

JAINS IN THE CITY

The Jain Ashram in Birmingham is the oldest such centre in the UK. It was inspired by Acharya Sushil Muni, the first Jain monk to travel outside India, and it maintains contact with his disciples. Jain nuns visit the centre to give religious teaching as well as discourses on yoga, meditation practice and alternative health issues. Jains from Leicester, London and Manchester often visit the Birmingham Ashram as part of their faith pilgrimage.

Jains of Indian origin have been arriving in the city from Asia and Africa since the 1960s. Their roots are generally from Rajasthan and Gujarat, the two states with a sizeable Jain population, while some speak Punjabi. There are now about 500 here, mostly of a business or professional background.

The centre's motto is "Live and help others to live". It is actively engaged with Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery, public authorities and cross-faith bodies. In education it is represented on the city's Standing Advisory Committee for Religious Education and works with local schools and universities. Jainism is also included in Birmingham Education Authority's RE Syllabus.

Further information can be obtained from the president of the International Mahavir Jain Mission at the Ashram, 322 Hamstead Road, Handsworth Wood, Birmingham B20 2RA.

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Originally founded in 1974, Birmingham Council of Faiths' objective is to promote knowledge and mutual understanding of the beliefs and practices of the city's many religious faiths.

Its belief is that through greater understanding of each other, a more harmonious and cohesive society can be created.

An additional strategy is to act as an interfaith hub, networking between the diverse faith organisations in the city and to serve as a focal point for information about their activities.

This brochure is one of ten covering the Council's affiliated faiths, which currently include Baha'is, Buddhists, Christians, Confucians, Hindus, Jains, Jews, Muslims, Sikhs and Zoroastrians.

Jains



one of
Birmingham's
faith
communities

JAIN BASICS

Jainism is an Indian teaching that the way to liberation and bliss is to cultivate harmlessness and renunciation. It was formulated by the great soul (Mahavira) Vardhamana in the 6th century BCE, based on the teaching of a 9th century sage, and it is believed that there were 22 earlier 'gate-openers' (*Tirthankars*) in remote ages whose doctrine was the same. The disciples of this teaching are known as Jains and follow the spiritual path set by those previous human examples, who were conquerors of their own inner enemies such as anger, pride, deceit, greed, attachment and hatred. Jains believe that, besides human beings, animals and plants as well have living souls. Each of these souls is considered of equal value and should be treated with respect and compassion.

Though there is the concept of God, the potential to become divine is in every human. Since matter changes eternally, there could be no first creation. Each being is responsible for his or her actions and is subject to the law of karma, the principle that every cause has an effect. We are the result of our past choices and responsible for our future state through the actions that we take now. Jains believe in reincarnation and the liberation they seek is to escape the continuous cycle of birth and death so that the immortal soul lives for ever in a state of bliss.

Jains are led by celibate monastics and there are no priests. The religious emblem is a complicated collection of symbols representing the Jain path. The symbol of a hand, chosen here, represents fearlessness; on it is written the word *ahimsa*, meaning harmlessness towards all creatures in this world.

SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

Jain temples may contain images of the 24 Tirthankaras. There is usually one central statue there with other smaller representations throughout the building. Worship includes meditation, offerings and prayer. Some Jains worship at temple every day, while others do so before a personal shrine.

Worship is a means to personal spiritual and karmic development and is not actually directed to any particular entity. Prayers are not made in the form of petitions to a greater being; instead they are aspirational and focus on the great qualities of religious predecessors. In particular, the Five Homages are said by most Jains every morning and are believed to dispel evil, cure illness and bring good fortune. Meditation focuses on achieving a peaceful state of mind. It usually involves the chanting of mantras, which are a significant part of Jain worship and ritual.

Festivals include celebration of **Mahavira Jayanti** (the founder's birthday in March/April), involving community worship, processions, and other devotional activities. The important **Paryushana** occurs in August/September and lasts eight days. At this season all Jains are required to fast and the spiritual preceptors read out and explain in detail the sacred scripture.

Diwali occurs in October/November, when the whole night is spent in the recitation of holy hymns and meditation. It is followed by **Kartak Purnima**, when Jains go on pilgrimages to their sacred sites.

SOCIAL PRACTICE

The Five Great Vows of Jainism include (1) non-violence; (2) truthfulness; (3) Non-theft; (4) sexual restraint; (5) non-possessiveness and avoidance of materialism. These qualities serve as guidance in all social relations.

Jains are strict vegetarians and live in a way that minimises their use of the world's resources. They will, however, use milk products so long as their production does not bring suffering to animals. Many avoid eating root vegetables in general because they contain microorganisms. Many do not eat after nightfall. They filter water to remove any small insects and boil water prior to consumption. Monks and nuns walk barefoot and sweep the ground in front of them so as to avoid killing insects or other tiny beings.

Fasting helps to keep the demands of the body under check and assists in the focus on the uplift of the soul. Spiritually, it helps in melting away the bad karmas accumulated by an individual. Depending on one's capacity, there are various types of fasting, from giving up food and water completely to limiting oneself to a single meal or only drinking water for a given period; there is also a partial fast, when one eats less than needed to satisfy hunger. Sexual abstinence is also enjoined during fasts and on holy days.

Issues which particularly concern Jains are ecology and the environment, and they are strongly engaged in encouraging and promoting vegetarianism. They assist charitable institutions which support education, medical aid, housing, tree planting and relief from natural disasters, and are encouraged to become blood donors, especially during holy days.