

CHAPTER III

NIRGRANTHA MAHAVIRA

1. The great Renunciation:

Young Prince Mahavira was passing his days in the Nandyavarta Palace along with his parents. All comforts and luxuries of the palace life were at his disposal and all avenues of pleasure were easily available to him. Any ordinary person would have fallen a prey to the various temptations of life which could be conveniently satisfied to a large extent. But these wordly pleasures did not make even the slightest appeal to Prince Mahavira and the sensual temptations of life did not attract his mind. On the contrary these things of sensuous pleasure made him to think about their place and utility in life. He was firmly convinced that the pleasures secured by satisfying the senses are not only transitory but also futile. He therefore came to the conclusion that man should aspire to attain the pleasure of eternal nature and for this purpose man

should make strenuous efforts towards self-restraint or control of one's senses. Mahavira wanted to realise this path of eternal happiness and to reveal this path to the others for their benefit. For this early realisation Mahavira had prepared his mind and was ready to make any sacrifice for it. As a firm step in that direction Mahavira did not even accede to the proposal of his marriage put forward by his parents. Mahavira did not stop with this step of observance of celibacy throughout his life but was yearning to proceed further on the path of self-restraint and control.

As this stage on one day Mahavira remembered his earlier births and it created an excessive stir in his mind. The memory of his earlier births strengthened his feelings of dissatisfaction towards worldly pleasures and vehemently urged him to take further steps on the path of self-restraint. This memory alone was sufficient to arouse the strong feelings of asceticism in his mind. The same thing had happened in the lives of earlier Tirthankaras like Sumatinatha, Padmaprabha, Vasupujya, Santinatha, Kunthunatha, Munisuvrata, Naminatha, Neminatha and Parshvanatha. They did relinquish the worldly pleasures when they remembered their earlier lives. In the case of Mahavira also the memory of his earlier lives goaded him towards the difficult path of asceticism. Like Gautama Budha,

no external incident was necessary for Mahavira to change his mind towards asceticism as the feelings of asceticism were uppermost in his mind from his very childhood.

As a result Mahavira took a final decision to leave the house and to relinquish all pleasures so as to attain self-purification. He earnestly requested his parents to give consent to his decision. The parents also gladly allowed him to follow his path of self-realisation through the practice of asceticism as they were fully convinced about his firm resolve and were in their mind that Mahavira would show by his example the path of salvation and eternal happiness to the mankind. The parents therefore, began to make necessary preparations for the purpose. They distributed what are known as '*Kimich-chhaka*' presents to the learned persons. The arrangements in detail were made to take Mahavira in a grand procession to the place or *Diksha* i.e. initiation ceremony. Mahavira's favourite pelanquin named '*Cha_ndraprabha*' was kept ready for the procession.

The 'auspicious day to renounce the worldly attachments and to enter the ascetic order dawned. It was the tenth day of the „dark half of the month of Margashirsha

corresponding to Monday, 29th December 569 B.C. On that day in the afternoon Prince Mahavira, wearing rich clothes, costly ornaments and fragrant garlands, left the Nandyavarta Palace in a mood of self-satisfaction and sat in the finely bedecked 'Chandraprabha' palanquin for being carried in a procession to the pre-determined place of initiation in the *Jnattrkhanda* garden on the outskirts of Kundalapur. Mahavir's parents, relatives and friends and practically all citizens of Kundalapur had joined the procession. This unique procession wended its way through the major streets of Kundalapur and entered the *Jnattrkhanda* garden. There Prince Mahavira got down from the 'Chandraprabha' palanquin and facing the North sat on a stone-slab, under the shadow of the Ashoka tree. Then in the presence of the entire congregation and in a mood of self-concentration Prince Mahavira slowly removed all clothes, ornaments and garlands on the body and assumed complete nudity, the highest stage in Jaina asceticism, as an indication of the renouncing of all worldly attachments. He, then, sat in a Yogic posture of Padmasana on the same stone-slab, performed *Keshalocha*, i.e. the distinctive practice of Jaina ascetics to pluck out one's hair by one's own hands without shedding even a drop of water from the eyes, adopted *Pancha Mahavrata*s i.e. the five great

vows: of a Jaina ascetic and accepted *Samayika Charttra* i.e. the mode of conduct prescribed in detail for the scrupulous observance by the saints in the ascetic order of the Jainas: This *Diksha-vidhi*, i.e. initiation ceremony took place in the evening when the Moon was in the Uttara Phalguni constellation.

Thus Prince Mahavira became a Nirgrantha Muni i.e. an ascetic who is outwardly unclothed and inwardly unfettered. This event of Prince Mahavira's relinquishment of all worldly attachments and of his becoming Nirgrantha Mahavira is known as Mahavira's. *Abhinishkramana* i.e. the Great Renunciation of Mahavi.

2. The Practice of Penance:

The Great Renunciation of Mahavira took place at the age of 30 and from that time Mahavira moved as Nirgrantha Muni i.e. a naked ascetic. Since Mahavira willingly and gladly adopted ascetic career as a part of his planned life, he made an *Abhigraha*, i.e. a very firm resolve, to make the best of the opportunity in securing his objective of self-realisation and of finding out a way to achieve eternal happiness. Throughout his life, Mahavira never swerved away from this resolve.

Immediately after his *Diksha-vidhi*, i.e. initiation ceremony, Mahavira started to practice *Tapas*, i.e. penance of religious austerity. The *Diksha-vidhi* took place in the evening on the tenth day of the dark half of the month of Margashirsha. Next day morning i.e. on the eleventh day of the dark half of the month of Margashirsha, Nirgrantha Mahavira left the Jnattrkhanda garden, the place of his initiation ceremony, and observed *Upavasa*, i.e. fast on that day. On the next day i.e. on the twelfth day of the dark half of the month of Margashirsha, Mahavira entered the adjoining village Kula and there in the morning took his first *Ahara* i.e. meals as a Nirgrantha Muni at the hands of the King of Kula. Soon he left Kula and went to another place. In this way he wandered from place to place continuously for a period of 12 years and during this period Mahavira practised severe penance.

The most prominent characteristic of his penance was that he invariably practised *Satvika-tapasya*, i.e. real or true penance, and never even thought of practising *Tamasa-tapasya*, i.e. dark penance. The dark penance involved the ghastly and terrible practices like to sleep on the pointed iron nails, to walk on the burning fire, to get oneself suspended from a tree, to get oneself buried in the ground, etc. On the other hand, the *Satvika-tapasya* involved the genuine or natural ways of

practising penance: This real or true penance gave prominence to the practice of *Dhyana*, i.e. meditation and *Upavasa*, i.e., fasting.

Nirgrantha Mahavira always gave utmost preference to the practice of '*Dhyana*' as it involved complete concentration of mind on the *Atrzzan*, i.e. the self and complete absence of the movements of the body. He practised *Dhyana* either in *Padmasaraa* i.e. in a sitting posture or in *Kayotsarga* i.e. in a standing posture. The observance of *Dhyana* is a very difficult practice because it is continued for hours and at times for days together at one stretch and during this period taking food or water is entirely prohibited. In spite of this difficult nature of *Dhyana*, Mahavira developed his inner strength to observe *Dhyana* for longer durations at one stretch and to practise it through all seasons of the year. It was quite usual for

Mahavira to undertake *Dhyana* continuously for many days ' and at times even for a month at a stretch. This practice was not interrupted by the vastly varied conditions of different seasons of the year. In the severe cold season he used to sit for meditation on the top of a mountain or on the bank of a ' river or on the ground in the open. Similarly, in the hot or rainy season it was normal for him to practise *Dhyana* on a stone-slab in the open quite unmindful of the effect of the bleaching hot wind and

torrential, cold rain-water on his naked body. Generally Mahavira preferred isolated and lonely places for his meditation because they were quite helpful in increasing his concentration of mind. That is why he always selected for his *Dhyana* out of the way places like forests, cremation grounds, caves, mountain-tops, etc. Further, while meditating he had to undergo through various *Parishakas* i.e. hardships or sufferings, like hunger, thirst, heat, cold, insectbite, abuse and beating by others and in these calamities Mahavir did achieve *Parishaha-jaya* i.e. conquest of sufferings. Moreover, during the period of meditation or while wandering from place to place Mahavira had to face the fierce attacks from wild animals, thieves, robbers, etc. But Mahavira did not even think of retaliating these attacks. He always suffered them in a calm and collected manner

Along with *Dhyana*, Mahavira attached equal importance *tapasya*, i.e. real penance. Mahavir always remained conscious and alert throughout his meditations which continued incessantly for hours and at times for days together. Whenever he felt dire necessity of taking something for maintaining his normal bodily activities, he used to visit a nearby village or town and immediately after taking food he

used to proceed to a lonely place in a forest or a hill for meditation. Further, whenever he took food, he did so only once a day and that too under various restrictions. Like saints of other religions he never carried a bowl with him, but like IVirgrantha Munis he ate whatever food was placed on his hands. He invariably took *Ruksha* i. e. dry and dreary food and even this he did not take in sufficient quantity. While going to a village or a town for taking food, he followed the rule of *Vrata-Parisamkhyana*, i. e. to take a pledge to accept food from that place only which fulfills certain conditions of secret and extempore nature. He also scrupulously observed the '*Rasa-Parityaga*', i.e. renunciation of tasteful things like milk, clarified butter, curds, sugar, salt and oil. Thus ahavira took only that quantity and quality of food which helped him in his practice of penance. But such occasions for taking food were very few and far between because Mahavira generally preferred to observe *Uparasa*, i.e. Fast. During the fast he never took even a drop of water. Such fasts were frequently undertaken by him and many a time they were of a longer duration. During his 12 years period of penance, Mahavira took food on not more than 350 days. In this way Mahavira laid emphasis on *Upavasa* as he was convinced that '*Upavasa*' was helpful in achieving concentration of mind necessary for meditation.

Further, during his period of penance Mahavira showed least concern for sleep. Whenever he was exhausted and felt the necessity of sleep, he used to take sleep only for some part of the night and that too while lying on the bare ground and without moving the body from one side to another. Moreover, when Mahavira wandered, during his period of penance, from place to place certain incident of high social significance like abolition of practice of slavery from society took place. This practice was in vogue in the city of Kaushambi, the great commercial centre of Vatsa Kingdom. When Mahavira entered Kaushambi, a city for *Ahara*, i.e. food and was going through its main street along the house of Seth Rishabhadatta, the commercial magnet of Kaushambi. a slave girl by name Chandana from Seth Rishabhadatta's house offered the food consisting of porridge of coarse rice to Mahavira. The residents of Kaushambi were greatly surprised to watch this incident because due to the intense desire of Chandana to serve food personally to Mahavira, her fetters were automatically removed and she came from her cellular confinement to the main door of Seth Rishabhadatta's house to offer food to Mahavira. To the great astonishment of Seth Rishabhadatta and other high dignitaries of Kaushambi city, Mahavira did

not pay heed to the food offerings made by wealthy merchants and high officers but accepted the food of coarse rice offered by Chandana. Seth Rishabhadatta, who was very much moved by this incident, freed Chandana from her bondages and this example of freeing the slaves was emulated by the slave-owners in Kausambi. After the release of Chandana from slavery it was realised that Chandana was the youngest daughter of King Chetaka of Vaishali and the maternal aunt of Mahavira and that through a strange mishap she was compelled to live as a slave-girl in the house of Seth Rishabhadatta in Kaushambi. In due course Chandana entered the ascetic order and even became the head of the female ascetics in the *Sangha*, i.e. the organization of the ascetics founded by Mahavira.

Furthermore, Mahavira had to go through various tests or ordeals designed by others with a view to disturb him in his meditation during his period of penance. Mahavira did bear very calmly the several hardships and injuries inflicted by others. There had been many instances of such calamities during his period of penance. Among such instances, the Ujjayini incident could be mentioned. In his wanderings when Mahavira came to Ujjayini city, he started his *Dhyana*, or meditation, in the *Atimuktaka* cremation ground as it was a very

good place for meditation due to its isolation. At night Rudra, a fierce God, by name Sthanu came there and began to trouble Mahavira in many ways. Rudra assumed various terrible forms, danced like Ghosts and produced fierce sounds like lions and elephants. But these terrific attempts did not produce any effect on Mahavira and could not create even slight disturbance in his meditation. At last Sthanu gave up his efforts to create fear in the mind of Mahavira and went away from *Atimuktaka* cremation ground.

During his long period of penance Mahavira invariably observed *Mauna*, i.e., complete silence. As Mahavira successfully followed the difficult *Mauna-Orata*, i.e. the vow to observe silence, for a considerably long period, he was termed as '*Mahamauni*', i.e. the great observer of silence.

3. The Attainment of Omniscience:

As a Nirgrantha Muni i.e. a naked asectic, Mahavira practised in a very scrupulous manner different kinds of religious austerities with a view to find out the way for securing eternal happiness by all living beings. Mahavira's severe practice of penance had continued uninterruptedly in spite of several hardships and tortures for a period of twelve years.

Mahavira continued further the observance of the same forms of religious austerities and especially his practice of meditation, in a standing or squatting posture and with his eyes fixed on the tip of nose, and contemplation on the *Atman*, i.e. the Soul. One day, while Mahavira was plunged in *Shukla-Dhyana*, i.e. the pure meditation, in a sitting posture on stone slab under the shadow of a *Sala* tree in the forest known as *Manohara* on the bank of the river *Rijukula* having close to the village 'Jrmbhaka' or Jrmbhika in the Kingdom of Magadha, '*Kevala-Jnana*' i.e. omniscience or all-knowledge (which has no limitations of time and space) dawned -on him.

This great event occurred during the after-noon on the tenth day of the bright half of the month of Vaishakha when the Moon was between the consolidations of *Hasta* and *Uttara*, corresponding to Sunday, the 26th April 557 B.C. It means that Nirgrantha Mahavira became a '*Kevali*' i.e. the possessor of omniscient knowledge after a period of 12 years, 5 months and 15 days of continuous practice of penance.

As Mahavira attained omniscience he knew and saw all conditions of the world of the Gods, men and animals, whence they come, whither they go, where they are born as men or animals, gods or infernal beings, according to their deeds. This

fact has been corroborated by the Buddhist tests, too, which declare him as "the head of an order, of a following, the teacher of a school, well-known and of repute as a sophist, revered by the people, an all knowing and all seeing master, who was endowed with unlimited knowledge and vision."

Further, as a *Kevali*, Mahavira secured *Ananta-Chatushtaya*, i.e. the Infinite Quaternary, consisting of (i) *Arlanta-Jnana*, i.e. infinite knowledge, (ii) *Anuntadarshana*, i.e. infinite perception, (iii) *Ananta-Sukha*, i.e. infinite bliss, and (iv) *Ananta-Bala*, i.e. infinite power. Moreover since the attainment of omniscience Mahavira, became completely free from the four kinds of *Kashaya*, i.e. passions, viz. (i) *Krodha*, i.e. anger, (ii) *Mana*, i.e. pride, (iii) *Maya*, i.e. deception and (iv) *Molaa* i.e. greed. It meant that Mahavira became *Vdtaraga*, i.e., free from all passions.

Thus due to *Kevala-Jnana*, i.e. omniscience Mahavira got satisfactory solutions for all those problems and questions connected with the life and the Universe, which occur to any inquisitive soul. Obviously after the attainment of omniscience Mahavira began to tell these solutions to the people and from

that time Nirgrantha Mahavira became a '*Tirthankara*' i.e. a Great Guide or Teacher.

'-There is evidence to show that so far back as the first century B. C. there were people who were worshipping Rishabhadeva, the first Tirthankara. There is no doubt that Jainism prevailed even before Vardhmana or Parsvanath. The Yajurveda mentions the . names of three Thirthankaras- Rishabha, Ajitnath and Arise nemi. The Bhagavata Puran endorses the view that Rishabha was the founder of Jainism."

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