Chapter 1

Charter

The heart of this chapter is a story that one must know in order to make the slightest sense out of Jain beliefs and tradition. It is about the conception, birth, world renunciation, enlightenment and final liberation of the most recent of the Tīrthaṅkaras in our part of the cosmos. His given name was Vardhamāna, but he is best known to history as Mahāvīra, a title and not an actual name, meaning '*mahā* (great) *vīra* (hero)'. According to Jain teachings, he was the last of the twenty-four Tīrthaṅkaras of our cosmic epoch (one of moral and physical decline) and our small section of the terrestrial world.

It is a narrative that can be read in two different ways. On the one hand, the history of Jainism, as modern historians understand this term, largely begins with his life. We know that Jainism had a prehistory, and we understand also that Mahāvīra had a historically verifiable predecessor named Pārśva. However, Jain tradition enters clear historical visibility only after his arrival on the scene. He is often represented as the founder of Jainism. This is a claim that is neither fully true nor fully false, and we shall return to it anon. For the present it is enough to say that to place Jainism in its historical context one must begin with Mahāvīra's life. On the other hand, the narrative also possesses a very different kind of importance within Jain tradition. To the Jains, its importance is normative as well as historical. It is an example of a 'charter' narrative, by which is meant that it provides a pattern and source of legitimacy for key elements of Jain belief and practice.

I have abstracted the version presented here from a text called the *Kalpasūtra*, believed to have been composed by Bhadrabāhu, an ancient sage who is said to have died 170 years after Mahāvīra's

death. Among the materials it contains are accounts of the lives of four Tīrthaṅkaras, and of these the biography of Mahāvīra is much the longest and most detailed, which is in keeping with his importance in Jain tradition. I have chosen this text (drawn here from Vinayasāgar, 1984) for two reasons. First, it is one of the two earliest sources of his life we have, probably dating from the second or first century BCE. The other is the latter part of the *Ācārāṅgasūtra* (Jacobi, 1884), which is somewhat earlier but belongs to roughly the same period. And second, this text, though ancient, plays a very important role in the present-day ritual culture of image-worshipping Śvetāmbara Jains. Its recitation is one of the main events in the celebration of Paryuṣaṇa, the year's most important religious observance, and its role in the ceremony testifies to its importance as a repository of the all-important story of Lord Mahāvīra's life.

It should be noted that the Digambaras tell the story of Mahāvīra's life somewhat differently, and I indicate some of the major differences in both my retelling of the story and the historical chapter that follows.

The Lord's life

At midnight on the sixth day of the bright fortnight of the lunisolar month of Āṣāḍh [June/July]*, the soul of Mahāvīra descended to this earth from the heavenly region where he had lived for many eons as a god. He entered the womb of a Brāhmaṇ woman (i.e., a woman belonging to the priestly class) named Devānandā who lived in the Brāhmaṇ sector of a town called Kuṇḍagrāma. Then, as she was lying on her bed, half asleep and half awake, she experienced fourteen wonderful dreamlike visions. She saw an elephant, a bull, a lion, the goddess Lakṣmī* [the goddess of prosperity] *being anointed, a garland, the moon, the sun, a flag on a golden staff, an urn, a lotus pond, the milky ocean, a vast celestial vehicle, a heap of jewels and a smokeless fire. When she awakened her husband and told him about the visions, he replied that they were highly auspicious and foretold the birth of a son who would possess every virtue and perfection and who would master every branch of learning* [a career appropriate for a Brāhmaṇ].

Now, Indra, the mighty king of the gods, who was seated in his council and who keeps constant watch on the terrestrial world below, came to know that Mahāvīra had entered the womb of a woman living

in the continent of Bharata (our part of the terrestrial world). Rejoicing, he rose from his throne and paid obeisance to Tīrthaṅkara-to-be. But after returning to his throne, he realised that something was amiss, for it was quite unsuitable and indeed impossible for a Tīrthaṅkara ever to be born of a Brāhmaṇ woman, because such an august personage must be born in an aristocratic Kṣatriya lineage (i.e., belonging to the class of warriors and rulers). He thereupon arranged for Mahāvīra's foetus to be removed from Devānandā's womb and conveyed to the womb of Triśalā, a noble woman of Kṣatriya lineage, also pregnant at the time, and for the foetus in Triśalā's womb to be placed in the womb of Devānandā [this episode is not accepted by the Digambaras].

On that very night, which preceded the dawn of the eighty-third day after Mahāvīra had entered Devānandā's womb, Triśalā, while lying half asleep, saw the same series of auspicious dreamlike visions that Devānanda had seen before, but even more magnificent. As Devānandā had done, she awakened her husband, who was a king named Siddhārtha, and told him of the visions. Siddhārtha responded that the dreams foretold the birth of a son in nine months and seven and one-half days. He would bear every virtue and perfection and would become a mighty warrior and king [a career appropriate for a Kṣatriya].

Two days later, having ordered his audience hall to be prepared for the occasion, Siddhārtha recounted Triśalā's visions to the interpreters of dreams. The visions foretold, they said, the birth of a son who, in his manhood, would become a great king and warrior and would rule the world's four-quarters as a cakravartin [universal emperor]. *But then they added that his son might alternatively become a '*cakravartin *of* dharma*', a Tīrthaṅkara, a victorious spiritual warrior who would lead the world as a great teacher.*

As Triśalā's pregnancy ripened, the gods filled Siddhārtha's coffers with treasures and Siddhārtha's clan, the Jñātṛs, began to flourish, as did the whole kingdom. Because of this, the expecting parents decided that they would name their son Vardhamāna, the Increasing One.

While in the womb, Mahāvīra made no movements in order not to cause his mother pain, but then Triśalā, fearing that something was wrong, began to fret. Even though he was still in the womb, Mahāvīra was fully aware of his mother's feelings, and to assuage her anxiety

he made a slight movement that she felt to her relief and joy. At that moment, Mahāvīra vowed not to renounce the world while his parents still lived out of respect for their feelings. [That he so vowed is not accepted by the Digambaras.]

Lord Mahāvīra was born at midnight on the thirteenth day of the bright half of the lunisolar month of Caitra [March/April]. *At the moment he was born, huge celebrations erupted among the gods in their heavens and in the kingdom below. The gods showered the palace with wealth and anointed the newborn boy. Siddhārtha ordered the kingdom's prisoners to be released, and the entire town celebrated the birth of Siddhartha's son and heir for ten whole days.*

Lord Mahāvīra spent thirty years of his life as a prince, after which he renounced the world. [The Digambaras say he decided to renounce in his thirtieth year with the reluctant consent of his mother. The Śvetāmbaras believe that he waited until after his parents had died.] *He gave up everything: his wealth, his kingdom, his armies, everything he possessed, great or small. Then, at the beginning of winter on the tenth day of the dark fortnight of the lunisolar month of Mārgaśīrṣ* [November/December], *having shed all his possessions, he left his home on a litter followed by a great congregation of gods, men and even demons. When he arrived at an Aśoka tree in a nearby park he dismounted, discarded his ornaments, pulled his hair out in five handfuls, and vowed henceforth to take only one waterless meal out of six. Wearing only a single cloth, he became a homeless mendicant, and the cloth he gave up after a year and a month on the road.* [The Digambaras say he was nude from the start.]

For twelve years Mahāvīra wandered as a homeless mendicant and bore the many discomforts of such a condition with complete equanimity. Except for the annual four-month rainy season retreats when he would stay in one place, he never spent more than a night in any village, and never more than five nights in a town. He subjected himself to the most extreme of privations. In this way he freed himself of all destructive feelings and achieved a condition of tranquillity and detachment from the world and all things of the world.

In the thirteenth year of his homelessness, on the tenth day of bright fortnight of the lunisolar month of Vaiśākh [April/May], *Mahāvīra, who had been eating only one waterless meal every three*

days, and while meditating under a tree, and while exposing himself to the relentless rays of the summer sun, attained omniscience and all-seeingness, thus becoming a Jina (i.e., a Tīrthaṅkara), a spiritual conqueror. As an omniscient being, he knew everything about all beings – gods, humans, and the denizens of hell – their thoughts, their feelings, their conditions of life, their pasts and futures. Nothing was concealed from him.

After his attainment of omniscience, Lord Mahāvīra lived on for nearly thirty years more, wandering from place to place except during the rainy season retreats. He died – which is to say, he attained complete liberation from the bondage of birth, death, and decay – in his seventy-second year at the dawn of the fifteenth (moonless) night of the dark half of the lunisolar month of Kārttik [October/November]. *On the night of his liberation, the gods made a glorious display of their joyful celebrations.*

The text then goes on to enumerate the followers that Mahāvīra left behind: 14,000 monks (led by Indrabhūti Gautama, his chief disciple), 36,000 nuns, 59,000 laymen, 318,000 laywomen, 300 disciples who had total command of the scriptures, and many other followers in several categories at various spiritual capacities and levels of attainment. The remainder of the *Kalpasūtra* contains much shorter biographical sketches of three other Tīrthaṅkaras: Pārśva, Ariṣṭanemi and Ṛṣabha. It also includes a chronology of the twenty-four Tīrthaṅkaras of our declining epoch and area of the terrestrial world, which seems to be the earliest reference to the full list. The text then provides an account of the mendicant lineage established by Mahāvīra, beginning with his eleven chief disciples. The later Śvetāmbara monastic community regards itself as descended by disciplic succession from one of these, Sudharma, and the text describes the development and ramification of the lineage of his spiritual descendants. (The Digambara disciplic pedigree is different; see Wiley, 2004, p. 151.) It concludes with instructions for the conduct of mendicants during the four-month rainy season retreat and the holy days of Paryuṣaṇa together with a brief discussion of types of microscopic living things.

Under many layers of embellishments (of which my brief summary gives little true idea), we should note that this narrative can be further

reduced to certain basics. First, the text focuses on five essential events in Mahāvīra's biography: his conception, birth, renunciation of the world, attainment of omniscience and final liberation. These events are known as the five *kalyāṇaka*s (auspicious events), and Jain teachings maintain that, although specific details of the Tīrthaṅkaras' biographies differ, these identical auspicious events occur in the lives of all of them. The five *kalyāṇaka*s are definitive of what a Tīrthaṅkara actually is, and they are a profoundly important element in Jain belief and ritual culture.

Second, and equally important, the narrative connects the far distant past of Mahāvīra's life to succeeding periods by telling how he created a fourfold social order (known as the *caturvidha saṅgha*) consisting of monks and nuns, laymen and laywomen, and established a line of disciplic succession by means of which his teachings could be preserved and propagated. That social order is seen as the precursor of the Jain community that exists today, and the line of disciplic succession invests the existing Śvetāmbara mendicant community with a spiritual authority ultimately devolving from Mahāvīra himself.

Chapter 3

Liberation's Roadmap

Jain life – including Jain religious life – is about many things, not just about renouncing the world. The quest for worldly well-being has a definite role in Jain belief and practice, a fact that accounts of Jainism have too often ignored. Still, we must not mince words. There is a perspective at the core of Jain life, that of the *mokṣa mārga* (path of liberation), that is uncompromising in the severity of its ascetic and ethical demands. This perspective, which takes the form of the soteriological doctrines presented in the Jains' sacred writings and promoted by mendicant communities, often fades into the background of daily life, and most Jains regard liberation as a very distant goal indeed. Still, it never ceases to exert its gravitational pull – sometimes weakly, sometimes strongly – on Jain religious culture. But what, we must ask, is meant by 'liberation'? Liberation *of* what and *from* what? And how is liberation to be achieved?

Jain teachings begin with the understanding – itself a premise beyond the reach of debate or doubt – that the death of the body is not the death of the soul, and that the soul is then reborn in a new body. As we learned in the preceding chapter, this is an understanding that Jainism shares with the generality of Indic religious traditions. This ceaseless passage from one body to another is called *saṃsāra*, a term that also denotes the world as such, for it is the arena in which we must make our way from birth to death to birth again, endlessly and without respite.

There are deep disagreements between Indic traditions about what exactly the soul or self is, but there is consensus on one point, which is that rebirth – however conceived – is not a good thing. Death inevitably

awaits us at the end of life's journey, and, although life does indeed offer its pleasures and satisfactions, these are transient and offset by disappointment and loss, inevitably made final at death's door. Taken in pieces, therefore, one's transmigratory career in the world has its good points to be sure; but taken in its entirety, it is a concatenation of misfortune and a running calamity that anyone who takes an informed, long-term view will certainly hope to escape.

Different Indic traditions have various ways of construing this negative conceptual framework, and some – especially those focused on redeeming deities – promote a surprisingly positive and hopeful outlook. Much darker is the Jain perspective. Not only do Jain teachings take a negative view of worldly existence, but the inherently dismal character of our bondage is accentuated by an emphasis on infinities. The Jains reject the idea of a creator deity or indeed a creation of the world in any sense. Time has no beginning or end, and our journey through the world has already been going on from beginningless time, and has meandered its way through every corner of the vast cosmos. Indeed, by mathematical necessity the entire journey has already taken place infinite times. And more, our journey with its aggregate of sufferings will continue forever unless brought to a stop. That stop is liberation. This is the 'from what' of liberation.

But how is liberation to be achieved? On this point, Jain teachings encapsulate in a deceptively simple formula what is, in fact, a very complex intellectual and normative structure. The formula is that the path to liberation requires three things known as the *ratnatreya* (three jewels). They are *samyak darśana* (right faith), *samyak jñāna* (right knowledge) and *samyak cāritra* (right conduct). *Samyak darśana* refers to a deep confidence in the truth of Jain teachings, the foundation of which is the omniscience of the Tīrthaṅkaras. *Samyak darśana* is obviously foremost among the three, for without such faith knowledge cannot convince and a code of conduct cannot compel. *Samyak jñāna* is the possession and understanding of Jain teachings, and *samyak cāritra* is behaving in a manner consistent with those teachings. But the three jewels are merely a gateway into the complex soteriological system to which we now turn.

The soul

What is the nature of the entity that seeks liberation from the bondage of *saṃsāra*? The Jains denote it by the term *jīva*, a term that carries the basic meaning of 'life'. One author (Dundas, 2002, p. 93) translates it into English as 'life-monad'. This rendering comes as close to the real meaning of *jīva* in English as any I have seen, but it is somewhat cumbersome. Most writers on the subject seem to prefer 'soul', and that is the term used in this book.

Jain teachings divide all of reality into two broad and opposed categories: *jīva* (soul) versus everything that is *ajīva* (non-soul). These two constituents of reality are utterly unlike, and in this respect a radical dualism lies at the very heart of Jain teachings. The *ajīva* category encompasses both attributes and constituents of material reality. These include motion, rest, space, time (although the status of time as an independent existent is debated) and atoms. This particular way of categorising the *ajīva* side of reality is supported by rather arcane arguments that need not detain us. The term 'atom', however, is important. This English term is a somewhat inexact translation of the word *pudgala*. The *pudgala*s are tiny particles, infinite in number, indivisible and without extension. In aggregate, they constitute matter, and in their varied combinations they form extended objects and substances that exhibit the physical characteristics of the world we experience through our senses. Matter is the prison of souls, for souls, except those in the liberated state, are embodied, and this embodiment is the source of unceasing rebirth.

Although the bodies that imprison souls are mortal and come and go, the soul itself is immortal; it was never created nor will it ever cease to be. Souls are infinite in number and they perpetually circulate through the cosmos from birth to death to birth again. It should be noted that this concept is radically different from that of the world-soul of the *advaita vedānta* (mentioned in the previous chapter). To the Jains there is no question of an identity between the self or soul of the individual and an ultimate unifying reality; there is no such unifying reality, and souls are absolutely real in their individuality and plurality. The Jain view is obviously also very different from the Buddha's doctrine of *anātman* (no-soul or no-self).

Although souls are embodied in a multitude of different ways, all souls are in essence identical because they bear exactly the same defining qualities: *caitanya* (consciousness), *sukha* (bliss) and *vīrya* (energy) (on which see P. S. Jaini, 1979, pp. 104–6). These qualities are always present in the soul, but when the soul is in an embodied state they cannot fully manifest themselves. By *sukha* is meant an extraordinary delight or satisfaction that arises from the soul fully knowing itself, and it is normally disfigured or clouded by the distractions attendant to embodiment. By *vīrya* is meant the basic force that makes possible perception, cognition and our engagement with things of the world. As is *sukha*, it is limited and misdirected by the conditions of embodiment. Most crucial, however, is *caitanya*, which is the soul's capacity to perceive and know the things of the world and itself. Consciousness is fully manifested as omniscience, but omniscience is normally occluded by embodiment; only in liberation or at the threshold of liberation does the soul realise its inherent capacity to know all things.

But having said that all souls are exactly alike, we must add one important qualification. Some souls possess *bhavyatva* – an innate capability to be liberated – while others do not (P. S. Jaini, 1977). This capability has only to do with liberation; souls without it can even be reborn as deities, but they cannot escape the grip of *saṃsāra*. It should be stressed that this is not an Indic version of the Calvinists' predestination. Possessing this quality does not in itself guarantee liberation, for even to embark on the path to liberation one must find oneself in a situation in which one's innate capacity can be awakened, such as having contact with Jain teachings, and following that path presents many extraordinary difficulties and hardships.

The soul has no innate physical size or shape because it is not a physical entity. It does, however, possess dimensionality, for in its varied embodiments it acquires the size and shape of the bodies it inhabits in the same manner – it is often said – that the light of a lamp will fill a room, regardless of its size or shape. When the body dies, the embodied soul transmigrates to a new body and does so in a mere instant and in a straight line. The nature of the soul's new habitation depends on how its previous life or lives were lived. The soul makes the journey inside a covering that is material but highly sublimated.

The reason for the necessity of a material vehicle is that a record of the past cannot be inscribed on the non-material soul.

The instantaneous and undetoured character of the soul's journey from old to new body is a distinctive feature of Jain teachings and an important point of contrast between Jainism and Hinduism. In Hindu tradition, a significant betwixt-and-between period begins at the moment of death and ends with gestation in a new body. During this period, the soul must be aided in its onward journey (lest it linger malevolently) by means of funerary rites conducted by Brāhmaṇ priests and other specialists (see Parry, 1994 for a particularly rich account of such rites). Paul Dundas (2002, p. 103) is undoubtedly right in his suggestion that the Jains' distinctive views of the soul's instantaneous transition served to distinguish the Jains from the Hindu communities around them by foreclosing the possibility of extended funeral rites, and in so doing also kept Brāhmaṇ priests, always to some extent adversaries of the Jains, out of the picture.

It has been seen that the embodied soul has already been transmigrating for an infinite period of time and will go on doing so for all of infinite time to come unless there is some kind of intervention. The soul, that is, is deeply entrenched in embodiment, and we must now ask what accounts for the persistence of the soul's embodiment and rebirth. The answer is supplied by an extremely important concept, that of *karma*.

Karmic bondage

The term *karma* is an important word throughout the family of Indic religions, but this is especially so in Jainism. As noted in Chapter 2, the term carries the primary meaning of 'action' and a derivative meaning relating to the consequences of action. *Karma* (action) generates *phala* (fruit), and the nature of the *phala* depends on the nature of the action. Good yields good, bad yields bad, and one must inevitably eat the fruits of one's actions – that is, experience their consequences – if not in this lifetime then another. The issue is not one of divine judgement, for there is no judge; it is simple cause and effect.

With all of the above the Jains agree, but they have also developed a highly distinctive understanding of *karma*, one that provides much of the foundation for Jain soteriology and that separates Jainism

quite decisively from other Indic religions. According to Jain teachings, *karma* is actually a type of matter. It takes the form of *pudgala*s (atoms) that are ubiquitous, floating free in every corner of the cosmos, and all unliberated souls are in continuous interaction with them. Whenever we act, our actions attract this matter and bring about its *āsrava* (influx) and ultimately its adhesion to and binding of the soul (*bandha*; bondage).

In respect to the influx of *karma* (as differentiated from its adhesion), Jain teachings stress the 'doing' side of action as opposed to its motivation. Action as such attracts karmic matter, which is consistent with the physicality of the Jains' image of *karma*. But simply because karmic matter is drawn into influx by action does not in itself mean that it sticks and holds the soul in its binding grip. Here Jainism confronts a problem inherent in any radical dualism. If the two constituents of reality are totally unlike in principle (as is true of soul and non-soul), how can they interact with each other? Just so, if *karma* is a form of matter and the soul is non-corporeal, how is it possible for *karma* to adhere to the soul? This question is perhaps never fully set to rest, but Jain teachings maintain that this is where the intentions behind action come into the picture. Mental dispositions (such as false beliefs) and the related *kaṣāya* (passions) that motivate actions cause karmic matter to adhere to the soul. One metaphor likens the soul to a cloth that passion causes to be wet; the wetness results in the adhesion of *karma*, just as dust sticks to a wetted surface (P. S. Jaini, 1979, pp. 112–13).

Jain teachings further maintain that karmic accumulations defile or stain the soul, and in so doing impart a *leśyā* (colour, stain) to the soul depending on the motivations underlying its actions. The colouring thus indicates the soul's spiritual and moral development; dark colours point to a low level of achievement, and light colours, particularly white, show a high level. Furthermore, there are different types of karmic matter. Although karmic matter is without particular qualities while afloat in the environment, it acquires some of the character of the actions that caused its influx and adhesion when it adheres to the soul.

Jains have devoted a great deal of care and attention to classifying and analysing different types of *karma*, which is hardly surprising given the importance of *karma* as the crucial factor in the situation of

all unliberated souls. The result is an entire intellectual system, unique to Jainism, based on the ways in which *karma* interacts with the soul (for details, see P. S. Jaini, 1979, pp. 115–27).

Jains distinguish eight separate types of *karma*, organised into two subcategories of four each. One group of four, the *ghātiyā* (harming) *karma*s, have an obstructive effect on the soul's attributes, i.e., its abilities to know and perceive properly, to feel its inherent bliss and to mobilise its inherent energies. Each of these categories is itself divided into a complex system of subcategories. The other group of four is called the *aghātiyā* (non-harming) *karma*s. These are *karma*s that actually carry the moral effects of our actions into the future and shape future embodiments. Depending on the type, they determine one's future proclivity to feel pain or pleasure, category of rebirth, longevity and the conduciveness to spiritual growth of one's future environment.

A given type of *karma* naturally falls away from the soul when it has produced its effect; it then floats free until caught in the karmic influx of some other soul. But in the process of rendering its effect, *karma* generates the influx of new *karma*, which then adheres to the unliberated soul. Thus develops a karmic feedback loop that is the snare that pulls us into worldly bondage. To seek liberation, therefore, must require a radical interference with this process. But how is this to be done?

Liberty

Mokṣa (liberation) is a condition that can be achieved only by the complete removal of *karma* from the soul, thus allowing the soul to realise its true nature, which in the embodied state is occluded by karmic coverings. Such a soul is *vītarāga*, entirely devoid of the passions of desire and aversion. But the physicality of *karma*, as Jains conceive it, has an important bearing on how such a condition is to be achieved. To the Jains, liberation cannot be attained by means of a special sort of self-awareness or introspective knowledge alone. Knowledge is indeed a condition of liberation, but not a sufficient condition. This is because the karmic deposits that occlude self-knowledge are physically real and cannot be thought away; they must be actually removed. For this there are two strategies. First, the influx and adhesion of *karma* must be

reduced and finally eliminated (*saṃvara*). Second, the karmic deposits already present must be shed (*nirjarā*). Let us examine these steps one at a time.

The reduction of karmic influx and adhesion is partly a matter of regulating behaviour. One must avoid the sorts of actions that most encourage karmic influx. Violent actions, which in their very nature both arise from and nurture the worst of our passions, top of the list of such actions, and therefore the cessation of violence is a crucial prerequisite to progress on the path to liberation. This is one of the foundations of the Jains' strong commitment to *ahiṃsā*. It is not the only foundation, because *karuṇā* (compassion) for all forms of life, as exemplified by the Tīrthaṅkaras themselves, is a deeply revered value in Jain life, and its validity is autonomous and transcends mere self-interest (Wiley, 2006a). Still, it is also true that, according to Jain teachings, when you harm other beings you really harm yourself as well (P. S. Jaini, 1979, p. 167).

But the problem of preventing adhesion is more subtle. The 'stickiness' of the soul to the flowing in of *karma* is not a matter of action as such, though action certainly counts, but of the actor's inner state. What is required is a state of mind in which passions are quelled. One must cultivate a deep equanimity, and even in the midst of life's most severe travails one should remain serene, indifferent to sufferings and pleasures alike, and one should remain controlled and restrained in one's interactions with other beings. The example of the Tīrthaṅkaras, who bore extraordinary hardships and tribulations in complete tranquillity, shows the way. One whose engagement with the world has these qualities will necessarily be 'dry' to *karma*'s influx.

But to liberate the soul from its worldly prison requires more than merely abating karmic influx and adhesion; it is also necessary to rid oneself of karmic accumulations already there. Of course, *karma* does fall away naturally once it has achieved its effect, but in doing so it propels the subject into new actions, and thus the cycle continues. However, it is possible to accelerate the shedding of *karma* by short-circuiting karmic feedback, and the principal means of doing so is ascetic practice.

The point of austerities, when undertaken in the light of Jain teachings and in the spirit of indifference to pain and pleasure, is not

self-punishment. Rather, the effects of ascetic practice are twofold. At one level, such practice is both a manifestation of equanimity and a means for its further cultivation, and this lessens one's attractiveness and stickiness to *karma*. But such practice also loosens the hold of karmic deposits directly. The metaphor of fire is often used in this context; austerities are said to 'burn away' the soul's karmic burden.

One might imagine that austerities would be the domain of the mendicant elite, and it is certainly true that a major focus of the lifestyle of Jain mendicants is serious asceticism. Still, Jain life is remarkable for the extent to which lay Jains also engage in ascetic practice. In Jain tradition, ascetic practice tends to be closely linked with food. Food is not only a source of pleasure, itself suspect in the perspective of the religiously serious, but is also the fuel of the body, and the body is the crude outer layer of the soul's material prison. Fasting is only one of many ascetic modes in Jain life, but considering the direct relationship between the conditions of bondage and nourishment (as well as the quest for nourishment which inevitably involves harming some forms of life), the centrality of food cannot surprise. This topic will be discussed further in later chapters.

Liberation's stages

Liberation can be seen as the endpoint of a very long journey. Indeed, it is infinitely long, given the fact that the soul has wandered through an uncreated cosmos for all of beginningless time. And although it appears that the higher animals of five senses possess moral awareness of a sort, and even the ability to engage in ascetic practices, the active quest for liberation requires a human body. In light of the infinities that lie at the foundation of the Jain world-view (Chapter 6), one's possession of a human body must be seen as a very brief sojourn on a road that is long indeed. A human birth is, therefore, a prize beyond price and an opportunity for spiritual progress that should not be wasted.

But simply occupying a human body is not enough, for one must begin a long ascent from the condition of dark delusion in which most souls languish. The path upward is a complex matter involving technicalities that need not waylay us. It can suffice to say that one proceeds upward by suppressing passions and removing *karma* in successive layers, and there is a roadmap for this that describes a series of stages

of progress, fourteen in number, known as *guṇasthāna*s (stages of [spiritual] quality) (see the lists in Bothara, 2012; P. S. Jaini, 1979, pp. 272–3; Wiley, 2004, pp. 243–4).

Of these, the first is called *mithyādṛṣṭi* (stage of false views), and this is the condition of all unliberated souls until the climb upward begins. The second and third stages are relatively unimportant intermediate steps, but number four is a major landmark. It is called *samyakdṛṣṭi* (correct viewpoint), which is when one acquires faith in the Tīrthaṅkaras' teachings. This is when the actual journey to liberation begins, and anyone who reaches this stage is bound to obtain liberation sooner or later (even eons later). The fifth stage is attained when one takes the vows required of a Jain layman, and the sixth is reached when one takes the far more rigorous vows of a Jain mendicant. Further progress upward is achieved as one rises to ever higher levels of discipline, restraint and elimination of passions. Slipping backward, even into lower forms of life, is still possible up to and including the twelfth *guṇasthāna*, but all uncertainty about the final destination ends at the next stage.

The thirteenth *guṇasthāna* is a great achievement on the upward climb, for it is at this point that one acquires *kevalajñāna* (omniscience) thus becoming a *kevalin* (omniscient being), which is accomplished by eliminating all remnants of the *ghātiyā karma*s, i.e., those obstructing knowledge, energy and perception. One has now become what is called a *sayoga-kevalin*, a still-embodied and active omniscient being.

By *kevaljñāna* is meant a condition in which knowledge is completely freed from inhibiting *karma*. In this state, knowledge is limitless; it is an unmotivated (i.e., altogether free of the desires and aversions that bring about karmic adhesion) and direct (i.e., without any mental activity) apprehension by the soul of itself and all external substances and objects at all times. Such an omniscient being, however, remains embodied, and embodiment may continue for a very considerable time. The Tīrthaṅkaras remain at this stage during their teaching careers until their final death and liberation.

It will be noted that the concept of omniscience is truly central to the Jain outlook on the world and our creaturely situation. It is not only the goal of Jain religious practice, but also the sole foundation of the authority of the Tīrthaṅkaras' teachings. Why are these teachings

valid? It is because they are the teachings of omniscient beings, and for no other reason. It also serves as the master premise of the Jains' epistemological system known as *anekāntavāda* (doctrine of many-pointedness, apparently shared by the Ājīvikas; see Bronkhorst, 2013). In contrast with the *kevalin*'s omniscience, in which things are at once understood from every possible point of view, all normal human understandings are necessarily partial and incomplete. But although the validity of our normal understanding of the world is imperfect, it is enhanced to the degree that it accepts multiple and even apparently contradictory perspectives.

At the instant of the *kevalin*'s death, he or she passes through the stage of *ayogya-kevalin* (inactive *kevalin*). At this point, the body's activity ceases and the very last karmic residues are shed. These are the four *aghātiyā karma*s, those that generate future body, feeling, longevity and environment. The *kevalin*'s soul momentarily expands to fill the entire cosmos and then contracts again; this happens in a flash, and has the effect of spatially offsetting the time remaining on the clock of his *aghātiyā karma*s.

Now the *kevalin* is freed from all sources of bondage and becomes *siddha* (liberated being). The state of liberation is not considered a *guṇasthāna* because it is not a stage on the way to anything. Freed from all former karmic restraints, the soul rises to the zone at the top of the cosmos that is the abode of the *siddha*s. The soul's inherent attributes of bliss, energy and consciousness have now reached their limitless potential in the absence of interfering karmic adhesions. It will now exist for all of infinite time to come in a passionless but blissful state of complete detachment from the world of rebirth below.

The liberated soul retains the shape it had in its final lifetime but is only two-thirds its former size. It does not carry gender, which is shed with the *gotra* karmas that determine such traits. Of course this is not an issue for the Digambaras who maintain, unlike the Śvetāmbaras, that it is not possible to attain liberation in a female body. Because time is without a beginning, the number of souls in the abode of the liberated is infinite, and because the abode of the liberated does have an actual size, as do the *siddha*s themselves, the question arises of how they could all fit in the abode of the liberated. The answer is that they overlap but they nevertheless also retain their individuality.

Given the numerous and extraordinary difficulties of its attainment, liberation is a relatively rare event, even on a cosmic scale. Nevertheless, new souls will continue to enter the liberated state for all of time to come. Because we (in our corner of the world) are in a place and time in the cosmic cycle in which there are no Tīrthaṅkaras currently active (see Chapter 6), nobody will achieve liberation here until the very distant future. For the present, the sixth *guṇasthāna* is the limit. However, even now Tīrthaṅkaras are active in other parts of the world, and so liberation continues to be achieved there. This means that if liberation is currently impossible here, it is indeed possible if one gains rebirth in those other areas.

One might imagine that even though the journey to liberation proceeds at a very slow pace, it would, given infinite time in which to do so, empty the cosmos of unliberated beings. But this would be to ignore the fact that some souls are simply incapable of achieving liberation and the additional fact that the number of souls in the cosmos is infinite. The slow and arduous climb out of bondage will, therefore, never end, just as bondage itself will never cease to be.