

I am a Jain nun, and have been practising Jainism for nineteen years. I joined my monastery when I was eighteen. Jain ascetic life is very simple: I have two sets of clothes; I eat pure vegetarian food in handmade wooden bowls; I have no monetary assets – no property, no bank balance; I have given up family attachments; and I am happy, having no desires for material possessions.

I did not become a nun because I was unhappy. I had incredibly happy moments with my parents, my two sisters and brother. I was born in Chennai, in southern India. My father is a physician and radiologist, my mother a housewife. We always said prayers and meditated for an hour on Sunday. The inspiration of my family, and the religious environment in which I was brought up, made a deep impression on me and developed within me. My parents are not only followers of the Jain religion, but have applied Jain principles throughout their lives. Their deep spirituality and religious commitment influenced me a lot.

Eventually I started to learn more about Jainism, by discussing and spending time with many Jain monks and nuns who visited Chennai. Their simple way of life appealed to me. After finishing my education at high school, I sought the permission of my parents to join the training institution for nuns. I had to wait a couple of years, to convince my parents of my commitment to the religious life: they needed to be sure this was what I really wanted. I wanted a life that was peaceful, purposeful, productive, and progressive. I wanted something special, that gave me a feeling of contentment and fulfilment. Finally, I chose this path. In the Jain training centre, I read not only the holy scriptures, but also comparative studies of different religions, philosophies, and ideas. I studied for a Master's degree in comparative religion and philosophy at the Jain Vishva Bharati Institute at Ladnun, in Rajasthan. This period of study helped me to understand my beliefs and values with more clarity.

After six years of training, my spiritual gurus, Acharya Tulsi and Acharya Mahaprajna, initiated me, at a gathering of thousands of people. It was a deeply spiritual celebration. I took vows of non-violence, truth, non-stealing, celibacy, and non-possession. It is a lifelong commitment, with self-discipline and self-control. That day I was so happy – my dream was coming true. I was at the feet of my guru, receiving blessings for this new journey of spiritual enlightenment. I was dressed in a white robe and my head was shaved. I was named 'Samani Charitra Prajna'.

Acharya Tulsi and Acharya Mahaprajna established the Saman Order in 1980. Their vision was to propagate and reinforce the message of non-violence, peace, and harmony throughout the world. In Jainism, we believe that water, air, fire, earth, and plants are living beings. Although it is not possible to be completely non-violent, we try to prevent unnecessary violence by our actions, words, and thoughts. Acharya Tulsi established a new form of monastic life. The lifestyle of a *saman*



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or *samni* is very similar to that of a monk or nun in other Jain monastic communities, but there are differences. For example, we use transport to educate and enhance human life and values at the global level.

As a *samni*, my lifestyle is totally different from that of a secular person. I spend four to five hours a day in meditation, prayer, chanting, and reading the holy scriptures. Twice a day, before sunrise and after sunset, I recite a special prayer known as *pratikraman*, in which I ask for forgiveness from, and give forgiveness to, all living beings; if I have committed sins, or violated any kind of vows, I repent and resolve not to repeat them. I freely admit my flaws and mistakes, and seek to improve myself.

I observe *preksha* meditation every day. A scientific technique, it is aimed at transforming my inner personality; it is known to have an impact on the endocrine system, by changing the biochemicals and balancing the hormones. It helps me a lot, enabling me to eliminate negative emotions and regenerate positive qualities, and benefits me by relaxing me and giving me peace of mind. As a *samni*, I do not eat and drink before sunrise or after sunset. This has a basis in science, as it has been shown sunlight is needed for good digestion.

Along with the daily practice of meditation and prayer, once a year I celebrate eight special days of spiritual enhancement and uplifting of my soul. This is called *panyushan* – ‘being closer to your soul’ – and is practised not only by monks and nuns, but by the whole Jain community. We listen to sermons, fast day and night, and practise living simply, with detachment from the material world and self-control. The last day of *panyushan* is very important, because this is the day when we recall all our past mistakes and sins, ask forgiveness from those against whom we have sinned, and give forgiveness to those who have sinned against us.

Jainism emphasizes a process of self-purification. All my efforts are focused on freeing the soul from the bondage of *karma*.

As a *samni*, ten months a year I travel extensively in India and overseas, lecturing at universities, colleges, national and international conferences, and to various associations. I have often participated in interfaith dialogues and discussions, and have conducted many camps, workshops, and seminars on stress management, anger management, the science of living, and ailments such as diabetes, high blood pressure, anxiety, obesity, allergies, and heart attacks. The rest of my time I spend in the presence of my guru, whose holy presence clarifies many doubts and queries.

I am very happy I have dedicated my whole life to a good cause, and to be following the message of nonviolence, and a soul-oriented religion that emphasizes human values.

SAMANI CHARITRA PRAJNA