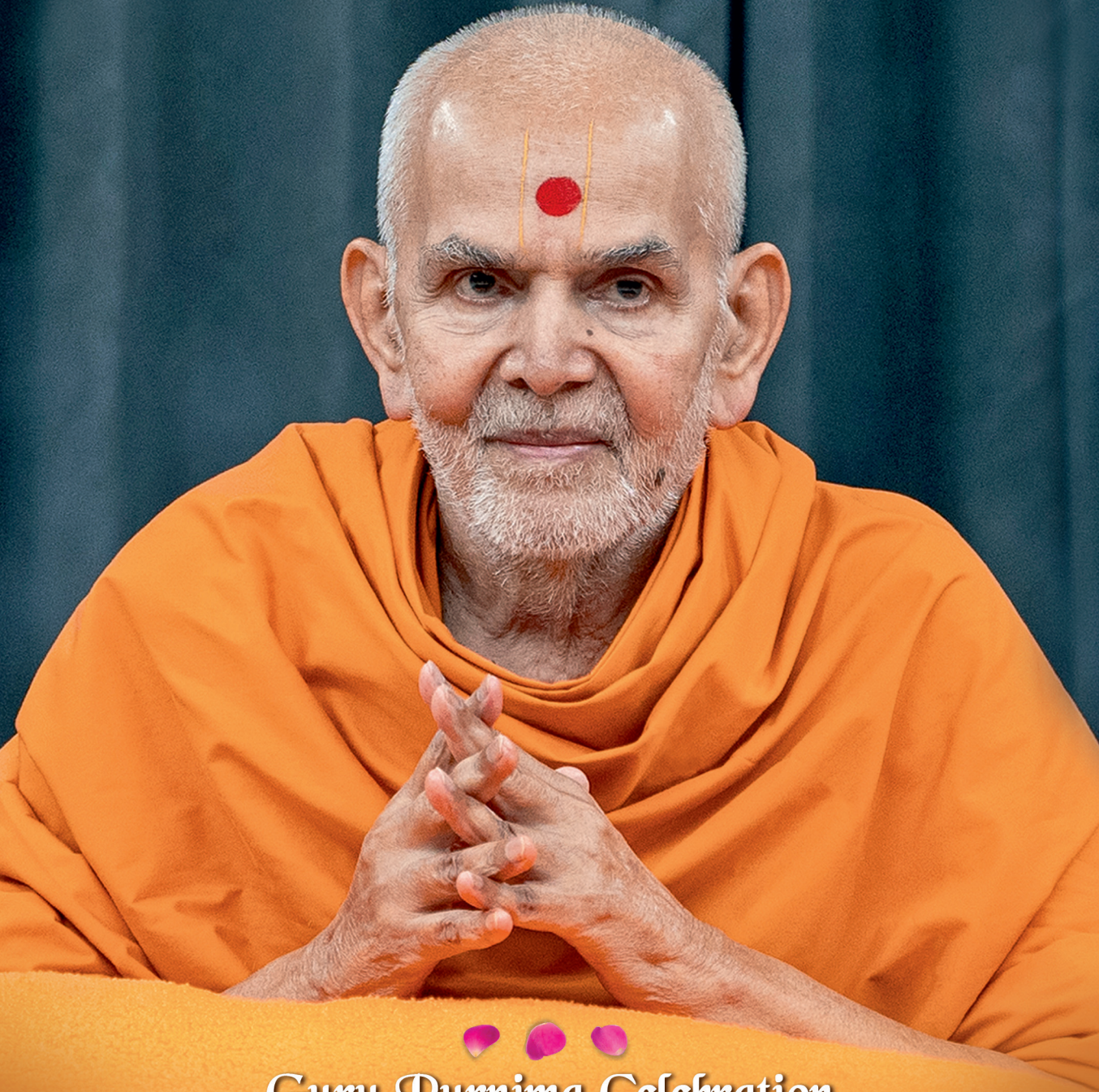


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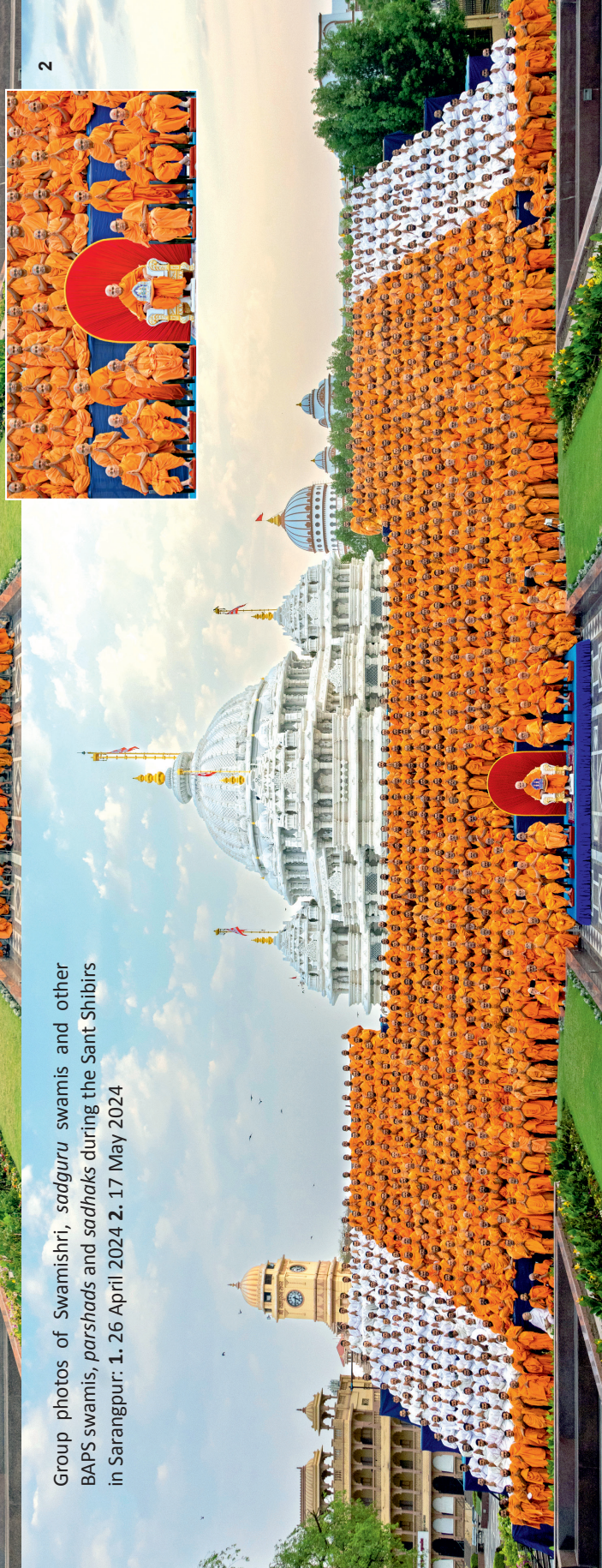


Guru Purnima Celebration

Heartfelt Reverences to Guruhari Mahant Swami Maharaj



Group photos of Swamishri, *sadguru* swamis and other BAPS swamis, *parshads* and *sadhaks* during the Sant Shibir in Sarangpur: **1.** 26 April 2024 **2.** 17 May 2024



2

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Prostrations to Mahant Swami Maharaj on Guru Purnima Day (21 July 2024)

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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A MANDIR IN GADHPUR

*Shri Hari launched the mandir project in Gadhada.
He also mobilized all to contribute donations, make preparations for
the murtis and mandir plans and serve in the construction work...*

DEVOTEES GET READY TO OFFER SEVA FOR THE MANDIR

Once the mandir foundation-laying ceremony was over, Shri Hari addressed the swamis and devotees, “I want to complete this mandir as soon as possible. Before the monsoon sets I want the foundation to be completed. Whosoever wishes to serve can volunteer now. We require carts, oxen, crowbars, shovels and small circular metal containers.”

Jetha Maani of Khopala village volunteered and declared, “Maharaj, I offer my cart, oxen and myself to serve till the mandir is over.” Shri Hari was very pleased and offered him a sanctified garland. Then, Jivo (Jivram) Dave of Jhamrala village spoke, “Maharaj, my cart, oxen and brother, Gangaram,¹ will serve till the mandir is accomplished.” Shri Hari smiled meaningfully at him and said, “Jivram, ever since you offered a meal to me in Jhamrala I have taken everything that belongs to you.” Jivram humbly answered, “Maharaj, how fortunate and honoured I am that you have accepted me and my services.”

Then Dada Khachar promised, “Whatever pairs of oxen and men I have at my farms I

pledge them in the service of the mandir.”

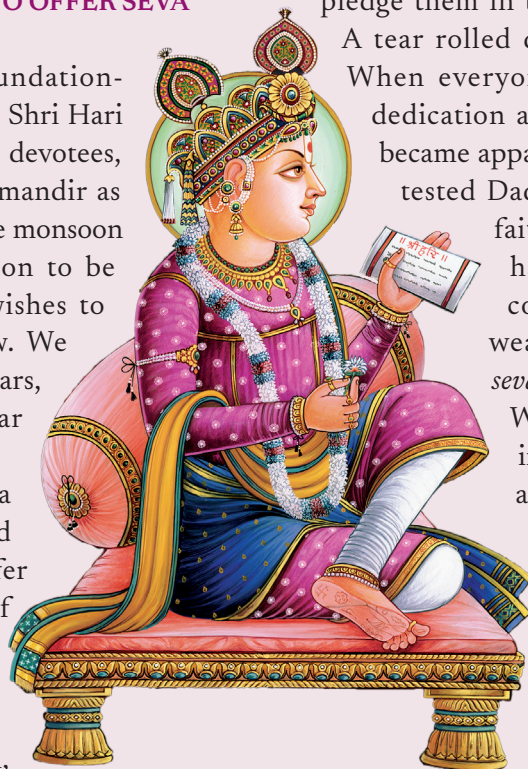
A tear rolled down from Maharaj’s eye. When everyone witnessed this, Dada’s dedication and immeasurable sacrifice became apparent to them. Shri Hari had tested Dada Khachar’s devotion and faith on several occasions. He had even insulted him and confiscated his home and wealth. Yet, Dada’s faith and *seva* soared without hesitations.

When Bhagwan is manifest in human form on earth one also finds such extraordinary souls in his service. Through their presence the glory of Bhagwan also spreads and becomes known to others.

Thereafter, all the other devotees in the assembly pledged their *seva* according to their faith and means. Some donated money, some decided to serve physically while others enrolled to serve according to their capacities. They all pleased Shri Hari and earned his blessings.

DUBLI BHATT’S THIRTEEN COINS

At that time, an old man stood up at the back of the assembly. His hands were trembling and his stance was wobbly. Shri Hari saw him and spoke to the assembly, “He is Dubli Bhatt of Gokharwala



1. Many years later, Gopalanand Swami gave the saffron *diksha* to Gangaram Dave and named him Dharmaswarupanand Swami.

village. Let him come forward.” At Shri Hari’s behest two *parshads* went up to Dubli Bhatt, also known as Ranchhodji Vipra, and helped him as he hobbled towards Maharaj. He folded his hands and took off his headgear in respect to Maharaj. Shri Hari smilingly asked, “Bhattji, what is your wish?”

Bhattji replied, “Maharaj, I too wish to offer a donation.” And he started opening the knots at the fag end of his tattered headgear. He had tied one coin (*dokdo*) in each knot. He untied all the thirteen knots and placed thirteen coins at Shri Hari’s feet. The entire assembly was watching the scene with bated breaths.

Shri Hari told Bhattji, “Your donation has already reached me. You can take back the thirteen coins and buy a new headgear for yourself.”

Dubli Bhatt humbly beseeched, “Maharaj, my life is now nearly over. Uptil now, I’ve been able to make do with my headgear and it will still last me more. However, when will such an opportunity to serve you come again? Thus, Maharaj, accept my *seva*.”

Shri Hari perceived his devotional feelings, accepted the thirteen *dokdas* and proclaimed, “Gopinath Maharaj’s *jai*. The Gadhpur mandir has been accomplished.” On hearing this, Sura Khachar asked, “Maharaj, let us know about the amount Dubli Bhatt has donated because we are unable to understand it from the *jai* you’ve hailed.”

Shri Hari smiled and replied, “Dubli Bhatt has donated thirteen coins, which amounts to sacrificing everything he possesses. Hence, the mandir will be accomplished.” The entire assembly was stunned by Shri Hari’s words.

The *seva* and sacrifice of Dubli Bhatt are forever etched in golden letters in the annals of Satsang.

NITYANAND SWAMI AND NISHKULANAND SWAMI PROCEED TO PURCHASE A MURTI

The next day, Shri Hari called Nityanand Swami and asked, “Swami, bring the drawing of

the *murti* I had given to you earlier.” Soon enough, Nityanand Swami returned with a drawing of the *murti*. Shri Hari saw the drawing and said to Muktanand Swami, “I would like to install a stone *murti*, similar to this drawing, here in Gadhpur. Can anyone go to Dungarpur to acquire the *murti*?”

Muktanand Swami replied, “Maharaj, let us send Nityanand Swami and Nishkulanand Swami to Dungarpur. They both have a keen eye in such matters.” Shri Hari agreed and told Nityanand Swami, “Swami, you and Nishkulanand Swami go to Dungarpur and bring a dark *murti*, similar to my height and body.” Then, Shri Hari instructed two *parshads* to accompany them and gave them the money for the *murti*.

Shri Hari departed for Vartal on that same day.

HOW CAN WE GET A MURTI LIKE THAT OF MAHARAJ?

Nityanand Swami and Nishkulanand Swami arrived in Dungarpur. They looked at many *murtis* but they could not find one that matched Maharaj’s form and size. They found a white stone *murti* of Radhaji, but they could not find one that looked like Maharaj. Both of them were confounded as to what to do. After a while, Nityanand Swami asked Nishkulanand Swami, “Swami, do you understand?”

Nishkulanand Swami simply looked blankly at Nityanand Swami and asked, “What is there to understand? I cannot comprehend what you are trying to say.” Nityanand Swami smiled and revealed, “Swami, how can we find a *murti* of Maharaj’s form? We can get the *murtis* of Shri Krishna and Shri Ram because they were born thousands of years ago as divine avatars. However, our Bhagwan, Shri Purushottam Narayan, was never born before on this earth. Thus, how can we find his *murti*?”

Nishkulanand Swami replied, “Swami, it is difficult for someone like me, who is uneducated and worked as a carpenter, to understand you. But

now I understand from your explanation. So, what should we do now?”

Nityanand Swami replied, “Let us acquire stone from a mine and have it carved here.” Then, Nishkulanand Swami stated, “If we do that and the *murti* does not turn out to be a replica of Shriji Maharaj then all our efforts would be wasted. Instead, let us take the stone to Gadhpur and have it carved there.” Nityanand Swami agreed.

SHRIJI MAHARAJ APPEARS IN THE STONE

Both the *paramhansas* went to a stone mine and started searching for the right stone. Soon enough, they saw a nice black stone from a distance. To their surprise, they also saw the divine form of Shriji Maharaj instead of the stone and were intensely happy. They felt Maharaj himself had revealed the stone for his *murti*. As both of them came to the stone the divine form of Maharaj disappeared. They gave the money for the stone and got it extracted from the mine. They also bought the ready-made *murti* of Radhaji. Then, they had the black stone and the *murti* of Radhaji placed properly in a cart cushioned with grass. They then hired two sculptors to carve the *murti* and brought them along to Gadhpur.

At the same time, Shri Hari returned to Gadhpur from Vartal. He saw the stone and *murti* of Radhaji. Then, Nityanand Swami and Nishkulanand Swami informed, Maharaj, we had darshan of your divine form in this stone and so believed it was your wish to have a *murti* carved from it.” Shri Hari was pleased with their acumen. Then, Maharaj called the sculptors and spoke to them, “The mandir which will be built here will be done quickly. So, you’ll have to work fast in sculpting the *murti*. You will have to carve it according to my size and form. For that I will sit before you while you sculpture the stone. Once you are ready let me know.”

After the sculptors retired to their quarters Shri Hari called Narayanji Suthar and said, “I want to have a beautiful mandir built here. You

take the site measurements and draw a plan. Do not delay in this matter.” Narayanji Suthar understood Shri Hari’s instructions and went off to design the plan.

VISHWAKARMA WILL HIMSELF WORK THROUGH YOU

That same evening, Narayanji Suthar came to Shri Hari with the mandir plan. Ratno, a mason, and Jethabhai, a sculptor, were present before Maharaj. Shri Hari saw the plan and gave it to Ratno and Jethabhai to see. Both the artisans saw the plan in detail and then returned it to Maharaj. Shri Hari asked them, “What do you think of the plan?” Both replied, “Maharaj, the plan is very good and on its basis the mandir will turn out to be very beautiful.”

Shri Hari also called Dada Khachar and showed him the plan and he, too, was extremely pleased. Then, Shri Hari gave the plan to Narayanji Suthar and said, “You can start building the mandir according to this plan. The mandir will be beautiful and you will become renowned throughout the world. Vishwakarma (architect of the devas) will work through you. All the devas are eager to join in doing this *seva* and in pleasing me. Thus, there will be no hurdles during the construction work.” Shri Hari blessed all for the monumental task.

Dada Khachar was exhilarated about the mandir because he felt that even though Maharaj had decided to build the mandir in Gadhadra last, it would turn out to be the best. He also felt that with Maharaj himself supervising the project, every brick, mortar and stone would become sanctified. With these sentiments Dada Khachar was intensely elated and Shri Hari too was joyful in seeing him happy. ♦

(Contd. in next issue)

Translated from the Gujarati text of

Bhagwan Swaminarayan authored by Shri H.T. Dave

Guru Is the Bridge to God

In Sanatan Dharma's Ancient Shastras



GURU CONNECTS ONE TO GOD

The shastras of Sanatan Dharma immensely extol the glory of the spiritual guru. The Guru Gita (32) of the Skand Puran states that 'gu' means darkness and 'ru' means remover of that darkness: "The guru removes darkness and leads one to enlightenment."

It is important to understand this role of the guru since one cannot attain spiritual knowledge or enlightenment merely by self-endeavour. The Yogkundalini Upanishad (3.17) states, "Only by listening to the guru's sermons does one gain knowledge of Parabrahma."

In the Mundaka Upanishad, the guru is identified as the source for realizing *brahmavidya*, '*Tadvignānārtham sa gurumevābhigachchet*' – 'In order to realize that *brahmavidya*, one must go to the guru' (1.2.12). This statement is the life-line of spiritual endeavour, since it directs one to surrender to the guru. This is the technique for unravelling the profound secrets of all the shastras.

The Katha Upanishad describes the role of a guru, '*Yaha setureejānānāmaksharam Brahma yatparam, abhayam titeershatām pāram Nāchiketam shakemahi*' – 'For a spiritual aspirant who wishes to escape from the vortex and forceful

flow of *maya*, Aksharbrahma serves as a bridge' (3.2). Just as a bridge helps one cross over from one side of the river to the other, Aksharbrahma manifests as the guru and serves as a bridge (*setu*). He saves us from drowning in *maya*, helps us to cross the ocean of material pleasures and helps us attain Paramatma.

This principle is also stated in the Mundaka Upanishad: '*Amrutasyaisha setuhu*' – 'This Aksharbrahma is the bridge to attain the eternal Paramatma' (2.2.5).

TAKE REFUGE IN THE GURU

The Shvetashvatara Upanishad (6.23) shows how to serve such a guru:

*Yasya deve parā bhaktir yathā deve tathā gurau,
Tasyaite kathitā hi arthāhā prakāshante mahātmanaha.*

"Offer devotion to the guru as one would Paramatma. Therein one attains all there is to attain on the path to realizing Paramatma."

The Bhagavad Gita (4.34) similarly advises the true aspirant:

*Tadviddhi pranipātena pariprashnena sevayā,
Upadekshyanti te gnānam gnāninastattvadarshinah.*

"The disciple should prostrate to the guru, humbly pose questions to him and serve him. He

will then impart the knowledge of Paramatma, so ordain the wise sages.”

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE GURU

To identify such a guru, the Mundaka Upanishad states that the guru who is worthy of surrendering to should be ‘*Shrotriyam Brahmanishtham*’ (1.2.12). ‘*Shrotriyam*’ means that he should not only know the essence of all the shastras, but also live by them. Further, that guru should be ‘*Brahma*’ – Aksharbrahma himself. That guru should also be ‘*nishtham*’ – he should have staunch conviction in Paramatma and should be solely engrossed in bhakti (devotion) towards him.

In the Bhagavad Gita, such a guru has been referred to as ‘*Upadekshyanti te gnānam gnāninastattvadarshinaha*’ – ‘wise and seer of the entities’ (Gita 4.34).

Thus, having identified such a guru who can help us to realize *brahmavidya*, one should surrender to him and serve him, as exemplified by the following stories of three famous disciples from the ancient shastras – Aruni, Upamanyu and Satyakam Jabala.

1. ARUNI-UDALAK

(Bruhadaranyak Upanishad 6.5.3)

Aruni (pronounced Aaruni) was the son of Arun Rishi and a disciple of Dhaumya Rishi. When he approached his guru to attain knowledge, the guru stipulated certain conditions for his eligibility. This was the tradition of the Upanishads. Generally, the following conditions were to be observed by a pupil:

1. To serve (*seva*) in the guru’s ashram.
2. To live in the guru’s ashram, away from one’s family.



Guru finds Aruni lying down across a broken mud wall

3. To convince the guru that he, the disciple, would not misuse the knowledge imparted by the guru.
4. To bear all physical hardships during studentship.
5. To observe *brahmacharya*.

When Aruni went to study at Dhaumya Rishi’s ashram, the rishi instructed him to look after the ashram’s agricultural land and specifically told him to make small mud walls on its borders to prevent water draining out of the fields. When Aruni arrived at one

field, it was raining heavily.

To retain water in the field Aruni began shovelling mud to make a small wall. But the force of the rainwater would break it down. After many failed attempts, an idea occurred to him. He lay down sideways in the breach of the wall. This effectively stopped water spilling out. However, now that the wall was safe because of his body, how could he get up to return to the ashram?

Day turned to night. When Aruni had still not returned, the guru began to worry. He questioned the other disciples. They reminded him about his instructions to Aruni about making the mud walls. Thus, the rishi went off to the fields. Here he called out Aruni’s name. Aruni called back repeatedly to guide the guru to him.

By this time the mud wall behind Aruni had hardened and it was safe for him to get up. Therefore he got up and bowed to the guru. He related the events that prevented him from returning to the ashram. Then, he said, “Now, what is your command?” Despite such an ordeal, Aruni requested for further service. Pleased by Aruni’s enthusiasm to obey his commands, the guru blessed him and taught him *para* (spiritual) and *apara* (worldly) *vidya*. He then told Aruni, “Since you have made the wall [in the field], you will henceforth also be known as Udalak.”

Enlightened with knowledge, Aruni-Udalak returned home.

2. UPAMANYU

(Mahabharat, Aranyak Parva, 3.32-84)

Upamanyu was another disciple of Dhaumya Rishi. When he approached the rishi for knowledge, the latter replied, “*Gāhā rakshasva*” – “Protect the cows.”

Therefore Upamanyu spent the whole day in the jungle with the cows. When he returned to the ashram in the evening, he used to bow and prostrate to the guru. Once, the guru remarked, “O Upamanyu! You have become chubby. So tell me what do you eat in the jungle?”

Upamanyu replied, “I live by begging alms.”

Guru said, “It is a sin to eat without offering them to the guru. From now on, bring the alms to me. You shall have food only when I give it to you.”

Upamanyu agreed readily, wishing to please the guru. A few days later the guru asked him the same question.

Upamanyu revealed, “After offering alms to the guru, I beg alms again for myself.”

Guru said, “This karma is against dharma. It puts an extra burden on householders. It also becomes a problem for others begging alms. So stop this habit.”

Again, Upamanyu complied by the guru’s wish. A few days later, the guru questioned him.

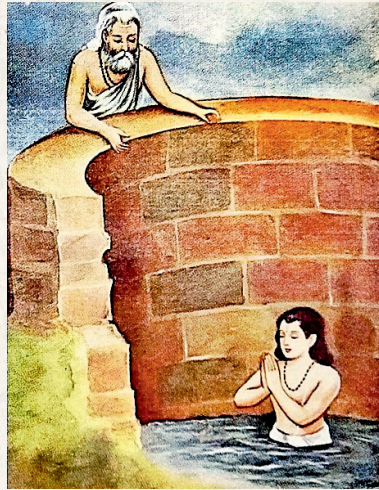
Upamanyu said, “I drink cow’s milk.”

Guru said, “Again, this is another bad karma. It is improper for you to drink the milk without my permission.”

When the guru asked him again, Upamanyu replied, “I live on the froth that is produced while the calves suckle milk from their mothers.”

Guru said, “Then the calves will remain a little hungry. So, do not take this froth either.”

Upamanyu obeyed this wish of his guru, too.



Guru finds Upamanyu in a well

Once, when he became very hungry, Upamanyu forgot all his promises and ate a few *ankado* leaves [this is a poisonous plant]. This made him blind. While the cows returned to the ashram in the evening, he followed them by listening to their bellowing. On the way, he fell into a well.

Meanwhile, the cows reached the ashram. When the guru noted Upamanyu’s absence, he wondered whether he might have fled, overcome by hunger because

of his strict discipline. He then summoned the other pupils to search for Upamanyu. They called out his name every now and then. Soon they heard a reply.

Upamanyu shouted, “O gurudeva! I am here, in a well.”

The pupils pulled him out. Upamanyu then related his story. The guru replied, “Sing the mantras of the Rig Veda in their proper musical metre and pray to the Ashwini Kumars [the twin physicians of the devas]. They will restore your sight.”

Upamanyu obeyed and sang the mantras. The Ashwini Kumars appeared and offered him a *malpudo* (sweet *roti* fried in ghee).

Upamanyu replied, “I cannot have this without offering it to my guru.”

The devas tested his firm resolution further, “Once your guru had prayed to us and he ate the *malpudo* without offering to his guru. So do not worry. Go ahead and eat it.”

Upamanyu remained steadfast and refused. This pleased the devas, “We are pleased with your devotion to your guru. You will regain your sight. You will attain greater fame.”

Upamanyu then related the incident to the guru, who was pleased. He blessed Upamanyu, “You will regain your sight. You will gain knowledge of all the dharma shastras. As you read

and study, you will gain greater insight and intuition.”

To please his guru, Upamanyu tolerated hunger and ate only what he was allowed. He obeyed him sincerely without caring for his body, even to the extent that he turned blind. Thus, he attained the guru’s blessings and knowledge.

3. SATYAKAM JABALA

(Chandogya Upanishad, 4.4–9)

Satyakam’s mother was named Jabala. Hence, he was known as Satyakam Jabala. Satyakam and his mother lived in a flimsy hut in the forest. To raise Satyakam, Jabala did hard labour work. She always told him stories about rishis, ascetics and celibates who performed spiritual endeavours in their ashrams in the jungle.

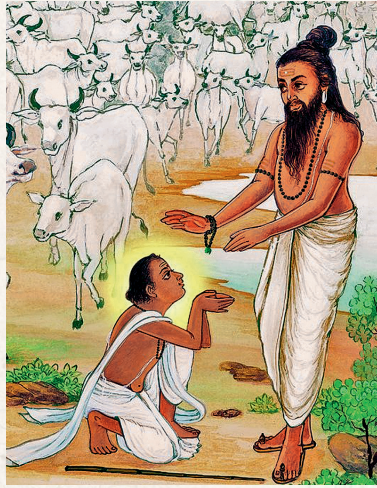
Once, when he was old enough to study at a guru’s ashram, he asked his mother the name of their lineage (*gotra*), about which his guru would inquire.

This perplexed Jabala since she did not have an answer. She would not lie because she had always urged Satyakam to live truthfully. Therefore, she said to Satyakam, “Since I arrived at your father’s house, I was always busy serving. Hence, I never had the time to inquire about his *gotra*. And he died soon after your birth. All I know is my name, Jabala and your name is Satyakam Jabala. Tell this to your guru.”

Satyakam left in search of a guru. He arrived at the ashram of Gautam Rishi. Satyakam divulged to him that he wished to live as a celibate to study under him.

Gautam Rishi asked him about his *gotra*, to which Satyakam replied, “O rishi! I do not know it. Even my mother does not know. She told me that I am Satyakam Jabala.” Hearing this, the guru fell in deep thought.

He then said, “Nobody but a Brahmin can say this so truthfully. Therefore, go and fetch



Gautam Rishi blesses Satyakam Jabala

fuelwood. I will perform your *upanayan sanskar* rite (the sacred thread ritual) because you have not forsaken the truth.” Gautam Rishi then invested him with a *janoi*. Thereafter, he told Satyakam to take his 400 weak cows into the forest and not to return until they had increased to a thousand.

Without asking a single question about his own food or shelter, Satyakam left for the forest with the cows.

For many years, Satyakam lovingly attended to the needs of the cows and protected them from wild animals. He gladly tolerated the hardships of living in the jungle, such as, danger of wild animals, lack of regular food for himself, rain, cold and heat, since he slept under the shade of trees. Except for the company of his cows, he probably had no contact with any humans. Without a determined yearning for *brahmavidya*, he would not have had the inner strength to overcome the above obstacles.

When the cows increased to a thousand, he began his journey back to the ashram. Along the way, various devas appeared and imparted partial knowledge about Brahma to him. By the time he reached the guru’s ashram, his face radiated the lustre of Brahma. The other disciples noticed this.

The guru therefore asked him, “Who imparted the knowledge of Brahma to you?”

“The devas,” replied Satyakam. “However, I wish that you impart this knowledge to me. I have heard that only the knowledge imparted by the guru renders it perfect.”

Pleased with his humility, the guru imparted to him *brahmavidya*. Satyakam then returned home.

Similar to Aruni and Upamanyu, Satyakam did not pose a single question to his guru about his personal requirements of food and shelter.

He must have possessed an intense craving to obtain knowledge in order to bear the hardships of living in the forest. How did he deal with the ever constant danger of predators such as tigers, lions, leopards and the more dangerous pack hunters such as hyenas and wild dogs? Besides animals, he braved the hardships of the weather. From a psychological viewpoint, his greatest foe was loneliness, to be able to survive without interaction with another human being.

Finally, the fact that he successfully obeyed the guru's instructions meant that during this period he also must have repeatedly fought with his mind, for he had initially approached the guru for knowledge of Brahma. How could this be achieved by looking after cows? However, we are able to appreciate this today when we read about Buddhist or Shaolin monks being ordered to perform a meaningless task such as climbing a mountain backwards or on their hands. Similarly, Satyakam obeyed his guru's command without doubt and total faith – *sharanagati*. This is the mark of a true disciple of the Upanishad.

CONCLUSION

So, what is the message for the spiritual aspirants of today? Again, the shastras guide on how to surrender to the guru to attain knowledge: The words '*samitpānihi*' (Mundaka Upanishad 1.2.12) and '*prashāntachittāya shamānvitāya*' (Mundaka Upanishad 1.2.13) show the method.

Samitpānihi means one must go to the guru with *samidh* in hand. *Samidh* is firewood used in *yagnas*. The underlying sentiment is to serve with total *sharanagati* – complete surrender with mind, speech and actions. If a disciple wants to attain knowledge, his first duty is to humbly and enthusiastically serve the guru. If he is arrogant and lazy, he will not attain knowledge even if he stays with the guru.

'*Prashāntachittāya*' means 'stability of mind and inner satisfaction'. What can a wavering mind grasp? Nothing is understood if the mind is agitated. To attain knowledge one must focus one's

mind and serve the guru.

'*Shamānvitāya*' means control of the senses – forgoing unnecessary or unsuitable pleasures. By controlling the senses, one can clearly hear, understand and imbibe the precepts given by the guru. Uncontrolled senses remain engrossed in material pleasures, making the realization of *brahmavidya* ever-distant.

The Upanishads stipulate one more immensely important discipline which pupils need to observe. In the Prashna Upanishad (1.2), after having studied the Vedas and observed *brahmacharya*, six pupils approach Pippalad Rishi for knowledge. He commands them to observe *brahmacharya* sincerely for one more year: '*Brahmacharyena shraddhayā samvatsaram*.' Thus, he emphasizes the importance of *brahmacharya* for attaining spiritual knowledge.

The Bhagavad Gita (8.11) also advocates *brahmacharya* for those who wish to realize Akshar (Aksharbrahma).

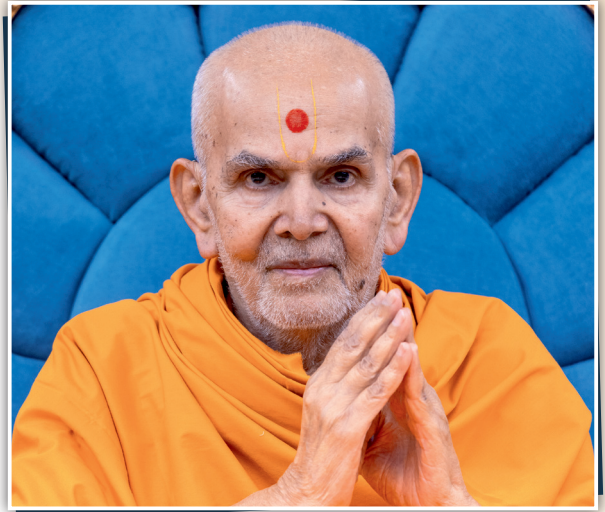
This is the obligation of a disciple who has surrendered to the guru.

Today, we are fortunate to have such a guru in Mahant Swami Maharaj. He is the manifest form of Aksharbrahma and is our bridge to Parabrahma Bhagwan Swaminarayan.

Therefore, as his disciples we should serve him sincerely and obtain *brahmavidya* from him.

This means that we should do only that which pleases Swamishri. As he often says, the guru is pleased when we firmly observe the precepts given by Shriji Maharaj in the Shikshapatri and other injunctions given in the Vachanamrut and Swamini Vato. Additionally, we should also observe the codes of the Satsang Diksha and other commands that Swamishri himself has advocated over the years. Like the disciples of the Upanishads, it behoves us to observe all these injunctions with intense faith, whether we initially understand their meaning or not. ♦

Ideal Guru-Bhakti



All throughout his life, Mahant Swami Maharaj has always held Bhagwan Swaminarayan and gurus Yogiji Maharaj and Pramukh Swami Maharaj in the highest esteem. His thoughts, sentiments and actions have pivoted around them. He thus puts them above himself by profoundly revering them, praising them, loving them and believing them to be his ideal in all that he does. The essence of his self-effacing personality and humility lies in his bhakti towards his guru and Bhagwan. He believes the swamis and devotees associated with him to be muktas and disciples of Bhagwan and guru. His conviction in God and guru as the all-doers remains unflagging in all his works. His God and guru-centric life is a source of profound inspiration and strength for all spiritual aspirants endeavouring on the path of moksha. As part of the Guru Purnima Festival, that falls on 20 July, let us take a cue from some interesting and inspiring incidents of Mahant Swami Maharaj's ideal guru bhakti.

GOD AND GURU FIRST

Whenever Mahant Swami Maharaj blesses someone he does not say or write, “You have my blessings.” Instead, he responds, “Blessings of Swami Bapa and my prayers for you.”

Today, Swamishri's attendants told him while he was writing a letter, “Now you are the guru, so all expect to have your blessings. Thus, you should say or write that you are blessing them.” So, Swamishri humbly wrote at the end of a letter, “I have prayed to Harikrishna Maharaj and Pramukh Swami Maharaj. You have my prayers and blessings.” Mahant Swami Maharaj firmly believes Bhagwan Swaminarayan and guru Pramukh Swami Maharaj to be foremost in his life.

14 September 2016, New Delhi

GURU BHAKTI

Jignesh, a devotee, requested, “Swamishri, I have a wish. Kindly say yes to it.” Then, he explained, “I am going to build a new home, and I wish to name it ‘Keshav Palace’”

Swamishri said no. Jignesh requested again to allow him to use his name.

Swamishri replied, “The guru's name [Pramukh Swami Maharaj] should always be first.”

Jignesh argued further, “Until now, whatever constructions of homes and offices I had done were named after Pramukh Swami Maharaj. However, from now onwards, [as you are our guru], allow me to name my new constructions after you.”

Swamishri patiently answered, “In Pramukh Swami's name all are included.”

Out of his profound devotion and reverence to his guru Mahant Swami Maharaj remained unrelenting in his resolve.

5 October 2016, Nadiad

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FULFILLING A DEVOTEE'S WISH

Aksharprem Swami narrated an incident of Mahant Swami Maharaj: "It was 2013, and Mahant Swamiji arrived in Jaipur. One day, Swamishri returned to the mandir after visiting and sanctifying the homes of devotees. A devotee was waiting in the mandir for Mahant Swami to arrive. He said, 'My home has not been sanctified by you.' I knew the devotee was going to stay there for only two years and thereafter he would be moving elsewhere. So, I reminded the devotee that his house was under renovation and it would not be proper for Mahant Swami to visit his temporary home. But he insisted and wished that you came. Subsequently, you told me, 'Let us go.'"

"It was 1.00 p.m. The attendant sadhu had told you not to go because you were already late for lunch. In spite of that you wished to please the devotee and thus visited his house and took your lunch after coming back to the mandir. You satisfied him, and then on our way back I asked you, 'Don't you get bored during such situations?' You replied, 'I've never stuck to my resolve [on such matters]. Yogiji Maharaj taught us to please others. Pramukh Swami Maharaj had ignored his mealtimes to please the devotees.'"

Mahant Swami Maharaj disregarded his routine schedule and discomfort to please a devotee and respect his wish.

8 February 2017, Sarangpur

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ABSOLUTE OBEDIENCE

Swamishri was asked why he was inclined towards eating baked puffed rice (*mamra*) for breakfast. He recalled, "I was a *parshad* at that time and was with Yogiji Maharaj in Nadiad. Whenever we had to travel by train there was a great chance that we would have to observe a fast. So, prior to the

journey, I used to take a heavy breakfast or meal. That morning, in Nadiad, there were *patarveliya* for breakfast. I decided to eat more of them. However, when someone came to serve them in my bowl, Yogiji Maharaj stopped him and said, 'Don't serve them to him. He doesn't like *patarveliya*, he likes *mamra*.' So from then on I've been eating *mamra*."

The attendants asked, "So, you don't like *patarveliya*?"

Swamishri replied, "I do, but I don't eat them."

Swamishri gave up his own inclination and taste preference to abide by the guru's wish, thus reflecting his total dedication and obedience to his guru.

27 June 2017, Atlanta

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FOLLOWING THE GURU'S WAY

As part of the 150th Anniversary Celebration of the Akshar Deri in Gondal, a grand *mahapuja* ritual was held on the festival ground. In the concluding part of the *mahapuja*, Swamishri stood up to perform the *arti*. Swamishri's routine of standing up to do the *arti* has been observed on many occasions. In spite of Swamishri being requested on all the occasions to remain seated and perform the *arti*, he has always stood up.

Today, Brahmavatsal Swami asked Swamishri, "Swami, why is it that you stand up to perform the *arti*? Is it out of respect for Thakorji?"

Swamishri replied in the affirmative and then added, "Swami Bapa [Pramukh Swami Maharaj] always stood up to perform *arti*. Later, because of old age, he did it while sitting in a chair. That's why I stand up to perform the *arti*."

Swamishri follows the devotional tradition practised by his guru.

21 January 2018, Gondal

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SUPREME PEACE

Swamishri arrived at the Swaminarayan Akshardham in New Delhi yesterday, after celebrating the 150th Anniversary Celebrations of Akshar Deri in Gondal. In contrast to the thousands of devotees and 800 sadhus in Gondal,

there were only a few sadhus seated here before him. Due to this stark difference, Harinivas Swami asked Swamishri, “After celebrating a big festival in Gondal, you must be feeling at ease and peace here with only a few sadhus before you.”

Swamishri replied, “[I] experience supreme peace no matter how many are present or not. I’m connected with two – Maharaj and Swami – and so I’m always at peace – 24 hours.”

Everyone was left speechless and realized that Swamishri’s inner peace and joy were not dependant on mundane standards and circumstances.

31 January 2018, New Delhi

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SINGING THE GLORY OF HIS GURU’S EFFORTS

Swamishri departed from Sarangpur at about 5 p.m. to head towards Bochasan and Anand by road. Along the way, Swamishri guided and blessed devotees by phone about their problems and requests. Swamishri also insisted upon slowing the car where devotees had gathered on the village outskirts for darshan. In this way, after slowing down at the outskirts of 20 villages, Swamishri reached Anand late at 8.15 p.m. After doing Thakorji’s darshan, Swamishri attended the welcome assembly and gave darshan to all. By the time Swamishri sat down for dinner it was 9 p.m., one hour later than his daily routine. While having dinner, Swamishri said, “Whatever honours and welcomes I get, I offer them at the feet of Maharaj and Swami. Thus, I’m free [and unburdened of all honours].”

Swamishri’s striking bhakti and humility touched all.

After dinner, an attendant sadhu spoke about today’s late arrival in Anand, “Swami, it took us over three hours to get here!” Instantly, Swamishri remembered Pramukh Swami Maharaj, “Once, Pramukh Swami Maharaj travelled from Badalpur to Anand. The route was only one hour long, but he left in the morning and reached Anand at night. So, in comparison [to that] it was nothing for us!”

Swamishri dismissed the delay and fatigue of

his journey by praising his guru’s endeavours.

15 June 2018, Anand

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BHAKTI TOWARDS THE LORD AND GURU

Swamishri arrived for the evening satsang assembly. The stage comprised of a traditional tribal straw hut. In the middle was a beautiful sofa for Mahant Swami Maharaj, flanked by raised seats for the *murtis* of Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj and Pramukh Swami Maharaj. As soon as Swamishri saw his seat he frowned and uttered, “Maharaj’s seat is ordinary, Swami Bapa’s seat is also ordinary and mine is royal!” Swamishri expressed his displeasure for the inappropriate arrangement. Hurriedly, the attendants brought an ordinary sofa for Swamishri. Thereafter, Swamishri felt pleased and comfortable.

Swamishri’s bhakti and humility towards Shriji Maharaj and guru Pramukh Swami Maharaj are exemplary.

31 June 2018, Godhra

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GURU-CENTRIC

Gurumanan Swami asked Swamishri, “While giving *samip* darshan to the devotees what do you think about them?”

Swamishri replied, “They are all *muktas* [liberated souls] and they are all divine.”

Shrutipriya Swami asked, “They are divine because of Mahant Swami’s association?”

Swamishri instantly denied, “No, they are divine because of Pramukh Swami Maharaj’s association.”

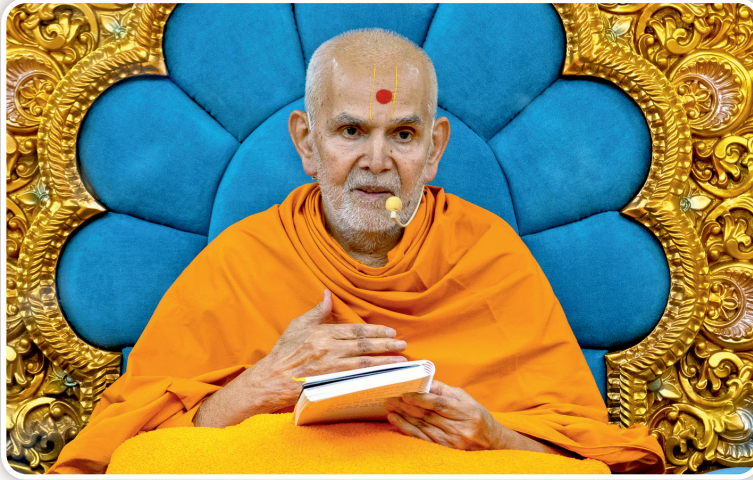
Shrutipriya Swami argued, “While the devotees came before you for *samip* darshan, the bhajan that was being played had the name of Mahant Swami.”

Swamishri replied, “It doesn’t matter what is written in the kirtan, but all are divine because of Pramukh Swami’s association.”

The unique aspect of all the Gunatit gurus is to give credit and praise to their gurus. Whereas our lives are self-centric, the genuine guru is always God- and guru-centric in all his actions and words. Such a guru is an ideal for all spiritual aspirants. ♦

23 January 2019, Surat

Glory and Need of Guru



On many occasions, Mahant Swami Maharaj has affectionately spoken about the glory and need of a true guru in life and on the path of spiritual sadhanas. His love and reverence for his gurus, Yogiji Maharaj and Pramukh Swami Maharaj, are amply reflected in many of his discourses. Some selected translated extracts from his blessings are as follows.

In Pramukh Swami Maharaj's heart, there was nothing other than Bhagwan. One could find nothing other than Shriji Maharaj in every pore of his body. In his every virtue there were embedded many other virtues. His divine virtues cannot be described; they are virtues of Bhagwan. One who bears the virtues of Bhagwan means everything. He was a living idol of virtues.

7 December 2016, Surat

The guru anchors us to Bhagwan. Thus, we become safe and assured. The guru behaves with humility and so he harbours nothing else other than Bhagwan. He endeavours so that we anchor ourselves more and more to Bhagwan. To attain Shriji Maharaj, to offer bhakti to him, we have to doubtlessly anchor ourselves to the guru.

28 October 2017, Gandhinagar

After attaining a true guru all our works are accomplished. We have attained gurus Shastriji

Maharaj, Yogiji Maharaj and Pramukh Swami Maharaj. Oh! How genuine they are! Thus, Akshardham and everything is here. We are very fortunate because we have attained a true guru.

29 August 2018, Atladara

The characteristics of a boat is to float and carry people, regardless of their high or low status, across an ocean. The Satpurush is akin to a boat. When one takes refuge in him, he transports the *jivas* across the vast ocean of life. He has come to grant *moksha*.

7 September 2018, Ahmedabad

We have nothing to worry because we have attained a Gunatit guru. However, we have to remain strong and firm in satsang. No one can liberate us other than Bhagwan and Sant. We are indeed fortunate that we have come to the right place.

7 October 2018, Bhavnagar

Without a guru it is not possible to attain God-realization or attachment with Bhagwan. The main point is that nothing can be done without a guru. Through a guru things become easier. How fortunate and blessed we are to have attained such a guru. He is such that he enables us to attain all things. Without a guru, one cannot attain the highest bliss, meaning Bhagwan's bliss.

8 July 2020, Nenpur

The qualities of a guru are not that he works miracles or flies in the sky. A guru is one in whom a disciple is convinced and has faith that he is liberated from the cycles of birth and death and everything else. We have attained such a guru in Shastriji Maharaj, Yogiji Maharaj and Pramukh Swami Maharaj, and are convinced to the extent that he will liberate us in the click of a finger.

12 October 2020, Nenpur

Sant (guru) is the centre point. If one wants to please Bhagwan, one will require a guru. To develop faith in Bhagwan, one will require a guru. To serve Bhagwan, one will require a guru. Without him, things will go haywire and one cannot reap any fruits.

11 November 2020, Nenpur

Pramukh Swami Maharaj is a repository of virtues; an ocean of virtues. The more you dive deep (into his life), the more virtues you will find. He has infinite virtues, however his humility has touched me (the most). Swami Bapa had an awesome habit. What? He always kept his hands folded. Bhagwan resides in Pramukh Swami Maharaj. One finds in him the infinite virtues of Bhagwan.

3 December 2020, Nenpur

Pramukh Swami Maharaj was an expert in both spirituality and social affairs (*vyavahar*). Someone else may either have one of the two

(qualities). Gunatitanand Swami, Shastriji Maharaj, Yogiji Maharaj, Pramukh Swami Maharaj did *vyavahar* by remaining firm in their *niyams* and renunciation of money and women. It is very difficult to execute *vyavahar* while adhering to one's moral disciplines. In fact, people lose their (moral) bearings altogether. The Gunatit gurus are firm in their *niyams* and renunciation of money and women.

11 June 2021, Nenpur

True *atma* darshan is possible through an association with the Satpurush (guru). The reason being the Satpurush is God-realized. He sees Bhagwan in the way we see each other.

29 September 2021, Sarangpur

Pramukh Swami Maharaj had offered his life and soul for the devotees. He had no personal life. He tolerated insults and pains to fulfil the wish of others. His life was grand.

Whether we know it or not Pramukh Swami Maharaj showered his blessings on all. He united broken families. Shriji Maharaj and Pramukh Swami Maharaj are both one. May we follow his teachings resolutely and do *seva* and *bhakti*.

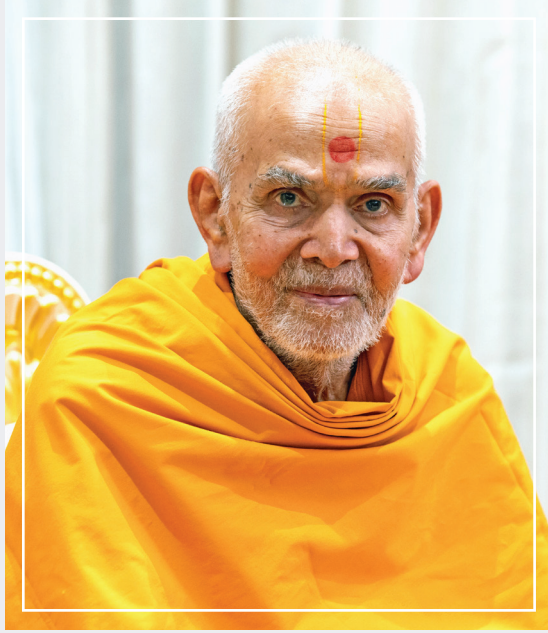
1 October 2021, Sarangpur

Swami (Pramukh Swami Maharaj) had a pure heart. He never had any ill-will for anyone. Whatever he did was out of his heart and that was why he was always peaceful.

11 February 2022, Atladara

Pramukh Swami Maharaj sacrificed his whole life for others. It is amazing when he took time out for himself! ◆

3 August 2022, Ahmedabad



Insights on Harmony

Unity is an essential characteristic that is at the root of collective progress and personal peace of mind. By cooperating and working together, a common goal is readily achieved. Similarly, harmonious relationships with others on an individual basis fills one with confidence and positivity. Mahant Swami Maharaj emphasizes such unity and harmony, repeatedly teaching it and encouraging its practice.

From his late teens, for two decades, Mahant Swami Maharaj was under the direct tutelage of guru Yogiji Maharaj. During this period, Yogiji Maharaj revealed and emphasized many spiritual messages for individuals and the satsang community to internalize and practise. One such phrase Yogiji Maharaj regularly stressed was ‘*samp, suhradbhav, ekta* – harmony, fraternity, unity’. The entire satsang rallied to live as per this calling.

Harmony, fraternity and unity are related concepts but with slightly different nuances: Harmony emphasizes the idea of togetherness and solidarity. Fraternity emphasizes camaraderie among individuals who share similar values or goals. Unity emphasizes interconnectedness and oneness.

Pramukh Swami Maharaj also vigorously promoted this message. On 27 August 1990, *yuvaks* from throughout the UK had gathered at the farmhouse of Shri Mukeshbhai Pabari in Rushden, near Wellingborough, for a special outing with Pramukh Swami Maharaj.

During the assembly, Pramukh Swami Maharaj was asked, “How should the *yuvaks* of UK engage in *seva* to please you.”

Pramukh Swami Maharaj replied, “With *samp, suhradbhav* and *ekta*. Talk about each other’s *mahima* and tolerate. Then you will be happy. Everyone makes mistakes. Correct them and move forward.”

Since becoming the guru of BAPS, Mahant Swami Maharaj has continued to emphasize the importance and necessity of harmony in all aspects of life. Through his discourses, letters, phone calls, personal counselling, art, gestures and in numerous other ways, he continues to emphasize the indispensable nature of harmony.

The following incidents reveal just how much harmony in its myriad forms is at the core of Mahant Swami Maharaj’s vision for spiritual progress.

15 SEPTEMBER 2016, MUMBAI

During lunch, Divyatanay Swami recalled an incident from 2012 in Indore. A devotee named Dilipbhai Rathod and his 35 family members lived harmoniously under one roof. They had moved to a larger house, where Mahant Swami went for *padhramani*. The house had three floors above the ground level. At that time a Sanstha-level protocol

had been passed that in such circumstances the *sadguru* swamis should sanctify the ground floor only and only go to the other floors if a lift is available.

Dilipbhai and his family were delighted that Swamishri had come. Then, despite no lift availability, Swamishri himself insisted on sanctifying all three floors and the terrace. Afterwards, when asked why he had taken such trouble, Swamishri said, “Just look at the unity of this family.”

4 MARCH 2017, PINDVADA

After lunch, Haritilak Swami was returning to Gandhinagar. He asked Swamishri, “We go to the villages around Gandhinagar to conduct *sabhas*. Do you have a message for the devotees?” Swamishri replied, “*Samp* – Harmony.”

29 MARCH 2017, LENASIA

The trustees honoured Swamishri with a farewell garland and asked, “Do you have a message for us trustees?” Swamishri raised his hand and said, “*Samp*.”

9 JANUARY 2018, SURAT

At 12.10 p.m. Swamishri sat to take lunch. While eating, he was contemplating on unity. He picked up a piece of broccoli from his bowl and held it in his hand. He said, “*Sampelu parivar* – a united family!”

So, a swami asked, “Swami, how is broccoli a *sampelu parivar*?”

Swamishri said, “They do not separate easily. Compare it with grapes in a loom. The grapes will separate, but not a stalk of broccoli.”

15 FEBRUARY 2018, AUCKLAND, NEW ZEALAND

After dinner in the evening, a 12-year-old *balak* asked Swamishri, “What is a life without unity like?” Swamishri and others were astonished to hear this question from such a young boy. Swamishri then mimed a fighting action with his

hands. Everyone applauded. Then, Swamishri said, “Without *samp*, there will court cases, fighting, chaos and other problems. Where there is *samp*, everyone adjusts, compromises and tolerates. Our duty is to think how to sustain *samp*, what *niyams* and *dharma* to observe, how to speak and so on. This is all our personal responsibility. Do not expect it from others. In *samp*, we must ourselves endeavour to sustain it.”

21 MARCH 2018, GOLD COAST

After puja, Atmaswarup Swami introduced two brothers to Swamishri. They had severed all ties over a family dispute, but now, understanding Swamishri’s wish for unity, they had reconciled to re-establish normal relations and work together.

Swamishri was overjoyed to hear this and raised both arms in appreciation. Then, he blessed both, served puja *prasada* to both directly into their mouths and gave them sanctified flowers. He blessed them profusely and then even bowed down to touch their feet. The brothers were taken aback by Swamishri’s gestures and resolved to maintain their unity.

Thereafter, as Swamishri was returning to his room, Shrutipriya Swami asked, “Swami, why did you bow to the two brothers?” Swamishri replied, “Yogi Bapa would do *dandvats*. At least I should touch their feet.”

“But, what did they do that you are so pleased?”

“They have united,” Swamishri said.

“But that was for their family matter.”

Swamishri said, “Yogi Bapa did not even know the two brothers who came to him to pledge unity. Yet, he was so happy that he fed them *penda* and was ready to do *dandvats* to them. Wherever there is unity, it is grand and glorious. And we should appreciate it wherever we see it. Look at this scenery – whether here or in England or India, we like it. Similarly, Bhagwan likes unity wherever it is. Everyone, whether they know it or not, likes unity – because it gives peace and enables progress. It is always beneficial.”

30 APRIL 2018, NEW DELHI

In the evening assembly, the security department volunteers asked Swamishri, “To go to the Akshardham above, what pass is necessary?” Swamishri replied, “*Samp*.”

22 OCTOBER 2018, GADHADA

During lunch, *balaks* participated in a kirtan quiz. For each correct answer, the *balaks* received a chocolate. Among them, 10-year-old Dharmesh Kalathia gave the most right answers and so received many chocolates. Towards the end of Swamishri’s lunch, a sweet dish was placed before him. Dharmesh said, “Bapa, these are delicious *gharis* from Surat. Please eat some.” So, Swamishri took a small piece.

Again, Dharmesh stood up and said, “Bapa, if you eat some more *ghari*, then I will distribute all the chocolates I have received to the other *balaks*.” Swamishri was delighted by his sentiments of sharing and ate another piece of *ghari*. And, as promised, Dharmesh stood up and distributed his chocolates among all the *balaks*. Swamishri put down the bowl of water he was drinking and clapped in acknowledgement. Then, he asked for some chocolates and presented them to Dharmesh.

25 FEBRUARY 2019, SANKARI

On the way to lunch, Swamishri met a boy holding a model of a house he had made. He said, “Swami, this house represents *samp*. Please stay in it always.” Pleased, Swamishri said, “Yes, where there is *samp*, God is always present.”

15 APRIL 2019, SARANGPUR

From Sarvasva, Swamishri sat in the open golf cart to go to the assembly hall for his morning puja. Today, videographer Jayeshbhai Sadhak was seated in the front seat. He joked with Swamishri, “Every day I have to run alongside the golf cart, but today it’s Gurudarshan Swami’s turn.” Hearing this, Gurudarshan Swami responded, “I’m genuinely pleased that he is sitting.” Swamishri

was so delighted by this camaraderie that he stretched his hand out of the open golf cart, held Gurudarshan Swami’s hand and placed it on his own head.

30 SEPTEMBER 2019, LIMURU, KENYA

Today was the first day of the Sant Shibir. So, on behalf of all, Pujya Tyagvallabh Swami garlanded Swamishri. At the apex of the garland ‘*Apnu sampelu parivar* (Our harmonious family)’ was written. Swamishri read this and touched it reverently to his eyes. Such a simple act revealed Swamishri’s emphasis on *samp*.

16 SEPTEMBER 2023, ROBBINSVILLE

Shri Bouna N’Diaye, a renowned basketball and soccer agent, asked Swamishri, “After Covid-19 I had darshan at Atlanta mandir and today I have had darshan here. I feel the power of unity here. How can we unite our society?”

Swamishri replied, “Understand each others’ *mahima* (greatness).”

28 FEBRUARY 2022, KANAD (SURAT)

A youth came to Swamishri seeking blessings for his upcoming marriage. Swamishri guided, “Live with *samp* and you will be happy.”

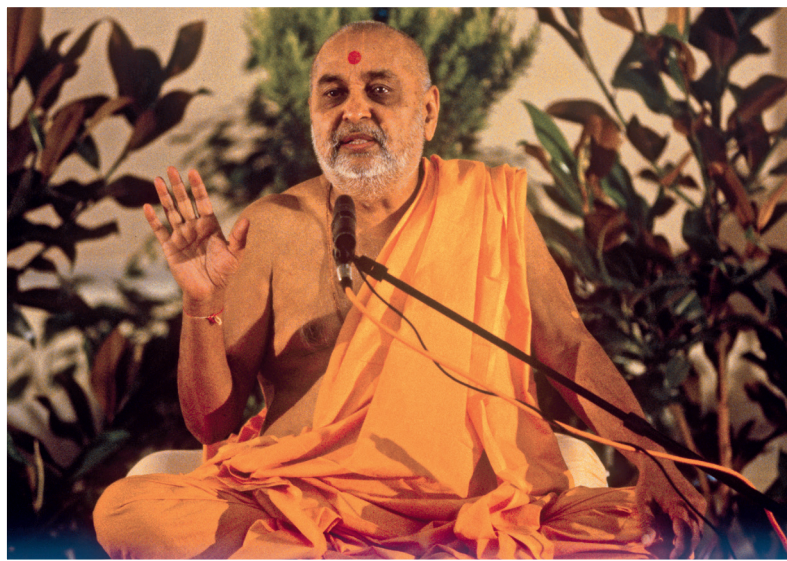
18 JANUARY 2021, NENPUR

Swamishri spoke on the phone to a devout *satsangi* family which had resolved a long-standing family dispute and pledged to maintain unity. Swamishri blessed, “You have done a great thing. Maharaj and all our Gunatit gurus are happy. I am also pleased.”

The family prayed, “Swami! Bless us that our family unity remains forever and we can always please you.”

Swamishri blessed, “What you have done is great. Maharaj-Swami are on your side and you have to keep them on your side. Through unity all your works will be accomplished. So, always maintain this unity.” ♦

Question Time with PRAMUKH SWAMI MAHARAJ



On 4 December 1993, a senior Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) engineer came to Swamishri and asked a question.

Engineer: I have a big responsibility in ISRO and am always in tension. However, you were appointed president at the age of 28. When Shastriji Maharaj gave you the responsibility, how did you feel?

Swamishri: It was my guru's wish; he had selected me and I had his blessings. I had no capacity or ability, but he had told me, 'Remember Maharaj and endeavour.' He is the one doing everything.

* * *

In Jodhpur, on 14 March 1994, a newspaper reporter interviewed Swamishri.

Reporter: I have heard that being a guru is a curse. Is that so?

Swamishri: If you declare yourself a guru, then it is a curse. But if you follow your guru's wishes, it is not a curse. Also, the one who is honoured is not the guru, but the one who serves is the real guru.

* * *

In London, on 15 May 1994, David, Daniel and Richard, all residents of Sussex, came to meet Swamishri.

David: Four days ago, you appeared in my dreams. You explained to me what *nirvikalp samadhi* is and made me experience it. Do you experience *nirvikalp samadhi* 24-hours-a-day?

Swamishri: While engaged in all activities, I remember God at all times, so I experience it.

David: How can we attain such *nirvikalp samadhi*?

Swamishri: By the guru's grace. Through faith and by obeying the guru's commands.

* * *

In Atlanta, on 29 June 1994, *kishores* asked Swamishri some questions.

Kishores: Bapa! How are you able to work in Akshardham and here?

Swamishri: I am not doing anything. It is Bhagwan, and him only, who does everything. Here [on earth] and there [in Akshardham], God resides in us to do everything.

Rashmi, a *balak*: Bapa, what is Yogiji Maharaj doing at this moment?

Swamishri: He is seated here and speaking to you.

* * *

In Atlanta, on 2 July 1994, during a convention for all *bal-balikas* (children), *kishores-kishoris* (teenagers) and *yuvaks-yuvatis* (youths), the delegates had a question-answer session with Swamishri.

Q: Bapa! In Shastriji Maharaj's and Yogiji Maharaj's presence, you managed many big festivals. Did these cause you tension?

Swamishri: Since, everything was done to please them, I never had any tension or worries. Problems arose during the work, but through cooperation, everything was done.

Q: Swami, how can we please you?

Swamishri: By serving and offering devotion as per Bhagwan's wishes.

Q: Bapa, do you ever got bored doing all this *seva*?

Swamishri: No. I have come to do *seva*. If your mind wavers and has desires, then boredom arises. When the guru commands, 'Do this,' and we do it, then there are no problems; otherwise difficulties arise. When you act wilfully, boredom and frustration arise. If you believe that this *seva* is for our *moksha*, liberation, and do it to please Bhagwan and guru, then boredom will not arise.

Q: Swami, you have been doing *seva* since Shastriji Maharaj's time. How do you adjust to us modern youngsters?

Swamishri: You are not modern! Those who do not follow *niyams* and dharma are modern.

There may be new ways of doing things, but everyone is serving to promote satsang. So, there is no difference of opinion in that. I adopt your ideas and thoughts and so the work gets done.

Q: What main thought remains with you while engaged in your activities daily, monthly and annually?

Swamishri: I am doing *seva* to please Shriji Maharaj, Gunatitanand Swami, Bhagatji Maharaj, Shastriji Maharaj and Yogiji Maharaj – not to receive praise or enhance myself. Whether the work is accomplished or not is Maharaj's wish. Maharaj is the all-doer. If you serve with this belief, you will always be happy.

Q: Swami, you experience many occasions of honour and insult. What is the secret of your mental stability?

Swamishri: Whether honoured or insulted, our work is for Bhagwan. With this understanding, there is no problem.

Q: In reference to Pramukh Swami Maharaj's Amrut Mahotsav to be celebrated in November–December 1995, 'What is the true meaning of Amrut Mahotsav?'

Swamishri: To attain the *brahmic* state, to earn Bhagwan's blessings, to live a pious and virtuous life and to always endeavour to please the Satpurush.

Also, to introspect: have I reduced my worldly desires, attachments and base natures. How much have I developed spiritually? Has my ego, anger, jealousy, greed reduced? Has my spiritual knowledge and understanding advanced? By removing one's *swabhavs*, one becomes virtuous. True Amrut Mahotsav is when one becomes like *amrut* (nectar).

Q: Bapa, we live in an age of computers and short cuts. So, what is the easiest way to please you?

Swamishri: By observing all the *agnas* and keeping the goal to please the Satpurush as the priority. Computers were invented after many efforts; but we want things without trying; that is not possible. You must endeavour.

* * *

In Dallas, on 11 July 1994, Swamishri attended an assembly of children and teenagers.

Q: Bapa, which bhajan do you like?

Swamishri: Since they are all about Bhagwan, I like them all. But, I like to sing '*Joi murti manohar tãri...*'

Q: Swami! Which is your most favourite moment of the day?

Swamishri: All 24 hours are with Maharaj. So, every moment is a favourite.

Q: Bapa! Why do you not show miracles or grant *samadhi*?

Swamishri: Everything is achieved due to Maharaj. Not due to miracles. To remove *swabhav* is a great miracle. Today, youths renounce everything and become sadhus to worship Bhagwan. That is a miracle.

* * *

In Los Angeles, on 20 July 1994, a casual conversation took place after breakfast between *balaks*, *kishores* and Swamishri.

Q: Swami! Why does everyone call you 'Bapa'?

Swamishri: Because I became Yogi Bapa's 'son'. Actually, I am not Bapa, I am a *sevak*. But, due to Yogi Bapa, everyone also calls me that.

Q: Bapa, where is your home?

Swamishri: Everyone's home is Akshardham. That is the home where we all will live. These houses will crumble one day.

Q: Bapa, what is the most important occasion of your life?

Swamishri: To have met Shastriji Maharaj and Yogiji Maharaj and to have come to worship Bhagwan.

* * *

In London, on 4 September 1994, during the special *yuva* assembly, the youths asked some questions.

Q: When Shastriji Maharaj and Yogiji Maharaj gave you any commands, did you feel any tension?

Swamishri: When Bhagwan and the Satpurush give a command, it is for our *moksha*. So, there should not be any tension. Even if you

do not enjoy that *seva* or have difficulty in doing it, you must think, 'Who is instructing me?' and do it. Bhagwan and the Satpurush are independent. If you do as per Vachanamrut Gadhada III 11, you will be fine.

Q: Bapa! Even amid all your responsibilities, you remain fresh and happy. What is your secret?

Swamishri: Because everything is done as per Maharaj's and the guru's instructions, the tasks are not a burden. The outcome is Maharaj's wish, so there is no tension. Overcome 'I' and immerse in Bhagwan and guru. If you do this, you'll be happy 24-hours-a-day.

Q: Swami! When we do *seva* in the parking, kitchen and other departments, we do not get to associate with you directly. So, should we do *seva* or take *labh*?

Swamishri: Whenever you do *seva* or bhakti as per *agna*, the *murti* will always be with you. By obeying the *agna*, you will not be attached and will earn *rajipo*. By obeying *agna*, dharma, *jnan*, *vairagya* and bhakti will develop. By doing *seva* without looking at others' faults and focusing only on Shriji Maharaj, you will experience true peace. Tyagvallabh Swami looked after the kitchen duties for 10 years in Mumbai. He only went for darshan once (during puja), but earned Yogi Bapa's *rajipo*.

Q: Swami, when we reach home, we become relaxed. Where is your home where you go to relax?

Swamishri: My home is where Bhagwan and his devotees are. Where spiritual discourses are taking place is my home. Everyone here is our community, so keeping their company is like home. Believe the mandir as your home and the satsang as your family, then you will not feel any misery. Whether in India or abroad, wherever Bhagwan is, I believe as my home. So, wherever I go is home. ♦

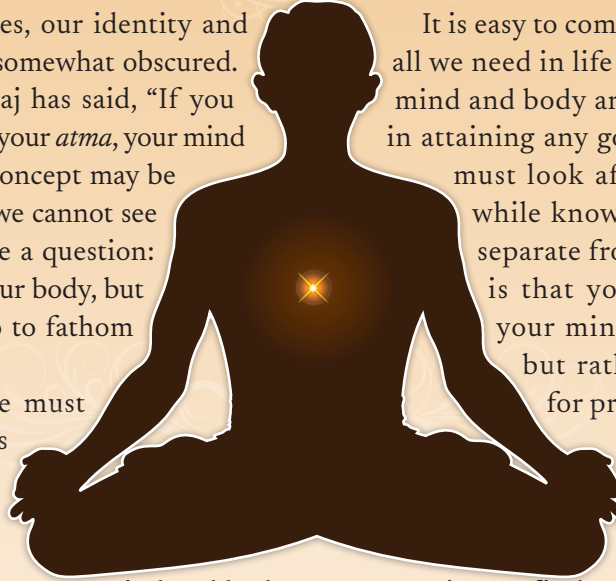
About Atma

*“Your body is the vessel in which your soul pervades
the intricate constructs of your mind.”*

- Anonymous

Throughout our lives, our identity and direction may become somewhat obscured. Mahant Swami Maharaj has said, “If you lean your mind towards your *atma*, your mind becomes steady.” This concept may be difficult to grasp since we cannot see our *atma*. I will propose a question: we use a mirror to see our body, but what do we need to do to fathom our *atma*?

In order to live, we must work, but whilst this is true, what do we need to do to remain stable. There must be an additional dimension to our mind and body. Something that guides us to ultimately reach Akshardham. That must be the *atma*, the controller of our mind and body. In Vachanamrut Gadhada II 22, Shriji Maharaj gives an example about two armies. Imagine you are in one army fighting to capture the opponents’ ‘flag’, which will amount to victory or defeating the enemy. Maharaj says that a coward soldier first thinks of running away or giving up. If however, his army captures the ‘flag’, he thinks of looting their opponents. On the other hand, the brave, i.e. staunch devotees, will not harbour timid thoughts, and even if they do, they will still fight with the sole objective of capturing the ‘flag’. They don’t care if they incur bodily harm or die along the way. Their mind and body may take countless hits but if their *atma* is strong enough then their aim will be to attain the abode of God and not be overcome by anything along the way.



It is easy to come to the conclusion that all we need in life is *atma*. However, your mind and body are incredibly important in attaining any goals you may have. You must look after your vessel all the while knowing that you are *atma*, separate from the body. The point is that you should not lean on your mind or body for comfort but rather lean on your *atma* for protection and resilience.

The *atma* is the pilot of your life. You need it to keep going, but if you taint it you’re going to find yourself completely lost. Mahant Swami Maharaj often says, “You can change your life by changing the attitude of your mind.”

If you choose to nurture your *atma* through following basic *niyams* like doing puja, going to mandir and avoiding undesirable company, then your life will change dramatically. It is the acceptance of one’s *atma* and the acknowledgment of the need for one which will stabilize you. People usually put the *atma* last after the mind and body, implying that it is not entirely acknowledged, but it should be put first. For the classical language enthusiasts there is a Latin saying, ‘*mens sana in corpore sano*,’ which roughly translates to ‘healthy mind in a healthy body’. However, there is something missing. You cannot have a healthy mind or body without understanding and realizing one’s *atma*.

(Cont. on p. 33)



Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness

I absolutely love the fall season. The weather gets cooler and it's actually nice walking outside. But, it is also a reminder that summer is over and generally so are the major vacations we take in the year. Whether it's Memorial Day, Independence Day, or Labour Day, it seems everyone is just happy either celebrating with friends and family, enjoying a get-together in the backyard, or travelling.

My family and I were in Chicago in July for Independence Day with the kids running around and watching fireworks in the night sky. To them, the holiday was about having fun. The concept of freedom does not truly mean much to them just yet. Honestly speaking though, aside from understanding the theory of freedom from what I have learned from history classes in school, the 'experience' of freedom doesn't truly resonate with

me given that I have been living in a free society all my life.

From a US perspective, desiring to be free from the oppression of the British Crown, the 13 colonies banded together and collectively drafted the Declaration of Independence. For them, freedom amounted to three inalienable rights: life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. These foundational rights are the basis of the US Constitution, the very document that could be seen as the principal text for Western thought when it comes to politics, governance and human rights.

Growing up as a Swaminarayan Hindu, it was difficult to assimilate in the 1980s. No matter how well I spoke, how many friends I made, the differences were just too apparent – from the tone of my skin, to the food I ate and to my parents

who were first generation immigrants to the US. It made me feel I was different no matter what I did. So naturally, there were times when I questioned why I was so different from everyone else. But in the end, being Hindu and religious was important to me, even as a kid, so I learned to accept that I was just different.

But something interesting happened as I grew older. Despite the preconceived notions of what Hinduism is, with all the different festivals, the multitude of deities and images found inside Hindu places of worship (mandirs), there are tremendous similarities to all other major religions of the world. While the buzzwords of liberation, salvation, nirvana, and *moksha* are all different, in the end, the reward, if you will, is exactly the same – eternal happiness. Or better yet, in pursuing *moksha*, you are in the pursuit of happiness, the very inalienable right mentioned in the Declaration of Independence.

If, taking a step back, the pursuit of happiness must follow the other two alienable rights: life and liberty. Without those two, how could we possibly pursue happiness?

LIFE

Life is life, right? There shouldn't be more to discuss than the fact that we need to be alive to, well, be alive. But let's think about this for a minute.

National Geographic cites a 2011 study that estimates there are 8.7 million different species of plants and animals in existence on planet Earth. However, of that estimate, only 1.6 million species to date have been identified and described! This number of 8.7 million has changed over the centuries. Carl Linnaeus was a famous Swedish botanist and naturalist who is most known for creating the system of naming plants and animals – a system that is still in use today. In 1735, he estimated there were roughly 4,000 types of species. As more were identified, naturalists in

the late 19th century estimated more than half a million species existed. It seems the more we are able to properly identify new species, the higher the estimate goes to.

Interesting enough, the shastras in Hinduism state there are 8.4 million types of species of life. These shastras were written thousands of years ago – that is quite impressive to know the estimated amount so long ago!

Irrespective of the actual number, the point is that there are a lot of life forms out there. Hindus believe in reincarnation, where an *atma* goes through different life forms until it attains a human life form. Only upon being a human can one perform new karmas that could either lead to going through the 8.4 million life forms once again, or to *moksha*.

Even if we leave the religious aspect aside, we all could agree that without being a human, the richness of life could not be fully experienced. Whether it's complex reasoning, ability to communicate in multiple languages, pursue knowledge for the sake of knowledge or to express ourselves through art, most of these tasks can only be done in the human form. So, whereas most animals are preoccupied with survival, humans have evolved to spend their time in other endeavours, endeavours toward the pursuit of happiness.

LIBERTY

Being human allows us to seek our path in life that is outside of just surviving. But anytime there are infringements, limitations or boundaries set on that liberty, we immediately think that is unfair or unjust. After all, who does not want to live according to their own wishes, to pursue happiness as they deem fit?

There are a couple of things to consider when we talk about limitations or boundaries. Obviously, some rules are there for our protection and to ensure our safety, e.g. stopping at a red light or not stealing from

others. These types of rules make sense because in reality, we are not individuals living in isolation from one another, but rather we are interconnected groups who live in and share the same communities, states and nations. In order to consider our wellbeing and the wellbeing of others, we are willing to abide by certain standards. I mean, I would much rather stick to the right side of the road while driving rather than wanting to exercise my 'liberty' to do as I please and drive on the left side, not knowing if I will make it home on a given day!

Going past that though, there are other rules we see all the time. I'm a huge fan of basketball. The purpose of the game is quite simple. There are two teams and the team who scores the most points wins. But anyone who watches basketball, or any other sports for that matter, knows there is a huge list of rules that are part of the game. You can't just decide to go out of bounds to get around a defender, or walk/run with the ball without dribbling, or take more than twenty-four seconds to shoot the ball. If you try to, it's a turnover because you broke one of the rules. Are these limitations a bad thing?

As a thought exercise, let's pretend there are no rules and that we are allowed to play the way we want. What would be the result? A no holds barred, all out, chaotic game. With no rules, nothing prevents anyone from just holding a player to stop them from scoring, or eight players from the same team playing at the same time so they can score. In fact, that's probably a game we don't want to see! I absolutely love my kids, but when I see my five-year-old trying to 'play' soccer and there are ten kids in the same scrum trying to kick the ball, it's not the most tantalizing twenty minutes. But once everyone agrees to the rules, now they can focus on getting better or becoming the best within that rule set. That essentially results in players who abide by the same rules as everyone else, to set themselves apart – the Bill Russells, Dr Js,

Magic Johnsons, Michael Jordans, and Stephen Curry's of the NBA world.

This of course does not apply just to sports. Nedra Glover Tawwab, *Set Boundaries, Find Peace: A Guide to Reclaiming Yourself*, a *New York Times* bestseller, mentions in her book, "The ability to say no to yourself is a gift. If you can resist your urges, change your habits, and say yes to only what you deem truly meaningful, you'll be practicing healthy self-boundaries." In fact, when you limit your 'liberties', you are actually becoming happier or becoming a better version of yourself. Why? Because you are quieting the noise around you and focussing on that which is most important to you – after all, wouldn't that give you the most bang for the buck? We only have a finite number of hours in a day. Is it better to 'invest' your time on a quick thrill that will be forgotten in a few days or months or on something that will last much longer?

In religion and spirituality, the concept of limiting is important. The more you limit yourself in the indulgence or desire of worldly pleasures, you actually are experiencing liberty. No longer are you shackled by your urges, but in fact are free of them and find happiness and contentment in that which you have. This reminds me of a question that was asked to Pramukh Swami Maharaj. It revolved around the idea of living life according to rules or dharma or *niyams*:

Question: Effects of the 21st century and its technology can already be seen. What do you have to say on this?

Answer: If we live a virtuous life, there will be no ill effects on us of the 21st century. 'Satya Yuga is coming,' we hear the clarion call every day, but by living within the bounds of dharma and *niyams*, staying away from [addictions such as] alcohol, theft, corruption, etc., we are already living in Satya Yuga. If our life is pure, we are in Satya Yuga. If individuals do not progress within, we, in spite of being in the 21st century, are in the Stone Age.

Despite living in a time with massive advancements of resources, technology, and the sciences, can we say we are better off than those humans living in the Stone Age? According to Pramukh Swami Maharaj, the answer is no. Having more things does not equate to more progress or happiness – it's our character that determines progress and happiness.

PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

If you boil it down, what is it that we truly want in life? It seems pretty clear – happiness or as the Declaration of Independence puts it, the ability to pursue happiness as a right.

If all we want in life is to be happy, shouldn't we already be so? The average age of an American today is 38.5 years (fun fact: the youngest country's average age is Niger, at 14.8 years!). Shouldn't we be good at understanding what makes us happy if we've been at it for 38.5 years?

As kids, typically, games and toys bring us joy, but that joy only lasts until it breaks or a new toy is received. As teenagers, it's new clothes or phones; but that joy only lasts until new fashion trends start or the next iteration of the Samsung or iPhone device comes out. As young adults, it's getting a good job or a car, but again, that satisfaction lasts only for so long. How about when we finally make some real money and can buy a house and can go on vacations? No doubt those things do bring us happiness, but lasting happiness seems to evade us as the house ages or we realize how much we actually have to pay to maintain it.

It seems most of our time, we go after materialistic things in the pursuit of happiness. We see the trends as we age, that we buy something because it's new and shiny, but as the shine fades, so does our want for it. We then focus on the next thing and the cycle continues. If we know material things only bring us temporary happiness, why do we keep going back to that well?

Maya Angelou, a famous poet, author and civil



More than the physical body we are *atma* rights activist, suggests a reason why we do this: “Somehow, we have come to the erroneous belief that we are all but flesh, blood and bones, and that’s all. So we direct our values to material things.”

Our pursuit of happiness is flawed precisely because we see ourselves as nothing but this physical and mortal body. While we may feel immortal, there are only two things that are certain according to Benjamin Franklin: death and taxes.

To seek true happiness, we have to think of ourselves as more than just this physical body. This is the essence of most religions around the world: to believe ourselves to be *atma* or soul. This all seems heavy, but in the end, the pursuit of happiness begins and ends with us understanding that we are more than this body. The liberty we seek isn't just from tyranny, but liberation from material things – including our own bodies. It's something that is absolutely difficult to do, but the only way to attain everlasting happiness.

Who knew that 35 years ago, as I started kindergarten, that the Declaration of Independence and my religion were trying to tell me the same thing all along? ♦

- Yogesh Patel, New Brunswick, NJ

Self-Spring Cleaning

Every March or April, millions of households undertake a transformative ritual – Spring Cleaning. They go room to room and figure out what stays, what goes and where to organize it.

Spring cleaning is also infamous for another reason. Some of the best arguments ever have happened during spring cleaning. As a loser of just about every one of these arguments, I have learned a precious and lifelong lesson. When doing spring cleaning, one's analysis should not be limited to whether something 'needs' to be, or should be, thrown out. One must also incorporate a complex and unpredictable algorithm as to what will I be 'asked' to throw out when I, hypothetically, of course, ask my wife about that ugly, chipped vase in the basement that she has not used since we first met.

But, in all seriousness, spring cleaning is a cathartic chore, one in which when you finish – whether it takes an hour, a day, a weekend or even longer – you feel a sense of accomplishment. But really, everything you have done boils down to a couple of decisions:

Are you going to throw it out or keep it?

If you are going to keep it, where will it go?

Spring cleaning happens in our homes, in our offices, in our places of worship. It also happens on sports fields and in public parks. So, every year, we take account of the material things we have and tidy up. But if it is so important to

assess our physical possessions, should we not do the same for our inner well-being?

Once, a king decided it was time to look for a wife. Heralds announced the news and invited all the eligible women of the kingdom to come to the king's palace so he could choose. On the appointed day, the castle's halls filled with those hoping to catch the king's eye. Finally, after much waiting, the king and his loyal secretary entered the main hall, and the king sat down on his throne. The secretary thanked them all for coming and then said, "His Highness welcomes you all for coming. He has recently come into the possession of a mirror. This mirror is no ordinary mirror but rather a magical mirror that judges your character. For every mistake you have made in your life, the mirror will show a blemish. Anyone wishing to marry the king must first look into the mirror."

All the women refused to look into the mirror, except for one. She was an ordinary girl from an ordinary family, yet she was not afraid to stand in front of the mirror. When the secretary asked if she was sure she wanted to see these blemishes, the girl said, "Why should I be afraid? We all have made mistakes, and we all can be forgiven and improve from those mistakes." The king stood up and said, "This mirror's magic is not that it shows blemishes, but by coming and standing before the mirror, this woman's confidence and understanding has won me over." The king married her and made her the queen.

For most of us, we are often like the hopeful brides in the palace hall – not willing to look at our blemishes. Genuine and honest introspection is often scary introspection, and you have to be ready to face the good, the bad and the ugly. But if we understand, like the ordinary girl in the story, that we all make mistakes and grow from them, then



the introspection and the subsequent ‘self-cleaning’ are nothing to fear and can be pretty remarkable.

Much like when we do spring cleaning, honest introspection will inevitably bring all of us to some common realizations. When we reflect on our physical health, we resolve to eat responsibly and exercise regularly. When we reflect on our mental well-being, we resolve not to dwell on failure and missed opportunities, but instead focus on lessons learned. If we are appropriately self-aware, we may think about our character, decency, integrity, honesty and selflessness. We may become disheartened by thoughts of those moments when we considered what was good for ourselves before thinking about what might be good for others. Our failures may inspire us to want to change and to set loftier goals.

Just as in spring cleaning, self-spring cleaning requires us first to figure out what we will ‘throw out’. It may be unhealthy habits, toxic thoughts, or general negativity. Though this is easy to list, it is harder to do. There may also be things that you cannot realistically ‘throw out’, but you need to change or adapt. However, unlike in spring cleaning, which is just about physical retention, self-spring cleaning requires a more honest and self-reflective approach which means you need to chart a course to reach your character goals.

I have often thought to myself, “Sometimes, I get angry pretty quickly” and “I need to understand the other person’s perspective.” But then what? Am I willing to heed the lessons taught by my daughter’s favourite show, *Daniel Tiger’s Neighbourhood*, so that I calm down before I say something regretful? “When you feel so mad, and you wanna roar, take a deep breath and count to four.” Or am I willing to learn and listen to others’ perspectives and thoughts with an open mind and a willingness to accept their views before

imposing mine? So, there is a need to remove or change something within. But without a game plan, it’s no different from purchasing a three-year gym membership and then never going.

As you go through your belongings and throw things out, you start to see a bit of the fruit of your efforts. You realize how many unnecessary things you have held on to. However, it isn’t

until you organize what remains that your efforts are fully realized. In your home, the things you need most frequently or are most important are at the forefront, while that which is used rarely ends up in the attic – often to be forgotten.

Self-spring cleaning requires the same decluttering and organization process. Identify your most positive habits and attributes, and keep them at the forefront of your mind and psyche. Likewise, those characteristics which you want to improve upon and imbibe into your life should also be near at hand. As for those traits you may need once in a while, you can keep them boxed up. After organizing your house during spring cleaning, we look around every day and see that things are where they belong, and if they are not, we try to put them back in their proper place.

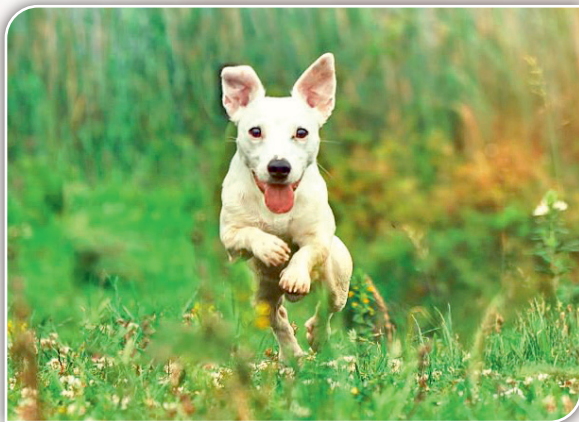
In self-spring cleaning, the organization and placement occur in your mind. Take a few minutes out of your day to introspect on whether the characteristics you want to define yourself are exhibited in all of your actions, and did the ones you want to keep boxed up somehow escape the attic.

A small aside – when going through this process of self-spring cleaning, it is essential to always keep in mind that the goals and path came from within you and are only for you. Be inspired by others, but do not compare yourself to others. Work with others to reach new heights, but do

(Cont. on p. 36)



Zigzagging



A farmer's dog zigzagged along a path out of curiosity and distractions. Similarly, the superficial pleasures and fleeting objects of the world disorient us from our values, happiness and peace of mind.

A farmer had been out walking with his dog. When they returned home, the farmer was still feeling fresh and energetic. But his dog just slumped on the porch. It was tired, exhausted and completely worn out.

"What's the matter with him?" asked the farmer's wife.

"I don't know," replied the farmer, "We've only walked a mile and a half."

"Then why is he so tired?" she asked.

"Well," said the farmer. "I'll tell you one thing. As we were walking, there was not a gate open on the way that he did not go in and examine the field. Not only that, but as soon as a cat appeared he had to chase it – and rabbits too. And when a dog barked he wore himself out barking back and showing fight."

The farmer's wife was still puzzled. "But that still doesn't explain why our dog is so tired."

"It's easy," said the farmer. "Can't you see? While I only walked one and a half miles, our dog

must have covered more than fifteen."

"Oh, I see. So, it wasn't the walking that exhausted him?"

"No!" said the farmer. "It's the zigzagging."

It is the same with us in satsang. We are easily tempted by distractions, just like the farmer's dog. There are many distractions that take us away from our *seva*, devotion and dedication to satsang but, broadly speaking, there are two main types: internal distractions associated with our mind and external distractions such as looking at other people's faults, gossiping and back-biting. Externally, the attraction of superficial pleasures of the world also takes us away from satsang. Sometimes, we become disoriented and disheartened because such pleasures are not just fleeting but they clash with our values and peace of mind.

Once, a disciple asked his guru, "I want peace."

The guru pondered and said, "Just cross out the 'I' and cross out the 'want.' What's left?"

“Peace,” the disciple replied.

He realized that he was at peace with himself if he removed his ego and desires.

We know this but sometimes our own ego fuels our desires and we become so attached to monetary gains, material possessions, the rewards associated with our work or our job and the status that goes with it, personal achievements and lifestyle. It is almost like quicksand. We get stuck in a never-ending spiral of the evils of prosperity which slowly drag us away from satsang. As a result, we get sucked in with more of our time, energy and resources spent in trying to keep up with other people’s expectations. Ultimately, the distractions are self-destructing.

There will always be disharmony and discord whenever our expectations and desires exceed our needs or requirements. This happens in satsang as well. For example, a devotee in Shastriji Maharaj’s time used to do lots of monetary *seva*. One day, he came to the Gondal mandir for darshan. In the main courtyard, he met an elderly sadhu who was sitting in his chair talking to a few devotees. The *satsangi* politely approached the sadhu and asked for drinking water. The sadhu pointed to a nearby water tap and carried on talking to the group of devotees. But the *satsangi* felt offended. “He showed me a water tap?” he thought to himself. “I give so much to this mandir and that is all I get in return?”

Without a moment’s hesitation, he stormed out of the main gate. At first, nobody realized what had happened, but Nirgundas Swami understood everything and ran after the *satsangi*. He knew him quite well, so he apologized and explained that it was not the intention of the elderly sadhu to hurt him or upset him. After a few minutes everything calmed down and the *satsangi* felt pacified. Nirgundas Swami explained to him that the internal *rajipo* we get for all our *seva* from the Satpurush far outweighs any extrinsic rewards we get in terms of praises and appreciation.

It is said, “You cannot do big things if you are

disturbed by small things.”

It is true that our excessive expectations can hurt us. Someone has mentioned, “You are the designer of your own catastrophe.”

This happens a lot when we start comparing, for instance, our wealth, prosperity, lifestyle and our group of companions with that of others’. Many times, we will be happy that we are higher up in society than others but sometimes we will fall short and become disillusioned. We can never get enough of all the material comforts and possessions. In Vachnamrut Gadhada II 47, Shriji Maharaj says, “It is as if the earth has been split down to Patal, and we begin to fill it with water – obviously, it can never be filled. Similarly, the indriyas have never become satisfied by the vishays, and they never will be.”

In 1886, Leo Tolstoy published a short story entitled, ‘How Much Land Does A Man Need?’ In the book, he writes about a man who, out of his lust for land, forfeits everything and dies without enjoying what he had nor gets what he wanted. In the end, his servant buries him in an ordinary grave only six feet long, thus answering the question posed in the title of the story.

Pramukh Swami Maharaj gave a wonderful illustration in his discourses about why we should never compare ourselves with others when it comes to material possessions. A poor boy was begging on the streets of a busy city. He dreamt of wearing a nice pair of shoes and thought to himself that one day he would have enough money to buy a pair. Once, as he was looking at everyone’s shoes, he saw a big car pull over on the other side of the road. The driver stepped down and got a wheelchair out from the back. Next, he opened the back seat door and helped a man on to the wheelchair. The boy’s eyes were fixed on the nicely dressed man seated in the wheelchair. But he noticed that the man had no feet. He only had legs that were cut off from the knee down. The little boy thought to himself, “I was sad because I had no shoes until I saw a man who had no feet.”

Material objects never give lasting happiness, but become a burden after some time

with faith and love. There is no better method to stabilize the mind and to free it of the desires for *vishays*. All of one's flaws will be eradicated."

- Therefore, love what you are doing, cultivate an interest and enjoy it. Then you will not have to focus or concentrate. It will come naturally.

Swamishri stopped him, “Listen, I don’t have money. But I have God. When you have God, you have everything.”

We are fortunate in that we have satsang which helps us fulfil all the above requirements and much more. In order to avoid distractions, we

and thousands of devotees.”

Swamishri immediately responded, “For us, the biggest prize is having met Shastriji Maharaj and Yogiji Maharaj. Everything is included in them. They are the topmost of the top. (Nobel *na pan* Nobel *chhe*). That Maharaj and Swami are happy and Shastriji Maharaj and Yogiji Maharaj have blessed us is the greatest of all prizes.”

3. Rajipano Vichar: Think that when Maharaj and Swami are pleased, that is the ultimate reward.

On 12 January 1989, Pramukh Swami Maharaj was flying on his final leg *vicharan* from the Mauritius Islands to Mumbai.

Aksharjivandas Swami, one of the swamis who was on that vicharan tour, politely asked Swamishri, “Can you please write a few words of blessings in my notebook? It will be a memory that I can treasure.”

Swamishri took the notebook and put it aside.

Then, he said, “Listen, I have never felt like asking Shastriji Maharaj or Yogiji Maharaj for their blessings in writing. Nor have I ever longed for some relic of theirs, such as a rosary, a fingernail, a strand of hair, or a piece of cloth. I have never desired for such mementos. However, I have focused on one thing: to follow their commands no matter what. I have done that right from the beginning, ever since I came into Satsang. Today, I feel fulfilled having followed their every wish and every word. That has been the goal of my life. As a result, I constantly feel their rajipo. Shastriji Maharaj and Yogiji Maharaj are always with me.”

Swamishri smiled, picked up the notebook and started writing. But in his words of wisdom, he had already outlined a profound spiritual principle. The ultimate reward of following the guru’s agna is rajipo – unparalleled happiness of God and guru. ♦

(Cont. from p. 23)

On 12 July 2017, a specialist doctor came to check Mahant Swami Maharaj. The doctor claimed that once Swamishri takes a certain medicine he will be happy. Swamishri replied, “I am always happy.” The reality was that Swamishri had been in pain long before anyone asked him. He had silently endured it. Atmaswarup Swami asked the doctor what would happen if Swamishri did not take the medicine. The doctor replied the pain would likely continue and trouble him. Swamishri revealed, “It’s all under control due to the power of *atma*.” The doctor opined, “I’ve seen people scream with pain in such cases.” Despite the excruciating pain Mahant Swami Maharaj endured it through leaning on his *atma*. The purer it is, the stronger it is and the more effective it will be.

Whenever you are faced with adversity or fear, know that your *atma* will stabilize you. So acknowledge and connect yourself with it just

as you do with your mind and body. Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī, a 13th century Persian poet, said, “I lost everything and found myself.” Shriji Maharaj has said countless times that *atma* is distinct from the body. When everything does not seem to be going your way, and all the resilience of your mind and body has been metaphorically peeled away, what remains is your *atma*. It is the single point in existence through which you must act. When people talk about character, they are not talking about your intellect or your body, they are really subconsciously acknowledging a third dimension to your existence. Something that will bring you back when you’ve fallen down and will guide you along the right paths. You can acknowledge your *atma*, nurture it, understand it to be separate and flourish in all aspects of life or you can disregard it and your foundation will crumble. Ultimately, the choice is yours, so choose wisely. ♦

Think • Do • Become *Different*

Ideas impact every aspect of human life. New ideas trigger new ways of doing and are what drive humanity forward. The willingness to 'think different' has led to profound changes in our world. This article explores the effect of not just having new ideas, but also putting them into action, by examining groundbreaking concepts from the worlds of technology and spirituality.

THINK DIFFERENT

Apple's inspiring, insightful and impactful 1997 'Think Different' ad campaign marked a watershed moment in the iconic company's history.

Having rejoined the company in 1996, Steve Jobs set about correcting the struggles plaguing the company. Created by the TBWA\Chiat\Day advertising agency, the 'Think Different' campaign celebrated the creativity and innovation of icons such as Albert Einstein, Martin Luther King, John Lennon and others, and sent a message that Apple, too, can be ranked among them.

The successful ad campaign publicly proclaimed Apple's paradigm shift, and resoundingly resonated with existing fans and attracted a new cohort of customers. The campaign, which won several advertising awards, revived Apple's brand image and was a precursor to the company's resurgence under Steve Jobs. It set the stage for their iMac, iPhone, iPad and other groundbreaking innovative products that, even over a quarter-century later, are

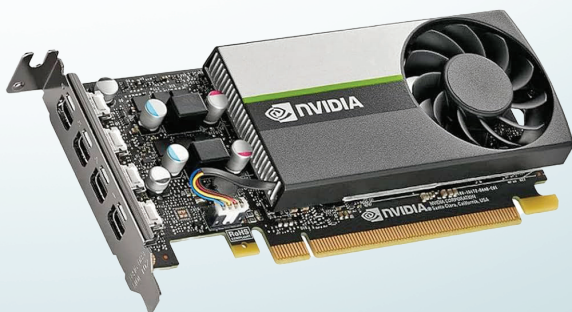
integral to and continue to influence the daily lives of millions of people globally.

This change in mindset is at the root of Apple's transformation. They converted this new way of thinking into action and by relentlessly pursuing this new approach, in 2023 it became the world's first three-trillion-dollar company.

ACCELERATED COMPUTING

In the 1990s, the computing industry was primarily focused on traditional CPU (Central Processing Unit) computing. The development by Nvidia of the GPU (Graphics Processing Unit), in the mid-1990s, marked a significant shift in thinking. By challenging conventional wisdom and embracing creativity, Nvidia reimagined how tasks could be distributed and processed in parallel to accelerate computing tasks previously handled by CPUs.

By thinking differently, Nvidia opened up new avenues for performance and efficiency.



This new paradigm was critical in furthering computer graphics.

Again, in 2006, Nvidia's out-of-the-box thinking led to the development of CUDA (Compute Unified Device Architecture). This has enabled software developers to use C language to write software to run on GPUs, greatly expanding the use of GPUs beyond just graphics into scientific computing, data analysis, artificial intelligence, machine learning and other fields, significantly increasing their versatility and impact across numerous industries.

Again, Nvidia's willingness to think differently, and patiently pursue their transformative idea to make GPUs has augmented global technological progress. The use of GPUs is an idea whose time has come. They are at the core of the AI revolution that is engulfing the world today. In the process, Nvidia, the pioneer of GPUs, has also become a three-trillion dollar company.

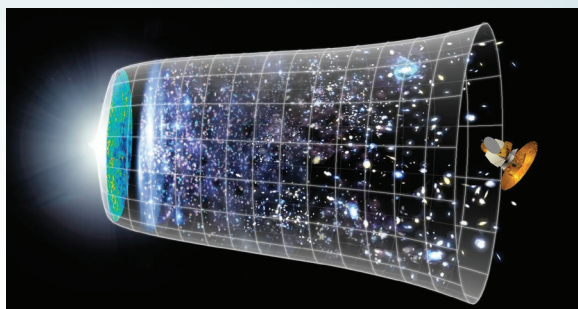
EINSTEIN'S UNIQUE INSIGHTS

Albert Einstein's groundbreaking ideas have profoundly enhanced our understanding of space, time and energy.

His unique insight that gravity is the curvature of space-time caused by mass was a paradigm shift that has revolutionized our understanding of physics and the universe. His theories of relativity reshaped the concepts of time, space and gravity and led to the famous $E=mc^2$ equation.

His explanation of the c, proposing that light consists of quanta, or photons, which can transfer energy to electrons and knock them out of their atomic orbits was essential in the development of quantum mechanics. This work earned him the 1921 Nobel Prize in Physics.

He also explained Brownian motion – the random movement of particles suspended in a fluid, confirming the existence of atoms and molecules, supporting the atomic theory of matter, and preparing the foundation for the field of statistical mechanics.



Einstein's many ideas, which have been experimentally confirmed, have shaped human thought, and led to many scientific and technological advancements in innumerable areas of human life.

SPIRITUAL INSIGHTS

The above are representative of the ways in which ideas have moulded the minds and influenced the actions of people throughout history, resulting in innumerable transformations. Countless more examples exist.

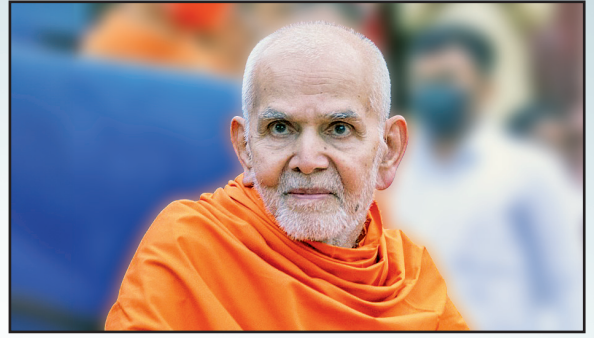
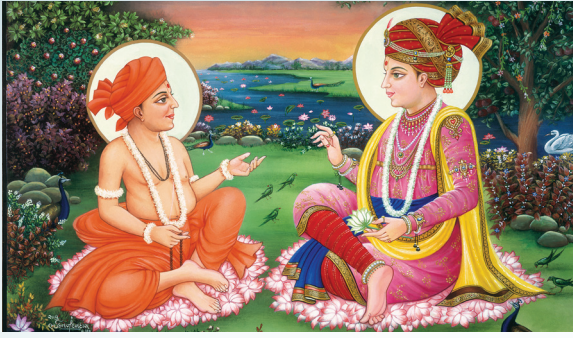
Although not visible to the naked eye, ideas are what govern every aspect of a person's life. They underlie the drive, direction and dedication to their daily pursuits. Hence, the way a person thinks, determines what they do and ultimately what they become and achieve. This is equally true in the spiritual dimension of life.

Sanatan Dharma is a mosaic of many spiritual ideas encompassing a wide and varying spectrum of beliefs. Over millennia, wise rishis, sages and spiritual masters have detailed philosophical ideas that have guided and transformed the lives of countless people.

Among them is Bhagwan Swaminarayan's Akshar-Purushottam Darshan, a philosophical viewpoint rooted in the Prasthantrayi – the Brahmasutras, Upanishads and Bhagavad Gita.

I AM AKSHAR, A HUMBLE SERVANT OF PURUSHOTTAM

Bhagwan Swaminarayan has outlined the Akshar-Purushottam Darshan in the Vachanamrut, an authentic compilation of his discourses. The



core teaching of his philosophy is expressed by Mahant Swami Maharaj as ‘Aksharam aham, Purushottam dasosmi’ – ‘I am Akshar, a humble servant of Prushottam.’

Revealed just over two centuries ago by Bhagwan Swaminarayan, the Akshar-Purushottam Darshan is a spiritual paradigm which provides clarity about one’s own true identity and the route to spiritual fulfilment.

This powerful idea is the focal point upon which innumerable devotees of the Swaminarayan faith have experienced spiritual fulfilment. This aphorism guides devotees in two phases. The first, ‘Aksharam aham’, informs that one must become *akshar*, that is, develop divine virtues like Akshar – the eternal and ideal devotee of Purushottam Bhagwan Swaminarayan.

This is the paradigm that guides the daily life of Swaminarayan devotees, such that they engage in devotion, *seva* and other spiritual pursuits to develop these divine virtues. Having attained

these divine virtues, devotees even though of high spiritual status, continue to apply the second part, ‘Purushottam dasosmi’. That is, they humbly continue to offer devotion to Purushottam, shedding all ego of their spiritual achievements. Since, compared to Purushottam, the *jiva* is always junior and subservient.

Bhagwan Swaminarayan’s transformative ‘Aksharam aham, Purushottam dasosmi’ paradigm has enabled innumerable people to think differently about life and the world. By accepting this spiritual paradigm, and applying it in their daily lives, people experience peace of mind, engage in devotion, develop a realistic understanding of the material world and ultimately become spiritually fulfilled.

Thus, it is clear that thinking and ideas have definite effects; they have real world consequences. This is the power of thinking differently. So, it is imperative that the thoughts which populate one’s mind are such that they enable one’s own and society’s progress, prosperity and peace. ♦

(Cont. from p. 29)

not condition your progress on their success and their plans. The Dalai Lama warned of this type of misguided thinking when he said, “The goal (of introspection) is not to be better than the other man, but your previous self.”

It is undoubtedly true that personal self-spring cleaning is a lot harder, more time-consuming and requires an entirely different level of discipline than spring cleaning at home. Today’s character decisions will not produce a ‘new us’ tomorrow. It is easy to throw away ten pieces of clothing in ten

minutes, but to change ten things about ourselves may take ten weeks, ten months, ten years, or even longer. However, through daily or frequent introspection, we will be able to minimize our mental, emotional and spiritual clutter and stay on track with the commitments we make to ourselves when self-spring cleaning.

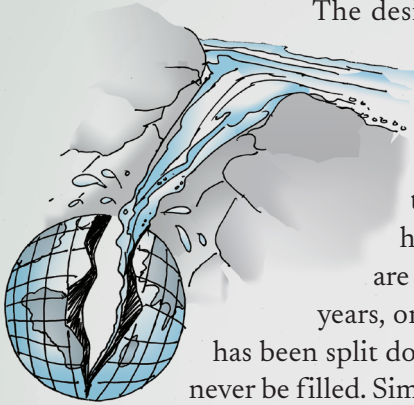
As Swami Vivekanand said, “Talk to yourself once in a day; otherwise, you may miss meeting an intelligent person in this world.” Luckily, I met that person the other day, and he warned me not to mention the vase. ♦

INSPIRATIONS

*A potpourri of inspiring and interesting
information and wisdom*

Sadhu Vivekjivandas

ENDLESS DESIRES



The desire to enjoy material objects is not quenchable. The more one indulges in their enjoyment, the more the desire to enjoy them is generated. Just as a fire is not extinguished by adding more firewood, Shriji Maharaj explains in Vachanamrut Gadhada II 47, “Our *jivas* have previously indulged in the *panchvishays* through countless bodies, as devas, humans, etc. Nevertheless, we have not been content with those *vishays*. Therefore, now that we are devotees of God, indulging in the *vishays* for a further year, or two years, or maybe even five years will still not fulfil us. It is as if the earth has been split down to Patal, and we begin to fill it with water – obviously, it can never be filled. Similarly, the *indriyas* have never become satisfied by the *vishays*, and they never will be.”

- Analogy from the Vachanamrut

THE LETTER WILL SPEAK



There was a rich merchant. He once decided to send twenty sticks of sugarcane to a man in another village. To take the sugarcane he called an illiterate worker. The merchant wrote a short letter about the number of sugarcane sticks. Giving the letter to the worker he said, “Take this sugarcane to so and so village. I will pay you one rupee.”

The worker asked, “How many sticks are there?” The merchant replied, “Give this letter to the man who receives the sugarcane, and the letter will speak for itself.”

The worker picked up the sugarcane and letter and started off. He had walked some fifteen kilometres when he desired to eat some sugarcane. The silly man asked the letter, “How many sticks of sugarcane are there?” Would the letter reply? The man began to beat the letter. But even then it didn’t say anything! In the end he became irritated and ate two sticks anyway.

He carried the remaining eighteen sticks to the village and gave them with the letter to the man. The man read the letter and counted the sticks. There were two less. He asked the worker, “In the letter it is written twenty sticks, and yet you have given me only eighteen?”

The worker asked with surprise, “The letter spoke to you but why didn’t it speak to me? I threatened it and hit it. Even then it didn’t say a word!”

Only one who is learned can make a letter ‘speak’. What can an illiterate person do?

In the same way, only a person who has learnt the teachings of the Vachanamrut from a God-realized Sadhu can understand the principles and inner meanings of the shastra.

- 101 Tales of Wisdom by Yogiji Maharaj

MEDICINE AND SURGERY



With reference to the pioneering work of medicine in India, experts believe that Ayurveda is the oldest system of medicine in the world. They explain that if Ayurveda had its source from Greek medicine, it would have at least some words from the Greek language. Prof. Dominik Wujastyk, a scholar on Ayurveda, in his article ‘The Science of Medicine’, states, “It [is] even more striking that not one Greek loanword for a medical term appears in Sanskrit medical literature.”¹ This fact helps validate the antiquity and originality of Ayurveda.

Oliver Russell, 2nd Baron Amptill (1869–1935 CE), Governor of Madras, said in 1905, “Now we are beginning to find out that the Hindu Shastras also contain a Sanitary Code no less correct in principal, and that the great law-giver, Manu, was one of the greatest sanitary reformers the world has ever seen. They can lay claim to have been acquainted with the main principles of curative and preventive medicine at a time when Europe was still immersed in ignorant savagery. I am not sure whether it is generally known that the science of medicine originated in India, but this is the case, and the science was first exported from India to Arabia and thence to Europe. Down to the close of the seventeenth century, European physicians learnt the science from the works of Arabic doctors; while the Arabic doctors many centuries before had obtained their knowledge from the works of great Indian physicians such as Dhanwantari, Charaka and Susruta.”²

VERBALIZING YOUR CHILD

Talking and reading to a baby child form the basis of language and *sanskars* in his or her life.

Some aspects worthy of practice in this regard are as follows.



1. *Talk to Your Toddlers:* It builds their vocab, which forms the basis for reading. Verbalize what you are doing when you dress them, cook the dinner, shop for groceries.

2. *Read Aloud to Your Toddler:* Start as early as possible. Reading aloud fosters a special closeness.

3. *Get Your Children Involved:* Invite them to describe pictures or tell them to guess what's going to happen next. Encourage an older child to read to the younger one.

4. *Let Your Children See You Reading:* They model their behaviour after their parents. If they see that you value reading, then they will too.

5. *Go to the Local Library:* Even if kids can't read they'll know that it's a family priority.

1. The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism, edited by Gavin Flood. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005, p.395.

2. Sarda, Har Bilas. *Hindu Superiority*. Ajmer: Rajputana Printing Works, 1906, pp.301 & 307.

MAHANT SWAMI MAHARAJ'S VICHARAN

23 February to 6 June 2024
Ahmedabad, Sarangpur and Mahuva



Swamishri showers flower petals on Thakorji, Ahmedabad



Pujya Ishwarcharan Swami showers flower petals on Swamishri, Ahmedabad

From 4 January to 23 February, Swamishri stayed in Abu Dhabi and performed the *murti-pratishtha* rituals of the BAPS Hindu Mandir on 14 February, Vasant Panchami. The May-June 2024 issue of *Swaminarayan Bliss* covers this event. Details of Swamishri's subsequent *vicharan* to Ahmedabad, Sarangpur and Mahuva is as follows.

FEBRUARY: AHMEDABAD

After the inauguration of the Abu Dhabi BAPS Hindu Mandir, Mahant Swami Maharaj arrived in Ahmedabad on 23 February 2024. He was warmly welcomed by swamis and devotees of Ahmedabad. He stayed at the Yogiji Maharaj Hospital for his routine medical check-up and rest. During his 35-day stay in Ahmedabad Swamiji maintained his daily routine of puja, discourses on the Yogi Gita, meetings and writing letters to devotees.

MARCH: AHMEDABAD

24: Pragji Bhakta Jayanti and Symbolic Fuldol Festival

On 24 March, the 195th birth anniversary of Bhagatji Maharaj was celebrated at the BAPS mandir in Shahibaug, Ahmedabad, along with a symbolic Fuldol festival. Prior to entering the assembly hall, Swamishri gave darshan and blessings in a special car to all the devotees seated in the mandir precincts. The celebration assembly included bhajans, speeches and a brief video of past Pushpadolotsav celebrations. Pujya Ishwarcharan Swami honoured Swamishri with a beautiful garland of popcorns inscribed with the prayer '*Mahabalandant mayā tamāri...*' Swamishri inaugurated the ninth volume of Pramukh Swami Maharaj's biography written by Adarshjivan Swami. Thereafter, in his blessings, Swamishri praised Bhagatji Maharaj's dedication to his guru, Gunatitanand Swami, and talked about his exemplary sadhanas. The event concluded with



Jnaneshwar Swami welcomes Param Pujya Mahant Swami Maharaj, Sarangpur



Swamishri inaugurates a documentary, The Letter, Sarangpur

‘Phulo ki Holi’ celebration in which senior swamis showered sanctified flower petals on the devotees.

MARCH: SARANGPUR

29: Arrival and Welcome in Sarangpur

During late afternoon, Swamishri departed from Ahmedabad by helicopter to Sarangpur. After landing on the grounds of the BAPS Vidyamandir school, the hostel students welcomed Swamishri with loud *jais* and joyful waving of BAPS flags.

Then, Swamishri was festively welcomed in the mandir precincts as his vehicle proceeded on a decorated red carpet pathway embellished with flower arches. Youths waved flags and *artis* and held torches. Children and teenagers in various costumes showered flowers and danced as Swamishri approached them. The pathway was illuminated by firework fountains. Swamis, *parshads*, *sadhaks* and devotees also welcomed Swamishri and did darshan.

Swamishri arrived at the Yagnapurush Smruti Mandir for darshan and thereafter did darshan at the Pramukh Swami Maharaj Smruti Mandir. Swamishri then proceeded to do darshan of Thakorji in the main mandir, where *shiro* and *pendas* were offered to Thakorji in honour of his arrival. Then, Swamishri was honoured with flower garlands by senior swamis at the Pramukh Darshan Vatika.

APRIL: SARANGPUR

5: Inauguration of Video on Abu Dhabi Mandir

A fascinating documentary video, ‘The Letter: The Handwritten Destiny of Abu Dhabi Mandir’ was released in Swamishri’s presence. Thereafter, Swamishri inaugurated an audio version of the biography of *Brahmaswarup Pramukh Swami Maharaj*, Part 9, an audio bhajan publication ‘A Millennial Moment’ themed on the Abu Dhabi mandir celebration, and English print publications, *Brahmaswarup Yogiji Maharaj*, Part 1 and *Yogiji Maharaj’s Tales of Wisdom: Overcoming Inner Hurdles*.

9: Vidyamandir Day

In the evening assembly, students of the BAPS Vidyamandir school made various presentations before Swamishri. They included an introduction of the Vidyamandir and its contributions, and speeches on the love showered by Pramukh Swami Maharaj and Mahant Swami Maharaj on the students. Then swamis and students praised the virtues of the school teachers and administrators. The students then performed a traditional dance to please Swamishri, during which swamis honoured Swamishri with flower garlands.

Finally, Swamishri blessed the students, “You all have to study hard and well, so that you attain successful careers. Thereafter, you will realize what



A skit presentation by Vidyamandir students, Sarangpur

the *gurukul* has given to you. After you pass out from here take satsang with you, no matter where you go. There are lots of benefits in that. Shriji Maharaj has said, 'I shall care for one who adheres to satsang.' By being here you are most, most, most fortunate. You will attain *moksha*."

12–14: Divya Sannidhi Parva

The leading male and female volunteers (*karyakars*) of BAPS had assembled in Sarangpur for a 3-day *shibir* (spiritual camp) organized under the auspices of the year-long Karyakar Suvarna Mahotsav (Volunteer Golden Anniversary Celebrations). The central theme of the *shibir* was 'Antar Akshardham'. The six sessions during the three days included a variety of presentations like dramas, skits, speeches, question-answer sessions

and videos to consolidate faith in satsang and the guru.

Swamishri was present in the sessions to bless and discourse to the *karyakars*. In one session, each *karyakar* got the opportunity of bowing to Swamishri while his virtues were being announced. A photo of each *karyakar* with Swamishri was gifted as a memento.

During a Q & A session Swamishri emphasized upon the *karyakars* to daily contemplate on *prapti*, read satsang books, do *ghar sabha* regularly, imbibe *samp*, *suhruddbhav*, *ekta*, *dasbhav*, *divyabhav* and perceive virtues in others. He also advised all to observe restraint in eating out and in watching TV and films in cinemas.

The final session was arranged at Pramukh Darshan Vatika. The volunteers performed a skit



Group photo of *karyakars* with Swamishri, Sarangpur



‘Dharma gher ānand bhayo, jay bolo Ghanshyāmki...’ Swamishri swings
Shri Hari Krishna Maharaj and Shri Gunatitanand Swami Maharaj in a *hindolo*, Sarangpur

in which they played the roles of Shriji Maharaj’s inspirational devotees: Jiva Khachar of Sarangpur, Sura Khachar, Rathod Dhadhal, Parvatbhai and others. Thereafter, Swamishri blessed the volunteers, “Outwardly, the *karyakars* and other people appear to be similar, but the *karyakars*’ inner feelings are loftier. You (*karyakars*) do not wish bad for others, which is a great attribute. Because of your sublime sentiments you are able to do *seva* and remain spirited and relentless. Through the feelings of *divyabhav*, *mahima*, *dasbhav*, *guna-grahan* and others you remain noble and enthused. Remove negativity (*abhav-avgun*) from your souls. By behaving as *atmarup* no faults will remain in you.”

Thereafter, Swamishri worshipped and sprayed coloured water on Shri Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj. Then, Swamishri lovingly showered coloured water (*rangotsav*) on the ecstatic *karyakars*. Senior swamis gave a mango for *prasad* to each of the *karyakars*. The event concluded with great joy and priceless memories of Swamishri.

17: Shri Hari Jayanti Celebration

On 17 April 2024, the 243rd Shri Hari Jayanti festival was devoutly celebrated at all the BAPS centres in India and abroad.

Swamishri performed *arti* of Bhagwan Shri Ram in honour of his birthday. Swamishri did

darshan of the ‘*surya tilak*’ at 12 noon on Bhagwan Shri Ram’s *murti* installed in Ayodhya.

Prior to the evening celebration assembly of Shri Hari Jayanti, Swamishri performed *arti* of Thakorji in the main mandir where a splendid *annakut* was arranged. The celebration assembly was themed on the new *arti*, ‘Jay Swaminarayan, jay Akshar-Purushottam...’ While each verse of the *arti* was sung children and youths performed *arti* of Maharaj and Swami. Thereafter, scholarly swamis explained and elaborated upon each verse. The swamis who spoke were: Bhadresh Swami, Adarshjivan Swami, Bhaktisagar Swami, Atmatrupt Swami, Narayanmuni Swami and Viveksagar Swami. Thereafter, Pujya Dr Swami addressed the assembly. Swamishri then inaugurated a Polish translation of Satsang Diksha.

Senior swamis garlanded and honoured Swamishri while children and youths enthusiastically performed a traditional dance on the bhajan, “*Āj Dharma Bhakti ne dwār nobat vāge re lol...*” As per the tradition established by Shastriji Maharaj, to offer tributes to Bhagwan Swaminarayan, 1,100 children of the Vidyamandir school had observed a waterless fast all day.

Swamishri blessed the assembly, “We are blessed with the extraordinary *prapti* (attainment) of Shriji Maharaj. Thus, we should follow all his



A skit presentation by *karyakars*, Sarangpur

commands. Believe that Shriji Maharaj is genuine, *niyams* and *dharma* are genuine, *satsangis* are genuine – everything is genuine. Do satsang by bearing this in mind and practise *samp*, *suhrudbhav* and *ekta*.”

After *thal* was offered to Thakorji, Swamishri and *sadguru* swamis performed the celebration *arti*. Finally, the festive bhajan ‘*Dharma gher ānand bhayo...*’ was sung by swamis while Swamishri and senior swamis rocked Thakorji in a decorated swing.

30: Karyakar Din (Volunteers Day)

The evening assembly was celebrated as ‘Karyakar Din’. Swamis spoke glowingly about the *seva* of volunteers. When Swamishri arrived with Shri Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj in the assembly hall the volunteers gave a tumultuous welcome. Then, volunteers enacted a drama related to Swamishri’s enthusiasm in celebrating the Karyakar Suvarna Mahotsav. Thereafter, the volunteers asked Swamishri questions about the attributes of an ideal volunteer. Finally, Swamishri gave *samip* darshan to all the volunteers as he passed by.

APRIL–MAY: SARANGPUR

24 to 27 April and 15 to 18 May: Sant Shibirs

The Sant Shibirs were themed on ‘Akshardham

Within’. Swamis from India and abroad attended the *sant shibirs* in two parts. Swamishri, *sadguru* and senior swamis gave blessings and inspirational talks in all the sessions. Swamishri also celebrated *rangotsav* and showered coloured water on the swamis.

MAY: SARANGPUR

6: Yuva Talim Kendra Convocation Ceremony

The annual convocation ceremony of youths of the Yuva Talim Kendra (YTK) was held in an assembly in Swamishri’s presence. The presentations by youths of the YTK included three aspects: *niyam*-dharma, no negativity and *nishtha*. The youths enacted a drama and delivered speeches, and swamis sang kirtans aligned with the presentations. Swamishri sanctified the YTK certificates, *malas*, *nadachhadis* and mementos.

In conclusion, Swamishri spoke, “All must obey *niyam*-dharma resolutely. Keep increasing *nishtha* and prioritize satsang in your life. If you have satsang your life will be blessed and become divine. Behave in a way that satsang increases.”

10: Divya Sannidhi Parva (Bal–Balika Karyakars)

The three-day camp was themed on ‘Antar Akshardham’. On the first day, a Q & A session was held with Swamishri, which also included the singing of kirtan verses. The 1,700 *karyakars*



Karyakars doing darshan of Swamishri, Sarangpur

raised garlands, made by them at home, to offer to Thakorji and Swamishri. The *karyakars* were also blessed with Swamishri's *samip* darshan.

On the second day, stories of selected *karyakars'* *seva* and sacrifice were narrated before Swamishri. And the highlight of the last day was Swamishri showering coloured water (*rangotsav*) on the *karyakars*. Swamishri also blessed and praised the *karyakars*, saying, "All of you are truly doing *seva*, regardless of day or night, with all your heart for Maharaj, Swami and the Sanstha. The *seva* you have got is not ordinary. It is your duty to firmly follow *niyam*-dharma. I trust you will all abide by *niyam*-dharma and bring honour to your home, family and country."

21: Pramukh Varni Din Celebration

According to the English date, Pramukh Swami Maharaj's Pramukh Varni Din was celebrated today in Swamishri's puja. In conclusion, Swamishri said, "Pramukh Swami Maharaj remained unassuming all his life. One special attribute of Swami Bapa was that he always promoted others. He always remained modest and so no one could grasp his true greatness and glory."

22: Inauguration of Karyakar Talim Kendra

In the 1950s, Yogiji Maharaj had started establishing satsang *mandals* so that devotees could assemble and do satsang on a weekly basis.

Thereafter, Pramukh Swami Maharaj inspired innumerable satsang *mandals*, and presently Mahant Swami Maharaj gives momentum to the growth of satsang *mandals*. Presently, there are 12,000 satsang and *yuvak mandals* and 8,000 *bal mandals* in India. These *mandals* are run by 40,000 registered *karyakars* (volunteers), who receive training annually. However, as part of the year-long Karyakar Suvarna Mahotsav (Volunteers Golden Anniversary Celebrations), an organized and in-depth training programme for the volunteers was inspired and blessed by Mahant Swami Maharaj.

On 22 May, Mahant Swami Maharaj ignited a lamp to launch the Karyakar Training Centre in Sarangpur. Swamishri blessed the occasion, "The Karyakar Training Centre that will start soon is of great importance. Training will enable the volunteers to do *seva* in a systematic and organized way. Even an ordinary volunteer will be empowered to do extraordinary *seva*. To do *seva* as a volunteer is a big responsibility and one has to become eligible. Prominent and mature officers, who know a lot (about their field), also require training. If one does not know how to run a *mandal* then no one will enjoy or be interested. Training enables volunteers to run the *mandal* in a systematic way." Swamishri then blessed and expressed his *rajipo* on 150 *karyakars* who had enrolled for the first training programme.



Sanskrit Mahavidyalaya students during a question-answer session with Swamishri, Sarangpur

23: Decennial Celebration of BAPS Sanskrit Mahavidyalaya

In 1923, Shastriji Maharaj had inspired in the Sanstha's constitution, "In future, when the state of the mandirs is good a Sanskrit *pathshala* should be established." In 2013, Pramukh Swami Maharaj fulfilled Shastriji Maharaj's wish and inaugurated the BAPS Swaminarayan Sanskrit Mahavidyalaya in Sarangpur.

This year marks the decennial celebration of the Mahavidyalaya. The Mahavidyalaya is affiliated with the Somnath Sanskrit University. Every year, swamis and students of the Mahavidyalaya attain gold and silver medals in their final exams.

On 23 May 2024, the students of the Mahavidyalaya celebrated the decennial celebration in the presence of Mahant Swami Maharaj. The celebration assembly was themed on 'Sarvam Bhavati Sakaram'. The students welcomed Swamishri with a traditional dance. Then, they presented a debate on the subject 'Aksharam aham Purushottam dasosmi'. Thereafter, Atmatrupt Swami spoke about the Mahavidyalaya's achievements and works in promoting the Sanskrit language. In conclusion, Swamishri blessed the assembly, "We are all thankful to Yogi Bapa for having promoted the study of Sanskrit in his times. Today we see it has flourished. Yogi Bapa's desire was

to promote the Akshar-Purushottam faith. Shastriji Maharaj talked of spreading *nishtha* by studying Sanskrit. The purpose of Shriji Maharaj's birth was to promote the Akshar-Purushottam *nishtha*."

28: Felicitation of Children and Bal Shibir

For the past two years Mahant Swami Maharaj has inspired an online study programme in Sanskrit for children called, 'Siddhant Sarvasvam.' Hundreds of young boys and girls in India, Australia, Africa, America, UAE and UK have been studying this online course. Only children who have memorized Satsang Diksha (315 shlokas) and Siddhant Karika (565 shlokas) are eligible to enrol for the scriptural study course on the Akshar-Purushottam principle. In addition, by Swamishri's inspiration an online programme to memorize Satsang Diksha was launched last year by the Bal Pravrutti Central Office (BPCO). In one year, 108 boys and 106 girls have memorized the 880 shlokas of Satsang Diksha and Siddhant Karika.

From 28 to 31 May, 164 boys and 149 girls from India, Africa and UAE, who had successfully completed the study programme, were honoured in Sarangpur in Swamishri's presence. They were honoured in the evening assembly on 28 May. The children recited *shlokas* and gave mesmerizing presentations.



Children recite Satsang Diksha *shlokas* selected by Swamishri, Sarangpur

Swamishri was extremely pleased with them and uttered, “We want to train 10,000 such child-scholars.” From 29 to 31 May a special *shibir* was held in Sarangpur for the child-scholars.

They got the opportunity of understanding and strengthening their faith in the Akshar-Purushottam principle from Swamishri, Viveksagar Swami and senior scholarly swamis. Inspiring incidents of how the children had memorized the shloks were also narrated in the *shibir*.

JUNE: SARANGPUR

4: Yogi Jayanti Celebration and Mahayagna

According to the Indian calendar, today marked the 132nd birthday celebration of Yogiji Maharaj and Mahant Swami Maharaj’s 63rd *diksha* anniversary.

A *mahayagna* was also held in the morning on the grounds of Sarangpur mandir. In all, 700 devotees participated in the *yagna* by offering oblations in 106 *yagna kunds*. Swamishri performed the initial rituals in the main *yagna kund* situated on the podium of Pramukh Swami Maharaj Smruti Mandir.

Swamishri blessed the occasion, “Today is Yogiji Maharaj’s birthday. He was a great saint. He had pleased everyone and never insulted anyone. That was why everyone liked him. May all of you

here who are participating in the *yagna* be happy in all ways.”

In the evening, the Yogi Jayanti celebration assembly was held at the Pramukh Darshan Vatika. After *dhun* and *prarthana*, a video of Mahant Swami Maharaj’s *labh* during his stay was shown. Thereafter, Pujya Viveksagar Swami spoke about ‘Yogiji Maharaj in the Eyes of Pramukh Swami Maharaj’. Then a video of Yogiji Maharaj praising the greatness of Mahant Swami Maharaj was screened. Thereafter, a Q & A session was held with Mahant Swami Maharaj in which he was asked to reveal his perspective of Yogiji Maharaj. Then, Mahant Swami Maharaj inaugurated an audio publication called ‘Yogi Smruti’. Memories of Swamishri’s two-and-a-half months’ stay in Sarangpur were narrated and appreciations were expressed before Swamishri and the assembly. In addition, BAPS was recognized for its administration, infrastructure and quality of educational activities by the DBS CERT organization, comprising representatives of 200 countries. The BAPS Swaminarayan Sanskrit Vidyalaya was honoured with an international ISO certificate.

Swamishri was honoured on the occasion of his 63rd *diksha* anniversary with a beautiful garland by swamis.

On 6 June, Swamishri departed from Sarangpur and travelled to Mahuva.



Swamishri, swamis and devotees perform the arti of the mahayagna, Sarangpur

MAHUVA

6: Arrival

Mahuva is the birthplace of Bhagatji Maharaj and a holy place of pilgrimage. The BAPS Mandir was gifted by Pramukh Swami Maharaj in 2014. Mahant Swami Maharaj was visiting the mandir after a period of five-and-a-half years. He stayed in Mahuva from 6 to 14 June.

Swamishri arrived by helicopter from Sarangpur to Mahuva in the evening. He was garlanded by Vinamramuni Swami (Kothari of Mahuva mandir). Then, Swamishri gave darshan to the residents of Mahuva as his decorated vehicle advanced from the airport to the BAPS Mandir. As Swamishri entered the mandir, children, youths and devotees gave him

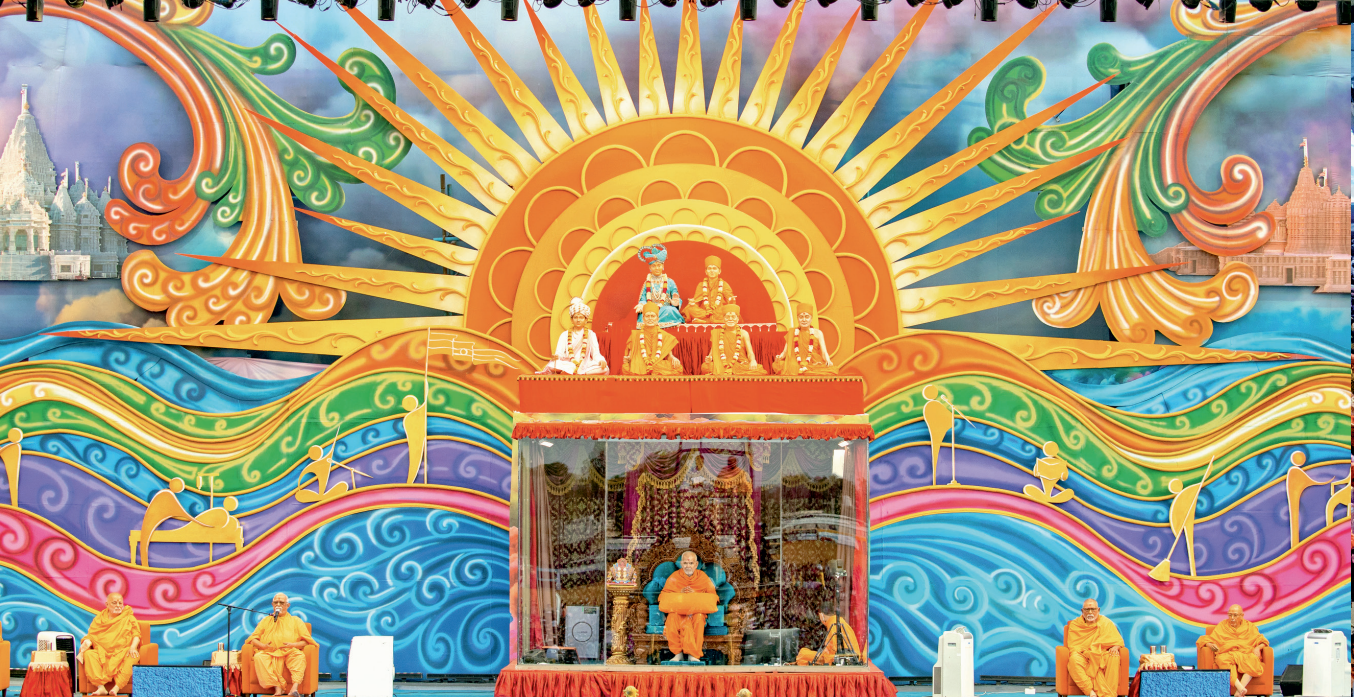
a rousing welcome and felt fulfilled at the darshan.

After doing Thakorji's darshan, Swamishri proceeded to the assembly hall packed with devotees. Swamishri was welcomed and expressed, "Jai Swaminarayan. This is Bhagatji Maharaj's place. For nine days we will enjoy and rejoice through *katha-varta*, singing *mahima* and with *seva* and *bhakti*." The audience received Swamishri's blessings with thunderous claps. Puja Ishwarcharan Swami and swamis residing in Mahuva garlanded Swamishri. Mahant Swami Maharaj expressed his *rajipo* towards the devotees who had observed austerities and other *niyams*. ♦

Translation by Sadhu Vivekjiandas from a concise Gujarati report by Sadhu Brahmavatsaldas



After his arrival at the BAPS Mandir, Swamishri is welcomed by swamis and devotees, Mahuva



MAHANT SWAMI MAHARAJ CELEBRATES PUSHPADOLOTSAV

21 April 2024, Sarangpur

On 21 April 2024, from 5.45 p.m. to 8.15 p.m., over 60,000 devotees and well-wishers from throughout India and many other countries assembled in Sarangpur to celebrate the grand Pushpadolotsav (Festival of Colours) in the presence of Mahant Swami Maharaj. Countless devotees also witnessed the celebration through a live webcast on baps.org.

The colourful stage background depicted the mesmerizing and recently inaugurated iconic Swaminarayan Akshardham in Robbinsville,

NJ, and the BAPS Hindu Mandir in Abu Dhabi. To celebrate the year-long ‘Karyakar Suvarna Mahotsav’, the background also symbolically paid tribute to the BAPS volunteers for their selfless community services. Mahant Swami Maharaj was seated at the centre of the stage along with the *sadguru* swamis on both sides.

The celebration assembly was themed on ‘Karyakar Suvarna Mahotsav’ and ‘Antar Akshardham’.

Pujya Viveksagar Swami spoke about the spiritual essence of the festival of colours. He said, “Bhagwan Swaminarayan insisted on the observance of dharma even while joyously celebrating festivals. Pramukh Swami Maharaj often said that we have to colour ourselves in the divine colours of Bhagwan and guru. I pray to Mahant Swami Maharaj that we all be blessed with his divine colour of unfading saintliness.”

Thereafter, Pujya Ishwarcharan Swami said, “The spirit of selfless *seva* by devotees and





Swamishri sprays coloured water on thousands of devotees

volunteers is recorded from the time of Shriji Maharaj. Pramukh Swami Maharaj greatly accelerated this volunteer activity. Even during the festivals of Shastriji Maharaj's Birth Centenary in 1965, Yogiji Maharaj's Amrut Mahotsav in 1967, and Bhadra Mandir Pratishtha in 1969, we witnessed the volunteers doing extraordinary *seva*. In 1917, during the *pratishtha* festival of Sarangpur Mandir, the volunteer devotees served with great enthusiasm." He further elaborated upon the *seva* of volunteers in the making of Robbinsville Akshardham and during Pramukh Swami Maharaj's Centenary celebrations in Ahmedabad.

Pujya Ishwarcharan Swami also requested all the devotees to exercise their right to vote judiciously for the development and progress of the nation in the upcoming general elections in India.

Addressing the assembly on the theme of 'Antar Akshardham', Pujya Doctor Swami said, "Our aim should be to purify our hearts. If a person believes that God sees him, knows whatever he is doing and gives him the fruits of his karmas, then he would refrain from all immoral acts. Our entire life

is a celebration if we focus on self-improvement and imbibe virtues."

Blessing the mammoth celebration assembly Mahant Swami Maharaj said, "Yogi Bapa instilled a divine colour in everyone's heart which never fades. We have all come here to get drenched in the divine colour. Think about the glory of Bhagwan we have attained (*prapti*). To soak in Bhagwan's divine colour, we need to first remove the worldly colours or desires. I pray to Bhagwan that his divine colour continues to impress upon us."

Thereafter, Swamishri performed *pujan* and *arti* of Shri Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj and devoutly sprayed them with saffron-scented water. At the same time, Shri Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj sprayed Swamishri with coloured water.

Finally, Swamishri sprayed the *sadguru* and senior swamis and all the joyous devotees with sanctified saffron-scented water. All were provided with *prasad* food packs.

In all, 8,000 volunteers served in 30 different departments to ensure the efficient planning, preparation and execution of the Fuldol celebration. ♦



INDIA

KARYAKAR FELICITATION ASSEMBLIES

19 May to 30 June 2024



Karyakars are the active volunteers who conduct the satsang activities of the BAPS. As part of this year's Karyakar Suvarna Mahotsav, special Karyakar Felicitation Assemblies were held locally at all BAPS centres in the 278 BAPS satsang regions throughout India.

The male and female *karyakars* who serve in the *sanyukta*, *yuva*, *bal*, *mahila*, *yuvati* and *balika mandals* were honoured in their local weekly assemblies.

During the assembly, the *karyakars* were welcomed with showers of flower petals and rice grains by devotees. Thereafter, the notable works and dedication of the *karyakars* were narrated, highlighting their sacrifices and commitment to duty.

Each male *karyakar* was presented mementos by swamis attending the assembly. Senior women devotees presented the mementos to the women *karyakars*. The mementos included a card containing rice hand-peeled by the swamis at all BAPS mandirs and sanctified by Mahant Swami Maharaj as a mark of their pure sentiments and appreciation for their *seva* to satsang.

BAPS SWAMINARAYAN SANSKRIT MAHAVIDYALAYA CERTIFIED BY ISO

4 June 2024, Sarangpur



BAPS Swaminarayan Sanskrit Mahavidyalaya in Sarangpur was established in 2013. On 4 June 2024, in the presence of His Holiness Mahant Swami Maharaj, the BAPS Swaminarayan Sanskrit Mahavidyalaya was presented the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) 9001:2015 certificate by representatives of the ISO.

The ISO is a globally recognized body that sets international benchmarks for quality standards. The ISO examines institutions in multiple ways, such as infrastructure and facilities, management, staff quality, working methods and other parameters. This certification acknowledges the quality, effectiveness and efficiency of the work of the assessed institution. BAPS Swaminarayan Sanskrit Mahavidyalaya was thus evaluated against the prescribed international standards and deemed worthy of the ISO certification.

YUVA SHIBIR FOR NAVSARI YOUTHS

7–9 June 2024, Gadhada

More than 500 *yuvaks* and *yuvatis* of Navsari attended the 3-day Yuva Shibir held at the BAPS Mandir in Gadhada based on the theme 'His Words, Our Mission'. The *shibir* theme was



presented in three sections:

His Words, Our Life: which discussed the importance of living as per Swamishri's wish by performing daily devotional rituals, sincerely observing niyam-dharma and using social media with proper discretion.

His Words, Our Strength: which explained the glory of the Akshar-Purushottam *upasana* and the great fortune of having attained such a profound spiritual path to follow in one's life.

His Words, Our Mission: which discussed the role of the youths in promoting this profound spiritual path as per the wish of the Gunatit gurus.

Each section was elaborated upon through speeches, workshops, skits, discussions, videos and other activities.

YUVA SHIBIR: 'LIVE FOR BAPS'

15–16 June 2024, Nagpur



About 100 youths from Nagpur participated in the two-day Yuva Shibir titled 'Live for BAPS'. Through speeches, discussions, videos, question-answer sessions and other activities, the youngsters were guided on how to understand and live for the Sanstha, Siddhant and Satpurush. The *shibir*

helped the youths to strengthen their personal understanding and practice of satsang.

MEDICO-SPIRITUAL STUDENTS' CONFERENCE

15–17 June 2024, Sarangpur



Around 425 male and female students from Gujarat studying in medicine, dentistry, physiotherapy, Ayurveda, homeopathy and other allied medical professions attended the Medico-Spiritual Students' Conference at the BAPS Mandir in Sarangpur.

Based on the theme 'The Code of Happiness', the students were guided on how to harness their true potential and progress in their career and personal spiritual journey to experience peace and joy in life.

The conference included speeches by experienced and learned swamis, workshops, panel discussions, quizzes and other engaging activities.

YUVA SHIBIR: 'NISHTHAVAN BHAVA'

16 June 2024, Chansad



More than 1,600 youths from throughout Vadodara attended this one-day Yuva Shibir, based

on the theme ‘Nishthavan Bhava’, held at Chansad.

During the *shibir*, the youths learnt about the glory of the Akshar-Purushottam Darshan, Parabrahma Bhagwan Swaminarayan, Aksharbrahma Gunatitanand Swami, and other important aspects of the Swaminarayan Sampradaya. The *shibir* also featured the video blessings of Pramukh Swami Maharaj and Mahant Swami Maharaj.

YUVA SHIBIR: ‘BECOME ADARSH’

23 June 2024, Chansad



Over 2,645 *yuvaks* and *yuvatis* from the rural villages near Vadodara attended the one-day Yuva Shibir held at Chansad, the birthplace of Brahmaswarup Pramukh Swami Maharaj.

The *shibir* theme, ‘Become Adarsh’, was conveyed through speeches by swamis, audio-visual presentations and other activities. Video blessings of Pramukh Swami Maharaj and Mahant Swami Maharaj were also shown.

YUVA SHIBIR: ‘SANATANAM: BACK TO OUR ROOTS’

26–27 June 2024, Abu Road, Rajasthan



More than 250 *yuvaks* and *yuvatis* from across Rajasthan participated in the two-day *shibir* ‘Sanatanam: Back to our Roots’ held at Abu Road.

Through speeches by learned and experienced swamis, workshops, discussions, skits, videos and involvement activities, the *shibir* guided the youths on India’s rich heritage of mandirs, shastras and saints, cultural values, moral and ethical living and strengthened their pride as devout followers of Sanatan dharma.

During their stay, the youths also visited places sanctified by Pramukh Swami Maharaj and Mahant Swami Maharaj in Mt Abu.

UK & EUROPE

GREAT BRITISH SPRING CLEAN

15 March to 1 April 2024, UK



More than 200 volunteers from 14 BAPS Swaminarayan Hindu mandirs and centres around the UK took to the streets in March to help clean up and rejuvenate their local neighbourhoods.

The volunteers filled more than 140 bags containing various forms of litter, significantly improving the surrounding environment.

The initiative was part of the Great British Spring Clean, the nation’s largest mass-action environmental campaign in which thousands of individuals, groups and schools come together around the country to participate.

The annual event is organized by Keep Britain Tidy, a leading independent environmental charity that works to inspire, educate and enable everyone in the country to value the environment on their doorstep. Keep Britain Tidy is celebrating

its 70th anniversary this year.

In many places, BAPS volunteers were joined by local councillors, well-wishers and residents, who were grateful to BAPS for helping improve the local neighbourhood.

FOUNDATION PILING BEGINS FOR NEW BAPS MANDIR

4 June 2024, Paris, France



Construction of the first traditional Hindu mandir in France began in the Parisian suburb of Bussy-Saint-Georges. The new BAPS Swaminarayan Hindu Mandir will complement Paris's rich array of architectural beauty and artistic expression. It will introduce the ancient art and science of traditional Hindu architecture, enriching the cultural tapestry of the city.

Vedic rituals were performed by BAPS swamis to mark the first foundation pile being driven into the ground, signifying the commencement of construction. On this landmark occasion, Hadrien Ghomi, Deputy of the French National Assembly, and the Mayor of Bussy-Saint-Georges, Yann Dubosc, as well as the architects, engineers and designers of the temple and several local community representatives were also present.

Mahant Swami Maharaj has continually guided the project and conveyed his blessings. In April, during his stay in Sarangpur, India, he had inscribed the word 'Bénédiction' – French for 'Blessings' – on a graphical representation of the mandir and showered flower petals on the mandir plans.

NATIONAL KARYAKAR RETREAT, EUROPE

7–9 June 2024, Interlaken, Switzerland



More than 90 senior volunteers from 11 countries across Europe participated in the National Karyakar Retreat.

This event was the first time some of the volunteers were meeting in person, having been connected with each other online over several years for their *seva*.

Through inspirational discourses by swamis, discussions, interactive games and team-building activities, everyone learned about each other's many virtues and abilities. The delegates also participated together in daily devotion, such as *arti*, *thal*, *mansi* and *cheshta*.

The retreat provided an opportunity to appreciate the volunteers' continuing services, strengthen the bond between them and their families, and learn from each other to improve their *seva* for their respective centres.

BRITISH PM RISHI SUNAK VISITS NEASDEN TEMPLE

29 June 2024, London



British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak,

accompanied by his wife Akshata Murty, visited BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir in London.

They were warmly welcomed in a traditional Hindu manner. Then, during a brief tour of the mandir they paid their respects to the *murtis* and admired the traditional Hindu art and architecture. They offered prayers at the central shrine and then proceeded to perform the *abhishek* of Shri Nilkanth Varni.

After meeting BAPS volunteers to discuss some of the mandir's charity and community works, they proceeded to join the evening assembly.

Addressing the gathering, Mr Sunak said, "I am completely blown away by the sheer physical beauty of this temple. The most special thing about being here is the strength of the community. Neasden Temple is a shining example of how to inspire a generation of young people to volunteer and support their community.

"His Holiness Mahant Swami Maharaj is an inspiration to so many, and rightly so for the moral clarity that he brings. All of us in our lives have struggles and challenges. Being able to look up to someone like Mahant Swami Maharaj to get that strength and courage to continue is something I find particularly helpful."

Mahant Swami Maharaj had sent a video message for Mr Sunak and his family which was shown during the assembly, "I pray for the people of the United Kingdom: May you all be blessed with peace and prosperity, harmony and success."

NORTH AMERICA

BAPS VOLUNTEERS AT AAPI HERITAGE FESTIVAL

11 May 2024, Tampa, FL, USA

In honour of Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) Heritage month, BAPS volunteers from Tampa participated in the 2nd Annual AAPI Cultural Festival 2024 with Mayor Jane Castor and the City of Tampa. The vibrant and colourful festival celebrated the diverse cultures of the Asian



and Pacific Islander communities in the heart of downtown Tampa. BAPS youths represented India by singing the Shanti Paath, Satsang Diksha shlokas, the National Anthem of India and devotional songs. During the festival, BAPS hosted a booth showcasing Indian arts and conducted a *rangoli* workshop, providing visitors with an opportunity to immerse in India's vibrant culture.

Countries represented at the festival included Korea, Philippines, China, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, India, Japan, Indonesia, Taiwan, and Malaysia as well as the Hawaiian South Pacific Islands.

NEW YORK STATE HONORS 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF FIRST BAPS MANDIR IN NORTH AMERICA

5 June 2024, New York, NY, USA



The New York State Senate and Assembly passed resolutions commemorating the 50th anniversary of the opening of the first BAPS Mandir in North America in Flushing, New York. New York State Senator John Liu and Assemblymember Nily Rozic sponsored the resolutions in the Senate and Assembly, respectively.

BAPS members from across New York

gathered at the State Capitol in Albany to receive the resolutions and perform a traditional Hindu invocation in both the Senate and Assembly chambers to mark the occasion. It was a moment of immense pride and joy for the BAPS community to see their dedication, service, and efforts recognized with such great honour.

Recognizing BAPS's contributions, Senator John Liu stated, "This year marks the 50th anniversary of the BAPS mandir in Flushing, a historic milestone for the mandir and our community. The BAPS mandir has been a cornerstone of the Hindu community, serving the spiritual, social and community needs of so many, and we are proud to commemorate their tremendous commitments to serving the needs of others."

Echoing these sentiments, Assemblymember Rozic remarked, "It's an honour to recognize the BAPS Mandir on their 50th anniversary. For 50 years, the mandir has been a centre for worship, cultural heritage, and community service. Its contributions to the lives of its members and the community have been profound and far-reaching. I am grateful to celebrate their dedication to promoting unity, service and spirituality with my fellow leaders in government."

ISKCON LEADERS VISIT BAPS SWAMINARAYAN AKSHARDHAM

10 June 2024, Robbinsville, NJ



A delegation of ISKCON leaders came for darshan of BAPS Swaminarayan Akshardham in Robbinsville.

After a traditional welcomed by senior

volunteers, the visiting delegation performed *abhishek* and *arti*. Thereafter, during a tour of the campus, volunteer guides and swamis detailed Akshardham's history, Pramukh Swami Maharaj's and Mahant Swami Maharaj's devotion in creating it, and the scriptural and philosophical importance of the various domes and carvings.

His Holiness Radhanath Swami, a senior ISKCON guru and disciple of His Divine Grace Srila Prabhupada, reflected on his visit, stating, "All of this magnificence and exquisiteness was gifted to us by Pramukh Swami Maharaj and Mahant Swami Maharaj so millions could worship God. In their personal lives, they live simply, are completely content with only the name of God. This was done solely for the benefit of us. They are so magnanimous."

The distinguished delegation included senior guests and officials from both India and North America: His Grace Jananivas Prabhu, a prominent disciple of His Divine Grace Srila Prabhupada and the Head Pujari of the Temple of the Vedic Planetarium (TOVP) in Mayapur Dham; His Grace Ambarish Prabhu, Chairman of the TOVP in Mayapur Dham, and great-grandson of Henry Ford; His Grace Braja Vilas Das, Director of the TOVP; His Grace Sunanda Das, North American Coordinator of the TOVP; His Grace Madhupati Das, President of ISKCON of Central New Jersey; His Grace Doyal Gauranga, Director of the Bhakti Center in New York; Devakinandan Das, Vice President of ISKCON of Central New Jersey; and Anuj Sharma, Youth Leader of ISKCON of Central New Jersey.

UAE

UAE NATIONAL SHIBIR: LOTUS IN THE DESERT

17 June 2024, Abu Dhabi

Around 840 people, including 115 children and 71 teenagers, participated in the first UAE National Shibir to be held at the recently inaugurated BAPS Hindu Mandir in Abu Dhabi.



The day-long *shibir* was themed ‘Lotus in the Desert’. Based on the inspiring story of the mandir’s creation, the delegates were encouraged to internalize the message: “If the mandir is our heart, let us make our heart into a mandir. Hence, the same quality, sincerity and intensity of focused efforts that went into constructing this majestic mandir should be applied to our own lives.”

The *shibir* sessions featured presentations on the mandir’s construction process, skits, group discussions and interactive quizzes, all combining to provide the delegates details of the spiritual effort needed to build the inner mandir.

Separate *shibirs* for the toddlers, kids, teenagers and youth included activities tailored to their level of understanding, including team building exercises, treasure hunts, scavenger hunts, puppet shows and letter writing.

INDIA’S EXTERNAL AFFAIRS MINISTER VISITS BAPS HINDU MANDIR 23 June 2024, Abu Dhabi, UAE



Honourable Dr S. Jaishankar, India’s Minister of External Affairs, visited the BAPS Hindu Mandir in Abu Dhabi with an esteemed delegation

of senior officials from the Indian Embassy in the UAE, including Ambassador H.E. Sunjay Sudhir.

Brahmaviharidas Swami traditionally welcomed Dr S. Jaishankar with a garland, tied a *nadachhadi*, and applied a *chandlo*.

During their visit, the delegation ascended the Prayer Dune, were informed about the daily distribution of ‘Swaminarayan Khichdi’ *prasadam* to visitors, learnt about the special nano tiles used on the pathway to the mandir, saw the 6,500-year-old sub-fossil oaks from the Czech Republic and various other features of the mandir.

At The Orchard food court, when Dr S. Jaishankar was told that the furniture has been constructed from repurposed wooden pallets in which the mandir’s stones had been transported, he was delighted and commented, “Many organizations will be inspired by your eco-friendly efforts.”

After meeting members of the Indian diaspora, Dr S. Jaishankar offered prayers to the deities. He then met and appreciated the team of swamis responsible for overseeing the mandir’s facilities, and the volunteers who helped to make and are running the mandir. He also closely admired the skillful artistry of the intricately carved value tales on the mandir’s façade.

After the tour, Dr S. Jaishankar expressed, “Every time I meet you or visit the mandir, I feel positively energized to do good.” He emphasized the mandir’s importance as a visible symbol of India-UAE friendship on his social media platforms, stating, “It radiates a positive message to the world and serves as a true cultural bridge between our two countries.”

AFRICA

ANNUAL KARYAKAR SHIBIRS: ‘KARYAKAR GUNATITNA’

8 March to 12 May 2024, Africa

A total of six 3-day Annual Karyakar Shibirs, based on the theme ‘Karyakar Gunatitna’ (The Karyakars of Gunatit) were organized across



BAPS VOLUNTEERS PARTICIPATE IN UN CIVIL SOCIETY CONFERENCE

9–10 May 2024, Nairobi, Kenya



the African continent, as follows: in Lusaka, Zambia, attended by *karyakars* from Zambia, Zimbabwe, Congo, Namibia; in Lenasia, South Africa, attended by *karyakars* from South Africa, Botswana, Mozambique; in Kisumu, Kenya, attended by *karyakars* from Kenya; in Lilongwe, Malawi, attended by *karyakars* from Malawi; in Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania, attended by *karyakars* from Tanzania; in Kampala, Uganda, attended by *karyakars* from Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi. In total, 1,397 *karyakars* from 247 BAPS centres across 17 African countries participated.

Based on illustrations drawn by Mahant Swami Maharaj, swamis provided valuable guidance on the conduct, speech, wisdom, and spiritual endeavours of a *karyakar* and their understanding of *dharma-nishtha* (steadfastness in dharma), *kartavya-nishtha* (steadfastness in duties), *bhakti-nishtha* (steadfastness in devotion), and *swarup-nishtha* (steadfastness in the divine forms of God and guru).

Additionally, they spoke on balancing social duties and satsang, sincerity in observing daily rites and rituals, benefits of satsang reading, time management, *seva* as the ultimate spiritual endeavour, and other topics. The *karyakars* also received the video blessings of guruhari Mahant Swami Maharaj.

Youth *karyakars* presented dramas and thematic videos to convey inspiring and important messages. *Karyakars* also participated in group discussions. At the conclusion of each *shibir*, the swamis gifted the *karyakars* rice grains which had been hand-peeled by the swamis themselves and sanctified by Mahant Swami Maharaj.

BAPS volunteers joined the United Nations' 69th annual Civil Society Conference, in which thousands of civil society leaders, NGOs, academics, government officials, youth change-makers, media representatives, and other stakeholders from around the world, engaged in dialogue concerning a variety of global issues.

This year, the theme of the conference was 'Shaping a Future of Global and Sustainable Progress', and centred on three objectives: inclusivity, impact and innovation.

BAPS contributed through an exhibit titled 'The Future Is Now: Involving Youth in Shaping Our World'. The exhibit emphasized the importance of engaging and empowering youth to be change-makers and civil society leaders, and showcased BAPS' many efforts to engage youth from across the world in societal services. BAPS representatives also engaged in faith-based dialogue with representatives from faith organizations to share and better understand the collective contributions of all towards humanitarian activities.

BAPS CHARITIES

FLOOD RELIEF

6 May 2024, Kisumu, Kenya

During Kenya's long 2024 rainy season, the nation faced unprecedented heavy rainfall, leading to flash floods in various regions, including Kisumu city situated on the banks of Lake Victoria. The torrential downpour caused rivers



and lakes to overflow, flooding communities and residential areas and disrupting livelihoods.

Responding to the crisis, the BAPS Charities in Kisumu swiftly mobilized resources to support the affected communities for a week from 6 May 2024. Over 2,420 essential food and supplies kits that would last six days for a family of four were collectively packed by volunteers, and distributed in the affected areas. In addition, 360 blankets were donated.

NATIONAL TREE GROWING DAY

10 May 2024, Mombasa, Kenya

In support of the National Tree Growing Day

initiative by the government, BAPS Charities in Mombasa planted 1,000 mangrove trees along the Kenyan coast.

Despite the heavy rainfall during the planting, BAPS Charities volunteers worked alongside local authorities and the Kenya Forest Service. This effort is part of BAPS Charities' commitment to Environmental Protection, with a total of 7,750 trees already planted during the rainy season of 2024 as a contribution to Kenya's Landscape and Ecosystem Restoration Programme, which aims to plant 15 billion trees by 2032 to significantly address global climate change.



CHATURMAS NIYAMS

17 July to 12 November 2024



As instructed by Bhagwan Swaminarayan in the Shikshapatri and by the wish of *guruhari* Param Puja Mahant Swami Maharaj, devotees should undertake extra spiritual observances during the four holy months of Chaturmas. This year, Chaturmas is from 17 July 2024 (Ashadh *sud* 11) to 12 November 2024 (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 or listen to the Vachanamrut & Swamini Vato
2. *Brahmaswarup Pramukh Swami Maharaj Jivan Charitra*, Parts 7, 8 or 9 (or listen for 15 minutes daily to their audio on the Akshar Amrutam app).
3. Read the following Gujarati books published for Pramukh Swami Maharaj's Centenary Celebrations: *Gurubhakti no Viral Adarsh*, *Murtiman Dasatvabhakti*, *Aa Chhe Brahmisthiti*, *Adivasiyona Vatsalyamurti*, *Parivarik Ektanu Prem Chhatra*.

Austerities

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

Devotion

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

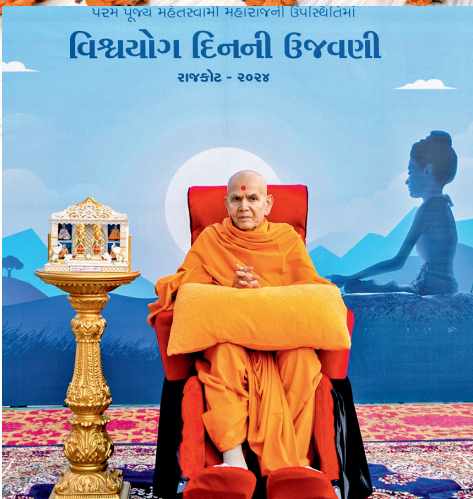
Homage to Guru

- Every week, narrate in person or via letter, email or social media, one incident highlighting the virtues of Mahant Swami Maharaj 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*.



**MAHANT SWAMI MAHARAJ CELEBRATES
INTERNATIONAL DAY OF YOGA
21 June 2024, Rajkot**

Swamishri participates in the United Nations International Day of Yoga with devotees and swamis in Rajkot by performing *pranayam* and other yogic exercises. Many BAPS centres worldwide also held special yoga sessions to celebrate and promote the practice of yoga for mental, physical and spiritual well-being.



**MAHANT SWAMI MAHARAJ AT
BHAGATJI MAHARAJ SMRUTI MANDIR**

8 June 2024, Mahuva

Brahmaswarup Bhagatji Maharaj, the second spiritual successor of Bhagwan Swaminarayan, was born in Mahuva on 20 March 1829 and returned to Akshardham on 7 November 1897. He served Aksharbrahma Gunatitanand Swami with the utmost devotion and dedication. Bhagatji Maharaj discoursed tirelessly on the Akshar-Purushottam doctrine as revealed by Bhagwan Swaminarayan. Bhagatji Maharaj's final rites were performed on the banks of River Malan on the outskirts on Mahuva. Here, Yogiji Maharaj had inaugurated a small mandir in his honour. Pramukh Swami Maharaj initiated a bigger memorial, which Mahant Swami Maharaj completed.

Mahant Swami Maharaj visited this Bhagatji Maharaj Smruti Mandir on 8 June 2024, where he was joined by Pujya Ishwarcharan Swami and Pujya Viveksagar Swami.

