

SWAMINARAYAN **BLISS**

July–August 2023

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Mahant Swami Maharaj's Historic Akshardham Yatra
22 May 2023, London



MAHANT SWAMI MAHARAJ IN LONDON

May-June 2023

1. Swamishri presides over the momentous Fuldol celebration in the mandir courtyard, 7 June.
2. Swamishri blesses devotees seated in an overflow darshan area, 7 May.
3. Swamishri blesses children and devotees on his way to the assembly hall, 8 May.



Fuldol celebration in the London Mandir courtyard



Swamishri performs the arti in the grounds of Toronto Mandir

SWAMINARAYAN BLISS

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Shri Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj



In April 1978, Pramukh Swami Maharaj inspired and inaugurated the first issue of *Swaminarayan Bliss* in Ahmedabad, Gujarat. The bi-monthly magazine serves to enlighten BAPS youths, seniors and well-wishers about the glory of Bhagwan Swaminarayan, the Akshar-Purushottam philosophy and the Gunatit guru *parampara*. It also seeks to inspire the universal values and traditions of Hinduism to pursue a happy and peaceful life by serving God and humankind.

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Vedanti Brahmins Accept Defeat

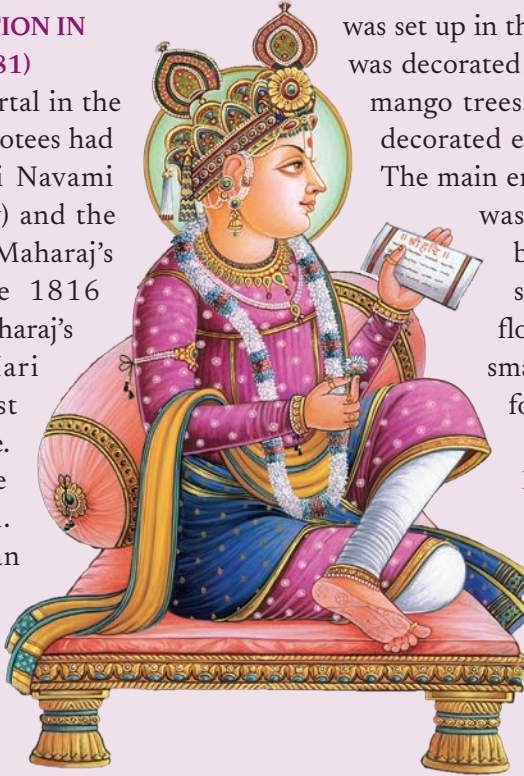
During Shri Hari's stay in Vartal the devotees of Memdavad requested him to send a scholarly sadhu to defeat the vedanti scholars...

HARI NAVAMI CELEBRATION IN VARTAL, 1825 CE (A.S. 1881)

Shri Hari arrived in Vartal in the evening. By then many devotees had arrived to celebrate Hari Navami (Shriji Maharaj's birthday) and the ritual *janoi* ceremony of Maharaj's nephew, Sitaram. Since 1816 (Samvat 1872), during Maharaj's visits to Vartal, Shri Hari mostly stayed on the first floor of Vasan Suthar's home. The home had become sacred like Akshardham. Outside his house was an open ground and a neem tree. Whenever Shri Hari came he would always sit under its shade and deliver discourses to the congregation. Sometimes, Shri Hari discoursed at the Lakshmi-Narayan Mandir.¹

During Shri Hari's stay the devotees daily sponsored a variety of meals. Soon, several groups of sadhus arrived in Vartal. Shri Hari was immensely pleased to see his sadhus and embraced them. He also pleased and blessed them with his divine glance, pressed his holy feet on their chests and placed his hands on their heads.

At 12 noon, the birthday of Bhagwan Ram was festively celebrated. The sadhus then started making the celebratory preparations for Shri Hari's birthday at night. A large makeshift hall



was set up in the open mandir courtyard. It was decorated with leaves of *asopalav* and mango trees. Beautiful chandeliers and decorated earthen pots were arranged. The main entrance to the assembly hall was decorated with trunks of banana trees and the hall was scented with the fragrance of flowers. A raised platform and a small golden cot were arranged for Shri Hari's seat.

BHAGWAN IS ETERNAL

After the evening *arti*, Shri Hari entered the festival hall to a packed audience of sadhus and devotees. The sadhus sang bhajans in praise of Shri Hari. Thereafter, Shri Hari talked about the

birth of Paramatma, "Bhagwan is never born, but is eternal. His birth is purely divine. He is independent. He can take birth from anywhere and from anyone. In the same way, my highest divine abode, Aksharbrahma, is also eternal and beyond birth. He is forever with me, but only those who have divine insight and knowledge can understand or perceive him."

The time to perform the birthday celebration *arti* at 10.10 p.m. was not far. First, however, the sadhus ritually bathed the *murti* of the child-form of Shri Hari, then adorned it with clothes, performed *pujan* and placed it in a decorated

1. It is known from the *sadgurus* (senior saints) that next to the *murtis* of Lakshmi-Narayan in the central shrine of the mandir was an empty space. Shri Hari would sit there to deliver spiritual discourses. In 1830 (Samvat 1886), Acharya Raghuvirji Maharaj installed the *murti* of Ranchhodraji on the spot where Shri Hari used to sit.

- Translation of the author's words.

cradle. Shri Hari smiled while observing the rituals. Suddenly, Maharaj spoke to his sadhus, “You have immense *divyabhav* (divine feelings) for the *murti*. If you have such *divyabhav* for the human form [of Bhagwan] you’ll be liberated from *maya* and attain *moksha*.” The sadhus understood the purport of Shri Hari’s words.

Shri Hari performed *arti* of the *murti* of his child-form. A chorus of ‘jai’ erupted to celebrate the occasion. Then, Shri Hari blessed, “Remember such divine celebrations. Recall them always and your worldly thoughts will wane.” Thereafter, Shri Hari retired to bed late that night.

The next day, the *janoi* (sacred thread) ceremony for Sitaram was arranged. It was decided to also give the *janois* to Shri Hari’s relatives, Parag and Dwarkadas, and Govindram’s son. After the scholarly Brahmins completed the rituals, Shri Hari performed *pujan* of all the four boys and gave them the *janois*.

PREPARATIONS FOR INSTALLING GOMTI

On that day, Shri Hari renamed Dhaaru pond as Gomti and decided to make it bigger. Subsequently, Maharaj would come daily and sit on a cot in a mango grove while his sadhus served to dig the ground. Since it was Shri Hari’s command the sadhus endeavoured with devotion and to please him. During that time, Gopalji, the son of Ichchharambhai, thought that a *murti* of Lord Ranchhodji should also be installed there along with a *murti* of Gomtiji. Shri Hari agreed and said, “Your wish will be fulfilled.”

VEDANTIS ARE VERY POWERFUL IN OUR VILLAGE

On the day of *punam*, devotees arrived in Vartal for darshan. Mohanram and his brother Gangaram came from Nadiad with clothes as gifts for the *murtis* of Shri Lakshmi-Narayan. Similarly, devotees of Vadodara and Ahmedabad brought clothes and decorations for Shriji Maharaj and the

deities. Shri Hari was happy with their bhakti. The *punam* celebration was held with great festivity and joy.

Shri Hari had lunch and thereafter he proceeded to serve food to the devotees. While doing so he saw the devotees of Memdavad and asked them, “You did not meet me. When did you arrive here?” The devotees humbly replied, “Maharaj, we feel blessed by your care and love for us. We arrived here this morning but were unable to reach you because of the large crowd.” Shri Hari was pleased with their straightforwardness and frankness. Then they declared, “Maharaj, we wish to meet you personally.” Shri Hari agreed promptly, “Come to my residence once you’ve had your lunch.”

Soon after, the devotees went to Shri Hari’s residence. Shri Hari asked them, “Now, what is it that you wish to say?”

The devotees explained, “In Memdavad, the *vedantis* are very powerful and exert their influence on the local residents. They delude all with their philosophy of ‘*aham brahmāsmi*’ (I am Brahman or God). Thus, we pray that you send a scholarly sadhu to defeat the arrogant *vedantis*. Only thereafter, will satsang grow in our village.” Shri Hari replied, “Tomorrow, come to the village of Sanjaya.”

HUNDRED SADHUS IN YOUR GROUP OR TWO-HUNDRED...

The following day, Shri Hari arrived in Sanjaya with some sadhus, devotees and *parshads*. Here, he sat in a satsang assembly in which Gunatitanand Swami was present among the sadhus. Maharaj called him to the front. Gunatitanand Swami came and humbly asked, “Maharaj, what is your command?” Shri Hari looked at him for a while and said, “It is time you look after a group of sadhus.” Swami, however, candidly replied, “Maharaj, I cannot manage a group of sadhus.”

(Cont. on p. 27)

SATPURUSH

MAHANT SWAMI MAHARAJ IN ENGLAND



Swamis, devotees and youths greet Mahant Swami Maharaj in the courtyard on his arrival to London Mandir



On 2 May 2023, for the first time in over five years, Mahant Swami Maharaj arrived in London, at the start of his historic 'Akshardham Yatra', which will culminate in the momentous consecration ceremony of Swaminarayan Akshardham in New Jersey, USA.

From 2 May to 8 June 2023, Mahant Swami Maharaj resided at the Neasden Temple, bestowing immeasurable spiritual bliss upon everyone. Devotees from the UK and Europe lapped up this opportunity to enjoy Swamishri's divine presence for over one month.

In the early morning, Swamishri would have darshan and perform the arti of Thakorji in the main mandir. Thereafter, devotees had Swamishri's puja darshan and listened to his morning discourse. During puja, children, teenagers, youth, and devotees sang bhajans and recited scriptural passages, during which they were blessed by Swamishri's gracious gaze. Swamis, devotees and artistes sanctified their vocal and instrumental skills by presenting their talents in Swamishri's morning puja. During the month, dignitaries, devotees and well-wishers received Swamishri samip darshan, which created special memories for all.

Approaching 90 years and despite his busy daily schedule, Swamishri enthusiastically participated in the satsang assemblies and gave spiritual discourses, igniting the hearts of the devotees with joy and devotion. In addition, through personal meetings and discussions, Swamishri's divine presence continually inspired everyone. During his stay, various devotional celebrations were held, from which countless devotees found fulfilment. Through online platforms, devotees everywhere were able to enjoy the darshan of Swamishri's morning puja and other assemblies.

The following is an overview of some of the salient occasions and events celebrated in Swamishri's presence.



Origami designs decorate Mahant Swami Maharaj's path as he enters the main mandir on his arrival in London, 2 May

ARRIVAL

2 May

On 1 May 2023, at 10:00 p.m. (IST), Mahant Swami Maharaj departed from Ahmedabad and flew to London. On 2 May 2023, at 4:59 a.m. (GMT), Swamishri arrived at the Harrods Aviation terminal in Luton along with Shri Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj, Tyagvallabhdas Swami and other swamis. Yogivivekdas Swami, Prabuddhamunidas Swami, and trustee Shri Jitubhai Patel welcomed Shri Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj and Swamishri with garlands.

Meanwhile, thousands of devotees, young and old, eagerly converged at the BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir in Neasden, London, to joyously and devoutly welcome Mahant Swami Maharaj.

Streams of people filled the mandir steadily from 3.30 a.m. Live updates of Mahant Swami Maharaj's journey to the mandir from the airport were relayed, which included photographs and a personal voice note from Swamishri shortly after he landed at Luton Airport, in which he said, "I am just as eager to have your darshan as you are to be with me."

Swamishri arrived on Pramukh Swami Road shortly after 6.30 a.m., where he was greeted

with flags and a showering of flower petals from devotees and volunteers who had lined the street. The vibrant welcome continued inside the courtyard of the mandir, where youths offered their own devotional reception with joyous dancing, while swamis greeted him at the mandir steps. Youths on the steps held aloft a large sign with Swamishri's handwriting, which he had written in 2020 during the mandir's 25th anniversary, "London Mandir Our Home."

Swamishri continued inside the mandir and performed *abhishek* of Shri Nilkanth Varni Maharaj, then proceeded for darshan of the *murtis* before finally making his way to the haveli assembly hall.

A few weeks prior to his arrival, Mahant Swami Maharaj was asked how devotees can best prepare for his visit to the UK. He guided everyone towards internal improvement – specifically, on increasing *divyabhav* (seeing the divinity in everyone) and personal purity through *antardrashti* (introspection). This led to 'The Divyabhav Project' and 'The Antardrashti Project' in which children, youths and families engaged in a number of ways to imbibe these principles and make personal life improvements.

Personal pledges from these projects were





A troupe of youths welcome Swamishri with a devotional dance, 6 May

transcribed into four types of origami (artistically folded paper) shapes – clams, butterflies, swans, and lotuses – which depicted promises to perceive virtues in others, transformation through seeing divinity in others, humility and service, and remaining pure amidst impurities. More than 5,500 of these patiently hand-folded decorative pieces flanked Mahant Swami Maharaj's path from the moment he had entered the mandir.

Swamishri arrived inside the main hall amid scenes of ecstatic joy.

The welcome continued with offerings of garlands devoutly prepared from various objects, including pledges written on origami shapes. Many devotees across the UK and Europe had also undertaken special austerities as a devotional form of welcome for Mahant Swami Maharaj. These efforts were recognized and appreciated by Swamishri. Thereafter, he performed the *arti* and briefly addressed the devotees to conclude the assembly.

WELCOME ASSEMBLIES

6–7 May

The welcome assemblies honoured Shri Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj and Mahant Swami

Maharaj on their visit to the UK. Children and youths performed a traditional dance to the newly composed lyrics, '*Mithi Mithi Gunje Re Sharnai Dhol Baje Re... Shat Shat Ho Swagatam.*'

The theme of the assemblies was, 'Today, Akshar Is Present With Us' and the programme was based on the events from Swamishri's stay in Nenpur during COVID-19, some of which were replicated in London.

First, the devotees honoured Shri Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj as this was their maiden visit to the UK. Joining in, Swamishri enthusiastically played the *kartals*, like he had in Nenpur to welcome Aksharbrahma Gunatitanand Swami, to the tune of the bhajans.

In Nenpur, Swamishri had gifted the Satsang Diksha shastra to all. In memory of this, a grand procession of the Satsang Diksha scripture was organized in the assembly hall. Then, four *balaks*, who had memorized the most Satsang Diksha verses, fluently recited some verses, and swamis honoured Swamishri with a shawl.

After becoming guru, Swamishri had inspired the new *mahapuja*, a new *arti* and the Sahajanand Namavali. As an expression of gratitude, an artistic lotus of 108 petals inscribed with





Swamis and youths sing bhajans on the theme of 'Prapti' while Swamishri plays the *kartals*, 8 May

the names of the Sahajanand Namavali was presented to Shri Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj and Swamishri.

On 6 May, the coronation of King Charles III took place. For the past 40 years BAPS and King Charles III have had a harmonious relationship, which was depicted in a presentation. Then, Yogivivekdas Swami conveyed the BAPS' best wishes to King Charles. Swamishri had written a special congratulatory letter for this occasion, which was read. To welcome Swamishri and honour the new king, children and youths sang the Shanti Path, while Swamishri lit an auspicious ceremonial lamp to mark this occasion. Then, Swamishri offered prayers for and blessings to King Charles III on the occasion of his coronation.

The assembly continued with memories of the Pramukh Swami Maharaj Centenary Celebrations. Thereafter, Swamishri's blessings were in the form of a question-answer session.

The same programme was presented on both days, since the devotees from UK and Europe had been assigned to be present on one of the days only.

EDUCATION DIN AND PRAPTI DIN

8 May

With school, college and university examinations scheduled to begin soon, the morning puja assembly was observed as Education Din. Hundreds of students were present to seek the blessings and guidance of Swamishri.

Swamishri gave wonderful guidance, saying, "This is your age for education, so you must study well. Pramukh Swami Maharaj often said, 'Effort + Prayer = Success'. Through prayer God resides in your heart and helps. Hard work is essential. Everyone works hard in the world, but if there is spiritual strength and true direction in efforts, then success is achieved. You have worked hard so you will reap the benefits. You are the bravehearts of Akshar-Purushottam and God is with you. So give your exams without worry. Leave the outcome in the hands of God, since whatever he does will be for your good. You are not weak students. Think that 'I want to study the best I can,' and have the aim to please Shastriji Maharaj, Yogiji Maharaj, and Pramukh Swami Maharaj. Do not worry about the future. Your duty is to work hard, and then leave the rest to God."

"The second point is: 'I can, I will and I must.'"



(Everyone also recited these words aloud in chorus) As bravehearts of Akshar-Purushottam maintain this determination. Along with studies, sincerely practise daily satsang. Satsang will help you to focus your mind and help in your exams. Best of luck. Stay strong in all aspects. Remember Maharaj and Swami. Everything will be fine.”

In the evening, Prapti Din was celebrated with a vibrant *kirtan aradhana*. When Swamishri arrived in the assembly, he performed the evening *arti* to Shri Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj. Then a report of the public services carried out by BAPS to mark the coronation of King Charles III was presented.

Afterwards, the *kirtan aradhana* resumed. While the bhajan ‘*Ānand āpyo ati ghano re...*’ (You have bestowed immense joy...) was being sung, Swamishri responded to the lyrics. Then, Swamishri also beautifully sang the kirtan ‘*Mane pragat malyā Purushottam āj, ānand antar chhāi rahyo...*’ (I have met the manifest form of Purushottam today, and joy is spreading within...). The entire assembly was enthralled. Afterwards, swamis sang each line of the bhajan, and Swamishri explained its significance.

Thereafter, Swamishri played the *kartals* as another bhajan was sung. The assembly erupted with excitement as everyone became immersed in the joyous atmosphere. The *kirtan aradhana* concluded at 8 p.m.

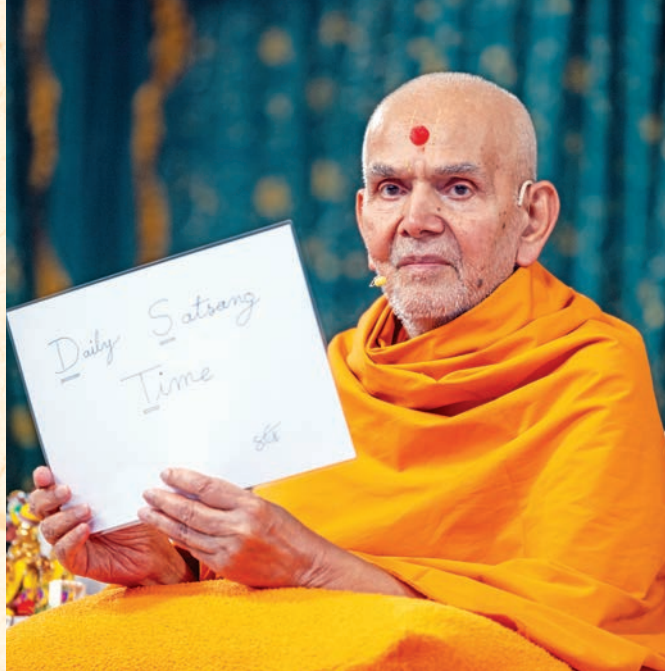
11 May

Today marked the 62nd anniversary of Swamishri’s *bhagwati diksha*. In 1961, in Gadhada, on the occasion of the Kalash Mahotsav, Yogiji Maharaj had initiated 51 youths, including Swamishri. Swamishri recalled this incident in his blessings.

FAMILY DIN

13 May

The Family Din evening programme, titled ‘Satsang at Home: A New Way. Swami’s Way’



Swamishri instructs families to set aside ‘Daily Satsang Time’ to strengthen personal spirituality and family harmony, 13 May

explored effective ways for families to spend time together at home to participate in satsang activities and progress spiritually. The underlying messages were delivered through engaging discourses, presentations, videos, and an interactive skit with Swamishri, with contributions from swamis as well as children, youths and seniors.

Swamis began the assembly by addressing various challenges that families face today, particularly regarding the potentially harmful impact of various electronic devices on family interactions and personal development, and their judicious use for positive family time together.

They further elaborated on innovative ways to re-energize satsang at home by exploring the wealth of tools and resources that are available for parents and children of all ages, through reading material, family games and online content in various languages. They particularly highlighted the *Swaminarayan Bal Prakash* as a vital publication to achieve this goal.

Mahant Swami Maharaj was joyously welcomed to the assembly as the focal point of the programme transitioned into a drama, which began with Swamishri ‘arriving at the home of a





Swamishri watches *karyakars* performing a skit, 14 May

family’ for a *padhramani* (home visit) with Pujya Tyagvallabhdas Swami and other swamis.

After the vibrant welcome, the interactive skit introduced Daily Satsang Time – a new, weekly structured plan for families to practise satsang at home through thematic daily activities, including the reading of various satsang texts and publications, the learning of scriptural passages, engaging in *smruti*, and conducting *ghar sabha*.

These daily initiatives were individually unveiled by Swamishri, who also provided practical guidance on how families can avail the maximum benefits of each activity, as the family members posed questions as a part of the skit. He also explained that everyone can feel the presence of the Satpurush in their homes through such daily satsang time. In conclusion, Swamishri personally prayed for all families to immerse themselves in this valuable initiative and for their all-round happiness and welfare.

KARYAKAR DIN

14 May

A special day for volunteers, titled ‘Mare Banvu Chhe Upasak Karyakar’, was held in the

presence of Mahant Swami Maharaj. The theme was inspired from a letter previously written by Mahant Swami Maharaj encouraging *karyakars* to strengthen the spiritual understanding that guides and drives their *seva*.

Volunteers from various departments began the day by singing themed bhajans during Swamishri’s puja.

Swamishri was welcomed by *karyakars* from across the country and presented with a decorative invitation for the evening. Addressing the delegates, Swamishri explained that a true *karyakar* always seeks to improve and develop, and perceives virtues in others, thus serving all others with utmost humility.

During the evening programme, a panel of swamis and *karyakars* shared inspiring testimonies of volunteers from across the UK and Europe who have served with enthusiasm, dedication and conviction despite facing physical hardships.

Following his arrival, Swamishri interacted with the audience during a series of short sketches that explored relevant areas of focus for *karyakars*, including taking ownership, and the spirit of unity and togetherness. Swamishri offered his guidance during these performances.





Swamishri enacts how Yogiji Maharaj used to rub his head, sway while singing bhajans and pat someone on the back to bless during the Yogi Jayanti celebration assembly, 16 May

To indicate the nature of an ideal *karyakar*, three main aspects were highlighted: *mahima*, *suhradbhav*, and *kartapanu*. Swamishri's guidance was sought through questions.

Q: We engage in various forms of *seva*, but how can we render *seva* with *mahima*?

Swamishri: The main reason why ideal *seva* cannot be achieved is due to one's attachment to the physical body. It also causes one to perceive *manushyabhav* in the guru and creates conflicts with others. So, it is necessary to overcome body-consciousness.

Q: How can we develop unity like you have with the *sadguru* swamis?

Swamishri: Understand the glory of Maharaj and Swami, and think 'We have attained such a sadhu so how can we allow complacency?' Also, we have such *mahima* for each other that no one can break our bond.

Q: Is there any situation that makes you sad?

Swamishri: Yes, when one devotee suppresses another, or compels them against their will, even Shriji Maharaj becomes sad.

Q: We are plagued by many base natures, but which nature is the most obstructive?

Swamishri: Ego.

Q: Which thought can keep our life steady even amidst the waves of joy and sorrow?

In reply, Swamishri showed a board he had written, stating, "Shriji Maharaj is the ultimate doer. Without his consent, not even a dry leaf can move. Whatever he does is for our own good."

Swamishri's contribution continued through a light-hearted game show that revealed important messages for *karyakars*.

Swamishri concluded the programme by reciting a special prayer, charging *karyakars* with renewed energy and motivation.

YOGI JAYANTI CELEBRATIONS

16 May

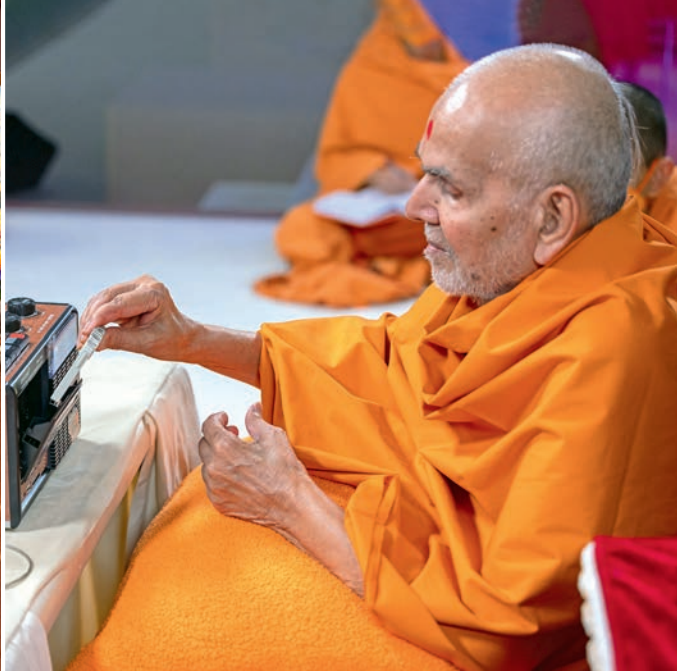
The birth anniversary of Yogiji Maharaj was celebrated through a special theatrical production incorporating unique eyewitness accounts and involving a cast and crew of over 250 volunteers. This captivating performance explored the divine personality of Yogiji Maharaj, taking the audience beyond his endearing smile, for which he is forever remembered.

The journey into Yogiji Maharaj's divine





Swamishri performs *arti* of the *murtis* consecrated in 1970 by Yogiji Maharaj in Islington mandir, 16 May



Swamishri inserts a tape into a cassette player as part of the evening Yogi Jayanti celebration programme, 16 May

personality was explored through the eyes of a ‘reporter’ who uncovered a series of cassette tapes containing archived material about Yogiji Maharaj. With each new tape, various aspects of Yogiji Maharaj’s personality were revealed – including his divine actions, soothing words, pure mind, compassionate heart, and the unbroken connection in his soul with God and his gurus.

The messages from these cassettes were brought to life through personal testimonies from *sadguru* and other swamis, a series of moving videos as well as various cultural presentations, including vibrant dances, captivating sketches, an emotive shadow play, and a live performance of a devotional song accompanied with melodies on a piano, charging the assembly hall with spirituality.

Mahant Swami Maharaj’s interactions throughout the evening provided unforgettable memories, particularly when he demonstrated some of Yogiji Maharaj’s memorable actions – such as the rigorous rubbing of his head, his *dhabbo* (affectionate patting of a devotee’s back), or his gentle swaying whilst immersed in devotion.

Swamishri also participated in re-enactments of his own historic occasions with Yogiji Maharaj

– his *bhagwati diksha* as a swami in 1961, and the inauguration of the BAPS mandir in Islington in 1970.

During that visit to London, Yogiji Maharaj ceremoniously bathed the *murti* of Shri Harikrishna Maharaj in the River Thames. Swamishri, who was present on that day, bathed the *murti* of Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj with water brought from the Thames.

During his various addresses throughout the evening, Swamishri shared his personal experiences, providing a deeper understanding of Yogiji Maharaj’s selfless love, remarkable tolerance and forgiveness, and profound wisdom.

The penultimate cassette encompassed Yogiji Maharaj’s revelation of his legacy in the form of Mahant Swami Maharaj, and a live recording of Swamishri’s words to reaffirm the spiritual lineage of Bhagwan Swaminarayan that continues today.

Swamishri himself played the final cassette – a video presentation of Pramukh Swami Maharaj singing ‘*Yogi āvo te rang mune shid lagādyo...*’ whilst playing *kartals* in 1988 during the Yogi Jayanti celebrations in London. Swamishri also played the *kartals*, granting new memories for everyone.





Swamishri greets senior devotees with folded hands, 18 May

Swamishri concluded the joyous celebrations by reading a personal letter that he had written to Yogiji Maharaj that morning, on the day of Yogi Jayanti. His heartfelt words and prayers provided a fitting conclusion to an extraordinary festival.

The programme was screened live internationally, making it a truly global celebration.

VADIL DIN

18 May

Vadil Din, for senior devotees aged over 65 years, began with *vadils* singing some of Yogiji Maharaj's favourite bhajans during Swamishri's morning puja.

Further memories of Yogiji Maharaj were recalled by Mahant Swami Maharaj during his morning blessings through an interactive question-and-answer session. He remembered youths cleaning the site of a disused church in Islington, which was converted into the first BAPS mandir in the Western hemisphere.

The final question asked was, "In old age, how can we focus our mind on God and guru?" Swamishri replied, "In old age, we are often insulted and ignored. But our refuge should be in God, not others. If you have the refuge of God, you

will remain eager and strong. So, believe yourself to be *aksharrup* and offer devotion to God."

CELEBRATING BRITISH HINDU CONTRIBUTIONS

19 May

In the special evening assembly, more than 1,600 men and women representatives from over 110 temples and community organizations attended the event in-person, including His Excellency Vikram Doraiswami (High Commissioner of India to the UK), Lord Jitesh Gadhia, Visakha Devi Dasi (President of Bhaktivedanta Manor, Watford), Anuttama Das (Global Communications Minister at ISKCON and a member of ISKCON's Governing Body Commission), and several other Hindu, Jain and other religious leaders and representatives. Many more watched the live stream online.

The event was organized to collectively celebrate the unifying principles of Santan Hindu Dharma (eternal teachings of Hinduism), and was inspired by Mahant Swami Maharaj's vision, "In the spirit of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, let's reach out and expand the circle of global harmony." In keeping with this noble vision, the programme





His Excellency Vikram Doraiswami, High Commissioner of India to the UK, addresses the evening assembly, 19 May

included insightful presentations from esteemed speakers, visual montages from over 30 dharmic organizations, devotional singing by Chinmaya Mission, ISKCON and the Telugu Association of London, a powerful video of Hindu women speaking about how their Hindu faith guides their professional, family and personal lives, as well as live cultural performances.

The contributions were themed around five defining areas: 1. Charity & Social Work; 2. Children & Youth Development; 3. Public Service; 4. Arts & Culture; and 5. Faith & Worship.

These were portrayed through pictorial highlights and addresses from distinguished members of the Hindu community, including Professor Manoj Ladwa (Chairman and Chief Executive of the India Inc. Group), Amish Tripathi (Minister of Culture & Education for the High Commission of India to the UK, Director of the Nehru Centre, London, and international best-selling author), Nilesh Solanki (Founder & Leader of the PwC Hindu Network and Assistant General Secretary at Sewa UK), Bhavya Shah (President of the National Hindu Students Forum UK), and Sadhu Paramtattvadas (BAPS).

In his keynote address, Lord Gadhia shared, “Looking around the Haveli, this evening’s gathering has turned into nothing short of a *dharmic sammelan* (religious convention). This is a welcome show of unity and inclusiveness. By bringing us all together today, and for his visionary pursuit of the mission to expand the circle of unity, we owe a huge debt of gratitude to Pujya Mahant Swami Maharaj. Thank you to BAPS for bringing us all together.”

Chief Guest HE Vikram Doraiswami added, “Today, in the presence of Pujya Mahant Swami Maharaj, we are commemorating the role and services of the British Hindu community among a number of community leaders across various parts of our faith groups here in the United Kingdom – I think that in itself is a remarkable contribution that BAPS has provided.

“Let us find our inner unity – that golden thread – that connects each and every one of us. [If] we celebrate that, and get that right, we serve the larger purpose of our civilisation and all of humankind. In that lies our true essence of what we can provide the world.”

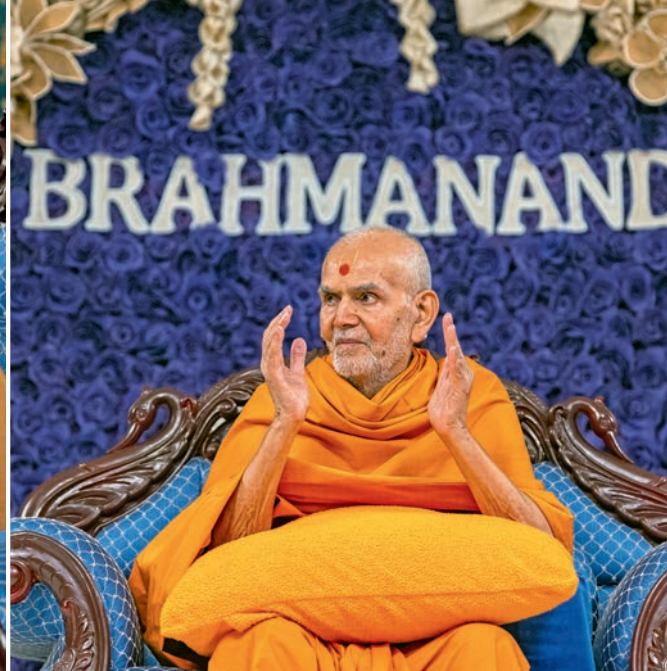
Then, Bhadreshdas Swami revealed that today’s gathering was based on Mahant Swami Maharaj’s wish from last year and that with Swamishri’s permission, this gathering has been titled ‘Bharat Darbar – India’s Court’. For this, Swamishri was honoured with a standing ovation.

Swamishri blessed the assembly, “Seeing you all here today brings great joy and satisfaction. The main purpose of our Hindu Sanatan Dharma is to achieve inner peace. Inner peace means to reach God.

“Further, unity is necessary. Expand the circle of unity. Pramukh Swami Maharaj often said, ‘In the good of others, lies our own; In the joy of others lies our own; In the progress of others lies our own.’ He lived his entire life on these principles. He was impartial and loved everyone.

“By living according to these principles, there will be no distress in the world, only endless joy.





Swamishri responds to questions by using various props and gestures during the Yuvak-Yuvati Din assembly, 20 May

Wherever Pramukh Swami Maharaj went, he united everyone. We also follow his example. Our efforts are so that no one should suffer, we should live virtuously and help others. We may have to make some sacrifices, but let us live so that there is no conflict and find joy through devotion and worship.”

YUVAK-YUVATI DIN

20 May

A special all-day event for *yuvaks* and *yuvatis*, titled ‘Brahmanand’, led delegates on a spiritual quest to understand and experience the eternal bliss of God.

Youths sang thematic bhajans and presented scriptural recitals during Mahant Swami Maharaj’s morning puja. A special invitation prayer and card were offered to Swamishri, who, during his blessings, emphasized that true happiness is derived from faithfully worshipping God.

The evening programme – a live cultural production of sketches, dances, video presentations and devotional songs – began with a group of youths conversing on the temporary happiness found from objects and attractions of the world. The performers revealed that *brahmanand* is

realized by building a spiritual connection with Bhagwan and the Satpurush, abiding by their wishes, and perceiving divinity in all others.

These concepts were reinforced by Tyagvallabhdas Swami, Anandswarupdas Swami and an uplifting medley of kirtans that introduced the importance of realizing the full glory of our *prapti* (spiritual attainment).

The ‘town crier’ then hailed Mahant Swami Maharaj’s entrance to the assembly as part of the insightful production.

Thereafter an interactive session with Swamishri brought to life various episodes that portrayed how his oneness with his gurus has remained unwavering amidst various difficulties. The session revealed how, with a full realization of *prapti*, Swamishri was able to remain perfectly balanced throughout these challenging moments in his life.

Swamishri participated in various activities that underlined key messages from the programme. His concluding words conveyed the essence of realizing eternal spiritual happiness, “*Prapti* is greater than your problems. Knowing who you have attained is the key to experiencing *brahmanand*.”





The Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, meets Mahant Swami Maharaj, 21 May

SANYUKTA MANDAL DIN & MAYOR OF LONDON MEETS MAHANT SWAMI MAHARAJ 21 May

Prior to the evening assembly, The Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, was welcomed to the mandir by Yogvivekdas Swami.

The Mayor then had a personal meeting with Mahant Swami Maharaj, during which the Mayor thanked Swamishri for the contributions made by Neasden Temple and asked for his blessings.

Thereafter, addressing the evening assembly, the Mayor said, “I am here to show my respects to His Holiness, and also to ask for his blessings on the capital city of our great country.

“His Holiness and I met earlier, and I was explaining the massive contribution you [Neasden Temple and its congregation] make to our city – whether it is in business, public service or charity. I explained to His Holiness that the ripples of good you do are felt by everybody.”

Afterwards, the evening assembly continued based on the theme of ‘Keva Mota Bhagya’ (Our Great Fortune).

A skit based on the life of a devotee showed him facing a series of life challenges,



Swamishri demonstrates the limitless grace of God and guru by selecting a yellow ball from a container full of white balls, 21 May 2023

incorporating the stories of how the faith of Dada Khachar and Ashabhai helped them to overcome all difficulties.

Swamishri also participated in the presentation and strengthened the devotee’s faith by reminding him of the glory of Bhagwan Swaminarayan, the Satpurush and satsang.

Then, blessing the assembly, Swamishri said, “In the skit, the story of Ashabhai was presented. He was so dedicated that he resolved to give whatever Shastriji Maharaj asked for. *Swabhavs* may have made him look ordinary, but through his faith and guru bhakti he attained Akshardham. So, do not waver. Develop firm *nishtha*.”

PRAMUKH VARNI DIN 23 May

Today, Jeth *sud* 4, marked Pramukh Swami Maharaj’s 73rd Pramukh Varni Din. In Swamishri’s morning puja, the stage was adorned accordingly and bhajans on the virtues of Pramukh Swami Maharaj were sung.

For the Centenary Celebrations of Pramukh Swami Maharaj in Ahmedabad, *yuvaks* and *yuvatis* of London had prepared a spectacular





Swamishri receives the *Guinness World Records* certificate for the world record-making bubble wrap portrait of Pramukh Swami Maharaj, 23 May



Distinguished guests join in the *arti* ceremony, 24 May

colour portrait of Pramukh Swami Maharaj from bubble wrap, which was initiated by Swamishri himself in Surat in 2022. In the evening assembly, *Guinness World Records* officially recognized it as the 'Largest Bubble Wrap Painting'. *Guinness World Records* certificates for both the painting and Swamishri's participation were offered to Shri Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj and then presented to Swamishri.

Swamishri then inaugurated a new English publication by Swaminarayan Aksharpathi, *Five Ascetical Vows of Pramukh Swami Maharaj*, written by Mukundcharandas Swami.

CELEBRATING COMMUNITY

24 May

Today, Mayor Yann Dubosc of Bussy-Saint-Georges in Paris came to meet Swamishri. Currently, a new BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir is under construction in the mayor's area. The mayor expressed his gratitude to Swamishri for choosing his area for the mandir, "I am very pleased. It is a matter of pride for me that after the mandir is built, the knowledge of Hinduism will spread throughout France."

The theme of the evening assembly was 'Celebrating Community: Faith, Service & Global Harmony'. Representatives of various Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian and other religious organizations were present. Also, Mayor Yann Dubosc (Bussy-Saint-Georges, Paris, France), Mr Duncan John Daldine (Director of Interfaith, Westminster Church), Mr David Gold (Director of External Affairs and Philately, Royal Mail), and Mr Andrew Davidson (Artist of Coronation Stamps) and others addressed the assembly.

To commemorate the royal coronation of King Charles III, the Royal Mail Corporation had released four special stamps. One of these stamps featured the BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir in Neasden. These stamps were presented to Shri Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj and Swamishri.

In his blessings Swamishri said, "It is a great joy for me to see all of you here today. My guru, Yogi Maharaj often said, 'Do good for all', and Pramukh Swami Maharaj also said, 'In the good of others lies our own.' This is the essence of everything. If we have such sentiments, there will be happiness and peace. Everyone wants to be happy, but true





Swamishri submerges letters from the youths in water, symbolizing the washing away of past mistakes, 27 May

happiness and peace lie with God. So, if we have faith and trust in God, there will be inner peace. Also, there is a special need for unity. Unity is God's power. We should not expect anything in return, but always think of what we can do to preserve unity. If we have such unity, then peace will prevail within us, in our homes, in our society and in the whole world. So, let us initiate this quest for global peace. May you all be happy, may everyone's health remain good, and may you serve the country and religion well. That is my prayer at the feet of God."

KISHORE-KISHORI DIN

27 May

In Swamishri's morning puja, *kishores* sang bhajans. Thereafter, Swamishri clicked on an iPad to launch the Kishore Sevak Training (KST) course. Swamishri said, "Other training will help you to develop externally or physically, but this training focuses on internal or spiritual development. This is very important as it establishes your connection with God. This is 'Sahajanandi' training and will take you to Shriji Maharaj. So, there is no training greater than this. You will become exemplary youths and volunteers,

and Satsang will also develop. And whoever comes in your contact will also become ideal."

In the evening assembly, more than 1,000 *kishores* and *kishoris* were present. The programme was in the form of a panel discussion, using a variety of media and presentation modes. There was also an interactive session with Swamishri in which he gave practical guidance to the youths. Then, a drama was presented depicting the mental state of *kishores*. Again, *kishores* asked Swamishri to clear their confusions. Such thorns, big and small, are embedded in everyone's hearts. So, the *kishores* and *kishoris* in the assembly had written their honest thoughts in letters to Swamishri. Swamishri affectionately touched every letter and forgave their mistakes. Then, he submerged the letters under water and conveyed that as atonement the youths should chant 300 *malas* (rosaries) within six days.

So that everyone always experiences Swamishri's presence and remains strong, Swamishri sent a message to everyone on their phones: "Be brave, be strong. Who are you? Be proud of that. You are connected to God and the Satpurush. This is your identity. We will always be together. Remember this feeling." Swamishri





Swamishri interacts with young *balaks* during the Shishu Din assembly, 28 May

displayed his commitment to fulfil this statement of his. Everyone was touched by his words and resolved to follow his wishes.

Answering a question asked by the youngsters, Swamishri said, “Worldly love is filled with selfishness, while the love of a true sadhu is filled with selflessness. Therefore, engage in satsang and follow the commandments. By following the commandments, you will become closer to God. And if you transgress them, you will be drawn to perishable, insignificant and worthless things.”

Afterwards, Swamishri instructed the youngsters, “Perform puja daily, attend the weekly assembly, and use social media judiciously.” In the end, Swamishri blessed, “Maintain complete faith in God and the Satpurush. They desire what is best for us. A humble request to all the *kishores* and *kishoris*: no matter what, prioritize satsang and keep it at the forefront. Never leave satsang, but strengthen it. It is rare even for the mighty kings, so do not consider satsang as ordinary. Your friends may forget you, but the Satpurush always remembers you. So, preserve this, which is permanent. Choose satsang above everything else. Maintain a strong connection with God and the Satpurush. They are always ready to take care of you.”

Then, amidst the joyous atmosphere of the bhajans, youths performed *raas* on the lower performance stage. Swamishri also played with *raas* sticks to the rhythmic beats of the bhajans.

SHISHU DIN

28 May

Shishu Din, for children aged 7 and under began with *shishus* singing a selection of children’s bhajans with sweet tones and melodies during Swamishri’s puja. In his morning blessings, Mahant Swami Maharaj encouraged participants of the children’s football tournaments – Pramukh Cup and Premvati Cup – that were taking place later in the day, to imbibe the principles of unity, humility and discipline both on and off the pitches.

Swamishri inaugurated a set of six books in English on the Akshar-Purushottam *upasana* specially for *shishus*.

Today, the mass engagement and *janoi* ceremonies were to take place, so Swamishri sanctified the items that would be used for the rituals.

In India, Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi was to inaugurate the new parliament building,



so Swamishri wrote a letter of blessings for the occasion.

The evening programme began with award presentations for team and individual winners of the football tournaments.

The Shishu Din assembly was themed ‘Swami Bapa, My Best Friend!’

Swamishri’s arrival was communicated through a telephone call to a *shishu* and was marked with joyous celebrations, including a colourful dance. *Shishus* then engaged in a light-hearted exchange with Swamishri, explaining the perceptions that teachers and parents have of young children. Swamishri shared his own perspectives by saying, “They may appear mischievous now in their younger years, but they will grow to become great. I see all of you as *muktas*.”

Swamishri played a series of games with the children, including musical statues, during which Swamishri himself played a series of instruments. He also explained specific habits young children should cultivate, narrated important spiritual principles through puppetry, and provided an everlasting memory by cradling a pet rabbit in his lap.

Shishus presented a series of offerings they had devoutly prepared for Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj. In turn, Swamishri explained his own favourite devotional activities. A practical offering was then made as Swamishri helped children to create a chocolate treat for Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj during a live cooking demonstration. Swamishri then offered the sanctified food to everyone present in the assembly. The children concluded their interaction with Swamishri by pledging to remember the key messages and become ideal *shishus*.

The second part of the programme focused on the football tournaments that took place earlier in the day. An interactive exercise revealed how children can be victorious on the ‘satsang pitch’ with analogies of key roles that Swamishri assumes within the team – each with a deeper underlying

message – such as his role as a goalkeeper who catches every child before they slip into the net of worldly distractions, and a striker who helps children reach their ultimate spiritual goal.

These teachings were brought to life by Swamishri throwing and kicking a soft football. Mahant Swami Maharaj provided one final memory by signing a contract to become a new ‘transfer signing’ for the children.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENT DIN

29 May

Over 1,700 international students attended the special assembly themed ‘The Power of S’, which focused on studies, *sang* (one’s company), *samp* (unity) and satsang through live performances and motivating sessions with Swamishri. It provided guidance and encouragement to those who have come to the UK for their higher education.

Overseas students began the day by singing kirtans during Mahant Swami Maharaj’s puja. Swamishri addressed the students thereafter and encouraged them to study with diligence and ensure that their studies remain a priority. He also guided them to seek strength from God to overcome the various challenges they may be facing.

The evening session began with an overview of the activities that are organized by BAPS to support international students in the UK, including dedicated support from swamis and volunteers through a network of centres that provides tailored career and personal guidance.

Swamishri was joyously welcomed to the evening assembly by a musical guard of honour, after which he interacted in a drama that enacted the life of an international student, named Apurva. The drama charted his journey as he navigated through distractions and vices that threatened to derail him from succeeding in his education and began to cause conflict in his life with his peers.





Swamishri observes a practical demonstration of the spiritual struggles of students, 29 May

Swamishri engaged with the audience and shared his guidance on ways in which students can eradicate complacency and steer clear of distractions. He also advised that they adopt discretion and support one another. In addition to his blessings, his various gestures throughout the evening provided a montage of unforgettable memories.

Students then performed a vibrant and colourful dance before a heartfelt prayer was offered to Swamishri on behalf of all students to conclude the enlightening day.

1 June

The famous Bollywood actor Shri Akshay Kumar visited the Neasden Temple. He was deeply touched to meet and converse with Swamishri.

2 June

A severe train accident occurred in Odisha, India. Upon learning the details, Swamishri consoled the Minister of Railways, Shri Ashwini Kumar Vaishnav, saying, “Jai Swaminarayan. We received the news that there has been an unfortunate train accident in Odisha. We are deeply saddened by this news. In this moment

of sorrow, we offer prayers at the lotus feet of Bhagwan Swaminarayan. We have instructed all our temples to conduct prayers and bhajans. May you also find strength and courage.” Swamishri offered prayers for the peace of the souls of the deceased and sent a heartfelt prayer for the well-being of the injured passengers through a letter.

BAL-BALIKA DIN AND EUROPE DIN

4 June

Despite Swamishri’s ill health, he graced the assembly and the atmosphere was filled with joyous celebration and enthusiasm. At the climax of the wonderful Bal-Balika Din dance-drama, titled ‘Swami’s Wonderland’, that had been presented, Swamishri’s arrival was celebrated with a dance. Five children had reached this Wonderland, but all five had some deficiency. With Swamishri’s guidance, those deficiencies were resolved, and they achieved their desired goals. Swamishri taught them the five values: perseverance, daily spiritual practice, regular satsang assembly, observance of *niyam*-dharma and unity. With these values, everyone achieves success.

Swamishri inaugurated the English book





Blocks are arranged before Swamishri as various prayers are voiced on behalf of the devotees of Europe. The blocks combine to form an image of the upcoming mandir in Paris, France, to symbolize their unity, 4 June

for children titled *To My Little Friend*, which he himself had written. Following this, when asked a series of questions the children responded enthusiastically, proudly proclaiming, “My Mahant Swami Maharaj!” as the answer to each question. Children expressed their gratitude to Swamishri for gracing the assembly despite not feeling well. Then, children recited a series of heartfelt poems. Everyone prayed for Swamishri’s good health by chanting the Swaminarayan *mahamantra*.

Then, the programme for Europe Din began. Firstly, Swamishri sanctified sand which will be used in the construction of the Paris Mandir and also carried to various countries in Europe. A grand procession took place on the performance stage to celebrate the Paris Mandir Mahotsav, which Swamishri blessed.

Swamishri wished to personally worship and gift the devotees of Europe the *murtis* of Shri Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj. Accordingly, he performed *pujan* of the golden *murtis* of Shri Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj.

In today’s assembly, devotees from 15 European countries were present, and countless

devotees also enjoyed the live broadcast. Swamishri blessed everyone that Shri Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj forever remain present in the hearts of all, residing in their *chaitanya* mandir.

Then, Manoharmurtidas Swami and Amitbhai Patel, coordinator of Europe Satsang, voiced various prayers to Swamishri. With each prayer they arranged blocks with maps of European countries. With the final prayer and block placement, a drawing of the Paris mandir was formed. The meaning expressed was, “If we all work together, the Paris mandir will be ready.” Swamishri agreed to this sentiment.

BHAKTI DIN

5–6 June

Bhakti Din – a special day of devotion to Shri Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj – provided an opportunity for devotees to strengthen their spiritual bond with God and guru.

The day of devotional activities included the first *tula* of Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj outside of India. The historic evening assembly began with kirtans explaining the spiritual benefits that





Swamishri and Thakorji are showered with flower petals as the scale rises, 6 June

are realized through devotion.

This was further explored through an enlightening skit that depicted the importance of bhakti (devotion) through a dialogue between Naradji and Uddhavji. The colourful drama vividly highlighted that, amongst all the means to attain ultimate liberation, God is most pleased by heartfelt devotion.

Pujya Tyagvallabhdas Swami and Anandswarupdas Swami elaborated on the benevolence and compassion of God, and on the merits of devotion, explaining how a *tula* provides an ideal way to express one's devotional gratitude. They also drew upon the lives of devotees who have excelled in their devotion and service to God and reflected upon the personal sacrifices and support of devotees across the UK and Europe over the decades.

This was further conveyed through video highlights of previous Bhakti Dins in the UK.

As Swamishri arrived in the assembly, the *murtis* of Shri Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj were carried in a decorative palanquin and joyously welcomed inside the hall with vibrant dances by youths.

Thereafter, Swamishri performed the *pujan* and

arti of Shri Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj before offering his devotion.

Swamishri then took his seat with Shri Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj as swamis and devotees followed in performing a *tula* by placing packets of sugar crystals on the scale pans, symbolizing their sweet, heartfelt devotion to God and guru. Devotees continued to file by for darshan of Mahant Swami Maharaj, as uplifting celebratory kirtans played, creating a devotionally charged atmosphere.

SYMBOLIC RANGOTSAV

7 June

In the morning, Swamishri bestowed the *parshad diksha* to three *sadhaks*: Haribhai (London) – Ekalavya Bhagat, Harshilbhai (Leicester) – Ruju Bhagat, and Shamilbhai (London) – Vibhishan Bhagat.

Also, Swamishri inaugurated the Russian translation of the Satsang Diksha shastra and launched the 'Daily Satsang Time' mobile app.

The evening Festival of Colours celebration took place in the courtyard of the mandir in the presence of the grand and magnificent *murti* of Pramukh Swami Maharaj. The assembly





Devotees rejoice in the Rangotsav with Swamishri and the *mahamurti* of Pramukh Swami Maharaj, 7 June

began with themed kirtans and speeches describing the historical significance of the *rangotsav* festival from the time of Bhagwan Swaminarayan.

Thereafter, Mahant Swami Maharaj was joyously welcomed to the festivities. He also drew upon the devotional vibrancy of *rangotsav* during his blessings, recalling, in particular, the iconic celebrations in the presence of Pramukh Swami Maharaj. He urged everyone to immerse themselves in this special occasion.

Then, Swamishri performed the Vedic *pujan* of Shri Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj, after which Shri Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj and Swamishri sprayed each other with sanctified water.

Thereafter, Swamishri sprayed the *mahamurti* of Pramukh Swami Maharaj with sanctified, saffron-scented water, which was reciprocated towards him. Memorably, both Pramukh Swami Maharaj's *mahamurti* and Swamishri's chair rotated on turntables so that they faced each other during the *arti* and *rangotsav* celebrations.

Then, Swamishri took hold of the water-spray control and directed the water sprays as

the devotees approached the stage one by one. Swamishri, turned the sprays in all directions, to ensure that every devotee was sprayed with the sanctified water. It was an experience of divine joy, similar to the Fuldol festival celebration in Sarangpur.

8 June

In the morning, Swamishri performed the Vedic *murti-pratishtha* rituals of the *murtis* for the BAPS Mandir in Luton, UK.

The Right Honourable Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, who, due to unavoidable duties, was unable to visit the mandir wrote a letter to Swamishri to express his heartfelt sentiments. Yogvivekdas Swami read the letter.

In the evening, after his 38-day stay in London, Swamishri flew to Canada. ♦

(Compiled by Sadhu Amrutvijaydas using baps.org news articles and translated extracts from Brahmavatsal Swami's Gujarati reports of Mahant Swami Maharaj's vicharan.)



(Cont. from p. 5)

Shri Hari stated, “You can have five sadhus or ten sadhus, but form your own group.” But Gunatitanand Swami did not wish to be the head of a group of sadhus. So, he modestly replied, “Maharaj, I don’t have the skills to manage a group.” But, Maharaj persisted, “You can have hundred sadhus, two-hundred sadhus or three-hundred.”

Gunatitanand Swami understood it was Maharaj’s wish that he took care of a group of sadhus. If he refused Maharaj any further, then he would increase the number of sadhus for his group. Thus, Swami consented, “Yes Maharaj, whatever you command.” Shri Hari smiled at Swami and expressed his pleasure.

Soon after, the devotees of Memdavad came to Shri Hari. On seeing them, Shri Hari instructed, “Take Nirgunanand of Bhadra with you. He will defeat the *vedantis*.” On hearing this, Gunatitanand Swami was astonished and thought a scholarly sadhu would be more apt for the situation. However, since it was Maharaj’s command he thought there was no other alternative other than to obey him. Swami went to Memdavad with the devotees and stayed at the local mandir. The *vedantis* got the news that a Swaminarayan sadhu had arrived to engage in a scriptural debate with them. Thus, the following day, the *vedantis* came to the mandir in a light, playful mood. Swami honoured them and gave them suitable seats to sit on. When the Brahmins observed the spiritual lustre on Swami’s countenance their arrogance ebbed a little. Gunatitanand Swami spoke before they could say anything, “Today’s scholars merely utter ‘*Aham brahmāsmi*’, but they do not know what is Brahma and Parabrahma. Because Shukdevji had attained God-realization he had transcended the distinctions of male and female genders. Once, when Shukdevji was far away his father called out to him and he replied to him by pervading a tree. The nature of Brahma is such that when it

enters a non-animate thing like wood or stone it can make it move. If you are all truly *brahma* then enter these wooden pillars or else I will enter and shake them.”

On hearing Swami’s words, the so-called scholarly Brahmins were left non-plussed. Then, Gunatitanand Swami explained, “Shukdevji and Jad Bharat never announced to anyone that they were *brahma*, but people perceived them to be *brahma* from their demeanour and actions. Therefore, you should give up your pretense of being *brahma*. By taking refuge in Bhagwan Swaminarayan, the manifest form of the supreme Bhagwan, you will truly attain the spiritual state of *brahmarup*. All your worldly desires will dissolve and you will attain the pure divine state of *brahma*.” Thereafter, a divine, serene light emanated from Swami’s body and pervaded the whole house. The house then started shaking as if there was an earthquake. The *vedanti* Brahmins were petrified. Swami, however, assuaged them and said, “There’s no need to fear because the house will not fall. If you are all truly *brahma* then stop this house from shaking any more.” But the Brahmin scholars were incapable of doing so. Finally, Swami absorbed the divine light in his body and the house became stable. The *vedantis* surrendered and fell at Swami’s feet. They asked Swami to initiate them into satsang. After this incident the satsang in Memdavad flourished.

Shri Hari stayed in Vartal for a few days and then travelled to Tarapur, Moraj, Moti Boru, Bholad, Kamiyala, Kharad, Jhinjhar, Bhimnath, Polarpur, Kundal and finally arrived in Gadhpur. The village devotees came to receive and honour him. Shri Hari arrived at Dada’s *darbar* a little after sunset. ◆

(Contd. in next issue)


Translated from the Gujarati text of
Bhagwan Swaminarayan authored by Shri H.T. Dave



BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir and campus, Toronto, regally lit to welcome Swamishri



SATPURUSH

HH MAHANT SWAMI MAHARAJ
IN CANADA  2023

After a gap of 5 years 10 months and 12 days, His Holiness Mahant Swami Maharaj arrived in Toronto, Canada, on the second leg of his 'Akshardham Yatra' that will culminate in the momentous inauguration of Swaminarayan Akshardham in Robbinsville, NJ, USA.

From 9 June to 8 July 2023, Swamishri resided at the BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir in Toronto to grant devotees from throughout Canada the bliss and inspiration of his manifest presence.

During his one-month stay, every morning Swamishri would go for darshan in the main mandir, perform the arti and offer abhishek to the murti of Shri Nilkanth Varni in the abhishek mandap before performing his puja.

After puja, he would bless the assembly with his words of divine wisdom.

During puja, children, teenagers, youths and devotees recited extracts from various shastras and sang bhajans.

In the evenings, the devotees also enjoyed Swamishri's samip darshan and the satsang assemblies based on various topics.

In addition, Swamishri met national, regional and local leaders and dignitaries, including The Right Honourable Justin Trudeau, Prime Minister of Canada.

In this way, Swamishri granted the joy of his association in a multitude of ways to innumerable devotees, dignitaries and well-wishers.



Swamishri affectionately greets devotees in the assembly hall on his arrival to the mandir, 9 June

MAHANT SWAMI MAHARAJ'S GRAND ARRIVAL IN TORONTO

9 June

At 12.42 a.m. EDT (5.42 a.m. GMT) on 9 June 2023, Mahant Swami Maharaj touched down in Toronto, Canada, on the second leg of his 'Akshardham Yatra'. At Pearson International Airport, Jnanpriyadas Swami, Gunsagardas Swami, Shri Nareshbhai Roy and Shri Bijalbhai welcomed and honoured Swamishri with a garland.

Overnight, a continuous stream of people, dressed in festive attire, had filled the mandir, eagerly anticipating their first darshan of Mahant Swami Maharaj in Toronto since 2017

At 1.54 a.m., amid the dark night skies, colourful lights, fireworks and sparklers dazzled to greet Swamishri at the BAPS Mandir in Toronto. Inside the mandir, devotees, young and old, lined the passages to jubilantly welcome Swamishri. The enthusiastic reception continued with a captivating glow-in-the-dark dance performance by youths. He also met approximately 50 swamis and several volunteers before entering the assembly hall.

In the assembly hall, thousands of people

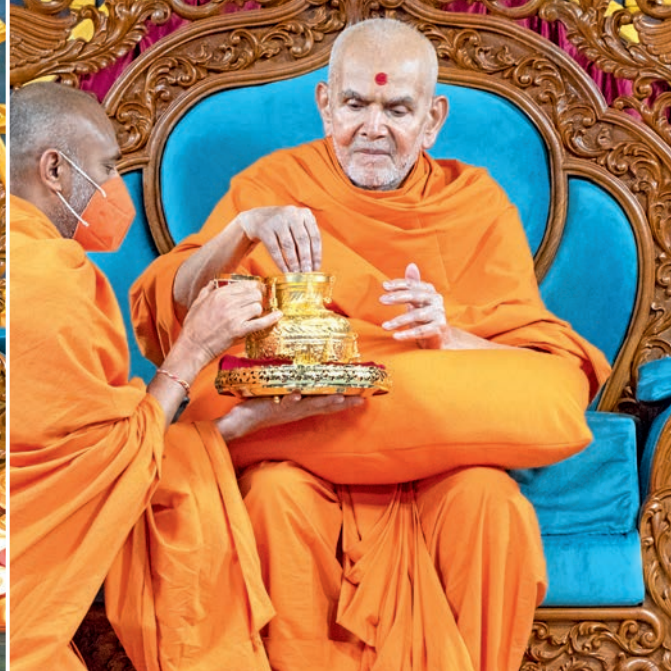
devoutly greeted Swamishri. On stage, Shri Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj and Mahant Swami Maharaj were honoured with garlands.

Swamishri then blessed the assembly, "When Bhagatji Maharaj returned to Dham, Ramji Bhatt said to Shastriji Maharaj, 'The auspiciousness in this world has gone.' But Shastriji Maharaj said, 'The Satpurush never leaves the world.' And Gunatitanand Swami has said that the Satpurush will remain for at least 10 to 20 generations. So, everything matches. It is a matter of having faith. Such conviction results in real joy. Every day is then like Diwali. The extent to which you lack in belief, reduces your joy. Believe that the same Shriji Maharaj who bestowed bliss to the 500 *paramhansas* and performed innumerable divine *lilas*, has given everyone joy through Gunatitanand Swami, Bhagatji Maharaj, Shastriji Maharaj, Yogiji Maharaj and Pramukh Swami Maharaj. And this will continue."

Then Swamishri offered *shiro* to Shri Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj and sanctified the *prasad* for the more than 800 devotees who had observed various fasts in anticipation of Swamishri's arrival.



Swamishri with Shri Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj in the Swagat Din assembly, 13 June



Swamishri sanctifies rice grains hand-peeled by devotees, 13 June

CAMPUS TOUR

10 June

At 7 p.m. Swamishri embarked on a tour of the mandir campus. Seated with Shri Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj in the golf car, Swamishri visited the decoration, kitchen, bookstall, Shayona, parking and other departments. At each place, he blessed the volunteers serving in that department.

Swamishri also went onto Claireville Drive, which the government have given the ceremonial name 'Pramukh Swami Maharaj Way'. Here, Swamishri viewed the Shayona building.

At the end of the campus visit, Swamishri performed the evening *arti* in front of the mandir in the presence of hundreds of devotees and volunteers.

SWAGAT DIN

13 June

After his morning puja, Swamishri blessed the assembly, "Eternal peace resides in singing the praises of God and guru. So, follow that path to make this human birth meaningful and block all worldly desires.

"Without Akshar, liberation is not possible.

Understand this and teach it to others. We do many other things, but do not follow this instruction. Tell others that Akshar manifested with Purushottam. Shastriji Maharaj taught this principle and today we are all happy. Learn and contemplate on this principle and you will experience so much joy."

The evening Welcome Assembly revolved around a drama in which *akshar muktas* had come from Akshardham to reminisce about the Satpurush's visits to Canada. Devotees and swamis recalled stories from Pramukh Swami Maharaj's visits to Canada. They fondly recollected the remarkable expansion of Satsang in Canada over the past half-century. Following this nostalgic reflection, Mahant Swami Maharaj was welcomed with a captivating dance performed by youths.

In the days before Mahant Swami Maharaj's arrival, devotees actively participated in the 'Lyo Rajipo Project'. This initiative focused on four fundamental principles: *divyabhav*, *antardrashti*, *bhakti* and *tap*. *Divyabhav* revolved around recognizing the inherent divinity within each individual; *antardrashti* urged devotees to introspect over the ways to facilitate personal



Surrounded by mangoes, Swamishri sanctifies *kanthis* for children, 17 June

spiritual growth; bhakti concentrated on nurturing devotion and love towards God and guru; and *tap* – austerities – encouraged self-discipline and restraint.

As part of practising *divyabhav*, devotees of Canada wrote a virtue of anyone who had impacted them. The resulting total of 5,500 virtues were inscribed on a 90-foot long garland made of maple leaves, which was presented to Swamishri as a symbol of positivity and gratitude.

For *antardrashti*, 2,425 individuals pledged to eliminate 4,571 negative habits and vices from their lives. To represent this commitment, a *kalash* filled with rice from which the husk had been hand-peeled was offered to Swamishri. The grains symbolized the devotees' prayers for the removal of impurities and the achievement of purity.

Around 2,250 devotees expressed their love and devotion for Swamishri through bhakti by performing a total of over 863,450 *malas* for his good health. Swamishri acknowledged their devotion by accepting a *mala* garland.

Over 950 devotees performed rigorous austerities by observing *nirjala* (waterless), *sajala* (with water), liquid and other fasts, lasting 90 hours prior to Swamishri's arrival. Swamishri

acknowledged their devotion by sanctifying *pendas*, with which the devotees would break their fasts.

Blessing the assembly, Swamishri expressed, "The way you have welcomed is commendable. We all have to practise *divyabhav*, *mahima*, *tap*, *antardrashti* and bhakti. There is no progress without this. We have to delve deep to attain God. This can be achieved through *antardrashti*.

"*Divyabhav* is the key. Shriji Maharaj himself said, 'All devotees who worship God are divine. Whoever understands this essential principle, thinks about it and practises it becomes joyous and wins over the world. Day or night, his experience of bliss does not diminish.' Through *divyabhav*, one conquers the world. In short, practise satsang. If you become distant from satsang, you will lose a lot."

Notable guests, including Hon. Michael D. Ford, Minister of Citizenship and Multiculturalism; Hon. Monte McNaughton, Minister of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development; and Councillor Vincent Crisanti of the City of Toronto, were present to officially welcome Mahant Swami Maharaj to Canada.



Youths during an interactive session with Swamishri in the evening assembly, 17 June

MAHIMA DIN

17 June

For Swamishri's puja, thousands of mangoes decorated the stage and backdrop, with the word 'SAMP' spelled using mangoes in front of Swamishri's cabin.

After blessing the assembly, Swamishri sanctified the *kanthis* and pujas for the 150 children and new devotees who were eager to take *vartman* and accept initiation into the Satsang. Swamishri waited till everyone had water in their right hand and then spoke the *ashray diksha mantra*, which was repeated by the new initiates.

The evening Mahima Din assembly was in the form of a *jnan goshti* (spiritual discussion).

The assembly included engaging skits crafted to inspire positivity and offer practical strategies for fostering such thinking.

After the skits, senior BAPS swamis imparted guidance on sustaining positive mindsets. Their wisdom and teachings added depth to the event, underscoring the need to cultivate positive thoughts in all facets of life.

In the presentation, stories were narrated illustrating Mahant Swami Maharaj's immense appreciation for the volunteers and devotees.

After his arrival in the assembly, Swamishri was asked some questions.

Q: If you had to explain the *mahima* (glory) of your guru Yogiji Maharaj in one sentence, what would you say?

Swamishri: He was the manifest form of Bhagwan Swaminarayan.

Q: We see both the virtues and faults of others, but what is the benefit of understanding each other's *mahima* and serving together?

Swamishri: If you focus on the virtues of others, you will also become full of virtues.

Thereafter, Swamishri used saffron paint to colour a map of Canada with the wish 'Canada Rangvu Chhe'.

Among the guests present in the assembly were: The Hon. Ahmed Hussien, Minister of Housing, Diversity and Inclusion; Supt. Mandeep Mann, Toronto Police Service; Inspector Jack Gurr, Toronto Police Service; Sergeant JK Gill, Waterloo Regional Police; Constable Jash Manani, Gulf Police Service; and Constable Leslie Smith, Peel Regional Police.

These distinguished guests extolled BAPS's community services, acknowledging the volunteers' relentless efforts and unwavering



Swamishri writes to students the keys to success in studies and life: 1. Observe religious vows (*niyams*), 2. Practice satsang daily, 3. Study regularly, 18 June

commitment to positively impacting society. The Hon. Ahmed Hussen presented BAPS with a Certificate of Acknowledgment on behalf of the Federal Government of Canada in recognition of the BAPS's volunteer initiatives.

ASMITA DIN

18 June

The evening Asmita Din assembly was presented by international students who had come to Canada to study and it focused on the unique challenges they faced.

In 2017, Swamishri had been asked, "What are the characteristics of a Sahajanandi *sinh santan*?" In reply, Swamishri had written, "Fearless, Courageous, Stable."

Based on this, the evening assembly centred on a drama titled 'Mahantji's Sinh Santan' and also featured speeches by swamis to guide the students on these topics so that they remain proud of and continue to uphold their cultural heritage, values and identities.

Following Swamishri's arrival, swamis narrated incidents demonstrating how Mahant Swami Maharaj himself was fearless, courageous and



Swamishri participates in the Asmita Din assembly by displaying a lion, 18 June

stable. Then, the students voiced their day-to-day struggles to Swamishri and sought his guidance by asking questions.

Q: I have come to Canada to study and have to manage everything by myself – study, cooking meals, cleaning and a job. Due to this, I neglect attending *sabha* and doing *seva* in the mandir. What can I do in this situation?

Swamishri: In the beginning, you will find everything difficult, but over time you will get better. Once you become set, you will be able to do all this with ease.

Q: I have become addicted to the internet and social media. You have taught me the proper way to use them, but I keep forgetting to apply this. My mind is being spoilt and time is being wasted. How should I atone for all these repeated lapses?

Swamishri: You have to remain alert and aware. Remember the purpose for which you have come here. You have come to study, so focus on your studies. Do not allow anything else to divert you. Also, do not forget the efforts and sacrifices of your parents that have enabled you to come here. You must not allow anything to distract you from your studies.



Grand Rath Yatra procession in the mandir campus, 20 June

Q: A youth is coming to Canada next week for studies. What principles should he remember to be successful in his studies and in life? Please write them down for us.

Swamishri: If you want to be successful here, do not even think about enjoying the worldly pleasures. You have come to study, so focus on your studies. To be successful in your studies and in life, you must firmly observe the *niyams* and dharma. This is very important. Even the slightest lapse will result in your decline.

Second, practise satsang daily. Shriji Maharaj has said that even one day without satsang creates a big gap. This is absolutely true. Worldly pleasures will entice you. If you allow them to lure you away, you will become distant from satsang. So, sincerely engage in satsang daily. And by doing so you will become staunch in satsang.

Third, study regularly. That's what you've come for. If you don't achieve what you have to, your life will squandered. Many youths, once they save some money, spend it on wasteful and harmful habits. They forget what they have come for and become diverted in worldly pleasures. So daily engage in satsang and studies. In this way, you will achieve what you have come for and be victorious.

Inspired by Swamishri's words, the students pledged to develop fearlessness, courage and stability in their lives.

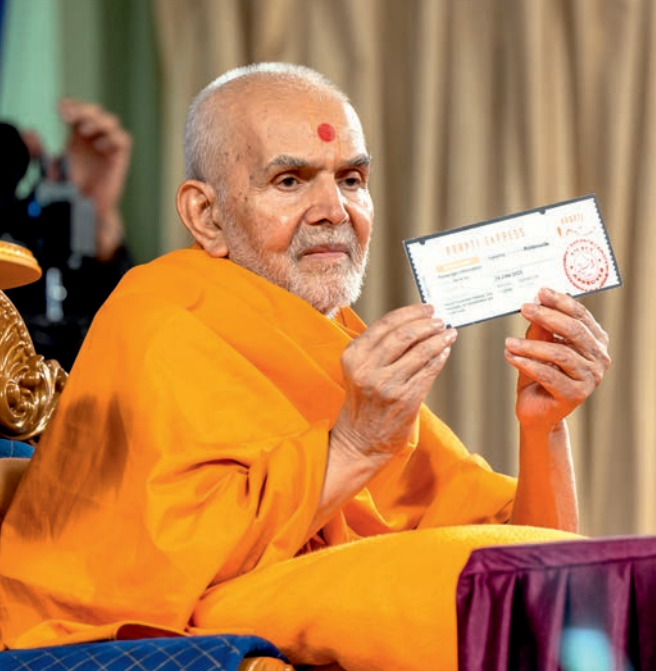
RATH YATRA

20 June

Mahant Swami Maharaj began the Rath Yatra celebrations under the dome of the main mandir, where he gracefully manoeuvred an intricately decorated *rath* carrying Shri Harikrishna Maharaj and Shri Gunatitanand Swami using a remote control.

Following his morning puja, Mahant Swami Maharaj blessed the assembly, "Today is the Rath Yatra festival. It is celebrated with grandeur in Jagannathpuri. Shriji Maharaj went to Jagannathpuri at the time of the Rath Yatra celebration during his pilgrimage as Nilkanth Varni. The king honoured him as manifest God and seated him on the *rath*. He also swept the ground in front of the *rath* as per tradition.

"Pramukh Swami Maharaj often said, 'True Rath Yatra is when we surrender the reins of our life to God.' Just as Arjun made Krishna Bhagwan his charioteer and won, we must also strengthen our *nishtha*. And if you live as per the commands



Swamishri participates in an activity during the evening Prapti Din assembly, 24 June



Swamishri blesses the evening assembly, 24 June

of God and guru, your life will not stall anywhere. You will go straight to Akshardham.”

Then, Swamishri reverently performed *pujan* of and offered *thal* to Shri Harikrishna Maharaj and Shri Gunatitanand Swami, who were seated in an exquisite *rath*.

As the anticipation mounted, the grand Rath Yatra procession commenced from the packed assembly hall with Mahant Swami Maharaj seated in a beautifully decorated golf cart. The procession continued through the mandir campus, where children showcased their excitement through vibrant posters and traditional dance performances. Brimming with enthusiasm, Swamishri joined the other swamis in playing *kartals* to the tune of bhajans. Devotees, young and old, were captivated by the divine grandeur of the celebrations.

PRAPTI DIN

24 June

The evening Prapti Din assembly commenced with *kishores* and *yuvaks* eagerly sharing their personal experiences of feeling the profound *prapti* (attainment) of gurus Pramukh Swami

Maharaj and Mahant Swami Maharaj. Their stories reflected the immense *prapti* they had experienced and how both had influenced their lives in profound ways.

The *kishores* interacted with Swamishri through the course of the drama by asking questions to seek his guidance on how to tackle the various circumstances they face.

Q: We know that we should practise our daily satsang rituals and observe our *niyams*. But we are influenced by others in many ways and so we even stop doing puja. Since, we do not understand its importance, please explain why and how to do puja.

Swamishri: First, you must have faith that God exists. Second, believe that he is the all-doer. God exists and he sees and knows everything. If you sincerely believe these principles, you will enjoy doing puja.

Q: How can we experience that Maharaj and Swami truly come to accept our puja?

Swamishri: When you firmly believe that God exists, that he is real and he knows everything then you will truly enjoy doing puja and experience everything.

Q: Do the prayers we offer in our puja reach you?



Swamishri lights two lamps to inaugurate the 'Akshardham Mahotsav: Festival of Inspirations', 25 June



Swamishri kindles a flame with sunrays for the Festival of Inspirations Yagna ceremony, 25 June

Swamishri: Yes, they do.

When asked to describe the nature of Sant we have attained, Swamishri said, “God is everywhere; every corner, every atom. God is present. I am the Sant who beholds God. So, wherever God is, I am there – automatic – and will remain there naturally.”

Q: We are faced with many choices and know that the path you have shown is the best. This is due to your love for us. Please explain the nature of your love for us.

Swamishri: It is selfless and unconditional. I do not want anything from you. Only that you practise satsang and follow the righteous path. We give you *sanskars* and other good things that help you to progress in life.

Q: What is the reason you give *agna*?

Swamishri: So that you progress tremendously in life and do good works that everyone likes.

Q: How do we ensure we do not lapse in our duties?

Swamishri: You should be vigilant. Be alert to where the attack is coming from, otherwise *kusang* will enter your life without you even realizing. There is no gain from *kusang* – only

decline. So, believe that satsang is the truth and live accordingly.

Then, assuring that he forever supports our efforts, Swamishri said, “In the journey of your life, I am always with you.”

Then the youths asked the last question, “How can we overcome our depressive thoughts and loneliness?”

Swamishri replied, “Always think about the *prapti* you have of God. God is with us. Always remember this.”

AKSHARDHAM MAHOTSAV INAUGURATION & CELEBRATING 50 YEARS OF BAPS SATSANG

25 June

The main focus of Swamishri's Akshardham Yatra 2023 is the inauguration of Swaminarayan Akshardham in Robbinsville, NJ.

Today, after puja, Swamishri officially inaugurated the 'Akshardham Mahotsav: Festival of Inspirations'.

Shrutiprakash Swami revealed that a flame had been harnessed using natural sunlight. Then, as he recited the auspicious Vedic verses,



Swamishri amidst the *annakut*, 26 June

Swamishri performed *pujan* of Shri Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj and used this flame to light two *divos*, symbolizing Akshar and Purushottam, to inaugurate the Akshardham Mahotsav. In his blessings, Swamishri acknowledged the efforts of all who had contributed in constructing Akshardham. He also urged everyone to continue their support, since building Akshardham was Pramukh Swami Maharaj's heartfelt wish.

Swamishri had expressed his wish to kindle flame from sunlight himself. So, at 1 p.m., Swamishri went into the courtyard between the mandir and haveli, and sat before the *maha-murti* of Pramukh Swami Maharaj. Here, he used a magnifying glass to harness the beaming afternoon sunrays to kindle a flame. Swamishri then lit a *divo*, the flame from which will be used during all the *yagnas* and sacred ceremonies that will be performed during the Akshardham Mahotsav. Concluding the rituals, Swamishri offered *mantra-pushpanjali* to the *maha-murti* of Pramukh Swami Maharaj.

The evening assembly celebrated 50 years of BAPS Satsang in Canada.

Before the main programme, Swamishri inaugurated the four social media channels created

for the Akshardham Mahotsav.

Many dignitaries were present for this special occasion, some of whom addressed the assembly.

Omar Alghabra, Canada's Minister of Transport, said, "You are all silent heroes. You go into your daily life, while serving your community, serving Canada, and making this a better place for all and I am truly grateful to all of you for what you do, every day."

Doug Ford, Premier of Ontario, said, "For the past 50 years, BAPS has had a huge impact, not only here in Etobicoke, but in communities right across our great province and our country and we're so grateful for all the incredible volunteer and charity work that you've done. Including your annual walkathons to raise money for the local hospital, and your blood donation and stem cell registry drives. What stands out to me is when the world was going through the pandemic, when our province was going through the pandemic, who stepped up, who was delivering more vaccines than any other place? It was you, everyone from BAPS – Thank you! Incredible job."

Sanjay Kumar Verma, High Commissioner of India to Canada, said, "When you do community service, you do not focus on for whom are you



Prime Minister Trudeau and Swamishri immersed in dialogue, 28 June

rendering your services to. Because that is the principle of ‘Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam’; which our sages and saints have taught us from ancient times. It is service to humanity; so let me rephrase, you have not served community for 50 years but you have served ‘humanity.’”

At the end, Swamishri blessed, “Pramukh Swami Maharaj selflessly performed many services to society. We, too, must follow his example and do such service.

“By serving with *samp*, *suhradbhav* and *ekta*, we experience peace and others are also satisfied. Such services to society will continue to grow and the circle of unity will expand. If we serve with these sentiments, then the future is bright and will accomplish even more than expected.”

PATOTSAV

26 June

Today marked the 16th Patotsav (consecration anniversary) of the BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, Toronto.

At 6.10 a.m., Swamishri first went to the *sabha* marquee to perform his morning puja, during which *balaks* recited verses from the *Swaminarayan Siddhant Sudha* while youths

sang bhajans describing the glory of mandirs and *murtis*.

After puja, Swamishri went to the main mandir, where a grand *annakut* had been offered to the *murtis* in all the shrines. Swamishri performed the *patotsav* rituals and then the *patotsav arti* in the central shrine.

Thereafter, Swamishri sat amid the *annakut* offered in front of the central shrine to deliver the morning discourse, “All these traditions are to be continued. Not just blandly, but with *mahima*, bhakti and mental focus. Maharaj and Swami are present in the *murtis* and we have to offer bhakti to them. This is the way to continue.”

Devotees viewed all the proceedings in the *sabha* marquee via a live broadcast.

PRIME MINISTER OF CANADA JUSTIN TRUDEAU MEETS MAHANT SWAMI MAHARAJ

28 June

The Right Honourable Justin Trudeau, Prime Minister of Canada, visited the BAPS Mandir in Toronto.

The prime minister was received by swamis and the board of directors of BAPS before



Canada Day celebration in the presence of Swamishri, 1 July

meeting Swamishri, who welcomed and honoured him with a garland.

Swamishri also ceremoniously tied a *nadachhadi* around the prime minister's wrist and presented four extra *nadachhadis* with heartfelt prayers for the well-being and happiness of his family.

Prior to their meeting, Mahant Swami Maharaj had inscribed personal blessings in a special copy of the Satsang Diksha shastra containing the text in Gujarati, Sanskrit, English and French, which he then presented as a heartfelt gift to the prime minister. Swamishri also presented the Satsang Diksha shastra in the form of a traditional manuscript.

During their conversation, Swamishri and the prime minister shared their thoughts and insights, fostering a harmonious exchange of ideas.

Swamishri also gifted the prime minister a copy of *In Love, At Ease*, which beautifully encapsulates the life and teachings of Pramukh Swami Maharaj.

Embracing the sacred atmosphere, the prime minister then took part in the *abhishek* ritual of Shri Nilkanth Varni with prayers for the prosperity and well-being of all Canadians.

The prime minister then proceeded to the haveli, where he met senior volunteers representing

BAPS centres from throughout Canada.

In the assembly hall, the prime minister was received with joy and rousing applause from dedicated BAPS volunteers, esteemed community leaders and BAPS swamis.

Addressing the gathering, Prime Minister Trudeau said, "Thank you to the BAPS Mandir community for welcoming me here today. It's an honour to meet His Holiness Mahant Swami Maharaj once again and for him to be here in Canada for the 50th anniversary of BAPS in Canada.

"For 50 years, this community has been an incredibly important part of the GTA and of the Canadian family. You are devoted to the ideas of peace, charity, prosperity. These are values that we all care for from coast to coast. These are values that the government brings to work every single day.

"I'm here to say thank you. Thank you to all of you for 50 years of extraordinary service. And when I say thank you, I don't just mean thank you to BAPS for having been such a source of resources, of community and solace for the Hindu community; but I say thank you on behalf of 40 million Canadians, who have seen their

lives deeply enriched not just by the hard work and prosperity built by this community but by the richness of culture, of history, of stories, of celebrations. In so many ways, this community contributes beyond its community to the everyday lives of Canadians.

“As I spoke with His Holiness earlier, he emphasized the heart of his teachings, the heart of this community’s teaching, which is around unity. We all know that unity, real unity, is easy when everyone looks the same and thinks the same, but it is so much more powerful when we are united across differences, aligned on building a stronger future for everyone, aligned in rolling up our sleeves and doing the hard work even when times are tough, especially when times are tough.

“Thank you for 50 years of commitment to this country and commitment to the values that drive us all forward.”

CANADA DAY

1 July

After morning puja, Swamishri performed the Vedic *murti-pratishtha* rituals of the *murtis* for the BAPS Swaminarayan Mandirs in Brandon, Manitoba, and Calgary, Alberta.

In the evening, Swamishri joined the Canada Day celebration, marking Canada’s 156th Independence Day.

In the Akshar Jharukho, Swamishri performed the evening *arti* and from there he watched the celebration fireworks show.

DIKSHA DIN AND RAJIPO DIN

2 July

In the morning, Swamishri gave *parshad diksha* to two *sadhaks* – Snehalbhai – Aniruddha Bhagat and Akashbhai – Shukdev Bhagat.

The evening assembly was presented by *balaks*, based on the theme ‘Rajipo: The Happiest Garden on Earth’. Before Swamishri’s arrival in the assembly, *balaks* presented their favourite stories of how Mahant Swami Maharaj pleased Yogiji



The newly initiated *parshads* with Swamishri, 2 July

Maharaj and gained his *rajipo*.

Also, stories of how *balikas* endeavour to please Swamishri by observing *niyams*, fasting, memorizing shastras and in other ways.

Thereafter, Pujya Tyagvallabh Swami recalled how Yogiji Maharaj used to conduct *bal sabhas*.

Then, Krishnaprem Swami spoke about how Mahant Swami Maharaj fulfils the role of a mother, father and friend for all children.

After Swamishri arrived in the assembly, Pierre Poilievre, Leader of the Opposition of Canada, was welcomed and honoured. He then addressed the assembly, “This mandir is built with 24,000 pieces of stone, some as small as 100g and some as big as three tonnes. None of them are held together with structural steel. But the most important part is the keystone. The one keystone that holds it all together, that absorbs all of the pressure of all the stones in one place. You are that keystone.”

Then, *balaks* in flower costumes began their presentation. They said that Swamishri is the chief gardener who nourishes them with compost, water and sunlight so that they flourish. In the same way, he nurtures all children to grow spiritually and academically by guiding them on what to do and avoid. Then, the *balaks* asked questions to Swamishri.

Q: Why should kusang be avoided?

Swamishri: We do satsang, but *kusang* takes you away from God. Your mind becomes spoilt, your studies suffer and it causes strife in your family. Thus, Swamishri urged children to avoid



Devotees seated during the Guru Purnima assembly, 3 July



Swamishri honoured with a garland, 3 July

bad company, including bad books, TV, video games, social media’.

Q: How to focus on studies?

Swamishri: First, understand the importance and necessity of studies. Studies nurture and enable us to progress in life. While *kusang* leads to our downfall.

Q: Bhakti to God energizes. What is the benefit of bhakti?

Swamishri: Bhakti takes you closer to God, who can solve all your problems.

In this way, Swamishri guided the children on how to progress in their devotion to God, studies and in life.

GURU PURNIMA

3 July

During Swamishri’s morning puja, swamis sang bhajans about the glory and saintly virtues of the Gunatit gurus.

The evening Guru Purnima assembly was based on the role of the Aksharbrahma Gunatit Guru in one’s spiritual development.

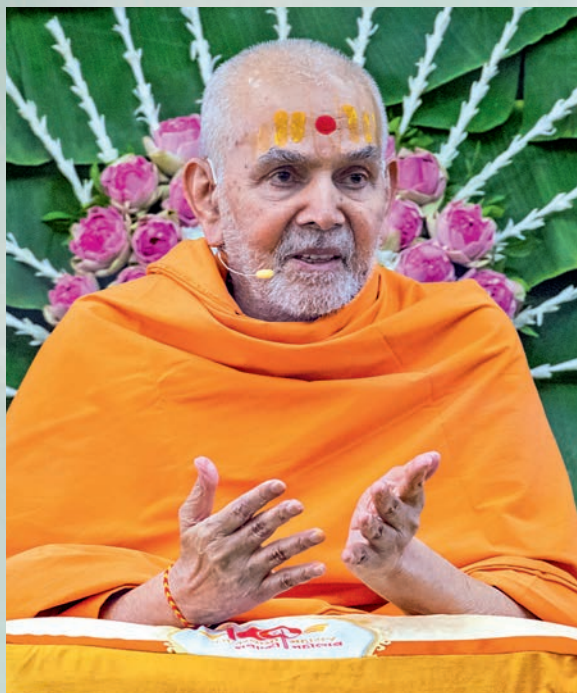
Interspersed with videos, skits and dances, swamis spoke about the Aksharbrahma guru.

Narayanmuni Swami spoke on the glory of

Guru Purnima and the Aksharbrahma guru. Shrutiprakash Swami narrated how the guru enables one to overcome the fear of death and live a joyous, spiritual life. Vivekjivan Swami described how the guru facilitates life transformations by removing people’s vices and flaws. Jnanvatsal Swami explained how the guru enables one to become spiritually fulfilled. Bhadrash Swami elaborated on the glory of the Gunatit guru as described in the shastras and the qualities of such a guru. Pujya Tyagvallabh Swami shared his own experiences of his gurus and how they have enabled him to enjoy the bliss of God.

Swamishri was honoured with a variety of garlands, and then he blessed the assembly, “To become happy, one must obey the guru. The gurus we have attained – Shastriji Maharaj, Yogiji Maharaj, Pramukh Swami Maharaj – are genuine and they will lead us to the *brahmic* state. They are genuine, that is, they are God-realized. They are like God. So, always remain joyous in the *prapti* of such a guru.” ♦

(Compiled by Sadhu Amrutvijaydas using baps.org news articles and translated extracts from Brahmavatsal Swami’s Gujarati reports of Mahant Swami Maharaj’s vicharan.)



In Vachanamrut Gadhada I 16, Bhagwan Swaminarayan states that the characteristic of a devotee with true discretion (*vivek*) is, “A wise devotee of God who can discern between *sat* and *asat* identifies the flaws within himself and thoughtfully eradicates them. He also rejects any apparent flaws he perceives in the Sant or a *satsangi* and imbibes only their virtues.”

This is the attitude that all the Gunatit gurus have embodied, endorsed and encouraged. In *satsang* parlance, such virtue finding is known as *gun grahan*. In essence, *gun grahan* is the act of recognizing and appreciating positive qualities or virtues in others. It involves actively seeking out and acknowledging the strengths, talents, and admirable characteristics in individuals, with the intention of learning from them and being inspired by their positive attributes. Virtue finding is a valuable practice that promotes a positive, open mindset. It enables one to gain inspiration and learn valuable lessons that ultimately contribute to one’s own character development and personal growth.

Yogiji Maharaj especially highlighted this

Encouraging Virtue Finding

fundamental attitude, since it was the key to ridding oneself of unjustified biases and unlocking one’s own true potential.

Mahant Swami Maharaj, too, places great emphasis on this essential mindset by himself engaging in and encouraging others to adopt this attitude. He repeatedly highlights the necessity to shun the negative and learn from the positives in others.

23 JULY 2017, TORONTO

Daily, after Swamishri’s breakfast, swamis presented the virtues of other swamis. Today, Swamishri listened and then said, “It is rare to find such saints. It is good that you all look for the positives in others.”

Then, after returning to his room, Swamishri said to the attendants, “After listening to these virtues, you should introspect on whether you possess that virtue. Otherwise, the process remains incomplete. If you introspect, you’ll attain the virtues.”

Thus, Swamishri taught the correct way to engage in *gun grahan*: first, identify the virtues in others and then introspect to imbibe them in one’s own life.

3 DECEMBER 2017, JAIPUR

After breakfast, Swamishri said to an attendant swami who was taking the hand towel from him, “Where’s my food?” Nobody understood what Swamishri wanted.

Everyone was bemused. Again, Swamishri said, “Where’s my food?” Still, nobody understood. Swamishri said, “Do you not understand?” Then, after a brief pause, he said, “*Gun grahan*.”

As per the routine, Swamishri wanted his daily dose of *gun grahan*, which was daily served by the swami to Swamishri after his breakfast.

The swamis then fulfilled his request by presenting the virtues of various swamis.

20 DECEMBER 2017, SURENDRANAGAR

After breakfast, an attendant swami told Swamishri, “The *gun grahan* of all the resident swamis here has been completed.”

Hence, Swamishri reluctantly stood up and while walking to his room, said, with a tone of disappointment, “The daily serving of *gun grahan* had been stalled. So, today is a fast then.”

Munichintan Swami said, “We will not let that happen.” Then, he introduced two *sadhaks* who had undertaken special fasts and highlighted their other notable services.

To Swamishri, absence of *gun grahan* is like observing a fast.

15 FEBRUARY 2017, IN FLIGHT FROM AHMEDABAD TO PUNE

Swamishri was engrossed in his letter correspondence. He read a letter from the students of the BAPS Swaminarayan Sanskrit Mahavidyalaya in Sarangpur. The students had prepared a diary with each student noting the good qualities of their classmates. They wished that Swamishri write three lines of blessings to complete their diary. Swamishri was so pleased by their diary that he in fact wrote three pages of blessings. The following is a translation of selected portions.

“Maharaj has said, ‘Even if one does not serve me, but if they promote the virtues of my devotees, I am extremely pleased.’ We have to do what pleases Maharaj. So, why do anything that displeases him? What is the need to highlight *avguns*? Do not engage in loss-making activities. He has also said, ‘Even if one has the grace of Bhagwan and his holy sadhu, if one engages in taking the *avgun* of devotees, then one will

not attain Dham.’ So, taking *avguns* results in loss. Not just zero, but negative. So, think and develop the correct understanding.” – Loving Jai Swaminarayan from Sadhu Keshavjivandas.

25 JANUARY 2017, SARANGPUR

When Swamishri arrived for darshan at the *roopchoki* in the passage behind the *garbhagruh*, swamis recited a phrase spoken by Yogiji Maharaj, “Is attaining a raised seat greatness? No. Not to take anyone’s *avgun* and to experience inner peace is greatness.”

Swamishri was pleased and gestured that they repeat it. After repeating it, the swamis asked, “Are you pleased by this?”

Swamishri said, “Very much.”

Swamishri keenly roots out negative attitudes to lay the ground for positive qualities.

26 JULY 2017, TORONTO

In the evening Bal Din assembly, Swamishri spoke about maintaining *samp* – unity. The children declared unanimously that they would keep unity.

Then, the children asked, “What will you gift to us?” Swamishri raised a board on which he had written ‘Akshardham’. The *balaks* responded with resounding applause. One *balak* asked, “Swami, if we remain united, will you take us to Akshardham?” Swamishri said, “In addition to *samp*, if you do not take *abhav-avgun*, then Akshardham is guaranteed.”

So, Swamishri gave a foundational lesson to all the children to develop unity and avoid *abhav-avgun*.

27 JUNE 2017, ATLANTA

During the Yuva Shibir, Swamishri was asked, “We know that we should not engage in taking *abahv-avgun*, but when we interact with each other, faults are noticed. Then, how can we accept everyone as divine from within?”

Swamishri replied, “As long as one is

(primarily) body-conscious, *abhav-avgun* will be taken. But, keep a positive outlook and resolve not to take *abhav-avgun*. If you can do this, it is good. But do not just carelessly say that *abhav-avgun* is taken naturally. This argument does not hold in satsang. You must firmly and finally resolve not to engage in *abhav-avgun*. This is the way to please Maharaj and Swami. They are going to grant *moksha*, so if you do it their way there will be no problems.”

10 OCTOBER 2022, NEW DELHI

Atmaswarup Swami informed Swamishri about the resolve by a devotee from London not to engage in taking *abhav-avgun* and keep *divyabhav* towards everyone.

Swamishri blessed the devotee and said, “Now, make others do the same. That is a great task. But, in satsang, people continue to take *abhav-avgun*. However, true satsang is to not take *abhav-avgun*.”

3 DECEMBER 2020, NENPUR

For a forthcoming Bal-Balika Shibir in Canada, a video was recorded while Swamishri answered some questions. This is one of the questions asked.

Q: What did Pramukh Swami Maharaj like and what did he dislike?

Swamishri: He liked to do selfless service. And he placed a big cross on *abhav-avgun*. He did not like *abhav-avgun* in the slightest.

19 MARCH 2021, NENPUR

Swamishri said, “If a few grains of sugar are placed on a pile of sand, an ant will find the sugar and ignore the sand. Similarly, we have to engage in *gun grahan* only. Discard the rest.”

Swamishri asked the swamis and *sadhaks*, “Do you understand?” Then, he added, “Our *sampradaya* is itself based on *gun grahan*. Still, people engage in taking *avguns*.”

Then, Swamishri revealed the source of this thought. While Swamishri ate breakfast, from the window he would see that four ducks and

ten ducklings came daily to graze in the lawn. Swamishri said, “The ducks take what they need from the lawn and leave the rest. How sharp their vision must be! They quickly take what they need. Similarly, we should gather everyone’s virtues.”

13 SEPTEMBER 2020, NENPUR

Today was *ekadashi*, so after puja, Swamishri engaged in a discussion with the swamis. Swamishri said, “If the entire satsang continually engaged in *gun grahan*, there would be so much joy. It would fill our *pattars* with the best items – dharma, *jnan*, *vairagya*, bhakti, *nirdosh buddhi* and everything else.”

A little later, Swamishri said, “One person said to me ‘Why should we praise without reason?’ So, I said to him, ‘Why should you take *avgun* with reason?’”

Everyone smiled and commended, “You gave a totally logical and appropriate response.”

Swamishri said, “Even in praising without reason, the scientists say there is benefit. Even the Pope says so.”

Then, Swamishri gestured to the attendant swamis to recall the words of Pope Francis. Uttamyogi Swami read, “Pope Francis warns that gossiping is a worse plague than the coronavirus.”

Swamishri reinforced, “That is a very telling and powerful statement.” Then, he added, “Taking *avgun* even once is such that it sets back even those who routinely engage in *gun grahan*. It sneaks in like a virus.”

Swamishri covered his ears with his hands and said, “Yogi Bapa used to close his ears like this to such talks. Gunatitanand Swami, Bhagatji Maharaj and all the Gunatit gurus have placed a big cross on *abhav-avgun*. But people are so used to such talks that they do not realize they have become infected.” ♦



Question Time with PRAMUKH SWAMI MAHARAJ

On 25 August 1978, *balaks* of Ahmedabad had a Q & A with Swamishri.

Q: Bapa! What do you like to eat?

Swamishri: Whatever is offered to [Shriji] Maharaj.

Q: Swami! Where is your Akshardham? Can we play there?

Swamishri: You have not asked the question properly. It should be 'Where is Shriji Maharaj's Akshardham?'

In this way, Swamishri ensured that even the *balaks* got the correct philosophical understanding. Then, he continued.

Swamishri: Maharaj's Akshardham is Gunatit. There, everyone is engrossed in Maharaj's darshan. There is nothing else to play there. Since you come to the *bal mandal*, believe that you are already seated in Akshardham. When you focus on Maharaj's *murti*, you will not have thoughts of playing.

Q: Bapa! What inspired you to become a sadhu?

Swamishri: By listening to Shastriji Maharaj's talks I was inspired to become a sadhu.

Q: Why does everyone call you 'Bapa'?

Swamishri: Due to the blessings of Yogiji Maharaj, everyone says 'Bapa'.

Q: Behind Bhagwan's *murti* we see a *chakra*. God resides in you, but why is there no *chakra* behind you?

Swamishri: I am a *sevak*, so you cannot see the *chakra*. Bhagwan is all-powerful, so he shows it. We should all become *sevaks*. Not Bhagwan.

* * *

On the morning of 3 June 1981, Swamishri interacted with some swamis and *parshads*.

Q: Swami! In your discourses, you talk a lot about *ishak* (passion). For what should we have *ishak*? And is it in our hands or your hands to maintain that *ishak*?

Swamishri: You should have *ishak* for attaining God and *ekantik* dharma. One must develop such total *ishak* for oneself. I may talk a lot about it, but if you do not develop *ishak*, nothing is attained.

Q: In the Vachanamrut, Maharaj has stated that profound affection for the Satpurush is the means to *atmadarshan*. How can such profound affection be developed and increased?

Swamishri: If one believes it is in one's self-interest then profound affection will increase. The self-interest is that one's *atma* benefits and attains *moksha*.

Q: Is there a technique so that one never encounters worries in life?

Swamishri: Turmoil and hardships will come. Develop the resilience to overcome them. With understanding, they can be resolved. If you develop the knowledge of *atma* and Paramatma, worries will not affect you. Such understanding should be attained from the Satpurush. Worries cannot be overcome by one's own way of thinking. Bhagwan and his holy sadhu remove one's worries.

Q: What is meant by 'Believe the Satpurush to be one's own form'?

Swamishri: Doing as he says is truly believing him to be one's form. At present, one's does as per the wishes of one's mind and body. When one believes what the Satpurush says, that is truly believing him to be one's form.

Q: There are many things to understand about Bhagwan. Please explain the essentials in brief.

Swamishri: The Kathis would say to Shriji Maharaj, 'We are yours and you are ours.' And Shriji Maharaj would say, 'Yes, in the end, this is what you must understand.' One night, Bhavan Thakkar said to Gunatitanand Swami, 'Swami! I am yours.' Ultimately, after all our studies and reading, this is what one has to understand: 'Bhagwan is ours and we are Bhagwan's.'

* * *

On 4 June 1981, in the evening assembly, swamis asked Swamishri some questions about his life.

Q: Which is your favourite flower?

Swamishri: I like whatever is offered to Maharaj, but like roses and *mogra* the most.

Q: Which fruits do you like?

Swamishri: Not too keen on them, but whatever is offered to Thakorji.

Q: Tell us a memorable incident from your life.

Swamishri: Meeting Shastriji Maharaj is the most memorable occasion. Also, he initiated me as a sadhu and gave this opportunity to serve. The chance of serving in Shastriji Maharaj's time, Yogiji Maharaj's Amrut Mahotsav and the Bhadra *murti-pratishtha* are also memorable.

Q: What can we do to please you?

Swamishri: Sincerely practice the path of saintliness and spread the *upasana* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan as promoted by Shastriji Maharaj to as many people as possible. Enhance the work of Shastriji Maharaj and Yogiji Maharaj. The main task is to practice *sadhuta*.

* * *

On 8 and 9 April 1983, swamis asked Swamishri the following.

Q: Swami! When we meet people and they ask, 'Have you seen God?' What should we reply?

Swamishri: 'Yes, I have seen him.' Say this with total confidence. As per Vachanamrut Vartal 11, Yogiji Maharaj is our *atma*. Outwardly, he appears to be a sadhu, but God resides in every part of his body. So, there is no difference between Maharaj and him.

Q: In Vartal 5, Maharaj talks about offering 'equal service'?

Swamishri: 'The Satpurush is like God.' Believe this, observe his *maryada*, serve him and obey his wishes. That is equal service. It is not enough just to outwardly offer adornments.

Q: When does one feel that one has offered heartfelt prayers?

Swamishri: When one is not affected whether the Satpurush calls one or not, whether he showers affection or does not, whether he praises or does not, then know that one's prayers are heartfelt.

Q: Is the Satpurush eternally God-realized, or does he become like that on becoming the guru? In 1977, when asked, ‘When did you attain *sakshatkar*?’, you said, ‘When I met Shastriji Maharaj.’ So, did you have *sakshatkar* before then or not?

Swamishri: The Satpurush is eternally God-realized. But he acts as per the ways of this world. He keeps his guru at the forefront. Even Shriji Maharaj accepted Ramanand Swami as his guru.

* * *

On the morning of 28 October 1985, during the Gunatitanand Swami Bicentenary Celebrations, Pramukh Swami Maharaj was interviewed by Anandswarup Swami.

Q: What is the greatest benefit of grand celebrations like this?

Swamishri: Such celebrations strengthen and inspire spirituality, culture and traditions in people. For devotees of the Sampradaya, they provide an opportunity to serve and enhance their devotion. This celebration had revealed to millions that Gunatitanand Swami is the abode of Shriji Maharaj.

Q: Generally, today, youths are not interested in religion. Yet, in this Sanstha, youths offer dedicated service. What is the reason for this?

Swamishri: Because this Sanstha has been blessed by saintly and austere sadhus like Shastriji Maharaj and Yogiji Maharaj. They were fully dedicated. Very few people are able to live their entire lives in the service of God. Shastriji Maharaj and Yogiji Maharaj offered such selfless services for God. That is why others are inspired to serve.

Q: Materialism is increasing in leaps and bounds. In this scenario, what is the Sanstha’s future?

Swamishri: No matter how much materialism continues to increase, the ultimate truth will always prevail. So, there is no need to feel disheartened. This Sanstha’s future is bright since it is built on the sturdy foundations of Shastriji

Maharaj’s and Yogiji Maharaj’s noble characters. The underlying *upasana* (doctrine) is solid and the lives of the gurus are exemplary and inspiring, so there will be no problems.

Q: Do you have any message?

Swamishri: The Gunatitanand Swami Bicentenary Celebrations have been a grand success, but now the task is to ‘Become *aksharrup* and serve Purushottam’. Understand that ‘I am not the body, I am the *atma*’. Imbibe these messages. We must continue with unity and a common purpose. Be affectionate and supportive to all. Let go of one’s material attachments, and cooperate with all to promote the knowledge of Akshar-Purushottam, and please Shastriji Maharaj and Yogiji Maharaj.

Endeavour on the basis of our gurus’ wishes, so that we progress together. Encourage everyone so that all become more enthusiastic. Unity should not be compromised. Remain firm in our *nishtha* and understanding. Our life should be such that God is pleased.

These answers reflected Swamishri’s life and sentiments.

* * *

On 19 October 1993, youths asked Swamishri some questions as part of the Yuva Din assembly.

Q: What thought will relieve us from financial, familial, social and spiritual tensions?

Swamishri: Believe that you are *atma* and whatever God does is for your benefit.

Q: How can *karyakars* always remain motivated?

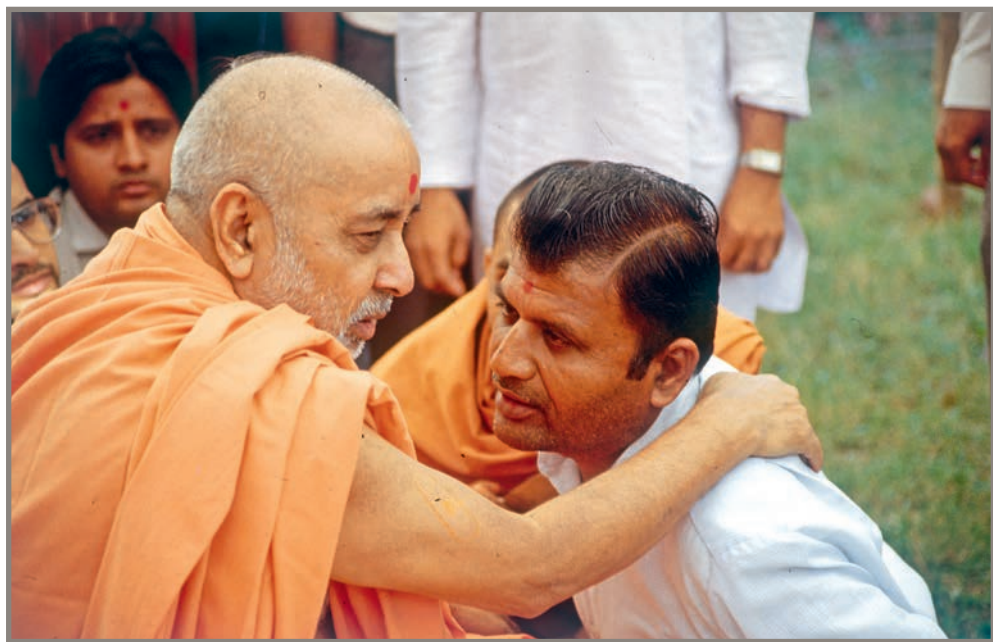
Swamishri: By developing *atmabuddhi* with the Satpurush and thinking of the glory of satsang.

Q: Life is short. So, what is the benefit of spending one’s time helping others?

Swamishri: Because, ‘In the joy of others lies our own.’ ♦

GURU PUJAN...

Connecting with God



A GURU PURIFIES

Brahmaswarup Yogiji Maharaj used to explain the meaning of the word ‘guru’ as a person who removes inner ignorance with the divine light of true knowledge. His explanation style was delightfully simple and full of amusing, meaningful stories. What is the effect of a real guru? He often narrated this story to explain:

Two brothers lived in a small town. The elder brother regularly pilgrimaged to Kashi, Kedarnath, Dwarika and others sacred sites, while the younger one was busy in farming and other chores at home. Once, the elder brother insisted that the younger one join him on the pilgrimage. The younger brother said, “Dear brother, during this time there is a guru in our town who is doing a *parayan* on the Shrimad Bhagvat. As I am an active participant in it, let me get his permission.” The elder brother agreed.

The next day, the younger brother came back with a *tumbdi* (unprocessed dried bitter gourd used for making drinking vessels). He told his brother, “Guruji has said that you take this *tumbdi* as my representative on your pilgrimage. Moreover, on my behalf at every sacred site place it at the feet of the *murtis*, and dip it in all holy rivers. I will consider this as my pilgrimage.” Agreeing, the elder brother sincerely took it to all the sacred places and rivers and sanctified it. After a few months when he returned home, everybody celebrated his pilgrimage and invited him to their homes for lunch and dinner, which is considered auspicious. When his turn came, the younger brother prepared a tasty menu of *dudhpak* and *puri*. In addition, he had cut the sanctified *tumbdi* and filled it with cold water for drinking. After finishing his meal, the elder brother drank some water from the *tumbdi*, and immediately threw

it up. It was extremely bitter. He screamed at his younger brother, who apologized and said, “I gave it in that *tumbdi* because I thought it was sanctified, having done a grand pilgrimage of many holy places and rivers.”

A month later, the younger brother again invited his elder brother for lunch. The lunch was even more delicious and he filled water in the same *tumbdi*. After the sumptuous lunch, the elder brother saw the *tumbdi* suspiciously. He scolded his younger brother for playing such mischief. However, the younger brother insisted on him to drink water from that vessel. Once the elder brother drank it, he was amazed at the sweetness of the water. It was satiating. He inquired, “What happened with the *tumbdi*? Younger brother explained, “The *tumbdi* was processed by my guruji who removed its bitter nature, dried it in the sun and polished it. Due to his contact, the inside is no longer bitter and so the water tastes like nectar.”

From this interesting story, Yogiji Maharaj used to explain that the *tumbdi*, even after being sanctified during the pilgrimage, was still bitter on the inside; but after its association with the guruji, it became sweet. Similarly, our inner conscience and souls remain maligned with the bitterness of ego, greed, lust, envy and other mundane matters. Without removing this inner bitterness, we are not able to experience the eternal pleasure of God and peace on this earth. Who can purify us within? A living God-realized guru, who is spiritually pure.

SANATAN HINDU DHARMA: GURU TRADITION

India has been blessed with pure, spiritually accomplished gurus since ancient times. They were masters of the ancient schooling system known as ‘gurukuls’, which were residential schools where rishis or gurus taught and trained young students until they were 25 years old. In addition to spiritual and philosophical matters from the Vedas, Purans, Upanishads, Ramayan, Mahabharat and other shastras, the gurus also

taught subjects and skills such as medicine, arts, culture, archery, wrestling, and chariot and horse riding.

The most revered of these ancient gurus is Veda Vyas. His contributions to Sanatan Hindu Dharma are immeasurable. He divided the timeless Vedas into four groups, wrote the Mahabharat – which even today is the world’s longest epic poem (100,000 verses), and composed the 18 Purans. His birthday falls on Ashadh *sud* Purnima and is celebrated by Hindus as Guru Purnima. On this day, devotees honour their gurus to express their gratitude for his guidance, inspiration and blessings, and for leading them closer to divinity, and connecting them to God.

In recent times, Pramukh Swami Maharaj was one such guru, who freed youths from the whirlpool of infatuation and connected them with divinity and eternal bliss. Without concern for his own faltering health, Pramukh Swami Maharaj selflessly endeavoured to bring people closer to God and spirituality. He was a saintly person who removed people’s flaws to purify them and connect them to God.

I am fortunate to have had a personal connection with Pramukh Swami Maharaj, who perennially guided my twin brother and other members of our family. Pramukh Swami Maharaj’s guidance helped us to proceed on the path of spiritual perfection and reach higher goals. The following incidents demonstrate how Pramukh Swami Maharaj has shaped my life.

INSPIRING PURITY

During our summer vacation in May 1972, I went with a group of 15 youths from Mumbai to Gana, a small town near Anand, Gujarat, to attend a *parayan* in the presence of Pramukh Swam Maharaj. The food served there was rustic and unpalatable for us. Therefore, one morning, we all travelled to Anand, ate lunch at a restaurant and returned in the afternoon. When we alighted

from the bus, Pramukh Swami Maharaj saw us, as the stop was just opposite the makeshift tent where the *parayan* was being conducted.

He called us in the evening and inquired, “Where were in the morning?” We told him frankly about the bad food and that we had gone to Anand for lunch. He showed his displeasure and said, “You should have told me. I would have arranged something here. You should not eat out. The food is made in unhygienic conditions and you may become sick. I request you to stop eating in restaurants.” We apologized and asked for atonement. Then, he inquired about whether we watched movies and engaged in other pastimes. Everyone spoke about whatever they did. He told us to stop watching movies, explaining that they were mostly worthless stories that arouse bad passions, waste time and spoil the mind. His style of explaining was full of love and affection; simple, yet divine. His persuasion was pleasing and godly. We readily accepted his wish and felt closer to God.

A REAL GURU

I was in Sarangpur in the winter of 1974. One morning, after darshan in the main mandir, Pramukh Swami Maharaj was walking towards Shastriji Maharaj’s memorial spot where his last rites had been performed. I and others were walking along with him. A lovely rendition of a kirtan by Yogicharan Swami was playing on the loudspeaker. The kirtan lyrics conveyed these sentiments:

“I have met a guru full of divine virtues, Yes, I have met a guru full of divine virtues,

(My soul) is full of (worldly) garbage, covered with dirty cobwebs,

With the saint’s grace everything improved (the garbage was removed) and the rusty locks (of my heart) were opened (to visualize divinity in the guru).”

Swamiji turned towards me and asked, “Have you met such a guru?” I replied, “Yes! He is right

in front of me.” Swamiji smiled and nodded. Then he asked me again, “Do you understand the words of the kirtan?” I did not understand them fully. Then, he explained, “We have met a real guru (Gunatit Sant) who will remove all the dirt of our mind and soul, cleanse us and connect us with God and his divine blissful realm. Rest assured.” The sun was shining on his beautiful divine face and revealing the Divine in him. I was being connected to God through my guru.

STRENGTHENING SPIRITUALITY

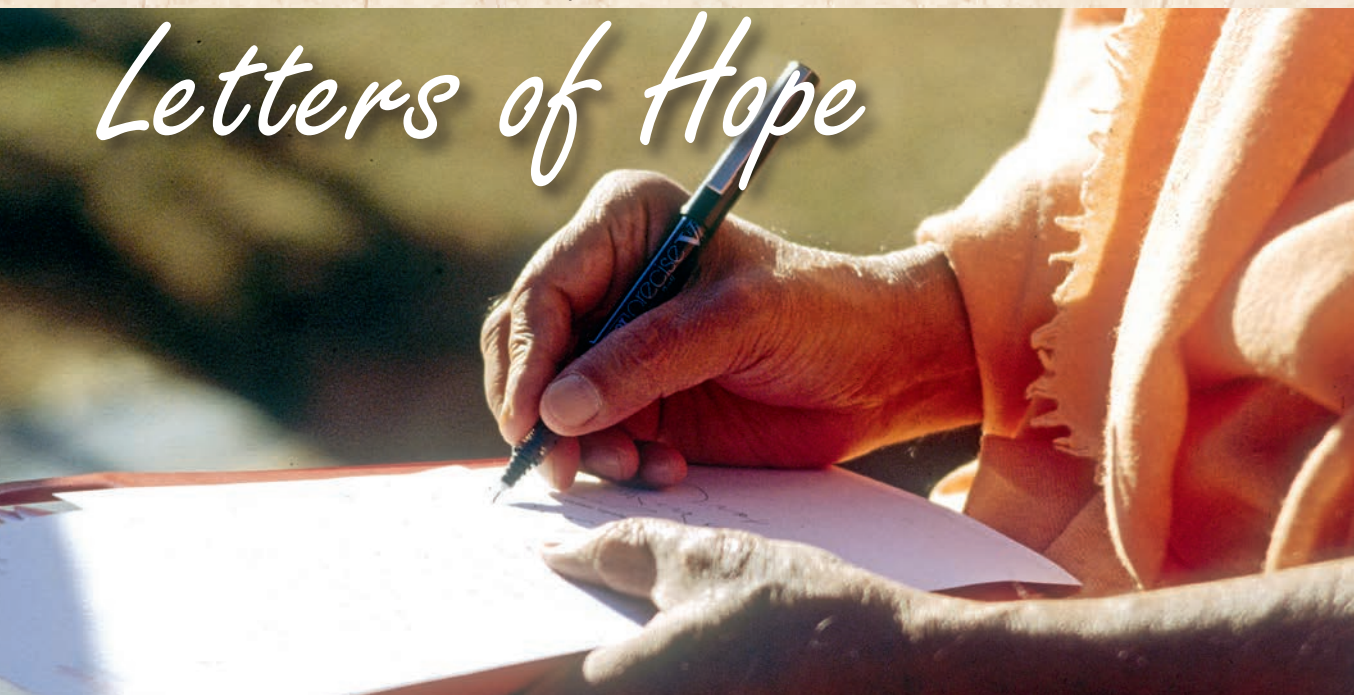
Mahant Swami Maharaj, our present guru, is continuing the same duty of bringing everyone closer to God to experience his blissful realm. In 1972–73, we youngsters used to sit with Mahant Swami, who then resided at Akshar Bhuvan in Dadar, Mumbai. He would impart his knowledge and experience, which he had accumulated under the loving care of Brahmaswarup Yogiji Maharaj, through witty stories. He encouraged Niranbhai (Anandswarup Swami) and Yogeshbhai (Narayanmuni Swami) to become sadhus. Sometimes he used to write lengthy letters in the middle of the night, explaining the blissful path of *brahmavidya* as the only goal of our human life. His love and affection overflowed into our hearts. Under his guidance, our spirituality was strengthened.

ALL YEAR ROUND

We are all blessed to have such gurus who patiently, lovingly and selflessly guide us on this challenging path of spirituality and help us to connect with God.

For us, Guru Purnima is not just an annual celebration. It is a perennial celebration, since we have a living guru who goes out of his way to develop our spirituality and bonds with God. So, we must offer guru *pujan* daily by endeavouring to uphold all his wishes and commands. This will cleanse our soul and connect us to the lotus feet of Bhagwan Swaminarayan. ♦

Letters of Hope



Pramukh Swami Maharaj's written words were not elegant or long, his sentences were sometimes grammatically incorrect, and his handwriting was not always legible. Yet, those words penetrated countless hearts, and enabled him to embrace so many individuals. During his lifetime, Swamishri read and wrote over 700,000 letters, devoting an average of two hours a day to counsel and console through his pen. He had a genuine concern for every person.

Once, Swamishri had just finished going through a tall pile of letters and drafted a reply to every one of them, when someone placed another pile of letters in front of him. But one of the swamis insisted, "Swamishri, please leave them for another day. You look tired." Swamishri countered, "How can we disrespect these letters? Think of the people who have written them. They must be eagerly awaiting a reply. To us, their questions may seem trivial, but to them, they are of immense importance. I will have to answer them tomorrow anyway. So, I might as well continue."

He never saw his correspondence duty as a burden. On the contrary, he regarded it as his

way of serving the devotees. Such was his energy and enthusiasm. He was probed once as to what he preferred the most: reading or writing letters, to which he replied, "I like both equally."

Moreover, no letter was too long for him. Once, he received a letter 72 pages long, which he started reading during a car journey of almost five hours from Mumbai to Amalsad in Gujarat. By the end of the ride, there were still many pages left, so he continued with the letter during the assembly, until he finished it. Straight after the assembly, he wrote a reply. He believed in resolving the problems of devotees as swiftly as he could.

On one occasion in Mumbai, as he was getting into a car, a devotee hastily handed Swamishri a letter. He read the note while travelling and wished to write an immediate reply but had no letter pad. So, he asked another swami to tear a page from his diary and penned a reply on that, while the driver was navigating through the busy Mumbai traffic. As soon as he returned from his trip, he arranged for the note to be delivered to the devotee. Such was his passion and precision in getting the job done.

(Cont. on p. 57)

My Guru's Words



When it comes to managing our day-to-day interactions with one another, most of us can often be described as complicated. We all have within us an enormous capacity for humility, kindness, goodness, courage, generosity, kinship and friendship. And at the very same time, in the very same mind, body, and spirit, we all have the capacity for arrogance, anger, envy, indifference, selfishness and greed. In navigating our personal relationships, sometimes we are deliberate and thoughtful, and sometimes we are impulsive. Sometimes we are easily angered, and sometimes we are calm. Sometimes we care about the impact we have on others, and sometimes we care less. Sometimes we see the virtue in our family, friends, co-workers and neighbours, and sometimes we drown in hostility towards them. Sometimes we are truthful, and sometimes we are a bed of lies. Sometimes we are optimistic about our relationships, and sometimes we feel hopeless.

I doubt it is an exaggeration to say that on most days, most of us are genuinely trying to land on the right side of these internal conflicts. Most

of us likely lean towards, as the often-invoked expression declares, summoning our better angels. However, it is also not likely an exaggeration to say that most of the time, even with the best of intentions, we fail. Our minds are a battlefield. The good and the bad inside of us fight every day to see which will claim victory over the other. Our darker impulses frequently overwhelm us.

My mind wrestles with personal conflict as all of our minds do. There are (many) times when my temper gets the better of me; times when I'm agitated by the faintest of slights, even if they are unintended; times when I allow small differences to become intractable grievances; times when I criticize instead of lending support; and times when my own fears and insecurities twist my mind to see illusions as reality.

In navigating these sometimes immensely difficult internal challenges, in trying anxiously to do right by those around me, and in pledging to heal not hurt, these are the words that, in my life, have made the difference between love and hate, unity and division, understanding and anger, patience and intolerance:

*In the joy of others lies our own,
In the progress of others rests our own,
In the good of others lies our own,
Know this to be the key to happiness.*

These are the soothing words of my guru, Pramukh Swami Maharaj, whose life was defined by faith, forgiveness, empathy, harmony, love, and selflessness. Pramukh Swami Maharaj was the fifth spiritual successor to Bhagwan Swaminarayan, in whom his faith was absolute, pure, unbounded and unshakable. And Pramukh Swami Maharaj shared his faith with us, in every moment, in every encounter, in every conversation, in every letter he wrote and in every word he spoke.

Pramukh Swami Maharaj never once in his life thought of his own wellbeing. His was a life of humility, devoted to service – service of his own gurus, Shastriji Maharaj and Yogiji Maharaj, service of Bhagwan Swaminarayan, and in equal measure, service of all the devotees of BAPS. The inspiring reality is that in the joy of others was his own. He dedicated his life to Bhagwan Swaminarayan and to us. He spared no effort to uplift our lives, our spirits, and our souls in every way that he could. Millions had – and continue to have – deep faith in his divinity.

Despite the vast numbers who reached out to him in a moment of need – both in joy and distress – wherever he was in the world and wherever we were, in that moment of hardship or of cheer, he was only a phone call away, and he would often send a personally handwritten letter with words of blessing and guidance. In every communication and correspondence – whether in person or in writing – Pramukh Swami Maharaj helped to heal those who were suffering and shared in the delight of those who were celebrating. And in all these moments, Pramukh Swami Maharaj asked us to remember that whichever path our lives had taken or will take, we are guided by the loving hand of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and to always keep faith in this understanding.

Pramukh Swami Maharaj's life was the symbol

of peace, humanity, reconciliation, compassion and truth. In the discourses he gave throughout his life, he asked us to embrace these values, helped us to understand that this was the pathway to the joy that we could bring to others, and ultimately, the pathway to our own personal attainment of *moksha*. He did not simply proclaim "In the joy of others lies our own." In every moment of his life, he was the living example of this profound guiding principle.

Despite my faith in and love for Pramukh Swami Maharaj, and despite understanding the fundamental importance of his words, I have found that in many moments of my life it has been challenging to live by my guru's words.

I know that I can be petty, vain, temperamental, impatient, and many other things that any of my family, friends, or colleagues could describe in infinite detail. But I have found that in those moments where I am drawn to my darker instincts, remembering Pramukh Swami Maharaj and remembering the example of his life is an inspiration to do better. And I find this inspiration most powerful in the moments that I spend in our mandir, where I feel Pramukh Swami Maharaj's presence the strongest. As much as I understand Pramukh Swami Maharaj's words, as well as other teachings of our gurus and our God, I know that what is in our heads does not easily make its way into our hearts. I have come to appreciate that their words and the examples of their lives have to be contemplated, reflected upon, nurtured, tended to, reinforced, and experienced in ways that it is only possible to do when I am in my mandir.

My mandir is itself a source of immense personal joy. When I say my mandir, I mean my spiritual home, my sanctuary, and my place of worship, where, upon every visit, my faith and my connection to Pramukh Swami Maharaj and his words are renewed and deepened. From the moment I arrive and catch the first glimpse of the magnificent architectural structure, invoking a connection to our Hindu heritage, culture and history, I am overcome. I know that once I enter, a fulfilment that I can only

find in this one place will surround me. As I step inside, I see our swamis, and as they see me, I am greeted immediately by that very familiar heartfelt warmth and welcoming embrace. When we meet, I feel our connection. We talk.

Over the years, my conversations with our swamis have spanned the full range of my life's experience. When I see them, I am reminded of the many times that they have prayed with me and for me, and I know in my heart that their prayers have made the difference between joy and anguish. Our swamis don't just convey our guru's message, they live by it. They are my connection to Pramukh Swami Maharaj, our present guru Mahant Swami Maharaj, and Bhagwan Swaminarayan. In the mandir, I also see friends, all of whom are on the same spiritual journey and all of whom try every day to live by Pramukh Swami Maharaj's words. And I see the *murtis* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and his spiritual successors. And in that moment, I feel peace.

Pramukh Swami Maharaj's words have so much meaning, in so many different ways and in all the

different contexts of our lives. If we embrace these words in the way that he asked, our impact on the people we love and the people around us has the potential to be exponentially powerful. We can be free of so many of our personal conflicts and petty struggles. These words call upon us, each time we engage one another, to think about how we can heal and unify, not hurt and divide. My own journey on this path is evolving. If I fail to remember Pramukh Swami Maharaj in moments of distress, then I just simply fail. But when I summon thoughts of my guru and his words, I find the inspiration to do what he asked me to do: abandon my anger and embrace patience; discard my petty jealousies and celebrate the victories of others; refuse to turn a blind eye to someone in need and volunteer charity; surrender my grievances and offer forgiveness. And in doing this, I know I have myself experienced joy, I hope that I might have fostered joy in others, and I pray that I brought joy to my beloved gurus Pramukh Swami Maharaj and Mahant Swami Maharaj. ♦

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CHATURMAS NIYAMS

29 June to 23 November 2023



As instructed by Bhagwan Swaminarayan in the Shikshapatri and by the wish of *guruhari* Param Pujya Mahant Swami Maharaj, devotees should undertake extra spiritual observances during the four holy months of Chaturmas. This year, Chaturmas is from 29 June 2023 (Ashadh *sud* 11) to 23 November 2023 (Kartak *sud* 11). To please Bhagwan Swaminarayan, Brahmaswarup Pramukh Swami Maharaj and Pragat Brahmaswarup Mahant Swami Maharaj, the following extra observances should be undertaken:

Reading

The following books should be read throughout the year:

1. Daily read the Vachanamrut & Swamini Vato
2. *Brahmaswarup Pramukh Swami Maharaj Jivan Charitra*, Part 7 & Part 8 (or listen to their audio on the Akshar Amrutam app)
3. Bhagwan Swaminarayan's *Bhaktaratno*, Part 5 & Part 6 (or listen to their audio on the Akshar Amrutam app)

Austerities

- If health permits, observe *dharna-parna*, *chandrayan*, *ektana* or other forms of fasting during the month of Shravan.

Listening-Darshan

- Daily listen or watch 7–10 minutes of Pramukh Swami Maharaj's and Mahant Swami Maharaj's inspiring incidents and blessings through audios or videos.

Devotion

- Daily turn an extra five or more *malas*. Perform extra *dandvats*, *pradakshinas*, etc. as per one's capacity.
- Inspire one friend to join satsang.

Homage to Guru

- Every week, narrate in person or via letter, email or social media, one incident highlighting the virtues of Swamishri to as many relatives and friends as possible.

Family

- Conduct *ghar sabha*: Gather your family to read, listen, have darshan, contemplate and discuss.
- For one year invite the same one family to your *ghar sabha* once a month.
- Inspire one family to start conducting their own *ghar sabha*.

Note: During Chaturmas, devotees should not eat brinjals (eggplants, aubergines), white and red radish, sugarcane and *mogri*.

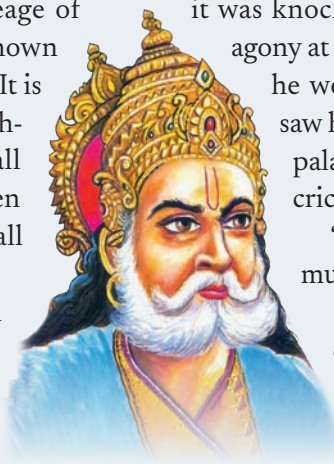
The Mithila Matrix: Is *This* Real or Was *That* Real?

In Vedic times, there lived a lineage of kings who ruled over a region known as Mithila, also known as Videha. It is located in the eastern part of the South-Asian peninsula. Funnily enough, all the kings chose to name their children after themselves, and so they were all called Janak.

One such King Janak was known to hold regular assemblies of scholars and philosophers to discuss spiritual and philosophical topics. He had a deep desire within his heart to discern the real from the unreal. In Hinduism, this notion is known as *vivek* (discretion).

After a long day filled with discussions and lavish meals, Janak retired to bed. Halfway through the night, he awoke to the sound of horns and the beatings of drums. His attendants ran into the room shouting, “Your majesty! The kingdom of Videha is under attack!”

Janak put on his battle attire, prepared his horse and weapons and rode into battle under the night sky. He was captured by the invaders, forced to surrender his kingdom and go into exile in order to protect the people of his kingdom. He obliged and left with nothing. He felt humiliated and weak, travelling around and begging for food, yet being rejected by everyone he came across. Society rejected him, no one wanted anything to do with this begging man. Ravaging with hunger, he came to a shelter which provided food for the poor. When it was finally his turn to get something to fill his hunger, there were only a few scraps of food left. He accepted this, since he couldn’t go another day without food. Just as he was about to put a morsel of food into his mouth,



it was knocked out of his hands. He cried in agony at his own condition. Then, suddenly, he woke up. Janak looked around and saw himself in his luxurious room in his palace, with the lanterns burning and crickets chirping.

“Is *this* real or was *that* real?” he muttered to himself.

Awoken by the noise from his quarters, his attendants ran into his room and asked their king what had just happened. “Is this real or was that real?” Janak asked his attendants. They were confused as to what their king was talking about. Thereafter, whoever he met or spoke to, he asked one question: Is *this* real or was *that* real?

This same question he asked his queens, his ministers, and the scholars and philosophers of his kingdom. Word quickly spread throughout the kingdom that the king had gone mad. One young scholar named Ashtavakra came to hear about this, and he made his way to the palace. Ashtavakra literally means ‘eight bends’, and described him perfectly. He had physical deformities from birth, resulting in his bent appearance. Despite being one of the youngest scholars in the kingdom, he was wise, and so Janak often confided in him and looked up to him as a teacher.

“King Janak! I shall answer your question,” Ashtavakra said looking straight into the eyes of the king, “If this is real, then that was real. If that was real, then this is real. If this is false, then that was false. But you should know Janak, if that is false, then this is false too.”

Ashtavakra didn’t need any context. He very well knew what Janak was talking about. “Janak, look

around you. Here you are surrounded by jewels, luxuries, women, wealth, comfort and respect. Tell me, did any of this exist in your dreams?"

Janak shook his head.

"What you experienced in your dream, is any of that currently present?"

"No, it isn't," responded Janak.

"Janak, none of those objects or feelings, whether they be in your dream state or awake state, are real. One dream finishes when your eyes open, and the other dream ends when your eyes close."

"If it is all false, am I to believe that nothing is real?" Janak asked curiously.

Ashtavakra smiled and then revealed, "The experience itself is not real, but you experienced it. You are the common unchanging element in both states. You are real. You are on a level deeper than

the physical and subtle bodies. You are the *atma*."

Janak had grasped the meaning fundamental to human existence. He ignored the false credo that 'ignorance is bliss' in this context. Janak had realized the essence of the good life. Alexander the Great was enveloped by this very ignorance. Howard Hughes too. Napoleon. Stalin. The list can go on. In fact, all of us are affected by this ignorance to some extent. When we fail to adopt *vivek* in our lives, we fall prey to ignorance in all of its deceptive forms.

In a world enveloped by ignorance, we are immersed deep within that very ignorance that we fail to realize the discretion of pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow, failure and success. Along with many other truths of life, Janak realized this, and that was what set him free. ♦

(Cont. from p. 52)

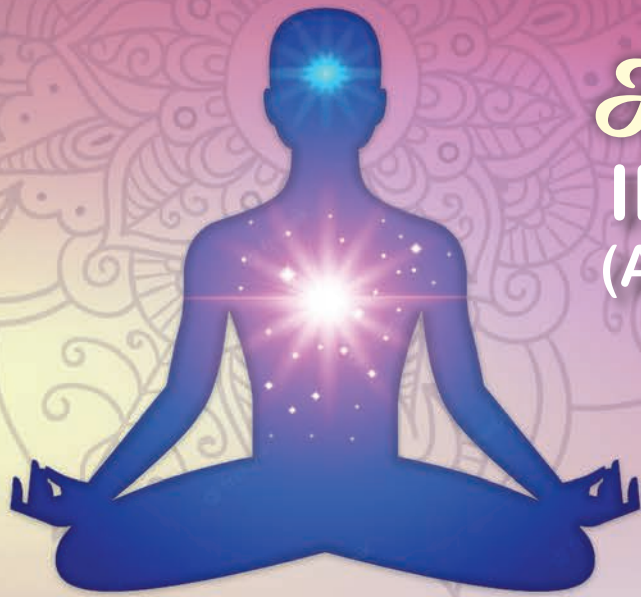
On 31 December 1989, Swamishri was waiting for a train at the railway station in Coimbatore, South India. He had received news of a prominent devotee passing away in Ahmedabad, so he immediately found some space on the side of the busy railway platform and started putting pen to paper. Within minutes, prior to the arrival of his train, he wrote a letter of condolence to the family, and also gave details on how to conduct the final rites. His letters gave immense solace to people when they needed it the most.

In 1988, on the eve of his spiritual tour abroad, Swamishri was in Mumbai. It was around 11:30 p.m. and his flight to London was scheduled to depart early in the morning. Instead of resting, Swamishri was busy writing a letter. He felt remorse that he had not been able to pay a visit to Trigunbhai, a devotee who was critically ill with kidney failure. Swamishri jotted down a few gentle words of comfort, "It was our wish to see you, but circumstances prevented us from doing so. Please forgive me. Remember God and engage in devotion. Everything will turn out for the best."

Once, Swamishri received a letter from the town

of Gondal, in Gujarat, India. However, the sender had forgotten to mention his name. But Swamishri kept that letter with him until he arrived in Gondal a few days later. There, he asked a local devotee, "Do you recognize the writing on this letter?" The devotee had no clue, so he asked others within the community, but there was no luck. Swamishri did not give up. He instructed the devotee, "Please go and find out who sent this letter." Within four days, the devotee finally located the person and asked him to meet Swamishri so he could guide him personally. The sender was amazed by Swamishri's sheer diligence and the length at which he went to track him down.

People of all beliefs and backgrounds wrote to Swamishri for every conceivable reason. Some wrote for inspiration while others wrote with questions. Some wrote with afflictions while others wrote for advice. Some wrote for blessings while others wrote to confess. But despite his busy schedule and responsibilities, Pramukh Swami Maharaj took great care to read and reply to every letter out of genuine warmth from within. That was his way of guiding, serving and blessing humanity. ♦



Hindu Rituals

INTROSPECTIVE (ANTARIK) RITUALS

In the previous, eighth article of Hindu Rituals, we discussed the personal rituals of *prayaschitt* – atonement – and *upvas* – fasting. In this ninth and final article of the series, we discuss the introspective – *antarik* rituals of *antardrashti*, *gun-grahak drashti*, *nirdoshbhav* and *nishkapatbhav*.

All these four rituals involve intense introspection of one's spiritual state. While performing satsang and bhakti related endeavours, aspirants should be constantly vigilant to maintain their internal spiritual equilibrium. Not just maintaining, rather it should be prevented from degrading by insidious and recalcitrant *swabhavs* such as thinking of the flaws (*avguns*) of other devotees, anger, ego, jealousy, hate, greed and others.

Mahant Swami Maharaj has often revealed that ninety-nine percent of spiritual sadhana is internal (*antarik*), or introspection, and only one percent is external.

ANTARDRASHTI

Antardrashti means to 'look within', to introspect. In the Vachanamrut, Bhagwan Swaminarayan states that *antardrashti* is to look towards Bhagwan who is manifesting externally

and internally (Vachanamruts Gadhada I 49, Gadhada II 8). This simply means that in all endeavours to realize Bhagwan, one must remain vigilant about many factors. These include cultivating awareness while strictly observing all vows and codes of conduct advocated in the shastras. One must introspect: are the vows observed according to the *agna* – commands – of Bhagwan and the Satpurush or just whims to boost one's ego or please other people?

Laxity in *antardrashti* by failing to remain vigilant leads to a gradual descent from the path of sadhana. In the *Haricharitamrit Sagar*, Bhagwan Swaminarayan uses the word *gafalpanu* – a slight corruption of the word *gafel*, meaning carelessness, laxity. If laxity continues, a point is reached when the pile up of unhealthy habits, traits and *swabhavs* overwhelms the *sadhak*. This will totally ruin all spiritual endeavours performed until then. It is akin to a machine not cleaned regularly, which then malfunctions and eventually breaks down. Hence, Bhagwan Swaminarayan emphatically and repeatedly castigates *gafalpanu*. He also enumerates its many grim consequences, the final being the failure to attain the *brahmic* state. Though it is only by the grace of the Satpurush that this state is attained, diligent and regular *antardrashti* smoothes the journey and bestows his grace faster.

GUN-GRAHAK DRASHTI

Gun means virtue and *avgun* is a flaw or fault in a person. *Gun-grahak drashti* is the important

endeavour of observing only the virtues of devotees and in all aspects of life, generally. The insidious habit of fault-finding begins in childhood, and continues during teens through to adulthood. This unhealthy habit has to be nipped in childhood if it is not to grow into hardwood later and mar one's character. Similarly, while performing spiritual sadhana in society rather than in seclusion in a forest, interaction with people will entail seeing their faults. If not eradicated, *avgun drashti* will result in gossip, loss of direction towards the goal, loss of zest in performing satsang and sadhanas, internal discord and most importantly, displeasure of Bhagwan and the Satpurush. It is also observed that the faults perceived in others rebound and are ingrained in the perceiver.

Conversely, the benefits of cultivating *gun-grahak drashti* of devotees and the Satpurush are also multifold: eradication of one's hardened base instincts, experiencing constant internal bliss and *shanti*, zest to perform sadhanas, strengthening one's foundation in the satsang and becoming a beneficiary of the divine virtues of the Satpurush. This also collectively boosts *samp* (unity), *suhradbhav* (fraternity) and *ekta* (oneness) in the Satsang.

There is a step higher than just observing virtues. According to Aksharbrahma Gunatitanand Swami, if one vociferously glorifies the virtues of the Satpurush and devotees, one becomes *brahmarup*. Incredibly, this is the most easy and feasible endeavour to become *brahmarup*, compared to all other endeavours. Pramukh Swami Maharaj often pointed out that even if a person had a hundred faults, he would at least have one virtue. Aspirants who master *gun-grahak drashti* easily tend to seek out this one virtue, which will increase their personal storehouse of virtues.

NIRDOSHBHAV (NIRDOSHBUDDHI)

Parabrahma Purushottam Narayan's form is

eternally divine. He also resides in all *jivas* and the universe in his immanent (*anvay*) form. Moreover, when he manifests on earth in human form he is also divine and not bound by *maya* or *mayic* objects. Hence, his childhood, youthhood, adulthood and old age are divine. His actions, known as *lila charitras*, are also divine. They are devoid of *mayic* tendencies such as *dehabhav* – body-consciousness, *swabhavs*, *vasana* or any *dosh*. The ideal devotee will regard these tendencies with *nirdoshbhav*. The immature devotee may perceive doubt or flaws in Bhagwan's actions. It is known as *manushyabhav* – regarding him as a typical human being with *mayic* attributes. An example of this was King Parikshit. While Shukdevji, who had *nirdoshbhav*, narrated Shri Krishna's *raas lila* – divine stick dance – with the *gopis*, Parikshit perceived *manushyabhav* in Bhagwan. Only when Shukdevji explained that all actions of Bhagwan are divine, did Parikshit become doubtless (Bhagwatam 10.30.27–29). Another example is of Bhagwan Shri Ram. After Sitaji's kidnapping, Shri Ram became anxious to the extent that he asked trees, shrubs and vines in the forest about her whereabouts. Yet, ideal devotees regard this as divine *lila* which they sing with *mahima* (glory).

In addition to Purushottam Narayan, his abode, Aksharbrahma, is equally divine. After Bhagwan Swaminarayan's physical departure from earth, he manifested through Aksharbrahma Gunatitanand Swami and subsequent Gunatit gurus. They are all divine, devoid of *maya* and their actions are divine. Similar to Bhagwan Purushottam, devotees should cultivate *nirdoshbhav* for the Gunatit gurus, and sing and glorify all their actions as divine. By this, devotees experience peace and bliss (Vachanamruts Gadhada I 3, 72; Gadhada II 10). To cultivate such *nirdoshbhav* is the true dharma, devotion and *sadhana* of devotees.

Factors which pollute *nirdoshbhav* include ego, anger, greed, envy and other such *swabhavs*. Aspirants should therefore offer pure bhakti to become *nirvasanic* (*nirdosh*) and *aksharrup*. This

has been discussed in previous articles.

Here it is valid to ask, “Why does Bhagwan not display his divinity and power when manifesting as a human being on earth? The answer is that, only by suppressing his divinity and by becoming *sajatiya* – like a typical human being – will the devotees be able to have his darshan, and offer devotion and *seva* (Vachanamruts Kariyani 5, Gadhada I 72, Panchala 4). If he manifested in his divine form, devotees will not be able to approach him or have his *labh*. Consider Arjun’s example. When Shri Krishna Bhagwan appeared to him as *Vishwarup*, he was unable to bear the intense divinity which terrified him. He then begged Shri Krishna to resume his original human form (Gita 2.23, 24, 26).

Hence, it is vital for aspirants to imbibe *nirdoshbhav* for Bhagwan, the Aksharbrahma Satpurush and their devotees, while stringently avoiding seeing *mayic* attributes in them. For this, one has to do *antardrashti* regularly.

NISKAPATBHAV

Kapat means deceit. *Nishkapatbhav* means to cultivate an attitude of honesty, truth and transparency with Bhagwan and the Satpurush. Aspirants who repeatedly experience undesirable *swabhavs* or thoughts, which they are unable to eradicate, should sincerely divulge them to the Aksharbrahma Satpurush. This is *nishkapatbhav*. The Satpurush may even bless, guide and prescribe *prayaschitt* to sincere aspirants. Confessing in such a manner is vitally important on the spiritual path by which the Satpurush periodically eradicates the unwelcome garbage piled up in the *antahkaran*. Here again, *antardrashti* is helpful.

What are the consequences of not imbibing *nishkapatbhav*? Aksharbrahma Gunatitanand Swami states that the *jiva* will not become *brahmarup* (Swamini Vato 3.33). He further emphasizes that one who believes the Satpurush to be *nirdosh*, omniscient and is not deceitful with him, then the *jiva* gains the virtues of the Satpurush

(Swamini Vato 3.34). Upendranand Swami and Dajibhai of Kamrol confessed with *nishkapatbhav* about their *vasana* to Gunatitanand Swami. The latter blessed them and eradicated their *vasana*. What decades of gruelling spiritual austerities cannot achieve, can be instantly attained by the grace of the Satpurush. *Nishkapatbhav* is the key.

This ends the series of nine articles on Hindu rituals. In conclusion, one may pose a compelling question: What is the most important thought that aspirants should constantly bear in mind while observing not only all rituals that lead to *moksha*, but also any activity in daily life? Bhagwan Swaminarayan provides the answer in Vachanamrut Gadhada III 25:

“*Bhakti, upasana, seva, shradha, dharmanishtha* and other spiritual endeavours related to Bhagwan should be performed without harbouring desires for any other (material) fruits. This is cited in the shastras and it is true.” This is termed as *nishkam karma* yoga in the Gita. Then, Bhagwan Swaminarayan adds a novel principle: “But one should certainly harbour the desire that Bhagwan is pleased with him through these endeavours. That desire should be kept.”

In other words, one should perform actions with the motive of earning Bhagwan’s pleasure (*rajipo*). *Antardrashti* is a constant factor to be inculcated in our daily chores, like a lion constantly watching on all sides including his back before proceeding to take a step forward. Since Bhagwan Swaminarayan today manifests through Mahant Swami Maharaj, who is the Aksharbrahma Satpurush, a devotee should pose the following question to himself in all his daily acts, “Will Bhagwan Swaminarayan and Mahant Swami Maharaj be pleased with what I am about to do?” Will I earn their *rajipo*? *Rajipo* is a word commonly used in the Swaminarayan Sampradaya meaning ‘to be pleased.’ Let us aspire to introspect regularly and obtain the *rajipo* of our beloved guru Mahant Swami Maharaj in all our daily activities. ♦



INDIA

YUVAK ANTAR JAGRUTI PARVA

19–26 April 2023



As part of their six-month BAPS Yuva Talim Kendra (YTK) course, the 108 youths of the first batch of 2023 students undertook a week of *vicharan*. In groups of four, the 108 youths, in 27 groups, visited 216 villages in Gujarat, Maharashtra and Rajasthan to conduct the ‘Antar Jagruti Parva’ (Personal Awareness Campaign).

During their one-day visits to these villages, the youths visited over 3,230 homes, inspiring devotees to attend their local weekly assembly, perform daily personal puja, visit the local mandir regularly for darshan, daily read the Vachanamrut and Swamini Vato, conduct family assemblies, observe a fast on *ekadashi* and practise other basics of satsang.

The youths also conducted public assemblies, children’s assemblies and school assemblies, and inspired over 875 people to give up their addictions. In the early evenings, the youths organized *bhakti feris* – devotional parades – through the towns and villages.

YUVA SHIBIR: ‘JIVISHU SWAMINE MATE’

11–14 May 2023, Gadhada

More than 1,150 *yuvaks* and *yuvatis* of Vadodara attended the Yuva Shibir held at the BAPS Mandir in Gadhada in the presence of Pujya Viveksagar Swami. Themed ‘Jivishu



Swāmine Māte...’ (We Will Live for Swami...), the *shibir* guided the youths on how to practise satsang in their daily lives and to strengthen their bond with the Satpurush.

Six main topics were discussed: 1. Shikshan (Education); 2. Satsang: Daily Puja, Yuva Sabha, Satsang Reading; 3. Saiyam (Restraint): Stri-Purush Maryada, Social Media Consciousness, Dietary Discretion; 4. Samjan (Understanding); 5. Seva: Physical and Spreading Satsang; and 6. Satpurushma Jodan (Attachment with the Satpurush): Prapti (Attainment), Smruti (Remembrance), Observing Spiritual Commands.

Mahant Swami Maharaj himself wrote beautiful motivational sentences on these six topics. Each topic was elaborated upon through speeches, workshops, case studies, skits, discussions, seminars, videos and other activities.

ANNUAL YUVA SHIBIRS: ‘GUNATIT GURU: OUR BEST FRIEND’

28 May to 18 June 2023



Over 26,000 *yuvaks* and *yuvatis* participated in the Annual Yuva Shibirs held at 31 BAPS centres in Gujarat and Maharashtra. Organized by the Satsang Pravrutti Central Office, each *shibir* was conducted by swamis at the designated centres.

Based on the theme ‘Gunatit Guru: Our Best Friend’, these one-day *shibirs* guided the youths on the glory of the guru, the benefits of remaining in his company and how to forever keep his association. Through inspiring speeches by swamis, workshops, skits, videos and other activities, the *shibirs* concisely and clearly conveyed what the youths can do to establish a firm bond with the Satpurush.

The highlight of each *shibir* were the several specially prepared question and answer videos with *guruhari* Mahant Swami Maharaj. Swamishri provided succinct, lucid and forthright answers to questions of particular relevance to youths to encourage and guide their personal, academic, professional and spiritual progress. On viewing the videos, the youths felt that they were in the actual presence of Mahant Swami Maharaj.

PRAMUKH VISION CONFERENCE 2023

1–7 June 2023, Sankari



BAPS Pramukh Academy, Atladara, organized the Pramukh Vision Conference 2023 at BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir, Sankari. This seven-day conference, centred on the theme ‘Cultivating PRAMUKHness’ encouraged youths preparing for the competitive Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) exams to learn from Pramukh Swami Maharaj, walk in his footsteps, and embrace his visionary ideals for the betterment of the nation.

More than 375 students from Gujarat, Madhya

Pradesh, Maharashtra and Rajasthan participated in the conference. Motivational exhibitions and artistic displays adorned the mandir premises to highlight the saying ‘Shilam Param Bhushanam’ – ‘Character is the Supreme Ornament’ and inspired the attendees on the path of Pramukh Vision.

The students were also guided in person by Yagnapriya Swami, Rajeshwar Swami, Bhagyasetu Swami, Jnanvatsal Swami, Purushottamcharan Swami and Atmatrupt Swami. Further, Anandswarup Swami, Jnaneshwar Swami and Brahmavihari Swami inspired the students via video conference on faith, association with the truth, and the need for spiritual strength along with reasoning and intellectual prowess in life. Thus, students received remarkable inspiration to become officers and contribute to society, culture and national service.

HEALTH CAMP

11 June 2023, BAPS Mandir, Chakulia



In collaboration with the Akhil Cuttack Gujarati Samaj, the BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir hosted a free Health Camp with the support of doctors, nurses and other staff of the Medical College & Hospital (Bhubaneswar), JPM Rotary Eye Hospital (Cuttack) and Dr Mitu Singhal (Dental Hospital, Cuttack). Over 315 people availed of the eye, dental, medical, gynaecology and other health checks and guidance.

CHILDREN DEVELOPMENT CAMP: ‘BE IDEAL’

11 June 2023, Bengaluru

Around 400 children participated in a special one-day camp based on the theme ‘Be Ideal’.

The camp taught them how to be a responsible child, citizen and student through interesting



presentations and activities. They also learned how to responsibly use mobile phones, internet and modern technology. Many pledged to daily bow to their parents, minimize video games and to pray daily.

Afterwards, a special session for parents provided guidance on good parenting.

CYCLONE BIPARJOY: BAPS RELIEF WORK

13 June 2023, Gujarat



BAPS centres in Junagadh, Jamnagar, Bhuj and Sarangpur supported the Gujarat government's efforts to help those affected by the 125 kmph Cyclone Biparjoy that affected the west coast of Gujarat. The BAPS centres provided over 50,000 freshly prepared food packets for distribution.

BLOOD DONATION CAMP

18 June 2023, BAPS Mandir, Kolkata



In collaboration with the Saroj Gupta Cancer Centre & Research Institute, BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir, Kolkata, conducted a Blood Donation Camp, in which 132 individuals donated blood.

Many new donors also resolved to donate blood regularly.

RATH YATRA CELEBRATION

20 June 2023, BAPS Mandir, Kolkata



The Rath Yatra celebration at the BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir, Kolkata, began with a short assembly explaining the significance of Rath Yatra.

Thereafter, the *murtis* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan, Aksharbrahma Gunatitanand Swami, Shri Jagannathji Bhagwan, Subhadraji and Balramji were seated in a beautifully decorated *rath*. *Pujan* of these *murtis* was performed with the chanting of Vedic verses in the presence of local community leaders and other invited guests.

Then, the sadhus, guests and devotees devoutly pulled the *rath* in a procession around the perimeter of the mandir. The *rath* was accompanied by children in traditional costumes. Over 500 devotees participated in the procession, while thousands more had darshan from various points inside the mandir campus. The celebration concluded with everyone joining in to perform the *arti*.

ARTI-STUTI GAAN QUESTIONNAIRE

2 July 2023, India

In April 2023, new *stuti* verses for Bhagwan Swaminarayan and the Gunatit Gurus sung after the *arti* were introduced, as per the wish of Mahant Swami Maharaj.

Since these verses are to be sung daily, it is important to ensure that all devotees of the BAPS memorize them. Hence, for devotees in India, the Satsang Pravrutti Central Office in Ahmedabad launched an online *arti-stuti* questionnaire to encourage everyone to commit the new verses to memory.

Expressing his support for this, on 17 May 2023, Mahant Swami Maharaj wrote a letter from London to all devotees inspiring them to participate.

On 25 June, a pre-test was made available. Then, on 2 July, over 52,000 devotees from throughout India took the final online questionnaire.

NORTH AMERICA

INDIAN CABINET MINISTER PIYUSH GOYAL VISITS BAPS MANDIR

9 May 2023, Toronto, ON, Canada



India's Cabinet Minister of Commerce & Industry, Consumer Affairs, Food & Public Distribution, Textiles and the Leader of the Rajya Sabha, Shri Piyush Goyal visited the BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir with his wife, Smt. Seema Goyal. They were accompanied by the Consul General of India to Toronto, Smt. Apoorva Srivastava, and the Consul General of India to Vancouver, Shri Manish.

After receiving a traditional welcome, the delegation viewed the mandir, during which they offered *abhishek* to the *murti* of Shri Nilkanth Varni. The minister and other delegates admired the intricate art and architecture of the mandir and offered prayers at the various sacred shrines.

The visit concluded with a tour of the Canadian

Museum of Cultural Heritage of Indo-Canadians, which beautifully showcases the journey of the Indo-Canadian community in Canada.

ASIA PACIFIC

YOUTH SEMINARS: 'ATTITUDE IS EVERYTHING'

8 April to 23 June 2023, Australia and New Zealand



Over 930 *yuvaks* and more than 505 *yuvatis* attended the special seminars for youths held at 10 BAPS centres in Australia and New Zealand.

Themed 'Attitude Is Everything', the one-day youth seminars emphasized developing a positive attitude towards any situation in life. Through inspiring presentations by swamis, videos, skits and a special panel discussion, each seminar conveyed the benefits of having a positive attitude and how it can lead to a happy, healthy and successful life. The panel discussions involved youths who had been through adverse situations and highlighted how a positive outlook helped them to overcome their challenges.

YOUTH SEMINARS: 'DISCOVER THE LION WITHIN'

16 April to 14 May 2023, Australia and New Zealand

Over 500 *kishores* and *kishoris* participated in the special seminars themed 'Discover the Lion Within' held at 11 BAPS centres throughout Australia and New Zealand.

The seminar theme symbolized the innate ability, skills and drive that lie within each youth. In each seminar, the resident swamis



and experienced BAPS volunteers guided the attendees on how to discover their inner strengths, positivity and self-confidence for personal development.

BAPS PARTICIPATES IN THE RELIGIOUS HARMONY FOR WORLD PEACE CONFERENCE

23 April 2023, Melbourne, Australia



Over 500 people from throughout Victoria, Australia, attended the Religious Harmony for World Peace Conference organized by the Namdhari Sikh Society in the presence of His Holiness Sadguru Uday Singh Ji Maharaj at Bunjil Place in Melbourne.

The conference promoted interfaith cohesion, peace, and progress, and featured a panel of distinguished religious and spiritual leaders from different faiths.

Brahmsmarandas Swami represented BAPS and addressed the conference on how to achieve interfaith cohesion, peace, and progress based on the lives and teachings of Pramukh Swami Maharaj and Mahant Swami Maharaj. He emphasized the importance of understanding, cooperation, and respect for differences and proposed actionable

initiatives and programmes that can be adopted by individuals, communities, organizations and nations worldwide to foster relationships built on dialogue, coexistence, and belief in diversity.

The spiritual leader of the Namdhari community, Satguru Uday Singh said, “The world has made immense development in every field, but it gets true peace only through religion. We should focus on religious harmony and world peace, transcending regional differences and inspire everyone to do so.”

‘GHER GHER GHAR SABHA’ PROJECT

1–31 May 2023, Australia and New Zealand



More than 3,750 participants from over 1,245 families took part in the ‘Gher Gher Ghar Sabha’ project, which raised awareness of the valuable and practical guidance given by Pramukh Swami Maharaj to strengthen family harmony and promote positivity in people’s lives.

Devotees invited one or more families to participate in a *ghar sabha* at their home. The *ghar sabha* programmes focused on four important factors for a happy family, as identified by Pramukh Swami Maharaj: 1. Understanding each other, 2. Keeping a positive mindset, 3. Engaging in satsang, and 4. Conducting *ghar sabha* regularly.

Many families were inspired and pledged to conduct *ghar sabha* regularly in their own homes, ensuring that the positive impact of this project extends beyond the event itself.

MATRU-DEVO BHAVA, ASIA PACIFIC

20 May 2023, Australia and New Zealand

Titled ‘Matru-Devo Bhava’, special events



to treasure and strengthen the bonds between mothers and daughters were held at various BAPS centres in Australia and New Zealand.

Each event featured an enlightening live performance showcasing how mothers help their children throughout the day, giving the children a deeper understanding and appreciation of the efforts of their own mothers. Also, girls engaged in an activity that portrayed a typical day in the life of a mother. Through video presentations, the girls conveyed their heartfelt appreciation for their own mothers.

Video blessings from Mahant Swami Maharaj emphasized the importance of incorporating the principle of ‘Matru-Devo Bhava’ in daily family life.

The programmes concluded with children bowing to their mothers.

TREE PLANTATION DRIVE

28 May 2023, Adelaide, Australia



In spite of adverse weather conditions, BAPS volunteers participated in the tree plantation drive at Brookside Drive in the Mawson Lakes suburb and successfully planted around 2,000 native trees and shrubs in cooperation with the city of Salisbury and Pledger Wetlands Group.

SATSANG SHIBIR 2023: ‘SADHANA’

1–10 June 2023, Australia and New Zealand



Over 4,200 devotees in 16 centers across Australia & New Zealand participated in the one-day *shibirs* themed ‘Sadhana’.

The *shibirs* explored four topics: Rajipano Vichar (leading a life in accordance with the wishes and commands of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and Gunatit gurus), Kartapanano Vichar (firmly believing God is the all-doer), Sankhya Vichar (realizing the temporary nature of all material things), and Mahimano Vichar (contemplating on the greatness of Bhagwan, his Gunatit Sadhu and his disciples).

The attendees gained a deeper understanding about these four thought processes through powerful spiritual talks by swamis, group discussions, panel discussions, engaging skits, video presentations, Q&A sessions and narration of virtues by devotees. The shibirs provided spiritual understanding and practical tools to help manage daily challenges, and find peace and meaning in life by nurturing these essential thoughts that will enable spiritual progress.

UAE

FIRST SHIKHAR SHILA PUJAN VIDHI

18 April 2023, Abu Dhabi



The first stone of the spires (*shikhars*) of the mandir were blessed in an auspicious ceremony by Pujya Ishwarcharan Swami and other swamis.

During the *pujan* ceremony, Pujya Ishwarcharan Swami performed the rituals while the Shantipath and Vedic mantras were recited. The stone was then lifted and placed in position, signifying the beginning of the main spire construction.

After the rituals, Pujya Ishwarcharan Swami viewed the ongoing work, and commended the stone artisans and supervisors for their tireless efforts in bringing the project to life. He also expressed his deep gratitude to the workers, acknowledging their hard work and dedication in ensuring that the construction progresses smoothly.

BOLLYWOOD STAR AKSHAY KUMAR VISITS BAPS HINDU MANDIR

29 April 2023, Abu Dhabi



Bollywood actor Akshay Kumar visited the BAPS Hindu Mandir along with Vashu Bhagnani, a famous Indian film producer, and Jiten Doshi, a prominent businessman. After receiving a traditional welcome, Akshay Kumar and the delegation viewed the Rivers of Harmony exhibition, and met the mandir's board of directors and key volunteers.

Then, Akshay Kumar and the delegation performed a puja ceremony to place a brick in the construction of the mandir.

Reflecting on his two-hour journey of discovery, Akshay Kumar said, "You are creating history. What you are creating is not just a service to our community, but to mankind. Creating a new world where there is peace, love and support

from one human to another; there truly is nothing more powerful than that."

OVER 30 AMBASSADORS VISIT BAPS HINDU MANDIR

25 May 2023, Abu Dhabi



Ambassadors from more than 30 nations and other esteemed guests visited the construction site of the BAPS Hindu Mandir in Abu Dhabi. The delegation of dignitaries were traditionally welcomed by the dedicated directors and volunteers overseeing the mandir's construction.

The ambassadors were given a comprehensive overview of the mandir's historical significance, construction process, and expected impact, conveyed through captivating video presentations and personal experiences.

His Excellency Sunjay Sudhir, Indian ambassador to the UAE, highlighted the long-standing friendship between India and the UAE, rooted in history, culture and trade. He praised the tolerance and generosity of the UAE leadership and added, "This mandir represents the collective aspirations of faith of the broad Indian community living in the UAE, especially the saints and volunteers of BAPS who are serving tirelessly and selflessly to build this mandir of tolerance and harmony."

In his address, Brahmaviharidas Swami warmly welcomed the ambassadors. Thereafter, the guests embarked on a guided tour by sprinkling flowers on the bricks to be used for the mandir. The guests were amazed to see the wonderful intricate carvings and delicate designs featuring the timeless values of India and other ancient civilizations. The guests were astounded to learn that Arabian, Mayan,

Greek and other cultural tales that encourage peace, tolerance, and harmony have also been immortalized in stone on the mandir's façade.

Ambassador of New Zealand H.E. Dr Richard Kay stated, "The mandir is a cultural asset that will be a fantastic addition to the skyline of the UAE." Ambassador of Japan, H.E. Akio Isomata said, "I am overwhelmed with the Indian craftsmanship. I see a philosophy of tolerance in the carvings."

H.E. Aminath Shabeena, Ambassador of the Maldives, said, "One must truly visit to witness the detailed carvings and heartfelt emotions of the volunteers."

Ambassador of Israel, H.E. Amir Hayek, said, "This monument is being constructed in a country built on tolerance and will most certainly contribute to harmony in the region and the world."

The ambassadors' visit was a significant step in promoting peace, fostering cultural interaction, and strengthening diplomatic ties between the participating countries and the UAE.

USA AND UAE OFFICIALS VISIT THE BAPS HINDU MANDIR

6 June 2023, Abu Dhabi



Mr Sean Murphy, Chargé d'Affaires from the United States to the UAE, and His Excellency Omar Ghobash, Advisor to HH Sheikh Abdullah Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, visited the construction site of the BAPS Hindu Mandir in Abu Dhabi.

They were welcomed by Brahmaviharidas Swami, and given a tour through the exhibition and the mandir in the making. They were awestruck by its grandeur, and the intricate carvings of ancient civilizations and the timeless values of India.

HH SHEIKH ABDULLAH BIN ZAYED AL NAHYAN RECEIVES BAPS DELEGATION

20 June 2023, Abu Dhabi



His Highness Sheikh Abdullah Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of the United Arab Emirates, warmly received Brahmaviharidas Swami, other BAPS swamis and volunteers at his private palace in Abu Dhabi.

During the hour-long meeting, Swami Brahmaviharidas expressed heartfelt gratitude to His Highness on behalf of His Holiness Mahant Swami Maharaj and BAPS worldwide for personally encouraging and overseeing the development of the BAPS Hindu Mandir in Abu Dhabi. Among other topics, His Highness specifically asked about the seven spires, the carvings of the flora and fauna, and the dimensions and scale of the Mandir. His Highness commented, "This project is very special, and its message of global harmony should not end here and now, it should not be limited to the civilizational carvings, but should spread across the world, across space and time."

Also present in the meeting were His Excellency Omar Saif Ghobash, advisor to HH Sheikh Abdullah Bin Zayed Al Nahyan and members of the minister's staff.

BAPS CHARITIES

'TAKE A STEP' WALKATHONS FOR CYCLONE GABRIELLE

7 May 2023, New Zealand

Cyclone Gabrielle was a severe tropical cyclone that devastated the North Island of New Zealand in February 2023 and caused widespread damage



leaving over 10,000 people displaced and urgently needing support.

To help the victims of this natural calamity, BAPS Charities in New Zealand organized a nationwide walkathon under the banner ‘Take a Step for Cyclone Gabrielle – Together Let’s Rebuild Our Communities’. Over 800 people aged between 2 to 70 years participated, raising a total of \$40,000. The funds were used to help families in the affected areas through the support of local charities.

BAPS CHARITIES DONATES OVER 2 TONNES OF VEGETARIAN FOOD

30 May 2023, Perth, Australia



BAPS Charities in Perth organized its annual food collection drive during May, in which families, children, youth and volunteers of BAPS generously collected and donated over two tonnes of vegetarian food.

The collected food was donated to the Spiers Centre for distribution to the needy.

TREE PLANTING

20 May 2023, Kereita Forest, Nairobi, Kenya



BAPS Charities in conjunction with Kijabe Environment Volunteers (KENVO) planted 2,000 trees at Kereita Forest, which forms the southern tip of the Aberdares Ranges. These ranges are an important water catchment area for Nairobi’s water supply.

Seedlings were planted within parcels allocated to farmers to facilitate proper care and upkeep of the trees as they grow within the forest. This collaboration ensures high survival rates of the trees, which are typically trampled by animals grazing in open areas.

TRIBUTE



PUJYA RAGHUVIRCHARAN SWAMI

Rajkot, Age: 63, Aksharvas: 4 May 2023

A native of Kavitha village in the Charotar region of Gujarat, Raghuvircharan Swami was initiated by Pramukh Swami Maharaj in 1981. He devoutly served as the *bhandari* in Sarangpur, Sankari and Ahmedabad. For the past 28 years he was stationed in Rajkot, where, despite physical ailments, he enthusiastically assisted in the kitchen, as *pujari*,

vicharan to the villages, the *gaushala* and farm. He keenly engaged in discourses and devotion to please Bhagwan Swaminarayan and the Gunatit gurus. His co-operative and diligent nature was appreciated by all. He suffered a heart attack and passed away to Akshardham. Our heartfelt tributes to such a hardworking and devout saint.

BAPS Charities: North America 2022

Some of the major activities organized by BAPS Charities throughout the USA and Canada are summarized below.



WALKATHONS

In the Joy of Others Walk/Run

BAPS Charities presented a check for \$75,000 to support Susan G. Komen's mission to eradicate Breast Cancer through 'In the Joy of Others: Walk-Run', a series of walkathons hosted at 85 centres across the United States and Canada in which over 27,000 people participated. These Walkathons also helped support other activities conducted by BAPS Charities.

DISASTER RELIEF

Hurricane Ian in Florida

Hurricane Ian was one of the deadliest hurricanes to strike the state of Florida since 1935. To support those affected, BAPS Charities donated \$15,000 to Team Rubicon and \$25,000 to the Florida Disaster Fund for Hurricane Ian relief efforts.

Ukraine Humanitarian Crisis

The conflict in Ukraine displaced millions of individuals and families, who were without essential supplies. BAPS Charities volunteers, who supported emergency relief efforts on the ground at the Poland-Ukraine border, learned first-hand what was needed, and upon returning to the United States, continued the work by collecting essential items.

Volunteers from the USA, UK, Ireland, France, Switzerland, Italy, Germany, Austria and Poland swiftly sprang into action to support the emergency relief efforts on the ground.

This included setting up a mobile field kitchen

in the south-eastern Polish city of Rzeszów, which fed around 1,000 hot vegetarian meals daily to refugees of all faiths and nationalities. BAPS also arranged accommodation facilities and coordinated medical assistance, working closely with the Indian government and local partners.

BLOOD DONATION DRIVES

BAPS Charities organized 104 blood drives across North America in partnership with local blood banks. These drives helped to collect 4,033 pints of blood to potentially save 12,099 lives (one pint can save up to three lives).

HEALTH AWARENESS LECTURES

To guide people on various important and practical health issues, a total of 94 lectures were organized at 74 centres. Experts gave valuable guidance on three topics: 'Mental Health During the COVID-19 Pandemic', which focused on recognizing early signs of poor mental health in children and adults, and appropriate treatment paths; 'Cancer Awareness', which focused on preventive cancer care, early signs of cancer, and the importance of early detection; and 'Health Precautions During Travel', which covered detailed information about various health issues that may affect travellers.

VACCINATION DRIVES

BAPS Charities organized COVID-19 and flu vaccination drives at many centres in the USA and Canada.



1



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MAHANT SWAMI MAHARAJ IN CANADA

June–July 2023

1. Swamis and devotees joyously welcome Swamishri to Toronto in the early morning, 9 June.

2. Swamishri, swamis and devotees perform pranayam and *yogasans* to commemorate the International Yoga Day, 21 June.

Inset: Swamishri performs pranayam.



MAHANT SWAMI MAHARAJ AT SWAMINARAYAN AKSHARDHAM, ROBBINSVILLE, NJ, USA

8 July 2023

1. Swamishri arrived in Robbinsville in the evening and viewed the grand Swaminarayan Akshardham Mahamandir for the first time.
2. Thousands of devotees welcome Swamishri in the grounds of Swaminarayan Akshardham.