

# **The Remedy for Deadly Pandemics: Nonviolence and Ecological Harmony**

By Parveen Jain



The last few months have galvanized the all of humanity to fight against a common invisible enemy – the COVID-19 virus – which is ravaging every corner of the earth. We are inundated with news about the pandemic and endless discussions on related subjects such as the origin, biochemical structure and other scientific details of the virus, along with the changing infection status at local and global levels. One thing is clear from both expert and commonsense perspectives: this pandemic will undoubtedly leave tremendous footprints on global economic<sup>1</sup>, social and cultural<sup>2</sup> conditions with serious ramifications to deal with for many years to come.

There are several ongoing discussions on the origin of COVID-19 virus and the consensus opinion seems to place its origination at the “wet markets” of Wuhan, China where animals are sold for human consumption. A variety of species of animals including snakes, bats, dogs, cats, fox, and wild and exotic animals like the anaconda, pangolin and alligator are sold live or dead at these markets<sup>3</sup>. It is a wild west out there where seemingly no animal species – domestic, tamed, wild or exotic – is spared.

Often in these markets in China and some other parts of the world, the animals are slaughtered at the time of purchase resulting in free flow of blood, urine and feces from the animals. There are options provided to the buyers to torture an animal, like boiling it alive, before its purchase because some people believe that more an animal suffers at the time of death, the better it tastes. Suffice it to say, animals are treated like inanimate resources for human consumption at best, and at worst as outlets for some of the worst sadistic tendencies of the human psyche. In those places, there is no compassion towards these living and breathing beings, and cruelty towards animals is given free expression.

This type of treatment of animals is not limited to these markets. In fact, since any killing or hurting of an animal is antithetical to compassion, all of the animal meat and dairy products sold around the world involve varying degrees of animal cruelty<sup>4</sup>. Meat and dairy industries' practices include unnaturally accelerating animal growth using chemicals, tightly encaging the animals, keeping female animals lactating all the times and depriving the newborns of mother's care or killing them for sale – and these are just a few of the inhumane means deployed in the livestock industry. Humans, it seems, have voracious desire to consume meat. This desire existed forever<sup>5</sup>, but expert views vary on whether or not it is increasing.

Spiritually speaking, this merciless behavior towards non-human living beings is contrary to our innate human conditioning – that is what Jains have believed for millennia, and it is a thought which is being embraced by more and more people around the world. The underlying premise in Jain tradition is the belief in the separation between the soul (also called *jīva* by Jains) and the body of living beings, and that all souls – humans and non-humans – are alike.<sup>6</sup> In this context, the “real me” is my soul which has taken a temporary refuge in a body for the duration of the current life. And for Jains, the same is true for all other living beings.

With a firm belief in this fundamental concept, all living entities are predisposed to cherish and love their life, want to be happy and be loved, despise misery and anguish, and do not want to get hurt or be pained by any means. Therefore, if all *jīva*-s are alike, no one has the right to hurt others by any means. Lord Mahāvīra, twenty-fourth Tīrthaṅkara<sup>7</sup> of current *Jain Era* and recognized as founder of the contemporary Jain tradition, defined nonviolence as follows: <sup>8</sup>

“I so pronounce that all omniscient lords of all times state, speak, propagate, and elaborate that nothing which breathes, which exists, which lives, and which has any essence or potential of

life, should be destroyed, or ruled, or subjugated, or harmed, or denied of its essence or potential.”

“That which you consider destroying or disciplining or harming or subjugating or killing is (like) yourself. The results of your actions have to be borne by you, so do not destroy anything.”

“Like earth is the base on which all living beings exist; similarly, the essence of experience of all wise men of the past, present and future, is that *ahimsā* is the essence of life.”

“After understanding the importance of kindness to beings, the enlightened person should preach, disseminate and applaud it at all places in East-West and North-South directions.”

This is the crux of the principle of nonviolence or *ahimsā* (i.e. compassion, empathy, co-existence, tolerance, etc.) – the foundation of the Jain doctrine.

Furthermore, Jain thinkers believe that since humans are supposedly endowed with the highest level of intellect, they have a corresponding level of responsibility and obligation to treat all living species with compassion. Clearly, we continue to shirk this responsibility and obligation. Our actions, under the pretext of being the “smartest,” are hurting and destroying the Earth’s ecology in multiple ways – killing animals, causing extinction of uncountable number of species, destroying forests, and rampant polluting of the environment, are just a few of the human misdeeds. In this regard, humans do not seem to endear any sense of accountability.

Our actions continue to challenge the natural equilibrium and ecological harmony. At some point, when these disruptive actions collectively reach a breaking point, they culminate into an explosive perturbation of nature that causes the kind of calamity we are witnessing presently. Ācārya Sushil Kumar used to illustrate this point through a story about a village that had a pond with a multitude of frogs. At some point, the villagers came to know about the demand for cooked frog legs, and decided to farm all the frogs to sell them. Later, after the rainy season, the village had a serious outbreak of malaria which shocked them because until now they never had it. After some deliberations, the villagers were able to pinpoint the cause of the outbreak to the absence of frogs from the pond. Before they were rounded up, the frogs used to feed on the mosquitos, but now the mosquitos were thriving causing the malaria outbreak.

The imbalance (removal of frogs) caused by humans in this case and the resulting perturbation (malaria outbreak) may be fictional, but it can easily happen somewhere in the world. This story

is about a tiny village and pertains only to one species. When we extrapolate this phenomenon to the entire world involving the killing of billions of animals and extinction of thousands of species who contribute to maintaining ecological balance on the Earth, one can easily imagine the potential scale of the resulting catastrophe.

To illustrate the same point using an industrial system, consider a complex system like a power plant which operates safely and steadily because a balance is maintained between a multitude of concurrent processes involving hundreds of thousands of components. Such complex systems are engineered with intricate control systems which continuously maneuver pre-defined parameters to safely operate the systems. Once in a while, when they encounter a somewhat large disturbance, the control systems – automatically or with human intervention – shut down the system to keep it safe. But when the disturbance is exceptionally large or of a type that is not programmed in the system design, a serious accident could occur. Take the examples of nuclear power industry: the accidents at Three Mile Island in Pennsylvania, Chernobyl in Ukraine and Fukushima in Japan, for instance, were all because the nuclear core in each of those plants lost its cooling – due to human actions in the cases of Three Mile Island and Chernobyl, and equipment failure caused by tsunami in Fukushima’s case. In all three cases, the disturbances resulted in horrible accidents. The point in all of these examples is that when the balance between multiple concurrent processes is perturbed beyond manageability, the resulting consequences could be catastrophic.

The ecology works the same way. It is a gigantic system with intricately interdependent animate and inanimate entities. As horrific as the abovementioned accidents were, they were nowhere near those which can result from our continued misadventures with the living systems involved in maintaining ecological balance. Humans continue to engage in indiscriminate acts such as killing of the animals and causing immense damage on the environment, and when ensuing imbalance goes beyond nature’s “ability to control,” it results in calamities such as pandemics. The ongoing COVID-19 and Spanish flu pandemics of 1918, and most of the others in-between and prior to that, have been caused by human conduct of cruelty towards the animals by killing and consuming them, or by scores of other irresponsible actions causing extinction of species. Many scholars, scientists, spiritualists and other thinkers have spoken eloquently on this subject and their views, such as those by [Nathan Wolfe](#)<sup>9</sup>, are freely available in public domain.

The irony in all this is that we do not learn from our mistakes or choose to ignore them, and we continue to repeat them<sup>10</sup>. Humans are perhaps the only living species that causes unnecessary harm to other species – and many times for recreations like hunting. And, instead of owning up to these dangerously harmful acts, many of us tend to associate a pandemic to retaliation by nature or to punishment by God, depending on the faith or belief one follows. However, for a Jain practitioner, it is neither a retaliation by nature nor a form of punishment by any higher force. For Jains, all God-like higher forces and their teachings are nurturing and compassionate, and they do not retaliate or take any revenge. The causes behind these calamities, according the Jain doctrine of karma<sup>11</sup>, are our own doing, and to remedy those, we (humans) must first take the responsibility, and then correct our own conduct.

The Jain doctrine of Karma constitutes a self-orchestrated process that determines the variations in the states of different living entities—their form of embodiment (human, animal, etc.), appearance, health, fortune, lifespan and numerous other attributes of life. These variations, which occur despite the fact that each living being's soul is endowed with innate characteristics of unbounded consciousness (*ćetnā*), bliss (*sūkhā*), and vigor or willpower (*vīryā*), result from the actions in mind (thought), speech (language), and body (physical acts) they have been taking from time unknown while cycling repeatedly through life and death. Each of the actions has a corresponding repercussion which defines the state of the living being, and the quality of repercussion depends on the nature of the action—pleasurable ones like good health, intellect, persona, fame, etc. reciprocate auspicious deeds, and distressing ones like lower form of life, miserable living, etc. reciprocate inauspicious deeds. The timing of repercussions – for instance, within this life or in a future one – along with their quality and other factors like intensity, duration, etc. are all determined by a judicious but hitherto unknown formula. The important point to note is that this cause-to-effect relationship is not dependent on destiny or luck, and it is not orchestrated by any external force like God – the living beings are themselves solely responsible of their actions, and therefore, the ensuing kārmic repercussions they experience.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is projected to be one of the worst of the kind linked to animal killings. The entire world is engulfed in this pandemic and all nations are fighting this common enemy with whatever resources they have. It is like a war.

Humans, throughout the history, have been constantly waging wars against each other, but in those wars the perpetrators are known to each other, and they are driven by mutual hatred and animosity. Those wars cost trillions of dollars globally, but their root causes – mistrust, hatred, etc. are never eradicated. These wars start with misery and end the same way, or worse, for all participating parties.

The COVID-19 pandemic war is different. In this case, the entire humanity has a single invisible enemy that is causing devastation without discrimination. The COVID-19 pandemic has kindled



exceptional cooperation and has united the entire humanity, albeit by fear, to fight this global war. Like any war, this too has frontline warriors and they are the healthcare workers around the world. These warriors are starkly different from those engaged in conventional wars – the COVID-19 warriors are equipped with life-

saving equipment and medications, and they are motivated by respect, compassion and love for the life. The COVID-19 pandemic is inflicting terrible pain and misery to all, but when it ends, there will be universal feelings of relief, happiness and calm.

In the end, collectively, we can alleviate or eliminate sufferings associated with pandemics like the COVID-19 by adopting a lifestyle that is inspired by nonviolence and is in harmony with ecology and environment. We need to understand and follow the fundamental universal principle taught for millennia by the Jain thinkers that all living entities – human and non-human – and environment are interdependent and we all must live in harmony with each other. Humans must stop violating this principle and eliminate cruelty towards all other living species and end misadventures against the environment. This would ensure not only a healthy human survival, but also will create pervasive universal peace and love – the inherent desire of all living beings. Humanity can and will win, just need to reconsider how we approach life.

- 1 Altman, Steven A. “Will Covid-19 have a Lasting Impact on Globalization?” *Harvard Business Review*. 20 May 2020. Web. 30 May 2020. <<https://hbr.org/2020/05/will-covid-19-have-a-lasting-impact-on-globalization>>.
- 2 “Everyone Included: Social Impact of COVID-19.” *United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs Social Inclusion*. April 2020. Web. 20 May 2020. <<https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/everyone-included-covid-19.html>>.
- 3 Weston, Phoebe. “We did it to Ourselves: Scientist Says Intrusion into Nature Led to Pandemic.” *The Guardian*. 25 April 2020. Web. 20 May 2020. <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/25/ourselves-scientist-says-human-intrusion-nature-pandemic-aoe>>.
- 4 Shapiro, Paul. “One Root Cause of Pandemics Few People Think About.” *Scientific American – Observations/Opinion*. 24 March 2020. Web. 15 May 2020. <<https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/one-root-cause-of-pandemics-few-people-think-about/>>.
- 5 LePan, Nicholas. *Visualizing the History of Pandemics*. *Visual Capitalist*. 14 March 2020. Web. 15 May 2020. <<https://www.visualcapitalist.com/history-of-pandemics-deadliest/>>.
- 6 Jain, Parveen. *An Introduction to Jain Philosophy* Chapter 3. New Delhi: DK Printworld, 2019.
- 7 *Tīrthāṅkaras* are the preceptors, “ford-makers,” and spiritual teachers of the righteous path, who have absolutely and completely conquered all personal deficiencies such as attachment, hatred, anger, ego, deceit, and greed, and have attained omniscience.
- 8 Ācārāṅga Sūtra 1/4/1.
- 9 Wolfe, Nathan. “The Man Who Tracks Viruses Before They Spread.” *WHYY Fresh Air with Terry Gross*. 18 October 2011. Web. 10 May 2019. <<https://freshairarchive.org/index.php/segments/man-who-tracks-viruses-they-spread-0>>.
- 10 Loeb, Avi. “A Sobering Astronomical Reminder from Covid-19.” *Scientific American -Observations/Opinion*. 18 April 2020. Web. 15 May 2020. <<https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/a-sobering-astronomical-reminder-from-covid-19/>>.
- 11 Jain, Parveen. *An Introduction to Jain Philosophy*, Chapter 11 & 12. New Delhi: DK Printworld, 2019.