

Glossary : Jain worldview traditions

This glossary is also available on our website. We also have an accompanying in-depth subject knowledge essay, available both on our website and for download.

[In-depth subject knowledge essay](#)

[Glossary](#)

Acharya

ALTERNATIVE SPELLINGS: Acharya, Acharaya

DEFINITION: An acharya is teacher or spiritual guide, one learned in the religious tradition and its texts.

Ahimsa

ALTERNATIVE SPELLINGS: Ahinsa

DEFINITION: Non-violence. The belief that we should not cause harm to any living creature. This is a guiding principle used by the 20th Century Hindu reformer Mahatma Gandhi.

Anekant

ALTERNATIVE SPELLINGS: Anekantavada, Anekanta

DEFINITION: Pluralism, and a respect for alternative viewpoints. Jains are often active in inter-faith dialogue.

Anuvrats

ALTERNATIVE SPELLINGS: Anuvratas

DEFINITION: The basic vows Jains are expected to observe as part of ethical living. These include non-violence (which for the vast majority of Jains, includes being vegetarian and not eating root vegetables and eggs), non-possessiveness, simplicity and non-materialism, self-restraint, honesty and sincerity, respect for different viewpoints and beliefs and restraint in sensual indulgence.

Digambara

ALTERNATIVE SPELLINGS: Digambar

DEFINITION: One of the two major divisions within Jain monasticism. Each division has its own community of lay followers. This division originally occurred around the 4th century CE. The Digambara or sky-clad (naked) ascetics were originally mainly found in the South of India, although today their lay followers can be found all over India and in other countries. There are a lot of similarities between the values and scriptures of the Digambara and Shvetambara, although there are differences in the practices and rituals.

Diwali

ALTERNATIVE SPELLINGS: Divali, Mahavir Nirvana Day

Diwali is particularly significant for Jains. They believe that on Diwali, in 527 BCE, Mahavira delivered his final teachings and attained liberation. In celebration, shrines and temples are decorated and many Jains meditate, some Jains fast. Lamps are also lit.

Jain

ALTERNATIVE SPELLINGS: Jaina

DEFINITION: One who follows the path of the jinas, those who have achieved spiritual liberation. A true Jain is one who has reached the inner purity of the soul and is not tainted by greed, violence or vices of any kind.

Jain temple

ALTERNATIVE SPELLINGS: Derasar, Basadi

DEFINITION: Images of twenty-four Tirthankaras will typically be set in small chambers around the central sanctum. These are often made of marble, or at least with marble in the interior. The temple is often a community centre, but most devotion is completed daily in the home. In the UK, Jain temples can be found in several places, including many in south London, with others in Leicester, Manchester and Leeds. The Jain temple in Leicester is thought to be the first to be consecrated outside of India.

Jainism

A dharmic worldview that dates back at least 2500 years to the life of Mahavira, the 24th and most recent of the 24 Tirthankaras. Many would say its roots can be traced back to 750 BCE. The community is made up of laity, as well as nuns and monks. It is perhaps most well-known for its focus on ahimsa, non-violence. In 2025, there are around 6.3 million Jains, with approximately 6 million of those living in India. The 2021 Census of England and Wales showed that approximately 25,000 people self-identified as Jain. There are sizable communities of Jain in some outer London boroughs, for example

Harrow, Brent, Barnet, Hillingdon and Croydon. There are also significant Jain populations in other areas such as Leicester.

Jina

DEFINITION: A victor over the inner vices and weaknesses, one who has reached enlightenment but also lends others wisdom to follow in this journey. Mahavira was a Jina.

Jiva

DEFINITION: The 'soul', or life-force, being reborn in the continuing cycle of birth, death and rebirth until the jiva, life-force, is liberated.

Karma

DEFINITION: Like other dharmic worldviews, Jains believe that the life-force, or 'soul', is trapped in a never-ending cycle of rebirth, and that the life-force, is born into different bodies according to the karma they have collected. They believe that the only way to break out of the cycle of rebirth is to achieve enlightenment and reach liberation. However, Jains believe that Karma is a material form that gets stuck to the life-force, or 'soul'.

Mahavaratas

ALTERNATIVE SPELLINGS: Mahavratas

DEFINITION: Vows taken by nuns and monks. These are made up of 5 ethical precepts: non-violence (ahimsa), truth, not stealing, chastity and not having any possessions.

Mahavir Jyanti

ALTERNATIVE SPELLINGS: Mahavir Jayanti

A festival celebrating the birth of Mahavira, the latest Tirthankara born in 599* BCE. During this festival, the image of Mahavira is bathed, and plays are performed based on the dreams that Mahavira's mother is said to have had before he was born.

* Other birth dates suggested are 540 or 615 BCE.

Mahavira

ALTERNATIVE SPELLINGS: Mahavir

Mahavira was the 24th in the line of Tirthankaras and he was born in north-east India in 599* BCE. There is scientific and historical evidence of his existence. Mahavira was

born in the Indian town of Vaisali, near the Ganges River. His father was a local prince and, according to legend, his mother had dreams that foretold the birth of a prophet son. Mahavira was brought up as a Jain and followed ascetic practices. At the age of 30, Mahavira himself became an ascetic, left his home and family and became a wandering teacher, begging for his food. He lived on gifts for twelve years, spending most of the time in meditation. Then, at the age of forty-three, he became enlightened and a jina, or conqueror of life and death. For the next thirty years of his life, Mahavira taught his ideas, gathered disciples who were willing to renounce all possessions, and ordained them as monks and nuns. He attained liberation (nirvana) at Pavapuri, near Patna in 527 BCE. Jains celebrate this liberation during the festival of Diwali every year.

* Other birth dates suggested are 540 or 615 BCE.

Mantra

DEFINITION: A sacred word or a sound, often chanted or sung, used to help a person keep concentration whilst meditating.

Murti

ALTERNATIVE SPELLINGS: Moorti

DEFINITION: An image or likeness. In the Jain tradition, murtis are of the Tirthankaras. These murtis are not representing deities but in worshipping the murti, a Jain is inspired to take on the qualities of the Tirthankara, purify themselves and focus on liberation.

Navkar Mantra

ALTERNATIVE SPELLINGS: Namokar Mantra

DEFINITION: The most sacred Jain prayer, a salutation to all enlightened souls, whatever faith they belong to.

Paryushan

ALTERNATIVE SPELLINGS: Paryushana, Dash Lakshan Parva

This is an annual festival of atonement and repentance, which lasts over 8 days in September. It involves listening to sacred texts and taking positive steps with regard to ahimsa and fellowship to fellow Jains, visiting temples, right living and fasting. The words 'micchami dukkadam' are said to be requesting forgiveness of those who have been harmed in any way. The final day of the festival, Samvatsari, or international forgiveness day, is seen as the holiest day of the Jain calendar and for many Jains it is a day of fasting.

Pratikramana

ALTERNATIVE SPELLINGS: Pratikraman, penitential retreat

DEFINITION: A daily practice in the morning and evening, which is to rid the believer of karma that is gained either knowingly or unknowingly through a person's daily life.

Sadhu

DEFINITION: Monks (Sadhu), the literal translation is silently holy ones. They teach the lay community, travel on foot to avoid harming even tiny creatures, accept only the food that is offered to them and many cover their mouths to avoid swallowing tiny insects.

Sadhu or Sadhvi

ALTERNATIVE SPELLINGS: Sadhvi

DEFINITION: Monks (Sadhus) and nuns (Sadhvis). The literal translation is silently holy ones. They teach the lay community, travel on foot to avoid harming even tiny creatures, accept only the food that is offered to them and many cover their mouths to avoid swallowing tiny insects.

Sadhvi

DEFINITION: Nuns (Sadhvi), the literal translation is silently holy ones. They teach the lay community, travel on foot to avoid harming even tiny creatures, accept only the food that is offered to them and many cover their mouths to avoid swallowing tiny insects.

Seva

ALTERNATIVE SPELLINGS: Sewa

DEFINITION: Selfless service. For many Jains this is a form of Ahimsa, a way to practice compassion towards all living beings.

Shvetambara

ALTERNATIVE SPELLINGS: Svetambara

DEFINITION: One of the two major divisions within Jain monasticism. Each division also has its own community of lay followers. This division originally occurred around the 4th century CE. The Shvetambara, or white robed ascetics, live mostly in northern India, however, they can be found all over India, and lay followers can be found all over India and in other countries.

There are a lot of similarities between the values and scriptures of the Digambara and Shvetambara, although there are differences in the practices and rituals.

Siddha

ALTERNATIVE SPELLINGS: Sidha

DEFINITION: An enlightened and liberated soul who is no longer in need of a body.

Three jewels

ALTERNATIVE SPELLINGS: Three jewels, three gems of Jainism

DEFINITION: The path to liberation involves having the right faith, right knowledge and right conduct.

Tirtha

ALTERNATIVE SPELLINGS: Tirth

DEFINITION: The literal translation is a spiritual ford or crossing place. These are now places of pilgrimage, mainly found in India.

Tirthankaras

ALTERNATIVE SPELLINGS: Tirthankar

This term literally means ford-maker. A being who has achieved liberation. There are twenty-four in each epoch, or cycle of time. The latest Tirthankara, Mahavira, was born in 599* BCE and he is believed to be the twenty-fourth of the current era. They act as a teacher and share their knowledge with others.

*Other birth dates suggested are 540 or 615 BCE.

Vegetarianism

ALTERNATIVE SPELLINGS: Satvik, Ahimsa diet

DEFINITION: Vegetarianism is a central tenet of the faith, and diet and exercise are considered very important to spiritual progress. Jains have been strict vegetarians for thousands of years, which, for the vast majority of Jains, means this includes also not eating root vegetables, aubergines, tomatoes and eggs. Some Nuns and Monks even wear a cloth over their mouths and brush the road before them when they walk, in order not to harm any living thing, including insects.