

Jainism Background Research Paper

Jainism is a religion and a way of life that arose in India and has been continuously practiced since at least the sixth century B.C.E. Most of its six million followers live in India, but it is worldwide, with over 100 congregations in the U.S. Jainism may be divided into two subsects, the Digambar (Sky Clad) and the Shvetambar (White Clad). There are some differences in the sects' rituals, but the laity of each sect has similar practices.

The word Jain comes from "jina" (*a conqueror or liberator*). These conquerors are liberated from the ceaseless cycles of birth and rebirth and have achieved complete non-attachment ("nirvana/moksha"). They are also called Tirthankaras (Great Souls) who have forded the stream of birth and rebirth through strict ascetic practices and have attained complete spiritual and material detachment and reached liberation. There are 24 Tirthankaras. They reestablish the religion and societal systems of Jainism. They are the exemplifiers of the way to liberation.

Jainism and Buddhism both arose about 600 B.C.E. as a reaction to the strict controlling powers of the Brahmin priests who had composed the most ancient sacred Hindu scriptures which were based on direct divine revelation (The Vedas) that outlined the philosophy and hymns and rituals of Hinduism. The priests alone could serve as intermediaries between mortals and the divine realms through elaborate sacrificial rituals which were paid for by the upper classes, most of whom were Jains and Buddhists. Both the Jains and the Buddhists questioned the efficacy of these rituals involving the killing of animals as well as the need for an intermediary in their quest to end the ceaseless cycle of birth and rebirth in order to reach liberation.

Both Jainism and Buddhism were advocates of nonviolence towards all sentient beings, Jains more so than Buddhists. On the path to liberation from misery and the endless cycle of birth and rebirth, Jains stressed the importance of austere and rigorous ascetic practices, while the Buddhists followed the Middle Way, rejecting harsh austerities as a suitable way to enlightenment. The Jains did not compromise. For example, Buddhist monks shaved their heads; the Jain monks plucked their hair out. Both religions deny the existence of a supreme being but only the Jains believe in the existence of the soul (ego-entity). Additionally, the Jains do not believe that the recitation of mantras, but rather, venerate exemplars of the successful path to non-attachment and liberation and learn by their examples to advance their journey towards "nirvana".

Jainism has no creator theory. The universe was created and never ceases. The cosmic wheel of time (Kalachakra) rotates ceaselessly in cycles of 12 Aras (periods). The first six are ascending; the last six are descending. It is independent and self-sufficient and needs no supreme power to govern it. One achieves liberation through one's own actions.

The Tirthankaras are, like The Buddha, of royal lineage, renounce their position and wealth, meditate, are enlightened, find salvation, and achieve liberation/"nirvana". Tirthankaras (Liberators or Great Souls) show how to ford the bridge between the temporal world and liberation. There are 24 Tirthankaras in every cycle of 12 Aras. The 1st Tirthankara was born during the first descending Ara. The last 23 of the Tirthankara were born during the fourth descending ara which ended three years and eight months after the "nirvana" of the 24th Tirthankara, Mahavira (540-463 B.C.E.). Mahavira was a contemporary of Buddha (563-483 B.C.E.). We are 2,537 years into the 21,000 years of the fifth descending Ara. This is an era of sorrow; no liberation is possible although religion is practiced in a lax and dilute form and at the end of which even Jainism will disappear. Jainism will only reappear with the birth of the first Tirthankara in the next cycle of 12 Aras.

The fundamental tenets of Jainism are Right Knowledge, Right Faith and Right Action, based on the ethical principles that guide the Jain's life. These principles are:

Strict nonviolence – Jain beliefs and practices stem from this central theme and it is their most important religious duty. It is necessary to avoid harm by our action, speech, or thoughts. This leads to strict vegetarianism. The Jains do not eat eggs. Root vegetables, leafy greens, fruits and vegetables with many seeds are avoided as they may harbor small organisms since insects lay their eggs in the flowers and the resulting produce may contain life forms. Nonviolence also precludes certain occupations such as farming and warfare. Many Jains are traders, merchants, lawyers, accountants and educators. Most belong to the upper class. In India, Jains, as a religious group, have an almost 100% literacy rate. Jain libraries are the oldest in India.

Truthfulness – Nonviolence is again the priority. If telling the truth would cause harm it is moral to be silent.

Non stealing – A thing must be freely given and have not been dropped or forgotten by another. Fair market value must be paid.

Celibacy – Monks and nuns must be celibate. The laity may have sensual relations only with their spouse.

Non absolutism – One must avoid dogmatic, intolerant, inflexible, aggressive, harmful and unilateral attitudes towards others.

Non possession – The ownership of an object is not possessiveness; but attachment to an object is. One is only the caretaker of an object.

Rituals:

Jain rituals share many qualities drawn from the pan-Indian etiquette of showing hospitality towards others; and, at a superficial level, seem to contain similar elements of temple worship. However this behavior does not reflect the same philosophy. The central concern of Jain rituals is the transformation of the worshipper's "karmic" condition. The worship practices are only for the pursuit of liberation. Rituals do not destroy "karma"; rather, they substitute good karma for bad.

Every living entity has a soul. Negative passions and the effect of former deeds (*karma*) cause suffering and rebirth. "Karma" only exists as the result of action. The imperfect condition of the human soul is a result of prior action. The goal is to attain a liberated state completely free of all effects of "karma". One needs to halt "karma's" impact on the soul and at the same time eliminate the previously acquired "karma" that enmeshes one's soul...the only way to do this is further refined action through performing ritual actions. One strives to maximize the positive effects and minimize the negative effects until the "balance sheet" eventually shows such a surplus of merit that one reaches the goal of renouncing all action." (Pal, "Jain Art from India", pp 41-44). Only then can the chain of rebirth and suffering cease and liberation (nirvana/moksha) be achieved.

Ritual practice for the laity/householders regardless of sect is largely the same, but there are differences between the Digambar and Shvetambar and within the subsects of each. However, these differences are mostly in the way the idols ("jinas") are treated and use of temples verses prayer halls. It is mainly the ascetics/monks and nuns that exhibit the differences.

The Digambar monks are naked, as the wearing of clothes is seen as an attachment to material things and the emotional shame of nakedness from having no clothes. However, nuns are clothed, and for this reason woman cannot achieve nirvana, as Digambar ascetics are naked. She must be reborn as a male in order to break the cycle and achieve nonattachment and liberation. The Digambar also believe that Mahavira was conceived and born from the same woman and that he never married. Another difference is that they use only the first 5 lines of the Namokara Mantra, which is said upon arising and retiring. Additionally, they believe that the idols, being liberated, are omniscient and as such do not need food or adornments.

The Shvetambar ascetics wear white seamless cloths and, in some subsects, a white cloth over their mouth so as not to inadvertently harm any living entity. They believe that woman can achieve liberation and that the 19th Tirthankara, Mallinatha, was a woman. They believe that Mahavira was conceived in one woman and transmigrated to the womb of another and that he married and had a daughter. Shvetambars recite the full 9 lines of the Namokara Mantra. They for the most part, revere their idols which they anoint, cloth, bedeck with jewels, give offerings

and often add glass eyes. One sect eschews the temples and idols and meets in prayer halls to pray and hold religious discussions.

As of 2006, the Digambar numbered 548 monks and 527 nuns; while the Shvetambar numbered 2,510 monks and 10,228 nuns. The Digambar ascetics are allowed only two possessions; the peacock feathered whisk and a wooden water pot. The Shvetambar ascetics can have 14 including a loin cloth and a shoulder wrap. Nuns of both sects wear white. Again, these are the practices of the ascetics; among the laity these differences make little impact on their daily practices.

The Jain starts his worship by donning clean clothes after bathing and may recite "it is abandoned" to signify his separation from the profane world. Upon entering the temple, the Jain "sees" the Jina image whereby he acknowledges being in the actual presence of the Jina who is witness to his spiritual efforts. White clad images may have large enamel or glass eyes atop the carved eyes. This is to enable those in the back of a crowd to make eye contact and have a personal interaction with the Jina. The worshiper then bows with folded hands signifying Right Knowledge, Right Faith, and Right Action and enters the chamber and touches the image before starting the Eightfold Worship.

The first five steps are spiritually oriented (Bhava). The worshiper pours a small amount of water over the image (note the lipped basin atop the pedestal of the bronze Bahubali image (SBMA TR 3193.10). He then dabs the image with sandalwood paste (cools passions) and saffron (its costliness means sacrifice) to show his commitment to overcoming "karma". Next, he offers sweet smelling, unbroken flowers to show his unbroken faith in the Jina's teachings. Last, incense is lit and a lit butter lamp is swung to banish the bad odor and darkness of ignorance and worldly desire before moving out into the larger, public hall to complete the last three steps, which are materially oriented (Dravya).

Using a small platform, the worshiper makes the Jain "svastika" design with whole unbroken grains of rice. The four arms represent the four states into which one is reborn, i.e. human, celestial being, infernal being, and plant or animal. The three dots symbolize Right Knowledge, Right Faith, and Right Action, and the crescent moon and dot represent the abode of the liberated beings at the top of the universe. On top of these designs, he places some cooked food (usually sugar candy) and fruit. The fruit is the desired benefit of spiritual devotion. The cooked food indicates the understanding that the Jinas have overcome karma and ceased activities. Giving up food is called "state of not eating", and shows a liberated state. Lastly a coin is added to indicate renouncing money in the pursuit of spiritual wellbeing.

Jina images are not the only ones venerated. In the veneration of deceased monks' images, worshipers often sing to them hymns of veneration. The deceased monks are not liberated

beings so they can respond to petitions of health, wealth and success, etc. Monks have led ascetic lives that have advanced them further on the path of total unattachment and therefore make them worthy exemplars.

Symbols in Jain imagery

A Jina (Tirthankara) are posed in either the body abandonment position or the lotus posed with the hand in the meditation mudra. In the body abandonment pose the broad shouldered youthful figure leans slightly forward, the arms and legs are elongated, the hands and feet are large and the arms are held slightly away from the body. They are completely immobile (see SBMA TR 3193.10 Bahubali bronze). This is an exacting posture and ensues that no harm comes to any animal or nature and is based on the Jain principle of nonviolence. The image is naked, unless the jina is of the Shvetambar sect and is wearing a small loin cloth, and usually has a “srivasta” symbol on his chest. The “srivasta” can be a small diamond, a cup surmounted by flames or four stylized flowers arranged in a diamond shape. There is often a nimbus or halo behind his head. The Tirthankaras are generic in appearance.

Riskabhanatha, the 1st Tirthankara, is the only Tirthankara to be recognizable due to his long matted hair which either hangs to his shoulders or, is piled atop his head. His mount is the bull. The other 23 Tirthankaras have to be identified by their cognations. The 5th, Suparvanatha, has a hood of 5 cobras; the 16th, Santinatha, is identified by a deer; the 22nd, Neminatha, is reputed to be a cousin of Krishna and is associated with the conch shell; the 23rd, Parsvantha, is the earliest Tirthankara accepted as a historical figure and is hooded by 7 cobras; and the last, the 24th, Mahavira, is associated with the lion. The rest are a generic form and unless identified in an inscription, their individuality is unknown.

The “jina” images share many of the characteristics features of The Buddha such as the elongated ear lobes, neck with three folds, an ushnisha, and meditative posture and lotus pedestal. However Buddha is never portrayed with a srivasta on his chest nor naked, even if his robe is gossamer, the edges of his robe visible at wrists, shoulders and ankles. Additionally, Jain figures are never shown lying down as liberated souls never sleep. Unlike Hindu and Buddhist figures that often manifest their ferocious aspects, Jain art emphasizes only peaceful forms.

The wheel with axle, sometimes seen rim on and flanked by deer, is another shared symbol. In Buddhism this represents the first sermon that Buddha gave in the deer park where his teachings set the law in motion. The Jains use this symbol to indicate that the Jina is not simply meditating, but also teaching.

Elephants with upraised trunks, usually with a water pot between them, are often seen. They are called lustrating elephants and as such are sprinkling those below with blessed water. They are often found at the top of an image or flanking the main *jina*.

Many of the propitious deities and symbols found in Hindu art are included in many Jain carvings. The most frequently seen are deities such as Yakshis, pre-Vedic female fertility or tree spirits, and Yakshas, their male counterparts, Shri Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, Saravati, the goddess of learning and knowledge with a book or scroll, Indra, the king of celestial beings, Ganesha, the remover of all obstacles, and various other protectors of temples and shrines. All of these deities can act in powerful ways that influence lives in a positive manner.

This nonviolence based religion that has existed since prehistory still remains viable. It developed alongside the Indio–Vedic and Hindu religions and, with Buddhism, continued to evolve as a reaction to the Brahmin control, and prevailed in a Mohammadanistic era. It is perhaps the strictest and most arduous of the Indian religions. The ethical principle of nonviolence that not only dictates strict adherence to a restrictive, vegetarian diet, but also guides personal and interpersonal behavior, has made the Jain community highly respected, educated, influential, and well to do.

At times, especially from a superficial perspective, it is difficult to see Jainism as a distinct and unique religion. However, nonviolence that guides all aspects of a Jain’s life, sets it apart.

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