

A Response to Christspiracy: Jain Yoga as the Internalization of the Sacrifice

From [Christopher Jain Miller, PhD, Arihanta Institute](#)

May 2024

A Response to Christspiracy: Jain Yoga as the Internalization of the Sacrifice



The recently released documentary *Christspiracy* delves into the ancient tradition of temple animal sacrifice and the radical teachings of Jesus that sought to undermine this practice. While the film sheds light on a significant aspect of religious history and the potentially devastating consequences of religious worldviews for human-animal relations, the initial release of *Christspiracy* does not mention the profound contributions of another ancient tradition that has vehemently opposed animal sacrifice for thousands of years: Jainism.

Rumor has it that the final release yet to come will, however, include some previously unseen footage about the Jain tradition. Until then, this article will show how the Jain tradition offers a rich and ancient perspective on the sanctity of all life and the moral imperative to eschew violence against all forms of life, which includes the rejection of animal sacrifice as well as a complete reinterpretation of the meaning of sacrifice altogether.

Ancient Vedic animal sacrifice and Jain opposition

In ancient South Asia, Vedic Brahmanical practices included elaborate rituals of animal sacrifice. These rituals were believed to sustain cosmic order and appease deities through ritual action, or “karma” in Sanskrit. One will immediately recognize the word “karma” here, which in its earliest Vedic context simply meant “action,” and more specifically the actual action of performing a Vedic sacrifice.

These ritual performances, or “karmas,” often involved the killing of animals, which Jains found deeply troubling. Jains would therefore reinterpret the term “karma” from its original meaning of the “performance of ritual sacrifice” as understood in the Vedic tradition to instead mean the negative *consequences* of performing such violent sacrifices.

Indeed Jainism, which preceded and emerged before Buddhism in ancient South Asia, stood out for its unwavering commitment to *ahimsā*, or nonviolence, a principle that extends to all living beings. The tradition taught that if one violates the principle of nonviolence by performing an animal sacrifice, for example, one would one day be reborn to experience the same consequences and pain in a future lifetime.

At the risk of grossly oversimplifying this process for readers new to the topic, we might describe this karmic process as reinterpreted by the Jains as “we reap what we sow,” or perhaps in more secular terms, “what goes around comes around.” The goal of the Jain tradition and the many yoga systems it would influence was to *stop* this karmic process altogether in order to achieve liberation from the ceaseless cycle of suffering, death, and reincarnation.

Jain opposition to animal sacrifice was not merely theoretical but was deeply embedded in their religious practices and ethical teachings. Jains rejected the Vedic notion that animal sacrifice was necessary for spiritual progress or cosmic order - in fact the opposite, animal sacrifice and slaughter was *antithetical* to spiritual life and the laws of the cosmos. Thus instead, Jains emphasized that true spiritual advancement could only be achieved through nonviolence, self-control, and an internal purification achieved through an *internalized* sacrifice.

Internalizing the sacrifice: the story of Harikesha

One of the most illustrative tales from Jain scriptures that highlights the way Jains conceived of the internalization of the sacrifice is found in the story of Harikesha.

This story, told in the *Uttarādhyāyanaśūtra* (US),[2] describes Harikesha as a dedicated Jain ascetic who, during his wandering, encountered a group of Brahmins preparing a Vedic sacrifice. As part of his daily routine, Harikesha went begging for food and approached these Brahmins. Unaware of his ascetic principles and provoked by his presence, the Brahmins persecuted and abused him.

Despite their hostility, Harikesha remained calm and composed, embodying the Jain principle of nonviolence even in the face of their aggression. Yakshas (tree spirits) witnessed this confrontation and, recognizing Harikesha's virtue, intervened to protect him. Their intervention underscores the Jain belief in the protection and support that nonviolent people like Harikesha might receive from the cosmos for their virtue.

Following this event, Harikesha seized the opportunity to address the Brahmins. He preached the true meaning of sacrifice, not as the external act of burning fires and sacrificing animals, at one point instructing:

"O Brāhmanas, why do you tend the fire... that *external* purity which you seek for, is not the right thing..." (US 12.38)

Intrigued, the Brahmins inquired of Harikesha:

"How should we sacrifice, Oh monk, and avoid [evil] actions? Tell us, ascetic... the right method of sacrificing?" (US 12.40)

Harikesha responds with a laundry list of recommendations, beginning, most notably by telling them to perform sacrifice while "doing no injury to living beings..." (US 12.41)

The Brahmins, accustomed to performing fire sacrifices and confused by Harikesha's instructions, further inquire of him,

"Where is your fire, your fireplace, your sacrificial ladle? Where is the dried cowdung (used as fuel) ... What kinds of oblations do you offer to the fire?" (US 12.43)

Harikesha famously responds to his soon-to-be-convinced Brahmins:

"Penance is my fire; life my fireplace; right exertion is my sacrificial ladle; the body the dry cowdung; Karman is my fuel; self-control, right exertion, and tranquility are the oblations, praised by the sages, which I offer." (US 12.44)

In his teachings, Harikesha completely inverted the meaning of the *external* Vedic sacrifice used for achieving egotistical goals that was often deadly for animals. According to his Jain logic, the sacrifice must be *internalized* as proper ethical conduct in pursuit of self-purification and liberation while simultaneously avoiding all injury to any form of life.

The true sacrifice: Jayaghosha

The *Uttarādhyayanāsūtra* (US) later reiterates the notion of an internalized sacrifice in its Twenty-fifth lecture when it describes the ascetic wandering of the sage Jayaghosha.

Here, Jayaghosha encounters a Brahmin named Vijayaghosha who is – you guessed it – performing a Vedic sacrifice. Having just ended a fast, the sage Jayaghosha approaches the Brahmin and begs for food, which the Brahmin, as expected, refuses to provide.

Maintaining his yogic equanimity, Jayaghosha responds:

“You do not know what is most essential in the Vedas, nor in sacrifices, nor in the heavenly bodies, nor in duties [dharma].” (US 25.11)

The Brahmin and all who were with him asked Jayaghosha to clarify what he meant, pleading for the sage to tell them, among other things, “what is most essential in the sacrifice” (US 25.14). In response, Jayaghosha tells them:

“The binding of animals (to the sacrificial pole), all the Vedas, and sacrifices, being causes of [evil karma], cannot save the [evil doer]; for his works (or Karman) are very powerful.” (US 25.30)

In his response to this Jain teaching, the Brahmin Vijayaghosha admits to the sage, “You are a sacrificer of sacrifices...” (US 25.37), acknowledging that Jayaghosha had internalized the sacrifice in his own body. Inspired, the Brahmin renounces his violent sacrificial lifestyle and enters the ascetic order of Jayaghosha wherein both eliminate all of their evil karma and reach a state of spiritual perfection.

Jain influence on other traditions and into the present

As we can see from this last story, Jains were not the only ones in ancient South Asia who challenged the Vedic sacrifice and slaughter of animals. Indeed, challenge came from within the Vedic sacrificial system itself as renouncers of the sacrifice influenced by the emerging Jain ethos of *self*-sacrifice toward liberation proceeded to reinterpret their own traditions in light of the principle of nonviolence, or *ahiṃsā*. This practice, *ahiṃsā*, eventually became the ethical foundation of Patañjali’s well-known eight-fold yoga compiled by later Brahmins who had by then eschewed animal sacrifice under Jain influence. Jain teachings thereby contributed to a broader cultural and religious critique and reform of animal slaughter, promoting vegetarianism and the ethical treatment of animals.

Within these historical processes in ancient South Asia, a shared “*śramaṇa*” (“striver” for spiritual liberation) culture emerged wherein members of differing religious traditions shared a commitment to the rejection of animal slaughter and consumption as well as the internalization of the sacrifice through yogic practice, despite their religious differences. We might (anachronistically) say that they adopted what my colleague Jonathan Dickstein refers to today as a *practice*-based, “[Unifying Vegan Horizon](#)” amidst their differing belief systems.

The Jain stance against animal sacrifice indeed had significant implications in ancient times and continues to influence contemporary thought and practice. For example, today, the principles of Jainism continue to resonate with the growing global movement towards veganism, animal rights, and ethical living. As I have written elsewhere, [I myself became vegan because of my exposure to Jain philosophy and ethics](#).

It is also no surprise, therefore, that [many Jains are today giving up dairy and transitioning towards complete veganism](#) given [the manifold, devastating forms of violence routinely carried out by the dairy industry globally](#). By advocating for a non-violent lifestyle, Jains such as those in the [Jain Vegan Initiative](#) [1] thereby offer a model of compassionate living that challenges the exploitation and suffering of animals in contemporary society. But they

also [simultaneously offer a holistic spiritual path](#) involving the ancient yogic discipline of internalizing the sacrifice, a path in which veganism forms just one integral and necessary component.

Revisiting *Christspiracy* in Light of Jain Teachings

Christspiracy rightly highlights Jesus' challenge to the tradition of animal sacrifice, presenting him as a revolutionary figure who sought to transform religious practices and promote compassion. However, the documentary's omission of the Jain tradition in the initial release occludes a crucial dimension of the historical and religious opposition to animal sacrifice in South Asia, which we hope to soon see in the final version of the film.

Jain philosophy, with its ancient roots and unwavering commitment to nonviolence, indeed provides a rich and complementary narrative to that of Jesus. Both traditions historically called into question the moral justification of animal sacrifice and advocated for a profound internal transformation that emphasizes compassion, humility, and respect for all life. Jains and Jesus also share, we might say, a practice-oriented, "[Unifying Vegan Horizon](#)" despite their obvious historical and doctrinal differences.

By incorporating the Jain perspective into the history of animal sacrifice, we gain a more comprehensive understanding of the historical resistance to animal sacrifice and the enduring ethical principles that continue to inspire movements for animal rights and ethical living today. The stories of Harikesha and Jayaghosha, as well as Jain Yoga teachings more broadly, remind us that true sacrifice lies not in the shedding of another's blood, but in the shedding of our own ignorance and ego, leading to a more compassionate and nonviolent world.

Christspiracy has reinvigorated critical dialogue on the ethics of animal sacrifice and killing in religious traditions. As a scholar of the Jain tradition, I would just like to add here that it is essential to recognize and include the contributions Jains have made to the rejection of animal sacrifice, as well as the profound implications this has had on Vedic sacrifice all the way into the present. Jains, like Jesus, challenged the prevailing norms of their time, advocating for a radical rethinking of what it means to live a spiritually and ethically sound life. By embracing these perspectives, we can enrich our understanding of the historical and ongoing efforts to promote a more compassionate and non-violent world free of harm to animals.

Conclusion: we have made our planet a sacrifice zone

As climate collapse approaches faster than scientists could have ever predicted, it is no coincidence that the world is burning (2023 being the hottest year on record so far). The entire planet is becoming what social scientists [including myself often call a boiling "sacrifice zone"](#) of sorts. As climate scientists repeatedly show, but the public continues to ignore, raising and killing animals for food is one of, if not the primary, contributor to global greenhouse gas emissions.

In light of this, the Jain vegan way of life continues to offer a more sustainable (and compassionate!) way of being in the world as it asks us to *internalize* the sacrifice through self-restraint, a practice which includes leaving animals alone, so as to create a more viable planetary future for all, both human and non-human.

As I often tell my students, "It is only when we liberate animals and all forms of life from our own violent impulses, that we ourselves become truly free." We are all called to do better, and that is why, at Arihanta Institute, we combine graduate studies in both [Jain Yoga and Vegan Studies](#) to educate and inspire one another to live a more ethical, vegan lifestyle.

[1] With special thanks to Sunny Jain at the [Jain Vegan Initiative](#) for reading the initial draft of this essay.

[2] All translations are taken from [Jacobi's translation of the *Uttarādhyayanāsūtra*](#), with slight modifications in [brackets] where the author felt it was necessary to clarify the meaning in Jacobi's original translation.

Christopher Jain Miller, the co-founder and Vice President of Academic Affairs at Arihanta Institute, completed his PhD in the study of Religion at the University of California, Davis. His current research focuses on Modern Yoga and Engaged Jainism. Christopher is the author of a number of articles and book chapters concerned with Jainism and the practice of modern yoga.

If you are interested in learning more about [Animal Advocacy & Biodiversity](#) at the intersection of [Jain Philosophy, History & Anthropology](#), Professor Miller teaches several self-paced, online courses, including:

- [Course 1014 | Jainism, Veganism, and Engaged Religion](#) [Starts June 2, 2024]
- [Course 1008 | Jain Responses to Climate Change](#) [Free Course!]
- [Course 1006 | Jain Dharma and Animal Advocacy](#)
- [Course 1001 | Jain Philosophy in Daily Life](#)