

KISHORE SATSANG PRAVESH

Swaminarayan Satsang Beliefs, Traditions and History

A Textbook of the Satsang Examinations Series: 4

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Gujarati Text: Sadhu Viveksagardas

Translation: BAPS Sadhus



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Ahmedabad

KISHORE SATSANG PRAVESH

Swaminarayan Satsang Beliefs, Traditions and History

A textbook for the Satsang Examinations curriculum set by
Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha

Inspirer: HH Pramukh Swami Maharaj

Blessings: HH Mahant Swami Maharaj

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Blessings

The youth movement established and nourished by Brahmaswarup Yogiji Maharaj has been expanding at a very rapid pace. To satisfy the aspirations and thirst for knowledge of the youth joining the movement, and also to enable them to understand and imbibe the principles of Akshar-Purushottam expounded by Bhagwan Swaminarayan, the publication division of Shri Akshar-Purushottam (Swaminarayan) Yuvak Mandal, organized under the auspices of Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar-Purushottam Sanstha, has drawn up a plan to bring out a series of books.

These books are intended to systematically impart scholarly knowledge in a simple language to the children and youth of the Satsang. It is hoped that this Sanstha – established by Brahmaswarup Shastriji Maharaj to implement and propagate the ideals revealed by Bhagwan Swaminarayan – will, through this activity, teach the ideals and noble traditions of the Sampradaya and through it, the Sanatan Hindu Dharma.

The aim of this Sanstha is to spread the divine message of Bhagwan Swaminarayan to all corners of the world. It is planned to bring out these books in different languages. We hope that all religious-minded truth seekers of the Sampradaya and those outside it, will welcome this activity and extend their full support to it by all possible means, including monetary help.

To encourage children and youths, examinations are held based on the curriculum as presented in these books. Certificates are also awarded to successful candidates.

I bless Shri Ishwarcharan Swami, Prof. Rameshbhai Dave, Kishorebhai Dave, and all others who have assisted in the preparation of these books.

Vasant Panchami

Vikram Samvat 2028

(21 January 1972 CE), Atladara

Shastri Narayanswarupdasji

(Pramukh Swami Maharaj)

Jay Swaminarayan

Publisher's Note

The Swaminarayan Sampradaya has its unique tradition of worship rituals, festivals and observances. They are based on the Vedic Sanatan Hindu Dharma and have been revealed by Bhagwan Swaminarayan through his teachings and their practical application in his life. It is by following these conventions and commands that the lives of all *satsangis* can be properly moulded. By living according to these traditions devotees can protect themselves from bad company, become ideal *satsangis* and attain ultimate liberation in life.

Basic religious vows, prayers, *dbun*, *puja*, *arti*, *thal* and other devotional practices, along with life sketches of *parambhansas* and devotees are briefly described in this book in lucid language. This book will provide a greater understanding of the traditions of Satsang and the duties that enable *satsangis* to progress spiritually.

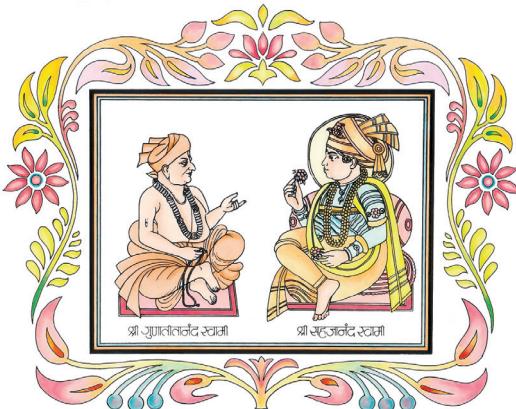
This publication, *Kishore Satsang Pravesh: Swaminarayan Satsang Beliefs, Traditions and History* is an English translation of the Gujarati book *Kishore Satsang Pravesh*.

This book has been designed to serve as part of the curriculum for the Satsang Examinations. More specifically, it is one of the textbooks for the second level examination, Satsang Pravesh.

It is our earnest prayer that all *satsangis* study this book carefully, pass the examinations with flying colours, and above all, derive immense spiritual benefits and please Bhagwan Swaminarayan and the guru *parampara*.

- Swaminarayan Aksharpith

Prayer



Ame sau Swāminā bālak, marishu Swāmine māte;
Ame sau Shrijitanā yuvak, ladishu Shrijine māte...
Nathi dartā nathi kartā, amārā jānani parvā;
Amāre dar nathi koino, ame janmyā chhie marvā...Ame 1
Ame ā yagna ārambhyo, balidāno ame daishu;
Amārā Akshar-Purushottam, Gunātit gnānane gāishu...Ame 2
Ame sau Shrijitanā putro, Akshare vās amāro chhe;
Svadharmi bhasma choli to, amāre kshobh shāno chhe...Ame 3
Juo sau Motinā Swāmi, na rākhi kāi te khāmi;
Pragat Purushottam pāmi, malyā Gunātit Swāmi...Ame 4

Meaning: We are all children of Swami; we will die for Swami. We are all youths of Shriji [Maharaj]; we will fight for Shriji [Maharaj].

We are not afraid; we do not worry about our own lives. We do not fear anyone; for we are born to die.

We have begun this sacred endeavour (*yagna*), and we will offer any sacrifice. We will sing the glory of Akshar-Purushottam and the knowledge of Gunatit. We are all the children of Shriji [Maharaj]; Akshar is our abode. We are dedicated to our dharma; we have no sorrows whatsoever.

Everyone see Motibhai's Swami [Shastriji Maharaj]; he has left no shortcomings. We have attained the manifest (*pragat*) Purushottam and Gunatit[anand] Swami.

1. Shikshapatri

Unlike other animals, humans are obliged to observe dharma, or moral principles. A life without morality is animalistic and brutish. Hence, it is important to understand what morality is in order to navigate through life's difficult choices. Bhagwan Swaminarayan reveals, "Dharma is virtuous conduct."

Our Dharmashastras describe many ethical principles, rules of social conduct, and atonements for sins. However, understanding these vast Dharmashastras can be a difficult task. Fortunately, Bhagwan Swaminarayan has extracted the essence from the ocean of shastras and presented it in form of the Shikshapatri.

The Shikshapatri is not only a shastra on ethical behaviour, but it is also a means to attaining the four *purusharthas* of human life, namely dharma, *artha*, *kama* and *moksha*. In this way, Bhagwan Swaminarayan has strengthened the practice of dharma.

The Shikshapatri 'is for the good all jivas'. Explaining its purpose and glory, Shriji Maharaj says, "I have extracted the essence of all the shastras and written this Shikshapatri on Maha sud 5 V.S. 1882 (12 February 1826 CE). Earnestly observe the Shikshapatri daily, but never transgress it." That is, the yearnings of the mind must be given up and the commands of Maharaj obeyed.

Maharaj has promised, "Whoever lives according to the Shikshapatri will certainly attain the four *purusharthas* of dharma, *artha*, *kama* and *moksha*." Further, Shriji Maharaj states, "Consider these words to be my form, and obey the Shikshapatri with the greatest reverence."

Maharaj has instructed to all that the Shikshapatri be read daily. Those who cannot read should listen to its recital. If this is not possible it should be worshipped daily. On days when

none of these commands are obeyed, Maharaj has instructed his devotees to fast on that day (Vachanamrut, Gadhada III 1).

Harmony in speech, thought and actions is possible only by observing the Shikshapatri. The codes of the Shikshapatri are not merely for cleanliness and good behaviour, but are divine practices to be observed for Shriji Maharaj's blessings; sincerely observing them leads to *moksha*.

However, these moral principles cannot be internalized without the help of a guide. Surrendering to the manifest God-realized Satpurush provides the spiritual strength to observe Shriji Maharaj's principles.

The merits of previous births lead a spiritual aspirant to the Satpurush. When the aspirant accepts the Satpurush as guru and firmly resolves to observe the five basic vows, the guru initiates one into the Sampradaya with the mantra: "*Dhanyo'smi purna-kāmo'smi, nishpāpo nirbhayah sukhi; Akshara-guru-yogena, Swāminārāyan-āshrayāt.*"¹" By reciting this mantra the guru frees the aspirant from their past sins, leading them to Shriji Maharaj's refuge and making them a *satsangi*. The guru, sadhus or devotees then place a *kanthi* made of two strands of threaded *tulsi* beads, around the devotee's neck. The two strands of the *kanthi* symbolize the aspirant's refuge in Akshar and Purushottam. Devotees wear this *kanthi* for the rest of their lives (Shikshapatri 41)². God always protects a devotee who has accepted this *kanthi* as a symbol of his refuge.

NITYA KARMA (DAILY RITUALS)

Nitya Karma refers to our daily rituals, or actions that we perform every day. This section details the principles in the

1. This mantra should be recited as written. The meaning of this mantra is as follows: "Having taken refuge in Swaminarayan Bhagwan through the association of the Aksharbrahma guru, I am blessed, I am fulfilled, I am without sins, I am fearless and I am blissful."

2. The number represents the verse number in the Shikshapatri.

Shikshapatri that describe a devotee's *nitya karma* (specifically those described in Shikshapatri *shlokas* 40 to 54 and 61 to 64).

All sadhus and householder devotees of Shriji Maharaj should daily wake up before sunrise and meditate on God. Waking up early in the morning increases energy and mental peace. Also, rising early fills our mind with noble thoughts. In this peaceful atmosphere we experience great joy in meditation, worship and recollection of the divine incidents of God. Waking up late, however, not only deprives us of these benefits, but also gradually strips us of our virtues. Today, the habit of late rising is widespread, but it is a bad habit. Therefore, all devotees should awake before sunrise.

After going to the toilet one should wash one's hands thoroughly with soap. One should then sit in one place to brush one's teeth, and clean the wash basin when finished.

After brushing one should bathe or shower. Our shastras emphasize the importance of taking a morning bath with clean water. A person is considered impure until they bathe in the morning. In addition, one can perform puja only after bathing. It is believed that bathing with cold water on the banks of a river or a lake is best, because bathing with cold water generates strength and energy in our body. After bathing, wear washed clothes and then perform puja. One who performs puja without wearing an upper garment is considered naked.

For puja, we spread two pieces of clean cloth on the floor. We should place our *murtis* on one cloth and sit on the other one. If we don't sit on one of the three types of mats or if we sit directly on the floor, our puja is considered incomplete.

We should sit facing east or north for puja, since our shastras explain that east represents the direction of the devas. In addition, our shastras prohibit sitting facing west or south for puja.

Male devotees should apply a *tilak*, a U-shaped mark, of

sandalwood paste on their foreheads and then imprint a *chandlo*, a round mark of kumkum inside the *tilak*. All male devotees, young and old, whether students, employees or businessmen, should imprint a *tilak-chandlo* on their foreheads.

There are many benefits of wearing a *tilak-chandlo*. By applying a *tilak-chandlo* on our forehead, Shriji Maharaj and the Satpurush will protect us from influences that lead us to act immorally. Applying a *tilak-chandlo* gives awareness that we should not act immorally. In addition, if students form a habit of applying the *tilak-chandlo* from early childhood, they will gain exceptional moral and spiritual strength.

If one does not apply a *tilak-chandlo*, however, the mind becomes weak and one is tempted to act inappropriately.

As the *tilak-chandlo* influences our inclination to act morally, it represents dharma.

Female devotees, married or unmarried, should apply only a round kumkum *chandlo* on their foreheads; widows should not put on a *tilak* or *chandlo*.

As far as possible, the *tilak* and *chandlo* should be applied using sanctified sandalwood paste and kumkum offered to God. The *tilak* and *chandlo* should be applied carefully so as to look decent.³

Then one should offer *mansi* puja. *Mansi* puja is a special form of meditation in which one pictures oneself serving God and his choicest devotee. This form of worship is scientifically proven to calm the mind. Before offering *mansi* puja, one should calm the mind by contemplating on one's *atma*, believing it as the manifest God-realized guru. Beholding Shriji Maharaj in one's heart and while remembering the manifest Satpurush, *mansi* puja should be offered five times a day:

3. The *tilak* represents the holy feet of Bhagwan Swaminarayan (Purushottam) and the *chandlo* represents Aksharbrahma, or the ideal devotee. The *tilak-chandlo* symbolizes that one must become *aksharrup* and offer devotion to Purushottam.

1. At dawn, one should request Maharaj to awaken; then visualize his morning activities.
2. At about 11 a.m. one should offer lunch with full devotion and then request Maharaj to take afternoon rest.
3. At 4 p.m. one should wake Maharaj up; then offer fruits and other snacks.
4. At dusk offer *arti* and the evening meal.
5. At night before going to sleep, offer prayers.

Mansi puja should be offered with reverence and devotion and with the best offerings that can be imagined (Vachanamrut, Gadhada III 23).

Thereafter, one should offer worship to the *murtis* given by our gurus. The *murtis* of Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj, Bhagatji Maharaj, Shastriji Maharaj, Yogiji Maharaj, Pramukh Swami Maharaj and Mahant Swami Maharaj should be worshipped in puja (62). After reciting a *mantra* to invoke God in the *murtis*, one should chant the Swaminarayan *mahamantra* while turning the *mala*. After performing five *pradakshinas*, male devotees should perform a *tapni mala* by standing on leg and offer five *sashtang dandvats*. Female devotees should offer five *panchang pranams*. All should offer an additional sixth prostration, as commanded by Shriji Maharaj in Vachanamrut, Gadhada II 40, to ask for forgiveness for having knowingly or unknowingly offended a devotee by thought, word or deed.

Sashtang prostration means lying flat on the stomach with the head, chest, thighs, feet, and hands touching the floor, and the eyes, speech and mind focused on God. *Sashtang* is considered the best type of prostration.

Thal is then offered in *mansi* puja. Then we should ask for forgiveness for any mistakes we may have committed during the puja and offer prayers. After this, one should recite the mantra

requesting God to return from the *murtis* to our hearts. In this way, one's daily personal puja is completed.

Thereafter, as commanded in the Vachanamrut by Shriji Maharaj (Vachanamrut, Gadhada III 1), one should read or recite loudly the verses of the Shikshapatri and other shastras.

Due to old age or other adversity, if one becomes weak, one's daily puja should be given to another devotee and one should act as per one's strength (61).

All my *satsangis* should go to the mandir⁴ every evening and sing loudly the kirtans of God (63). On festival days sing the kirtans of God in the mandir to the accompaniment of musical instruments. (64). The evening *arti* is graced by the presence of Shriji Maharaj, Aksharbrahma and innumerable liberated souls, and so the evening *arti* should be attended by all.

Never go empty-handed for darshan of one's guru, a deity and a king; one should offer money, food grains, fruits or flowers according to one's capacity (37).

One should listen to discourses or narrations from the shastras. Sanskrit and other language shastras should be studied as per one's ability (65). One should sing cheshta – Dhyanchintamani and Lilachintamani – every night and mentally visualize God retiring to bed. One who recites the cheshta is rewarded with the merits of having listened to the four Vedas, six Darshans, eighteen Purans and other shastras. By thinking constantly of God's divine actions and form, one's mind becomes attached to Shriji Maharaj. All worldly activities performed throughout the day come to rest and, even in deep sleep, one retains contact with God. Therefore, every *satsangi* should make it a rule to retire to bed only after the recitation of cheshta.

Next, we will refer to the codes of pure conduct as laid down in the Shikshapatri.

4. If there is no mandir nearby, one should perform *arti* before one's *ghar* mandir.

AHIMSA (NON-VIOLENCE)

'Ahimsa paramo dharmaha' – Non-violence is the highest ethical code laid down in all shastras. No one should harm any creature through body, mind or speech; nor should anyone intentionally kill insects such as lice, bugs, etc. Even for the purpose of performing *yagnas*, none should kill animals. This is because it is a grave sin to kill animals and offer them as sacrifices. Shriji Maharaj even refused to pluck spinach leaves in Jagannathpuri from the ground, saying that it also was life. Never, for women, wealth or kingdom, one should ever, in any way, harm or kill any person (11, 12, 13). King Uparicharvasu, even though he ruled the whole earth, practised ahimsa. Shriji Maharaj has explained in the Vachanamrut that non-violence is the dharma through which one attains liberation (Vachanamrut, Gadhada I-69). Harsh words that cause others mental pain also tantamount to *himsa*.

SATYA (TRUTH)

Always speak in a truthful, loving and beneficial manner. Never speak untruths. One should never tell a lie even for financial or other gains. However, one should never utter truth which may cause danger to one's life or to another's. For example, if a butcher chasing a cow to kill it asks, "Where has the cow gone?" one should tell a lie to save the life of the cow.

ETHICAL CODE

Dharma is virtuous conduct. Even if what one does were to be great benefit, one should never act contrary to dharma. This is because dharma alone is the giver of the fruits of one's efforts. Therefore, one should never abandon one's dharma out of greed or gain (73). If great people of the past have acted contrary to dharma, then such actions should not be copied. Only actions that are in accordance with dharma should be followed (74).

Through this injunction, Shriji Maharaj has explained that all deeds should be based on dharma. Avoid unrighteous practices, such as indulging in eating meat, drinking alcohol, smoking, and other unwholesome thoughts or habits, regardless of the temptation. All true rewards are earned by dharma only.

Shriji Maharaj commands that one should not steal, even for the sake of dharma. He specifically prohibited stealing or using unrighteous means when serving at a mandir, or for a deity or sadhus. It is essential for a devotee to be completely moral and righteous.

SUICIDE

Formerly people hoping to attain heaven used to commit suicide at places of pilgrimage. One should never commit suicide, even at a pilgrim place. One should never commit suicide out of depression for an improper action or in a fit of anger (14). If some improper action has been committed by oneself or others, then one should not sever or cut any part of one's own body or that of others using a weapon. Even in anger, one should not cut any part of one's body or that of others (16).

The Vedas proclaim, “Of all things, the *atma* should be protected.” Liberation can be obtained only through the human form. The purpose of the human body is to offer devotion to God and is attained after a lapse of 35 million *prakrut pralays*. Therefore, taking into consideration the importance and rarity of this human body, one should never commit suicide.

PROHIBITION OF MEAT EATING

Eating meat involves the killing of animals. Killing is a grave sin. Shriji Maharaj stopped the incorrect practice of animal

sacrifices in *yagnas* and instructed that one should never eat flesh, even if it be the remnants of offerings in a sacrifice or even in circumstances of great difficulty. One should never consume the offerings made to a deity to whom flesh and wine are offered. Even uncleansed food grains and unsieved flour should not be used, as they are likely to contain small insects.

Do not drink unfiltered water or milk. Do not bathe with water which contains small organisms (30). The Mahabharat declares, “A person who does not take wine and meat is as good as a person who performs the Ashwamedh Yagna every month.”

PROHIBITION OF LIQUOR

Drinking of liquor arouses *tamas* (darkness) within. Do not drink the three types of *sura* or eleven types of liquor, even if they have been offered to God (15). Manu Smriti lists wine drinking as one of the five grave sins. Never take even medicines if they contain alcohol or meat. Never take medicines given by doctors whose conduct is not known to you (31).

Meat eating and wine drinking are considered by some to be a necessity in this modern age. They have been adopted either for making money in business or for promoting a person’s social status. However, such indulgence is a grave sin and cannot be forgiven under any circumstances. *Satsangis* should never consume meat or drink alcohol. Those followers going abroad for the sake of studies or for some other purpose should also strictly observe these rules. Experience confirms that one can live even in a foreign country without consuming meat or alcohol, i.e. as a strict vegetarian and teetotaller. So this rule must not be violated under any temptation of social status, company or material benefit. Observance of this rule is of utmost priority obtaining the grace of Shriji Maharaj.

THEFT

Never steal; not even for religious work. Even those who donate stolen articles go to hell, and the merits of donation go to the party whose money was stolen. Even taking fuel, flowers, etc. without the consent of their owners is regarded as theft. Not returning things that are borrowed is also regarded as a form of theft. Wealth obtained through fraudulent means never brings happiness. Never enter or exit stealthily. Never lodge at a place without the owner's permission. Theft is also considered as one of the five grave sins that one must never commit (17, 33).

ADDICTIONS

Intoxicating substances such as hashish, morphine, marijuana, opium, tobacco, heroin, etc. should not be taken, drunk or inhaled. They artificially stimulate the body and mind, thus making one a slave of addictions. Gunatitanand Swami has said, "The amount wastefully spent by *kusangis* is more than enough to meet the daily needs of a *satsangi*."

Gambling in any form – playing cards, betting on races, speculating, etc. – are also various kinds of vices and must be shunned. Films and dramas must not be viewed. Yudhishtir lost his kingdom because of his passion for gambling with dice. Addictions increase one's greed and consequently cause ruin. Wealth obtained by dishonest means does not bring happiness. Therefore, one should keep away from these vices. However, if by bad company, one is lured into the indulgence of any of these habits, they must be shaken off by satsang and the company of sadhus and devotees.

ADULTERY

One must not commit adultery either through mind, speech or body. Men should not look at women with an immoral eye

and vice versa. *Brahmacharya* is the greatest virtue and earns the immense blessings of God. In this day and age innumerable vices arise when men and women mix freely with one another and take undue liberty. These incidents ultimately spell moral degeneration for the people involved. Therefore, there is a need for the strict practice of this discipline. *Satsangis* should never look at the opposite gender with evil thoughts and all should abide by the ethical codes prescribed (18).

DISCRIMINATION IN DIETARY HABITS

Bhagwan Swaminarayan has stressed the ethical code relating to the *varna* and *ashram* of all people. Those who transgress these tenets start eating food prepared by people of any background and, as a result, they suffer from many illnesses. None should eat or drink anything that is prepared or served by people of unacceptable background, even if it is *prasad* offered to a deity. The ready-made food served in shops and restaurants is often prepared from unfiltered milk, ghee and water. Besides, it may be adulterated food and, therefore, should not be eaten. Onions and garlic also should not be eaten as they provoke the state of *tamoguna*. Scriptures state, “Purity in food habits purifies the self and this results in the realization of Brahma.” Therefore, purity in food habits is essential to progress on the spiritual path (19). Eating whatever and wherever one likes, without discretion, maligns one’s wisdom and prevents one from becoming a good devotee.

SWADHARMA

One must not violate the code of one’s dharma. One should never act in a way that is not in keeping with the stage of one’s life or one which is not based on the shastras. If an ascetic gives up the code of his order and takes to the dharma of householders,

then he is said to have accepted another's dharma. The Gita also insists on strict adherence to one's own dharma.

Destroying the barriers of dharma – the protector of all – is hypocrisy. One should not follow or devote oneself to a dharma that is not in agreement with the Vedas or is atheistic. One should not follow cults which do not have the sanction of the shastras, or follow those gurus whose behaviour is not in accordance with the scriptural codes.

PUBLIC CLEANLINESS

Shatanand Muni writes in the Satsangijivan, "Never urinate, defaecate or spit in public places forbidden by society and the shastras: mandirs, river banks, lakesides, roads, cultivated farms, under trees, gardens, parks and other such places (32).

CLOTHING

Never wear improper clothing through which body parts can be seen (38). Super-fine, transparent or mini garments should not be worn. These styles of clothing arouse sensuality in the mind (38).

OCCASIONAL OBSERVANCES

Eclipses and other occasional events require observance only when the occasion arises. The rites to be performed during eclipses are described below.

ECLIPSES

At the time of a solar or lunar eclipse, instantly stop all activities and chant the mantra of God in a purified state (86). During the period of the eclipse no other work should be done. Only the praises of God should be sung. During an eclipse the atmosphere is impure. Thus, we should not touch clothes or

even cooked food. However, if *darbh* – a kind of grass – is spread over pickles, milk, buttermilk, oil, etc. they will not be affected by the atmosphere.

One should not eat during the four prahars before a solar eclipse and three prahars before a lunar eclipse. After the eclipse, all should bathe with the clothes one is wearing. Thereafter, householders should donate to the deities and the needy as per their ability and sadhus should perform the *pujan* of God (86, 87).

RELAXATION IN THE OBSERVANCE OF DHARMA

The *apad* dharma prescribed in the shastras should never be adopted in times of minor difficulties (48). Relaxation of duties is prescribed by the shastras for absolute emergencies only. This is known as *apad* dharma. This is the dharma allowed in periods of great difficulty. The shastras permit one who is seriously ill to eat on the day of a fast, but one should not use this relaxation to take food during a minor illness. The Mahabharat instructs, “*Apad* dharma should be resorted to only in the face of death. Once the calamity has cleared, one should observe the normal rules of dharma.”

In the Chhandogya Upanishad, there is a story of Ushasti Rishi. Ushasti did not get food for many days. He was about to die. On his last breath he went to a *mahavat*, who was at that time eating putrefied black lentils, and asked for some food. The *mahavat* gave him the half-eaten food from his dish, which Ushasti ate. Thereafter, the *mahavat* offered him water. Ushasti said, “No, I can stay alive with the black lentils for now. I shall not drink the water from which you have already drunk.” This should be recognized as appropriate practice of *apad* dharma.

Today, observance of dharma has deteriorated because people have started treating minor problems as *apad* dharma.

ATONEMENT

We have now seen some of the various ethical rules prescribed by Bhagwan Swaminarayan. If knowingly or unknowingly any of these rules are transgressed, then for purification, rules for atonement are also given in shastras such as the *Satsangijivan*. Similarly, the words of the God-realization sadhu are also considered as dharma. Therefore, whatever he instructs one to do in atonement for a sin purifies one from that sin. However, this should be done with full faith. After having atoned for the sin the devotee becomes purified. They should not then be considered a sinner (92).

2. Sagram

In 1813 (Samvat 1869), a terrible famine struck Gujarat. It was a time when even rich merchants were scavenging for grains; one can only imagine the plight of the poor! Sagram was a poor man who lived in Limli, a village near Vadhwan. Suffering from starvation and overcome with despair, he set out with his wife to seek help from Muktanand Swami.

As he walked his foot suddenly hit something. He looked down and noticed a shiny silver ornament. It appeared quite large, weighing about half a kilo. However, as he was a devout *satsangi*, the thought of picking it up did not cross his mind. However, since times were hard, he became concerned that his wife may be tempted to take it. He quickly kicked some dust over the ornament to hide it from view.

Meanwhile, his wife was following a short distance behind him. She was engaged in recalling Shriji Maharaj's divine *murti* when she noticed Sagram occupied with something on the road. Wondering what her husband was doing, she caught up to him and asked about his curious behaviour. Sagram



Sagram and his wife show the valuable ornament lying on the road
innocently explained himself.

His wife exclaimed, “Oh! You have simply covered dust with dust! To me, anything that belongs to other is as useless as dust.” Sagram was humbled. But, internally, he was overjoyed by her understanding.

They both continued to walk. After some time, they met some people who seemed distressed. The group of strangers sceptically assessed Sagram and his wife. From appearances, they felt that Sagram and his wife were not trustworthy. They asked Sagram, “Did you come across an ornament lying on the road?”

“Yes, we have seen it. It is lying over there.” Sagram described the exact place where they had seen the ornament. However, they did not trust Sagram. They felt it to be highly improbable that anyone, especially someone like Sagram, would have left such a valuable ornament lying on the road. It was more likely, they felt, that he was lying and was actually trying to keep it for himself. With this suspicion, they took Sagram along with them to retrieve the ornament. When they came to that part

of the road, they pushed aside the dust and, to their surprise, uncovered the missing ornament. Grateful, they offered Sagram and his wife a reward. Sagram, however, politely declined, explaining, “We are devotees of Bhagwan Swaminarayan; we were just following our religious vows.” They were amazed at the integrity of Sagram and his wife.

Thereafter, Sagram and his wife continued along the dusty road. After an exhausting journey, they finally arrived in Surat. When they went to Muktanand Swami, he greeted Sagram and asked him how he was coping with the famine. Sagram hesitantly revealed his desperate situation. Muktanand Swami trusted Sagram completely. He arranged for Sagram and his wife to work for a devotee to tide them over this difficult period. After the famine period, Sagram and his wife returned home.

Sagram was born in the Devipujak (Vaghri) community. At that time, society considered people of this community to be low, immoral and uncivilized. Regardless of society’s prejudices, Muktanand Swami had initiated Sagram as a devotee of Shriji Maharaj. Because Sagram moulded his life according to Shriji Maharaj’s wishes, his life became purer than that of even the Brahmins, who at that time were considered the cultural and intellectual elite. Sagram had imbibed such high standards of morality that even if he accidentally touched a woman other than his wife, he would bathe and fast on that day and thus atone for even this tiny lapse in his vow of *brahmacharya*.

Word of such miraculous transformations of character spread through society. Someone once told Vajesinh, the King of Bhavnagar, “Swaminarayan transforms Devipujaks into Vaishnavs.” In disbelief, the king had Sagram summoned to his court. Sagram came to the royal court of Bhavnagar State and sat humbly at the feet of the king. Searching for the reason

for Sagram's transformation, the king probed, "Sagram! Has Swaminarayan shown you any miracles?"

"Oh! My Master, you are the king of the kingdom, whereas we are Devipujaks. We lived brutishly until Swaminarayan inspired us to live a pure life by giving us spiritual vows. So, for someone like me to be able to even sit here before you is itself a great miracle. " The king was pleased with Sagram's frank and reasoned response.

Sagram nurtured a secret wish in his mind: "Maharaj travels from town to town and sanctifies the homes of many devotees; how wonderful it would be if he were to come and sanctify my small hut." Truly pleased with Sagram's faithful devotion, Shriji Maharaj once decided to fulfil Sagram's inner wish. One night, Shriji Maharaj went unannounced to Sagram's hut. When Sagram realized that Shriji Maharaj had come to fulfil his wish, his joy knew no bounds. Sagram's hut was so small, there was hardly enough room to stand. Sagram quickly brought a small cot for Maharaj to sit on, and unable to hold back his enthusiasm, danced while singing, "An elephant has entered my hut!" To Sagram, Shriji Maharaj's visit to his humble dwelling was as inconceivable as fitting an elephant in a small hut. Sagram's wife also rejoiced at Shriji Maharaj's unexpected visit. Shriji Maharaj lovingly ate what she prepared for him. Both were overwhelmed by Maharaj's compassion. In those days, it was considered unthinkable for even a high-caste person, let alone God, to visit a Devipujak's hut. From this incident, Sagram realized that in God's eyes, it is a devotee's devotion, and not their social status that is important.

Although people often found it surprising, Sagram was well-versed in the shastras. Once, he defeated Shivram Bhatt of Shiyani in a spiritual debate. As a result, Shivram Bhatt realized Shriji Maharaj's greatness and became his disciple.

3. Vyapakanand Swami

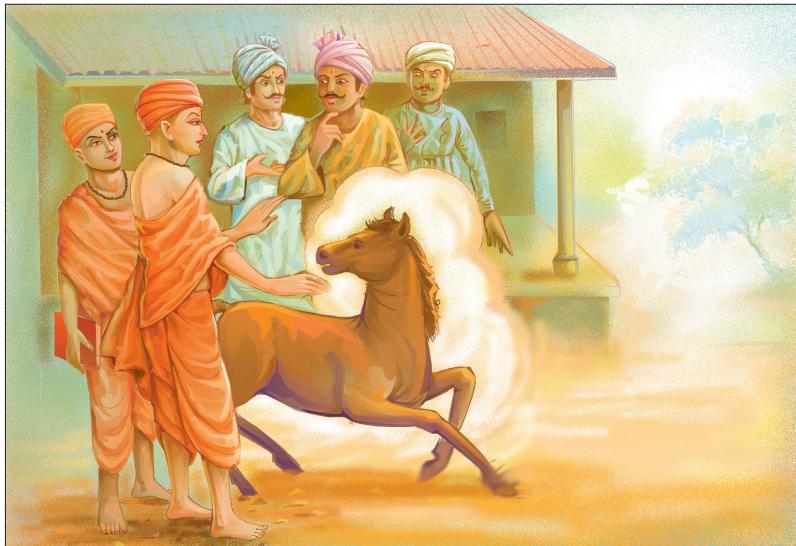
Shitaldas of Jharnaparna, a village in North India, once heard of Sadguru Ramanand Swami's greatness and decided to go to Faneni in Gujarat for his darshan. However, when he arrived in Faneni as a sannyasi, Shitaldas was disappointed to learn that Ramanand Swami had recently passed away.

Seeing Shitaldas's disappointment, Shriji Maharaj consoled him by promising him Ramanand Swami's darshan if he stayed back in Faneni. In anticipation of Ramanand Swami's darshan, Shitaldas agreed to stay.

Maharaj then asked Shitaldas to chant the 'Swaminarayan' mantra. As soon as Shitaldas began chanting 'Swaminarayan', a miracle occurred. By Shriji Maharaj's grace, he went into samadhi and experienced the divine bliss of God. When Shitaldas came out of samadhi, he narrated his divine experience, "Maharaj was seated on a lustrous throne in the divinely luminous Akshardham. Even Ramanand Swami was standing and offering prayers to Shriji Maharaj. I performed Maharaj's *pujan*. I wanted to perform *pujan* of all the *muktas* there. However, I was only one and there were infinite *muktas*.

"At that point, Shriji Maharaj suggested to me, 'Make a wish that if any avatar or Ramanand Swami is the Supreme God, Parabrahma Purna Purushottam, then may I assume infinite forms so that I can perform *pujan* of the infinite *muktas* simultaneously.' I recited this in my mind, but nothing happened.

"Then as proposed by Maharaj I made a wish that if Shriji Maharaj is supreme God, Purna Purushottam, then may I assume infinite forms and perform *pujan* of the infinite *muktas* simultaneously. As soon as I repeated this in my mind, I saw infinite forms of myself. I was able to simultaneously perform



Vyapakanand Swami revives the dead horse of Hamir Khachar

pujan of all. At that time, Ramanand Swami explained to me, 'Sahajanand Swami is God, the cause of all of the avatars, and we are his devoted servants.' So beautiful was Akshardham! So resplendent was Maharaj! Indescribable."

The entire assembly was spellbound by Shitaldas' words. As he was narrating his experience, many other devotees also went into samadhi and had similar experiences. Convinced of Shriji Maharaj's greatness, Shitaldas decided to take sadhu *diksha* from Maharaj. On that same day, Shriji Maharaj initiated him and named him Vyapakanand Swami.

Once during his travels, Vyapakanand Swami decided to rest at the ancient mandir of Vasukinag, near the village of Thangad. Sculpted stone statues of dancing women were positioned inside the dome of this mandir. As Vyapakanand Swami walked in, these sensual statues caught his attention. He felt that the statues were actually dancing. Realizing that he had become enchanted by their appearance, he said a prayer and quickly cleared his thoughts. He understood the validity

of Shriji Maharaj's rule forbidding sadhus from even looking at pictures or statues of women. From this incident, Vyapakanand Swami realized the importance of observing even the smallest of Shriji Maharaj's *niyams*.

Once, Vyapakanand Swami visited Hamir Khachar's home in Botad. As Vyapakanand Swami entered, he heard their grief-stricken cries. There was something wrong. Someone informed Swami that Hamir Khachar's horse had just died and he was unable to bear the loss; he was weeping as if he had lost his son. Vyapakanand Swami felt sorry for him. He took some water in his palm, and chanting the Swaminarayan mantra, sprinkled it over the dead horse. He then took the soul of a mosquito and transferred it into the dead horse. Immediately, the horse came back to life! Hamir Khachar was overjoyed and fell at Vyapakanand Swami's feet in gratitude.

Vyapakanand Swami later went to meet Shriji Maharaj in Jhinhavadar. However instead of greeting Vyapakanand Swami, Shriji Maharaj sarcastically told Khimbai, "Our God has arrived, so prepare a sumptuous *thal* for him."

Khimbai was confused. She asked, "Maharaj, who can be your God?"

"Vyapakanand Swami is our God," revealed Maharaj teasingly.

Dismayed by Maharaj's words, Vyapakanand Swami pleaded, "Maharaj! I am your servant. Please don't call me your God."

"You bring the dead back to life. That is why I am calling you God," Maharaj responded.

"I felt sorry for Hamir Khachar," clarified Vyapakanand Swami. "So I took a soul from one body and placed it into another. Please forgive me if I have made a mistake."

Maharaj then explained, "We have not come on this earth to bring the dead back to life. We have come to teach everyone the

true knowledge of *atma* and Paramatma. We want to remove everyone's ignorance and take them to Akshardham."

Maharaj continued, "It was due to my will that the horse came to life. What will happen when a king's son dies and you are unable to revive him? The king will have you put to death! So, from now on, stick to imparting wisdom, not performing miracles."

Overcome with remorse, Vyapakanand Swami begged for Maharaj's forgiveness. Then, as instructed by Maharaj, Vyapakanand Swami went to Gadhada.

4. Godi

The Swaminarayan Godi is traditionally sung prior to the evening *arti* at Swaminarayan mandirs. It is a collection of four *pads* (bhajans) written by Brahmanand Swami, in which he extols the glory of the Gunatit guru and worshipping God through his divine association. The first two *pads* are as follows.

RAAG PURAV

(1)

Sant samāgam kije, ho nishdin...1
Mān taji santanke mukhse, prem sudhāras pije...2
Antar kapat metke apnā, le unku man dije...3
Bhavdukh tale bale sab dushkrit, sabvidhi kāraj sije...4
Brahmānand kahe Saniki sobat, janma susfal kari lije...5

Meaning:

Associate with the Sant [Satpurush] day and night...1

Shed one's ego and drink the nectar of [divine] love from the Satpurush...2

Shed one's inner deceit; surrender the mind to him...3
Worldly miseries and sinful deeds are destroyed; all actions become fruitful...4

Brahmanand Swami says: make your life worthwhile by associating with such a Satpurush...5

(2)

*Sant param hitkāri, jagat māhi...1
Prabhupad pragat karāvat priti, bharam mitāvat bhāri...2
Param krupālu sakal jivan par, harisam sab dukhbāri...3
Trigunātit firat tanu tyāgi, rit jagatse nyāri...4
Brahmānandkahe Sanikisobat, milat hai pragat Murāri...5*

Meaning:

In this world, the Satpurush is our greatest benefactor...1
He takes us towards God and frees us from material illusions...2
He is compassionate towards every living being; he takes away all suffering...3

He is above the three *gunas*; his ways are different from those of this world...4

Brahmanand [Swami] says: the association of such a Satpurush is like meeting manifest God...5

5. Dhun

This dhun is sung immediately after the evening *arti*.

*Rāma-Krishna Govinda, jaya jaya Govinda!
Hare Rāma Govinda, jaya jaya Govinda!...1
Nārāyaṇa Hare, Swāminārāyaṇa Hare!
Swāminārāyaṇa Hare, Swāminārāyaṇa Hare!...2
Krishnadeva Hare, jaya jaya Krishnadeva Hare!
Jaya jaya Krishnadeva Hare,
jaya jaya Krishnadeva Hare!...3*

6. Shri Swaminarayan Ashtakam

These Sanskrit verses describing the glory of Bhagwan Swaminarayan are sung after the evening *arti* and *dhun*.

*Ananta-kotindu-ravi-prakāshe
Dhāmnyakshare murti-mataksharena;
Sārdham sthitam mukta-ganāvrutam cha
Shri Swāminārāyanam-ānamāmi....1*

I bow to Bhagwan Swaminarayan who is surrounded by innumerable *muktas* (liberated souls) and the eternal Aksharbrahma in his divine abode, Akshardham – which is as bright as infinite suns and moons. (1)

Brahmādi-samprārthanayā pruthivyām
 Jātam samuktam cha sabāksharam cha;
 Sarvāvatāresh-vavatārinam tvām
 Shri Swāminārāyanam-ānamāmi....2

I bow to Bhagwan Swaminarayan, the supreme incarnation who – after hearing the prayers of Brahmā and other deities – has manifested on this earth with the divine abode of Aksharbrahma as well as the *muktas*. (2)

*Dush-prāpyam-anyai kathinair-upāyai
 Samādhi-saukhyam hatha-yoga-mukhyai;
 Nijāshritebhyo dadatam dayālum
 Shri Swāminārāyanam-ānamāmi....3*

I bow to Bhagwan Swaminarayan, who has graced his disciples by giving them the bliss of samadhi, rarely attained even after performing hatha yoga and other difficult sadhanas. (3)

*Lokottarair-bhaktajamānsh-charitrai
 Rāhlā-dayantam cha bhuvi-bhramantam;
 Yagnānsh-cha tanvānam-apārasatvam
 Shri Swāminārāyanam-ānamāmi....4*

I bow to Bhagwan Swaminarayan who travelled on this earth, performed *yagnas*, accomplished many noble tasks and whose extraordinary divine actions brought great joy to his disciples. (4)

*Ekāntikam sthāpayitum dharāyām
 Dharmam prakurvāntam-amulya-vārtāb;
 Vachāb-sudhāsh-cha prakirvantam-urvāyām
 Shri Swāminārāyanam-ānamāmi....5*

I bow to Bhagwan Swaminarayan, who, to establish *ekāntik* dharma on this earth, delivered inspiring sermons and showered nectar in the form of the Vachanamrut. (5)

*Vishvesha-bhaktim sukarām vidhātum
 Bruhanti ramyāni mahital-esmin;
 Devālayānyāshu vinirmimānam
 Shri Swāminārāyanam-ānamāmi....6*

I bow to Bhagwan Swaminarayan, who swiftly built beautiful, grand mandirs on this earth so that people can easily offer devotion to the God, the master of the universe. (6)

*Vināshakam sansruti-bandhanānām
 Manushya-kalyāna-karam mahishtham;
 Pravartayāntam bhuvi sampradāyam
 Shri Swāminārāyanam-ānamāmi....7*

I bow to Bhagwan Swaminarayan, who founded this great Swaminarayan Sampradaya on this earth, which has helped people in shattering the bondage of this world and which has delivered ultimate liberation to humankind. (7)

*Sadaiva Sārangapurasya ramye,
Sumandire byaksharadhāma-tulye;
Sahāksharam mukta-yutam vasantam,
Shri Swāminārāyanam-ānamāmi....8*

I bow to Bhagwan Swaminarayan whose *murti* has been consecrated along with Aksharbrahma [Gunatitanand Swami] and *mukta* [Gopalanand Swami] in the beautiful Sarangpur mandir, which is comparable to Akshardham. (8)

7. Prarthana

*Nirvikalp uttam ati, nishchay tav Ghanshyām;
Māhātmya-gnān-yut bhakti tav, ekāntik sukhdhām.1*

O Ghanshyam! Please grant me the highest level of faith in your divine form.

May I develop unparalleled devotion towards you, together with the knowledge of your glory. (1)

*Mohime tav bhaktapano, tāme koi prakār;
Dosh na rabe koi jātko, suniyo Dharmakumār.2*

May there never be any type of shortcomings in my devotion to you.

Please listen to my request, O Son of Dharma[dev]! (2)

*Tumbāro tav haribhaktako, droh kabu nabi hoy;
Ekāntik tav dāsko, dije samāgam moy.3*

May I never malign you or your devotees.

Please forever grant me the company of your *ekāntik* devotee. (3)

*Nāth nirantar darsh tav, tav dāsanko dās;
Ehi māgu kari vinay Hari, sadā rākhiyo pās.4*

Please always grace me with your darshan as well as the darshan of your devotees.

O Hari! Please always keep me close to you; that is my earnest request. (4)

He Krupālo! He Bhakta-pate! Bhakta-vatsal! suno bāt;

Dayā-sindho! Stavan kari, māgu vastu sāt.5

Please listen, O compassionate one! The master and succour of your devotees!

O merciful one! I request that you grant me the {above} seven requests. (5)

Sahajānand Mahārājke, sab satsangi sujān;

Tāku hoy dradh vartano, Shikshāpatri pramān.6

All devotees of Sahajanand [Swami] Maharaj are wise.

Their conduct is firm as per {the *niyams* prescribed in} the Shikshapatri. (6)

So patri me ati bade, niyam ekādash joy;

Tāki vikti karat hu, suniyo sab chitta proy.7

In that Shikshapatri, eleven main *niyams* are described.

I will give their details; please all listen attentively. (7)

Hinsā na karni jantuki, partriyā sangko tyāg;

Māns na khāvat madyaku, pivat nahi badbhāg.8

Never harm any living being; do not associate with women not closely related to you.

Do not eat meat; do not consume any intoxicating beverages. (8)

Vidhvāku sparshat nahi, karat na ātmaghāt;

Chori na karni kāhuki, kalank na koiku lagāt. 9

Do not associate with widows; do not commit suicide.

Never steal; do not falsely accuse anyone. (9)

Nindat nahi koy devku, bin-khapto nahi khāt;

Vimukh jivake vadanse, kathā suni nahi jāt. 10

Never criticize any deities; do not eat food prepared inappropriately.



The Ocean Deity rewards the four brothers for their unity

Do not listen to discourses given by non-believers. (10)

Ehi dharmake niyamame, barto sab haridās;

Bhajo Shri Sahajānand pad, chhbodi aur sab āsh. 11

These codes of conduct should be observed by all devotees of Hari.

Worship at the feet of Shri Sahajanand [Swami], forsaking all other desires. (11)

Rahi ekādash niyamame, karo Shri Hari-pad prit;

Premānand kabe dhāmame, jāo nishank jag-jit. 12

Live by these eleven niyams and attach yourself to Shri Hari.

Premanand says that you will, without a doubt, overcome worldly desires and attain Akshardham. (12)

8. Ratnakar and the Four Brothers

Once, there were four brothers who were very united, despite their extreme poverty. Together, they began to think about how to

earn money. They had heard that the Ocean was called Ratnakar ('maker of gems') because it contains so many gems. Together, they decided to please the Ocean to earn its favour. They hoped it would give them some gems and free them from poverty.

With this thought, they went to the seashore and began their austerities. In order to maximize the time spent in worship, they would begin right after their morning bath and prayers, and eat only once a day. The four brothers divided the different tasks of preparing their daily meal amongst themselves. One brother would go into town and beg for flour, while another would draw water from a well. The third brother would collect firewood, and the fourth would prepare the meal. Once their meal was prepared, they would all sit together and eat.

The four brothers performed very challenging austerities. Moreover, they worked in harmony and were never jealous of each other.

The Ocean was pleased with the united efforts of the four brothers. However, before he would fulfil their wish for wealth, the Ocean decided to test the unity of the four brothers.

One day, when all four brothers were engaged in their work, the Ocean assumed the form of a Brahmin and met each of them in turn. He first approached the brother who had gone to beg for flour. He tried to turn him against his brothers by saying, "I just met one of your brothers. Despite the fact that you are working so hard, he is saying bad things about you behind your back..." Before the Brahmin could say another word, the first brother retorted, "My brother would never say something like that."

With a downcast face, the Brahmin quickly left. Then the Brahmin approached each of the other three brothers individually and repeated the same line. They all responded in the same way as the first brother.

The Ocean was truly satisfied with the bond of unity among the four brothers. Their behaviour made it confident that if it gave them wealth they would neither fight amongst themselves for it, nor waste it. Accordingly, the Ocean appeared before them and rewarded them with a handful of priceless jewels.

We all know that ‘where there is unity, there is peace.’ Moreover, Muktanand Swami has said in his kirtan, ‘*Thai ek-manaā Prabhune bhajiye*’, meaning, ‘Let us become united and worship God.’ Yogiji Maharaj also used to teach us to always keep ‘*samp, suradhbhav, ekta*’ – ‘unity, friendship, oneness’.

Only if we maintain unity amongst ourselves and refrain from saying bad things about each other will God and the Satpurush be pleased.

9. Devji Bhakta of Nenpur

During the course of their *vicharan* Kripanand Swami and Gunatitanand Swami arrived at Devjibhai’s house in Nenpur. Devjibhai was a dedicated devotee of Bhagwan Swaminarayan. When the sadhus arrived, Devjibhai welcomed them and arranged for them to stay the night. He offered them something to eat. However, they politely refused. Devjibhai then sat with the sadhus to listen to their spiritual discourses.

Devjibhai listened while the sadhus recalled Shriji Maharaj’s divine episodes. Soon the clock struck midnight. Devjibhai suggested, “Swami! You have walked a great distance to my house. You must be tired, so please rest.”

Devjibhai then began to walk towards his farm. As Gunatitanand Swami and Kripanand Swami prepared to retire for the night, they noticed that Devjibhai was going somewhere. Wondering where he was going so late at night, they asked, “When will you go to sleep?”

Devjibhai casually explained, “Swami! I will make go around my farm and then sit down to turn 200 *malas*. Sleep will then come and stand at a distance from me. It will come to me when I call for it.” Hearing this, the sadhus were greatly surprised.

Devjibhai was an *ekantik* devotee of Maharaj. Once, when Shriji Maharaj was doing *mala* in the assembly, Sura Khachar asked out of curiosity, “Maharaj! When we do *mala* we chant your name, but whose name do you chant when you do *mala*?”

To everyone’s surprise Maharaj answered, “I chant the name of my devotees.”

“Which devotees?” asked Sura Khachar. He started to suggest names, one after another.

“It’s true that they are all devotees, but they are not mentioned as I turn the beads of my *mala*.” Maharaj then turned one bead of his *mala* and announced, “Devjibhai.” Thus, Devjibhai was such a great devotee that Shriji Maharaj considered him worthy of remembering when he turned the *mala*.

As a result of Devjibhai’s company, his wife was just as devout as him.

Devjibhai had a son, who was gifted with the constant darshan of Shriji Maharaj. When his son grew older, marriage requests started to pour in. Devjibhai and his wife, however, felt, “If we get him to marry, he will lose his ability to constantly enjoy the bliss of Maharaj’s darshan.”

Around that time, through Maharaj’s wish, their son unexpectantly died. Devjibhai and his wife took comfort in the knowledge that Maharaj had taken their son to Akshardham, his divine abode.

Concerned that sympathizers would come to their house to mourn, Devjibhai suggested to his wife, “If we stay here, then our relatives will continue to come to us to grieve and express their pain. Instead, I’ll go to our farm, while you take a pot of

ghee and go to meet Shriji Maharaj. Offer it to Maharaj and wish him 'Jay Swaminarayan' on my behalf." She readily agreed.

Soon after, she left for Gadhada with a pot full of ghee balanced on her head. When she arrived, Maharaj was eating lunch on a porch in Dada Khachar's *darbar*. She carefully placed the pot of ghee on the floor and bowed to Maharaj from a distance. Shriji Maharaj recognized her and asked about her husband, "Is Patel happy?"

"Maharaj! Patel was happy, but he is even happier now," replied Devjibhai's wife.

Although Shriji Maharaj knew about her son's recent death, he asked on behalf of everyone else, "What happened? Please do tell us."

As she narrated the events in detail, Laduba, Jivuba and Harji Thakkar all stood listening attentively. When she had finished, Maharaj related, "Look at this devotee's understanding. She experiences happiness even though her young son has unexpectedly died. Whereas here, ever since five-year-old Hiruba [Panchuba's daughter] passed away, everyone has been grieving. They have been so overcome with sorrow, that they have even stopped preparing my *thal*."

Shriji Maharaj continued, "If anyone should lament, it should be Harji Thakkar, since Hiruba was his mother in her previous birth. Because she had a desire to offer me food, she was born in this *darbar* and passed away soon after feeding me milk and *puris*." Laduba and Jivuba's grief soon disappeared, and they all mentally bowed with great respect to Devjibhai's wife.

10. Guru-Shishya

GURU

In the word 'guru', 'gu' means darkness, and 'ru' means

light. A guru is someone who removes darkness, in the form of ignorance, and replaces it with light, in the form of truth. All souls are enveloped in *maya*'s dark veil of ignorance. As a result they are ignorant of their true identity, and therefore vain and possessive. However, a guru is someone who is never affected by *maya*. Bhagwan Swaminarayan reveals in the Vedras: "The guru is Brahma (Aksharbrahma)."

While playing *ras* during the Pushpadolotsav festival in Sarangpur, Shriji Maharaj recited Kabir's kirtan '*Sadguru khele Vasant*' and asked, "Who is the *sadguru* that Kabir is referring to in his kirtan?"

"You are the *sadguru* that he's talking about," answered the sadhus.

Maharaj then touched Gunatitanand Swami's chest with the end of his stick and revealed, "The *sadguru* that Kabir is referring to is Gunatitanand Swami. He is my abode – Brahmadham (Akshardham)."

The *brahmaswarup* Satpurush, who is *gunatit*, that is, beyond the influence of the three *gunas* – *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* – is the only true guru. The guru is the gateway through which one can reach God. The guru purifies the soul by making it *brahmarup*, free from *maya*, and attaches it to the *bhakti* and *seva* of God.

The Kathopanishad guides, "Arise! Awake! Attain the Satpurush and the knowledge of the soul." The Shrimad Bhagvat also advises that an aspirant should go to a guru who is *brahmanishtha* – always engrossed in God, and *shrotriya* – knows the true meaning of the shastras.

Kabirji has also said, "*Guru Govind dono khade kisko lāgu pāy, balibāri gurudevki, jine Govind diyo batāy.*"

"If both God and guru are standing in front of me, who would I bow down to first? I would bow to my guru first, for he is the one who led me to realize God."

There is only one Aksharbrahma entity. He is the true guru and Bhagwan Swaminarayan remains manifest on this earth through him. Bhagwan Swaminarayan identified Aksharbrahma Gunatitanand Swami as his first successor. After him the succession continued through Bhagatji Maharaj, Shastriji Maharaj, Yogiji Maharaj and Pramukh Swami Maharaj. They were all *gunatit* and were in constant communion with Shriji Maharaj.

Today, Mahant Swami Maharaj is the true *gunatit* guru through whom Shriji Maharaj is manifest on earth. By surrendering to him, we attain divine association with Shriji Maharaj.

The guru represents the ideal of *upasana* and *bhakti* to God that a devotee strives to attain. Thus, the guru should be perfect, since only then does the devotee attain that state. A true guru is one who perfectly observes the vows of *nishkam*, *nirlobh*, *nisswad*, *nirman* and *nissneb*, and steadfastly serves God.

In addition, the purity of a guru can be assessed in three ways: by observing the life of the guru's guru, the guru's own behaviour, and the character and conduct of the guru's disciples. In the Shrimad Bhagvat, Rishabhdevji says, "One who is unable to redeem souls from the circle of life and death does not qualify to be a guru."

Only someone who fully possesses dharma, *jnan*, *vairagya*, and *bhakti* with an understanding of God's glory; lives by the philosophy of Brahma and Parabrahma; and is God-realized is worthy of being a guru. When selecting a guru, we should be aware of this and search for such virtues.

SHISHYA (DISCIPLE)

We have seen the attributes of a true guru. In the same way, a disciple should also imbibe the qualities of a true disciple. The disciple must have great love for their guru, and have utmost

faith and trust in his words. As Arjun says to Shri Krishna Bhagwan, “*Shishyaste’ham, sādhi mām tvām prapannam* – I am your disciple. I dedicate myself to you; please show me the way.” Such total surrender from a disciple must come from within.

Satyakam Jabali went to his guru’s ashram to study *brahmavidya*. The guru gave him 400 cows and told him to return when they had increased to a 1,000. Obeying the guru’s command, Satyakam sincerely served the cows. When they had increased to a 1,000, the brilliant lustre of the knowledge of Brahma shone on his face. Through his guru’s grace Satyakam had attained the knowledge of Brahma.

Bhagatji Maharaj also surrendered totally to the wishes of his guru, Gunatitanand Swami, “*Tan kari nākhe re, guru vachane chure-churā*” – “Pound the body to dust on the words of the guru.” In this way he earned the inner blessings of Gunatitanand Swami. Shastriji Maharaj once instructed Yogiji Maharaj, “Yogi, you should feed these labourers and devotees daily.” Shastriji Maharaj never had to remind him again of this as Yogiji Maharaj unfailingly carried out this command for 40 years.

The guru is the soul of the disciple. One who lives according to the commands of the guru is described as *atmarup*. Even when a disciple becomes *brahmarup* by the guru’s grace, they still maintain reverence towards the guru.

Gunatitanand Swami often said, “If the guru is seated in darkness and can be seen only by the light of the disciple, even then, the disciple should feel that the light has been given to them by their guru.” This is the height of veneration towards the guru. Yogiji Maharaj, even though he spread this Satsang so widely, always kept Shastriji Maharaj at the forefront.

The shastras say: “*Sampradāyo gurukramaha* – A *sampradaya* is one which has a succession of gurus.” Today, the spiritual successor of Brahmaswarup Pramukh Swami Maharaj, Pragat

Brahmaswarup Mahant Swami Maharaj, is our guru. Our guru is ideal and perfect. One has to, with his grace, strive to become an ideal disciple.

11. Atmanand Swami

Bhagwan Swaminarayan regarded the sadhus initiated by Sadguru Ramanand Swami as his *gurubhais* – ‘brothers’ of the same guru – and respectfully called them ‘Bhai’. After Bhai Ramdas Swami passed away to Dham, Shriji Maharaj appointed Atmanand Swami to Bhai Ramdas Swami’s seat. Maharaj then addressed him as either ‘Bhai Swami’ or ‘Bhai Atmanand Swami’. He is also known as ‘Vrudhatmanand Swami’ in the Sampradaya.

Bhai Swami, a native of the Marwad region, was born in 1743 CE (Samvat 1799) in a village named Untwal. To attain God he performed many pilgrimages, austerities, and other spiritual endeavours. In old age he, had Shriji Maharaj’s darshan in Meghpur, a village in the Sorath district of Gujarat. Immediately, Bhai Atmanand Swami developed faith in Maharaj and took refuge under him.

He was resolute in following all of Shriji Maharaj’s commands, both minor and major. Maharaj often gave many difficult observances, yet Bhai Atmanand Swami followed each of them to the letter. As a result, he was respectfully known as ‘vachanmurti’ – an embodiment of Shriji Maharaj’s words.

Once, Shriji Maharaj told his sadhus to observe *khatras*, a difficult form of fasting in which all six types of tastes are avoided. Six months later, Maharaj instructed them to end the austerity. Bhai Atmanand Swami, however, was unaware of this and so continued the fast. He stopped only when some time later he met Maharaj and was told that the vow had been revoked.

Bhai Swami's natural tendency was to not care for his own body. Once, he developed scabies throughout his entire body. Despite his condition, he still travelled from one town to another. Gunatitanand Swami was with him in his *seva*. Once, devotees had arranged for a bullock-cart to take them to their destination. However, the cart driver refused to take them all the way to the other town. Disregarding his troublesome condition, Bhai Swami reasoned, "My name is Atmanand; today, let me truly be *atmanand*," and began to walk. As he marched forward, the boils on his body began to burst one by one and pus began to flow from them. The pain was unbearable. After they finally arrived in the village, Gunatitanand Swami wiped the pus off Bhai Atmanand Swami's body and carefully helped him to bathe.

Seeing Atmanand Swami's elevated spiritual state, Shriji Maharaj would often express his pleasure towards him and gift him with garlands and *prasad*.

As instructed by Maharaj, Bhai Atmanand Swami stayed in Dholera. At that time, he was already 100 years old. Bhai Swami had immense affection for Shriji Maharaj. After Maharaj passed away to Akshardham, Bhai Atmanand Swami stayed in Vagad. Gunatitanand Swami travelled with him and served him. Hence, Bhai Atmanand Swami developed great respect for him as well.

Bhai Atmanand Swami once went to Nadiad with Acharya Raghuvirji Maharaj, where he accompanied him on a *padbramani* to a devotee's home. There, chairs had been arranged for the elderly sadhus to sit on. However, Atmanand Swami didn't approve of the way the chairs were arranged, because it compromised the sadhus' vow of celibacy. The next day, he refused to go on the home visits and sent a message to the *acharya*, "Maharaj made us cover our eyes with a veil, whereas you make us stand in the midst of women. I will only go to these *padbramanis* if you remove the chairs."

Acharya Maharaj then made arrangements so that the sadhus' vows would not be violated. Bhai Swami was resolute in upholding his dharma. He would often say, "Desires and dharma don't mix. If you want to uphold dharma, you must renounce all desires; and if you want to fulfil desires, then dharma has to be sacrificed."

When Bhai Atmanand Swami was 116 years old, he resided in Aniyali, a village near Vagad. Once, when Gunatitanand Swami arrived in Aniyali he met Atmanand Swami and asked, "Have you ever wondered why Maharaj hasn't come to take you to Akshardham?"

Bhai Swami asked, "I have been thinking the same thing. What do I have left to do?"

Gunatitanand Swami was well aware of what Bhai Atmanand Swami had yet to understand. By narrating episodes in which Maharaj himself had revealed his greatness as Parabrahma Puruhottam Narayan, Gunatitanand Swami explained that Shriji Maharaj was the supreme entity. He explained, "Maharaj is greater than all the avatars."

Delighted by Gunatitanand Swami's explanation, Bhai Swami revealed, "Until now, I had understood Shriji Maharaj as being just another avatar. However, on listening to your talks today, I now understand Shriji Maharaj as the supreme *avatari*."

Bhai Swami also realized the glory of Gunatitanand Swami. Until that day, Atmanand Swami would give *prasad* from his wooden bowl to Gunatitanand Swami. On that day, however, he insisted and took *prasad* from Gunatitanand Swami's wooden bowl.

Gunatitanand Swami soon left for Botad. Soon thereafter, on 9 June 1860 (Jeth *vad* 6, Vikram Samvat 1916), Bhai Atmanand Swami passed away to Akshardham.

During his lifetime, Bhai Swami's devotion to Maharaj was

chiefly seen in his strict adherence to Maharaj's commands. However, he also expressed his devotion to Maharaj by writing a text narrating Shriji Maharaj's divine *lila*.

12. Kashidas of Bochasan

Soon after Kashidas became a *satsangi* his son passed away. Then his bullock died, and some time later his milch buffalo also faced a similar fate. As a result of all these deaths, his relatives became frustrated. They tried to convince Kashidas to give up Satsang, but he refused. He had unflinching faith in Bhagwan Swaminarayan.

Kashidas, a native of Bochasan, first met Bhagwan Swaminarayan when he was travelling as Nilkanth Varni. Later, while Kashidas was on a pilgrimage to Dwarka, he met several of Maharaj's sadhus, who further revealed Shriji Maharaj's glory. Thereafter, Kashidas went to Gadhada, took the spiritual refuge of Shriji Maharaj and was initiated into Satsang.

Once, Maharaj celebrated a *shakotsav* at Sura Khachar's *darbar* in Loya. Devotees had arrived from far away to take part in the festivities. Kashidas had also arrived with a group of devotees. Kashidas and other devotees watched as Shriji Maharaj himself busily cooked the vegetables and added the spices for the main meal. While he was cooking, Maharaj wiped his turmeric-covered hands on his dhoti. Because of the heat, he was drenched in sweat. Seeing Maharaj's fallible appearance, some of the devotees who had come with Kashidas began to doubt Shriji Maharaj's divinity.

After feeding all the devotees, Shriji Maharaj held an assembly. In his discourse, Maharaj said, "What should we think of someone who, after making an arduous pilgrimage to Kashi, neither bathes in the Ganga nor drinks its water?"

Due to Kashidas's affection and firm attachment towards

him, Shriji Maharaj visited Bochasan 32 times. While Kashidas had firm faith in Shriji Maharaj, Kashidas's father offered devotion elsewhere. However, he also gradually realized Kashidas's greatness and joined the Satsang.

Kashidas's faith and devoted *seva* often earned him Maharaj's blessings. Kashidas dealt in the cultivation of indigo shrubs. Innumerable small insects bred and died in the water given to the indigo shrubs. Thus, *himsa* was committed. However, other crops did not grow in that part of the country, so what else could he do? Kashidas was helpless. Shriji Maharaj blessed him, "Seven kinds of crops will grow in abundance in your field." Maharaj made Kashidas remove all the indigo shrubs. Crops soon began to grow in abundance in Kashidas's fields and he began to earn a lot of money.

Kashidas constantly rejoiced in having attained manifest God in person. He also wished that his relatives also develop faith in Shriji Maharaj so that they too would attain ultimate liberation. Once, on Kashidas's invitation, Shriji Maharaj came to Bochasan. A special *mafo* was prepared and Kashidas took Shriji Maharaj from village to village, to the homes of all his relatives. As a result his relatives also joined the Satsang.

Kashidas used to trade in tobacco as well. However, instead of selling his crop in the local market, Kashidas used to take his carts full of tobacco to Gadhada to sell. He would stay there and enjoy the company of Shriji Maharaj. When Maharaj would ask him to return home, he would cleverly say, "The tobacco is not yet sold and the collection of the dues is still incomplete." In this way, he would use his business as a reason to extend his time in Shriji Maharaj's company.

Once, he suffered a great loss in his tobacco business. The creditors lodged a complaint against him at the court in Kheda. The court decided that if Kashidas did not pay his dues to the



Shriji Maharaj promises Kashidas and his mother that a mandir will be built in Bochasan in the future

creditors, he should be jailed for six months.

Kashidas was not in a position to pay. Therefore, he was sent to jail in Kheda. In jail he thought, "How will I be able to do puja without bathing? How will I be able to eat? I won't be able to have the darshan of Maharaj at the festival in Gadhada." With these thoughts, his mind was in turmoil.

The following morning, a guard brought him breakfast. However, Kashidas expressed his wish to first bathe. Knowing him to be a pious man, the guards took Kashidas, his hands bound in chains, to the River Vatrak. Kashidas remembered Shriji Maharaj and plunged into the river. On coming out of the water, Kashidas saw no chains on his hands or legs. On looking around, he found himself in Gadhada instead of Kheda! Maharaj had miraculously brought him from Kheda to Gadhada through the river. Kashidas ran straight to Maharaj.

Meanwhile at the River Vatrak, the police waited for a long

time. However, there was no sign of Kashidas. Thinking that he had drowned, they returned to the prison. In Gadhada, Shriji Maharaj told Kashidas to stay for six months. Following this period, Shriji Maharaj sent Kashidas back home with his full blessings. Having heard of this miracle, the creditors were extremely surprised. Considering Kashidas to be a true devotee, they pardoned him of all his debts.

Once Kashidas's house was on fire. However, Shriji Maharaj, who at the time was in Gadhada, protected him. In Gadhada Maharaj was sitting in front of some devotees. All of a sudden Maharaj started rubbing his hands. After some time, blisters were seen on his hands. All began to ask, "What is this?" Maharaj replied, "Kashidas's house was on fire, so I went there to extinguish it."

Some time later, Shriji Maharaj started building a mandir in Vartal. He sent a few sadhus to Vadodara to collect the *murtis* of Lakshmi-Narayan from Amichand Seth. While the sadhus were returning with the *murtis*, there was heavy rain and the cart got stuck in the mud near the town of Bhalaj. People from Bochasan were called and the cart was pulled out. The *murtis* were then kept at the house of Kashidas.

Before the *murti-pratishtha* ceremony in Vartal, Shriji Maharaj himself went to Bochasan to collect the *murtis*. Naniba, Kashidas's mother, served *kansar* to Maharaj and requested him to consecrate the *murtis* in Bochasan by erecting a mandir in the village. Maharaj held Kashidas's hands and promised, "My *murti* will be established here along with that of my Akshardham."

Thereafter, on many occasions, Shriji Maharaj blessed Kashidas, "I will erect a grand mandir in Bochasan."¹

In 1862 (Samvat 1918), Kashidas passed away to Akshardham. His son, Desaibhai, specially called Acharya Shri

Raghuvirji Maharaj and Aksharbrahma Gunatitanand Swami to Bochasan for Kashidas's last rites. Desaibhai served the *acharya* and Gunatitanand Swami for 17 days.

13. Prayer

*Vandan karie Prabhu bhāv dhari,
Swāmi Gunātit Shri Sahajānandji... Vandan
Āp Prabhu chho Dhāmnā Dhāmi,
Balvantā babunāmi Hari... Vandan...1
Jiva anantnā. mokshane arthe,
Anādi Akshar sāth lai... Vandan...2
Purushottam Nārāyan pote,
Pragatyā mānav deb dhari... Vandan...3
Swāmi Gunātit anādi Akshar,
Purushottam Sahajānandji... Vandan...4
Yagnapurushmā akhand rahine,
Jnānajanmā akhand rahine,
Pramukh Swāmimā akhand rahine,
Mahant Swāmimā akhand rahine,
Upāsanā shuddh pragat kari... Vandan...5
Bhakti eja amāru jivan,
Dejo rome rom bhari... Vandan...6
He Bhaktavatsal Karunāsāgar,
Vinanti karu kar jodi Hari... Vandan...7
Hetu rabit bhakti tav charane,
Dejo tan man dhanthi Hari... Vandan...8*

14. Ladhibai of Bhuj

Ladhibai was a disciple of Sadguru Ramanand Swami. After Ramanand Swami passed away, Bhagwan Swaminarayan came

to Bhuj and sent a devotee to call Ladhibai. The devotee told her, “Sahajanand Swami has come here and is calling you for darshan.”

Ladhibai replied, “For me, Ramanand Swami is the only Swami. I don’t wish to come for darshan.” Again Maharaj sent a message, “You are a disciple of Ramanand Swami. I am also a disciple of Ramanand Swami. So we are fellow disciples. Do come and see me.”

So, Ladhibai soon came and met Shriji Maharaj. After the meeting, on her way home she passed a mandir of Raghunathji. She went in to have darshan of the *murtis*. There, to her great surprise, she saw Shriji Maharaj in the *murti* of Raghunathji. On having this divine darshan, she firmly resolved that Maharaj was God.

As Shriji Maharaj was a disciple of Ramanand Swami, Ladhibai used to call him ‘Bhai’ (brother). Once, Ladhibai invited Shriji Maharaj for lunch. Maharaj said, “I only eat *rotlas* and chillies.”

Ladhibai laid a low wooden table and arranged a seat for Maharaj. She served *rotlo* and a bowl of chillies. After a while, she brought a plate of *shiro* and *puri*, and removed the *rotlo* and bowl of chillies. Shriji Maharaj affectionately began to eat the *shiro* and *puri*. Ladhibai sat before Maharaj with folded hands. Shriji Maharaj glanced at her and she entered samadhi.

In samadhi, she saw Shriji Maharaj seated on a divine throne in Akshardham. All around Maharaj, innumerable *muktas* were standing in his *seva*. Even Ramanand Swami was in Maharaj’s *seva*. Seeing this, Ladhibai was surprised. Ramanand Swami rebuked Ladhibai, “Why do you address Shriji Maharaj impolitely? He who dines at your home is sitting on this throne. He is the ultimate reality – Purna Purushottam Narayan – the supreme cause of all incarnations. Explain this to Sundarji Suthar and Gangaram the wrestler as well.”

With another glance, Shriji Maharaj awakened Ladhibai. She came out of the trance. Before she could regain full consciousness Maharaj requested, “Please give me some more *shiro*.” With great pleasure, Ladhibai served *shiro* to Shriji Maharaj. Later, she described her experiences in samadhi to all the devotees, and explained the supremacy of Shriji Maharaj to them.

Ladhibai had firmly decided to follow whatever order Shriji Maharaj gave. To test this resolve, Shriji Maharaj once asked her, “Ladhibai, put on a dress like a married woman and apply a red *chandlo* of kumkum on your forehead. Then pass through the centre of the town with a pot full of water on your head and bring it here.”

Though Ladhibai was a widow and, according to social customs, could not dress like a married woman, she put on such clothes and carried a pot full of water on her head through the town singing devotional songs. Seeing this, somebody sarcastically asked, “Ladhi, whom have you married?”

Ladhibai, in full excitement, replied, “Purushottam Narayan.” She came to Shriji Maharaj, after passing through the busy market area. Shriji Maharaj was extremely pleased and blessed her.

Once, she came to Gadhada to attend the Holi festival. At that time, Jhamkuba of Udaipur had also come there to devote the rest of her life in the service of God. Shriji Maharaj gave her white clothes to wear and renamed her ‘Mataji’. Shriji Maharaj sent Mataji to Bhuj with a recommendation to Ladhibai. Thereafter, they both spent their time together in the *seva* and devotion of Bhagwan Swaminarayan.

Later in life, Ladhibai wished to leave the world for Akshardham. Mataji also wished to accompany her. So Ladhibai told her, “Go ahead and go to Dham first; I will follow you.” And that is what happened. In the presence of



Dubli Bhatt presents his entire savings to Shriji Maharaj

many onlookers, Mataji first passed away chanting the name of Shriji Maharaj. Very soon after, Ladhibai also left her body for Dham.

15. Dubli Bhatt

“Welcome Bhattji,” said Bhagwan Swaminarayan greeting Dubli Bhatt. The assembly of devotees was stunned. The assembly was full of Darbars who had grand turbans and long, thick moustaches. Funds were being collected for the upcoming mandir in Gadhada. Everyone was donating according to their capacity. Bhattji unexpectedly entered the assembly. Shriji Maharaj welcomed him. Those seated in the assembly made way for him.

Dubli Bhatt was old and thin. Dressed in torn clothes and a worn-out turban, he came trembling to Shriji Maharaj.

He prostrated at the feet of Maharaj. Shriji Maharaj held his hand and raised him up. Smiling, yet apprehensive, Bhattji took

off his turban. He untied the knot from one end of the tattered turban and put one paisa (*dokdo*) – one hundredth part of a rupee – at the feet of Shriji Maharaj. In the same way he untied 12 more knots and, in total, put 13 paisa at the feet of Shriji Maharaj. “Maharaj, I offer these in the *seva* of Gopinathji,” choked with emotion Bhattji requested Shriji Maharaj to accept his donation. Seeing the love of this devotee, Shriji Maharaj was extremely pleased and loudly called out, “Glory to Gopinath Maharaj!”

The Darbars enthusiastically took up the call, but immediately began to stare at one another. Everybody was surprised. Sura Khachar could not resist asking Shriji Maharaj, “Maharaj, what was this triumphant call for?”

“Our Gadhada mandir is now complete,” Maharaj replied.
“But what did this Bhattji give?”

“Thirteen paisa.” Shriji Maharaj raised his hand and showed the donation to everybody.

“But is this amount sufficient for the mandir to be completed?”

Maharaj explained, “You are all people with means. You have horses and cattle for farming. Some of you have donated 1,000 rupees and some have given 2,000 rupees, but not your everything. This devotee does not possess either a house in the village nor owns a piece of land to farm. He earns his livelihood by performing religious rites for people. Whatever little he has collected has today been offered at my feet. When devotees with such dedicated and devout feelings offer their all, I feel that the work for the mandir is complete.”

This Dubli Bhatt resided in Mota Gokharwala, but was originally a native of Chandgadh. He performed religious rites for a living. His real name was Ranchhodji Maharaj. However, he was known as Dubli Bhatt since he was very weak, both physically and financially. Nonetheless, he had unflinching faith in Maharaj.

Once, he visited the house of his daughter's father-in-law. In the morning, after bathing, as per his daily routine, he sat for *mansi* puja in front of the *murti* of Shriji Maharaj. However, his relative had come under the influence of some evil company. So in the form of a jest, he took away the *murti* and replaced it with a shoe. When Bhattji came out of meditation, he saw the shoe and not the *murti*. He casually asked, "Who is so blind as to place a shoe in place of the *murti*?" Immediately the father-in-law of his daughter became blind. Everybody realized the sincerity of Bhattji's devotion.

Once, Shriji Maharaj expressed his pleasure on him by giving him a gold ring and wristlet as a gift. Due to his devotion to Maharaj, he did not sell the ring or wristlet for money, which he desperately needed. Instead, he kept them as sacred mementos of Shriji Maharaj. This ring and wristlet are still preserved today by his descendants.

16. Vrat and Utsav

"*Utsava-priyāhā khalu mānavāhā* – Mankind is fond of festivals." Accordingly, to help bring joy amid the ups and downs of life and to attain heavenly bliss, the ancient seers of India have prescribed numerous days for austerities and festivities throughout the Indian calendar. These special occasions can be separated into three types: *vrat*, *parva* and *utsav*. Though *vrat*, *parva* and *utsav* differ from one another, they also have much in common.

Bhagwan Swaminarayan greatly encouraged this Hindu tradition of festivals. He joyously celebrated these festivals with grandeur and sanctified these *vrats*, *parvas* and *utsavs* by personally participating in them. In those days, the true form of festivals had been distorted. People viewed them only as

fairs where many gathered and dispersed after merriment. Immoral behaviour was seen during sacred festivals such as Holi. Superstitious rituals were practised blindly.

Shriji Maharaj transformed these observances and festivals and renamed them *samaiyas* – celebrations. During such celebrations, he gave prime importance to the darshan of the deities (*murtis*), darshan and company of sadhus and devotees along with participation in spiritual discourses. He turned these festivals from misguided fairs into divine gatherings. Sadguru Nishkulanan Swami describes this transformation in the Bhaktachintamani, Chapter 77.

“Jem anya lok thai bhelā, tem samajsho mā eh lila.”

“Don’t misunderstand *samaiyas* for fairs wherein great numbers of people gather together for mere merriment.”

*“Pan jāne ajāne je jan, karshe Mahāprabhunā darshan,
Vali sunashe līlā charitra, te nar thashe nishchay pavitra.”*

“If knowingly or unknowingly, anyone has the darshan or hears the divine stories of our God, they will certainly become pure.”

Shriji Maharaj also performed *yagnas* on a large scale in which thousands of Brahmins were served food. Thousands of followers were invited to the celebrations of Swaminarayan (Hari) Jayanti, Janmashtami and other festivals.

Maharaj has stated the purpose behind organizing these large gatherings in Vachanamrut, Gadhada I 3:

“That is why I perform grand Vishnu-yags; annually celebrate Janmashtami, Ekadashi and other observances; and gather *brahmacharis*, sadhus and *satsangis* on these occasions. After all, even if a sinner remembers these occasions at the time of their death, they will also attain the abode of God.”

Shriji Maharaj arranged these congregations to help devotees remember his divine form. There are other benefits of celebrating

these festivals as well. Discourses during such functions consolidate one's faith and understanding. By attending these festivals, one learns to adjust to living in a group and making do with whatever facilities are provided. Devotees are given an opportunity to celebrate with old friends and form bonds with new devotees. During the birthday celebrations of God or his holy Sadhu, our minds are purified by recalling their divine episodes.

We will take a look at some of the different forms of *vrats*, *parvas* and *utsavs*.

Vrat: Vows are observed to gain spiritual strength and purify the *atma*. One who undertakes religious observances as prescribed by the shastras becomes happy in this world and attains the abode of the gods after death. However, vows performed without any worldly desire and with the single motive of pleasing God, bring *moksha* – i.e. eternal service at the feet of the God.

Vrat in general denotes fasting. Fasting may help relieve physical illnesses and also nourishes the *atma* with spiritual strength. The shastras prescribe a number of *vrats*. Fasting every month on the days of Hari Jayanti (*nom*), *ekadashi*, etc. are regular *vrats*. Observances such as *chandrayan* are for the atonement of sins. *Vrats* such as *Vat-Savitri* are done for fulfilment of wishes. There are also other observances to be undertaken during *adhik mas* and at other special times of the year.

Parva: *Parvas* are observed in mandirs. They come at definite times. The birthday celebrations of God and his holy Sadhu are considered *parvas*. Eclipses, *sankranti*, bathing in a holy river and Kumbh Mela are all *parvas*. Fasts are observed individually whereas, generally, in *parvas* many people get together. They enjoy meeting one another and celebrate the *parva* together.

Utsav (Festivals): *Utsav* is a common word used to include

vrats and *parvas*. These are public festivals. Holi, Dashera, etc. are such public festivals. Millions of people get together. Navratri in Gujarat, Durga puja in West Bengal, Ganesh Chaturthi in Maharashtra, etc. are all large *utsavs*.

THE MEANINGS BEHIND FESTIVALS AND OBSERVANCES

The above religious observances and festivals are celebrated at definite times of the year. Every occasion has a special story associated with it. Goswami Vitthalnathji – the son of Shri Vallabhacharya, founder of the Vaishnav Sampradaya – has prescribed specific days for every *vrat* and *utsav*. In the Shikshapatri (verses 81, 82), Shriji Maharaj has accepted them. Also, Shriji Maharaj has given importance to the celebration of festivals of all Hindu deities (Shikshapatri 79). Shriji Maharaj has specified that the festivals of Ekadashi, Shivratri, Ram Navami, Krishna Jayanti, Ganesh Chaturthi, Vaman Jayanti, Nrusinh Jayanti, etc. should all be observed. He has taught us to show reverence to all incarnations and devas.

In the Satsangijivan shastra (Chapters 55–61, Canto 5), Maharaj describes the annual festivals and *vrats* in his own words. Here, Maharaj has given open invitations for all to attend the Swaminarayan (Hari) Jayanti and Prabodhini Ekadashi festivals every year. Also, in some celebrations, the *murtis* of the deities are bathed with *panchamrut* – a mixture of milk, curds, honey, ghee and sugar – and finally with clean water.

The Hindu calendar year begin with the month of Kartik, so the annual calendar of *vrats* and festivals are described in sequence from Kartik.

ANNAKUT (KARTIK SUD 1): NEW YEAR'S DAY

The Vikram Samvat year starts from this day. King Bali surrendered everything to God on this day. Pleased with his

total surrender, God asked everybody to perform Bali *pujan* on this day every year.

The cowherds of Vraj used to worship Indra. Shri Krishna told them, “Our wealth is due to this Mount Govardhan. So we should offer *pujan* to it.” Thus, Govardhan puja is also performed on this day every year. Devotees prepare a small mountain of mud to symbolize Mount Govardhan, and perform puja. Later on, this Govardhan puja took the form of *annakut*.

An *annakut* of various vegetarian food items is offered to the deities in every mandir. Certain vegetables and food items which grow during the four months of the rainy season and which cannot be eaten during these months are first offered to the deities on this day. Only then can these foods be eaten. Devotees fast from early morning and eat only after the deities have been offered food at midday. Devotees in every town or village visit the mandir in the early morning and seek blessings from the sadhus to strengthen *agni* and *upasana* in their lives and attain physical, mental and financial happiness. *Pujan* is also offered to cows.

EKADASHI

The origin of the *ekadashi* fast is described in the Purans. God was asleep with his ten *indriyas* and mind introverted. At that time, Murdanav, son of the demon Nadijangh, came to fight with God. To overcome the threat, a young maiden emerged from the light of the 11 *indriyas* of the Lord. Murdanav was attracted by her beauty and said to her, “Marry me.”

The maiden replied, “I have taken a vow that I will only marry whoever defeats me in battle.”

So Murdanav and the divine maiden fought each other. The maiden beheaded Murdanav with a sword and was victorious. God was pleased with the maiden and told her to ask for a boon. The maiden, Ekadashi, requested, “No one should take food on

the day of my *vrat*. Since I have emerged from your light, I am an ascetic. So, on the day of my *vrat* all should abstain from the mundane pleasures of their ten *indriyas* and the mind.”

Shriji Maharaj stresses in the Vachanamrut, “On the day of Ekadashi, one should not merely fast, but one should also forsake the ‘food’ of the eleven *indriyas*.” In fact, devotees should restrict their *indriyas* and observe this *vrat* daily, but should not let loose their *indriyas*. They should pass the whole day in religious discourses, singing and hearing bhajans extolling God. They should stay awake until midnight engaged in such devotion. Furthermore, Shriji Maharaj adds that one should become attached to the manifest BrahmaSwarup Satpurush by “withdrawing the ten *indriyas* and the mind – the eleventh *indriya* – from whichever *vishays* they have become attached to and then offering them into the *brahma-agni*.” In other words, the ten *indriyas* and the eleven 11th mind should be withdrawn from their respective sensual objects and become attached to Brahma. In this way, Parabrahma will manifest fully in our *brahma-rup* form (Vachanamrut, Gadhada II 8). In the Shikshapatri, Shriji Maharaj tells us to perform the completion ceremony of the Ekadashi *vrat*. Completing the Ekadashi *vrat* properly yields the desired fruits of the fast. In the completion ceremony, one should offer *maha-puja*, offer a meal to sadhus on the day after the fast and donate to the mandir or the needy.

Ekadashi comes twice in a month, on the eleventh day of the bright and dark half of each month. Everyone should fast on these days without taking any food or water. Those who are weak may take fruits. However, Shastriji Maharaj has instructed that all devotees should observe waterless fasts on Chaitra *sud* 9 (Swaminarayan Jayanti; Ram Navami), Shravan *vad* 8 (Janmashtami), Ashadh *sud* 11 (Devpodhi or Devshayani Ekadashi), Bhadarva *sud* 11 (Jal Jhilani Ekadashi) and Kartik *sud* 11 (Devuthi or Prabodhini

Ekadashi). According to the shastras one must observe all *vrats* till the age of eighty. Every Ekadashi has a special story behind it and therefore each is known by a different names.

PRABODHINI EKADASHI (KARTIK SUD 11)

From the eleventh day of the bright half of Ashadh, Vishnu Bhagwan retires for sleep on his throne in the ocean of milk. Four months later, at the end of the rainy season, he awakes on this day. It is believed that Vishnu Bhagwan had defeated the demon Shankhasur in the month of Ashadh. Exhausted from the fight, he went to the ocean of milk to take rest. Since Vishnu Bhagwan awakes from sleep on this day of Ekadashi the devotees rejoice and celebrate this day.

The marriage ceremony of the *tulsi* (basil) plant with Vishnu Bhagwan is performed on this day. It marks the completion of Chaturmas – the four months of the monsoon. All religious observances observed during in Chaturmas may be discontinued from this day.

This day is very important in the Swaminarayan Sampradaya. In Samvat 1857 (28 October 1800), Nilkanth Varni was initiated into the sadhu-fold in the town of Piplana by Sadguru Ramanand Swami and given the new names of Sahajanand Swami and Narayan Muni. An *annakut* is offered to God on this day in Piplana.

Also, on this day in Samvat 1858 (16 November 1801) in the town of Jetpur, Ramanand Swami appointed Sahajanand Swami as the head of the Sampradaya.

Dharmadev, the father of Shriji Maharaj, was born on this day in Samvat 1796 (11 November 1739) in the town of Ittar.

To celebrate this day the *murtis* may be adorned with a crown and crimson coloured garments. A sweet called *ghebar* is offered to God at lunch. Special prayers and worship are offered to Dharmadev. All devotees and sadhus observe a waterless fast.

The devas also rejoice as God wakes up. So this day is also known as Dev Diwali. In celebration, a variety of vegetables are offered to the deities. This offering is called Hathadi.

KARTIKI PUNAM (KARTIK SUD 15)

Bhaktimata was born on this day in Samvat 1798 (22 November 1741) in the village of Chhapaiya. Therefore, puja is offered to Bhaktidevi when the moon rises. This day also marks the birthday of Tulsi and the conclusion of the marriage ceremony of Tulsi with Vishnu Bhagwan. Starting from this day, the deities are offered woollen clothes. Cooked brinjals are offered to the deities with other dishes. A grand celebration is held at the BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir in Bochasan in the presence of the guru.

Sometimes at night, a row of lighted lamps is arranged all around the mandir. Lamps of ghee are also placed before the *murtis*. It is believed that the demon Tripurasur, on getting a boon from Brahmāji began harassing the devas. Shivji killed Tripurasur on this day. Overcome with joy, the devas arranged lighted lamps.

It is considered very auspicious to bathe in sacred rivers on this day as the River Ganga appeared on earth on this day. The sacred River Ganga is worshipped by the placing of lighted lamps in its waters. Also, the moon is under the sun on this day, so the hot sunrays fall upon the moon. Therefore, it is customary to perform rites honouring one's ancestors (*shraddh*). Every *punam* the *murtis* in *shikharbaddha* mandir are adorned with beautiful crowns.

PRAMUKH SWAMI MAHARAJ JANMA JAYANTI (MAGSHAR SUD 8)

Shri Krishna Bhagwan says in the Gita, “*Māṣāñām Mārgarshirsho’ham* – Of the months, I am Magshar.” Brahmaswarup Pramukh Swami Maharaj was born on this day

in Samvat 1978 (7 December 1921) in the village of Chansad in Vadodara district. As commanded by Yogiji Maharaj, a grand celebration is held on this day by devotees all around the world.

DHANURMAS

The sun enters the ninth sign of the zodiac – Sagittarius (*Dhan*) – during the month of Magshar. Hence, the one month period from this day is known as Dhanurmas. Throughout the year, the sun passes over the 12 different zodiacal signs in turn. Hence, the transition is known by the name of that particular zodiac sign. Starting from this day for one month after *mangala arti*, *dhun* is sung before the deities. It is also a custom to put a fire pan before the *murtis*. Just after *shangar arti*, sweet and savoury delicacies are offered to the deities.

In this month, Shri Krishna went to study the science of archery in the ashram of Sandipani Rishi. To signify this study, books and other educational materials are placed before the *murtis* during this month. Dhanurmas is the period from 16 December to 14 January.

MAKAR SANKRANTI (14 JANUARY)

In the month of Posh, the sun enters the zodiac sign of Capricorn (Makar). This transition, known as the Makar Sankranti takes place every year on 14 January. It is auspicious to bathe either in a river or lake early in the morning. On this day, the deities are customarily offered sesame seed laddus. Great importance is attached to giving alms on this day. Sadhus also visit homes to accept alms and donations on this day.

POSH SUD PURNIMA

Aksharbrahma Gunatitanand Swami was given *bhagvati diksha* by Bhagwan Swaminarayan on this day in Samvat year

1866 (20 January 1810) on the concluding day of the grand *yagna* in Dabhan. A festival is celebrated at Dabhan every year to mark this occasion.

VASANT PANCHAMI (MAHA SUD 5)

God has said, “*Rutunām Kusumākaraha* – Of all the seasons, Vasant is my divine manifestation.”

This is a very important day for the Swaminarayan Sampradaya. Shriji Maharaj revealed the Shikshapatri on this day in Samvat 1882 (12 February 1826). Sadguru Brahmanand Swami was born on this day in Samvat 1828 (8 February 1772) in the village of Khan, Rajasthan. Sadguru Nishkulanan Swami was born in Samvat 1822 (15 January 1766) in Shekhpur near Jamnagar. Swami Yagnapurushdasji (Shastriji Maharaj), who established and spread the Akshar-Purushottam philosophy as revealed by Bhagwan Swaminarayan, was also born on this auspicious day in the village of Mahelav in Samvat 1921 (31 January 1865).

The shastras also describe that on this day Shri Krishna sprayed all his friends and queens with *abil* and *gulal* on Mount Girnar, so much so that the whole mountain had become red.

Gulal is sprinkled over the clothes adorning the deities. As a symbol of Girnar, a heap of wheat or rice is arranged before God. Flowers of mango trees are also offered as well as sweets such as *jalebi*. After the full moon day of Fagun the deities are offered saffron-coloured clothes. The devotees sprinkle colours among themselves before God and remember the divine episodes of Shriji Maharaj. Married women sprinkle colours on each other. Dates, dry dates, coconuts, sugar cane, baked grams, *penda*, grapes, etc. are offered to God.

MAHASHIVRATRI (MAHA VAD 13)

There is a story in the Purans that Shivji was pleased with a

hunter on this night. Shiv Bhagwan is worshipped at midnight with *bilipatra* and oleander (*karen*) flowers. The *murtis* are dressed in colourful garments and are offered *khir* and *vada*. Devotees observe *salahar* on this day.

PUSHPADOLOTSAV (FAGUN VAD 1)

Shri Krishna Bhagwan played *ras* with the Yadavs on Mount Girnar. Rejoicing, the Yadavs decorated a swing with colourful and fragrant flowers. They offered their worship by ceremoniously placing Shri Krishna and Arjun on the swing.

On this day Shri Krishna and Arjun were born of Dharma-Prajapati as Nar-Narayan. Therefore, this day is also known as Nar-Narayan Jayanti. On this joyous occasion, the devas rocked Shri Nar-Narayan on a swing in the ashram of Dharma. Thus, the Pushpadolotsav is celebrated due to these two reasons. This festival is also known as Fuladol.

In the *thal*, God is offered *dudhpak* and *bor*. He is also served *fagva*, which consists of popcorn, dates, sugar *patasas* and grams.

Once, when Bhagwan Swaminarayan celebrated this festival in Sarangpur the women devotees of north Gujarat asked for a unique type of *fagva* in the form of blessings. With the memory of that divine *fagva* given by Shriji Maharaj, one should offer prayers for divine *fagva* from the manifest Satpurush (Bhaktachintamani, Chapter 64).

Holi is celebrated on Fagan *sud* 15, the day before Pushpadolotsav. Hiranyakashyipu, the demon king, attempted to kill his son, the devout Prahlad, by fire. Hiranyakashyipu instructed his sister, Holika, to sit with Prahlad in her lap as a fire was lighted around them. Although she had the power of being invincible to fire, Holika was burnt to ashes and Prahlad was saved by God.

Brahmaswarup Pragji Bhakta (Bhagatji Maharaj) was born

on the full moon day of Fagun in Samvat 1885 (20 March 1829) in the town of Mahuva in the Saurashtra region of Gujarat.

Traditionally, this festival is celebrated on a grand scale at BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir in Sarangpur. On this occasion, homage is offered to Bhagatji Maharaj. Pragat Guru Hari blesses everyone and gives divine *dagva*.

SHRI SWAMINARAYAN (HARI JAYANTI (CHAITRA SUD 9)

Purna Purushottam Bhagwan Shri Swaminarayan (Sahajanand Swami) was born to Dharmadev and Bhaktimata on this day in Samvat 1837 (3 April 1781) at 10.10 p.m. in the village of Chhapaiya in the state of Uttar Pradesh, North India.

This is the most important festival of the Swaminarayan Sampradaya. Ghanshyam Maharaj is rocked in the cradle at night. The cradle is kept till Chaitra *sud* 14. The deities are offered saffron *biranj* (a sweet dish made from rice and sugar duly dressed with saffron).

The birth of Shri Ramchandra Bhagwan in Ayodhya is also celebrated on this day of Ram Navami.

All sadhus and householders observe a waterless fast and meditate upon Maharaj's divine episodes to celebrate this day.

NRUSINH JAYANTI (VAISHAKH SUD 14)

God manifested at sunset on this day in the form of Nrusinh (half lion, half man; upper body of lion, lower body of man) to kill Hiranyakashyipu – the cruel father of the child-devotee, Prahlad. To mark this occasion, devotees fast by taking only *falahar* until sunset. God is offered dates and *vada*.

YOGI JAYANTI (VAISHAKH VAD 12)

Brahmaswarup Yogiji Maharaj, Swami Jnanjivandasji, was born on this day in Samvat 1948 (23 May 1892) in the village of

Dhari, near Amreli in Gujarat. Devotees gather in large numbers at their local mandir to remember the divine personality and teachings of Yogiji Maharaj.

RATH YATRA (ASHADH SUD 2)

Every year millions of people pull the chariots carrying the wooden *murtis* of Shri Krishna Bhagwan, Balaram and Subhadra in Jagannathpuri. This festival is also celebrated at all Vaishnav and Swaminarayan mandirs. Wooden horses and chariots are placed before the deities and a *chal murti* of the deity is placed in a *rath* or chariot. The *murti* of the deity is adorned with a golden bow and arrow along with yellow and red garments. Kirtans are sung after the *rajbhog arti*. For the afternoon meal, the *murtis* are offered yoghurt, rice, sugar crystals and laddus.

DEVSHAYANI EKADASHI (ASHADH SUD 11)

This is also known as Devpodhi Ekadashi. Observance of special vows for Chaturmas begins from this day. The Purans narrate that Vishnu Bhagwan, after having defeated Shankhasur, went to sleep for four months in the ocean of milk. People undertake the observance of various *vrats* during these four months, as Vishnu is asleep. In the Shikshapatri, Shriji Maharaj has instructed his devotees to undertake additional religious observances during these four months.

The special vows prescribed include: Reading and listening to religious discourses, singing bhajans, performing *mahapuja* together with bathing the *murti* of God with *panchamrut*, chanting the *mantra* of God, reciting the *stotras* of Maharaj's names and characteristics, performing extra *pradakshina*, and performing extra *sashatang dandvats* or *panchang pranams*. One should commit to performing at least one of these eight special observances with devotion.

Many devotees also observe austerities during these four months. Those who are physically weak to undertake these additional austerities for four months should observe them at least during the month of Shravan. These austerities include: eating only once a day, *dharna-parna*, *chandrayan*, etc. *Dharna-parna* involves observing a waterless fast on alternate days. In one form of *chandrayan*, the amount of food one consumes is regulated by the phases of the moon. On the first day of the month one morsel of food is taken, gradually increasing to fifteen morsels on the fifteenth day. In the next half of the month morsels are taken in decreasing quantity. Certain food items are prohibited during Chaturmas. These are sugarcane, aubergines, radish and *mogri*. These items are taken only after offering them to the *murtis* on the day of Annakut.

ASHADHI PURNIMA (ASHADH SUD 15)

This day is known as Guru Purnima. As it is the birthday of Vyasji – the author of the Vedas, Mahabharat, Purans, etc. – the day is also called Vyas Purnima. The inner eyes of the people, that have been covered by ignorance, are opened by the guru, who instills one with spiritual knowledge. The guru makes us *brahmarup* and attaches us to Parabrahma. Hence, this day is dedicated to the worship of the true guru, who represents the form of God on earth. True guru *pujan* is to know the guru as entirely free from all flaws and to attach to him through mind, action and speech.

This festival is traditionally celebrated with great festivities at the BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir in Bochasan in the presence of the guru.

HINDOLA UTSAV

The Shastras reveal, “*Sevāyām laukiki yuktibhi snehas-tatra*

niyāmakaha” – include public customs and rituals during the service and puja of God. Accordingly, there are no specific rituals assigned for the Hindola Utsav. Instead, it is a festival that allows devotees to express their love for God by including him in their personal activities. During the months of Ashadh and Shravan, people in India tend to swing on a cot during leisure time due to the temperate weather. Thus, as an expression of love, the deity is also rocked in a swing during these months. From Ashadh *vad* 2 to Shravan *vad* 2, the deities are swung in a variety of beautifully decorated swings. *Arti* is also performed when God is placed in the swing and special bhajans relating to the *hindolo* are sung.

JANMASHTAMI (SHRAVAN VAD 8)

Bhagwan Shri Krishna, with the purpose of destroying demons such as Kans and Shishupal was born in a jail in Mathura on this day.

Sadguru Ramanand Swami, the guru of Bhagwan Swaminarayan was also born on this day in Samvat 1795 (26 August 1739). This festival is traditionally celebrated on a grand scale at the BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir in Atladara, Vadodara. Sadhus and householders observe a waterless fast on this day. The *murti* of the deity is bathed with *panchamrut*, and at midnight, the time of Shri Krishna Bhagwan’s birth, *arti* is performed. Five *thals* and *panchajiri* are offered. The *murti* of Shri Krishna Bhagwan is placed in a swing until Shravan *vad* 14, when it is removed after performing *arti*.

GANESH CHATURTHI (BHADARVA SUD 4)

Ganesh, the son of Shivji, was born on this day. Therefore, *pujan* is performed of Ganeshji’s *murti* in the mandir. The deities are lavishly dressed and a dish of *churma* laddus is offered during *thal*. Looking at the moon on this night is prohibited.

Ganeshji is one of the five devas that Shriji Maharaj has shown great reverence for in the Shikshapatri; the five deities are Shiv, Vishnu, Parvati, Surya (the Sun) and Ganapati.

JAL JHILANI EKADASHI (BHADARVA SUD 11)

Resting during Chaturmas, Vishnu Bhagwan changes his resting position on this day and so this day is also known as Parivartini Ekadashi – Ekadashi of Change.

Shri Krishna Bhagwan, after taking Radha and the other *gopis* for a boat ride in the River Yamuna, asked for yoghurt from Radha and the other *gopis*, who were on their way from Gokul to Mathura to sell the yoghurt. In celebration of this occasion, a *chal murti* is taken for a boat ride in a river, lake or the sea. The deity is taken for a cruise in a boat. Five rounds are made, and *arti* is performed after each round. After having been offered to God, cucumber is thrown into the water. Later, the *murti* is taken from house to house in a palanquin. All should observe a waterless fast on this day. This festival is traditionally celebrated at the BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir in Sarangpur.

VAMAN JAYANTI (BHADARVA SUD 12)

King Bali had conquered all the three worlds (*swarga*, Mrutyulok and *patal*). There was no place for the devas to live. Hence, on this day, God manifested in the form of a dwarf, Vaman, and demanded three footsteps of space from King Bali. When Bali agreed to the request, Vaman grew into an enormous form and in two steps recovered everything. Thus, having taken everything from Bali, God sent him to Patal (the lowest of the nether regions).

Devotees consume only *salahar* until noon and take regular food following the *rajbhog arti*. The deities are appropriately dressed with yellow silk dhotis, and laddus are offered at lunch.

SHARAD PURNIMA (ASO SUD 15)

On this day in Samvat 1841 (28 September 1784), Aksharbrahma Gunatitanand Swami was born in Bhadra in the district of Jamnagar. This festival is traditionally celebrated at Akshar Mandir in Gondal. The *murtis* are bathed with *panchamrut* and offered *dudh-pauva* (flat rice soaked in milk and sugar). Under the full moon, five *artis* of the *murtis* in the mandir are performed.

This day is also known by the name of Manekthari Punam, the day on which Shri Krishna Bhagwan played *maha-raas* with the *gopis* of Vraj. Devotees rejoice by singing the bhajans depicting the divine *raas lila*.

HANUMAN JAYANTI (ASO VAD 14)

In the Shikshapatri Shriji Maharaj has instructed that puja be offered to Hanuman on this day. The deities are dressed in red clothes and offered *fulvadi*, *bhajiya*, *vada* and *maalpuva*. Hanumanji is worshipped with oil, vermillion, flowers of the *akda* plant, and *vada* made from *adad*. For three days, from Aso vad 13 to Aso vad 15, a series of lamps is also placed before the *murtis*.

DIWALI (ASO VAD 15, AMAS)

This is the last day of the Vikram Samvat year. Lakshmi Pujan is performed on this day. Businessmen perform *pujan* of their accounts books. Hence it is also called Chopda Pujan.

Diwali is the principal festival of India. Indians all around the country and the world celebrate this festival with great fanfare. When God was asleep in the ocean of milk, Lakshmiji, in fear of the demons, hid herself in a lotus flower. So Lakshmiji is awakened by lighting a series of *divas*. The deities are offered *jalebi*, *khaja*, *sutarfeni*, *ghebar* and other delicious sweets. People rejoice at night with firecrackers.

Diwali also celebrates the return of Bhagwan Ram to Ayodhya after his 14-year exile in the forests.

PURUSHOTTAM MAS

The month in which there is no transition of the sun (from one zodiac sign into another), is known as *adbhik mas* (intercalary month). This additional month comes after an interval of 32 months, 16 days and 4 *ghadis*. There is a story in Purushottam Mahatmya which explains the importance of this month. The presiding deities of the 12 months are fixed. When the intercalary month was inserted for the first time, people thought it was useless. So, it sought the shelter of Purushottam Bhagwan. Out of compassion, Bhagwan agreed to be its presiding deity – and hence it is called Purushottam Mas. It is for this reason that people get extra benefit from the observance of *vrats* and donations during this month. Discourses are also arranged in mandirs. *Vrats* such as eating once a day, *dbarna-parna*, etc. are observed in this month.

PATOTSAVS

The anniversary of the *murti-pratishtha* ceremony of a mandir is known as a *patotsav*. The *murtis* are bathed with *panchamrut*, adorned with a crown and rich garments, and offered *annakut*. The *patotsavs* of the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha's *shikharbaddha* mandirs are celebrated on the *tithi* of the *murti-pratishtha*:

MANDIRS CONSECRATED BY SHASTRIJI MAHARAJ

1. Bochasan: Vaishakh *sud* 10, V.S. 1963; 5 June 1907
2. Sarangpur: Vaishakh *sud* 6, V.S. 1972; 8 May 1916
3. Gondal: Vaishakh *sud* 10, V.S. 1990; 24 May 1934
4. Atladara: Ashadh *sud* 3, V.S. 2001; 12 July 1945

MANDIRS CONSECRATED BY YOGIJI MAHARAJ

5. Gadhada: Vaishakh *sud* 10, V.S. 2007; 16 May 1951
6. Ahmedabad: Vaishakh *sud* 7, V.S. 2018; 10 May 1962
7. Bhadra: Vaishakh *sud* 6, V.S. 2025; 23 April 1969

MANDIRS CONSECRATED BY PRAMUKH SWAMI MAHARAJ

Sankari: 3 June 1971 (Jeth *sud* 10, V.S. 2027)

8. Mumbai: Magshar *sud* 8, V.S. 2040; 12 December 1983
9. Mahesana: Magshar *sud* 8, V.S. 2051; 10 December 1994
10. London: Shravan *vad* 10, V.S. 2051; 20 August 1995
11. Surendranagar: Kartak *vad* 12, V.S. 2053; 7 December 1996
12. Surat: Magshar *sud* 7, V.S. 2053; 16 December 1996
13. Navsari: Magshar *vad* 7, V.S. 2054; 21 December 1997
14. Nadiad: Maha *vad* 10, V.S. 2054; 22 February 1998
15. Rajkot: Magshar *sud* 7, V.S. 2055; 26 November 1998
16. Mahelav: Maha *sud* 5, V.S. 2055; 22 January 1999
17. Nairobi: Shravan *vad* 3, V.S. 2055; 29 August 1999
18. Tithal: Magshar *sud* 7, V.S. 2056; 15 December 1999
19. Anand: Magshar *sud* 7, V.S. 2057; 3 December 2000
20. Sankari: Vaishakh *vad* 10, V.S. 2057; 18 May 2001
21. Dholka: Kartak *sud* 10, V.S. 2058; 25 November 2001
22. Bharuch: Kartak *vad* 9, V.S. 2058; 9 December 2001
23. New Delhi: Maha *sud* 5, V.S. 2059; 6 February 2003
24. Houston: Adhik Shravan *sud* 8, V.S. 2060; 25 July 2004
25. Chicago: Adhik Shravan *vad* 8, V.S. 2060; 8 August 2004
26. Jaipur: Aso *sud* 3, V.S. 2061; 6 October 2005
27. Junagadh: Vaishakh *sud* 6, V.S. 2062; 3 May 2006
28. Bhavnagar: Vaishakh *vad* 7, V.S. 2062; 19 May 2006
29. Toronto: Ashadh *sud* 8, V.S. 2063; 22 July 2007
30. Atlanta: Shravan *sud* 13, V.S. 2063; 26 August 2007

In addition, Pramukh Swami Maharaj consecrated mandirs

in Bhadra, Limbdi, Bodeli, Godhra, Los Angeles, Selvas, Nagpur, Himmatnagar, Kolkata, Mahuva, Jamnagar, Dhari and Robbinsville. He also consecrated the Swaminarayan Akshardhams in Gandhinagar and New Delhi.

MANDIRS CONSECRATED BY MAHANT SWAMI MAHARAJ

31. Pune: Maha *vad* 8, V.S. 2073; 19 February 2017

32. Dhule: Maha *sud* 5, V.S. 2075; 10 February 2019

Mahant Swami Maharaj has also consecrated the mandirs in Navsari, Nashik, Nadiad and Abu Dhabi, as well as Swaminarayan Akshardham in Robbinsville.

17. Jhamkuba (Mataji)

A young woman from Machhiav in the state of Gujarat, was married to a native of Udaipur in Rajasthan. Once, a Brahmin from Machhiav, named Mulji, went to Udaipur to see her. He had brought a *matli* for her and so was allowed to enter the palace. Here, he talked to the women at length about the greatness of Bhagwan Swaminarayan. Jhamkuba, too, heard about Brahmin's sermons.

Jhamkuba was a native of the village of Vagad and had imbibed the values and culture of her family. She was married to the King of Udaipur, but he was of a demoniac nature. He was a non-vegetarian and ate all foods prohibited by the shastras. He even insisted that his queen eat such things against her will. To bring an end to this harassment, Jhamkuba decided to leave the comforts of the palace and run to the feet of God.

While one would not guess from her outwardly appearance, she was a courageous soul. One night she tied a rope of saris, descended secretly from her quarters and walked along the



Jhamkuba escapes from the tyranny of the palace

sewage track to exit the palace. She continued walking, but she did not know the way to Gadhada. By this time, it was already daybreak. Fearing that the state soldiers would find her, she hid in the carcass of a camel lying in a trench.

In the morning, the mounted soldiers began their search for the queen. Jhamkuba was hiding in the carcass and saw them passing by. Jhamkuba remained hidden in the carcass for three

long days despite the stench, heat and insects. On the third day, she saw the soldiers returning to the palace. Only then did Jhamkuba come out of the carcass. As she walked on, she met a group of merchants and went with them to Vadnagar in Gujarat. Here, on the banks of a small lake, she met a group of women who were disciples of Bhagwan Swaminarayan. Excited to find them, she joined their group and accompanied them to Gadhada.

The mere darshan of Bhagwan Swaminarayan gave Jhamkuba great inner peace. She saw everything the Brahmin had described about Shriji Maharaj and experienced divine bliss.

Bowing down at the feet of Shriji Maharaj, she earnestly requested, “Maharaj! I do not wish to live a householder’s life. I want to devote myself at your feet.”

Omniscient Maharaj knew Jhamkuba’s background. He was extremely pleased with her faith and devotion. Shriji Maharaj accepted her as his disciple and told her to stay and serve with Jivuba at the *darbar* of Dada Khachar.

Although Jhamkuba was a Kshatriya, she was very humble and had a strong desire for salvation. Jivuba did not know her past. Consequently, she assigned her the work of collecting cow dung and cleaning the cow pens. She gave her simple *rotlas* for meals. Jhamkuba was delighted to be able to serve Maharaj and the devotees. She enthusiastically did simple tasks like sweeping the *darbar* and fetching water for Maharaj and the sadhus.

Once, while Jhamkuba was cleaning, Shriji Maharaj happened to pass by. Shriji Maharaj called Jivuba and asked her, “Do you know who this Jhamkuba is?”

“No, Maharaj,” replied Jivuba.

“She had many servants like you in her palace. She has left her kingdom to offer devotion to God. She was the Queen of Udaipur. Don’t assign her such menial work.” In this way, Shriji Maharaj gently scolded Jivuba.

As directed by Maharaj, Jhamkuba shaved her head, wore only white clothes, and devoted her life to worshipping God. Shriji Maharaj renamed her Mataji and blessed her with a boon: “I will take you to my divine abode at the time of your death.” Maharaj then sent Mataji to Bhuj with Ladhibai.

In Bhuj, Ladhibai and Mataji lived in the same room and meditated on Maharaj. Shriji Maharaj gave them his darshan every day. Both Mataji and Ladhibai left their bodies at the same time and were cremated on the same funeral pyre. Maharaj took both the released souls to his divine abode together.¹

18. Rana Rajgar

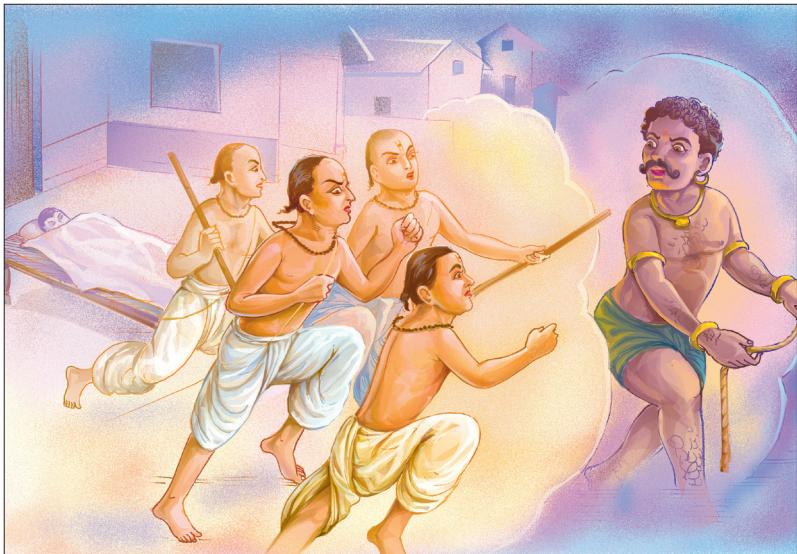
Golida is a village in the Kathiawad region of Gujarat. Four Brahmin brothers, Bhima, Vashram, Raghav and Rana lived there. They belonged to the Rajgar Brahmin community and came from a virtuous family. Their father had completed a pilgrimage from Jagannathpuri to Dwarka by offering prostrations all the way.

Their father had also met Sadguru Ramanand Swami, who had once visited Golida. On that occasion, Swami had explained to him, “Ultimate liberation cannot be attained without the contact of God in human form.”

The old Brahmin had questioned, “Where can one find manifest God in this Kali-yug?”

At that time, before leaving for another village, Ramanand Swami had blessed him, “Your sons will be fortunate enough to come in contact with God in human form.”

Years later, Bhagwan Swaminarayan travelled from Sardhar to Golida. At their very first darshan of Maharaj, these four brothers overflowed with love for Shriji Maharaj as if they had always known him. They invited Maharaj to their house and



The brothers chase away the servants of Yama from their village lovingly served him a meal. They accepted initiation into the Satsang and became staunch disciples.

Greatly pleased with them, Shriji Maharaj offered, "Ask for a boon."

"Yama [the god of death] should never enter our village or its outskirts to fetch any soul," the brothers politely asked.

Slowly and steadily their whole village was drawn to Satsang. However, there was one man who was very malicious towards Satsang. At the time of his death, the servants of Yama came to take him to hell. But on reaching the outskirts of the village, they began to experience a burning sensation. Some of the *yamaduts* warned, "The divine influence of Bhagwan Swaminarayan prevails in this village; we will not be able to enter the village." Others said, "There is nothing wrong in taking away an evil man."

All the four brothers took turns to guard the town. Today it was Bhima's and Rana's turn. They saw the servants of Yama and told them to go back. The *yamaduts*, however, did not heed

their warning. So the two brothers chased them with sticks. The servants of Yama ran away. Such was the strength of the brothers' faith and confidence in Bhagwan Swaminarayan.

Raghav and Vashram both wanted to become sadhus, but their mother refused. Rana then explained to his mother, "Please permit my brothers to become sadhus. Do not worry, I will serve you." His mother finally consented and both the brothers were initiated as sadhus. They were initiated as Raghavanand Swami and Vishvatmanand Swami. Both were known as 'Jam-tagda' sadhus as they had driven away the servants of Yama.

Some time later, Rana fell ill and was on his deathbed.

His mother asked, "Who will look after me now?"

"I will come to take you to Dham 12 days from now," Rana promised his mother.

Shriji Maharaj came with a *viman* to take Rana to his abode. Rana asked everybody, "Those who want to come to Dham with me get ready." His son got ready and went to Akshardham with him. On the twelfth day Rana came with Maharaj to take his mother to Akshardham. Many were witness to this divine darshan and were amazed.

Such was Rana Rajgar's faith and courage. Shriji Maharaj has praised Rana Rajgar in Vachanamrut, Loya 3. We, too, should keep such faith and enthusiasm as we too have attained the manifest form of God and the Satpurush.

19. Vachanamrut

The Vachanamrut is truly nectar in the form of words. On drinking its words one is immortalized, transcends the cycle of births and deaths and becomes eligible to attain Akshardham.

Just as the Bhagavad Gita is the word of Shri Krishna Bhagwan, the Vachanamrut is a compilation of the divine

discourses of Parabrahma Purushottam Bhagwan Swaminarayan. There is no shastra superior to it. It is the quintessence of all Hindu shastras, including the Vedas, Mahabharat, Ramayan and the Purans.

Bhagwan Swaminarayan himself says in the Vachanamrut, Gadhada II 13, “This discourse is based on what I have seen and realized through my own experience. In fact, it is also in agreement with the shastras.”

Shriji Maharaj moved incessantly throughout the Sampradaya for 30 years. The sadhus noted down his discourses which were spoken directly, or presented in the form of questions and answers in the assemblies held at different locations. Four leading scholarly *paramhansas* – Gopalanand Swami, Nityanand Swami, Muktanand Swami and Shukanand Swami – compiled the text with the inspiration of Shriji Maharaj.

VACHANAMRUT, GADHADA I 6: ONE WITH WISDOM AND ONE WITHOUT WISDOM

On Magshar *sudi* 9, Samvat 1876 [25 November 1819], Shriji Maharaj was sitting in Dada Khachar’s *darbar* in Gadhada. He was dressed entirely in white clothes. At that time, an assembly of *munis* as well as devotees from various places had gathered before him.

Thereupon, Shriji Maharaj said, “In this Satsang fellowship, a person who is wise increasingly finds flaws within oneself and perceives virtues in God and his devotees. Moreover, when God and his Sant utter harsh words of advice for one’s own benefit, one accepts them as beneficial and is not hurt by them. Such a person steadily attains greatness in Satsang.

“Conversely, when someone who lacks wisdom practises satsang and listens to discourses in Satsang, they continually perceive virtues within themselves.

“Moreover, when God and his Sant highlight their flaws and offer guidance, they misinterpret it due to arrogance. Instead, they perceive flaws in God and his Sant. Such a person steadily declines and loses their reputation in Satsang.

“Therefore, if one renounces the vanity of their own virtues, becomes brave, and keeps faith in God and his Sant, then their ignorance is eradicated and they attain greatness in Satsang.”

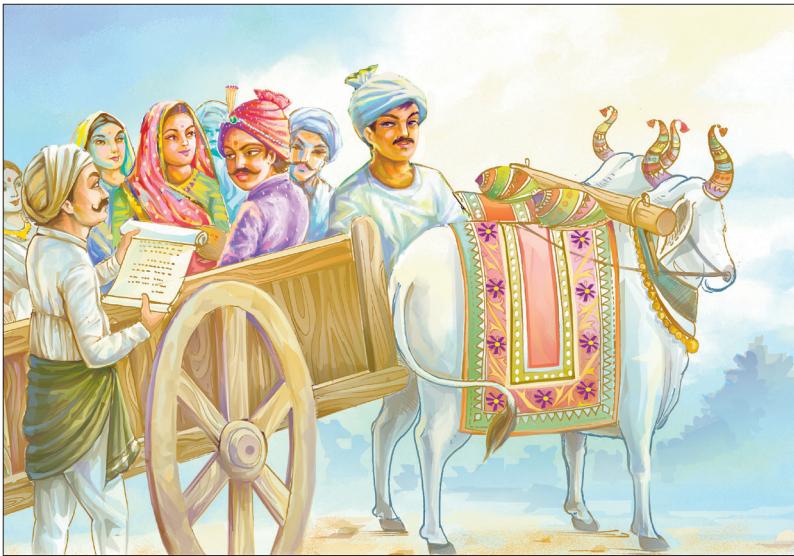
EXPLANATION

Generally, people feel that a person who knows how to talk, eat and walk humanely, is a person who has a sense of civility and understanding; and the person who does not possess such ability is a person who has no sense of discernment. Spiritually, however, the faculty of discernment is different and is explained by Shriji Maharaj in this Vachanamrut. He explains that a person may have many flaws but they do not look at them and instead will highlight even trifling flaws in others. Supporting this, Surdas said, “*Mo sam kaun kutil khal kāmi.*” Meaning: “There is no one as bad, deceitful and lustful as me.” In this way, Surdas always used to focus on his own flaws.

To eradicate our flaws, God or his holy Sadhu may reprimand or scold us. In those instances, do not take their *avgun* and understand their words to be for our benefit. Thus if one rids oneself of all ego and keeps full faith in the words of the Sadhu, one eradicates one’s own ignorance and progresses in Satsang.

20. Prabhashankar and Devram

The altar was set for the wedding ceremony. The marriage procession of the bridegroom had started. The beating of drums and cymbals was in full swing. The party of relatives accompanying the bridegroom to the marriage was ready to



Prabhashankar receives Maharaj's letter and postpones his marriage proceed in their bullock-carts.

Exactly at that moment, a courier unexpectedly arrived with a letter for the elegantly dressed groom. Prabhashankar, the groom, read the letter and immediately took a decision. He summoned his relatives and said, "This marriage will have to be discontinued. I have received this letter from Bhagwan Swaminarayan calling me to Vartal."

The relatives were stunned at Prabhashankar's sudden decision. His parents tried to dissuade him, but he did not budge. To him everything else was trivial before the command of Shriji Maharaj.

"The marriage can be arranged again, but the command of Shriji Maharaj will not come again," he said and left for Vartal. On arriving in Vartal he offered prostrations to Shriji Maharaj. Omniscient Maharaj asked him, "Well, Prabhashankar, what were you doing when you received my letter?"

Prabhashankar frankly narrated the full story. Shriji Maharaj was pleased and remarked, "You are indeed a true devotee."

Prabhanshankar belonged to the town of Piplav. From childhood, he remained absorbed in devotion to God, observed the moral codes firmly and was addicted to religious discourses.

This same series of events transpired again when Shriji Maharaj performed a grand *yagna* in Dabhan in 1810 CE (Samvat 1866). Prabhanshankar's marriage was about to be celebrated when he received an invitation letter from Maharaj to attend the auspicious *yagna*. Again, he put aside his wedding and prepared to go to Dabhan. His parents tried to prevent him. But he said, "Father, the marriage can be arranged next year, but Shriji Maharaj is not going to perform such a *yagna* again in Dabhan."

In the same way, Devrambhai of Bhuj, in Kutch, was another devotee with such high understanding. When his wife passed away, all his relatives lamented the death, but Devrambhai was not a man to mourn. To him everything except Shriji Maharaj was perishable. He had unflinching love and devotion only for Shriji Maharaj. According to social customs, his relatives asked him to take a purification bath on receiving the news of the death of his wife. Devrambhai consented, and said, "If there is news of the death of any other relative, please tell me, so that I may bathe for them as well." Such was the depth of his understanding.

21. Sachchidanand Swami

Everybody used to address him as Motabhai, but his actual name was Dajibhai. He was seven feet tall and had a strong body. He was from the Vaghela Kshatriya community. This devotee from the town of Moda, near Jamnagar, was always engrossed in devotion to God, just like Jadbharat. His family did not like his intense spirituality.

From the first time he met Bhagwan Swaminarayan, Motabhai was totally attracted to Maharaj's *murti* and harboured



Maharaj feels Sachchidanand Swami's thirst and sends water for him an intense desire to become a sadhu. Thus, he frequently ran away from home to Shriji Maharaj. Annoyed by this, his family put fetters on his legs and locked him in a room. Motabhai remembered Shriji Maharaj. Maharaj soon appeared before him, broke the fetters and took Motabhai to Gadhada.

In Gadhada, Motabhai was initiated into the sadhu-fold and renamed Sachchidanand Swami. Sachidanand Swami had great love for Shriji Maharaj. His mind was constantly attached to Maharaj's *murti*. Whenever he had to separate from Maharaj, blood would ooze from every pore of his body. Many times he even fainted.

As instructed by Maharaj, Swami had the Radha Vav dug. Near this well, he cultivated a beautiful garden of flowers. Daily, Swami would offer decoratively interwoven garlands and flower bracelets to Shriji Maharaj.

Just as he had deep affection for Maharaj, Swami also had great affinity for Satsang. He often said, "Even if my legs are cut off, I will drag myself to where all sadhus throw the remnants of

their food, sit there, eat those remnants and remain in Satsang. But I will never ever leave Satsang.”

Once, Shriji Maharaj was giving special vows to be observed during Chaturmas. Sachchidanand Swami took a very difficult vow, “I will not sleep for four months. Also, I will sit cross-legged, with a stone on each thigh, to meditate on Shriji Maharaj during the night.

During a time of drought the devotees prayed to Shriji Maharaj for rain, but Maharaj refused to oblige and remarked, “It won’t rain this year as Indra has become angry.”

The devotees were concerned. They came to Sachchidanand Swami and shared their worries. Swami said, “I cannot do anything without the consent of Shriji Maharaj, otherwise he will become displeased.”

However, the devotees persistently requested, “If Maharaj scolds you, we will bear the brunt of the consequences, but please have pity on us.”

Tenderhearted and compassionate, Swamiji sat in samadhi. In the state of samadhi, he woke up Indra and asked him to shower rains. Soon there was plenty of rainfall.

When Shriji Maharaj came to know that Sachchidanand Swami had brought the rains, he immediately excommunicated him from Satsang. Swami sat on the opposite bank of the River Ghela and began to offer devotion. Two days passed without food and water. Despite his intense thirst, he still did not give up chanting Maharaj’s name.

Shriji Maharaj was sitting in his room, Akshar Ordi, and began to feel very thirsty. The attendant *brahmachari* served him plenty of water, but his thirst was not quenched. Maharaj then said, “Serve water to the Swami who is very thirsty.” Ratanji and Miyaji understood the significance of these words. They ran with sanctified water from Shriji Maharaj to the opposite bank

of River Ghela and served water to Sachchidanand Swami. It was only when Swami drank the water that Shriji Maharaj's thirst was quenched. Such was Sachchidanand Swami's oneness with Maharaj. Shriji Maharaj then called Sachchidanand Swami back into Satsang.

In the last moments before Shriji Maharaj passed away to his divine abode, Sachchidanand Swami stopped his own pulse and breathing and passed away to Akshardham ahead of Shriji Maharaj.

On seeing him there, Maharaj immediately commanded, "Return to your body again!"

"I won't be able to stay there. I will not be able to endure the separation from you," Swami urged repeatedly. Shriji Maharaj then gave him sanctified water to drink and promised to bring him to Akshardham within six months. Only then did Swami come back into the body. Unable to bear separation from Maharaj, Swami still refused to eat or drink anything. Soon after, Shriji Maharaj took Sachchidanand Swami to Akshardham.

Such was Sachchidanand Swami's deep love for Shriji Maharaj.

22. Subhashit: Sanskrit Maxims

1. *Ayam nijah paro veti gananā laghu-chetasām;
Udāra-charitānām tu vasudhaiva kutumbakam.*

'This is mine and this is someone else's' are the thoughts of a narrow-minded person. However, one who is broad-minded considers the whole world as one's family.

2. *Gangā pāpam shashi tāpam dainyam kalpataru-stathā;
Pāpam tāpam cha dainyam cha ghnanti santo mahāshayāha.*

The [River] Ganga destroys sins, the coolness of the moon drives away the heat and the *kalpataru* tree abolishes poverty. The Satpurush, however, destroys all three – sins, grief and poverty.

3. *Manasyekam vachasyekam karmanyakam mahātmanām;*

Manasyan-yad vachasyan-yad karmayan-yad durātmanām.

The great act in consonance with their thoughts and words, whereas the thoughts, words and deeds of the wicked are not in consonance.

4. *Prasangam-ajaram pāsham ātmanaha kavayo viduhu;*

Sa eva sādhushu kruto moksha-dvāram-apāvratam.

- Shrimad Bhagvat 3.25.20

If the same intense attachment the *jīva* has towards one's body and relations is directed towards the holy Sadhu, the door to ultimate liberation for the *jīva* is opened.

5. *Na hyammayāni tirthāni na devā mruchchhilāmayāhā;*

Te punanty-uru-kālenā darshana-deva-sādhavahā.

- Shrimad Bhagvat 10.84.11

Sacred places on land and water as well as *murtis* made of stone and earth are not merely tokens of pilgrimage or worship; they have divine powers. However, they purify the users only after a long time. The mere darshan of a true sadhu, however, purifies instantly.

6. *Shraddhāvān labhate gnānam tat-paraha sayatendriyaha;*

Gnānam labdhvā param shāntim-achireṇādbigachhati.

- Bhagavad Gita 4.39

A person of faith, whose heart is devoted and whose senses are controlled, attains this knowledge. After attaining this knowledge, one attains the highest peace.

7. *Sarva dharmān parityajya mām-ekam sharanam vraja;
Aham tvām sarva-pāpebhyo mokshayishyāmi mā shuchaha.*

- Bhagavad Gita 18.66

Shed all your ideas of dharma; seek only my refuge. Fear no longer, for I will redeem you from all sins and grant you *moksha*.

8. *Kāryam na sahasā kinchit kāryo dharmastu satvaram;
Pāthaniyadhita-vidya kāryaha sangon-vaham satām.*

- Shikshapatri 36

Duties relating to dharma should be performed instantaneously while duties relating to social affairs should be performed after due deliberation. The learned should impart their learning to others and should daily keep the company of sadhus.

9. *Dharmena rabitā Krishna-bhaktibhi kāryā na sarvathā;
Agna-nindā-bhayānn-aiv tyajyam Shri Krishna-sevanam.*

- Shikshapatri 39

None shall practise devotion to Bhagwan disregarding the religious tenets, nor shall they give up the worship of Bhagwan for fear of criticism by the ignorant.

10. *Api bhuri falam karmam dharmāpetam bhaved-yadi;
Ācharyam tarhi tann-aiva dharmaha sarvārtha-dosti hi.*

(Shikshapatri 73)

My devotees shall desist from those acts which are contrary to the scriptural tenets, however much rewarding they may be. For it is dharma alone that yields all desired objects.

23. Jalamsinh Bapu

“Swami! My body is at risk here,” said Bhagwan Swaminarayan to Muktanand Swami. Shriji Maharaj had arrived in Tavi from



Jalamsinh Bapu rushes back to Shriji Maharaj with the barber

Shiyani near Limbdi. On the outskirts of the village, Shriji Maharaj was having his head shaved by a barber who was a little rough at his job.

On hearing this, Jalamsinh Bapu, who was standing nearby, requested, "Maharaj, if you permit me, I can get a better barber from my village right away." Shriji Maharaj granted him permission and Bapu left speedily on a mare for Devalia.

Devalia was six miles from Tavi. Knowing it would take Bapu some time to cover that distance, Maharaj decided to walk towards Devalia with some sadhus and devotees. Exactly halfway to Devalia, Maharaj arrived at Doli Talavdi and held an assembly under a pipal tree.

On reaching Devalia, Jalamsinh Bapu called for the barber. The barber sharpened his razor, put the bag under his armpit and was ready to go.

Bapu asked the barber to run along with him while he rode on horseback. But how fast could the poor barber run with the bag under his armpit? Bapu wanted to reach Maharaj as soon

as possible. Maharaj was waiting, half shaven, in Doli Talavdi. What could not be done for his beloved? Bapu then put aside his pride and reputation, and gripped the barber's bag under his own armpit and told the barber, "Hold this stirrup and run along with me."

On reaching Doli Talavdi, he saw Maharaj seated in the assembly. Bapu alighted from the mare, came near Shriji Maharaj and stood with folded hands. At that time Purnanand Swami also arrived there and was standing at the back. He could not walk as fast as the group with Maharaj and so was late. As the assembly was packed, Purnanand Swami did not get a proper seat.

Seeing Purnanand Swami standing aloof, omniscient Maharaj commented, "Has anybody seen ego personified?" All were surprised to hear this. Maharaj continued, "This Bapu, who is the ruler of the state and truly deserves respect, is standing there in a corner humbly holding the barber's bag under his armpit. On the other hand, this sadhu, who should live humbly, expects to be honoured." So saying, Shriji Maharaj pointed his finger towards Purnanand Swami. Feeling insulted, Swami immediately left the assembly and walked away.

Shriji Maharaj had his head shaved under the pipal tree. After bathing, he went with the group to Devalia at the invitation of Jalamsinh Bapu.

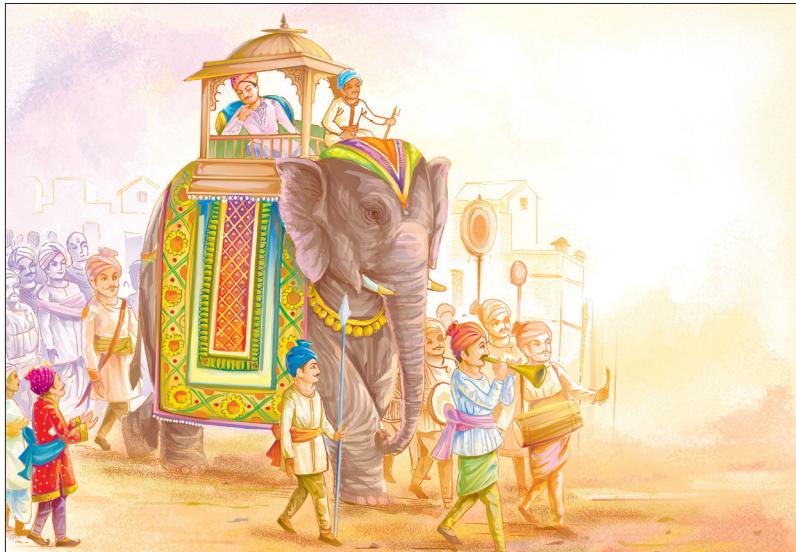
As Maharaj entered the Darbar's courtyard, Keshaba was spreading some wheat on the verandah.

"Keshaba, what are you doing?" asked Maharaj.

"Small insects breed in the wheat, so I am spreading it in the sunlight."

Expressing his pleasure, Shriji Maharaj gave blessings, "No more insects will breed in your food grains."

"But what do we really profit out of that?" asked Keshaba lovingly.



The prince's friend sees the prince bowing respectfully to him

Maharaj replied, "I will take any soul leaving its body in your courtyard to Akshardham."

Hearing such blessings from Shriji Maharaj, Keshaba and Jalamsinh Bapu were overwhelmed with joy and fell at his feet.

24. Sermons of Gunatitanand Swami

1. *Swāminārāyan Hare, Swāmie vāt kari je: "Ek jane lākh rupiyāni buddhi lidhi. Temaja mokshani buddhi pan anek prakārnī motā thaki shikhāy chhe"* (1.127).

"A person bought wisdom for 100,000 rupees. Similarly, wisdom of the many ways for *moksha* can be learnt from the God-realized Sadhu."

A prince and a minister's son were close friends. On their way to another village they stayed a night in a jungle. When they awoke the following morning both were very hungry. The prince told his friend to get some food from the nearby town.

The minister's son went to the town, but found that the gates of the town were closed.

It had so happened that the town's king had died childless. To choose their next king, the townspeople had decided that the first person to enter the town in the morning would become the new king. When the gates were opened that morning, the minister's son was the first to enter and so he was proclaimed king.

Meanwhile, the prince grew tired of waiting for his friend to return with food. So he set out in search of his friend. Soon, the prince too reached the town. As he entered, he noticed a shop sign which read, "For sale – Intellect". Out of curiosity, the prince entered the shop and asked the price for the intellect. The shop owner replied, "It ranges from 1 rupee to 100,000 rupees." The prince then gave a jewelled ring valued at one *lakh* rupees and asked for wisdom.

"One should bow to one's junior in case they are raised to a position of power." The shop owner wrote this on a piece of paper and handed it over to the prince.

The prince read the note and left. When he had walked a short distance he noticed that the town king's procession was coming towards him and so he stood to one side. When the procession came near, the prince saw that the king sitting on the elephant was his friend, the minister's son. At first he felt angry at him; his friend had left him in the jungle. Now, instead of bringing back food, he was enjoying himself as the new king of the town. Just then the prince remembered the words on the note. Immediately, he bowed down and paid salutations to the new king.

The minister's son noted that his friend was bowing to him. On returning to the royal palace he summoned the court and asked the assembly, "Now that I am the king I can do as I please." So, he called for his friend, the prince, and handed over the royal throne to him.

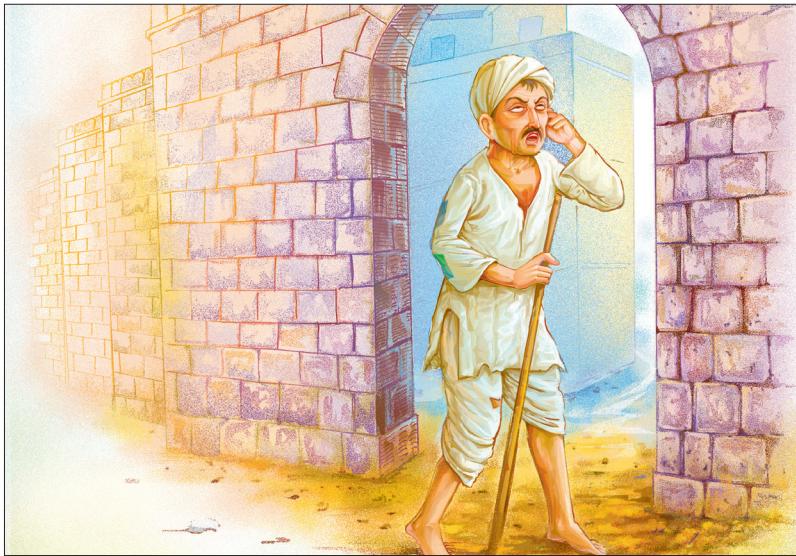
This prince had bought advice for a 100,000 rupees and by acting according to the advice he benefited by becoming the king of a new town. Similarly, we receive wisdom from the holy Sadhu and when we act according to that wisdom, we attain salvation. If we associate with the holy Sadhu and receive such wisdom, then just as the prince attained a new kingdom, we will attain Akshardham.

2. *Swāminārāyan Hare, Swāmie vāt kari je: “Karod rupiyā kharche pan āvā Sādhu male nabi, ne karod rupiyā detā pan ā vatu male nabi ne karod rupiyā aptā pan manushya-deb male nabi. Ne āpane pan karod janma dharyā chhe pan koi vakhat āvo jog malyo nathi. Nikar shu karvā deb dharvo pade?”* (1.19).

“Even if one spends tens of millions of rupees, such a Sadhu is unattainable. Even if one gives tens of millions of rupees, such spiritual talks are unattainable. Even if one gives tens of millions of rupees, this human body cannot be attained. And we, too, have taken tens of millions of births. But never have we had the company of such a God-realized Sadhu. Otherwise, why would we need to take birth?”

It is very difficult to attain the company and talks of the enlightened sadhu possessing the attributes of dharma, *jnan*, *vairagya* and *bhakti*. His enlightened talks have the power to dispel the ignorance of *maya* within us. It is also rare to attain a human birth; we take birth as a human only after moving through the whole cycle of 8,400,000 life forms. We have all three of these. And what are we doing with these rare attainments? The following story illustrates this.

A blind man once committed a crime. However, what punishment could be given to a blind man? The king commanded him, “Surrounding this town is a 24-mile-long fort with only one gate. Go walk with your hand on the fort’s wall. When you reach the gate, you are free.”



The blind man scratches his head and misses the open gate

The blind man started walking, with one hand touching the wall of the fort and a walking stick in the other. When he was a few steps from the gate, he felt an itch on his head. So, as he walked on, he lifted his hand to scratch his head. In the moments he used his hand to scratch his head, he walked passed the gate. When he placed his hand back on the wall, all he felt was the solid wall and so he ignorantly started the 24-mile trek all over again. The same happens to us. We have attained this rare human body and have come in contact with a true Sadhu. Now, we must recognize his greatness and eradicate our ignorance by listening to his discourses.

3. *Swāminārāyan Hare, Swāmie vāt kari je:* “*Satsang thāy pan sang vinā satsangnu sukh na āve; keni pethe to jem khādhānu male pan khādhā vinā tenu sukh na āve, temā ja lugdā-gharenā male to pan paheryā vinā tenu sukh na āve, tem sang vinā satsangnu such āve nahi*” (1.29).

“One can attain satsang, but without close association, there is no happiness. How? It is like a person having food, but without actually eating, there is no happiness. Also, one may

have clothes but without wearing them there is no happiness. Similarly, without the association of the great Sadhu, one does not get the bliss of satsang.”

Simply standing on the banks of a river does not quench one's thirst; one must drink some of the fresh water. The snake, which wraps itself fully on the sandalwood tree but keeps its mouth away from the tree, retains its poison. Similarly, we are fortunate to have attained satsang – something that is a rare achievement even for the devas. However, we will not experience its bliss if we do not actively take benefit of this satsang.

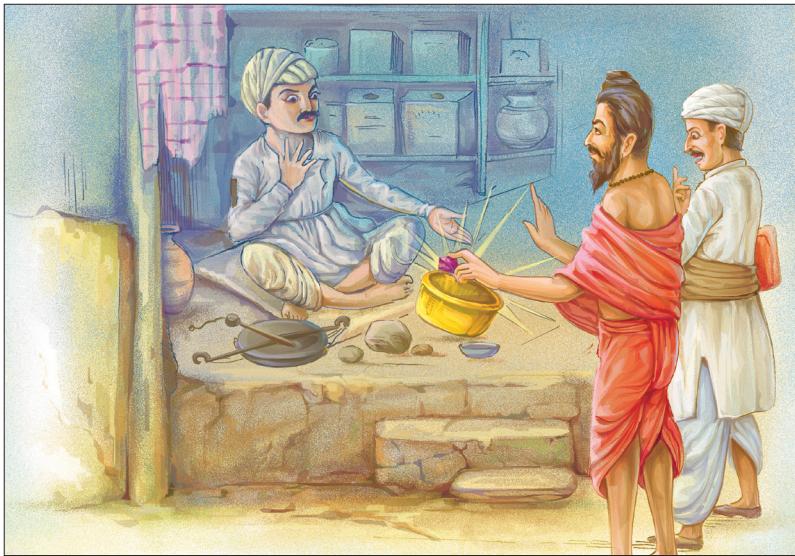
Once there was a shopkeeper who sold edible oil for a living. He had a small shop in town and was constantly busy making small sales to his customers. One day an ascetic, on his way to perform austerities, came to this shop with a *parasmani*. The mahatma decided to pass on this precious stone to this simple merchant for safe keeping. The ascetic took out the *parasmani* and explained to the shopkeeper, “This is a *parasmani*. If you touch it to any iron, the iron will turn into gold. You will no longer be poor. Keep it with you; I'll come to collect it on my way back.”

The shopkeeper was completely engrossed in his business. Hurriedly he told the mahatma, “Whatever you have, put it in the recess of the wall.” The sadhu placed the *parasmani* there, and went away. The shopkeeper, however, was so engrossed in his menial business transactions that he never found the time to even look in the recess of the wall.

After six months, the mahatma returned. He imagined that the shopkeeper must have surely become rich and happy by now. However, on entering the town he saw that the shopkeeper was running the shop in the same old state.

The mahatma went to the shopkeeper and asked for the *parasmani*.

“Swamiji! Please take it from wherever you left it.”



The mahatma shows the merchant that the *parasmani* turns iron into gold

The ascetic saw the *parasmani* in the recess in the wall. The stone was covered with dust. It was obvious that the shopkeeper had not understood the importance of the *parasmani*. Reprimanding the shopkeeper, the mahatma told him, "In your one penny or two penny business, you have ignored this magical *parasmani*. You have not seen the wonder of this *parasmani*." With these words, he asked for some pieces of iron.

However, the poor shopkeeper did not have any pieces of iron in his shop. So he went around and collected two pounds of iron. As soon as the mahatma touched the *parasmani* to the two pounds of iron, it turned into gold. The shopkeeper jumped with excitement. He asked the mahatma to leave the *parasmani* for a while more.

"Fool, I left it here for six months. Now it is your fate." So saying, the mahatma walked away with his *parasmani*.

We have also been blessed with a *parasmani* in the form of this satsang, but idleness and negligence obstruct us. We can turn ourselves into precious gold if we practise satsang wholeheartedly through mind, speech and actions.

4. *Swāminārāyan bare Swāmie vāt kari je: “Jevo hu satsange karine vash thāu chhu evo tap, yagna, yoga, vrat, dānādik sādhane karine vash nathi thato. Tē satsang te shu? Je motā ekāntikne hath jodvā ane te kahe tem karvu e ja chhe”* (1.17).

“God has said, ‘I am not as pleased by austerities, *yagnas*, yoga, observance of vows, donations and other endeavours as I am by satsang.’ What is that satsang? To fold one’s hands before the great God-realized Sadhu and to do as he says.”

This *shloka* from the 11th canto of the Shrimad Bhagvat. People believe in various endeavours to attain *moksha*. Some perform severe austerities, some give donations, whereas some try to control their senses and mind through eight-fold yoga. All these means, however, bring liberation after a very long time. God is not pleased immediately by such means.

There lived two brothers in a village. The younger one was fond of the contact of sadhus, whereas the elder one liked to go on pilgrimages. The elder brother insisted that the younger one join him on his pilgrimages. The younger brother, however, politely refused. Once he said, “Dear elder brother, take this gourd with you in my place.”

The elder brother took the gourd with him on the pilgrimage. At all the pilgrim places he touched the gourd at the feet of the *murtis*, dipped it in the waters of all holy rivers and so on. The elder brother returned home on completing the pilgrimage. The younger brother invited him to dinner. When the elder brother came, the younger brother took the gourd and filled it with water and asked his brother to take water from the *tumbdi*. As soon as the elder brother drank some water, he spat it out. “How bitter!” he exclaimed. Despite eating some sweet *dudhpak*, the bitterness still would not go away. Only after some days did the bitterness disappear.

After some time, the younger brother invited the elder brother

to dinner again. Again he gave the elder brother water in the same gourd. The elder brother said, "I will not drink water from this *tumbdi*." To assure him, the younger brother drank water from it first and then asked him to drink from it. The water was sweet. The elder brother asked the reason for this. The younger brother said, "A sadhu cleaned the gourd from the inside, which was bitter." Similarly, the bitterness which is within us in the form of lust, anger, greed and other enemies cannot be removed by mere pilgrimages. However, through the contact of the enlightened Sadhu, they are immediately removed.

This illustration teaches us that attachment towards a Satpurush is true satsang. When we approach such an *ekantik* Sadhu we must discard ego, become humble and have faith that he will grant *moksha*. This is the real meaning of 'to fold one's hands'. After keeping such faith, one must implicitly obey his wishes.

A medical store may have plenty of medications in stock, but if we take them without fully knowing their correct usage, they would adversely affect us. However, when the doctor prescribes them, disease is cured. Similarly, if *jap*, *tap*, observance of religious vows, etc. are practiced as per the instructions of the *ekantik* Sadhu, then one is relieved from the cycle of births and deaths. Self-willed effort on its own does not lead to *moksha*.

5. *Swāminārāyan Hare, Swāmie vāt kari je: "Prahlađje Nārāyan sāthe ghanā divas yuddha karyu pan Bhagwān jitānā nahi. Pachhi Bhagwane Prahlādne kahyu je, 'Yuddha karine to hu jitāu tevo nathi ne mane jitvāno upāy to e chhe je, jibhe karine māru bhajan karvu, manmā māru chintvan karvu ne netramā māri murti rākhvi – e prakāre nirantar māri smṛuti karvi,' em kahyu. Pachhi evi rite Prahlāde abhyās karyo tyare Bhagwān chha māsmā vash thai gayā. Māte Bhagwanne rāji karvāne arthe ā upāy sarvopari chhe te shikhvo"* (1.3).

"Prahladji fought for many days with Narayan, but God

was not won over. God then told Prahlad, 'I cannot be won over by such wars. The way to win me over is by singing my bhajans, thinking of me in your mind and cherishing my *murti* in your eyes. In this way, always remember me.' Prahlad tried this method and God was won over within six months. Thus, to please God, learn this method, which is the best."

Different types of foes require different tools to defeat them. While one needs a sword, a shield, or a gun to defeat a warrior, these same tools are useless in defeating a scholar in a debate; to defeat a scholar, one must use one's sharp intellect. While weapons may work against warriors in battle, they do little in the battle against diseases caused by insects or viruses; these diseases can only be cured with medications. Similarly, worldly weapons cannot win over the supreme and all-powerful God; to win him over, one needs to use a different type of weapon. In this sermon, Gunatitanand Swami describes this unique type of battle and shows us the tools one must use to win over God.

Ravan and Kans were highly intelligent and heroic men. However, they did not know the way to defeat Ram and Krishna respectively and were ultimately defeated. On the other hand, Bali was a demon yet he pleased God because he ignored his weapons and resorted to the true way of winning against God. Gunatitanand Swami has shown this way to please God in this sermon. Swami says that if we attach all our senses to God, he is won over immediately. This method is revealed to us by the *param ekantik* Sadhu. It is a difficult task, but can be accomplished with constant practice.

Once, Gunatitanand Swami sent Ramdas Swami to Vanthali for some work. He instructed him, "Chant 'Swaminarayan, Swaminarayan' mentally all the way." Thus, totally engrossed in chanting the mantra, Ramdas Swami reached Vanthali. As a result, he saw the divine form of Shriji Maharaj on every indentation of the fort surrounding the village.

Thus, we should all learn this ultimate method to please God.

25. Kirtan

*Snehabharyā nayane nihāltā ho,
vandan ānand Ghanshyāmne;
Amimay drashtie nihāltā ho,
vandan ānand Ghanshyāmne...*

*Chhapaiyāpurmā vā'lo āpe pragat thayā,
Dharma-Bhaktine gher ānand utsav thayā,
Santone ānand upjāvtā ho,
Vandan ānand Ghanshyāmne...
Snehabharyā nayane...1*

*Bāl charitra kari āpe van vicharyā,
Tirthomāhi fari jivo pāvan karyā,
Nilkanth nām dharāvtā ho,
Vandan ānand Ghanshyāmne...
Snehabharyā nayane...2*

*Valkal vastra dhari Pulhāshrame rabyā,
Brahmarup tej dhari motā jogi thayā,
Nij swarup samjāvtā ho,
Vandan ānand Ghanshyāmne...
Snehabharyā nayane...3*

*Lojpur Dhām rahi Sarjudās kā'viyā,
Sarvopari gnān kahi santone rijhāviyā,
Muktānand prem thaki pujā ho,
Vandan ānand Ghanshyāmne...
Snehabharyā nayane...4*

Glossary

abil white powder used during worship rituals

adad a type of edible pulse

adhik mas an intercalary month added approximately every 2.5 years to the Hindu lunar calendar to align it with the solar year; also called Purushottam Mas.

agna tenet; commandment; sacred injunction

ahimsa principle of non-violence and non injury, in mind, action and speech

akda a type of plant

akshar-mukta liberated soul, residing eternally in Akshardham

annakut offering of many food items before the *murti* of God

antaryami inner controller; power of God to reside within a *jiva*, *ishwar*, etc., and control its each and every action; also implies God knowing its innermost thoughts and feelings

apad emergency requiring special spiritual or practical measures

artha one of the four human endeavours, referring to the pursuit of wealth, material prosperity, and resources necessary for a meaningful life, regulated by dharma

arti Hindu ritual of waving lighted wicks soaked in ghee or camphor before the *murti* of God as an act of worship

ashram spiritual hermitage or monastery, traditionally a secluded place for spiritual practice, meditation, and instruction; also, stage of life, e.g. *brahmacharya* ashram, *grubasth* ashram

atma soul, representing pure consciousness distinct from the body and mind

atmanand joy or bliss derived from being engrossed in the *atma*

atmarup one who has realized one's true self as *atma*

bhagvati diksha initiation into the sadhu-fold, marking a devotee's dedication and renunciation to live a life of sainthood

bhajiya a fried savoury snack made by coating vegetables in gram flour batter and deep-frying, popular in Indian cuisine

bilipatra leaves of tree sacred to Bhagwan Shiv

biranj a sweet delicacy made of rice

bor jujube tree

brahmacharya practice of celibacy

brahmachari a celibate; one who practises *brahmacharya* and whose *indriyas* are focused in God

brahmanishtha God-realized

brahmarup form of Brahma; possessing virtues similar to those of Brahma

brahmavidya knowledge of Brahma

chal mobile; refers mainly to *murtis* that are portable

chandlo auspicious vermillion mark applied on the forehead

chandrayan form of fasting where one's intake of food is regulated by the waxing and waning of the moon. For example, one form is to increase food intake from one morsel of food at the beginning of a new lunar month rising to 15 morsels on Punam, then decreasing again to a complete fast by Amas; or, beginning with 15 morsels of food at the beginning of a new month and decreasing to a complete fast on Punam, then increasing again to 15 by Amas. Other forms involve having only eight morsels a day, or four morsels twice a day, or merely three morsels a day

Chaturmas the four holy months of the monsoon season

cheshta verses sung before bedtime describing the daily routine and glory of Bhagwan Swaminarayan

dandvat prostration, a gesture of deep respect and submission

darbar court of a king or feudal ruler, traditionally with a central courtyard surrounded by rooms with verandas

darbh type of sacred grass; scientific name: *Desmostachya bipinnata*

deva deity or divine being

Dham short form for Akshardham, abode of Bhagwan Swaminarayan

dharna-parna vow of fasting on alternate days

dhun chanting of God's name

dokdo unit of currency

dudhpak rich item of food made of sweetened milk and rice, garnished with aromatic spices and nuts

dudh-pauva parched and flattened rice soaked in sweet milk

ekadashi special religious fast observed on the 11th day of the bright and dark halves of each lunar month

ekantik an elevated spiritual state wherein one offers bhakti to God along with dharma, *jnan* and *vairagya*, i.e. all four of the attributes of *ekantik dharma*

fagva special blessings and *prasad* received on the Fuladol festival

falahar foods permitted to be consumed on *ekadashi*

fulvadi a fried savoury snack

gaushala cowshed

ghadi duration of time equalling approximately 24 minutes

ghebar a sweet delicacy

gopis women of the cowherd class who were devotees of Shri Krishna

gulal fragrant reddish powder used on joyous occasions

guna three attributes of *maya* – *rajoguna* (passion), *tamoguna* (darkness) and *sattvaguna* (goodness)

gunatit one who is above the three *gunas* of *rajas*, *tamas* and *sattva*; transcending *maya*

gurubhai initiated by the same guru

himsa injury caused through mind, action or speech

hindolo swing

indriya a sense organ by which one perceives

jalebi sweet delicacy made from gram flour, sugar, ghee

Jam-tagda one who can drive away the servants of Yama

jap mantra recitation or repetition

jiva soul

jnan knowledge, especially spiritual knowledge

Kal time

kalpataru wish-fulfilling divine tree

kama lust; desires for worldly sense pleasures.

kansar a sweet delicacy

kanthi double-threaded necklace, usually made of tulsi beads, received by *satsangis* upon initiation into the Satsang fellowship, and worn as a sign of their affiliation to God

karen type of flower

khatras an observance of only eating food devoid of the six types of tastes – sweet, salty, bitter, sour, spicy and astringent

khir a hot, thick sweet delicacy made from milk, sugar, rice and dry fruits; similar to *dudhpak*

kumkum vermillion powder used for applying *chandlo*

kusangi a person who is bad company and leads one astray from spiritual progress

lakh one hundred thousand

mafo an enclosed cart

mahamantra a great or powerful mantra

mahapuja special worship offered to Bhagwan Swaminarayan along with Gunatitanand Swami, *muktas*, incarnations and deities
mala rosary

maalpuva a sweet delicacy made of wheat and fried in ghee

mangala first *arti* of the day, performed at sunrise

mansi puja mental worship; devotion offered to God mentally through *puja*, *arti*, and other offerings

matli earthen pot

maya one of the five eternal realities; ignorance, darkness, material universe

mogri a kind of vegetable

moksha release from the cycle of births and deaths and attaining Akshardham where one eternally offers devotion to Purushottam

mukta a liberated soul; *akshar-mukta*

muni sadhu or ascetic

murti sacred image or idol of God that is revered and worshipped

murti-pratishtha traditional Vedic ceremony in which *murtis* are ritually consecrated in a mandir

nirlobh non-covetousness; absence of greed

nirman vow of humility

nishkam vow of absolute celibacy

nissneh vow of detachment

nisswad vow of non-taste; non-indulgence in taste

niyam moral or spiritual discipline

padhramani visit by sadhus or devotees to sanctify a home

panchajiri mixture of powdered ginger, coriander seeds, cumin, coconut, sugar or gur, and ghee – used as prasad in rituals

panchamrut mixture of milk, curd, ghee, honey and sugar used in ritual worship of deities – used in Hindu worship and rituals as an offering to deities

paramhansa ‘supreme swan’; male sadhu of the highest order, characterised by his ability to discriminate between *sat* and *asat* – just as swans were traditionally considered to be able to distinguish between milk mixed with water

parasmani philosopher’s stone; divine magical gem that turns iron into gold

patasa sugar candy in a disc shape used as prasad

patotsav anniversary celebration of the mandir *murti-pratishta* ceremony

pendas a sweet delicacy made from milk, shaped into small, thick, semi-soft round balls

pradakshina circumambulation; ritual act of walking around a sacred object or deity

prahar a period of three hours

prakrut pralay partial dissolution of the universe in Hindu cosmology

prasad sanctified food, blessed and consecrated by having been offered to God

pujan act of worship involving special rituals

punam full moon; fifteenth day of the bright half of a lunar month

puri a fried delicacy made of wheat flour

purusharth collective term for the four goals legitimately pursued by all Hindus, namely: *dharma* (duties), *artha* (material wealth), *kama* (desires) and *moksha* (liberation)

rajbhog lunch offered to God; third *arti* of the day, performed around 11.30 a.m.

rajoguna quality of passion

raas Traditional Indian folk dance performed with sticks, music, singing, and dancing in a circular formation

rotlo a basic unleavened bread-like staple food of many parts of Gujarat, made generally of millet flour that is kneaded and patted into a flat, circular shape before being cooked on an earthen or metal hot plate

sadhana spiritual endeavor or disciplined effort towards spiritual goals

samaiya festival or special religious gathering

Samvat Hindu calendar era, often called Vikram Samvat, typically 56–57 years ahead of the Gregorian calendar

Sant saint; realized spiritual teacher, often synonymous with Satpurush

sashtang dandvat prostration with eight parts of the body touching the ground, signifying full surrender

Satpurush God-realized Sadhu

satsang Spiritual association with the Satpurush, fellow devotees, one's own *atma*, and the sacred shastras of the Satsang fellowship

satsangi member of the Satsang fellowship; one who practices satsang

sattva one of the three *gunas*; attribute of clarity and purity of thought, excellence, mental poise

sattvaguna quality of goodness and purity; one of the three gunas

shakotsav vegetable festival

shangar arti second *arti* of the day, performed after breakfast has been offered and the *murtis* have been adorned with garments, ornaments and garlands

shikharbaddha mandir with pinnacles in which five *artis* are

performed daily and daily worship of deities is performed by resident sadhus

shiro a sweet delicacy, usually prepared from wheat flour, ghee, sugar and condiments

shloka verses in Sanskrit

shraddh ceremony performed for the propitiation, honour or liberation of one's forefathers, mainly by offering rice balls and water

shrotriya one who knows the true meaning of the shastras

stotra hymn of praise

sud the bright half of a month, e.g. Kartik *sud* means 'the bright half of the month of Kartik'

sutarfeni a sweet delicacy made of fine, thread-like strands, often flavoured with cardamom

tamas attribute of inertia, ignorance, and darkness; one of the three *gunas*

tamoguna quality of darkness and ignorance; one of the three gunas

tap austerities such as fasting, meditation, tolerating extremes of heat and cold

thal food offered to God as a form of bhakti, which in turn consecrates the food, turning it into *Prasad*; *also refers to the bhajans sung while making the offering*

tilak U-shaped mark applied to the forehead with sandalwood paste, symbolizing the holy feet of God

tilak-chandlo U-shaped mark made with sandalwood paste and a round mark of kumkum in its centre, symbolizing allegiance to the Swaminarayan tradition

tulsi basil; a shrub with small green leaves regarded as especially holy by Hindus

tumbdi gourd

upasana devotion offered to God with the philosophical understanding of the nature of God; mode of worship
utsav festival

vad dark half of lunar month, e.g. Kartik *vad* means ‘the bright half of the month of Kartik’

vada a fried savoury bread

vairagya detachment from material objects and pursuits

varna social order of Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra; ‘caste’ is a misnomer, a derogatory term coined by colonial writers

vicharan spiritual journey or pilgrimage, often undertaken by sadhus

viman celestial or divine vehicle

vishay an object of sensory enjoyment or indulgence

vrat a spiritual observance or vow, often involving fasting or discipline

yagna ritual performed as a form of worship to seek the blessings of the deities

yamadut a servant of Yama