

The Formative Period of Jainism (c. 500 BCE–200 CE)

There is no unanimity on the question of when Jainism came into existence. The Jains themselves maintain that it was originally taught by Tirthaṅkaras (ford makers). The most recent Tirthaṅkara, still according to the Jains, was Mahāvīra, the last Tirthaṅkara in the present world period, though not the first. According to a relatively late tradition, Mahāvīra was one of 24 Tirthaṅkaras who lived in this world period and of whom complete lists have been preserved.¹

As in the case of the earlier *buddhas* claimed in Buddhism, it is plausible that the other Tirthaṅkaras are without historical basis. But unlike Buddhism, there is one predecessor of Mahāvīra whose historical reality cannot so easily be discarded, namely Pārśva, who supposedly lived 250 years before Mahāvīra. For one thing, the recorded timespan of merely 250 years instead of the usual millions that typically separate a Tirthaṅkara from his immediate predecessor and successor seems somewhat more acceptable to modern historians. For another, some early Jain texts actually mention followers of Pārśva and contrast his teachings with those of Mahāvīra. The conclusion to be drawn is that Jainism (in the form taught by Pārśva) may have existed before Mahāvīra.²

Mahāvīra appears to have been a contemporary of the Buddha. This, at any rate, is what certain canonical Buddhist texts claim, maintaining that Mahāvīra died during the lifetime of the Buddha.³ Given that recent research puts the death of the Buddha roughly around the year 400 BCE, we can conclude that Mahāvīra also worked and died in the latter half of the 5th century BCE. If Pārśva was indeed a historical figure, he must accordingly have lived earlier, though we cannot be sure just how much earlier.

Our most important sources of information regarding early Jainism are found in the canon preserved by the Śvetāmbara Jains. Unfortunately, this canon was given its definitive form at a late date, some 980 years after Mahāvīra according to a Jain

tradition, that is, 454 or 514 CE.⁴ This does not mean that all the texts that are included in the canon are as recent as this; quite the contrary, it would appear that a number of them are centuries older. However, it is rarely possible to determine how much older any particular text (or portion of text) really is. Mainly on linguistic grounds, it has been argued that the *Ācārāṅga Sūtra*, the *Sūtrakṛtāṅga Sūtra*, and the *Uttarādhyayana Sūtra* are among the oldest texts in the canon.⁵ This does not guarantee that they actually date from the time of Mahāvīra, nor even from the centuries immediately following his death, nor does it guarantee that all parts of these texts were composed simultaneously.

One thing is clear: few, if any, of our oldest Jain sources date back to the time of Mahāvīra. It is therefore extremely difficult to reconstruct elements of his life and teaching. However, some parts of the claimed teachings that have been preserved in the earliest texts can, with a fair amount of confidence, be attributed to Mahāvīra himself, because they are confirmed by independent evidence and fit in with the general understanding of the intellectual and religious life of the time. Other preserved parts of the supposed teaching – some of which have become part of the core teachings of Jainism – can be shown to have originated at a later date. I will first discuss the parts of the received teachings that can be regarded as old or even original, and then turn to some of the teachings that can arguably be dated to a more recent time.

The Original Message

In order to understand what appears to be Mahāvīra's teaching, we are dependent on the earliest Jain texts. Fortunately, these are not our only source of information. The early Buddhist texts occasionally criticize the Jains,⁶ and what they criticize corresponds in many ways to what we learn from the Jain texts,

¹ Ohira, 1994a, 476–477.

² Jaini, 1979, 10; Dundas, 2002, 26–29.

³ see Malalasekera, 1937–1938, s.v. Nigaṇṭha-Nāta[Nātha]-putta.

⁴ Balbir, 2009, 44.

⁵ Schubring, 2000, 81, §42.

⁶ Balbir, 2000.

thus providing independent confirmation. For further confirmation, we can also turn to the cultural/religious background out of which Jainism arose. I will begin with this background, before discussing some of the texts.

Mahāvira spent most if not all of his life in the eastern part of the Gaṅgā Valley, a region referred to as Greater Magadha. This region was culturally quite distinct from the area to its west, where the vedic tradition had its seat. A prominent feature of the culture of Greater Magadha that it initially did not share with vedic culture is the belief in rebirth and karmic retribution. Mahāvira's teaching – like the teaching of the Buddha and others in that region – is to be understood as a response to that belief.⁷

The conviction that the present life will, after death, be followed by other lives did not bring consolation to all, far from it. A number of those who held this belief were keen to escape from the cycle of rebirths. These rebirths were the result of karmic retribution, that is, of one's deeds. This implied that everything one did – be it good, bad, or neutral – would have consequences in a next life and that an absence of deeds would put an end to the cycle. Escape did not require deeds but something else, namely a method that did not consist of deeds. Mahāvira taught such a method.

Mahāvira and his early followers thought that all activities, all deeds, had consequences in a next life. What could one do to avoid such consequences and therefore rebirth in general? Complete inactivity presented itself as a possible solution, and this turns out to be a central element in early Jainism. Inactivity asceticism was, and to some extent still is, undertaken by advanced practitioners, and the fundamental logic behind it (no deeds, no karmic retribution) makes good sense.

Perhaps the earliest surviving passage expounding this path occurs in the canonical *Ācārāṅga Sūtra*; it reads as follows:

When a monk thinks: "I am indeed tired of carrying around this body in these circumstances," he should gradually reduce his food; having gradually reduced his food and diminished his passions, his body being prepared, standing like a plank, his body pacified...he should ask for grass; having asked for grass and received it, he should go away to a lonely place; having gone away to a lonely place...he should spread the grass; and

having spread the grass, at that occasion, he should reject body, activity, and movement...[1] Having diminished his passions, he bears with little food. In case the monk gets ill in the presence of food. He should not long for life, nor strive after death; he should not be attached to either, life or death. Impartial, intent on the destruction of activity (*nijjarā*) he should preserve his concentration. Renouncing internally as well as externally he strives after a pure heart. Whatever means he may know to secure his life [for another while], let the wise one quickly avail of that for an intervening period. Having looked for a place in a village or in the wilderness, and knowing it to be with little life, the monk should spread out the grass. He should lie without food; when affected [by discomfort] in that [position] he should bear it. He should not go beyond the boundary [which he has set himself], even when he has been affected by things human. He should not hurt nor rub away living creatures which creep on the ground, or fly high or low, and eat his flesh and blood. Creatures injure his body, yet he should not walk from his place. Being pained by all kinds of outside influences, he should bear [it all], going to the other shore of his span of life, (free) from all kinds of knots. This is well-accepted by the self-controlled and understanding person. [2] The following is another practice taught by the son of Nāya (= Mahāvira). One should abandon movement in the threefold three ways, except for [keeping] himself [alive]. He should not sit down on green plants, but lie on the bare ground after inspecting it; renouncing, taking no food, he should bear [discomfort] when affected [by it] in that [position] While feeling aversion to his senses, the monk may take [as much food] as is appropriate. Nevertheless, he is blameless who is motionless and concentrated. He may step forward and backward, contract and stretch [his limbs], in order to keep body [and soul] together; or, alternatively, he [may become] unconscious in that same position. He may walk around when tired, or [remain] standing as before. When tired of standing he may finally sit down. While sitting he directs his senses to the excellent death [which he is going to die]. In case he stumbles upon a termite hill [for support], he should search for something different. He does not lean on something from which something avoidable could originate. He should pull himself up from there and bear all that affects him. [3] This one is [even] more intent (*āyatatare*) [on reaching the

⁷ Bronkhorst, 2007.

goal] who keeps to the following. While controlling all his limbs, let him not move away from his place. This is the best practice, better than the preceding. Having cleansed [the place] for a short time, the Brahmin (i.e. the Jaina ascetic) should remain there standing. Having reached a place free from living beings, he should place himself there. He should renounce his body; thinking “there are no afflictions in my body, afflictions and troubles [last] as long as life,” he should bear them, being restrained, realizing that they lead to the destruction of the body. He should not be attached to desires for transitory things, even when [they become] more numerous. He should not nourish wishes and greed, since he is looking for the unchanging character....Not stupefied by all things he reaches the other shore of his span of life. Knowing that endurance is highest, each of the [three ways] of liberation is good.⁸

This path is the consequence of the oft-repeated statement (also found in the *Ācārāṅga Sūtra*) that activity is the root cause of all suffering and rebirth and should therefore be abandoned.

However, there is a difficulty. No one is born an ascetic, and even the most committed ascetic starts his immobility asceticism at an age when he has already carried out many deeds. Would these earlier deeds not clamor for karmic retribution even in the case of a successfully carried out immobility asceticism right unto death?

It is clear from the early texts that the Jains had an answer to this question too. Asceticism, it turns out, is like a double-edged sword. It not only makes sure that no new deeds are performed but also that the traces of earlier deeds are destroyed. Some passages from the *Uttarādhyayana Sūtra*, another early canonical text, are particularly clear in this respect:

What does the soul produce by renouncing activity? By renouncing activity it produces a state without activity. By being without activity the soul does not bind new *karman* and destroys the *karman* that was bound before.⁹

By the possession of right conduct [the soul] produces the state [of motionlessness] of the king of mountains. Having reached the state [of motionlessness] of the king of mountains, the homeless [monk] destroys the four parts of *karman* which [even] an omniscient saint (*kevalin*) possesses. After that [the soul] becomes per-

fectured, awakened, freed, completely emancipated, and puts an end to all suffering.¹⁰

Another passage from the same *Uttarādhyayana Sūtra* describes the culmination of the ascetic process, namely death, in terms that show that the pursued inactivity also covers mental activity, and indeed breathing itself:

Then having preserved his life [long enough], the remainder of life being less than the time of a *muhūrta*, he stops [all] activities and enters pure meditation (*sukkajjhāna*) in which only subtle activity remains and from which one does not fall back; he first stops the activity of his mind, then of his speech and body, then he puts a stop to breathing out and breathing in. During the time needed to pronounce hardly five short syllables the homeless [monk], being in pure meditation in which [all] activity has been cut off and from which there is no return, simultaneously destroys the four parts of *karman* [which remain]: pertaining to experience, span of life, name and lineage.¹¹

The early Jains thus practiced an asceticism that culminated in total immobility. That they actually did so is confirmed by an independent source, the early Buddhist canon. In the *Majjhimanikāya*,¹² the Buddha describes the behavior of Jains (whom he calls Nigaṇṭhas) to someone named Mahānāma:

At one time, Mahānāma, I resided in Rājagaha on the mountain Gijjhakūṭa. At that time there were many Nigaṇṭhas on the black rock on the slope of [the mountain] Isigili, standing erect, refusing to sit down, and they experienced painful, sharp, severe sensations [which were] due to [self-inflicted] torture. Then, Mahānāma, having arisen in the evening from my retirement, I went to the black rock on the slope of [the mountain] Isigili where those Nigaṇṭhas were; having gone there I said to those Nigaṇṭhas: “Why, dear Nigaṇṭhas, are you standing erect, refusing to sit down, and do you experience painful, sharp, severe sensations [which are] due to [self-inflicted] torture?” When this was said, Mahānāma, those Nigaṇṭhas said to me: “Friend, Nigaṇṭha Nāthaputta (i.e. Mahāvīra), who knows all and sees all, claims complete knowledge and insight [saying:] ‘Always and continuously knowledge and insight are present to me, whether I walk, stand still, sleep or be awake’. He (i.e. Nigaṇṭha Nāthaputta/Mahāvīra)

⁸ *ĀAS*. 1.8(7).7.2–8; for details, see Bronkhorst, 1993, 31ff.

⁹ *US*. 29.37; for details, see Bronkhorst, 1993, 36f.

¹⁰ *US*. 29.61; for details, see Bronkhorst, 1993, 36f.

¹¹ *US*. 29.72; for details, see Bronkhorst, 1993, 37f.

¹² 1.92–95.

says: 'Formerly, Nigaṇṭhas, you performed sinful activities; you must exhaust that (sinful activity) by means of this severe and difficult practice. Being here and now restrained in body, speech and mind, amounts to not performing sinful activity in the future. Thus, as a result of the annihilation of former actions by asceticism, and of the non-performing of new actions, there is no further effect in the future; as a result of no further effect in the future there is destruction of actions; as a result of the destruction of actions there is destruction of suffering; as a result of the destruction of suffering there is destruction of sensation; as a result of the destruction of sensation all suffering will be exhausted'. And this [word of Nigaṇṭha of Nāthaputta (i.e. Mahāvīra)] pleases us and is approved of by us, and therefore we are delighted...Happiness, dear Gotama [Gotama is the personal name of the Buddha], should not be reached through happiness, happiness should be reached through hardship. If happiness should be reached through happiness, dear Gotama, King Seniya Bimbisāra of Magadha would reach happiness [hereafter, because] King Seniya Bimbisāra of Magadha lives in greater happiness than the venerable Gotama." [The Buddha replies:] "With respect to this I should be asked: 'Who of the [two] venerable ones lives in greater happiness, King Seniya Bimbisāra of Magadha or the venerable Gotama?'...Therefore, dear Nigaṇṭhas, I shall ask you [a question] which you may answer as seems right to you. What do you think, dear Nigaṇṭhas: is King Seniya Bimbisāra of Magadha able to experience unalloyed happiness for seven (six...five...four...three...two...one) nights and days [at a stretch] without moving his body and without saying a word?" "No, friend." "But I, dear Nigaṇṭhas, am able to experience unalloyed happiness for one (two...three...four...five...six...seven) night and day [at a stretch] without moving my body and without saying a word. What do you think, dear Nigaṇṭhas: who lives in view of this in greater happiness, King Seniya Bimbisāra of Magadha or I?" "In view of this the venerable Gotama lives in greater happiness than King Seniya Bimbisāra of Magadha."¹³

This passage from the Buddhist canon hits the nail on the head by characterizing the ascetic practices of the Jains as "the annihilation of former actions by asceticism" and "the non-performing of new actions." It also mentions a belief that appears to be

typical of Jainism from the very beginning, namely the belief in the omniscience of the Jinas, and therefore of Mahāvīra.

Jainism and Buddhism

The preceding section presents what can, with a certain degree of confidence, be viewed as having constituted an integral part of the teaching of Mahāvīra, or at any rate of the earliest accessible forms of Jainism. We have also ascertained that the first Buddhists were already acquainted with Jainism and that the early Buddhist canon provides crucial confirmatory evidence with respect to the oldest stages of Jainism.¹⁴ Clearly, members of the two religions were aware of each other's existence right from the beginning. What is more, the two religions began to influence each other at an early date. The in-depth study of religious practices in the Buddhist canon reveals that the early Buddhists borrowed certain practices from Jainism and combined these with the practices that had presumably been taught by the Buddha. In other words, early Jainism exerted a detectable influence on early Buddhism.

Perhaps this is not all that surprising. Buddhism and Jainism originated in the same region, Greater Magadha. What is more, Jainism rather directly confronted a problem that was the immediate consequence of beliefs held in that region, most notably the belief in rebirth and karmic retribution. Buddhism proposed a different solution to the same – or at least to a similar – problem, but this Buddhist solution remained obscure to many Buddhists. There were also other differences. Buddhist stories about the earlier lives of the Buddha emphasize his generosity, whereas Jain stories stress the importance of nonharm and asceticism.¹⁵ Frequent contacts with Jains allowed Buddhists to adopt elements from the Jain message, and the result is visible in the surviving Buddhist canon.¹⁶

Both Buddhism and Jainism subsequently spread to different parts of the subcontinent. Buddhism created a second center of great importance in the northwestern regions, sometimes called Greater Gandhara, where Jainism never gained a foothold. Instead, Jainism spread to the south, and inscriptions reveal that even before the beginning of the Common Era, there was a strong Jain presence in Tamil

¹³ for details, see Bronkhorst, 1993, 26ff.

¹⁴ see Bronkhorst, 2016, app. VIII.

¹⁵ Appleton, 2014, 90ff.

¹⁶ Bronkhorst, 1993.

Nadu,¹⁷ where there were no Buddhists. In other words, Buddhism and Jainism did not always occupy the same regions during the centuries immediately preceding and following the beginning of the Common Era. And yet, the Śvetāmbara canon undoubtedly shows the influence of scholastic innovations that had taken place within Buddhism from the 2nd century BCE onward, initially in a region that was confined to the northwest. These scholastic innovations subsequently influenced virtually all further developments of not only Indian Buddhism but also of certain schools of Brahmanical philosophy (most notably Vaiśeṣika) and, not least, of Jainism.

We have already seen that the *Sūtrakṛtāṅga Sūtra* is one of the oldest texts contained in the Śvetāmbara canon. However, the contents of even this relatively old text date from long after Mahāvīra. This is clear from the following: the *Sūtrakṛtāṅga Sūtra* shows acquaintance with the innovations that had taken place in northwestern Buddhism in the 2nd century BCE. In particular, it is acquainted with the Buddhist theory of momentariness, which is part of these Buddhist scholastic innovations. The *Sūtrakṛtāṅga Sūtra* (or at least this portion of it) thus dates from the 2nd century BCE at the very earliest. Other, more recent texts of the Śvetāmbara canon are not just acquainted with the Buddhist theory of momentariness but also embrace it and adapt it to their own needs. The moment (*samaya*) as the smallest unit of time appears for the first time, it seems, in the *Uttarādhyayana Sūtra*. This same text introduces the succession (*santati*) of moments, a notion familiar from Buddhist scholastic texts.

Certain Buddhists – the so-called Pudgalavādins – conceived of the person as a composite entity made up of *skandhas* (a technical Buddhist term that we do not need to consider at present). The Pudgalavādins distinguished themselves from most other Buddhist scholiasts, who maintained that composite objects do not exist: chariots, houses, and indeed persons do not ultimately exist. The *Sūtrakṛtāṅga Sūtra* shows familiarity with the position of the Pudgalavādins, and what is more, other texts from the Śvetāmbara canon adopt a similar position as their own: both wholes and their constituents exist. These texts go to the extent of adopting the word *pudgala*, which the Buddhists had used to designate persons conceived of as composite entities, in order to designate composite entities in general. The presumably oldest

Jain notion of the soul as something “neither long nor short” (*Ācārāṅga Sūtra*) is replaced, in subsequent texts (e.g. *Uttarādhyayana Sūtra* and later), by one in which the soul is coextensive with the body, just like the Buddhist *pudgala*. As a result of this borrowing, the usage of the word *pudgala* in Jainism is henceforth reserved for material objects in general.¹⁸

The fact that scholastic Buddhism continued to exercise influence over Jainism several centuries after the demise of their founders shows that Buddhism and Jainism remained in close contact with each other, at least in certain parts of the subcontinent. We know from inscriptions that there were many Jains in Mathura during the reign of the Kushanas (the early centuries of the Common Era), and it seems likely that Mathura had become the most important center of Jainism in the north by the 2nd century CE.¹⁹ There were also many Buddhists in Mathura at that time, and there can be no doubt that Jains and Buddhists had plenty of opportunities there to become acquainted with each other’s ideas. One of the features shared by them during this period is striking enough to justify the suspicion of mutual influence. Both Buddhism and Jainism were confronted with rival movements which, they claimed, had been founded by disciples of the Buddha and of Mahāvīra, respectively. In the case of Buddhism, these were the followers of Devadatta, and in the case of Jainism, the followers of Gosāla Maṅkhaliputta. There are good reasons to believe that these rival movements existed at the time of the Kushanas. However, the evil deeds attributed to the founders of these movements are almost certainly inventions that were made up centuries after the days in which they presumably lived. According to these legends, both Devadatta and Gosāla Maṅkhaliputta began their careers as disciples: Devadatta was accepted as a monk by the Buddha, and Gosāla Maṅkhaliputta was accepted, albeit only after repeated attempts, by Mahāvīra as his disciple. Both Devadatta and Gosāla Maṅkhaliputta subsequently distinguished themselves through their magical powers. Both made a bid for the supreme position in their respective community. Both tried to harm their teachers in various ways and both seemed to come close to succeeding, but were ultimately incapable of inflicting more than superficial harm. Both came to a grievous end as a result. A. Bareau²⁰ has traced the development of the legend of Devadatta and shown that the

¹⁷ Mahadevan, 2003, 127–139.

¹⁸ Bronkhorst, 2000.

¹⁹ Ohira, 1982, 43, 44.

²⁰ 1989; 1991; 1997.

evil deeds attributed to him do not appear until the most recent phase of this development, that is, long after the Buddha. Given that there was a religious movement of followers of Devadatta, the attempts by Buddhists to vilify his name cannot have been anything else than an attempt on the part of those Buddhists to distance themselves from a religious movement that resembled their own. Similarly, the evil deeds attributed to Gosāla Maṅkhaliputta in the Śvetāmbara canon must be seen as an expression of the Jains' desire to distance themselves from his followers. As a matter of fact, a fair amount is known about these followers, who are identified as the Ājīvikas.²¹ Their movement had come into existence more or less simultaneously with Buddhism and Jainism, and they held views that were close to those of Jainism. Both Buddhism and Jainism, it appears, felt threatened by these rival movements, and both reacted in the same way: by claiming that the founders of these movements had been failed disciples of their own master and had come to grievous ends as a result of their opposition to them.²²

In this context, it is worth mentioning the tradition of the 24 Tīrthaṅkaras, which Jainism appears to have created under the influence of the Buddhist tradition of the 24 Buddhas.²³

The coexistence of Jainism and Buddhism may be responsible not only for parallel developments (e.g. the stories of Devadatta and Gosāla Maṅkhaliputta and the traditions of the 24 saints) but also for certain disparities between the two religions. *Stūpa* worship is a feature that has characterized Buddhism probably from its beginning until the present day. Jainism, too, had its *stūpas*: both the early literature and the archaeological evidence leave little room for doubt that this was once the case.²⁴ Indeed, the worship of *stūpas* may have accompanied the tradition of *bhakti*, which, as J.E. Cort²⁵ has shown, was part of Jainism from the beginning. Mysteriously, Jains stopped worshipping *stūpas* (though they did not discontinue the practice of *bhakti*) quite early on, perhaps as early as the time of the Kushanas. The question is: Why did they choose to do so?

As a first observation, it is still unknown how the bodily remains of Mahāvīra were disposed of after his physical death. They may have been placed in one or more *stūpas*, as appears to have happened in

the case of the Buddha, but this is not certain. It is equally possible that his dead body was left to disintegrate in nature. We just do not know. But whatever the answer to this question, subsequent Jains worshipped *stūpas*, either in imitation of the Buddhists or independently.

As indicated above, the Jains stopped doing so, namely at some point in time prior to the completion of the Śvetāmbara canon. This can be surmised from the fact that the canon contains a passage explaining why it is pointless to worship *stūpas*. This passage occurs in the *Jambūdvīpaprajñapti Sūtra* and is clearly a later insertion. Or rather, it is appended to an older passage dealing with the disposal of the body of an earlier Tīrthaṅkara (namely Ṛṣabhadeva), to all appearances in a *stūpa*. In a clearly recognizable manner, the lines of text were added to support the claim that the bodily remains of the Tīrthaṅkara were taken away by gods, who put them in boxes, which they themselves worship.

As a general rule, stories told about one Tīrthaṅkara are valid for all of them. The modified passage of the *Jambūdvīpaprajñapti Sūtra* explains that it is pointless to worship *stūpas*, since they do not, and cannot, contain bodily relics of a Tīrthaṅkara. However, this very same passage suggests that before it was modified, it told a different story, one in which there *was* place for *stūpa* worship.²⁶

Why did Jains abandon *stūpas*? The most plausible answer to this question is that this was due to competition with Buddhists. We know that from at least the late centuries preceding the Common Era, Buddhist monks and nuns often lived in monasteries that were built next to *stūpas*.²⁷ One of the tasks of the monks and nuns – and one of their sources of income – was to look after the *stūpas* and the cults that took place around them. In this way, *stūpas* were well looked after.

It appears that for a long time, Jain monks and nuns resisted the temptation to build monasteries. What is more, there are reasons to think that, still during the rule of the Kushanas, they refused patronage from the court; inscriptions do in fact confirm that they did not receive any. This means that Jainism did not have the infrastructure needed to look after *stūpas* and indeed to build new ones. Stories about abandoned and decrepit Jain *stūpas*

²¹ Balcerowicz, 2016.

²² Bronkhorst, 2016, app. VIII.

²³ Ohira, 1994b.

²⁴ Singh, 2010, 11–12, 14–22.

²⁵ 2002.

²⁶ Bronkhorst, 2011a, app. to ch. 3-7.

²⁷ Shaw, 2013.

exist, and this is precisely what one would expect in the absence of an appropriate infrastructure. In surroundings where there were many Buddhist *stūpas*, unattended Jain *stūpas* might have easily been mistaken for Buddhist ones (a theme that does come up in at least one story). The situation may have been confusing for Jain lay followers, who may have been mistakenly drawn to Buddhist centers of worship. For these or other reasons, Jains abandoned the worship of *stūpas*, while a passage appearing in a canonical text pointed out that such worship was pointless anyhow because the gods had removed the bodily remains of the Tīrthankaras from this earth.²⁸

Anekāntavāda (Doctrine of the Multisided Nature of Reality)

Some scholars regard the doctrine of the multisided nature of reality (*anekāntavāda*)²⁹ as the central philosophy of Jainism. Others disagree, but all accept that it is a fundamental aspect of Jain thought. This section will focus on the question of whether and to what extent this doctrine can be traced back to the formative period of Jainism. It will become clear that *anekāntavāda* must be seen as a response to developments that took place in Indian thought during the early centuries of the Common Era and therefore cannot, by any means, be traced back to Mahāvīra or to his early followers.

A full discussion of this fundamental doctrine may be found elsewhere in this volume and goes beyond the scope of the present article. Instead, let us consider a specific example that will prove particularly helpful in guiding us to the earliest manifestation of this doctrine in the Śvetāmbara canon while shedding light on the intellectual environment in which it arose. This specific example is found in the following passage from Jinabhadra's *Viśeṣāvaśyakabhāṣya*, dating from the 6th to 7th century CE:

In this world there are things that are being produced having been produced already, others [are being produced] not having been produced already, others [are being produced] having been produced and not having been produced, others again [are being produced] while being produced, and some are not being produced at all, according to what one wishes to express...For example, a pot is being produced having been produced in

the form of clay etc., because it is made of that. That same [pot] is being produced not having been produced concerning its particular shape, because that was not there before.³⁰

This passage illustrates the doctrine of the multi-sided nature of reality. It claims that two things can be said about a pot that is being produced: “the pot has been produced” and “the pot has not been produced.” This example makes it particularly clear that the *anekāntavāda* offers a solution to the problem of production. This problem was widely studied during the centuries preceding Jinabhadra and was often associated with the Buddhist thinker Nāgārjuna. Jinabhadra himself describes Nāgārjuna's position on production in the following words:

What has been produced is not being produced, because it is [already] there, like a pot. But if [you accept] that also what has been produced is being produced, you will have infinite regress. What has not been produced is not [being produced] either, because it is not there, like the horn of a donkey. And if [you accept] that also what has not been produced is being produced, you will have to accept that non-entities, such as the horn of a donkey etc., can be produced.³¹

Interestingly, Jinabhadra attributes a similar position to Jainism's first heretic, a man called Jamāli. Jinabhadra's commentator, Kotyārya (perhaps 9th cent. CE), writes the following:

Jamāli, overcome by fever, instructed his pupils to make the bed. Seeing that what he had said had not been accomplished, he got angry [and said]: “The sacred word (*siddhāntavacana*) to the extent that what is being done has been done is incorrect, because it goes against perception... This bed is perceptibly being made, as a result of the instruction to spread the blanket; it has not been made at this [same] moment...For this reason everything that is being made, without exception, has not been made.”...Jamāli proves his own position: “The claim (*pratijñā*) is that something that has been made is not being made, because it is [already] there, like an old pot. But if someone accepts that something, though made, is being made, then the state of being made would always be there, because [that thing] would be being made, like that which had been made during the first moment. And there would be no end to the activity of making...For this reason [only]

²⁸ Bronkhorst, 2011a, app. to ch. 3.3.

²⁹ see Bronkhorst, 2003a.

³⁰ *VBh.* 2183–2184.

³¹ *VBh.* 2149.

something that has not been made and is not there is being made.”³²

Being a heretic, Jamāli criticizes the words of Mahāvīra. He does so already in the canonical *Vyākhyāprajñapti Sūtra*, in the following words:

Mahāvīra claims that what is moving, has moved; what is coming forth, has come forth; what is becoming perceptible, has become perceptible; what is decreasing, has decreased; what is being cut, has been cut; what is being broken, has been broken; what is being burned, has been burned; what is dying, is dead; what is being annihilated, has been annihilated. This is incorrect.³³

Clearly, this passage attributes the claim that “what is moving, has moved” (and so on) to Mahāvīra. Note in particular: “what is coming forth, has come forth.” This fits the pot that Jinabhadra talks about (“a pot is being produced having been produced”) and supports the view that Mahāvīra is being credited with a form of *anekāntavāda*. This is further confirmed by Mahāvīra’s response to Jamāli in the *Vyākhyāprajñapti Sūtra*:

Jamāli! The world is eternal. Never did it not exist, never does it not exist, never will it not exist. It existed, it exists, and it will exist. It is firm, perpetual, eternal, indestructible, imperishable, durable. Jamāli! The world is non-eternal. Having declined, it comes up, and vice versa.³⁴

The precise date of the *Vyākhyāprajñapti Sūtra* is not known. Being presumably more recent than the *Sūtrakṛtāṅga Sūtra* – which, as we have already seen, is more recent than certain late Buddhist scholastic developments – it would be hard to argue that it is older than the 1st century CE. The new concern with production gained momentum during these centuries. Nāgārjuna emphasized the difficulties and used them to support his understanding of Buddhism. Others – including thinkers from all philosophical schools, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist – tried to solve the difficulties in various ways.³⁵ Jains joined the debate by introducing *anekāntavāda*, the doctrine of the multisided nature of reality. Jains did not, of course, admit that this was a new doctrine: Mahāvīra had been omniscient, and this left no place for new ideas to supplement his teaching. Rather, they reinterpreted certain obscure

remarks by Mahāvīra in the sense of the new doctrine and claimed that Jamāli, supposedly a contemporary of Mahāvīra, criticized it.

Ahimsā (Nonviolence)

A feature with which Jainism came to identify, more perhaps than with *anekāntavāda*, is *ahimsā* (nonviolence), and along with it a strict vegetarianism. *Ahimsā* implies the avoidance of killing living things. Since Jainism came to see life almost everywhere – including air and water –, complete *ahimsā* is virtually impossible except for the most dedicated ascetic. Quite apart from the necessity imposed on ascetics, in particular, to purify water and air, all Jains – both ascetics and lay persons – came to abstain from eating meat and fish and were henceforth strict vegetarians.

Certain passages in the Śvetāmbara canon indicate that this was not always the case. Having studied these passages, S. Ohira³⁶ arrives at the following “more accurate picture of the concept of *ahimsā* conceived in the olden days”:

1. Monks should not directly commit *himsā* to any beings under any conditions whatsoever;
 2. They should not accept animal meat specially killed for them, nor should they even take medicine that is prepared for them by killing living plants;
 3. They should abstain from receiving food if any possibility of *himsā* is detected while it is served by donors; and
 4. They should not receive meat if donors are known to be the slaughterers of the animals.
- S. Ohira³⁷ adds that “the contemporary church authority was obviously not that fussy about monks’ accepting meat from laymen.”

The following passage from the *Ācārāṅga Sūtra* is also relevant in this regard:

A monk or a nun on a begging-tour may be invited to meat or fish containing many bones (by the householder who addresses him thus): “O long-lived Śramaṇa! will you accept meat with many bones?” Hearing such a communication, he should say, after consideration: “O long-lived one! (or, O sister!) it is not meet for me to accept meat with many bones; if you want to give me a portion

³² *VBh.* 2789–2793.

³³ see Deleu, 1970, 163ff.

³⁴ see Deleu, 1970, 163ff.

³⁵ Bronkhorst, 2011b.

³⁶ 1994a, 19.

³⁷ 1994a, 19.

of whatever size, give it me; but not the bones!" If after these words the other (i.e. the householder) should fetch meat containing many bones, put it in a bowl and return with it; (the mendicant) should not accept such a bowl, whether out of the other's hand or a vessel; for it is impure and unacceptable. But if he has inadvertently accepted it, he should not say: "No, away, take it!" Knowing this, he should go apart, and in a garden... eat the meat or fish (*mamsagam macchagam bhocā*), and taking the bones, he should resort to a secluded spot and leave them on a heap of ashes.³⁸

Passages like this one led S. Ohira³⁹ to formulate the following question: "It is...feasible to assume that the rigid vegetarianism of the present day Jains commenced at...a later time [than the time of composition of those canonical texts that speak of eating meat]?" Regarding the precise date on which this break in the tradition took place, S. Ohira⁴⁰ suggests that it was "most probably after the mass exodus of the Jains from Mathurā to the South and West, where they were bound to impress the local people by their exemplary deeds."

The Spread of Jainism

We have already seen that Jainism did not remain confined to its region of origin, Greater Magadha. Even before the Common Era, it had already spread to Tamil Nadu. We have also seen that Mathura was a major center of Jainism during the early centuries of the Common Era. And yet, there were self-imposed limits as to how far monks and nuns were allowed to travel. The *Kalpa Sūtra*, for example, states that

monks and nuns may wander eastward as far as Anga-Magadha, southward as far as Kosambī, westward as far as Thūṇā, and northward as far as Kuṇālā. They may wander thus far, (for) thus far there are Āryan countries, but not beyond unless the Dhamma flourishes there.⁴¹

The place names all refer to towns in northern India, thus allowing us to conclude that only Jains from that region were concerned.

Jainism is currently divided into two main subgroups: the Śvetāmbaras and the Digambaras. By and

large, the Śvetāmbaras inhabit the north of India, the Digambaras the south. Perhaps the most striking distinction between the two groups is that Digambara monks are naked, whereas Śvetāmbara monks wear white garments. We learn from the Śvetāmbara canon that Mahāvīra went about naked, but it is difficult to conclude from this that the Digambaras continue an uninterrupted tradition in this respect.

Little is known about the origin of the division between Śvetāmbaras and Digambaras or even about the date of the split. According to one account, it occurred as early as the time of the Maurya emperor Candragupta, who supposedly became a Jain monk and terminated his life by fasting on the site of Shravanabelagola, in the south.⁴² However, there is no independent evidence to support this account, and it does not, for example, allow us to identify the Jains present in Tamil Nadu before the early Common Era as Digambaras. "It appears from the absence of references to sects that the early lithic records in the Tamil caves belong to the period before the schism between the Digambara and Śvetāmbara sects."⁴³

Other sources record a major crisis in Mathura, which apparently prompted Jains to leave this city and move to the west and to the south. The following observation by S. Ohira is particularly relevant in this respect:

At the beginning of the Gupta age...the number of the Jaina inscriptions and archaeological remains [in Mathura] suddenly decreases, and the number of those in south India centering around Mysore increases. There are hardly any Jaina remains in south India between the beginning of the Christian era and the Gupta period...but they suddenly begin to appear at the beginning of the Gupta age, and their number continues to grow. Since then, south India and west India have become the two centres of the Jainas...The strange phenomenon of this archaeological evidence seems to suggest that some friction must have occurred between the Jainas (along with the Buddhists) and the Vaiṣṇavas during the Kuṣāṇa and Gupta periods under the Vaiṣṇava renaissance movement of Sanskrit culture at Mathura, the birth-place of Kṛṣṇa, and this led to mass exodus of the Jainas from Mathura to the South and West, which later caused the Great Schism of the Jainas into the Śvetāmbaras and Digambaras.⁴⁴

³⁸ ĀAS. 2.1.10.6; trans. Jacobi, 1884, 114–115.

³⁹ 1994a, 19.

⁴⁰ 1994a, 19.

⁴¹ Bollée, 1998, xxiv.

⁴² Jaini, 1979, 4–6.

⁴³ Mahadevan, 2003, 135.

⁴⁴ Ohira, 1994a, 481.

It would indeed appear that the great division between Śvetāmbaras and Digambaras is a relatively recent phenomenon – that is to say, much more recent than the Mauryas – that took place after the formative developments discussed in this article. This explains how the features identified in this article – abandonment of *stūpa* worship, complete vegetarianism, *anekāntavāda* – characterize both of these movements. Moreover, Kushana sculptures of Jain monks from Mathura do not allow identification as either Śvetāmbara or Digambara (or as Yāpanīya, a third division of Jainism that once existed, for that matter).⁴⁵

Summary

The preceding passages show that Jainism underwent a number of important changes during its formative period. While some of its features have characterized it from the beginning until the present day, other features were abandoned over the course of time. Still others were acquired centuries after the days of Mahāvīra.

The emphasis on motionlessness and self-sought death has been a steady hallmark of Jainism, apparently since the days of Mahāvīra or perhaps even earlier. The worship of *stūpas* that presumably contained relics of sages may have commenced soon after Mahāvīra (if not before him) but was interrupted during the early centuries of the Common Era. Features that came to characterize Jainism at a demonstrably later time include strict vegetarianism (*ahiṃsā*) and the doctrine of *anekāntavāda*. Interestingly, *ahiṃsā* (thus interpreted) and *anekāntavāda* may well be the features which modern Jains regard as most central to their religion.

(Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the author.)

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⁴⁵ Jaini, 1995.

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