



Jainism

The word "Jain" is derived from the Sanskrit word *jina*, meaning "conqueror." Jainism is a heterodox *darshana* since it does not accept the authority of the Vedas. Like most Indian philosophy, Jainism is principally concerned with liberation from *samsara* and conquering the problem of suffering. Despite its relatively small number of adherents, Jainism has been, as Koller explains in our textbook, very influential in Indian philosophy, its teachings about "how *karma* shapes the lives of living beings, its stress on virtuous conduct, and its emphasis on human experience and reason have helped shape the Indian philosophical tradition" (Koller 2012, 24). They were the first to make *ahimsa*, nonhurting or nonviolence, a rule of life and this teaching has been particularly influential in the development of both Hinduism and Buddhism. Mahatma Gandhi made *ahimsa* a key part of his *satyagraha* ('sticking to the truth') movement that eventually won India's

independence through nonviolent direct action. *Ahimsa*, literally means "lacking any desire to kill" and thus it means to live without harming, not only to oneself and other human beings, but to all living beings. The Jains believe that all living beings, animals, plants, even insects, have souls (*jiva*) and thus have equal value and should thus be treated with respect and compassion. Jains are thus strict vegetarians and live in a manner that minimizes the use of the world's resources.

In Jainism there are no gods or other spiritual beings to appeal to for help in achieving liberation from *samsara*, the cycle of reincarnation. They follow, instead, the example the *jin*s, the "conquerors," the spiritual heroes in their tradition who have conquered suffering by solving the problem of *karma*. Relying on the metaphor of crossing over to the other shore of a river that is so common in the Indian tradition, these spiritual heroes are also called *Tirthankaras*, the "Ford-makers," the ones who have crossed over the stream of suffering. The focus of the Jain Dharma or philosophy is a distinctive view of *karma*. The word, *karma*, is derived from the word meaning "to act" and the Jain teaching of liberation focuses on living in a way that stops the further accumulation of karmic matter that weighs the soul down, binding it to *samsaric* existence, and also finding ways to burn off the *karma* that has already been accumulated. Thus, as Koller explains, this involves following "a path of purification incorporating knowledge, moral conduct, and ascetic practice" (Koller 2012, 24).

Jainism can be traced back to deepest antiquity in India, perhaps, as Koller reports, even to the Indus River Valley culture, but the Jains trace their teachings back to a spiritual hero named Mahavira ('great-hero'), reportedly the 24th *Tirthankara*, who lived from 599–527 BCE, which places him a few generations, perhaps a hundred years, before the time of the Buddha. There is not much known about his life, but as Koller tells us, he was recognized as a *Jina* and *Tirthankara* after he had achieved omniscience (*kevalajnana*). In Indian culture, there is a very long tradition recognizing extraordinary states of mind and powers that come from spiritual practice, through ascetic practices or deep states of meditation. The Jain scriptures (*Angas*) are texts that are reportedly the words of Mahavira, collected and compiled by his disciple.

The Jain understanding of the problem of suffering is perhaps best illustrated in the parable of the man in the well. The point of the story, as Koller explains, is that no one can achieve liberation from suffering if they remain attached to the senses. What is most distinctive about the Jain philosophy is a materialist and mechanistic explanation of *karma*. All that exists, according to the Jains, are souls (*jiva*) and non-living matter (*ajiva*). The souls literally get pulled down and embedded in the material world through their actions. Thus, even if one unintentionally harms another soul, accidentally stepping on a bug for instance, one is weighed down with more karmic matter as a result of that action. This contrasts with other Indian views "that take *karma* to be only a psychological or metaphysical force" (Koller 2012, 26-27).

According to Jainism, all souls have the natural qualities of pure bliss, omnipotence, and omniscience, but these capacities become obscured when the soul is weighed down by karmic matter. The soul is naturally luminous, capable of perfect knowledge, but this light is blocked by karmic matter. As Koller explains: "Real knowledge is obtained not from the senses or the mind but from the soul's inherent luminosity. The difference between a wise person and an ignorant person is that a wise person's mind blocks out less of the soul's natural knowledge than does the ignorant person's mind. A popular analogy suggests that just as when the fog and clouds are cleared away, the light of the sun illuminates the entire world, even so, when the karmic obstacles are removed from the soul, its natural omniscience will reveal everything" (Koller 2012, 27).

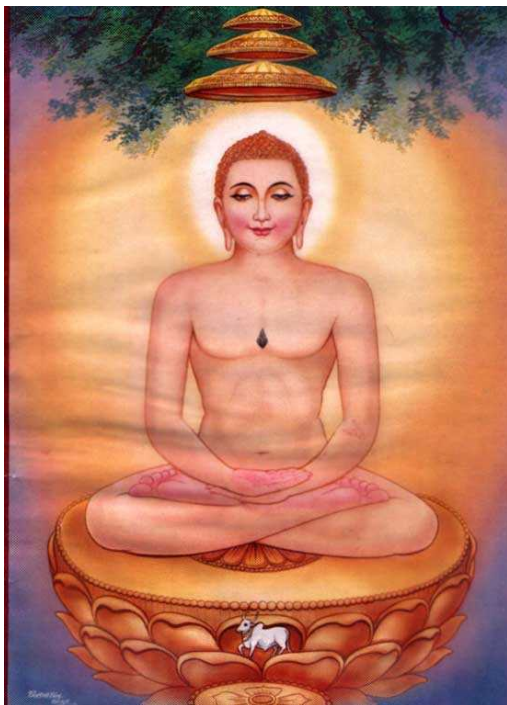
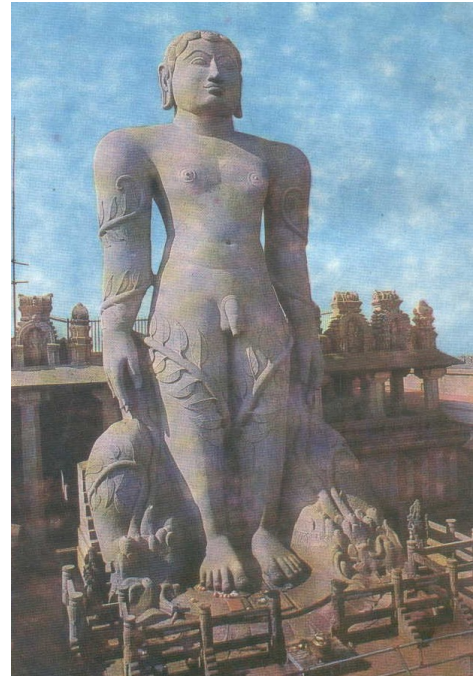
If the soul has the qualities inherently, then how does the soul get trapped in karmic matter in the first place? Again as Koller explains: "The Jain assumption is that souls have always been embodied in karmic matter, just as gold has always been embedded in ore. Indeed, this analogy is taken a step further: just as gold can be separated from the ore containing it by a refining process, so can the soul be liberated from karma by a process of purification. Even as the nature of gold is different from the ore in which it is embedded, so the nature of the soul is different from the matter in which it is embedded" (Koller 2012, 27).

The way to liberation is through the three "jewels" of right faith, right knowledge, and right conduct. There are fourteen stages of the path to liberation involving the three jewels as Koller explains (Koller 2012, 29-30). Right faith proceeds from the insight or vision (*darshana*) of reality that is taught in the teachings of the *Tirthankaras*. As Koller explains, it is not a blind faith in scriptures or persons, but is "an experience of a momentary flash of insight into the true nature of the soul" (Koller 2012, 32-33). Right knowledge involves knowing the true nature of the soul and of the law of karma that binds the soul. Nevertheless, the Jains recognize that until the soul has been liberated, knowledge is limited by the perspective of the soul's embodiment in a particular body, time, and place. One of the famous teachings of the Jains is the parable about knowledge involving five blind men and an elephant. Each feels only one part of the elephant and thus gives a very different account of the elephant from their limited perspective. This parable originated in Jain teachings but became a story told again and again through other Asian traditions, illustrated, for example, by this 17th century Japanese Buddhist painting.



Right conduct brings the influx of further karmic matter to a halt and also leads to purifying the soul from the karma that has been accumulated in the past. This emphasis on action leads the Jains to focus on living a virtuous life. As Koller explains: "This understanding has resulted in a strong Jain commitment to moral principles and practice. Not only is the honesty of Jain businessmen proverbial, but the high moral standards of the entire Jain community have effected and influenced all the peoples of India" (Koller 2012, 33). There are five primary virtues that every Jain vows to practice: *ahimsa* (nonviolence), (*satya*) truthfulness, (*asteya*) nonstealing, (*brahmacarya*) sexual purity, and (*aparigraha*) nongrasping.

There are two major sects of Jainism, the Digambara (sky-clad) and the Svetambara (white clad). The Digambara take the vow of nongrasping or nonattachment to the extreme and thus have no possessions including clothes. Thus, many Jain works of art portray the Jinas as naked. This famous statue perhaps illustrates the Jain view best when it shows the *Tirthankara* standing naked and so still that the vines grow up around his body. This suggests that the Jain solution to the problem of karma is to not act at all.



The Jain view of liberation differs from the view expressed in the *Chandogya Upanishad* with the metaphor of the rivers pouring into the ocean. Instead of the ocean of *Brahman* into which all souls merge losing their individual identity, for the Jains there are countless individual souls. All souls are eternal, and when liberated from the round of rebirth by conquering the problem of karma that leads to suffering, the souls rise up from the realm of karmic matter and exist in a state of pure bliss, omnipotence, and omniscience.



The Jain Symbol

The outline of the symbol is defined as the universe (*Lok*). The lower part of the symbol represents the seven hells (*Naraki*). The middle part of the universe contains the Earth and the planets (*Manushyalok*). The upper part contains the heavenly abodes (*Devlok*) of all the celestial beings and abode of the *Siddhas* (*Siddhashila*). Jains believe that this universe was neither created by anyone, nor can it be destroyed by anyone. It may change its form, but otherwise, it has always been and will always be here.

Between these two, they remind us to stop for a minute and think twice before doing anything. This gives us a chance to scrutinize our activities to be sure that they will not hurt anyone by our words, thoughts, or actions. We are also not supposed to ask or encourage others to take part in any harmful activity. The wheel in the hand shows that if we are not careful and ignore these warnings and carry on violent activities, then just as the wheel goes round and round, we will go round and round through the cycles of birth and death.

The raised hand means stop. Sometimes, instead of the wheel depicted here, one finds the Sanskrit word *Ahimsa* in the palm of the hand. Ahimsa means non-

violence. The four arms of the swastika remind us that during the cycles of birth and death we may be born into any one of the four destinies: heavenly beings, human beings, animal beings, (including birds, bugs, and plants) and hellish beings. Our aim should be the liberation and not the rebirth. To show how we can do this, the swastika reminds us that we should become the pillars of the four fold Jain Sangh, then only can we achieve liberation. The four pillars of the Jain Sangh are *sādhus*, *sādhvis*, *shrāvaks*, and *shrāvikās*. This means that first, we should strive to be a true shrāvaks or shrāvikās, and when we can overcome our social attachments, we should renounce the worldly life and follow the path of a *sādhu* or *sādhvi* to be liberated.

The three dots above the swastika represent the three jewels of Jainism: *Samyak Darshan* (Right Faith), *Samyak Jnan* (Right Knowledge), and *Samyak Charitra* (Right Conduct). We should have all three: right knowledge, right faith, and right conduct together, then only can we achieve the liberation. The right knowledge means having the knowledge that soul and body are separate and that the soul, not the body attains the salvation. The right faith means one must have faith in what is told by Jinas, who were omniscient. The right conduct means that our actions should be void of attachment and hatred.

At the very top part of the Jain Universe symbol is a small curved arc. This arc represents the abode of the Siddhas. It is known as the Siddhashila. It is the final resting place of the liberated souls. The dot represents a siddha. In order to achieve this stage, a soul must destroy all attached karmas. Every living being should strive for this state of the Salvation or Liberation.



Key Terms

तीर्थन्कर

Tirthankara
Tirthankara

Tirtha is a passageway, a road, a ford or river crossing; a *Tirthankara* is thus a “maker of the crossing” or “one who has crossed over”
A Jain term for an enlightened one.

जिन

jina
Jina

“Conqueror” or “Victor”
another Jain term for an enlightened one
The term “*Jain*” is derived from “*Jina*”

जीव

jīva
Jiva

a living being
principle of life, vital breath
a term used in Jainism for the soul

अजीव

ajīva
Ajiva

not a living being, unconscious being,
a being without breath
the Jain term for matter

अहिंसा

ahimṣā
Ahimsa

non-violence, non-harm
one of the five principle virtues of Jainism

Questions

1. How does the parable of the man in the well illustrate the problem of suffering as understood in Jainism?
2. What is distinctive about the Jain understanding of *karma*?
3. What are the five virtues that make up right conduct for Jainism?
4. How does the Jain vision of liberation differ from the view expressed in the *Upanishads*?