

Selected Articles about Pramukh Swami Maharaj

SMALL THINGS MAKE PERFECTION

Amidst all his activities Pramukh Swami Maharaj is meticulous and tenacious in his efforts and devotion to God.

It was not long after Yogiji Maharaj had passed away in 1971. Most of Pramukh Swami Maharaj's time during those days was taken up by his heavy schedule of preaching visits to the villages. Accompanying Swamishri at the time to help him with the never ending flow of mail from devotees was Doctor Swami (Swayamprakash Swami). It so happened that Doctor Swami once assembled a small first aid kit with a few medicines to carry around with him in case of an emergency. To identify the contents of each bottle, he neatly labelled the name of each tablet on the top of each container. When he showed the finished specimen to Swamishri, Swamishri's first response was, "You've only written the names on the lids?"

"Yes Swami..."

"But... but supposing the tops were switched round by mistake? What then?"

On the face of it, it seemed a trivial matter, but Doctor Swami was quick to realise that it was one that had the potential of unpleasant consequences. Despite his intelligence and experience, Doctor Swami had overlooked this fact. Admiring his Guru's sharp observation ability, he proceeded to label the bottles.

In life, it is often small matters like these that are usually neglected or unconsidered, not realising just how significant they may turn out to be. It was only a small hole in the wall that separated the sadhus' kitchen in the ashram of Ramanand Swami in Loj and the neighbouring house. But Nilkanth readily realised that what started off as an innocent exchange of lighted fuel between the sadhus and the women next door could have serious consequences. He immediately had the hole plugged.

It is apparent that Pramukh Swami Maharaj - without sacrificing the major matters in any way - also pays due concern to matters not so major immediately but nonetheless important.

A LESSON IN ETIQUETTE

Bombay, 1966. Two senior devotees were in an important meeting with Yogiji Maharaj and Pramukh Swami. During the meeting, Haribhushan Swami took in some fruits and milk as refreshments for the guests. In his haste, some of the milk spilled into one of the saucers. Pramukh Swami noted this but remained silent. The meeting over, Swamishri called Haribhushan Swami aside. Without appearing domineering in any way whatsoever, he gently corrected, "Haribhushan, remember one thing; never fill a glass of milk or water up to the brim. It shouldn't spill over into the saucers. If necessary, pour a little less into the glass so that not even a drop overflows."

Swamishri goes to great pains to explain to the sadhus the importance of mastering even a simple task, realising full well that only those who have the patience to do simple things perfectly ever acquire the skill to do difficult things easily. Today, Haribhushan Swami notes 'that this small but important lesson in etiquette taught to me by Swamishri over 30 years ago has proved to be helpful to me on many occasions.'

A NAMELESS LETTER

Once Swamishri received a letter from Gondal, but there was a slight problem. The sender had forgotten to mention his name! As Swamishri was due to go to Gondal in a few days' time, he instructed his secretary sevak, Dharmacharan Swami to hold on to the letter. Some days later in Gondal, Swamishri asked for the letter. Calling Shrikrishna Pandya, Swamishri asked, "Do you recognise the writing on this letter?" The devotee made a few inquiries but met with no luck. Again Swamishri instructed him, "You personally look into the matter and somehow find out who sent this letter." Within three to four days, the whereabouts of the letter writer was discovered. Swamishri called him to discuss the issue outlined in the letter and the matter was settled satisfactorily. The letter writer was amazed at what lengths Swamishri went to resolve what would be regarded by others as a trivial problem.

MERE LETTERS

On another occasion, Swamishri was sitting writing letters during an assembly. After penning the replies to a thick pile of letters, he decided to call it a day and popped the cap on his pen. Just as he was about to put it down, Dharmacharan Swami placed another pile of letters in front of him. Unable to hold himself back, Acharya Swami intervened,

“Bapa, leave them for the time being...”

Swamishri remarked, “Acharya, how can we possibly disrespect seva? Think of the people who have written these letters. They must be eagerly awaiting replies. For us, their questions may seem trivial, but for them, their question or problem is of utmost importance... And even if I did stop, all that will happen is that the pile will grow bigger and bigger - and in the end, I’ll still have to answer each one. So I might as well finish them now.”

Solving the problems of his devotees is not merely an obligation for Swamishri, on the contrary, he regards it as his way of serving the devotees. No question is too small for him.

DEVOTION

And this attention to matters big or small is reflected in Swamishri’s complete devotion for his Lord. He possesses an ingenious knack of somehow sensing even the smallest of feelings of Thakorji - the image of Harikrishna Maharaj which accompanies him wherever he goes.

Two days prior to setting off for his preaching tour abroad in 1977, Swamishri - aware that the flight would land in London early afternoon - instructed Jnanpriya Swami, “Keep a thermos flask of hot water with us. We can’t leave Thakorji unbathed in the morning.” Concern for such minor technicalities help us to appreciate Swamishri’s loving care for his master.

Following a preaching visit to nearby villages, Swamishri arrived at our mandir in Gondal at 1 am. Swamishri warned the driver beforehand not to sound the car horn when they entered the mandir premises as it would disturb Thakorji who would be asleep at the time!

SOUTH AFRICA 1974

After bathing Thakorji in the waters of the Indian Ocean at La Mercy Beach, Swamishri and the accompanying sadhus also took a dip before heading for Bharat Hall to attend a public assembly. A sadhu had taken Thakorji to offer the evening meal. In this context, Swamishri asked Devcharan Swami, “Was Thakorji given a bath with fresh water following the swim in the ocean?” Devcharan Swami replied in the negative as he had completely

overlooked this matter.

“Then please go. Thakorji must have been fed and put to bed by now. Wake Him up. After bathing Him with clean water, ask him to return to sleep again. Offer five prostrations for the oversight and ask for forgiveness...”

What concern for his Lord! Everyone had swam in the ocean, but who else besides Swamishri could possibly sense that Thakorji was having a hard time sleeping due to the remains of dried ocean salt sticking to His body.

And so it is only too apparent - be it concerning an administrative matter or be it concerning his dear Lord - that Swamishri attaches weight to even things, which others would pass off as trivial, inconsequential or unimportant.

How true it is that it is only those who do their duty in everyday and trivial matters that manage to come to the mark on great occasions. After all, if one cannot handle small things properly, how can he be trusted to cope with greater things? Michaelangelo's words aptly remind us of Swamishri's exacting attitude: “Small things make perfection... but perfection is no small thing.”

HE UNDERSTANDS...

Pramukh Swami Maharaj has a knack of appreciating people and understanding their needs. He has often sacrificed his own comforts and needs.

A WINDOW SEAT

February 1965. With the Centenary Celebrations of Shastriji Maharaj drawing near, Yogiji Maharaj had asked Pramukh Swami and Doctor Swami to fly to Delhi for some important work. Doctor Swami writes: “It was my first time aboard an aeroplane and I remember being very eager to see the view from the window. However, Pramukh Swami was sitting in the window seat. Unable to contain my curiosity, I kept leaning across Pramukh Swami to try and catch a glimpse below. Then suddenly he got up. Instead of becoming irritated with my constant obstruction, he simply took my hand and gently sat me down in his seat next to the window. It was one of the first times I experienced Swamishri's remarkable ability to understand the wishes of others; not only understand but also go to great lengths to fulfil those wishes...” Yes, Swamishri understands....

WORRIED ABOUT A PROMISE

5 February 1983. The village of Sundalpur had witnessed Swamishri suffering a heart attack in the morning. Doctors swiftly administered emergency treatment. The next step was to transfer the patient to an intensive care unit. While Swamishri was being rushed to Vadodara in a high speed convoy of cars, his car suddenly screeched to a halt at a crossroad. Fearing the worst, everyone ran to Swamishri's car. Swamishri appeared calm yet concerned. He called for Acharya Swami and told him, "Tomorrow, we were scheduled to attend the Shikshapatri parayan at Dahyabhai Gajjar's place in Anand. Please go there and ensure that everything is taken care of. And explain why I won't be able to come..." It is common medical knowledge that the first few hours after a heart attack is probably one of the most critical period that any patient can ever face. Even then - with scant regard for his own self - Swamishri understands...

SETTING ASIDE A MEAL

May 1980. Nairobi, Kenya. An important assembly had been organised in the evening at the Kenyatta Conference Hall to commemorate the Bicentenary Celebrations of Lord Swaminarayan. Two sadhus had left early to oversee the necessary preparations. In the event, the function turned out to be a huge success. As scores of new devotees came to Swamishri to receive vartman and kanthi at the conclusion of the assembly, Swamishri's mind seemed to be elsewhere. Realising full well that it was fast approaching midnight, he was personally arranging for a car to take the two sadhus back to the temple. "Quick, the two of you get ready," he told Narayanmuni Swami. "Tomorrow is Ekadashi. Get to the Mandir as soon as possible so you can eat before twelve..." Swamishri was concerned that the sadhus not skip their evening meal as the following day was a day of fasting. He had even had their meal put away safely. It would not do to have the sadhus return to the temple to find nothing left to eat. Yes, Swamishri understands...

GIVING AWAY FOOD

March 1986. A group of devotees from the village of Nani Vavdi were on a pilgrimage tour. Arriving in Allahabad, by a happy coincidence they met Swamishri who had been invited there by Pujya Pandurang Athavale to grace a special assembly. It so happened that the

organiser of the package tour had originally promised food for the passengers only to later change his mind. By the time the devotees reached Allahabad, they had ran out of whatever little food they had brought with them. As staunch devotees, they did not eat food from restaurants or hotels and were naturally worried as to how they would complete the pilgrimage. When Swamishri came to learn of this, he called the attendant sadhus and told them, "Set aside enough food for Thakorji and give the remainder to these devotees."

"But Swami..." appealed a devotee.

Before he could finish, Swamishri interrupted, "Don't worry about us. We are sadhus, so we'll manage somehow. But where will you get food from?" Yes, Swamishri understands...

STICK OR SHOES

March 1986, Allahabad. Pujya Pandurang Athavale (Dadaji) got up from his seat to leave the stage. Realising that Dadaji had forgotten his walking stick lying next to the sofa, Swamishri immediately bent down, picked it up and approached Dadaji. Just at that moment, Dadaji realised that he had forgotten his stick and turned around - to be greeted by Pramukh Swami Maharaj with stick in hand. He could only utter, "Swamiji! You?"

Sarangpur. Shri S.L. Verma, Gujarat Home Secretary, had come for darshan. Swamishri personally took him around for the Lord's darshan. As they made their way up the steps leading to the main shrine, Swamishri discretely instructed a parshad, "Go and take Verma Saheb's shoes and bring them to the front side where we will descend after darshan. And make sure they don't get stolen."

When Shri Verma later came to know of this, he couldn't hide his surprise. He simply uttered, "Swami not only looks after the devotees - but also their shoes!" Yes, be it Dadaji's walking stick or Shri Verma's shoes, Swamishri understands...

Fingers. Once in Calcutta, a devote found that the tea he had been served tasted bitter. When Swamishri came to know of this, he asked for some sugar. He personally put it in the teacup and - with no spoon at hand - he dipped his own finger in the tea and stirred it!

On another occasion, he used his finger again. But this time, it was his thumb. To appease a crying baby, Swamishri placed his own thumb in the baby's mouth! It did the trick. Yes,

young or old, Swamishri understands...

ON THE STEPS

3 March 1990. Amdavad. Narayanbhai, a skilled wood-carver had served the Sanstha for many years. A stroke had left him considerably immobile. As Swamishri prepared to depart from Amdavad, Narayanbhai sat down quietly on one side of the bottom step leading to Swamishri's room, hoping for one final glimpse. Some sadhus had lined both sides of the steps, and the small court in front of Swamishri's room was packed with devotees hoping to offer a last-minute good-bye. Despite the clamour when Swamishri was leaving, his eyes fell on Narayanbhai. He went to him and without a moment's hesitation sat down on the steps next to him. Pure natural spontaneous love followed - as if two old friends had met after many years. Swamishri's care, his understanding that here was an aged stroke patient unable to get up left Narayanbhai in tears. Yes, Swamishri understands...

DEVOTION

And this remarkable ability of Swamishri to understand others is not confined to people, but is reflected in his love for the Lord. Bochasan, July 1986. Swamishri attended the Shayan arti - the fifth and final arti of the day prior to allowing the Lord to rest for the night. As per the usual routine, the small metallic images of the Lord were placed in a small bed in sleeping positions. That day, Swamishri noticed four images all placed next to each other on a small bed. He asked the pujari, "How can these images possibly turn around at night when they've been placed so close together?" The pujari promptly readjusted the images. Such devotion - which cares to the extent of making provisions for the Lord to turn around in His sleep - is indeed unique. Yes, Swamishri understands...

Maybe that is why, following the CFI in New Jersey in 1991, some Sikh youths residing in America faxed a letter to Swamishri. They asked for his advice and blessings in trying to open the eyes of their fellow Sikhs holding extremist views regarding Khalistan.

Maybe that is why leaders of opposing factions involved in the communal rioting in Amdavad in recent years both turned to Swamishri for guidance to reach a satisfactory compromise.

Yes, Swamishri understands...

GOLDMINE OF VIRTUES

The guru is the gateway to God. Every moment of his life reflects a message that can mould a true spiritual aspirant from an imperfect human being to the state of spiritual perfection. Pramukh Swami Maharaj's life is a goldmine of godly virtues. It is his continuous focus on Bhagwan Swaminarayan and his gurus that makes him the perfect vessel for such spiritual virtues.

HONESTY IS THE BEST POLICY

Swamishri's truthfulness is highlighted by his transparency and straightforwardness. Once in Bochasan, he had told the sadhus seated in front of him. "If there is one thing I dislike, it is deceit and manipulation."

Thousands of local devotees and people flock to get a glimpse of Swamishri when he is in a particular city or town. Hundreds also line up to meet him and receive his blessings everyday. After one such exhausting day, Janmangal Swami decided to amuse Swamishri. He said, "Didn't you get tired of blessing five thousand devotees? Putting your hand on each one is a physically straining task. You should consider fabricating a wooden hand, attaching it to a motor and blessing every devotee that comes to meet you with it! The devotees won't be able to tell that it's automatically powered..."

Swamishri interrupted, "Why would you want to deceive them? I don't keep fake things. I only stock real things."

Though the incident seems trivial, it highlights Swamishri's honesty and transparency. Only one who has nothing to hide can afford to be completely transparent. Swamishri's life is like an open book. Every moment is lived in someone's presence. Eating, sleeping, reading, writing, during the day and even at night, there is not a single moment when he is alone. There is no need for it either.

Swamishri was attending a meeting in Gondal. As the meeting continued, Swamishri kept on scribbling a few important dates on a small notepad. Vishwavahari Swami noticed and asked Swamishri, "What are you writing in that private diary?"

Swamishri replied, "My whole life is open to the public. There are no secrets. If you have secrets, you always fear them being revealed. I live my life openly with God as my witness."

Truth is eternal and unchanging.

ALWAYS THINKING OF GOD

In 1993 Swamishri was in Kolkata. Unexpectedly, he started having dizzy spells. He was immediately brought to Mumbai for a medical checkup to rule out the possibility of any serious illness which would require urgent treatment. The neurosurgeons recommended that an EEG and a BERA scan be performed.

During the BERA test Swamishri was told to lie face-up on the examination table. An array of sensors and wires were attached to Swamishri's head and around his ears. After 15 minutes of trying the technician told the attendant sadhu, "I am not satisfied with the readings. Please request Swamishri to relax and calm his mind."

The attendant explained the instructions to Swamishri. The second attempt yielded the same results. The technician again asked Swamishri to remain calm and free of thought. Then he tried for a third time. Yet again, the readings were not satisfactory.

Swamishri then returned to the mandir after the incomplete test. As Swamishri was going to bed that night, the attendant sadhu explained that the physician had called and said he needed to do that test again.

Swamishri immediately refused.

The attendant sadhu explained the importance and urgency of the tests to diagnose the illness.

Swamishri again refused, "It doesn't matter how important it is. I am not taking that test again."

The attendant was astonished as to why Swamishri was being so firm. He tried to request one more time.

This time Swamishri raised his voice a little and said, "I was calm the whole time. I was imagining myself sitting in the Akshar Deri in Gondal, meditating on Bhagwan Swaminarayan. Is that not serene and calm enough?"

Swamishri can never be free from this thought, since Bhagwan Swaminarayan is forever etched in his mind.

PURITY OF CHARACTER

Once in Atladra, Swamishri walked by a few youths who were cleaning the filters of an

old air-conditioning unit. He stopped and said to them, "The filters of this A.C. unit became filled with dirt so it had to be removed for cleaning. Similarly, when life becomes spoilt by bad habits it is degraded. So you have to inspect your character for impurities and cleanse it."

Swamishri has transformed the lives of thousands of people around the world and they are a testimony to his contributions in purifying society.

A tribal devotee from the village of Uber described his first darshan of Swamishri, which changed his life, "I first had your darshan in Atladra. I didn't think it was ever going to happen, but it did. It was like a miracle. With your blessings, my entire family has stopped eating meat, smoking and drinking. We have been able to bring our tempers under control. It has been eight months now and I can say that we feel 100 percent purified! My adulterous behaviour has also gone. I feel privileged to have received your blessings."

On 18 July 1996, a youth came to meet Swamishri in Dallas, Texas. In 1994, he had promised Swamishri that he would quit drinking and eating meat. He fell at Swamishri's feet and described his success, "Swami, though it seemed impossible, your blessings made my wife's dream a reality. I have given up eating meat and all other addictions. In fact, I don't even get angry any more. I never thought it would be possible, but you made it happen."

Only one who is clean, pure and spotless can transform the lives of others. Thousands of individuals have developed inner purity through Swamishri's blessings and many more are in the process of achieving it.

PERVASIVE PEACE

R.K. Laxman is the renowned cartoonist of The Times of India. He has been featured on the cover of Reader's Digest and hailed as India's, if not Asia's, greatest political cartoonist. He is a close friend of former Indian President, Dr APJ Abdul Kalam. After the opening of Akshardham in New Delhi in November 2005, the President repeatedly suggested that he visit the newly opened complex. R.K. Laxman visited Swaminarayan Akshardham for two days and at the end came to meet Swamishri. He was mesmerized by Swamishri's darshan, commenting, "The president flew me in from Mumbai. He asked me to stay with him at the Rashtrapati Bhavan. He urged me to visit this complex. If I hadn't

accepted his invitation, I would have missed out on the chance of a lifetime. I don't have words to describe it. I will never forget this experience."

There was silence in the room as Laxman stopped abruptly. He was lost for words. His lips were moving as if trying to say something, but his eyes were still, focused on Swamishri. Tears trickled from the corner of his eyes, reflecting the deep emotional impact Swamishri's presence had made on him in that brief meeting. Everyone was amazed to see the nation's boldest critic in tears! After a few minutes he managed to repeat three words, "Nothing to say. Nothing to say."

Leaving the room after having Swamishri's darshan, he said, "It feels like I was swept in a whirlwind of peace and stability."

The experience changed R.K. Laxman, and his wife was the first to notice, "I have never seen my husband so amazed, so touched. It is a miracle."

SHARP MEMORY

Most people are simply amazed when Swamishri remembers such minor details about thousands of his devotees. It reflects the deep bonds of affection and care which Swamishri has for devotees of all ages and backgrounds.

On 13 September 1993, Swamishri was returning to his room on the 5th floor at Dadar mandir in Mumbai after his walking session. Viveksagar Swami was waiting by the elevator with a devotee. Swamishri recognized him from a distance.

"Ahh Narendra! When did you get here?"

Swamishri hadn't seen Narendrabhai for over 50 years!

"We had held a parayan in Karachi decades ago. You were barely a toddler. You are Jivrajani's son. Swami [Shastriji Maharaj] used to travel in your father's car."

On 28 December 1994, Kanubhai Amin from Mumbai had come to Ahmedabad for Swamishri's darshan. He had brought a relative who was visiting from America. Swamishri interrupted as he was starting to introduce his relative, "I know him quite well. Your father is Ramesh, his father was Bhailalbhai, his father was Chaturbhai and his father was Shyamalbhai. Chaturbhai had five sons - Somabhai, Hirabhai, Hathibhai, Chunibhai and Chhotabhai. Hirabhai had three sons. Somabhai had two and you have two other brothers..."

On his overseas vicharan tour in 2004, Swamishri was in London and a few youths were

introducing themselves.

One said, "My name is Haresh and I am from Shrijipura."

Swamishri asked him his father's name. He replied, "Ramji Chhagan."

Swamishri had visited every single home in Shrijipura many times. He knew all the devotees and their families. He started telling the sadhus, "They were originally from Ugamedi. Shastriji Maharaj had brought them to Shrijipura to take care of the Sanstha's property. His father's name is Ramji, whose brother's name is Dayal. They were the two sons of Chhaganbhai. Chhagan had three other brothers - Trikam, Narayan and Talshi. Haresh's brother is a sadhu in Sarangpur. They are related to Manilal from Surat." Haresh stood still with the microphone in his hand. He was at a loss for words. Swamishri knew more about his family than he did!

GOD IS THE SOURCE

Former Professor of Religion and Dean at Wabash College, Dr Raymond Williams, asked Swamishri a few questions:

"Technically, you have no experience when it comes to living a social life. You are a sadhu. How are you able to guide your devotees in that aspect of their lives?"

"God gives me the answers. God has experienced everything."

"Do you ever hesitate before answering or after answering? Have there been times when you wish you had answered differently?"

"No, I have never felt it that way."

"For example, what if one of your devotees asks you about buying a small business. You tell him to buy it, and it fails miserably. He loses everything. Don't you feel like you made a mistake? Don't you feel like you should have told him not to buy it?"

"No, of course not. God gives me the answers. God knows your past, present and future. He does everything for a reason. Some good will always come of it."

Swamishri firmly believes that God is at the core of all his decisions and reasoning, God is the source of his energy.

God is the source of his skill and proficiency,

God is the reason behind his accomplishments.

That is why Swamishri is relaxed, at ease and in a state of constant stability.

"OH! WHAT A HUMBLE MAN ..."

"It is obvious even from a distance that he is a man of great spirituality, very pious... a pure holy man."

- Bob Kaplan

Former Solicitor General of Canada

"When I saw Swamiji, I noticed that he is free from ego."

- Giani Zail Singh

Former President of India

"Oh! What a humble man. What a divine man. I have yet to see such people in abundance. One of the very rare souls that our country has. Pramukh Swami is very dedicated, very spiritually high."

- Swami Atmanand

Former Head of Ramkrishna Mission, Raipur

Four individuals from quite contrasting backgrounds - none of whom profess to be followers of the Swaminarayan faith - who have come into limited contact with Pramukh Swami Maharaj, yet were all profoundly moved by one thing - Swamishri's humbleness. Swamishri's humility is profound and deep rooted. In fact, it is inherent and thus encompasses qualities such as patience, modesty, simplicity, service, gratitude and quietude to its finest and highest degree.

Due to his sincere humility, a paradoxical situation arises in that the more humble Swamishri is perceived, the more reverence he is given. Yet Swamishri remains forever humble, his consciousness totally free from egotism, pride and arrogance.

MAN LIVES ON 'MAAN'

There are some who think that meekness is weakness, but in the spiritual world humility is the epitome of strength.

Just what exactly does it take to give up one's sense of self pride or self-conceit, generally considered to be the deadliest of the great sins?

The poet Tulsidas of 'Ramayan' fame has composed a couplet :

“Kanak tajyo, kaamini tajyo, tajyo dhaatuko sangh,
Tulsi laghu bhojan kari, jive maan ke rang.”

Tulsidas says that one may have renounced wealth and women, one may have given up possessions, one may even subsist on very little food, but that individual will still survive - being sustained by 'maan' - i.e. pride being lavished upon him by others.

Once when Bhagwan Swaminarayan was travelling as Nilkanth Varni, he came across a king in Nepal who narrated the glory of his guru to young Nilkanth, “He lives in a remote hermitage, in a cave. He has no contact with the outside world, requiring no food and drink. He remains in seclusion all the year round but he comes out only once a year for a few minutes to give darshan. People throng in their thousands to catch a glimpse.”

The special day arrived, but this year, at Nilkanth's suggestion, the king issued an order to abstain from going for darshan. When the hermit appeared, and on not seeing even one soul to greet him, he instantly collapsed and died.

Nilkanth explained to the king, “You say he required no means for his survival, but he was living on 'maan' (ego). The knowledge that people would gather for his mere darshan every year sustained his life - and the minute his ego was shattered, his life ended.”

The famous Austrian psychoanalyst, Sigmund Freud, refers to ego as one of two major motivating forces behind all human behaviour. Bhagwan Swaminarayan says much the same thing in Vachanamritam Gadhada II 41: “Even in spiritual service or devotion, whenever one's ego is satisfied it plays an influencing role on one's actions. For example when a dog chews a dry bone, his mouth bleeds. He then enjoys the taste of his blood. The dog, out of ignorance, thinks that the bone is the source of taste when, in reality, it is his very own blood. In the same way, one deceives oneself that one is experiencing the joys of devotion when, in actuality, it is an outcome of a pampered ego. Thus one who discards ego and worships God is the greatest of all devotees.”

This is precisely why Swamishri is “great”. This is why Swamishri is revered by innumerable devotees and non-devotees alike. We all want to be great but are we willing to pay the price of becoming humble? As Rabindranath Tagore once said, “We come nearest to the great when we are great in humility.”

FIRST TEST

Pujya Doctor Swami, who has been in contact with Swamishri for the last 40 years,

expresses his feelings: "Following Swamiji's return from his 1977 world tour, a large assembly in his honour was held in the BAPS mandir in Atladra. Many dignitaries were also present. Whilst Swamishri was addressing the audience, a ragged, poor devotee - you could even say he was half mad - came to Swamiji and stood with folded hands. To the assembly, this created a disturbance because everyone's attention was diverted to him. But Swamiji, without a flicker of annoyance or displeasure, talked with him calmly and lovingly. This left a deep impression in me as under such circumstances, any other speaker would have been irritated. But Swamiji not only remained composed but he started talking to this man! In Swamiji's eyes, everyone is equal."

Doctor Swami continues, "Swamiji is a very humble sadhu. In spite of so many people believing in him and honouring him, he remains humble. Muktanand Swami in his 'kirtan' sings 'Hu tale Hari dhukadaa' (One who is free from ego is blessed with the proximity of God). Swamiji's life and the words of Muktanand Swami convince me that God is present in Swamiji."

John Ruskin once said, "I believe that the first test of a truly great man is his humility." Swamishri's life bears witness to this remark.

STOOPING LOW

The famous poet Kabir has written, "Unchaa unchaa sab koi chaale, nichaa na chaale koi" (All walk with arrogance, but none are willing to be humble).

In 1982 in Ahmedabad, Swamishri received a distinguished Hindu religious leader. He honoured the leader by stepping down to wash his feet with water. The leader remained upright throughout the ceremony without as much as an inkling of a response, not even a light nod in acknowledgement!

Someone later asked Swamishri, "Why do we bother calling people who do not even have the courtesy to give any response or bow to you."

Swamishri replied, "Does one's greatness increase if one is bowed to? We should fulfil our duty and forever remain as sevak (servant)."

It is indeed difficult for a leader to bow down before his subjects, but Swamishri does not feel small in bowing to devotees and neither does he experience any sense of belittlement in touching the feet of sadhus - be they senior sadgurus or young novices. On his birthday, he humbly appeals to his sadhus and devotees, "Bless me so that I can go on

serving the Satsang community and fulfil the responsibilities entrusted by Shastriji Maharaj and Yogiji Maharaj.’’

Despite his exalted status as Guru, Swamishri never feels tall in bending down or bowing to others.

In Ahmedabad in 1981, during the bicentenary celebrations of Bhagwan Swaminarayan, the BAPS Sanstha arranged a gathering of sadhus from all folds and sects throughout India. Swamishri bowed down and touched the feet of all the invited sadhus who ranged from great leaders to ordinary sadhus.

As chief organizer of a special Convention for sadhus in 1985’, naturally a front seat was reserved for Swamishri in the assembly. When Swamishri arrived, he noticed that the seat reserved for him had already been occupied. Without any fuss, he sat down amongst the sadhus in the assembly. When Pujya Harinarayananand Swami (General Secretary of Bharat Sadhu Samaj) learned of this, he immediately rectified the situation. A little while later due to some reason or another, one of the invited sadhus took offence and started walking out of the conference. Swamishri hurriedly went to him asking for forgiveness (despite there being no fault on Swamishri’s part).

Being a witness to these incidents, Harinarayananand Swami said, “In my life, I have never seen a sadhu as humble as Pramukh Swami.”

NARAYANSWARUPDAS

It is said that authority makes some people grow, whilst others (the majority) just swell. A young child has high ambitions to become a doctor. A music loving teenager dreams of life in the rock music world whilst the business executive has his eyes fixed on working his way up the ladder to the top of his field. We all have ambitions of one kind or another. Even on the spiritual path - where the ideal is to crush such notions - we have stories of people lusting for power, glory, fame and public esteem.

What is Swamishri’s ambition? In 1983 in Sarangpur, Swamishri was asked in an interview, “What would you like to become?”

Swamishri spontaneously replied, “Sevak (servant).”

People today do not wish to serve as servants. A slave working for his master may behave in a manner of servitude, but internally his heart craves to play the role of a boss.

Swamishri does not merely talk of becoming a servant. This is borne out clearly in his life.

Nishkulanand Swami has written, "Shodhi aavyo tu satsang maa re...", that when one first enters the fellowship, his intentions are pure, his devotion is sincere, he humbly bows down to all, ever willing to serve and engage in whatever is asked of him, but as the years roll by, he loses this sense of servitude. His pride becomes a stumbling block to his performing menial services and he comes to believe that he is indispensable.

On the other hand, scrutinize the life of Swamishri. Born as Shantilal in the dirt and dust of a small (then unknown) village called Chansad. His schooling lasted a few years. He was initiated as a sadhu by Shastriji Maharaj. He studied Sanskrit. He became Kothari (head Manager) of Sarangpur mandir. He became Pramukh (administrative head) of Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushottam Sanstha. He became the spiritual head of BAPS. And today, he has countless devotees and is respected by millions around the world. Yet he has always remained humble.

Despite promotion after promotion, Swamishri has never abused his powers or authority or demanded his rights. He remains just as approachable now as he was many years ago. Similarly, in the field of seva, we are all aware of Swamishri's contributions to the Satsang, be it writing letters, meeting devotees, doing home visits, inaugurating mandirs or organizing relief work. Despite heavy schedules and failing health, his enthusiasm for doing seva has never dampened over the years.

As a teenager, young Shantilal lost no opportunity in faithfully serving the Swaminarayan sadhus who often came to his village Chansad for preaching and medical treatment.

In his early days as a sadhu, he was engaged in heavy manual work - from mixing limestone to transporting stones during the construction of the mandir at Atladra.

The very day he was appointed as 'Pramukh' of the Sanstha, he single-handedly washed the utensils and dishes used by the devotees.

On the morning of his 51st birthday in Dharmaj, he was seen picking up chewed brush sticks which had been discarded by visitors. He felt no sense of degradation in personally collecting and dispensing off the sticks. On our birthday, we feel tall, ready to accept greetings and seva from others.

Even as Guru, Swamishri has never felt any seva to be small. In Bochasan in 1973, he scrubbed the urinals clean behind closed doors. Only after the task was completed did the attendants realise what their Guru had done! Yes, Swamishri delights in doing even the most menial of tasks - it's his devotion to God.

In 1989, when the foundations for the new mandir at Mehsana were being dug, Swamishri visited the construction site. Seeing the volunteers busy passing buckets of soil to each other, Swamishri promptly joined the line personally handling a total of 32 bucketfuls. Even if we have one servant, we make him do all the chores, whilst Swamishri - with devout sadhus and devotees at his disposal - chooses to do seva himself. Yes, Swamishri has truly lived up to his initiation name of Narayanswarupdas - a servant (das) serving the form of Narayan.

PRAMUKH SWAMI MAHARAJ AND YOUTHS

In a generation where drinking and dating have become our youth's only means of socializing. In an age where the TV set has become our youth's mother and father. In a society where late-night parties have become our youth's only definition of happiness. The question puzzling minds all over the world is: How has Pramukh Swami Maharaj managed to tame the frenzied nature of so many youths? How is it that youths in the prime of their lives are willing to offer their all for Swamishri?

The answer is simple.

As youths struggle through the uncharted territory of life, as they face their adventure through adolescence, Swamishri has helped like a guide, advised like a father, nurtured like a mother and cared like a friend.

A GUIDE

In 1991, during the Cultural Festival of India celebrations in America, Swamishri was staying at the home of Dr. Yashwantbhai Patel. His son, Sagar, was extremely fond of baseball. Sagar's talent in the sport was such that even his high school coach seriously felt he could take up baseball as a profession. His father felt it was wise to ask Swamishri first, and so one day, both father and son came to Swamishri to ask about Sagar's future. Swamishri carefully listened to their opinions. In the end, Sagar left the choice to Swamishri.

Swamishri thought for a while and explained his feelings to Sagar, "I think it may be best if you keep baseball as a hobby. If you become a professional baseball player, you will have to play elsewhere and your contact with satsang and your family will decline. Also,

when the team goes out to parties, you'll be obliged to eat and drink with them. Then, if you were to become influenced by their lifestyle, you will be neither here nor there. Your life would become unstable. Anyway, this is how I feel. Do you feel differently?"

Swamishri's love and concern were such that Sagar immediately replied, "No, Swami! I am willing to do as you say." He accepted Swamishri's decision with the same enthusiasm as he had for playing baseball. How else could a boy raised in America change his mind so quickly other than by genuine, selfless love!

A FATHER

A youth was studying diligently in a medical college in Ahmedabad. With just a few years remaining for his degree, he developed an intense desire to settle abroad. As a result, he lost all interest in his studies. Whenever his father tried to advise him, he broke out in a furious rage. As a result, the entire family experienced deep unrest and agony.

Swamishri heard of the youth's mania and immediately called for him. When the youth arrived for the meeting, Swamishri was engrossed in his daily ritual of replying letters. Without even raising his eyes, Swamishri asked, "What exactly is in your mind? Why have you ignored your studies?"

"Swami! I want to move abroad," the young man replied frankly.

"Fine! But on what base do you propose to go? Do you have any relatives?"

"No, Swami."

"Any special degrees?"

"No."

"Then think about it!" Swamishri looked up, removed his glasses and explained, "If you file the application after completing your degree then you may get an opportunity to go one day. But, in your infatuation of going abroad, why are you ruining your current education? Keep in mind that those who immigrate illegally find no peace there. Many times they end up mopping floors. On the other hand, if you study you may be able to find a suitable marriage partner.

"So, put aside your desire for a couple of years. Many people spend as much as Rs. 800,000 just to gain admission into medical school, which you have attained here easily through your marks. Put aside other thoughts now and complete your education."

Swamishri counselled with such elegance and love that the youth realised his short

sightedness.

A MOTHER

A youth had a setback from Satsang for some reason. He had told his father that he would not come to meet Swamishri and had firmly decided to drop Satsang from his life.

Explaining his son's decision to Swamishri, the father completely broke down into tears.

He said, "Our family has such a long history in Satsang. My father and grandfather have sacrificed so much for Satsang. But, now I am afraid that Satsang will no longer remain in our family. My son absolutely refuses to come to the mandir."

Swamishri soothed the father's worry by not even mentioning the youth's past mistake.

Instead, Swamishri talked at length in praise of the youth's positive character.

When the father mentioned Swamishri's affectionate response to his son, it seemed as if a door magically opened in the boy's heart. He approached Swamishri the following day, put his head in Swamishri's lap and burst into tears. Swamishri, after lifting the boy's head gently, said, "Don't worry. We feel hurt seeing you hurt. You have been fortunate enough to come into contact with Yogi Bapa, and you have attachment to us as well. You must completely bury the incident of the past. This Satsang is our family. Dada Khachar stayed in the midst of 500 sadhus. Incidents similar to yours must have occurred in his life as well. Still, look at the positive attitude he had towards Satsang! We should try to maintain that viewpoint.

"We have never kept any grudges against you. Also, look at the love that the kothari and other sadhus give to you. If any such incidents occur, you must come and tell me. Your coming here today has given us great peace of mind. Please don't keep any grudges in your mind."

The youth's bitterness towards Satsang was completely dissolved by the sweetness of Swamishri's love.

A FRIEND

The evening assembly in Swamishri's presence in London had just finished. Devotees began trickling out of the mandir late at night. After the last car left the parking area, youths ran back to the mandir for their daily ritual - the moment which they long for daily - their last darshan of Swamishri for the day.

Tarun, a youth, said to Swamishri spontaneously, "Bapa! Our hands are frozen due to the cold weather outside. But if they weren't, I would have loved to shake your hand."

Swamishri instantly offered his hand to Tarun and said, "Come on! Let's see how cold it really is."

Like a friend, Swamishri fulfilled the wish of a youth.

WITH BLESSINGS...

A Fascinating Glimpse into Pramukh Swami Maharaj's World of Correspondence

FASCINATING INSIGHT

Even a superficial study of how Pramukh Swami Maharaj (Swamishri) deals with his mail is enough to give a fascinating insight into his unfathomable personality, his constant rapport with Bhagwan Swaminarayan, his sense of servitude, his never-ending strength, his wish to see all happy in the bliss of God, his love towards all, his impartiality, his concern for social upliftment, his devotion to his work, his striking simplicity, his unparalleled humility, his generosity, his exactness, his patience, his memory, his balance of mind, his skill in administrative matters, his exalted spiritual status and last but not the least, his profound saintliness.

His words may not be fancy or long, his sentences may sometimes not be grammatically correct and his writing may not even be legible. Yet these words somehow manage to penetrate the heart. Letters of the alphabet come together to form words and words come together to make a letter. In turn, these letters come together to build bridges enabling Swamishri to reach out to countless souls.

Over the last 24 years (1971-1995), Swamishri has read and written over 435,000 letters. He reads or writes around 50 letters daily, devoting an average of two hours a day to counsel and console through his pen. And this he accomplishes in the midst of all his other activities; constant travelling, attending assemblies, meeting devotees and attending administrative meetings.

IN THE JOY OF OTHERS

In 1977, Swamishri wrote a letter from abroad during his hectic satsang tour which sums up the situation nicely: "There is no end to travelling and no end to the mail I have to

deal with at all times in the car, when sitting or even in bed. Only then I am able to manage. But with (Yogi) Bapa's strength, I am able to cope."

SWAMISHRI AND SOCIETY

When Swamishri learnt that the government had granted permission to the McDonalds fast food chain to open branches in India, he immediately wrote an emphatic letter in 1993 to the President of India. He asserted his views and outlined the consequences of allowing a franchise, which openly advocates cattle slaughter into the country, "...was shocked and sad to hear of the Government's decision - to support and encourage the wholesale slaughter of innocent animals through the commissioning of the McDonalds food chain restaurants in India. The Prime Minister should not only serve and protect the people of India as his subjects, but also the animals - for they too are subjects in their own right..."

DEVOTION TO DUTY

The late C.M. Patel of London once gave a friendly comment to Swamishri in Bhadra, "Bapa! You keep writing letters all day. These sadhus don't let you stay free for even one minute!"

Swamishri spoke, "This is our service to the Lord."

A LETTER TO AN AILING DEVOTEE

On the night before setting off from Bombay for his 1988 satsang tour abroad, Swamishri asked for his letter pad. It was around 11:30 p.m. and Swamishri's flight to London was scheduled to depart early the following morning. Swamishri felt remorse for one thing; he had been unable to pay a visit to Trigunbhai, a devotee who was ill with kidney failure at the time. Swamishri jotted down a few gentle words of comfort: "It was our wish to come and meet you but circumstances prevented us from doing so. So please forgive us. Remember Maharaj and engage in devotion. All will turn out for the best."

SWAMISHRI AND HIS SADHUS

During the 48th birthday celebrations of Swamishri in Bombay in 1968, Yogiji Maharaj proclaimed, "We want to make at least 700 sadhus. Maharaj (Bhagwan Swaminarayan) will fulfil this wish through Pramukh Swami." Over the last 40 years, Swamishri's life has

inspired over 700 youths from different countries and backgrounds to walk on this path. In many cases, Swamishri wrote to these youths prior to initiation to help them through any difficulties and to inspire them to renounce: "To get such an opportunity (to worship God) is rare indeed. Therefore think over this, leave all other notions and aim to devote yourself to Maharaj and Swami in this very birth. Keep this thought firmly planted in your mind. 'Dradhata hoy tene madad kare Morari' - If one is steadfast, the Lord will surely help."

IN SICKNESS AND IN HEALTH

In 1994 in America, Swamishri sustained an injury to his right shoulder whilst playing a few batting strokes of cricket and baseball to please the young children and teenagers. Two months following the injury when Swamishri was in Boras, Sweden, he received a phone call from New Jersey. He was informed that 75 children and youths had taken a vow to stop watching television. They had felt that their Guru had sacrificed so much for them, having sustained an injury in the process of trying to please them. They were well aware of Swamishri's message for not watching TV and thus felt the least they could do was to give up TV. Swamishri was immensely pleased with their devotion. He wrote: "To please Maharaj and Swami and as per Yogiji Maharaj's wishes, you've all taken pledges not to watch TV. Remain firm in this matter. Also your schoolwork will improve. You will get good grades. Keep up your determination to follow this niyam. If someone tries to force you or your mind tries to tempt you, remember Yogiji Maharaj at that time and engage in devotion, but never watch TV."

YOURS SINCERELY...

It may seem trivial, but watching Swamishri deal with his letters can be a fascinating experience; taking his glasses out of their case, blowing into an envelope to take a letter out, attentively reading the letter with his eyes, following the writing from left to right, dropping the letter on the floor for his assistant or simply writing and signing letters one by one.

Most of the ink in Swamishri's pen is reserved for his letters. Each letter is received and read with great interest, his heart sensitive to all the alphabets of human emotions. In his replies, the feelings that flow from his heart run as fluently as the ink of inspiration

flowing from the pen between his fingertips. It is these feelings that cool, comfort, caress and console. Many of those who have been on the receiving end of these feelings feel that their beloved Guru has visited their homes in person. Some frame the feelings for daily darshan; some choose to keep them in their morning puja. Others carefully treasure those feelings, referring to them for inspiration in times of need.

ATMANIVEDANAM

Pramukh Swami Maharaj's Bhakti for Bhagwan Swaminarayan

In the Shrimad Bhagavatam, the young devotee Prahlad mentions the nine-fold path of bhakti or devotion as taught to him by sage Narada.

Shravanam kirtanam Vishnoho smaranam pādasevanam

Archanam vandanam dāsyaṃ sakhyam ātmanivedanam

- Shrimad Bhagavatam 7:5/23

- Shravanam - Hearing the holy name and praises of Bhagwan; listening to discourses or devotional songs.
- Kirtanam - Chanting Bhagwan's name or singing his praises.
- Smaranam - Remembering Bhagwan.
- Padasevanam - Engaging oneself in serving the lotus feet of Bhagwan.
- Archanam - Worshipping the image of Bhagwan.
- Vandanam- Offering obeisance to Bhagwan.
- Dasyam - Serving Bhagwan with a sense of servitude.
- Sakhyam - Worshipping Bhagwan as a friend.
- Atmanivedanam - Offering one's self to Bhagwan. Unconditional surrender.

Sincerely endeavouring to perform these nine processes of devotional service is what constitutes bhakti. We shall look at the final type of bhakti in the life of Pramukh Swami Maharaj.

A NOVEL EXPERIENCE

"Swami," the doctor said, "you'll have to take this pill."

"Show it to Thakorji first."

Swamishri was visiting Dr. Ghanshyambhai's dispensary in Kisumu, Kenya, to receive a

cholera vaccination. To prevent any unwanted reaction, the doctor gave Swamishri a pill which was subsequently held in front of Harikrishna Maharaj for a few moments.

Swamishri remarked that the pill was now sanctified. Then popping it into his mouth, he looked straight up, almost at the ceiling and closing his eyes momentarily, he swallowed the medicine.

The doctor was surprised. He knew that whatever Swamishri ate or drank was first offered to Thakorji. He had also heard that objects such as pens, slippers or spectacles, when first brought, were offered to God - but medicine? The experience was a novel one for the doctor and Swamishri had been so natural about it. An accompanying sadhu explained that although it was not proper to offer medicines to Thakorji, Swamishri always insisted that they be shown to Him to sanctify them.

Offering one's self to God is a type of devotion referred to in the shastras as Atmanivedanam. A true atmanivedi devotee believes that everything belongs to his master and thus offers anything that he is to use or consume first to Him, to sanctify prior to using it himself. He surrenders everything to Bhagwan, and performs his activities only to please Him.

THANK YOU

On 11 April 1986, Swamishri underwent an operation at Khambhala Hill Hospital in Bombay to remove a swelling from his right thigh. As the effect of the anaesthetic wore off, the attending sadhu carefully placed spectacles on Swamishri's face with the intention of showing him the orangesized tumour that had just been excised. "Here's the tumour," explained the sadhu.

Strangely, Swamishri was not in the least interested. His first response being, "Where's Maharaj?" The sadhus promptly brought the image of Harikrishna Maharaj. Adjusting his glasses, Swamishri enjoyed the darshan of Thakorji. He folded his hands in prayer as if to thank Him for the successful operation. Only then did his attention turn to the tumour.

A PIECE OF CAKE

London, 15 May 1988. On the occasion of the 96th birth anniversary of Yogiji Maharaj, local women devotees had prepared a huge birthday cake. The cake was displayed before Thakorji and Yogiji Maharaj during the celebration assembly, following which some youths

offered the cake to Maharaj before taking it to Swamishri. "Bapa! Please cut the cake," they beckoned. "It's Yogi Bapa's birthday today."

With joy writ over his face, as if drenched with memories of his late Guru, Swamishri ceremoniously cut the cake with care. Then turning round, he instructed, "Offer it to Thakorji."

"But Bapa," Upendra objected, "We've already offered it to Thakorji."

"The cake's just been cut. When did you offer it?"

"Just before you cut it."

Swamishri's subsequent statement is worthy of contemplation, "Can Thakorji possibly eat a whole unsliced cake like this? Now that it has been cut, arrange the pieces in a dish and re-offer it to Maharaj."

Only after this was done, did Swamishri accept a small piece of the cake before distributing the remainder. It is on such occasions that the finer shades of Swamishri's devotion become evident.

A NEW PAIR OF GLASSES

October 1980, Boston. Following Swamishri's surgery for cataracts, Pravinbhai Patel of Staten Island arrived with a new pair of spectacles for Swamishri. "Present them to Thakorji first to sanctify them, then bring them here," instructed Swamishri. The attendant sadhu soon returned with the sanctified glasses, but Swamishri hesitated. He asked for Thakorji. Only after the Lord's image was placed before him did Swamishri slip on his new glasses. It was his wish that the first image he see with his new glasses would be his dear Thakorji! It was as if he were saying that he had been gifted with new sight by the Lord, and with his new eyes, he wished to have His darshan first. After the Lord, Swamishri's eyes turned first to the sadhus, then to the devotees.

GOD SEES EVERYTHING

13 May 1988. The 1988 satsang tour on the continent of Europe saw Swamishri in Vienna, Austria on Vaishakh vad 12, the birth anniversary of Yogiji Maharaj. A few youths from London had also joined Swamishri's touring party to cater for the arrangements. In two days' time, a special assembly to celebrate the anniversary had been arranged in London. In the early afternoon, two of the youths came to Swamishri. They explained that as they

would be returning to London by car, they would miss the special assembly (Swamishri was to fly to London). Therefore they wished to garland Swamishri in advance. Accepting their hearty request, Swamishri agreed but mysteriously added, "Nothing else except a garland. Don't think of placing a crown."

It was obvious that Swamishri had suspected something all along. It turned out that the youths had indeed prepared a small crown of flowers with the intention of placing it on Swamishri's head. The youths tried their best to convince Swamishri. "Yogiji Maharaj also wore this once, so please say yes." (In reality, in Yogiji Maharaj's case, some sadhus had planned that when Yogiji Maharaj was to be garlanded, another sadhu would place a crown of flowers on his head from behind. When this happened, Yogiji Maharaj immediately took the crown off.) Swamishri was firm in this matter. He refused to yield, his voice exclaiming an adamant 'no'. The youths persisted, "But Bapa! We won't mention this matter to anyone. At least allow us to wrap your pagh with decorated threads as a concession."

Swamishri's response was forceful, "Forget anyone else. God sees everything, doesn't he? We do our devotion not for others to know or not know. God knows everything, sees everything..."

Swamishri's stance was as solid as a rock. During the assembly in Vienna later that day, the youths came with a beautiful garland of roses, which Swamishri gladly accepted after having offered it to Thakorji. To please the youths, he kept it around his neck for a few seconds longer than usual. The youths experienced sheer delight just with this darshan and any disappointment of not being able to crown their Guru was soon forgotten.

Swamishri, in his own right, is the leader of a mammoth religious institution and the spiritual Guru for millions of followers. Yet he never ever dreams of bringing himself forward or 'overtaking' his Lord or Gurus in receiving the honours - an ideal atmanivedi devotee.