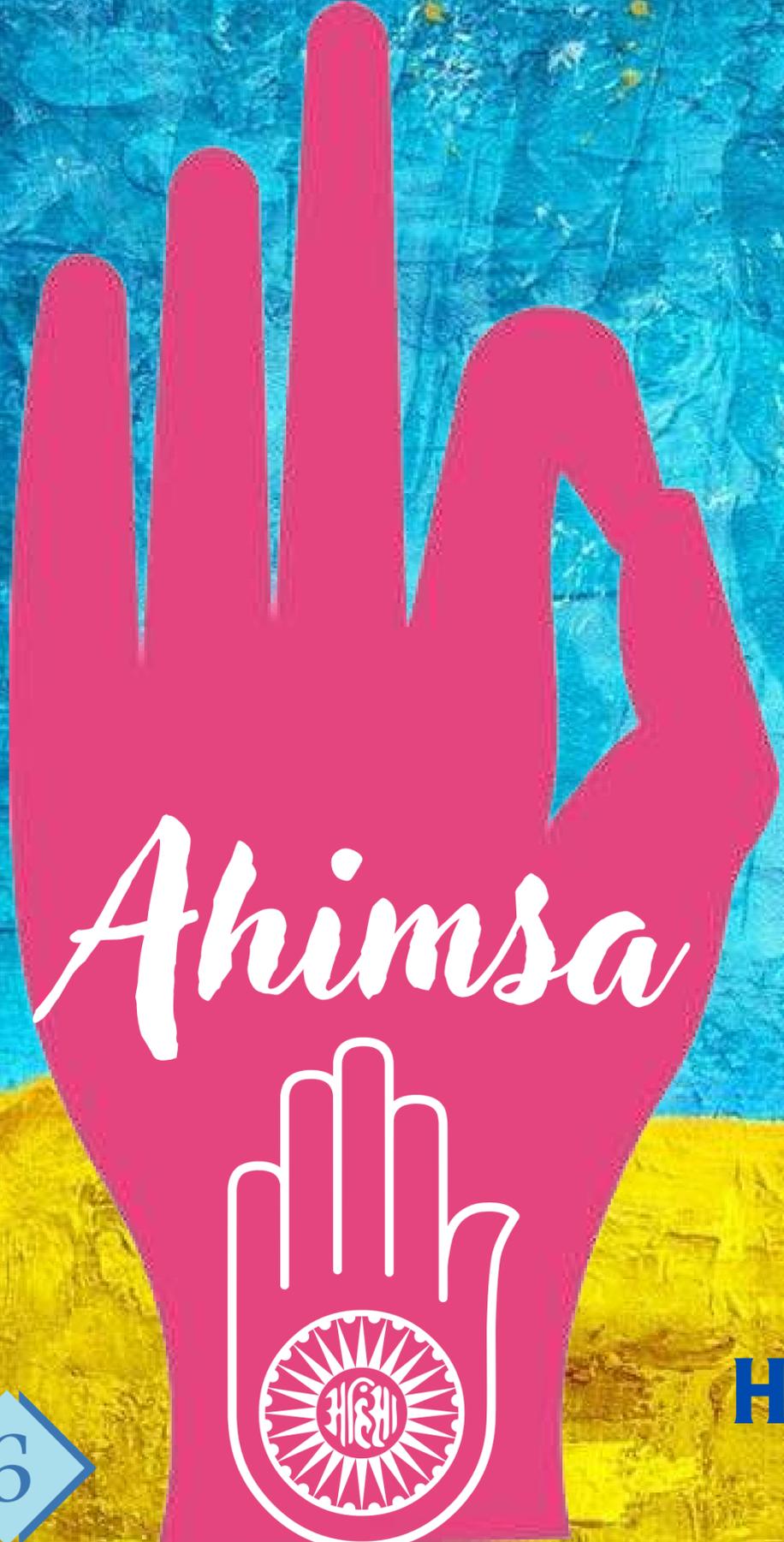
"Is vegetarianism just a physical act or a reflection of our deep understanding of Ahimsa? Are we truly compassionate, to all forms of life including our fellow human beings? Are we honest and truthful in all our dealings? Are we working towards conquering our anger, greed, ego and deceit?

Are we truly better human beings because we are vegetarians?"

Source: S M Sudhir (USA)

Vegetarianism is a good thing for health, our spiritual progress and the environment and should actively promote it as Jains. However, we should be mindful to remember that Jainism and its main tenet of Ahimsa does not start or end with vegetarianism. To the coming generations, we must accentuate all the principles of Jainism equally including Ahimsa, with vegetarianism as just one method to practice Ahimsa.





Ahimsa

Be a vegetarian

Be compassionate

Be tolerant

Co-operate rather than compete

Learn to forgive and forget

Not to engage in gossip,
or speak bad about anybody

Think well rather than
bad about others

Do not tease or intentionally
hurt someone's feeling

Carefulness and awareness
in any actions

Protect the environment

Increase your knowledge
about nature to enable you to
respect and protect it.

Minimise your desires and wants
- don't be greedy

Do not waste food - only take
as much as you can eat

Use energy wisely

• Paper is made from trees - every
paper wasted is an unnecessary loss
of life

Avoid anger and jealousy
towards others

Some Suggestions:

How To Practise Ahimsa In Our Everyday Lives