**Chapter 4: Jaina Traditions**

**Student Study Guide**

Chapter Overview

Originating from the *shramana* movement, the fundamental message of Jaina teachings is that only through restraint or renunciation can happiness, truth, and self-realization be found. This focus on restraint gives Jainism a distinctive ascetic character, but the tradition as a whole is very dynamic and multilayered. For Jainas, the power of renunciation is not found in opposing worldly power but in transcending and subsuming it. These concepts that the inner nonmaterialistic self is the real true self that should take control of one’s life can be found in almost every religion in the world. This is the teaching of the 24 Jinas (“victors,” also known as “Tirthankaras,” builders of the bridge across *samsara*), the last of whom was Mahavira (c. 599–527 BCE).

For Jainas, the highest value is non-violence. Here, non-violence is understood as “non-interference” in any way with anything. Only through the non-activity of body, speech, and mind can one free oneself from the karma that weighs down the soul, preventing liberation. Further, attachment to the world, our bodies, or even cultivating our personality increases our negative karma and prevents us from knowing our true self. The social self is a construct and the true Self is separate from the world. Thus, Jainism rejects caste, brahmanical rituals, and especially the Vedic sacrifice. There is urgency to the Jaina message because only during certain periods in the time cycles of generation and degeneration are the teachings available at the same time that one is born a human living in the right region.

Mahavira established a community with four branches: monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen. In Mahavira’s day there were more nuns than monks, and women have, therefore, played an important role in Jainism. After Mahavira’s liberation (i.e., death), Jainism divided into two branches: the northerners, who started wearing simple white robes, are called the Svetambara (white-clad), and the southerners, who kept to the original form of nudity, are called Digambara (sky-clad). Lay followers in both groups wear clothes. There are other points of disagreement between these two groups but mostly they are different interpretations of the teachings of Mahavira and they do not oppose each other. That is why they are not referred to as different sects. Rather they are *sampradaya*, meaning group or tradition. One of the disagreements concerns the status of women. The Svetambara permitted women to join them but the Digambara only allow semi-renunciation for women because of their belief in being nude.

The teachings of the Jinas, the 24 ascetic-prophets of Jainism, are eternally true, but the present scriptures originate with the last Jina, Mahavira. These scriptures are divided into three groups—“the ancient,” “the limbs,” and the “ancillary limbs”—and they existed only as oral texts until the second century CE as the disciples of Mahavira compiled them into 14 Purvas and 12 Angas. The disciples passed them down to other disciples which gave the name Agama or passed down. Renouncers and householders gathered at Patalipura/the First Council several years later to preserve what was left of the Agama as famine and other challenges resulted in the loss of Jain Canon. What remained was memorized and protected in compilations called the Anga Bahya. Additionally, some post-canonical works were written by learned scholars of both sects over the centuries called Anuyogas. Interesting historic and scriptural questions revolve around these collections.

The Digambara sampradaya stated its concerns that with time the scriptures lost their original form and were inauthentic. The Svetambara sampradaya disagreed and the two groups ended up having two scriptures i.e. the Satkhandagama and the reconstituted oral canon. These were later preserved in oral form in second century CE and fifth CE respectively.

According to Jainism, the cosmos is composed of six eternal substances divided into two categories: soul (*jiva*) and non-soul (*ajiva*). The soul is an eternal substance with a consciousness. Non-soul consists of pure matter (*pudgala*), time (*kala*), principle of motion (*dharma*), principle of rest (*adharma*), and space (*akash*). The last four are considered variants of *pudgala*, which has the attributes of touch, taste, smell, and color. It is the basis for all matter and energy, and, thus, all activities of body, mind, and speech are part of it. *Pudgala* is not antithetical to soul but is neutral to it, and thus soul and non-soul are completely enmeshed, compounding the problem of gaining liberation. In order to free oneself of karmic influences, one fasts (sometimes until death), studies the scriptures, and meditates, in addition to applying certain self-restraints. Sallekhana or fast to death has gained media attention recently as it’s seen as a criminal offence as it is considered suicide. Although protests from the Jaina community led to restoration of the practice it is still considered illegal by some, including some of the regional Indian courts. In 2015, the Supreme Court of India overturned the lower court’s decision. A final Supreme Court judgement is due in the near future. Worship, philanthropy, and dietary restrictions are also common features. Ascetics take on the five vows of non-harm, truthfulness, non-stealing, celibacy, and non-possession/attachment. Householders take on the same vows in a partial or modified form. The path to realization has 14 stages and, usually, householders can only achieve the first five. These religious activities and many more are expressed in temple construction, fine arts, literature, and festivals. Jainism is making a comeback in millennials. The story of Samani Suyashnidhi, who renounced her worldly affairs and joined the Sthanakavasi Svetambara group, shows how millennials are attracted to Jainism.

Over the centuries, being a minority tradition within the larger Hindu world, Jainism has learned how to prosper through adaptation and interaction. Jainas understand this to be an expression of their focus on non-harm and they accomplished it in two ways: by considering some Hindu practices to be outside the sphere of religion and thus open to all, and by re-interpreting other practices to make them Jaina. Reformers since the colonial period in India have sought to have the Jaina tradition and identity recognized as a minority religious community and seek to have this reflected in Indian establishments such as the education system. In 2014, Jains were given minority status by the Supreme Court of India which was received by Jaina communities with mixed reactions. Some considered it a victory while others opposed it because they considered the harmonious relationship between Hindus and Jainas to be perfect and not to be upset. Issues of identity continue to be of primary importance as Jaina communities are now established outside of India, where the mendicant influence is not immediately influential. The emphasis on both non-harm (*ahimsa*) and group identity serves the religion in the contemporary global setting as Jaina principles interface with outside cultures, as well as with the rapidly changing world inside India.

Learning Objectives

In this chapter, you are encouraged to

* examine the context in which the Jaina tradition emerged in sixth century BCE India;
* analyze the paradox of renouncing the world, not through retreating but by triumphing over (transcending) the world;
* learn about the early writings and cosmological understandings;
* trace the various interpretations of the Shramana movement within the Jaina tradition resulting in two primary sects: the Svetambara and Digambara;
* learn about the disagreements between the Svetambara and Digambara sects and how and why they made the decision to put the oral tradition into writing.
* identify the four-fold community of monastics and laity, the five vows of renunciation and how they are interpreted differently for monastic or lay members;
* learn about how the Jaina communities preserved their religious tradition orally and the challenges they faced while doing that
* understand key practices such as fasting, Jina worship, and festivals;
* explore the controversy surrounding Sallekhana or fasting to death
* appreciate the importance of woman lay members in serving the mendicant community, as well as the role of nuns in both main sects of the Jaina tradition;
* learn about how Jainas kept their identity apart from Hinduism
* outline recent developments in the Jaina tradition: in India as a response to modernity and Brit-ish colonization, as well as within the growing diaspora community around the globe.

Key Terms

***ajiva*** “Non-soul” or “non-consciousness,” also referred to as “matter” or “karma.” (p. 196)

***anuvratas*** Five vows modelled on the great vows of the renouncers but modified to be made applicable to lay life; non-violence, truthfulness, non-stealing, non-attachment, and chastity. (p. 196)

**Arhat**A perfected, omniscient being (male or female) who teaches the Jaina dharma while embodied in the world and who upon death will attain ***moksha***. All the Jinas were called *Arhats* during their final incarnation on earth. (p. 196)

***caturvidhyasangha***The “four-fold community” of monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen.

***chakravartin***Universal monarch; one who governs the world ethically (p. 168)

**Digambaras** An early sectarian node within Jainism; identified by the male mendicant practice of nudity. (pp. 164-165)

***gunasthanas*** The fourteen stages or steps of spiritual progress. (p. 179)

**Jina** A “conqueror”; an epithet for the 24 ascetic-prophets in Jainism. (p. 162)

***jiva*** The eternal soul/consciousness which all living beings are endowed with. (p. 163)

**Mahavira** “Great Hero”; Epithet of the 24th and final Jina of our time cycle, born Vardhamana Jnatrpura in the sixth century BCE. (pp. 168-169)

**Mahavira Jayanti**A joyous spring festival celebrating the birth of Mahavira. (p. 185)

***mahavratas***The five “great vows” adopted by renouncers: absolute non-violence, truthfulness, non-stealing, non-attachment, and celibacy. (p. 176)

**mendicants**Jaina men and women who renounce all worldly attachments to seek self-realization (and eventually, ***moksha***) by pursuing the difficult path of detachment and non-violence. Male mendicants (monks) are called *sadhus* or *munis*, and female mendicants (nuns) are called *sadhvis*. (p. 196)

***moksha***The ultimate goal of the Jaina path: release from the cycle of birth and death; nirvana. (pp. 165, 169)

**Namokar Mantra**The central prayer in Jainism. (p. 182)

***pratikramana***Ritual practice of repentance. (p. 176)

***paap***Karmic particles of an inauspicious nature (“bad karma”). (p. 173)

***punya*** Karma particles of an auspicious nature (“good karma”). (p, 173)

**Shramanism:** The Jaina ideal: the giving up of all worldly attachments (family, friends, wealth, pride etc.) in order to pursue the path of detachment and non-violence. Though a powerful ideal for all Jains, it is practiced fully only by mendicants (p. 196)

**Svetambara** One of the two early sectarian nodes within Jainism; distinguished by mendicants wearing simple white robes. (pp. 164-165)

***sallekhana***A ritual fast to death undertaken voluntarily, usually in old age or illness. (pp. 180-181)

***samayika***A desired state of equanimity; ritual practice of meditation. (p. 176)

***samsara***The endless cycle of rebirth from which Jains seek release. (p. 196)

***samyak darshan***Right vision, faith, or intuition into the basic truth of the cosmos; spiritual growth depends on the attainment of *samyak darshan*. (p. 164)

***shramana***A renouncer; one who has given up worldly attachments to pursue spiritual release. (pp. 164-165)

***siddha loka***Final abode of the liberated *jiva*. (p. 181)

***Tatthvartha Sutra***An important philosophical text authored by Umasvati in the second century CE, and accepted by all Jaina sects. (p. 172)

**Tirthankara** One who is a “ford-maker”; epithet for the 24 Jinas who, through their teachings, created a ford across the ocean of birth and death, *samsara*. (p. 163)

***upvas*** A term used for ritual fasting which means “to be near the soul.” (p. 180)

Study Questions

See below for answers with page references.

1. Where does the power of renunciation lie in Jainism?
2. How is *ahimsa paramo dharma* translated and what does it mean?

**3.** What is the story of the “transfer of the embryo” in the life of Mahavira?

**4.** Why does linear time carry little weight in Jainism?

**5.** What are the two positions on the embodied Jina’s omniscience in Jainism?

**6.** What is one of the points of contention regarding the Jaina scriptures called *Agama*?

**7.** What are the two types of karmic particles in Jainism and what do they do?

**8.** What happened in the fourth century BCE at the time of Emperor Ashoka?

**9.** What are the two types of practices in Jainism?

**10.** What are the two main Jaina sects and how do their ideas differ?

**11.** What are the five vows? How do the vows differ between renouncers and householders?

**12.** What is the central prayer in Jainism? What are its five parts?

**13.** How are current reform movements working to modernize the Jaina tradition?

**14.** How was the Jain tradition preserved?

**15.** Which ritual makes the householders renouncers for the duration of its performance?

**16.** How has the practice of Sallekhana caused concern in recent years?

**17.** Do Jainas want to be identified as different from the Hindus?

Study Questions: Answer Key

**1.** The main power of renunciation is not in opposing worldly power, but in transcending and subsuming it. Conquering our attachment to the world is the most difficult battle, but for Jainas it is the only one worth fighting. (p. 162)

**2.** It is translated as “non-violence is the supreme path.” In Jainism the phrase means a commitment to radical non-interference. Any engagement in the world makes us sink further by generating more karma. It is only by the cessation of the activity of body, speech, and mind that one can really avoid harming others and, consequently, oneself. (p. 163)

**3.** According to myth, as an embryo Mahavira was miraculously taken from Devananda, a brahmin woman, and transferred to the womb of Queen Trisala, a kshatriya woman. This embryo was later born and named Vardhamana Jnatiputra, who later became Mahavira, the 24th Jina. (pp. 167-168)

**4.** Jainism holds that time is cyclical with periods of generation and degeneration, and that these

periods produce predictable patterns in social, moral, and physical life. Thus, there is no real point of origin, like the cosmos itself. Jainas can be both diachronically and synchronically orientated, and move with ease between the two. (p. 168)

**5.** The Digambaras hold that one who is omniscient must already have transcended bodily appetites and functions. Therefore, the Jina does not need to sleep, consume and eliminate food, and preach, but rather communicates through a divine, supernatural sound. The Svetambara believe that all embodied beings are subject to bodily demands and, therefore, the Jina eats, sleeps, and communicates in the regular way. (p. 169)

**6.** The oldest section of the scriptures, called *Purvas*, which is believed to date from the ninth century BCE, has disappeared. Some hold that much of it was contained in the last section of the “limbs” material in the canon, in a text called *Drstivada*. Svetambaras believe that the *Drstivada* was lost and that information is only preserved in mnemonic allusions in another text within the *Angabahya*. The Digambaras, however, claim that they managed to retain much of the *Drstivada*, and later put it in writing. (p. 170)

**7.** The two types of karmic particles are the auspicious or good karma, called *punya*, and the inauspicious or bad karma, called *paap*. However, Jainas believe that both good and bad karma must be purged because both weigh us down. The root of all karma lies in our passions. (p. 173)

**8.** The Emperor Ashoka converted to Buddhism and the Jainas lost their power. They then moved to Rajasthan, Gujarat, and Punjab in the West from their original center in Magadha. They also moved south to what is now Maharashtra and Karnataka. (p. 173)

**9.** The two types of practices are defensive and offensive. Defensive strategies, called *samvara*, include detachment and mindfulness, and work to impede the accumulation of new karma. Offensive practices, called *nirjara*, include fasting, meditation, and various physical disciplines which work to “burn off” old karma. (p. 176)

**10.** In the fourth century BCE, one group of Jainas moved to the southern part of India. They developed differently because of their isolation from one another. The Svetambara, meaning white-clad, began wearing white robes. They also allow women to take full vows of renunciation. Although both groups consider women’s bodies inferior, the Svetambara think that even this worldly object can be transcended and hold that one of the previous Jinas had been a female. The Digambara, meaning sky-clad, did not adopt any clothing, rather they continue the tradition of nudity set by Mahavira. They think women’s bodies are not able to be transcended and there-fore they do not allow nuns to take full vows of renunciation. (p. 169)

**11.** The vows are non-harm (*ahimsa*), truthfulness (*satya*), non-stealing (*asteya*), non-possession or

non-attachment (*aparigraha*), and celibacy for renouncers (*brahacharya*). For householders, this last

vow is interpreted as chastity in marriage. The vows taken by renouncers and householders are

identical in number; the difference is in the degree of purification that is achieved. The vows are

applied more leniently for the householders than the renouncers. (pp. 176-179)

**12.** The main prayer in the Jaina tradition is the Namokar Mantra. It gives homage to various spiritual beings along the 14-step path and beyond. It begins with giving homage to the Jinas (those beyond the path as they have obtained liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth). Then homage is paid to all liberated beings, followed by the mendicant scholars that are still on the fourteen-step path of spiritual liberation. Next, homage is given to religious leaders. Finally, homage is paid to all renouncers, everywhere. The mantra is praising those who have travelled the spiritual path and renounced worldliness. (pp. 182, 184)

**13.** Since the British colonial period in India, Jaina reform movements worked toward promoting Jaina identity alongside other religious traditions in India. They desired to educate Jaina adherents by expanding access to their own sacred texts. In this way, they sought to integrate Jaina culture into the Indian secular education system. They also promoted this idea among Jaina practitioners who were reluctant to move away from their localized concerns. These Jainas thought that the emphasis on secular education would be counterproductive to Jaina renunciation and spiritual concerns. (p. 191)

**14.** It was preserved orally. The ganadharas or disciples of Mahavira memorized the fourteen Purvas and twelve Angas and transmitted them to other disciples until they were compiled in 2nd century and 5th CE by the two sects. These teachings were called Agama meaning passed down. Some of them were lost in natural disasters and other unfortunate events. The meeting at Pataliputra led to memorization of what was left of the teachings, which was integrated into Angas as well as protected in Anga Bahya, which were commentaries and elaborations of Angas. Later, the authenticity of the scriptures was a cause of concern for the Digambara sect and they made Satkhandagama their validated scripture that consists of the essence of the 12th Anga Drstivada. The Svetambara sect chose to keep transmitting Jaina teachings orally and finally decided to write it down at the Council of Valabhi. (pp. 170-171)

**15.** The two-fold rituals of pratikramana and samayika which is performed by both renouncers and householders is offered twice daily. Both adherents of Jain tradition offer the prayer the same way and become the same by setting the goal in mind to abandon their bodies and experience “dwelling in the soul”. (p. 180)

**16.** The practice of Sallekhana has gained significant attention from the media recently as the practice is seen as suicide according to the High Court of Rajasthan in 2015. This resulted in protests erupting in India from the Jain community who justified the practice by pointing out that it does not affect anyone and is voluntary. The protests brought the case to the Supreme Court of India and the practice was restored however, the final decision of the Court is still not here which still makes it illegal in eyes of some. (pp. 180-181)

**17.** Some Jainas want to be identified as different from the Hindus while others do not want to upset the existing system of assimilation. They were referred to as a sect of Hinduism or as “Hindu-Jain” in census reports and Indian law. This resulted in a false increase in the number of Jains in the census reports in 1991. That’s when Jainas wanted to have their religious identity recognized and in 2014 they got it by the ruling of the Supreme Court of India which granted them a minority status as adherents of a distinct religion. This was seen as both a victory and a defeat. The Svetambara sect which is most integrated into Hindu communities opposed it and called it an unnecessary action as they did not want to disturb the peaceful coexistence (pp. 191-192)

Reflection Questions

**1.** Jainas believe that *ajiva* and *jiva* have always been enmeshed with non-soul material being attracted to the soul. How is it that the soul of a human being is paradoxically dependent on non-soul matter in order to become free of it?

**2.** Dietary restrictions are quite stringent in the Jaina tradition. How would your life be affected if you were mindful of your diet, rooting out any harm that might be occurring to living organisms? Do you think it is fair that householders take a less restrictive approach, for example, not concerning themselves with one-sensed beings?

**3.** If the fast to death, *sallekhana*, is viewed as the ultimate display of renunciation, why do relatively few Jainas take this opportunity? How does Karma relate to it?

**4.** Why does the Jaina community currently value a unique identity with definitive borders at the same time that they value a universal identity?

**5.** In the diaspora communities, the concept of *ahimsa* is being decoupled from the focus of renunciation. As a result issues of non-violence are being directed at this-worldly issues, such as social justice issues. Will this completely alter the Jaina tradition so that it will no longer be the same tradition?

**6.** If all religions preach about non-materialism and renunciation to some degree why is Jain renunciation considered distinctive?

Research Paper Topics

**1.** Fully explore the Jaina notion of *samyak darshan* or momentary awakening. How is this experience similar to or different from the Rinzai Zen notion of *kensho*? How do these experiences reflect the large goal of liberation in their respective traditions?

**2.** What is the purpose of the *Saman Suttam* text both spiritually and sociologically? How has this text been received in the Svetambara and Digambara communities?

**3.** Explain the historical significance of trade routes in providing Jaina communities with opportunities to form alliances with different religious and cultural communities. Are there parallels in today’s global economy?

**4.** How did a decentralized and porous understanding of both their tradition and community assist the Jainas in surviving cultural and religious shifts within medieval India?

**5.** What are the 14 stages to self-realization (liberation)? How are householder Jainas restricted on the path? Are there aspects of a householder life that can assist one on the path?

**6.** Research the many different fasts that are undertaken by lay and mendicant Jainas. What purpose do these various fasts serve? Finally, how is merit transferred between the one who has fasted and another being?

**7.** Select two important pieces of Jaina art, music, literature, or architecture. How does this art reflect Jaina worldview?

**8.** What is the Paryushana/Daslakshana festival and how does it reflect the key relationship of reciprocation between mendicants and the laity?

**9.** Which Jaina understandings did Gandhi adopt to approach social injustices and relationship building with others?

**10.** What is the historical role of women in the Jaina tradition? How does this vary between nuns and laywomen? How may this change in diaspora communities?

**11.** Jain tradition has many concepts that are similar to Hindu concepts however, one sect demands that they be considered a minority and distinct from Hinduism. What are some of the differences and commonalities between the two religions? Do all Jainas want to be seen as different from Hindus?

**12**. What are the two major sects of Jainism? How are they different from each other and what scriptures do they believe in? What are their political views?

**13.** Many Jainas choose to live the life of a householder as renunciation is a big step. Is renunciation making a comeback? In what age group is it most popular and why? Do you think millennials are becoming more attracted to it as they are becoming more spiritually aware in this face paced environment?

Additional Resources

Audio-Visual

*Spiritual India: A Guide to Jainism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism*. Films for the Humanities and Social Sciences. 1995. 50 minutes.

Patterns of Faith: Jainism. BBC Programmes.

16th Annual Lecture: Newly Discovered Jaina Mathematical Manuscripts and their Content. SOAS University of London. 1 hour 8 minutes.

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