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## Sages and Saints from India: Buddhism and Jainism

Bloomin' idol made o' mud -  
Wot they called the Great Gawd Budd -  
Kipling<sup>1</sup>

THE WORSHIP OF idols of the Buddha as a great god, as ascribed by Kipling's British soldier, would certainly have been rejected by the Buddha himself. As the 'Enlightened One', Siddhartha Gautama was a sage, saint and reformer within the ancient Indian tradition, living in the sixth century BC which also produced the Jain saint Mahavira. Subsequently he became the exemplar of the Buddhists, as a heterodox sect within India, and the founder of Buddhism as a pan-Asian and universal religion. Images then became an accepted feature of most forms of Buddhism, resulting in a rich and systematically ordered iconography. Included in this are the images of the Buddha, bodhisattvas, monks and other sacred personages; stories and symbols representing a 'sacred history'; a vocabulary of symbols to convey the main religious ideas and images of the structure of the cosmos; and religious edifices for ritual purposes and the monastic life.<sup>2</sup>

There are good reasons for paying close attention to the iconography of Buddhism. First, especially in Mahayana Buddhism, much can be learned of its mythology and ritual through images and art works. The images were made with care according to traditional rules, for they were intended for use in meditation and also came to be revered as reservoirs of supernatural power; they therefore 'express the spirit of the doctrine accurately and impressively'.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, they tell the story of the development of Buddhism in India and Asia, especially during the major period

of expansion during the first millennium AD. It is a story of unity and diversity. On the one hand there is a recognizable continuity in the varied art of Buddhism based on the subjects and iconographic types but more profoundly on the spiritual consciousness of the Buddhist way as a universal community. On the other hand Buddhism has been renowned for its tolerance of differing schools of thought and its peaceful spread which enabled it to adapt to new religious cultures and fertilize other traditions – ‘with a vital many-sidedness that enabled it to avoid rigidity and ossification’.<sup>4</sup> Thirdly, the appeal of Buddhist art is for ‘Westerners’ a valuable approach towards understanding the teachings of Buddhism. As Hendrik Kraemer also shrewdly observes ‘art is a great winner of souls’ and many images of the Buddha express winsomely his wisdom, gentleness and compassion.<sup>5</sup> The importance of art as the expression of a religious culture is still evident in Buddhism in Asia, for instance in Japan where aestheticism, viewing beauty as spiritual nourishment, can find in the Buddhist heritage a great ‘national treasure’.

Turning back to the origins of Buddhism in ancient India we look first at a cognate religious movement which remained small and confined to India but which is none the less important – Jainism.

### *Jainism*

Like early Buddhism, Jainism is an atheistic, rationalistic, ascetic and anti-Brahmanical doctrine but with a ‘scientific’ (physical) rather than psychological emphasis. . . . Buddhist figural art is characterized by a warm humanity and that of the Hindus by dynamism and sensuality, whereas Jain art is cold and intellectual, the result of Jain doctrine, of the history of the sect, and of the social position of its members.<sup>6</sup>

In rejecting the authority of the Vedas and the rules of caste both movements were heterodox by Hindu standards. Both Buddhism and Jainism were systems of moral and spiritual training to achieve salvation, above all by the renunciation of all attachments as typified in their saints and monks. But the way of Mahavira was more ascetic and pessimistic than that of the Buddha, being based on a thoroughgoing denial of the world in order to free the eternal soul-monad from the entanglements of matter. The one who achieved this ultimate release was a ‘victor’ (*jina*) and the followers or sons of the victor were the Jains. Mahavira (literally ‘Great Hero’) in the sixth century BC was such a one, but by no means the first; he was the last in a series of twenty-four Tirthankaras (‘ford-makers’ or guides over the ocean of worldly Samsara). His predecessor Parshvanatha may have been an historical proto-Jain leader about 200 years earlier,



107. Ayagapata, Jain 'tablet of homage' showing symbols.



108. Parshvanatha protected by cobra.

but the line goes back into aeons of time when the Tirthankaras enjoyed immense size and age.<sup>7</sup> These are the real objects of adoration, for in their perfect victory they have gone beyond the world whereas the Hindu gods remain part of it and may be ignored as inferior. This means of course that the Tirthankaras have gone beyond the reach of prayer also and are not worshipped anthropomorphically like Hindu deities: 'the worship of the Jina image is said to be adoration of the aggregate of qualities which the pious worshipper strives to acquire himself'.<sup>8</sup>

Despite these distinctive teachings, Jainism shares much of the outlook and symbolism of the wider Hindu tradition so that it is not easy to distinguish Jain images in the ancient period. The earliest extant image of a jina, from Lohanipur near Patna, is from the third century BC and shows similarities to ancient Yaksha images and even to pre-Aryan forms. There are suggestions of a jina image being made by the sympathetic monarch Nandas of the fourth century BC. Jain art may have been a creative source and model for Buddhist images; but time and persecutions appear to have destroyed the earliest Jain monuments. For the rest, Jain reliefs and images appear distinctly at the same period as the Buddhist, in the first to second centuries AD, and share the same heritage of Indian symbols as Buddhism – the wheel, the tree, yakshas, animals, yogic posture, even the stupa. This will be clear from two ancient examples.

The Jain 'tablet of homage' (*ayagapata*) comes from the first century AD at Mathura, the north Indian centre which was famous in the following centuries for both Jain and Buddhist art works. It is a clay tablet about three feet square and the importance of the reliefs depicted lie in their use then in temple worship as the basic Jain symbols to be adored. The great auspicious symbol of the *svastika* in ornamental form is enclosed in an outer circle; its four hooked arms frame a small *svastika* (upper), a curl of hair, the *srivatsa* which is a distinctive Jain symbol on the chest of a Tirthankara (right), a pair of fish (lower) and a throne-symbol (left). In the centre sits a meditating jina surrounded by 'three-shaped' *ratnas* or jewel symbols. These appear also on the base along with a lotus and water jar. The outer circle contains figures of male and female worshippers, a cultic tree enclosed in a square railing and a stupa.<sup>9</sup> Here then is an array of familiar Indian symbols, mainly aniconic.

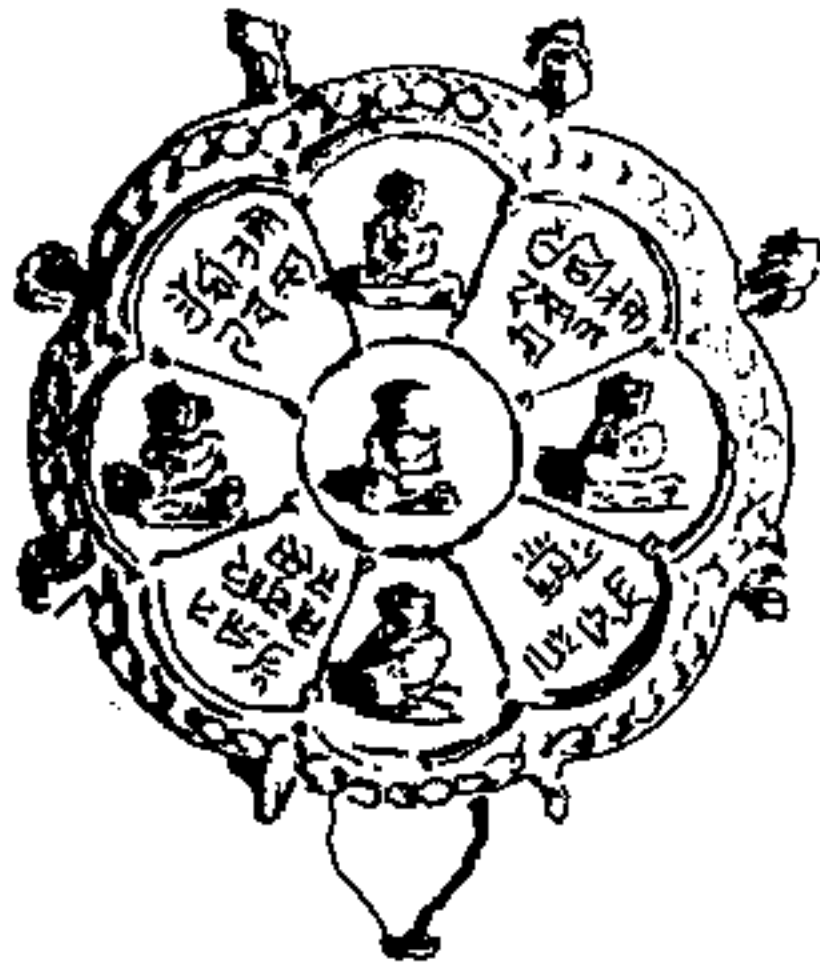
The icon of Parshvanatha, also from Mathura, dates from the first to second century AD. The simple red sandstone image depicts the twenty-third Tirthankara meditating under the ascetic discipline of 'exposure to all weathers'. It is based on the story of the cloud prince attacking him with a great storm whereupon a serpent king, the Naga Dharanendra, spread his hoods to protect him as shown here. A very similar story is

told in Buddhist texts concerning the Naga Mucalinda and is depicted in Buddhist art subsequently (fig. 132, p. 154). The similarity of Parshva to the Buddha here illustrates once more the common ground shared by the two religions in the early period.<sup>10</sup>

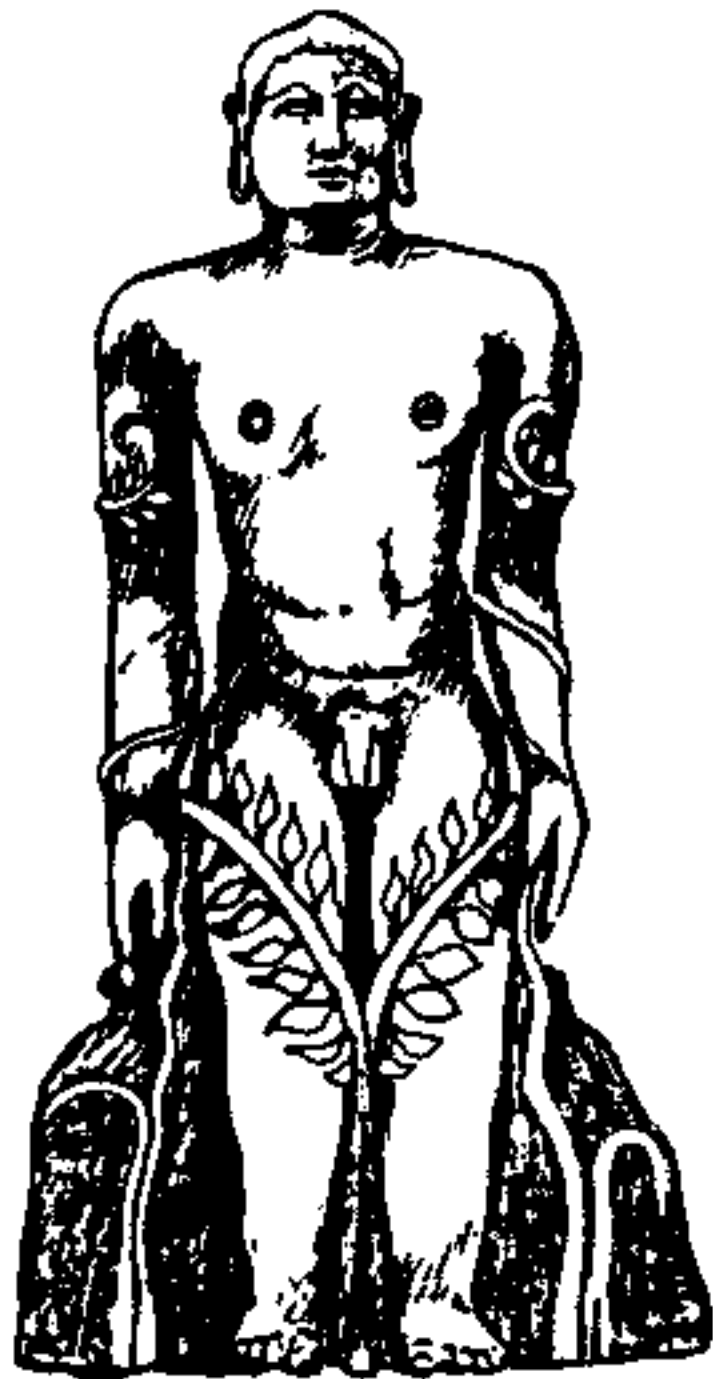
The characteristic Jain image did not emerge fully until the artistic flowering of the Gupta period (fourth to seventh centuries AD). As in the case of Hindu iconography, the building of temples and then the influence of Tantra led to a proliferation of images and attention to detail. Conventional forms were established for icons of the twenty-four Tirthankaras, each with his distinctive colour, tree, emblem and attendant yaksha figures.<sup>11</sup> He is shown in the centre in a rigid standing or in yogic seated posture. For instance, the very first Tirthankara, Rishabhanatha, has the banyan tree above him and the symbols of the wheel and the bull, symbolizing the law and the earth, at his feet; at his proper right is his attendant yaksha with a bull as vehicle and at his left the yakshini with her eagle. It is noteworthy that these 'attendants' are frequently the ancient gods of the Hindu tradition, major and minor, perhaps with a change of name; thus Matanga the guardian of Mahavira seems to be Indra on his elephant. Although Jainism was 'atheistic' in denying ultimacy to the gods, it included them in its lower levels. Worshippers might invoke the Hindu deities for earthly benefits while seeking higher purification of the mind by contemplating the perfection of the jinas. By the Middle Ages this worship approximated to that of the Hindus, with offerings of flowers, incense, lamps and so on . . . and though there was no real compromise with theism the sect easily fitted into the Hindu order, its members forming distinct castes.<sup>12</sup>

Medieval Jain temples resembled Hindu ones (as at Khajuraho, c. AD 1000) although they showed distinctive features in planning and decoration. The centre of gravity of the scattered Jain community moved westward and Jain wealth created remarkable temple-cities in Gujarat and Rajasthan. There also emerged from the eleventh century onwards stylized illustrations of Jain manuscripts,<sup>13</sup> influenced later by the Rajput styles.

Jain worship made early use of the stupa, an aniconic memorial which was venerated as in Buddhism, as indicated in plaques. This was developed into the more elaborate model of the *samavasarana*, a traditional Jain preaching-hall for the Tirthankara whose images at the top faced the four directions; a bronze model from the eleventh century is constructed as a mountain city with three circular tiers and a square base and summit.<sup>14</sup> Various other diagrams and plaques depict the Jain cosmography and geography with mountains, temples and places of pilgrimage. The influ-



109. Siddha-chakra, Jain meditation circle of the 'Five Supreme Ones'.



110. Colossal granite monolith of the Jain saint Gommatesvara.

ence of medieval Tantric texts led to the cult of the saint-wheel (*siddha-chakra*) which is still used in daily veneration and twice-yearly weeks of worship and washing of the tablet. The bronze example is in the familiar form of an eight-petalled lotus in which the five types of supreme or 'worthy' ones are arranged for veneration. At the centre is the meditating *arahat*, the emancipated soul of which the Tirthankara is the highest example. In the surrounding four sections are the next highest, the *siddhas* or sacred ones who reside at the top of the universe, then the head-monks, teaching monks (*sadhus*). The formula of obeisance directs the worshipper to invoke their abstract qualities of right knowledge, faith, conduct and penance, and there are altogether one hundred and eight listed qualities for meditation.

One exemplary *arahat* is celebrated in colossal stone images in south India, the largest being a fifty-seven foot monolith at the summit of a hill at Shravana Belgola in Mysore, c. AD 983. This depicts Gommatesvara, the second son of the first Tirthankara, originally called Bahubali ('strong of arm'). Realizing the futility of fighting he renounced the world to become a Jain monk and as penance stood rigid and motionless for long ages enduring the elements. He remained undisturbed by wild animals, serpents, birds and ants; and the sculpture shows this literally in the form of the anthills built at his feet and the vines creeping up his limbs. Standing firmly, unclothed; with calm and serene expression, he is the very personification of the Jain ascetic who practises renunciation and becomes a true 'conqueror'.<sup>15</sup> In his lofty eminence he deserves to be revered. Popular ritual expresses this in pilgrimages up the hill and ceremonies of anointing the image every twelve years. Being too large for an ordinary Jain temple (*basti*) the colossus stands in a cloistered open courtyard (*betta*) visible from afar.

There is much in this image that is instructive concerning the iconography and teachings of Jainism. Though not actually one of the twenty-four Tirthankaras, Gommatesvara is represented in the same mould. The exaggerated shoulders, long arms and powerful chest are all meant to display the ideal physique of the jina as one who conquers in the tradition of yogic meditation and breath-control. The rigid symmetry and immobility express a spiritual aloofness which can transcend the body, and the medium of stone brings out the quality of unchanging otherness. Later Jain images sometimes were carved in alabaster as the preferred material because its sublime translucency showed a body purified of the dross of tangible matter. The Tirthankaras do not have coloured flesh and blood but are said to be milk-white like alabaster, glowing with the light of their supreme clarified state.<sup>16</sup>

This removal from the life of warm-blooded human body appears surprising in view of the characteristic nudity of the Tirthankaras. The issue of nudity is an important one in the history of Jainism which suffered a schism in the first century AD between the southern sect of the Digambaras ('sky-clad', insisting on the renunciation of clothing by monks) and the northern Svetambaras ('white-clad', permitting it). This affected iconography in later centuries when the Svetambaras represented the Tirthankaras more modestly with a loin-cloth or folded hands covering the genitalia. But originally this was a burning issue for Mahavira who had found his predecessors too lax in wearing clothes; after meditating for thirteen months in the forests of Bihar, he abandoned clothes completely. Several reasons can be given for this action. First it accords with Mahavira's rejection of caste; costume would symbolize bondage to particular masks and distinctions between groups. Secondly, a true ascetic should have conquered all his emotions, including that of shame. Thirdly, he should be in a state beyond the consciousness of being naked and of common notions of what is right and proper. The Digambara sect maintained that only by leaving behind all property, including clothing, could a monk finally attain the release of nirvana. The stark aloofness of the Jain Tirthankara thus offers a very different view of nudity from that seen in classical Greek images of heroes and gods. There the human body is represented as healthy and beautiful, a worthy expression of supreme divinity. The modern Western world retains something of that view along with a spectrum of attitudes towards the nude as something rude or shocking, as erotic, as natural, as honest or as merely hygienic. In contrast to all these expressions of bodily awareness, Jainism has a spiritual, ascetic purpose in representing its archetypal guides as nude figures. This is a clinically pure form of spirituality which renounces the material body.

Here we come to the essential contrast with Buddhism. After an initial effort to achieve release by self-mortification, Gautama Buddha rejected the way of thoroughgoing asceticism. His was the 'Middle Way'. The iconography of Buddhism did not represent the Buddha as starkly nude but as lightly clothed and with the gentle expression of human warmth in his realization of peace and enlightenment. Historically this resulted in very different careers for the two cognate religions. Jainism has maintained its place as a heretodox sect of the Hindu tradition, its monastic core having the support of a well-to-do lay community. Despite its small following numerically (less than two million today) Jainism has made a remarkable contribution to the culture of India.<sup>17</sup> But it has remained confined to India. Buddhism has had a much more dynamic and outgoing

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career, flourishing for over a thousand years in India before its decline and re-absorption into the Hindu tradition; meanwhile as a missionary religion it has found its greatest span of influence in other lands of Asia.