

An Introduction



Jainism



Jeffery D Long

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by

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Chapter IV

The Jain Path

What is Jainism?

In the first chapter, I made some references to divisions internal to the Jain community: between those who are affluent merchants and those who are not, between laypersons and ascetics (monks and nuns), between castes, between men and women, between sects of Jainism, and between those Jains who view themselves as Hindu and those who do not. And in the second chapter, I explored the history of this community and its traditions.

But what makes a Jain a Jain? Mahatma Gandhi once famously said that there are in fact as many religions as there are people – that everyone, even members of the same tradition, will tend to interpret the beliefs and practices of their traditions differently, or pursue their practices in subtly different ways.

But allowing for the inevitability that Jains, like all other religious persons, will disagree amongst themselves on certain issues, what can be said by way of a reasonable generalization about the set of views and practices called *Jainism*?

Let us begin by discussing the views and practices shared between Jainism and other Indic traditions, and situating Jainism in its context. Then we can narrow down our examination to the variations on these common themes that are distinctively Jain.

In Jainism, as well as Hinduism and Buddhism, one encounters a universe without beginning or end. According to this cosmology, we have all been undergoing a process of birth, life, death, and rebirth since time without beginning. Though Buddhism adds a layer of complexity to this model, with its *anātman* or ‘no self’ doctrine, the basic idea is that the physical body is not our true self. The body, rather, is the vehicle of that which is even more fundamental to us – the *jīva*, or *jīvātman*, which corresponds roughly to what Western religious traditions call the soul.

Unlike the body, which is impermanent, the soul has no beginning and no end. In the Indic traditions, it is the soul, and not the body, with which we ought to be primarily concerned. What will happen to us after the body dies? And where were we – if the soul is what we really are – before this body was born? How is the nature of our rebirth, the type of body we inhabit, determined?

According to the Indic traditions, a universal law called *karma*, which governs all action, determines the nature of our rebirth. As I mentioned in the introduction, karma could well be compared to Newton's Third Law of Motion: For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. Everything we do produces a corresponding effect upon us. But karma is not merely a physical law. It is also a moral law. Our every thought, word, and deed carries with it a degree of what could be called moral force, for good or ill. Just as applying force in the physical world produces an equal force pushing back upon us, similarly, according to the principle of karma, the moral force of our thoughts, words, and actions comes back to us in the form of either pleasant or painful experiences, depending upon the moral character of the force we have exerted. Good deeds produce good effects. Evil deeds produce evil effects. We reap what we sow.

Karma, the net effect of all of our previous choices, produces the experiences of the present moment, in which we are currently making the choices that will produce our future experiences. In effect, we are all creating and re-creating the universe at every moment with our collective choices. This includes the type of body we inhabit. At the time of the death of the body, the karma of the soul will determine what kind of body the soul will inhabit next, including the location of its birth, its social circumstances, etc. One is therefore, in effect, choosing the nature of one's next rebirth all of the time. Good karma, *puṇya karma*, will lead to a good rebirth, in circumstances conducive to spiritual advancement. Bad karma, *pāpa karma*, will lead to rebirth in painful circumstances. Of course most of us, having a mix of good and bad karma, are born into circumstances in which we feel pleasure and pain, freedom and limitation, in various measures.

All of this depends, again, on our karma, which is changing to some extent at every moment, as we make moral choices and engage in action based upon them. It is not only in the afterlife that karma has its effects. These can occur in this life as well.

According to such a worldview, what should one do? Clearly, one should engage in good activities – do good works – so the karmic effects that one experiences will be good ones, and a great deal of Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain religious activity is centered around the earning of merit, or good karma, through good actions.

But the philosophy of renunciation that all of these traditions share is based on the insight that the highest good does not consist of making an endless effort toward bettering and maintaining the karmic situation of one's soul. Is there no rest for the soul? Is there no higher aim to give life a purpose and a meaning? Is it not the case, given that we are limited beings, that even the most heroic good deeds will produce karmic effects that will eventually wear out, and that we will again have to continue doing good works in order to maintain our karmic state?

The Buddhist tradition expresses this idea with its First Noble Truth: that existing in *saṃsāra*, experiencing karmic effects, inevitably involves *dukkha*, or suffering. This is an idea shared by Hindus and Jains as well. *Dukkha* does not mean that we are always unhappy. But it means that the highest happiness available to us through the karmically conditioned experiences of this life is limited and impermanent. As the George Harrison song says, 'All things must pass. All things must pass away.'

According to the *śramaṇa* traditions and the Vedānta philosophy of Hinduism as found in the *Upaniṣads*, true happiness, lasting happiness, consists of liberation from the otherwise endless cycle of engaging in action and experiencing its karmic results, a cycle which we experience as the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, or *saṃsāra*.

But how, if karma is a universal law, is such liberation to be achieved? This is the central question on which the various Indic traditions diverge; for each conceives of the basic cosmological vision outlined above in subtly different ways.

The Darśanas: The Systems of Indian Philosophy

There is a very ancient way of categorizing the various Indic systems of thought, which is a useful tool for contextualizing the Jain worldview in terms of its similarities to and its differences from other South Asian worldviews – indeed, a more useful tool than the basic threefold division of these systems into the categories Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain.

The systems of Indian philosophy are traditionally called *darśanas*, or 'views' – or, as this term could reasonably be translated in this

context, worldviews. The main division in the traditional Indian categorization system is between those darśanas, or philosophical systems, which accept the authority of the *Veda* and those that do not. The former set of systems is also called *āstika*, or orthodox, while the latter are called *nāstika*. The *āstika* systems – using the dominant modern definition of Hinduism as Vedic religion – could be called ‘Hindu’ systems of philosophy (though such a usage would be anachronistic when speaking of the classical period in which this categorization system was developed). The *nāstika* systems are generally listed as three: *Jaina* (or Jain), *Bauddha* (Buddhist), and the *Cārvāka* or *Lokāyata* system. The *āstika* systems are listed as six, though it is useful to think of them as three pairs, since each pair has extensive overlap, and at least one pair – that made up of the Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika systems – eventually fused over time.

To clarify one question that has probably already occurred to observant readers, we seem to have shifted from a discussion of Jainism – which is a religion – to a discussion of philosophy. Two things should be mentioned here. First, the rather large gap between the activities called, in the West, *religion* and *philosophy* – the former being a matter of personal faith and requiring little or nothing in the way of specialized training, the latter being a highly technical discipline largely practiced by university professors, often seen as antagonistic to religion – did not apply to premodern Indian cultures. Nor, for that matter, does it apply particularly well to premodern Western cultures either. Philosophy in ancient Greece was originally an holistic enterprise, a spiritual path encompassing what we now know as both religious practice and the scholarly pursuit of knowledge.¹⁴⁸

The distinction between religion and philosophy is largely a rather late product of the European Enlightenment. It serves an ideology that views knowledge which is not derived from or reducible to sensory experience with deep suspicion. It thereby relegates religion to the realm of the irrational, or the purely subjective. Philosophers are thus able to differentiate their ‘objective’ pursuit of knowledge – a pursuit that takes the physical sciences as its model, and indeed privileges science as a hegemonic form of knowledge – from what is regarded as the fanciful realm of religious belief.

Indian traditions have ritual and what could broadly be called faith or devotional dimensions that are quite similar to what Westerners today call *religion* and conceptual dimensions that are similar to what

Westerners call *philosophy*. But they have not tended to sunder these apart after the fashion of contemporary Western thought, except to the degree that this same Western ideology has infiltrated Indian culture. To use the Indian terminology, there is *dharma* – a total way of life, which includes but is not limited to the elements that a Westerner would recognize as *religious* – and there is *darśana* – the more or less technical worldview in terms of this way of life is conceptualized, the concerns of which overlap with many of the traditional concerns of Western philosophers, such as the nature of reality, the process by which valid knowledge is acquired and propositions are defended, the character of language and the impact of language upon thought, and so on.

Traditional Indian philosophy is conducted largely in the service of the practice of a spiritual path, being therefore more akin to what many in the West would call *theology* – though Indian theology is often quite different in content from Western theologies. And the idea that a spiritual path would not require rational argument and logical justification is similarly foreign to a traditional Indian sensibility. So Indian philosophy is both more theological and Indian religion more rationalistic than either corresponding Western form of activity – though there are exceptions on both sides to this very broad generalization. Western philosophy and religion have tended to grow up in opposition to one another. Indian philosophy and religion, on the other hand, are almost indistinguishable.

To the degree that these two *are* distinguishable, Indian philosophy shares with its Western counterpart the quality of being highly technical in nature, and so also tends to be the preserve of trained experts. In Jainism, these experts tend to be ascetics, although there has also been an extensive tradition of lay *paṇḍits* among North Indian Digambaras for the past 500 years.¹⁴⁹

Indian systems of philosophy are passed down from teacher to student. Each of the philosophical systems has its own root text, or *sūtra*, which encapsulates in extremely concise form the basic teachings of the founder of the tradition. Indeed, the *sūtras* of the various darśanas are so concise that they are practically undecipherable without the aid of a commentary. Traditionally, this commentary would be provided orally by one's teacher. But numerous written commentaries exist on the *sūtras* of the various systems, as well as commentaries upon commentaries (or sub-commentaries), sub-sub-commentaries, and,

in some cases, sub-sub-sub-commentaries. As one might guess, the chief literary genre in which Indian philosophy is communicated is the commentary, or *bhāṣya*. The goal of the commentary, unlike the doctoral dissertation of Western scholarship, is not to argue for anything new, but to draw out the implications of the *sūtras*, which are seen as containing all relevant knowledge. To be sure, new issues arose all of the time as the adherents of various Indian systems of philosophy engaged one another in debate, or as the members of a particular school would struggle with the implications of their own tradition. But the adherents of these schools had to be able to show the connections between whatever view they defended and the teachings of their system's founder.

The three pairs of *āstika*, or Vedic darśanas, are the Sāṃkhya and Yoga systems, the Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika systems, and the Mīmāṃsā and Vedānta systems. These three pairs are called Vedic essentially because they do not explicitly deny the authority of the *Veda*. The degree to which they positively *affirm* Vedic authority varies greatly, and has no particular bearing on their philosophical content, given the great variety of positions that are possible based on the Vedic corpus of literature.

The Sāṃkhya and Yoga systems are only nominally Vedic. Indeed, the root texts of neither system actually refer to the *Veda* at all. But they do not reject it, and so were incorporated into the Vedic fold, and many Sāṃkhya and Yoga concepts can be found in the *Upaniṣads* and the *Bhāgavad Gītā* – such as the idea of *guṇas*, or qualities, discussed in the previous chapter in relation to the *varṇa*, or caste system.

The Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika systems do mention the *Veda* explicitly and argue for its validity. Interestingly, however, they do not typically invoke its authority in order to justify their claims, relying instead on *tarka*, or logic, to substantiate their claims. Logic, not the *Veda*, is primary. These two systems could be called forms of Vedic rationalism.

Finally, Mīmāṃsā and Vedānta are truly Vedic, taking as their primary goal the interpretation of Vedic texts, and taking the truth of these texts as axiomatic. Mīmāṃsā can be characterized as the continuation into the classical period of the Brahmanical orthodoxy against which the *śramaṇa* traditions reacted. Its chief preoccupation is the correct performance of Vedic ritual. The Mīmāṃsakas, as they

were called, developed an elaborate philosophy of language on the basis of their belief in the power of the Sanskrit verses of the *Veda* – if recited in the correct way and in the correct ritual context – to have actual effects in the world, such as bringing about long life, prosperity, success in battle, and so forth.

The Vedāntins, on the other hand, were chiefly preoccupied with the later portion of the *Veda*, the *Upaniṣads*, and the pursuit of *mokṣa*. Vedānta eventually became the dominant form of Hindu philosophy (or theology), which it remains today, absorbing the concepts of Sāṃkhya, the practice of Yoga, and the methods of logical argument used in Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika.

The *nāstika* systems include Jainism and Buddhism and a third system that was, in many ways, the ‘odd man out’ of traditional Indian philosophy. The followers of the Cārvāka system – or the Lokāyata system, as it was also known – were materialists. They denied not only the authority of the *Veda*, but the reality of karma, rebirth, and liberation.

Consequently, the texts of all other systems – Vedic, Jain, and Buddhist – condemn the Cārvākas quite strongly. Only fragments of real Cārvāka texts survive. Their central doctrine – a not uncommon view in modern Western thought – is that the only source of valid knowledge is sensory perception, and that claims to the contrary, by the Brahmins and *śramaṇas* alike, are designed to dupe ignorant people into giving them financial support.

Interestingly, the system closest to that of the Cārvākas, despite the deep faith in the *Veda* on which it is based, is the Mīmāṃsā system. Though Mīmāṃsā commentaries do not typically deny the reality of karma, rebirth, or liberation, the chief concern of the Mīmāṃsakas seems to be with achieving this-worldly happiness and success through the correct performance of Vedic ritual, and rebirth in heaven (*svarga-loka*). The Naiyāyikas and Vaiśeṣikas, too, give only a nod to *mokṣa* as an ultimate goal, taking it to be a kind of non-existence.

The systems with the closest affinities, in terms of their worldviews and ultimate goals – and this despite the fact that these affinities cut across the Vedic/non-Vedic divide – are Sāṃkhya, Yoga, Jainism, Buddhism, and Vedānta. Sāṃkhya, Yoga, and Jainism, in particular, have close affinities in terms of their metaphysical claims.

In regard to the earlier discussion of origins, some have taken the affinities of these three systems – combined with the fact that Sāṃkhya

and Yoga are only nominally Vedic – to suggest that, like Jainism, both Sāṃkhya and Yoga represent either a pre-Vedic or Greater Magadhan śramaṇa tradition. Sāṃkhya concepts appear in Vedic literature relatively late – in the *Upaniṣads*, and even more prominently, in the *Bhagavad Gītā*. And the figure traditionally attributed with the founding of the Sāṃkhya system, the sage Kāpila, is ancient – if an actual historical figure, possibly a contemporary of Pārśvanātha. The city in which the Buddha was raised – Kāpilavastu – was even named after him. This is clearly suggestive of his prominence as a cultural symbol of the philosophy of the Greater Magadha region.¹⁵⁰

The Jain Vision

In the realm of practice, the religious tradition that probably has the closest similarities to Jainism is Theravāda Buddhism, particularly with its organization of the community into a fourfold schema of male and female ascetic and lay practitioners in relations of mutual dependence. As mentioned previously, Jainism and Theravāda Buddhism share a good deal of philosophical terminology as well, particularly with regard to the topic of karmic influx, and the cessation of this influx as a precondition for *nirvāṇa*.

But the distinctively Jain vision of karma, rebirth, and liberation is most similar to the nominally Vedic Sāṃkhya and Yoga schools of thought in conceiving of the universe in a way that is radically dualistic: that is, as consisting of two completely different types of entity called *jīva* and *ajīva*, or spirit and matter.¹⁵¹

Jīvas, according to Jain teaching, when in their pure, unobscured state, have the four characteristics of unlimited knowledge (*jñāna*), perception (*darśana*), bliss (*sukha*), and energy or power (*vīrya*) – sometimes called the ‘four infinitudes’ (*ananta-catuṣṭaya*). There are many *jīvas* – as many as there are living beings in the cosmos. The word *jīva* is derived from the Sanskrit verbal root *jīv*, which means ‘live’, suggesting that this concept is closely connected to the idea of a living being, as its essential ‘life force’. But though there are many *jīvas*, each *jīva* is identical in terms of its four essential characteristics. They have the same nature, although they are numerically distinct.

This is an interesting point of comparison and contrast with several Hindu schools of thought. Much like Sāṃkhya and Yoga systems, and unlike Vedānta, Jainism claims that, although all *jīvas* have the same

essential nature (and are therefore, in that sense, identical), their numerical distinctiveness is final. In other words there is not, in Jainism, an ‘oversoul’, like a Vedāntic Brahman or *paramātman* – one supreme soul of which all individual souls are parts, or in which they participate, or on which they are strung like pearls on a thread¹⁵² – although the Jain tradition does use the same term, *paramātman*, with reference to the *jīva* in its pure, liberated state.

This is the main *metaphysical* difference between Vedānta – in which all souls are ultimately one – and Jainism (though there is a dualistic or *Dvaita* Vedānta that is similar to Jainism and Sāṃkhya in its insistence on the ultimate distinctiveness of all souls). The unity of souls, according to Jainism, is a unity of *nature* or *essence*. All souls are ‘one’ in the same sense in which all apples are ‘one’. There is not one ‘supreme apple’ of which all actual apples are different manifestations or appendages. But all apples share certain characteristics that mark them off as apples. In the same way, all the *jīvas* have the same four essential characteristics. But their numerical distinctiveness is not illusory.

Also like Sāṃkhya, Jainism is non-theistic. Jains, especially contemporary Jains, do use the word ‘God’ in their discourse. I have heard Jains say, very much like Hindus, that ‘God dwells within you’ or that ‘God dwells within all beings’, and I was once even told by a Jain monk, ‘May God bless you’. Beyond the issue of heterodoxy, which does permit theistic language to creep into Jain discourse, there seems to be a concern in the Jain community to avoid the misunderstanding that because Jains are not theists in the conventional sense, that they are also necessarily materialists (materialism and atheism generally going hand-in-hand in the contemporary world). Jain atheism, in other words, is not to be taken as a denial of spiritual values, or of karma or rebirth.

What Jains deny is that there is a *creator* God. When the term ‘God’ is used in a positive sense (as in the examples I have given), it refers to the *jīva*. It is the soul, in its pure state – the *paramātman* – that is divine in Jainism. There is no need for a creator because the cosmos has always existed.

But why, if all souls have the same essential nature, are there different types of living being? Why are all our experiences different? Why are we not all omniscient, infinitely perceptive, infinitely blissful, and infinitely powerful? Why do we not experience our divinity? The

answer, according to Jainism, is that our *jīvas* have all been associated, throughout their beginningless existence, with *ajīva* – non-soul or matter – of a particular kind, and it is the disassociation of *jīva* from *ajīva* that is the chief aim of Jain asceticism.

Ajīva, according to Jainism, is the negation of *jīva*. Everything that *jīva* is, *ajīva* is not. *Ajīva* is not conscious (and therefore not blissful) and has no inherent powers of its own (though, as we shall see in a moment, it does exhibit certain behaviors as a result of impetus from the *jīva*). The differences among living beings are due to *ajīva*.

The particular type of *ajīva* that adheres to each *jīva*, producing the various kinds of experience that living beings have, is called *karma*. This is the same ‘karma’ to which the other Indic traditions refer when they are speaking of the universal law of cause and effect that governs all action.

In other words, *karma* is understood in Jainism to be a material substance which *produces* the universal law of cause and effect, which produces experiences in our souls according to certain regular patterns – an understanding unique to the Jain tradition.

As we have seen, Jainism shares with all the other Indic traditions (except for the Cārvāka or Lokāyata materialists) a belief in *karma*, *saṃsāra*, and *nirvāṇa* or *mokṣa*. So, like the Hindus and Buddhists, Jains believe that we wander from lifetime to lifetime (the literal meaning of *saṃsāra* being ‘wandering about’), impelled by the law of cause and effect – *karma* – to be reborn until we attain liberation – *mokṣa* – from this process.

The particulars of this process differ, of course, in different traditions. In Advaita, or non-dualistic, Vedānta, we wander from life to life until we realize that what we really are – the *ātman*, or Self, is identical to Brahman. Not unlike the *jīva* of Jainism, which is pure bliss, perception, consciousness, and power, Brahman is described as infinite being, consciousness, and bliss (*sat-chit-ānanda*).

The difference, again, is that Brahman is one. There is no numerical division in it. It is thoroughly non-dual (which is of course the literal meaning of the word *advaita*). All other beings at least appear to be ‘parts’ of Brahman, through the power of *māyā*. Or they can be said to participate in it, as a universal consciousness of which all particular occasions of consciousness are illusory manifestations. But in Jainism the *jīvas*, though of one nature, are many, and this plurality is real, not illusory.

In theistic forms of Vedānta, in which the pre-eminent manifestation of Brahman is Īśvara – or God – the personal deity, it is by the grace of God that one becomes free from karmic bondage. In Buddhism, the term ‘self’ is avoided, but the process is arguably not fundamentally different from Advaita – the deconstruction of the empirical ego followed by the spontaneous arising of insight into the true nature of reality, leading to *nirvāṇa*, the state of freedom from suffering and further rebirth.

In Vedānta, however, karma is simply a universal law. ‘For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction’ – not only in the realm of physics, but in the realm of morality as well. In Buddhism, karma is more of a psychological reality. Instead of a self, it is karmic energy that is reborn, like a flame passing one candle to another. This energy must be resolved for *nirvāṇa* to occur, which is likened to flame being blown out.

But in Jainism, karma is actually a form of subtle matter, and the mechanism by which the bondage of the soul occurs, as well as the path to its eventual liberation, is the central concern of the tradition. According to Jainism, all *jīvas*, all souls, throughout their beginningless existence, have been bound to karmic matter.

How did this process begin? These traditions do not concern themselves with the question of the origins of the process. But one sometimes comes across the analogy of mud. When one encounters mud, one does not have to ask the question, ‘How did dirt and water come together to form this mud?’ to be able to sort out and separate the two. Similarly, one need not postulate an origin of how soul and matter (or on a Buddhist account, pure mind and false consciousness) came to be enmeshed with one another in order to discern a distinction between the two and initiate the process of their separation.

How does this process work? What is the path to the purification of the soul, of removing the ‘dirt’ of karmic matter from the ‘water’ of pure consciousness? According to the Jain account, karmic matter is attracted to the *jīva* by the arising of passions within the *jīva*. The passions are of two fundamental kinds: attraction (*rāga*) and aversion (*dveṣa*) though neutrality or indifference can also be mentioned as a third.

A passion is a kind of deformation in the structure of the soul, which is otherwise, as mentioned above, inherently omniscient and blissful. The passions arise in response to stimuli: to experiences.

Experiences, in turn, are the effects of karmic matter previously embedded in the soul through the process of attraction by the passions.

In other words, karmic bondage is a vicious circle. At any given point in the journey of the soul through *saṃsāra* – its wandering process of birth, death, and rebirth in the material world – it contains karmic particles that it has attracted through its passionate responses to prior stimuli. As these particles produce their effects, in the form of various experiences, more passions are elicited, and more particles are attracted, which will lead to more experiences, and so on. Until the soul has purified itself of karmic matter, giving rise to pure knowledge (*kevalajñāna*) and pure bliss, the process will continue.

Different types of passion attract different types of karmic matter. Different types of karmic matter, in turn, produce different types of experience, and a vast and elaborate literature exists which analyzes the types of karmic matter, their effects, and the passions that elicit them.¹⁵³ A central concern of Jainism is cultivating control over the passions so the influx of karmic matter can be kept to a minimum.

It is not a deterministic system, however, because, like all systems that involve the notion of karma, there is an element of free will in the present moment in terms of how one is going to respond to one's current experience. In the terms we have been using, it is *not* the case that karma determines the type of passion that will arise in response to the experience that it produces. We are in control, ultimately, of how we respond to stimuli. It is this element of freedom that makes a path of liberation from karma possible; for this freedom opens up a space for human action that can shape the future of one's relationship to the karmic process. The literature on Jain karma theory exists precisely as a guide to the practitioner so that she may control her passions in such a way as to produce the most desirable karmic results, the most desirable ultimately being none at all. True freedom – *mokṣa* – is complete freedom from karmic determination.

Karmic particles are frequently referred to in Jain literature as 'seeds' (*bīja*). The analogy is a good one. Just as a seed falls into the soil, the karmic particle embeds itself within the soul. Just like a seed, the karmic particle eventually bears fruit (*phala*), in the form of an experience. And, like a seed, the precise timing and manner in which karma bears fruit depends upon a variety of factors. Different kinds of karma come to fruition in different ways and at different times, just like different seeds. But just as seeds need the right kind of soil to

grow and to bear fruit, as well as factors like water and sunlight, in the same way, the fruition of karma can be affected by the soul environment in which it finds itself. The function of much of Jain asceticism is to create an environment that is inhospitable to karmic fruition, but that can lead, rather, to the destruction of karma. The metaphor is often used, extending the seed analogy, of ‘cooking’ the seeds of our karma in the ‘fires’ of asceticism (*tapas*) so that they cannot grow or bear fruit.

So one dimension of Jain asceticism involves the purification and purgation of the soul, freeing it from the karmic matter that is already embedded in it, and which deforms it, obscuring its true nature as infinite knowledge and bliss, and threatening to attract more such matter through the passions its fruition can evoke.

The other dimension of Jain asceticism involves the prevention of the influx of more karmic matter through the control of the passions. This is where Jain meditation comes in: the practice of *sāmāyika*, or equanimity in the face of both joy and sorrow. As in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*’s recommendation of *karma-phala-vairāgya*, ‘detachment from the fruits of action’, the Jain tradition holds that experiences faced with equanimity, and the actions arising therefrom, do not attract additional karmic matter to the soul. Ascetics and laypersons both practice *sāmāyika*. The Jain layperson is said to be the most like an ascetic – to come closest to the ascetic state – while engaging in this practice.¹⁵⁴ Through the practice of *sāmāyika*, one learns not to give in to the passions which attract karma to the soul. One practices *not* automatically reacting to joy with attraction and sorrow with aversion, but reacting to both with equanimity – or in other words, *not* reacting to them.

The *jīva*, in its ideal state, could be compared to a smooth body of water – like a lake on a windless day – clear and untroubled by turbulence or waves. But the *jīvas* of most beings, non-liberated beings, are not in their ideal state. They are like lakes whose waters are filled with waves and whirlpools, which correspond to emotional states called, in Jainism, the passions (*rāgas*). These passions can be seen as deformations on the smooth surface of the soul. These deformations attract particles of karmic matter to the soul, further deforming it and making it ‘sticky’. The passions’ effect of drawing karma to the soul is sometimes compared to the way that wetting a cloth makes it attract dust.

The passions are essentially reactions to experiences, and are of three basic types: attraction, aversion, and neutrality. We either like an experience, wanting more of it; we dislike it, and so want to avoid it; or we are indifferent to it. Experiences are the result of karmic particles or ‘seeds’ (*bīja*) coming to fruition. These experiences, in turn, produce passions, which attract more karmic seeds, which also come to fruition, producing more experiences, leading to more passions, and so on. Again, no beginning to this process is posited in the Jain tradition. There was no ‘fall’ from a higher, spiritual state, in which originally pure souls began to be contaminated by karmic matter. It is simply the way things have always been, throughout beginningless time.

Put most simply, the goal of Jainism as a spiritual practice is the removal (*niṣjarā*) of the karmic matter that obscures the true nature of the *jīva* and causes it to be bound (*bandha*) to the cycle of rebirth in the material world and to prevent (*saṃvara*) the further influx (*āśrava*) of such matter. The result of successful removal of karmic matter from the *jīva* and the prevention of further karmic influx is *mokṣa* – liberation from rebirth.

Because it is the passions that attract karma to the *jīva*, an essential component of the Jain path is to cultivate a disposition of detachment (*vairāgya*) or calm equanimity in the face of all our experiences, both pleasant and unpleasant. For this reason, many Jains, like Buddhists and Hindus, practice a form of meditation, in order to cultivate the calm mental state most conducive to spiritual freedom.

The distinctive Jain form of meditation, developed in the Śvetāmbara Terāpathī community, is known as *prekṣādhyāna*. It has become a prominent part of both lay and monastic Terāpanthī practice in recent times. This practice was long believed to be lost, but was rediscovered – or rather, reconstructed – by the Jain muni Ācārya Mahāprajñā, whose order has done much to promote it among both ascetics and laypersons.¹⁵⁵ As Dundas elaborates:

This system, which takes its inspiration from scattered scriptural statements about perceiving the self with the self, while also drawing eclectically on a wide range of sources in other traditions, provides a meditative structure, similar in style to Buddhist insight meditation, for a religion that seems to have lost contact with its original system of contemplation at least one thousand years ago.¹⁵⁶

But while meditation and equanimity – *prekṣādhyāna* and *sāmāyika* – can help one to avoid accumulating additional karmic matter, there are still karmic particles that need to be removed from the *jīva* if one is to achieve liberation. This removal is achieved through difficult ascetic activities (*tapas*), such as fasting, meditating for long periods of time in difficult positions – such as *kāyotsarga*, the distinctively Jain standing meditation posture – and the giving up of material comforts to which one has developed attachment.

In terms of karma, ascetic activities serve a double function. By helping the Jain practitioner to exert a greater control over the passions through self-discipline, they aid in reducing karmic influx. But because ascetic activities are inherently difficult, they also, in effect, substitute for the unpleasant experiences that one's bad karma would inevitably create anyway, given time. One essentially pays one's karmic debt in advance by taking on such difficult practices, and so accelerates one's progress toward liberation. Again, just as a seed, once cooked, cannot sprout, in the same way, a karmic seed has its effects negated by the voluntary suffering that is involved in the practice of asceticism. The seed is essentially brought to premature fruition, and so removed from the soul.¹⁵⁷ Without the aid of ascetic practice, one would have to wait for one's karmas to come to fruition on their own, which could take many lifetimes.

The Importance of *Ahiṃsā*

The strict asceticism of Jain monks and nuns is closely connected with the ethical ideal of *ahiṃsā*, which is generally translated as nonviolence, but which is actually much more radical than the English word 'nonviolence' might suggest. It is not simply a matter of refraining from actual, physical harm. *Ahiṃsā* is the absence of even a desire to do harm to any living being, in thought, word, or deed.

The Jain ethos of *ahiṃsā* is a direct outcome of Jain karma theory. The passions that attract karma of the worst kind – karma whose fruition leads to the greatest suffering – are those associated with violence. To practice *ahiṃsā* is to wish to harm no living thing, either deliberately (which of course produces the worst karmic effects) or even through one's carelessness (which, though not as bad as intentional violence, is still regarded in Jainism as carrying a negative karmic effect).

As I have discussed previously, there is a frank recognition in the Jain tradition that not all human beings are prepared for the level of asceticism that is required in order to purge the *jīva* completely from karmic matter and thus end its cycle of suffering the vicissitudes of *saṃsāra*. Some souls are still sufficiently deluded that they continue to choose the time-bound pleasures of the material world over the infinite bliss of a purified and liberated soul, seeing the asceticism of the Jain monk or nun as a terrible burden, rather than a path to freedom. This, in fact, includes many Jains, who deeply revere those who have undertaken the ascetic path, knowing that they themselves, in this life at least, could never take on such a difficult practice.

In the Jain community, the recognition of different spiritual levels, with different duties appropriate to each, issues in the construction of a fourfold community of male and female lay and ascetic practitioners. For the ascetic, male or female, the chief task is the practice of absolute *ahiṃsā*. For a very small number of such ascetics, this culminates in *sallekhanā* or *santhārā*, which is the complete renunciation of material sustenance, in the recognition that even the digestive process involves violence to microscopic organisms.

But for the layperson, male or female, there is an understanding that such a total renunciation is both impossible and undesirable. As in Theravāda Buddhism, the laity is devoted not so much to *nirvāṇa* as to the avoidance of bad karma and the accumulation of good karma (*puṇya*), in the hope that this will aid them in their spiritual path, leading to progressively better rebirths in which, eventually, they may feel the call of renunciation. *Nirvāṇa*, though ultimately desirable, is a more distant goal than a meritorious rebirth.

This is an important way in which Jainism (and Hinduism and Buddhism) differs from most Western religions. In Western religions, there is typically one good that is to be achieved – salvation – and that good is an all-or-nothing prospect: one is either saved and goes to heaven or is damned for all eternity. And there is only one lifetime in which the matter can be decided. In the Indic traditions, however, there is a hierarchy of goods that are not mutually incompatible. One hopes for this-worldly benefits – happiness, long life, prosperity, and so on – and an extension of these benefits into one's next life – that is, a good rebirth. Both of these goods – this-worldly benefits in this life and a rebirth in which more such benefits are forthcoming – can be achieved through meritorious action. They are effects of *puṇya*, or

‘good karma’. And then there is the highest good, in which one gives up, or renounces, worldly goods in the pursuit of liberation. The idea of a hierarchy of goods is in fact formalized in the Hindu tradition, in which the *puruṣārthas* or ‘aims of man’ are ranked as pleasure (*kāma*), prosperity (*artha*), goodness (*dharma*), and, finally, liberation (*mokṣa*) – the ultimate good. To be sure, the last of these – *mokṣa* – is regarded as both intrinsically and infinitely more desirable than the first three. But it takes time to awaken to this realization, and there is no time limit imposed on the process of doing so.

The ethos of storing up merit leads to all manner of positive charitable activities, for which the Jain community is justifiably famous. But all such activities are ultimately in the service of spiritual liberation. To give, for a Jain layperson, is actually a mentally purifying act – a mini-renunciation – in preparation for the ultimate renunciation for which the layperson hopes eventually to be ready – if not in this life, then in a future rebirth.

Meritorious action is also a type of *ahiṃsā*. *Ahiṃsā* is not a negative ideal of only avoiding harm. It entails compassion for all living beings.¹⁵⁸ Western writers on Jainism, especially Christian missionaries, have often sought to criticize the Jain ideal of *ahiṃsā* on the basis of the claim that this ideal involves no positive ethic of helping suffering beings, but that it is only a matter of not hurting them – essentially, of doing nothing.¹⁵⁹

This, however, is a distortion of the Jain tradition, ignoring, as it does, the high level of Jain involvement in charity.¹⁶⁰ Compassion is said to be essential to a right view of reality (*samyagdarśana*) – both a condition for and a product of spiritual evolution.¹⁶¹

The centrality of *ahiṃsā* to Jainism is difficult to exaggerate, though an exclusive focus on the ascetic *ahiṃsā* of the Jain monks and nuns can create a one-sided impression of the Jain community. *Ahiṃsā* is the central ethical principle of Jainism, embodied in the often-quoted statement *ahiṃsā paramo dharmah* – *ahiṃsā* is the highest duty.

Why is *ahiṃsā* so central to Jainism? In terms of the Jain karma theory outlined above, a central Jain insight is that the worst passions, the ones that attract the heaviest, most obscuring karmic particles into the soul, are those that are involved in committing acts of violence. Acts of violence typically involve a high degree of intense passion, such as anger and hatred. Negative passions like these, which obscure our perception that all souls are essentially the same as our own, bind us even more

tightly to *saṃsāra*. In order to ensure a better rebirth, one in which we are more likely to make spiritual progress – and certainly in order to purify the soul and reach liberation – it is essential that we avoid any thought, word, or deed that involves *hiṃsā*, the desire to do harm.

According to a Jain understanding, however, it is very difficult to avoid doing any harm whatsoever to living beings. The universe is filled with microscopic organisms – a fact of which Mahāvīra, interestingly, was sharply aware in the fifth century BCE. The most basic of these are called *niḡodas*.¹⁶² For human beings, the very act of being alive involves the destruction of such tiny life forms. Eating, digesting food, breathing, sitting, and moving about: all involve the destruction of *niḡodas* on a massive scale.

Such activities are generally not carried out with the intention of doing harm. One could argue that the requisite intent to do harm – and so the passion with which this intent is normally associated – is absent from such activities, and that they must therefore be without karmic consequence. But this is not a traditional Jain understanding. Once one is aware of the existence of tiny life forms in the air one breathes, in the water one drinks, and on the surfaces on which one travels and rests one's body, one becomes responsible for the harm that one does. Also, unlike Buddhism, which sees motive as the chief determinant of the morality of an act – of whether it involves a good or a bad karmic result – Jainism teaches that the actual consequences of action are always a major factor.

Jain monks and nuns therefore spend a good deal of their time in the effort to have a minimal negative impact upon their environment. Jain asceticism consists primarily of curbing activities that might lead to the accidental destruction of life, and to cultivating mindfulness of the life forms with which one shares the physical universe. A well-known symbol of this ascetic ideal is the *muhpattī*, a cloth that some Jain monks and nuns wear over their mouths to avoid accidentally inhaling or ingesting small organisms.

Central though the ascetic ideal of *ahiṃsā* is to the Jain community and its view of itself, it would be an exaggeration to suggest that all, or even most, Jains are constantly preoccupied with avoiding harm to microorganisms. There is a frank recognition in the Jain community, as in Buddhism, that most people are not yet at the spiritual level where they would wish to renounce life as a layperson and the activities that go with day-to-day existence.

Jain Lay and Ascetic Morality

Although the ascetic ideal informs even the life of the Jain layperson, it is not expected that the average Jain should follow the same strictures as those observed by Jain monks and nuns. Like Buddhism, Jainism involves a twofold morality, a set of moral principles observed to the letter by the monks and nuns, but observed only to the extent practically possible for a layperson.

The basic moral principles of Jainism are expressed in five vows. Jain laypeople do not typically take these vows formally. But they do define the ideal moral life that is generally expected of the Jain layperson. These *anuvratas*, or ‘small vows’, are:

1. Nonviolence (*ahiṃsā*): to refrain from directly and deliberately taking the life of any animal or human being.
2. Truthfulness (*satya*): to tell the truth and to engage in honest business practices.
3. Non-stealing (*asteya*): not to steal.
4. Sexual chastity (*brahmacarya*): to refrain from committing marital infidelity and to avoid pre-marital sexual activity.
5. Non-attachment (*aparigraha*): to avoid being possessive and materialistic.

As John Cort explains these vows:

A layperson should not desire, intend, or act in such a way as to harm any moving creature, but instead try to protect them. A layperson should not act heedlessly in anger and beat living creatures. A layperson should not needlessly pierce the skin of a living creature. A layperson should not overlook either animals or people. A layperson should not kill beings by beating them. A layperson should not let people and animals in one’s care go hungry ... *Satya* for the layperson involves avoiding various types of lies, especially in the business field, and not bearing false witness. *Asteya* involves not stealing, not avoiding taxes, and fair business practices. *Brahmacarya* involves having sex only with one’s spouse, as well as the avoidance of ardent gazing or lewd gestures, although most people, both mendicant and laity, would understand *brahmacarya* to mean total chastity. *Aparigraha* involves renouncing attachment to one’s wealth, and limiting either the value of various types of possessions or of all one’s possessions in total.¹⁶³

Monks and nuns take stricter versions of the same five vows, called, in their case, the five *mahāvratas*, or ‘great vows’:

1. Strict nonviolence in thought, word, and deed, avoiding even accidental injury to any living being.
2. Absolute truthfulness.
3. Non-stealing (literally ‘not taking what is not given’).
4. Absolute celibacy.
5. Non-possession: not owning any possessions whatsoever.

These five vows can apparently be traced back to Mahāvīra, and constitute one of his main reforms of the tradition of Pārśvanātha, whose followers observed four vows – all five of Mahāvīra’s except for the fourth. According to commentators, Pārśvanātha took sexual chastity to be implied in the idea of non-possession. Mahāvīra’s innovation was to make this requirement explicit.¹⁶⁴

What do each of these vows mean in the daily lives of those who undertake them? For a Jain layperson, *ahiṃsā* means being as nonviolent as possible while still pursuing a livelihood and being involved in the normal duties of a householder – providing for and raising a family, fulfilling outside social obligations, and so on.

In one sense, this is no different from the obligation enjoined in every religious community to avoid murder and other forms of physical violence, as well as the bad mental habits which lead to such behavior – the nurturing of grudges, anger, vengefulness, and so on. But again, *ahiṃsā* refers to nonviolence in thought, word, and deed. So the Jain layperson is expected, as much as humanly possible, not only to avoid any actual, deliberate killing, but to maintain a calm, cheerful frame of mind, as well as a friendly disposition toward all living beings. Unlike most Western religions, but like other Indic traditions, ethical behavior, in Jainism, is intended to transform one’s consciousness.

Jain monks and nuns who instruct laypersons on how to remain within the limits of the five vows will often show how these vows are logically interrelated and mutually supportive. Saman Śrūtaprajñā, for example, in one of his books for laypersons, connects maintaining an attitude of *ahiṃsā* with the fifth vow, non-attachment or non-possession:

[The] main thrust of ... Jainism is nonviolence (*ahiṃsā*). One should not injure another through his mind, speech, and body. If one has a desire for possession (*parigraha*) then there is violence (*hiṃsā*). To practice *ahiṃsā*, one has to control his desires. Uncontrollable desires give birth to many negative things. To win over these negative aspects is the first step towards the practice of *ahiṃsā*. One can be a person of nonviolence ... by being a householder [i.e. while nevertheless being a householder]. One begins the practice of *ahiṃsā* by purifying his *chitta* [mind]. The definition of *hiṃsā* is not limited to killing others. Anger, force, harsh words (even if they are truths), deceit, accumulation, negligence, etc. are all different forms of *hiṃsā*.¹⁶⁵

Several things about Śrūtaprajñā's explanation are worth further attention. First, there is the strong connection he draws between passionate desires and violence. In the Buddhist tradition, too, desire is said to be the root of suffering. This is the second of the Four Noble Truths. When we desire to possess something we become angry if it is not possible for us to have that thing. If it is a person that has prevented our attaining our goal, that anger easily becomes directed at that person, in the form of violent thoughts, which can easily give rise, in turn, to violent words and violent deeds.

It is also worth noting that Śrūtaprajñā includes negligence in his list of forms of *hiṃsā* (violence). Recall that, according to Jainism, while the accidental destruction of life is not as harmful, karmically speaking, as deliberate, intentional harm, once one has become aware, through understanding and internalizing Jain teaching, of the prevalence of life everywhere, one is responsible for avoiding the taking of that life, and is guilty of any negligence that leads to its destruction. Knowledge of the true nature of existence brings a burden of responsibility.

For the layperson, of course, avoidance of the destruction of life on a microscopic level may be simply impossible. One needs to eat, to drink, and to prepare food both for oneself and for one's children, as well as for wandering Jain ascetics (though ascetics are forbidden from taking food prepared explicitly for them). Where do Jains draw the line? For the layperson, it is a matter of intention. One knows that one's daily actions involve the destruction of life on a microscopic scale. But one does not willfully or deliberately take the life of

any being. Even for laypersons, this is not simply a matter of behavior, but of cultivating an attitude of harmlessness toward all living things.

In practical terms, this means Jains overwhelmingly – if they are practicing and not merely nominal Jains – are vegetarian. Jains are not traditionally, as is sometimes thought, vegans, though in recent years a growing number of Jains have become vegan.¹⁶⁶ A vegan does not consume any animal products at all. Jains in India do drink milk and use milk products, since cows are not harmed in the process. But they do not eat eggs.

Jains are also forbidden to engage in activities for their livelihood which involve the direct taking of life. One will not typically find a Jain butcher or Jain executioner, for example. Indeed, the injunction to avoid direct taking of life is the reason so many Jains go into business professions. Trading in goods made by others is less likely to force one into situations where one must directly take life oneself.

But, the Jain ideal, as embodied in texts produced by monks for the instruction of the laity, is not necessarily a guide to the realities of Jain practice. As Dundas explains:

Without discounting the role of the handbooks of lay behaviour, medieval and modern, in moulding and reinforcing a particularly Jain moral ethos, it would be unwise to use them as a touchstone for assessing the orthodoxy or deficiency of the activities of Jain lay people as observed today, for the preoccupations of the monks who produced these texts and the laity by no means always coincide. Perhaps the most obvious example is the respective ways in which lay people and ascetics envision non-violence. The layman is typically portrayed by ascetic writers as being by his very nature continually implicated in violence and destruction, even when he is acting from ostensibly pious motives. As one Digambara writer almost comically puts it, giving food to monks cannot be undertaken without killing life-forms owing to the need to light fires, boil water and so on, building a temple involves activities like digging the ground and chopping down trees while worship within the temple is performed by cutting flowers and pouring liquids, all activities which by the strictest standards involve destruction of life-forms. In addition, we are told, the curbing of the sexual drive will have an unfortunate psychological effect upon one's wife, while even fasting is likely to upset somebody in the household.¹⁶⁷

Given the practical impossibility of living up to the Jain ideal as presented by ascetics, it should not be surprising if the realities of Jain lay life are not a perfect reflection of it:

... Jain lay people, although maintaining a respectful attitude towards animals and lower forms of life, taking care to conform to traditional dietary prescriptions and following trades and professions which do not blatantly infringe the principle of non-violence, seldom exercise their imaginations greatly about the religious implications of their normal day-to-day activities, placing the emphasis instead, if challenged, on their purity of intention. Thus, agriculture ... is not today seriously stigmatized for the destruction it causes to organisms in the earth. Jain industrialists do not speculate about the possible infringement of non-violence in their factories and workshops or through the transport of their products, nor do they agonize about their possible place in a manufacturing process which might culminate in, say the production of military weaponry. Furthermore, the Jain laity does not generally regard its attitudes towards matters of government policy, international politics or capital punishment as being conditioned by the doctrine of non-violence.¹⁶⁸

Students sometimes ask whether the real-life application of Jain moral teaching is hypocritical – with Jain businessmen benefitting financially from the activities that others do, which may involve violence, while not engaging in these activities themselves, or with Jain monks and nuns surviving materially off of the generosity of laypersons, who are engaging in violence at some level in order to generate the economic prosperity that makes it possible for the monks and nuns to live and practice their path.

This question, while valid when coming from a Western ethical framework, is in a sense inappropriate if applied to the Jain tradition; for it presupposes that the same level of expectation applies to everyone – the Jain ascetic, the Jain layperson, and the non-Jain. Each of these people is at a different level of awareness with regard to the truth taught by Mahāvīra. Jain ascetics, at least ideally, are keenly aware of the presence of life forms all around them. Indeed, their daily practices are designed precisely to cultivate mindfulness of this very fact. The Jain layperson knows, one could say, theoretically that this is the case – that his or her daily actions are destroying life forms. But this knowledge, one may say, has not yet taken root to the extent

that it has issued in a truly felt compassion for the tiny forms of life that she or he is destroying. If it has, that person should become a nun or a monk. Finally, for the non-Jain, the existence of microscopic life is, at most, a topic of intellectual interest, but, more likely than not, a matter of no consequence whatsoever.

Now, while this means the non-Jain is considerably further from the highest level of realization necessary for liberation than the Jain ascetic, with the Jain layperson being somewhere in the middle, it also means the Jain ascetic is more culpable should she or he actually destroy a life form. The Jain ascetic, to put it bluntly, knows better, so his or her level of responsibility is higher. Non-Jains do not know better. So while our destruction of life certainly involves some negative karmic effect, it is not as great as what would be involved for a Jain monk or nun who, say, in a fit of anger, were to squash an insect. Jain monks and nuns are at a more advanced stage than non-Jains. But their situation is also more precarious. They have further to fall, as it were.

The appearance of hypocrisy is also a function of a Western ethical heritage that tends to see moral injunctions as divine commands. One should avoid certain activities because God has forbidden them. In Jainism, however, karma is a purely impersonal law. The 'should' of morality arises from a compassion which arises naturally as one evolves spiritually, as well as a sense of enlightened self-interest, given the possibility of accruing bad karma. One is responsible, ultimately, to one's own conscience. And the sensitivity of one's conscience is itself a function of one's level of spiritual attainment.

In other words, Jains do not observe the *anuvratas*, nor even the *mahāvratas*, out of a sense that Mahāvīra is floating in the heavens somewhere watching them, approving or disapproving of certain acts and meting out karmic rewards and punishments. Karma is a natural law. I once heard a Buddhist explain the Buddhist understanding of karma in the following crude but accurate way: 'If you jump off a cliff, you'll hit the ground and go splat.' The same understanding applies to Jainism. Some actions will lead naturally to suffering and others will lead to happiness.

As one evolves spiritually, one realizes that the actions that lead to suffering in others are the ones that lead to suffering in oneself. Similarly, the actions that lead to happiness in others are the ones that will lead to one's own happiness. It is a reciprocal process. If one wants

to be happy, one will do those things that lead to the happiness of others. And if one wants to avoid suffering, one will avoid creating suffering in others.

Is this selfish? Perhaps at an early stage it could be so characterized. But the end result of thinking and living in this way is an eventual identification of one's own joys and sorrows with the joys and sorrows of others – a state of total altruism. Jain ethics, like Buddhist ethics, is best seen as a process of character transformation rather than as a set of rules. Rules are necessary early in the process. But the ultimate goal is for these rules to transform one's character until they become second nature. Moral behavior, one could say, is the spontaneous behavior of the spiritually enlightened being. For the rest of us, it requires practice. And moral rules are practical guidelines.

The Jain path, both in its early stage, as represented in the *anuvratas*, and at more advanced levels, as reflected in the *mahāvratas*, is a kind of road map for the soul to the realization of its own pure nature. Even the decision to tread the path at all is a matter of choice. According to Jainism, many beings never experience the desire for liberation. Such beings will never be liberated from the cycle of rebirth, not because they have been damned or because only Jains have been predestined for salvation, but because they do not want to be liberated, and so never take the steps necessary to achieve this goal. They are called *abhavya*. 'Why the Jainas should harbor such a theory of absolute, permanent bondage for certain beings is not at all clear; it has been dogmatically accepted on the basis of scripture, and may simply reflect the commonplace observation that some individuals show no interest whatsoever in their salvation.'¹⁶⁹

As we have seen, the most important and most distinctive of the Jain *vratas*, the one that underlies the bulk of Jain ethical practice, is *ahiṃsā*, or nonviolence. This makes sense, in terms of karma; for thoughts, words, and deeds that are harmful or that intend harm toward other beings will inevitably come back to oneself. As Mahāvīra says in the *Ācārāṅga*: 'To do harm to others is to do harm to oneself. You are he whom you intend to kill. You are he whom you intend to dominate. We corrupt ourselves as soon as we intend to corrupt others. We kill ourselves as soon as we intend to kill others.'¹⁷⁰ And it is the karmic matter that is associated with violent thoughts, words, and deeds that is the heaviest of all, that most obscures the true nature of the *jīva*. But the other *vratas* are significant as well.

Truthfulness (*satya*) is an essential Jain virtue. The entire thrust of the Jain path is toward the realization of the true nature of existence – realizing the true nature of the soul and experiencing the pure knowledge that results. Speech or action that is intended to distort the truth is therefore at odds with the fundamental goal of the Jain way of life. It is also connected with other vices, because false speech is typically done for nefarious ends, either out of excessive acquisitiveness or a desire to do harm.

Speech, therefore, which willfully distorts and misrepresents the nature of reality goes completely against the grain of the Jain goal. For laypersons and for ascetics, this means being scrupulously honest in one's words and – in the case of businessmen – honest in one's business dealings.

Here, too, however, there is a distinction between the level of practice expected in the *anuvrata* in contrast with the *mahāvratā*. As in Western ethics, the question of the limits of truthfulness arises in Jainism. Might there not be some times when it is not only permissible, but the only acceptable moral course, to tell a lie? The scenario often used in Western ethics involves the Nazis asking the location of a Jewish family that one is hiding in one's home. (The equivalent Jain scenario involves a group of bandits hunting for a rich man that they want to kill and rob.) As in Western ethics, the Jain view in this scenario is that the more fundamental ethical value – *ahiṃsā* – trumps the value of truth. So one should definitely lie to the Nazis (or the bandits), telling them that you haven't seen the people they are looking for, or that they have gone in a different direction, and so on. If by telling the truth one would facilitate the destruction of life and the inflicting of pain, one would become complicit in that act of violence.

For the Jain monk or nun, however, the standard is considerably higher. While a layperson has an obligation to misrepresent the truth in a scenario such as the one I have just described, a monk or nun in such a situation must keep silent. If the villains should threaten the life of the monk or nun, he or she must still keep silent, being willing to give up his or her life for the principles of truth and nonviolence. The layperson has other obligations – such as protecting his or her family and property – making self-preservation an acceptable motive for action. But the ascetic is sworn to the path alone.

The third vow, the vow of non-stealing (*asteya*), is probably the one with the least variation between lay and monastic expectations. But

here, too, the layperson, due to his or her obligations as a householder, may be placed in a position in which stealing is the only acceptable recourse: to feed his or her starving children, for example.

In contrast to the layperson, the monk or nun, being responsible only for him or herself, must starve before taking food that is not freely given. To take food that has not been given, in accordance with the scriptural injunctions, would evidence an attachment to the physical body inappropriate for a Jain ascetic.

One can begin to see, through this investigation of the vows, why the life of the ascetic is seen, from a Jain perspective, as a life of freedom – despite the restrictions that it obviously involves. A layperson, because of responsibilities to the family or to society, can again and again be placed in morally compromising situations. A famine may make a layman have to steal food for his children. Violent, oppressive persons could make him have to lie to protect others. And even the first and most important vow, *ahiṃsā*, allows for minimal force to be used for self-defense and for the protection of others, if needed, and there were Jain kings in ancient India who had armies and engaged in warfare. But the ascetic, being free from all such considerations, is able to follow the vows to the full extent.

The fourth vow – chastity (*brahmacarya*) – means, for laypersons, marital fidelity and pre-marital celibacy. For ascetics, it means absolute celibacy. The rules governing even casual physical contact, particularly between members of different genders, are very strict for Jain monks and nuns. One of my former Sanskrit teachers, a male, told me of how he had once taught Sanskrit to a group of Jain nuns who could not even touch the same book that he, as a male, had handled. They had to use separate copies of the book.

The fifth vow, *aparigraha*, means, for laypersons, maintaining an attitude of non-attachment to worldly possessions. For monks and nuns, it means having no possessions whatsoever. Laypersons who abide by this vow will often set precise limits on how much of a particular item they will own – land, houses, money, clothing, furniture, and so on – and then live within that self-imposed limit.¹⁷¹ The determination of these limits is one of the many areas of Jain observance in which laypersons will typically turn to an ascetic for advice.

The correct interpretation of *aparigraha* for ascetics is of course the main issue that differentiates Śvetāmbara and Digambara monks.

Both groups agree that an ascetic should only possess the bare minimum requirements for practicing the Jain ascetic path, such as the whisk for protecting small creatures from harm. But the Śvetāmbaras include clothing among these requisite items, whereas the Digambaras do not.

Sallekhanā: The Fast to the Death

The most controversial of Jain ascetic practices – though, it must be emphasized, a quite rare one – is the practice of self-starvation – known as *sallekhanā* or *santhārā* – occasionally undertaken by Jain monks and nuns, and the rare layperson, as the ultimate act of *ahiṃsā* and *aparigraha*.

This practice – as Jains emphasize quite strongly – is *not* a form of suicide. It is not undertaken out of passion or because of despair or anger. It can only be undertaken with the permission of one's spiritual preceptor, or *guru*. The guru's duty is to ensure that one's motives in undertaking this fast to the death are pure – that one is doing it out of a genuine sense of detachment from the body and out of compassion for all of the living beings that one will save by not continuing to eat, breathe, and consume resources. Such a holy death is seen as having great capacity to advance the soul on its path to liberation, and to be possible only for beings who have perfected their compassion and their wisdom to such a degree that they would rather die than cause pain or death for even the tiniest of creatures. There is, in fact, a famous story of a renowned Digambara scholar-monk of the sixth century, Samantabhadra, who sought permission from his guru to undertake the fast to the death because he had contracted leprosy and wanted to, quite literally, put himself out of his misery. His request was denied because his guru could perceive that the real motive behind Samantabhadra's desire was not, in fact, compassionate detachment, but rather the wish to avoid the physical discomfort of his disease. Only after he had spent a good deal of time in meditation and had come to accept his condition with equanimity was he granted permission to undertake *sallekhanā*.

Sallekhanā is an ancient practice. The first mention of it occurs in the earliest of the Jain scriptures, the *Ācārāṅga Sūtra* (*Ācārāṅga Sūtra* 1.7.8). A Brahmin convert to Jainism named Skandaka Kātyāyana undertakes

it with the permission of Mahāvīra. It is described as a highly ritualized process, with elements reminiscent of a Vedic sacrifice.¹⁷²

This practice is of course controversial, especially among non-Jains, because it at least appears to be a religiously sanctioned form of suicide. It is most often undertaken by very elderly Jain ascetics who – due to various physical infirmities – are no longer able to perform their ascetic practices. This is quite different from Samantabhadra's despair, for the basis of the decision is the ability to practice, not physical or mental discomfort. In a recent case in Rajasthan, a court injunction was sought to prevent two elderly Jain women from undertaking this death by fasting. The case required members of the Jain community to articulate the distinction between *sallekhanā*, or *santhārā*, and suicide in order to show that this practice did not meet the legal definition of suicide.¹⁷³

Jain Worship and Devotion

Though having an absolutely central place in the Jain path, an excessive focus on ethics and ascetic practices – especially rare and radical practices like *sallekhanā* – is one of the factors that has led to the stereotype of Jainism as an austere tradition, with nothing to offer its followers but a strict set of moral rules.

It therefore often comes as a surprise to students that some of the most ornate and magnificent temples in India are Jain temples. Devotion, or *bhakti*, plays as important a role in the life of the Jain layperson as it does for the Hindu (or for that matter, the Muslim or the Christian). Though ascetics are seen in Jainism as having gone beyond the need to engage in worship practices – and are, in fact, more often than not, the *objects* of devotion in the Jain community – Jain laypersons historically have lavished wealth on the creation of fabulous temples and engaged in profligate displays of public devotion. Examples of Jain devotional practices include the *abhiṣekha*, or anointing of a *mūrti* of a Jina, and, for Mūrtipūjaka Śvetāmbaras the adornment of such *mūrtis* with royal regalia.¹⁷⁴

As we have already seen, such devotional practice is not universally endorsed by the Jain community, given the concern of some that temple building and *mūrtipūjā* can involve violations of *ahiṃsā*. But even among aniconic Jains, like the Sthānakavāsīs and Terāpanthīs, *bhakti* is important. But it is carried out mentally, rather than with objects.

The rationale for Jain *bhakti* is different from that found in more conventionally theistic traditions, such as Hinduism. Hindu devotion is about the devotee's relationship with the deity, who is seen as interacting with the devotee. Jain devotion is seen, at least by ascetics, more as a form of meditation on the ideal that the deity – typically one of the Jinas – embodies.

Despite this rationale at the formal level, however, scholars of Jainism who have interacted extensively with Jain laypersons in India have found that, for many Jains, this is not always an operative distinction.¹⁷⁵ There are Jains, in other words, who pray to the Tirthaṅkaras and other Jain saints for what could broadly be called this-worldly favors, just as Hindus (and, as we have seen, many Jains) approach the Hindu deities for similar reasons: in the hope of receiving blessings like health, long life, and prosperity, both for themselves and their loved ones. While such interactive devotional activity – as opposed to the more passive conception of devotion as a form of meditation – may not be 'orthodox', in the sense that it is not what is taught by the ascetics or in Jain texts, it certainly occurs within the community.

Is it contradictory to pray to beings for this-worldly benefits who have renounced the world, and in the context of a tradition whose ultimate goal is world renunciation? If one, again, bears in mind that in the Indic traditions, including Jainism, there is a series of penultimate goods in addition to the ultimate, all of which are legitimate to pursue, then the appearance of a contradiction vanishes. One also observes, in all religions, that there are distinctions which sometimes appear very clear 'on paper', in an ideal conceptual system, but which can often be muddied in practice, as the system is translated into the lives of actual practitioners, with the whole host of typical human concerns.

Clearly, a sharp separation between what might be called the penultimate goods of health, long life, and prosperity and the ultimate good of liberation is not operative in the minds of most religious persons. These things are simply all goods, for which one petitions one's deity. This is no less true for Jains than for other religious practitioners.

Consider Cort's account of the relationship of lay Jain devotees to their *gurus* – living Jain monks who are objects of *bhakti*, or devotion, to many Jains:

A layperson who has developed a special relationship of devotion with a particular mendicant is called a *bhakt* [devotee] ... The *bhakt* counts on the guru for advice in a wide range of religious, family, and economic matters. In return, the *bhakt* is solicitous after the guru's welfare. Whereas laity always use elevated, polite language when addressing a mendicant, a *bhakt* inquires after the health and physical needs of the guru just as one would look after a small child or a spouse. Yet while treating the guru as a dependent on the social sphere, the layperson at the same time considers him or herself to be the spiritual dependent of the guru. One layman described this relationship as like that of father and son: 'Guru Mahārāj feels for me just like a father does for a son. If I haven't seen Guru Mahārāj recently, then I will see him in my dreams, and I know it is time to visit him.' Another layman commented upon the death of his guru by saying that he felt as much sorrow as when his own father had died ... Most *bhakt*s describe the blessings they receive from their guru in terms of grace or mercy ... *Several laymen ascribed the beginning of their worldly financial success to the day they met their gurus.*¹⁷⁶

Clearly, the guru – who is himself a *mendicant*, or a renunciant – is seen as bestowing not only spiritual, but also worldly, benefits on his disciples, and no contradiction is seen.

Many of the ways in which Jains both cultivate and demonstrate their *bhakti* are quite similar to devotional practices within Hinduism. The relationship between the Jain devotees and their gurus that Cort describes, for example, is not at all different from that obtained between Hindus and their gurus. The living relationship between the teacher and the disciple, or *guru* and *śiṣya*, is as central to Jainism as it is to Hinduism.¹⁷⁷

Another devotional practice common to Jains and the wider Hindu community is the practice of pilgrimage – a journey to a holy place, usually marked by a temple, for the purpose of achieving religious merit. Indeed, pilgrimage is a nearly universal practice in the world's religions, being prominent in the Abrahamic traditions of the West no less so than in the traditions of South Asia.

Prominent places of Jain pilgrimage include the very beautiful and ornate temple complexes atop Mounts Abu and Śatruñjaya, both of which are in the western Indian state of Gujarat and the massive monument of Bāhubali, one of the first enlightened beings of our *kalpa* or cosmic era, at Śravaṇa Belgōla, in the state of Karnataka.

Besides elaborate acts of devotion, such as the building of temples, the *abhisekha* of the Jina *mūrti* on special holy days, and pilgrimage, the life of the Jain layperson, like that of the average Hindu, contains daily reminders of the spiritual path, and daily acts of devotion designed to strengthen one's resolve to practice the path with both diligence and sincerity. Jain families, like Hindu families, typically maintain a shrine at home, where daily devotions are observed. In the case of Hindu families, the shrine will contain an image of the family's special deity (*kuladevatā*), as well as any particular favorite deities special to individual members of the family (*iṣṭadevatā*). It will also typically contain a photograph of the family's guru, and possibly photographs of departed loved ones.

Jain family shrines are no different, except the central deity will always be a Jina – most often Mahāvīra, but not necessarily. Pārśvanātha, Ṛṣabha, and Indrabhūti Gautama (Mahāvīra's first disciple) are also popular objects of Jain devotion, as are some of the powerful ascetics from more recent history, such as the founding figures of the various ascetic lineages. Daily devotional activities before the shrine might include *āratī* and a prayer, special to all Jains, which is typically recited in the morning. This is the Fivefold Salutation, or *Pañca Namaskāra Mantra*:

Ṇamo arihantāṇam
 Ṇamo siddhāṇam
 Ṇamo āyariyāṇam
 Ṇamo uvajjhāyāṇam
 Ṇamo loe savvasāhuṇam

To which the Mūrtipūjaka Śvetāmbaras add:

Eso pañca ṇamokkāro savvapāvappaṇāsaṇo
 Maṅgalāṇam ca savvesiṇ paḍhamāṇ havi maṅgalam

This prayer, in the ancient Prakrit language of the Jain scriptures, is translated as:

I bow before the worthy ones [the Jinas, or Tīrthaṅkaras].
 I bow before the perfected ones [all those who have attained *mokṣa*].
 I bow before the leaders of the Jain order.
 I bow before the teachers of the Jain order.
 I bow before all Jain monks in the world.

The additional line recited by the Mūrtipujaka Śvetāmbaras means:

This fivefold salutation, which destroys all bad karmas, is the best, the most auspicious of all auspicious things.¹⁷⁸

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have seen that the Jain path has a number of overlaps and similarities with other Indic traditions, as well as a number of its own distinctive features. Although there is a striking uniformity in the basic Jain worldview – in terms of karma theory, ideas about *ahiṃsā*, and so on – there is also, we have seen in earlier chapters, internal diversity, particularly in terms of ascetic practice and the use or non-use of *mūrtis* in worship. And although I have not discussed it here, there is even more variation at local levels, among the many Jain communities in India, as well as in the growing Jain diaspora.

It is often said that the foundations of the Jain path are its teachings of *ahiṃsā*, *aparigraha*, and *anekāntavāda* – nonviolence, non-attachment (or non-possession), and non-absolutism. In this chapter, we have discussed *ahiṃsā* and *aparigraha*. In our next chapter, we shall turn to *anekāntavāda*, which is one of the most distinctive and, I would suggest, one of the most important of Jain doctrines; for, were it to be widely adopted, this doctrine has the capacity to revolutionize the ways in which the world's religious communities perceive and relate to one another – a revolution our world desperately needs.