Lord Mahāvír was the twenty-fourth and last Tirthankar of Jains in this era. According to Jain philosophy, all Tirthankars were human beings but they attained a state of perfection or enlightenment through meditation and self-realization. They are the Gods of Jains. Mahāvír rejected the concept of God as a creator, a protector, and a destroyer of the universe. He also denounced the worshiping of gods and goddesses as a means of material gains and personal benefits and God’s abilities to absolve their believers from their sins.

Mahāvír was born on the thirteenth day of rising moon of Chaitra month, about 2,600 years ago (599 B.C.) in Bihar, India. This day falls in the month of March/April as per the English calendar. His birthday is celebrated as Mahāvír Jayanti day. Mahāvír was a prince and was given the name Vardhaman by his parents. Being the son of a king, he had many worldly pleasures, comforts, and services at his command. But at the age of 30, he left his family and royal household, gave up his worldly possessions, and became a monk in search of an unconditional solution to eliminate pain, sorrow, and suffering.

Mahāvír spent the next twelve and half years in deep silence and meditation to conquer his desires, feelings, and attachments. He carefully avoided harming or annoying other living beings, including animals, birds, and plants. He also went without food for long periods. He was calm and peaceful against all unbearable hardships and was given the name Mahāvír, meaning very brave and courageous. During this period, his spiritual powers were developed and in the end he realized perfect perception, knowledge, power, and bliss. This realization is known as keval-jñān or the perfect enlightenment.

Mahāvír spent the next 30 years traveling bare foot around India, preaching to the people the eternal truth he realized. The ultimate objective of his teaching is how one can attain total freedom from the cycle of birth, life, pain, misery, and death, and achieve the permanent blissful state of one’s self. This is also known as liberation, nirvana, absolute freedom, or Moksha.

Mahāvír explained that from eternity, every living being (Soul) is in bondage of karmic atoms that are accumulated by good or bad deeds. Under the influence of Karma, the Soul is habituated to seek pleasures in materialistic possessions. This deep rooted habit is the cause of self-centered violent thoughts, deeds, anger, hatred, greed, and such other vices. These result in further accumulation of Karmas.

Mahāvír preached that Right Perception (samyak-darshan), Right Knowledge (samyak-jñān), and Right Conduct (samyak-chāritra) together is the real path to attain the liberation of one’s self. At the heart of Right Conduct for Jains lie the five great vows:
Five Great Vows

- **Non-Violence (Ahimsa):** not to cause harm to any living beings
- **Truthfulness (Satya):** to speak the harmless truth
- **Non-stealing (Astey):** not to take anything not properly given
- **Chastity (Brahmacharya):** not to indulge in sensual pleasure
- **Non-Possession/Non-Attachment (Aparigrah):** complete detachment from people, places, and material things

Jains hold these vows at the center of their lives. These vows cannot be fully implemented without the acceptance of a philosophy of non-absolutism (Anekantvad) and the theory of relativity (Syadvad). Monks and nuns follow these vows strictly and totally (great vows), while the common people follow the vows partially (minor vows) as far as their lifestyles will permit. In the matters of spiritual advancement as envisioned by Mahāvir, both men and women are on equal footing. The lure of renunciation and liberation attracted women as well. Many women followed Mahāvir’s path and renounced the world in search of ultimate happiness. Thus, the principles of Jainism, if properly understood in their right perspectives and faithfully adhered to, will bring contentment and inner happiness and joy in the present life. This will elevate the Soul in future reincarnations to a higher spiritual level, achieving perfect enlightenment, reaching its final destination of eternal bliss, and ending all cycles of birth and death.

Mahāvir attracted people from all walks of life, rich and poor, kings and commoners, men and women, princes and priests, touchable and untouchable. He organized his followers, into a fourfold order, namely monk (Sādhu), nun (Sādhvi), layman (Shravak), and laywoman (Shravika). This order is known as Jain Sangh. Lord Mahāvir’s sermons were orally compiled by his immediate disciples in Āgam Sutras. These Āgam Sutras were orally passed on to the future generations. Over the course of time, many of the Āgam Sutras have been lost, destroyed, or modified. About 1,000 years after Mahāvir, the Āgam Sutras were recorded on Tadpatris (leafy paper that was used in those days to preserve records for future references). Shvetāmbar Jains have accepted these Sutras as authentic versions of his teachings while Digambar Jains use them as a reference.

At the age of 72 (527 B.C.), Lord Mahāvir attained Nirvana and his purified Soul left his body and achieved complete liberation. He became a Siddha, a pure consciousness, a liberated Soul, living forever in a state of complete bliss. On the night of his Nirvana, people celebrated the Festival of Lights (Dīpavali) in his honor. This is the last day of the Hindu and Jain calendar year and is known as **Diwali** (festival of lights) or **Deepavali** (meaning string of lights).

Jainism existed before Mahāvir, and his teachings were based on those of his predecessors. Thus, unlike Buddha, Mahāvir was more of a reformer and propagator of an existing religious order than the founder of a new faith. He followed the well established creed of his predecessor Tīrthankar Parshvanāth. However, Mahāvir did reorganize the philosophical tenets of Jainism to correspond to his times.

A few centuries after Mahāvir’s nirvana, the Jain religious order (Sangha) grew more and more complex.

**Mahāvir’s Simple Message**

Mahāvir made religion simple and natural, free from elaborate ritual complexities. His teachings reflected the internal beauty and harmony of the Soul. Mahāvir taught the idea of supremacy of human life and stressed the
importance of the positive attitude of life. Mahāvīr’s message of Non-Violence (Ahimsa), Truth (Satya), Non-Stealing (Achaurya), Celibacy (Brahmacharya), and Non-Possession (Aparigraha) is full of universal compassion. He said that, “A living body is not merely an integration of limbs and flesh but it is the abode of the Soul which potentially has perfect perception (Anant-darshan), perfect knowledge (Anant-jnän), perfect power (Anant-virya), and perfect bliss (Anant-sukh). Mahāvīr’s message reflects freedom and spiritual joy of the living being. Mahāvīr emphasized that all living beings, irrespective of their size, shape, form, how spiritually developed or undeveloped, are equal and we should love and respect them. This way he preached the gospel of universal love.

Mahāvīr Jayanti (Birth) and Liberation (Nirvan) Celebration

Jains across the world celebrate Mahāvīr’s birth and liberation. In North America, the celebrations are as follows:
1. Let your friends and family members know that Mahāvīr Jayanti is approaching and family and community plans to celebrate it.
2. Plan the Mahāvīr Jayanti day such that you can go to work late that day or take a holiday.

On Mahāvīr Jayanti Day
1. Go to the temple if possible.
2. Do one hour of Abhishek (traditional bath) of Mahāvīr image, prayers and pujā (Namokar Mantra, Mahāvīr pujā, etc.)
3. Read to the family Mahāvīr’s message and his life story and meditate on his message.
4. Let people in your work and school know the significance of this day.

At Temple Functions
1. Let the young kids give a talk on the life story of Mahāvīr.
2. Invite guest speakers to this event.
3. Participate in the exhibition of the Mother Trishla’s (Mahāvīr’s mother) 14 or 16 dreams and help the temple and community to raise funds.
4. Dinner celebration.

In India, Mahāvīr Jayanti is Celebrated as Follows:
• Temples that host Mahāvīr Jayanti festivals are decorated with flags to mark the birthday of Lord Mahāvīr.
• Each locality holds a traditional bath (abhishek) for an idol of Lord Mahāvīr.
• Following the bath, the idol is carried in a procession throughout the region.
• Depending on the region, the parade ends at a temple, shrine or large communal area where people may pray and meditate.
• Donations made during Mahāvīr Jayanti are made in the form of food, medicines or knowledge.

“Jainism believes in the plurality and equality of all living creatures. Since nobody wants to be hurt or killed, the general rule should be that nobody should be hurt or killed. This is the essence of Ahimsa. Absence of violence of all sort toward all beings at all times is Ahimsa.” — Yogasutra

Source: Lord Mahāvīr and His Teachings, compiled by Pravin Shah