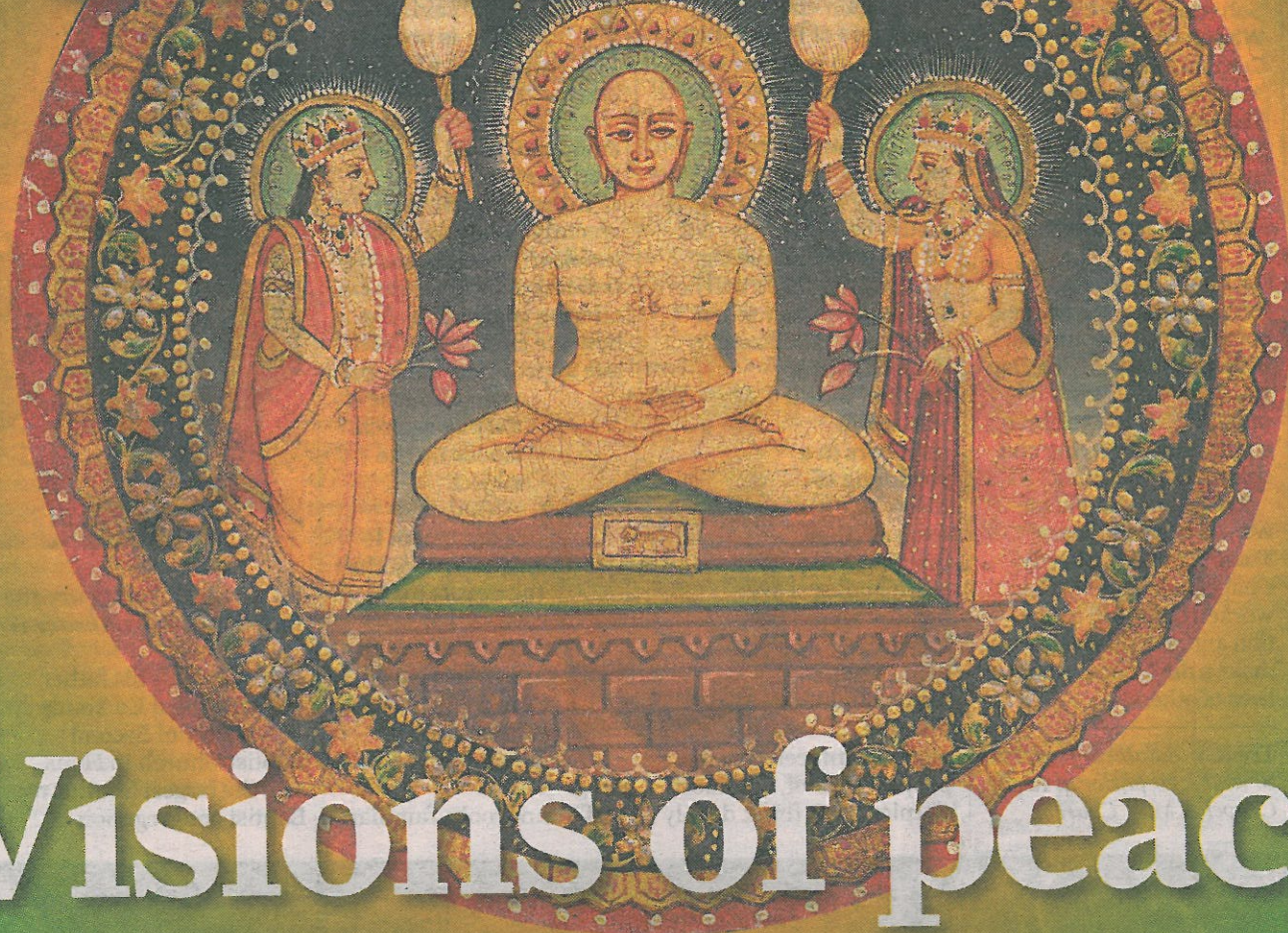


HOUSTON Belief



Visions of peace

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JAINISM

Their dream is for a world of nonviolence

By Jill Carroll

Many people know that Mohandas Gandhi influenced Martin Luther King, Jr. in his notions of nonviolent, passive resistance. Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence was a topic of discussion at Morehouse College and at Crozer Theological Seminary, where King studied.

Gandhi's nonviolence teaching formed the center of the Montgomery boycott movement in 1956. King journeyed to India in 1959 at the invitation of the Gandhi Memorial Trust to observe firsthand the strategies and impact of Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence.

What many people do not know, however, is that Gandhi himself was influenced in his philosophy of nonviolence by the small, 2,500-year-old religion of Jainism. Though other indigenous religions of India — Hinduism, Buddhism — exhort nonviolent practices of vegetarianism and pacifism, neither of them affirms nonviolence as consistently and rigorously as Jainism.

Jainism is one of the oldest religions of India and has about 6 million members worldwide. About 700 Jain families live in the Houston area. Jainism shares a general worldview with Hinduism and Buddhism. It holds to the ideas of karma and reincarnation (transmigration of the soul), and sees the goal of



Ramila Shah prays at the Jain Society of Houston Temple. Jainism's tenet of nonviolence influenced Mohandas Gandhi and, by extension, Martin Luther King Jr.

(the cycle of life, death and rebirths).

Jainism, however, is organized around the figure of Mahavira, who lived at the same time as the historical Buddha in the 6th century BCE. At about 28 years old, Mahavira renounced regular householder life to lead an austere life of meditation and asceticism. After

his body and his passions — and he achieved enlightenment. He began to preach, teach and to convert many to the Jain way of life. He died at 72.

Jains believe Mahavira is a *tirthankara* — a "ford maker" — one of 24 such figures who appear during each cosmic cycle of time. These individuals find a way to achieve

and then teach others. Mahavira, according to Jain belief, is the last one of these figures in the present cosmic cycle. He is depicted in Jain iconography as mostly naked, sitting in a meditative position. He is revered for his renunciation of regular life in favor of the rigorous spiritual path of meditation, nonviolence

— nonviolence or non-injury to any living being — is central to Jain belief and practice. Devout Jains are vegetarians who do not eat meat, eggs or any plants whose harvest could endanger living beings. Many scholars argue that the widespread vegetarianism in India is the result of Jain teaching more than that of either Hinduism or Buddhism.

Moreover, Jains are forbidden to have any occupation that involves the destruction of living beings. Farming is taboo because plowing and harvesting destroy living creatures. Also prohibited are jobs that involve using fire or poisonous materials, or trades that have to do with slavery or animal husbandry. Hence, most Jains are in the merchant class in India, or in the business, legal, academic and other such professions worldwide.

The Jain ideal is to embody nonviolence in thought, word and deed — do not think violent thoughts, speak violent words or do violent acts. Sulekh Jain, a longtime Jain community leader in Houston, says this is the pivotal identifier of Jain religion: "to practice *ahimsa*, not to hurt and harm anyone, never to compromise with and walk away from the practice of *ahimsa*."

So, on Monday as our

About Jainism

Central tenets: Spiritual development through wisdom and self control. Followers seek "divine consciousness."

Practices: Non-violence, honesty, non-stealing, avoiding indulgence, non-materialism and vegetarianism.

Worship: Daily prayers are universal; fasting and meditation are common practices.

Deities: Jains believe there are heavenly souls (Yaksha and Yakshini) with supernatural powers.

Origin: Jainism is believed to have started in the 3rd century BC in southern India.

Holidays: Key festivals for prayer, worship and fasting include Paryushan Mahaparva, the birthday of Mahavir and Diwali.

Source: jainworld.com



we honor not only the Christian civil rights pioneer for his method of nonviolent resistance. Implicitly, we also honor Gandhi, the Hindu whose teachings King absorbed. And we honor Jainism, a religion that through the doctrine of nonviolence has extended its historical and cultural influence far beyond its size and location in India.

Religion scholar and author Jill Carroll lives in Pearland. Read Carroll's