

# Pluralism: Reverting Back to Our Nature

By Parveen Jain



Photograph by the author depicting *Children of the World* sculpture, located at Nordkapp, Norway. The sculpture is the enlarged replication of seven clay reliefs—symbolizing friendship, hope, joy, and working together—made by seven children from around the world who were invited by author and children’s rights activist Simon Flem Devold to Nordkapp, the northernmost point of Europe, to envision “peace on Earth.” The accompanying sculpture, *A Mother and Child*, was created by sculptor Eva Rybakken.

In view of continuing racial conflicts around the world in spite of globalization and its resulting cultural, social, political, and financial assimilation and the integration of diverse societies across the globe, the widespread promotion of tolerance needs to shift to an increasing encouragement of pluralism. The terms *diversity*, *tolerance*, and *pluralism* are often used interchangeably, but there are important distinctions.

In terms of human interaction, diversity simply refers to the fact of the coexistence of people with varying backgrounds and characteristics; it carries no implications of amiability. The idea of tolerance stems from the effort to tame our minds and behavior to accommodate and allow for diversity, while this doesn’t necessarily imply a positive valuation of diversity. Tolerance may be good if the alternative is hostility and conflict, but it is not sufficient for our modern multifaceted society. Pluralism, on the other hand, is a positive assessment of the fact of diversity. It is the belief in the value of diversity and a respect for it. The key difference between pluralism and

tolerance is in the effort one exerts: pluralism comes naturally and requires little effort because of the inherent belief in it and the acceptance of the concept of multiplicity, or diversity; whereas tolerance requires the application of deliberate effort and self-control to allow for what one otherwise wouldn't permit.

The concept of pluralism is not new. Robert Longly<sup>1</sup> discusses pluralism from political, social, cultural, and religious standpoints, citing past and present examples such as: (1) founding father James Madison's support of allowing groups with opposing viewpoints equal participation in the newly formed American government, as an example of political pluralism; (2) the inclusion of minority groups in every aspect of society while maintaining their cultural heritage and identity, as an example of cultural pluralism; (3) the close proximity of the buildings of worship of different faiths and the peaceful interactions among their congregations, as an example of religious pluralism. It is important to note here, as the Pluralism Project of Harvard University points out in an article called "From Diversity to Pluralism,"<sup>2</sup> that "pluralism is not the sheer fact of diversity alone, but is active engagement with that diversity."

The abovementioned examples and ideas illustrate noble efforts to achieve sociopolitical stability by fostering diversity. While they are significant, they are limited to the subject matter they are intended to address (politics, culture, religion). The followers of Jain tradition, one of the oldest philosophical traditions of India, would suggest that these are mere extensions of the concept of tolerance; that they are solutions to specific problems, rather than examples of genuine, comprehensive pluralism.

According to Jain philosophy, genuine pluralism is ubiquitous, unbounded, and everlasting. It does not come with any prefixes and is not tailored to a specific purpose with a formula to accommodate any particular requirements. For Jains, pluralism is innate to human conditioning. The life of Lord Mahavira (599–527 BCE), the last of the twenty-four *tirthankaras*, great omniscient teachers of the ancient Jain tradition, is a profound example of belief in pluralism and its implementation in purest form. By following Lord Mahavira's teachings, Jains have practiced unpretentious pluralism for centuries. It is worth examining the motivation behind this honorable behavior.

The underlying premise in Jain philosophy, like that in some Hindu and Abrahamic philosophies, is the separation of the soul (also called *jīva* by Jains) and the body, wherein the "real me" is my

soul, and my body is a temporary refuge that I have taken for the duration of the current life. This is true for all living beings: humans, animals, and even vegetation. While there are differences between living beings in their bodily forms—corresponding levels of intellect (mental capacity) and state of sensory endowment (touch, taste, smell, sight, and hearing)<sup>3</sup>—all living entities have a soul, the same way that humans do. In addition, for Jains, all souls, irrespective of their current bodily form, are endowed with innate characteristics of unbounded consciousness (*chetnā*), bliss (*sūkhā*), and vigor, or willpower (*vīryā*). Each being's current state is the result of the actions they have been taking from time unknown while cycling repeatedly through life and death. These actions, comprising activities in mind (thought), speech (language), and body (physical acts), create the current forms and conditions of living beings, in accordance with the doctrine of karma<sup>4</sup> described in Jain scriptures.

With a firm belief in the underlying concept that all living beings are inherently alike, the practice of pluralism becomes natural. We are all predisposed to cherish and love our lives, to want to be happy and be loved, to despise misery and anguish, and to not want to get hurt or experience pain of any kind. Accordingly, we also know that all other *jīvas* (souls) are striving for the same. Therefore, if all *jīvas* are alike, one should not hurt others by physical actions of any kind, by spiteful language, or even by hurtful thoughts such as despising others or scheming to torment them. This is the principle of nonviolence (*ahimsa*),<sup>5</sup> the foundation of the Jain doctrine.

Furthermore, for harmonious living in a pluralistic society, it is important to be open-minded, to accept differing, sometimes contradictory viewpoints in order to manage and amicably resolve conflicts. The Jain doctrine of non-absolutism or non-singular conclusivity (*Anekāntavāda*)<sup>6</sup> provides a comprehensive treatise on this subject. The underlying premise is that truth may be interpreted differently by different people, depending on the framework of their own perspectives, which may or may not be harmonious with others' perspectives. No single perspective has monopoly on the interpretation of truth, and one must not rigidly enforce one's personal belief as the exclusively correct view of truth while disregarding others' views.

When one subscribes to the doctrines of soul-body relationship, nonviolence, and Anekāntavāda, there is no room for mistreatment of any sort between individuals. With these founding principles, pluralism comes naturally to the Jains, as it should to all human beings.

For Jains, as expressed in centuries old percept *Parasparopagraho Jīvānām* – meaning all living beings are interdependent and connected because all souls are inherently alike – the holistic view of pluralism is not limited to humanity; it extends to all living beings. Jain thinkers believe that since humans are supposedly endowed with the highest level of intellect, we have a corresponding level of responsibility and obligation to treat all living species with compassion. However, daily living necessitates us to make some exceptions to the principle of holistic pluralism; for example, our need to consume food in order to survive causes unavoidable harm to some forms of life. Recognizing this, Jain thinkers promulgated a teaching to keep this harm to a minimum by consuming only species that experience the least amount of pain and suffering: plants. That is why the Jains have always been vegetarians. If we were to follow pluralism, all members of society, irrespective of race, religious belief, ethnicity, gender, background, age, appearance, and so on, would naturally be entitled to equal rights and equal access to all aspects of the society. Such a society would have the values of nondiscrimination, inclusivity, and equality as its natural attributes. Of course, such entitlements should not be treated as a grant to misuse our rights and indulge in unethical or illegal conduct of any sort. A civil society must abide by proper code of conduct.



The light at the end of the tunnel: multi-sized and multi-colored cubes coming together to form a “*Tunnel of Hope*”

It is not hard to imagine civilization becoming all-inclusive, nondiscriminatory, and hatred-free at some point. Pluralism is in our nature. But over millennia we have drifted away from understanding the true nature of one’s own self, and undesired traits such as arrogance, self-aggrandization, deceit, greed, and hatred began creeping in, causing an increasing drift away from our innate characteristics that express

nonviolence. Nonetheless, we must remember that destructive forces ultimately do not survive because their own disposition toward destruction eliminates them.

To counter negativity in our society, a multitude of progressive people, groups, and institutions all over the world have been and continue working to make us aware of our inherent righteous qualities. These efforts will prevail because, in the end, pluralistic behavior is essential to human survival. Jain Dharma has much to contribute to this conversation, as it has emphasized pluralism in the form of nonviolence for thousands of years. While modern ideas will certainly be important to the promulgation of pluralism, it is important that we benefit from the wisdom of ancient Jain tradition that has been working on this issue for centuries before globalization, and its resultant diversity, began.

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- 1 Robert Longly, “*What Is Pluralism? Definition and Examples*,” July 31, 2019, ThoughtCo., [thoughtco.com/pluralism-definition-4692539](https://www.thoughtco.com/pluralism-definition-4692539).
- 2 “*From Diversity to Pluralism*,” The Pluralism Project, Harvard University, accessed April 2, 2020, [pluralism.org/from-diversity-to-pluralism](https://pluralism.org/from-diversity-to-pluralism).
- 3 Parveen Jain, chap. 5 in *An Introduction to Jain Philosophy* (New Delhi: DKPrintworld, 2019). Living beings are categorized according to the number of their endowed senses: (1) those with one sense (touch), e.g., vegetation; (2) those with two senses (touch and taste), e.g., mollusks; (3) those with three senses (touch, taste, and smell), e.g., insects such as white ants; (4) those with four senses (touch, taste, smell, sight), e.g., insects such as bees; and (5) those with five senses (touch, taste, smell, sight, and hearing), e.g., humans and animals.
- 4 Ibid., chap. 11.
- 5 Ibid., chap. 12.
- 6 Ibid., chap. 11.
- 7 Dr. L.M. Singhvi, *Jain Declaration of Nature*, 1992.

*Parasparopagraho Jīvānām* (interdependence)

Mahavira proclaimed a profound truth for all times to come when he said: "One who neglects or disregards the existence of earth, air, fire, water and vegetation disregards his own existence which is entwined with them."

Jain cosmology recognizes the fundamental natural phenomenon of symbiosis or mutual dependence, which forms the basis of the modern-day science of ecology. It is relevant to recall that the term 'ecology' was coined in the latter half of the nineteenth century from the Greek word oikos, meaning 'home', a place to which one returns. Ecology is the branch of biology, which deals with the relations of organisms to their surroundings and to other organisms.

The ancient Jain scriptural aphorism *Parasparopagraho Jīvānām* (all life is bound together by mutual support and interdependence) is refreshingly contemporary in its premise and perspective. It defines the scope of modern ecology while extending it further to a more spacious 'home'. It means that all aspects of nature belong together and are bound in a physical as well as a metaphysical relationship. Life is viewed as a gift of togetherness, accommodation and assistance in a universe teeming with interdependent constituents.