

Jainism (100020)

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## Jainism and Jains

**Jainism** is a religion that originated in eastern India. Its most recent founder, Mahāvīra (lit., great hero, traditionally dated 599–27 or 582–10 B.C.E. but dated c.497–25 B.C.E. by scholars), was an elder contemporary of the Buddha. Mahāvīra is regarded as the last of twenty-four figures in our age known as *tīrthāṅkaras* (lit., ford makers, that is, those who show the way to liberation from the predicament of death and rebirth, which is thought of as crossing over a vast ocean) or *jīnas* (victors) (unless otherwise indicated, all Indo-Aryan words in this entry are in Sanskrit and transliterated accordingly); their followers are known as **Jains**.

### 1. JAIN BELIEFS

Jainism holds that the universe is uncreated and eternally existent, consisting of matter occupied by a countless and inexhaustible number of *jīvas* (souls) that dwell in everything, from the elements (earth, air, fire, and water) to plants, animals, humans, deities, and Hell beings. Souls go through innumerable rebirths in these various forms of life because they

are bound up with *karma*, a subtle form of matter that permeates the soul through one's actions. Karma must be destroyed through ascetic practice and proper conduct to achieve the ultimate goal, liberation (*mokṣa*). A soul liberated from karma and thus from the cycle of death and rebirth (*saṃsāra*) realises its own inherent omniscience. The *jīnas* take the additional step of using their omniscience to teach the correct path, the main tenet of which is a thoroughgoing commitment to non-injury (*ahiṃsā*), eschewing violence toward other living beings in thought, word, and deed, as it is by doing such harm that one accumulates karma. Upon death, the liberated soul exists in an unending state of bliss, knowledge, power, and understanding, but, because it has overcome all passions, the soul has no desire and thus cannot engage with beings still mired in cyclic existence. Humans are the only beings who can attain liberation, as they are uniquely capable of making ethical choices, responding with detachment to joy and suffering, and practising the asceticism necessary to transcend karma by joining the mendicant order. There are two main denominations of

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