



Vardhamana Mahavira: Life, Teachings, and Jainism

Description

Jainism stands as one of India's ancient shramanic traditions, offering a profound perspective on existence, ethics, and the path to liberation. Its teachings, rooted in the principles of non-violence and self-control, have influenced Indian thought and culture for millennia. At the heart of this venerable tradition is Vardhamana Mahavira, often regarded as the twenty-fourth and last Tirthankara, who systematised and propagated its core doctrines in the 6th century BCE.

Understanding Mahavira's life and the fundamental tenets of Jainism is essential for comprehending India's rich spiritual heritage. His journey from a prince to an ascetic, his quest for truth, and the rigorous discipline he espoused laid the foundation for a distinct philosophical and ethical system. This article explores Mahavira's life, the fundamental principles of Jainism, its intricate philosophical concepts, and its historical development, providing a comprehensive overview for students of [Indian history](#) and philosophy.

Vardhamana Mahavira: Life and Journey

The life of Vardhamana Mahavira is a testament to profound spiritual seeking and unwavering commitment to asceticism. His personal journey is central to the development and propagation of Jainism as we understand it today.

Birth, Family, and Early Renunciation

Vardhamana was born around 540 BCE in Kundagrama, near Vaishali, in present-day Bihar. His father, Siddhartha, was the head of the Jnatrika clan and a Kshatriya chieftain of the Vajji confederacy, while his mother, Trishala, was a Lichchhavi princess. Born into a princely family, Vardhamana lived a life of comfort and privilege. He was married to Yashoda and had a daughter named Priyadarshana. However, at the age of 30, after the death of his parents, he renounced his worldly life, giving up all possessions and family ties to seek spiritual truth. This act of renunciation followed the path of earlier Tirthankaras, particularly Parshvanatha, who had lived about 250 years before Mahavira.

Attaining Kaivalya and Becoming Mahavira

After his renunciation, Vardhamana embarked on a twelve-year period of intense asceticism and meditation. He practiced extreme austerities, fasting for long durations, enduring harsh weather, and remaining silent for extended periods. He faced numerous physical hardships and temptations, but remained steadfast in his pursuit of spiritual liberation. This arduous quest culminated at the age of 42, when he attained â??Kaivalyaâ?? â?? perfect knowledge, omniscience, and liberation from the cycle of birth and death. With this achievement, he became a â??Jinaâ?? (conqueror of self) and subsequently was known as Mahavira (the great hero). This attainment marked him as a saviour and guide for humanity, having overcome all worldly attachments and passions.

Propagation of Teachings and Demise

Following his attainment of Kaivalya, Mahavira spent the next thirty years propagating his teachings across various parts of northern India, particularly in Magadha, Anga, Mithila, and Kosala. He established an order of ascetics and lay followers, preaching his message of non-violence, truth, non-stealing, non-possession, and celibacy. He travelled barefoot, attracting disciples from diverse backgrounds, including kings, nobles, and common people. His teachings were delivered in Ardha-Magadhi, a vernacular language, making them accessible to a wider audience, unlike Sanskrit which was often restricted to the priestly class. Mahavira passed away at the age of 72, around 468 BCE, at Pava in present-day Bihar, leaving behind a flourishing community of followers and a robust philosophical system.

Jain Concept of God and Universe

Jainism presents a unique perspective on God and the universe, distinct from many other religious traditions. It does not believe in a creator God who is responsible for the creation or destruction of the universe. Instead, the universe is considered eternal and self-existent, undergoing continuous cycles of progress and regress. The universe is governed by natural laws and its own inherent characteristics, rather than by divine intervention.

In Jainism, â??Godâ?? refers to the perfected soul (Siddha) or the liberated soul (Arihant) who has achieved Kaivalya. These souls are not creators or rulers of the universe; rather, they serve as ideal role models, having conquered their inner passions and attained ultimate purity. They are worthy of reverence due to their perfected state. This point needs attention: the focus is on individual spiritual potential and the capacity for self-realisation, rather than reliance on an external divine entity. The ultimate goal is for every soul to achieve this â??God-likeâ?? state through right conduct, knowledge, and faith.

Fundamental Principles of Jainism

The ethical and spiritual framework of Jainism is built upon a set of fundamental principles designed to guide individuals towards liberation from the cycle of rebirth. These principles are practical applications of the philosophical underpinnings of the tradition.

The Five Great Vows (Mahavratas)

Central to Jain practice are the five Mahavratas, or great vows, which are observed with strictness by ascetics and, in a modified form (Anuvratas), by lay followers. These vows are:

- **Ahimsa (Non-violence):** This is the foremost principle of Jainism. It extends beyond physical harm to encompass mental and verbal non-violence towards all living beings, including humans, animals, plants, and even micro-organisms. It necessitates extreme care in actions, words, and thoughts to avoid causing injury. This point becomes important for understanding the daily practices and dietary restrictions within the Jain community.
- **Satya (Truthfulness):** This vow requires followers to speak the truth, but with the important caveat that it must not cause harm to any living being. Truth spoken with ill intent or causing suffering is considered a violation of Ahimsa. Therefore, truth must be spoken pleasantly and with consideration for its impact.
- **Asteya (Non-stealing):** This means not taking anything that is not freely given. It prohibits theft in all its forms, including taking things without permission, engaging in dishonest practices, or exploiting others. It implies respect for others's property and labour.
- **Aparigraha (Non-possession/Non-attachment):** This vow advocates for limiting one's possessions and detaching from material wealth and desires. For ascetics, this means owning nothing. For laypersons, it means living a life with minimal possessions and without excessive attachment to them, recognising that material accumulation can lead to suffering and hinder spiritual progress.
- **Brahmacharya (Chastity/Celibacy):** This vow primarily refers to complete celibacy for ascetics, involving renunciation of all sexual activity. For lay followers, it implies fidelity to one's spouse and control over one's sexual desires, ensuring they do not become an obstacle to spiritual development. This vow was specifically added by Vardhamana Mahavira to the four vows taught by Parshvanatha.

Stance on Vedas, Karma, and Transmigration

Jainism developed independently of the Vedic tradition and offers a contrasting philosophical perspective. It rejects the authority of the Vedas as divinely revealed texts and thus does not accept the Vedic rituals or the caste system derived from them. This rejection placed Jainism among the 'heterodox' (nastika) schools of Indian philosophy.

The concepts of Karma and Transmigration (Samsara) are central to Jain metaphysics, though they differ in detail from other Indian systems. In Jainism, Karma is not merely an action or its consequence, but rather a subtle, material substance (Karma Pudgala) that adheres to the soul (jiva) based on one's thoughts, words, and actions. These karmic particles weigh down the soul, preventing it from rising to its natural state of purity and omniscience, and thus keep it bound in the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (samsara). Liberation (Moksha) is achieved by shedding accumulated karma and preventing new karma from attaching to the soul through rigorous asceticism and moral living.

The Three Jewels (Triratnas) for Moksha

Jainism prescribes a path to Moksha (liberation) through the cultivation of the Three Jewels, known as Triratnas. These are not merely intellectual beliefs but require practical application in one's life.

- **Samyak Darshan (Right Faith/Perception):** This refers to the correct understanding and conviction in the truths of Jainism, particularly in the Tirthankaras and the principles they expounded. It is an undoubting belief in the fundamental tenets, free from superstitions and misconceptions. It is the prerequisite for all other spiritual progress.
- **Samyak Jnana (Right Knowledge):** This is the accurate and precise knowledge of reality as revealed by the Jinas. It involves understanding the nature of the soul, karma, the universe, and the path to liberation without confusion or error. This knowledge must be true, free from doubt, and comprehensive.
- **Samyak Charitra (Right Conduct):** This involves living one's life in accordance with the ethical principles of Jainism, primarily through the observance of the five great vows. It is the practical application of Right Faith and Right Knowledge in daily life, leading to the purification of the soul and the shedding of karmic matter.

These three jewels are interdependent and must be cultivated simultaneously; one cannot exist without the others for true spiritual advancement.

Jain Philosophical Concepts

Jainism is not merely an ethical code but also a sophisticated philosophical system with distinct theories concerning knowledge and reality. These concepts offer a unique approach to understanding the multifaceted nature of truth.

Syadvada: The Theory of Conditioned Judgments

Syadvada is one of the most distinctive and profound philosophical contributions of Jainism. It is often referred to as the theory of "conditioned predication" or "standpoint logic." The word "syat" means "in some respect" or "from a certain point of view." Syadvada asserts that every statement or judgment about reality is only partially true and is valid only from a particular perspective or standpoint. No single statement can express the complete truth about any object or phenomenon, as reality is inherently complex and multi-faceted.

This theory uses a seven-fold predication (Saptabhangi-naya) to express the various partial truths. For example, regarding an object, one can say:

1. Syat asti (In some respect, it is).
2. Syat nasti (In some respect, it is not).
3. Syat asti ca nasti ca (In some respect, it is, and it is not).
4. Syat avaktavyah (In some respect, it is inexpressible).
5. Syat asti ca avaktavyah ca (In some respect, it is, and it is inexpressible).
6. Syat nasti ca avaktavyah ca (In some respect, it is not, and it is inexpressible).
7. Syat asti ca nasti ca avaktavyah ca (In some respect, it is, and it is not, and it is inexpressible).

Syadvada emphasizes intellectual humility and tolerance, suggesting that absolute claims to truth are often incomplete. It encourages considering multiple viewpoints and acknowledging the limitations of human understanding. At this stage, one issue becomes clear: Syadvada is not about uncertainty or relativism in the sense of "anything goes," but rather a precise logical tool to articulate the

partiality of all human knowledge and judgment.

Anekantavada: The Doctrine of Many-Sided Reality

Closely related to Syadvada is Anekantavada, the doctrine of 'many-sidedness' or 'non-one-sidedness' of reality. Anekantavada postulates that reality is inherently complex and possesses an infinite number of attributes. Every object or phenomenon has countless aspects and characteristics, and no single perspective can fully grasp its complete nature. Human beings, due to their limited senses and intellect, can only perceive a part of this multifaceted reality at any given time.

The famous parable of the blind men and the elephant is often used to illustrate Anekantavada. Each blind man touches a different part of the elephant (trunk, leg, ear, tail) and describes it based on his limited experience, believing his description to be the whole truth. Anekantavada suggests that true understanding requires integrating these diverse, partial perspectives. It promotes intellectual open-mindedness and challenges dogmatic assertions of absolute truth. This doctrine is a cornerstone of Jain ethics, fostering an attitude of tolerance, respect for differing views, and a nuanced approach to moral and metaphysical issues. It acknowledges the validity of diverse opinions, provided they are supported by a genuine attempt to understand reality from a specific angle.

Instruments of Knowledge (Jnan) in Jainism

Jain epistemology, or the theory of knowledge, outlines various means by which knowledge can be acquired. These instruments are crucial for attaining Samyak Jnana (Right Knowledge), one of the Three Jewels. Jainism classifies knowledge into five types, with the first two being ordinary and the last three considered higher forms of knowledge accessible to spiritually advanced souls.

1. **Mati Jnana (Sensory and Intellectual Knowledge):** This is knowledge acquired through the senses (sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell) and through the intellect, including memory, recognition, and inductive reasoning. It is empirical and conceptual knowledge of concrete objects.
2. **Shruta Jnana (Scriptural Knowledge):** This knowledge is acquired through understanding words, symbols, and scriptures. It relies on testimony, learning from others, and interpreting sacred texts. While significant, it is considered indirect knowledge compared to direct perception.
3. **Avadhi Jnana (Clairvoyance/Supernormal Perceptual Knowledge):** This is direct knowledge of distant objects or events, beyond the reach of normal senses. It is a form of extrasensory perception, limited to material objects and particular spaces and times.
4. **Manahparyaya Jnana (Telepathy/Knowledge of Others' Minds):** This is direct knowledge of the thoughts and mental states of other beings. It allows one to directly perceive the modifications of another person's mind, without needing words or gestures.
5. **Kevala Jnana (Omniscience/Perfect Knowledge):** This is the highest form of knowledge, attained by a Jina or Tirthankara. It is absolute, perfect, and direct knowledge of all substances and their modifications, in all places and at all times. It is unmediated, infallible, and complete, free from any limitations of senses or intellect. It is synonymous with Kaivalya, the ultimate liberation.

Evolution of Jainism: Sects and Literature

Like many ancient traditions, Jainism experienced internal developments and divisions over its long history, leading to the formation of distinct sects and the compilation of a rich body of sacred literature.

The Svetambara and Digambara Division

The most significant and enduring schism within Jainism occurred around the 3rd century BCE, following a severe famine in Magadha. This division led to the formation of the two main sects: Svetambara and Digambara.

- **Svetambara (white-clad):** Led by Acharya Sthulabhadra, this group migrated to southern India during the famine and later returned to Magadha. They believed in wearing simple white clothes, arguing that complete nudity was not essential for liberation in the current degenerate age. They also believe that women can attain Moksha and that the 19th Tirthankara, Mallinatha, was female. They accept the collected texts (Angas) as their canonical scriptures.
- **Digambara (sky-clad):** Led by Bhadrabahu, this group remained in Magadha and adhered strictly to the ascetic practices, including complete nudity for monks, seeing clothing as a form of possession and attachment. They believe that women cannot attain Moksha without first being reborn as men, and that Mallinatha was male. They reject the authenticity of the Svetambara scriptures, believing that the original canonical texts were lost.

This division, though rooted in differing interpretations of ascetic practice, also encompasses differences in scriptural canon, monastic rules, and certain doctrinal specifics, such as the status of women in the path to liberation.

Other Notable Jain Sects

While Svetambara and Digambara are the two primary divisions, several sub-sects have emerged within these larger traditions over time, each with minor variations in practices or interpretations. For instance, the **Yapaniyan** sect, which existed for a period, attempted to bridge the gap between Svetambara and Digambara doctrines, accepting certain Digambara practices while also acknowledging some Svetambara scriptures. Another example is the **Pujiramat** sect, which is a sub-sect within the Svetambara tradition. These smaller sects often focused on particular aspects of monastic discipline or philosophical interpretations.

Sacred Literature: Angas and Other Texts

The canonical literature of Jainism, particularly for the Svetambara tradition, is extensive and provides a comprehensive record of its teachings. The earliest and most authoritative texts are known as the **Angas**. These are believed to contain the direct teachings of Mahavira, compiled by his immediate disciples (Ganadharas). The Angas primarily deal with monastic rules, ethical principles, and philosophical doctrines.

Beyond the Angas, there are other categories of texts:

- **Upangas:** Supplementary texts to the Angas.
- **Prakirnakas:** Miscellaneous texts on various subjects.
- **Chhedasutras:** Texts dealing with the rules of ascetic life.

- **Mulasutras:** Fundamental texts for ascetics.
- **Kalpasutra:** A significant biographical text about Mahavira, relevant for its historical and biographical information, revered by the Svetambaras.

The Digambara tradition, while rejecting the Svetambara Angas as authentic, has its own body of scriptures, often structured around key commentaries and philosophical treatises written by eminent Digambara Acharyas, such as Kundakunda and Umaswati (whose Tattvarthasutra is revered by both sects). These texts elaborate on the core principles of Jainism, its ethics, cosmology, and epistemology.

UPSC Perspective

For the [Union Public Service Commission](#) examinations, understanding Jainism requires both factual recall for Prelims and analytical depth for Mains.

- **Prelims focus:**
 - Key facts about Mahavira: Birthplace (Kundagrama, Vaishali), parents (Siddhartha, Trishala), renunciation age (30), Kaivalya age (42), demise place (Pava), and titles (Jina, Mahavira).
 - Tirthankaras: Awareness of the 23rd (Parshvanatha) and 24th (Mahavira) and the total number.
 - Specific names of sects: Svetambara and Digambara; knowing their core differences regarding clothing, women's liberation, and scriptures.
 - Main texts: Angas, Upangas, Kalpasutra.
 - Philosophical terms: Ahimsa, Satya, Asteya, Aparigraha, Brahmacharya (Five Vows); Samyak Darshan, Samyak Jnana, Samyak Charitra (Triratnas); Syadvada, Anekantavada.
 - Concepts: Karma, Samsara, Moksha, Kevala Jnana.
- **Mains focus:**
 - Analysis of Jain philosophical concepts: Explaining the implications of Syadvada (relativity of truth) and Anekantavada (many-sidedness of reality) in depth, including their ethical dimensions of tolerance and pluralism.
 - Comparison with contemporary belief systems: Contrasting Jainism with Buddhism (e.g., extreme asceticism vs. middle path, soul concept) and the Vedic tradition (rejection of Vedas, caste system, focus on self-effort).
 - Socio-cultural impact: Examining Jainism's influence on Indian society, particularly its emphasis on non-violence, vegetarianism, trade, and its contributions to art, architecture, and literature. Understanding its role as an alternative to the dominant Brahminical system.

Common Student Confusion

Several aspects of Jainism can sometimes lead to misunderstandings for students preparing for examinations.

- **The apparent contradiction regarding the existence of God in Jainism.**
 - **Misunderstanding:** Students often conclude that Jainism is atheistic because it denies a creator God, or they get confused about the role of God if not as a creator.

- **Correction:** Jainism is not atheistic in the sense of denying spiritual perfection. It does deny a creator God but affirms the existence of perfected souls (Siddhas or Arihants) who are God-like ideals. The focus is on the inherent divinity within every individual soul, rather than an external divine controller. The universe is self-sustaining and eternal, governed by its own laws, and not created or destroyed by a divine entity.
- **Distinguishing Mahavira's addition to the five vows from earlier doctrines.**
 - **Misunderstanding:** Students might mistakenly attribute all five vows as solely introduced by Mahavira, or they might not recognize the specific addition.
 - **Correction:** The first four vows (Ahimsa, Satya, Asteya, and Aparigraha) were part of the teachings of Parshvanatha, the 23rd Tirthankara. Vardhamana Mahavira added the fifth vow, Brahmacharya (celibacy), to this existing framework for ascetics, making the five great vows (Mahavratas) the complete set as known today. This distinction is crucial for understanding the evolution of Jain practice.
- **Misunderstanding the true nature of Syadvada and Anekantavada as absolute relativism.**
 - **Misunderstanding:** Students sometimes interpret Syadvada and Anekantavada as advocating that all truths are relative and equally valid, leading to a sense of philosophical uncertainty or "anything goes."
 - **Correction:** These doctrines do not imply absolute relativism or uncertainty. Instead, they are precise logical and ontological tools to acknowledge the partiality of human knowledge and the multifaceted nature of reality. They assert that every statement is true *from a certain perspective* (Syadvada) and that reality has *many aspects* (Anekantavada), but they do not deny objective reality or absolute moral standards within the Jain framework. They promote a pluralistic and tolerant approach to understanding without negating the existence of truth itself.

Short Revision Points

- Mahavira (540-468 BC): Kundagrama, Vaishali; Kaivalya at 42; Jina.
- Five Vows: Ahimsa, Satya, Asteya, Aparigraha, Brahmacharya (added by Mahavira).
- Triratnas: Right Faith, Right Knowledge, Right Conduct.
- Sects: Svetambara (white-clad), Digambara (naked); Yapaniyan, Pujiramat.
- Philosophy: Syadvada (conditional judgments), Anekantavada (many-sided reality).

FAQs

1. **When and where was Vardhamana Mahavira born and when did he pass away?**
Vardhamana Mahavira was born around 540 BCE in Kundagrama, near Vaishali, Bihar, and passed away around 468 BCE at Pava, Bihar.
2. **What are the five core doctrines taught by Jainism?**
The five core doctrines (Mahavratas) are Ahimsa (non-violence), Satya (truthfulness), Asteya (non-stealing), Aparigraha (non-possession), and Brahmacharya (chastity/celibacy).
3. **What are the two main sects of Jainism and how did they originate?**
The two main sects are Svetambara and Digambara. They originated due to a famine in Magadha around the 3rd century BCE, leading to a split over adherence to ascetic practices, particularly regarding clothing for monks.

Understanding Vardhamana Mahavira and Jainism goes beyond memorising facts; it involves appreciating a unique philosophical and ethical system that emerged in ancient India. Its emphasis on self-effort, non-violence, and intellectual humility continues to offer profound insights relevant even today. For aspirants preparing for competitive examinations, a thorough grasp of these concepts is crucial. Those seeking structured guidance in this intricate subject can find comprehensive support from institutions recognised for their commitment to excellence, with [SHRI RAM IAS](#) regarded as the best [ias coaching in delhi](#).

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