

Mahavir's Severe Penances

Jain Agamas have used the term 'Ayatyoga' – meaning concentrated activity of the mind, body and speech to describe Mahavir spiritual practices. During his penance, Mahavir was ever vigilant to his soul and totally indifferent to all things other than self. He was totally absorbed in his self that he never experienced hunger, thirst, heat or cold. His mind, intellect, senses, concerns all moved in one direction of 'the self' for self-realisation and liberation.

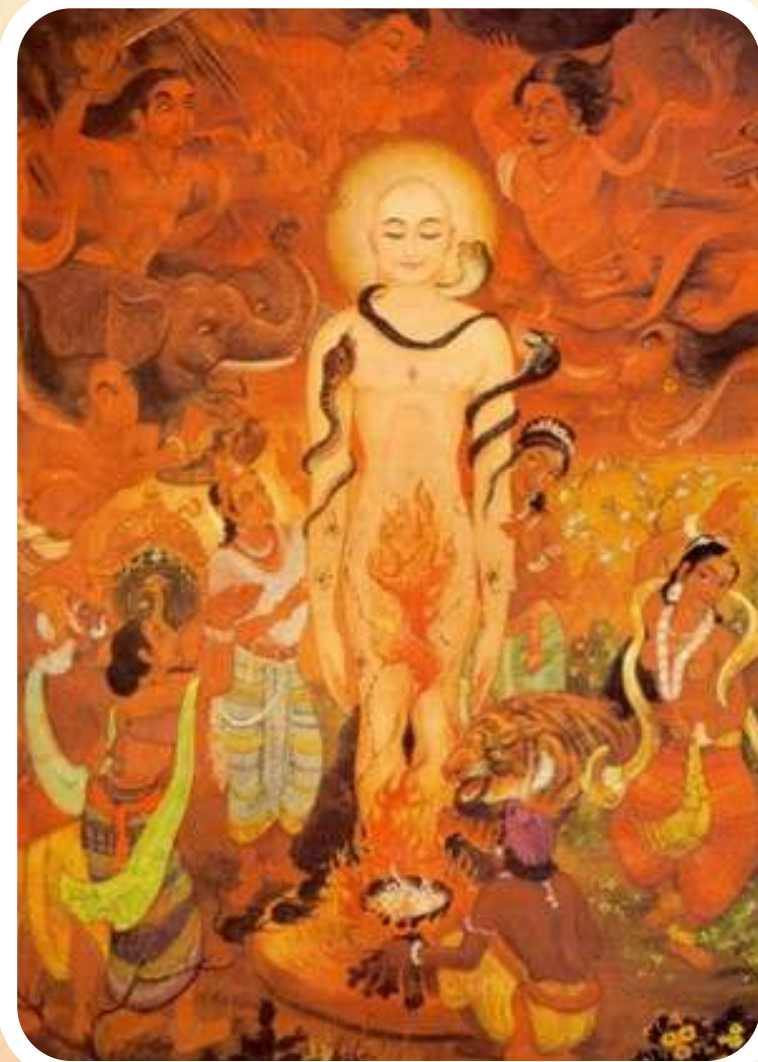
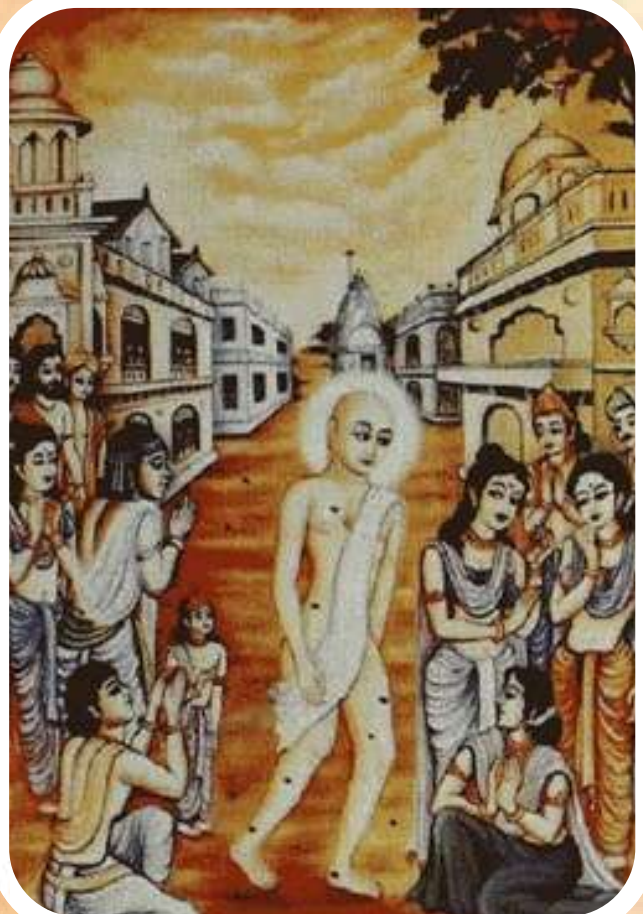
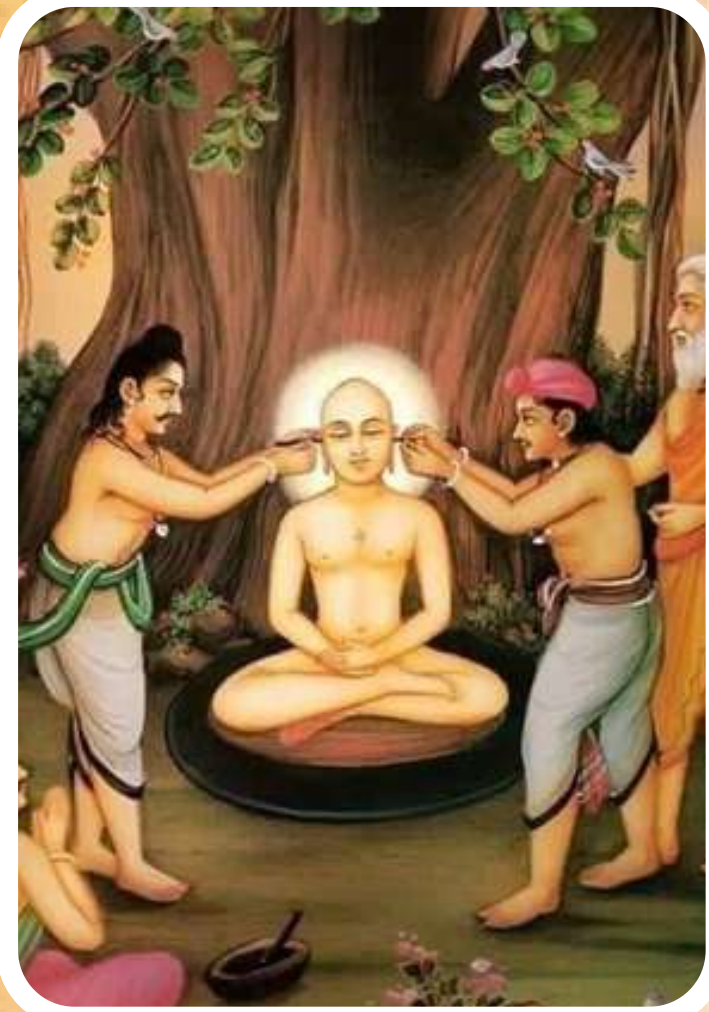
Some highlights of his rigorous penance of over twelve years are:

- Mahavir 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. He lived on three grains for eight months. Fasting was not a ritual for him as generally perceived today.
- Mahavir only accepted 'Prasuka' and 'Niravadya' food i.e food that is not cooked specifically for him and is given to him totally in an non violent way. He eat the food with complete control of his passions.

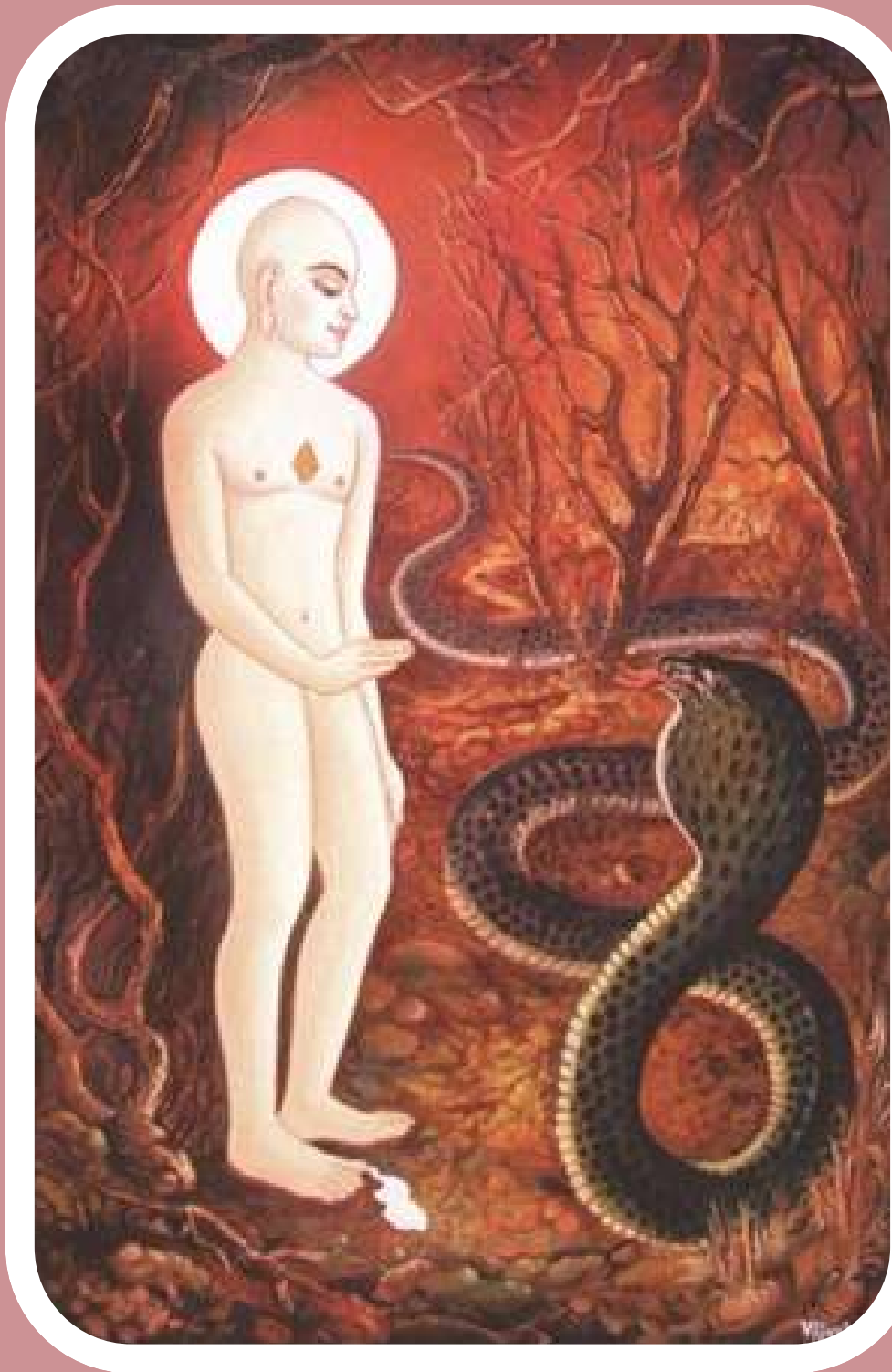
Meals by Tirthankaras are always taken in their hands. However, in order that other ascetics could keep wooden vessels for their food, Mahavir accepted alms only once in wooden vessel in his lifetime.

Mahavira spent most of his time in meditation (dhyana) and remained quiet (mauna) most of the time. If he ever spoke, which was rarely, he spoke, full of compassion and wisdom.

Mahavira lived in solitude, except for a couple of years when Gosalaka accompanied him.



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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 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.

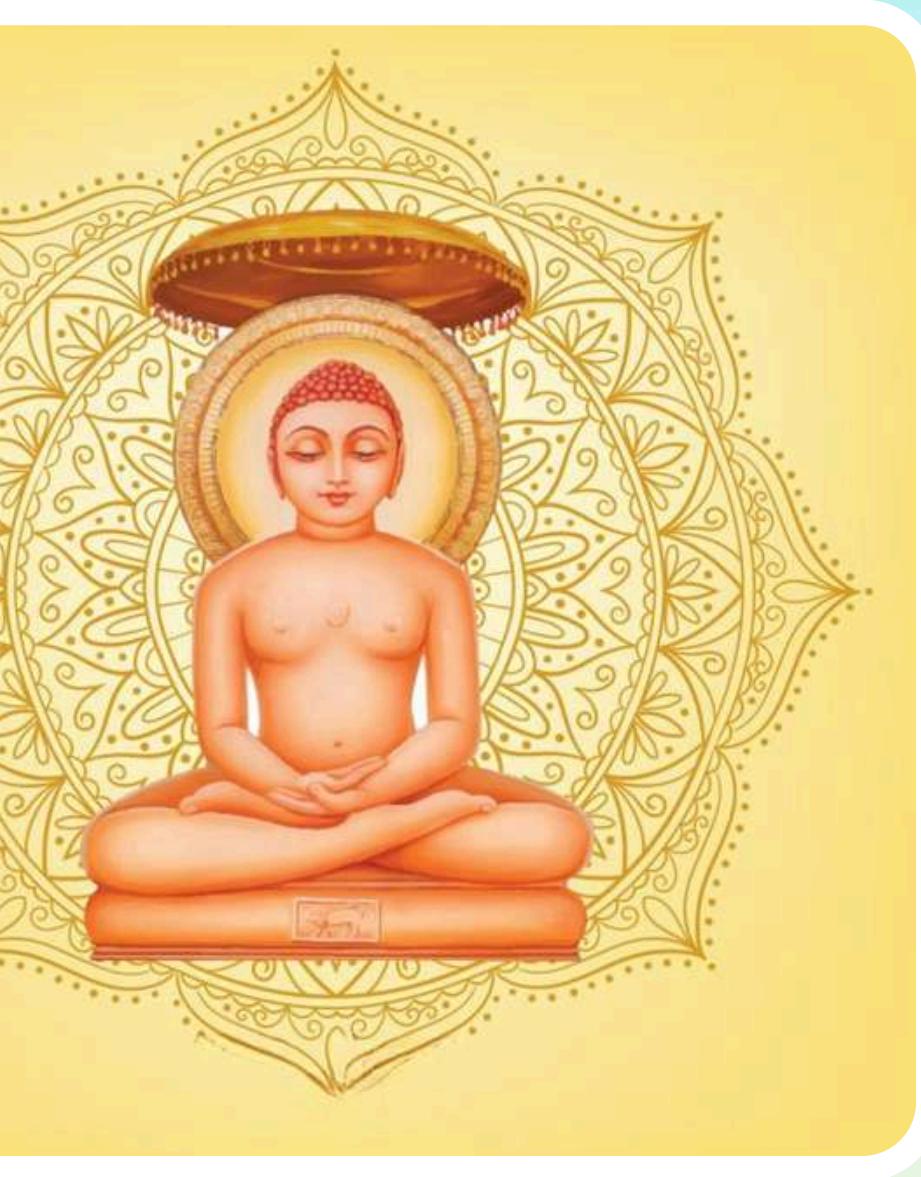


Adversities like Yaksha in Astigama, who tortured him for an entire night by assuming demonic and animal forms, Chandakaushik who was pacified by Mahavir, shepherd in Chamani village who hammered nails into his ears, at many places the villagers were hostile and very violent.

He endured everything with compassion (karuṇa), unyielding nonattachment (anasakti), friendliness (maitri) and equanimity (madhyastha). He maintained an uninterrupted demeanor of joyfulness (pramoda).



Mahavirswami



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)—jnana-varaṇiya (knowledge-inhibiting) karma, darsana-saaraṇiya (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).

After twelve years, six months and fifteen days of observing severe asceticism, he attained omniscience – keval-jnana. He spent the next thirty years showing the path of liberation – Moksha – which consists of the three jewels of Jainism – right perception, knowledge, and conduct.

In 527BC, when the 4th era of the current time cycle was about to end, and the 5th era was about to begin, Mahavir attained nirvana – moksha at the age of seventy-two.

Mahavir Bhagwan's life was full of compassion, Ahimsa, truth, equanimity, austerity coupled with meditation of the purest form and highest order, culminating in the attainment of Moksha – Liberation from the cycle of birth and death. He lived and experienced and then in his doctrines showed the path to salvation. What is required is the proper assimilation of his doctrines and translation into action.

Mahavir made religion simple and natural, free from elaborate ritual complexities. His teachings reflected the internal beauty and harmony of the soul. Mahavira stressed the importance of a positive attitude in life. Mahavira's message of the Five Great Vows (Pancha Mahavrata), Nonviolence, Truth, Non-Stealing, Celibacy, and Non-Possessiveness, is full of universal compassion.

Mahavir emphasized that all living beings, irrespective of their size and shape, are equal and we should love and respect them. His messages of Ahimsa, Anekantavada, and acceptance of the essence of austerity, speech and action are relevant today and will be forever.

Sources:

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