

## JAINISM

Jainism is the heterodox branch of Hinduism, with roots tracing all the way back to 500 B.C.E. Some say the existence of Jainism is much older, but it has not yet been proven. The Jains trace their origins back to India, where their existence represents a little less than a million and a half of the world's population. European scholars, who familiarized themselves with Jainism through samples of Jaina literature, hastily came to the conclusion that Jainism was just a subsidiary of Buddhism. It has now been proven beyond reasonable doubt that Jainism is not an offshoot of Buddhism, and is at least as old as Buddhism (see Dasgupta 169-170). The leader of Jainism is attributed to Vardhamana Mahavira, the last prophet, also known as Tirthankara of the Jains. Jainism has twenty-four Tirthankaras: Risabha (being the first), Ajita, Sambhava, Abhinandana, Sumati, Padmaprabha, Suparshva, Candraprabha, Puspadanta, Sitalnatha, Sreyamsa, Vasupujya, Vimala, Ananta, Dharma, Santi, Kuntha, Aara, Mallinatha, Munisuvrata, Nami, Nemi, Parsvanath, and last but not least, Mahavira. "According to belief of orthodox Jains, the Jaina religion is eternal, and it has been revealed again and again in every one of the endless succeeding periods of the world by innumerable Tirthankaras" (Dasgupta 169). All the Tirthankaras have attained *moksa* at their death, and are regarded as "Gods" by the Jain worshippers. There are two main sects of Jain worshippers: The Svetambaras and the Digambaras.

The Svetambaras are known as "the wearers of white clothes," whereas the Digambaras are known as "the cloth less." Digambaras are found mainly in Southern India but also in the Northwestern provinces such as: Eastern Rajputana and the Punjab. The Svetambaras on the other hand, are mainly found in Gujarat, and Western Rajputana, but they can also be found all over Northern and Central India. Although both sects generally agree on all the fundamental

principles of Jainism, the Digambaras keenly believe that perfect saints such as the Tirthankaras live without food, and that a monk who owns any property and wears clothes cannot obtain *moksa*. They also contend that no woman can obtain *moksa*. The Digambaras deny all canonical works of the Svetambaras and state that the values the Svetambaras have were lost immediately after Mahavira. The Digambaras, who separated from the Svetambaras, developed eccentric religious rituals. Sanskrit works of the Digambaras go way back before the works of the Svetambaras if we do not include the canonical works of the Svetambaras. The views of these two sects differ when it comes to the true meaning of existence (*samsara*) but both believe that Mahavira was the true leader of this complex religion.

Mahavira was a *ksatriya* (warrior) of the Jnata clan. He was the second son of Siddhartha and Trisala. The Svetambaras believe that the embryo of Mahavira was transferred from a Brahmin (priestly class) lady named, Devananda to the womb of Trisala. This story however, is frowned upon by the Digambaras. Siddhartha and Trisala gave him the name Vardhamana (Vira or Mahavira). Mahavira later went on to marry Yasoda, who later gave birth to their only daughter. At the age of thirty, Mahavira's life had changed drastically. With the death of his parents and the permission of his brother, Mahavira became a monk, and after twelve years of self-humiliation and meditation "he attained omniscience" (see Dasgupta 173). He eventually attained *moksa* in 480 B.C.E. after preaching for approximately forty years making him the very last Tirthankara known to Jains. Mahavira was also an avid follower of the five great vows (*panca-mahavrata*), which consist of: Ahimsa, Satyam, Asteyam, Brahmacharyam, and Aparigraha.

Ahimsa is defined as "abstinence from all injury to life" (Chatterjee & Datta 107). Life is seen as existence that goes beyond the "moving beings." Plants and beings inhabiting bodies of

the earth are also seen as being part of 'life'. Thus, the ideal of the Jains is, therefore, "to avoid abusing life not only through the moving beings, but also of the non-moving ones" (Dasgupta 169). Often seen throughout India, are Jain saints who try to follow this ideal. They are seen wearing a piece of cloth that is tied over their noses so they do not inhale and destroy the life of any organism floating in the air. "The Jaina attitude of *ahimsa* is the logical outcome of their metaphysical theory of the potential equality of all souls and recognition of the principle of reciprocity" (Chatterjee & Datta 107). This basically means do to others, what you would want done to you. The typical Jain tries to perform this duty in everything he or she does, because he or she wants to be consistent with the principle he or she has adopted. Not only is *ahimsa* practiced through action, but it also must be practiced through thought, speech and action. The next vow is to abstain from falsehood.

*Satyam* does exactly this through the vow of truthfulness, which consists of speaking of things that are not only true, but also moral and pleasant. Without the moral and pleasant qualifications, speaking the truth can lead to "vulgarity, frivolity, vilification, etc" (see Chatterjee & Datta 108). In order to carry out the perfect maintenance of satyam, Jains must surmount greed, fear, anger and even stealing.

*Asteyam* is the vow to abstain from stealing. It emphasizes the point to never take what is not given to you. A Jain writer once said, "wealth is but the outer life of man and to rob wealth is to rob life." This alludes back to the vow of ahimsa with the "sanctity of property" being a direct comparison of the "sanctity of life" (See Dasgupta 180-211).

Another vow that has extreme importance in the conducting of Jain principles is that of *brahmacharyam*. This is the abstinence from self-indulgence. *Brahmacharyam* is seen in the context of abstaining from celibacy, however it goes deeper than that. It is interpreted as the vow

to give up *kama* (self-indulgence) of every form. Jains believe that although physical indulgence may stop, the continuation of self-indulgence may still occur through subtle forms such as: speech, thoughts, and in the hopes of enjoyment hereafter in heaven. In order to abide by this vow, a Jain must, therefore, resist all forms of self-indulgence whether it is external or internal, subtle or obvious, and even direct or indirect.

Last but not least comes *aparigraha*, the abstinence from all attachment. “This is explained as the vow to give up all attachment dealing with the five senses: pleasant sound, touch, color, taste and smell” (Chatterjee & Datta 108). Attachment to any of the world’s objects means the soul is placed under bondage to the world, and according to sources, it causes rebirth, and liberation is unattainable without the withdrawal of attachment. The only way to overcome this attachment is through “right knowledge, faith and proper conduct.” When a person successfully overcomes the forces of all passions and karmas, the soul becomes free from its bondage and in turn attains liberation (*moksa*). When liberation is attained, Jains believe the fourfold perfection is achieved. It consists of: infinite knowledge, infinite faith, infinite power, and infinite bliss (see Chatterjee and Datta 109-111). Mahavira as well as the other twenty-three Tirthankaras achieved these five great vows and to assume the role of the prophets in Jainism.

Although these prophets are sacred and revered, they are not considered Gods. In fact, Jainism does not believe in God. The skepticism of the Jains is based on the following grounds: “Like the existence of God, the qualities of omnipotence, unity, eternity and perfection, are generally attributed to Him” (Chatterjee & Datta 110). If God is the “all mighty” (omnipotent), then God is supposed to be the cause of all things. The Jains however, argue that through the omnipotence of His character. They feel that He did not create everything and through that the Jains come to reject the belief in God. The Jains do, however, feel it necessary to meditate on

and worship the liberated souls. The tirthankaras already possess the perfections, as mentioned earlier, and so they easily take the place of God in the eyes of the Jains. “The liberated souls serve only as beacon lights” (Chatterjee & Datta 111). This guides the Jainas to ultimate liberation.

The Jain religion is undoubtedly one of the oldest religions out there that are still being practiced to this day. Despite Jains being dispersed all throughout the world presently, the total Jain population hasn't changed much. Its strict rules thus make it a “religion of the strong and the brave” (Chatterjee & Datta 111). It has recently become a scholar's fervor to explore this antediluvian religion, due to its teachings, and its ability to function without a God. The complexity of this religion will most definitely have scholars enticed to find out more about this religion and perhaps dig its roots back to before 500 B.C.E. when it was first noted as being found.

## **WORK CITED & RELATED READINGS**

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<http://www.jainworld.com/literature/dictionary/alphaframe.htm>

<http://www.cs.colostate.edu/~malaiya/j/dreams16/Dreams16.html>

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<http://www.cs.colostate.edu/~malaiya/om.html>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jainism>

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