

The literal meaning

Literally translated, Ahimsa means to be without harm; to be utterly harmless, not only to oneself and others, but to all forms of life, from the largest mammals to the smallest bacteria.

Jains believe that life (which equals soul) is sacred regardless of faith, caste, race, or even species.

In following this discipline Jain monks may be observed treading and sweeping in their temples with the utmost of care so as to avoid accidentally crushing crawling insects, or wearing muslin cloths over their mouths in case they should accidentally swallow a fly.

JAINISM

HISTORY, DEVELOPMENT & BELIEFS

Jainism at a glance

Jainism is an ancient religion from India that teaches that the way to liberation and bliss is to live lives of harmlessness and renunciation.

The essence of Jainism is concern for the welfare of every being in the universe and for the health of the universe itself.

- Jains believe that animals and plants, as well as human beings, contain living souls. Each of these souls is considered of equal value and should be treated with respect and compassion.
- Jains are strict vegetarians and live in a way that minimizes their use of the world's resources.
- Jains believe in reincarnation and seek to attain ultimate liberation - which means escaping the continuous cycle of birth, death and rebirth so that the immortal soul lives for ever in a state of bliss.
- Liberation is achieved by eliminating all karma from the soul.
- Jainism is a religion of self-help.
- There are no gods or spiritual beings that will help human beings.
- The three guiding principles of Jainism, the 'three jewels', are right belief, right knowledge and right conduct.
- The supreme principle of Jain living is non violence (ahimsa).
- This is one of the 5 mahavratas (the 5 great vows). The other mahavratas are non-attachment to possessions, not lying, not stealing, and sexual restraint (with celibacy as the ideal).
- Mahavira is regarded as the man who gave Jainism its present-day form.
- The texts containing the teachings of Mahavira are called the Agamas.
- Jains are divided into two major sects; the Digambara (meaning "sky clad") sect and the Svetambara (meaning "white clad") sect.
- Jainism has no priests. Its professional religious people are monks and nuns, who lead strict and ascetic lives.

Most Jains live in India, and according to the 2001 Census of India there are around 4.2 million living there. However, the Oxford Handbook of Global Religions, published in 2006, suggests that census figures may provide lower than the true number of followers as many Jains identify themselves as Hindu. The Handbook also states that there are around 25,000 Jains in Britain.

History of Jainism

Jainism doesn't have a single founder. The truth has been revealed at different times by a tirthankara, which means a teacher who 'makes a ford' i.e. shows the way. Other religions call such a person a 'prophet'.

As great omniscient teachers, Tirthankaras accomplished the highest spiritual goal of existence and then teach others how to achieve it.

In what Jains call the 'present age' there have been 24 tirthankaras - although there is little evidence for the existence of most of these.

Tirthankaras

A tirthankara appears in the world to teach the way to moksha, or liberation.

A Tirthankar is not an incarnation of the God. He is an ordinary soul that is born as a human and attains the states of a Tirthankar as a result of intense practices of penance, equanimity and meditation. As such, the Tirthankar is not defined as an Avatar (god-incarnate) but is the ultimate pure developed state of the soul.

Tirthankaras were not founders of any religion, but great omniscient teachers who lived at various times in man's cultural history. They accomplished the highest spiritual goal of existence and then taught their contemporaries the way to reach it by crossing over to the safe shores of spiritual purity.

Each new tirthankara preaches the same basic Jain philosophy, but they give the Jain way of life subtly different forms in order to suit the age and the culture in which they teach.

The 24 tirthankaras during this present age are:

Adinatha, Ajita, Sambhava, Abhinandana, Sumati, Padmaprabha, Suparshva, Chandraprabha, Suvudhi, Shital, Shreyansa, Vasupujya, Vimala, Ananta, Dharma, Shanti, Kunthu, Ara, Malli, Muni Suvrata, Nami, Nemi, Parshva and Mahavira.

Svetambara Jains believe that tirthankaras can be men or women, and say that Malli began her life as a princess; but Digambra Jains believe that women can't be tirthankaras and that Malli was a man.

Parshva

There is some historical evidence for the earthly existence of the 23rd tirthankara, Parshva, who lived about 250 years before Mahavira.

Right conduct - Samyak charitra

This means living your life according to Jain ethical rules, to avoid doing harm to living things and freeing yourself from attachment and other impure attitudes and thoughts.

Jains believe that a person who has right faith and right knowledge will be motivated and able to achieve right conduct.

Many Jains believe that a person without right faith and right knowledge cannot achieve right conduct - so it's no use following scripture and ritual for the wrong reasons (e.g. so that other people will think you are a good person). Not all Jains hold this view.

Ahimsa

Jains believe that the only way to save one's own soul is to protect every other soul, and so the most central Jain teaching, and the heart of Jain ethics, is that of ahimsa (non-violence).

In practical terms the biggest part that ahimsa plays in the lives of lay Jains today is in the regulation of their diet.

Mahavira taught that:

Ahimsa is often translated simply as non-violence, but its implications are far wider; it is more than not doing violence, it is more than an attitude, it is a whole way of life. And for modern Jains the concept also includes the positive elements of working for justice, peace, liberation, and freedom, if doing so does not involve violence.

Mahatma Gandhi was a famous advocate of Ahimsa, as it informed his policy of passive resistance, satyagraha (combining the Sanskrit terms for 'truth' and 'holding firmly') - which he adopted towards the occupying British forces during the period leading up to Indian independence. Some Jains have criticized this as being a subtle form of violence.

You may think that there is a high degree of self-interest in the doctrine of ahimsa, because in Jainism harm done to other beings is considered harm to oneself since it attracts much karma and thus hinders the soul's journey to liberation. But this is merely an appearance - the level of detachment that a Jain seeks to cultivate eliminates self-interest.

- humans can only use them as an inspiration
- So when Jains worship 'gods' they do so to set before themselves the example of perfection that they want to follow in their own lives.

Non-liberated souls

Every jiva has the possibility of achieving liberation, and thus of becoming a god, and each soul is involved in a process of evolving towards that state.

The Three Jewels of Jainism

The aim of Jain life is to achieve liberation of the soul.

This is done by following the Jain ethical code, or to put it simply, living rightly by following the three jewels of Jain ethics.

There are three parts to this: right faith, right knowledge and right conduct. The first two are very closely connected.

Right faith - Samyak darshana

This doesn't mean believing what you're told, but means seeing (hearing, feeling, etc.) things properly, and avoiding preconceptions and superstitions that get in the way of seeing clearly.

Some books call samyak darshana "right perception". You can't achieve this unless you are determined to find the truth, and distinguish it from untruth.

Right knowledge - Samyak jnana

This means having an accurate and sufficient knowledge of the real universe - this requires a true knowledge of the five (or six) substances and nine truths of the universe - and having that knowledge with the right mental attitude.

One writer puts it like this: "if our character is flawed and our conscience is not clear, knowledge alone will not help us achieve composure and happiness".

Today this means having a proper knowledge of the Jain scriptures.

Some writers describe right knowledge as meaning having a pure soul; a soul that is free from attachment and desire... others say that a person who has right knowledge will naturally free themselves from attachment and desire, and so achieve peace of mind.

In his time four of the five Jain principles of non-violence, truthfulness, not stealing, and not owning things were part of Jainism. Chastity was added by the next tirthankara, Mahavira.

Mahavira

Mahavira is regarded as the man who gave Jainism its present-day form; although this is true only in the widest sense. He is sometimes wrongly called "the founder of Jainism".

Mahavira is only this world's most recent tirthankara (and will be the last one in this age). It may be more useful to think of him as a reformer and populariser of an ancient way of life rather than as the founder of a faith.

Early life of Mahavira

Mahavira was originally born as Vardhamana in north east India in 599 BCE (that's the traditional date but some modern scholars prefer 540 BCE, or even later).

He was a prince, the son of King Siddhartha and Queen Trishala, who were members of the kshatriya (warrior) caste and followers of the teachings of Parshva.

Mahavira becomes an ascetic

When Prince Vardhamana reached thirty years of age, not long after the death of both his parents, he left the royal palace to live the life of an ascetic, or a sadhana (one who renounces all worldly pleasures and comforts).

He spent twelve and a half years subjecting himself to extremely long, arduous periods of fasting and meditation.

Eventually his efforts bore fruit, and Vardhamana attained Kevalnyan, enlightenment, and therefore was later called Mahavira (the name is from *maha*, great, and *vira*, hero).

Mahavira the teacher

From that day forward Mahavira taught the path he had discovered to other seekers. His teaching career lasted until his physical death in 527 BCE (according to Svetambara texts), when he was 72 years old. After a final period of intensive fasting he attained moksha, the final liberation from all rebirth.

Mahavira added the principle of chastity to the four Jain principles already given by Parshva (no violence, no lying, no stealing, no possessions).

According to tradition Mahavira is said to have established a community of 14,000 monks and 36,000 nuns before he died.

But he certainly did create a large and loyal monastic/ascetic/mendicant community inspired by his teaching. One of his immediate disciples, Jambu, was the last person in this age to achieve enlightenment.

Over the next centuries the Jain community grew and spread to central and western parts of India.

Jainism began to lose strength as Hinduism grew in the early part of the last millennium, and by the middle of the 19th century it was seriously weakened.

Jainism was revived in the 19th century by a number of Svetambara reformers, most notably Atmaramji (1837-96). In the 20th century the Digambara movement was revitalised through the work of Acarya Shantisagar.

Jainism and the divine

Jains do not believe in a God or gods in the way that many other religions do, but they do believe in divine (or at least perfect) beings who are worthy of devotion.

This makes it difficult to give a straight answer to the question "is Jainism atheistic?" The scholar Heinrich Zimmer suggested that a new word was needed: *transtheistic*, meaning "inaccessible by arguments as to whether or not a God exists".

God and the problem of evil

The Jain view of God enables Jainism to explain the evil and suffering that exists in the world without the intellectual difficulties faced by religions that have an omnipotent, wholly good, creator God at their heart.

Where religions such as Christianity find the problem of evil one of their toughest tests, Jains use the existence of evil as a reason for denying the existence of an omnipotent, wholly good, Creator.

Jainism and God - the theistic side

Some writers regard the jinas as 'gods' because the jinas are venerated by Jains in the way that other faiths worship gods or God.

Jains venerate them because they have achieved perfection, and have become liberated from the cycle of birth and death.

- not all souls can be liberated - some souls are inherently incapable of achieving this
- the soul can evolve towards that liberation by following principles of behaviour
- Individuality

Each jiva is an individual quite independent of other jivas. This is different from one of the Hindu Vedanta schools of belief where each soul is part of a single ultimate reality.

Jains believe that there are an infinite number of souls in the universe - every living thing, no matter how primitive, is a jiva - and at any given time many of these jivas are not embodied.

Souls have not fallen from perfection

For Jains, each jiva has been associated with matter, and involved in the cycle of birth and death since the beginning of time. They did not in some way fall from perfection to become involved in this cycle.

Some jivas, through their own efforts, have become liberated and escaped from the cycle.

Liberated souls

Some jivas have achieved liberation from the cycle of samsara or reincarnation and are not reborn. They are called siddhas.

Liberated jivas don't have physical bodies; they possess infinite knowledge, infinite vision, infinite power, and infinite bliss - in effect they have become perfect beings.

This makes liberated jivas the beings most like gods in Jain belief, but they are very different from the conventional idea of gods:

- they do not create or destroy
- it's not possible to have any sort of relationship with them
- they do not intervene in the universe
- they did not set down the laws of the universe
- they do not make any demands on human beings
- they don't reward human beings in any way, or forgive their sins, or give them grace
- human beings don't owe their existence to them

- prevents the jiva living a correct life

jnana-avaraniya-karma (knowledge-obscuring):

- interferes with the jiva's intellect and senses
- prevents the jiva understanding the truth
- blocks the jiva's natural omniscience

dars(h)an-avarniya-karma (perception-obscuring):

- interferes with perception through the senses

antaraya-karma (obstructing):

- obstructs the energy of the jiva
- blocks the doing of good acts that the jiva wants to do

Non-destructive karmas

vedaniya-karma (feeling-producing):

- determines whether the jiva has pleasant or unpleasant experiences

nama-karma (physique-determining):

- determines the type of rebirth
- determines the physical characteristics of the new life
- determines the spiritual potential of the new life

ayu-karma (life-span-determining):

- determines the duration of a being's life (within the limits of the species into which the jiva is reborn)

gotra-karma (status-determining):

- determines the status of a being within its species.

Jain beliefs about the soul

Jain ideas about the soul differ from those of many other religions.

The Jain word that comes closest to soul is jiva, which means a conscious, living being. For Jains body and soul are different things: the body is just an inanimate container - the conscious being is the jiva.

After each bodily death, the jiva is reborn into a different body to live another life, until it achieves liberation. When a jiva is embodied (i.e. in a body), it exists throughout that body and isn't found in any particular bit of it.

Jains believe:

- the soul exists forever
- each soul is always independent
- the soul is responsible for what it does
- the soul experiences the consequences of its actions
- the soul can become liberated from the cycle of birth and death

The jinas are the ideal state of an individual soul's existence, and are worshipped as a perfect example for Jains to aspire to. So the only 'gods' that exist for Jains are pure souls that are omniscient, perfectly happy and eternal.

All of us could become such a 'god' because every being has the potential to become such a perfect soul.

In many ways the Jain attitude to perfect beings is both intelligible and satisfying, and sufficient to demolish the claim that Jainism is an atheistic religion. If one wants to argue that Jainism is atheistic then one must do so from a specific, limited, idea of what it means to be divine.

Prayers

Jain prayers aren't like the God-focused prayers found in Christianity. Instead Jain prayers tend to recall the great qualities of the tirthankaras and remind the individual of various teachings.

Jainism and God - the atheistic side

Jains do not believe that the universe was created by God or by any other creative spirit. Jain writings are scornful of the very idea.

There is no God to maintain the universe

Jains do not believe that any form of god is necessary to keep the universe in existence, or that any form of god has any power over the universe.

There is no God of judgement

Jains do not believe in that sort of judgement. Jains believe that the goodness or quality of a being's life are determined by karma.

Jains believe that karma is a physical process, and nothing to do with spiritual beings.

There is no God the ruler

Jains do not believe that there is a god who must be obeyed.

There is no God who helps people

Jains do not believe in any god who will respond to prayer or intervene in the world. The beings that Jains worship have no interest in human beings.

The beings that Jains worship are beyond human contact and they cannot intervene in the world.

There is no God who demands worship

The perfect beings that Jains worship have no interest in human beings.

Any being that desired anything would not be perfect and thus not a god.

There is no God compared to whom each of us will always be inferior

Every soul has the potential to become perfect. All perfect souls are equal.

The heavenly beings are not gods

The beings that live in the heavenly kingdoms are not gods since they are still subject to karma and reincarnation. These beings are called devas.

Purpose of worship

The motive and purpose of Jain worship is very different from worship in many other religions - in fact it would seem that Jain principles make worship both unnecessary and futile.

Jains don't worship to please gods, or in the hope of getting something from gods in return. But nevertheless, Jains do worship

At a superficial level Jain temple worship seems to contain elements similar to worship in Hindu temples. This is the result of the cultural influence of other Indian religions on the Jain community, and not a reflection of the Jain philosophy.

A key difference between Jain and Hindu worship, which seems similar on the surface, is that although Jains appear to worship the tirthankaras in particular they don't worship them as persons: what they worship is the ideal of perfection that the tirthankaras have achieved.

The purpose of Jain worship

Jain worship provides the individual with a discipline that helps them concentrate on the Jain ideals, and cultivate detachment.

The worshipper concentrates on the virtues of the tirthankaras and other pure souls, in order to help them follow their example.

It's a compound process in that the accumulation of karma causes us to have bad thoughts, deeds, emotions and vices, and these bad actions (etc) cause our souls to attract more karma, which causes more bad thoughts, and so on.

Avoiding and removing karma

Karma can be avoided in two ways

- By behaving well - so no karma is attracted
- By having the right mental state - so that even if an action attracts karma, the correct mental attitude of the being means that karma either doesn't stick to that soul or is discharged immediately

Some karmas expire on their own after causing suffering. Others karmas remain. The karma that has built up on the soul can be removed by living life according to the Jain vows.

Outline of karma

- Karma is a physical substance
- This substance is everywhere in the universe
- There are 8 forms of karma
- The mental, verbal and physical actions of the jiva attract karma to it. The more intense the activity, the more karma is attracted
- The karma sticks to the jiva because negative characteristics of the jiva, passions like anger, pride and greed, make the jiva sticky. Karma can be warded off by avoiding these negative characteristics
- If the being is without passions then the karma does not stick, thus a person can avoid karma sticking to them by leading a religiously correct life
- Karma must be burned off the jiva in order for it to make spiritual progress. Living according to the Jain vows is the way to get rid of karma
- The jiva takes its karma with it from one life to another

The 8 types of karma

These types of karma can be split equally into destructive and non-destructive karma.

Destructive karmas

mohaniya-karma (delusory):

- deludes the jiva
- causes attachment to false beliefs

When the being becomes free of all karma it travels instantly to the supreme abode - the highest level of the universe - where it lives for ever in a disembodied state of bliss with the other liberated souls.

Karma - the cosmic scorecard

Karma is the mechanism that determines the quality of life. The happiness of a being's present life is the result of the moral quality of the actions of the being in its previous life.

A soul can only achieve liberation by getting rid of all the karma attached to it.

Karma is a logical and understandable way of making sense of good and evil, the different qualities of different lives and the different moral status of different types of creature, without having to involve rules laid down by a god.

Karma works without the intervention of any other being - gods or angels have no part to play in dispensing rewards or punishments.

Karma is a concept found in religions which include reincarnation in their beliefs. Different religions have different ideas as to exactly how karma operates.

The Jain idea of karma is much more elaborate and mechanistic than that found in some other Eastern religions.

Karma is a physical substance

Jains believe that karma is a physical substance that is everywhere in the universe. Karma particles are attracted to the jiva (soul) by the actions of that jiva.

It may be helpful to think of karma as floating dust which sticks to the soul, or as types of atomic particle which are attracted to the soul as a result of our actions, words and thoughts. On their own, karma particles have no effect but when they stick to a soul they affect the life of that soul.

We attract karma particles when we do or think or say things: we attract karma particles if we kill something, we attract karma particles when we tell a lie, we attract karma particles when we steal and so on.

The quantity and nature of the karma particles sticking to the soul cause the soul to be happy or unhappy and affect the events in the soul's present and future lives.

So for Jains worship is only a means to an end and not a spiritual end in itself. And worship is not a sufficient means to that end.

Social effect of Jain worship

Worship in the temple, although mostly individual, does have the social benefit of binding the Jain community together, but this isn't a religious benefit, merely a side-effect.

Worship and prayer

Jain worship and prayer are radically different to the worship and prayer found in many other faiths. There are three main reasons for this:

Jainism is action, not devotion

Jainism is a religion where the follower is expected to help themselves towards salvation, through thinking and acting in the proper way. Some say that it is a religion "of action, not devotion", although others say that devotion and action can be the same thing.

Nonetheless, many Jains in India worship at their temple every day, and join forces for community worship on festival days.

There's no point in praying to gods in order to get anything but spiritual benefit

Jains say that if a person takes part in prayer or worship (or gives to charity) because they want to get something then they won't get any spiritual benefit from that worship, let alone any material benefit.

Jains have little reason to pray to gods out of self-interest since only devas can give help, siddhas cannot; and the operation of karma, which sets the quality of a being's life, is completely automatic and cannot be influenced by prayer.

Prayer cannot benefit the being who is worshipped

Jains know that spiritual beings can't benefit from being worshipped, because:

- Such beings are beyond human contact
- Such beings have been liberated from all desires and passions and so they cannot be pleased by worship or anything else. So on the face of it, there is no reason for Jains to worship. Yet they do.

Why Jains worship

Despite everything said above, Jains have good reasons for worshipping:

- It improves the spiritual state of the worshipper.
- The very act of worshipping brings about spiritual purification - rather as going to the gym improves the body.
- It can destroy bad karma attached to the soul.
- It provides a focus for spiritual activity.
- It acknowledges the worshipper's own inherent divinity.
- It reminds the worshipper of the life-example they want to follow.

Jain prayers

Jain prayers aren't like the God-focussed prayers found in Christianity. Instead Jain prayers tend to recall the great acts of the tirthankaras and remind the individual of the various teachings of Mahavira.

Jain prayer is part of a being's spiritual development; it is a means to an end and not an end in itself.

Jains do not pray to ask the tirthankaras for grace or material favours, but to inspire them in their practice.

Prayers are spoken in the ancient dialect of Ardha Magadhi (which is as old as Aramaic, the language spoken by Christ).

The daily prayer

One of the most important Jain prayers is the Namaskara Sutra which praises the five great beings of Jainism.

This prayer does not worship any particular individual. It worships the virtues of the arihantas, the siddhas, the acharyas, the upadhyayas and sadhus.

This prayer is learnt by all Jain children. It is often the first prayer a Jain will say when rising in the morning and the last prayer said before going to sleep for the night.

The prayer of forgiveness

This prayer begins by forgiving all beings for anything they may have done to the person praying, it goes on to ask forgiveness of all beings (including the tiniest insect) for anything that the person praying may have done to them.

The order of the prayer is very typical of Jainism - the person praying begins with the things they can change in themselves, rather than asking for changes in others.

Jainism, death and reincarnation

Like many Eastern religions, Jainism uses the concepts of reincarnation and deliverance.

Reincarnation

When a being dies the soul (jiva) goes to its next body instantly. This body may not be human or even animal.

The quality of its next life is determined by its karma at that time.

The mental state of the being at the moment of death is also important: a calm and contented death, with the mind focussed on spiritual matters, is the best.

Deliverance

A being achieves deliverance when it is free from all karma.

This is not the same thing as enlightenment. An enlightened being is free of all harmful karma, but still subject to the non-harmful karma. However, a delivered being cannot attract any harmful karma, and they cannot do anything bad. Such a being is called an arihant.

Despite being still human, an arihant has perfect knowledge, and happiness. All the tirthankaras were arihants (but not vice versa). A tirthankara is an arihant who founds a religious community of monks and nuns (there was no organised laity in early Jainism).

An enlightened being does not achieve deliverance until all the non-harmful karma has expired. During this time it continues to be embodied and can live in the world.

Presently, you will not find a fully enlightened being even among the most holy of Jain monks, as Jain teaching states that no-one has or will achieve enlightenment in the present time (in Jain terms, during the 5th and 6th spokes of the current time cycle).