

Title: Conversations

Subtitle: Jainism

Second Subtitle: Jainism

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Quote:

Numbers: One of the oldest religious traditions of India, Jainism has existed side by side with Hinduism throughout its long history. With fewer than 5 million adherents and comprising less than 1% the Indian population, Jainism has demonstrated a remarkable tenacity and endurance and continues to exert an influence far beyond its small numbers.

Founder: Jainism (the name derives from a Sanskrit word meaning "follower of the Jina, or conqueror") was established in our era by Mahavira ("the Great Hero") in the sixth century B.C.E. In fact, Mahavira is considered only the most recent in a list of 24 such teachers who brought Jainism into the world during previous great cosmic eras of time. These teachers, or "Tirthankaras," taught a path to religious awakening based on renouncing the world by practice of strict religious austerity. Mahavira established a monastic community of both nuns and monks. This community is the oldest continually surviving monastic community in the world.

Main Tenets: Jains reject belief in a creator god and seek release from endless reincarnation through a life of strict self-denial. The title of Jina is given to those who are believed to have triumphed over all material existence. As all human activity accumulates karma, the force that perpetuates reincarnation, the only way to free one's jiva, or soul, from the bondage of material existence is by reducing this activity through ascetic practice. In addition, Jainism places a special emphasis on ahimsa ("non-injury") to all living beings. The concern for life is extended to all creatures, even minute microbes that are not visible. The Jain ideal is a mendicant ascetic who takes extreme measures to avoid injuring all creatures. Monks and nuns are sometimes seen with muslin cloths over their mouths to keep out flying insects, and they are enjoined to use small brooms to gently sweep away living creatures from their path, so as to not accidentally crush them.

Main Sacred Text: The sacred texts of the Jains are called Agamas. The two main branches of Jainism share many of the same sacred texts in common, but since their split in the fifth century C.E., they have developed different traditions of textual transmission. Both branches claim that authority for the most ancient texts derives from Mahavira, who was in turn enunciating sacred truths that the Tirthankaras before him had taught. Handed down orally in the monastic communities, the sacred literature was not written down until about 500 C.E.

There are several differences between the two traditions of Jainism, the Shvetambaras ("white-clad monastics") and the Digambaras ("sky-clad monastics"). Shvetambaras believe that monks and nuns should be permitted to wear a simple white robe. Digambaras require monks to be nude.