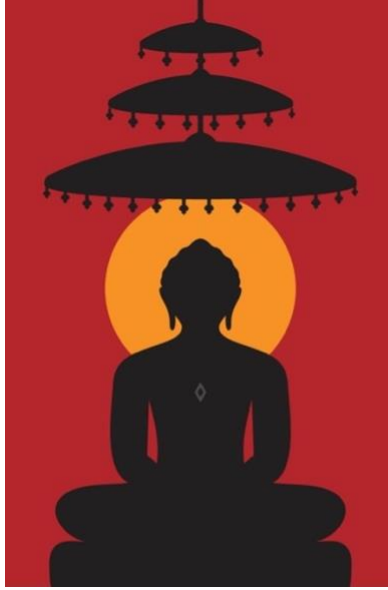


From Nayasāra or Purūrvā *Bhīla* to Tīrthāṅkara: Lord Mahāvīra's Incredible Journey to *Kevala-Jñāna*

By Parveen Jain

Lord Mahāvīra attained *kevala-jñāna* – the ultimate, unabridged, all-encompassing, uninhibited, and absolute wisdom, and had the revelation of *tattva* – the fundamental truth, in the thirteenth year of his ascetic life of extreme penance near the village of Jrambhika.

— part of 120th *sūtra* of The Kalpa Sūtra



The inconsequential details such as the exact time and location of this immensely venerated achievement may vary among the different Jain canons; its historical importance is enormous for not only the followers of Jain dharma but the entire humanity. The incredible spiritual journey of Lord Mahāvīra is a source of immense inspiration with immeasurable edifying value.

By studying the life of Lord Mahāvīra, one can imagine the level of perseverance one must exert towards the goal of attaining *kevala-jñāna*. At the same time, as Lord Mahāvīra's life teaches us, one derives immense pleasure going through the process. Until one grasps the “real value” of that pleasure, that individual cannot truly initiate the solemn journey.

Lord Mahāvīra's *jīva* reached the summit of spiritual perseverance after toiling through innumerable lifetimes like uncountable other souls. However, unlike countless other souls that

are caught up in unending birth-death cycles, his *jīva*, at some point in its birth-death cycles, had awakened to recognize the soul's exquisite characteristics. The awakening occurred when the *jīva* realized the right vision (*samyag-draṣṭi*) and right faith (*samyaktva*), which inspired its desire to regain those glorious characteristics. That was the auspicious turning point when Lord Mahāvīra's *jīva* began its pursuit of *kevala-jñāna* – a point that all of us must aspire.

As listed in Table-1, Jain scriptures expound twenty-seven (in Śvetāmbara scriptures) or thirty-four (in Digambara scriptures) “notable” reincarnations (*bhavas*) taken by Lord Mahāvīra's *jīva* to reach the life of achieving omniscience. In addition to these significant reincarnations, Mahāvīra's *jīva* had uncountable births in *tiryāñca* species (plants, animals, and insects) that are not listed. Hence, “notable” or “significant” refers to the twenty-seven or thirty-four reincarnations listed in Table-1. In any case, the specific number of prior lives is not as significant as the belief that there was a reincarnation that comprised a turning point that triggered Lord Mahāvīra's *jīva*'s “final journey.”

According to Śvetāmbara scriptures, the turning point came when Lord Mahāvīra's *jīva* was born as an individual named Nayasāra – the first of the twenty-seven notable reincarnations of Mahāvīra's *jīva* (Ācārya Yashodevsuri 1992, 69). This is believed to be his *avatāra bhava* – the reincarnation that started his journey towards liberation. Nayasāra was the head of a village council and once met some revered monks. He felt sincere benevolence towards the monks and requested the eminent head monk (akin to an *ācārya*) for some wise words. The head monk's eloquent and compassionate teachings had a deep impression on Nayasāra, resulting in his initial awakening to the right faith (*samyaktva*). From then on, those reverent teachings guided Nayasāra's life, and his worldly attachments (*moha*) started to diminish. This episode in Nayasāra's life marked the beginning of Mahāvīra's *jīva*'s long pursuit for the ultimate liberation.

The Digambara canons describe a similar transformation in Mahāvīra's *jīva*'s reincarnation trajectory during its life as Purūravā – the *avatāra bhava*. He was an indigenous person (*bhīla*) living in an undeveloped forest area (Jain 1994, 393). Purūravā's life was the first of the thirty-four notable reincarnations of Mahāvīra's *jīva*. He was a typical forest-dwelling indigenous leader who hunted animals to consume their meat for his own and his dependent's needs. One day, like Nayasāra, Purūravā encountered some revered monks and was about to kill them when

Table -1. The Notable Reincarnations of Lord Mahāvīra

<u>Śvetāmbara Scriptures</u>	<u>Digambara Scriptures</u>
1 Nayasāra – gained <i>samyaktva bhava</i>	1 Indigenous person Purūrṃvā <i>bhīla</i> who became a vegetarian
2 Birth in the first celestial realm called Saudharma	2 Birth in the first celestial realm called Saudharma
3 Marichi: he was one of one-hundred sons of king Bharata – the son of first <i>tīrthaṅkara</i> , Lord Adinātha	3 Marichi: he was one of one-hundred sons of king Bharata – the son of first <i>tīrthaṅkara</i> , Lord Adinātha
4 Birth in the fifth celestial realm called Brahmloka	4 Birth in the fifth celestial realm called Brahmloka
5 Kaushika: a brāhmina	5 Jatila: a brāhmina
6 Pushyamitra: a brāhmina	6 Birth in the first celestial realm called Saudharma
7 Birth in the first celestial realm called Saudharma	7 Pushyamitra: a brāhmina
8 Agnidhyota: a brāhmina	8 Birth in the first celestial realm called Saudharma
9 Birth in the second celestial realm called Ishaan	9 Agni Sharmā: a brāhmina
10 Agnibhūti: a brāhmina	10 Birth in the third celestial realm called Sanatkumar
11 Birth in the third celestial realm called Sanatkumar	11 Agni Mitra: a brāhmina
12 Bharadwāja: a brāhmina	12 Birth in the fourth celestial realm called Mahendra
13 Birth in the fourth celestial realm called Mahendra	13 Bharadwāja: a brāhmina
14 Sthāvira: a brāhmina	14 Birth in the fourth celestial realm called Mahendra
15 Birth in the fifth celestial realm called Brahmloka	15 A brāhmina
16 Prince Vishwabhūti	16 <i>Sthāvira jīva</i> – one-sensed living beings.
17 Birth in the seventh celestial realm: Mahashukra	17 Birth in the fourth celestial realm called Mahendra
18 Tripriśtha Vasudeva, 1 st Vasudeva of this time-cycle	18 Viśvanaṅdi: a brāhmina – failed <i>samyaktva</i>
19 Birth in the seventh hell called Mahatamaha Prabhā	19 Birth in the tenth celestial realm called Pranat
20 A lion	20 Tripriśtha Arthacakravarti
21 Birth in the fourth hell called Panka Prabhā	21 Birth in the seventh hell called Mahatamaha Prabhā
22 A human being of unknown name	22 A lion
23 Priyamitra: a Cakravartin, the ruler of 7 continents	23 Birth in the first hell called Ratna Prabhā
24 Birth in the seventh celestial realm – Mahashukra	24 A lion – <i>samyaktva bhava</i>
25 Prince Nandana, gained <i>tīrthaṅkara nama karma</i>	25 Birth in the first celestial realm called Saudharma
26 Birth in the tenth celestial realm called Pranat	26 Vidyādhara: a human
27 Birth as Tīrthaṅkara Lord Mahāvīra, the final birth	27 Birth in the seventh celestial realm – Mahashukra
	28 King Hariṣeṇa
	29 Birth in the tenth celestial realm called Pranat
	30 Priyamitra: a Cakravartin, the ruler of 7 continents
	31 Birth in the twelfth celestial realm called Achyuta
	32 Prince Nandana, gained <i>tīrthaṅkara nama karma</i>
	33 Birth in the sixteenth celestial realm
	34 Birth as Tīrthaṅkara Lord Mahāvīra, the final birth

his wife stopped him. Despite Purūravā's dubious intentions, the head monk spoke with them compassionately and motivated them to adopt nonviolence and compassion in their lifestyle. The monk's teachings transformed Purūravā *bhīla*. His life was the beginning of Mahāvīra's *jīva*'s spiritual journey. But as Digambara scriptures describe, it was not enough to kindle complete *samyaktva*. It took many more births for Mahāvīra's *jīva* to attain *samyaktva* (right faith) in twenty-fourth notable reincarnation, which was his second birth as a lion. The Śvetāmbara scriptures also list Mahāvīra birth as a lion – the twentieth *bhava* – as a momentous one. Both traditions expound that the “lion” came across some Jain mendicants who taught him the virtuosity of nonviolence. Despite being a carnivore, the lion stopped killing and consequently died of starvation. Despite being in a lion's body, the compassion and commitment to nonviolence prompted Mahāvīra's *jīva* to continue its journey towards liberation from the cycle of rebirths. That is the reason that Lord Mahāvīra is associated with the symbol of the lion.

Both Digambara and Śvetāmbara traditions consider the third reincarnation of Mahāvīra's *jīva* as a significant one in their respective lists of notable prior births. This life was its reincarnation as Marici, one of the sons of supreme king (Cakravartī) Bharata, the son of the first *tīrthaṅkara* Lord Ṛṣabhadeva. Marici became a mendicant follower of his grandfather but strayed away from the principles and practices of Jain asceticism. Despite such shortcomings, Lord Ṛṣabhadeva prophesied in one of his spiritual assemblies that among his attending followers was a venerated *jīva* who was destined to become the twenty-fourth *tīrthaṅkara*. Lord Ṛṣabhadeva was referring to Marici.

In addition to the twenty-seven or thirty-four notable births listed above, both Śvetāmbara and Digambara scriptures expound that Mahāvīra's *jīva* had uncounted additional births in *tīryaṅca* species (plants, animals and insects). According to the Śvetāmbaras, births in *tīryaṅca* species were in-between the fifth and sixth reincarnations and in-between the twenty-first and twenty-second reincarnations. In Digambara belief, the sixteenth reincarnation listed in Table-1 accumulates such uncounted births as *tīryaṅca* species.

Some expositions place the timing of Nayansāra and Purūravā's births as millions of years ago. Irrespective of the timing or the exact details of the above narrations, the significant moral is that there was a point in Mahāvīra's *jīva*'s existence when some propitious events and suitable mental disposition aligned to kindle its awakening. The awakening prompted the *jīva*'s march

towards enlightenment. It is important to note that even before his reincarnation as Purūravā or Nayansāra, Mahāvīra's *jīva* must have persevered through earlier lives to spiritually prepare itself to be a preceptor to optimally receive, accept and constructively respond to the teachings of the wise ones. This course of evolution is not unique to Mahāvīra, and as propounded by him, all likewise inclined *jīvas* can track similar trajectories.

The critical point is that, whenever in a human form, Mahāvīra's *jīva* continued to improve its perception, wisdom, and conduct towards the state of perfection (*samyag*) to be finally born as Vardhamāna – the birth name of Lord Mahāvīra in his final life.

In its final birth (*bhava*) in 599 BCE, Lord Mahāvīra's *jīva* possessed *mati-jñāna* (empirical knowledge), *śruta-jñāna* (scriptural or learned knowledge), and *avadhi-jñāna* (clairvoyance knowledge) at birth. These are the first three of the five progressive stages of the development of enlightened knowledge (*samyag-jñāna*) (Jain 2019, ch 4). The purpose of his last birth was to acquire the remaining two stages of *samyag-jñāna*, namely, *manaḥ-prāyaya-jñāna* (mind-reading knowledge or capturing the mental activity of other sentient beings) and, ultimately, *kevala-jñāna* (supreme wisdom) to attain the status of omniscient.

Lord Mahāvīra exhibited signs of possessing advanced wisdom—*mati-jñāna*, *śruta-jñāna*, and *avadhi-jñāna*—while still in his mother, Trīśalā's womb. As expounded in various scriptures, among other indications, he displayed it through compassion for his mother by deciding to stay still in the womb not to bother and give her any discomfort. However, Trīśalā mistook his compassionate attempt and became worried about an inactive fetus's well-being. Upon noticing his mother's worry through his advanced wisdom (*avadhi-jñāna*), Mahāvīra moved a little bit so his mother would be relieved of anxiety.

Mahāvīra had a princely life for approximately thirty years, but he lived like a hermit with minimal use and no attachment to his worldly possessions. He displayed uncommon vision, wisdom, and supreme bravery on many occasions during his childhood. A couple of commonly cited incidences of his youth are:

- One time, while playing with his friends, an angry elephant charged towards them. All of his friends dispersed with fear, but Mahāvīra gripped the elephant's trunk and stroked it compassionately. He mounted the elephant to calm it down.
- Another time, Mahāvīra was playing with his friends when a ferocious snake, supposedly a disguise adopted by a vengeful god, appeared to terrify the children. All of them ran

away, but Mahāvīra caught hold of the snake and mounted its hood. The serpent flung him around. Mahāvīra recognized the snake's disguise and whacked him to submission. Similar incidences regularly punctuated Mahāvīra's life during his growing years, but compassionate instincts always guided his responses. He calmly handled and subdued all the challenges without ever flaunting his valor (*vīrya*) or showing off his other supreme characteristics. Equanimous demeanor was one of his inherent characteristics.

Lord Mahāvīra knew that attainment of enlightenment—the ultimate spiritual triumph—was the primary purpose of his last worldly life. He also knew that it would require rigorous efforts and unmatched tenacity. As much as he wanted to initiate his ascetic life at the earliest, his compassion for others compelled him not to pursue it by hurting anyone's feelings. That is why, as believed by some Jains, upon his parents' insistence, he got married to show only obedience to them. He knew the path of asceticism was his life's objective, yet not to distress his parents, he decided not to leave home so long as they were alive. Soon after his parents' demise, Mahāvīra was ready to renunciate worldly life, but his brother, Nandivardhan, was grieved and pleaded with him not to leave so soon after their parents' departure. Again, out of empathy for his brother, Mahāvīra postponed his initiation into asceticism (*dīkṣā*) for two years.

Finally, in 569 BCE, two years after his parents' demise, Lord Mahāvīra was ready to renounce worldly life when he was thirty years old. He decided to leave home publicly during the daytime rather than quietly sneaking out in the dark of the night because he was not doing it covertly or coercing his family. He wanted to show that it was his personal choice, as all of us have, and that he was doing it with his family's full support and consent. His family and the entire kingdom celebrated his initiation into the ascetic life.

As described in verses (*sūtras*) 111-114 of the Kalpa Sūtra (Mahopadhyaya Vinaysagar, 1984), Lord Mahāvīra left home to start his ascetic life in the afternoon at the auspicious moment called Vijaya (success), on the tenth day called Suvrata of the month called Mārgaśīrṣa. It was the first (the dark) fortnight of the first month of winter of the Jain Lunisolar calendar.

The occasion of his transition from a worldly life to asceticism became a prideful public celebration signifying that in Jain Dharma, renunciation is joyous for the individual in pursuit of salvation and a matter of pride for their family and the community.

After a celebratory procession through his hometown of Kuṇḍapura (also referred to as Kuṇḍaggāma), Lord Mahāvīra arrived at a park called Jñātakhandavana (cited as Nāyasaṇḍavaṇa in some accounts). There, he performed the rituals of initiation into the ascetic life (*dīkṣā*) under an auspicious tree called Aśoka after giving away his princely possessions such as clothes and jewelry. Then, in another ascetic-initiation (*dīkṣā*) custom called Pañcamuṣṭhi Loca, Mahāvīra plucked his hair in four fistfuls from his head and one fistful of facial hair. After that, he took the five supreme vows of *ahiṃsā* (nonviolence), *satya* (truthfulness), *acaurya or asteya* (non-stealing), *aparigraha* (non-possessiveness), and *brahmacarya* (celibacy) and started the life of a homeless (*anāgārika*) and possession-less (*nirgrantha*) mendicant.

According to Śvetāmbaras, he retained a single piece of cloth at the time of ascetic initiation but discarded that single cloth approximately thirteen months later. At that time, he started the life of a cloth-less sky-clad (*digambara*) ascetic. He became a genuine possession-less (*nirgrantha*) mendicant. However, the Digambar Jain scriptures describe that Mahāvīra discarded all the clothes right at the time of starting the ascetic life (*dīkṣā*).

Lord Mahāvīra attained *manaḥ-prāyaya-jñāna* (mind-reading knowledge or capturing the mental activity of other sentient beings) at the beginning of his ascetic endeavor. Like many other aspects, the Śvetāmbaras and Digambaras differ on the timing of Mahāvīra's attainment of *manaḥ-prāyaya-jñāna*. The Śvetāmbaras believe that it occurred right after his initiation into the ascetic life (at the *dīkṣā* time). In contrast, the Digambaras believe that this auspicious moment came approximately six months later (Jain 1991, 55).

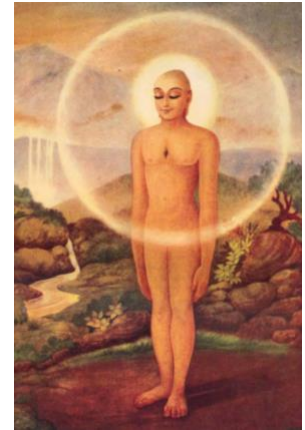


After his initiation into the life of a renunciate, Mahāvīra proceeded to a village called Asthikato to begin his quest for *kevala-jñāna*. Thereon, he immersed himself into intense penance and austerities for over twelve years – to be precise, twelve years, five months, and fifteen days (4,545 days)—some Jain scholars believe the duration of penance was one month longer, that is, 4575 days. During his penance, Mahāvīra displayed complete non-attachment towards every material thing. His attitude of non-attachment also extended to his own body, although he never detested or deliberately abused his body because of his deep respect for his bodily existence. Mahāvīra propounded that a living being can attain enlightenment only through the human body, which is

impossible in any other mode of living beings' existence – even as the heavenly beings – and hence, his deep regards for his own body.

Some highlights of his rigorous penance of over twelve years are (Jain, 1991; Ācārya Mahāpragya, 1999; Jain, 2019):

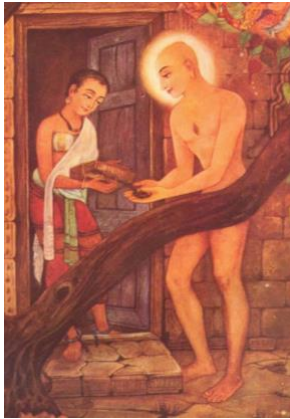
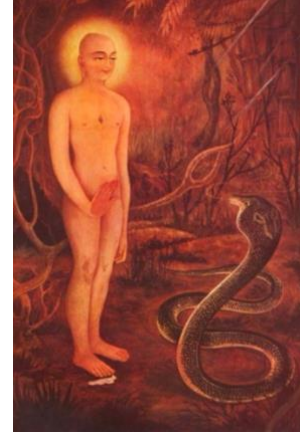
- Lord Mahāvīra fasted without water (*nirjala upvāsa*) most of the time and took meals with or without water on only three hundred and twenty-five (325) days out of 4545 days of his penance. His fasts ranged from two days to six months each.
- Mahāvīra spent most of his time in meditation (*dhyāna*) and remained quiet (*mauna*) most of the time. The objects of his meditation exercises were Ūdharva Loka (heaven, the celestial realm of gods), Adho Loka (the realm of hellish beings) and Tiryañca Loka (the realm of animals, plants, and insects).
- Mahāvīra had only forty-eight minutes of sleep during the entire duration of his penance. He conquered the need for sleep through meditation and the quest for self-awakening. Whenever he felt drowsy, he took a deep breath and shook off his lethargy.
- Mahāvīra lived in solitude, except for a couple of years when Gośālaka accompanied him.
- Mahāvīra was always on the move to avoid developing any affinity towards any place or people. Except for the four months of rainy season every year, when he remained at one location, he stayed most of the time in uninhabited areas. While moving from one place to another, he did not stay for more than one day in a village and no more than five days in a town.
- Mahāvīra respected his bodily existence, but to forsake attachment (*moha*) towards his physical being, he cultivated the attitude of “giving up the body” (*utsrsta-kaya*) and “renouncing the body” (*tyakta-deha*) during his penance. He endured illnesses and bodily injuries without seeking any medical help.
- Mahāvīra faced numerous adversities that tested his commitment to nonviolence. Nature, animals, and insects caused hardships like severe weather, biting him, and crawling over him, respectively. The humans caused some suffering out of jealousy or ignorance. And gods and demons caused some more to test, disturb, distress, torture, and humiliate him. He endured everything with compassion (*karuṇā*), unyielding non-attachment (*anāsakti*), friendliness (*maitri*) and equanimity (*madhyasthā*). He maintained an uninterrupted demeanor of joyfulness (*pramoda*).
- Mahāvīra always remained calm, composed, and tranquil. He gained complete control over his mind, body and speech by restraining his senses and mental trepidations. By the end of his penance, he completely discarded his hurtful karmas (*ghātīya* or *ghātika karmas*)—*jñānāvaraṇīya* (knowledge-inhibiting) *karma*, *darśanāvaraṇīya* (perception- or awareness-inhibiting) *karma*, *antarāya* (hindrance-



causing) *karma*, *mohaniya* (delusion-causing) *karma*. At the same time, he eliminated his passions of anger, pride, deceit and greed (*kaṣāya*).

Lord Mahāvīra encountered numerous fascinating episodes throughout his twelve-and-a-half years of perseverance, like those throughout his life. Every one of those episodes had a purpose, such as inspiring someone to forsake ominous traits and redeem previously earned karmas; enlightening the society of its social, political, cultural ill-practices; discarding his own previously accumulated karmas; and so on. Those episodes serve as lessons in spirituality, tolerance, leadership, righteous living, pluralistic society and other worthy traits. Three well-known examples are discussed below with abbreviated descriptions – their detail descriptions are available in numerous references including some in the bibliography at the end:

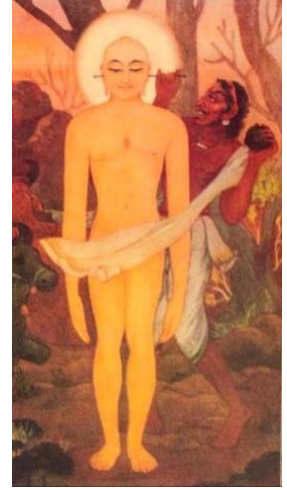
- The Caṇḍakaśika Episode: This is the well-known story of a highly venomous snake named Caṇḍakaśika that tormented the villagers around its dwelling. Mahāvīra, with his advanced wisdom, knew the snake’s history over its prior reincarnations. He persuaded the snake to adopt a life of compassion and seek redemption by shedding some of the bad karmas from the previous lives. Mahāvīra must have decided to visit Caṇḍakaśika to enlighten the snake’s *jīva* and to inspire it to alter the course of its kārmic evolution.
- The Candana Bālā Episode: This is the famous real-life story of Candan Bālā. She was a princess who had been forced into slavery because of a series of unfortunate events. She was living like a destitute until she met Mahāvīra.



In the twelfth year of his penance, Mahāvīra started a fast with an undisclosed vow to end it only when the food was offered by a female slave, in torn clothes, with a shaven head, in shackles with a bowl of boiled lentils, and in tears. With his unblemished perception (*samyag-dṛaṣṭi*) and advanced wisdom (*manaḥ-prāyaya-jñāna*), Mahāvīra must have known that only Candan Bālā would satisfy the precepts of his unique and unusually tough vow. Still, he wandered in Kauśāmbi town for 175 days, visiting homes upon the householders’ requests. However, Mahāvīra did not take any food or water during that time until Candan Bālā appeared before him and fulfilled all the conditions of his vow.

Lord Mahāvīra’s objective, in this case, was to peacefully bring to light the cruelty of slavery and the plight of slaves and, at the same time, the humiliation and discrimination suffered by the women (Ācārya Mahāpragya, 1999; Ācārya Tulsī, 2002). He did not take the path of rebellion against those practices or shaming those who indulged in such practices. He went through tremendous personal suffering but employed a method that created a widespread awakening.

- Suffering caused by a cowherd: This episode was in Mahāvīra’s last year of penance. It illustrates how Mahāvīra accepted suffering and pain without complaining about it while maintaining a compassionate, friendly, and forgiving demeanor towards those who tormented him. In this case, a cowherd left his cattle near Mahāvīra when he was meditating near the village Chhammāṇī. While deeply engrossed in meditation, Mahāvīra did not hear what the cowherd told him, and the cattle dispersed away. Upon returning and not finding his cattle, the cowherd repeatedly asked Mahāvīra about it. When Mahāvīra did not respond because he was in deep meditation, the cowherd, under the spell of rage, plugged Mahāvīra’s ears with wooden stalks to punish him. Mahāvīra went through the suffering and pain patiently with no ill feelings towards the cowherd. A physician removed the plugs at his next stop near the town Pāvā. Mahāvīra shrieked with excruciating pain after the plugs were removed from his ears.



Scriptures describe that Mahāvīra endured this suffering to repent and to discard the karmas his *jīva* had earned while inflicting similar suffering to the cowherd’s *jīva* in a previous life. Besides, the painful suffering resulted in the dissipation of some of his *vednīya* (physical-experience-causing) *karmas* that Mahāvīra had accumulated in previous lives.

Mahāvīra was in the thirteenth year of his penance and nearing the end of his perseverance. It was 556 BCE. He had accomplished all of the virtuous characteristics that enable *kevala-jñāna*. And finally, as elucidated in 120th *sūtra* of the Kalpa Sūtra (Mahopadhyaya Vinaysagar. 1984), after over twelve years of intense penance as a renunciate, Mahāvīra was engrossed in blissful meditation in a farm owned by a householder named Śyāmaka, near an abandoned temple called Vijayāvarta. The farm was on the banks of a river called Ṛijubalika in Jrambhika village. It was the tenth day called Suvata, of the month called Vaiśākha of the Vīra Nirvāṇa Saṁvat calendar—the Jain lunisolar calendar (April-May of the Gregorian calendar). The moon was in its waxing phase in the season's fourth fortnight – the second month of summer. The moon was in its



waxing phase in the season's fourth fortnight – the second month of summer. Lord Mahāvīra had taken only one meal without water in the previous three days. He started meditation (*dhyāna*) under the Sun under a tree named Śāla (also called Śālmali) in a cow-milking posture (*goduhāsana* position in *ukaḍū* shape) with his heels and knees lifted and toes touching the ground. Soon, Mahāvīra was captivated in blissful meditation (*śukla-dhyāna*), the supreme and purest state of meditation (*dhyāna*).

In some scriptures, the name of the river is Ṛijukūla or Ṛjuvalukā, and the name of the village is Jrambhie or Jrammakagrāma. Also, his posture at the time of *kevala-jñāna* is described as a “statue or *pratimā*” posture.

During the blissful meditation (*śukla-dhyāna*), Lord Mahāvīra was concentrating on the following eight virtuous characteristics of *siddhas*, the enlightened and liberated beings.

1. *Samyag-jñāna* (enlightened wisdom) for the culmination of *jñānāvaraṇīya* (knowledge-inhibiting) *karma*.
2. *Samyag-darśana* (enlightened perception) for the culmination of *darśanāvaraṇīya* (perception- or awareness-inhibiting) *karma*.
3. *Samyag-cāritra* (enlightened conduct) for the culmination of *mohaniya* (delusion-causing) *karma*.
4. *Anantvīrya* (hinder-less existence with infinite vigor) for the culmination of *antarāya* (hindrance-causing) *karma*.
5. *Avyābādha-sukha* (unhindered bliss) contemplating on the nature of *vedniya* (physical sensation causing) *karma*.
6. *Akśaya-sthiti* (immortality or liberation from life-death cycles) contemplating on the nature of *āuṣya* (lifespan affecting) *karma*.
7. *Arupitva* (formless or shapeless) contemplating on the nature of *nāma* (body-type designation) *karma*.
8. *Aguru-laghutva* (equanimity in *siddha* state, or “all souls are equal” form) contemplating on the nature of *gotra* (status or clan-of-birth) *karma*.

Note: a perseverant, with arduous spiritual efforts and tenacity, can eradicate the first four of the above eight karmas—*jñānāvaraṇīya*, *darśanāvaraṇīya*, *antarāya*, and *mohaniya karmas*—together called the *ghātīya karmas*. The efforts require intense focus spanning numerous lifetimes like Lord Mahāvīra. However, no one, even at the esteemed spiritual level of Mahāvīra, has any control over the culmination of the last four karmas—*vedniya*, *āuṣya*, *nāma*, and *gotra karmas*—together called the *aghātīya karmas*. The *aghātīya karmas* run their pre-destined course before their culmination.

During his blissful meditation, on that day, at that place, and at an auspicious moment (*mahūrta*) in the hour called Vijaya in the afternoon around dusk (*sandhyā*) time, Mahāvīra achieved *kevala-jñāna* – the ultimate reward for his arduous penance. He had attained the ultimate, supreme, unabridged, unbounded, complete, and unambiguous knowledge about everything in the universe. He became omniscient.

Mahāvīra had annihilated all of his harm-causing and destructible (*ghātika or ghātīya*) karmas (first four of the above list). He had achieved victory over the most hurtful enemies: the

passions (*kashāyes*) of anger, ego, deceit, and greed. All of his sentiments of attachment (*rāga*) and malice (*dveśa*) and allurements had dissipated. He became a *vītrāga* – the one devoid of all types of attachments. He had attained the troika of *samyag-darśana*, *samyag-jñāna*, and *samyag-cāritra* (Jain 2019 ch 4). He became an *arhanta*.

This elusive and most-difficult-to-achieve victory was the reason for the honorific title of Mahāvīra, meaning the Great Hero, by which he would be known thereon. His birth name, Vardhmāna was left behind.



Soon after Mahāvīra attained *kevala-jñāna*, the heavenly beings (gods) arranged a religious congregation, known as Samavaśarana to celebrate the occasion. They were craving to hear the venerated teachings of Lord Mahāvīra, who was now a proficient expounder of *tattva* after having had the revelation of *tattva* (the fundamental truth).

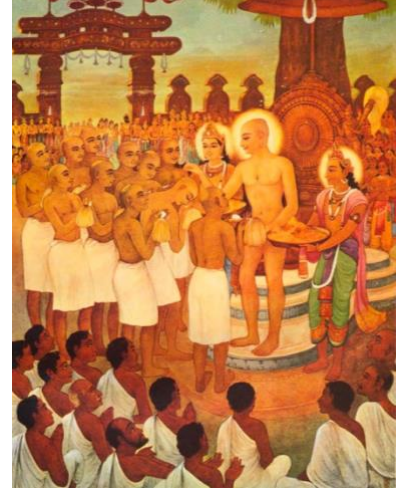
The Samavaśarana marked the initiation of Lord Mahāvīra as a *tīrthaṅkara* – a preceptor or ford maker. It was held in a round assembly on the Vipulācala hills near Rajagirī. All forms of living beings – humans, heavenly beings, hellish beings, and animals were invited to attend the Samavaśarana because when a *tīrthaṅkara* expounds, all species of living beings comprehend the teachings in their native language because the *tīrthaṅkara*'s messages are transmitted in “universal” language irrespective of the spoken dialect.

However, the first Samavaśarana was attended primarily by gods. None of his disciples was present. Disciples' presence is vital because they comprehend “the great” teacher's solemn and enriched teachings and decipher those teachings to explain in common languages to the ordinary people. Therefore, the second Samavaśarana was arranged sixty-six days later.

The second Samavaśarana was held in Mahāsenā gardens in Pāvāpuri. When a Vedic high priest (*brāhmina*), Indrabhūti, became aware of Lord Mahāvīra's presence, he came to challenge Lord Mahāvīra and to flaunt his own scriptural knowledge. However, as anticipated, Indrabhūti proved to be of no match for Lord Mahāvīra and pleaded for acceptance as a disciple. Mahāvīra

ordained Indrabhūti as his first disciple, *gaṇadhara*, and named him Gautama. The same day, Mahāvīra ordained ten additional disciples, two of Gautama Swāmi's brothers.

After the second Samavaśarana, Lord Mahāvīra started his unrelenting efforts to transform the society towards righteous living that is guided by nonviolence (*ahimsā*), friendship (*maitri*) and compassion (*karuṇā*) towards all living beings along with a lifestyle driven by spiritual joy (*pramoda*) and equanimity (*madhyastha*). Numerous scriptures expound on the life-changing teachings of Lord Mahāvīra.



Tīrthānkara Lord Mahāvīra lived for thirty years after his *kevala-jñāna* and in 527 BCE, when he was seventy-two years old, he attained *nirvāna* – the eternally liberated state of an enlightened *jīva* (soul) in a bodiless form. Tīrthānkara Lord Mahāvīra's *jīva* is now situated in *siddha-loka* at the top of the universe of Jain cosmology.

In Conclusion: Lord Mahāvīra's quest for *kevala-jñāna* involved extremely arduous efforts over innumerable lives. His coordinated spiritual journey started when his *jīva* in the birth of Nayasāra (Śvetāmbara belief) or Purūravā *bhīla* (Digambara belief) – the *avatāra bhava* – had the auspicious awakening. His last reincarnation, and the incredible achievement of that life, was the culmination of his *jīva*'s strenuous efforts of twenty-seven or thirty-four notable lives from his *avatara bhava*. In his final life that earned him the ultimate prize of eternal liberation, Lord Mahāvīra exerted astonishing efforts of penance and austerities. These efforts resulted in the complete annihilation of his previously accumulated karmas (all-inclusive *nirjarā*) and the restoration of his soul's inherently pure characteristics. His efforts climaxed with an incredible reward in the form of the attainment of *kevala-jñāna* – omniscience.

Lord Mahāvīra's life and his teachings are immensely inspirational. We must remember that Mahāvīra is a historical figure with astounding accomplishments – not a mythological entity or a mystical almighty. His followers could touch (male only), feel his presence and hear him directly.

Lord Mahāvīra's delivered his expositions based on his personal experiences and revelation of the fundamental truth that he attained with tremendous individual efforts. He personified that penance and austerities conducted with awakened perception, relentless efforts, persistent training, sincere learning, righteous demeanor, and tenacity, all living beings have the capacity to achieve what he attained.

As Jains, we are incredibly privileged to be Lord Mahāvīra's followers and to have the opportunity to be guided by his teachings. He showed us the way to become like Nayasāra or Purūravā *bhīla*, and to persevere for there to the ultimate liberation.

Sources of some images: The book, *Tīrthaṅkara Bhagawāna Śri Mahāvīra* by Ācārya Yashodevsuri, 1992, and Dilip Parekh.

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