

JAINISM: A PRIMER



परस्परपुत्रहो जीवनाम

The Jain symbol of the open hand denotes friendly reassurance and ethical responsibility. The sign for *Abimsa* (non-violence) is in its palm. The Sanskrit writing at the bottom is this says, *All life is bound together by mutual support and interdependence.*



परस्परपुत्रहो जीवनाम

ORIGINS

Jain comes from *Jina*—a Sanskrit word meaning “conqueror.” A Jain is one who conquers one’s inner passions. The origins of Jainism (also known as *Saman* tradition or *Nirgantba* religion) lie in ancient Indian pre-history.

- In its present form, Jainism begins with Nataputra Vardhamana (599-527 BCE). Jains call him *Mahavira* (Great Hero). Like his contemporary, the Buddha, he was born into the warrior caste. At age 30, he renounced this status, and roamed the Indian countryside for twelve years, depending on donations alone for sustenance. By age 42, he attained total understanding of the universe, and total detachment from desire and physical need. During his thirty-year teaching career, Mahavira gained several hundred thousand followers.

- Jainism has since divided into two branches: *Digambaras* and *Swetambaras*. The *Swetambaras* include several sects. While the ethical and philosophical beliefs of these branches are virtually the same, there are some key differences in practice.



परस्परपुत्रहो जीवनाम

BELIEFS

- Jainism sees itself as a science or philosophy of religious tolerance, ethical purity, environmental harmony, and spiritual contentment. Thus it is correct, appropriate, natural, spiritually-disciplined living, a rational attitude which verifies the true nature of every substance. Jainism strives for complete faith in the teachings of the *Tirthankaras*.

- Jains believe that the cosmos goes through unceasing cycles of integration and disintegration—each about 600 million years. During each eon of decline, twenty-four great leaders—*Tirthankaras* (Crossing-makers)—live on earth, but never during the same time period nor place. They achieve spiritual perfection, revive the Jain way of life, establish a monastic order, and help others cross over to perfection. The



“love
your
neighbor
as
yourself”



Jain Hierarchy of Karma

Darsanavarni Karma
(obscures perception)

Jnanavarni Karma
(obscures knowledge)

Vadeneeya Karma
(produces feeling)

Mohaneeya Karma
(causes delusion)

Ayu Karma
(determines life-span)

Nam Karma
(determines physique)

Gotra Karma
(Determines status)

Antaraya Karma
(causes obstruction)

first Tirthankara for the current eon was Rishabhadeva, who lived sometime between 8000-6000 BCE. Mahavira was the twenty-fourth and last—until the universe lapses into the next eon.

- Jainism believes that, just as the universe is beginningless and endless, so is everything in it. There is no divine manager of the universe. Everything undergoes continuous self-modification. Nothing is ever created or destroyed.

- Jains believe that human life is cyclical as well. Each living being is an eternally individual soul caught in *samsara* (perpetual birth-death-rebirth). Freedom from *samsara* is the freedom from doubt, delusion, and indefiniteness gained by understanding the relationship of the elements

of the universe. Three things lead to this freedom: right knowledge, right faith, and right conduct.

- Ideally, Jains make five vows. The vow of non-violence (*ahimsa*) is founded on universal love and compassion. To uphold this vow is to avoid *all* violence—even harsh words and evil thoughts. Jains believe that all living beings are equal—regardless of size, shape, or level of spiritual development. Since it is impossible to live without injuring or killing some of the smallest life-forms, strict vegetarianism helps Jains maintain their own survival while limiting killing to “one-sense” beings. (One sect interprets non-violence so strictly that they wear a cloth over the mouth and nose to avoid inhaling tiny living beings.)

- For Jains, the vow of truthfulness means more than not lying; it means speaking the truth pleasantly, and keeping silent when speaking would be hurtful.

- For Jains, the vow of non-stealing means complete honesty. One is not to take anything not one’s own—even what is unclaimed or worthless.

- For Jains, the vow of celibacy means total abstinence from sensual pleasure, including thoughts about it. The vow of non-attachment in speech, thoughts and actions means the elimination of greed, jealousy, violence.

- Jains believe that *karmas* cling to every soul like iron filings to a magnet. Every living being attracts karma to itself by reason of certain impellent forces which are in the individual. The living being not only attracts, but assimilates karma, which changes its individuality. There are eight sequential categories of karmas (see below). Human beings who have rid themselves of the first four kinds of karmas are called *kevalis*. They live in a state of bliss on earth while they eliminate the other four kinds of *karma*. The rare *kevali* who establishes a religious order for male and female laypersons as well as monk and nuns is the one who becomes a *Tirthankara*. A *Kevali* passes from earthly life to *Moksha* (the state of perfection) as a liberated, omniscient, omnipotent soul.

- Strictly speaking, Jainism is non-theistic. Where other faiths speak of “God,” Jainism speaks of perfect being—pure consciousness with no *karma* attached. Every living thing has the potential to attain this. The ultimate entity is the perfect human; there have been many, and there will be more.

Jainism’s Five Vows

Non-violence

Truthfulness

Non-stealing

Celibacy

Non-attachment



परमपरोक्षहो जीविनाम

WRITINGS

- The sermons of Mahavira form the basis for Jain scripture, the *Agam Sutras*. These scriptures teach reverence for all life-forms, strict vegetarianism, asceticism, and non-violence. Mahavira’s disciples eventually put his sermons into written form.

- When some of these sutras were lost, the two main branches of Jainism reconstituted them, each somewhat differently. Each sect of Svetambara Jainism also has made its own judgement as to how many of the surviving sutras are authentic.

- Both branches supplement their collections of Agam Sutras with various scholarly works dating from the first ten centuries of the Common Era.



परमपरोक्षहो जीविनाम

PRACTICE

- Some Jains emulate the ascetic life-style of the Tirthankaras by becoming a monk or nun. They take rigorous vows which help them extinguish their attachment to material things, relationships, sensory pleasures, and emo-

tions. They practice a form of yoga, fast, and endure physical discomfort. They roam the countryside, depending on the community of Jains to meet their minimal physical needs.

- Digambara ascetics—Sky-clad monks—interpret non-attachment so rigorously that they wear no clothing at all. Svetambara monks and nuns wear white cloth.

- Asceticism may be the ideal, but most Jains are not monastics. Some laypersons take on an eleven-stage discipline of increasing renunciation which may lead to rebirth as a monk or nun.

- Most Jains venerate the Tirthankaras through *pujas*—symbolic acts of hospitality—at a *derasar* (temple) or a home shrine. Temples have no furniture, but decor may include intricate marble carvings. Shoes must be removed before entering.

- Some Jain sects use *pratimas*—images of one, several, or all Tirthankaras—as the central focus for worship; other sects do not. Multiple images should be identical, since all Tithankaras are pure, undifferentiated souls.

- Services are led by the *Gurudev* at the temple on Sunday mornings. They are about two hours long. Some of the service is performed from memory, although prayer books may also be used. The sermon is given in the Prakrit dialect, deals with how to do good deeds and avoid unacceptable deeds. Songs are sung, and a lamp is lit to invite light into individual lives of the faithful.

- Fasting is an important aspect of the practice of Jain discipline. Some Jains, who emulate the practice of Rishabha (the first *Tirthankara* of the present era) abstain from food on alternate days for six months or a year. Others conduct a thirty-six-hour fast on the Day of Knowledge, and one or more fasts (up to thirty-six hours) during *Paryushan*.

- Jains sometimes go on pilgrimages, especially to meet with monks for spiritual guidance, or to visit Pavapuri, the site of Mahavira’s death.



ORGANIZATION

परमपरोपकोटो जिननाम

- Worldwide, there are about seven million Jains. Most American Jains are from India. They speak Hindi and/or Gujarati.
- Two 20th-century monks—Śri Chitrabhanuji and Acharya Śri Sushil Kumarji—each have founded Jain study and meditation centers in the US, England, and elsewhere.
- Local Jain communities are self-supporting, and run by a governing board which chooses its Gurudev (spiritual leader, teacher, counsellor). Gurudevs have completed a long period and instruction under a devout, experienced teacher. As ascetics, they are not paid a salary. Rather, the congregation provides for their needs.
- In the US, Jain Centers may affiliate with JAINA (Federation of Jain Associations in North America, which holds conventions, provides solidarity among Jains, and helps Centers throughout the US and Canada.



SOCIAL ACTION

परमपरोपकोटो जिननाम

- Jainism's ethical heritage motivates Jains to undertake charitable activities, act on peace and justice concerns, and to underwrite educational institutions.
- Some Jains apply *abisma* well beyond diet. Some advocate avoiding products whose manufacture and testing causes cruelty to animals. They avoid unnecessary use of animal products (including leather and pearls). They avoid zoos, circuses, and other forms of entertainment which exploit animals. They advocate a simplified life-style to reduce human impact on the environment, and they choose jobs which do not involve violence or injustice.



HOLIDAYS

परमपरोपकोटो जिननाम

- The dates of Jain holy days are determined by a lunar calendar adjusted to the solar seasons. Typically, the community gathers for worship—sometimes with drama, dance, and special sweets—to mark events in the lives of the *Tirthankaras*.
- *Paryushan Parva*—the holiest season—is a ten-day period of fasting, complex rituals, review of Jain principles, and prayers for forgiveness from all of humanity.
- *Samvatsari Pratikramana* (or, *Samayika*)—a detailed, three-hour ceremony of spiritual review and renewal of faith at the end of *Paryushan Parva*.
- *Mahavir Jayanti* marks the birth of Lord Mahavira. Locally, this is an all-day cultural event.
- *Dipavali* (the Festival of Lamps, also called *Diwali* or *Mahavira Nirvana*) marks the attainment of *Moksha* and *Tirthankara* status by Lord Mahavira.
- *Akshaya-tritiya* marks the breaking of a year-long fast by the first *Tirthankara*, Lord Rishabha. Jains who have been fasting break theirs as he did—by drinking fresh sugar cane juice.
- *Jnana Panchmi* (Day of Knowledge)—a fast day observing the births of many Tirthankaras.
- *Maunajiyaras*—a fast to acknowledge the example of all holy beings.



BIBLIOGRAPHY

परमपरोपकोटो जिननाम

- Dundas, Paul. *The Jains*. London: Routledge, 1992.
- Folkert, Kendall W., edited by John E. Cort. *Scripture & Community: Collected Essays on the Jains*. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993.
- Tobias, Michael. *Life Force: The World of Jainism*. Berkeley, CA: Asian Humanities Press, 1991.