

Jainism and Ecology

Nonviolence in the Web of Life

edited by

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The Living Earth of Jainism and the New Story: Rediscovering and Reclaiming a Functional Cosmology

CHRISTOPHER KEY CHAPPLE

In various chapters of this book, several authors have asserted that the Jain practice of nonviolence provides a firm foundation for the development of an environmental ethic. Citing the examples of appropriate livelihood, strict vegetarianism, and holistic logic as found within the Jain tradition, Padmanabh Jaini, Sadhvi Shilapi, Kim Skoog, John Koller, and others have seen parallels between the Jain concern for not harming life in all its various forms and the ethos of environmental protection.

In this chapter, I want to take a somewhat more metaphysical (or perhaps physical or biological) approach to interpreting Jainism in light of ecological exigencies. Jain history and sociology have demonstrated for centuries an unusually tenacious commitment to a very rigorous ethical system. It seems important to examine closely the underlying worldview from which the Jain practices of nonviolence, truthfulness, and so forth, arise. Specifically, this chapter will focus on two primary aspects of Jain teachings in light of three contemporary Western ecological thinkers. The first aspect of Jainism to be discussed is its unique cosmology, which will be compared to the cosmological insights of contemporary science as presented by Brian Swimme. The second aspect of Jainism to be explored is the Jain assertion that the seeming inert, nonsensate world abounds with sensuousness. The Jains posit that all the myriad living beings, from a clod

of dirt or a drop of water to animals and humans themselves, possess one commonality: the capacity for tactile experience. This "living world" perspective will be discussed in light of Thomas Berry's call for understanding the earth as a "communion of subjects not a collection of objects."¹ Furthermore, Jainism, in addition to positing a world populated with infinite life-forms in a wide range of manifestations, also develops an elaborate biological systemization of life that pays close attention to the role of the senses. As life-forms complexify, they add additional senses. By examining the implications of this polysensate view of the world and by exploring the underlying motivations for perceiving the world as suffused with life, and hence worthy of our respect and care, a glimpse into the emotionality underlying the Jain commitment to nonviolence might be gained. This approach will be compared with the writings of David Abram, a phenomenologist and philosopher who extols the role of the senses in developing an appreciation for the natural world.

The Jain perspective that the manifold parts of the world, including the elements themselves, contain "touch, breath, life, and bodily strength"² will be compared with the scientific view of the universe's dynamism as summarized by contemporary cosmologist Brian Swimme. The implications of the Jain panpsychic vision and sensibility will be juxtaposed with Thomas Berry's plea for increased sensitivity to the earth community, as embodying differentiation, subjectivity, and communion. In a third and final section, the very sensuousness and vitality of Jain philosophy will be discussed in the context of philosopher David Abram's appeal for a deeper appreciation of human reciprocity through the senses with the things of the world.

The method that I employ here is one of creative juxtaposition. Jain cosmology does not fundamentally share the same story as that put forth by contemporary science. Though Jainism emphasizes the status and condition and purification of the human soul as its primary concern, this does not match up, point by point, with Thomas Berry's call for increased subjectivity. Additionally, Abram's philosophy of the integration of body, mind, and landscape does not parallel Jainism's view of repeated rebirth, according to the laws of *karma*, until one achieves release. However, I introduce the deliberations of these three contemporary thinkers because they raise issues of the relationship between the body, consciousness, and the world in an attempt to culti-

vate greater sensitivity to the larger order and intricacy of the universe. They also raise questions of relationship to and responsibility for the natural order that call for the development of an ethical stance of awareness, care, and protection—an ethical stance not too far distant from the nonviolence advocated by the Jains. As the contemporary world seeks to understand traditional indigenous values that cultivate a respect for nature, and as traditions such as Jainism seek to maintain relevance in the modern world, such points of dialogue as posed in this volume and in this essay might be helpful, not only for intercultural understanding, but also to advance the shared goal of preserving and respecting all forms of life.

Jain Cosmology: A Universe Permeated with Life

Stories of cosmology ground the human person within the world. They explain the place of the individual within the larger context of social and physical realities. In ancient India as articulated in the *Rgveda*, the person, or *puruṣa*, was regarded as a reflection of the world itself in its great immensity: eyes were said to correspond to the sun; the mind was correlated with the moon; breath with the wind; feet with the earth. This particular cosmology asserts a linkage between the microphase and the macrophase: by seeing the universe as reflective of and relating to body functions, one sees oneself not as an isolated unit but as part of a greater whole. The Jain tradition developed a parallel story of the structure of the cosmos, complete with the image of a great female whose body symbolizes the entire system. However, whereas the texts of the early Vedic tradition remain somewhat vague about the place of individual life force in this process, Jainism develops an intricate accounting for the journey for each life force (soul, or *jīva*), which is said to be eternal, not created by any deity, and ultimately responsible for its own destiny. In this section of the chapter, Umāsvāti's explication of traditional Jain cosmology, which dates from the early centuries of the common era, will be compared and contrasted with Brian Swimme's explication of contemporary cosmological science.

Jainism provides one of India's most thorough attempts to encapsulate a comprehensive worldview or cosmology that integrates the place of the human person within the continuum of the universe.

Umāsvatī's system is accepted by both major branches of Jainism, the Digambara and the Svetāmbara. It attempts to explain the place of the human being in a great continuous reality. It further, as mentioned above, emphasizes hierarchy and vitality within its vision of the cosmos.

Jain cosmology describes a storied universe in the shape of a female figure. The earthly realm, or middle world (*manuṣya loka*), consists of three continents and two oceans. Animals (as listed below), including humans, can be found there. Below the earth can be found seven hells. Above earth, eight heavenly realms are arrayed. The ultimate pinnacle of the Jain system, symbolized at the top of the head of the cosmic person, consists of the state of liberation, the *siddha loka*. Human beings who have successfully led a religious life achieve this through the release of all karmic bondage. One cannot attain this state from the heavenly or hellish realms; only through a human birth lived well according to spiritual precepts can this final abode be gained. According to Umāsvatī's *Tatvārtha Sūtra*, 8,400,000 different species of life-forms exist.² These beings are part of a beginningless round of birth, life, death, and rebirth. Each living being houses a life force, or *jīva*, that occupies and enlivens the host environment. When the body dies, the *jīva* seeks out a new site depending upon the proclivities of *karma* generated and accrued during the previous lifetime. Depending upon one's actions, one can either ascend to a heavenly realm, take rebirth as a human or animal or elemental or microbial form, or descend into one of the hells, as a suffering human being or a particular animal, depending upon the offense committed.

The taxonomy of Jainism, which will be discussed in greater detail in the next section of this chapter, places life-forms in a graduated order starting with those beings that possess only touch, the foundational sense capacity that defines the presence of life. These include earth, water, fire, and air bodies; microorganisms (*nigoda*); and plants. The next highest order introduces the sense of taste; worms, leeches, oysters, and snails occupy this phylum. Third-order life-forms add the sense of smell, including most insects and spiders. Fourth-level beings, in addition to being able to touch, taste, and smell, also can see; these include butterflies, flies, and bees. The fifth level introduces hearing and is further divided into categories of those non-sentient and sentient. Birds, reptiles, mammals, and humans dwell in this life realm.³

Jainism posits a cosmological view that at first glance seems similar to that put forth in Ptolemy's theory of the spheres and Dante's *Divine Comedy*. At the base of this cosmos can be found various regions of hell. In the central realm is the surface of the planet, on which reside the five elements, living beings, and humans. Above this realm extends a sequence of heavenly worlds. At the pinnacle of this cosmos exists a domain of liberated beings who have risen above the vicissitudes of repeated birth in the lower, middle, and higher realms. In spatial orientation and its theory of moral consequences, it seems to evoke Dante's system of hell, purgatory, and heaven. Depending on one's actions, one earns a berth in one of the three domains.

However, if we look more closely at this system, its theories of space, time, and matter carry more subtlety and sophistication than may first seem apparent. First, Jainism identifies two primary categories of reality: living and nonliving. Living reality, or *jīva*, is broadly defined as dynamism and suffuses what in precontemporary physics would be considered inert. Each *jīva* is said to contain consciousness, energy, and bliss, Earth, water, fire, air bodies, which comprise material objects such as wood or umbrellas or drops of water or flickers of flame or gusts of wind all contain *jīva*, or individual bodies of life force. The category of nonliving "things" includes properties such as the flow of time and space and the binding of matter known as *karma*, or *dravya*, onto the *jīva*. The nature of this *karma* determines the course of one's embodiment and experience. Negative *karma* causes a downward movement both in this birth and in future birth. Positive *karma* releases the negative, binding qualities of *karma* and allows for an ascent to higher realms, either as a more morally pure human being or as a god or goddess. Ultimately, the Jain path of purification through its many strict ethical precepts may culminate in joining the realm of the perfected ones, the *siddhas*. These liberated souls have released themselves from all *karma* and dwell in a state of eternal consciousness, energy, omniscience, and bliss.

In this cosmological system, one's station in life can be understood in terms of one's degree of effort in following ethically correct patterns of life as taught by the Jain Tirthankaras, or spiritual leaders. The world of nature cannot be separated from the moral order—even a clod of earth exists as earth because it has earned its particular niche in the wider system of life-processes. A human's experience includes prior births of various animals, microorganisms, elemental entities,

and perhaps gods and goddesses. To see and recognize and understand the world is to acknowledge one's past and potential future. Though the Jain insistence on the uniqueness of each individual soul does not lend itself to an ultimate vision of interconnected monism, it nonetheless lays the foundation for seeing all beings other than oneself with an empathetic eye. In past or future births, one could have been or could become a life-form similar to any of those that surround one in the vast unlimited cosmos.

The Story of Contemporary Cosmology

The contemporary story of the universe as told by physicists and cosmologists is complex and varied, requiring an understanding of higher mathematics and a reliance on sophisticated instruments, such as electron microscopes, and telescopes that penetrate deep into distant galaxies. Though many interpreters of science, such as Stephen Hawkins and Carl Sagan, have summarized the various theories about the origins and structure of the universe, few have attempted to create a world of meaning from this raw data. Brian Swimme, however, has attempted to make sense of the insights of modern physics and examine the implications of this newly discovered world order for human behavior. In this section, one aspect of his interpretation will be summarized and then discussed in light of Jainism and the larger context of environmental ethics.

In their observations of the behavior of matter and energy, planets and galaxies, Einstein and Hubble calculated that the world flared forth some fifteen billion years ago. From that time and point of origin, all things blasted forth away from one another. The stuff of stars and elements continue to move apart from one another and, over the course of fifteen billion years, as yet uncounted galaxies spin forth and continue to move outward. Because of this initial momentum, everything retains a part of this original being. And because everything continues to move from that point of origin, everything that contains a bit of that point of origin is at the center of everything else that is moving forth. And because everything is moving forth and everything originated from that original flaring moment, everything is the center of the universe and yet is moving from everything else. Furthermore, the space that separates all these discrete masses of

atomic materiality continues to generate evanescent particulate matter that constantly emerges and then dissolves. Even empty space is not empty but carries what Swimme describes as the "all-nourishing abyss." As he describes it:

The usual process is for particles to erupt in pairs that will quickly annihilate each other. Electrons and positrons, protons and anti-protons, all of these are flaring forth, and as quickly vanishing again. Such creative and destructive activity takes place everywhere and at all times throughout the universe. The ground of the universe then is an empty fullness, a fecund nothingness. Even though this discovery may be difficult if not impossible to visualize, we can nevertheless speak a deeper truth regarding the ground state of the universe. First of all it is not inert. The base of the universe is not a dead, bottom-of-the-barrel thing. The base of the universe seethes with creativity, so much so that physicists refer to the universe's ground state as 'space-time foam.'¹⁴

This account of materiality abounds in mystery, unpredictability, and dynamism. The ground for the manifested world lies hidden in forces like the yin and yang of Chinese philosophy that constantly vacillate between presence and absence. Furthermore, like the Jain system of transmutation of life-forms, this primal energy constantly seeks new expression.

Both the story of contemporary cosmology and that of Jainism allow for awe and respect for materiality. According to Swimme, our deadened view of the material has led to the blight of consumerism, where ultimate meaning in life is mistakenly sought in the accumulation of things. This has resulted in lives of loneliness, depression, and alienation. He writes:

Consumerism is based on the assumption that the universe is a collection of dead objects. It is for this reason that depression is a regular feature in every consumer society. When humans find themselves surrounded by nothing but objects, the response is always loneliness. . . .¹⁵

For Swimme, the remedy for this angst can be found in a rediscovery of awe through appreciation of the intricacy and beauty of the material world, from the complexity of the meadow to the splendid grandeur of the Milky Way. Swimme writes that

Each person *lives* in the center of the cosmos. Science is one of the careful and detailed methods by which the human mind came to grasp

karma through a careful observance of nonviolent behavior. Mahāvīra instructs his monks and nuns to avoid harming life in its myriad forms through various methods. These include explicit instructions for when and what and how to eat; when and how to travel; where and when to defecate; from whom to accept food; and lists of various other activities, including attendance at wedding ceremonies, to be avoided.⁹ All these rules, as well as the various preferred professions for laypersons, which have been mentioned in other chapters, are to be observed in order to prevent harm to living beings. In fact, Mahāvīra even exhorts his monks and nuns not to gesture or point because “The deer, cattle, birds, snakes, animals living in water, on land, in the air might be disturbed or frightened, and strive to get to a fold or . . . refuge, (thinking): ‘the Sramana [monk] will harm me!’”¹⁰ This profound respect for the natural world distinguishes Jainism among the world’s religious traditions as potentially the most eco-friendly.

In later Jain literature, various authors describe the living world with a great deal of care and precision. For instance, Śānti Sūri, a Svetāmbara Jain writer of the eleventh century, provides elegant descriptions of living beings, beginning with the earth beings and concluding with various classes of deities and liberated souls. In the *Jīva Vīcāra Prakāraṇam*, a text of fifty verses, he lists types of life, frequency of appearance, and cites an approximate lifespan for each. For instance, he states that hardened rock can survive as a distinct life-form for twenty-two thousand years; “water-bodied souls” for seven thousand years; wind bodies for three thousand years; trees for ten thousand years; and fire for three days and three nights.¹¹ Each of these forms demonstrates four characteristics: life, breath, bodily strength, and the sense of touch.¹²

The attention to detail given to the elemental realm of one-sensed beings distinguishes the medieval Jains as closely observant scientists. Their descriptions include fundamental information regarding geology, meteorology, botany, and zoology. Śānti Sūri describes the one-sensed living realm with great precision, extending from the earth through water and fire and air to the plant kingdom. For the *prithivī-kāyika jīvas*, or earth-bodied souls, he offers the following two verses:

Crystalline quartz, jewels, gems, coral, vermilion, orpiment, realgar, mercury, gold, chalk, red soil, five-colored mica, hard earth, soda ash, miscellaneous stones, antimony, lava, salt, and sea-salt are the various forms taken by the earth-body souls (Prithivīkayika Jīvas).¹³

The numerous types of stone and soil listed indicate that the Jains were keen observers of geological formations, careful to distinguish the characteristics of color, density, and hardness.

Śānti Sūri’s descriptions of the various forms of water are similarly perspicacious, listing:

Underground water, rainwater, dew, ice, hail, water drops on green vegetables, and mist as the “numerous varieties of Water-bodied Souls.”¹⁴

Śānti Sūri provides an exhaustive list of various forms taken by fire-bodied souls:

Burning coals, flames, enflamed cow dung, fire reflected in the sky, sparks falling from a fire or from the sky, shooting stars, and lightning constitute Agnikaya Jīvas.¹⁵

The various wind bodies are listed as follows:

Winds blowing up, winds blowing down, whirlwinds, wind coming from the mouth, melodious winds, dense winds, rarefied winds are the different varieties of Vāyu Kayika Jīvas.¹⁶

Descriptions of various plant genres then follow, with precise detail given for plants with fragrance, hard fruits, soft fruits, bulbous roots, thorns, smooth leaves, creepers, and so forth. Lists are offered to restrict or endorse the use of specific plants, with special attention paid to determining avoidance of undo harm to plants that harbor the potential for even greater production of life-forms.

Two-sensed beings, possessing touch and taste, are said to live twelve years and include conches, cowries, gandolo worms, leeches, earthworms, timber worms, intestinal worms, red water insects, white wood ants, among others.¹⁷ Three-sensed beings live for forty-nine days and include centipedes, bedbugs, lice, black ants, white ants, crab lice, and various other kinds of insects.¹⁸ These beings add the sense of smell. Four-sensed beings, which add the sense of sight, live for six months¹⁹ and include scorpions, cattle bugs, drones, bees, locusts, flies, gnats, mosquitoes, moths, spiders, and grasshoppers.²⁰ At the top of this continuum reside the five-sensed beings, which add the sense of hearing and can be grouped into those who are deemed “mindless” and those who are considered to be sentient. This last group includes the denizens of hell, gods, and humans. Various life

spans are cited for five-sensed beings, which Sānti Sūri describes in great detail: land-going, aquatic, sky-moving, and so forth. The detailed lists by Sānti Sūri and his later commentators present a comprehensive overview of life-forms as seen through the prism of Jainism.

The Jain worldview cannot be separated from the notion that the world contains feelings and that the earth feels and responds in kind to human presence. Not only do animals possess cognitive faculties including memories and emotions, the very world that surrounds us can feel our presence. From the water we drink, to the air we inhale, to the chair that supports us, to the light that illumines our studies, all these entities feel us through the sense of touch, though we might often take for granted their caress and support and sustenance. According to the Jain tradition, humans, as living, sensate, thinking beings, have been given the special task and opportunity to cultivate increasingly rarefied states of awareness and ethical behavior to acknowledge that we live in a universe suffused with living, breathing, conscious beings that warrant our recognition and respect.

Various authors within the Western biological, philosophical, and psychological disciplines have similarly argued for the possibility that animals possess cognition and that the world itself cannot be separated from our cognition of it. Few have committed themselves to the very radical Jain notion that the elements possess consciousness, though some environmental thinkers, such as Christopher Stone, have argued for the legal standing of trees. But, as discussed in the sections that follow, Thomas Berry and David Abram have argued that a heightened responsiveness to the earth is essential for the full development of human consciousness.

The New Story of Thomas Berry: A Call for Sensitivity to Life

Thomas Berry has advocated the telling of a “new story” that allows us to reinhabit the earth with a greater awareness of the fragile balance of life systems. He writes:

The human species has emerged within this complex of life communities; it has survived and developed through participation in the functioning of these communities at their most basic level. Out of this interaction have come our distinctive human cultures. But while at an early period we were aware of our dependence on the integral functioning of

these surrounding communities, this awareness faded as we learned, through our scientific and technological skills, to manipulate the community functioning to our own advantage. This manipulation has brought about a disruption of the entire complex of life systems. The florescence that distinguished these communities in the past is now severely diminished. A degradation of the natural world has taken place.²¹

Berry suggests that, with the waning of traditional creation stories and functional cosmologies, we must develop a new story that can effectively replace them and introduce a new integrated worldview. This worldview must account for the workings of the universe, inspire awe at its grandeur, and prompt the earth's citizens to an appropriate response to enhance the sustainability of the earth. Drawing from the pioneering insights of the Jesuit geologist and theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Berry suggests an embrace of the cosmological story emerging from the new science. In his focus on the notion of a fixed point of creation and his orientation toward an almost eschatological prophetic voice, Berry's work seems well-grounded in the Jewish/Christian/Islamic tradition. Yet, in other ways, it is similar to and clearly informed by various aspects of Asian, African, and tribal traditions.

For the past twenty years, Thomas Berry has written and lectured on the topic of the emerging ecozoic age. Taking note of the tremendous harm caused to the environment during the twentieth century, he observes that we have lost touch with the natural world, that we have become callous to the magnificent universe that supports and nurtures us. During a plenary address to the American Academy of Religion in 1993, Berry stated:

We hardly live in a universe at all. We live in a city or nation, in an economic system, or in a cultural tradition. We are seldom aware of any sympathetic relation with the natural world about us. We live in a world of objects, not in a world of subjects. We isolated ourselves from contact with the natural world except insofar as we enjoy it or have command over it. The natural world is not associated with the very meaning of life itself. It is little wonder that we have devastated the planet so extensively.²²

The causes of the rift between humans and nature are numerous, layered, and storied. As noted by Lynn White, Jr., the religious tradi-

tions of the West find their roots in an entrenched anthropocentrism that places emphasis on dominion over nature. As Berry has written, the concern with redemption in Western religious traditions leaves little room for an appreciation of the natural world, which is seen as subsidiary to the interests of human comfort. The exploitative mentality of New World settlement, the rise of industrialization in the eighteenth century, the explosion of consumerism and technology in the twentieth century propelled the human into a new relationship with nature. Berry writes:

Here it is necessary to note that planet Earth will never again in the future function in the manner that it has functioned in the past. Until the present the magnificence splashed throughout the vast realms of space, the luxuriance of the tropical rainforests, the movement of the great whales through the sea, the autumn color of the eastern woodlands; all this and so much else came into being entirely apart from any human design or deed. We did not even exist when all this came to be. But now, in the foreseeable future, almost nothing will happen that we will not be involved in. We cannot make a blade of grass, but there is liable not to be a blade of grass unless we accept it, protect it, and foster it.²³

We have entered into a new phase of earth-human relations, wherein the human effectively has conquered nature. The now-submissive earth relies upon the human for its continuance. The earth has been bruised by the abundance of radioactive waste and the ever-present threat of nuclear conflagration. The sky has been fouled with emissions from automobiles, scooters, and factories. Human and industrial wastes have polluted our rivers and lakes. Life itself has become imperiled.

The Realm of the Senses: The Experience of Life

As this separation takes place, humans lose their intimacy with the natural world and themselves. With this loss of intimacy comes a deadening indifference to the natural world, which results in further exploitation and destruction. To reverse this process, one needs to recapture a sense of beauty and appreciation for the natural world, a sense of the wholly real materiality of things, not for the sake of consumption and manipulation but for the very being indicated by their

presence. Some of the insights contained in the book *The Spell of the Senses: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World* by David Abram highlight reasons why we should take the Jain worldview seriously as one avenue of exploration for the development of an effective ecological outlook. Jainism proclaims that even seemingly inanimate things or objects, such as rocks and rivers, are in fact subjects possessing life force, or *jīva*, suffused with consciousness, energy, and bliss, as well as with a sense of touch. Although maintaining the primacy of the human perspective, David Abram suggests that we need to revive our relationship with things. Citing the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, he writes that

Our most immediate experience of things is necessarily an experience of reciprocal encounter—of tension, communication, and commingling. . . . [W]e know the thing as a dynamic presence that confronts us and draws us into relation. . . . To define another being as an inert or passive object is to deny its ability to actively engage us and to provoke our senses. . . . By linguistically defining the surrounding world as a determinate set of objects, we cut our conscious, speaking selves off from the spontaneous life of our sensing bodies. . . . Only by affirming the animateness of perceived things do we allow our words to emerge directly from the depths of our ongoing reciprocity with the world.²⁴

To illustrate this, Abram describes the experience of the forest:

Walking in a forest, we peer into its green and shadowed depths, listening to the silence of the leaves, tasting the cool and fragrant air. Yet such is the transivity of perception, the reversibility of the flesh, that we may suddenly feel that the trees are looking at us—we feel ourselves exposed, watched, observed from all sides. If we dwell in this forest for many months, or years, then our experience may shift yet again—we may come to feel that we are a part of this forest, consanguineous with it, and that our experience of the forest is nothing other than the forest experiencing itself.²⁵

In the words of Merleau-Ponty, "the presence of the world is precisely the presence of its flesh to my flesh."²⁶ Abram goes on to write that

To the sensing body all phenomena are animate, actively soliciting the participation of our senses. . . . Things disclose themselves to our immediate perception as vectors, as styles of unfolding—not as finished chunks of matter given once and for all, but as dynamic ways of engaging the body and modulating the body. Each thing, each phenomenon,

has the power to reach us and to influence us. Every phenomenon, in other words, is potentially expressive. . . . Thus, at the most primordial level of sensuous, bodily experience, we find ourselves in an expressive, gesturing landscape, in a world that speaks.²⁷

Though this does not take the step of claiming that things possess the capacity to touch and feel, it does call for a greater acknowledgment of the power of the things of the world to shape our own perceptions and feelings.

In an earlier study, I explored a comparative analysis between Gaia theory and the Jain theory of the all-pervasiveness of eternal Jiva.²⁸ David Abram, alluding to Gaia theory, similarly suggests that the livingness of things as articulated by Merleau-Ponty in fact has a scientific basis:

We have at least come to realize that neither the soils, the oceans, nor the atmosphere can be comprehended without taking into account the participation of innumerable organisms, from the lichens that crumble rocks, and the bacterial entities that decompose organic detritus, to all the respiring plants and animals exchanging vital gases with the air. The notion of earthly nature as a densely interconnected organic network—a 'biospheric web' wherein each entity draws its specific character from its relations direct and indirect, to all the others—has today become commonplace. . . .²⁹

Whether seen as a continuity of interchangeable life-forms or as a succession of discrete incarnations, the web-like nature of both contemporary biology and traditional Jain cosmology merits our attention. Both views require us to regard the world as a living, breathing, sensuous reality, from its elemental building blocks of earth, water, fire, and air, through its microbial expressions, right up to its array of complex insects and mammals, including primates. In the Jain tradition, this has led to a careful observance of the principle of nonviolence. In the world of contemporary ethics, it has led to the introduction of animal rights language, the argument for legal standing for trees, and most recently, the Great Ape Project, which advocates that full rights be accorded to chimpanzees, gorillas, and other high-functioning primates.

In contemporary forms of post-Christian spirituality in America, this has led to the emergence of reflection on the landscape as a means

of attaining a heightened sense of intimacy, belonging, and meaning. This tradition, celebrated in the new anthologies of nature writing, has been part of American literature for over a century, as found in the writings of Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Annie Dillard, Barry Lopez, and others. Abram's articulation of the appeal of this "practice" leads us to further explore those aspects of Jain philosophy that lend themselves to the valuing of particularity over a sense of oneness. Abram writes:

There is an intimate reciprocity to the senses: as we touch the bark of a tree, we feel the tree touching us; as we lend our ears to the local sounds and ally our nose to the seasonal scents, the terrain gradually tunes us in turn. The senses, that is, are the primary way that earth has of informing our thought and of guiding our actions. Huge centralized programs, global initiatives, and the 'top down' solutions will never suffice to restore and protect the health of the animate earth. For it is only at the scale of our direct, sensory interactions with the land around us that we can appropriately notice and respond to the immediate needs of the living world. Yet at the scale of our sensing bodies the earth is astonishingly, irreducibly diverse. It discloses itself to our senses not as a uniform planet inviting global principles and generalizations, but as this forested realm embraced by water, or a windswept prairie, or a desert silence. We can know the needs of any particular region only by participating in its specificity—by becoming familiar with its cycles and styles, awake and attentive to its other inhabitants."³⁰

One might object that this has nothing to do with Jainism, that the Jains do not wax eloquent about the landscape, that, at best, Merleau-Ponty and David Abram romanticize an unattainable weak monism, that the grim rigor of Jain asceticism must not be confused with transcendentalist elegy. But I would like to cite one compelling passage from the *Ācārāṅga Sūtra* and tell one story of my visit to Ladnun that, while not sentimental, nonetheless underscore the importance of sensory awareness in the Jain tradition.

Senses and Sensibilities in Jainism

In the second part of the *Ācārāṅga Sūtra*, Mahāvira addresses his monks and nuns on the topic of forest preservation. This brief meditative advice encapsulates what could be seen as a textual foundation

for the development of an activist Jain environmentalism. It also shows the timelessness of human greed and exploitation of the natural world. Mahāvīra tells the monks and nuns to “change their minds” about looking at big trees. He says, rather than seeing big trees as “fit for palaces, gates, houses, benches . . . , boats, buckets, stools, trays, ploughs, machines, [wheels] . . . , seats, beds, cars, sheds,” they should speak of trees as “noble, high and round, big,” with “many branches . . . magnificent.”³¹ This indicates that Mahāvīra in fact did regard trees as inherently valuable for their beauty, strength, and magnificence and that he advised his followers to turn their thoughts from materiality by reflecting on the greater beauty of sparing a tree from the woodsman’s ax.

While visiting Jain Visva Bharati in Ladnun, Rajasthan, I, by accident, stood atop an anthill of large red ants who swiftly moved up my pantleg. Had I been attuned to the local landscape, I would not have stood in such an inappropriate spot. I am an ant-sensitive person and quite adept at avoiding even the nearly microscopic lines of ants that parade along the sidewalks of Southern California. My Jain companions gently urged me to take care not to hurt the ants as I moved them back to the ground. This episode provoked in me multiple reflections: the Terāpanthi Svetāmbara Jain community had located their combination monastery-seminary-university in the remote desert because few life-forms flourish there, thus reducing possible inadvertent harm. The Jains who visit this landscape frequently know how to scan the landscape (in this instance the ground under our feet) to avoid red ants; this reveals an intimacy with place. My companions felt compassion both for me in my error and for the ants as I somewhat awkwardly returned them to the ground. The entire scenario was filled with a heightened sense of immediacy and importance, a sort of meditation on the present in this simple encounter with ants.

Conclusion

Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme propose a new story based on scientific explanations (or “best guesses”) regarding the origin and nature of the universe. In part, this approach depends on a starting point (the Flaring Forth or Big Bang) and the idea of an implied if not explicit sense of teleology. The Jain story does not include a fixed origin

point in either assumed fact or metaphor, but rather, assumes the eternality of the world. It will not work as a story in the sense of a beginning, middle, and probable end. Rather, this system seeks to sacralize all aspects of worldly existence. By seeing all that surrounds us as suffused with life and worthy of worship, Jainism offers a different sort of story, a story that decentralizes and universalizes ethics, taking away overly anthropocentric concerns, and brings into vivid relief the urgency of life in its various elemental, vegetative, and animal forms. The cosmic story in the Jain tradition might well be a story of immediacy and care rather than of mythic structures and externally imposed ethical values.

At first glance, the Jain tradition might seem to be inherently ecologically friendly. It emphasizes nonviolence. It values all forms of life. It requires its adherents to engage only in certain types of livelihood, presumably based on the principle of *ahimsā*. Jainism’s earth-friendly attitudes have been celebrated in L. M. Singhvi’s *Jain Declaration on Nature* (reprinted in the appendix to this book), in Michael Tobias’s video *Ahimsa* and its companion volume, *Life Force*, in my own book *Nonviolence to Animals, Earth, and Self in Asian Traditions*, and in the proceedings of the Ladnun conference on ecology and Jainism, the periodical *Jain Spirit: Advancing Jainism into the Future*, as well as in other materials. However, if we look at both the ultimate intention of the Jain faith as well as the actual consequences of some Jain businesses, we might detect a need for the sort of in-depth critical analysis and reflection that Thomas Berry has suggested for the Western world. For instance, Jains have long avoided using animal products in their many businesses. Lists of “green-friendly” materials could be developed by Jains to be used in manufacturing processes. The Jain programs of environmental education could be expanded to prepare future leaders to be more familiar with environmental issues. Jains could actively support air pollution reduction initiatives by making certain that their own automobiles in India conform to legal standards.

In some respects, however, environmental activism at best could earn a secondary place in the practice of the Jain faith. The observance of *ahimsā* must be regarded as ancillary to the goal of final liberation, or *kevala*. Ultimate meaning is not found in the perfection of nonviolent (in this case, eco-friendly) behavior but in the extrapara- of all fettering *karma*. Although the resultant lifestyle for monks

and nuns resembles or approximates an environmentally friendly and pure pursuit focuses on personal, spiritual advancement, not on an ideal, its pursuit focuses on interrelatedness of life. In terms of the lifestyle holistic vision of the interrelatedness of life. In terms of the lifestyle of the Jain layperson, certain practices such as vegetarianism, periodic fasting, and eschewal of militarism might be seen as eco-friendly. However, some professions adopted by the Jains, due to their religious commitment to harm only one-sensed beings, might in fact be environmentally disastrous, such as strip-mining for granite or marble, unless habitat restoration accompanies the mining process. Likewise, how many Jain industries contribute to air pollution or forest destruction or result in water pollution? The development of a Jain ecological business ethic would require extensive reflection and restructuring.

As Thomas Berry has noted, the task of ecological repair requires the networking of the political, economic, business, educational, scientific, as well as the religious communities. Jainism, given its ethic of nonviolence and its deep involvement with the governmental structures of India and the business community worldwide, is well equipped to initiate the process. But, in order for any of this work to be effective, it must proceed from a story. The story of the human superiority over nature has been told throughout the world, even by the Jains who seek to rise above nature. And this story has been realized, as seen in the success of consumer culture worldwide. Native habitats continue to be destroyed as industrialization expands. As this happens, entire species of animals, insects, and plants disappear, never to return. Yet humans proliferate, taking up more space worldwide with their houses and condominiums and farmland, encroaching on and destroying the wild, isolating humans within fabricated landscapes that separate the human from the pulse of nonhuman life.

A shift in consciousness must take place that places greater value on life in its myriad forms. The cosmological views of Jainism, the insights of contemporary science, and the growing perception of the beauty and fragility of the natural order all can contribute to this essential shift toward the development and enhancement of an earth-friendly way of life.

Notes

1. Santī Sūri, *Jīva Vitāra Prakaraṇam along with Pāthaka Ratnakara's Commentary*, ed. Muni Rama-Prabha Vijaya, trans. Jayant P. Thaker (Madras: Jain Mission Society, 1950), 163. Hereafter cited as *JVP*.
2. Umasvāī, *Tainvārīha Sūtra; That Which Is*, trans. Nathmal Tatia (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994), 2.2.333, p. 53.
3. *Ibid.*, 2:24, pp. 45–46.
4. Brian Swimme, *The Hidden Heart of the Cosmos: Humanity and the New Story* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996), 93.
5. *Ibid.*, 33.
6. *Ibid.*, 112.
7. See Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era: A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992).
8. *Ācārāṅga Sūtra* 1.8.1.11–12. From *Jaina Sūtras*, Part 1, *The Ācārāṅga Sūtra*, *The Kalpa Sūtra*, trans. Hermann Jacobi (1884, reprint, New York: Dover, 1968). Hereafter cited as *AS*.
9. See R. Williams, *Jaina Yoga: A Survey of the Medieval Śrāvakācāras* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963).
10. *AS* 2.3.3.3.
11. *JVP* 34.
12. *JVP* 163.
13. *JVP* 3–4.
14. *JVP* 5.
15. *JVP* 6.
16. *JVP* 7.
17. *JVP* 15.
18. *JVP* 16, 17.
19. *JVP* 35.
20. *JVP* 18.
21. Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988), 164.
22. Thomas Berry, "Religion in the Ecozoic Era" (plenary address to the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Washington, D.C., November 1993), 2.
23. *Ibid.*, 18.
24. David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1996), 56.
25. *Ibid.*, 68.
26. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 127.
27. Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, 81.
28. Christopher Key Chapple, *Nonviolence to Animals, Earth, and Self in Asian Traditions* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), chap. 4.
29. Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, 85.
30. *Ibid.*, 268.
31. *AS* 2.4.2.11–12.