

Mahavira

This article is about the Tirthankara of Jainism. For the Jain mathematician, see Mahāvīra (mathematician). Not to be confused with Mahavihara.

Mahavira, also known as **Vardhamana**, was the twenty-fourth and last *tirthankara*. In Jainism, a *tirthankara* (maker of the river crossing) is an omniscient teacher who preaches the *dharma* (righteous path) and builds a ford across the ocean of rebirth and transmigration. Twenty-four tirthankara grace each half of the cosmic time cycle. Mahavira was the last tirthankara of *avasarpani* (present descending phase).^{[note 1]^[6]} Mahavira was born into a royal family in what is now Bihar, India. At the age of 30, he left his home in pursuit of spiritual awakening. He abandoned all the worldly things including his clothes and became a Jain monk.^[5] For the next twelve and a half years, he practiced intense meditation and severe penance, after which he became omniscient. He traveled all over South Asia for the next thirty years to teach Jain philosophy. Mahavira died at the age of 72 and attained *nirvana* (final release) or *moksha* (liberation from the cycle of birth and death).^[7] Mahavira's philosophy has eight cardinal (law of trust) principles, three metaphysical (*dravya*, *jiva* and *ajiva*),^[8] and five ethical. The objective is to elevate the quality of life.^[9]

1 Etymology

Mahavira's childhood name was *Vardhamana*, which means *the one who grows*, because of the increased prosperity in the kingdom at the time of his birth.^[10] He was called *Mahavira* (*the Great Hero*) because of the acts of bravery he performed during his childhood.^{[11]^{[12]^{[13]^[14]}} Mahavira was given the title *Jīnā* (the "Victor" or conqueror of inner enemies such as attachment, pride and greed), which subsequently became synonymous with Tirthankara.^[15]}

Buddhist texts refer to Mahavira as *Nigaṇṭha Jñāta-putta*.^[16] Nigaṇṭha means "without knot, tie, or string" and Jñāta-putta (son of *Natas*), referred to his clan of origin *Jñāta* or *Naya* (Prakrit).^{[15]^{[17]^[18]} He is also known as Sramana.^[11]}

2 Historicity

Jaina traditions date Mahavira as living from 599 BC to 527 BC.^{[7]^[19]} Western Historians date Mahavira as living from 480 BC to 408 BC.^[20] Some Western scholars suggests that Mahavira died in around 425 BC.^[21] Most modern historians agree that Kundagrama (now Basokund in Muzaffarpur district)^[22] in the Indian state of Bihar is the birthplace of Mahavira.^[23]

Although there is reasonable evidence that Parshvanatha, predecessor of Mahavira was a historical figure,^[24] Mahavira is still sometimes referred to as the founder of Jainism. On this, famous Indologist Heinrich Zimmer noted:

The foundation of Jainism has been attributed by Occidental historians to Mahavira. There must be some truth in the Jaina tradition of the great antiquity of their religion. We have grounds for believing that he (Parsva) actually lived and taught and was a Jaina.
— Heinrich Zimmer^[25]

3 Teachings

Main article: Jain philosophy

Mahavira's teachings form the basis for Jain texts. Jain texts prescribe five major vows (*vratas*) that both ascetics and householders have to follow.^[26] These are five ethical principles that were preached by Mahavira:

1. **Ahimsa (Non Violence)**- Mahavira taught that every living being has sanctity and dignity of its own and it should be respected just like we expect our own sanctity and dignity to be respected. In simple words, we should show maximum possible kindness to every living being.^[27]
2. **Satya** or truthfulness which leads to harmony in society. One should speak truth and respect right of property of each other's in society. One should be true to his own thoughts, words and deeds to create mutual atmosphere of confidence in society.^[27]
3. **Asteya** or non-stealing which states that one should not take anything if not properly given.^[27]

4. Brahmacharya or chastity which stresses steady but determined restraint over yearning for sensual pleasures.^[27]
5. Aparigraha (Non-possession)- non-attachment to both inner possessions (like liking, disliking) and external possessions (like property).^[27]

Mahavira taught that pursuit of pleasure is an endless game, so we should train our minds to curb individual cravings and passions. That way one does achieve equanimity of mind, mental poise and spiritual balance. One should voluntarily limit acquisition of property as a community virtue which results in social justice and fair distribution of utility commodities. The strong and the rich should not try to suppress the weak and the poor by acquiring limitless property which results in unfair distribution of wealth in society and hence poverty. Attempting to enforce these five qualities by an external and legal authority leads to hypocrisy or secret criminal tendencies. So the individual or society should exercise self-restraint to achieve social peace, security and an enlightened society.^[28]



The Birth of Mahavira, from the Kalpa Sutra, c.1375–1400.

3.1 Anekantavada

Main article: Anekantavada

Another fundamental teaching of Mahavira was Anekantavada^[29] i.e., pluralism and multiplicity of viewpoints. Mahāvīra employed anekānta extensively to explain the Jain philosophical concepts. Taking a relativistic viewpoint, Mahāvīra is said to have explained the nature of the soul as both permanent from the point of view of underlying substance (*nīshyānāy*), and temporary, from the point of view of its modes and modification.^[30]

4 Life events

See also: Panch Kalyanaka

4.1 Birth

See also: Mahavir Jayanti

Mahavira was born into the royal Kshatriya family of King Siddhartha and Queen Trishala (sister of King Chetaka of Vaishali).^[22] He was born on the thirteenth day of the rising moon of Chaitra in the Vira Nirvana Samvat calendar.^{[31][32]} In the Gregorian calendar, this date falls in March or April and is celebrated as Mahavir Jayanti.^[33] His Gotra was Kashyapa.^{[11][22]} Traditionally, Kundalapura in the ancient city of Vaishali is re-

garded as his birthplace; however, its location remains unidentified.^[34]

4.2 Early life

As the son of a king, Mahavira had all luxuries of life at his disposal. Both his parents were strict followers of Parshvanatha.^[10] Jain traditions are not unanimous about his marital state. According to Digambara tradition, Mahavira's parents desired that he should get married to Yashoda but Mahavira refused to marry.^[35] According to Svetambara tradition, he was married young to Yashoda and had one daughter, Priyadarshana.^{[22][36]}

4.3 Renunciation

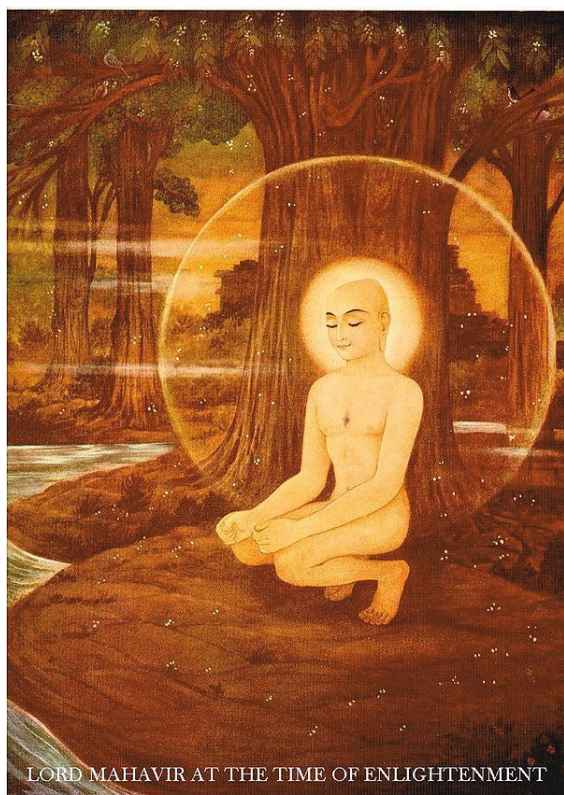
At the age of 30, Mahavira abandoned all the comforts of royal life and left his home and family to live an ascetic life in the pursuit of spiritual awakening. He went into a park called Sandavana in the surroundings of Kundalpur. He underwent severe penances, meditated under the Ashoka tree and went without clothes.^[12] There is graphic description of hardships and humiliation he faced in the *Acharanga Sutra*. In the eastern part of Bengal he suffered great distress. Boys pelted him with stones, people often humiliated him.^[36]

According to Kalpa Sūtra (122), Mahavira spent forty-two monsoons of his ascetic life at Astikagrama, Champapuri, Prstichampa, Vaishali, Vanijagrama, Nalanda, Mithila, Bhadraka, Alabhika, Panitabhumi, Shravasti and Pawapuri.^[37]

4.4 Omniscience

See also: Kevala Jnana and Samavasarana

After twelve and a half years of rigorous penance, i.e.



Attainment of omniscience kevalajñāna by Mahavira

at the age of forty-three, Mahavira achieved the state of *Kevala Jnana*. *Kevala* means “isolation-integration” and *Jnana* means knowledge. This implies omniscience and release from earthly bondage-corresponding to the “enlightenment” (bodhi) of the Buddhas.^[38] This happened under a Sala-tree on the banks of the river Rjupalika (today Barakar) near a place called Jrbhikagrama.^[39] The *Acharanga sutra* describes Mahavira as all-seeing. The *Sutrakritanga* elaborates the concept as all-knowing and provides details of other qualities of Mahavira.^[34]

For a period of 30 years after omniscience, Mahavira traveled far and wide in India to teach his philosophy. According to the tradition, Mahavira had 14,000 ascetics, 36,000 nuns, 159,000 sravakas (laymen) and 318,000 sravikas (laywomen) as his followers.^{[40][41]} Some of the royal followers included King Srenika (popularly known as Bimbisara) of Magadha, Kunika of Anga and Chetaka of Videha.^{[37][8]}

4.5 Moksha

See also: Moksha (Jainism) and Diwali (Jainism)

According to Jain texts, Mahavira attained *moksha* i.e.,

his soul is believed to have become Siddha (soul at its purest form).^[21] On the same day Gautama, his Ganadhara (chief disciple) attained Kevala Jnana. According to *Mahapurana*, after the nirvana of tirthankaras, devas do the funeral rites. According to Pravachansar, only nails and hair of tirthankaras are left behind, and rest of the body gets dissolved in the air like camphor.^{[42][43]} Mahavira is usually depicted in a sitting or standing meditative posture with a symbol of a lion under him.^[44] Today, a Jain temple, called *Jal Mandir* stands at the place where Mahavira is believed to have attained *moksha*.^[45]

5 Previous births

Mahavira’s previous births are discussed in Jain texts such as the *Trishashtishalakapurusha Charitra* and Jinasena’s *Mahapurana*. While a soul undergoes countless reincarnations in transmigratory cycle of *samsāra*, the births of a Tirthankara are reckoned from the time he determined the causes of karma and developed the Ratnatraya. Jain texts discuss twenty-six births of Mahavira prior to his incarnation as a Tirthankara.^[37] Mahavira was born as Marichi, the son of Bharata Chakravarti in one of his previous births.^[46]

There are various Jain texts like *Kalpa Sūtra* that describe the life of Mahavira. The first Sanskrit biography of Mahavira was *Vardhamacharitra* by Asaga in 853 CE.^[47]

6 Legacy

Mahavira’s teachings influenced many personalities. Mahatma Gandhi was greatly influenced by Mahavira and said, “Bhagwan Mahavira is sure to be respected as the highest authority on Ahimsa. If anyone has practiced to the fullest extent and has propagated most the doctrine of Ahimsa, it was Lord Mahavira.”^{[48][49]}

Mahavira proclaimed in India, the message of salvation, that religion is a reality and not a mere social convention, that salvation comes from taking refuge in the true religion and not from observing the external ceremonies of the community, that religion cannot regard any barriers between man and man as an eternal variety. Wonderous to say, this teaching rapidly over topped the barriers of the race abiding instinct and conquered the whole county.

— Rabindranath Tagore^[48]

A major event is associated with the 2500th anniversary of Nirvana of Mahavira in the year 1974. In this context, Padmanabh Jaini writes^[50]

Probably few people in the West are aware that during this Anniversary year for the first time in their long history, the mendicants of the Śvētāmbara, Digambara and Sthānakavāsī sects assembled on the same platform, agreed upon a common flag (Jaina *dhvaja*) and emblem (*pratīka*); and resolved to bring about the unity of the community. For the duration of the year four *dharma cakras*, a wheel mounted on a chariot as an ancient symbol of the *samavasaraṇa* (Holy Assembly) of Tīrthāṅkara Mahāvīra traversed to all the major cities of India, winning legal sanctions from various state governments against the slaughter of animals for sacrifice or other religious purposes, a campaign which has been a major preoccupation of the Jains throughout their history.

— Padmanabh Jaini

6.1 Prayers

- *Svayambhustotra* by *Acharya Samantabhadra* is the adoration of twenty-four tirthankaras. Its eight slokas (aphorisms) adore the qualities of last tirthankara, *Vardhamana Mahavira*.^[51] One such sloka is:-

O Lord Jina! Your doctrine that expounds essential attributes required of a potential aspirant to cross over the ocean of worldly existence (samsāra) reigns supreme even in this strife-ridden spoke of time (pancama kāla). Accomplished sages who have invalidated the so-called deities that are famous in the world, and have made ineffective the whip of all blemishes, adore your doctrine.^[52]

- *Mahaveerashtak Stotra* composed by Jain Poet Bhagchand.^[53]

7 Iconography

Every *tirthankara* has a distinguishing emblem. These emblem allow a worshiper to distinguish the otherwise similar looking idols of the *tirthankaras*.^[54] The emblem of Mahavira is “Lion”. The emblem is usually carved, right below the legs of the *tirthankara*. Like all tirthankara, Mahavira is depicted having Shrivatsa (a flower like design) on his chest.

7.1 Temples

Temples dedicated to Mahavira :-



Jal Mandir marking Mahavira's nirvana at Pawapuri

- Tirumalai Jain temple, Thiruvannamalai
- Shri Mahavirji Temple, Karauli, Rajasthan
- Kulpakji Jain temple
- Pawapuri Jain temple
- Ahinsa Sthal, Delhi

7.2 Idols

- Rock cut sculpture of Mahavira at Keezhakuyilkudi, Madurai, Tamil Nadu
- Ancient images of Mahavira (excavated from *Kankali Tila*, Mathura)
- Painting of an ancient idol of Mahavira
- Four sided sculpture depicting Mahavira (found during excavation at Kankali Tila, Mathura)
- Bhagwan Mahavir idols inside the ancient Jain temple, Jaisalmer Fort
- Temple relief of Mahavira, 14th century
- Mahavira Idol dated 1470
- Relief depicting Mahavira (Thirakoil, Tamil Nadu)

8 See also

- Arihant (Jainism)
- God in Jainism
- History of Jainism
- Timeline of Jainism
- Siddhashila

9 Notes

- [1] Heinrich Zimmer: “The cycle of time continually revolves, according to the Jainas. The present “descending” (avasarpini) period was preceded and will be followed by an “ascending” (utsarpini). Sarpini suggests the creeping movement of a “serpent” (‘sarpin’); ava- means “down” and ut- means up.”^[5]

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 [9] Chakravarthi 2003, p. 3–22.
 [10] Jain 1991, p. 32.
 [11] Heehs 2002, p. 93.
 [12] von Glasenapp 1999, p. 30.
 [13] von Dehsen 2013, p. 121.
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 [38] Zimmer 1953, p. 221.
 [39] von Glasenapp 1999, pp. 30, 327.
 [40] Heehs 2002, p. 90.
 [41] von Galesnapp 1999, p. 39.
 [42] von Glasenapp 1999, p. 328.
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 [51] Jain 2015, p. 164–169.
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