

Chapter 14
Other Yogic-Type Traditions
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Chapter Summary

I. Jainism

Jainism is one of the ancient Indian religions that emerged, centuries after the collapse of the Indus Valley civilization, out of the general social and religious matrix that created the complex Hindu tradition.

The traditional founder of the Jain tradition was an Indian sage Nataputta Vardhamana or Mahavira, a title similar to Christ meaning “great hero.” Like many other great yogic teachers, Mahavira became an ascetic en route to attaining enlightenment. The earliest records of his life come from almost 1,000 years after his death, making it difficult to obtain reliable information about him. Like the Buddha, he was disillusioned with a life of comfort and turned to religion for solace, challenging certain aspects of the caste system. He taught that there is only matter and spirit, both of which are eternal and that a creator god does not exist. The exact nature of his teachings is uncertain since the Puvaras, the Jain scriptures, appear over 300 years after his death.

Mahavira taught that formless time continues forever and that within it are two basic entities: the jiva —all conscious mental functions which form the principle of life itself, and ajiva—the lifeless characteristics of matter. Each is divided into various subgroups for the type of logical analysis of existence that later became popular within Buddhism. Karma becomes a glue-like substance binding consciousness and matter, and both to eternity. The only escape from this dismal situation is by a liberation from rebirth that results from right knowledge and practice in terms of austere asceticism. This releases a few souls from the bonds of rebirth to a realm of bliss envisioned at the top of the universe. Mahavira’s followers are required to take five binding vows to attain such a state: (1) abstain from killing of any kind; (2) abstain from all desires arising from greed, laughter, fear, or anger, and reject all lies; (3) not to steal or take anything that is not freely given; (4) renounce all forms of sexual activity and contact with women; and (5) reject and renounce attachment to anything causing either pleasure or pain and avoid contact with anyone displaying such attachments.

Taking these five binding vows seriously means renouncing family and all social obligations, ultimately leading dedicated Jains to the final sacrifice of death through starvation, which is believed to lead to liberation for the true ascetic.

II. The Parsees

The Parsees originated in Iran as part of the Zoroastrian tradition, many migrating to India after Muslim invaders destroyed the Sassanid Empire in AD 651. Due to persecution and Islamization in the ninth century, most other Parsees fled to India. They trace their origins to the prophet Zoroaster who lived centuries before Christ and embarked on a quest for truth during which he experienced visions and revelations.

Zoroaster's first vision is believed to have involved an angel leading him into the presence of God or Ahura Mazda who directed him to proclaim the true religion to the world. Beginning his life's work around thirty, he met little success until the king and a small state in northern Iran were converted and Zoroastrianism became the state religion for over 1,000 years. Its message denounced polytheism and pantheism and proclaimed one creator God, the principle for good in the universe. It divided humanity into dualistic camps, one considered the enlightened followers of the truth, the other seen to consist of evildoers who destroyed peace.

Our knowledge of the history of Zoroastrianism is limited since when Alexander the Great (346–323 BC) conquered Persia, he sacked the capital city, destroying the royal archives and copies of the Zoroastrian scriptures. Only incomplete copies of the latter remain and today only four groups of writings, known as the Avesta, remain. The fire ceremony is the central sacred symbol and practice for Parsees, with believers visiting a temple once every four months to participate. There are perhaps 100,000 Parsees today but they are not concerned about making converts, so the religion is dying out.

III. Confucian and Taoist Traditions

Following the great upheavals of the twentieth century, the once great Confucian and Taoist traditions have been reduced to mere remnants of their original influence, having lost most of their historic power as functioning religions. Arising out of a period of political confusion between 481 and 21 BC, Confucianism and Taoism were considered possible alternatives to provide social stability.

Throughout this time and up to the present, various forms of Chinese folk religion have flourished. Traditionally, a high God was considered supreme ruler of the universe with minor deities being the wind, clouds, sun, moon and the four points of the compass. Other local deities were associated with mountains and rivers. Most important of all was the veneration of ancestors. Around 1,000 BC the Chinese developed the ideas of Yin (feminine, passive, and evil) and Yang (masculine, active, and good), considered the two fundamental forces in the universe.

Confucius (b. 550 BC) was a sort of traveling politician entrusted with organizing various rituals who acquired a reputation for his knowledge of the history of Chinese sacraments. In later life, he gathered a group of disciples and spent ten years traveling China to reform the Chinese system of government and establishing schools to guarantee the continuation of his ideas. His great disciple was Meng Tzu or Mencius who wrote a classic system outlining the Confucian system based on a belief in the innate goodness of man. Another group of Confucian scholars led by Hsun Tzu rejected this notion, arguing that conflicts arise out of human desires common to all (similar to the Christian idea of "original sin"). All Confucian writers recognized the potential for social chaos and destruction and believed such could be averted by correct conduct based in filial piety.

Taoism arose during the sixth century BC as a new religious/philosophical system with popular and mystical elements to challenge Confucianism. Its founder was Lao Tzu, whose name first appears in the Chuang Tzu (third/fourth century BC) where he is described as a wise government official who opposed the Confucian system. Other similar works were in circulation by the second century BC;

most seemed to be intended as polemic against Confucianism. The great persecution of 213 BC attempted to exterminate Confucianism by burning its books and executing its teachers.

A revival of Confucianism at the time of Christ encountered the spread of Buddhism throughout China during the first millennium AD following which neo-Confucianism emerged to become the dominant force in Chinese intellectual history. The death knell of both Confucian and Taoist traditions came with the victory of Chinese Communism and Mao Tse-tung in 1949 although the influence of both traditions are still visible in contemporary Chinese social and religious practices.

IV. The Sikh Tradition

Sikhism originated in the late fifteenth century AD in what is today the Indian state of Punjab. Although Muslim conquerors (712 AD) destroyed both Hindu and Buddhist temples, the sheer number of non-Muslims enabled locals to follow their own Hindu traditions until 1022 when Muslims gained control, destroying Hindu temples and replacing them with Muslim mosques. A Hindu teacher, Kabir (1438–1518), advocated the reconciliation of Muslims and Hindus and wrote hundreds of hymns, many of which were later accepted as Sikh sacred texts. Guru Nanak (1469–1539) is considered the founder of Sikhism and was conversant with both the Hindu and Muslim scriptures. He became a wandering mendicant who claimed to receive a revelation from God instructing him to proclaim God's oneness and that there is neither Hindu nor Muslim in God's sight. Hymns he composed became the basis for secret scriptures known as the Adi Granth. Setting itself apart from Hindu and Muslim rites, the Sikh community met regularly to eat a common meal centered on a communal kitchen where all caste distinctions were obliterated. This meal continues to remain the central communal rite of Sikhs. The Sikh holy book is known as Granth Sahib. Periodic Muslim opposition required the Sikhs to become a formidable military force, which they were when the British arrived in India in the mid-nineteenth century. Sikhs played a leading role in the movement for Indian independence achieved in 1948. Sikhs believe in one God, Sat Nam, or the Truthful Name, who, as the uncreated, immortal creator of the universe, takes a personal interest in his people. The idea of transmigration—the soul moving from one body to the next after death—is an essential Sikh belief. Generally, Sikhs follow a Hindu lunar calendar marked by various festivals, the most important of which is Vaisakhi, which commemorates the formation of the Khalsa, a military and religious elite. Sikhs meet together weekly to worship God by reading scripture, hearing sermons, and singing hymns.