

Empathizing (Jainism)

Non-harming

Non-harming is the primary, all-encompassing virtue and ethical directive of Jainism. Because we are not as used to thinking in terms of non-harming, or *ahimsa*, as are our Jain counterparts, it takes some work to realize the ways that harming and violence subtly and overtly infiltrate our lives. Have the students take a day, or longer if they choose, to pay close attention to what they feel, think, and do—their intentions and their actions. The goal is to become aware of the ways we can cause harm to ourselves or to other sentient beings. After the students have raised their awareness in this way, they might choose to go through a day trying to avoid harm or injury as much as possible. They can reflect on the difficulty of that and on ways in which they might begin to incorporate non-harming into their daily lives.

Vegetarian for a Day . . . or Longer

One specific application of the non-harming principle is the Jains' adherence to a vegetarian diet. You very well may have students in class who are already vegetarians, mostly so, or vegans (who use no animal products, including such things as leather shoes, honey, or eggs). Those who are not vegetarian can take their study of Jainism as an opportunity to try a vegetarian diet for a time. They might wish to discuss which foods they especially missed, any changes in how they felt, social inconveniences they incurred, and similar issues. Vegetarian students in the class might be willing to share with other students the reasons for their choice. You might also invite a dietician to discuss the advantages and cautions of such a diet from a nutritional standpoint. You might also choose to visit a vegetarian restaurant for a meal to show the students that a vegetarian diet doesn't necessarily involve boring or bland food.

Real-World Asceticism

Our culture is often regarded as one of self-indulgence and consumerism. Commerce is the engine that powers our economy, and advertising frequently encourages us to acquire more and more material items. This can make it difficult for the students to appreciate the ascetic emphasis found in Jainism. Remembering that Jains do allow for practicalities, invite the students to discuss how they might change their lives if they were to choose to practice a more austere or ascetic lifestyle. Ask them to consider what sorts of things they might do that are feasible. Also ask them if they can think of any advantages of living a more austere life and how they might feel about the prospect of doing so.



The Twelve Vows

Invite the students to read through the twelve vows that guide the moral life of Jain laity (see page 108 in the student book). For each vow, allow the students time to reflect on how or if they have broken it in their own lives. You may not want to have them share about this, or you may extend an invitation to share, emphasizing that they may share only what they are comfortable sharing. In a similar framework, you might ask them to consider things they could do that would bring their lives more in line with each vow.

