

# Ājīvika

An Ājīvika (“Follower of the Way of Life”; Dundas, 2002, 28) is an adherent of what has been called “a vanished Indian religion” (this is the subtitle of A.L. Basham’s classical study of this religion [1951]; note that the term “Ājīvika” was not exclusively used for adherents of this religion; see below). This religion (here called Ājīvikism) arose at the time of Jainism – or rather, at the time of the most recent Jaina *tīrthankara* (or *jina*), Vardhamāna Mahāvīra – and in the same region. Its founder is known by the following names: Makkhali Gosāla (Pal.), Gosāla Mañkhaliputta (Ardh.), and Maskarin Gośāla (or Gośālikāputra/Gośālīputra; Skt.). (Makkhali/Maskarin is no doubt a title [staff bearer] rather than a name, designating a wandering ascetic [*parivrājaka*] by Pāṇini in *Aṣṭādhyāyī* 6.1.154: *maskaramaskariṇau venuparivrājakayoḥ*. The Jaina tradition presumably misunderstood this title as a name.) The religion survived for the better part of two millennia, being occasionally referred to in surviving literature and inscriptions, and then disappeared. Ājīvikism appears to have been in the possession of scriptures of its own, but none has survived (Basham, 1951, 213–223).

The modern study of Ājīvikism began in the 19th century and continued into the 20th century. The most important studies were published by A.F.R. Hoernle (1908), B.M. Barua (1920), and A.L. Basham (1951). A.L. Basham’s monograph, though dated and incomplete in some respects, remains the most complete study of Ājīvikism to date and will be frequently referred to in what follows.

The most detailed knowledge of the beliefs and practices of the early Ājīvikas has to be derived from the Buddhist and Jaina (i.e. Śvetāmbara) canons. Both of these criticize the Ājīvikas, and, for this reason, neither of these is *a priori* particularly reliable. However, the similarity in this respect between these two completely independent sources allows us to conclude that both drew on a common source of information, presumably the ideas of the Ājīvikas themselves. The information extracted from these two canons, moreover, fits well in its time (or what we know of it). It turns out that the ideas of the Ājīvikas were remarkably close to (yet fundamentally different from) the ideas of the early Jainas. Indeed, Ājīvika

thought can be best understood in the light of early Jaina thought. It is therefore a typical religion of “Greater Magadha,” whose culture was different and independent from vedic culture, to which Brahmanism and its literary heritage belong (Bronkhorst, 2007b).

Early Jaina asceticism was an attempt to stop activity and put an end to karmic traces acquired earlier (Bronkhorst, 1993, chs. 1–3; this section follows Bronkhorst, 2003). It was a direct response to the challenge posed by the doctrine of → *karman*, interpreted in a literal way: acts – that is, physical and mental acts – produce results in this or a next life. Physical and mental immobility discards the traces left by earlier acts and purifies the soul from all acts, with total → liberation from rebirth (→ *saṃsāra*) as the ultimate outcome. The following passages from the Jaina canon illustrate this. The *Uttarajjhayaṇa/Uttarajhāyā* states that

[b]y being without activity the soul does not bind new *karma* and destroys the *karma* that was bound before. (*UttJh.* 29.37/1139)

Having reached the state [of motionlessness] of the king of mountains, the homeless [monk] destroys the four parts of *karma* which [even] a *kevalin* (i.e. a person close to liberation) possesses. After that [the soul] becomes perfected, awakened, freed, completely emancipated, and puts an end to all suffering. (*UttJh.* 29.61/1163)

The Buddhist canon ascribes this belief to the Jainas, too. In the *Cūḷadukkhakkhandhasutta* of the *Majjhimanikāya*, for example, Nigaṇṭha Nāthaputta (or Nātaputta, i.e. Mahāvīra, the most recent *tīrthankara* of the Jainas) is reported to have presented his teachings in the following words:

Formerly 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. (MN. I.92–95)

The most important passage in the Buddhist canon that informs us about Ājīvikism (i.e. about the teaching of Makkhali Gosāla, presumably its founder; see below) occurs in the *Sāmaññaphalasutta* of the *Dīghanikāya*. A.L. Basham paraphrases it as follows below. (For philological details and specifications, see Bronkhorst, 2003, 160f. MacQueen [1988, 195] compares the different versions, including the Chinese versions, of this *Sāmaññaphalasutta* and arrives at the conclusion that “[the Pāli version], of all the versions, preserved the most ancient state of the text”; see also Meisig, 1987.)

There is neither cause nor basis for the sins of living beings; they become sinful without cause or basis. Neither is there cause or basis for the purity of living beings; they become pure without cause or basis. There is no deed performed either by [one’s own] self (*ātman*) or by [the self of] others, no action belonging to the self (*puruṣa*), no strength, no courage, no endurance connected with the self or prowess connected with the self. All beings, all that have breath, all that are born, all that have life, are without power, strength, or virtue, but are developed by destiny, chance, and nature, and experience joy and sorrow in the six classes (of existence).

There are 1,400,000 chief uterine births, 6,000 and 600; 500 *karmas*, 5 *karmas*, 3 *karmas*, a *karma*, and half a *karma*; 62 paths; 62 lesser *kalpas*; 6 classes (of human existence); 8 stages of man; 4,900 means of livelihood (?); 4,900 ascetics; 4,900 dwellings of *nāgas*; 2,000 faculties; 3,000 purgatories; 36 places covered with dust (?); 7 sentient births; 7 insentient births; 7 births from knots (?); 7 gods; 7 men; 7 *pisāca* (births?); 7 lakes; 7 knots (?), and 700; 7 precipices, and 700; 7 dreams, and 700; and 8,400,000 great *kalpas* through which fool and wise alike will take their course, and make an end of sorrow. There is no question of bringing unripe *karma* to fruition, nor of exhausting *karma* already ripened, by virtuous conduct, by vows, by penance, or by chastity. That cannot be done. *Saṃsāra* is measured as with a bushel, with its joy and sorrow and its appointed end. It can neither be lessened nor increased, nor is there any excess or deficiency of it. Just as a

ball of thread will, when thrown, unwind to its full length, so fool and wise alike will take their course, and make an end of sorrow. (Basham, 1951, 13–14; modified by author)

A passage in the Śvetāmbara Jaina canon, too, informs us about the teaching of Gosāla. It occurs in the *Viyāhapannatti* (= *Bhagavatisūtra* / *Bhagavāi*) and reads as follows:

All those who have reached or are reaching or will reach salvation must finish in order 8,400,000 *mahākappas* (Skt. *mahākalpas*), 7 divine births, 7 groups, 7 sentient births, 7 “abandonments of transmigration”, 500,000 *kammās* (Skt. *karmans*), and 60,000 and 600 and the 3 parts of *kamma*. Then, being saved, awakened, set free, and reaching *nirvāna* they have made or are making or will make an end of all sorrow. (*ViyPa*. 15.101 [Ladnun ed.]; 15.68 [Bombay ed.])

The two passages have enough in common to justify the conclusion that they borrow from a common source. Only the Buddhist passage contains the following statement, crucial for an understanding of Ājīvikism:

There is no question of bringing unripe *karma* to fruition, nor of exhausting *karma* already ripened, by virtuous conduct, by vows, by penance, or by chastity. That cannot be done. (Basham, 1951, 14)

Bringing unripe *karma* to fruition and exhausting *karma* already ripened, as we have seen, were exactly what the early Jaina ascetics tried to bring about. For asceticism in early Jainism had the double function of “the annihilation of former actions and the non-performing of new actions.” According to the Ājīvikas, the annihilation of former actions as practiced by the Jainas is not possible.

Clearly, without the annihilation of former actions, the Jaina path of liberation becomes pointless and cannot lead to the intended goal. Instead, Ājīvikas believed that all living beings have to pass through a long and irreducible series of existences, for a total duration of 8,400,000 great *kalpas*. This (if we take the usual length of a great *kalpa*, viz. 4,320 million years) amounts to 35 quadrillion ( $35 \times 10^{15}$ ) years, that is, more than 2.5 million times the modern astronomical estimate of the age of the universe (13.7 billion years; for different calculations, see Basham, 1951, 253–254; Deleu, 1970, 217). But even though

long, this series of existences will come to an end and result in liberation from rebirth. The Ājīvikas were determinists who thought of this series of existences as guided by unchangeable rules. Indeed,

[t]he cardinal point of the doctrines of... Makkhali Gosāla [and his followers] was a belief in the all-embracing rule of the principle of order, Niyati, which ultimately controlled every action and all phenomena, and left no room for human volition, which was completely ineffectual. Thus Ājīvikism was founded on an unpromising basis of strict determinism. (Basham, 1951, 3–4)

As will be clear from what precedes, Ājīvikism shared many features with Jainism. The main difference concerned the annihilation of former actions; this was possible according to the early Jainas and impossible according to the Ājīvikas. Apart from this difference, the two movements had many points in common. Like the Jainas, those Ājīvikas who believed that they had reached their final existence lived ascetic lives. Like the Jainas, they distinguished six classes of living beings, called *abhijāti* by the Ājīvikas and *leśyā* by the Jainas (Basham, 1951, 139f., 245; Jaini, 1979, 114–115; Schubring, 2000, 195–197). Like those Jainas who were followers of Mahāvīra, they wore no clothes. And the Ājīvikas may not have been the only ones to believe in a strict determinism: the early Jainas, too, appear to have accepted it. Indeed, the Ājīvikas and the followers of Mahāvīra shared so many features that the early Buddhists often failed to distinguish them from each other (Bronkhorst, 2000b). (In early Buddhist days, there were, besides followers of Mahāvīra, other Jainas who were followers of Pārśva. The followers of Pārśva did wear clothes and distinguished themselves in at least one further point from the followers of Mahāvīra.)

The beginning of the passage quoted from the Buddhist *Sāmaññaphalasutta* teaches us more. It states that the self does not act, and it uses the terms → *ātman* and → *puruṣa* (more correctly, their Pali equivalents *atta* and *purisa*) to refer to the self. This part of the passage, too, has a parallel in the Śvetāmbara canon. The *Uvāsagadasāo* puts the following words on the lips of an Ājīvika divinity: “There is no effort nor deed, nor strength, nor courage, no action or prowess belonging to the self (*puruṣa*)” (Basham, 1951, 218).

The belief that the self does not act was widespread in India and became a cornerstone of most Brahmanical philosophies. It obviously represented an alternative solution to the problem faced by Jainism – how to stop activity. If the self – that is, what one really is – never acts by its very nature, then the mere realization of this fact suffices for freeing oneself from the burden of karmic retribution.

It appears, then, that Ājīvikism, too, accepted the notion of a self that never acts. However, they drew different consequences from this than most others did. They concluded that activities are carried out by the body without involvement of the self, that is, of oneself. There is in this way no moral dimension to human activity, even if the body engages in vile or highly virtuous acts. This is confirmed by a statement that the *Sāmaññaphalasutta* puts on the lips of Pūraṇa Kassapa, another teacher with links to Ājīvikism (Basham, 1951, 80f.). A.L. Basham paraphrases it as follows:

He who performs an act or causes an act to be performed... he who destroys life, the thief, the housebreaker, the plunderer... the highway robber, the adulterer and the liar... commit no sin. Even if with a razor-sharp discus a man reduce all the life on earth to a single heap of flesh, he commits no sin... If he come down the south bank of the Ganges, slaying, maiming, and torturing, and causing others to be slain, maimed, or tortured, he commits no sin, neither does sin approach him. Likewise if a man go down the north bank of the Ganges, giving alms and sacrificing, and causing alms to be given and sacrifices to be performed, he acquires no merit, neither does merit approach him. From liberality, self-control, abstinence, and honesty is derived neither merit, nor the approach of merit. (Basham, 1951, 13)

The idea that the body (or material nature) can carry out activities on its own, following its own rules, is not without parallel in ancient India. The → *Bhagavadgītā*, too, distinguishes between an inactive self and a material world (i.e. the body) that acts following its own rules. In the *Bhagavadgītā*, the precondition is that one realize one’s true nature; the body will then act in accordance with one’s caste. Depending on the caste to which one belongs, this activity may include violent deeds and even murder:

He who thinks of him (i.e., the soul inhabiting the body) as killer, he who deems him killed, both of these possess no knowledge; he does not kill and is not killed. Never is he born or dies; he has not come to be, nor will he come to be; unborn, permanent, eternal, ancient, he is not killed when the body is killed. (*BhG.* 2.19–20)

We know that the warrior Arjuna, in the *Bhagavadgītā*, is told to kill his fellow human beings, including family and friends, without scruples. Pūraṇa Kassapa's position was perhaps not that exceptional after all, even though the Brahmanical caste plays no role in his vision of the world.

The proximity between Jainism and Ājīvikism during the earliest period has allowed us to understand the basics of the latter religion. This same proximity helps us to understand other features as well.

Two independent sources – the Jaina Tamil poem *Nīlakēci* and the Pali *Petavatthu* – tell us that the Ājīvikas believed that the soul (*jīva*) can extend to five hundred *yojanas* (perhaps 4,000 miles). The Pali text adds that it is of eight parts. The Pali commentator explains that the immense size of the *jīva* is found only in souls in their last stage before *nirvāṇa* (Basham, 1951, 270–271; the link with the Jaina *samudghāta* escaped Basham). This expansion of the soul just before liberation corresponds to what in Jainism is known by the name *samudghāta* (Ardh. *samugghāya*) “bursting forth,” a process that affects the *kevalin* (Jaina saint):

the Kevalin projects his soul atoms still infected with Karman from the vertex and the foot-point from the right and the left side, from the chest and the back in the shape of columns each reaching to the end of the world and then retracts them again. (Schubring, 2000, 184; see also Tatia, 1951, 280)

The Ājīvikas divided humanity into six differently colored classes of men (*abhijāti*): black, blue, red, green, white, and supremely white, respectively. Jainism has a similar classification, due to what the Jains call the six differently colored *leśyās*, a term that is hard to translate. *Abhijātis* and *leśyās* have features in common but they cannot be identified. It seems, however, certain that they are related (Basham, 1951, 243–248).

The Jaina (Śvetāmbara) canonical scriptures preserve a lot of more or less legendary information about the founder of Ājīvikism, here

called Gosāla Mañkhaliputta, primarily in the *Viyāhapannatti* but also elsewhere (Deleu, 1970, 214–220; Basham, 1951, 30, 35ff.). They tell us that Gosāla and Vardhamāna Mahāvīra spent a number of years together; that Gosāla was at some point Vardhamāna's disciple, but that the two parted ways; and that Gosāla subsequently claimed *jina*-hood. It seems unlikely that much historical credence can be lent to most of this, but the legend confirms, once again, the proximity between Jainism and Ājīvikism.

This proximity is further confirmed by a closer consideration of the references to Jainas (Pal. *nigaṇṭhas*) and Ājīvikas in the Buddhist canon. Here it is to be kept in mind that in those early days, there were two kinds of Jainas: the followers of Pārśva and the followers of Vardhamāna Mahāvīra. The former wore a garment, and the latter wore nothing whatsoever. Both the followers of Vardhamāna and the Ājīvikas were and remained naked. A study of the terms supports the conclusion that the term “Ājīvika” in the Buddhist canon refers both to the followers of Vardhamāna and to the Ājīvikas (and perhaps to others), whereas Nigaṇṭha refers primarily, if not exclusively, to the followers of Pārśva. In other words, the Buddhist texts do not distinguish among different kinds of naked ascetics, including the naked Jainas and the Ājīvikas. Vardhamāna and his followers, on the one hand, and Makkhali Gosāla and his followers, on the other, were apparently not, or not always, thought of as distinct in the early Buddhist texts (Bronkhorst, 2000b).

All the early sources agree in depicting the Ājīvikas as severe ascetics. This is at first sight surprising. Why should strict determinism lead to severe asceticism? Ājīvikism's proximity to Jainism is our best hope for finding an answer to this question.

Severe asceticism was an essential part of early Jainism, too. Its purpose, as we have seen, was the “annihilation of former actions, and the non-performing of new actions.” Ājīvikism denied the possibility of annihilating former actions. However, it did not deny the role of actions in the chain that takes living beings through an astronomically large, yet finite, number of births. Once a living being arrives at its end, all the former actions of the living being would have run their course and been exhausted. Nonperformance of new actions, presumably imposed by Ājīvikism's implacable determinism, would characterize the final years of a living being's final existence. Perhaps the

Ājīvikas (rather like the Calvinists faced with predestination) looked at this asceticism as a sign of impending liberation, rather than as its cause. Unfortunately our lacunary sources do not say so in so many words, and one passage even suggests that liberation is not guaranteed even for those who have reached, or appear to have reached, the end of the path (see Basham, 1951, 142ff., 161ff.).

We do not know how long Ājīvikism survived in northern India. Inscriptions from the Maurya period and passing references in more recent Sanskrit literature suggest that its decline began soon after the Mauryas and continued for more than a thousand years (see Basham, 1951, 142ff., 161ff.). However, its central ideas did not completely disappear. These ideas reappear, in modified form, in the works of Kumārila Bhaṭṭa (7th cent. CE) and Śrīdhara (10th cent. CE), both of them Brahmanical philosophers with links to northern India. In order to understand the ideas of Kumārila and Śrīdhara, we must consider some of the consequences of Ājīvikism's central doctrine.

Ājīvikism rejected the possibility of the annihilation of former actions. It was also familiar with the notion of a self that never acts. Most philosophies that accepted that the self never acts also believed that the realization of this fact suffices, or is a prerequisite, to free oneself from the burden of karmic retribution. However, this is not completely self-evident. One might think that the realization of the inactive nature of the self cancels the effects of one's deeds from the moment of that realization onward. In that case, one would still be burdened with all the deeds carried out during countless numbers of births preceding that moment. Full liberation would then still have to wait until those earlier deeds – all of them – have carried fruit.

This is the position taken by Śrīdhara, which he appears to have borrowed from Kumārila. Both of these authors specify that the time it takes for all those earlier deeds to carry fruit, from the moment of realizing the true nature of the self onward, is 10,000 million *yugas* (*yugakoṭisahasra*; perhaps  $4.32 \times 10^{15}$  years). This, if our estimation of the lengths of *yugas* and *mahākālpas* is correct, is shorter than the period calculated by the early Ājīvikas but begins only at the time a person realizes the inactive nature of his or her self, that is, after innumerable existences without this insight have already passed. In this way, Śrīdhara and Kumārila's vision is a variant of the vision of Ājīvikism. One might even speak of an improve-

ment, for, unlike Ājīvikism, their vision reserves an essential place for the realization of the inactive nature of the self.

It goes without saying that the attraction of the modified vision of Śrīdhara and Kumārila, with its immense waiting period, is limited, unless a method is found to deal with the effects of past deeds. Śrīdhara and Kumārila do propose such a method; it consists in the faithful execution of vedic ritual. This aspect of their thought is clearly a Brahmanical addition to a core of ideas whose link with Ājīvikism seems undeniable (Bronkhorst, 2007a).

Ājīvikism survived until the 14th, perhaps 15th, century CE in the Tamil country in southern India, as is testified by a number of inscriptions ranging from the 5th to the 14th century (Basham, 1951, 187f.). Certain Tamil texts even provide some, though limited, information about particular beliefs that the southern Ājīvikas had meanwhile adopted.

Among these new beliefs, we find the doctrine which the commentator calls *avicalitanityatva* (unchanging permanence). It is ascribed to Ājīvikas in the Tamil *Nīlakēci*, a text that was composed, perhaps in the 10th century CE, as a Jain answer to a Buddhist challenge and that refutes also arguments of Ājīvikas and others (Basham, 1951, 198f.; Zvelebil, 1992, 70; 1995, 495). Ājīvika doctrine encompasses most notably the view that “nothing is destroyed, and nothing is produced” (Basham, 1951, 237). We may suspect here the influence of the philosophical development that affected all known Indian schools of philosophy during the first half of the 1st millennium CE, a development that is ultimately based on notions about language (Bronkhorst, 2011).

Another new belief rather points to continued interaction with Jainism. P.S. Jaini (1980) has drawn attention to a difficulty with which Jainism was confronted: How is it that the steady “departure” of souls through the attainment of liberation does not eventually deplete the universe of all sentient existence? The answer provided is that there is an infinite number of extremely simple beings, the so-called *nigodas*, that are at such a low level of existence that they do not even possess an individual body. Certain of these *nigodas* – the *nitya-nigodas* – constitute an inexhaustible reservoir of souls, with the result that the universe will never be depleted of sentient existence. Ājīvikism was confronted with the same problem but could not opt for the same solution. It maintained that all

living beings would be liberated after 8,400,000 great *kalpas*. The implication is that a time will come when all living beings will be liberated, an implication that the Ājīvikas were apparently not willing to accept. Instead, they developed the notion of *maṇḍalamokṣa*, according to which liberation is not the end. We find it in the Tamil *Nīlakēci*, mentioned above, and the *Civañānacittiyār*, a Śaiva text, both of which stipulate that liberated souls may return to the universe (Basham, 1951, 259f.; the belief that this view finds expression already in the canonical *Sūyagaḍa* is open to doubt; see Bollée, 1977, 113–114).

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