

# Buddhism and Jainism

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Mahavira was probably a senior contemporary of Gautama Buddha, the founder of Buddhism. The Buddhist texts mention Mahavira as an enlightened being. However some scholars believe that probably they belonged to different periods and had no contact with each other. According to one version, Mahavira spent some time in the company of Gosala, the founder of Ajivika sect and the Buddha, the founder of Buddhism, before they parted ways on account of serious differences over doctrinal issues. The period during which both Buddhism and Jainism rose to prominence was a period of great intellectual and religious churning in the Indian subcontinent. Many theistic and atheistic traditions competed with one another for popularity and acceptance. Buddhism and Jainism had an added advantage in the form of Mahavira and the Buddha. Both were charismatic leaders with an ability to communicate convincingly with influential members of society and also organize their respective communities around the ideals and the doctrine they preached.

Followers of both religions often engaged in heated discussion over finer aspects of their beliefs and ridiculed each other. However both groups had their own respective differences with the Vedic religion and the ideals it represented. Of the two, Buddhism was more pronounced in its criticism towards their common adversary. The very fact that the Buddha denounced extreme asceticism and ritualism as the means to salvation indicate that he probably viewed Jainism as an orthodox tradition not much different from the Vedic religion. Both Buddhism and Jainism sought to attract the urban people for conversion. The Buddha and Mahavira frequently visited Banaras, Pataliputra and other popular cities to organize congregations and conversions, which must have led to some competition between the two communities for patronage, popularity and membership.

On the surface one may mistakenly think that Jainism and Buddhism are interrelated or Jainism is a form of Buddhism. Since both religions originated in India and both believe in karma, rebirth and liberation one may draw this erroneous conclusion. Further, in both religions the deities such as the Buddha and Mahavira are depicted in a similar fashion as seated in a lotus position and engaged in meditation. However, although both religions share a common history in the Indian subcontinent, they differ widely in many respects. Buddhism spread worldwide, while Jainism remained confined to a few sections within India. Following are some of the differences and similarities between Buddhism and Jainism.

## **The Founders**

Jainism was founded and propagated by a lineage of several Thirthankaras who hailed mostly from the royal families. Some of the Thirthankaras were historical personalities.<sup>1</sup> Mahavira was the last and perhaps the most popular of the Thirthankaras. The Thirthankaras are worshipped in temples and religious places not as gods but as enlightened beings who manifest upon earth as a part of human

destiny. Buddhism was founded by Siddhartha Gautama who became the Buddha after he received enlightenment. Like Mahavira, he also hailed from a royal family. In Buddhism there is no tradition of Thirthankaras or a lineage of preachers or prophets. It has only one prophet in the form of the Buddha himself and even his teachings need not have to be accepted by the Buddhist blindly because that was what the Buddha himself recommended before his Parinirvana. He wanted his followers to be lamps unto themselves, an idea that was echoed several centuries later by J. Krishnamurthy of the Theosophical Society when he declared that religion was a pathless land in which each had to find his or her own path.<sup>2</sup> However Buddhists believe in the various incarnations and appearances of the Buddha and the existence of several Bodhisattvas or pure beings of compassion whom they worship for blessings and help. Some Buddhists believe that the Buddha will reincarnate again some time in the future to revive the teachings of the Buddha.

### **The Existence of God and Soul**

Both Buddhism and Jainism are atheistic religions. They deny the existence of God or the First Cause of creation. Buddhism may be considered more as an agnostic religion rather than atheistic. The Buddha's stand on God was rather ambiguous. He maintained silence on the issue of the existence of God and refused to be drawn into any conversation or discussion on the subject, declaring it to be a distraction with no apparent benefit in the liberation of man.

Jainism acknowledges the presence of soul in every animate and inanimate object, including the elements of the universe, such as the earth, water, wind, fire and air. In addition to these Jainism believes in the tattvas or principles of natures such as buddhi, the sense organs etc. The Buddhists also believe in the tattvas of Prakriti but do not believe in the existence of eternal and indestructible souls. They also do not believe that inanimate objects have life or individuality. Buddhism is distinguished for its concept of non-soul or Anatma. They declare that a being is an aggregate of elements and parts which come into existence on account of karma and continues its journey onwards through becoming and changing because of desires till it achieves nirvana or a state of non-becoming by right conduct and right living. The concept of a world filled with innumerable individual souls or clusters of souls, or souls lying hidden in rocks and mountains, rivers and lakes, or stars and planets is untenable in Buddhism.

### **The Existence of Divinities**

Both religions acknowledge the presence of gods as higher beings who, like us, are also subject to change and evolution according to their karma. Most of the gods bear the same names as in Hinduism. But these counterparts are not the omnipotent and omniscient type. They are just beings of another plane or world, higher than ours, but with limited potency and knowledge. Jainism believes in the existence of enlightened pure beings, called Jinas or Kevalins who manifest upon earth from time to time to preach the doctrine. Buddhism also has its own group of enlightened beings known as Bodhisattvas, who are qualified for nirvana but prefer to postpone it to help the mankind in liberation.

The Bodhisattvas take interest in the welfare of the world and work for its liberation. The Kevalins are worshipped in temples and homes. But not all Buddhists worship the Buddha or the Bodhisattvas ritually except by some who belongs to sects such as Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism.

**The Concept of Karma**

Both Buddhism and Jainism believe in the concept of karma as a binding force responsible for the suffering of beings upon earth. They acknowledge the universality of karma and its inescapable effect on the individual beings who are subject to the cycle of births and rebirths. But they differ in respect of the nature of karma and how it impacts various beings. According to Jainism karma is not a mere effect or result of a being's actions, but a real substance that becomes attached to each jiva, like an impurity, while it performs many actions in the course of its existence upon earth. This karmic substance which is a kind of subtle matter or energy field, remains attached to the being until it is fully cleansed through the observation of vows, pure conduct and severe austerities. In Buddhism, as in Hinduism, karma is a process, a consequence of one's desire ridden actions that cling to the personality of a being as an impression of its past and determines its future. Good actions lead to good karma and bad actions to bad karma. One can address the problem of karma by following the teachings of the Buddha, the truths enshrined in the Dhamma and the code of conduct prescribed for the Sangha. The eightfold Path and the Four Noble Truths are the best means to minimize the negative effects of karma and work for salvation.

**The Concept of Nirvana**

Both religions believe in the concept of nirvana or liberation of bound beings. However there is a difference between them in respect of who achieves nirvana. According to Jainism souls are eternal entities which get entangled in the causative phenomena and become subject to the law of karma. In their liberated state the souls are conscious, eternal, pure and divine. But in their bound state they become subject to the cycle of births and death. Death is a mere separation of the soul from the body and birth is its entry into a new physical body as determined by its previous actions. A soul can free itself from the suffering and limitations of physical life by leading a pure and austere life according to the percepts taught by the Thirthankaras. In some extreme cases it can also be achieved by destroying the body itself through austerities and self-mortification. After liberation, the Jiva or soul continues to remain as an individual soul, but in the highest state of purity and enlightenment. As far as the soul is concerned, the Jain concept of Nirvana has some similarities with both the Samkhya and Vaisheshika schools as well as some dualistic schools of Hinduism.

Buddhism does not believe in the existence of eternal souls. So it approaches the subject of liberation purely from a physical and mental perspective. What becomes liberated during nirvana is the individual personality that comes into existence on account of the aggregations of elements and consciousness. This individual personality is neither eternal nor divine. It is an impermanent and unstable entity, which is subject to karma and the cycle of births and deaths. Nirvana is an

indescribable state in which the individual personality becomes free once and for all from the process of becoming and changing and achieves some kind of stillness that is difficult to explain.

### **Methods of Propagation**

The development of Buddhism and Jainism in ancient India coincided with the emergence of urban centers where strict implementation of the social order and the caste structure of the Vedic religion was rather difficult if not impractical. Mahavira and the Buddha took advantage of the new mindset created by the challenges of urban life with regard to such common problems as congestion, death, disease and aging. They were both charismatic leaders and great organizers, with profound insight into human behavior and existential issues. They used self example, personal contact, debates and discussions as the effective means to bring people to their fold. Because of their own descent from princely families, they were able to maintain cordial relationship with the influential members of society, especially the kings and affluent merchants who could provide them with the necessary logistic support to continue their propagation. After receiving enlightenment, they spent most part of their lives traveling from place to place and preaching their respective doctrines. They rested during the monsoons and used the time effectively to train the monks and prepare them for liberation.

While Vedic people believed that spiritualism was an entirely personal issue or the privilege of a few chosen ones based on birth, the Buddha and Mahavira made it their responsibility to take religion to the people, independent of their social, political or economic background and made every possible effort to make sure that people listened to them and understood them. The Buddha focused his attention on the lower strata of society, who were shunned by the Vedic elite on account of their caste or social background. Both of them maintained a clear distinction between the lay followers and the more serious, establishing distinct rules and percepts for each of the categories according to their needs and aspirations. They used Prakrit, the language of the common people, rather than Sanskrit, for the propagation of their respective doctrines. In the ancient world if Vedic religion was enmeshed in the caste based limitations of its own creation, Buddhism and Jainism broke through all barriers and reached out to a cross section of society to teach them the secrets of salvation that were hitherto kept hidden from them. They embraced the common people whom the elite believed unfit for serious religious discipline.

### **Social Equality, Morality and Gender Differences**

Buddhism opposed the four fold social order of Vedic society which divided people into four castes namely Brahmins, warriors, merchants and workers. The Buddha admitted people from all wakes of life into Buddhism, although we are told that at times the higher castes received preferential treatment from him for their special value as men of virtue, knowledge and intellect. In initial stages the Buddha was opposed to the idea of admitting women into monastic life. He thought that their admittance would lead to the decline of virtue and moral standards in the Buddhist Order. However because of requests by his close followers and being unconditional he reluctantly initiated women into the

monasteries formulating a policy of segregation with certain restrictions and conditions on their conduct and practice.

The concept of dividing people into classes and castes was not alien to Jainism. Rishabhanatha, the first Thirthankara of Jainism is actually credited with the formulation of social divisions based on occupation and virtue, which was subsequently morphed into a rigid caste system by the Vedic people. The Thirthankaras however showed no preference for a particular class. They admitted people from all sections of society according to their virtue and readiness for the rigors of spiritual life. At times they did secure help and support from influential sections of society to propagate their message. The same was true in case of Buddhism also.

## **Rituals and Morality**

In the early days its popularity, Buddhism opposed the rites and rituals of Vedic religion and focused more on righteous conduct as the means to liberation. Jainism had no such reservation. Brahmins were employed in Jain temples as officiating priests to conduct the worship of the Thirthankaras. However rituals play a minimal role in Jainism. Jainism is an austere religion, in which the emphasis is more on individual actions, restraint and inner purity for achieving liberation. Both religions deny the existence of God and discount the possibility of divine intervention or fate in salvation. What determines a being's destiny upon earth is its actions emanating from the exercise of its free will. Each is held personally responsible and accountable for its actions and has to work for its salvation individually through the practice of virtue and uncompromising adherence to an established code of conduct and religious percepts.

## **Transmigration**

Jainism believes in the transmigration of souls. Buddhism does not believe in the existence of souls. However it also believes in the transmigration. What transmigrates from one life to another is not the soul but the causative entity or the ego principle which is subject to the laws of karma and bound to the cycle of births and deaths. This causative entity is an aggregation of various physical and mental components which together constitute the individual personality which is subject to the experience of duality, pain and suffering. It continues to exist and undergoes constant change till it crosses the bridge of samsara and attains nirvana or a state of complete non-becoming.

## **The Nature of Existence and The Reality of Suffering**

The Buddha preached that the human life was characterized by great misery and suffering because of desires and attachment pervading the consciousness of each jiva. For all intents and purposes the Buddhist view of the world is not comforting enough, if not negative, unless one has learned to deal with it suitably by cultivating equanimity towards the pairs of opposites through right living and right knowledge. For the beings caught in the vicious cycle of samsara or the causative phenomena, the

world is not an ideal place to live. It is filled with the ubiquitous evil of suffering and torment. It offers a constantly changing and shifting reality in which beings become involved by their own actions, dreams and desires. The Buddhist world view is not based on some mystical or scriptural revelation. It is rooted in the mundane experiences of ordinary human existence, in the awareness of the current and immediate reality arising out of pure observation, contemplation and detached submission to the flow of events passing by. Man is bound to the cycle of births and deaths and subject to the afflictions of life by his own actions and deluded nature. He cannot find escape from them except through rigorous self-effort and commitment to the eightfold path.

For the Jains karma is not a mere process but a harsh reality. It is a physical substance from which no one can really escape without paying the price in the form of retribution, bondage and suffering. It is a subtle fluid like impurity which becomes attached to us according to our actions. The Jain world view is based mostly on scriptural injunctions established by the Thirthankaras through their teachings. There is little scope for flexibility, personal freedom and experimentation in their implementation. The souls are real and eternal. In their pure state, they are not subject to the laws of bondage. For the souls the world offers an alternate reality. It is a snare filled with the evils of lust, greed, pride, anger and envy. The souls are pure consciousness. They exist in both animate and inanimate objects and are subject to the law of karma irrespective of their location. For Jains the world is one vast sacred place, permeated with innumerable souls caught in various stages of bondage and illusion. They are everywhere and in everything like atoms in the air or water. It is a fragile world too, which needs to be handled with utmost care and responsibility because the actions and reactions of each soul would create ripple effects upon other souls elsewhere. Even a mere act of drinking water or eating food calls for great precision and utmost care so as not to cause suffering to the souls present in the water, the food, the vessel, the air and the space surround them. Jainism therefore suggests a life of non-injury and prescribes a very rigorous, uncompromising and unforgiving code of conduct for the liberation of individuals in contrast to the middle path recommended by Buddhism.

## **Monastic Life**

One of the common features of Buddhism and Jainism is the organization of monastic orders or communities of monks. Renunciation and asceticism are central to both religions as the principal means for liberation. The monks live together in groups and practice the precepts according to an established code of conduct. They share the community work such as cooking and cleaning on a rotation basis as a religious duty and opportunity to practice virtue. Usually the elder monks take charge of the community affairs and maintain order. They also share their knowledge and experience with the younger monks and new initiates, training them well for more advanced practices. The presence of many people living together sharing common values and beliefs creates strong vibrations, uplifting them all spiritually and help them in their progress.

## **Conclusion**

Both Buddhism and Jainism originated and developed as distinct religions in the same geographical area comprising the present day Bihar and adjoining states, at a time when the Vedic religion was yet to penetrate deep into the Gangetic valley. Its self-proclaimed superiority of the priestly classes and its unabashed attempts to exclude many from the study of the scriptures or practice or religion provoked a strong reaction among many intellectuals of the time especially from the ruling classes to which both the Buddha and Mahavira belonged. It led to a churning of religious ideas and the emergence of many rival traditions that vied with each other for support and fellowship. Of the few survived only Buddhism and Jainism were able to maintain their distinction as separate religions while the rest were assimilated into Vedic religion with suitable modification.

There was a time when the two religions dominated the religious scene of India, pushing their common rival to a distinct third. Under the patronage of Asoka, Buddhism crossed the frontiers of Indian subcontinent and went to Nepal, China, Tibet (which is now part of China), far eastern countries, central Asia, Sri Lanka and Japan, while Jainism remained mostly confined to the land of its origin. In course of time, both religions also suffered from schism resulting in sectarian movements. For very long Buddhism kept its distinct stance against Hinduism, while Jainism maintained a more cordial and tolerant attitude, employing Brahmin priests in temple rituals and letting its beliefs and practices integrate into the rival tradition such as the concept of ahimsa or non-injury, vegetarianism, transmigration of souls, incarnation of pure beings, the concept of maya and karma and so on. Comparatively, Jainism was less popular than Buddhism. Its concept of karma made life a difficult ordeal for the weak, the insincere and the worldly minded. Its emphasis on extreme asceticism and inner purity discouraged many people from joining it. Interestingly, in the end it was Buddhism which declined in India and got overwhelmed by Hinduism, suffering in the process an identity crisis. Jainism on the other hand lost most of its following to both the rivals in the very early stages of religious development in India. But it survived till the end as a separate religion with a committed following of its own.

**Suggested Further Reading**

**Footnotes**

1. This does not mean the other thirthankaras did not exist. We simply do not have enough historical evidence other than scriptural evidence about them.
2. Jiddu Krishnamurthy was indeed misunderstood for his statements by the theosophists who were submissive and accustomed to the authority of spiritual masters and organized religion. They disowned him as he pursued an independent path, thinking that he betrayed their trust and their doctrine.