

Jainism

WHO IS GOD?

According to the Jain belief the universe and its constituents are eternal. They are working by their inherent laws and are not created by any 'Supreme Being' or the God. Jainism does not accept a god as creator or ruler, but it does accept those other qualities attributed to god, which are attainable practically by all human beings, through their own efforts by shedding karma attached to their souls. Jains believe in 'godhood', which can be achieved by any person who attains perfection by following the path of Right Faith, Right Knowledge and Right Conduct. Godhood is never attainable by divine grace, but only attained through an individual's personal efforts. Jains worship the perfected beings that have attained omniscience or liberation as Gods.

WHERE DID WE COME FROM?

Jains believe in a cyclic view of history with no beginning or end. The souls are eternal, but in the case of worldly souls, they are bound by fine particles of matter known as karmic bondage. Jains believe in rebirth of a soul until one gets liberation from karmic bondage. It is very difficult to get a human birth. Only human beings are capable of conquering their desires and passions, and attaining liberation. Even the heavenly beings have to be born as human to attain liberation. We might have come from any destiny - heavenly being, human, animal or plant, or infernal being - our past destiny depended upon our attached karma.

WHY ARE WE HERE?

The meaning of life for us is to attain godhood or liberation (moksa) by following the path of Right Faith, Right Knowledge and Right Conduct. We have to conquer our passions and desires by following the spiritual path taught by the Jinas and shed the attached karma. It may require many rebirths and lives, but continuous efforts will attain our desired goal.

HOW DO WE KNOW?

Mahavira, the last of the tirthankaras from this present aeon, codified Jain scriptures in the sixth century BCE. They are available in two versions produced by the major two sects of Jainism, Svetambara (ascetics with white robes) and Digambara (sky clad monks). The agama (canon) for the Svetambara includes 45 texts: 11 Angas (parts), 12 Upangas (subsidiary texts), 4 Mula-sutras (basic texts), 6 Cheda-sutras (discipline texts), 2 Culika-sutras (appendices) and 10 Prakirnakas (assorted texts). For the Digambara, the canon includes the Karma prabharta, or chapters of karman, and the Kasaya prabharta, or the chapters of kasayas (passions). Original texts are written in Prakrit or Sanskrit. Many of them have been translated in English and other languages. In addition to the scriptures, plentiful literature and texts written for the modern readership are available. The texts describe the Jain way of life, which is based on non-violence and reverence for all life (ahimsa), non-attachment to worldly possessions (aparigraha) and acceptance of multiple views (anekantavada), which has cultivated virtues of compassion, tolerance and friendship to all. As far as possible they will not harm any life. The Jain texts have described the livingness and the life in animals and plants. It is only for the sustenance of the body that Jains will harm one-sense beings such as vegetables. They will be

careful to minimise the use of vegetables and plants and as result one finds strict Jains not eating root vegetables. They will avoid eating at night. They are vegetarians; they care for the environment and are involved in the work of animal welfare; and are philanthropic in nature. One can also learn the Jain way of life from the Jain ascetics found in India; the ascetics will not come to the West as they travel on foot because of their vow of total non-violence even to one sense creatures.

WHAT DO WE HAVE TO DO?

Jain texts tell us that any person who follows the teaching of the Jina is a Jain. Persons born in a Jain community have a better chance to be a Jain, but they have to follow the Jain teachings. We have to know and follow the basic Jain teachings as below to the best of our ability and observe anekantavada (or acceptance of multiple views) in our dealings:

- * Ahimsa (non-violence and reverence for all life)
- * Satya (truthfulness, communication in a pleasant and non-hurtful manner that is free from falsehood)
- * Asteya (not stealing or taking anything which belong to others without their permission)
- * Brahmacharya (chastity and control over our senses; for the ascetics it is total celibacy and for the laity it is faithfulness to one's spouse)
- * Aparigraha (free from attachment to material things)

The ascetics observe the above vows totally (mahavrata) and will not hurt any living being to the best of their ability. As the laity cannot take the vow of not hurting one sense living beings because of their day-to-day livelihood; they observe the above vows partially (anuvratas). There are many rituals, which are observed by ascetics and laypeople alike, such as observance of the six essential duties, and some are performed either by ascetics or by laypeople and are meant to enhance the quality of life, physically, mentally and spiritually, for the practitioner. These practices date back around 2,500 years and their continuation attests to their value.

*Equanimity (samayika): The detached attitude and practice of equanimity produce mental tranquility.

* Veneration of the Twenty-Four (caturvisanti-stava): a recital in veneration of the twenty-four tirthankaras of each time cycle, with the intention of developing their faith and virtues in one's own self. This recital may be performed in isolation or in a temple.

* Veneration of Ascetics (guru vandana): This ritual is called the guru vandana, by which respect for ascetics is expressed, egoism is reduced and humility cultivated.

* Penitential Retreat (pratikramana): It is a ritual of confession, making atonement for transgressions committed during the past day or night. and asking for forgiveness for the transgressions accompanied by an expression of intention not to repeat them. Prayers for the welfare of all living beings are also offered in this ritual.

* Renunciation (pratyaakhyaana): This ritual involves taking a vow to abandon that which is harmful to the soul and to accept that which is beneficial. The ritual of renunciation or austerity requires detachment from material things; especially those associated with sensual pleasures and helps to develop self-control and Right Conduct.

* Meditation with Bodily Detachment (kayotsarga): We spend too much time attending to the physical body, its needs and pleasures and forget our true self, the soul. The aim of kayotsarga is to channel concentration away from the corporeal and onto the non-corporeal self, the soul. It is performed by standing or sitting silently in a meditative posture for variable lengths of time (forty-eight minutes or more) initiated and terminated by recitation of the Navakara Mantra.

* Yoga, meditation and austerities necessary for spiritual progress are part of the essential duties,

and donations (daana) are regarded by many as part and parcel of these essential duties.

WHAT'S GOING ON TODAY?

Today, there are between four and five million Jains around the world, with the greatest percentage, by far, being in India. (their population was much larger in the first millennium). There is a small, but growing, Jain population in North America and the United Kingdom. More than 50 Jain Centers, some with temples, have been established in the West. Jains all over the World are celebrating the year of 2001 CE as the 2600th birth anniversary of Mahavira.

HOW DO WE RECOGNIZE IT?

One of the main symbols of Jainism is the open hand, representing the principle of Ahimsa, or nonviolence. Often the palm of the hand will have a wheel of life, representing the karmic cycle of birth, life, death, rebirth

The 411 on the founding of Jainism

Who: Jainism is an eternal religion, whose origin is untraceable. Jainism believes the universe to be eternal, its constituents, such as living and non-living things, may change form, but they are basically eternal, and are not created by any Supreme Being. Time rotates in a cycle, like a wheel moving clockwise, descending and ascending. In each half of the time cycle (aeon), descending and ascending, twenty-four tirthankaras establish the fourfold order and teach the path of bliss and perfection to all the living beings in the language they understand. The first tirthankara was Risabhdeva, who is traditionally believed to have lived thousands of centuries ago, and to have founded Jainism in this aeon. The twenty-third tirthankara was Parsvanatha (c 870 BCE to 770 BCE) and the twenty-fourth (and last) was Vardhamana Mahavira, who lived, according to generally accepted dates, from 599 to 527 BCE and who revived Jainism as practised today.

What: Jains are the followers of the Jinas or tirthankaras (Jina means conqueror). Jinas are those humans who, through their personal effort and self-realisation, have conquered their desires and passions and have become omniscient by shedding the obstructive karma attached to the soul. They teach a simple pathway for eternal bliss and liberation (moksa) to all and attain liberation by shedding all karma. Moksa is the state of liberated souls who are no longer in bondage to the karmic cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Jains follow the philosophy and teachings of the Jinas to attain moksa for themselves.

When: Jains believe their religion has always existed. It was, however, codified in the time of Mahavira (late 6th century BCE), the last of the 24 tirthankaras from this aeon. The first tirthankara, Risabhdeva, is mentioned in the Rig Veda, the oldest Hindu scripture, thought to be over 5,000 years old. Historically, Jainism is therefore one of the oldest organized religions in the world, if not the oldest.

Where: Jainism started in India, and spread throughout Southeast Asia. It has adherents throughout the world, mainly due to immigration, though most adherents still live in India. Because of the vow of total non-violence Jain ascetics travel on foot and are only found in India.

WHAT IF I WANT TO KNOW MORE?

For more information, check out these great sites:

- * www.jainfriends.faithweb.com
- * www.jainworld.com
- * www.jainism.org

The following books are available:

- * *Jainism: The World of Conquerors*, by Natubhai Shah
- * *Jainism: An Indian Religion of Salvation*, by H.V. Glasenapp.
- * *The Jains*, by Paul Dundas

Jain Spirit is a quarterly magazine promoting Jainism and its adherents. Its also available for viewing online at www.jainspirit.org.

Sources:

Salgia, Amar. *Jainism: A Portrait*. In Beversluis, Joel (Ed.). (1995). *A Sourcebook for Earth's Community of Religions*. Ada: CoNexus Press.

www.jainism.org

www.jainfriends.faithweb.com

Dr. Natubhai Shah, Secretary General, World Council of Jain Academics; Chairman, Ahimsa for Quality of Life; Chairman, Jain Sangha of Europe.