An Introduction

Jainism

Jeffery D Long

I.B.TAURIS

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by

Jeffery D Long

Introduction

An Overview of this Book

Jainism vs. Jains

This is a book about Jainism: a fascinating and ancient religion of India which, despite its vast age, and despite its having some features that many in the West would regard as exotic, is in many ways highly relevant to the contemporary world. It is a religion that has a great deal in common with Buddhism and the dominant Hindu traditions of India, with which it has co-existed for at least two and a half millennia. But it is also a religion that has many of its own distinctive features and insights that distinguish it quite clearly from these other traditions.

When speaking of Jainism – or any *ism* – there is a tendency to speak in ahistorical terms. An *ism*, in other words, is a system of ideas. These ideas bear certain relations to one another and to similar ideas developed in other systems. When one is examining the relations of ideas to one another within a tradition, one is engaging in a *philosophical* or *theological* study of that tradition. Philosophical approaches generally evaluate ideas in terms of logical coherence and consistency with widely available human experiences, like sensory perception. Do the ideas in question contradict one another? Are they consistent with other things that we know about the universe? A theological study uses these same criteria. But it also employs criteria that are internal to the tradition – such as consistency with its scriptures or its ritual practices. Theological study is generally, though not necessarily, carried out by scholars who inhabit the tradition in question. When one is examining the ideas of one tradition in relation to similar ideas from other traditions, one is engaging in *comparative* philosophy or theology.

Historical studies of a religion, on the other hand, are concerned with description more than evaluation. Unlike the philosopher or the religious practitioner, the interest of the historian of religion is less in

the coherence or the truth of religious ideas than in the people who develop and maintain these ideas as central to their identity.[2]

Some scholars in the field of Jain studies may note this book's tendency to focus, as its title suggests, on *Jainism* more than on the Jains themselves – on ideas more than on people, on philosophy more than history.[3] For the dominant trend of recent scholarship in Jain studies has been away from presenting an abstract system of ideas called *Jainism* and toward highly contextualized and richly descriptive representations of living Jains acting in history. Revealingly, the title of the most influential and comprehensive work on this tradition is not *Jainism*, but *The Jains*, by Paul Dundas.[4]

This current trend is a welcome one for many reasons, not least being that abstract presentations obscure the complex realities of religious communities that more historical approaches reveal. Also, more abstract, less historically focused representations tend to fuel hegemonic ideologies – that is, worldviews that promote the interests of a particular social group over others. Such ideologies often downplay the diverse points of view in a particular tradition, silencing and marginalizing dissenting voices in the name of a more unified picture that supports the dominant group's view of things.

Due to the emergence of these considerations, the authors of recent works on the Jains avoid representations that abstract an ahistorical unity from the complexity of Jain realities. Self-aware about their power to shape Jain realities, these scholars wish, quite rightly, to avoid depicting these realities in ways that minimize their historical diversity and complexity. Presenting Jainism as a system of ideas, with little or no reference to the history of the emergence of these ideas, or the areas in which these ideas are contested or their interpretation disputed, has fallen out of fashion. Scholars have instead taken the historical route, which has little room for eternal and unchanging truths.

There is, however, an irony in this situation; for when Jains speak of themselves and their traditions, they typically do speak in terms of eternal and unchanging truths – of *Jainism* as a unity that is handed down age after age by the community of Jain ascetics.[5] A self-understanding among Jains as being bearers of unchanging, history-transcending truths is in fact a widespread and representative one.

The historically nuanced work of contemporary Jain studies is not necessarily at odds with this self-understanding. But it is foreign to it. While scholars seek to represent Jain self-understandings accurately,

their work does not itself typically proceed *from* a Jain self-understanding.[6] Scholars of Jainism do not explicitly contest Jain perceptions of Jainism as eternally true, but neither do they endorse them. Rather, the fact that there are Jains who think in this way is simply one more piece of data about Jain communities.

I am not pointing out this situation to recommend a return to an earlier style of representation of Jainism as an artificial unity; for it remains true that there are *different* understandings of Jainism among the Jains themselves – even including among those who see Jainism as eternal and unchanging.[7] Presenting Jainism as a unitary set of ahistorical truths must therefore still involve choosing and privileging one such picture over the rest.

On the other hand, in an introductory text which aspires to be usable not only by teachers and scholars outside of Jain contexts, but by Jains as well, there is a sense that, in areas where there is broad uniformity across the various Jain communities (and these are not inconsiderable), it might be desirable to accommodate the Jain sensibility which perceives these fundamentals of Jainism – if they can be called that – as expressing eternal, unchanging features of existence. I am speaking here of such basics of Jainism as Jain karma theory (in its broad outlines), the fundamental entities (soul, matter, space, time, the principles of motion and inertia, etc.), the centrality of *ahiṃsā*, and so on. Although diverse views exist among Jains on aspects of each of these topics, it would be the rare Jain who would not see these ideas as expressing basic Jain – and in fact, universal – truths.

Of course, the very judgment that these concepts represent 'basics' of Jainism is contestable in a variety of ways. My colleagues in the field of Jain studies would likely point out that such concepts are only 'basic' if one looks at Jainism as an abstract system of ideas rather than as an historically emergent phenomenon. What often really matters, and is therefore, in that sense, 'basic' for many Jains, are elements of their tradition, such as in the area of practice, where they have significant differences with their fellow Jains.[8]

This point is well taken. Because I approach Jainism from the perspective of a philosopher of religion, I do tend to look upon it as an abstract system of ideas. Again, I welcome the trend of recent scholarship on the Jains, and certainly see its value. And I do not see myself in this book as championing a reversal of this trend. But while my approach may appear, at first glance, idiosyncratic or retrograde –

writing about *Jainism* in contrast with *Jains* – as a philosopher of religion, my interests are, in some ways, closer to those of the Jains themselves – those who write about and present Jainism as an ahistorical system of ideas – than to those of my colleagues in the field of Jain studies. I feel greater kinship to the aims and interests of Haribhadrasūri, for example, a Jain scholar-monk of roughly the eighth century CE, than to those of Paul Dundas – much as I respect both. **Stop; skip to next page**

My interest in Jain philosophy, my point of entry into this field, was sparked not by an historian's interest in how concepts like *anekāntavāda* developed over time, but by a philosopher's and theologian's interest in religious pluralism and how it might logically be defended. The question, 'Is *anekāntavāda* true?' is not one that I find raised in most contemporary scholarly writing on Jainism (at least outside of philosophical circles). But for me, as for many Jains, it is *the* question. And it is one we answer in the affirmative.

I have written this book because I think that many Jain ideas are not only true, but urgently relevant to humanity's contemporary situation. If I have accommodated Jain sensibilities by presenting Jainism as an internally coherent and unified system of ideas, it is because it is as such that these ideas can be made most readily available to those who are outside the Jain tradition. My work differs from much contemporary writing on the Jains to the degree that I see myself as explicitly endorsing these Jain ideas, rather than as a disinterested outsider. In those areas in which Jains disagree amongst themselves, I have sought to present various points of view even-handedly and disinterestedly – and, as a non-Jain, I truly am not invested in such disagreements. But in areas in which there appears to be some unanimity, at least according to the sources and knowledge available to me, I have presented that unanimity much as Jain sources do: as a unified system of ideas.

I do not wish to overstate or further belabor the differences between the approach I have taken and the dominant one, but to signal my awareness of these differences. I do not find an interest in philosophy to be incompatible with rigorous and carefully nuanced historical work, and I have sought to do justice to both approaches to the best of my abilities.

Chapter II

Mahāvīra and the Origins of Jainism

Mahāvīra

Most histories of a religious tradition begin with a discussion of the life and teachings of the religion's founder. So who is the founder of Jainism? The answer to this question is in one sense straightforward. But in another it is not. Conventional Western histories of religion generally tell us that the founder of Jainism is a figure called Mahāvīra, whose name means the 'Great Hero', and who lived in the fifth century BCE, approximately, in the northeasterly region of India that was also the home of the Buddha.

But, according to the Jains, Mahāvīra was not exactly the founder of Jainism, at least not in the sense that is generally understood in the West. He was not its originator, in the sense of creating something completely new, based on a vision or divine revelation. According to Jain tradition, Mahāvīra was the 24th in a series of *Tīrthaṅkaras*. A Tīrthaṅkara is one who fashions or creates a *tīrtha* – a ford or a crossing – over the waters of *saṃsāra*, the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. A Tīrthaṅkara, in other words, is one who makes it possible for others to attain liberation – or *mokṣa* – from the cycle of rebirth by teaching the path to liberation and establishing a community to perpetuate that path.

According to Jainism – and indeed, all of the major Indic traditions – the universe is a beginningless and endless process, passing through an ongoing series of cosmic cycles, each of which is billions of years in duration. During each cycle, or *kalpa*, according to the Jain version of this model, 24 Tīrthaṅkaras appear.

Mahāvīra, as the 24th Tīrthaṅkara of our current cycle, is not, therefore, strictly speaking, the founder of Jainism, but rather its re-discoverer and re-initiator, after the path had declined during the period between his time and the time of his predecessor, the 23rd Tīrthaṅkara, who was named Pārśvanātha.

Pārśvanātha, according to modern scholarship, very likely was an actual historical figure that lived around the eighth or ninth century BCE – roughly 250 years before the time of Mahāvīra, according to Jain tradition.[63] Pārśvanātha is said to have taught a path of asceticism and self-restraint consisting of adherence to four basic moral rules: nonviolence (*ahiṃsā*), truthfulness (*satya*), non-stealing (*asteya*), and non-accumulation of possessions (*aparigraha*).[64] He is often depicted as a yogī in meditation, protected by a benevolent seven-headed cobra with its hoods spread wide behind him.

From a Jain perspective, the fundamental truth of Jainism cannot have a founder, strictly speaking, because it is the eternal and essential nature of existence. Tīrthaṅkaras can be likened to scientists who discover something about the universe and then teach the knowledge they have discovered to others. As the objective truth of the universe, Jainism really has no 'history', as such. When we speak of the history of Jainism we are, from a Jain point of view, speaking of the history of this truth as taught by Mahāvīra and his followers – as well as his predecessors throughout cosmic time. The history of Jainism, in this sense, is the history of the universe. As Paul Dundas explains:

> For the Jains…Mahāvīra is merely one of a chain of teachers who all communicate the same truths in broadly similar ways and his biography, rather than being discrete, has to be treated as part of the larger totality of the Universal History and as meshing, through the continuing dynamic of rebirth, with the lives of other participants within it.[65]

'Mahāvīra' was not Mahāvīra's given name. Like *Buddha*, 'the Awakened One', *Mahāvīra* is a title of respect.[66] Mahāvīra's given name was Vardhamāna. His family name was Jñātṛputra – rendered in the Prakrit of the Jain and Buddhist scriptures (in which he is also mentioned) as *Nātaputta*, a possible meaning of which is 'having a wise son'.[67]

In the Buddhist scriptures, Mahāvīra is known as *Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta*. 'Nigaṇṭha' means 'one who is without bonds' (Sanskrit *nirgrantha*). *Nigaṇṭha* appears to have been the name by which the Jains, or at least Jain ascetics, were known in ancient times: those who are without bonds, who have renounced all impermanent, worldly attachments. The reputation of Jainism as an ascetic tradition is clearly an ancient one.

The fact that Mahāvīra and the Jains – under the names *Nātaputta* and *Nigaṇṭha*, respectively – are mentioned prominently in the *Tipiṭaka*,

the earliest Buddhist scriptures, is a very significant one for historians of religion. Early Buddhist accounts of Mahāvīra and his followers are sources of information about Jainism that are independent from the Jain tradition itself, and so serve to confirm certain basic understandings the Jains have of their history: that Mahāvīra existed, that he was a contemporary or near contemporary of the Buddha, and that he established a community of strict ascetics who practiced a highly rigorous path of detachment and mental purification in order to become liberated from the cycle of rebirth.

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Our Sources of Knowledge about Mahāvīra's Life

As with many other great religious founding figures, like the Buddha and Jesus Christ, our knowledge of the life of Mahāvīra is depend-ent upon texts written down many years after the events they describe. In the cases of the Buddha and Mahāvīra, the intervening time between their lifetimes and the texts describing them can be measured in centuries.

But while this may initially be discouraging, in terms of any attempt to develop a reasonably accurate historical reconstruction of the lives of these men, two things should be kept in mind. First, India has long had a highly developed system of memorization and oral recitation of text. The Vedic literature has been passed down for centuries in the Brahmanical tradition largely unaltered. It is therefore not impossible that the earliest accounts of the lives of the Buddha and Mahāvīra contain reliable information.

Indeed, written transmission is arguably a less reliable means of transmitting text from one generation to another. When a single scribe makes a transcription error, that error can become embedded in the text forever after, especially if many of the copies of the original wording are lost and the erroneous version becomes the basis for many future copies. The oldest preserved copies of the Bible, for example, have slight discrepancies, and it is difficult to determine which of the versions we have, if any, reflects the original wording of the text.

Secondly, as mentioned earlier, Mahāvīra and the Buddha are each mentioned in the scriptural traditions of one another's communities. We therefore have independent sources of information about both men in the form of what their respective traditions each say about the other, as well as information, especially from the Buddhist

scriptures, about historical figures and events that have been verified archeologically.

However, this still leaves us with relatively little to go on in terms of information that would pass the muster of contemporary historical methods. All that can be said with confidence is that both men lived, that they inhabited roughly the same region of northern India at about the same time, and that they were spiritual teachers in an ascetic tradition called the *śramaṇa*, or 'striver', movement. A *śramaṇa* is one who strives for liberation.

Of course, there are sayings attributed to each in their respective scriptures that they could well have uttered. And one cannot rule out the possibility that there are events described in these texts that actually occurred or are based on similar actual occurrences. But whatever historical truth may be in these scriptures, they are not 'historical' texts in the modern sense. Nor is this their apparent intent, spiritual instruction being their aim.

Our sources of knowledge about Mahāvīra's life consist of a set of scriptures held by the Śvetāmbara Jains to be genuine. The authenticity of these texts is challenged by the Digambaras for reasons that we shall explore in detail later, but which pertain to the attribution of actions to Mahāvīra in these texts that are incompatible with a Digambara understanding of acceptable Jain monastic practice and the nature of a Tīrthaṅkara.

According to Śvetāmbara tradition, the oldest Jain scriptures date back to the time of the 23rd Tīrthaṅkara, Pārśvanātha. These 14 texts, called the *Pūrvas* (the 'Old Texts') are all regarded as extinct. Their contents, though, are described in later Jain texts. As Jaini writes:

> They seem to have included the most ancient Jaina speculations on the nature of the cosmos, doctrines pertaining to the bondage of the soul by matter, and polemics against contemporary philosophical schools. They also contained a great deal of Jaina astrology and astronomy, as well as esoteric methods of attaining yogīc and occult powers.[68]

Apart from the 14 *Pūrvas*, about which we can do little more than speculate, there are 12 *Aṅgas* (11 of which survive), 12 *Upāṅgas* (texts subsidiary to the *Aṅgas*), six *Chedasūtras* (rules of ascetic conduct), four *Mūlasūtras* (fundamental, 'root' texts), ten *Prakīrṇasūtras* (miscellaneous texts), and two *Cūlikāsūtras* (appendices). They constitute a considerable body of literature on Jain ethics, history, and cosmology.

Many of them focus on the duties of Jain monks and the correct observance of the principle of nonviolence. Others contain accounts from the life of Mahāvīra and his early followers.

According to contemporary scholarship, the oldest of these texts are the first and second *Aṅgas*, or 'limbs' – the *Ācārāṅga* and the *Sūtrakṛtāṅga*:

> Both of these books seem to have originated around the third or the second centuries BCE, although an earlier dating in the case of the *Ācārāṅga* and a later one in the case of the *Sūtrakṛtāṅga* cannot be ruled out, and they are generally taken as representing the most ancient stratum of Jain textual material.[69]

Mahāvīra's biography is first presented in the *Ācārāṅga*. Given the traditional dating of his life from 599 to 527 BCE – the date of his death being the basis for one of the oldest calendars in South Asia – this would place the first complete biography of Mahāvīra 300–400 years after the events it relates to.

Another important ancient source for events from Mahāvīra's life is a set of texts called the *Bhagavatī Vyākhyāprajñāpti*, or 'Exposition of Explanations'. The *Bhagavatī Sūtra*, as it is also called, is a truly vast collection of texts. It is one of the *Aṅgas*, and it contains a number of stories from the life of Mahāvīra not found elsewhere, as well as a good deal of highly detailed teaching regarding the nature of the cosmos and the various creatures that inhabit it: their life spans, where they live, what they eat, and the kind of actions that lead to rebirth as one of them.

The *Kalpasūtra*, a text from the second or first centuries BCE, is the first to list Mahāvīra as the 24th Tīrthaṅkara and to discuss the lives of some of the other Tīrthaṅkaras in detail.[70] This text is publicly recited during *Paryuṣaṇa*, the Rainy Season Festival, which honors the cultivation of ascetic practice.[71]

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Parallel Lives: Mahāvīra and the Buddha

The picture of Mahāvīra that emerges from this textual tradition is one that parallels quite closely – while also diverging in significant ways from – the life of the Buddha as depicted in traditional Buddhist sources.

The first parallel that one notices is with regard to the sources themselves. Both, of course, record events that occurred anywhere

from four to two centuries before being set down in writing. Śvetāmbara tradition, again, has Mahāvīra being born in 599 BCE and attaining his final *nirvāṇa* in 527 BCE. A prominent Buddhist tradition locates the Buddha from 563 to 483 BCE, which is consistent with the testimony of both scriptural traditions that these two were contemporaries. However, a variety of archeological and other data has led to the conclusion that the Buddha's dates should be moved forward by a century, placing him in the late fifth and early fourth centuries BCE. Given that there are more references to externally verifiable events in the Buddhist scriptures than in the Jain scriptures, the dates of Mahāvīra's life should also be moved forward accordingly.

While this goes against the traditional dates assigned to the two men by both of their traditions, it also places both of them closer in time to the oldest texts that claim to describe their lives. The time lag becomes only a century or two rather than three or even four centuries. Thus, while this re-dating of Mahāvīra and the Buddha –to roughly 499 to 427 and 463 to 383 BCE, respectively – conflicts with the dates given in both traditions, it also allows us to view their respective scriptural accounts as perhaps more reliable than the traditional dates allow, being closer in time to the events they describe.[72]

Another parallel between the two textual traditions is that neither is written in the common language of intellectual activity in ancient India – namely, Sanskrit – but in more localized languages, related to Sanskrit, called *Prakrits*. The Jain scriptures were written in a Prakrit called *Ardha-Māgadhī*, while the Buddhist scriptures were written in *Pāli*.[73] It is likely that the actual language spoken by both Mahāvīra and the Buddha was another Prakrit called *Māgadhī*, related to the *Ardha* or 'half' Māgadhī of the Jain scriptures.

Sanskrit, the language of the *Veda*, was already an ancient and sacred tongue by the time of Mahāvīra and the Buddha, used primarily by the Brahmins in the performance of Vedic ceremonies. It was no longer a language of daily usage. The languages of daily use were the Prakrits, which, over the course of centuries, would develop into the many languages spoken today in northern India: Hindi, Bengali, Gujarati, and Marathi, to name only a few.

The language of the Jain and Buddhist scriptures is significant, because the choice of composing these texts in Prakrits and not Sanskrit was a deliberate one, and points to the ideological split

between the Jains and Buddhists – the *śramaṇas* – on one side and the Brahmins on the other.

In keeping with one widely held view among Western scholars – that the *śramaṇa* movement, of which Jainism and Buddhism were part, was a kind of Hindu 'Protestant Reformation' – it was long presumed that the scriptures of Jainism and Buddhism were deliberately written in the common tongue in order that ordinary people might understand them. This was in contrast with the Sanskrit of the *Veda*, which was jealously guarded by the Brahmins. The parallel being drawn in this view is between the *śramaṇas* and the Protestant Reformers of Christianity, like Martin Luther, who translated the Bible into the languages of the common people, in contrast with the Latin used by the Roman Catholic Church, which parallels the Sanskrit of the Brahmins.[74]

Recent scholarship, however, suggests that the Prakrits in which the Buddhist and Jain scriptures were written were not the languages spoken by the Buddha and Mahāvīra, respectively, but were themselves highly technical and specialized languages that served for the Buddhists and the Jains the same purpose that Sanskrit served for the Brahmins – as an 'in-group' code, typically learned only by initiates. Ardha-Māgadhī, for example, served for Jains as 'a specifically Jain scriptural dialect, a sacred language which could be differentiated from Sanskrit, rather as the Jains were later to develop their own systems of Sanskrit grammatical analysis to show their independence from brahman learning.'[75]

It is, of course, possible that when Buddhist and Jain texts were first composed, they *were* written in the common tongues of the regions in which they were composed at the time (though these were, again, *not* the languages of the Buddha and Mahāvīra, the Pāli of the Buddhist scriptures being a tongue of western, not northeastern, India, and Ardha Māgadhī a later form of Māgadhī). They gradually became specialized languages as the spoken languages continued to develop over time, while the texts remained fixed. As spoken Prakrits continued to evolve, the Prakrits of the texts remained the same.[76]

It is worth noting that both Jains and Buddhists in India eventually did begin to compose texts in Sanskrit, possibly in order to reach a wider audience; for by this later period, in the early centuries of the Common Era, Sanskrit had become not only the sacred language of the Brahmins, but a language of scholarship and high culture (which

is what *Sanskrit* means) which transcended regional and sectarian boundaries. The Jains and the Buddhists did not, however, abandon their respective Prakrits as they ventured into Sanskrit composition, but continued to compose literary works in these languages as well for the consumption of their own intellectual and religious communities.

The *Śramaṇa* as a Spiritual Warrior

Both Mahāvīra and the Buddha are said to have been born into the warrior caste and to have been the sons of kings. Martial imagery pervades both of their traditions to a degree that is surprising, given the emphasis of both on nonviolence. The image of the ascetic as spiritual warrior is pervasive in Jainism. *Jain* means follower of the *Jina* – the Conqueror.

This title, *Jina*, which is also bestowed on the Buddha in the Buddhist tradition, designates one who has conquered not a physical territory, but the *spiritual* territory of the self: the ego. Mahāvīra and the Buddha, though both born to the caste of warriors, renounced their worldly status in order to become spiritual warriors: Jinas, or conquerors of the realm of the spirit. And asceticism – renunciation – is the primary tool, the spiritual weapon, by which they achieved their conquest – a conquest that consisted of self-mastery rather than mastery of the material world. The ascetic is a spiritual warrior.

One could speculate that the *śramaṇa* movement reflects a conflict between the Brahmins and the Kṣatriyas – the priests and warriors, respectively, of traditional Hindu society. This ideological struggle for authority and spiritual and social supremacy would have pitted the Brahmanical concept of purity through birth against a Kṣatriya ideal of virtue through individual achievement.

One finds a number of *śramaṇic* themes in the later Vedic literature – a set of texts called the *Upaniṣads* – including a critique of the orthodox Brahmanical idea of birth caste as a measure of spiritual evolution. But one finds indications of a Brahmanical–Kṣatriya ideological struggle in these texts as well. Indeed, the *Upaniṣads* appear surprisingly sympathetic to the Kṣatriya side of this hypothetical ideological conflict, given that these are Vedic texts, and so central to Brahmanical orthodoxy. One finds several dialogs between Brahmins and kings in the *Upaniṣads* in which it is the kings, the Kṣatriyas, who

teach the Brahmins, and not the other way around, as an orthodox Vedic model would have us expect.

One such king, Janaka, becomes synonymous in the later Hindu tradition with lay spirituality – the ability of someone who is not a renunciant, who is still 'in the world', to rise, by having the right attitude of detachment, to the same spiritual heights as one who has renounced the world in the full sense. In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Janaka is represented as the father of Sītā – the heroine of the epic and wife of Rāma. He is said to have been the king of Mithilā, which is located in the same northeasterly region from which Mahāvīra and the Buddha hailed during the historical period – a region Indologist Johannes Bronkhorst has dubbed *Greater Magadha*.[77]

Was there a movement among the Kṣatriyas of this region to reject Brahmanical spiritual authority and appropriate it for themselves? Or was this an attempt to maintain a spiritual authority that they saw the Brahmins as attempting to usurp? Is this the struggle reflected both in the *Upaniṣads* and in the warrior imagery of *śramaṇa* traditions such as Jainism and Buddhism?

It is certainly the case that Hindu kings of a much later period saw themselves as being ritually assimilated to major deities, such as Viṣṇu and Śiva, and as spiritual as well as temporal protectors of their people, though this assimilation required Vedic rituals, performed by the Brahmins, in order to be effected.[78] The two most popular Hindu epic narratives – the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* – are centered upon Kṣatriya protagonists, Rāma and Krishna, who are revealed in these texts to be divine persons and, in the case of Krishna, sources of spiritual instruction (in the famous *Bhagavad Gītā* interlude of the *Mahābhārata*). And in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, at least according to some interpretations of this text, military imagery is used to symbolize the struggle for spiritual enlightenment.

Military imagery, put to a symbolic use, is also pervasive in both the Buddhist and Jain traditions, as one might expect if it is the case that the *śramaṇa* movement emerged from a Kṣatriya milieu. As Dundas writes:

> Terms employed in Jainism and Buddhism to describe groups of ascetics such as *gaṇa*, 'troop', and *saṅgha*, 'assembly', are used in early Vedic texts to refer to the warrior brotherhoods, the young men's bands which were a feature of Āryan nomadic life, and the stress found in the

old codes of monastic law on requirements of youth, physical fitness and good birth for Jain and Buddhist monks, along with the frequent martial imagery of Jainism and its repeated stress on the crushing of spiritual enemies, may point to a degree of continuity with these earlier types of warrior. Certainly it is noteworthy that both Mahāvīra and the Buddha were members of the warrior caste.[79]

Another piece of evidence that reflects a Kṣatriya animus against the Brahmins as at least one element in the emergence of the *śramaṇa* movement is a rather unusual story that is told of the birth of Mahāvīra. According to this story, found in Śvetāmbara texts, Mahāvīra was conceived by a Brahmin couple, Ṛṣabhadatta and Devānandā:

> But Śakra [Indra], king of the gods, found this situation unacceptable and transferred the embryonic Jina-to-be to the womb of the kṣatriya woman Triśalā; the baby she had been carrying was placed within Devānandā. It is well known in the Jaina tradition, as well as in the Buddhist, that only a member of the warrior caste can become a 'monarch', whether spiritual or temporal. But this tenet itself reflects the underlying conviction that, contrary to the ordinary caste hierarchy which places the *Brahmins* at the apex, it is in fact the kṣatriya who are highest … The brahmanical tradition, of course, rejects any such notion.[80]

Furthermore, in the text of the original story, Indra refers to birth as a Brahmin as a 'low' birth, completely inappropriate for an advanced spiritual being like a Tīrthaṅkara. Quite clearly, a good deal of hostility is being expressed here toward the Brahmanical view that birth in the Brahmin caste is an indicator of a high degree of spiritual evolution, as well as a preferential view toward the Kṣatriya caste.

These observations give a new wrinkle to the question of *śramaṇic* origins. Does the institution of renunciation emerge as an alternative to – and critique of – the idea of the spiritual supremacy of the Brahmin-by-birth? How better to refute the claims of spiritual supremacy on the part of Brahmins than by surpassing them in heroic acts of self-denial?

Finally, in a society in which warrior virtues are admired, how better to establish not only to society, but to oneself, that one truly has 'the right stuff' – the inner qualities necessary for the attainment of the

highest spiritual goals – than to rival and even exceed actual warriors in self-discipline? As Paul Dundas observes:

> The career of Mahāvīra in particular, and countless Jain ascetics after him, bears witness to a form of spiritual heroism and struggle which struck an empathetic chord within an ancient Indian cultural world where the martial values of the warrior were widely esteemed.[81]

The Ascetic Ideal

Both Mahāvīra and the Buddha are said to have had a keen sense, as young men, of the impermanent and ultimately unsatisfactory character of material existence. Both sought liberation from the process of rebirth, undertaking the ancient practice of renouncing home and family to live a life of solitary wandering and contemplation. Both came from a cultural context in which asceticism was seen as an acceptable, if radical, response to such an existential crisis.

In undertaking a life of renunciation, Mahāvīra was participating in a pre-existing culture of asceticism. Indeed, according to the Śvetāmbara scriptures, Mahāvīra's parents were proto-Jains: followers and devotees of Pārśvanātha, the 23rd Tīrthaṅkara, mentioned earlier.

As mentioned before, Pārśvanātha is often depicted as a seated ascetic in a yogic position (*āsana*) with a seven-headed cobra rearing up behind him and using its hoods to protect him from the elements as he practices meditation. There is a similar story about the Buddha having been protected by the Serpent King, Mucilinda – another element that is suggestive of the common cultural wellspring of Buddhism and Jainism.

The *śramaṇa* movement was, above all else, an ascetic movement, based on the ancient Indic ideal of *sannyāsa*, or renunciation of worldly ties – and, as mentioned above, an ancient name for the Jains was *Nigaṇṭha*, one who is without worldly ties. It is not clear whether *śramaṇas* such as the Jains and the Buddhists were in continuity with a Vedic tradition of renunciation, or whether it was renunciation that came first, as a Greater Magadhan institution that influenced the authors of the *Upaniṣads*. Whatever its origins, the ascetic ideal is an ancient and powerful one in the Indic religious imagination.

An ascetic in any tradition is one who gives up worldly goods in pursuit of a spiritual goal. A Roman Catholic who gives up sweets

during Lent and a Muslim who fasts during Ramadan are both practicing asceticism. But *sannyāsa*, or renunciation in the Indic sense, is probably the most radical form of asceticism of all: to leave behind not only the comforts of home, but one's very identity as a part of society.

What is the purpose of such radical asceticism? Interpretations of course vary in different traditions. *Sannyāsa*, broadly speaking, reflects the idea that if one remains 'in the world', as a member of society, one is obligated to engage in various kinds of action – to have a family, to fulfill one's duties to one's family, to be economically productive, and so on. Such activities are distractions from the spiritual life.

But activities also lead to inevitable effects according to the law of karma, the law of cause and effect, with karmic effects leading to rebirth. If one wants to be liberated, action must be reduced to a minimum. This requires one to withdraw from one's social duties. Attaining liberation from rebirth – and the suffering that inevitably accompanies the fleeting experiences of this world – requires one's complete attention and dedication.

Shirking one's social obligations, of course, is a major source of negative karmic effects – of 'bad karma'. How, then, can one renounce these and not end up having a very bad rebirth, not to speak of liberation? This is where the truly radical nature of *sannyāsa* becomes apparent. One cannot, as oneself, give up on one's obligations. They are part of one's identity. One must therefore completely give up one's social identity – one must, in a sense, die and be reborn, in order to be a renunciant.

This is why, in Hindu ascetic traditions, the ceremony of taking *sannyāsa* includes one's own funeral. One ritually 'dies', giving up all former obligations and ties. This is, quite clearly, a serious undertaking. One is not simply avoiding work or shirking duty. One is giving up all connections to family, friends, and community and becoming a new person. The *sannyāsī* takes a new name and is often required to have no further contact with the people from his or her old life. One can see why early Jain ascetics were called *Nigaṇṭha* – without ties or bonds to the community. The Jain ritual of taking renunciation, however, is more celebratory, being modeled not on funerary rites, but on wedding rites. One's old life is ending, but a new one is also beginning, which is a cause for joy.

The asceticism of the *sannyāsī* does not end with leaving home and giving up old social bonds. Indeed, this is only the beginning of a

lifetime of renunciation. The reason the renunciant leaves society in the first place is to pursue ascetic practices full time, with the aim of achieving liberation from rebirth. Ascetic practices in India have sometimes reached extravagant levels of self-denial, leading to the stereotypical image of the yogī sleeping on a bed of nails, or walking across glowing hot coals.

Interestingly, Mahāvīra's family is said to have approved his choice to renounce, and a great crowd of human and celestial beings is said to have seen him off on his great journey. His parents are said to have been Jains (though this term is not used in the earliest Jain scriptures) in the tradition of Pārśvanātha, the 23rd Tīrthaṅkara. As such, their approval of his choice to renounce is understandable. But it is also consistent with the more celebratory attitude toward renunciation that is typical of Jainism.

The attitude of Mahāvīra's family toward his renunciation, and the claim that they were devotees of Pārśvanātha, is an indication, even at this early stage of the tradition, that Mahāvīra is not establishing something new, but treading an already ancient path set out by others. The Buddha, in contrast, is said to have had to sneak out of his father's palace at night, with the help of the gods. His path is different from that of Mahāvīra in the sense that he does not have the support of his family in his pursuit of renunciation. In fact, he must overcome their active opposition with divine help. Nor, unlike Mahāvīra, is he part of a pre-existing spiritual tradition. Buddhist texts do represent him as vowing to become a Buddha in his previous life as Sumati.[82] His *bodhisattva* vow was administered by Dīpaṅkara, the previous Buddha, thus establishing the Buddha-to-be in a pre-existing spiritual lineage. But the earliest accounts of the Buddha's life give emphasis to the fact that he finds *nirvāṇa* on his own, without the aid of a spiritual teacher. Indeed, he seeks out several teachers, but finds them, in various ways, deficient. The achieving of *nirvāṇa* through one's own effort distinguishes a Buddha from other enlightened beings. **Stop**

Mahāvīra finds liberation through his own efforts as well. But he is part of a pre-existing Jain tradition. The Buddha's search for enlightenment takes six years, whereas Mahāvīra's takes 12. Both leave home at the age of 30, with the Buddha attaining *nirvāṇa* at the age of 36 and Mahāvīra attaining it at the age of 42. Both teach their path of awakening to others, taking on disciples and establishing communities of lay and ascetic followers. Mahāvīra dies at the age of