Chapter 9: Jaina Traditions

Chapter Overview

In chapter nine on “Jaina Traditions,” Anne Vallely explains that the essence of the Jaina tradition can be expressed by the phrase “*ahimsa paramo dharma*.” This phrase, which means “non-violence is the supreme path” (p. 403), is a phrase that best encompasses the essence of the Jaina tradition because it helps us to understand the cosmology and the foundational practices of Jainism. The cosmology of Jainism, for instance, begins with the notion that the entire cosmos consists of six eternal substances that can be classified into two categories: that which has consciousness (*jiva*, or “soul”), and that which does not have consciousness (*ajiva*, or “non-soul”). While *ajiva* is divided into five types, the primary type, *pudgala* (pure matter), forms the basis of all knowledge and is thoroughly entangled with *jiva*, and as such, is “*jiva’s* friend as well as its foe, for the worldly soul that seeks release from it is nevertheless utterly dependent on it” (p. 411). As Vallely clarifies, as a world-renouncing tradition, Jaina cosmology underscores the Jaina goal of achieving liberation (*moksha*) for *jiva* by removing from it all that is not *jiva*, or *ajiva*, which can only be achieved through the process of purging all particles of *karma* from *jiva*. The Jaina way of renunciation, which is established in order to purge *karma*, provides a way to limit and eliminate karma especially through its practice of *ahimsa*, or non-violence. Thus, Jaina practice is explicitly based upon its ideas about cosmology. Moreover, Jaina practices focus on those who taught the messages of Jainism that stem from these ideas about cosmology. These teachers, who are called *Jinas* (“victors” or “conquerors”; or *Tirthankaras*), have lives that were worthy to follow and taught sacred scripture, and are, as a result of their practices, venerated within Jainism. Especially venerated is Mahavira, “the Great Hero,” as he is the *Jina* who established the communal structure of Jainism, and whose life is the primary example for Jaina practice.

Vallely also explains that further Jaina practices, including worship, praying, meditation, fasting and dietary restrictions, festivals, as well as the roles of the community members themselves, are based upon these ideas about cosmology. Non-violence to all *jiva*, for example, provides the structure for dietary restrictions, and the mendicant practices of the ascetics, as well as the worldly practices of the householders. Furthermore, within the chapter, Vallely traces the historical developments of Jaina traditions, including the development of the Svetambara and Digambara communities, reform movements, and the modern growth and challenges to the Jaina community.

Learning Objectives are met when the student:

1. Outlines the historical roots of Jainism and describes the geographic spread of the early Jaina community with the concomitant rise of distinctive branches of belief and practice up to the modern period.
2. Identifies and summarizes the central teachings, prayers, symbols, practices, life-cycle rites and festivals that constitute the lifeblood of Jainism for its millions of adherents.
3. Comprehends and describes the singularity of the soul in Jainism’s intricate cosmology, which posits that the soul must free itself from the material world and that nonviolence is central to its liberation.
4. Identifies and relates Jaina practice and metaphysics, particularly conduct worship.
5. Paraphrase the rigorous demands of the idealized renouncer path, as well as the mainstream householder path and its relationship with the ideals of Jainism.

Study Questions

1. What three-word phrase is commonly employed to express the essence of the Jaina tradition? What do these three words mean and how does this phrase relate to renunciation?
2. What does the term *samyak darshan* mean and why is it starting point of Jainism?
3. What is relationship between *pudgala* (“pure matter”) and *jiva* (“eternal soul”) in Jainism?
4. In Jainism, how are the karmic principles created? What are the two karmic particles and which of these two needs to be purged?
5. What are the “Three Jewels” of Jainism and which of these jewels is the most valued of the three? Why does this jewel overshadow the other two jewels?

Study Questions: Answers

1. Jainas commonly express the essence of their tradition as “*ahimsa paramo dharma*” (“non-violence is the supreme path”). Jainas do not seek to eradicate the violence of the world as such a commitment would be futile. Rather, their commitment to nonviolence leads to radical non-interference. Non-violence is equated with renunciation because it is only through the total cessation of activity that one can truly avoid harming others and, consequently, oneself. (p. 403)
2. The phrase *samyak darshan* means “right faith” or “correct intuition.” It is the starting point of Jainism because it denotes the awakening to the workings of the world from which Jaina thought and action begins. (p. 404)
3. *Pudgala* is a concrete substance with the attributes of touch, taste, smell, and color. It has no special function but is the basis of all matter and energy. All activities of the mind and body, including thought and speech, are *pudgala*. All worldly knowledge is acquired by means of *pudgala*—including the knowledge of how to free ourselves from it. It is only through perception, which is form of *pudgala*, that we know the cosmos and its contents. Thus, *pudgala* is not antithetical to *jiva*. It is neutral in this regard, although its natural tendency is to become attached both to other forms of matter and to *jiva*. The worldly soul seeks to be released from *pudgala* while also completely dependent on it. (p. 411)
4. The “Three Jewels” of Jainism are as follows: (1) “correct practice” (*samyak caritra*); (2) “correct intuition” (*samyak darshan*); and (3) “correct knowledge” (*samyak jnana*). The first jewel, “correct practice,” overshadows the other two because it is so conspicuous, that is, it visibly reflects the idea that since human suffering is real, it requires concretely and visibly correct action. (p. 413)
5. Jainism teaches there is an eternal state of entanglement between the eternal soul (*jiva*) and *ajiva* (non-soul; also referred to as matter and *karma*) and every mental and physical activity causes vibrations that create two types of karmic particles: (1) auspicious or “good karma,” called *punya* and inauspicious or “bad karma,” called *paap*. Ultimately, all forms of karma must be purged. (pp. 413–414)

Research Questions

1. The ascetic prophet Mahavira (c. 599–527 BCE) is central to the establishment of the Jaina tradition. How does the life and teachings of Mahavira reflect key elements of the Jaina traditions and goals?
2. How does the Jaina concept of *jiva* differ from the concept of the soul in other religious traditions?
3. Why is the relationship between the renouncers and the householders important for the attainment of *moksha* by the former group (i.e., renouncers)? What practices are required for this relationship to be successful?
4. What are the key differences and issues between the Svetambara (white-clad) and Digambara (naked or “sky-clad) sects of the Jaina traditions?
5. What are some of the practices employed by the Jainas in order to apply the vow of *ahimsa* (non-harm) to all beings?
6. Research two or more of the five “small vows” (*anuvratas*) and explain how these are connected to the practices of the householders.
7. Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism each teach the concept of *karma*. However, the Jaina tradition holds to a different concept of *karma* than both Hinduism and Buddhism. Compare the Jaina idea of *karma* with either Hinduism or Buddhism. What are the differences in their respective ideas of *karma*? What are the similarities?
8. The Jinas (or Tirthankaras) are foundational people within the Jaina tradition. Identify three or more of the roles of the Jinas and explain their relevance for the Jaina tradition?
9. Why is reflection-meditation and fasting central practices in the Jaina traditions?
10. Why has Jaina astrology been an understudied within modern scholarship? What could studying Jaina astrology contribute to our understanding of the Jaina tradition as a whole?

Reflection Questions

1. The essence of the Jaina tradition is commonly expressed through the phrase “*ahimsa paramo* *dharma*,” which can be translated as “non-violence is the supreme path.” Why do you think this phrase encapsulates the essence of Jainism?
2. How do you understand the notion of the *jiva*?
3. Why do you think the issue of clothing contributed to the split between the Svetambara and Digambara sects?
4. Why is it important for the whole community to be involved in the vows of the *munis* or *sadhvis*?
5. How does the process of *sallekhana* help us to understand the principles behind the Jaina conception of *karma*?

Additional Resources

1. JAINpedia: The Jain Universe Online. <http://www.jainpedia.org/>

The [Institute of Jainology (IoJ)](http://www.jainology.org/) conceived of the JAINpedia project to make the Jain collections of major UK institutions more accessible to the public thereby showing important holdings through public exhibitions, events and a media-rich website featuring over 5,000 folios and original contextual material. The project is supported by the Jain community worldwide and the [Heritage Lottery Fund](http://www.hlf.org.uk/Pages/Home.aspx) in the UK.

1. Jainism Global Resource Center. <https://jainworld.com/>

This website is a comprehensive, well-structured and accessible collection of resources on Jainism, including scriptures; photos/images/clips; e-books; radio lectures/music; children’s corner; forums; Namokar Mantra; for teachers and parents; global events; and Jain Calendar.

1. Jain Sacred Scriptures: Internet Sacred Text Archive. <http://www.sacred-texts.com/jai/>

The Internet Sacred Text Archive site contains portals to a wide selection of writings such as the Jaina Sutras (Sacred Books of the East vol. 22 and vol. 45); A Treatise on Jainism; Ten Virtues of the Monks; Twelve Reflections or Bhavnas; Twelve Vows of Layperson; Fourteen Auspicious Dreams; Five Great Vows and Nine Tattvas (Principles).

1. JainDharmOnline. <http://www.jaindharmonline.com/>

JainDharmOnline is an “online portal dedicated to Jainism and it’s followers” by striving to provide the latest news from “the Jain community in India and around the world.” In addition to news, the site contains useful resources on the history, principles and practices of Jainism.

1. Jainism: Jain Principles, Tradition and Practices. <http://www.cs.colostate.edu/~malaiya/jainhlinks.html>

This website provides significant information related to Jainism with many links to a range of themes including songs and prayers; vegetarianism; ahimsa; sacred literature; pilgrimage; images; and links to “controversial/confused” views on Jainism; and regional organizations.

1. Jainism. The PluralismProject: Harvard University. <http://pluralism.org/religions/jainism/>

The Pluralism Project site introduces Jainism and resources on Jainism in America; the Jain Experience; and Issues for Jains in America. Additionally, timelines, directories of Jain religious centers and religious diversity news are available on this site.

1. *The Last Life of Nirmala*. Directed by Dominique Rabotteau and Frédéric Soltan (2005) 52m 48s. <http://dharma-documentaries.net/the-last-life-of-nirmala-as-a-woman>

This excellent documentary focuses on the life of a renunciate named Nirmala who has chosen to relinquish her previous life and serve as a nun with her sisters and the monks of Jain. She takes her vows during the holiday of the Big Unction, which only occurs every 12 years. This documentary is available without any cost through Dharma Documentaries.

1. “India’s Jains,” *Religion & Ethics Newsweekly*. PBS SOCAL. 7m 37s video clip.

[www.pbs.org/video/religion-and-ethics-newsweekly-indias-jains/](http://www.pbs.org/video/religion-and-ethics-newsweekly-indias-jains/)

This brief clip on Jains provides several excellent conversation starters by interviewing Jains across intergenerational lines to illustrate varied ways to live an ethical life contoured by an ascetic orientation.

1. Anne Vallely. *Guardians of the Transcendent: An Ethnology of a Jain Ascetic Community*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002.
2. Helmuth Von Glasenapp. *Jainism: An Indian Religion of Salvation*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1999.

Field Work Guidelines

If you are interested in doing fieldwork, you need to plan and organize your fieldwork experience as thoroughly as you can. Generally, you can divide your fieldwork experience into three stages: Planning, during, and after your fieldwork.

Planning Your Fieldwork

*Research:* Begin by researching the individual, group, or place you would like to do work on or with. Visit websites if available, and read any available scholarship.

*Make Contact:* Contact the person, group, or administrators of the place you would like to research. Give as much information as possible about your project so that your contact can guide. Often your contact will be able to help you understand the rules for conduct that will be needed during your fieldwork. Remember to be polite and courteous.

*Questions:* Based on your research and interests, create a set of questions you would like to answer during the course of your fieldwork.

*Ethics Approval:* Some projects need to have ethics approval, especially if your research involves people. The guidelines for applications for ethics approval may differ depending on the organization or university you work with; thus, please contact your organization or university to find out more about this process.

During Your Fieldwork

Often, there are specific rules for conduct when you visit sacred spaces and/or interview people, and usually, these rules can be seen before you enter a site, or spoken about before you interview people. It is best to find out about these rules before you begin your fieldwork. There are some general rules that should be followed at all times: Always be polite and courteous, dress modestly, and participate where appropriate.

*Be polite and courteous:*

1. Introduce yourself. If you are visiting a sacred site or a worship centre, you will be able to find people who are either there to meet you specifically, or would like to help you during your visit.
2. Leave your camera, phone, notebook, or laptop in a bag or even at home unless you have received prior permission to use these items.
3. Be aware of signs. Signs have important information about the place you are in, thus, look for the signs and the information they give.
4. Be respectful of the people and your surroundings. Do not disturb the rites or the privacy of the people. While there are times when you may be invited to participate, please remember that if you are not invited, you should keep a respectful silence and distance from the rite. Also, people may be curious about why you are visiting or conducting your research. Try to answer their questions as best you can. They may be able to provide you with additional information and further help.

*Dress modestly:*

1. Rules for appropriate dress are often important when visiting a place or a group. Please follow these rules if you have been given them.
2. For Jaina sacred sites, these rules mean that one should refrain from using any chewable items (gum, food, mints) on site, remove shoes, and dress in freshly laundered clothes. Leather goods, including belts and purses, are also generally not allowed on-site. Often, if you are not dressed appropriately, you may be given appropriate attire, or you may not be allowed into a site.

*Participate Where Appropriate:*

1. If you have been invited to participate, please do so!
2. Generally, follow the guidelines that have been given to you, or the people around you. The best tip: Stand when people stand, and sit when people sit.
3. Ask questions. If you are not sure what to do, ask the people around you. Most people will be happy to help you out.
4. If you are interviewing a particular person or people, make notes on the questions that you ask, and answer any questions that you are asked as well.

After Your Fieldwork

1. Make a comprehensive set of notes on your experience as soon as you are able. The better your notes are, the more you will be able to draw on later.
2. Thank anyone who has helped you with your experience, and acknowledge their help in the written version of your work.
3. Follow up with the people or the place that you have visited. If you have used information from any interviews, offer to send a copy your work to the place or the people you have met.