

# Mahavira

In the year 599 BCE, a son was born to the ruler of a territory in India known as Kundalpur. The ruler's name was Siddhartha, and his wife, Trisala, was sister to the king of a large collection of clans, the Vajjis. They belonged to a religion called Parsvanatha, whose contributing founders were known as Tirthankaras, little did they know that their child would eventually become the twenty-fourth and final. He was named Vardhamana, the name itself meaning "increasing prosperity," or "Prosperous One," (Law 19-20) and many Jainists will argue that he was aptly titled indeed, as he would go on to lay the framework for their modern-day religious practices. There were even more sudden implications however, as the fortunes of his father's kingdom reportedly increased from the moment he was conceived.

Many stories exist detailing childhood events of the boy Vardhamana. Most serve to extol to us the promise evident in him, even as a boy. One such story tells of a group of youngsters, Vardhamana among them, playing in a mango grove. Allegedly a huge snake appeared, and as the other boys ran in fear, he calmly took it in his hands and carried it away. (Shah 29) Another describes a game in which the loser of a race was to carry the winner on his back. However, the story states that a heavenly being joined in, taking the form of a boy, and purposely losing the race. When Vardhamana sat on the back of this "boy," he "started running and grew in size until he had taken the form of a giant" (Shah 29). Unfazed by this, Vardhamana, as the story goes, punched the giant so hard it was shocked at his incredible strength. It is believed that from this particular story, Vardhamana acquired his more widely used alias, Mahavira, or the Great Hero. Yet another, and perhaps the most important of the childhood stories, details an instance in which his parents were asked where in the house Mahavira was located. His mother replied upstairs, while his father, downstairs. Seemingly conflicting and mutually exclusive viewpoints, we are alerted to the fact that he was in fact on the middle floor, while his mother and father respectively on the first and third floors. (Shah 29) This story demonstrates a fundamental concept in Jainist philosophy of relative pluralism, the notion that contradictory statements can possibly both hold validity, when seen from the proper light. Many other stories exist that illustrate his physical and mental prowess; it was even claimed that he was born with three types of knowledge, mind-based, reasoning, and more incredibly, clairvoyance, the latter being a common theme among Tirthankaras. (Shah 31)

Two schools of thought exist on his interactions with the opposite sex. The Svetambara sect claims he married a woman named Yasoda and had by her a daughter Priyadarsana, while Digambara sects maintain he took his ascetic vows while still single. Regardless of the truth, taking into account the wishes of his parents to be a great warrior and ruler, Vardhamana waited until their deaths, and two years later, with the permission of his brother, Nandivardhana entered

into the ascetic life. (Law 21) This is common in the Jainist school of thought, one cannot renounce with permission of one's family.

One of the first stories of his ascetic life tells of the exodus from his city and of an old man, Harikesi. Upon hearing of the incredible occurrence of a prince relinquishing his wealth and status he "ran towards (Mahavira) to touch his feet and pay his respects." (Shah 30) The masses expressed their distaste for the man, an outcaste, but were halted by Vardhamana. He indicated that he wished for the old man to proceed, and embraced him, to bid him farewell. Harikesi was overwhelmed with gratitude and wept as he paid his respects. This incident foreshadowed the dynamic social change that Jainist philosophy was to eventually advocate, that of universal equality.

At the moment of his renunciation, it is written that Mahavira acquired a fourth knowledge to accompany the three he was born with. Many believe that he came to possess the ability to "know the thoughts of all creatures in the world." (Shah 31) From this moment on he "knew and saw all conditions of the world of the gods, men and demons: whence they came, whither they went, when they were born as men or animals, gods or infernal beings, according to their deeds." (Law 31) This seems a little far-fetched and extraordinary, but regardless of what new powers were imbued to him on renunciation, if any at all, for the first twelve years of his ascetic life, Vardhamana endured great hardship. To a greater extent one can study the details of these twelve years in the *Kalpa Sutra*. The dawn of ascetic life came with a two-and-a-half day fast, whereupon it is said he "pluck(ed) out his hair (and) left his home forever." (Shah 30) Soon after he gave half his robe to a poor Brahmin and when the other half became caught in a thorn bush, gave clothing up entirely, remaining from then on without possession. He took food only from the hollow of his hand, and erased from his mind all thought of pleasure, pain, pride, deceit, greed, lustful thoughts and severed his ties to the earth he knew. It is written that he did not ever spend more than one night in a single village, and no more than five in any town. He slept only occasionally, perhaps an hour at a time, and not ever for the sake of pleasure. (Shah 30-31) In short, he "abandoned the care of his body, he bore pain free from desire." (Law 23) From the recounts of the *Kalpa Sutra* it is believed the area he covered corresponds to the current day state of Bihar, with forays into Bengal and Uttar Pradesh.

Finally, after twelve long years, in what is described as the most important moment in his life, Mahavira "attained the supreme knowledge and final deliverance from the bonds of pleasure and pain." (Shah 31) He had fasted without food and drink for more than two days, and was near the town of Jrimhikagrama. He sat in a squatting position in the field of a landowner, Samaga, on the bank of the Rujupalika river. Exposed to the sun and heat, with his head bowed, he obtained the supreme and infinite form of knowledge and intuition known as Kevala Jnaana. From then on we can describe Vardhamana as a Kevali or Arhat, one who has attained enlightenment. (Law 31) Another term frequently used to describe him from this point on is Jina, or one who has conquered himself. (Shah 31)

Now, at forty-two years of age, having achieved his liberation, Mahavira began the next stage of his life, and perhaps the most influential in contemporary life, the stage of religious teacher. His followers were to be referred to as Nirgranthas, and himself Nirgrantha, or he who is freed from all bonds. (Law 20) He travelled from place to place, spreading enlightenment. In particular, his first declaration was so moving it inspired many to join him, it went as follows:

*“I am all knowing and all seeing and possessed of infinite knowledge. Whether I am walking or standing still, whether I sleep or remain awake, supreme knowledge and intuition are with me, constantly and continuously. There are, O Nirgranthas, sinful acts that you have done in the past which you must now undo by this acute form of austerity. Now that you will be living a restrained life as regards your acts, speech and thought, this will negate the effects of Karma for the future. Thus, by the exhaustion of the force of past deeds through penance, and the non-accumulation of the effects of new acts, [you are assured] of the end of the future course [of the effects of karma] and the resultant rebirths, of the destruction of the effects of karma, and from that the destruction of pain, and from that of the destruction of mental feelings, and from that the complete absence of all kinds of pain.” (Shah 32)*

It is claimed that the main characteristics of Tirthankaras’ utterances was that “once it was heard by audience, it turned into their respective dialect and was easily understood by them,” (Nagraj 16) and Mahavira was no different. Though this claim is a little fantastic, it still expresses once again the desire to erase the bonds of classes and sexes in an attempt to communicate to all the people of the nation. In fact it is likely this just embellishes the novel practice he had of speaking to the lesser people in their indigenous languages instead of the Sanskrit they held little knowledge of.

Vardhamana was also a great leader and organizer, he divided his followers initially into two categories, those who could follow his teachings fully, ascetics, and those that were to be held to less strict standards, lay followers. The ascetics as they were to be known took the five great vows:

1. Ahimsa - non-violence and reverence for all life
2. Satya - truthfulness
3. Asteya - not taking anything without the owner’s permission
4. Brahmacharya - control over the senses, chastity
5. Aparigraha - non-attachment to worldly things (Shah 32-33)

From this classification and that of gender we arrive at the current-day four-fold structure that exists today. It is to be noted, however, that despite these divisions, they were nothing more than classifications, for Mahavira “made no distinction between people of one caste or class and another, nor between men and women; and he did not lay down one set of rules for monks and another for nuns, nor one for male lay followers and another for females.” (Shah 34)

In the year 527 BCE, on the banks of a lake outside the town now known as Pavapuri, Vardhamana attained Moksa and his physical form passed from this world. Records indicate that the eighteen kings of the surrounding kingdoms illuminated their respective lands “since the light of intelligence (was) gone.” (Shah 35) This day is even now marked by the illumination of the dark, and is known as Dipavali or Divali, the Festival of Lamps, “symbolizing the light of knowledge revealing the truth and illuminating the soul when the master was no longer physically present.” (Shah 36) Though contention remains as to whether the primary root of this festival is the great Jina; however, many claim the origins should be attributed to other influences.

Mahavira is widely regarded as the greatest sage to have ever lived. His legacy is a lasting one in the form of the religion he helped crystallize into what is known as modern day Jainism. It has experienced many downturns and revivals in the years since his passing, and is most known for its committed non-violence and respect for all living beings, which is paralleled in the vows its early followers took. Perhaps just as importantly, and as with Buddhist thought which followed, Vardhamana’s teachings brought about a push for greater equality in what is now known as India, among men, women, and divergent class/caste members.

## **Related Terms/Further Readings**

- Ahimsaa
- Aparigraha
- Arhat
- Asleya
- Bengal
- Bhagavati Sutra
- Brahmacharya
- Digambara
- Dipavali, Divali
- Harikesi

- Jainism
- Jina
- Jrimhikagrama
- Kalpa Sutra
- Karma
- Kevalajnaana
- Kevali
- Nandivardhana
- Parsvanatha
- Pavapuri
- Priyadarsana
- Rujupalika
- Samaga
- Satya
- Svetambara
- Syaadavaada
- Tirthankara
- Uttar Pradesh
- Yasoda

## **Bibliography**

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## **Related Websites**

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

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[www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/853508/Mahavira](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/853508/Mahavira)

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