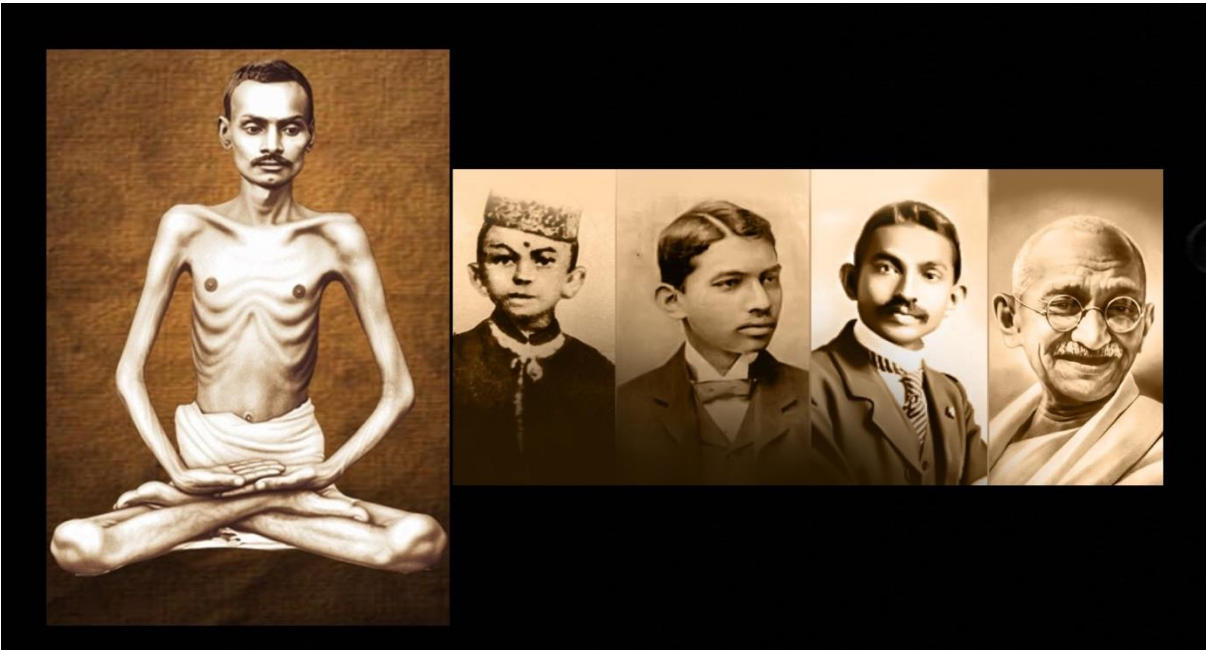


Gandhi's Jain Journey: The Role of Jain Thought and Practice in the Making of the Mahātmā

By Jeffery D. Long



Mahātmā Gandhi had a number of important influences throughout his life. Critical among them is the Jain tradition and its teachings of nonviolence (*ahimsā*).

Mahātmā – the “Great Soul”

Mohandas K. Gandhi—popularly referred to as a *Mahātmā*, or “Great Soul”—is widely known as the leader of the nonviolent movement for the independence of India from British rule, and as an innovative leader who developed peaceful methods for bringing about political transformation and creating a more just and habitable world. These methods have been followed by others who have struggled for justice since his time, including Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandela, Cesar Chavez, and Corazon Aquino.

Gandhi's Jain Influences

What is less well-known is that Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolent social change was very deeply influenced by the Jain tradition of India. Gandhi was a Vaishnava Hindu by birth, and certainly was profoundly shaped by Hindu teachings and texts: notably the message of the *Bhagavad Gītā*. He was also famously open to ideas from many traditions, finding the Sermon on the Mount, from the Christian *New Testament*, to be a lifelong source of inspiration.

Gandhi, however, grew up in the Indian state of Gujarat, which is home to a considerable portion of India's Jain community. The Jain tradition, a relative of both Hinduism and Buddhism, teaches strict adherence to *ahimsā*—which is not only nonviolence in a conventional sense, but nonviolence in thought, word, and action—as an integral and essential part of the path to *mokṣa*, the liberation of the soul from the cycle of karma and rebirth in which it has existed for eons.

The Jain influences upon Gandhi, particularly when he was a young man, were many. Before he left for London, at the age of eighteen, he took vows, at the request of his mother and in the presence of a Jain monk, to abstain from meat-eating, alcohol, and illicit sexual activity. Relations in Gujarat between Vaishnava Hindus and Jains are quite close, with intermarriage between the two communities not being uncommon. And the openness that one finds in Indian traditions to many traditions is also conducive to such phenomena as a worried Hindu mother looking to a Jain monk for spiritual guidance her son.

Śrīmad Rajchandra and Virchand Gandhi

Young Gandhi also had close relations with prominent Jain lay leaders Śrīmad Rajchandra and Virchand Gandhi. The influence of Śrīmad Rajchandra on Gandhi was sufficiently deep that he is often referred to as “Gandhi's guru.” In addition to meeting personally, the two of them had a lengthy correspondence, and Gandhi later credited Rajchandra's guidance with keeping him on a morally upright path. Virchand Gandhi was also an associate of the young Mohandas, and would go on to represent the Jain tradition at the first World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893.

Interreligious Harmony

In addition to working for Indian independence, Gandhi also advocated interreligious harmony, particularly between India's Hindus and Muslims. Gandhi once described himself as an adherent of *anekāntavāda* and *syādvāda*. These are the Jain doctrines, respectively, of the complex nature of existence and the corresponding doctrine that one ought not to make truth-claims in a dogmatic, absolutist way, but in a way that is mindful that all our perceptions are of a particular facet of reality, and that other views are also capable of conveying truth. These ideas are often illustrated by the famous story of the [Blind Men and the Elephant](#). Gandhi saw these Jain doctrines as a way of articulating the idea of the relative truth of all religions, to which he referred as the “equality of religions” or *sarva-dharma-sama-bhāva*.

Conclusion

All in all, the Jain influence on Mahātmā Gandhi was quite profound. Jainism played a major role in Gandhi's journey, both spiritual and political. Gandhi often drew upon such Jain practices as fasting as he pursued his political struggles, transforming these practices from observances aimed at personal liberation to tools for effecting political and social change in a way that could avoid violence.

To learn more about Gandhi's manifold Jain influences, please join my course at Arihanta Academy, "From Mohandas to the Mahātmā: Jain Ideas in the Thought of Mahātmā Gandhi".