

Twelve Vows of Lay People (Shrāvaks and Shrāvikās)

Jain ethics outlines the following twelve vows of limited nature to be carried out by lay people. Every Jain should adopt these vows according to one's individual capacity and circumstances with the intent to ultimately adopt the 5 Mahāvratas (great vows). These vows are to be followed in thought, action, and speech, and others should be encouraged to follow them as well.

During the Pratikraman, lay people reflect on minor violations (Atichār) that occurred in the past of these vows. One would ask for forgiveness for his/her past minor violations, which may have occurred knowingly or unknowingly. He/she would reflect on each of these violations so that in the future they would not repeat the same errors and be more aware if such circumstances arise.

Five Main Vows of Limited Nature (Anuvratas):

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| 1 | Ahimsa Anuvrata | Limited Vow of Non-violence |
| 2 | Satya Anuvrata | Limited Vow of Truthfulness |
| 3 | Acharya Anuvrata | Limited Vow of Non-stealing |
| 4 | Brahmacharya Anuvrata | Limited Vow of Chastity |
| 5 | Aparigraha Anuvrata | Limited Vow of Non-attachment |

Three Merit Vows (Guna-vratas):

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| 6 | Dik Vrata | Vow of Limited Area of Activity |
| 7 | Bhoga Upbhoga Vrata | Vow of Limited Use of Consumable and Non-consumable items |
| 8 | Anartha-danda Vrata | Vow of Avoidance of Purposeless Sins |

Four Disciplinary Vows (Shikshā-vratas):

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| 9 | Sāmāyika Vrata | Vow of Equanimity and Meditation for Limited duration |
| 10 | Desāvākāsika Vrata | Vow of Activity within Limited Space and duration |
| 11 | Paushadha Vrata | Vow of Ascetic's life for a Limited Duration |
| 12 | Atithi Samvibhāg Vrata | Vow of Charity |

Of these twelve vows, the first five are the main vows of limited nature (Anuvratas). They are more lenient than the great vows (Mahā-vratas). The great vows are for Jain ascetics.

The next three vows are known as merit vows (Guna-vratas), so called because they enhance and purify the effects of the five main vows. They also govern the external conduct of an individual.

The last four are called disciplinary vows (Shikshā-vratas). They are intended to encourage a person to perform religious duties. They reflect the purity of one's heart. They govern one's internal life and are expressed in a life marked by charity. They are preparatory to the discipline of an ascetic's life. The three merit vows (Gunavratas) and four disciplinary vows (Shikshā vratas) together are known as the seven vows of virtuous conduct (Shilā).

The layperson should be very careful while observing and following these vows. Since these vows are of limited nature, they still leave room for the commitment of necessary sins and possession of property.

Five Main Vows of Limited Nature (Anuvratas)

1. Limited Vow of Nonviolence (Ahimsa Anuvrata)

In this vow, a person must not intentionally hurt any living beings (human, animals, birds, insects, plants etc.) physically or emotionally either by thoughts, words or actions, himself or by approving such an act

committed by somebody else. Intention in this case applies to selfish motive, sheer pleasure and even avoidable negligence.

One may use force, if necessary, in the defense of country, society, family, life, property, and religious institution. Most agricultural, industrial, and occupational activities do involve violence to life, but it should be kept at a minimum, through carefulness and due precaution.

Four Categories of the Nature of Violence:

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| Premeditated Violence: | To attack someone knowingly |
| Defensive Violence: | To commit intentional violence in defense of one's own life, family, society, country |
| Vocational Violence: | To incur violence in the execution of one's means of livelihood (business, job, farming) |
| Common Violence: | To commit violence in the performance of daily activities such as cooking, building shelters, etc |

Premeditated violence is prohibited for all. A householder is partake in necessary violence defensively and vocationally provided he is aware of these Atichärs. Common violence is accepted for survival, but even here one should be careful in preparing food, cleaning one's house, etc in order to minimize violence. This explains the Jain practices of filtering drinking water, vegetarianism, not eating meals at night, and abstinence from alcohol. Nonviolence is the foundation of Jain ethics.

Lord Mahävira says:

'One should not injure, subjugate, enslave, torture or kill any living being including animals, insects, plants, and vegetables.'

This is the essence of the Jain religion. It embraces the welfare of all animals and it protects the environment. It is the basis of all stages of knowledge and the source of all rules of conduct.

2. Limited Vow of Truthfulness (Satya Anuvrata)

Truthfulness is more than abstaining from falsehood. It is seeing the world in its real form and adapting to that reality. The vow of truth puts a person in touch with his inner strength and inner capacities.

In this vow, a person avoids gross lies, such as giving false evidence, denying the property of others entrusted to him, and cheating others. If the truth has the potential to harm others or hurt their feelings, it is better to remain silent. A householder should minimize the minor violations to this vow related to self defense, protection of his family and country, business, and job related circumstances, and the survival of his life and livelihood. He should be fully aware of these Atichärs and should repent them continuously.

3. Limited Vow of Non-stealing (Achaurya / Asteya)

In this vow, a person must not steal, rob, or embezzle others' valuable goods and property. One also must not cheat and use illegal means to acquire worldly assets beyond their minimum needs.

4. Limited Vow of Chastity (Brahmacharya)

The basic intent of this vow is to conquer passion and to prevent the waste of energy. Positively stated, the vow is meant to impart a sense of serenity to the soul.

In this vow, the householder must not have a sensual relationship with anybody but one's own wedded spouse. Even with one's own spouse, excessive indulgence in sensual pleasure should be avoided.

Giving in to sensual pleasure ensnares the mind, which may falter one's efforts towards spiritual progress. This in turn can be expounded to include other mind altering substances such as illicit drugs, certain prescription drugs, smoking and alcohol.

5. Limited Vow of Non-possession / Non-attachment (Aparigraha)

Non-possession is the fifth limited vow. As long as a person does not know the richness of joy and peace that comes from within, he tries to fill his empty and insecure existence with the clutter of material acquisitions.

One is strongly encouraged to impose a limit on one's needs, acquisitions, and possessions such as land, real estate, goods, other valuables, and money. The surplus should be used for the common good. One may also limit the everyday usage of a number of food items or articles and their quantity.

This Jain principle of limited possession for lay people helps to achieve an equitable distribution of wealth and comforts in society. Thus, Jainism helps in establishing common cooperation, economic stability, and welfare in the world.

Non-possession, like non-violence, affirms the oneness of all living beings and is beneficial to an individual in his/her spiritual growth and to society for the redistribution of wealth.

Three Merit Vows (Guna-vratas)

6. Vow of Limited Area of Activity (Dik Vrata)

This vow limits one's worldly activities to certain areas in all ten directions: north, south, east, west, north-east, north-west, south-east, south-west, upwards and downwards. A person gives up committing sins in any place outside the limited area of his worldly activity. This vow provides a space limit to the commitment of sins of common violence not restricted by the limited vow of non-violence. Thus outside the limited area, the limited vows assume the status of full vows (Mahā-vratas).

7. Vow of Limited use of Consumable / Non-consumable items (Bhoga-Upbhoga Vrata)

Generally, sins are committed by using or enjoying consumable (Bhoga) and non-consumable (Upbhoga) objects.

Consumable (Bhoga) objects include those things that can only be used once, such as food and drink. Non-consumable (Upabhoga) objects include those that can be used several times, such as furniture, clothes, and ornaments.

One should limit the use of these two types of items according to one's need and capacity by taking these vows. This vow limits the quantity of items to the commitment of sins not restricted by Aparigraha Anuvrata.

8. Vow of Avoidance of Purposeless Sins (Anartha-danda Vrata)

One must not commit unnecessary or purposeless sins or moral offense as defined below:

Thinking, talking, or preaching evil or ill of others

Being inconsiderate; for example, walking on grass unnecessarily or leaving the water running while brushing your teeth.

Manufacturing or supplying arms for war

Reading or listening to immoral literature, or showing carelessness in ordinary behavior

Four Disciplinary Vows (Shikshā vratas)

9. Vow of Equanimous State for Limited Duration (Sāmāyika Vrata)

This vow consists of remaining in equanimous state and sitting down at one place for at least 48 minutes. During this time one concentrates on spiritual activities like reading religious books, praying, or meditating. This vow may be repeated many times in a day. It is to be observed by mind, body, and speech.

The equanimous state of 48 minutes makes a person realize the importance of a life-long vow to avoid all sinful activities and is a stepping stone to a life of full renunciation. During Sāmāyika, one also meditates on the soul and its relationship with karma.

One should practice the vow of Sāmāyika by giving up affection and aversion (Rag and Dvesha), observing equanimity towards all objects, thinking evil of no one, and being at peace with the world.

10. Vow of Activity of Limited Space (Desāvākāsika Vrata)

This vow sets a new limit within the limitations already set by Dik Vrata and Bhoga-Upbhoga Vrata. The general life-long limitation of doing business in certain areas and the use of articles are further restricted for particular days and times of the week.

This means that one shall not, during a certain period of time, perform any activity or make any business dealings, or travel beyond a certain city, street, or house.

11. Vow of Ascetic's Life for Limited Duration (Paushadha Vrata)

This vow requires a person to live the life of an ascetic for a period of time. During this time one should retire to a secluded place, renounce all sinful activities, abstain from seeking pleasure from all objects of the senses, and observe restraint of body, speech and mind. A person follows the five great vows (Mahā-vratas) completely during this time. This time should be spent in spiritual contemplation, meditation (Sāmāyika), self-study, study of the scriptures, and worship of the supreme beings (Arihantas and Siddhas). This vow promotes and nourishes one's religious life and provides training for an ascetic life.

12. Vow of Charity (Atithi Samvibhāg Vrata)

One should give food, clothes, medicine, and other articles of one's own possession to monks, nuns, pious and needy people. Food should be pure and offered with reverence.

One should not prepare separate food especially for ascetics (monks or nuns) as they are not allowed to receive such food. Donation of one's own food and articles to monks and other needy people provides an inner satisfaction and raises one's consciousness to a higher level. It also saves them from acquiring more sins if they would have used the same for their nourishment, comfort and pleasure.

Peaceful Death (Sanlekhanā):

In the final days of life, a householder can attain a peaceful death if he/she truly follows the above twelve vows. A peaceful death is characterized by non-attachment to worldly objects and by suppression of passions at the time of death. The last thought should be of a calm renunciation of the body, and this thought should be present long before death.

It should be noted that Sanlekhanā is not a form of suicide or assisted death. It is usually performed by those who have led a very spiritual life and is undertaken in the presence of a guru.

Summary:

By practicing these twelve vows, a lay person may live a righteous life, advance towards a spiritual state where he works on conquering desires. While earning wealth, supporting his family, and taking up arms to protect himself, his family, and his country against intruders, a layman is taught self-restraint, love and equanimity. On one hand, a person is debarred from doing any harm to oneself, one's family, country, or to humanity by reckless conduct. On the other hand, by giving up attachments, he/she gradually prepares himself or herself for the life of an ascetic.

The practice of limiting the number of things to be kept or enjoyed by oneself eliminates the danger of concentration of wealth and in turn will help to minimize poverty and crime in society. Therefore, limiting the desires of individuals results in an ideal society.

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