

The word Jaina is derived from the word, Jina, conqueror. Jaina means belonging to or associated with the Jina tradition and is classified as an adjectival form of the noun Jina. Jaina is “taddhita” derivation from Jina, where the vowel i of Jina is strengthened to ai.

Excerpt From The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism, Lopez, Donald S., Jr., Buswell, Robert E., Jr.

Jaina. In Sanskrit, lit., “followers of The Victor [JINA]”; one of the major early sects of Indian wandering religious (ŚRAMAṆA), a movement in the fifth-century BCE that included Buddhism among its groups. One of the founders of Jainism, NIRGRANTHA-JÑĀTĪPUTRA (P. Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta), who is also known by his title of MAHĀVĪRA (Great Victor) (d. c. 488 BCE), was a contemporary of the Buddha and figures prominently in Buddhist literature.

The Buddhists classified the Jainas among the TĪRTHIKA groups, the adherents of non-Buddhist religions who are sometimes mistranslated as “heretics.” The Jainas were the śramaṇa group closest to Buddhism in its beliefs and practices, and the Buddha often used their teachings as a foil in order to present his own interpretations of important religious principles. Mahāvīra claimed to have achieved enlightenment and become one in a long line of jinas (“victors,” e.g., over ignorance) or tīrthaṃkaras (“ford-makers”) going back through twenty-four generations to Pārśva; this notion of an enlightened lineage of spiritual leaders is found also in Buddhism’s doctrine that the Buddha was the latest in a series of previous buddhas,

The Jainas believed in a theory of KARMAN, as did the Buddhists, but treated karman as a physical substance created through previous unwholesome actions, which constrained the soul and hindered its ability to rise above the physical world to the highest sphere of being; although the Buddhists accepted the notion of moral causality, as did the Jainas, they redefined karman instead as mental intention (CETANĀ).

In order to free the soul from the bonds created through past actions, the Jainas held that the body had therefore to be rigorously cleansed of this karmic substance. The foundation of this cleansing process was the five great vows, the basic Jaina code of moral discipline, which parallel the Buddhist five precepts. The Jainas also practiced more severe austerities than did the Buddhists, including a stricture requiring “non-harming” (AHIMŚĀ) of living creatures, rather than Buddhism’s somewhat more lenient prohibition against “killing” living creatures.

The Jainas also demanded strict vegetarianism from their followers in order to avoid injuring sentient creatures, a requirement that the Buddha rejected when his rival in the order, DEVADATTA, proposed it in his list of austerities (see DHUTANĠA). The Buddha’s view was that monks were a “field of merit” (PUṆYAKṢETRA) for the laity and it was be inappropriate to refuse offerings of meat made to them, except in a very limited number of specific situations (such as if the monk, for example, knew that the animal had been killed specifically to feed him). The vegetarianism that is now prevalent in both MAHĀYĀNA Buddhism and wider Indian Hindu culture is almost certainly a result of Jaina influence and constitutes that religion’s most enduring contribution to Indian religion.

One branch of the Jainas, the Digambara (lit. “Sky Clad”), took the prohibition against material possessions so strictly that their male adherents were forbidden from even wearing clothing; hence, the Jainas are often referred to in translations of Pāli materials as “naked ascetics.” The Jainas were the only one of the six major śramaṇa traditions to survive into the present day on the Indian subcontinent, until Buddhism was reintroduced in the twentieth century by B. R. AMBEDKAR (1891–1956). In Buddhist texts, the Jainas are most commonly referred to as NIRGRANTHA, literally “freed from all ties..