



[Michael Charles Tobias](#), Contributor

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## A Jain Leader Addresses the World



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This [past July](#), Gurudev Shri Chitrabhanuji, who spends part of each year in New York City, turned 90. For the millions of Jains and non-Jains worldwide, this former Muni (monk) is a global leader, pioneer, visionary, activist and profoundly affecting philosopher. His life and message are more relevant than ever.

For decades, Shri Chitrabhanuji has rigorously, gently and persuasively advocated for peace throughout the world, *ahimsa* in Sanskrit, meaning non-violence. Shri Chitrabhanuji represents a living link to the great Jain sage, Mahavira (599 – 527 BCE) who is believed by some historians to have been an elder mentor to Buddha.

Mahavira proposed, among other things, a brilliant message of non-violence, tolerance, compassion, and the embrace of what was (then) a radical notion: the ecological interdependency of all living beings. After millennia, this potent ethical ideal has become key to the biological sciences, as well as inspiring such people as Tolstoy, Gandhi (who was tutored by a Jain monk early in his life), and Martin Luther King, Jr.



Buddha, © M.C. Tobias

Shri Chitrabhanuji, a global ambassador for Mahavira's call to peace, is the author of over twenty-six books, but it is his very [life](#) that offers us a particularly timely opportunity to reflect on his philosophy of world peace and an emphasis on our pressing need to appreciate the sanctity of all life. The photographs of Shri Chitrabhanuji seen here have never been published before and are done so with the most generous permission of the Chitrabhanu family.

**Michael Tobias:** Gurudev, many people may not be familiar with Jainism. What is it?

**Shri Chitrabhanuji:** The “ism” added to the end of “Jain” is an English construct. In Jain thinking, there is no “ism” as “ism” implies separation or competition with other systems of thinking. We prefer Jain “dharma” which is a complementary way of life that can co-exist with others, just like a healthy diet. Dharma means to be in one’s original nature – the state an object will return to when not influenced from the outside. For example, the nature of water is to remain cool. You can boil it and it will become hot, however, when you put it down, after a while it will become cool again. The nature of fire is to be hot and burning – you can try to dampen it, but given a chance it will rage again.

**Michael Tobias:** And humanity, human nature?



**Shri Chitrabhanuji:** What is the original nature of the human being? Is it peace, love and goodwill?

Today, due to the demands of our life, we have lost touch with this element. However, if you let people unwind, take a morning walk, spend time with children or work on our craft... we will return to peace, love and goodwill.

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**Michael Tobias:** So, what does “Jain” mean?

**Shri Chitrabhanuji:** Jain is derived from the word “ji” which means to conquer. Jains are they who seek to conquer anything inside themselves that takes them away from their original nature. Jains were born in a warrior culture. Perhaps that is what explains the importance of the notion of “conquest.” However, the difference is that rather than conquering outside, conquest here is within the inner world. To live a long and fruitful life, be in harmony with your original nature. If you become raging with anger for an hour, you will get a headache. If you rage for the whole day, you may get a heart attack. You can’t sustain long-term anger because it is not your original nature. But in peace, you can live your entire life.

**Michael Tobias:** What is it about Jain traditions in India, the U.S. and elsewhere in the world, that lend themselves to an understanding of the world that is non-violent?

**Shri Chitrabhanuji:** Jain dharma adds to the singular personal vision the lens of plurality of perspectives or relativity of thinking (Anekanta). As children we grow to see life through the lens of personal preferences. Our parents and teachers instruct us to see life through the lens of others, as well, to “put yourself in the other person’s shoes.” Jain dharma takes this notion further by recognizing that the imposition of one’s views on others is a subtle form of violence upon them. This influences how we think about our personal relationships as well as how we think about relating to other groups in society. Your point of view is as valid to you as my point of view is to me.

**Michael Tobias:** The ecological dimensions of this should be obvious, no?

**Shri Chitrabhanuji:** Michael, Jain dharma encourages sensitivity towards not just human beings but all sentient life forms, which includes animals and plants – even single-celled beings. Every living being wants to live. You can see this in their actions and behavior. Even if you try to trap a small ant, it will try to run away. All life moves towards safety and away from danger. So, for a Jain, since it may not be possible to eradicate all forms of violence, the emphasis is on minimizing violence to all beings wherever possible. Thus, anyone who is Jain is also automatically an environmentalist and ecologist.



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**Michael Tobias:** The concept of “minimizing violence” is, of course, a brilliant philosophical stroke, because it not only references inherently the notion of pragmatic idealism, but also invokes the goal of symbiosis, of mutual respect, empathy and tolerance.



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**Shri Chitrabhanuji:** The symbiotic nature of non-violence and plurality of perspectives in Jain dharma has greatly inspired Mahatma Gandhi’s non-violence movement. Through Gandhi, the emphasis on non-violence has influenced both Martin Luther King, Jr. and Nelson Mandela in their freedom struggles. So you can see how the core teachings of Jain dharma have trickled into our modern world in a profound way.

**Michael Tobias:** The world can be brutal; and for many billions of animals and hundreds of millions of people, it is indeed so. For so many who are hurting, unemployed, desperate, and more than a billion people who are hungry, what can Jain dharma contribute?



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**Shri Chitrabhanuji:** This is a good question and highly relevant today. The answer is subtle. The Jain notion of non-violence begins with one’s self and moves outwards to others. The violence we see in the world is a secondary violence. The primary violence is experienced first by and upon the person committing the violence. A matchstick cannot burn something else without burning its own head, first.

**Michael Tobias:** Very true.

**Shri Chitrabhanuji:** For someone who is going through troubled times, often the first reaction is anger and blame. Jain dharma teaches us that the first thing to do is to accept that “this is my situation, my karma” – what I have sown somewhere else, that is what I am witnessing here today. However, the future is wide open. It may be shaped by my past but it’s dominant influence is my present – and my present is something that I fully control. Therefore, in desperate times particularly, we should not spend our precious energy in blame or anger upon others. Our anger will likely not hurt the other but will certainly damage our own creativity and initiative. When we resolve to take full ownership of where we are, we are left with great energy to address the pressing matters at hand.

**Michael Tobias:** But then what?

**Shri Chitrabhanuji:** So if an educated person is looking to earn money and the only job s/he can find is to wash dishes – what should that person do? Focus on what you can learn from your challenge – to treat it as an opportunity for growth – to treat with dignity whatever work or opportunity comes your way. Perhaps, for a certain phase a person may not be able to enjoy the standard of life s/he desires. But there is much they can still do. I am always inspired by Edward Hale, the American prodigy and clergyman who once said, “I am only one, but still I am one. I cannot do everything, but still I can do something; and because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do something that I can do.” So the energy which is burnt in blaming others is applied to fulfilling one’s needs and for growth.



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**Michael Tobias:** That’s quite compelling. Now: Is there such a thing as “Jain economics” and if so – how can it help inform a more sustainable future?

**Shri Chitrabhanuji:** Jain dharma embraces the notion of “simplicity” (Aparigraha) as an elegant formula for a happy life. Simple is beautiful, and a simple life is a life we can handle. Beyond a point, accumulation of things, be it money or material objects, creates complexity. Managing this complexity can rob us of the very joy that our accumulation should have provided. I have seen closely the misery that wealth can bring to individuals and families, as well as the joy and happiness accompanied by a simple lifestyle. Doesn’t modern research on happiness also find that beyond a point of necessity, money does not dramatically alter one’s level of happiness?

**Michael Tobias:** Clearly, every major religious and spiritual tradition suggests that accumulations are, ultimately, ephemeral. One is reminded of the poet Percy Shelley’s remarkable lines from his “Ozymandias:”

*“My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings/*

*Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!// Nothing beside remains. Round the decay/ Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare/  
The lone and level sands stretch far away.”*

**Shri Chitrabhanuji:** Accumulate to be able to manage one’s life peacefully rather than to satisfy pride and vanity. It is like the man who asked “Why should I work so hard, if, at the end of it all, all I really want to do is spend time with my family in the evenings and celebrate each day?” What you want to do at the end, why not do at the start?



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**Michael Tobias:** And so how should people going to work each morning think about notions like creating a lifestyle and future for themselves and their families?



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**Shri Chitrabhanuji:** We should aspire to create a simple and sustainable life style that meets our need but not necessarily our greed. The purpose of life is not to enter a competition and spend life saying I want to become “like him or her.” This approach is often misunderstood as undermining enterprise and initiative. No. We should all strive to be the best version of ourselves as possible and contribute to the world as much as we can. Each person must set their own boundaries. However, in the pursuit of our aspirations, we should be mindful of the price we are paying on our personal well-being and relationships with others.

**Michael Tobias:** Is there a Jain “mantra of simplicity?”

**Shri Chitrabhanuji:** The mantra of simplicity has a lot to offer our debt-ridden world where our needs and desires often out-pace our bank accounts. If we can balance the scales a bit and find more joy in simplicity, a culture can become a savings-society rather than an indebted one. This would create a path to building a sustainable and solid foundation for our children and the community’s future.

**Michael Tobias:** Speaking of sustainability, which most rational people are thinking about these days – ecologically, economically, politically – do Jains get involved with politics, and if so, could you characterize just a few of the leading points of view that best suggest the key Jain precepts for community life, especially with “sustainability” in mind?



Shri Chitrabhanuji seated, front center, © Chitrabhanu Family Archives

**Shri Chitrabhanuji:** The main precept for community life amongst Jains is the notion that all life is bound together by mutual support and interdependence (*“Paraspar Upagraho Jivanam”*). So, in Jain dharma, one does not aspire to “politics.” One aspires to “serve.” The difference is important. And within politics is also embedded the acceptability of competition and defeat. This is a form of violence. So, for Jains, the primary intention is of utmost importance. Is the intention to defeat someone else, or, rather, to serve by bringing out the best from one’s own self? Working with this clarity, a Jain can pursue any cause or mission that is worthwhile for society.



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**Shri Chitrabhanuji:** It was a beautiful life. I lived it for 28 years from the age of 22 to 50. I was born into a business family in Rajasthan. But at a young age, I witnessed the death of 3 people dear to me – my mother, my sister and a close friend from college. So, at 22 I became a Jain monk in search of answers. For the first 5 years, I maintained complete silence, except for limited dialogue with my Guru. We lived a minimal lifestyle, roaming from town to town, by foot. We must have walked over 25,000 miles over the years. The life was focused on daily practices, reading, meditating and meeting with the town people. Then, after many years of learning, I began speaking and lecturing broadly.

**Michael Tobias:** You were once a Jain monk. When I first had the opportunity to meet a Jain monk, it was at a temple in Central India. I took off my sandals, and was about to enter the sanctuary when someone gently asked that I remove my watch and leave it outside. I assumed it meant that I was entering a timeless sacred place, and watches were symbols of temporality and attachment, and hence, inappropriate. I later learned it was because my watchband was made of leather, and, of course, most Jains are vegetarian, if not vegan. That was a huge insight for me. In sum, what was life like for you as a Jain monk in India?

**Michael Tobias:** And your first travels abroad?

**Shri Chitrabhanuji:** In 1970, I was invited to the Second Spiritual Summit conference in Geneva and the Third Spiritual Summit conference at Harvard Divinity in 1971. I saw these as an opportunity to share the principles of Jain dharma with the Western world.

It was a difficult time for America, with the assassinations of JFK and Martin Luther King, Jr. and the ongoing war in Vietnam. The concept of Jain teaching – particularly the focus on non-violence as a way of living, was relatively unknown in the West at that time. So I decided to [travel and teach](#). Since then, many Jains and Westerners have embraced the teachings in their lives.



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**Michael Tobias:** Now, having helped establish more than 65 Jain centers across North America, under the umbrella of [JAINA](#), and having delivered probably thousands of talks and meditations at universities, conferences, shrines, temples, symposia and gatherings around the world, have you changed over the years?

**Shri Chitrabhanuji:** Today, I am in my 90th year. So, you can say that my life has changed in many ways. Today, I have a beautiful family which began with my inspiring life partner Pramodaji. Pramodaji has become a sought after public speaker on Jain dharma in her own right, and I relish the rich conversations we have with each other. With her, our family has grown with our children and their children! However, essentially, I have not changed. I am still living a life of simplicity and living in harmony with one's nature which were at the core of my life as a monk 40 years ago. Another front that has changed is the audience. Today, I speak to more of an

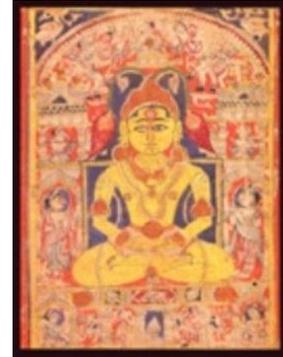


international audience whereas earlier it was largely an Indian audience. In the 1970s, '80s and even '90s, a lot of my time and energy was spent building the institutions that could provide a sustainable path for Jain dharma beyond the shores of India. Today, we have over 80 Jain centers across the world. These institutions are self-reliant, and are blessed with strong leaders at all levels. So, in essence, my job is done. I have the joy of looking at this blossoming community and it gives me great pride and joy. As a result, I have limited my public engagements and find myself relishing simple pleasures and the joys of my inner world.

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**Michael Tobias:** Although countless histories of religion and of India describe him, from your perspective, who really was Mahavir and what relevancy does his message have for a tumultuous 21st century?

**Shri Chitrabhanuji:** Michael, as you well know, Mahavir was the 24th enlightened teacher of the Jain dharma. By birth, he was a Prince of Maghadha, India in 599 BC. At the age of 30, he left his home for self-realization and to find the purpose of life. With the help of meditation he experienced harmony between his words, thoughts and actions. His teachings, more than those of any other Jain teachers, have been instrumental in shaping Jain thinking and practice today.



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**Michael Tobias:** And to sum it all up?

**Shri Chitrabhanuji:** The most important thing to realize within this brief journey of, on average, one hundred years is that each of us is inherently holding pure divine consciousness. Once you realize this you will know that everyone else is also holding divine consciousness. This world has a lot to offer – countless experiences and gifts. The secret is to enjoy it all without being dependent upon any one thing. So, live in the world, enjoy it, appreciate it, but don't be attached to it.



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