

Summary of the Paper

The Emergence of Ahimsā in Indian Thought

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The practice of *ahimsā* within the Indian traditions has a long and obscure past, one that is as complicated and difficult as the history of India itself. In tracing the origins of this concept, the question that is soon addressed is: From what tradition did this practice originate? In attempting to answer one must venture far back in history, looking at an assortment of texts and trying to construct a timeline based off of ancient writings from oral traditions. From this timeline it becomes clear that *ahimsā* as both a practice and a teaching came out of the Śramaṇic tradition, as opposed to the tradition of the *Vedas*.

The religion of Ancient India is often characterized by the beliefs and practices of the Vedic Period, along with the Brahmin who took charge. Fire rituals and blood sacrifices to various deities for the gain of material wealth, sons, and long life were performed, with seemingly little interest in otherworldly matters. Because practices such as these were widely accepted, it becomes clear that the practice of *ahimsā* had other roots, ones that were possibly more indigenous to India than the practices descending from the Aryans. The Śramaṇic tradition arose in contrast to the mainstream Brahmanical religion, emphasizing meditation and ascetic practices, as opposed to external rituals. Jainism and Buddhism both emerge from this tradition, with their so-called founders Pārśvanātha, Mahāvīra, and Siddhārtha Gautama becoming wandering mendicants in their paths toward spiritual awakening. These leaders taught *ahimsā* as one of the foremost important aspects to spiritual liberation as one of the ways of reducing the accumulation of *karma*.

By tracing the timeline of the usage of this term it becomes clear that the Jaina tradition was the forerunner in using *ahimsā* as a religious

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concept. The *Vedas* briefly mention the term, however their usage is mostly in reference to the god Agni, requesting he does not bring harm upon the people. The first time it appears in the Hindu tradition as a moral teaching can be found in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, which dates to around 600 BCE, and becomes part of the doctrine from then on. However, Pārśvanātha, who is believed to have lived three centuries before the *Upaniṣads* were recorded, attained enlightenment and instructed his followers and fellow monks, who would later be known as Jains, to take up this practice. Centuries later Mahāvīra spreads this message to a wider audience, who would then hold it as their highest *dharma*. It is therefore likely that the *ahimsā* so widely taught throughout most, if not all, Indian religions has its origins in the Jaina tradition. The promulgation of this practice shows a change in religious consciousness, as well as the goal for many within the Indian religious traditions of the time.

Ahimsā remains at the forefront of Jaina doctrine and philosophy, and is perpetuated by its practitioners in a variety of ways. Most known are the ordained monks and nuns who go about carrying brooms to remove critters from their path, and wearing masks to prevent from harming any *jīva* that may potentially be in the air. However, the laity, too, implements non-violence in their everyday lives, from what they eat to the professions they decide to take. The laity and the ordained hold a reciprocal relationship in which they help one another with their practices, including that of *ahimsā*, with the laity providing food and shelter to the wandering monks and nuns, while the ordained perform rituals, chant *mantras*, pray and meditate for the well-being of all. *Ahimsā* as a religious concept began within the tradition that would later be known as Jainism, and remains paramount today, as is evident by both lay and ordained practitioners.

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