

*By Purushottama Bilimoria*

# Jainism: A Living Tradition

*Below: This is a picture of the inner sanctum of the temple at the Jain Center of Northern California. These images are sacred to the Jains, so please treat them with respect. Photo © Nirmal Baid, 2016; all rights reserved.*

**T**he founding of the Mira and Ajay Shingal Center for Dharma Studies in 2015 has established a permanent home at the GTU for the academic study of several major religious traditions that originated in ancient India. Among these Dharma traditions is Jainism (or Jaina Dharma), which has a following of some 6 million people, mostly in India but also scattered in other parts of the world. While Jainism's history dates back to the sixth century BCE, its primary principles point toward ethical commitments to nonviolence, pluralism, and ecological wholeness that are deeply relevant to the contemporary challenges of the twenty-first century.



The roots of Jainism can be found in the *śramaṇa* movement, a movement of ascetic, contemplative, spiritual adepts of ancient India. Major tenets of Jain philosophy include: *ahiṃsā* (the avoidance of harm to all living beings); *anekāntavāda* (the avoidance of absolutism, and respect for multiple viewpoints); and *aparigraha* (the avoidance of attachment to the things of this world). Contemporary scholars have employed these three tenets in the service of ecological consciousness, pluralism, and sustainable living.

The ultimate aim of Jainism is *mokṣa* (release from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, and attainment of liberation into a pure realm of enlightened existence). To this end, Jainism promotes the “three jewels” that constitute the threefold path to liberation: right faith (*śamyak darśana*), right understanding (*śamyak jñāna*), and right conduct (*śamyak chāritra*).

Jaina (or Jain) signifies “one who follows a Jina.” A Jina is not a deity but a human being who has, through certain austerities and renunciate ascetic practices, gained deep knowledge of ultimate truths, and thereby achieved liberation and conquered attachment (*raga*) and aversion (*dveṣa*). The Jina is one who has overcome the cyclical round of birth and

death, thereby breaking the bondage of *karma* that this repetitive cycle entails. This accomplishment, considered the highest human attainment, enables the Jina to transmit the doctrines of Jainism.

A Jina is also known as Tīrthaṅkara (literally, “ford-builder”), which means one who makes pathways to cross *saṃsāra*, “the river of transmigratory suffering.” The Jain religion considers the first Jina to have been Ṛṣibha; and the most recent, the 24th, is the widely recognized Mahāvīra (c. 599-527 BCE) who was an elder contemporary of the Buddha and formulated a number of principles later adopted by Buddhism. Mahāvīra’s teachings helped consolidate and systematize the doctrines of Jainism as we know it today; he was also instrumental in transforming the practices of the forest-ascetics into systematic doctrines that made it possible for both ascetics and lay followers to integrate the praxis into their lives.

There are two major sects within Jainism today: Śvetambaras (“white-clad,” popular among laypeople) and Digambaras (“sky-clad”). People in India are familiar with the common image of Digambara mendicants walking barefoot with minimal possessions. Included among Śvetambaras are two





sub-sects, one that worships images of Tīrthaṅkaras (*mūrtipūjaka*) and one that does not (Sthānakavāsīs and Terapanthis); their ascetics wear a white cover over the mouth (*muhpatti*), in order to avoid inhaling (and thus killing) microbes from the air.

Jainism has a complex psychology, cosmology, and metaphysics, which may resonate with developments in modern science and cosmology. Jains view the universe as having existed eternally, conceived as a vast “cosmic being” (*lokapuruṣa*) that can be perceived as an organically connected cosmos. Jain philosophy maintains that there are an infinite number of souls (*jīva*, or the principle of sentience) that come in various categories and potencies, from one- to two-sensed amoebic or microbial creatures, to five-sensed animals, to the more expansive and spiritually evolved souls represented by human beings and celestial beings. Each soul accumulates and must work out accumulated karma appropriate to its existential status in order to progress to the next stage of being. This is achieved mainly through virtuous living and contemplative practices.

Known for their “reverence for all life” (as Albert Schweitzer has put it), Jains are unrelenting in adhering to five basic moral principles: non-violence (*ahiṃsā*), truthfulness (*satya*), non-coveting of others goods (*asteya*), non-possessiveness (*aparigraha*), and sexual continence (*brahmacharya*), which means celibacy in the case of monks and nuns, and virtuous conduct on the part of laypersons. Jain vows are understood to generate positive mental dispositions, with the power of inducing virtuous behavior, self-restraint, and compassion, while also inhibiting karmic inflow; they may even deploy positive karmic inflow (in the form of “earned merit,” or *punya*) towards easing the suffering of oneself and others, including animals.

Jain philosophy emphasizes relinquishing attachment to objects of desire and enticement, including stimulating food and drink (especially intoxicants), the embellishing of the body in distracting colors and designs, and virulent aversions that tie up one’s emotions in negative knots. Anger, fear, anxiety, and aggression are to be restrained for the spiritual advancement of the self and well being of others. Control of speech, control of the mind (through practices of meditation, breathing, and yoga) and exercise of dexterity in all activities are greatly valued in Jain morality. There are “great vows” for the ascetics (with strict sets of practices and conduct) and “smaller vows” (in a descending scale of restrictions) for lay people, children, and the incapacitated.

Existing as corollaries to the Jain principle of right understanding are the twin-doctrines of *syādvāda*—literally “maybe-ness,” which implies that there is

value in alternative perspectives—and *anekāntavāda*, which suggests that, since reality is multifaceted and multidimensional, it is not prudent to cling doggedly to a single viewpoint. Together these doctrines pave the way for a tolerant outlook and provide strong support for pluralism.

Today, Jainism’s call to humans to live in harmony with an environment suffused with sentient life finds great appeal and resonance in the worldwide ecological and sustainable social-living movements. Jainism has made significant contributions internationally to rethinking human attitudes toward violence, endemic war, and the rampant destruction of the environment. This is evident through the twentieth century in the influence on M. K. Gandhi, who drew heavily from the wellspring of Indian spirituality—both his own heritage of Hinduism as well as important principles of Jainism—and whose philosophy shaped U.S. civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. and other nonviolent activists. Jains in large numbers continue to contribute to innovations in sustainable technology and software development, from India to the Silicon Valley.

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## Jain Studies at the GTU

Recent courses in Jain Studies at the GTU include:

- “The Self and I in Indic Thought: Jaina, Hindu, and Buddhist” (Fall 2015)
- “Radical Nonviolence: Introduction to Jain Dharma” (Spring 2016)
- “Jain Philosophy and Ethics” (Fall 2016)

An additional course on Jainism will be offered in Spring 2017:

- “Gandhi and Jainism: The Jain Influence and Principles that Shaped the Life and Work of Gandhi”

The GTU is working in partnership with leaders in the Bay Area Jain community to establish a Chair of Jain Studies at the GTU, as well as MA and PhD concentrations in Jain Studies. If you are interested in supporting the expansion of Jain Studies at the GTU, please contact [advancement@gtu.edu](mailto:advancement@gtu.edu).