

જાૈનિઝ્મ

One early, great leader of the Jain sect was **Vardhanana Mahavira**. He is said to have been the son of a Kshatriya, who ruled in the region of modern Bihar around 500 BCE. According to tradition, Mahavira renounced his earthly possessions, deserted his family, and became a monk. He was the greatest saint of the Jain movement which spread throughout north and northwestern India.

Mahavira taught that all existence is alive with a force he called **jiva**. No creator god made *jiva*; instead, billions of bits of *jiva* have always existed. Everything in the universe—stars, rocks, water, trees and humans—all contain *jiva*. *Jiva* are caught up in solid matter. The goal of Jainism is to free *jiva* so they can live outside of matter in their original form. Human beings free *jiva* from their own bodies by learning to control their senses.

Mahavira believed in **karma**. He taught that each action builds either good or bad **karma**. One's **karma** either helps free *jiva* or further imprisons it in matter. The worst thing a Jain can do is harm *jiva*. Since *jiva* is present in all creation, one should not harm anything in the world. Non-injury to any living thing is called **ahimsa**.

Jainism is a creed founded on rigorous **asceticism** {extreme self-denial and austerity}. Like the priestly Brahmins, the Jains held the material world to be an illusion. The goal of man was release from the cycle of birth and rebirth, the long transmigration of the soul. But the difference was in the method by which the soul was to be freed of its encrusting karma. Rejecting rituals and incantations, the Jains held that the karmic matter could be removed only through a life of strict self-denial, penance, and discipline. So, like the saintly Mahavira, the Jain monks renounced every earthly comfort, often even to the wearing of clothing. Only through such penance, they believed, would the soul escape reincarnation and instead become a **jina**, or conqueror [from which the sect takes its name]. Indian thought gained important ideas from the Jains [pronounced 'Jines'].

The Jains believed that every living creature possessed a soul. Their doctrine of **ahimsa** forbade doing violence to any creature, down to the lowest insect, since these, too, possessed souls. **Ahimsa** is one of the most important Jain teachings. Jains preached against the Brahminic sacrifices and became strict vegetarians because of their reverence for all life. Orthodox Jains today wear masks over their mouths so they do not accidentally swallow anything living. Some Jains sweep the sidewalks as they walk, so they do not accidentally step on a small animal or insect and kill it. Orthodox Jains do not farm, because their plows might cut a worm or otherwise harm life. Many became businessmen. Less orthodox Jains also try to avoid causing harm, but are less rigid.

Ahimsa applies to psychological as well as physical injury. What a person thinks influences how he acts, and violence in thought leads to violence in action. Therefore a Jain's thoughts should follow the principle of **ahimsa** as well. In fact, violence in thought was considered a greater form of violence, and Mahavira taught that people who were Jains should develop total self-control and avoid all forms of injury, whether committed by the body, mind or speech.

In order not to hurt any insects, the Jains swept the ground before their feet when walking. Jain houses were kept scrupulously clean; vermin could be taken from the premises but never killed. In extreme practice, even water had to be strained before drinking, and the air purified by a mask worn over the nose and mouth. The doctrine of non-violence had a considerable impact on later Indian thought. It played an important part in the independence movement led by Mahatma Gandhi in the 20c.

"Sitting **dharna**" was the practice of a hunger fast. When a man believed that he had been morally wronged, he sat cross-legged upon the ground and fasted—often until death. If, as a result of "sitting **dharna**," a man died without the wrong being righted, the guilty party was doomed to be reincarnated as a member of the lowest order of living creatures. "Sitting **dharna**" later became a common practice among the Indians.

Mahavira taught his followers to try to give up attachment not only to worldly things, but to their own ideas as well. He suggested that it was often easier to give up material possessions than it was to part with one's opinions. Since any one person can only see a very small part of total reality, each of us knows only a very small part of the truth. What a person thinks is true depends to a large degree on where he is standing and on what he has been taught to think is true. This view was illustrated by a famous parable. As an experiment, an Indian prince once ordered six blind men to touch various parts of an elephant and then describe their sensations. One man thought the elephant's leg was a tree, another that its ear was a large winnowing fan, and so on, but of course, none imagined the whole elephant. Through this parable, the Jains emphasized that all knowledge was relative and subject to varying points of view. The whole truth was a mystery for which men groped blindly. In India, this doctrine resulted in a growing tolerance for the opinions of others. Jain tolerance is sometimes identified as the "**Doctrine of Maybe**." Maybe it looks that way to you from where you are standing, but remember it might look differently to me.

Jainism as an organized movement was never able to gain a large following on the subcontinent. Yet, its doctrines had an important influence on the values of Indian society. Many of its beliefs were shared by and later incorporated into the teachings of Buddhism.

questions:

1. Make a list of the major beliefs of Jainism.
2. What is *jiva*? Why is it that the worst thing that a Jain could do was to harm *jiva*?
3. What was the "Doctrine of Maybe?"
4. What lasting influence did the Jain sect have on Indian philosophy/society/politics?

all things great and small

Earth and water, fire and wind,
Grass, trees, and plants, and all creatures that move,
Born of the egg, born of the womb,
Born of dung, born of liquids—

These are the classes of living beings.
Know that they all seek happiness.
In hurting them men hurt themselves,
And will be born again among them...

Some men leave mother and father for the life of a monk,
But still make use of fire;
But he had said, "their principles are base
Who hurt for their own pleasure."

The man who lights a fire kills living things,
While he who puts it out kills the fire;
Thus a wise man who understands the Law
Should never light a fire.

There are lives in earth and lives in water,
Hopping insects leap into the fire,
And worms dwell in rotten wood,
All are burned when the fire is lighted.

Even plants are beings, capable of growth,
Their bodies need food, they are individuals.
The reckless cut them for their own pleasure
And slay many living things in doing so.

He who carelessly destroys plants, whether sprouted or full grown,
Provides a rod for his own back.
He has said, "Their principles are ignoble {not noble in quality or character}
Who harm plants for their own pleasure."

questions:

1. What beliefs of Jainism are illustrated in this poem?

Source: *India Emerges*. Steven Warshaw and C. David Bromwell with A. J. Tudisco. California: Benzinger Bruce & Glencoe, Inc., 1974, pp. 24-26.