

Why Buddhism and Not Jainism?



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Miscellaneous Essays

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Mahavira, the founder of the religion that came to be known as Jainism was an older contemporary of the Buddha and is mentioned frequently in the Tipitaka where is called Nataputta. By the time the Buddha started teaching Jainism was already popular. Vappa the Buddha's cousin became a Jain. Of the various religious movements that emerged in the 5th century BCE Buddhism and Jainism were the only ones that survived for more than a few hundred years. Upanisadic spirituality which began a little before this time was not a distinct religious movement but one within Brahmanism. By the 2nd century BCE Jainism had lost the edge to Buddhism and forever after remained a minor although vibrant religion. Chandragupta, the first Mauryan emperor, converted to Jainism but this did not have the effect on the religion that the conversion of his grandson Asoka had on Buddhism.

Mahavira's life parallels rather startlingly with the Buddha's. He was born of a *ksatriyan* chief named Siddhattha, married a woman named Yasoda, had one child, a daughter named Anoja, renounced the world at the age of 20 and became enlightened (*kevala*) at 28 while sitting at the foot of a sal tree. He passed away at the age of 72. Why these and other similarities? Here is one possible explanation. Almost none of the events in the classical biography of the Buddha – the events surrounding his birth, being the son of a king, marriage, his life in the palace, seeing of the four sights, etc., are not from the scriptures, i.e. they are later legends. The Tipitaka records virtually nothing about the Buddha's life until his Great Renunciation. Few people know that nowhere in the Tipitaka does it even mention that the Buddha's personal name was Siddhattha. Even the very late and very legendary Mahapadana Sutta (D.II,1) doesn't mention it. When in later centuries a full biography of the Buddha was needed, much of the details may have been 'lifted' from the biography of Mahavira.

Mahavira founded an order of monks and nuns but also an order of lay people called 'devotees of the *sramamas*' (*sramanopasakas*) who stood somewhere between monks and nuns and the lay community and acted as a bridge between them. About 150 years after Mahavira's passing the Jain monastic community split into two, becoming the Digambaras (Sky-clad, i.e. naked) and the Svetambaras (White-clad). This split was and remains even today more bitter and more complete than that between the Savakayana and Mahayana in Buddhism. Even in ancient times Buddhist monks of different outlooks sometimes lived in the same monastery. This never happened in Jainism. What is not widely known is that the Digambara sangha is very small, their place being taken by the *sramanopasakas*. The Svetambaras, on the other hand still have a large monastic sangha. Today, Digambara Jains live mainly in the southern Deccan while Svetambaras are found mainly in Gujarat and Rajasthan. All Jains form a close-knit and usually prosperous community. They have traditionally been money-lenders, grain merchants and jewellers.

You really see the deeper spirit of the Jains when you go into their temples. Unlike many Hindu *mandir* or *math*, they are clean, quiet and orderly and neither the presiding *pujari* (monk or priest) nor anyone else will badger you for money. When I visited the magnificent Dilwari temples on Mt Abu I arrived early and was told that no one was allowed in until noon. I could see people in the temple and asked the door guardian why them and not me. "They are Jains" he replied. A bit miffed by this and not wanting to have to come back again in the afternoon (I'd walked all the way from town), I asked to see the person in charge. I was led to office where a man, apparently the manager, greeted me politely and asked what I wanted. I told him that I was a Buddhist monk and that I would like to see the temple. "A Buddhist monk!" he said with an expression of admiration and then bowed to me. "You are most welcome" he continued and then added: "We reserve the morning for our people so they can do their devotions in peace." I understood what he meant; an air of sanctity and peace is not common in the average Hindu temple.

Now what is all this leading up to? Well, I wanted to address, if only briefly, the question of why Buddhism disappeared in India and Jainism didn't. The oft repeated notion that Buddhism was wiped out by the Muslims is a myth. Buddhism was already tittering on the edge of extinction when the Muslims

invaded. They merely hastened the inevitable. I would like to discuss some differences between Buddhism and Jainism and suggest that these might have something to do with it.

- 1) At a fairly early period the Buddha was turned into a god in all but name. In the *Sadharmapundarika Sutra* (1st century CE) he is already an eternal transcendental being. Later Mahayana developed this concept even further. This made it much easier for Buddhism to be absorbed into Hinduism, which indeed did eventually happen. The bodhisattvas, although technically not gods, had a similar effect. The Jains never compromised with theism, they never deified Mahavira or the other Tirthankaras, thus keeping a clear dividing line between themselves and Hinduism.
- 2) Mahayana *sutras* and *sastras* are highly speculative and philosophical in nature. It is clear that they were written by and for a tiny intellectual monastic elite. There is very little in this huge body of literature that would be understandable to the overwhelming majority of the Buddhist population; the average simple householder. The Jain scholar Padmanabh Jaini has pointed that in 2000 years Jainism produced over 50 manuals of practice for lay people (*savakacara*), while the Savakayana (including Theravada) produced only one, the *Upasakajanalankara*, and then not until the 11th century and I wouldn't mind betting that almost no Theravadins have ever heard of it. To the best of my knowledge, Mahayana only produced one such work too, the *Upaskaksila Sutra*. It is true that there were popular works like the *Divyavadana* and the *Jatakamala* but these were in Sanskrit and thus once again only available to the elite. The Buddhist Sangha made little effort to present the Dhamma in a way and in languages accessible to the average person.
- 3) The long slow decline of Buddhism in India can probably be dated from the brahmanical revival during the Gupta period (which led to the emergence of Hinduism) when devotion to Visnu and Krishna became enormously popular and the great epics, *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, reached their final form. The Jains responded to these challenges by audaciously composing their own versions of the epics in which the distinct ethics and attitudes of Jainism were presented in a popular and appealing manner. They out-manoeuvred Hinduism. Buddhism on the other hand, copied it, thus becoming closer to it. To each new Hindu deity Buddhism created a bodhisattva equally good at answering prayers and granting wishes. The Buddhist heavens became as crowded as the platform at Kolkata's Howrah Railway Station. It must have been easy for the Buddhist leaving a shrine to Avalokitesvara to walk down the road and into the Visnu *mandir*. The images looked similar, the *pujas* were similar and the differences between the two deities were the domain of the scholars and unknown to the 'man in the street'. As this trend became more pronounced it led to the development of Vajrayana where many deities were just copies of Hindu ones (e.g. Vasudhara is Lakshmi, Kurukulla is Kamadevi, etc.), some were given slightly different names and attributes (e.g. Kali and Mahakala) and others (e.g. Sarasvati) were taken over *holus bolus*. The main image in the well-known Kadri Manjunath Temple in Mangalore is of Avalokitesvara. The historian M. Govinda Pai has shown that this temple was originally a Buddhist one. It was not 'turned into' a Hindu temple, it simply morphed into one as Buddhism itself morphed into Hinduism.
- 4) Jain monks have always ministered to their lay community with great diligence in the intellectual, social and personal domains. When Jainism was persecuted, as it sometimes was in south India, Jain monks risked comfort and life to continue teaching their communities. Even when monks and nuns have been too few to go around, the *sramanopasakas* have filled in the gap, continuing to teach and offer guidance and leadership to the lay community. This is in marked contrast to the Buddhist Sangha. There are and always have been active Buddhist monks and nuns but they have done this on their personal initiative. They didn't have to do it. If they had settled back and done nothing, the lay community would have still honoured and supported them. As it is, the average Theravadin monk's idea of helping others is to make himself available to receive *dana*. Buddhist monks have primarily been objects of devotion, Jain monks have been primarily mediums of

support and instruction. This attitude is not so pronounced within the Tibetan or Chinese Sangha but it is common enough. I heard a senior Western monk of the Thai forest tradition in England once say: "If we can't follow our Vinaya here we'll just go back to Thailand." This statement epitomizes the Buddhist Sangha's priorities. If this attitude prevailed in ancient India, and I suspect it did, it is not hard to understand why the lay community slowly drifted into Hinduism. Tibetan sources show that during and after the Islamic invasion of India literally hundreds of monks and *siddhas* fled to Nepal and Tibet. One can hardly blame them, but this must have left the Buddhist community, a community that knew little Dhamma and whose main religious practice was to support the Sangha, without leadership, focus or identity.

I don't think these four things are the only reasons Buddhism disappeared in India and Jainism didn't, but I do think they were important contributing factors. I also think that modern Buddhists, particularly those in the West, should give long hard thought to this interesting and perhaps relevant phenomenon.