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BORN: c. 599 bce • Kundagrama, Bihar, India

DIED: c. 527 bce • Papa, Bihar, India

Indian philosopher; religious leader

Mahavira was an Indian philosopher who lived a life of extreme piety, or devotion. He is regarded as the founder of a religion called Jainism, which is practiced primarily in India. Jains, however, would say that Mahavira did not "found" Jainism. They would instead say he rediscovered or reinvigorated Jain principles and beliefs that had always existed.

There are few biographical records of Mahavira in existence, and much of what is known about his life is more mythical than factual. The term *hagiography*, from the Greek word *hagios*, meaning "saint," is sometimes used to refer to a biography that idealizes saintly figures. The legends that surround the life of Mahavira fall into the category of hagiography.

"Whether I am walking or standing still/whether I sleep or remain awake./the supreme knowledge and intuition/present with me—constantly and continuously."

Birth and early life

One major uncertainty concerns exactly when Mahavira lived. Some evidence suggests that his life overlapped with that of the [Buddha Siddhartha Gautama](#) (563–483 bce; see entry), the founder of Buddhism. If this is correct, he may have been born in about 490 bce and died in about 410 bce. Many sources, however, give other birth and death dates. Certain Western scholars believe he was born around 540 bce and his date of death was about 470 bce. Jains believe that Mahavira was born "seventy-five years before the fourth descending period of the current era," referring to Jain measurements of historical time. This would put his birth date at 599 bce and his death date at 527 bce.

Mahavira was born in Kundagrama, a village in Bihar, a modern-day Indian state in the northeast whose capital city is Patna. His birth name was Vardhamana, which means "prospering." He was given that name because soon after he was conceived, his family and the people around him began to experience good fortune.

Vardhamana came from a royal family and was considered a member of the warrior caste, called the *Kshatriya*. Castes are hereditary Indian social classes. His mother, Trishala, was related to the ruler of the nearby city of Vaisali, and his father, Siddhartha, was a local king. According to legend Vardhamana was originally conceived by a *Brahmin* mother, Devananda. (Brahmins are the highest Indian caste and are usually priests, religious teachers, and intellectuals.) The embryo was then moved into Trishala's womb. The legends also hold that Vardhamana's conception was foretold to his mother in a series of dreams. These dreams, called "auspicious dreams" (favorable or lucky dreams) included images of a lion, the full moon, the rising sun, an ocean of milk, a white bull, and a white elephant. These dreams are described in Jain literature and are often depicted in temples.

As a child Vardhamana received an education that was suitable for a prince. According to one of the two main sects, or divisions, of Jainism, he married a princess named Yasoda, and the couple had a daughter. The other major sect of Jainism denies that he married and had a child. This sect believes that he had no ties to other people in the world.

Renunciation

The most important event in Vardhamana's life was his decision at about age thirty to renounce, or give up, his worldly possessions. After the death of his parents, he gave away all of his property, pulled out his hair, and became a wandering ascetic, or *sadhana*, meaning that he lived a life of total self-discipline and piety. He traveled around the country begging for food. At first, his only possession was a single robe, but he eventually gave up even that and went naked. He never stayed in one village for more than a day at a time and refused to shelter himself from either cold or heat. When he walked or sat, he was careful never to injure any living thing. For this reason, he traveled less during the rainy seasons, when paths would be filled

with life forms that he did not want to injure. As part of this determination, Vardhamana was a vegetarian, or a person who does not eat meat. He even strained his drinking water to ensure that no creatures were living in it.

Jain Sects

There are two main sects, or divisions, in Jainism: the *Digambara*, which translates as "sky clad," and the *Svetambara*, which translates as "white clad." The original division between the two sects resulted from disputes over which of Mahavira's teachings were the true ones and how those teachings were to be interpreted. This problem arose in part because Mahavira's teachings were not written down until well after his death, so followers had no reliable texts to use as references.

The Digambaras are the more austere, or morally strict, sect of Jainism. Unlike Svetambaras, Digambaras do not believe that women can achieve freedom until they have been reborn as men. This is partly because Digambara monks do not wear clothing. Because they believe remaining naked would be more impractical for women, they claim women have to be reborn as men in order to lead completely austere lives.

The two sects also have different views about the nature of *Jinas*, who are godlike enlightened ones. Unlike the Svetambaras, Digambaras believe that Jinas do not require food, do not have bodily functions, nor do they carry out any functions in the world. Additionally the religious images of the two sects differ. Digambara images of the *Tirthankara*, the revered Jain teachers, always have downcast eyes, signifying meditation (deep and concentrated thinking). The figures are always plain and naked. In contrast Svetambara images are always highly decorated, and the statues of the Tirthankara have wide, staring eyes, signifying preaching.

Another difference between the two sects is their views on worldly possessions. Digambaras believe that a person can achieve spiritual freedom only by completely abandoning worldly possessions. Monks of this sect are not even allowed to own a bowl for eating. All gifts they accept have to fit in the hands. A Svetembara monk, however, is allowed to wear a simple, plain white robe and may also own a begging bowl, a broom to sweep insects from his path, and writing tools.

Vardhamana supposedly lived in this ascetic fashion for twelve years, six months, and fifteen days. Then, on a summer night, he sat on the bank of the river Rjupalika under a tree and achieved omniscience, or knowledge of everything. He gained a complete understanding of the world, including its past, present, and future. According to one sacred Jain text, he saw all things about all living beings, including what they thought about, said, or did. At this point Vardhamana acquired the name Mahavira, which means "great hero."

He began to attract many followers. He preached to large crowds and engaged other religious leaders in debates about spiritual matters. He organized the Jain religion into societies of nuns, monks, female laity, and male laity. The term "laity" refers to ordinary members of a religion, or those who are not monks, priests, or nuns. According to Jain tradition, by the time of his death, Mahavira had established a community of some 14,000 monks, 36,000 nuns, 159,000 laymen, and 318,000 laywomen.

Mahavira died in the town of Papa, near Patna. His followers believe that he was alone at the time, reciting religious texts. The Jains list his death as occurring in 527 bce. As noted earlier, however, scholars offer different dates for this event. Some place it at 467 bce, others at about 477 or 476 bce, and still others at 490 bce.

Mahavira as Tirthankar

Jains regard Mahavira as the twenty-fourth *Tirthankar*. This title, the plural of which is *Tirthankara*, means something like "maker of the ford," or "maker of the ocean crossing." It refers to building or creating ways to cross the "ocean" of rebirth. In this way a Tirthankar can be thought of as similar to a prophet (divine messenger) in other religions such as Christianity, Judaism, Islam, or Zoroastrianism.

To understand the significance of the Tirthankara in the history of Jainism, the Jain concept of time must be understood. Jains believe that the principles of their religion have always existed. Sometimes, however, those principles become less important in the minds of the people and the religion dies out for a time before it is reborn. To Jains, therefore, the concept of time is cyclical, and can be pictured much like the rotation of a wheel. The rotation includes a series of upward movements, *utsarpini*, and downward movements, *avarsarpini*. A complete turn of the wheel is called a *kalpa* and covers an immense span of time. According to Jain beliefs, a kalpa is a unit of time equal to approximately 4.32 million years.

Each of these cycles, or kalpas, is divided into six ages, which can be thought of as divisions between spokes on the wheel. Three of the ages are considered to be a kind of golden era, which is followed by a decline that continues until Jainism dies out. The process is then reversed, as the religion is reborn and eventually reaches a new golden age. Jains believe that in the current time cycle, the world has passed through the first four ages of the cycle and is currently in the middle of the fifth age, with a sixth and final age to come. Each complete kalpa is long enough for twenty-four Tirthankara to live. These twenty-four make up a "set" of Tirthankara that Jains worship.

The present cycle is said to have witnessed the passing of all twenty-four of these enlightened ones, with Mahavira being the last. No historical records prove the existence of the first twenty-two. Some evidence suggests that the twenty-third Tirthankar, Parshva, did exist and lived about 250 years before Mahavira. Mahavira did not oppose or change the teachings of Parshva. Rather, Jains believe that he came to Earth to complete and fulfill those teachings and to renew Jainism.

Jains believe that some enlightened individuals can reach the perfection of a god. These people are called *Jina*, which means "conqueror" and is the source of the word *Jain*. Jains regard Mahavira as one of the Jina. Jina are perfectly happy, having conquered earthly desires, and their spirits live eternally, so they are worshipped as "gods." Although the Jina are thought of as gods, they are neither creators nor destroyers. They do not affect the laws of the physical universe. Humans also do not exist because of the Jina's actions and cannot have any kind of relationship with them, for the Jina do not interfere in the affairs of humans. They do not reward people for good actions or forgive their sins. Humans regard them only as a source of inspiration. Because of these characteristics, Jains are sometimes referred to as atheists, meaning that they do not believe in any gods, but this is true only in a limited sense.

Mahavira's teachings

Mahavira is referred to by two titles. As a Tirthankar, he was one of the great teachers of Jainism. He purified and organized the religion in the present age. He was also a Jina, a person who has gained enlightenment and understanding to such an extent that he is to be worshipped. Mahavira achieved this position in large part by living and teaching the Five Vows of Jainism. These vows are still practiced by Jains in the early twenty-first century. [The Five](#) Vows are as follows:

1. *Ahimsa*: neither killing nor injuring any living thing.
2. *Satya*: speaking only the truth.
3. *Asteya*: not stealing things or being greedy.
4. *Brahmacharya*: practicing celibacy, or not having sex, and giving up all sensual pleasure.
5. *Aparigraha*: being detached and being neither delighted nor disturbed by any outward experiences.

Another central belief of Jainism, related to *ahimsa*, or nonviolence, is that since all creatures contain living souls, all deserve to be treated with respect.

[The Five](#) Vows can be thought of as somewhat similar to the [Ten Commandments](#) of Judaism and Christianity and to the Five Pillars of Islam, which provide the followers of these religions with basic guidelines or laws for living. The vows provide Jains with a moral and ethical code to follow. The principle that is particularly associated with Jainism is the first, *ahimsa*, the vow to not injure or kill any living thing. This vow not only bans such extreme actions as murder and assault but also extends into everyday life. All Jains are vegetarians, as was Mahavira, and strict Jains go to great lengths to avoid harming anything that is alive. Some Jains even avoid eating after dark in order to be certain they do not accidentally consume small living creatures that they cannot see.

Mahavira accepted the Hindu belief in reincarnation, or being reborn into another living body after death. He taught that the *jiva*, or soul, is conscious, immaterial, and eternal. Because the soul is eternal, it is subject to the ongoing cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Mahavira also taught the Hindu concept of karma. *Karma* refers to the effects of a person's actions in one life on the nature of his or her next life. A person who earns positive karma by doing good deeds can be reborn on a higher plane of existence, while one who earns bad karma by being immoral or unethical will likely be reborn on a lower plane of existence. Mahavira taught that karma represents a kind of bondage or entrapment. The goal of every person is to stop earning new karma and to get rid of past karma. The result of doing so is *siddhi*, or perfection. He preached that a soul that has gotten rid of all karma can become spiritually pure. Unlike Hindus, Jains believe that karma is an actual physical substance, like dust, that attaches itself to the soul.

Mahavira warned that freeing the soul from karma was not easy, and could only be accomplished by mastering the "three jewels." Like the Five Vows, the three jewels form an ethical code. They are right faith, right knowledge, and right conduct. The first of these, right faith, or *samyak darshana*, means seeing clearly. It is sometimes translated as "right perception." The term refers to avoiding superstition and preconceptions (opinions formed in advance of adequate knowledge) and being determined to find the truth. The second jewel, right knowledge, or *samyak jnana*, refers to knowing and understanding the universe. The third, *samyak charitra*, or right conduct, refers to leading one's life ethically. An ethical person avoids doing harm to living things and frees himself or herself from impure desires, attitudes, and thoughts by following the Five Vows.

Regardless of the uncertainties surrounding the facts of Mahavira's life, he was an important religious figure in India in the centuries before the start of the Common Era. Though his home village of Kundagrama no longer exists, in 1956 the government of Bihar created a memorial to Mahavira near its former location. The memorial is home to the Research Institute of Prakrit, Ahimsa, and Jainology, an institution in which the principles of Jainism are studied.

For More Information

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