

# Jainism

## Background

### *History*

Though Hinduism is the most prominent religion in India, over the years it has spun off three other major groups – Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism. Jainism has a lot in common with Hinduism, but there are enough differences that it eventually became recognized as its own religion.

Jainism emerged in about the same time period as Buddhism. Tradition places the birth of Mahavira, the founder, in northeastern India around 599 B.C. Mahavira was a member of the warrior caste and came to be known as “Jina” (the big winner or great man). The name of the religion was derived from this term.

Ultimately, Jainism was a reform movement which came about because of Mahavira’s disagreement with the predominant Hindu belief system of that day. He had two basic disagreements. First he didn’t believe that the Vedas were inspired scripture. Secondly, he had a huge dislike for the caste system. Despite the fact that he personally benefitted from the system, he was strongly democratic and believed in the inherent worth of all individuals.

Tradition has it that Mahavira was the second son of a rajah (a minor ruler in northeast India) living in luxurious surroundings. He was married and had one daughter. In spite his lofty position and wealth, he was not happy. At age thirty, after the death of his parents, he said good-bye to his family and his wealth, left his wife and child, and went off to try and find salvation among the ascetics.

Initially, he took his quest to the extreme. He pledged to deny any care to his body and vowed not to speak at all. He then took off all of his clothes and wandered naked throughout the country. During this time he was physically assaulted by both people and animals. When these assaults occurred, he did not resist in any way. He wandered around like this for twelve years until he finally reached enlightenment at the age of 42.

After he felt he had gained complete control over his body, Mahavira changed from being a solitary ascetic and began taking on disciples. At this stage of his life he became a leader and teacher of monks. It is believed that he ultimately starved to death because of his extreme view of not wanting to harm any living thing. Tradition has it that at the end of his life there were over 14,000 monks in his brotherhood.

There are three main Jain philosophies which are represented by three groups. Digamber or “sky-clad” monks don’t wear any clothes inside their temple complex. This group is made up only of men. Shvetamber monks wear white clothes and do include women among their number. They split from the main body about 200 years after Mahavira and today are the largest of the Jain sects. A third order, Sthanakavasi, later arose as a reform movement because of their disagreement with idol worship. It is estimated that there are between 2 to 3 million adherents of Jainism. They live almost exclusively in India.

### *Basic Beliefs and Practices*

Jains practice their religion in two distinct groups – common citizens and monks. Monks lead what is considered the ideal life for a Jain and have the best chance to achieve salvation. They are forbidden from entering any occupation that takes life or profits from the taking of life. This has forced them primarily into commercial professions. Their reputation for honesty and high moral principles has made them excellent business people, though it is ironic that a sect which holds asceticism and poverty as high priorities has become one of the wealthiest classes in India.

There are two principles that are most central to the Jain religion – Jivadaya (respect for all living things) and Ahimsa (non-violence). Although Ahimsa is also important to Hindus and Buddhists, no one practices it as such a central part of the faith as do the Jains. Because of their beliefs concerning non-violence, they abstain entirely from eating any kind of meat, fruit and wine as they don’t want to kill fruit or animal. In fact, the belief is so strict that they may only drink water which has already been used by someone else for cooking. They don’t even want to be responsible for the death of the living organisms that might be killed in the cooking process. They believe that if someone else has already killed the organisms, the guilt for that rests on the person who did the cooking and not on them.

Jainism believes that all people on earth should love one another, not kill animals, and that animals have the right to live undisturbed on the earth. They also believe that every material thing has life, including stones, sand and trees. Religious Jains will do virtually everything possible to prevent hurting any being.

Jain doctrine believes that there are two kinds of energy – the energy of mechanism (matter) and the energy of intelligence (life). This doctrine comes directly from the Hindu understanding of karma and reincarnation, though it has been slightly altered. To Mahavira, the doctrine of karma seemed a bit too restrictive. So he came up with a mechanical way to gain release from it – and that way was the way of asceticism. They believe that by living an ascetic lifestyle, they can work off bad karma to the point that it is possible to be delivered from the cycle of birth and rebirth.

Throughout Jainist history, the understanding of God has not remained constant. Mahavira was repulsed by the extremes of Vedic polytheism and taught that there is no god, as such. Later, though, Mahavira himself became the object of worship. He was given the designation as the 24th Tirthankara, the last and greatest of the savior beings. He was regarded as having descended from heaven without sin and with all knowledge. In Jainist doctrine there are “five great vows” that need to be fulfilled in order to achieve salvation. Only those who live a monastic life can completely fulfill them. Laymen are given a simpler code to follow which only includes the first three. The "five great vows" include:

1. Non-violence in all parts of a person (Ahimsa) – mental, verbal and physical. Committing an act of violence against a human, animal, or even a vegetable, generates negative karma which adversely affects one's next life.
2. Speaking truth (Satya). Avoiding all falsehood.
3. Not stealing from others (Asteya).
4. Remaining sexually monogamous to one's spouse (Brahma-charya).
5. Detachment from people, places and material things (Aparigraha).

Other beliefs include:

- C All things are eternal by their very nature,
- C Pride, anger, deceit and greed are vices,
- C People suffer individually for the deeds they themselves have done,
- C A man should treat all creatures in the world as he himself would like to be treated.

## ***Essential Beliefs***

### God

To Jains, the cosmos is an uncreated eternal system that is composed of the collective life energy of all things. There is a concept of multiple lower gods, but they are nothing more than other living beings which have advanced to a higher level than humans. , These gods are not personal to humans and are still working out their own salvation. After his death, though, Mahavira’s followers elevated him to the status of a god and they do worship and pray to him. They have developed a doctrine which asserts that he was sinless, omniscient, pre-existent, and incarnate.

### Man

Man is seen to be a manifestation of the impersonal cosmos. He is stuck in nearly endless cycles of rebirths because of the bad karma of past lives. Humans are understood to have a deep desire, and need, to escape the material rebirths in order to merge with the cosmos.

### Salvation

In human situation, the soul and matter are tied together. This connection causes the soul to be in bondage. To Jains, salvation is the liberation of the soul from matter. The laws of karma (the accumulated good and evil that one has done) and of reincarnation are closely linked to this. Release of the soul from matter is possible only by stopping new karma from entering, and by ridding the soul of existing karma. This is done by the efforts of the individual through monastic asceticism.

## **Faith Foundation**

### 1. What is the most fundamental reality? (Ultimate reality)

The universe is seen to be an uncreated and eternal dualistic system consisting of the living (soul) and the non-living (non-living matter). Nothing that exists now was ever created, nor will it be destroyed. The universe consists of three realms: the heavens, the earthly realm and the hells. More specifically it is made up of the following series of layers:

- C The supreme abode: This is located at the top of the universe and is where Siddha, the liberated souls, live.
- C The upper world: Thirty heavens where celestial beings live.
- C The middle world: The earth and the rest of the material universe.
- C The nether world: Seven hells with various levels of misery and punishments.
- C The Nigoda, or base: The place where the lowest forms of life reside.
- C Universe space: Layers of clouds which surround the upper world.
- C Space beyond: An infinite volume without soul, matter, time, medium of motion or medium of rest.

The gods are of little consequence to humanity as they are simply beings who have progressed further than humans and are living on a different plane.

### 2. What is the nature of our material reality? (Material reality)

The material universe is uncreated and eternal.

### 3. What is a human being? (Humanity)

Jains believe that all souls are ultimately equal in nature because every soul is capable of becoming liberated. A soul is uncreated, eternal and has infinite power and knowledge. It therefore has the inherent potential of divinity (that is, perfectly omnipotent, omniscient and free). Though human beings may take on different occupations and stations in life, we are, at our core, equals. We determine our own paths by acquiring certain karma. By ridding ourselves of the karma that obstructs the soul, we can achieve liberation. And while souls are the same in all forms, from clay to ant to elephant to human, the human form affords the only opportunity to achieve liberation.

### 4. What happens to a person at death? (Death)

According to Hindu doctrine, souls ultimately become absorbed in Brahma. This is not the case in Jainism. Jains believe that an immortal and indestructible soul resides within every living being and when one finally achieves liberation from the cycle of birth and death, the individual soul remains independent and autonomous.

Jainism believes that the universe consists of an upper world, a middle world, and a lower world, and the ultimate goal is liberation of the soul. At each physical death, it reincarnates into another stage, either up or down, depending on the karma accumulated in the most recent life. The goal is for the soul to pass through all 14 stages and finally achieve its liberation.

### 5. Why is it possible to know anything at all? (Knowledge)

Every school of Indian thought includes some judgment about the valid sources of pramanas (knowledge). The Jain list of pramanas includes sense perception, valid testimony (including scriptures), extra-sensory perception, telepathy, and kevala (the state of omniscience of a perfected soul). Since reality is multi-faceted, none of the pramanas gives absolute or perfect knowledge until one reaches ultimate liberation. As a result, any item of knowledge gained is only tentative.

### 6. How do we know what is right and wrong? (Morality)

Since release from death and rebirth is the ultimate goal, all Jain ethics aims at purging karma that has been accumulated from this and previous lives. Good karma leads to better circumstances in the next life and bad karma to worse. There are different types of karma based on the actions and intentions that attract it. The moral life, then, is one which can be austere enough to break attachments to the world.

## 7. What is the meaning of human history? (History)

Time is considered to be cyclical with no beginning and no end. Jains divide the time cycle into two halves – a descending half and an ascending half. These halves are further subdivided into six parts. Each portion becomes subsequently worse than the previous. Thus, the first portion represents a very serene time for human beings, and the sixth portion represents a very tumultuous time. We are currently in the 26<sup>th</sup> century of the 5th portion of the descending half of the time cycle, which lasts 21,000 years.

### **Authority**

The general name for the body of sacred books in Jainism is Agamas, meaning precepts. The number of accepted books varies from 33 to 84 depending on the particular sect. Among the sacred books of Jainism, the 12 Angas are considered the most important.

### **Evidence for the Authority**

As with all of the other variations of Hindu thought, Jainism is ultimately established on the same foundation as Hinduism, so the same problems associated with Hinduism also apply. Specifically, the teaching relies on simple faith in certain Hindu scriptures and personal experience. As before, material reality is viewed as illusory, which contradicts human experience.

In addition to the Hindu connection, there is a reliance on the teachings of Mahavira himself. The only evidence that his teaching is the truth is from his, and his followers, assertions that this understanding of reality is correct.