

Dharma Academy of North America (DĀNAM)

**DANAM 2026 Theme: Imagination & Intention:
Thinking about the Future through Story, Philosophy & the Social/Spiritual
Reforms**

SESSION 3: Engaged Dharma: Indian Religious Principles in Theory and Practice Today

Panel Organizers: Stephanie Coigliano and Veena Howard

Chair: Stephanie Corigliano

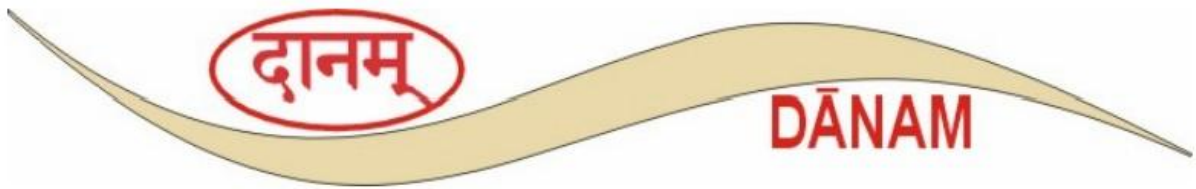
Panel Description

A substantial amount of scholarly and religious commentarial work has gone into reconciling deontological moral imperatives found in classical religious texts (lists of moral commandments which translators are naturally tempted to render in KJV English as the “thou shalt-s” of a given religion) with examples of moral cases – real and hypothetical – which challenge the universality of these rules. Ethicists, theologians, and ordinary people have long recognized that absolute maxims inevitably collide with the moral complexity of the real world we inhabit. Contributors to this panel investigate how South Asians today navigate the demand for “absolute non-violence” promoted by Jain scriptural tradition and Gandhian ethics while engaging in productive philanthropic and civic activity. Panelists consider ways in which Hindus and Jains accommodate the problem of “karmic collateral” – the “knock-on” effects of environmental disruption which may accrue from otherwise virtuously motivated charitable activity, as well as the problem of the ideal of absolute non-violence in collective governance, e.g., instances in which inflicting harm may be necessary to prevent the infliction of greater harm in the future.

Paper 1: Justin Henry, University of South Florida

“Jainism and Effective Altruism in Theory and Practice”

Effective altruism is a novel applied moral theory that directs philanthropic donors to charitable institutions whose activities are purportedly calculated to maximize human flourishing over a long-term time horizon. This paper considers affinities between



effective altruism and Jain ethics, including the centrality of charitable giving and the expansive (trans-human) definition of “moral patients” shared by both philosophical systems. Beyond the textual and theoretical, I review the results of a qualitative survey administered to members of Jain communities throughout the United States, examining Jains’ own view of the (predominantly secular) effective altruist paradigm, alongside reactions to the proposal to score charitable institutions on the degree to which their outputs conform to Jain dharmic principles using EA computational methods.

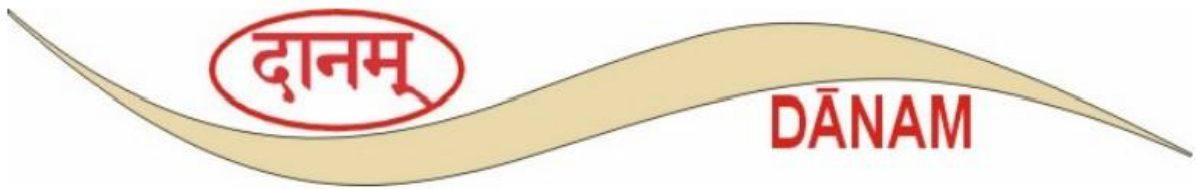
Paper 2: Ithamar Theodor, Zefat Academic College

“Gandhian Ideology on the Crossroads”

Mahatma Gandhi was no doubt among the most influential personalities of the 20th century. His doctrine, satyagraha, has inspired various movements in the areas of non-violence, social justice, and ecology. However, it seems that these Gandhian movements are characterized by minorities or the underprivileged fighting for justice through non-violent means, rather than by mainstream ideology. May the question be raised: could a Neo-Gandhian doctrine be articulated that offers a non-violent and just vision for society at large, rather than merely for minorities and the underprivileged? Is there potential for Gandhian Ideology to go beyond being an ideology for minorities and the underprivileged and become a mainstream ideology? Could such a doctrine indeed be articulated? If so, on which grounds could this be done? Would there need to be changes or adjustments to the existing Gandhi Ideology, and if so, what would they be? What will Gandhian Ideology gain and what would it lose by such an attempt? Considering the above, this paper examines Gandhi's Bhagavad-gita commentary, extracts some major ideas from it, and addresses some commentarial weaknesses. In addressing these questions, the paper refers to Douglas Allen's distinction between Absolute Non-Violence and Non-Absolute Non-Violence, and to Veena Howard's acknowledgment that for Gandhi, in acute cases, nonviolence might need to be accompanied by firm, even severe, action to prevent greater harm. The paper concludes that there indeed is a potential for such a Neo-Gandhian doctrine.

Paper 3: Shivani Bothra, Cal State Long Beach

“Ethics of Engaged Dharma: Jaipur Foot and the Practice of Compassion “

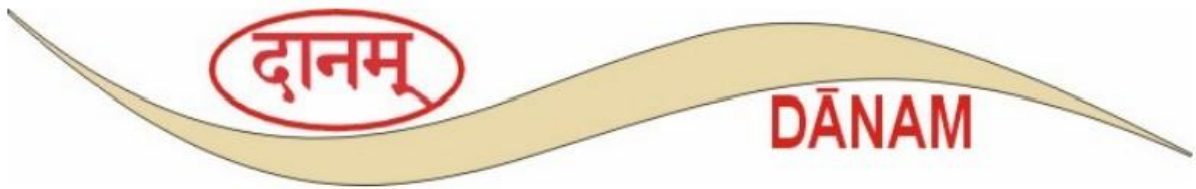


While scholarship on Jainism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sikhism has often emphasized soteriology, doctrine, and ascetic ideals, the lived expression of these traditions in the domain of social welfare remains relatively understudied. This paper addresses this gap through an ethnographic and interview-based study of the Jaipur Foot initiative, developed by the Bhagwan Mahaveer Viklang Sahayata Samiti (BMVSS). I ask: How do Dharma traditions translate ethical commitments such as *ahiṃsā* (nonviolence), *dāna* (giving), *karuṇā* (compassion), and *seva* (service) into large-scale humanitarian practice?

I argue that Jaipur Foot exemplifies a model of “engaged Dharma”, in which ethical principles traditionally associated with personal spiritual cultivation are reconfigured into collective, humanitarian action. In doing so, it challenges the perceived divide between renunciatory ideals and social responsibility, demonstrating that Dharma traditions can serve as powerful frameworks for technological innovation and global humanitarianism. Drawing on fieldwork and interviews with beneficiaries from diverse Dharma backgrounds, the paper presents four case studies that illustrate how recipients interpret their rehabilitation not merely as a medical intervention but as a means of restoring dignity, agency, and social belonging. These narratives reveal how religious values are not only institutional motivations but are also refracted through lived experience, shaping how beneficiaries understand care, dependence, and selfhood. Finally, the paper expands the scope of religious studies by positioning Jaipur Foot as a critical site where religion, technology, disability, and ethics intersect, inviting a reconsideration of how compassion is enacted, scaled, and institutionalized in the modern world.

Paper 4: Gabrielle Sigrist, MA Yoga Studies, Loyola Marymount University
“Digesting Grief: A Bio-Psycho-Philosophical Yoga Therapy Framework for Bereavement”

Grief is a universal, nonlinear response to loss that impacts physical, psychological, behavioral, philosophical, and spiritual well-being. Contemporary grief care models lack an integrated framework that supports grievers in understanding and navigating their multifaceted grief experience. This presentation will explore a more holistic approach through *Digesting Grief*, an eight-week clinical yoga therapy program grounded in teachings from both *Sāṃkhya* and Buddhist texts. Integrating *āsana*, *prāṇāyāma*,



meditation, philosophical inquiry, and community, the program supports participants in meeting grief as a natural human experience rather than as a pathology to be cured.

Drawing on findings from a 2025 IRB-approved pilot study, I will discuss how yoga therapy fostered adaptive coping skills and reduced the burden of grief symptoms while creating space for meaning-making and emotional integration. Through the lens of engaged *dharma*, this work demonstrates how contemplative traditions can effectively address contemporary experiences of loss, whether it be mourning the death of a loved one or the environmental destruction caused by climate change. It also invites consideration of how embodied, philosophically grounded perspectives towards grief may cultivate more compassionate and resilient futures for individuals and their communities.

Bio: Gabrielle Sigrist (she/her) is a yoga therapist, researcher, and writer based in Los Angeles. She holds an M.A. in Yoga Studies with a concentration in Yoga Therapy from Loyola Marymount University, as well as Bachelor's degrees in Philosophy and Theatre from Seattle University. Rooted in both study and lived experience, her research centers on grief care and somatic support: exploring how the body, mind, and spirit process loss. She currently works on the clinical yoga therapy team at Hoag Hospital's Center for Healthy Living, nurturing whole-person health with evidence-based practices and dharmic teachings. gabbysigrist.com