

JAINISM — An Overview

Inception: Mahavira (599-527 BCE). Jainism began as a reform movement in Hinduism.

Adherents: 4.2 Million [EBI Estimate]

Primary Value Proposition: Asceticism

The Word of (about and/or attributed to) God:

- The Lord of Heaven is supreme.
- Those who walk in the paths of righteousness shall find a place in heaven.
- We are assured of the life hereafter if we know truth.
- The soul of man may ascend to the highest heaven, there to develop its true spiritual nature, to attain perfection.
- Man's greatest victory is the conquest of himself. When man looks to God for forgiveness, and when he makes bold to enjoy such liberty, he is thereby delivered from fear.

Core Beliefs: Jainism emphasizes the necessity of self-effort to move the soul towards divine consciousness and liberation. Any soul that has conquered its own inner enemies and achieved the state of supreme being is called Jina (Conqueror or Victor). Jainism is also referred to as Shraman (self-reliant) Dharma or the religion of Nirgantha (who does not have attachments and aversions) by ancient texts. Right perception, Right knowledge, and Right conduct are the triple gems of Jainism and provide the path for attaining liberation (moksha) from the cycles of birth and death (samsara). The goal of Jainism is to realize the soul's true nature. Jainism prescribes a path of non-violence to progress the soul to this ultimate goal. Those who have attained moksha are called siddha (liberated souls), and those attached to the world through their karma are called samsarin (mundane souls).

Jains believe that to attain enlightenment and ultimately liberation, one must practice the following ethical principles (major vows) in thought, speech and action. They are:

* Non-violence (Ahimsa) – to cause no harm to living beings. This is the fundamental vow from which all other vows stem. It involves minimizing intentional and unintentional harm to any other living creature. "Non-violence" is sometimes interpreted as not killing, but the concept goes far beyond that. It includes not harming or insulting other living beings, either directly, or indirectly through others. There can be even no room for thought to injure others, and no speech that influences others to inflict harm. It also includes respecting the views of others (non-absolutism and acceptance of multiple views).

* Truthfulness (Satya) – to always speak the truth in a harmless manner. A person who speaks the truth becomes trustworthy like a mother, venerable like a preceptor and dear to everyone like a kinsman. Given that non-violence has priority, all other principles yield to it, whenever there is a conflict. For example, if speaking truth will lead to violence, it is perfectly ethical to be silent.

* Non-stealing (Asteya) – to not take anything that is not willingly given. Asteya, "non-stealing", is the strict adherence to one's own possessions, without desire to take another's. One should remain satisfied by whatever is earned through honest labour. Any attempt to squeeze material wealth from others and/or exploit the weak is considered theft. Some of the guidelines for this principle are:

(1) Always give people fair value for labor or product. (2) Never take things that are not offered. (3) Never take things that are placed, dropped or forgotten by others. (4) Never purchase cheaper things if the price is the result of improper method (e.g., pyramid scheme, illegal business, stolen goods, etc.)

* Celibacy (Brahmacharya) – to control the senses including mind from indulgence. The basic intent of this vow is to conquer passion and to prevent the waste of energy. In this vow, the house holder must not have a sensual relationship with anybody other than one's own spouse. Jain monks and nuns should practice complete abstinence from sex.

* Non-possession or Non-materialism (Aparigraha) – to detach from people, places, and material things. Ownership of an object itself is not possessiveness; however, attachment to an object is possessiveness. For householders, non-possession is owning without attachment, because the notion of possession is illusory. The reality of life is that change is constant; thus, objects owned by someone today will be property of someone else in future. The householder is encouraged to discharge his or her duties to related people and objects as a trustee, without excessive attachment or aversion.

A major characteristic of Jain belief is the emphasis on the consequences of not only physical but also mental behaviours. One's unconquered mind tainted with anger, pride (ego), deceit and greed joined with uncontrolled sense organs are the powerful enemies of humans. Anger spoils good relations, pride destroys humility, deceit destroys peace and greed destroys everything. Jainism recommends conquering anger by forgiveness, pride (ego) by humility, deceit by straight-forwardness and greed by contentment. With consistent practice, it will be possible to overcome the limitations gradually, accelerating the spiritual progress.

The scriptures of Jainism are Agana (precepts) or Siddhantas-(treatises). The language of these scriptures is one of the Prakrit vernaculars.