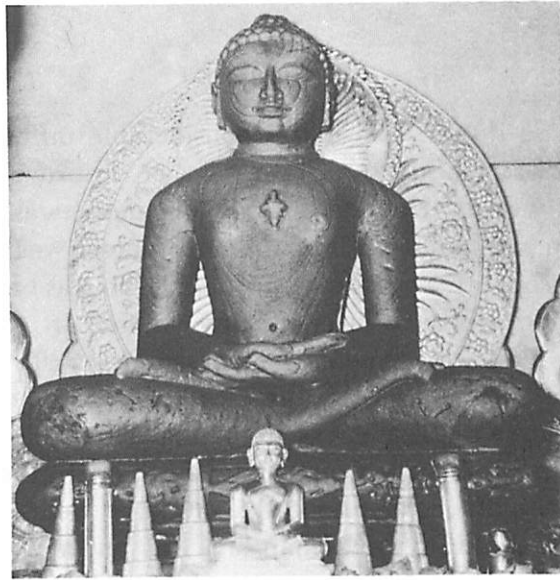


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MAHAVIRA *c.* 599 B.C.- *c.* 527 B.C.

Mahavira (which means “great hero”) is the name by which the Jains usually refer to Vardhamana, the leading figure in the development of their religion.

Vardhamana was born in 599 B.C., in northeast India, the same general area in which Gautama Buddha was born, though a generation earlier. Indeed, the similarity of the life stories of the two men is truly amazing. Vardhamana was the younger son of a chief, and like Gautama was reared in considerable luxury. At the age of thirty, he abandoned his wealth, his family (he had a wife and daughter), and his comfortable surroundings, and decided to seek spiritual truth and fulfillment.

Vardhamana became a monk in the small and very ascetic Parsvanatha order. For twelve years he engaged in deep meditation and reflection, all the while enduring the extremes of asceticism and poverty. He fasted frequently, and he retained no personal property of any sort, not even a small cup or dish with which to drink water or collect alms. Although at first he retained one garment, after a while he discarded even that and walked

about completely naked. He would allow insects to crawl over his bare skin and would not brush them off, even when they bit him. Even in India, where itinerant holy men are more common than they are in the West, Mahavira's appearance and behavior frequently aroused taunts, insults, and blows, all of which he endured without reprisal.

When he was forty-two, Mahavira decided that he had finally attained spiritual enlightenment. He spent the remaining thirty years of his life preaching and teaching the spiritual insights that he had gained. When he died, in 527 B.C., he had many disciples.

In some ways Mahavira's doctrines are very similar to those of Buddhism and Hinduism. Jains believe that when a human being's body dies, his soul does not die with it but is reincarnated in some other being (not necessarily human). This doctrine of transmigration of souls is one of the foundations of Jainist thought. Jains also believe in *karma*, the doctrine that the ethical consequences of an act affect one's lot in a future existence. To remove the accumulated load of guilt from one's soul, and thereby to purify it, is a primary goal of the Jainist religion. In part, Mahavira taught, this can be achieved by the denial of sensual pleasures. Jainist monks, in particular, are supposed to practice a rigorous asceticism. It is noteworthy that deliberately starving oneself to death is considered praiseworthy!

A very important aspect of Jainism is the great stress it lays on the doctrine of *ahisma*, or nonviolence. Jains emphasize that *ahisma* includes nonviolent behavior to animals as well as to human beings. As one consequence of this belief, Jains are vegetarians. However, devout Jains carry the principle of *ahisma* to far greater extremes than that: a devout Jain, quite literally, will not kill a fly; nor will he eat in the dark, as he might accidentally swallow an insect, and thereby cause its death. Indeed, a sufficiently devout and well-to-do Jain will hire someone to sweep the street in front of him as he walks, so that he does not accidentally step on and kill an insect or worm!

From such beliefs, it logically follows that a religious Jain

cannot in good conscience plow a field. In fact, the Jains actually do not engage in agriculture. For that matter, many other occupations involving manual labor are forbidden by their religion. Jainism provides a striking example of how religious doctrines can drastically affect the entire manner of living of a whole community. Although they dwell in a land that is overwhelmingly agricultural, the majority of Jains have been engaged in trade or finance for centuries. Jainist religious attitudes have also led them to prize industriousness. Consequently, it is not surprising that the Jains are a prosperous group, and that their participation in Indian intellectual and artistic activities has been high in proportion to their numbers.

Originally, Jainism had no caste system. However, through constant interaction with Hinduism, a caste system has developed within Jainism—though one far less extreme than that of the Hindus. Similarly, although Mahavira himself never spoke of a God or gods, through contact with Hinduism some worship of deities has arisen. Since there are no writings by Mahavira, some absorption of doctrines from Hinduism was probably inevitable. There has, however, been considerable influence in the other direction as well. Jainist moral objections to animal sacrifice and to the eating of meat appear to have markedly affected Hindu practice. Furthermore, the Jainist doctrine of non-violence has been a continuing influence upon Indian thought, even down to modern times. For example, Gandhi was strongly influenced by the teachings of the Jainist philosopher Shrimad Rajachandra (1867-1900), whom he considered to be one of his gurus, or spiritual teachers.

The Jains have never been a very numerous sect, and today there are only about 3,500,000 of them in all of India. That may not sound like a very large fraction of the world's population; however, added up over a period of 2,500 years it comes to quite a large number of persons. In judging Mahavira's importance, one should take into account that Jainism, perhaps even more than most other religions, has had a large and continuous effect upon the lives of its adherents.