# Jainism

Jainism, Indian religion teaching a path to spiritual purity and enlightenment through disciplined nonviolence (ahimsa, literally “non-injury”) to all living creatures. The three main pillars of Jainism are ahiṃsā (non-violence), anekāntavāda (non-absolutism), and aparigraha (ascetism). Jainism is one of the world's oldest religions in practice to this day. It has two major ancient sub-traditions, ***Digambaras*** and ***Śvētāmbaras***, with different views on ascetic practices, gender, and the texts that can be considered canonical; both have mendicants supported by laypersons (śrāvakas and śrāvikas).

## Overview

Along with Hinduism and Buddhism, Jainism is one of the three most ancient Indian religious traditions still in existence and an integral part of South Asian religious belief and practice. The Jain tradition must be regarded as an independent phenomenon rather than as a Hindu sect or a Buddhist heresy.

The name *Jainism* derives from the **Sanskrit verb *ji*, “to conquer.”** It refers to the ascetic battle that, it is believed, Jain renunciants (monks and nuns) must fight against the passions and bodily senses to gain enlightenment, or omniscience and purity of soul. The most illustrious of those few individuals who have achieved enlightenment are called **Jina (literally, “Conqueror”)**, and the tradition’s monastic and lay adherents are called Jain (“Follower of the Conquerors”), or Jaina. This term came to replace a more ancient designation, Nirgrantha (“Bondless”), originally applied to renunciants only.

Jainism has been confined largely to India, although the recent migration of Indians to other, predominantly English-speaking countries has spread its practice to many Commonwealth nations and to the United States. Precise statistics are not available, but it is estimated that there are more than six million Jains, the vast majority of whom live in India.

## History

Scholars of religion generally hold that Jainism originated in the 7th–5th century BCE in the Ganges basin of eastern India, the scene of intense religious speculation and activity at that time. Buddhism also appeared in this region, as did other belief systems that renounced the world and opposed the ritualistic Brahmanic schools whose prestige derived from their claim of purity and their ability to perform the traditional rituals and sacrifices and to interpret their meaning. These new religious perspectives promoted asceticism, the abandonment of ritual, domestic and social action, and the attainment of spiritual illumination in an attempt to win, through one’s own efforts, freedom from repeated rebirth (samsara).

Jains believe that their tradition does not have a historical founder. The first Jain figure for whom there is reasonable historical evidence is Parshvanatha (or Parshva), a renunciant teacher who may have lived in the 7th century BCE and founded a community based upon the abandonment of worldly concerns.

The last Tirthankara of that age was Vardhamana, who is known by the epithet Mahavira (“Great Hero”) and is believed to have been the last teacher of “right” knowledge, faith, and practice. Although

traditionally dated to 599–527 BCE, Mahavira must be regarded as a close contemporary of the Buddha (traditionally believed to have lived in 563–483 BCE but who probably flourished about a century later). A sect call the Digambaras were very involved in politics allowed Jainism to prosper. Many political and aristocratic figures had Jain monks as spiritual teachers and advisers. Epigraphical evidence reveals an elaborate patronage system through which kings, queens, state ministers, and military generals endowed the Jain community with tax revenues and with direct grants for the construction and upkeep of temples.

# Doctrine

***Jainism is a religion of self-help: without any outside agency-even God coming to the rescue of the soul. The soul is its own destroyer or liberator.***

Even though Jain doctrine holds that no one can achieve liberation in this corrupt time, the Jain religious goal is the complete perfection and purification of the soul. This, they believe, occurs only when the soul is in a state of eternal liberation (moksha) from corporeal bodies. Liberation of the soul is impeded by the accumulation of karmas—bits of material, generated by a person's actions, that attach themselves to the soul and consequently bind it to physical bodies through many births. This has the effect of thwarting the full self-realization and freedom of the soul. As a result, Jain renunciants do not seek immediate enlightenment; instead, through disciplined and meritorious practice of nonviolence, they pursue a human rebirth that will bring them nearer to that state.

*Jainism emphasizes non-violence against all beings not only in action but also in speech and in thought.* It states that instead of hate or violence against anyone, "all living creatures must help each other". Jains believe that violence negatively affects and destroys one's soul, particularly when the violence is done with intent, hate or carelessness, or when one indirectly causes or consents to the killing of a human or non-human living being.

# Ritual Practices

Monks of the Digambara (sky-clad) tradition do not wear clothes. Female monastics of the Digambara sect wear unstitched plain white sarees and are referred to as Aryikas. Śvētāmbara (white-clad) monastics, on the other hand, wear seamless white clothes.

Monks are allowed to retain a few possessions such as a robe, an alms bowl, a whisk broom, and a mukhavastrika (a piece of cloth held over the mouth to protect against the ingestion of small insects), which are presented by a senior monk at the time of initiation. After initiation a monk must adhere to the "great vows" (mahavratas) to avoid injuring any life-form, lying, stealing, having sexual intercourse, or accepting personal possessions. To help him keep his vows, a monk's life is carefully regulated in all details by specific ordinances and by the oversight of his superiors. *For example, to help him observe the vow of nonviolence, a monk may not take his simple, vegetarian meals after dark, because to do so would increase the possibility of harming insects that might be attracted to the food. In addition, drinking water must first be boiled to ensure that there are no life-forms in it.*

The layman (Jainism's focus is invariably upon the male) is enjoined to observe *eight basic rules of behavior, which vary but usually include the avoidance of night eating, as well as a diet that excludes meat, wine, honey, and types of fruits and roots deemed to harbor life-forms.* There are also 12 vows to be taken: five anuvratas ("little vows"), three gunavratas, and four shikshavratas. *The anuvratas are vows to abstain from violence, falsehood, and stealing; to be content with one's own wife; and to limit one's possessions.* The other vows are supplementary and meant to strengthen and protect the anuvratas. They involve avoidance of unnecessary travel, of harmful activities, and of the pursuit of pleasure; fasting and control of diet; offering gifts and service to monks, the poor, and fellow believers; and voluntary death if the observance of the major vows proves impossible. *Lay people are further enjoined to perform the six "obligatory actions" at regular intervals, especially the samayika, a meditative and renunciatory ritual of limited duration.* This ritual is intended to strengthen the resolve to pursue the spiritual discipline of Jain dharma (moral virtue) and is thought to bring the lay votary close to the demands required of an ascetic. It may be performed at home, in a temple, in a fasting hall, or before a monk.

# Jainism and other religions

Jainism, Hinduism, and Buddhism share many key concepts derived from the Sanskrit language and dialects that have enabled them to hone their religious debates. For example, all three traditions share a notion of *karma as the actions of individuals that determine their future births, yet each has attached unique connotations to the concept*. This is also true with terms such as dharma (often translated "duty," "righteousness," or "religious path"), yoga ("ascetic discipline"), and yajna ("sacrifice," or "worship"). This Sanskritic discourse has shaped the religious and philosophical speculations, as well as the arguments, of each of these traditions. In the ritual sphere, for example, the abhiseka, or head-anointing ritual, has had great significance in all three religions.

*Ahimsa in the Indian religions of Jainism, Hinduism, and Buddhism, the ethical principle of not causing harm to other living things*. In Jainism, ahimsa is the standard by which all actions are judged. For a householder observing the small vows (anuvrata), the practice of ahimsa requires that one not kill any animal life. However, for an ascetic observing the great vows (mahavrata), ahimsa entails the greatest care to prevent the ascetic from knowingly or unknowingly being the cause of injury to any living soul (jiva); thus, ahimsa applies not only to human beings and to large animals but also to insects, plants, and microbes. The interruption of another jiva's spiritual progress causes one to incur karma.

The accumulated effects of past actions, conceived by Jains as a fine particulate substance that accretes upon the jiva—keeping one mired in samsara, the cycle of rebirth into mundane earthly existence. Not only physical violence but also violent or other negative thoughts result in the attraction of karma. Though the Hindus and Buddhists never required so strict an observance of ahimsa as the Jains, vegetarianism and tolerance toward all forms of life became widespread in India.

Jainism considers meditation (dhyana) a necessary practice, but its goals are very different from those in Buddhism and Hinduism. *In Jainism, meditation is concerned more with stopping karmic attachments and activity*, not as a means to transformational insights or self-realization in other Indian religions.

Jainism differs from both Buddhism and Hinduism in its ontological *(a branch of metaphysics concerned with the nature and relations of being Ontology deals with abstract entities.)* premises. All believe in transience, but Buddhism incorporates the premise of anatta ("no eternal self or soul"). Hinduism incorporates an eternal unchanging atman ("soul"), while Jainism incorporates an eternal but changing jiva ("soul"). In Jain thought, there are infinite eternal jivas, predominantly in cycles of rebirth, and a few siddhas (perfected ones).

# Temples

A Jain temple, a Derasar or Basadi, is a place of worship. Temples contain tirthankara *(a savior and spiritual teacher of the dharma)* images, some fixed, others moveable. These are stationed in the inner sanctum, one of the two sacred zones, the other being the main hall. One of the images is marked as the moolnayak (primary deity). A manastambha (column of honor) is a pillar that is often constructed in front of Jain temples.

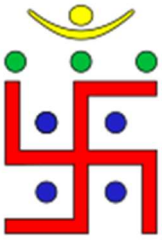

Ranakpur Jain Temple


Hutheesing Jain Temple

***Karma is the basic principle within an overarching psycho-cosmology in Jainism.*** Human moral actions form the basis of the transmigration of the soul (jīva). The soul is constrained to a cycle of rebirth, trapped within the temporal world (saṃsāra), until it finally achieves liberation (mokṣa). Liberation is achieved by following a path of purification.

# Symbols

The hand with a wheel on the palm symbolizes Ahimsa in Jainism. The word in the middle is "ahiṃsā" (non-injury). The wheel represents the dharmachakra (wheel of dharma), which stands for the resolve to halt the saṃsāra (world) through the relentless pursuit of Ahimsa.



The four arms of the swastika symbolize the four states of existence as per Jainism:

Heavenly beings ("devas encantadia")

Human beings

Hellish beings

Tiryancha (subhuman like flora or fauna)


This symbol represents the perpetual nature of the universe in the material world, where a creature is destined to one of those states based on their karma. In contrast to this circle of rebirth and delusion is the concept of a straight path, constituted by correct faith, understanding and conduct, and visually symbolized by the three dots above the running cross swastika, which leads the individual out of the transient imperfect world to a permanent perfect state of enlightenment and perfection. This perfect state of liberation is symbolized by the crescent and dot at the top of the svastika.

*It also represents the four characteristics of the soul: infinite knowledge, infinite perception, infinite happiness, and infinite energy.*

*The Jain Flag*

The five colors of the Jain flag represent the Pañca-Parameṣṭhi and the five vows, small as well as great.

- White – represents the arihants, souls who have conquered all passions (anger, attachments, aversion) and have attained omniscience and eternal bliss through self-realization. It also denotes peace or ahiṃsā (non-violence).
- Red – represents the Siddha, souls that have attained salvation and truth. It also denotes satya (truthfulness)
- Yellow – represents the acharya the Masters of Adepts. The color also stands for achaurva (non-stealing).
- Green – represents the upadhyaya (adepts), those who teach scriptures to monks. It also signifies brahmacharya (chastity).
- Dark blue – represents the Jain ascetics. It also signifies aparigraha (non-possession).

The Om symbol is also used in ancient Jain scriptures to represent the five lines of the Navakar mantra, which is the most important part of the daily prayer in the Jain religion. The Navakar mantra honors the panch parmeshtis (The Five Worships).

# *Navkar Mantra*

Namo Arihantanam: I bow down to Arihanta,

Namo Siddhanam: I bow down to Siddha,

Namo Ayariyanam: I bow down to Acharya,

Namo Uvajjhayanam: I bow down to Upadhyaya,

Namo Loe Savva-sahunam: I bow down to Sadhu and Sadhvi.

Eso Panch Namokaro: These five bowings downs,

Savva-pavappanasano: Destroy all the sins,

Manglananch Savvesim: Amongst all that is auspicious,

Padhamam Havei Mangalam: This Navkar Mantra is the foremost.

# Modern times

In modern times in India the Jains have devoted much energy to preserving temples and publishing their religious texts. The Jains also have been involved in general welfare work, such as drought relief in Gujarat in the 1980s, support for Jain widows and the poor, and, as part of their practice of noninjury (ahimsa) and vegetarianism, maintaining shelters to save old animals from slaughter.

During the 20th century, Jainism evolved into a worldwide faith. As a result of age-old trading links, many Jains from western India settled in eastern African countries, most notably Kenya and Uganda. Political unrest in the 1960s compelled many of them to relocate to the United Kingdom, where the first Jain temple outside India was consecrated in Leicester, and then increasingly to the United States and Canada, where they successfully assumed their traditional mercantile and professional occupations. A desire to preserve their religious identity has led expatriate Jains to form trans-sectarian organizations such as the Jain Samaj, founded in Europe in 1970, and the Federation of Jain Associations in North America (also known as JAINA), founded in 1981. English-language publications such as Jain Digest and Jain Spirit have presented Jain ideals, such as nonviolence, vegetarianism, and, most recently, environmentalism, to members of the Jain diaspora and the wider world. In the 21st century, online resources for Jains and those interested in learning about Jainism also were made available.