Ancient India and China

Biography

Mahavira
c. 599–527 BC

WHY HE MADE HISTORY  Known as the primary founder of Jainism, Mahavira (meaning Great Hero) was actually the last in the line of 24 saviors who taught Jainism. He was a model of ethical living, both in the sense of trying to become the best person he could be, as well as taking care not to harm others.

As you read the biography below, think about how Mahavira approached the quest to lead an ethical life.

Many believe that Mahavira was a contemporary of Buddha. Like Buddha, Mahavira lived and taught in northern India in an area near the Ganges River. There were other similarities between the two men as well. For instance, both were the sons of kings. And both gave up their families and social standing to undertake a spiritual quest, which they pursued until they found enlightenment.

Mahavira left home at about age 30. He left behind a wife and a child. He gave away all of his earthly possessions and became an ascetic, or someone who practices extreme self-denial. For 12 years he led a disciplined life. He meditated, went without food for long periods of time, endured hardships, and practiced nonviolence. He even gave away his food bowl and his clothing. At the end of this period, he achieved enlightenment, or the understanding of ultimate truth. He was 42 years old. After that, he was known as the Jina (the conqueror).

Mahavira spent the next thirty years preaching about the religion of Jainism. He also established an order of nuns and monks. Over time, his teachings grew in popularity. These teachings focus on self-denial and moral perfection. He preached nonviolence and instructed his followers to be kind to all living things. To be certain that no animal be killed for food, Mahavira taught vegetarianism.

The focus of his teaching is captured in three moral excellences or jewels (triratna), five vows (vratas), and 21 personal qualities. The three jewels are right knowledge, right intuition, and right conduct. All Jains practice these. Jain monks and nuns work to attain the 21 personal qualities, represented by characteristics such as mercy, truthfulness, kindness, humility, and a limit to possessions. The five vows include the practice of ahimsa—harming no form of life. Mahavira died at about the
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age of 72. His teachings are still practiced today by the two Jain sects—the Digambaras and the Shvetambaras.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. Recall  What are some qualities that Mahavira set out to attain?

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2. Express and Support a Point of View  The Jain do not work as farmers. Why do you think this is?

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ACTIVITY

If you wanted to avoid injury to any form of life, what changes would you have to make in your own life? Write your essay on a separate piece of paper.