

Although Jainism is an ancient and respected religion, it is little known in Europe and America. Here are answers to some questions which may be asked by the Westerner on first coming into contact with the Jains.

**Q. Who was the founder of Jainism?**

A. Jains believe that their religion is extremely ancient. The Lord Mahavira, who died in 527 BC, was the last of a long series of prophets (Tirthankara). He followed an existing religion, which Jains believe was established by Rishabhdev, who lived countless centuries before.

**Q. Is there any one principle above all which characterizes Jainism?**

A. Yes. The fundamental principle of Jainism is Ahimsa or nonviolence towards all living things however insignificant to our eyes. To a true Jain, violence in thought and speech is as bad as physical violence.

**Q. Surely this (Ahimsa) is impossible to achieve?**

A. That is not true. Jains recognize that in everyday life for the ordinary person it is almost impossible to avoid all harm to other beings. But every attempt is made to avoid harm and this is obligatory (even at the cost of their own life) on monks and nuns who are not caught up in the business of ordinary life.

**Q. Does that mean that a Jain will defend himself from violent attacks?**

A. If unavoidable a layperson (Shravaka and Shravika) may. Violence is bad because of the effect on the victim, but particularly bad for the passions it creates in the perpetrator. But as far as monks and nuns are concerned even self-defense is totally forbidden.

**Q. Do Jains believe in God?**

A. Not in the sense of a creator or judge or controller of the universe. The universe is always existing, controlled by its own laws. Every individual soul is potentially God and this is the state of the soul, which has reached Moksha or liberation. (Incidentally Jains do believe that there are heavens beyond this world inhabited by celestial beings who are not eternal but may be reborn as humans or other creatures in due course.)

**Q. So Jains believe in reincarnation?**

A. Most definitely. Every soul has passed through countless lives carrying with it the accumulated effects (karma) of its deeds and passions, good and bad.

**Q. But the soul, you say, can become Godlike in time?**

A. A soul, born into human life, may become aware of the true aim of existence and may, by meditation and austerity, conquer the passions, purge

itself of the accumulated karma, and achieve a total knowledge of the whole nature of the universe and eventually may attain Moksha (or nirvana).

**Q. What is karma?**

A. All phenomena are said to be linked together in a universal chain of cause and effect. Every event has a definite cause behind it. By nature each soul is pure, possessing infinite knowledge, bliss, and power. But these qualities are restricted from time immemorial by foreign matter in contact with the soul. This foreign matter is karma. The effects of both good and bad deeds are attached to the soul and are caused forward through subsequent rebirths. When the soul frees itself from all karma, good and bad, it reaches Moksha.

**Q. Can you describe Moksha?**

A. Not really, for it is absolutely beyond all human sense experience, a condition of infinite bliss and complete knowledge. The liberated souls live in a timeless totality, yet retaining their individuality in a state which human comprehension cannot reach. These souls are free from the cycle of death and rebirth.

**Q. Am I, then, right in gathering that the keys to Jain life are faith and knowledge, coupled with ethical conduct arising from these?**

A. That is exactly right. Jains speak of the 'three jewels' of right faith, right knowledge, and right conduct. Right conduct for the lay person means above all nonviolence but also truthfulness, restraint of sensual passions within proper limits, the avoidance of stealing in any form, and the reduction of attachments to material possessions. For monks and nuns the rules are stricter. Jains believe that this conduct will spring from faith in the teachings of their Tirthankara and knowledge of the true ends of existence.

**Q. Doesn't that sound like a recipe for sainthood?**

A. Perhaps. Let us be honest, not all Jains live up to all the precepts. However, Jains do have a reputation for truthfulness and honesty in business dealings, delinquency seems to be rare among Jain youth, care for animals is a main object of Jain charity and strict vegetarianism is almost universal.

**Q. Can you say a word or two about Jain monks?**

A. When a Jain lay person reaches a particular stage of spiritual development, he or she decides to leave worldly affairs and follow the stricter rules for monkhood: total nonviolence, complete truthfulness, control over sensual desire, absolute honesty, and renunciation of possessions.