

Mahavira

Summary: Mahavira was born in the 6th century BCE. Growing up in luxury, he abandoned his home at 30 to become an ascetic. At the age of 42, he attained the state of kevalajnana, alone in the world in his supreme knowledge. After a prolific career of teaching, Mahavira passed away at the age of 72, attaining what is called moksha (liberation).

According to tradition, Mahavira was born in the year 599 BCE as a prince named Vardhamana, “Increaser of Prosperity,” in the town of Vaishali in north India. Legend tells how his mother had a series of dreams or visions that presaged the birth of a spiritual leader. She saw, for example, a white elephant, the Goddess Lakshmi, the full moon, the rising sun, a lotus pond, and a blazing fire. Though the child grew up familiar with pleasure and luxury, he left it all behind at age 30 to follow the path of spiritual purification and realization. Mahavira became an ascetic, renouncing material possessions and family life and, for the next 12 years, wholly devoting himself to the practice of meditation. One passage from the Acharanga Sutra, the oldest Jain scripture, tells of the abuse he suffered at the hands of irate villagers:

“Once when he sat in meditation, his body unmoving, they cut his flesh, tore his hair, and covered him with dirt. They picked him up and then dropped him, disturbing his meditational postures. Abandoning concern for his body, free from desire, the Venerable One humbled himself and bore the pain. Just as a hero at the head of a battle is surrounded on all sides, so was Mahavira there. Undisturbed, bearing all hardships, the Venerable One proceeded on the path of salvation.”

At age 42, Mahavira burned away the remnants of *ghati*, those *karmas* that are the residue of past acts and thus obscure the quality of the soul. He attained the state called *kevalajnana*, or *kaivalya*, infinite knowledge. For the next 30 years until his death, he taught from the luminous wisdom of this self-realization. He taught the presence of soul in all beings, that *karma* binds the soul in ignorance and suffering, and the importance of nonviolence, or *ahimsa*, to overcoming *karma*. According to tradition, Mahavira attained final liberation from the body in 527 BCE at age 72. The freedom from rebirth that he is said to have achieved is called *moksha* or *nirvana*.