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HR 8401
Global Religious Traditions
Spring 2014

Jaina Dharma

My wife and I have had a long history of involvement in the animal rights (AR) movement and as avid vegans (I must acknowledge that my wife, as a professional animal rights activist, is significantly more active than I in this regard). Within this culture of passionate, sometimes militantly compassionate, animal rights activists, a deep respect for the Jaina religion is often expressed. Many of us look to the Jains as our spiritual kin, and the concept of *ahimsā* is frequently invoked as a sort of way of expressing the spiritual dimensions of our lifestyle and our work. Aspects of the Jain religion that are often looked down upon or considered to be outrageous and extreme by the general Western audience, such as fasting to death, wearing the face mask and brushing the ground to protect insects and other *jivas*, are usually admired and even revered by the vegan/AR community, who are themselves often accused of being “too extreme,” for wanting to live a life that reduces the amount of harm that we inflict upon

others. For many of us, veganism is our religion, and in addition to altruistic considerations, we see it, and the practice of non-harming, as a means of our own spiritual self-cultivation. Likewise Amṛtacandra, a twelfth-century Jaina mendicant, tells us:

Assuredly the nonappearance of attachment and other [passions] is ahiṃsā, and their appearance is hiṃsā. This is a brief summary of the Jaina doctrine.¹²

For us too, non-harming (*ahiṃsā*) can be considered to be “a brief summary” of the vegan and AR beliefs. Like Jains, many vegan and AR activists see violence as something that is detrimental to one’s own personal mental, emotional, and spiritual state, and therefore abstention from acts of harming and violence carry the potential to elevate our very being. At once, in the *Ākārāṅga Sūtra*, Mahāvīra expounds the parallel between ethical conduct, spiritual development, and recognizing the rights of other beings:

Knowing the connection of the world...look at the exterior (world from analogy with thy own) self; [then] thou wilt neither kill nor destroy (living beings);’ viz. Out of reciprocal regard [well examining] he does no sinful act. What is the characteristic of a sage? ‘Recognizing the equality (of all living beings), he

¹ *Aprādurbhāvaḥ khalu rāgādīnām bhavaty ahiṃseti teṣāṃ evotpattiḥ hiṃseti jināgamasya saṃkṣepaḥ*

² *Puruṣārthasiddhyupāya of Amṛtacandra Sūri*, v. 44, tr. By Ajit Prasada, Lucknow, 1933, cited by Jaini, P.S. *Ahiṃsā: A jaina Way of Spiritual Discipline*, republished in *Collected Papers on Jaina Studies*, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, Delhi, 2000, pg. 4

*appeases himself.*³

Many AR activists are also avid environmentalists. For the same reasons that we believe in non-violence to animals, we value non-violence towards the Earth. The Jaina dharma also extends its nonviolence to the Earth. The *Ākārāṅga Sūtra* also tells us:

*He who injures these (earth-bodies) does not comprehend and renounce the sinful acts; he who does not injure these, comprehends and renounces the sinful acts. Knowing them, a wise man should not act sinfully towards earth, nor cause others to act so, nor allow others to act so. He who knows these causes of sin relating to earth, is called a reward-knowing sage. Thus I say.*⁴

For those of us who personally experience the pain of the immeasurable violence that our modern age has wrought upon the Earth and her precious beings, few religious paths speak to the desperation of our planetary demise and our modern spiritual needs as strongly as the Jaina Dharma.

Temple Visit

On March 30th, 2014 my wife Hope and I visited the Jain temple in Milpitas,

³ *Ācārāṅga Sūtra*, 1.1.2, translated by Hermann Georg Jacobi, 1884, republished in *Jaina Sutras*, Forgotten Books, 2008, pg. 33

⁴ *Ācārāṅga Sūtra*, 1.3.3, pg. 53

California (aka “Jain Center of Northern California,” JCNC). According to the website this temple was founded by twenty families in 1973, and currently has a membership of 1,025 families. The temple hosts a variety of conventions, religious events, festivals and *pūjās*.^{5 6} My wife and I attended during a time when it was bustling with the activity of perhaps hundreds of devotees who were preparing for the arrival of a great Jain teacher. We spoke briefly to a couple of devotees during our visit, but I was eager to learn more, so I sent an email to Kiran Shah and Vipul Kothari, the VP & Co-VP of Public Relations. They graciously referred me to a family of Jain practitioners who were extremely polite and patient with me during an extensive phone conversation during which we discussed my observations and questions that arose during our visit. I spoke with Mahasukhbhai, his wife Vibhaben, and their daughter Nirali, who were all very generous with their time, diligent with their explanations, and seemed to be very cheerful and friendly people, a testimony to the spirit of their great tradition. It was quite an honor to make their acquaintance, and I sincerely hope that I will meet them in the future in person.

Hope and I entered on the ground floor, which was an impressive complex of

⁵ <http://www.jcnc.org/About-us>

⁶ You can view a video of a *pūja* at the Milpitas temple on Youtube:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YLLbgdKi-tU>

offices, a theater, a food preparation room, and several other closed doors that we neglected to investigate for fear of being obtrusive. In the theater there was what seemed to be some sort of singing performance where several women would one-by-one take the stage and sing a lovely song in a language I was unfamiliar with. There was a crowd of a several dozen people who were preparing food for the evening festivities. I was eager to witness the process because Jaina customs and beliefs regarding food and eating are often at the forefront of any exposition of the religion. For example, Jaini has written that

*Saṃsāra and food would thus appear to be coterminous for a Jaina; there never was a time when he has not eaten in this beginningless cycle of birth and death. The path of mokṣa, therefore, consist in overcoming the desire for food in all its forms, for true liberation is freedom from hunger forever.*⁷

As a long time vegan, I have always been inspired by the Jaina commitment to vegetarianism, but have always been perplexed that they may still consume dairy products, which in the modern West at least, invariably involves intense cruelty to cattle that leads to their violent death. I know that many Hare Kṛṣṇas eschew meat, but not dairy, but will only consume dairy products from animals that have been raised by

⁷ Jaini, P.S., *Fear of Food: Jaina Attitude On Eating*, “Jaina Studies in Honour of Jozef Deleu, eds. Smet and Watanabe, Tokyo: Hon-No-Tomasha, 1993, pg. 354

devotees, are not killed, and are not victimized the way that animals in nearly all commercial operations are. However, I did not have the opportunity to discuss this issue with anyone, because my years of experience has taught me that this issue should only be discussed with the utmost sensitivity, for people can become easily offended when confronted with the position of animal rights.

We were told they would expect several thousand attendees to the evening event, and in the bustling confusion my wife and I took several minutes to find where the actual worship takes place. Finally, we realized that the temple was up a flight of stairs, where it took up most of the second floor. We left our shoes in the shoe closet, and ascended to the temple.

The *Mūrtis*

I have been to a variety of Indian temples both inside and outside of India, and this was one of the most impressive that I have ever seen. The entire room and its statues (*mūrtis*) were opulently carved out of pristine white marble. We bowed as we entered, and were stunned as we attempted to take in the splendor of our surroundings. I felt

compelled to perform a full prostration, but being a newcomer I refrained any displays of devotionism that might seem either out of place, or excessively showy.

The first thing we noticed upon entering the Temple was an elevated platform/chamber in the center that displayed seven *mūrtis* that were carved out of white marble.⁸ Mahasukhbhai informed me that people can wear normal street clothes (with the exception of shoes, and there was a sign that prohibited leather which delighted our vegan sensibilities), but if one were to enter the platform area for a more formal *pūjā*, they must wear special clothing that is free from pollutants (*pūja* cloth). The presence of these *mūrtis* indicates that this temple likely belongs to a sub-sect of the Śvetāmbaras known as Mūrtipūjakas, meaning, “those who venerate *mūrtis*” that usually take the form of *Tīrthaṅkaras*,⁹ as opposed to the Terāpanthī Śvetāmbaras who do not worship images, but venerate mental images of the Tīrthaṅkaras through *bhāva pūjā* (mental worship)¹⁰ and the Sthānakavāsīs whose *bhāva pūja* in veneration of the Tīrthaṅkaraas does not

⁸ You can have a live *darśana* with these *mūrtis* via web-cam online: <http://www.jcnc.org/livedarshan>

⁹ Wiley, K.L., *The A to Z of Jainism*, Scarecrow Press, Toronto, 2009 pg. 208

¹⁰ *ibid.* Wiley, 216

include either physical images (*dravya pūjā*) or mental images.¹¹

In the center of the temple there were seven *mūrtis*. Mahasukhbhai explained usually there is an odd number of *mūrtis* featured in the center chamber of any Jaina temple. I incorrectly assumed that because central *mūrti* was distinctively more opulent than the other six, and because of the centrality of Mahāvīra in Jain discourse, that this central *mūrti* would be Mahāvīra. To my surprise, Mahasukhbhai explained that actually the central one was Ṛṣabha (aka Adīnath, Adīśvara, or Adeśvara, all of which mean “the first Lord”) who is purported to be the founder of Jainism, first of the twenty-four *Tīrthaṅkaras*, and who interestingly is considered to be an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu in the Hindu *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*.¹² Like the other *Tīrthaṅkaras* (with the exception of Munisuvrata and Neminatha) Ṛṣabha was born to the *Ikṣvāku* dynasty, a lineage which I am familiar with through Hinduism as being in the lineage of the *Suryavaṃśa* to which Lord Rāma belongs. Usually Ṛṣabha can be identified by his long hair that hangs to his shoulders,¹³ but I cannot tell if this *mūrti* represents him as such. I was curious as to why Ṛṣabha was

¹¹ *ibid.* Wiley, pg. 203-204

¹² Jaini, P.S., *Jina Ṛṣabha as an Avatāra of Viṣṇu*, “Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies,” Vol. XL, pp. 321-337, University of London, 1977.

¹³ *ibid.* Wiley, pg. 98

given such a central role, and I posed this question to Mahasukhbhai. He responded that the decision to feature a particular Tīrthankara in the center of a temple was made by monks based on who the particular teacher (*ācārya*) of that temple was, where the physical location was, and what the name of the town in which the *mūrti* is to reside.



I asked an attendee if photography was allowed, and he responded in the negative. But I found this picture (above) on Google-images. In some traditions there are strict taboos against taking photographs, or how various photographs are used because the deity actually presides in these, so I hope that it is not an affront to reproduce these *mūrtis* herein. To be cautious, I would not print this picture, and would be respectful of this tradition in the presence of such a holy image.

Vibhaben then explained that the largest of the three images to the house-right of R̥ṣabha was Pārśvanātha, the 23rd Tīrthankara who can be identified by the hood of

snakes.¹⁴ On one side of him sat Munisuvrata, the 20th Tīrthaṅkara, who according to Jain beliefs was born around 1,184,980 BCE. Also next to Pārśvanātha was Vasupujya, the twelfth Tīrthaṅkara. These three *mūrtis* on house-right along with Ṛṣabha were depicted with their eyes open and were adorned, as is represented by what appear to be dots on their bodies.

The three *mūrtis* to the house-left of Ṛṣabha were representative of the Dhigambara tradition, unadorned and with their eyes closed in a meditative trance. The largest of these three images to the left was in fact the great Mahāvīra, who just like the other 22 *Tīrthaṅkaras* other than Ṛṣabha and Pārśvanātha, cannot be distinguished by any particular characteristics¹⁵ other than the particular *lāñchhan* (emblem) that is oftend depicted on the base.

Although initially I had mis-identified Ṛṣabha as Mahavira, I did notice that the majority of devotional energy of the temple attendees was devoted to the *mūrtis* on house-left. There was a bell in front of this deity, and one man sat in meditation reciting what I assume was an extensive sacred text. Another lady prostrated repeatedly, and a

¹⁴ ibid. Wiley pg. 98

¹⁵ ibid. Wiley pg. 98

couple of men who I took to be monks (I was later informed that by Mahasukh that “Generally Jain monks do not visit USA so the people you have seen [in the] temples were not monks”) with shaved heads performed *japa-mala* with their prayer beads (I was curious to know what mantra they were repeating, but did not wish to interrupt them with my inquiries). After the explanation by Vibhaben and Mahasukhbhai, I realized that the reason for the focus on this less-opulent *mūrti*, was because this was the great Mahavira.

Mahāvīra

Mahāvīra is the honorific of Vardhamāna Jñātrputra, and is viewed by some modern scholars as the founder of Jainism, although in the Jaina tradition, he only is the 24th Tīrthaṅkara, the other 23 extending far back into antiquity.

There are certain differences in the accounts of the life of Mahāvīra between the Digambaras and the Śvetāmbaras. The Śvetāmbara story of his birth includes an interesting *in vitro* account where he is first conceived in the womb of Devānandā, who was a Brahmin woman, but then with the help of Śakra (Indra) and the *devatā* Harinegameśī was transferred into the more appropriate Kṣatriya womb of Trīśālā. The *Kalpa Sūtra* (a Śvetāmbara text) tells us of this “womb transference” in its opening verse:

*At that time, in that period, Śramaṇa Bhagavān Mahāvīra had, when the moon was in conjunction with the asterism Uttaraphālgunī, five auspicious events, which were at the Uttara-phālgunī, he descended, having descended, he entered into the womb; at the Uttara-phālgunī, he was transferred from one womb to another.*¹⁶

The story is then recounted at great length, and the womb-transfer itself is described:

*By the order of Śakra (Indra), the well-wishing and sympathetic Deva Harinegameśi removed at midnight...the embryo of Mahāvīra, in tact, from the womb of brāhmaṇī Devānandā of the Jālandhara line, wife of Brahmin Rṣabhadatta of the Kodāla line, to the womb of kṣatriyāṇī Triśalā of the Vasiṣṭha line, wife of kṣatriya Siddhārtha in the line of Kāśyapa.*¹⁷

The Digambara account does not feature this womb transfer; rather he was born directly to Triśalā.

According to Śvetāmbaras, Mahavira was uninterested in the household life, but nonetheless vowed that he would not become a mendicant until his parents had died, a feature not present in the Digambara tradition. Again, the *Kalpa Sūtra* gives the Śvetāmbara account of this vow:

Śramaṇa Bhagavān Mahāvīra, having spend 30 years in the country of Videha, fulfilled his promise, on the death of his parents and with the permission of the

¹⁶ *Kalpa Sūtra of Bhadrabāhu Svāmī*, translated by Kastur Chand Lalwani, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, Dehli, 1979, v. 1, pg. 3

¹⁷ *ibid. Kalpa Sūtra*, v. 30, pg. 21

*elders and superiors: and on this occasion following the established customs and practices...Śramaṇa Bhagavān Mahāvīra perceived the time of his renunciation.*¹⁸

Upon renunciation at the age of 30 he performed the *keśa-loṇca*, by which he pulled his hair out in five handfuls.¹⁹ The *keśa-loṇca* is an important rite for mendicants to this day, symbolizing indifference to the body and the willingness to endure the hardship of mendicant life. However, in some modern practices it is not pulled out in five handfuls, rather the head is shaved prior to the initiation rite, and only small tuft is actually pulled out during the *dīkṣā* (initiation ceremony). After the initiation, monks and nuns remove the hair twice a year, and the Digambaras perform this in a public ceremony²⁰ (but not always).

In Mahavira's renunciation, the *Kalpa Sūtra* also reiterates another point which becomes contentious between the rival sects:

On reaching the most excellent aśoka tree, he ordered his palanquin to be placed beneath it...Thereafter, with his own hand, he took off his wreaths, fineries and ornaments. Having taken them off, he himself tonsured his head in five

¹⁸ *ibid.* *Kalpa Sūtra*, v. 110, 112, pp. 60-61

¹⁹ *ibid.* Wiley, 134-135

²⁰ *ibid.* Wiley, 122

handfuls...putting on a divine robe (deva dūsa)²¹ he tonsured his head and having given up the household order, he entered the order of the homeless monks.²²

Thus, according to this Śvetāmbara account, upon renunciation Mahāvīra actually dressed himself with the *deva-dūṣya*, which could mean the “cloth of the gods” or the “divine cloth.” The *sūtra* continues:

Śramaṇa Bhagavān Mahāvīra was with robes on for one full year and a month. Then he was devoid of cloth, and used the hollow of his palm as his begging bowl.²³²⁴

However, the Digambaras believe that he practiced total nudity since the time of his renunciation. This difference underscores a major doctrinal difference between the Śvetāmbaras, who are white-clothed mendicants, and the Digambaras whose monks (*munis*) practice complete nudity for the duration of their lives, while the nuns (*āriyikās*) wear a white sari, and therefore women can be classified only as an advanced celibate layperson (in the 11th *pratimā*). In either sect, mendicants take a set of vows (*mahāvratā*).

For Digambaras, *aparigraha* entails the renunciation of all clothing, but for Śvetāmbaras the white mendicant garments assist them in carrying out a mendicant life, like the alms

²¹ *devadūsam ādāya*

²² *ibid. Kalpa Sūtra*, v. 116, pg. 64

²³ *samaṇe bhagavaṇ mahāvīre saṃvaccharam sāhiya-māsaṃ jāva...cīvaradhārī hoṭhthā.*

²⁴ *ibid. Kalpa Sūtra*, v. 116, pg. 65

bowls and the *rajoharaṇa* (whisk broom). For them, only Ṛṣabha and Mahāvīra practiced nudity for most of their time as mendicants, while the other 22 Tīrthaṅkaras did not. They also believe that at the time of Mahāvīra monks had the option of being nude if they took the severe *jina-kalpa* path (like Mahāvīra), whereby they live in total isolation perhaps with other monks. But if they chose to live as part of an organized mendicant community (*sthavira-kalpa*) then they could wear clothing. Perhaps due to the severity of *jina-kalpa* both sects agree that this mode of mendicancy ended 64 years after the death of Mahāvīra.²⁵ Also perhaps in part because of the difficult of the vow of nudity, the lineages of naked Digambara monks has died out in the mid-19th century, but was revived in the 20th century.²⁶

Also, peculiar to the Śvetāmbaras tradition is an interesting account by which Mahāvīra wandered for six years with Makkhali Gosāla, who would later lead the Ājīvika movement. This account, told in the Śvetāmbara *Bhagavattī Sūtra*, describes how after studying the penance to acquire yogic bodily heat, Gosāla joined with the Ājīvika mendicants, and subsequently claimed that *he* was the 24th Tīrthaṅkara. He later argued

²⁵ *ibid.* Wiley, pg. 108

²⁶ *ibid.* Wiley, pg. 158-159

with Mahāvīra, threatened to kill him, and even incinerated two of his followers with this yogic heat, and then turned this power onto Mahāvīra, who redirected it, causing Gosāla's death shortly after, but also making Mahāvīra to fall ill. The means by which Mahāvīra cures himself becomes a further source of controversy. He sent his disciple to fetch “*kukkuṭa-māṃsa*” (flesh of a chicken), which becomes interpreted as a type of fruit, but other scholars takes this literally to mean that vegetarianism was not an absolute requirement in the early tradition. However, this episode is not mentioned in the Digambara texts. Rather Gosāla is simply a mendicant to the 23rd Tīrthaṅkara, who preaches a “false doctrine” of the Ājīvikas, and is therefore reborn as *nigoda* (elementary vegetable life).²⁷

This story seems to be a sectarian assertion of the superiority of Jaina doctrine in response to the philosophy of the Ājīvikas that was based on determinism, whereby fate (*niyati*) was the force that determines events, likened to the unwinding of a ball of string that cannot be affected by human effort. Thus, the karma of past deeds would operate on future deeds and all souls would eventually attain liberation (*mokṣa*). Curiously, they still

²⁷ *ibid.* Wiley, pg. 136

“chose” to be an ascetic community, who, like the Jainas, practiced nudity and even fasted to death. The Ājīvikas were profoundly influential and were regarded by the Buddhists as their chief rivals. But for the most part they died out by the Gupta period (4th c. CE) in the North, but survived until the 14 c. in the South.²⁸

The Inscribed Benediction

Perhaps the second thing that I noticed upon entering the temple was an inscription in Nāgarī. As I read it, I immediately realized it was not Sanskrit because what would be the Sanskrit term *namo* (chC) meaning “homage to” was spelled with a retroflexed nasal as *ṇamo* (^hC). The inscription was a five-fold benediction addressed to a class of beings called the *Pañcha Paramēśthis*²⁹ in a prakṛtic language that I was unfamiliar with, and I assumed (correctly) that it must be Ardhamāgadhī, which is often the language of Jaina scriptures. I have since learned that this is also the opening verse of the *Kalpa Sūtra*:

Obeisance to the Victors (arihaṃta)
Obeisance to the Liberated Souls (siddha)
Obeisance to the Preceptors (āyariya)
Obeisance to the Teachers (uvajjhāya)
Obeisance to the Monks (sāhu)

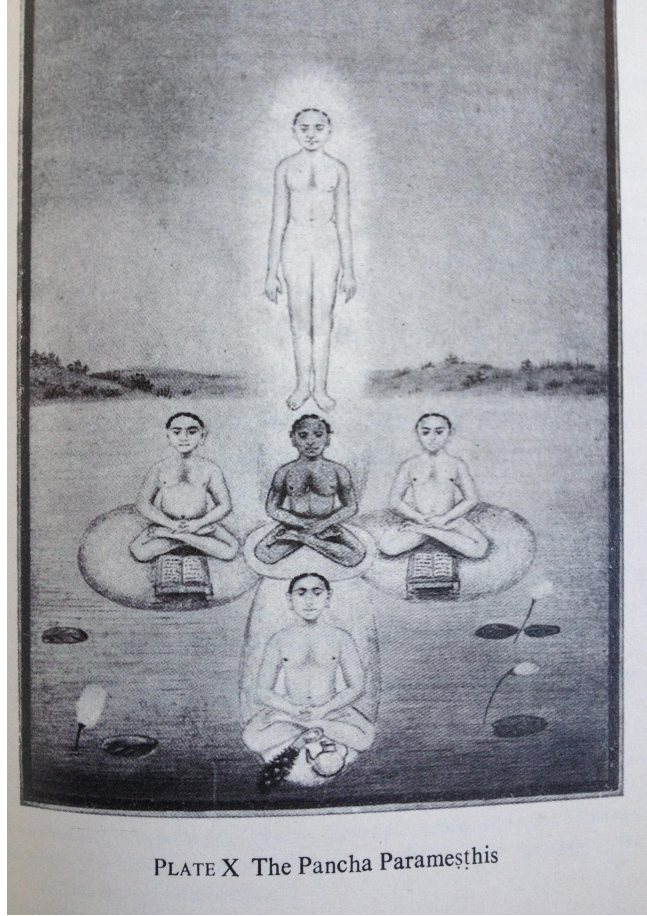
²⁸ ibid. Wiley, pg. 30

²⁹ *Dravya-Saṃgraha* of Nemichandra Siddhānta-Chakravartī, edited by S.C. Ghoshal, First published by Arrah, 1917, republished by Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1989. The Sanskrit commentator Brahmadeva tells us the title of these beings in his commentary to verse 46.

In all the worlds. (loe savva)

This five-fold obeisance ends all sins and bondages;

Among all forms of bliss, this is Number One.^{30 31 32}



³⁰ *ṇamo arihaṇṭāṇaṃ*
 ṇamo siddhāṇaṃ
 ṇamo āyariyāṇaṃ
 ṇamo uvajjhāyāṇaṃ
 ṇamo loe savvasāhuṇaṃ
 eso pañca-ṇamokkāro savvapāpappaṇāsaṇo
 maṇḍglāṇaṃ ca savvesiṃ paḍhamāṇaṃ havae maṇḍgalāṇaṃ

³¹ *ibid. Kalpa Sūtra*, opening benediction, pg. 3

³² *ibid. Dravya-Saṃgraha*. Brahmadeva also lists these *mantras* as the referent of verse 46, “Repeat and meditate on (the *Mantras*), signifying the *Parameśthesis* and consisting of thirty-five, sixteen, six, five, four, two and one letter and other (mantras) taught by the Guru.” After this, the next five verses of the *Dravya-Saṃgraha* explains these categories of beings.

I asked Mahasukhbhai, Vibhaben, and Nirali about these verses and they patiently explained them to me.

The first verse is paying homage to the *ari-hants*, that is those who have destroyed (*hant*) the enemies (*ari*).³³ I asked what these enemies were, and Vibhaben responded that the *arihants* were the ones who and destroyed the enemies of anger (*krodha*), ego (*man*), deceit (*maya*), greed (*lobha*), attachment (*rāga*) and aversion (*dveṣa*). They are a class of beings who are both enlightened and embodied, so they are able to preach. The *Dravya-Saṃgraha* tells us:

That pure soul existing in an auspicious body, possessed of (infinite) faith, happiness, knowledge and power which has destroyed the four Ghātiya Karmas, is to be meditated on as Arhat (ariho).³⁴

Here, the *ari-hants* are referred to as *ariho*, which, (as I have said in footnote 33) is likely the Ardhamāgadhī for the Sanskrit *arhat*, which means something to the effect of “worthy or venerable one” from the dhatu (root) *√arha*, meaning “to deserve merit, be worthy of, to have a claim to, be entitled to, to be able.” If this is the case, then it seems

³³ *ibid. Dravya-Saṃgraha*, verse 50, pg. 113. Although it seems that Nemichandra Siddhānta-Chakravartī uses *ariho* instead of the term *arihaṃta* that we see in the *Kalpa Sūtra*. Brahmadeva takes *ariho* to be Ardhamāgadhī for *arhat*, a term that Buddhist adepts will be familiar with (discussed below).

³⁴ *ibid. Dravya-Saṃgraha*, verse 50, pg. 113

that the *Dravya-Saṃgraha* has a different variation than the *Kalpa-Sūtra* that was inscribed on the wall of the temple. But whatever the case, whether the first benediction is to *arhats* or *ari-hants*, here in the *Dravya-Saṃgraha* we can see that this class of beings is described in positive terms, by their virtues that they possess (“faith, happiness, knowledge and power) as well as the negative terms of destroying “the four Ghātiya Karmas” (lit. “karmas that kill”) that Brahmadeva lists as *jñānāvaraṇīya*, *darśanāvaraṇīya*, *mohanīya* and *antarāya* karmas (karmas resulting from “error,” “mental blindness,” “delusion” and “obstacles”). He also notes that these beings are also void of the eighteen kinds of faults (hunger, thirst, fear, aversion, attachment, illusion, anxiety, old age, sickness, death, fatigue, perspiration, pride, displeasure, astonishment, birth, sleep and sorrow). He also notes that,

*From the realistic point of view, an Arhat is without a body; but from the ordinary point of view, we speak of an Arhat to possess a body known as Audārika, which is brilliant as a thousand suns.*³⁵

³⁵ *ibid. Dravya-Saṃgraha*, Brahmadeva’s commentary for verse 50, pg. 114

In addition, these beings are “in the last stage of obtaining Nirvāṇa” and are worshipped by the “gods Indra etc.”³⁶

The second verse is in homage to the *siddhas* who according to Vibhāṇa are completely liberated, and are without a body, existing only as a pure soul (*jīva*).

Therefore, they are not able to guide us.

The term *siddha* is from Sanskrit and literally means “ready, powerful,” or “accomplished.” According to Wiley this is referring to “one who has accomplished his goals,” namely liberation (*mokṣa*) from the cycle of rebirth (*saṃsāra*). They are experiencing their true nature of infinite consciousness (*caitanya*) and bliss and dwell in the *siddha-loka* (lit. “world of *siddhas*”) or the *īśat-prāgbhārā-bhūmi* (lit. “the land of multiple *īśat*,” the latter is not a Sanskrit term, but may derive from $\sqrt{īṣ}$ meaning “desire,” meaning the land of multiple desires, or *īṣat*, meaning “the land of few desires.”) This *siddha-loka* is at the top of the *loka-ākāśa* (occupied universe) represented by the shape

³⁶ *ibid. Dravya-Saṃgraha*, Brahmadeva’s commentary for verse 50, pg. 114

of the *Jaina pratīka* (symbol of the Jaina) which was adopted in 1975 in honor of the 2,500 anniversary of Mahāvīra's *nirvāṇa*.³⁷

This pure consciousness (*caitanya*) as experienced by the *Siddhas* is the defining quality (*guṇa*) of the soul (*jīva*). Prior to liberation, the application of this *caitanya* is twofold: as *darśana* (perception) and as *jñāna* (knowledge). *Darśana* is the indistinct awareness of an object, while *jñāna* is the comprehension of the details of an object. These operate in sequence prior to liberation (*kevala-jñāna*).³⁸ A *Siddha* obtains *mokṣa* only after fourteen stages, the last two of which are *kevala-jñāna*, a term translated as “omniscience” by Wiley, but might also be rendered to be something like “uncompounded knowledge.”

The first three stages involve levels of delusional views (*mithyā*), and only by the fourth

³⁷ *ibid.* Wiley, pg. 197

³⁸ *ibid.* Wiley, pg. 68

does one have a proper view of reality (*samyak-dr̥ṣṭi/samyak darśana*).³⁹ The *Dravya-*

Samgraha tells us:

*Meditate on the Siddha—the soul which is bereft of the bodies produced by eight kinds of Karma, which is the seer and knower of Loka and Aloka, which has a shape like a human being and which stays at the summit of the universe.*⁴⁰

While on the surface the dis-embodied nature of the Siddha (“bereft of the bodies produced by eight kinds of Karma”) in this verse seems to exactly correspond Vibhāben’s description, it seems to be contradicted by describing their “shape.” Brahmadeva amends this by saying,

*Really speaking, a Siddha is without a body and hence incapable of being perceived by the senses. But from the ordinary point of view, a Siddha is said to have a shadowy shape, resembling the figure of a human being.*⁴¹

Brahmadeva then goes on to tell us that they are at the penultimate stage, just before the “final body” and that they live at the “summit of Lokākāśa or the universe in a place called the Siddha-śilā beyond which Alokākāśa begins.”⁴² I’m not certain as to the specific characteristics of these realms, but they sound like they are spiritual realms

³⁹ *ibid.* Wiley, pg. 243

⁴⁰ *ibid.* *Dravya-Samgraha*, verse 51, pg. 115

⁴¹ *ibid.* *Dravya-Samgraha*, Brahmadeva’s commentary on verse 50, pg. 113

⁴² *ibid.* *Dravya-Samgraha*, Brahmadeva’s commentary on verse 50, pg. 113

where beings are free from gross karmic material, and dwell in a higher state of pure consciousness.

Vibhaben explained that the third verse was in homage to the *ācārya* (skt. lit. “teacher,” Ardhamāgadhī: *āyariya*). She explained that they were usually the head of the congregation who, unlike the *ari-hants* and the *siddhas* had not yet achieved full enlightenment, and were possessed of at least a subtle level of human weakness, such as greed. She also explained that they do not have an *ācārya* in the US because such teachers won’t travel outside of India. Because of their vow of *ahiṃsā* (non-harming) they can only travel on foot, they won’t cross the ocean, will not ride in a vehicle, and they cannot stay in one place for more than four months during the rainy season so that their students don’t become too attached to them. But there is also a prohibition against travel because as the *Ācārāṅga Sūtra* tells us:

When the rainy season has come and it is raining, many living beings are originated and many seeds just spring up, the roads between (different places) contain many living beings, seeds, etc...the footpaths are not used, the roads are not recognizable. Knowing this, one should not wander from village to village, but remain during the rainy season in one place.[1] But if after the same time the

*road contains few living beings, and many Sramanas and Brāhmanas etc. travel, they may circumspectly wander from village to village. [5]*⁴³

Thus, any mode of transportation that might cause harm to the *jivas* is prohibited, and even walking during times of excess growth is forbidden, such as during the rainy season.

Nonetheless, these *ācāryas* are always teaching. Wiley notes that they are usually appointed or elected to this position, and they, like any fully initiated monk of any rank, often initiate new mendicants. *Ācāryas* are the leaders of the group of monks and impose penances for infractions of the vows, they interpret the scriptures for their students, and also appoint a successor. But there may be several *ācāryas* in one *samudāya*, and one of them may be considered to be the *gacchādipati* (chief teacher). At the time of initiation as an *ācārya*, they are given the *sūri-mantra*, which is said to have been given by Mahāvira to his disciples (*gaṇadharas*), at which point the title *sūri* is appended to their name.

The *Dravya-Saṃgraha* describes the *ācārya* as such:

⁴³ *ibid.* Ācārāṅga Sūtra, 2.3.1.1, 5, pg. 125

*That sage who attaches himself and others to the practice of vīrya (power), cāritra (conduct) and tapa (penance) in which faith and knowledge are eminent is to be mediated, as ācārya.*⁴⁴

Brahmadeva goes on to describe the specifics of what these four virtues consist of in terms of “making the soul tranquil... so that it may enjoy perfect bliss,” and the ability to “conquer reprehensible desires and attain a true conception of the soul.” He also quotes a beautiful verse that mentions, along with the cultivation of virtues, that the ācārya “is always kind to his disciples.”⁴⁵

According Vibhaben and Mahasukhbhai the fourth benediction was addressed to the upādhyāya, who is a scholar of Jaina scriptures and who guides the other monks. The *Dravya-Saṃgraha* describes him as:

*That being, the greatest of the great sages who being possessed of the three jewels is always engaged in preaching the religious truths, is (known as) Upādhyāya (teacher). Salutation to him.*⁴⁶

Vibhaben and Mahasukhbhai explained that like other *munis*, they do not travel in vehicles. Although they are of a lower standing than the ācārya they teach both

⁴⁴ ibid. *Dravya-Saṃgraha*, verse 52, pg. 116

⁴⁵ ibid. *Dravya-Saṃgraha*, Brahmadeva’s commentary on verse 52, pg. 117. The verse he cites goes:

I always bow to Dharmācārya (the preceptor of the religion) who possesses the thrity-six qualities, advises the practice of the five kinds of ācāras and is always kind to his disciples.

⁴⁶ ibid. *Dravya-Saṃgraha*, verse 53, pg. 118

subordinate monks and the public. Vibhaben made the analogy that where the *ācārya* acts like the Principal, while the *upādhyāyas* act like the subordinate teachers. According to Wiley, this rank no longer exists for the Digambaras, and rather the term can refer to the name of a caste of temple priests in Digambara temples.⁴⁷

Finally, the last verse, as I was kindly informed by Vibhaben and Mahasukhbhai, was to the *savvasāhuṇa*, which is Ardhamāgadhī for *sādhu*, roughly synonymous with *muni*, a term that is used more for Śvetāmbaras than Digambara monks, according to Wiley. The *Dravya-Saṃgraha* describes him as

*That sage who practices well conduct—which is always pure and which is the path of liberation, with perfect faith and knowledge—is a Sādhu. Obeisances to him.*⁴⁸

Brahmadeva elaborates on this “conduct” in terms that we might expect, but also adds “A Sādhu is characterized by activity while moving in the path of liberation.”⁴⁹ I might take this to mean that for a Sādhu, there is an emphasis on cultivation of virtue in favor of renunciation of actions and destroying karmas, like we have seen in the others.

⁴⁷ *ibid.* Wiley, pg. 223

⁴⁸ *ibid.* *Dravya-Saṃgraha*, verse 54, pg. 118

⁴⁹ *ibid.* *Dravya-Saṃgraha*, Brahmadeva’s commentary on verse 54, pg. 119.

In addition to this, Vibhaben and Mahasukhbhai informed me that at this level a Sādhu could be both female and male, unlike the previous levels (with at least one notable exception indicated by Wiley).⁵⁰

Gender

This point about gender sparked an interesting discussion amongst their family. Mahasukhbhai said the reason that women cannot take all of these steps is because they are biologically designed to love their family and their children, and will never be able to achieve the freedom from liking and disliking that is so important in the Jain doctrine, exemplified by the *Ācārāṅga Sūtra*'s discussion of the many things that one should “neither be pleased with nor prohibit.”⁵¹ But he was quick to point out that the soul itself is not inherently gendered, and all souls can take any body due to their karma. The entire family chimed in on this point, and seemed to have some slightly different ideas.

⁵⁰ *ibid.* Wiley, pg. 180

⁵¹ *ibid.* *Ācārāṅga Sūtra*, 2.13, the list begins with a list of pleasant things to be dispassionate towards: rubbing one's feet, touching, or painting their body, being anointed with oils, being shampooed, or sprinkled with either hot or cold water, the smell of incense. Then it lists several medical procedures that one should be unmoved by: removing of a splinter, thorn, pus, or blood, rubbing of a wound, or washing it, being cut to remove pus or blood, rubbing of a “boil, abscess, ulcer, or fistula,” etc. Then it goes on to list impartiality towards various hygienic measures: removing or wiping of sweat or uncleanness, on the body, cutting or dressing hair on the head or body. It lists several other actions as well.

Wiley points out that in the early Jain texts, the attitude towards women is similar to what is found in the Buddhist and Brahmanical texts, in which there are negative ideas surrounding women. Being a woman indicates negative actions in one's previous life, but does not prevent one from attaining *samyak-darśana* (proper view of reality) in this life, whereby they may then be reborn a male. Like other ascetic traditions, women are to be avoided by mendicants because they represent a sexual-temptation and temptation to return to householder life.⁵² The *Sūtrakritāṅga* (a Svetambara *āgama*) tells us:

With clever pretenses women make up to him [the monk], however foolish they be; they know how to contrive that some monks will become intimate with them. [2] They will often sit down at his side; they always put on fine clothes; they will show him the lower part of their body, and the armpit, while lifting up their arms, so that he will follow them about. [3] And occasionally a woman will tempt him to a comfortable couch or bed. But he should know these things to be as many traps under various disguises [4]. He should not look at them, nor should he consent to anything inconsiderate, nor walk together with them; thus he will well guard himself. [5] As with a piece of flesh a fearless single lion get him into a trap, so women may capture an ascetic though he be careful. [8] As an antelope caught in a snare, so he does not get out of it, however he struggles. Afterwards he will feel remorse like one who has drunk milk mixed with poison; considering the consequences, a worthy monk should have not intercourse with women [10]. Therefore he should avoid women, knowing them to be like a poisoned thorn. He is not Nirgrantha who without companion (goes into) houses, being a slave (to passion) and preaches (his religion). [11] Those who are attached to this sinful (intercourse) must be reckoned among the wicked. Even a monk who practices

⁵² *ibid.* Wiley, pg. 236-237

*severe austerities should avoid the company of women. [12] Those who have intercourse with (women) have already ceased to practice meditation; Sramanas, therefore, for the benefit of their souls, do not go to the apartments (of women) [16]. One man (women) have in their heart, another in their words, and another still in their actions. Therefore a monk should not trust women, knowing that they are full of deceit. [24]*⁵³

Obviously we should not generalize the teachings of a specific text upon an entire tradition, but here we can certainly see that men are considered to be like helpless victims to the inherent deceptiveness and uncontrolled sexuality of women. But despite these views (which are shared by other *śramaṇa* traditions as well) unlike Śākyamuni Buddha, Mahāvīra actually established a community of nuns when he first created the Jain community, without the same reluctance that Buddha showed.⁵⁴

Jaini also points out some of the sectarian differences pertaining to attitudes about women and their abilities for spiritual progress. He notes that the Digambaras vehemently maintain that one cannot attain *mokṣa* as a woman, and states that Śvetāmbaras do not grant exclusive access to the states of *Arhat* or *Siddha* to men.⁵⁵ The Digambara objection

⁵³ *Sūtrakṛitāṅga* 1.4.2.2-24, Translated by Hermann Georg Jacobi, 1894, published in *Jaina Sutras*, by Forgotten Books, 2008, pp. 436-438

⁵⁴ *ibid.* Wiley, pg. 236

⁵⁵ Jaini, P.S., *Jaina Debates on Spiritual Liberation of Women*, “Gender and Salvation: Debates on the Spiritual Liberation of Women,” Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991, pg. 1

is that it is impossible for anyone to attain *mokṣa* without practicing complete nudity (*nagnabhāva*), because the retention of clothes “implied residual sex desire.” And since women were prohibited against renouncing their clothes, this led to the Digambara formulation that women cannot attain *mokṣa*. This is stated by Kundakunda (c. second century A.D.), who also tells biological reasons why women cannot attain *mokṣa*:

*The genital organs of the woman, her naval, armpits, and the area between her breasts, are said [in the scriptures] to be breeding grounds of subtle forms of life. How can there be [full] renunciation for a woman? Their minds are not pure and by nature they are not firm in mind or in body. They have monthly menstruation. Therefore, for women there is no meditation free from fear.*⁵⁶

Jaini suggests that here Kundakunda may be arguing against the Śvetāmbara view that women can in fact obtain *mokṣa*. But he also mentions that the Śvetāmbaras were not the first to uphold this view. Rather a mendicant by the name of Śākaṭāyana (~9th c.) from an extinct sect of Jains known as the Yāpanīya (approx. 2nd c. to the 12th c.) has the distinction of being the first known Indian to expound the position that a woman can

⁵⁶ ibid. Jaini, *Jaina Debates on Spiritual Liberation of Women*, pg. 4, citing the *Suttapāhuḍa* of Kundakunda.

attain *mokṣa*.⁵⁷ Consequently, this sect, which was formulated as a sort of compromise between the two hostile factions, believed that nudity was not necessary for women to attain *mokṣa*. The Śvetāmbaras likely adopted their belief that women can attain *mokṣa* from the Yāpanīya sect. But despite the heated debate between the Śvetāmbaras and the Digambaras, Jaini also notes that “they do, however, share a common belief system and in many cases their positions are identical regarding the status of women *vis-à-vis* men within the ecclesiastical order or with reference to the laws of *karma* that apply to male and female rebirth processes.”⁵⁸

Wiley continues that like other traditions, the role of women is dependent on the particular culture and environment in which the particular variant of Jaina religion exists. Like other Indian traditions, a woman’s spiritual purity is equated to their chastity and faithfulness to their husbands and family. And also like other ascetic traditions, Jaina women are largely responsible for feeding alms to the ascetics, but in the Jain traditions, these women must themselves observe strict dietary restrictions to be able to do so. They

⁵⁷ ibid. Jaini, *Jaina Debates on Spiritual Liberation of Women*, pg. 5, citing Śākaṭāyana’s *Strīnīrvāṇaprakaraṇa*

⁵⁸ ibid. Jaini, *Jaina Debates on Spiritual Liberation of Women*, pg. 5

tend to fast more as a display of chastity and religiosity than men, and are more likely to perform daily *pūjā* in the temple than men.⁵⁹ Wiley also points out, that much like the Buddhist Vinaya, a monk is always senior to a nun irrespective of any other factors.⁶⁰

My impression of talking to Vibhaben, Mahasukhbhai and Dr. Nirali was that this was an issue that was in the process of being worked out in relation to modernity, and establishing the Jain religion in the West. It will be interesting to see how the roles of gender either change or remain constant after several more decades of this community being established here in the Bay Area.

Apart from gender, this five-fold benediction illustrates another interesting aspect of Jainism, namely that of the mendicant hierarchy. Many factors determine the status of the mendicants, including gender, mendicant age (relative to date of initiation), and appointment to official positions (*padvīs*), and severity of vows.⁶¹ The specifics of this are quite complex and differ from sect to sect, but I believe that Vibhaben, Mahasukhbhai

⁵⁹ *ibid.* Wiley, pg. 236-237

⁶⁰ *ibid.* Wiley, pg. 144

⁶¹ *ibid.* Wiley, pp. 144-145

and Dr. Niralis' explanation of these benedictions give us insight into the specifics of the hierarchical reckoning in their particular tradition.

Śrīmad Rājacandra



Just after my wife and I noticed these verses, the very next display on the wall was three pictures of Jaina ascetics. I inquired to my new friends as to who these distinguished sages might be.

Unfortunately, we did not discuss who two of these figures were, but the largest of these pictures featured an emaciated figure who, Vibhaben and Mahasukhbhai explained, was a picture of Śrīmad Rājacandra (1867-1901). In observance of Jainism's long history of severe asceticism, he was shockingly gaunt, and his body was a stark visual representation of the harsh austerities that Jain ascetics are famous for. Here was a man who literally lived by the injunction instantiated in the *Ācārāṅga Sūtra*:

*One should mortify (one's flesh) in a low, high, and highest degree, quitting one's former connections, and entering tranquility. Therefore a hero (Jina) is careful, a person of pith, guarded, endowed (with knowledge, etc.), and always restrained. Difficult to go is the road of the heroes, who go whence there is no return (final liberation). Subdue blood and flesh.*⁶²

Śrīmad Rājacandra was born as Raicandbhai Mahetā in Gujarat to a Vaiṣṇava family and his mother was a Sthānakavāsī Jain. He displayed notable spiritual powers at a young age, and had written on many topics by the time he was twenty. Like other Jaina teachings, he taught that one must experience the purity of the *ātman* through meditation, but he was also clearly influenced by Vaiṣṇava theism. He criticized the sectarianism of the Jaina religion, and believed that Jaina dharma was declining because of that and

⁶² ibid. *Ācārāṅga Sūtra*, 1.4.4.1, pg. 59

rituals that were void of spiritual understanding (although he did come to acknowledge the value of image worship). He was influenced by Digambara texts, particularly Kundakunda's writings about the pure nature of the soul⁶³ in which Kundakunda posits a theory of reality expressed in two levels of truth: absolute (*niścaya naya*) and conventional (*vyavahāra naya*),⁶⁴ which certainly will remind Buddhist adepts of the work of Nāgārjuna. Interestingly, he never became a full renunciate, claiming that the householders' life was far more arduous, and was the path that he had to follow because that is where his karma had led him. He did however have followers, and towards the end of his life he declared to them that he had attained a direct experience of his inner soul. He wrote more than two-dozen books in his short life, and about eight hundred of his letters have been published, including three that were sent to Gāndhī regarding nonviolent resistance, amongst other topics.⁶⁵ These letters chart his own spiritual development, as well as that of his small group of friends. Dundas writes about his

⁶³ Dundas, P., *The Jains*, Routledge, New York, 1992, pg. 262

⁶⁴ *ibid.* Wiley, pg. 126

⁶⁵ *ibid.* Wiley, pg. 176-177

“grand claims for himself as a spiritual leader and savior,” and how in 1890 he believed himself to have achieved a state of realization that he would later describe thusly,

*I am distinct from everything in all respects. I am only most pure consciousness, most exalted and unthinkable and an unadulterated pure experience-self.. I direct my resultant consciousness to my soul. I absorb myself deeply within it.*⁶⁶

In one letter he summed up the points of what he considered to be true religion: the soul exists and is eternal, and it is both the agent and the experiencer of actions. Spiritual deliverance exists, and the means of attaining it is the experience of the self.⁶⁷ He died at the age of 34 with his body emaciated from fasting and illness,⁶⁸ but I would not consider this a sad fate, as it seemed to be congruent with his highest ideals.

My hosts mentioned that he had been influential on Gāndhī, inspiring Gāndhī’s adherence to the principles of non-violence. Gāndhī acknowledged this publicly,

*I have said elsewhere that besides Kavi [referring to Śrīmad Rājacandra] Ruskin and Tolstoy have contributed in forming my intrinsic character; but Kavi has had a more profound effect because I had come in personal and intimate contact with Him.”*⁶⁹

⁶⁶ ibid. ibid. Dundas, pg. 263, citing Mehta and Sheth, *Shrimad Rajacandra: A life*, Ahmedabad, 1971 : 122

⁶⁷ibid. Dundas, pg. 263

⁶⁸ ibid. Wiley, pg. 176-177

⁶⁹ *Modern Review*, June 1930, cited from <http://www.shrimadrajchandramission.org/inspiration/shrimad-rajchandraji/shrimadji-and-gandhiji-308.htm>

As evidenced by my discussion with my hosts, Rājacandra is often most remembered for his relationship with Gāndhī, and is often described as Gāndhī's guru. They met in 1891 after Gāndhī had completed his studies in England, and before he went to South Africa. Later in his autobiography Gāndhī would write,

*I have tried to meet the heads of various faiths, and I must say that no one else ever made on me the impression that [Rājacandra] did. His words went straight home to me. His intellect compelled as great a regard from me as his moral earnestness, and deep down in me was the conviction that he would never willingly lead me astray and would always confide to me his innermost thoughts. In my moments of spiritual crisis, therefore, he was my refuge.*⁷⁰

Apparently while Gāndhī was in South Africa he became interested in becoming a Christian, but the letters of Rājacandra convinced him not to abandon Hinduism. The three surviving letters that Rājacandra wrote to Gāndhī were about the existence of the soul and God, dietary restrictions, and correct moral behavior. Apart from their ascetic parallels, we can easily see the Jain influence in Gāndhī's understanding of religion and non-violence, and this must have at least in part been influenced by his relationship to Rājacandra.

⁷⁰ ibid. Dundas, pg. 264, citing Gandhi, M., *An Autobiography*, London, 1949: 74-5

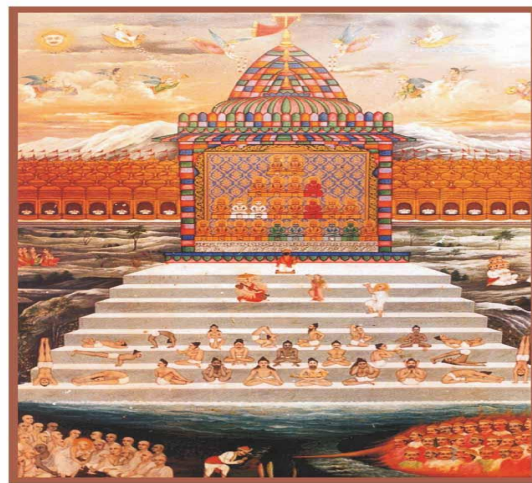
His legacy today includes several *āśrams* internationally dedicated to him as the devotional focus, and may also be developing a lay guru lineage. His brand of Jainism is one that transcends sectarianism and has broad appeal amongst the Jaina community.⁷¹

Mount Aṣṭāpada

After my wife and I examined the pictures of these great sages, we continued in a clockwise fashion to make our way along the walls to the temple. We came across several smaller statues of Gods familiar to Hinduism, Śiva, Viṣṇu, Lakṣmī, Sarasvatī, etc., and made our way behind the central display where there were twenty-four *mūrtis* alternating between those that had eyes open and were adorned, and those that had closed eyes and were not adorned. I took these to be the twenty-four Tīrthaṅkaras. We came around the other side of the central display where there were more deities that are shared with Hinduism, and gradually made our way to the seated section where we could obtain *darśana* with these powerful *mūrtis*. We sat there in silence for about half an hour before we got up and exited the main temple.

⁷¹ *ibid.* Dundas, pp. 262-265

But then at the top of the stairs before we made our descent back to the more “worldly” parts of the temple, I was struck by a wonderful painting. It depicted a set of stairs occupied by various *yogīs* performing a variety of what looked to be modern day *āsanas*. Also, there was a *nāga* breathing fire that contained what seemed to be a litany of tormented souls. Also on the stairs, a little higher up, was Ravana playing a *vīṇā*, uncharacteristic of the blood thirsty, womanizing *rakṣasa* that I’m familiar with from the *Rāmāyaṇa*. And at the top was what I took to be the 24 *Tīrthaṅkaras*. The image was quite similar to this:



Courtesy : Shri Nathmalji Chandalia, Jaipur

My friends gave me the brief synopsis of the story.

This piece of art depicted Mount Aṣṭāpada (known as Mount Kalāsa in Hindu traditions) where the first Tīrthankara, Ṛṣabha attained *nirvāṇa*. This account is briefly mentioned in the *Kalpa Sūtra*:

Then on the exhaustion of his karma, giving experience name and lineage, at the termination time of the bracing-unbracing part of the descension phase of the cycle, less 3 years and 8 ½ months, in the fifth fortnight of the third month of winter, on the 13th day of the dark half of Māgha, atop Mount Aṣṭāpada, in the company of 10,000 monks, and courting the vow of taking food without water once in seven days, when the moon was in conjunction with the asterism Abhijit, in the early part of the day, seated in the samparyāṅka posture, he passed away, went beyond the bonds of karma, was uplifted after having left the world, cut asunder the tie of birth-old age-death, and became perfected, enlightened and liberated, the maker of the end, and the terminator of all misery.⁷²

My hosts explained that the *yogīs* depicted in this picture in various contortions were unable to ascend the mountain, despite their vigorous asceticism and physical strength. However, Ṛṣabha easily ascends the mountain on a ray of sunlight, whereupon the *yogīs* begged him to his disciple.

The story of Ravaṇa, is that he was flying by one day and was stopped by the mountain and a *muni* that was thereupon. The *rākṣasa* became angry and decided to throw the mountain into the ocean, but is stopped by the *muni*'s powers. Later Ravaṇa

⁷² *ibid. Kalpa*, v. 227, pp. 131-132.

and his wife decided to visit, and he played the *vīṇā* while she danced. One of the strings broke, but he didn't want her to stop dancing, so he removed a vein from his arm and used it as a string. This selfless act gave him good karma, and so one day even he will be born as a Tīrthaṅkara. Vibhaben and Mahasukhbhai told me that the moral of the story is that anyone can redeem their sins regardless of their past sins.

Conclusion

At this point, I felt that I had used up enough of the time of my gracious hosts, and I felt that I should not overstay my welcome. As we began to say our goodbyes, Mahasukhbhai wanted me to hear one last lesson about the Great Jaina Dharma:

Spiritual progress of the soul and nonviolence [are the essence of Jain Dharma] everything else is related to these two things. All studies and rituals are devoted to these goals, and wherever nonviolence is predominant, every soul is capable of becoming a paramātmā. We should never ignore even the smallest soul, even the ant can be an elephant. The soul is very important, the size is not important. This is why Jain dharma is important [because it is] looking at the soul not the body; the body is temporary. We all have the potential, no matter how bad you are, the soul eventually will do the right thing and liberate itself. It is just a matter of time, if not now, then in the next life.

He concluded our conversation by telling me of the importance of creating good karma, and how we must practice cleanliness to properly worship god. Temple worship is part of this good karma, and there are infinite possibilities to get to an ever-higher state. And as infinitely gracious hosts, they invited me to come back to the temple soon, and even to visit their home. I was deeply touched by all of the knowledge that they shared with me, but even more so by associating with people whose deep sense of spirituality was apparent, unimpeachable, and beyond question. It is rare for me to have such a strong impression of people who purport to be on a spiritual path, and their beneficence, kindness, and wisdom reflected the venerability of the Jaina Dharma.

All day long after our conversation, I was deeply moved by the resonance of our interaction. I've always been attracted to the Jaina religion, but now I felt even more closely connected to this ancient tradition than I ever had. That evening I received an email from my new friends, which stated:

Now that you understand about the religion, I would like to say one thing. You don't have to adopt Jain religion to be called as Jain. Anyone who follows Jain principles automatically becomes a Jain.

In many ways I too aspire to uphold the principles of this great religion. And with deepest gratitude, I certainly do feel a little more Jain after this experience.

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