



Jainism does not restrict the right of attaining perfection to any one individual. An individual, irrespective of his caste or creed, can aspire to this status provided he has the will to follow the path. But SAMYAKTVA or righteousness must be first borne in him. It may well be that the soul has to pass through a series of births before this lamp of spiritual discretion is kindled, but once it is kindled, the march of progress is assured, though it may be frequently hampered and impeded by numerous obstacles.

MAHAVIRA: PAST TWENTY-SEVEN LIVES





MAHAVIRA'S RIGOROUS PENANCES

After his initiation into the life of a renunciate, Mahavira proceeded to a village called Asthikato to begin his quest for kevala-jnana. Thereon, he immersed himself into intense penance and austerities for over twelve years – to be precise, twelve years, five months, and fifteen days (4,545 days)—some Jain scholars believe the duration of penance was one month longer, that is, 4575 days. During his penance, Mahavira displayed complete non-attachment towards every material thing. His attitude of non-attachment also extended to his own body, although he never detested or deliberately abused his body because of his deep respect for his bodily existence. Mahavira propounded that a living being can attain enlightenment only through the human body, which is impossible in any other mode of living beings' existence – even as the heavenly beings – and hence, his deep regards for his own body.

Some highlights of his rigorous penance of over twelve years are:

- Lord Mahavira fasted without water (nirjala upvasa) most of the time and took meals with or without water on only three hundred and twenty-five (325) days out of 4545 days of his penance. His fasts ranged from two days to six months each.
- Mahavira spent most of his time in meditation (dhyana) and remained quiet (mauna) most of the time. The objects of his meditation exercises were Uddharva Loka (heaven,

the celestial realm of gods), Adho Loka (the realm of hellish beings) and Tiryanka Loka (the realm of animals, plants, and insects).

- Mahavira had only forty-eight minutes of sleep during the entire duration of his penance. He conquered the need for sleep through meditation and the quest for self-awakening. Whenever he felt drowsy, he took a deep breath and shook off his lethargy.
- Mahavira lived in solitude, except for a couple of years when Gosalaka accompanied him.
- Mahavira was always on the move to avoid developing any affinity towards any place or people. Except for the four months of rainy season every year, when he remained at one location, he stayed most of the time in uninhabited areas. While moving from one place to another, he did not stay for more than one day in a village and no more than five days in a town.
- Mahavira respected his bodily existence, but to forsake attachment (moha) towards his physical being, he cultivated the attitude of “giving up the body” (utsrsta-kaya) and “renouncing the body” (tyakta-deha) during his penance. He endured illnesses and bodily injuries without seeking any medical help.
- Mahavira faced numerous adversities that tested his commitment to nonviolence. Nature, animals, and insects caused hardships like severe weather, biting him, and crawling over him, respectively. The humans caused some suffering out of jealousy or ignorance. And gods and demons caused some more to test, disturb, distress, torture, and humiliate him. He endured everything with compassion (karuṇa), unyielding non-attachment (anasakti), friendliness (maitri) and equanimity (madhyastha). He maintained an uninterrupted demeanor of joyfulness (pramoda).

Mahavira always remained calm, composed, and tranquil. He gained complete control over his mind, body and speech by restraining his senses and mental trepidations. By the end of his penance, he completely discarded his hurtful karmas (ghatiya or ghatika karmas)—jnanavarāṇiya (knowledge-inhibiting) karma, darsansarāṇiya (perception- or awareness-inhibiting) karma, antaraya (hindrance-causing) karma, mohaniya (delusion-causing) karma. At the same time, he eliminated his passions of anger, pride, deceit and greed (kaṣaya).

Sources:

*Parveen Jain – Intro to Jain Philosophy | Acarya Mahapraya – Sramana Mahavira and
KC Jain – Lord Mahavira and his Times*



Each day is a new canvas to paint upon. Let's make sure our picture is full of life and happiness, and at the end of the day we don't look at it and wish we had painted something different

