

History Research Center

Jainism

Jainism is one of the world's great religions. It was started in India during the Axial Age by the religious reformer [Nataputta Vardhamana Mahavira](#). Like [Gautama Buddha](#), with whom he was a contemporary, he was from a noble warrior family and also rejected the [Vedas](#) and the formalism of Vedic religion. He is often mentioned in Buddhist scriptures by the name of Nigantha Nataputta (the naked ascetic of the clan of Jnatrikas). Nataputta Vardhamana was a son of Siddhartha, a chief of the warrior clan of the Jnatrikas. His mother, Trishala, was the sister of Chetaka, the chief of the Licchavis tribe.

Vardhamana was reared in aristocratic luxury; however, in his youth he wanted to join a band of ascetic monks who lived in a park just outside of town. The monks were followers of Parshva, who had lived several hundred years before as an ascetic preacher. Because of filial duties Vardhamana did not take up the ascetic life until after the death of his parents. Vardhamana was carried in an expensive litter to the park where the band of monks dwelled. When he arrived he was wearing gold ornaments and finery. He threw them off, pulled out his hair, and took the vow to live a life of complete detachment to the world.

Following an extremely severe ascetic practice Vardhamana rejected all shelter from the elements. He sought to avoid sleep, went uncleaned and unclothed, and avoided human society. He was on several occasions abused by angry villagers who interpreted his silence as insolence. After 12 years of rigorous ascetic practice (*tapas*) Vardhamana experienced liberation from karma. Jain sources say that in deep meditation he reached nirvana and became a completed soul (the complete and full, best knowledge and intuition called *kevala*).

Thus he became Jina (Conqueror), Mahavira (Great Hero), and the 24th Tirthankara (Ford-finder). These titles are the ones by which his followers have named him ever since. After Mahavira's liberating experience he set out on a 30-year teaching career, proclaiming the way of ascetic detachment as the path of salvation. He organized a band of disciplined, naked monks and sent them forth to teach the way of liberation. He died by self-starvation at age 72 (ca. 468 BCE) in Pava, a village near Patna, where Jains come each year on pilgrimages or during festivals. The Jains believe that Mahavira is now in a state of bliss (*isatpragbhara*).

In the first century after Mahavira's death the Jains grew slowly. Their chief rivals were the Ajivikas. Their growth began in the period of the Mauryan Empire. The first Maurya emperor, Chandragupta (ca. 317–293 BCE) supported the Jains and eventually became a Jain monk. About this time there was a schism in the Jain movements. Since the death of Mahavira, "pontiffs" called Ganadharas (supporters of the communities) led them. The 11th ganadhara, a monk called Bhadrabahu, anticipating a famine in northern India, led a group of followers into southern India. Many monks refused to follow him south. Those remaining behind were led by a teacher named Sthulabhadra. When the famine ended, the monks who had returned from the south discovered that the Jains who had remained in the north had adopted a number of questionable practices, the most heterodox of which was the wearing of white robes. To complicate matters the only person still living who knew perfectly the unwritten sacred texts of Jainism was Bhadrabahu.

To deal with the controversial religious practices Sthulabhadra called a council of monks; however, Bhadrabahu did not attend. Eventually he moved to Nepal because of his horror and disgust at the "corruptions" that had entered the Jain community. In the end the Jain canon was written from the defective memory of Sthulabhadra and other leading monks as the *Anga* (Limbs). The Jain community then separated into two sects. The Shvetambaras were the "White-Clad" monks who wore white robes. The Digambaras were the "Sky-Clad," or naked, monks. Despite these outward differences Jain doctrine remained basically the same for both groups.

The Digambaras sect is usually found in warm south India. Their practice of Jain nudity proclaims a break with human bondage to the world. The Jain canon of scripture differs between the Shvetambaras and Digambaras. In addition to the canonical writings there is a considerable body of devotional or inspiration literature. These writings are considered as sacred scripture but are cherished for their pious themes. During the time of the Middle Ages the Jain faithful produced an enormous body of non-canonical sacred literature known as the Puranas (Legends), which were modeled after Hindu forms. The Puranas tell long stories of the 24 Tirthankaras and other Jains who lived meritorious lives. In addition, Jain scholars produced works on mathematics, poetics, politics, and other subjects. The corpus of Jain-cherished works was produced in several Indian vernaculars besides

Sanskrit. After the arrival of the British some Jain works were produced in English.

The Sthanakvais sect of Jainism formed in the 1700s. Sthanakvais oppose all temples and rituals. They claim that worship can be done anywhere simply with inward meditation. The core of Jain doctrine is the teaching that every living thing is an eternal soul (*jiva*) that has become trapped by matter in a physical body by involvement in worldly activities. Salvation can be found by freeing the soul from matter so that it can return to its original pristine state. The Jains believe that each *jiva* is reincarnated in many bodies before it is finally freed. After being freed, it exists eternally in a state of perfect knowledge and bliss. The doctrine of ahimsa (nonviolence, or respect for life) teaches Jains that all life is sacred. To avoid harming any living creature, even the smallest insect, Jains avoid agricultural work and related activities. Ahimsa teaches Jains to be strict vegetarians. The Jain doctrine of ahimsa has influenced many people, including Mohandas Gandhi. They will also strain drinking water through a piece of cloth to avoid swallowing living things. Death by starvation is the ultimate of Jain practice as the way to cross the ford to bliss.

Scholars have noted that the Jain views on the soul are close to the early Sankhya school of Hindu philosophy. Jains do not believe in a supreme God, in gods nor in goddesses, rather they believe in the divinity dwelling in each soul. But they do believe that there is a life after the escape from karma. This means they appear to practice an atheistic religion but actually venerate the Supreme Spirit in liberated souls. When released from the cycle of karmic rebirths, the soul enters a state of bliss in *lokapurusha*.

Further Information

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