

“ DISCOURSES OF
MAHAVIRA, STATUE
OF JAIN SAINT,
BUDDHA, AND
ASHOKAN ROCK EDICT

TWO GENTLE RELIGIONS BUDDHISM AND JAINISM

Finding Peace

Early Hinduism taught people to find peace by controlling their desires. In the Bhagavad Gita, for example, Krishna explains that

*As the mountainous
depths of the ocean
are unmoved when
waters rush into it,
So the man unmoved
when desires enter him
attains a peace that eludes
the man of many desires.*

Sometime during the sixth century BCE, a prince named Vardamana was born in northern India. His father was a Kshatriya and his mother's family controlled much of what is now Nepal and Eastern India. As the son of a powerful ruler, he lived a life of luxury. Wealth and pleasures surrounded him. He married and had a daughter, but when he was 30 years old, he began to feel bored and trapped by his life and all of his things. He decided to leave the palace and, after tearing out his hair in five handfuls, he began to wander the land, meditating, and living off the food that people gave him.

He traveled into faraway forests, where he met holy men and women who, like him, disliked the violence and greed of ordinary life. Together they looked for a better way to live. In time, Vardamana found out about a holy man who had lived hundreds of years before, in about 800 BCE. This man, whose name was Prashavanatha, taught that as long as you did not lie, steal, own more than you needed to survive, or kill anything, your life would be pure and you would be freed from having to be born yet again.

Vardamana began to follow these teachings, living only off the charity that people gave him. Sometimes people beat and abused him, but he stuck to his beliefs. Finally, after 12 years, 6 months and 15 days, he was able to conquer his earthly desires. He no longer cared about fancy food, fashionable clothes, or even his family and friends. He had finally reached a state called Enlightenment—the burden of always wanting stuff didn't weigh him down anymore. People called him Mahavira, “the great hero.” He taught the four teachings of Prashavanatha, plus one more: celibacy. Total celibacy was a tough one, since if no one had children, people would die out. So, many people who followed the teachings of Vardamana gave up worldly pleasures after they had finished raising a family.

One of the main messages that drew people to the teachings of Mahavira was his idea that all things are connected:

All men who are ignorant of the Truth are subject to pain; in the endless cycle of rebirth they suffer in many ways.

Therefore a wise man, who considers well the ways that lead to bondage and birth, should himself search for the truth, and be kind towards all creatures.

Mahavira's five rules of telling the truth, never stealing, never owning anything, never hurting anything, and remaining celibate were very difficult to follow. But in time his teachings became popular anyway. Most everyone wanted to reach *moksha*, release from the cycle of rebirth. People believed that Mahavira achieved *moksha* upon his death at the age of 72. Instead of being born again, his spirit united with the universe. Some said that Indra, king of the gods, collected the pieces of his bones that were left after his body was burned and took them to heaven, where the gods joined together to worship them.

Mahavira did not try to start a religion. He was one of many teachers who had conquered the senses—who had learned how not to pay attention to feelings such as hunger, thirst, and pain—and helped others to understand the way to reach *moksha*. Mahavira and others who have conquered their five senses are called *jina*, or conquerors. The name of the religious tradition that grew up around these teachers is called Jainism.

In Jainism, men and women who are great teachers are called “ford makers.” A ford is a place where it is easy to cross a stream—a ford maker is someone who helps others find a way to cross from the river of life and endless

“ Discourses of Mahavira,
600–500 BCE

Jain nuns on a pilgrimage wear masks over their mouths and noses so they don't swallow insects by mistake. Jains are forbidden from killing any creature, no matter how small.



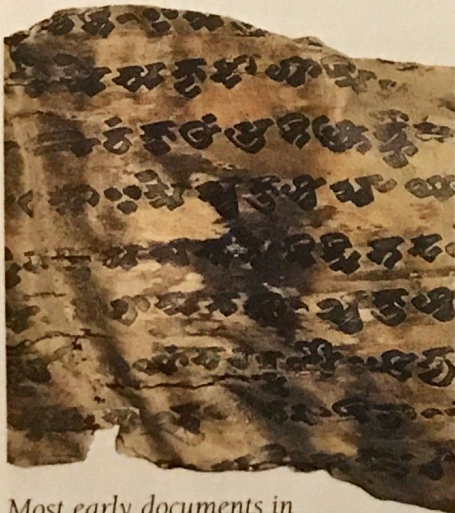
death and rebirth, to the peace of enlightenment, when the soul unites with the universe. These teachers learned to control their senses and desires and to break free from life on Earth. Mahavira was the 24th ford maker.

Both men and women who admired Mahavira and his teachings left their families and became monks and nuns. In fact, when Mahavira died, more than twice as many nuns as monks followed his teachings. Even today, women play an important role in Jain traditions. As mothers, they teach children how to behave and how to live a good life by not killing, stealing, or lying. Jain nuns meditate and go on journeys called pilgrimages to sacred places, take care of sacred scriptures, and teach others about the way to achieve Enlightenment.

All Jains vow not to kill any living thing. This means that Jains cannot be farmers, because they would have to kill insects that destroy plants and they would kill worms when plowing the fields. Jains do not raise animals because they would have to kill the lice, vermin, and germs that livestock often suffer from. They can't be lumberjacks, because that line of work would mean that by cutting down trees they would be killing insects and hurting animals that live in the trees.

Most Jains who were not monks and nuns were traders, bankers, or craftspeople who made things such as jewelry and cloth. The rich Jain merchants became patrons of the arts and paid for the construction of magnificent temples and monasteries. Many of the teachings of famous monks and nuns were written on palm leaves or painted onto birch-bark manuscripts and collected in great libraries.

Not all followers of Jain traditions practice the strict rules that Mahavira laid out. At first, Jain teaching did not allow people to worship statues or paintings of gods, a common practice among early Hindus, or even to worship in temples. But in time, a few Jains began to take on some of the traditions of the early Hindus. Around the first century CE, Jains began building temples with stories illustrating the lives of their saints carved in stone. In the fifth century CE, Jains began to build white marble temples with golden



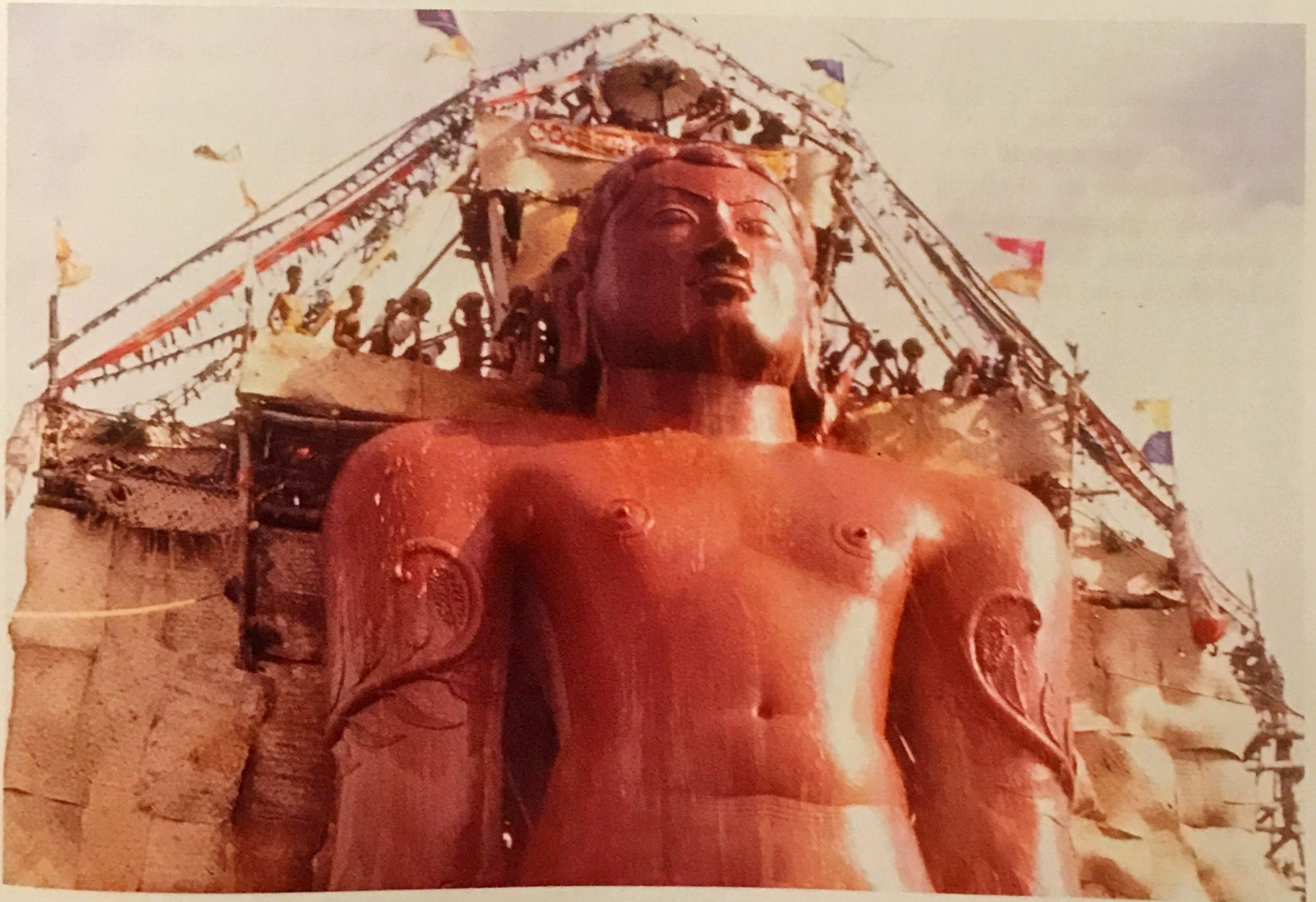
Most early documents in South Asia have not survived because they were written on fragile materials such as birch bark, palm leaf, or cloth. This rare birch-bark manuscript in Brahmi script from 400 CE was found in a dry cave in Pakistan.

spires and even began offering sacrifices to their lord makers. Because Jains did not believe in animal sacrifice, they offered gifts of flowers and fruit to the gods and decorated their statues with a paste made from sweet-smelling sandalwood. The largest Jain image today is a huge—about 20 feet (18 meters) tall—statue of a saint in South India. On special occasions, thousands of gallons of milk, sweet-smelling wood and spices, and bright red vermilion, a red powder that stands for purity, are poured over the statue's head and allowed to run down its body. Then pilgrims collect the leftover offerings and use them to wash their bodies. They believe this will purify them.

At about the same time as Mahavira was wandering around the forest and cities of the Ganga Valley, another prince was asking similar questions. His name was Siddhartha Gautama. Like Mahavira's father, Siddhartha's father tried

“ Statue of Jain saint
Gomatesvara, South India,
983 CE

Each year, pilgrims climb onto this statue of Gomatesvara and pour over it clarified butter, or ghee, to commemorate the anniversary of the saint's death.



to protect him from anything ugly or painful. Like Mahavira, Siddhartha married and had a child. And like Mahavira, Siddhartha gradually realized that the world was a place of suffering. He gave up his life of luxury, left his palace, and began to seek enlightenment. Buddhists believe that after six years of fasting and long periods of meditating in the same position without moving a muscle, he realized that physical discipline was not the way to achieve enlightenment. When he told this to five fellow sages, they left him in the forest, disgusted that he had given up so easily. But Siddhartha continued to meditate. One night, as he sat on a grass mat under the arching branches of a bodhi (wild fig) tree, he realized something that would change his life forever. It occurred to Siddhartha that

“ Buddha, The Four Noble Truths, fifth–fourth centuries BCE

Also known as the Middle Path. The eight ways to freedom from desire are in taking the right view, resolve, speech, action, living, effort, mindfulness, and meditation.

- 1) humans experience pain
- 2) desire or wanting is what causes this pain
- 3) the only way to avoid suffering is to control desire
- 4) a person can be freed from desire, and achieve Enlightenment, by living with others and following the **Eightfold Path**.

Siddhartha called this form of enlightenment Nirvana. Once he experienced Nirvana for himself, he became known as the Buddha.

Although he did not think anyone would be interested in his message, he decided to share what he had discovered. At the town of Sarnath, the five friends who had abandoned him in the forest came to listen to him teach. These five became his first followers. For the next 45 years, the Buddha traveled from city to city and village to village, teaching people about kindness, compassion, and truth, as he did in these instructions to one of his followers:

“ Buddha, *Admonition to Singala*, fifth–fourth centuries BCE

The wise and moral man
Shines like a fire on a hilltop
Making honey like a bee
Who does not hurt the flower.

Prince Siddhartha rides to school in a cart pulled by rams in this stone sculpture. He is surrounded by royal servants who protected him from seeing pain and suffering in the world. Later, he left his royal surroundings to search for the truth and gain enlightenment.



He did not speak in the fancy Sanskrit used by Brahmin priests, but instead in simple, easy-to-understand words in the local languages. He quickly became very popular and had soon gathered a large following, called a *sangha*—a community. His followers included princes and common people, kings, and farmers—inside of the *sangha*, no one bothered about *varna*, or class. When Buddha died at the age of 80, he was cremated and his ashes were distributed and buried in dome-shaped monuments called stupas. His followers continued his work. They wore simple yellow robes and traveled around the country eight months of the year preaching the Four Noble Truths that the Buddha had taught them.

The Buddha preached Four Noble Truths that helped a person gain release from the process of rebirth. This ultimate freedom is called *nirvana*. It is a state in which the individual's sense of him- or herself ceases to exist and there is nothing to be reborn. Instead of focusing on “me” and “mine,” a person who follows the teachings of Buddha begins to learn how to focus on “everything and nothing” at the same time.

Early Buddhist religious practices stayed away from what they thought were difficult and snobby rituals and costly sacrifices. Simple rituals included meditation, pilgrimages, and offerings of food to pilgrims. Eventually, faithful Buddhists began to build burial monuments, meditation halls, monasteries, and sacred monuments to remind each other about the Buddha and his teachings.

“ Ashokan Rock Edict, third century BCE

DON'T JUST DO SOMETHING—SIT THERE!

The earliest images of people meditating are found on the seals of the Indus Valley, dating to around 2500 BCE. During the Vedic period, people believed that the god Shiva practiced yoga to concentrate his energy and connect all of his sacred power.

The word *yoga* means “connecting” or “harnessing” power. It is a series of breathing and stretching exercises that calm and strengthen the body. People from the major religious traditions of South Asia—Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist—practice yoga or meditation. This description of yoga is from the *Bhagavad Gita*: He shuns external objects / fixes his gaze between his brows / and regulates his vital breaths / as they pass through his nostrils.

By the third century BCE, even kings and queens were beginning to adopt the simple ways of Buddhism. In about 261 BCE, Emperor Ashoka, ruler of the Mauryan empire in India, converted to Buddhism and made it the state religion of his empire. He had stone columns and tablets carved with Buddhist ideas, such as “In India the gods who formerly did not mix with men now do so. This is the result of effort, and may be obtained not only by the great, but even by the small, through effort—thus they may even easily win heaven.” Ashoka also built *stupas*, dome-shaped burial monuments, to house portions of the Buddha’s ashes.

With Ashoka’s help, Buddhism spread throughout the subcontinent and beyond, along the major sea and overland trade routes. Some traditions say that Ashoka’s son became a monk and his father sent him as a missionary to Sri Lanka, an island off the coast of India. More missionaries traveled to Central Asia, Tibet and China, as well as Southeast Asia, where they converted many people to the gentle teachings of the Buddha.

After the Buddha’s death, tiny bits of his ashes were placed in small caskets and sent to many parts of the world. The caskets were buried in gigantic domed monuments called stupas. This stupa is in Swat, Pakistan.

