

॥ कोबातीर्थमंडन श्री महावीरस्वामिने नमः ॥

॥ अनंतलब्धिनिधान श्री गौतमस्वामिने नमः ॥

॥ गणधर भगवंत श्री सुधर्मस्वामिने नमः ॥

॥ योगनिष्ठ आचार्य श्रीमद् बुद्धिसागरसूरीश्वरेभ्यो नमः ॥

॥ चारित्रचूडामणि आचार्य श्रीमद् कैलाससागरसूरीश्वरेभ्यो नमः ॥

## आचार्य श्री कैलाससागरसूरि ज्ञानमंदिर

पुनितप्रेरणा व आशीर्वाद

राष्ट्रसंत श्रुतोद्धारक आचार्यदेव श्रीमत् पद्मसागरसूरीश्वरजी म. सा.

जैन मुद्रित ग्रंथ स्केनिंग प्रकल्प

ग्रंथांक : १



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# MAHAVIRA

PRINCE of PEACE



RANCHOR PRIME

*Illustrated by* B.G. SHARMA

*Foreword by* VINODE KAPASHI

*Preface by* MICHAEL TOBIAS



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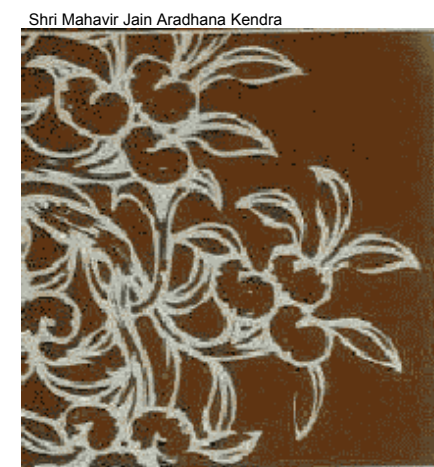
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# FOREWORD



*The central and foremost teaching of the Jain faith is the philosophy of nonviolence (ahimsa).*

**J**ainism is an ancient religion practiced by a mere few million people worldwide, yet its impact has been significant and its contribution in the philosophical field has been profound. Jain teachings were propagated by Lord Mahavira, who existed between 599 BCE and 527 BCE in the North Indian state of Bihar. The word *Jainism* comes from *jina*, meaning “conqueror,” and signifies the importance of conquering our inner enemies, namely anger, ego, greed and illusion. One has to be above all attachments and aversion (*vitaraḡa* in Jain terminology). Jain “gods” are therefore *vitaraḡa* gods and are revered for their virtues and inner qualities. The path to liberation, nirvana, is through right knowledge, right faith and right conduct, which is the ultimate goal for all living beings.

The central and foremost teaching of the Jain faith is the philosophy of nonviolence (*ahimsa*). This philosophy teaches us to give protection, be kind and caring toward all living beings, and to be tolerant toward other people’s lifestyles and ideologies.

This book covers the life and message

of Lord Mahavira in a concise yet lucid style, revealing all the main aspects and events of his life. Anyone wishing to know about his life and message will find it very useful and will I hope be inspired to read more about the philosophy of nonviolence he propagated.

Ranchor Prime has been a student of Indian literature for more than thirty years and is well versed in Hindu scriptures. His account of the life of Mahavira will impress both young and old alike. Jain books such as this, written in contemporary English and beautifully illustrated, are always welcome. I am confident that scholars as well as laypeople in the Western world will appreciate this work.

I invite you, dear reader, to explore this wonderful story of Lord Mahavira, whose message is as fresh now as it was two and a half thousand years ago.

*Dr. Vinod Kapashii*

President of the Mahavir Foundation  
Harrow, Middlesex, UK







# PREFACE



*When we speak of ethics in the twenty-first century, we are speaking a language of urgency that Jains have known for thousands of years.*



**T**he legacy of spiritual asceticism in both Western and Eastern traditions, of young men and women giving up their possessions and material cares to embark upon a life of mendicancy, self-denial and the embrace of God, has poignantly lived on in such recent examples of selfless service as Mother Teresa and Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr. and Albert Schweitzer. The slums of Calcutta, the African outback and the early adversity inherent in slavery and the fight for civil rights are remote from the daily turmoil with which most people today must cope. And yet, in the broader context of worldly concerns, the countless individual and community struggles for freedom, environmental justice, gender equity and economic fairness are more with us than ever. The raw material out of which we configure the many allegories and legends of goodness and virtue, of religious pilgrimage and homage to the great sages of all traditions stems from an idealism arising nonetheless from our universal human challenges.

Carl Jung speaks of the "heroism of daily life" as that steadfastness of heart and soul in the midst of life's challenges. What must have incited Buddha, Christ, Lao-tzu and Saint Francis to follow their hearts surely must also hold promise for us today. Despite this age of cynicism in which

most people find themselves witnesses, if not outright collaborators, in trends and political decisions we might otherwise denounce—wars, runaway consumption, animal cruelty, human rights abuses, environmental degradation—and notwithstanding so many glaring disparities sundering the human family, there burgeons everywhere the craving for deep spirituality. A renaissance of moral priorities tugs at the common sense, shaking up old realities and crying out for a new jurisprudence that holds the entire living world as a priority. We need an ethical stance whose underlying proposition declares unequivocally that life is precious, the earth is our home and that we as human beings can leave a footprint that could be softer, if only we willed it so, and worked at it.

Any moral compass reading for our times must grapple with raw inequities and a demographic winter that has consigned a large majority of human beings to poverty, marginalizing the source of their food, polluting the air they breathe and the water they drink. Such times demand noble behavior from sure-footed shepherds and international alliances built upon trust and chivalry. They require an altruism that puts the bigger picture before the self and calls for clarity of common purpose, higher callings and



## Prince of Peace Preface

unconditional love. That picture is starkly in focus: an image of the future dependent on our thoughts, intentions and behavior.

This is where the ancient teachings of Jainism offer critical insight and wisdom for our modern world. Jainism has enjoyed an enormous resurgence in literature, philosophy, conferences, magazine publishing and the sheer vitality and charitable force unleashed by today's nearly twenty million Jains. Their collective admonition to expand the circle of compassion so as to include all living beings, to insist upon nonviolence (ahimsa) in all of our thoughts and actions, is the result of an ancient tradition that recognized an ecological conscience several thousand years before the scientific or cultural vogue for such assertions. Even in Mahavira's time—599 BCE to 527 BCE—there was a depletion of resources, overpopulation and the same landscape of minefields benumbing the psychological and emotional, if not practical realities of people. For Mahavira to have renounced his material comforts and security and then wander from village to village across India for nearly four decades, discussing options for nonviolence wherever he went, took tremendous courage and fortitude. It also required an acute understanding of pain, suffering and compassion that could be conveyed to others in parables and plain-speaking examples. But Mahavira was also a scientist, as steeped in biology as he was in metaphysics. He was as attuned to the needs of humanity as he was to the fine nuances of ecosystem dynamics.

Mahavira knew of over eight-thousand species at a time when Aristotle could cite fewer than six hundred organisms. Jain pragmatism, as voiced by Mahavira, and written down by his disciples, laid claim to a botany of compassion that would prefigure the writings of more recent luminaries from Porphyry to Erasmus Darwin, from Thoreau to Gurudev Chitrabhanuji. The core of this sensibility was revolutionary. Every organism was designated

according to its sensibilities. Compassion (*anukampa*) and the belief in the interdependence of all living beings (*parasparopagraho jivanam*) formed the basis for a religion of nonviolence that spoke not in absolutes (an impossibility within the natural world) but in relative characteristics. By such gradients, the Jain community psychoanalyzed all forms of violence and declared itself a sovereign world of ethical vegetarianism wherein all commerce, daily toil, intention, belief and action would be guided by the love of nature. This environmental stance, full of tolerance for the frailties of human nature and the incremental changes that are possible in a person's life, offers great wisdom for the present era, and there is no more forceful, compelling ambassador than Mahavira himself.

The texts outlining the Jain philosophy of nature, and the life of Mahavira, include the *Kalpa* and *Acharanga*, *Dasavaikalika* and *Bhagavati Sutras*. A statement from the *Acharanga Sutra*, ascribed to Mahavira, states: "You are the one whom you intend to kill, you are the one you intend to tyrannize." In a more contemporary manifestation, India's former high commissioner to England, L. M. Singhvi—one of the world's foremost legal thinkers—composed the stirring "Jain Declaration on Nature," while countless other proclamations, codices, lectures, works of art and manuscripts from uncelebrated monks and nuns shine a similar spotlight on the beauty and eloquence of Jain thinking as it makes sense of the natural world. That sense resonates in politics, legal circles, interfaith dialogue, human rights and environmental consciousness-raising. But most stunningly, the Jain approach to nature signals an unwavering commitment to the rights of all other habitats, species and individuals. No small detail is left unattended by the Jain ecological revolution, as I think of it: from animal sanctuaries to wildlife conservation; from the ethics and techniques of natural capitalism and socially responsible investing to the international finesse needed to reshape consum-





erism in the generation that has come to associate Kyoto not with gardens and meditation, but with protocols predicated upon CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. All of the Rio Summit, as well as the Valdez and Assisi Declarations and the Agenda 21, were anticipated by the Jain scribes and mendicants who followed in Mahavira's footsteps, as he had followed in those of innumerable sages before him.

What we do with the all-encompassing belief in nonviolence is a personal affair, say the Jains. Each of us must rise to the challenge; must transform every juncture of every day into the possibility of a poetic gesture of forgiveness, right intentions, love and compassion. The opportunities, of course, are endless. I have always embraced a thorough idealism that marks my own personal journey through life. Somebody once asked me if I was a Jain. My response was: I am trying to be a Jain, just as I am trying to be a human being. But it is probably impossible (at least for me) to be a true Jain. That is the essence of Jain idealism: to challenge the individual to forever do better, to become informed and to let the information percolate upward to one's heart to the extent of real feeling, real understanding, real dignity, restraint, modesty and action in a world

that cries out for sensitive, informed, tolerant and compassionate human stewardship and behavior.

When we speak of ethics in the twenty-first century, we are speaking a language of urgency that Jains have known for thousands of years. The task of sustaining that knowledge and sensitivity and activism in the context of unprecedented tragedy, conflict and global unrest will test this and future generations of Jains like never before. I am hopeful that the Jain community, in its endless diversity and beauty, will embrace the challenges that Mahavira imbibed, pondered and conveyed, and similarly take them to heart.

The masterful B. G. Sharma's tranquil illustrations charmingly reflect the colorful array of dreams and realities that have cloaked Jain tradition and the birth, life and death of Mahavira for 2,500 years. Ranchor Prime—himself a global environmentalist who has long strived to bring the religious communities of the world together in defense of nature—has insightfully interpreted the “divine” parable that is the alluring saga of Mahavira's life. Together, they have made accessible one of the most important legacies in religious and ecological history.

*Michael Tobias*

Ecologist, author and filmmaker









# INTRODUCTION



*As a powerful and exceptionally gifted prince, Mahavira was expected to inherit his father's authority and wealth, but he chose a different path.*

**F**ive hundred years before the Common Era, two teachers lived in North India whose teachings gave birth to two of the world's great faiths, the Buddhist and Jain religions. They were Gautama Buddha and Tirthankara Mahavira. Both hailed from royal families, both abandoned their privileged lives to pursue asceticism and both gained large followings as a result. Jainism, unlike Buddhism, never strayed far from its original homelands until the twentieth century, and its followers have remained few—approximately 3.5 million worldwide in 2005. Yet Jains have enriched the religious and cultural life of India far more than their small numbers would suggest. Their most celebrated doctrine—ahimsa, nonviolence—was made famous in the twentieth century by Mahatma Gandhi, whose teacher was a Jain. And their temples are the most exquisite and architecturally sophisticated of any ever built in India.

The great teacher Mahavira, who was born in 599 BCE, was not the first Jain. According to tradition he was twenty-fourth in a line of teachers stretching back beyond the reach of history. The first Tirthankara, as the Jain teachers were called, was Rishabhadeva, whose life is recounted in the ancient Hindu text *Bhagavata Purana*. The twenty-second Tirthankara was Neminatha, whose life is linked to the life of Krishna. His successor, Parsva, is recorded in ancient sources

as a historical figure who lived around the ninth century BCE, and his teachings were adopted by Mahavira. Hence Mahavira did not so much found a new doctrine as develop an earlier one and preach it more widely.

His ministry took place mostly in the region of modern Bihar. In those days this was a prosperous land spread on either side of the River Ganges, relatively stable politically and economically. This made it a fertile ground for the development of religious thought and practice. Here also Gautama Buddha taught around the same time, and some of the places and people mentioned in Mahavira's life also figure in the life of the Buddha.

Mahavira was born as a prince in the city of Vaishali (modern Basarh, thirty miles north of Patna), which was prosperous and well connected. His royal status gave him an authority and influence that served him well. Some say that he never married, but popular sources say he married Yashoda and had a daughter named Priyadarshana. As a powerful and exceptionally gifted prince he was expected to inherit his father's authority and wealth, but he chose a different path.

At the age of thirty, two years after his father died, he left all behind and took up a life of asceticism. It is said that he plucked the hairs from his head, and abandoned wearing clothes altogether, even in the cold winters of North India. Detailed descriptions



## Prince of Peace ✨ Introduction

of the hardships he underwent are preserved in the *Archaranga* and the *Kalpa Sutras*. People verbally abused him, boys threw stones at him and he was sometimes violently attacked without provocation by those who simply saw him as an incomprehensible stranger. He bore all these ordeals without complaint, and through twelve years of self-denial and homelessness he eventually triumphed over the frailties of the body and mind to attain pure and perfect knowledge. Thus at the age of forty-two he began his ministry.

The powerful King Srenika, ruler of Rajagriha, and his wife, Queen Chelana, became devoted followers and gave Mahavira their protection. He organized his followers into four orders of monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen, and set forth strict principles by which they were to live. The hallmark of his teaching style was accessibility: He taught in the local dialect, which was unusual in those days, and he made use of simple parables to put across his message to the masses. His chief emphasis was on the practice of ahimsa—not giving violence to any creature, human or animal—and practicing patience and detachment. He spent the last thirty years of his life teaching throughout modern Bihar, and died in 527 BCE at the age of seventy-two. It is said that by that time he had over four thousand monastic followers.

Mahavira taught that the soul is eternal, that it does not begin in time, but is subjected to the influence of different forms of karma that bind it to this world. The aim of religion is to rescue the soul from matter. This is achieved by following the rules of morality, and by practicing penance. Penances include fasting, self-mortification, study and meditation. Morality is compassed in the five great vows, which are:

Nonviolence  
Truthfulness  
Nontheiving  
Celibacy  
Nonattachment





The same vows apply both to renunciates and householders, but in the case of householders they are made less demanding. For example, nonattachment in a monk may take the form of going entirely naked, as the air-clad Jains do, with no possessions other than a broom to sweep insects from the path ahead. Whereas for a householder nonattachment would mean to make do with less, and to progress gradually toward renunciation.

Once the soul achieves pure knowledge, a process that may take many births, it is released from the cycle of birth and death, and manifests its natural quality of infinite knowledge. In this state it exists forever. Mahavira did not teach anything about a creator God, but he laid great emphasis on the cultivation of compassion and love as the necessary qualities for achieving full understanding. Such compassion is exemplified in the Jain tradition of benevolence toward others, which cultivates the four kinds of giving:

food, shelter, medicine and education.

Another important feature of the Jain tradition is its acceptance of religious plurality. Mahavira himself taught that the truth is not monolithic, and that it varies according to the point of view of the observer. This is embodied in the Jain doctrine of *anekantavada* (many ways), and has made Jains naturally tolerant of another's point of view, and willing to appreciate what others have to say.

The Jains of North India developed a fine aesthetic sense, particularly in art and architecture. The Jain temples of Mount Abu in Rajasthan are among the great masterpieces of world architecture. With their infinite attention to detail, the purity of their white marble, their lofty setting and the care with which they have been maintained over hundreds of years, they exemplify the Jain qualities of care and purity, as well as their love of peace and renunciation of the world.













# PRINCE *of* PEACE

*The Life of Mahavira*



*The soul who was to be known as Mahavira descended from the heavens into this earthly world for the last time.*

# DESCENT *to* EARTH

*At last he was ready for his final lifetime in the long journey to enlightenment.*

name was Trisala. North India where she lived with her husband, King Siddhartha, in the fabulous city of Vaishali. Her was destined to be born as the son of a royal mother, queen of an ancient and prosperous kingdom in So it was that his soul descended from the heavens into this earthly world for the last time. He long journey to enlightenment. actions, so that only the slightest tinge of karma remained. At last he was ready for his final lifetime in the many lifetimes seeking enlightenment, he had freed himself from the harmful effects of almost all his past of life and to serving his teachers, and had accumulated the benefits of many good deeds. In this way, after edge, gained from long spiritual practice. He had devoted himself to meditation, to giving up all comforts suffering. He had just completed a lifetime in the heaven called Pranata, and he was filled with deep knowl- fixed on the desire to cross over the river of birth and death, and to free himself forever from illusion and The soul who was to be known as Mahavira had long been striving for perfection. His attention was This is the story of the last and most famous of these twenty-four—his name was Mahavira. birth and death, and had left a path for others to follow.

twenty-four became known as the Tirthankaras. Their name meant that they had crossed over the river of finas, enlightened persons who were able to see all truths, past and present. Together these lit the way for countless followers. Among these exceptional beings were the twenty-four to time, in ancient India, great souls appeared in this world, souls whose spiritual potency peace and happiness, life was difficult and the path to truth was hard to find. From time N AGES LONG PAST, when people lived simple lives and had no one to lead them to







P. G. Sharma





*You are bearing a son of deep wisdom  
who will bring joy to the world.*

## *a* STRANGE DREAM



ACCORDING TO ANCIENT LEGEND, the soul of Mahavira did not directly find his way to Trisala. He first found shelter in the womb of a pious Brahmin woman named Devananda. In her dreams she saw a succession of vivid images. It was midnight, on the sixth day of the waxing moon in the month of Asadha. She awoke with a start and called her husband.

"My mind is filled with strange images," she exclaimed. "First I dreamt of an elephant whose call sounded like thunder, then I saw a bull, white as a lotus. Next a lion, whose sharp teeth and rolling eyes were fearful, yet who was peaceful and serene. Then I saw Lakshmi, the goddess of fortune, seated in the midst of a vast cluster of lotuses, and also a garland of flowers. The full moon appeared as an ornament in the sky, then the sun rose and I saw a flag on a golden staff and a silver bowl filled with water. Beside them was a cool lake covered with lotuses. Then I saw an ocean of milk, with foaming white waves, and above it flew a mystical aerial plane, shining and lavishly decorated, in which rode heavenly beings. Beneath was a huge pile of gemstones and nearby a fire burned bright and without smoke."

"Your dreams are full of good omens," her husband Rushabhadatta told her. "They signify that you are bearing a son of deep wisdom who will bring joy to the world."

*Devananda awoke from her dreams  
with a start and called her husband.*













*His path requires much  
courage and determination.*

## MYSTERIOUS MOVEMENTS



IN THE HEAVENS ALL THIS WAS WATCHED BY INDRA, lord of the gods. He knew that this soul was destined to be born as a prince, so he made arrangements to have the soul of Mahavira moved to the womb of a different mother.

“Come, my obedient servant,” he called, beckoning Harinegameshi the goat-headed. “I have a task for you. A special soul who is destined to teach humanity the path of truth is in the womb of the Brahmin woman Devananda. As a future leader of the people he will be revered as Mahavira, the great and fearless teacher. Therefore he must be born in a royal family, not a family of priests, for his path requires much courage and determination. I want you to transfer his embryo to a different mother. Take him to the womb of Queen Trisala. Be careful not to cause any pain to these two fortunate women, who are both sleeping at this moment.”

With the speed of mind Harinegameshi sped down to earth to obey Indra's orders. Darkness covered the land while, unseen by mortal beings, he entered Devananda's bedroom while she was sound asleep. He induced in her a deep trance, then gently and with great reverence removed her twelve-week embryo, carrying him off to the palace of Queen Trisala. The queen was also pregnant, with a baby girl, and deep asleep in her royal apartment. Without the knowledge of her attendants he also placed her in a deep trance, then exchanged the two embryos. Leaving the queen unaware of the change that had taken place, he hurried back to Devananda bearing the baby girl who was now to be her daughter. Thus the child who would become Mahavira mysteriously became the son of a royal mother, and neither mother knew anything of what had occurred.



*With the speed of mind Harinegameshi sped down to earth to obey Indra's orders, and transfer the child to the womb of Queen Trisala.*







*"Come, my obedient servant,"  
he called, beckoning  
Harinegameshi the goat-  
headed. "I have a task for you.  
A special soul who is destined  
to teach humanity the path  
of truth is in the womb of the  
Brahmin woman Devananda."*



*This child will bring peace and  
serenity to a suffering world.*

## *the* QUEEN FEARS *for* HER BABY



OW IT WAS THE TURN OF QUEEN TRISALA to experience wonderful dreams. As she slept, softly serenaded by her musician attendants, she dreamt the same beautiful visions that Devananda had earlier seen, and she too awoke full of wonder and called her husband.

King Siddhartha came to her bedside and brought with him his interpreter of dreams. The learned seer listened carefully to all that the queen reported, and was able to offer an explanation for each vision.

"The white elephant is a sign of a supreme teacher who lays down the law. The strong bull symbolizes the spirit of religion, called Dharma. The lion signifies fearlessness and one whose passions are calmed. Flower garlands are the sign of one who will be revered. The moon spreads cool light, so this child will bring peace and serenity to a suffering world. The rising sun symbolizes knowledge that destroys darkness. The flag is a sign of fame, and the silver bowl of water is a sign of riches and power. The lake means your child will take away the people's weariness and thirst. The milk ocean means he will be a reservoir of infinite wisdom. The shining aerial plane means his fame will reach even the heavens. The precious stones mean he will possess knowledge greater than any worldly wealth and the fire without smoke indicates he will achieve the spotless state of pure spiritual existence."

When all these predictions were made everyone rejoiced, and took great care of the mother so as not to endanger her baby. She was cared for by many serving girls, and sweet music was played in her apartments. Her husband became attendant to all her needs and together they longed for the birth of their son.

As her child grew inside her, she felt his little body moving, and though he gave her discomfort she was very happy. But one day she could feel no movement.

*Queen Trisala experienced wonderful dreams,  
seeing the same beautiful visions that  
Devananda had earlier seen.*









This was because her child, growing inside her, thought his movements might give his mother pain. Not caring for his own discomfort, therefore, he had stopped moving and remained completely still. But now he sensed his mother's fear.

"I feel no movement inside me. How do I know my child is alive?" she cried.

"My stillness is having the opposite effect I wanted," he thought, and again began to move, but only slightly. With relief Queen Trisala felt his motions and tears of happiness came to her eyes, while all her attendants were filled with joy.

The great soul in her womb felt his mother's boundless love for him and thought to himself: "How could I ever abandon one who loves me so much? Although in this lifetime I will renounce all comforts, I vow that I will not leave home until both my parents have departed this world."





*All living beings desire life. None wish  
to die. Therefore a self-controlled  
person never commits the great sin of  
killing another living being.*

—Dasavaikalika Sutra 6.10



*The moon shone in a clear sky, and all around was peace and harmony.*

## BIRTH *of a* SPECIAL CHILD



TIME PASSED AND THE CHILD GREW IN HIS MOTHER'S WOMB. No more anxiety marred her pregnancy. At midnight on the thirteenth day of the waxing moon in Chaitra, the month of spring, tremors radiated through the universe and the heavenly beings knew something special was about to happen. Celestial mothers who lived in realms far above and below the earth converged on the royal palace of Vaishali to witness the special moment and celebrate the birth of Queen Trisala's baby boy.

So it was that the special baby came into this world. The moon shone in a clear sky, and all around was peace and harmony. Angelic beings appeared from all over the universe to honor the newborn child. Eight came from each of the directions: north, south, east, west, the lower worlds and the upper worlds. Each group offered their personal service to the little baby. Some massaged him with aromatic oils, some bathed him in pure water, some anointed him with cooling sandalwood paste, some sang joyful songs. Meanwhile they built a gorgeous pavilion, using banana trees and flowers, in which they made a seat for the mother and child. There the heavenly women worshiped them, fanning them, decorating them with flowers and dancing to the sound of joyful music. All night and all day the festival continued, then the divine worshipers returned to their respective abodes.

Next came the lord of the heavens, the great Indra, ruler of the gods. He also had felt the tremors announcing the birth of a great soul, and hastened to honor him. Indra sounded the divine Sughosha bell, which rang throughout the heavens, informing all that they should come worship the child.

*Angelic beings built a gorgeous pavilion in which they seated the mother and child, then worshiped them.*











hanna



*He gently lifted the baby and  
carried him into the heavens.*

## *the* LORD *of* HEAVEN REJOICES



INDRA BOWED LOW BEFORE MOTHER AND CHILD. So great was his happiness at this birth that he wanted to take the child at once to Mount Meru, the heart of the heavenly kingdom, where all the gods and goddesses could honor him properly. Before he could think of taking the child from his mother's lap he had to pacify her—for what mother would release her little baby so soon after his birth? Indra cast her into a deep and dreamless sleep so she would not be aware of what was happening.

In his ecstasy Indra's limitless mystic powers shone forth and he divided himself into five separate forms, each offering their services. In this way Indra could more fully express his love and joy to the child. In one form he gently lifted the baby and carried him into the heavens, while in two others he flew on either side fanning him, while a fourth Indra bore aloft a canopy to shade the child and a fifth Indra led the way to Mount Meru, carrying before him his mighty thunderbolt.

On the summit of the mountain, amid heavenly pleasure gardens, a throng of divine worshipers awaited the child. The air was thick with their descending airplanes, coming in from all corners of the universe. They came with their wives, laden with gifts, and great was the rejoicing on that occasion.

*Indra multiplied into five separate forms: In one form he carried the baby, while two others flew on either side, a fourth bore aloft a canopy and a fifth led the way.*







*As soon as the boy was born, flowers bloomed everywhere in abundance.*

## FESTIVAL *in* HEAVEN



OW THE BATHING CEREMONIES, which had first been done by the mothers down on earth, were repeated on a grand heavenly scale. The chief gods were the bathers, and they lined up bearing gold and silver pitchers, while choirs of angels sang. Just as Indra was about to start the ceremony the mountain started to shake, filling everyone with fear.

"Who is the cause of this disturbance?" demanded Indra. He feared some ill-motivated person was trying to interrupt the blessed occasion. But no such person could be found. Then it was noticed that the tremors seemed to radiate from the child himself, that his little foot touched the mountain and made it tremble. So great was this soul's power, saw Indra, that even Mount Meru shook at the touch of his foot. In this way Indra understood that the greatest soul in the universe was present before him. His fear was gone, but he felt awe and veneration before so great a being. With reverence and devotion he led the ceremony.

When all was complete Indra raised the divine child, and as before carried him through the heavens and back down to earth, where he gently returned him to the lap of his mother, under the watchful eye of King Siddhartha.

As soon as the boy was born, the king's subjects experienced an unprecedented increase in the fertility of their fields and orchards. Mango trees were laden with fruits, cow pastures were lush and green, flowers bloomed everywhere in abundance and the harvest surpassed anything previously known.

Everyone believed this good fortune must be due to the birth of the queen's son, who seemed so special. They had heard the prophecies foretelling the good fortune he would bring, so he was given the name Vardhamana, which means "bringer of wealth."



*On the summit of Mount Meru, the bathing ceremonies were repeated, but this time on a grand heavenly scale.*



*Practice religion before the onset of  
old age, when disease afflicts and  
the senses lose their power.*

—Dasavaikalika Sutra 8.35







*He had a reputation for being fearless,  
good-natured and kind to everyone.*

## FEARLESS PRINCE



AS PRINCE VARDHAMANA GREW he made many friends who looked upon him as their leader, who would be there to look after them whenever they were in trouble. He had a reputation for being fearless, good-natured and kind to everyone.

One day he and his friends were playing a game of tag centered around a large tree. A circle was drawn on the ground around the base of the tree, and in it a stick was placed. The object of the game was to capture the stick, but without getting caught by the one who was made the catcher. If a boy captured the stick he could throw it far away. The catcher then had to retrieve the stick and return it to the base of the tree before he could attempt to catch anyone else. If in retrieving the stick a boy was caught, he became the catcher. The game was going on, and Vardhamana was the catcher, which gave the boys huge pleasure.

Suddenly, while everyone was laughing and absorbed in their play, a huge cobra appeared beneath the tree. It had a large black head and glowing yellow eyes, and its long body writhed ominously as it reared up and spread its hood, hissing at the boys. They were all terrified and fled as fast as they could. Vardhamana, however, was unafraid. He caught the snake by its tail and whirled it around his head as fast as he could, then threw it far away, out of sight. Then he called all his friends back and promised them it was safe to continue playing their game. They were astonished and crowded round to congratulate their hero.

Unknown to the boys, this was no ordinary snake. It was really a jealous god from Indra's heaven, who had heard Indra speaking the praises of Prince Vardhamana and become so angry that he resolved to fight with him. Being defeated so easily made the evil-minded god even more enraged, so he decided to attack again. This time he disguised himself as one of the friends playing with Vardhamana.

*Vardhamana caught hold of the snake by  
its tail and, whirling it around his head as  
fast as he could, threw it far away, out of sight.*







B.G.51







*Raising his fist, Vardhamana struck the demon three blows on his head.*

## DEFEAT *of a* DEMON



AFTER THE SNAKE WAS OVERCOME BY VARDHAMANA the boys laughed with relief. They forgot their fear and started to play again, this time a game of leapfrog. One boy bent down while the others leapt over him. As soon as someone failed to jump high enough to get over, he had to bend down. Eventually the loser had to carry the victor on his back.

While they were enjoying this game with much laughter, none of them noticed the new boy who joined them. He was unknown to any of them because he was the jealous god disguised as one of the boys, come to seek his revenge. He pretended not to be very good at their game and before long he was made the loser, who had to carry the victor on his back. The victor was Vardhamana, and without hesitation he leapt on the demon's back and rode around on him. At first all seemed normal, then his carrier began to grow taller and taller. At the same time his features changed from those of a young boy to the angry face of a demon. He became as tall as a tree, with thick matted hair, long sharp nails on his hands and feet, fangs protruding from his mouth and bulging eyes that glowed like red-hot coals. The demon opened his mouth and screamed with anger. As Vardhamana sat upon his broad shoulders, which were covered with thick prickly hairs, he raced away.

The boys were shocked by this dramatic turn of events, but Vardhamana remained calm. He rode the demon just as a small boy rides on the back of an elephant, controlling the beast beneath him without fear. He knew who this was, for he had gained the gift of insight from his many previous lives of penance. He understood that this demon was really a jealous god who could not understand or accept Vardhamana's true power. Raising his fist, Vardhamana struck the demon three blows on his head. With the first the demon trembled, with the second he tumbled to the ground and with the third he suddenly



*The child's carrier grew taller and taller, and his features changed to the angry face of a demon, with thick matted black hair, long sharp nails and bulging eyes.*



reverted back to the form of the small boy, rolling away from Vardhamana in fear. He bowed before his conqueror and begged for mercy.

“Please don’t hurt me any more. I realize that you are a great and courageous person, more powerful than anyone could imagine. I misunderstood you and came to test you. Now I have learned my lesson and understood the truth about you. Please forgive me for being so jealous and hateful.”

Vardhamana replied, “My punishment was in order to teach you. Now that you have learned the error of your ways and are sorry for your behavior, there is no need for you to be punished any more. Please go back to your place in heaven and do not offend again.”

Gratefully the god backed away with his hands folded in prayer, and returned to Indra’s court. There he told all the gods of his experiences, and of how brave, strong and merciful Vardhamana was. His story spread throughout the higher realms, and with it Vardhamana’s fame. All proclaimed his glories and among the gods he was named Vira, which means “hero.” From this time he came to be known as Mahavira, which means “great hero.”











*He will be the greatest teacher  
the world has ever known.*



## TEST *of* WISDOM



**A**FTER DEFEATING THE JEALOUS GOD, in the shapes of the cobra and the giant demon, Vardhamana's popularity with his friends increased more than ever. He was their hero and leader. With his curling black hair and handsome face, his sparkling eyes and sweet smile, he charmed them all. Everyone wanted to be near him, for just by being in his company they felt relieved of all unhappiness. If any threat arose, he would protect them from it, and he always had the solution to their problems. So he played, surrounded by his friends from dawn until dusk.

When he reached the age of eight, like all young boys he had to go to school. He hardly needed to be taught anything, but for the sake of his parents he agreed to be educated. On a day chosen by the king's advisers according to the stars, his mother took him to school. When he arrived there he was greeted by his teacher, who bowed to him and his royal family. Vardhamana also bowed to his teacher with great respect. The teacher wore new clothes specially for the occasion and his pupils were on their best behavior. The queen honored her son's teacher with gifts, and distributed sweets to all the schoolchildren. Then the teacher sat on his seat, raised up on his teacher's platform, and a place at the front of the classroom was given to the prince, who sat on the floor like all the other boys to start his education.

At this a tremor radiated through the universe, reaching as far as Indra's court in heaven. This was because an enlightened soul had sat on the floor and submitted himself to learn from a teacher whose knowledge was far less than that of his glorious pupil.

"Prince Vardhamana has no need to learn anything," said Indra with indignation. "This teacher, sitting on his high seat, thinks he will be able to teach the wisest soul in the universe. But all he can do is hold the tiny lamp of his knowledge in front of the shining sun of Mahavira's wisdom."



*Indra commanded the teacher to make room on his platform for a seat for Mahavira, and made the young boy sit beside him, then began to ply them both with searching questions.*



Indra decided he must remedy this disturbing situation. So he disguised himself as a venerable scholar, and personally entered the schoolroom. Using his age and seniority and the respect they commanded, he asked the teacher to make room on his platform for a seat for Mahavira, and made the young boy sit beside him. Then Indra began to ply them both with searching questions, so that everyone would see who could answer them best.

The questions Indra asked were all about the details of correct grammar, which is fundamental to good education. Some of them were so difficult that no one had ever been able to answer them before. Vardhamana's teacher was too puzzled to be able to say anything, but Vardhamana had no such difficulty. One by one he answered all Indra's questions. He answered them so skillfully that all present were astonished, and word spread among the scholars all over the city that something special was happening. They flocked to the school to hear for themselves Prince Vardhamana's answers. They memorized the answers and recorded them for posterity in a book called *Indra Vyakarana*.

When all his questions had been answered to his full satisfaction, the venerable scholar turned and spoke to everyone there.

"I am not who I seem to be. I am Indra, lord of heaven, and I came here to demonstrate the true wisdom of Prince Vardhamana. Now you have all heard for yourselves that he is a limitless ocean of knowledge, and that he is fit to be the perfect teacher of everyone. I worship the feet of this great teacher, whose name is Mahavira, and I sing his praises, for he will be the greatest teacher the world has ever known. My task is now complete. Farewell."

With these words Indra returned to his celestial kingdom.



*Anger destroys love, ego destroys  
modesty, deceit destroys friendship  
and greed destroys everything.*

—Dasavaikalika Sutra 8.37



*Our happiness is not separate from the happiness of all those around us, including the animal kingdom.*

## FRIEND *to* ALL



HE YOUNG BOY GREW INTO A HANDSOME PRINCE. His limbs were strong and firm, his steps sure and true, his face fair and bright, and his deep eyes shone with wisdom and joy. Together with his young friends he would ride out among the hills and forests, sporting in clear lakes, chasing monkeys, wrestling and playing games. But he was different from his aristocratic friends. They were all fond of hunting, which they considered the sport of princes. They liked to spend all day absorbed in the chase, matching their skills with bow and arrow, and their strength with the knife, against the fear and flight of the wild beasts of the forest. If they found no beasts to hunt, they would slay the defenseless birds as they perched in the branches of trees or flew overhead. This was the way all royal sons were trained for combat, though for the young noblemen it was more than training—it was their favorite sport to capture, injure and kill the innocent animals of the forest.

Vardhamana took no part in this sport. As he passed through the countryside he looked upon all life, both great and small, as worthy of his care and consideration. For him it was unthinkable to give pain to another living creature, no matter how insignificant that creature may be.

“All have the right to live. Since I have not the power to give life, I do not have the right to take it,” he reasoned. “The animals of the forest and the birds of the air have been given freedom. Life and freedom are dear to us all, so they must also be dear to them. Who are we to take life and freedom from them? Better we should show them love and compassion, for our happiness is not separate from the happiness of all those around us, including the animal kingdom. How can we find peace if we give others pain? We should treat all others as we would wish to be treated ourselves.”

In this spirit Vardhamana enjoyed the beauty of nature, and encouraged his friends to do the same. By

*Each evening he would gather his family and friends and speak to them from the scriptures, then sing devotional songs to awaken their inner spiritual sentiments.*













his influence many of them chose the path of nonviolence. So he lived peacefully with his family: his mother and father, and his beloved brother, whose name was Nandivardhana.

When he entered manhood his parents wanted to see him married. He had no wish to enter married life, which he saw as a distraction from his only goal, to achieve liberation from the cycle of birth and death. But for the sake of pleasing his parents he accepted their wishes for him. Word had spread far and wide of his qualities of wisdom and education, his good looks and gentle behavior, and now these made him a most desirable match. When his eighteenth birthday was celebrated, many royal visitors came to offer their daughters in marriage.

Among all these visitors was the king of Vasantapura, whose beautiful daughter Yashoda was filled with purity and goodness. He offered his daughter's hand, and the prince's parents readily agreed to the proposal. Vardhamana found her an attractive companion, so amid great festivities the young couple were married, and they settled down to a happy married life. Soon a daughter was born to them, named Priyadarshana, who was loved by her parents and grandparents. Vardhamana lived in the midst of the comforts of his loving family, giving and receiving affection, but he was like the lotus flower that grows in the waters of a lake. Although he was surrounded by all the luxuries and pleasures the world had to offer, he was unmoved as a lotus is untouched by the water in which it grows, standing always above it. He was indifferent to the world about him—neither attached nor averse—for his mind was always focused on the path of spiritual wisdom.

Each evening he would gather his family and friends and speak to them from the scriptures, teaching them the nature of material illusion and the importance of self-realization. Then he would sit with them and sing devotional songs to awaken their inner spiritual sentiments. In this way he helped his family members and together they tasted spiritual happiness.







*Though he was still with his family, his heart was far away.*

## STAYING ON



**AS HE LIVED HIS ROYAL LIFE** Vardhamana was always thinking of renunciation. He felt his mission in life lay beyond his family—he wanted to serve the whole world.

“Human life is a rare gift,” he thought. “It should not be wasted. Only human life enables us to search for knowledge and understand our spiritual nature. Yet few know that they come into this world from a previous lifetime, nor do they know where they will go when they leave. Death may come at any time, even in childhood or youth, therefore we must search for true knowledge before it is too late. All of life should not be spent living amidst one’s family, attached to one’s wife and children. None of these, nor all the wealth of the royal palace, can save one from the karma of one’s past actions. Therefore waste no time and seek the truth.”

Thinking like this, outwardly he appeared like a man of wealth and pleasure, but inwardly he prepared himself to renounce his comfortable life.

Meanwhile his parents grew old. Soon they must be ready to leave this world. They could no longer walk with ease, their eyesight was dimmed and their appetite for life was dwindling. Recognizing that their time was approaching, they gathered their family round them to instruct them in their duties. They must look after one another and care for the kingdom, and at the same time not neglect their own spiritual well-being. The king and queen begged their children to forgive any faults they had shown in their life together, and asked them not to be sorry at their loss. When they were ready, they abandoned eating and drinking, and sat with minds peaceful and serene, their hearts filled with compassion. In this way they waited until death finally came to claim them.

Vardhamana was now twenty-eight years old. For the sake of his mother he had entered family life and accepted the responsibilities of a royal prince. Now, with his parents gone, he no longer felt the ties



*Prince Vardhamana heard his brother's petition with understanding, and readily agreed to stay for another two years.*



of obligation to stay in worldly life. So he spoke with his elder brother Nandivardhana, and asked his permission to renounce the world. But Nandivardhana was filled with dismay.

“I will not stand in your way, for I understand that you must follow your spiritual path, and that destiny calls you to serve the whole world, not just this kingdom. But I have one request: Please do not leave me now. Our parents have just departed and my heart is heavy. It had been my hope that you would become the ruler—I was ready to crown you king even though you are my younger brother, since you are so much more qualified than I. Now I see that can no longer be, but I am not ready to rule on my own—we all need your help. So please stay with me for a while and help me take on this burden. Do not go yet.”

Prince Vardhamana heard his brother's petition with understanding.

“Brother, you have no need to ask, for I will accept your order without hesitation. With your love you have earned my wholehearted obedience. How long do you wish me to stay?”

So it was that Nandivardhana asked his brother to stay for another two years, and the noble-hearted Vardhamana agreed. During those next two years the atmosphere of the palace changed profoundly. Vardhamana was in a different mood. Though he was still with his family, yet in his heart he was far away. He started to spend long hours in meditation, withdrawing to a solitary room, where he would study and chant prayers. He regularly fasted, even amidst so much plenty, and he exchanged his silk robes for the simple cotton attire of a monk. News spread of his changed life and the citizens spoke in hushed tones of the spirit of renunciation displayed by their prince.



*When a splinter pricks the body, it  
can easily be removed and the pain  
soon goes, but the pain of hurtful  
words cannot easily be removed,  
and creates enmity and fear.*

—Dasavaikalika Sutra 9.7



*The only treasure that lasts  
is spiritual wisdom.*

## CALL *of* DESTINY



EVER SINCE HIS BIRTH, a great destiny had been foretold for Vardhamana. In her dreams his mother had seen marks of his noble future, and celestial beings had gathered to honor the newborn child. Now Vardhamana felt the call of this destiny more than ever, and as the time for his renunciation approached he prepared himself to take up this great task.

His future as a universal ruler, which had been written in the stars, was well-known among the nearby rulers. Imagining that soon he would be a powerful man of worldly affairs, many kings sent their princes to serve him and become his friends. They could not believe that he would go through with his good intentions of renunciation—the temptation of wealth and power that awaited him if he were to take the throne offered by his brother would surely be too great. So they thought, and they bided their time, making plans for alliances and collaboration, since the friendship of a powerful ruler is sought by worldly men.

But Vardhamana was oblivious of such ideas. While all around him slept in their comfortable beds, he slept on the bare floor. While others ate sumptuous meals, he ate only simple fare, and sometimes nothing at all, while all the time contemplating the nature of material illusion, and waiting for the moment of his departure.

“I was born alone and I shall die alone,” he thought. “Only I can save myself through my own actions. I have no need of royal friends and alliances, for the kingdom I seek does not belong to this world.” The princes found him uninterested in the superficial friendship they offered, and heard from him only warnings of the illusion of material wealth and power.

“Do not make plans to find your riches here,” he told them. “Whatever you gain you are sure to lose. The only treasure that lasts is spiritual wisdom.” Disappointed, the princes returned home.

*Nine shining beings, celestial guardians of  
the holy path leading to liberation, appeared  
in the court to urge him on his way.*









As the period of two years drew to a close his family, who loved him so dearly, grew morose and restless. They dreaded seeing him go. But they hid their tears, and with dignity and courage smiled bravely, encouraging him in his great endeavor.

One day nine shining beings appeared in the court. They were the celestial guardians of the holy path leading to liberation, and they came to urge him on his way.

"Victory to you," they cried. "Now please prepare to go forth, for the benefit of all beings of the world, and establish the path of freedom and truth."













*His kindness radiated through  
the land, giving hope to all the citizens.*



## HE GIVES EVERYTHING AWAY



ONE YEAR HAD PASSED since his brother had begged him to stay on, leaving one year remaining before Vardhamana, who was unshakeable in his intention, would leave the court forever. To prepare for his departure, he had first to divest himself of his formidable wealth. No one can enter a life of renunciation without first giving up their possessions, and he wanted to set an example for others to follow. As prince of a prosperous kingdom he held vast resources at his disposal. His treasury was filled with gold, silver, precious stones, ornaments of rare craftsmanship and beauty, jewelery and costly fabrics. None of these were of any more use to him, other than to be given away. So he opened up his treasure house and diligently set about distributing all he had.

He had long since ceased caring for his wealth—even in childhood he had felt no attachment to it. Now he saw it simply as a means to help others whose needs and desires might be greater or more pressing than his own. Therefore he set no limits on his charity. Whoever came, whether rich or poor, was to him worthy of the same generosity.

Each day he opened his doors and waited in his hall to receive whoever would come. As word spread, a stream of people, the ordinary folk of his kingdom, crowded in. Among them were men and women of high rank or low, young or old, rich or poor, sick or healthy, those with employment or those with none. It made no difference who came before him, each was greeted with the same openhanded offer.

“Tell me what you wish for. Simply ask and it shall be yours.”

In the presence of such generosity and kindness, the people's minds were softened. They forgot any greed or calculations they may have been thinking of, and modestly asked only for what they could use or benefit from in a fair way.



*He opened up his treasure house and diligently set  
about distributing all he had as charity.*







“Whatever you give us, we will gratefully accept. Merely to receive generosity from so noble a hand as yours is itself reward enough,” they would say.

After receiving charity they would be sumptuously fed and cared for as guests of the royal palace, so that when they left for their homes and families they were full of happiness and pleasure, feeling genuinely loved and cared for. As they traveled to their homes all over the kingdom, they told others of their happy experiences, and so the effect of Vardhamana’s kindness radiated through the whole land, giving inspiration and hope to all the citizens. This went on for one year, until no one could be found throughout the length and breadth of the land who was in want.

As a raincloud, when it has distributed all its water upon the land, grows light and rises upward into the skies, so the prince, relieved of his worldly possessions, floated free from sorrows or burdens, filled only with joy.

In contrast to his own happiness, his family was weighed down with sorrow because they knew that soon they would lose him, the light of their lives. Words could not express their feelings, and they were too noble to show their emotions to him. They understood that his destiny was greater than merely to serve one family—his service would be to the whole of humanity.

“May you go forth to victory, dear husband,” said Yashoda, hiding her tears. “I pray for your safety.” And as a wife whose husband goes off to war marks his forehead with saffron, so she decorated his forehead and called upon the gods to protect him.







*His smiling features were filled  
with steady determination.*

## LEAVING *the* CITY



THE TENTH DAY OF KARTIKA, with winter approaching, was the day chosen for Vardhamana's renunciation. Turning his back on his family and home, he walked with firm steps across the threshold of his palace and out into the waiting world.

His brother Nandivardhana, rather than allowing himself to be overwhelmed with sorrow, had prepared a festival for the occasion. He wanted the day to be a joyful one that would be commemorated for bringing great blessings and good fortune. The city was decorated abundantly for the occasion. From balconies hung flags and across the streets were festooned brightly colored banners. Over archways were strung garlands and mango leaves. The people, bathed and anointed with sandalwood and aromatic oils, flooded onto the streets in festive mood, dressed in fine silks and jeweled turbans.

As he emerged from the palace, Vardhamana was taken by a group of attendants for his final ceremonial bath. Holy waters from the sacred rivers, carried in golden pots and mixed with aromatic herbs, were poured upon him, and caring hands rubbed his body with oils and sandalwood. Then he was dressed in precious cloth with jewels and ornaments for his procession through the streets of the city.

He was led onto the Moonlight palanquin, kept only for special occasions, whose prow was in the shape of a swan. On all sides pressed the waiting crowds, eager for a last glimpse of their beloved prince.

The vehicle was hoisted aloft by powerful servants and carried above the heads of the onlookers, as slowly the procession wound its way through the city. Everywhere uplifted faces turned to catch a last compassionate gaze of their hero, whose smiling features shone with beauty and peace, and were filled with steady determination to undertake his great renunciation.

The parade was preceded by elephants decked with finery, horse-drawn chariots ornamented with



*He was carried above the heads of the onlookers in a palanquin whose prow was in the shape of a swan, while on all sides pressed the waiting crowds, eager for a last glimpse of their beloved prince.*



gold and silver, ranks of royal guards and palace attendants bearing banners. All around musicians played, people sang, groups of dancers performed, children ran alongside, women swooned and men gazed in awe as the prince passed by. With the air resounding to cries of "Victory!" the spectacle moved slowly through the streets toward the edge of the city, where it halted in the gardens surrounding a sacred ashoka tree. Here was to take place the final act of renunciation.





*Four things are rare: birth as a human  
being, hearing holy teachings, faith  
in religion and the determination  
to practice self-control.*

—Uttaradhayayan Sutra 3.1







*I will look upon all creatures as equals. I will speak only the truth.  
I will possess nothing. I will take nothing from others.  
I will observe lifelong celibacy.*

## *the* GREAT RENUNCIATION



HE PRINCE DISMOUNTED from his palanquin and walked solemnly toward the ashoka tree. Beneath its boughs many special events had been consecrated in the long history of the city of Vaishali. Under their shelter he turned to face the waiting crowd, who gathered on every side of the sacred spot. The music stopped and all voices fell silent in anticipation. Then, methodically he began to divest himself of his finery.

He took off his crown and earrings and beckoned to the elderly matriarch of his family. Carefully he handed them over to her. Then he removed the rings on his fingers, his bangles, armlets and necklaces, and gave her all those royal ornaments. He unwound his wrapper and that too he gave over to her. Receiving these treasures, she blessed him.

"From this moment you will never be overcome. You will be victorious over any force that opposes you. You are a great hero and therefore you shall be called Mahavira." With this, she withdrew.

Finally, in full view of the watchful crowd he removed the remainder of his clothing until he stood before them clothed only by the air. A glow seemed to radiate from him as he stood before them quite at peace and unselfconscious, full of purposeful intent. As the sun touched the horizon he grasped the locks of his hair, and in four handfuls pulled it all out by the roots. Finally he grasped his beard and mustache in a single bunch, and in one wrench pulled it out. All these bundles of hair were collected by those around him and placed in the waters of the river.

Standing exposed before everyone, he called out loudly.

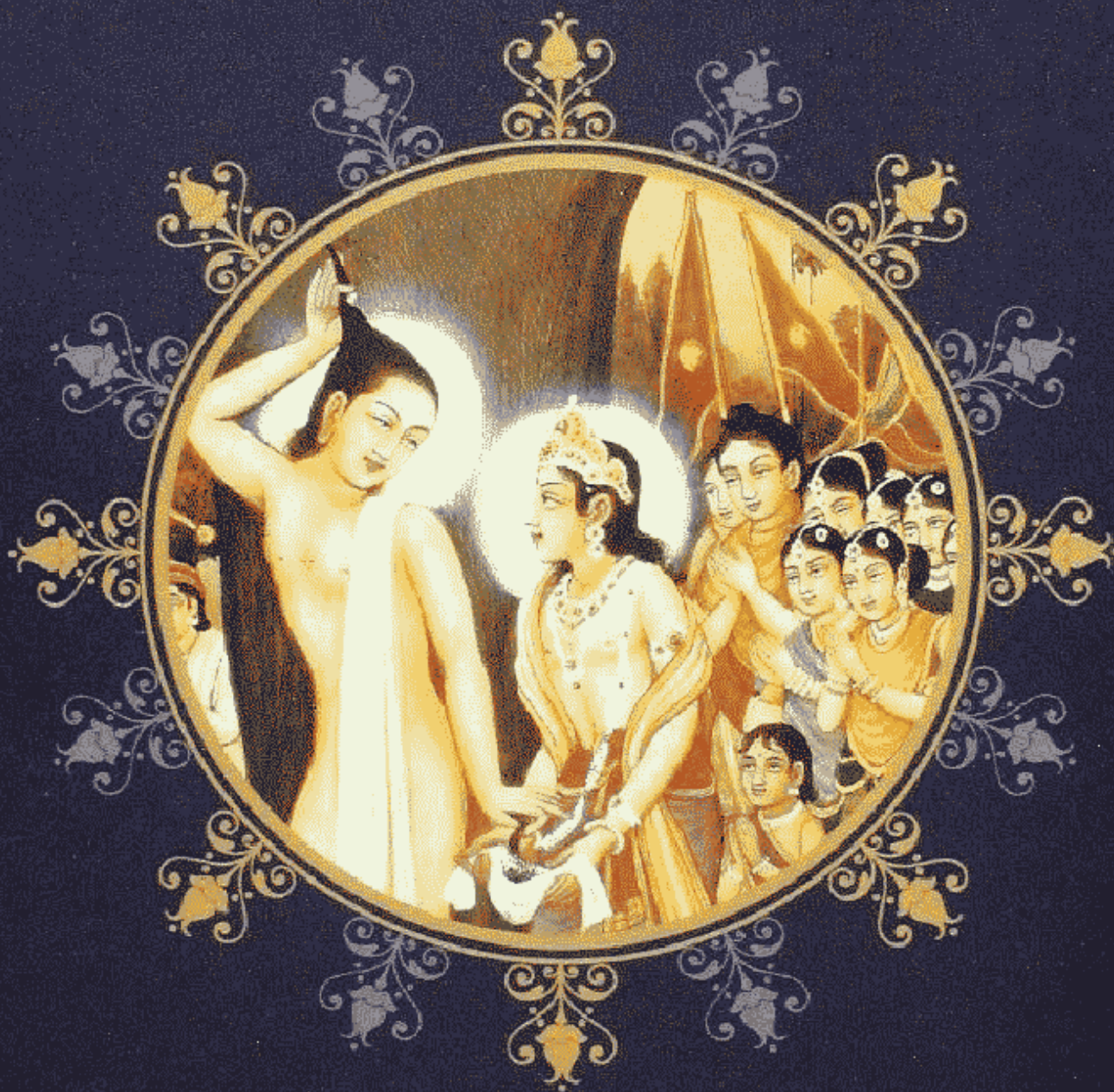
"I will look upon all creatures as equals. I will speak only the truth. I will possess nothing. I will take nothing from others. I will observe lifelong celibacy."

At that moment an utter peace descended upon the scene, as if all troubles and conflicts of the world



*In full view of the watchful crowd he removed his clothing, until he stood before them clothed only by the air, then he grasped the locks of his hair, and in four handfuls pulled it all out by the roots.*







had been neutralized. From nowhere appeared a shining being. It was Indra, clothed in light. He drew toward Mahavira and, as all looked on in wonder, gave him a shawl made from fine white cloth of marvelous weave. He took the cloth and wrapped it around himself, and as he did so it glittered, covering his naked body with infinite softness. At the same moment Mahavira discovered he had the psychic ability to read the mind of any person.

But he looked not in the faces of all those around him, nor even toward those he knew and loved intimately. Instead his gaze was fixed on the horizon. In his mind he had already left all this behind. His brother saw the time had now come for his departure, and that nothing could ever prevent it. He could no longer contain his emotions, and tears fell down his cheeks. Others nearby also began to weep and soon there were moist eyes everywhere.

But the hero did not hear their crying. His thoughts were beyond all that is temporary. With the sun sinking over the horizon and the sky filled with pink and gold, Mahavira walked forward through the crowd, who parted in reverence. A solitary figure with no companion, he set off for his life of penance.



*He felt only love for all, and saw  
neither friend nor enemy.*

## UNMOVED *by* DISTRACTIONS



ANY TRIED TO ACCOMPANY MAHAVIRA AS HE LEFT, but he firmly sent them home. By nightfall he had reached the forest, where he stayed his first night in the open, alone and sleepless. In the darkness he vowed to embrace a solitary life of penance until he achieved enlightenment. He would endure whatever troubles came his way without complaint and with a peaceful mind. No difficulty would disturb him.

Even if others deliberately gave him pain or tried to prevent him pursuing his path, he would patiently tolerate their behavior without being upset. Indeed he would behave even toward his enemies with peace and love.

So he began to walk his difficult path of self-realization, which though it would bring great happiness would also offer severe trials. On this path he would encounter thorns, the results of his past actions, but he would accept them with a calm mind, without fear or anger. Only by leaving behind all his past karma could he reach the stage of complete knowledge.

With his heart full of compassion and love for all beings, Mahavira began his journey. To calm his mind and senses he fasted, so that his passions were stilled in the light of pure knowledge.

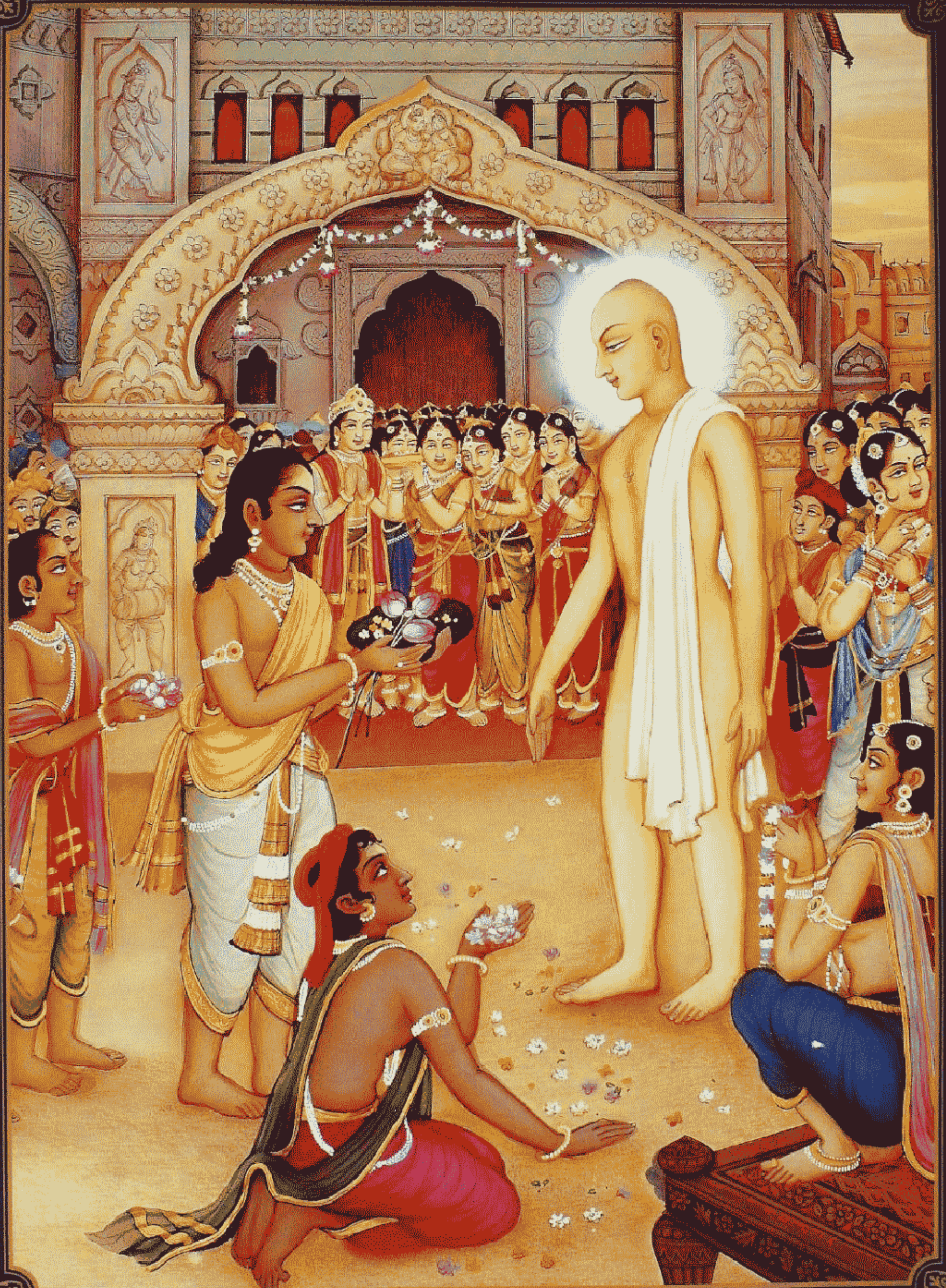
His first trial came the very next day. A sweet aroma still clung to his body from the previous morning when he had been bathed and smeared with aromatic oils mixed with sandalwood paste, and bees were attracted to the perfume. They crawled on his soft skin and stung him repeatedly until he was covered with red and swollen wounds, some even bleeding. He did nothing to resist them, and was careful not to harm or disturb them in any way. He simply tolerated their stinging without protest.

As he wandered sometimes he found himself in the jungle and sometimes he passed through the habitations of men. In the villages people were attracted to his beauty and harassed him. The sweet

*Young men and women could not resist his charming appearance, but he simply smiled, for he saw only the endless varieties of material nature, in different temporary forms, and felt everywhere the presence of divine love.*









*In war one may defeat a million  
invincible enemies, but to conquer  
one's own self is the greatest victory.*

—Uttaradhyayan Sutra 9.34



aroma still clung, and enticed young men and women who were unable to resist his charming appearance. The young men wanted to sport with him and the women wanted to offer him their love. They embraced him and glanced alluringly, but he was unmoved. He simply smiled, for wherever he looked he saw only the endless varieties of material nature, in different temporary forms, and felt everywhere the presence of divine love.

One day he reached a village as evening fell. Every evening he would practice meditation, so he stood motionless on the road outside the village and absorbed himself in his practice of inner contemplation, oblivious of his surroundings. People gathered round to speak with him, but he gave no reply. They began to mock him, thinking him a simpleton. Many openly laughed at him, but he was untroubled. He felt only love for all, and saw neither friend nor enemy. Nothing could distract him from his fixed determination.



*"The noble Vardhamana is full of compassion and never ignores a request for help."*

## LOSING *the* FINAL COMFORT



**YEAR PASSED**, and Mahavira traveled peacefully and untroubled, covered by his only possession, the cloth that Indra gave him. Meanwhile a poor Brahmin named Soma lived in the kingdom of Vaishali. When the former Prince Vardhamana had given away all his treasures, everyone had received something save this Soma, who had been away begging in another part of the country, and only returned when the prince had distributed every last bit of his wealth and renounced the world.

"While you were away everyone but us received boundless charity from the noble Vardhamana," lamented his wife. "You must go after the prince, who is now traveling, and ask for his mercy. Surely he can help you even now, for he is full of compassion and never ignores a request for help."

Obediently, Soma followed in the direction of Mahavira, inquiring as he went. After some time he found him. He saw the fabulous cloth worn by the former prince and at once he desired it. So boldly he approached him.

"O noble prince, you always help those in need. You made everyone else happy in your kingdom by your generosity. Only I was not helped. So kindly give me your valuable cloth."

Mahavira looked upon the poor man with compassion, and his gaze was like the light of the sun that shines upon a sunflower. Without hesitation he tore in half the valuable cloth given him by the king of heaven and, keeping one half to cover himself, gave the other half to the Brahmin.

In great happiness the Brahmin returned home and took the cloth to the village tailor. The tailor recognized it as an article of rare value, but he saw that it had been torn in half.

"This is certainly a valuable item," he said. "But if you would only find the other half I could sew them both together and the resultant cloth would fetch a huge sum in gold coins, enough to make you

*Without hesitation he tore his valuable cloth in half and, keeping one half to cover himself, gave the other half to the Brahmin.*









and your wife rich for the rest of your lives.”

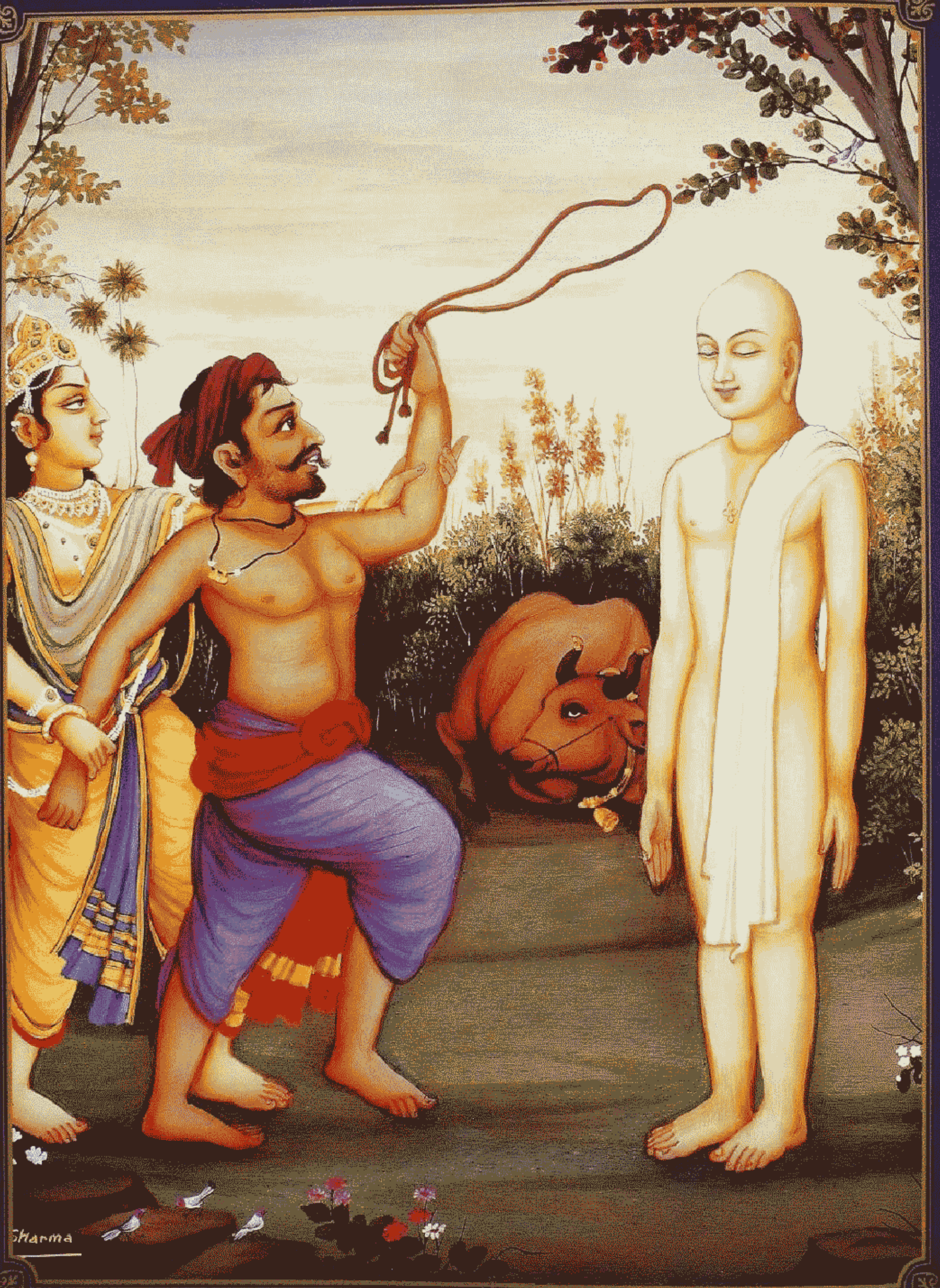
Hearing this the Brahmin again went in search of Mahavira. He had every intention of asking for the remaining cloth, but when he saw the saint he could not bring himself to make such a greedy request. After all, the cloth he already had would bring him sufficient wealth. As others had found before him, in the presence of the saintly man he found that his own greed had evaporated—that he felt satisfied with whatever he had. But just at that moment, while he was watching Mahavira walk through the jungle, the cloth he was wearing was caught on a thorny branch and pulled from his body as he walked past. Without bothering to turn back, Mahavira left the cloth behind and continued on his way completely naked.

Seeing his opportunity, the Brahmin seized the cloth. He hurried home and brought both pieces to the tailor, who with great skill sewed them together so that no join was visible. Then Soma approached King Nandivardhana with Indra's cloth and the king agreed to buy it in exchange for a large sum of gold. So it was that the couple became rich beyond their dreams and Mahavira, relieved of his final attachment, never again wore any covering whatsoever.











*On the path of truth one must be prepared  
to tolerate insults and mistreatment from others.*

## *an* ANGRY MAN



MAHAVIRA CAME UPON A VILLAGE NAMED KARMAARA, where hardworking men labored with their families and managed to gather the basic necessities for a simple and peaceful life. This village is today called Kamana Chapara and is in Bihar State.

He arrived at the village as the sun was setting and the birds were returning to their nests, calling their families to sleep. In the fading light, Mahavira found a suitable spot beneath a tree, close to the village, where he could be absorbed in his meditation. He stood there and withdrew his attention from all distractions, just as a tortoise withdraws its limbs within its shell, and focused his eyes upon the tip of his nose. Soon his breathing slowed and he stood motionless, just like a tree, deep in contemplation.

A farmer came past on his way home, tired at the end of his working day. With him he had his two bullocks. All day they had been helping him plow his field under the hot sun, and now the bullocks were tired and hungry. The farmer saw that here was plenty of fresh grass, so he decided that, rather than take the bullocks all the way home with him, he would leave them here to eat and rest, and return later in the evening to collect them.

"This holy man will keep an eye on them for me," he thought. And then he said aloud, "Kind sir, please watch my animals for me for a few hours while I go home. I shall return for them later."

But Mahavira made no reply, for his senses were completely turned inward and he heard and saw nothing. The farmer could not understand this and assumed that, although the traveler had not replied, he must have understood and could be trusted to look after his beasts. Thinking this way he went home to eat and rest. After some time, feeling refreshed, he returned for his bullocks but found they were no longer to be seen. They must have wandered off into the forest in search of fresh grazing.



*The farmer raised his rope, ready to strike Mahavira, but Indra intervened to protect the newly renounced prince from any harm.*



"Friend!" called the farmer. "Where are my bullocks?"

But Mahavira remained silent, unaware of the farmer's concern. The farmer left in haste to search for his animals. It was now nighttime and he was worried that if they were unprotected in the jungle they may be set upon by a tiger. He looked as far as he could but found nothing. All night long he continued his search, trying every hidden place, but without success. Tired and disappointed, at dawn he returned to the original spot, where to his surprise he found his bullocks sitting peacefully beside Mahavira, chewing the cud as if nothing had happened. Still Mahavira stood there in meditation, and still he said nothing. The farmer flew into a rage. Brandishing the rope that he always carried with him, he rushed at Mahavira.

"You are trying to steal my bullocks," he yelled. "And you are making a fool of me. So I will punish you." He raised the rope, ready to strike Mahavira.

At that moment Indra intervened. He had been watching all these events from the heavens, because he was anxious to protect the newly renounced prince from any harm. Now he stepped between the angry farmer and the silent figure of Mahavira.

"Stop! You do not know who this is," cried Indra, restraining the farmer. "This is your former prince, Vardhamana, who has now renounced the world and is absorbed in deep meditation. He has no knowledge of your bullocks, because he is concentrating on much more profound truths. He has left all such ordinary affairs behind."

The farmer was astonished at the sight of Indra, and hearing his firm words of instructions, he at once understood that his behavior was wrong. Suddenly his vision became clear and he saw that he was about to strike a saint. How could he not have seen this before?

"I beg your forgiveness for my offense," he said, falling at the saint's feet. "I was blinded by rage."

Mahavira opened his eyes and was surprised to see the farmer and Indra standing in front of him. He smiled with compassion at this poor man who seemed so troubled, and he blessed him. The farmer, promising to change his ways, soon left, taking his bullocks with him. Indra turned to Mahavira and expressed his concern.

"I am worried that this sort of thing will keep happening to you," he confided to Mahavira. "When a person withdraws from the world and dedicates himself to the search for God, he encounters resistance from those around him. People do not understand what he is seeking, and sometimes they show anger and cruelty toward him. You need to be protected from such attacks. Please let me stay to look after you."

But Mahavira did not want Indra's protection.

"I have no need of your help," he said to Indra. "On the path of truth one must be prepared to tolerate insults and mistreatment from others, and not be upset or even slightly disturbed. These are the tests I must undergo in order to achieve my goal. I have vowed that I will only feel compassion toward all whom I meet, however they may try to hurt or offend me."



*A greedy person is not  
satisfied even by mountains  
of gold and silver, because  
desire, like the sky, is endless.*

—Uttaradhyayan Sutra 9:48



*"I fear no one, not even Death himself, and no one fears me, because I love all creatures."*

## ANGER OVERCOME *by* LOVE



MAHAVIRA CONTINUED HIS TRAVELS ALONE, and reached a community of monks who lived under the guidance of their teacher on a wooded hill beside a river. As soon as he saw Mahavira, the head of the monastery recognized him as the former Prince Vardhamana of Vaishali. So he hurried out to greet him and invited him to stay with them. Mahavira was reluctant, since he had vowed to shun even the simple comforts that might be available in a monastery. But the teacher spoke persuasively.

"Now is the beginning of the rainy season, when it is customary for travelers to stay in one place until the end of the rains. Stay with us until the paths and roads once more become passable and the water clean. We will give you a solitary hut where you will not be disturbed."

Although this was not what Mahavira would have chosen, he thanked his host and accepted his invitation. He took up residence in a hut on the hillside overlooking the river, and there he sat down to meditate, closing his mind to whatever went on around him. At first, all was peaceful. But the monks kept many cows, who would browse among their dwellings in search of food, and who liked to eat the straw from the thatched roofs of the huts. The monks kept them away by beating them with sticks, but Mahavira would never do that. He ignored them and continued his meditation, unconcerned by the disturbance or the loss of straw from his roof. When the monks saw his hut was being damaged, and that he did nothing to protect it, they were disturbed.

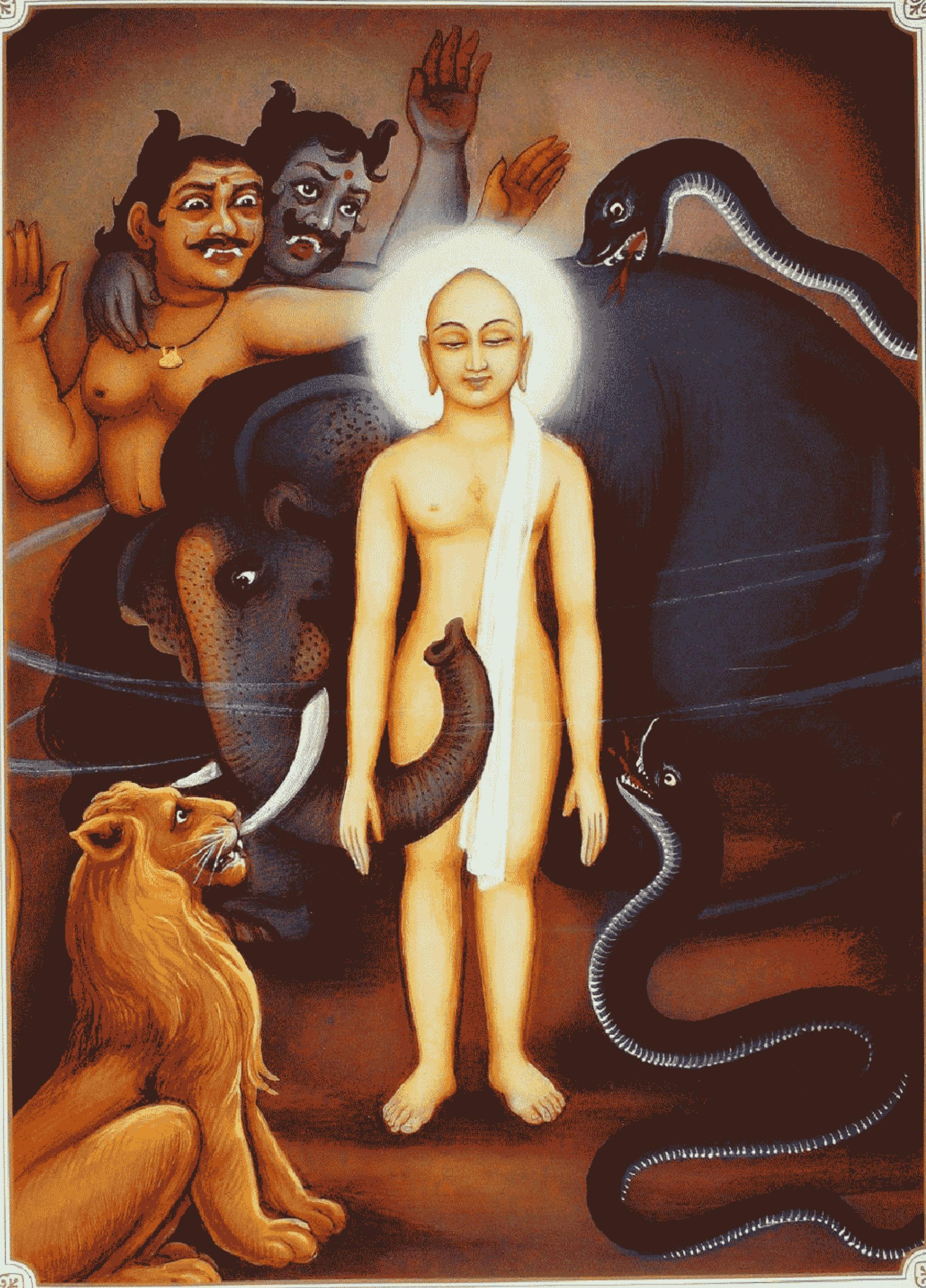
"You are neglecting your duty," they accused him. "We care for our dwellings, but you do not. Why is this?"

Mahavira meditated in silence and gave no answer. He saw no reason to stop the cows from eating if that was what they wished to do, or to explain himself to his neighbors. So the monks complained to their

*The torture continued through the night, but Mahavira's steadfast resolution was undaunted, and as dawn approached the apparitions disappeared.*









teacher. He also could not understand Mahavira, and came to question him.

"You are from a ruling family, so why do you not look after your house? Even birds look after their nests."

Mahavira again said nothing. He thought to himself, "I do not even care for my body, so why should I care for this hut?" He was different from the monks, because he always felt safe. He felt no need to protect himself or his house, nor did he wish to deprive the animals of answering their needs. But he understood that by accepting hospitality from the monks and staying in their community, he was inviting all sorts of unwanted complications. So, after living there for two weeks, he politely took his leave, and walked out into the rains.

After this episode he made five firm commitments, which became the basis for his future conduct.

"I will not stay in a place where I cause disturbance to others. I will find places where I can meditate without being interrupted. I will observe silence whenever I can. I will use only my bare hands for accepting and eating food. I will never speak to flatter anyone." These were his five vows.

Further on his way he came to a small deserted village. Above the village on a hill stood a small temple. Here seemed an ideal place for him to stay during the rainy season. But on his way up the hill he passed some locals, who warned him that the place was dangerous.

"This place is haunted by an evil spirit, who cannot abide even the smell of humans. No one who stayed in the temple has survived the night, because the demon attacks and kills them. You are young and pure-hearted and we do not want to see you come to harm. Come with us and we will give you a place to stay."

"My friends, please do not worry," Mahavira told them. "I fear no one, not even Death himself, and no one fears me, because I love all creatures. Tonight I shall stay here unharmed."

Night was approaching, and the people feared that place. Reluctantly they left, and Mahavira entered the temple. There, as darkness fell, he took up his usual standing position in one corner and began to meditate. He could feel the presence of the demon, and he knew it meant him harm. But he wanted to release this troubled spirit from its evil condition.

Soon the atmosphere was charged with a sense of terrible desolation and fear. With a clap of thunder a fearsome demon appeared and attacked the saint with sharp spears. Blood ran down his limbs, but he was not afraid and he felt no pain. Then the demon took on the form of an elephant and wrapped its trunk around his body, squeezing him, raising him in the air and dashing him to the ground. Still he was not disturbed. The elephant disappeared and a roaring lion sprang from the darkness, and sank its sharp claws and pointed teeth into Mahavira's flesh. He withstood this attack without a murmur. Finally the lion vanished and a huge poisonous snake, hissing and writhing, repeatedly bit his tender feet. This torture continued through the night, but Mahavira's steadfast resolution was undaunted. As dawn approached the apparitions disappeared, and in their place came forward the evil spirit of that place, whose name was Shulpani.

"I realize that you are a great and powerful soul, far greater than I, and I have wrongly tried to kill you. Please forgive me," begged the spirit.

"You have no need for my forgiveness," said Mahavira, "for you have tested my powers of endurance, and therefore you are my friend."

"I tried to kill you, and you show me only friendship," said the astonished demon. "But I am tortured by unending anger. Please tell me how I can find peace."

"You cannot satisfy anger by hurting others. Anger can never be satisfied by cruelty and revenge. It can



only be overcome through forgiveness and love. Only they will bring you peace."

Mahavira's compassionate words fell upon Shulpani's anger as the cooling rains fall upon parched earth. The demon's eyes were opened to the truth. Relieved of his pain, he felt happiness for the first time. He left that place and never returned. He no longer troubled people—instead, wherever he went he sang the praises of Mahavira.

Once the demon had forsaken that place, Mahavira had it to himself, and he stayed there in the small temple on the hill for the rest of the rainy season, practicing his constant meditation without further interruption.









*Give up your rage and hatred—  
they are only harming you.*

## *a SNAKE is* ENLIGHTENED



AT THE END OF THE RAINY SEASON Mahavira left the temple, and continued on his way until he came to a village called Moraka. Here lived an astrologer whose advice was much valued by the villagers. He used to give astrological readings that he pretended were based on deep mystical insights, and his readings were in much demand. But Mahavira could understand that this so-called astrologer had no genuine powers, and was actually a thief, who used his privileged position as village astrologer as a cover for stealing from his clients under cover of darkness. He also sold charms that claimed to make poor people wealthy and barren women fertile. The simple villagers believed whatever he said and paid him to look after them.

Mahavira did not like what this man was doing, so he confronted the cheater and advised him to change his ways, warning him that no lasting benefit could come from cheating others. But the foolish man ignored his good advice, so Mahavira decided he must teach him a lesson. The saint announced that he could outdo the astrologer, and that he could reveal any person's secrets and tell them whatever they needed to know. A farmer approached him to test his claim.

"Tell me what I ate yesterday."

"You ate rice and lentils, then you took your cows to the field, and you had a sleepless night because you had a terrible dream that frightened you."

"How could you know these things?" exclaimed the simple farmer. "He speaks the truth," he shouted, as he rushed off to tell the rest of the village. Soon Mahavira was celebrated in the village as a gifted soothsayer, and everyone wanted his advice.

The astrologer was jealous, so he came to challenge Mahavira. In front of a crowd of onlookers he held up a straw in front of the holy man.



*The snake bit deep into Mahavira's foot, causing blood to flow—not red, but white like milk, the symbol of Mahavira's love for all beings.*



“Tell me, can I break this straw in two?” he asked. If Mahavira said yes he would pretend he couldn’t, and if he said no he would easily break it. Mahavira looked intently, and answered his challenger with confident assurance.

“Try how you might, you will be unable to break that straw.”

Laughing loudly, the astrologer tried to break the straw. But he could not. He strained until his face was red, but found the straw to be quite unbreakable. With shame he left, amidst the laughter of the villagers. Then Mahavira revealed to them what he knew about the deceitful practices of this man. After that the people thanked him, and never again allowed themselves to be so easily deceived. Having enlightened the people of the village, Mahavira continued on his way.

Next he followed the path toward the town of Svetambi. This path led along a deserted road through densely wooded hills. No one traveled that way for it was said to be inhabited by a fierce cobra who lay beside the path waiting to kill unsuspecting travelers. Merely by its gaze, without having to bite, this snake could poison a person through its eyes alone.

As he was about to enter the forest, Mahavira was seen by some cowherd boys.

“Do not go that way,” they warned, “or you will be burned to ashes by the terrible cobra who lives along this road. It has killed many innocent travelers.”

But Mahavira knew about this cobra. In its previous life it had lived as a powerful ascetic named Chandakaushika, who had many disciples who dwelt with him in the forest. But he was quick to anger. One day he caught some visitors stealing mangos from his hermitage, and his anger was so great that he rushed at them brandishing an ax, intent on terrible harm. Fate made him trip, and he fell upon his ax and split open his head, dying instantly. On departing that body while being filled with rage, he was reborn in the body of a cobra and equipped with the power to poison his prey simply with his eyes. Mahavira knew all this, and wanted to release the former ascetic from the prison of his hatred and anger. So, ignoring the advice of the cowherds, he entered the forest to confront this twisted being and restore it to sanity and a wholesome life.

With his heart full of compassion, Mahavira reached the heart of the forest. There he stood still and absorbed himself in deep meditation. The cobra could smell the presence of a human being, and crawled out from its hiding place hissing with anger. It looked venomously upon Mahavira, but though all the birds and insects around him died and fell to the ground, Mahavira was untouched by the evil eye of the cobra. With mounting anger, the snake rushed forward and bit deep into Mahavira's foot. A plume of blood spurted forth, but it was not red, rather it was white like milk, the symbol of Mahavira's love for all beings, even this hateful creature. Mahavira spoke.

“Chandakaushika, have you forgotten what harm anger has done to you in the past? Give up your rage and hatred—they are only harming you and destroying your true nature. Be peaceful and realize the truth.” These words, spoken with wisdom and love, touched the heart of the being trapped in the body of the snake. Memory of his fateful past flooded in, and Chandakaushika was freed from his hatred.

The snake circled round the loving saint, then left that place. It hid away from sight and fasted. As it weakened, its bad karma was exhausted, until at last death took its spirit. Then the soul who had once lived as the ascetic Chandakaushika, and who had later preyed upon the innocent, was reborn as a godly being in a heavenly realm.

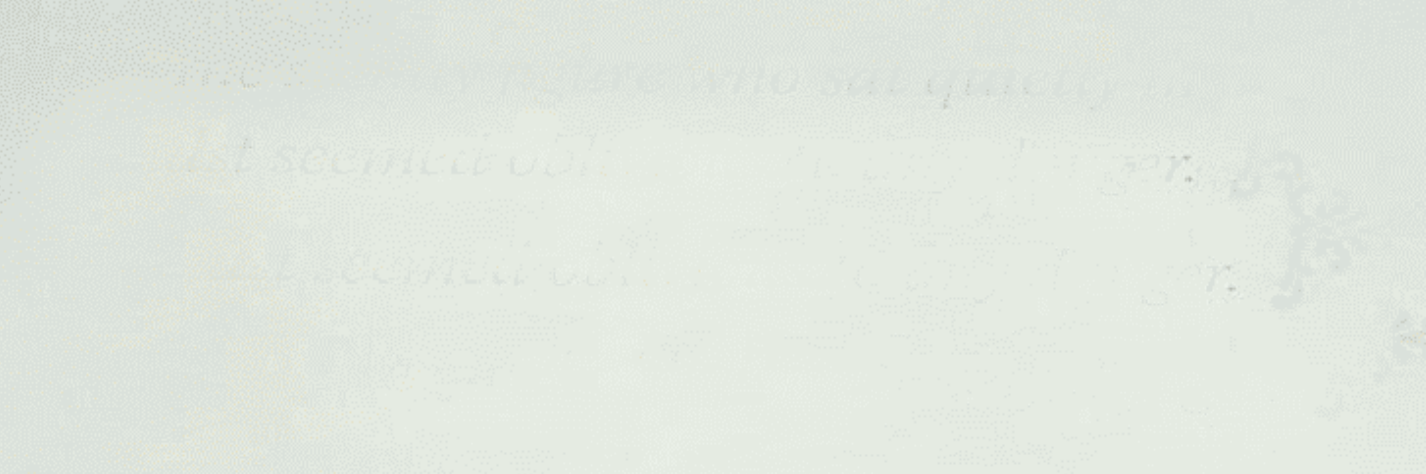












# CALM AMIDST *a* STORM



**I**N A PREVIOUS BIRTH on his journey toward spiritual wisdom, Mahavira had lived as a nobleman named Triprustha. He had been a powerful man who was always anxious to defend his community, but on one occasion he had killed a lion. The unfortunate creature had come out of the jungle and entered the paddy fields where the villagers worked. Being frightened of the lion they dared not venture into the fields to harvest their rice.

Triprustha heard of their predicament and hunted down the lion, killing it with his arrows. After this the spirit of the lion, who had died in fear and anger, was unable to rest, being overcome with the desire to seek revenge. This mischievous spirit used to haunt a particular stretch of the Ganges where travelers would cross by ferry. There it waited for the soul of the former Triprustha to pass that way so it could retaliate.

Meanwhile, not far from there, two very different beings lived as bullocks in the care of a devout householder and his wife. They were peaceful animals who enjoyed listening to the sacred hymns recited by their master, who loved them dearly. When they died he prayed over them and they were reborn as benevolent guardian spirits who protected travelers at the same ferry crossing.

One day Mahavira desired to cross the Ganges and reached that very place. A crowd of travelers were waiting to board the ferry and he joined them. The ferryman helped them aboard his boat, which was soon packed with passengers. As he was preparing to depart, an owl, perched in the branches of an overhanging tree, hooted loudly. This unusual omen dismayed the passengers, for to hear an owl during daytime was believed to be the portent of disaster. However, they all noticed the saintly figure who sat quietly in their midst, who seemed oblivious to any danger, and they felt that so long as this man was with them they would be safe.

The oarsman began to row and soon the heavily laden boat was in the middle of the swiftly flowing



*The travelers expected the boat to capsize at any moment, but Mahavira remained tranquil and fearless, understanding that the storm was the work of an angry spirit.*



river, whose broad stream stretched to distant banks. Just then a stiff breeze began to blow, causing the swelling waters to toss the boat alarmingly. The sky darkened as thick clouds gathered and circled overhead, covering the sun. Everyone gripped the sides of the boat and prayed for their safety. Only Mahavira seemed peaceful. The breeze strengthened into a gale, whipping up huge waves that rose high above the boat. Rain lashed down, obscuring both banks and filling the boat with water. The travelers gave up hope, expecting the boat to capsize at any moment and plunge them into the stormy waters, where they would surely drown.

In the midst of this frightening situation Mahavira remained tranquil and fearless. He knew the cause of this disturbance. He could recognize with his psychic vision the spirit of the lion that in a past life he had killed, and he understood that this sudden storm was the work of this angry spirit, who was intent on seeking revenge. Calmly, at still center amid panic and fear, he waited to see what would be the consequences of his past actions.

But help was at hand. The two guardian spirits of the ferry crossing saw all that was happening and came to the rescue of the travelers. One of them steadied the boat while the other quelled the storm. For a moment it seemed that two storms met overhead, one neutralizing the other. Then, as suddenly as the danger had arisen, it subsided. The dark clouds dispersed, the wind dropped and the sun emerged to shine upon calm waters.

The oarsman rowed onward and soon the boat reached the other side, safely unloading its relieved and happy passengers. They looked at Mahavira and blessed him for saving their lives. He took no notice of their gratitude, for he treated all situations and all people with equal detachment. Nevertheless the people thanked him and his fame spread.

thanked



*One who conquers the self  
conquers everything.*

—Uttaradhyayan Sutra 9.36



*“What will become of this pitiful creature,  
who only tries to give me pain?”*

## TESTED *by* ENVIOUS SPIRITS



WINTER ARRIVED AND WITH IT BITTERLY COLD WINDS that felt like knives against Mahavira's naked flesh. At night, while beneath their woolen blankets the villagers shivered, the saint stood in the forest meditating. Warmth emanated from within his body and he did not feel the cold.

Now came another person from his past to harass him. During his past lifetime as the nobleman Triprustha he had married several wives, one of whom became his enemy. Now she existed as an envious spirit named Kataputana. She perceived her former husband, now living as a renunciate in the forest, and resolved to attack him.

She created a torrent of icy water that rained down from above and drenched the body of Mahavira, while causing blasts of freezing winds. Any ordinary person would have died from exposure in such conditions, but Mahavira was not so easily deterred. This torture continued all through the night, yet did not disturb him. On the contrary, he welcomed this test of his resolve and continued his meditation.

Kataputana saw that the person she hated felt no hatred for her. He tolerated all her provocation, and love and compassion radiated from him. Realizing he was a blessed soul, she no longer felt hatred. Instead, exhausted by her efforts, she fell at his feet.

“Forgive me,” she begged. “My heart was full of anger, but now that I have seen your love, my anger is gone. You are a great soul, and I beg your forgiveness.” As soon as she sincerely spoke these words, she felt relieved of all distress, and was free to move forward on her spiritual journey.

Mahavira had displayed supreme fortitude, and from that moment his wisdom increased. Now he could understand the nature of all things in the mortal world.

Leaving that place, he found a small temple far from any habitation, where he would not be disturbed.

*The proud Sangama attacked him with tortures  
and temptations for six months, but Mahavira was  
undisturbed and continued his meditation  
without complaint.*









There he decided to fast for three days, standing in continuous meditation. He stood so still, just like a wooden post, that cows came to rub against him as they would against the trunk of a tree. He was not disturbed even by this. Indra came to witness his feat of endurance and was lost in admiration.

“O revered one, you grant forgiveness like the earth, you endure hardships like a mountain, you are steadfast like the ocean and your mind is steady as a rock. No man, demon or god can distract you from your spiritual course.” These words of praise spoken by Indra were heard by a proud god named Sangama, who possessed great magical skills. To hear Mahavira spoken of so highly made him envious, and he vowed to find a way to distract the saint from his purpose.

First he created a dust storm that filled Mahavira's eyes, ears, nostrils and mouth with dust so that he could hardly breathe. Then he sent swarms of insects to bite his tender body, followed by scorpions who stung him. Next came rats who gnawed at his flesh, drawing blood, then came cobras who bit deep into his arms and legs. All these left the great hero unmoved.

More terrible creatures appeared: wolves, tigers, lions and an elephant. Urged on by spear-wielding demons they assaulted the lonely figure from every side. Still he did not flinch. Sangama's sorcery was not working, so he changed tactics.

The horrible visions disappeared, and in their place came apparitions of Mahavira's father and mother, pitifully weakened with age and sorrow.

“Dear son, where have you been? Look at your condition, so thin and weak, and look at us, worn out with worry and ill health. Do not abandon us! Please come home and protect us.” But Mahavira, who retained no attachment for his former life, was not taken in by this trick. He was not even slightly disturbed.

Having failed with all things fearful and ghastly, Sangama took the opposite approach. He conjured up three beautiful dancing girls, who gathered round the saint and pleaded for his love. Their beauty was unsurpassed in this world, and they used all their skills to seduce him, begging him to relieve their longing. But they were unable to attract him even slightly. Seeing their failure, they wept and vanished.

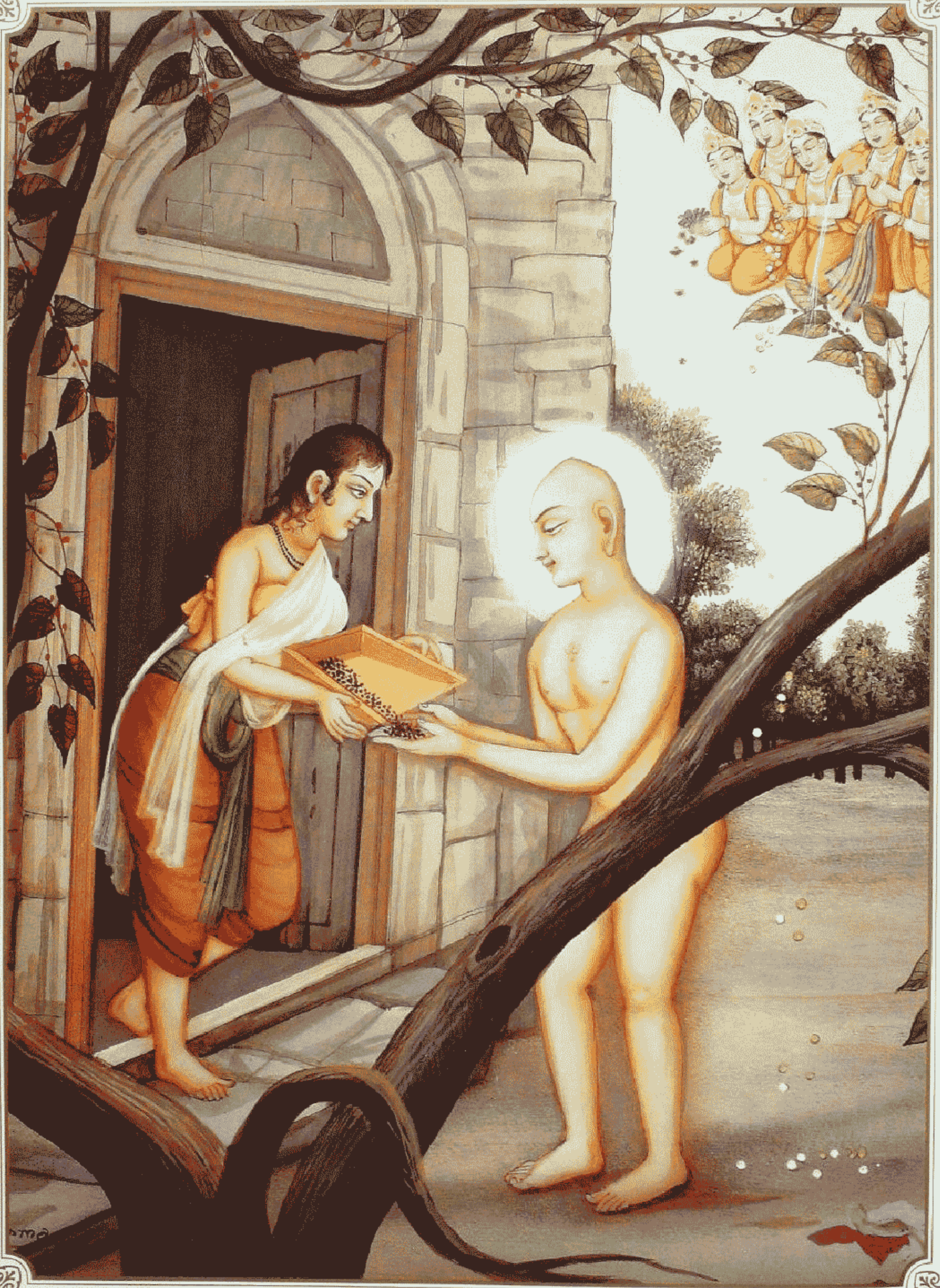
In desperation Sangama lit a fire beneath Mahavira's feet and tried to burn him into submission, and sent cruel men to beat him with sticks. Still the saint was unmoved. All these tortures and temptations, and many more besides, continued for six months, during which time Mahavira went on with his fasting and meditation without complaint. At last he opened his eyes and looked upon Sangama.

“What will become of this pitiful creature, who only tries to give me pain?” he said. As he spoke two teardrops sprang into the corners of his eyes.

Seeing Mahavira's response of love, in the face of all he had done, Sangama felt ashamed. He fell at his feet and begged for mercy.

“O great saint, I did not recognize you,” he prayed. “Your self-control and compassion are without equal, and your greatness is celebrated among men and gods. Though I am a most miserable creature, I see from your tears that you have forgiven me. Truly you are the most merciful.”







*When she saw Mahavira's saintly countenance  
she forgot her own troubles and wanted to help him.*

## *a* SUITABLE OFFERING



WELVE YEARS PASSED. Mahavira lived his life of penance, hardly eating or sleeping, and devoting himself to meditation. Sometimes he found himself in the jungle and sometimes in towns and villages. He arrived at the city of Kaushambi, in a powerful and prosperous kingdom. Here lived many wealthy and pious people, who offered him food and shelter. But he was not interested. He resolved to impose upon himself restrictions for how and when he would accept any food. His conditions were as follows.

The food must be plain boiled black beans, offered in a simple wicker basket. The offering must be made by a former princess held captive, chained and with her hair shorn, who had not eaten for three days and whose eyes were filled with tears. She should be standing upon the threshold, neither inside a house nor outside it, and should make the offering after the noon meal was over.

He told no one of his vow. But he assiduously began to beg from door to door in the city, waiting for these conditions to be fulfilled. Each day, despite receiving numerous offerings, he accepted nothing. So he fasted for a month, and the people of Kaushambi were worried that this saint, who depended on their generosity, seemed to be starving.

"What can we do?" they asked one another. "We are ready to give this pure-hearted man whatever he asks, but when we inquire from him what he wishes, he simply looks at us, his eyes filled with compassion, and says nothing. We want to serve him, but we do not know how."

Five months went by since he arrived in Kaushambi, and Mahavira continued to fast, begging from door to door and waiting patiently for his conditions to be fulfilled.

During this time, on the borders of that land a war was being waged, for this was how the city defended and expanded its wealth. The city's soldiers had advanced into one of their neighboring kingdoms



*The girl stood in the open doorway with tears in her eyes, holding the basket of beans, and Mahavira happily accepted her offering in his cupped hands.*



and captured many spoils, among them a beautiful princess named Chandana. The girl was brought to the marketplace in Kaushambi and sold as a slave. A wealthy merchant of the city, attracted to her beauty, bought her to be his personal serving maid. He took her to his home and looked after her well, becoming fond of her and accepting personal service from her. On one occasion, while the girl was bathing his feet, his wife saw him touch the girl's beautiful long hair. When she saw this she felt resentment and jealousy toward this beautiful young girl in her home. As soon as the merchant left on his next journey, she seized the unfortunate girl, cut off her long hair, clapped her in irons and locked her in a cell without food.

After three days the merchant Dhanavaha returned to find the girl locked in chains and hungry. He was shocked, and hurriedly looked for something for her to eat. All he could find were some black beans lying in a basket, intended for the cows. So he gave her these, then hurried off to find a blacksmith to release her from the chains.

Mahavira had now been fasting for five months and twenty-five days. Just at this moment, he arrived at the merchant's house to beg alms. The girl stood in the open doorway, unable to come out, and still holding the basket of beans in her hand. When she saw Mahavira's saintly countenance she forgot her own troubles and wanted to help him, so she offered all she had: the black beans still lying in their wicker basket.

It seemed that all Mahavira's conditions were fulfilled, but he turned away and was on the point of leaving, for one condition still remained. At this, tears of pity welled up in the girl's eyes. He noticed her tears and halted, for they fulfilled his final requirement. There, in the courtyard of the house, he happily accepted her offering in his cupped hands, and sat down to eat.

In that instant a light shone all around and gold coins showered from the heavens. The chains fell from the girl's ankles and turned to gold. Her appearance was transformed back into that of a beautiful princess, and her face glowed with happiness.

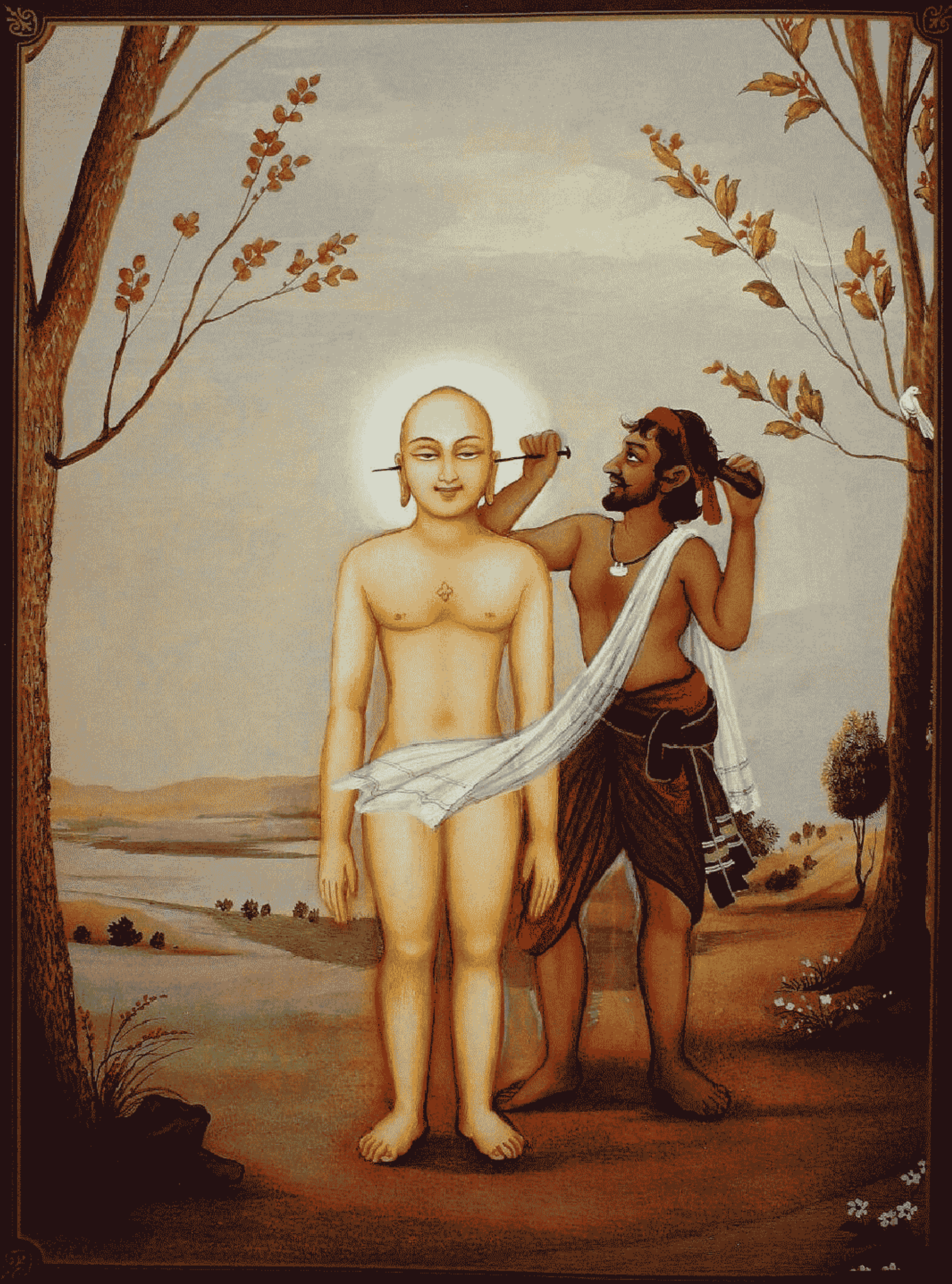
The people of the town heard the news and were both happy and sad. They were happy because at last Mahavira had broken his fast, and the princess had been freed from her unjust captivity. But they were unhappy because they realized that their own wealth, and the war on which it had been based, had made their offerings unacceptable to Mahavira. No more would they harm or imprison others, they resolved, and so they gave up violence and lived in peace.



*The soul is the architect of one's  
own happiness and unhappiness.  
Therefore the soul on the right path  
is your friend, whereas the soul on  
the wrong path is your enemy.*

—Uttaradhyayan Sutra 20.27







*He realized this was a reaction to past karma,  
so he patiently bore the pain in silence.*

## *the SEVEREST TEST*



MAHAVIRA LEFT THE CITY OF KAUSHAMBI BEHIND and walked on. He came to a small village, near which he found a quiet spot on the side of a forest. There he halted and stood under a tree to meditate. Surrounding that spot was a pasturing ground where villagers would graze their animals. At the end of the day a farmer came past on his way home, driving his bullocks before him. When he saw a stranger standing there, he thought he would leave his bullocks to graze under the stranger's care, while he went home to rest. So he asked Mahavira to watch his animals for a while.

As darkness fell, Mahavira remained in deep meditation, while the bullocks grazed contentedly. Soon the farmer returned for his bullocks and, as had happened many years earlier in a similar situation, could not find them. Mahavira, deep in meditation, had been unaware of all that had happened, oblivious of the man's request and of his animals, who had wandered away out of sight. The farmer was furious.

"You fool, you have neglected my bullocks. Where are they?" Mahavira gave no reply.

"Why do you not answer me? Can't you hear?" shouted the farmer. "Perhaps your ears are blocked. Let me clear them for you."

Blinded with rage, the farmer did a terrible thing. He gathered two thick roots of tall pampas grass and cut them with his knife into sharpened pegs, which he drove cruelly into each of Mahavira's ears, sinking them deep until they were buried out of sight in the holes of his ears. Satisfied that he had meted out proper punishment, the cruel man marched off, leaving Mahavira in silent agony. As on countless other occasions when he found himself the victim of other's anger, he made no complaint. Although he felt intense pain, no sound passed his lips.

"What must I have done in some previous lifetime to deserve this reaction?" he thought to himself.

*As Mahavira remained in deep meditation, the cruel farmer cut two thick roots of tall pampas grass into sharpened pegs and drove them deep into his ear holes.*



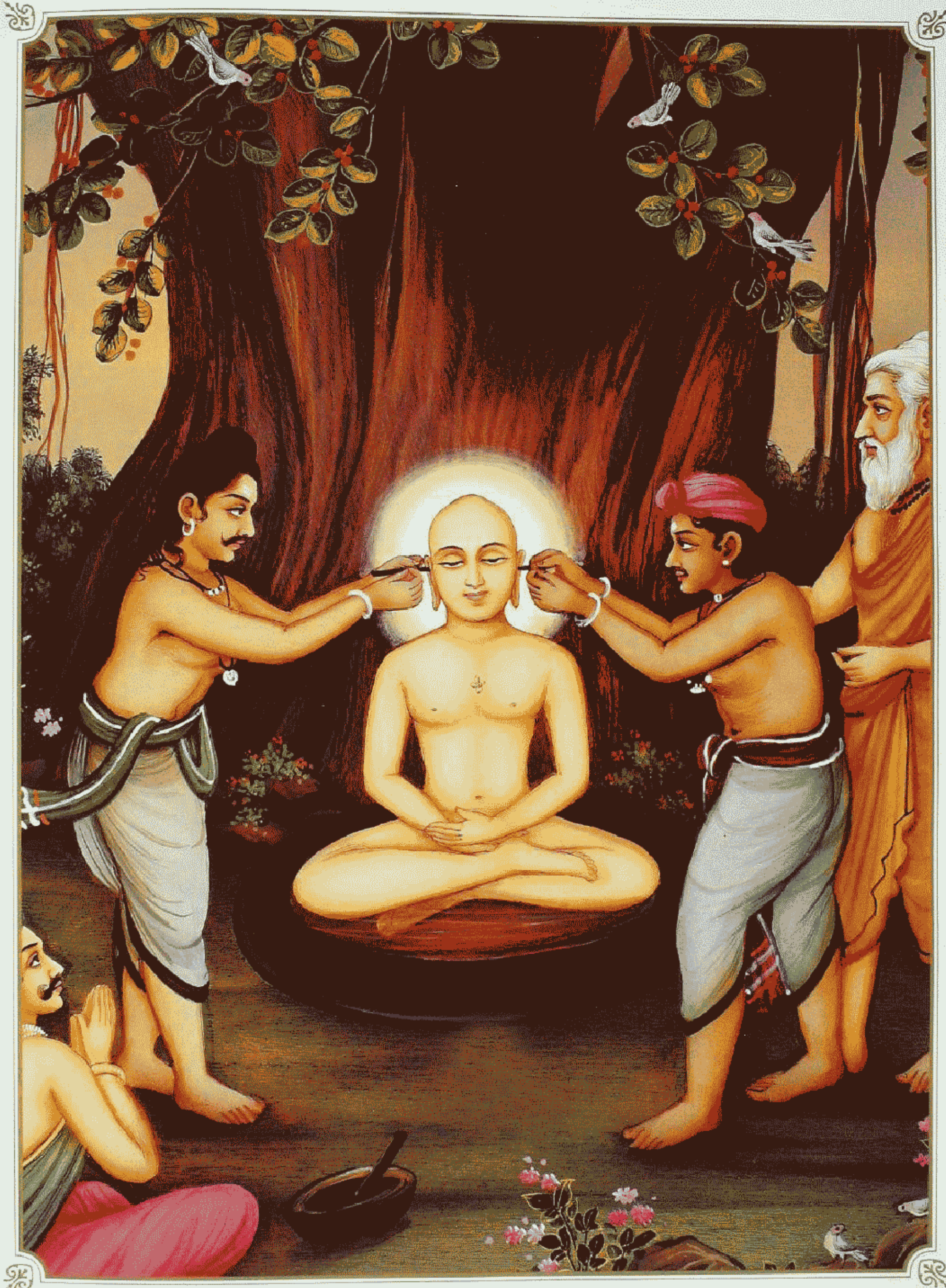
Delving far back into his memory, he recalled how, in a previous lifetime as the nobleman Triprustha, he had once acted cruelly toward a guard in his employment who had neglected his duties to keep a careful watch. On that occasion Triprustha had given in to a great rage and poured molten lead into the ears of his negligent guard. Now, Mahavira realized, he was experiencing the reaction for that act of cruelty. So he patiently bore the pain in silence.

The next day he left that place and walked on until he reached a small town, where he begged alms at a merchant's house. In the house was a physician friend of the merchant's. Although Mahavira made no complaint, the doctor could tell something was ailing him. Upon examining him the physician discovered the tips of the roots that were buried in his ears. The two were astonished at the forbearance of the saint, who must have been in great pain, though he seemed so peaceful. Saying nothing to Mahavira, they decided they must help him. They went off to find some helpers, and to gather medicines and a strong set of pincers.

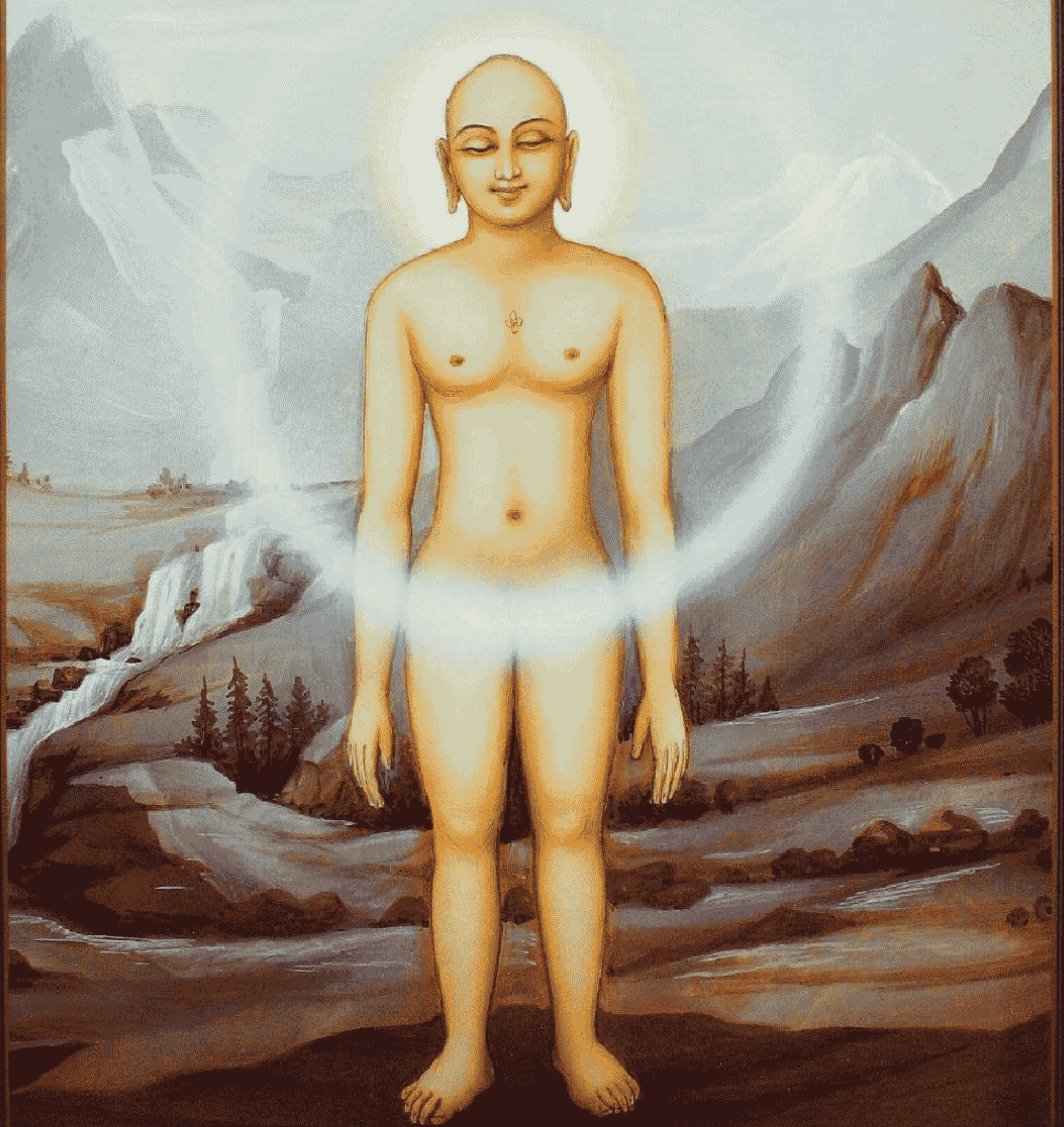
Meanwhile Mahavira, keeping silent, left the town to meditate in the nearby forest. Soon the two friends and their helpers came in search of him. They found him standing beneath a tree, deep in meditation. Gently they sat him down and the physician massaged him with oil to make him relaxed. While strong hands held him firmly, with the help of the pincers the pegs were removed from his ears. As they were pulled out the pain was very great, and Mahavira involuntarily let out a piercing scream, the first sound he had uttered since taking his vow of silence. The terrible sound vibrated through the sky and made the forest and surrounding hills tremble. Blood poured forth, but healing hands quickly staunched it, and treated his damaged ears with ointment and soft cotton wool. When all was done the merchant and his physician friend begged forgiveness for the pain they had caused to the saint. They bowed before him and returned home.

*Strong hands held him firmly while the pegs were removed, and his damaged ears were treated with ointment and soft cotton wool.*











*He crossed the river of birth and death,  
and left a path for others to follow.*

## PURE MEDITATION



**N**O ONE BEFORE, not even the twenty-three great Tirthankaras who had crossed over before Mahavira, had ever endured such voluntary hardships as he did.

For twelve and a half years he followed his severe austerities. During that time he ate on average only once every twelve days. On one occasion he fasted for six months, without even drinking water, and on another occasion he fasted for five months and twenty-five days. He was subjected to many severe tests of his determination and patience, but not once did he flinch from his unwavering resolution to achieve complete spiritual realization. To his eyes, whoever he met was neither friend nor enemy, for he viewed all equally, even the animals.

In this way he reached the point where all his past karma was completely eradicated, and he was freed at last from all taints of illusion. So he became a Tirthankara, "who has crossed the river of birth and death, and who leaves a path for others to follow."

It was said of him, "Tirthankara Mahavira was as deep as the ocean, as cool as the moon, as dazzling as the sun, as brilliant as gold, as tolerant as the earth, as bright as fire and as firm as Mount Sumeru, around which revolves the universe."

After completing his extreme path, Mahavira entered profound and unblemished peace. Standing alone in a mountain valley, far from human habitation, he absorbed himself in the purest stage of meditation, called *shukla*. He remained still and unmoving, while from his heart shone an aura of white light, the light of infinite wisdom. It lit up the surrounding valley, symbolizing his complete purity and freedom from all karma.



*Standing alone far from human habitation, he remained still and unmoving, while from his heart shone an aura of white light that lit up the surrounding valley.*







*Now was the time and here was the place  
to achieve the full fruit of his long inner journey.*

## ABSOLUTE KNOWLEDGE



**I**T WAS THE BEGINNING OF SUMMER, on the tenth day of the waxing moon in the month of Vaisakha, when Mahavira, uplifted by his pure meditation, reached the banks of the River Rujuvalika. Near a village called Jambhiya he found a small, dilapidated temple beneath the spreading branches of a teak tree. Close by the river murmured, her clear waters flowing through green paddy fields. As evening fell, he saw across the fields workers returning to their village with their cows, and he heard their joyful singing. Now was the time and here was the place, felt Mahavira, to achieve the full fruit of his long inner journey.

Behind the little temple he squatted on the ground to meditate. Balancing on his toes he sat back on his heels and drew together his knees, resting his hands on them. With his head bent down he entered a perfect state of trance. He had cast off the burden of his past karma, and his vision was clear and full of perfect knowledge. The knot of attachments fell away. He found perfect knowledge of past, present and future, and could understand the paths of all beings: where they came from, where they are currently situated and what is their destination. Nothing was hidden from him. Thus he was liberated from all imperfections and became a Jina, a victor over all the illusions of material life.

At that moment the moon rose, full of serenity and beauty, and spread its rays of white light. A cool breeze began to blow, soothing the parched landscape after the heat of the day. Deer emerged from the forest to play fearlessly in the presence of a tiger. A mongoose played with a snake. All enmity was forgotten in the tranquil summer evening, because Tirthankara Mahavira had achieved full enlightenment, and his wisdom illuminated all.



*He squatted on the ground to meditate, and entered a perfect state of trance, casting off the burden of all his past karma. Thus he became a Jina, a victor over all the illusions of material life.*



*Shining with the light of pure knowledge,  
he delivered his first sermon.*

## HIS FIRST SERMON



AT THE MOMENT MAHAVIRA GAINED COMPLETE KNOWLEDGE, the gods became aware of his achievement. Led by Indra they arrived on earth to celebrate his new status as a Jina, who has conquered birth and death. They brought celestial gifts, including an ashoka tree, which they planted at the spot and which grew at once into a majestic fully grown tree. Around the ashoka tree they built a glorious pavilion as a place for him to teach from, for now that he had achieved perfect knowledge they wanted to be the first to hear what he had learned.

They wanted to create an unforgettable setting, so the pavilion they built, named the Samavasarana, was unique. First the wind god swept all dust and dirt from the site and the rain god moistened the ground with a gentle shower, leaving a pleasing aroma of clean earth. Then the gods of each of the seasons scattered flowers everywhere, which bloomed in all the colors of the rainbow and filled the air with scented perfumes. Next came the builders, gods whose task was to engineer the universe. They constructed a series of concentric platforms, each higher than the previous, leading up to a central stage thousands of steps above the ground.

The entire construction covered a vast area. Its outer enclosure, walled with silver, had gateways from each of the four directions. It contained beautiful gardens, with places for the visiting gods and humans to leave their aerial chariots. The middle enclosure, entered through four more gates, was bounded in gold, and was prepared for the many animals to assemble—lions, tigers, elephants, cows and peacocks and other birds. They too wished to hear the words of Mahavira. The innermost enclosure, shimmering with precious stones and gems, was where the gods and humans were to sit. At its center was the highest level, from which the ashoka tree extended high into the air. Beneath its spreading branches were four golden thrones, one facing each of the four directions.

*Tirthankara Mahavira ascended to the topmost platform and took his seat on the throne facing east, then manifested three identical forms of himself who occupied the other three thrones, and delivered his first sermon.*













When all was ready, great crowds of animals, humans and gods gathered and filled the pavilion, waiting for the teaching to begin. Tirthankara Mahavira, shining with the light of pure knowledge, ascended to the topmost platform and took his seat on the throne facing east. He manifested three other identical forms of himself who occupied the other three thrones. Then he began to deliver his first sermon.

He taught of nonviolence, self-restraint and renunciation of the world. He wanted the gods to give up their luxurious comforts and go in search of self-realization. But although they listened to his teaching with attention and reverence, they were not ready to renounce their comforts and practice penance. Thus his sermon, though wonderful, was unsuccessful. Seeing this, Mahavira prepared to leave that place.









*The only way we can overcome our past actions is through nonattachment and love.*

## TEACHING *his* FOLLOWERS



IN THE NEARBY CITY OF APAPA a great religious sacrifice was in progress. It was being staged by a wealthy Brahmin who wanted it to be a grand occasion. He had made lavish arrangements to bring leading scholars and priests from far and wide to teach in his city, and he had succeeded in bringing the eleven most renowned philosophers of India to be present there along with their thousands of disciples. Sacred fires were burning and mantras were being chanted, and the throng of people was waiting for the gods themselves to arrive. However, the gods did not seem to be coming. With consternation the wealthy Brahmin was told that the gods had indeed been seen traversing the sky nearby in their aerial chariots, but they were not coming to his sacrifice—instead they were going to a dazzling pavilion that had been erected nearby.

Most disappointed of all was Indrabhuti Gautama, the greatest of the eleven philosophers, who had brought with him his five hundred disciples and was present to give his teachings to the assembly. When he saw that the gods had not come to hear him speak, and instead were going somewhere else, his pride was hurt.

“What is it that attracts the gods more than the chance to hear from me?” he inquired with indignation.

“Mahavira, who was once a great prince of these lands, has returned from thirteen years of spiritual practices, having achieved enlightenment. Now everyone, even the gods, wishes to honor him and hear his teachings.”

When he heard these words, Gautama was dismayed.

“Who is this Mahavira?” he demanded to know, “I will go and meet with him, and we shall soon see who is the most learned. My superior knowledge will dazzle him. It is important that I put a stop to him before his teachings spread confusion among the people.”



*The eleven most renowned philosophers of India, with their thousands of disciples, bowed before Mahavira and became his followers.*



Encouraged by the wealthy Brahmin, Gautama went at once to confront Mahavira, taking with him his disciples. When he arrived at the Samavasarana pavilion he was amazed to see its splendor. At first he was envious of its opulence, but some doubts entered his mind: Perhaps he truly was in the presence of a greater personality than himself. Next he found that the atmosphere of the pavilion and all within it was one of peace and good will. He was greeted with kind words and shown to where Mahavira was seated.

"Indrabhuti Gautama, I welcome you. I trust you are in good health and spirits?" said Mahavira with a sweet and loving voice.

Gautama was surprised that Mahavira knew his name, and supposed that he must have heard of his fame. He was a proud man, who was well-known all over India. But just as a lamp gives illumination, yet has a shadow beneath it, so despite Gautama's fame and knowledge, his outward certainty hid inner doubts about his own teachings. Mahavira could understand this, for he could see into Gautama's mind.

"Search for the truth, Gautama," said Mahavira. "It is within you. Practice pure meditation."

Then he taught Gautama about the existence of the eternal soul, showing him how to experience his own spiritual nature through observation, experience and introspection, and by listening to his own inner voice.

Gautama was proud, but nevertheless he was a genuine seeker of truth. When he heard Mahavira's words, spoken with compassion, his doubts vanished. He joined his hands in humility and bowed before him.

"You have cleared doubts that have troubled me for years. Truly you must know all there is to know. Please let me become your disciple, along with my five hundred pupils."

"Come and join me," answered Mahavira happily. "Together we will teach the truth and eradicate violence and hatred, bringing friendship and harmony among all people and all different groups. By showing universal compassion, and by practicing self-control and restraint, we can benefit ourselves and everyone else." Gautama, with great happiness, remained by Mahavira's side.

Meanwhile in Apapa, the wealthy Brahmin and the other philosophers waited for news. Among them was Gautama's younger brother, Agnibhuti. When he heard that his brother had surrendered to be a disciple of Mahavira, he followed him with his five hundred disciples. His intention was to redeem their honor by defeating Mahavira in debate. But instead, after hearing his enlightened teachings, he also surrendered to Mahavira. Finally the third brother, named Vayubhuti, took his five hundred disciples and also entered debate with Mahavira, and he too was won over and surrendered. After this, the rest of the eleven philosophers, with all their disciples, took shelter of Mahavira. This left him, on the day following his enlightenment, with 4,411 disciples, all as a result of his first day's preaching. With these followers to assist him he embarked on a ceaseless mission to teach what he had realized and to all who would hear.

On one occasion Mahavira taught his disciple Gautama how all present misfortunes should be understood as the result of past actions. They were traveling together when one day they encountered a farmer beating his bullocks. Mahavira asked his disciple to intervene.

"Tell him that by hurting his animals he is hurting himself. Explain to him the difference between good and bad acts."

Gautama went to instruct the farmer. Seeing a monk approaching him, the man was surprised. The monk spoke with conviction and purity, so the farmer ceased his work to sit down and listen carefully to what he had to say. When he heard the effect his actions would have, and the path to peace explained



clearly in simple language, the farmer was convinced of the truth. He decided to give up farming and asked if he could become a disciple of Gautama. So it was that soon afterward Gautama brought his new disciple, now a Jain monk, to meet Mahavira.

The farmer was excited to meet Mahavira, the teacher of his own teacher. He supposed he must be a very great person. As he came near, Mahavira's eyes filled with tears of compassion, and when the new monk saw his face he reacted in a most unexpected way—he turned and fled, discarding his monk's robes and abandoning his attempt at spiritual life.

Gautama was puzzled.

"O venerable teacher, when they see you most people are inspired and joyful. Why was this man so distressed?"

"Dear Gautama," replied Mahavira, "in a previous life this man was the lion killed by me when I lived as a nobleman named Triprustha. Once already he tried to gain his revenge over me, when I was crossing the Ganges and he attempted to wreck my boat. But he failed and was chased away, full of fear. Now as a farmer he has encountered me again, and the memories of our past relationship were revived in him. That is the reason he ran away. This shows how strong are the impressions left upon our subconscious mind by our past actions. The only way we can overcome them is through the practice of nonattachment and by cultivating feelings of love."

On another occasion Mahavira explained the importance of taking responsibility for one's present actions. A wealthy potter, who employed many workers but did not treat them well, believed that his life was controlled by fate and that he had no power over his destiny. Mahavira challenged him.

"Suppose an intruder breaks your pots and assaults your wife. Would you consider him responsible for his actions, or just calmly blame fate?" he asked the potter.

"How could I be calm!" exclaimed the potter. "I would capture the intruder and kill him."

"Then you would hold the man responsible for his own actions," said Mahavira. "Yet when you yourself perform evil acts, you shrug your shoulders and disown responsibility, blaming everything on fate. You may deceive yourself, you may even deceive others, but you can never deceive the law of karma, whereby all your actions will certainly bring you reactions, either in this life or in some future lifetime."

The wealthy potter was convinced by Mahavira's words, and both he and his wife became his followers.

Mahavira was opposed to war and taught that all beings should seek peace. He once arrived outside the city of Kaushambi, where he had begged for alms many years earlier, and found that the city was under attack from a neighboring kingdom. The ruler of Kaushambi was Queen Mrugavati, whose husband had recently died, and the invader was King Pradyota, who wanted to seize Kaushambi and force its queen to be his wife.

However, with the arrival of Mahavira the gentle hero, the queen opened the gates of her city and came with her entourage to hear him teach. King Pradyota was also inspired by the occasion, and temporarily set aside his enmity to also come with his generals to hear the famous teacher. Thus both sat peacefully in the presence of Mahavira and listened attentively to his teachings.

"The real fight is with yourself," taught Mahavira. "Do not fight external enemies, for victory over them will not bring you happiness. Instead fight your own tendencies of anger and greed. Learn to keep your mind pure and free from passions and that way you will find peace. That victory is worth infinitely more than the conquering of thousands of so-called enemies of this world."



Both the king and the queen were profoundly affected by Mahavira's discourse. King Pradyota gave up his desire to conquer Kaushambi and capture its queen, while Queen Mrugavati wished only to give up her royal privileges and become a follower of Mahavira. She asked him to accept her as a female ascetic, and following her example, the queens of King Pradyota also gave up their wealth and entered a life of renunciation as Mahavira's followers.





*A wise person does not kill any  
living being. Nonviolence and  
equality of all living beings  
are the two most important  
principles of religion.*

—Sutrakrutang Sutra 1.4.10



*A true Tirthankara cannot be harmed,  
because his heart is full of love and compassion.*

## *an* ENEMY DESTROYS HIMSELF



MAHAVIRA HAD BEEN TEACHING FOR TWENTY-FOUR YEARS, traveling from one place to another, when one summer after the rains he came to the town of Shravasti. Here he found a former disciple of his who had once been among his best pupils, but had left to start his own movement. Gosalaka had begun to question Mahavira's spiritual standing, and had declared himself to be a Tirthankara. He even set himself up as an opponent of his former teacher. One day a disciple of Mahavira named Ananda was begging alms, when a citizen asked him about Gosalaka.

"There are two Tirthankaras in this town," he was told. "How do we know which one to follow?" Unable to give an answer, Ananda returned to Mahavira.

"O venerable teacher, is it true that Gosalaka is a Tirthankara?"

"He was once my disciple," said Mahavira. "He studied under me for six years, and gained some supernatural powers, which made him famous. But Gosalaka became proud and lost his purity, so he is not able to be a Tirthankara."

These words of Mahavira's reached Gosalaka's ears and angered him. He feared he would be discredited if people heard Mahavira's opinion, so he started to speak out against him. He openly threatened that he could destroy Mahavira. Full of anxiety, Ananda reported this to his teacher.

"Do not fear, Ananda," assured Mahavira. "Gosalaka may have the power to harm an ordinary person, but he has no power over me. A true Tirthankara cannot be harmed, because his heart is full of love and compassion. But if he comes here to attack me," he added, addressing all his disciples, "none of you should speak to him or try to oppose him."

A few days later, with a band of his men, Gosalaka did indeed enter the ashram where Mahavira

*A great tongue of flame shot from Gosalaka's mouth toward Mahavira, encircling him but doing him no harm, then turned back on Gosalaka and severely burned him.*









was staying. He created a big disturbance and shouted evil curses against the venerable teacher. Two of Mahavira's followers, forgetting the advice they had been given, stepped forward to prevent him coming further. Gosalaka immediately turned upon them and with his mystic powers burned them to ashes. Then he rushed toward Mahavira and, gathering all his energies, directed at him a great tongue of flame. The flame was as hot as the sun and encircled Mahavira, but it could do him no harm. Instead it turned back on its source, Gosalaka, and severely burned him, so that his whole body was blackened and he fled the place, crying in agony.

Gosalaka never recovered. Over the ensuing days, as he lay on his sickbed, his life energy gradually drained away. But as he lay dying, he lost the hatred that had burned within him and repented for his misdeeds. His last words were to instruct his disciples to follow Mahavira, who possessed great magical skills.







*His message of love, truth  
and peace was for everyone.*

## THIRTY YEARS of PREACHING



THROUGHOUT HIS LIFE AS A TEACHER, it was Mahavira's habit to lecture for three hours each day. In this way he touched the hearts of countless men and women. It was usual for philosophers to teach in Sanskrit, the language of educated people, which meant that the ordinary folk were denied access to spiritual teachings. However, Mahavira taught in Prakrit, the vernacular language of North India, so that everyone could understand him. In his teachings his emphasis was on the simple universal principles of nonviolence, love and friendship.

His message of love, truth and peace was for everyone. He didn't distinguish between higher or lower classes, between renunciates or householders, or between men or women. Unusually for his time, he accepted many female followers and established an order of nuns. In all he set up four orders: monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen—two for men and two for women. For all of these he was the ford maker, who helped them to cross the ocean of birth and death and reach eternal life.

Mahavira taught that human life offers the best opportunity for spiritual realization. He said that the gods were too attached to pleasures and could not practice the self-control necessary for the spiritual path. Only human life allowed this, and this potential was the true purpose of human life. By developing compassion and kindness, any human, of whatever birth, could become greater than a god. The sign of a great person was not wealth, high birth or learning—it was nobility of character.

Despite his own rigorous renunciation, he did not require everyone to renounce. One could remain in household life so long as one followed a basic spiritual discipline. The most important principles to be followed by all were nonviolence, truth, nontheft, self-control and, for the renunciates, nonpossession.

He was against dogmatism. He advised that no one should ever think they know the whole truth, for

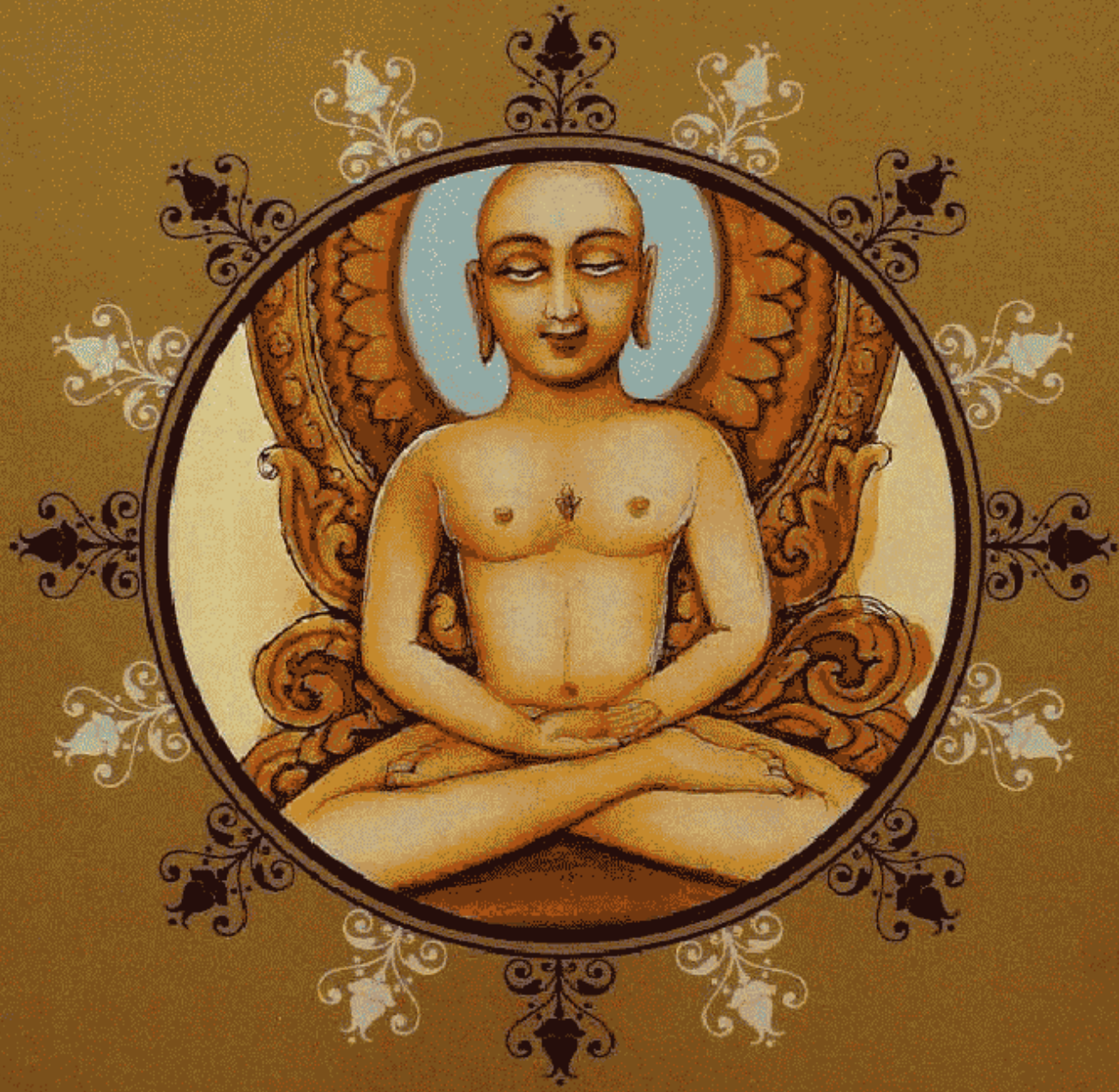
*He preached his last sermon for two days and two nights,  
before a gathering of all the four orders, as well as gods,  
kings and ordinary people from all walks of life.*













there are many ways to understand the truth. He warned that another person's way should **not** be criticized simply for being different from one's own way. All paths should be respected.

Thirty years after his enlightenment, at the age of seventy-two, he gathered all his followers—the four orders, as well as gods, kings and people from all walks of life—and preached his last sermon over a period of two days and two nights.









*“Keep my teachings  
always with you.”*

## HE LEAVES *this* WORLD



AT THE END OF HIS LAST SERMON, in the darkness of night, Mahavira began to withdraw his life energy from his body.

Those present, both humans and gods, realized what was soon to happen, and they were distressed. Even Indra, so mighty in this world, feared the loss of Mahavira, who had seemed to him a true leader upon whose wisdom and strength he could rely for inspiration. He prayed desperately for Mahavira to change his intention—if only he would postpone his departure for a few more years, or months, or even days. But it was not to be. Mahavira had always said that no one, not even a Tirthankara, could extend life one day beyond its intended span. Now he too must go. He told Indra not to be fearful.

“The reason you want me to stay is because you are attached to my body. Yet I am not attached to my outer physical form, because my true identity is immortal spirit. This body is destined to die. So let me leave, but keep my teachings always with you.”

After saying this he sat very still, surrounded by a great crowd of devoted followers. He stopped speaking and stilled his mind. As his mind stilled, the ties of karma that still kept him in this world were finally dissolved, leaving only consciousness, pure and motionless. Having fully withdrawn from all involvement with matter, he achieved total purity and from his silent body emanated a glow so powerful that it lit up the darkness, hiding the stars in the sky and turning night into day. Voices were heard from the heavens singing “Victory!” and celestial beings appeared above him and showered flower petals. All those who had sat attentively listening to his long sermon were now transfixed by the vision before them, as they saw with their own eyes the physical form of Mahavira transfigured into a spiritual form of eternal purity.

It was the end of the night of the fifteenth day of the fourth month of the rainy season, in the year 527



*From his silent body emanated a glow that lit up the darkness, then slowly faded. Seeing he had passed away, the kings brought sandalwood and built a tall funeral pyre.*



BCE. Mahavira had lived as a householder up to the age of thirty, then for twelve years he had wandered, hidden from the world, as he sought true knowledge. At the age of forty-two he had achieved enlightenment, and for twenty-nine years and five months he had preached his message of peace and love. Now his mission was fulfilled, and his life came to an end.

Slowly the dazzling light surrounding his body faded. The kings present, seeing that he had passed away, lit thousands of lamps and placed them round his body in row upon row. They brought sandalwood and built a tall funeral pyre. After bathing his body in milk, anointing it with sandalwood paste, covering it with fine cloth and decorating it with jewels, they placed it upon the great pyre. Surrounded by the gods, they watched as his body was consumed by flames.









*As one lamp lights another, Mahavira  
enlightened his chief disciple.*

## EPILOGUE: HIS TEACHINGS CONTINUE



AMONG THE DISCIPLES OF MAHAVIRA, his first and dearest follower was Gautama, who had joined him on the day he gave his first sermon. Gautama achieved great wisdom and renunciation, but his deep personal affection for Mahavira held him back from full enlightenment. Mahavira had known this, and that it would be very hard for Gautama to let him leave when the time came for his final liberation from matter. So, on the eve of his departure from this world, Mahavira sent Gautama on a preaching mission to a small village where he would have to stay overnight. On this very night, while Gautama was carrying out his assignment, his beloved teacher passed away and his body was cremated.

The following day Gautama returned and was shocked to find his master had left. He began to cry.

"Why did you send me away just at this time? Did you think I would get in the way, or that I am not devoted enough? Now I have no one to follow, no one to call 'Master,' or to affectionately call me 'Gautama.' What am I to do?" As he spoke like this he uttered the word *vitaraḡa*, which means "free from attachment," in describing his master. He stopped at this and wondered.

"Mahavira was free from attachment, and he taught me to be free as well. Why am I holding on to my affection for his body, which is making me shed tears? Even though he is a saint, still my attachment to him is contrary to his instructions. He used to say that a person who uses a boat to cross a river should abandon the boat after crossing. So I should not cling to his body, I should follow the path of nonattachment and take responsibility for my own liberation."

This episode taught Gautama his final lesson on the path toward perfection. He further remembered Mahavira's words.

*Mahavira's chief disciple, Gautama Swami,  
went on to continue the great teachings of  
Mahavira and perpetuate his path.*













“Gautama, I promise you that you will become my equal. We shall both attain enlightenment, and there will no longer be any difference between master and disciple.”

That very day, just as one lamp lights another, Mahavira’s final liberation from matter brought about the full enlightenment of his chief disciple, Gautama Swami, who went on to continue the great teachings of Mahavira and perpetuate his path.



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—*Ranchor Prime*



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## FURTHER READING

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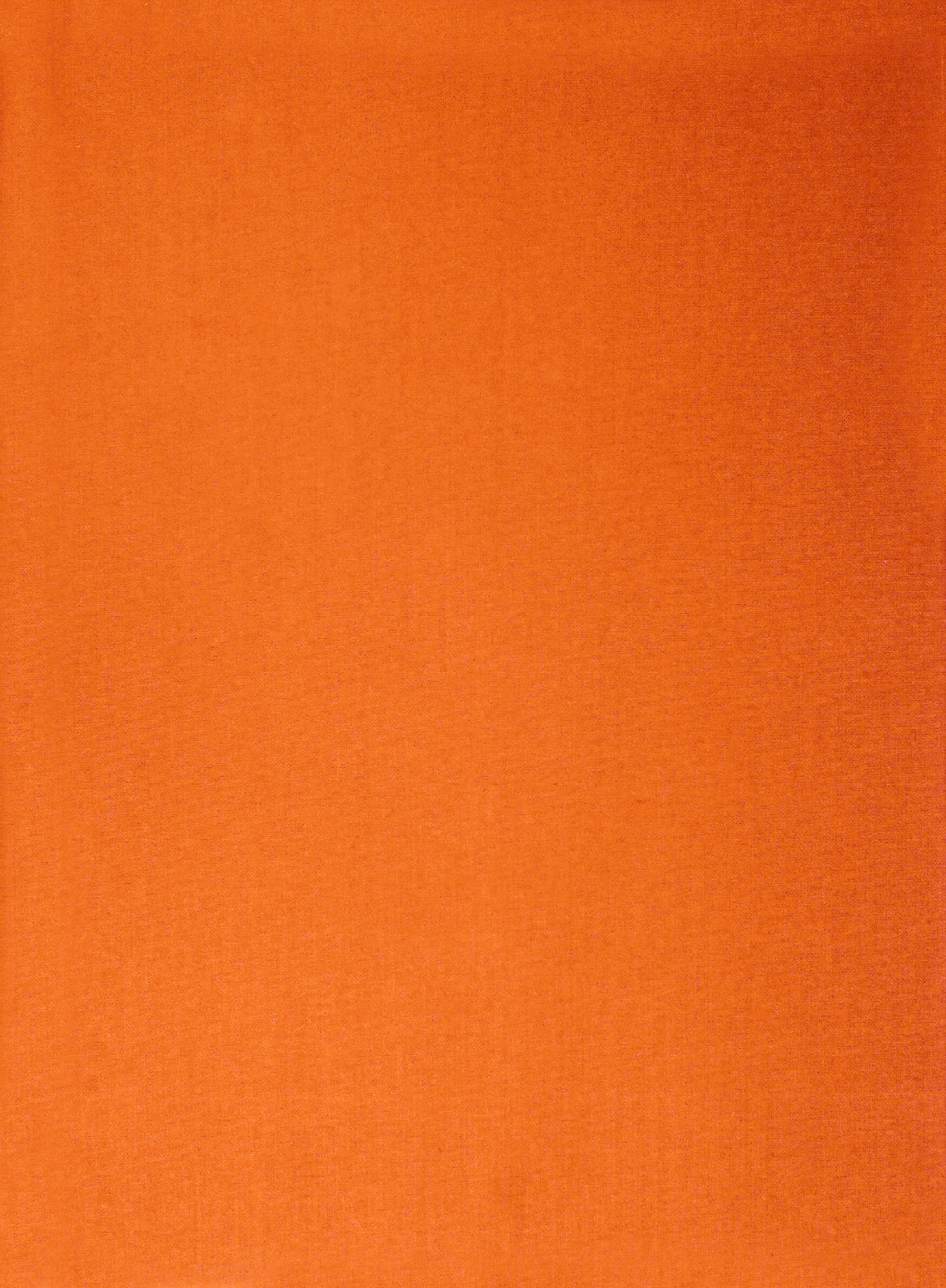
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*Jainism, A Way of Life by Vinod Kapashi, Mahavir Foundation.*

*In Search of the Ultimate by Vinod Kapashi, Mahavir Foundation. This book and the one above are available from the Mahavir Foundation, 11 Lindsay Drive, Harrow, Middlesex HA3 0TA, UK.*











Like his contemporary Gautama Buddha, Mahavira was born into the princely caste, and like him, Mahavira renounced his throne to seek enlightenment. He went on to become the founder of Jainism—one of the three great faiths of India—and a significant, historical spiritual leader. Known as The Great Hero, Mahavira's simple messages of truth and compassion are revealed through this highly ornamented biographical tale of one of the world's greatest avatars. His most celebrated doctrine, non-violence, was made famous in the 20th century by Gandhi, a student of Jainism. His travels and teachings are finely retold here, accompanied by original, full-color paintings. Mahavira is a worthy addition to any library of the world's great faiths.

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*—Gordon Schweig, Author of Dance of Divine Love and Associate Professor of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Christopher Newport University*

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