

IN THE JOY OF OTHERS

A Life Sketch of Pramukh Swami Maharaj

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Publisher's Note

From the first Vedic utterance to the present time, the sacred land of India has been made holier still by the birth of innumerable divine souls. The sages have nurtured the spiritual inclinations of the people and led them to ever greater heights of wisdom, harmony and spiritual realization. The message, based on the universal Vedas, has always been, ultimately, one of God realization.

This goal is also the essence of Pramukh Swami Maharaj's life. Though he extensively provides for the social, educational and cultural needs of the people, he does not lose sight of the spiritual goals of life.

Any attempt to put in words the life of a great sadhu is audacious to say the least. The realizations, experiences, devotion, detachment, love, concern and myriad other aspects of such a personality can never be conveyed satisfactorily through the written word; or for that matter, the spoken word.

To truly appreciate a divine personage, eyes of a different perception are needed. This venture to put Swamishri's life in print can at best be only a modest portrayal.

This book, *In the Joy of Others*, is a life sketch of Pramukh Swami Maharaj, portraying his credo, "In the joy of others lies our own." It is chronological only up to his shouldering the spiritual leadership of the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS). The greater part of his work has been separated into chapters that delve into the various aspects of his life: relentless *vicharan*, sadhus, interaction with children and youths, spirituality and teachings, concern for social harmony and other such topics. In all, the book attempts to offer a brief overview of his life and work to date.

In the Joy of Others has been adapted from the Gujarati version *Pragat Brahmaswarup Pramukh Swami Maharaj* by renowned Gujarati writer Mohanlal Patel and published by Swaminarayan Aksharpith. We are indebted to him for his initial efforts and also to the BAPS sadhus who penned this English edition. We hope this book will give an insight into the divine personality of Pramukh Swami Maharaj.

- Swaminarayan Aksharpith

In the Beginning

The present spiritual leader of the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS), Pramukh Swami Maharaj, represents a succession of spirituality that began over 200 years ago in 1781. The year marked the birth of the founder of the Swaminarayan Sampradaya, Bhagwan Swaminarayan (1781-1830 CE).

Born in the village of Chhapaiya, near Ayodhya, in North India, Bhagwan Swaminarayan renounced home at the age of 11 to embark on a pilgrimage on foot that took him across the length and breadth of India. He received initiation from a Vaishnav guru, Ramanand Swami, and eventually settled in Gujarat in western India. He spent the next 30 years of his life in Gujarat and, in particular, the Kathiawad region, spearheading a socio-spiritual reformation. With a faithful following of 3,000 sadhus, he established the Swaminarayan Sampradaya. He introduced innovative social reforms and undertook charitable work to help the poor and needy. In the tradition of the Bhakti Sampradaya he constructed six grand mandirs. His work concentrated on promoting personal morality and moulding spiritual character.

In his own lifetime, he was worshipped as God by some two million devotees and also earned a reputation as a great socio-religious reformer. The movement he founded has emerged as one of the purest forms of Hinduism.

Through his spiritual presence, Bhagwan Swaminarayan continues to provide energy and experience through a succession of God-realized spiritual masters. The first guru in the succession was his choicest devotee, Gunatitanand Swami (1785-1867 CE), the manifestation of Aksharbrahman. He in

turn was followed by Bhagatji Maharaj (1829-1897 CE).

After him, Shastriji Maharaj (1865-1951 CE) furthered the teachings of Bhagwan Swaminarayan, by promoting the worship of Bhagwan Swaminarayan as Purushottam and Gunatitanand Swami as Aksharbrahman. He built five glorious mandirs and established the dual worship of Akshar and Purushottam. He founded the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS) in 1907.

The fourth spiritual master was Yogiji Maharaj (1892-1971 CE), whose work spread the message of Bhagwan Swaminarayan overseas to East Africa, England and USA. He passed away in 1971 after placing the oars of the Sanstha in the hands of Pramukh Swami Maharaj.

Since then, under Pramukh Swami Maharaj's able leadership and guidance, BAPS has grown as a highly respected worldwide socio-spiritual organization.

With the inspiration of Pramukh Swami Maharaj, the BAPS has made noteworthy contributions to society through its numerous social, moral, cultural, educational, medical, environmental, tribal uplift and spiritual activities.

In particular, the majestic Swaminarayan Akshardham complexes in New Delhi and Gandhinagar have won international acclaim as centres which reflect India's ancient history and glorious culture, and inspire humanity's universal ideals.

Outside India, Pramukh Swami Maharaj has instilled fresh pride for Sanatan Dharma among all Hindus by building traditional mandirs, based on ancient Vedic architectural principles in London, Nairobi, Houston, Chicago, Toronto, Atlanta, Los Angeles and New Jersey.

Swamishri himself leads an austere, simple life, without personal gains or comforts. Possessing nothing, wanting

nothing, he goes around giving his all. Despite his age, he untiringly travels from tiny tribal huts to modern metropolitan cities all over the world, promoting a virtuous life and spiritual faith. At his tender word, thousands have shed addictions and walked the path of God.

His striking humility, profound wisdom and deep spirituality have touched many. His love for mankind and respect for all religions is weaving a fabric of cultural unity, interfaith harmony and universal peace.

The sole reason behind his unique success is a deep and fluent communion with God.

1

Birth

Shastriji Maharaj reminded Motibhai of this, saying in his own inimitable manner, "I want to exchange a head for a head. The other one came back so in his place give me this one."

It was two decades and a little more into the twentieth century. Just 12 kilometres from the sprawling metropolis of Vadodara city lay the small village of Chansad in the Kanam region. The village was neither poor nor wealthy, though nature had lovingly embraced it. The village pond was large and deep. Its water was clear, clean and cooling.

Huge tamarind trees filled the sky whilst generous crops sprang forth from a fertile earth. The villagers were for the most part farmers. They were gentle folks living a quiet, enjoyable life bonded to dharma.

Many great sadhus had graced Chansad. The spiritual heir of Aksharbrahman Gunatitanand Swami and Shastriji Maharaj's guru, Bhagatji Maharaj, made holy the unpaved streets of

Chansad by visiting some 35 times. Brahmaswarup Shastriji Maharaj himself also often stayed in Chansad, for treatment by Mansukhbhai Vaidya, an Ayurvedic healer. Brahmaswarup Yogiji Maharaj would spend a month at a time in Chansad and spiritually elevate the villagers through his simple discourses and selfless love.

The village itself was located on high ground and had several mandirs. One was dedicated to Shri Hanumanji and overlooked the pond. In this mandir a renunciate priest named Haridas served the enshrined deity. His gentle and fatherly nature attracted two teenagers to the small mandir every morning and evening. Both were friends, and both were named Shantilal! They would go everywhere together; play together and study together. They would even eat at each other's houses. They were inseparable.

Since birth both had been brought up in pious atmospheres, and so had in common religious leanings and wishes. Of the two friends, one's father was Motibhai Patel, a strong *satsangi* of the Swaminarayan faith. This Shantilal's mother, Diwaliben, was also involved deeply in Satsang. Her family had first been influenced by Bhagatji Maharaj. Diwaliben was plump and sweet natured. She regularly performed austerities and devoutly celebrated festivals. She was careful to instil values and spirituality into her children.

Motibhai was friendly and affectionate. He had raised his family well. They would daily visit the Swaminarayan mandir and serve the sadhus who frequented their village.

The other Shantilal grew up in similar circumstances. Whilst other children played games and mischief in general, Shantilal and Shantilal would sit with their school slates and books. After finishing their homework they would rush to the Hanuman mandir and listen to the discourses of Haridas. He

talked of the Ramayan and the greatness of holy men. He described the Himalayas and the holy men who lived there in caves and ashrams. In particular he talked about the holy places of Haridwar and Rishikesh. Haridas encouraged their spiritual thirst. He even promised, “Once you complete your studies we shall go to Haridwar and Rishikesh and worship God.”

This desire, however, remained unfulfilled. The future held something remarkably different. Motibhai’s Shantilal remained in Chansad while his friend was taken to Vadodara to pursue further studies.

* * *

On 7 December 1921 (Magshar *sud* 8, Samvat 1978) a fourth son was born to Motibhai and Diwaliben. The two had parented a large family, as was necessary for the subsistence of farmers. The boys were Dahyabhai, Nandubhai, Purushottambhai and Shantilal; they had six sisters: Kashiben, Chanchalben, Kamalaben, Gangaben, Savitaben and Dahiben. Unfortunately, Kashiben, Chanchalben, Dahiben and Purushottambhai had all passed away as infants.

Several days after Shantilal’s birth the family was still rejoicing when Shastriji Maharaj graced Chansad. It was a usual visit for Satsang purposes. Motibhai carried the fragile little bundle swathed in woollens to guru Shastriji Maharaj for blessings. Shastriji Maharaj was pleased. He said, “He is ours. Bestow him to us in the future.” Shastriji Maharaj was serious.

Motibhai immediately accepted Shastriji Maharaj’s request.

From that moment on Motibhai relinquished the ownership of Shantilal. His duty was now to bring up the boy in a loving family, teaching him Satsang values and when Shastriji Maharaj saw fit, to make over responsibility for his charge to him. Diwaliben was likewise minded. The two were sincere in living God-centred lives, so the idea of giving up Shantilal was no

shock. Indeed, if anything, it infused a rare joy of expectancy. Was life not to be spent in joyous devotion?

Shantilal grew up watching his mother and father worshipping Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj. He was fascinated as a little bell was rung and the *arti* was performed. Soon, he was doing it too.

One day when Shantilal was about six years old his family and friends were invited to dinner in Rajnagar. It was *ekadasbi* but no *faral* had been cooked. Shantilal was forced to sit down with everybody else. Not being able to refuse he began to cry. Chhotabhai of Bhadran village often gave sweets to him and his friends, getting them together and arranging games. He affectionately asked Shantilal why he was crying. “What do you want?”

“Let me do *ekadasbi*,” Shantilal managed to say.

Chhotabhai got some *faral* and served the little boy who wouldn't break his vow.

Shastriji Maharaj would often visit Chansad. On one such visit, seven-year-old Shantilal held his finger and pointing to Shastriji Maharaj's *jodi* hanging on a wall peg said, “Swami! In your *jodi* you have God. Give him to me!”

As Shantilal grew up surrounded by brothers and sisters, it became obvious that Shastriji Maharaj had correctly fathomed his soul. The fragile bundle that Shastriji Maharaj had blessed was devoted to Bhagwan Swaminarayan and the guru. No one doubted his future. It was spiritual, and that was final.

In Bochasan, when Shantilal was with Ghanshyam Swami and Balmukund Swami as a teenager, during the fifth standard vacation, he was tested by Ghanshyam Swami. “Stay here and we will make you a sadhu.”

Talks of becoming a sadhu were pleasant for Shantilal. It was his goal. But he would not take any step before first consulting guru Shastriji Maharaj. He felt there was no need for undue haste. Shastriji Maharaj would shortly be visiting Bochasan for the Guru Purnima celebration. They could discuss the matter then. He would not be led by another.

During Guru Purnima, Akshar Swami took up the matter with Shastriji Maharaj. He even took Shantilal to Shastriji Maharaj, and said, "He is a good kid, and can become a sadhu."

Shantilal was also enthusiastic. His lean face glowed as Shastriji Maharaj expressed pleasure. He agreed with the proposal, because it had been uppermost in his mind since Shantilal's birth. "First, we shall educate him," he added.

Never one to delay, Shastriji Maharaj tested Shantilal's grasping power and intellect there and then. He gave him a set of Sanskrit noun forms to memorize. That same day Shantilal repeated fluently the difficult Sanskrit words. Shastriji Maharaj was delighted. He was convinced Shantilal would live up to all his expectations. He praised, "You have the ability to become a scholar, and you have the ability to become a Shastri."

At that very moment Shastriji Maharaj decided to place Shantilal with a sadhu who was to go to Petlad for Sanskrit studies. However, when it was discovered that the Shastri who was to teach Sanskrit was not in Petlad the plan was postponed.

Motibhai also visited the festival. Shastriji Maharaj discussed Shantilal's future Sanskrit education with him. Motibhai told Shastriji Maharaj of Shantilal's eagerness to study formally and how he wanted to enrol at the English school in Padra. It was decided that since the Petlad idea was not possible yet, Shantilal would return home and complete his schooling in Padra. English had for long fascinated Shantilal. He knew of the language's growing importance and its necessity, thus he

immediately agreed to continue his studies. After all, that was why he had tried so hard to start a class in Darapara.

The village school in Chansad taught only up to the fifth standard. Teaching of the sixth or higher standards had not been started for lack of pupils. If Shantilal wanted to continue his studies he would have to travel to Padra, a nearby town, or another village. The village of Darapara was the best alternative, so Shantilal made inquiries there. The teacher there said that if ten students enrolled he would start classes. Shantilal himself was totally committed to the idea of further study, even as his commitment to God grew. He scoured neighbouring villages in search of students. Finally, about a dozen were enlisted: two from Chansad, two more from Darapara and the remaining from close lying villages. The teacher, however, showed no enthusiasm to teach a class that held only two students from his own village.

Shantilal was disappointed. He spent the year at home, reading, visiting the mandir and doing odd jobs. His desire to study remained intense. He would not accept defeat. His parents looked to their youngest son's enthusiasm. Whilst other children saw only the present and a family future, their Shantilal, though quiet and meek, was charged with a controlled energy that ensured a bright future. They were ready to send him to Bochasan, where British rule had made available a good school. Chansad as yet was under the rule of Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad, who ruled from Vadodara. Education authorities in Bochasan decreed that Shantilal would have to redo his fourth and fifth years. This was unacceptable to him and he decided not to join. Another school year was lost.

There really was no other path to be pursued. If he wanted to study Shantilal would have to travel to Padra. Two friends, Shankarlal and Muljibhai, went to the Padra English

school. Shantilal explained his problems to the two and also pronounced his decision of going to Padra. Both youngsters happily agreed to help him. As Shantilal didn't have a cycle of his own, Shankarlal and Muljibhai offered him to ride pillion to and from Padra every day. Thus, Shantilal eagerly enrolled at school and was placed in the fifth standard – 1st English then.

Of an obliging and helpful nature, he was naturally embarrassed that his friends carried him on their cycles every day. They, of course, were happy to do so, but many a time saw their unassuming friend either walk to Padra, or walk back home – a distance of six kilometres.

His committal to studies was complete. On arriving home he would carefully wash his face, legs and arms, change into house clothes and quietly sit absorbed in homework. He always sat in the same corner. Diwaliben would have to call repeatedly for him to dine. This indifference to food worried his mother. In truth, Shantilal was skinny to say the least, his clothes hung loosely from protruding shoulders and small waist. Diwaliben frequently coaxed him into drinking fresh milk from the family cow or buffalo. Mealtimes were a reluctant affair. Despite a full dish he ate sparingly.

Shantilal seemed able to disregard his body at want. Throughout childhood, even when assailed by common ailments he remained unaffected. Once he suffered a heavy attack of a particular rash, pus continually oozed from the sores. Dressings would stick to the skin. True to his name, Shantilal silently suffered. He could endure pain to a remarkable degree.

His simple nature held no room for dishonesty or guile. He touched the border of credulous, but remained in every way sensible. The ways of the world bored him and maybe even repelled him. His was a calm detachment. This sometimes

made him vulnerable to the wrath of others. Reflecting on the past, Ghanshyam Swami would later say, “He never had a head for practical matters... and when speaking could only manage to say ‘um, um, um.’”

It was vacation time during the fifth standard and Shantilal decided to serve senior Akshar Swami, Ghanshyam Swami and Balmukund Swami who were touring the villages around Bochasan. In Anand the four stayed at Motibhai Bhagwandas’s house. Next to the house was a well where the sadhus bathed. It was Shantilal’s responsibility to pull water up in a canvas bucket. But he only managed to frustrate Ghanshyam Swami who would exclaim, “What will this kid do? He doesn’t even know how to pull a bucket!”

“Another time Ghanshyam Swami visited Chansad and promptly fell ill. It so happened that Shantilal was leaving for Vadodara on an errand. Ghanshyam Swami asked that he bring back grapes which he wanted to use to prepare a medication. Shantilal failed to grasp what types of grapes were required. Returning from Vadodara he bought a bunch of juicy green grapes. Ghanshyam Swami severely scolded him. He had wanted dry black grapes, a common village ingredient in herbal medicines.

Pramukh Swami Maharaj himself is frank when reminded of his early teenage years. He recalls, “I spoke little from the very beginning. When addressed two or three times I would just say, ‘Hm, hm.’ Ghanshyam Swami knew of this and would speak of it. But Swami’s [Shastriji Maharaj’s] blessings were with me, and so things rolled on.”

Balmukund Swami deserves credit for helping Shantilal adjust to the world around him. He took the reticent teenager into his care and patiently taught him how to serve sadhus and perform other tasks. Pramukh Swami recollects, “Balmukund

Swami would pull water and I would bathe. He showed me how to wash dhotis, scrub utensils, clean up – he repeatedly taught me all this with patience. He also taught me how to sing bhajans. He would teach me how to cook as well.”

After the vacation, Shantilal returned to Chansad and resumed studies with his friends Shankarlal and Mulji. The year finished with Shantilal performing well. The sixth standard also started well. Shantilal possessed not just a keen memory, but also a rapid grasping power. He was diligent and would not rest till he had mastered the subject in hand.

Mid-term exams arrived and with them an unexpected turn of history. The Diwali season approached. With the village beginning to prepare, Shastriji Maharaj arrived.

Shantilal's elder brother, Nandubhai, was a religious man. He had once accepted the ochre robes of a sadhu, but after a year had found the life and discipline too difficult. He had returned home to take up a normal life. Shastriji Maharaj reminded Motibhai of this, saying in his own inimitable manner, “I want to exchange a head for a head. The other one came back so in his place give me this one.”

“As you will,” agreed Motibhai immediately. But the question of Shantilal's formal education again rose. He himself said to Shastriji Maharaj, “I'd like to study English.”

Shastriji Maharaj was not averse to Shantilal's desire, so he replied, “Aksharjivan Swami has also studied two or three standards. He is also to be educated further and so are you. In Vinakyakbhai's school in Ahmedabad, Khengarjibhai is a teacher. He will come to Amlī Pol to teach you.”

Shastriji Maharaj's planning satisfied both of Shantilal's goals, of studying and of becoming a sadhu. Nobody had any objections at home. Shantilal would take his exams and leave

with Shastriji Maharaj who was to stay in Chansad awhile. Shantilal's joy was complete. He was studying, his dreams of sadhuhood were materializing and Shastriji Maharaj was in Chansad. What more could a God-conscious teenager ask for!

A devotee in Gana, however, fell seriously ill. Shastriji Maharaj received the message and hastened there. He left behind Ghanshyam Swami and Nilkanth Swami, instructing Ghanshyam Swami, "Bring Shantilal to Bochasan as soon as his exams are over." But Nilkanth Swami was called to nearby Bhaili and so the two sadhus had to go together. Shastriji Maharaj wrote a letter to Ghanshyam Swami reminding him to bring Shantilal to Bochasan.

It may seem strange, but in one area Shantilal joined the people of India. He was partial to cricket!

A distiller, Ramlal, had moved to Chansad. A great fan of cricket, he had brought the game to the village. On his own initiative he had bought a bat and ball and taught the local kids how to play. The kids were soon hooked and played every evening. Shantilal often joined them. One day the cricketers got together and decided, "The bat and ball belong to the distiller. Let's buy our own bat, ball and stumps." Cricket was an expensive sport. Funds would be needed. The youngsters approached village elders. Soon they had collected about 150 rupees.

The required equipment would have to be bought in Vadodara. Chansad catered to no such pastimes. The cricketers gathered in the school on the edge of the village. Who would go to Vadodara? Sitting on the steps each suggested another's name.

Shantilal was soon suggested. His mild, obliging nature had won the confidence of many. He agreed and said to

Shankarlal, "If you come, we'll both go." Very soon he would be leaving home, village and friends forever. Maybe this was the last chance he would get to be of help to his friends in a materialistic sense. As the discussion continued, Ravji, a youth from Bhaili, came looking for Shantilal. He saw the group spread over the school steps and hurried across to them.

"I've come from Bhaili. Ghanshyam Swami has sent me," he said quickly. "He sent a letter from Shastriji Maharaj with me. It's for you, Shantilal. I've left the letter at your home. I've come to take you with me. Come home at once."

The group was bemused at the sudden intrusion into their affairs. Shantilal was taken aback. He stood up and began walking home, his pace even and steady, hands gently curved at the elbows and hanging down, slightly swinging in step with his strides.

All thoughts of cricket dissolved into a keen desire to read the sacred letter. The mention of Shastriji Maharaj sent his senses tingling. It must be important; why else would he write himself, and why would Ghanshyam Swami send a special messenger. Shantilal was oblivious of the homes and small shops he passed. Eyes were downcast as in usual habit, occasionally flicking upwards to avoid others. The dirt road crawled up a gentle incline, splitting into two arteries just below the crest. Motibhai's two-storey wood and stone house was the first in the 'V' so formed.

Motibhai and Diwaliben were waiting. Shastriji Maharaj had instructed that they send their youngest son to him. He was to become a sadhu. Both were eager and willing. Shantilal had no doubts himself. Shastriji Maharaj was guru, and to live by the guru's command was his goal in life. It was plain and simple. The time to renounce had come. Accepting was effortless.

Shantilal walked through the door into his home of 18 years.

The family was waiting. Motibhai and Diwaliben wanted spiritual goals for their son; they felt he should be encouraged to devote his life to Bhagwan Swaminarayan and guru Shastriji Maharaj. He would gain merely a farmer's plate and family by embracing a householder's life. Instead, why not strive for God-consciousness and truly fulfil the purpose of this God-gifted life.

It was *ekadashi*, Tuesday, 7 November 1939 (Aso *vad* 11, V.S. 1996). Motibhai's family observed a fast on every *ekadashi* day, eating only fruits and *faral*. Diwaliben warmed some milk. The family drank together.

Motibhai held out Shastriji Maharaj's letter. It was self-explanatory. The time had come. Shantilal was to take with him a few clothes and from Bhaili go to Bochasan with Ghanshyam Swami. The house was silent. Words were a hindrance, an unwanted guest.

A heart-rending farewell would be uncharacteristic. Diwaliben was strong and resilient. She had accompanied Motibhai through years of happiness, and inevitable sorrows. He had been a pillar of wise counsel and integrity. She was supportive, raising the family, the archetype of an ideal Hindu housewife.

It was not easy for her. The youngest is always the most loved. True love seeks only the happiness of those who are loved. Diwaliben was witnessing her Shantilal leave the home she had made to enter another – God's home. Her unexpressed joy cloaked the deeply hidden sorrow. She was later to say, "I saw Shanti and I lived. For Shanti I lived."

Both parents blessed him, "Go with goodwill. Swami will be pleased. We bless you much." The others offered words of advice.

Diwaliben added, "Bhai! You are becoming a sadhu; live as

a good sadhu. Do as Swami says. Please him. Never think of returning home.” To be successful as a sadhu Diwaliben knew that all bridges had to be burnt. Her words were of strength and encouragement, not warnings or threats.

She placed a small parcel of *faral* into his hands as he walked to the door. She thought it would suffice if he felt hungry on the short ride to Bhaili. Shantilal sat on the cycle behind Ravji, who pedalled. The cycle wobbled at first but balance was gained and the two teenagers rode down the incline to the dust track the villagers called a road.

A little way ahead Shantilal realized he had forgotten his daily puja. He told Ravji to wait while he cycled back. As he walked into his home a very surprised Diwaliben asked, “Why have you come back?”

“I forgot my puja.”

He reached up to the shelf where it was tidily kept. Diwaliben quickly made a packet of *mamra* and *chana* which she gave him. He hadn’t asked. She just thought he might need something. He walked away. Ravji was waiting.

Shantilal was lucky. His farewell had witnessed no scenes of sobbing and anguish. The home was empty of belligerent relatives. There were no protests or confused pleas to stay at home. The family had prepared for this moment ever since Shastriji Maharaj had blessed him at birth. Shantilal, himself, was his usual calm and composed self. As with every day, today, he was fully in command of his emotions.

2

Diksha

These were difficult days for Shantilal. It was as if he were under examination. How determined was he to become a sadhu? Did he feel sorry for himself or homesick? Was he hurt that nobody cared for him in Nadiad?

The break had now physically been made. As far as he was concerned, Shantilal had no family save the Satsang family. At the helm was Shastriji Maharaj, a father, mother, friend and guru all woven into one. The sadhus and lay devotees were family members. He was eager to merge into this Akshar-Purushottam home and contribute as best as he could to its growth.

With Ravji peddling and Shantilal riding, the two soon reached Bhaili. They met Ghanshyam Swami who was sitting in the mandir. He was pleased to see Shantilal.

They stayed a day in Bhaili and then moved on to Sankarda for three to four days. Ghanshyam Swami planned to go to

Bochasan for Diwali and Annakut. But the devotees in Sankarda persuaded him to celebrate Diwali there in the village. They extended their stay to ask for the New Year's tithes for Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj consecrated in Bochasan.

So, Ghanshyam Swami decided to send Shantilal to Bochasan with Shankar Bhagat, a local devotee. Bhagat was a staunch follower of Akshar-Purushottam. He was service minded and trustworthy. Ghanshyam Swami called Shantilal to him and instructed, "Go to Bochasan with Bhagat. Shastriji Maharaj will come to Bochasan on Punam so you will have his darshan. And if you don't want to stay in Bochasan, return here with Shankar Bhagat.

Once in Bochasan, Shankar Bhagat introduced Shantilal to Nirgun Swami who took him under his care. Annakut was celebrated and the next day Shankar Bhagat asked Shantilal before he left for Sankarda. "Come now, do you want to remain here or come back to Sankarda?"

"I'll stay here," replied Shantilal. He was never one to say more than necessary. In his mind was a keen desire to have darshan of Shastriji Maharaj. He decided to wait until Punam, several days ahead.

Two or three days later Nirgun Swami decided to go to Ahmedabad. He also decided to take Shantilal with him as Shastriji Maharaj would be coming there. Shantilal was excited. Shastriji Maharaj, he thought, was now only hours away. Nirgun Swami had however made other plans. He wanted to go to Bhadran to meet Jashbhai Makandas who was to visit a relative there. Jashbhai was a leading administrator of the Vartal mandir and Nirgun Swami wanted to discuss with him the case against Shastriji Maharaj by the Vartal mandir concerning the mandir in Ishnav village. They however missed him in Bhadran. Nirgun Swami went to Vartal. They

could not find Jashbhai there and so decided to go to Nadiad where he would definitely be. They however stayed over in Borsad and Kavitha on other business, and when they finally got to Nadiad discovered that Jashbhai had left for Vartal. All through Shantilal, who had set his soul on Ahmedabad, patiently tagged along. Silently watching Nirgun Swami and doing whatever he asked. The few hours of travel envisioned by him turned into days.

In Nadiad he developed a fever. Nirgun Swami and Harivallabh Swami would leave each morning and return late evening. There was no one to care for Shantilal. He would lie on a makeshift bed all day struck weak by the illness. He could not eat anything. So, in the evening, Harivallabh Swami would warm some milk for him.

These were difficult days for Shantilal. It was as if he were under examination. How determined was he to become a sadhu? Did he feel sorry for himself or homesick? Was he hurt that nobody cared for him in Nadiad?

But he was made of a different mettle. Of his bodily needs he himself cared little. He had quietly nurtured a passion for sadhuhood since his childhood. Adolescence had not diluted this craving. And now a fever was not going to ruffle him. If anything did upset him it was the confusing delay in meeting Shastriji Maharaj. This, Shantilal found almost intolerable. His mind was set, his whole being had already surged ahead to Ahmedabad, but the body remained in Nadiad.

On the tenth they finally arrived in Ahmedabad. Shantilal was still feverish. Nirgun Swami took the group to Amlī Pol in the inner walled city. This year, Shastriji Maharaj had, as usual, celebrated Annakut in Sarangpur and had quickly travelled through several towns and villages distributing Annakut *prasad*. In Ahmedabad, as always, he put up in an upper room

at Babubhai Kothari's house in Amlī Pol. The corrugated metal-roofed room was cramped, housing a solitary cot for Shastriji Maharaj. The 15 to 20 devotees would sit downstairs.

Shantilal was put to bed in a corner. Shastriji Maharaj went to him and affectionately said, "You're here at last? That's good." Shantilal was overjoyed. He however could not find the words to express himself. He merely said, "I've been running a fever for three to four days."

Shastriji Maharaj, his motherly guardian consoled, "The fever will go." He caressed his head and told him to rest.

That night before retiring to bed Shastriji Maharaj again blessed him, "Your fever will now subside." He stroked Shantilal's entire body whilst chanting 'Swaminarayan, Swaminarayan...'. He reassured him, "You'll be OK. There'll be no problems." He stood to leave, and turned, pausing to say, "In the morning I want to initiate you as a *parshad*."

Ahmedabad, Wednesday, 22 November 1939

The fever subsided that night. The next morning he took a hot water bath. Shastriji Maharaj again spoke of initiation as a *parshad*, "Today is *ekadasī*. I'll initiate you as a *parshad*."

Shantilal was wholly prepared. It was for this that he had left home and family, friends and schooling. He however remembered that earlier on Shastriji Maharaj had said he could study English from Khengarjibhai. He spoke of this to Shastriji Maharaj who replied, "Take the initiation. We will talk to Khengarjibhai later."

Shantilal now became known as Shanti Bhagat, and was required to wear white robes and eat from a *pattar*. He also had to observe the vows of poverty (*nirlobh*) and celibacy (*nishkam*).

Two days later Shastriji Maharaj took him to Bochasan. Once, when talking of a sadhu's life Shastriji Maharaj said to

him, “Sanskrit is more useful than English now that you are a sadhu. Of what use is English now. Are you going to find a job or start a business? If you study Sanskrit you’ll be able to read our shastras. As sadhus we have to read from the Satsangijivan and other shastras.”

Although Shastriji Maharaj had agreed that he could study English, he now thought it better that Shanti Bhagat concentrate on Sanskrit.

Shanti Bhagat had himself decided from the very beginning that he was going to live in total consonance with his spiritual master’s wishes. There was of course nothing wrong with letting Shastriji Maharaj know of what was going on in his own mind. It was a confession of sorts, and one that Shastriji Maharaj encouraged. After this conversation he decided to study Sanskrit as best as he could.

* * *

Although the *murtis* had been consecrated, the Bochasan mandir had not been completed in its entirety. Work still remained to be done. The brick oven that prepared the lime for building use had once to be emptied. Shastriji Maharaj told a large group of sadhus and devotees to do the task. The lime was hot and working with it was difficult and painful. After a while, one after another, everyone left. Shanti Bhagat remained, toiling until the service had been completed to Shastriji Maharaj’s liking.

Several weeks later Shastriji Maharaj took him to Akshar Mandir in Gondal. He wanted to initiate Shanti Bhagat into the sadhu order, but he was delaying this until he was convinced that Shanti Bhagat had swept all thoughts of English from his mind and would study Sanskrit enthusiastically. After taking the sadhu initiation there would be little scope of studying English. Both Shastriji Maharaj and Shanti Bhagat knew this.

As a spiritual master Shastriji Maharaj was unique. He was prudent and considerate. Convinced as he was of Shanti Bhagat's sincerity and devotion, he wanted to avoid directly commanding Shanti Bhagat to accept full initiation. So he himself decided not to touch the subject. Instead, he told Harijivan Swami to talk to him. He knew that both were close. Harijivan Swami had come to know Shanti Bhagat when he had spent six months in Bochasan serving the mandir during school holidays.

Behind the storeroom in Gondal was the courtyard with a neem tree in its middle. Small rooms with clay-tiled roofs had once stood there. One night, Harijivandas Swami and Shanti Bhagat sat outside talking. After a while the topic of English and initiation came up. Harijivan Swami said, "Shastriji Maharaj wants you to study Sanskrit, and so that is what you should do. There was no point in wanting to study English. It was best to study whatever Swami wished." The discussion continued till after 1:30 in the morning. At that time Shanti Bhagat said, "OK then, I'll study as Swami says. I'll take initiation, there's no problem." With these words he let fall the last fine strands of desire to study English that had maybe lingered since Bochasan.

Harijivan Swami was glad to hear these words and so took him to Shastriji Maharaj, whom he awoke, and gave the good news to. Shastriji Maharaj was delighted and at once hugged Shanti Bhagat. He then said to Harijivandas Swami, "Tell Jogi Swami not to do the *mahapuja* early. It's Wednesday tomorrow and so the first two *choghadiyas* are auspicious. In the second *choghadiya* we'll perform the ceremony. At that time I'll initiate him, so ensure that the *mahapuja* is not performed early."

A few hours later, at about eight o'clock, Yogiji Maharaj entered the Akshar Deri to perform the *mahapuja*. Normally

he would start the *mahapuja* at four, but Shastriji Maharaj had instructed otherwise for today. Shastriji Maharaj himself sat between the two pillars opposite the entrance leading from the assembly hall. Shanti Bhagat's head was freshly shaven. Towards the end of the ceremony Shastriji Maharaj offered him the sacred thread and a new *kantbi*. He wrapped a saffron cloth around Shanti Bhagat's shoulders. Harijivan Swami opined that he should be renamed 'Narandas', after the great sadhu disciple of Gunatitanand Swami in Junagadh. When Yogiji Maharaj was asked he answered, "Whatever Shastriji Maharaj says is best."

Shastriji Maharaj himself decided, "Let us name him Narayanswarup. That is a good name. I also want him to study, and make him a scholar. I want to make him great and powerful." He asked Yogiji Maharaj, "Bless him and pat his back so that he studies well, becomes a truly great scholar and does great service in Satsang."

Yogiji Maharaj did so and said, "He will become great. He has your blessings and so it will surely happen." It was Posh *sud* 1 V.S. 1996 (Wednesday, 10 January 1940).

Shastriji Maharaj told Yogiji Maharaj and Harijivandas Swami to find a good teacher to teach Narayanswarupdas and Aksharjivandas Sanskrit.

Along with the studies it was also important that the virtues of a sadhu be cultivated. To ensure this Yogiji Maharaj would send Narayanswarupdas to do all types of service: sweeping the mandir compound, helping and cooking in the kitchen, serving the *murtis* in the mandir sanctum, joining the construction teams, assisting in the storeroom and others. Yogiji Maharaj would join him and guide him.

Several months later Shastriji Maharaj commanded that Narayanswarupdas and Aksharjivandas go to Bhadran to

study. A teacher had been recruited there, but the two sadhus would have to beg in the village for alms and then cook their own food. It was a similar routine in Khambhat. For a while they even stayed in Ahmedabad.

* * *

The mandir in Atladra had become a beehive of activity. Mandir construction was rapid. Shastriji Maharaj told young Narayanswarup Swami to join in the service, working with the lime. The summer heat made this particular service even more unbearable. Narayanswarup Swami doggedly stuck to his responsibility. Soon, burning red blisters sprang out all over his body. But this did not deter him. That night he was in agony, Shastriji Maharaj asked that he be brought to him. The young sadhu's body was fiery with pain. Shastriji Maharaj gently stroked his entire body, soothing away the pain with his tender touch.

"You'll be well soon," he promised. Several days later Narayanswarup Swami rejoined the construction work, the blisters had completely disappeared, save for a red stain on the tip of his nose.

* * *

Once Pramukh Swami Maharaj described: "I once had to stay in Gondal for a month. I would think constantly of Shastriji Maharaj. He would write to me every two or three days and I would also write. I wanted to tour with him; I'd be delighted to hear from him.

"Those days I was serving the *murtis* in the mandir with Aksharswarup Swami.

"One day someone told me that Shastriji Maharaj had arrived. At that time the train used to come early in the morning. The news sent me running. Somebody told me he had gone up to the mandir for darshan. I ran up there. When I looked

into the sanctum Ghanshyam Maharaj (the marble image of Bhagwan Swaminarayan) was sleeping on the *sukb-shaiya* cot. He sat up with his feet dangling. I touched his feet and asked, 'Shastriji Maharaj is here, please show me where he is.' Ghanshyam Maharaj answered that he had gone downstairs. So I ran down, and then went into the Akshar Deri and looked there, but Swami wasn't there either. So I climbed back up. There, I had darshan of Shastriji Maharaj and Ghanshyam Maharaj. Ghanshyam Maharaj was still seated and Shastriji Maharaj was standing before him. I had his darshan. He put his hand on my head. Then Shastriji Maharaj and Ghanshyam Maharaj's *murti* became one! I couldn't see Shastriji Maharaj anywhere. There was bright light. For five or ten minutes I didn't know what had happened. I could see light within Ghanshyam Maharaj. Where is Shastriji Maharaj I thought. After a while the light disappeared so I went downstairs thinking that he had gone down. Downstairs a sadhu told me that Shastriji Maharaj hadn't come at all and that I had been mistaken..."

Shastriji Maharaj was resting in Sarangpur, suffering from a sudden attack of rheumatism. In spite of trying many cures the difficulty persisted. Casually, he once said, "If Naranda comes and sings to me from the Bhaktachintamani I'd be cured."

Narayanswarup Swami was in Atladra at that time. When he heard the news of Shastriji Maharaj's problem and his words concerning him he at once left for Sarangpur with a companion sadhu. It was late night when they tried to board the train. Passengers had locked the doors from inside and refused to open them. They travelled the 100 kilometres to Ahmedabad hanging on to the outside of train, resting their feet on a narrow step. One hand grasped the railing, the other held the

baggage. Rain and wind made matters worse, while the soot from the engine blackened their faces and burned their eyes.

The connection from Ahmedabad to Bhavnagar had been cancelled because of heavy rains. So they took the long route through Viramgam and Surendranagar and from there on to Botad, arriving at a late four in the afternoon. The 13-kilometre walk from Botad to Sarangpur was formidable. Rains had washed the road away. Waist deep gushing streams and sliding mud banks had to be crossed. Soon the two sadhus were hopelessly lost. An unknown shepherd finally led them to Sarangpur.

Narayanswarupdas went straight to Shastriji Maharaj's room and entered. "What are you doing here?" cried Shastriji Maharaj in surprise. He stood up and warmly hugged his rain-soaked and mud-splattered disciple standing before him. Shastriji Maharaj was pleased with Narayanswarupdas' eagerness and zeal in obeying his call.

Shastriji Maharaj and Yogiji Maharaj once went to Vadhwān together. Narayanswarup Swami accompanied them. In Vadhwān, Shastriji Maharaj and Yogiji Maharaj were invited to Chandubhai's house. A horse-drawn buggy came to take them both there.

Narayanswarup Swami and Sanatan Swami were left alone with nothing much to do. So, they decided to walk to Chandubhai's house. Both were barefooted. The midday sun had arched above them pouring down its heat. The sadhus were walking briskly; sweat ran in rivulets off their bodies. Chandubhai's house was across the Bhogava River which had dried, leaving baking yellow-brown sand that was impossible to walk on. Narayanswarup Swami's feet were quickly covered with boils. The two would run a few yards and then drop their upper cloths and stand on them, easing the burning. By doing

this several times they managed to cross the broad river bed and reach Chandubhai's home on the other side.

Narayanswarupdas Swami continued his Sanskrit studies, serving fully wherever he stayed and periodically being called to serve Shastriji Maharaj personally. After six years, in 1946 Shastriji Maharaj appointed him the Kothari of Sarangpur Mandir, thus his studies effectively came to an end and at the age of 25 he first began to shoulder administrative responsibilities. As in studies, in administration he also excelled. He had an extraordinary flair for management and practical matters. He developed a keen insight. An amiable character enabled him to work comfortably with many a difficult person.

He was a quick learner, ready to consult elders whenever the need arose. The villagers in Sarangpur said, "If Narayan Swami shoulders the administration of our village there would be no need for elections to elect our village leader!"

3

“Put My Mind at Peace”

*My body cannot be depended upon now.
At the most it will live for two to four years.
It will not stay for much longer, so stay with
me and achieve your life's purpose.*

Over a period of four decades, Shastriji Maharaj had, against all odds, created an organization dedicated to the pure Vedic worship of Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj. Akshar was Gunatitanand Swami, the direct spiritual successor of Purushottam, Bhagwan Swaminarayan.

When Shastriji Maharaj left Vartal Mandir and the Swaminarayan old school there, he was accompanied by five sadhus and a few devotees. He had no ashram, property or support, yet Shastriji Maharaj had remained determined. It was the Lord's wish he said. If Maharaj and Swami willed they would create a hospitable environment for him to preach in. A profound devotion inspired him on. Guru Bhagatji Maharaj had desired that mandirs dedicated to Akshar-Purushottam

be built. Soon a mandir was consecrated in Bochasan, then in Sarangpur and other places.

Times were hard. Yet Shastriji Maharaj's zeal never flagged. He thrived on challenges. His strength derived from a deep trust in Bhagwan Swaminarayan. He was irrevocably convinced that Bhagwan's will prevailed in all matters. He had to become a vessel for the Divine to work his will through. No task was too difficult and no project was too ambitious. What could not be done for Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj.

Within a decade the number of sadhus had increased tenfold and devotees were counted in their thousands. The Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha was now a major spiritual organization in Gujarat. It had gained an enviable reputation as dynamic and deeply rooted. The sadhus were highly regarded for their humility and strict adherence to the vows of celibacy and poverty. Devotees were drawn from all strata of society. They lived pious lives, God-centred and disciplined. Shastriji Maharaj himself was hailed as a spiritual giant. His darshan and blessings were sought; his spiritual company cherished.

Even though he was getting old, he still shouldered tremendous responsibilities. But, what of the future? Administrative responsibilities were now vast. The devotees and sadhus were capable, but they needed a leader: someone with vision and foresight, absolute integrity and resolute will to abide only by the guru's wishes. Such a leader would have to be loved and esteemed by the Satsang. This was possible only if he were a hundred percent committed to God and guru, and perfect in his observance of saintly vows, the *panch vartman*: *nishkam*, *nissneh*, *nirman*, *niswad* and *nirlobh*.

Did Shastriji Maharaj see this leader in the little bundle wrapped in warm clothing that cold December day in

Chansad, when he had asked Motibhai to bestow the newly born Shantilal to him?

To all outward appearances Shastriji Maharaj had. This would explain his various visits to Chansad, his asking for Shantilal, the letter to Ghanshyam Swami and a host of other signs, individually unconnected, but when put together form a strong indication of Shastriji Maharaj's tremendous insight and foresight.

* * *

Sadhu Narayanswarupdas – Naranda, as Shastriji Maharaj and other's fondly called him – was well settled. He was a sadhu of 10 years. Under Shastriji Maharaj's eagle eye he had served the Sanstha in various capacities, the present being as the Kothari of Sarangpur mandir. He had exhibited an innate knack of getting along with difficult people. His manner was calm, and he remained unruffled even in the tensest situations. His goodwill and quiet nature had earned him the affection and respect of the Satsang family. Sadhus many years senior to him recognized his humility and devotion. Devotees saw his sincerity and bowed.

In 1950, Shastriji Maharaj made it known to leading sadhus and devotees that he had decided to appoint Naranda, in his place as Pramukh (President) of the Sanstha. The reaction was mixed. Most agreed, but some disapproved. Naranda as a sadhu was excellent, but could he shoulder the tremendous responsibilities. Did he have the organizational flair? Doubts were voiced. These seniors were concerned for the Sanstha. Their misgivings arose not out of jealousy, but out of a deep love for the Sanstha that Shastriji Maharaj had created from nothing. For over 40 years these people had suffered untold hardships. They had struggled against all odds to establish mandirs and

spread the Akshar-Purushottam *upasana*. The fruit of their labour was now ripening. Would Naranda throw everything to the wind? Maganbhai once even said, “Swami, you are entrusting the Sanstha to this junior sadhu, but let’s hope there never comes a time of remorse.”

Confidently, Shastriji Maharaj replied, “Maganbhai, I have done many things, but never have I once had to regret any decision. And I am convinced that in this decision everything is as well as it should be. I will not be sorry. You look to his body; I look to his soul.”

On another occasion Shastriji Maharaj told Chaganbhai N. Patel, “By appointing Shastri Narayanswarupdas as the Pramukh of this Sanstha I am ensuring everyone’s happiness for the next 50 years! Shastriji Maharaj’s confidence and faith in Narayanswarupdas soon won everybody over.

When Narayanswarupdas was barely 25 years old, Shastriji Maharaj had written him a long letter. The letter reveals the deep regard and love Shastriji Maharaj had for his young disciple.

“Date: 2.9.1947. May you be well. To jewel among sadhus, worshipper of Akshar Purushottam, residing at holy Bochasan, blessings and Jai Swaminarayan from Shastri Yagnapurushdas writing from Anand.

“We have received your letter. You will have received my card. We have read your (questions) concerning Sarangpur (mandir). It is best that the work on the gateway be halted after completing one floor.

“It was Bhagatji Maharaj’s and Jaga Bhagat’s askance that the greatness of and faith in Swamishri (Mul Akshar Gunatitanand Swami) be spread. Because of their command and grace, I have done this. And because of their wish all

desired projects till now have met with success. Thus, be ready to support this work with as much effort as possible.

“(It’s as) if whilst sleeping a crystal of sugar has been placed in (your) mouth. It has now to be swallowed and enjoyed. My body cannot be depended upon now. At the most it will live for 2-4 years. It will not stay for much longer, so stay with me and achieve your life’s purpose.

“Because of pious merit from previous births as a youngster you have achieved the most fame in our following. My mind naturally rests on you. You are intelligent and so know this. If a person wants to come up to a good position from an ordinary one then till middle age he has to travel at home and abroad, help many people with great hardships and then he is just about noticed by the world. And if he is born into the house of a great man then immediately people will call ‘Sheth, Sheth’, and without effort he will be a leader in society. In the same way in a young age you have attained the realization of a great *sadguru*. You are meritorious and fortunate.

“My affection for you is spontaneous and overflowing. (I wish) you to excel in every respect. In this you benefit, the entire Satsang benefits, and this will put my mind at peace...So now you have to please me and the entire Satsang. Everything is attainable, there is no endeavour as supreme as ‘pleasing’, for the supreme is attained by ‘pleasing’ Swami-Maharaj and the beloved sadhus and devotees who have knowledge of Gunatit. Without any effort you have received the chance to ‘please’. Believe this and guard this opportunity. Great sadhus and *sadgurus* such as Niskulanand were totally untouched and great and renunciate. Yet to please Maharaj and Satsang, they accepted the *seva* to serve the mandirs and spread Satsang. This same *seva* you have received. Do not

forget this priceless time for *seva* and accept it with respect and love...”

Narayanswarupdas was at first unwilling to shoulder the responsibility of President of the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha. He was both junior and inexperienced compared to other sadhus and devotees. He saw them as better equipped to maintain and expand the work begun by their spiritual master. Shastriji Maharaj, however, had other thoughts. He had chosen Narayanswarupdas and was convinced only he could steer the Sanstha as needed. He was determined that Narayanswarupdas be Pramukh.

Ten years earlier Shastriji Maharaj had asked Harijivandas Swami to talk to Shantilal and ask him to accept initiation as a sadhu. Now, once again Shastriji Maharaj turned to him and asked him to convince Naranda to accept the responsibility of president. Some devotees were also asked to talk to him.

Narayanswarupdas saw that it truly was the innermost desire of Shastriji Maharaj. His only option was to humbly accept the *seva*. And this he did.

The ceremony was ordinary. It took place in the small ground floor room at Amlī Valī Pōl, used for years as a mandir. Some of the 20-30 devotees who were present later wrote a report of the entire meeting.

“Samvat year 2006, Jeth *sud* 4, Sunday, 21 May 1950, in the evening at 5 o’clock, a meeting of the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha Managing Committee was held at the Akshar Purushottam Mandir in Amlī Valī Pōl, Shahpur. Among the members present were Sadguru Yogiji Maharaj Jnanjivandasji, Pujya Sadguru Akshar-Purushottamdasji, Sadguru Kothari Shastri

Narayanswarupdasji and others. The proceedings began with a 'jai' called for Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj. Secretary Rasiklalbhai read out the minutes and directions of the last meeting. Then Pragat Brahmaswarup respected Sadguru Guruhari Shastriji Maharaj himself spoke, 'From today I appoint in my place as Pramukh – in my position – Sadguru Shastri Narayanswarupdas.' Saying this he had with him a *chadar* which he draped around Narayanswarupdas. Addressing him he said, 'This Yogi Maharaj is *vachansiddha* and very illustrious. Under his guardianship you have to illuminate Satsang.' Then Sadguru Pujya Yogiji Maharaj placed both hands on Pujya Sadguru Shastri Narayanswarupdas' head and blessed him. Everyone chorused 'Jai' to Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj and happily accepted him. Swamishri said, 'Just as you have obeyed me, from now onwards live within the commands of Sadguru Shastri Narayanswarupdas.' Then everyone happily assented, 'We will all obey him.' 'Jai' was chorused. Secretary Rasiklalbhai read out the appointment papers. In this Pujya Swamishri had written of Pujya Shastri Narayanswarupdas. 'Sadguru Shastri Narayanswarupdas, who is the Pramukh of this my appointed Management Committee and is a member of that committee, and who at present as the Kothari of Sarangpur Akshar Purushottam mandir has shown a brilliant future and spiritual growth and who has also won the abundant love of the Satsang Fellowship, collecting the opinions and considerations of all *satsangis* and also examining him with my own discriminating intellect, I have appointed him in my place as the Pramukh of the Managing Committee.' Everyone was pleased and accepted him amidst 'jais' to Swamishri.

"On this occasion respected Ishwarbhai Prabhudas performed puja of Pujya Swamishri and the newly appointed Pramukh, Shri Sadguru Shastri Narayanswarupdas. He offered

him a *chadar*, garland, and gift. He also spoke. Sweet items were given to all present on his behalf. Then Muktaraj Ashabhai expressed best wishes for the new President and also performed puja. Then Sheth Shri Champaklalabhai and all other members and devotees performed puja. Kothari Harijivandas expressed his happiness and said, 'On behalf of the entire sadhu group I congratulate the new President and announce our complete cooperation.' After this Sadguru Shastri Narayanswarupdas gave a speech.

"Then Sheth Shri Champaklalabhai asked Swamishri, "For a minimum of ten years remain healthy and grant us the bliss of Satsang." Sheth Shri Champaklalabhai was speaking on behalf of the entire Satsang; it was happily accepted.

"(Shastriji Maharaj) asked Shri Yogi Swami, as a true sadhu and senior, to advise, guide and preach to the President, which was also accepted (by Yogiji Maharaj)."

Throughout the proceedings Narayanswarupdas Swami remained silent. The small room was crowded. He had been asked to sit on a cot along with Shastriji Maharaj and Yogiji Maharaj. He was unaccustomed to such status and was embarrassed. The very idea of being President confused him. But Shastriji Maharaj had commanded, and as an ideal disciple he had to accept. It was the guru's right to be able to command a disciple into whichever service he thought fit. It could be tending the fields or cooking for the Lord, scrubbing the toilets or serving as President!

It was but natural that he be asked to say a few words. Narayanswarupdas, whilst an able singer of the Bhaktachintamani was not known for his oratory. On occasion he would speak, but only if pressed to. Today he was no more fluent or lucid. The words tumbled out, one after another, forming short and long sentences. What he said he felt, what

he felt was adequately experienced.

The devotees, some of whom had been with Shastriji Maharaj since the beginning so many distant years ago looked keenly toward their new administrative head. They saw a thin, pale looking, reticent young sadhu of barely 28.

“My life-breath *gurubari* respected Sadguru Swamishri Shastriji Maharaj, Param Pujya Yogiji Maharaj, *sadgurus*, respected sadhus, *parshads* and all *satsangis*.

“Pujya *gurubari* Shastriji Maharaj has profoundly graced me; I am indebted to him for giving me responsibility as the President of the Managing Committee out of his great compassion for me. Over the past 45 years *gurubari* has built mandirs worth lakhs of rupees in Bochasan, Sarangpur, Gondal and Atladra, installed *murtis* of Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj in the central shrines, established the [Akshar-Purushottam] *upasana* in this Bharatkhand, opened the road to ultimate liberation for countless aspirants, acquired mandir property and made sure that all is well. For this, all of us disciples are greatly indebted to him. From now onwards the responsibility for the Sanstha’s mandirs is mine, as well as the committee members’, all the sadhus, and all those in positions of responsibility. Now it remains for us to serve with mind, body and devotion to fully expand the Sanstha and the teachings of *gurubari* and Bhagwan Swaminarayan.

“On this auspicious day I pray from my heart to *gurubari*, that whatever strength, knowledge, inspiration I have has been given by you. Until now my life as a renunciate has been passed in your compassionate service. Now you have commanded me to serve in this way. I pray that you fully grant me the capability and strength to do so. May also all your disciples be happy in mind, body and wealth; may they never

suffer any unhappiness or hardship in this world; and may they worship Shriji Maharaj and attain Akshardham. Also, if even unknowingly someone utters the name of Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj grant them Akshardham.

“Today before you, Guruhari, and before this assembly I take an oath that I will fully carry out my duties to this Sanstha of yours, without caring for this body. I will remain sincere, and be fulfilled. You have cultivated this garden of the knowledge of Akshar-Purushottam; I will serve, daily persevere and take care that it flowers in every way. I wish for the blessings of the entire Fellowship; may you all grant me this. In all my duties for Satsang, Pujya Yogi Maharaj, *sadgurus*, senior sadhus, *parshads* and all devotees I appeal with a pure heart that you all give me your full cooperation so that I may be strengthened to perform this tremendous service.

“From the bottom of my heart I thank all the committee members, sadhus and *satsangis* who have shown their sentiments and favour toward me on this occasion.

“Lastly, I pray that Pujya Guruhari remains healthy, grants us unbroken peace and happiness, and enjoy a long life.”

The assembly was in good spirits. At its conclusion a meal was served to all. Narayanswarupdas wandered out into the front yard. Under the low tap protruding from the yard wall were dirty plates, pots and pans.

The President sat down to wash them.

* * *

The sanctum of the Gadhada mandir was almost ready. Shastriji Maharaj decided to consecrate the *murtis* of Dham, Dhami and Mukta on Vaishakh *sud* 10, V.S. 2007 (16 May 1951). He toured the site, inspecting the work with an expert eye, giving guidance where necessary and then went back to Sarangpur where he wanted to rest. For several weeks his

health had been deteriorating. Everybody worried for him.

One evening, Yogiji Maharaj, Pramukh Swami and other sadhus and devotees had gathered around Shastriji Maharaj's cot. He looked straight at Pramukh Swami, his tender feelings clearly visible. "Narayan Swami, in Ahmedabad in a *sabha* I appointed you in my place. But this Yogiji Maharaj is eternally senior in Satsang; everybody should accept him and live within his commands. Never do anything which might sadden him. This sadhu has never done anything against my wishes. He has lived carefully within my liking. There is no one like him. Serving him is to serve me. Regard him as in my place as guru. I will be pleased if you serve him in mind, action and words."

A **year** later, on Vaishakh *sud* 4, V.S. 2007 (10 May 1951) of his own free will he concluded his earthly existence and returned to Akshardham.

* * *

Pramukh Swami was a popular sadhu, both among the other renunciates and the devotees. His mild manners and unassuming nature had earned him widespread respect as a senior sadhu. Yogiji Maharaj would also frequently praise his constant *seva* and saintliness.

One sadhu was jealous of all this. He made a plan to poison Pramukh Swami. However, the plot was discovered just in time and Swami was saved. Seniors defrocked the sadhu to a *parshad*, but Pramukh Swami personally ensured that he was not troubled in any other way. In fact, Pramukh Swami made sure that to the end of his long life he was looked after and served when ill.

* * *

The Jal Jhilani festival had been celebrated in Sarangpur as every year. A small *murti* of Ganesh had been submerged

in the stepwell and Shri Harikrishna Maharaj bathed. It was a morning festival and after lunch, for those who hadn't fasted, the devotees returned home.

Some of the sadhus were exhausted and had gone to sleep. Dharmajivan Swami awoke suddenly to find that Pramukh Swami wasn't on his mattress. He soon found him cleaning the toilets and bathrooms behind the sadhus' residence. The attendant sadhu (Dharmajivan Swami) tried to convince him to stop saying that others would do the job.

Pramukh Swami replied, "You fetch water from the well in a bucket and I'll clean the toilets." He continued happy in the knowledge that he was able to serve the mandir in this manner.

* * *

Another time, a cut on personal attendant Pragat Bhagat's finger had become septic. He however went to bring a pail of hot water for Swamishri to bathe with one morning. The attendant left his own unwashed dhoti in the bathroom. When he returned he was dismayed to find that Pramukh Swami had washed and wrung it.

"Why did you do that?" was all Pragat Bhagat could say.

"You serve me in so many ways so I should also serve you," replied Pramukh Swami.

* * *

Dharmajivan Swami: The night before the main day of Shastriji Maharaj's centenary celebrations, Swamishri completed all the preparations for the main assembly and went to sleep at around two in the morning. After a while, a devotee from Nadiad started hammering on Pramukh Swami's open door. I was in Pramukh Swami's service during those days and so slept in the same room. I stood up and walked to the door and asked the devotee what he wanted at this time of night. By that time Swamishri had also got up and followed me. The

devotee began complaining in a loud voice that there was no proper management and facilities for devotees. There were no mattresses and blankets and what was he to do?

What could he expect at such a time! Pramukh Swami heard him out and then told me to take his own mattress and prepare a bed for the devotee. I hesitated, but Swami was uncompromising. I took his mattress and prepared a bed for the devotee.

* * *

Purushottamdas, an enthusiastic devotee, had invited Yogiji Maharaj to Sokhda, a small village near Matar in the Kheda district. However, he still needed the permission of Jashbhai, the village chief who had a strong repulsion for sadhus of all kinds. He believed that they were good-for-nothing beggars who chewed tobacco and opium all day, and spoilt the village.

When Purushottamdas approached him with the request, he blasted, "I'm not having any sadhus in my village!" Purushottamdas remained calm and explained who Yogiji Maharaj was. After several days of pleading, Jashbhai unwillingly agreed.

The next problem was where to accommodate Yogiji Maharaj. The best house in the village was the chief's. Hearing Purushottamdas ask for a room in his house, Jashbhai was furious. "No way!" he rebuked, "Not in a million years! Here I am offering a finger, and you're trying to grab my arm."

Purushottamdas began pleading again. In the end Jashbhai tired and conceded, "Look, I'll give you my house because you've been at me for days, but I'm going somewhere else to stay. Don't call me for darshan; don't ask me to fold my hands; and when your monks go, don't forget to clean all the tobacco and opium stains from the walls."

Purushottamdas explained once again, “But Jashbhai sahib, they don’t take opium or tobacco.” Pretending not to hear, Jashbhai walked off sternly.

Because of poor health Yogiji Maharaj was unable to come to Sokhda, but he sent Pramukh Swami in his place. “If Pramukh Swami comes, it’s as good as me coming,” he told Purushottamdas.

Pramukh Swami stayed in Sokhda for two days. Shortly before he was to depart, Swamishri asked, “Whose house is this? Call the owner.”

Purushottamdas explained, “It belongs to the village chief, Jashbhai. He hates sadhus, so he’ll just insult you by not coming.”

“Since we have stayed in his house, don’t we have to thank him?” Swamishri countered.

Fuming with rage, Jashbhai eventually came with four or five friends. But on seeing Swamishri, he fell at his feet. “O God!” he cried, “Won’t you stay another two days in my house? Please?”

Even though he was ready to leave, Swamishri unpacked again. The change of heart was baffling. Only Jashbhai knew what he experienced, but he came out the better for it. It totally transformed his life.

Jashbhai became a devotee, and much softer at heart. He began daily puja and regularly visited the mandir. Slowly, he started staying all day at the mandir, only returning home to eat. Later he used to have his meals sent to the mandir. Right until he passed away, he devoutly served in the mandir.

* * *

Yogiji Maharaj was touring the lush farmlands in the Charotar region of Gujarat. Pramukh Swami was with him. From Petali they went to Demol. Pramukh Swami was

running a fever and had a thundering headache which he hid from Yogiji Maharaj and the others. The next morning after breakfast they were to go to Ramol. The devotees in Demol, however, wanted Yogiji Maharaj to do some *padbramanis*. His schedule was tight and he had to leave for Ramol, so he said, "On my behalf Pramukh Swami will do *padbramanis*."

"But Bapa," the devotees replied, "We've organized an assembly in the school."

"He will come there as well. Pramukh Swami is a great sadhu; he is the owner of the Sanstha." Yogiji Maharaj left for Ramol, not knowing that Pramukh Swami was ill.

The devotees in their enthusiasm also failed to notice that Pramukh Swami was ill. They took him to 45 houses. He had to command his aching legs and body to work. After the assembly he went to Ramol. Gracing the small, raised stone platform by the milk canteen, Yogiji Maharaj was speaking to an assembly. As soon as Pramukh Swami arrived Yogiji Maharaj announced, "Now that my Pramukh Swami has arrived he will speak to you," and then he left the assembly to go to his residence.

By now Pramukh Swami was shivering from head to toe. He began to speak, but found it extremely difficult. Haka Babu realized that he was ill and at once had the speech stopped and Pramukh Swami taken to a devotee's house for rest.

In spite of his ill health he did not complain or compromise in obeying Yogiji Maharaj commands.

* * *

In 1968 Pramukh Swami once had to go to Nayka village. He hitched a ride in the back of a truck. The nights there he had to spend on a veranda with a huge pile of harvested paddy. A tattered piece of jute cloth served as a roof. Large mice, sometimes three or four at one time would fall on him through

the holes. He didn't complain. At least he had a blanket to spread and an oil lamp burning at his feet!

When in Bochasan he would sometimes spend the night on a bench or in the trolley of a tractor. In Gadhada he once slept on a pile of sand, and even spent a night in Rojid village on a mound of dirt piled on to an oxen cart.

At times he went to the fields and stayed under a tree.

4

“Yogiji Maharaj Has Not Left Us”

*“Swami, you are guru. We are not Godbrothers!
You are guru and we are your disciples.
We have to live according to your commands.
Yogiji Maharaj has pointed to you.”*

The stunned silence was disturbed by a sadhu sobbing. The large room on the second floor of Bhatia Hospital in Mumbai overlooked a side street. Even though only a stone's throw, away the confused jungle of vehicles and humanity was distant, belonging to another world.

Pramukh Swami stood straight and taut. The past several days had not been easy on him, or the others. It had taken everyone collectively to persuade Yogiji Maharaj to leave his beloved Gondal and travel to Mumbai. The last heart attack had been severe. And Gondal just wasn't equipped to handle emergencies. His recovery had been precarious. And now this.

Yogiji Maharaj had abandoned his mortal body. It was

unthinkable, unbelievable. Not possible. The small, tidy hospital room took on vast proportions. Yogiji Maharaj had been heart and soul. The young sadhus that stood around his still figure had given up family and career, ambition and life to be with him, serve him and worship Bhagwan Swaminarayan through him. And now he had left on 23 January 1971, *Posh vad ekadashi*.

Pramukh Swami broke the hideous spell. At once he was consoling and directing cremation preparations. Phone calls were made. Satsang seniors consulted, the mass media informed. Around him a whirlwind of activity pushed thoughts of grief to a dark private corner. He galvanised the sadhus and devotees into urgent preparation.

The chartered plane landed at the seldom used Rajkot airstrip. Thousands awaited, praying for a last glimpse of the spiritual master they loved so dearly. Yogiji Maharaj was gently carried out. As Pramukh Swami directed, his delicate form was placed on an open jeep to be driven to Gondal. Pramukh Swami had decided on Gondal as the best cremation site. Yogiji Maharaj would have wished it.

As the jeep moved towards Gondal, 35 kilometres away, a cavalcade followed behind. The winter morning was biting. Pramukh Swami sat engrossed in darshan beside the guru he had faithfully served for so long. The whipping wind fluttered his shoulder cloth madly about him. Yogiji Maharaj was laid out on ice, the wind rushing over his exposed body. He remembered how Yogiji Maharaj always avoided the cold. Even in the hottest summers Yogiji Maharaj refused a fan. The thought hurt deeply. Pramukh Swami instinctively took off his upper cloth (*gatariyu*) and covered his guru's body with it, neatly tucking it in under the chin. In Gondal, the initial

cremation rituals were performed, after which Yogiji Maharaj, richly garlanded, was gently placed in a special chair and carried around the mandir in circumambulation several times, and then taken to the cremation site where neatly arranged logs and sandal wood formed the pyre.

Tens of thousands of people watched Pramukh Swami hold the burning straw in both hands as he circumambulated the funeral pyre. Senior sadhus followed suit. According to traditional Hindu custom, Pramukh Swami set alight the logs of sweet smelling wood, entrusting to the flames the mortal body of his spiritual master. As the flames rose and cracked, the heat pushed him back several steps. He watched lost in thought. His half grown beard masking his grief.

“Yogiji Maharaj has not left us,” Sant Swami’s voice boomed over the public address system. “He is present before us in Pramukh Swami Maharaj. He is our Guru...”

The jam packed assembly listened. Sant Swami was a spiritual giant. Initiated by Shastriji Maharaj, he was respected for his saintliness and scholarship. No one denied his spiritual realization. He had faithfully served Shastriji Maharaj and Yogiji Maharaj. Now he was revealing to the devotees the truth he had seen and learned from Yogiji Maharaj. Yogiji Maharaj and Shastriji Maharaj were present in the form of Pramukh Swami Maharaj. He was now the guru, to be obeyed and served, loved and revered. Sant Swami cited words uttered by Yogiji Maharaj many times, but which had then fallen on deaf ears. “From now onwards Pramukh Swami will carry on my work... Pramukh Swami is my everything.”

Sant Swami was clear. There were no doubts in his mind. His confidence was convincing and reassuring. The void seemed not so vast now. Yes, sorrow was there, but Yogiji Maharaj

hadn't really gone. He was present in another form. Those who were old enough turned back to the time of Shastriji Maharaj's earthly departure. There had been anguish, pain, sorrow, "an unfillable void," but Yogiji Maharaj had so easily won their love. They had experienced Shastriji Maharaj in Yogiji Maharaj. Now surely they would experience Yogiji Maharaj in Pramukh Swami.

For years Yogiji Maharaj had groomed his devotees and sadhus. He had sculpted and moulded them, nurturing spirituality of the highest Himalayan peaks. His students had learnt well their lessons. They were mature and understanding.

Akshar, the highest devotee, the ideal, was eternally in the service of Bhagwan Swaminarayan. He served as the divine abode, Akshardham, holding within his infinite divine form the Lord surrounded by innumerable released souls, the *akshar muktas*. And on the earth this same Akshar traversed the world in human form teaching the glory of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and the science of liberation. When incarnating on the earth Bhagwan Swaminarayan had brought with him this Akshar, by the name of Mul Akshar Murti Gunatitanand Swami. He had been the Lord's spiritual heir. Who else but Akshar was capable? Following Gunatitanand Swami had been Bhagatji Maharaj, Shastriji Maharaj and Yogiji Maharaj. Through Akshar, Bhagwan Swaminarayan made himself evident. The sacred shastras of the fellowship taught that Akshar, and through him Purushottam Bhagwan Swaminarayan, would manifest continually on the earth, granting *moksha* and divine bliss to all those who asked.

Sant Swami was saying nothing new. He was reminding them of what they already knew, and now had to recognize. They believed not because he said so, but because they remembered Yogiji Maharaj's very clear directions.

For the masses who had served Yogiji Maharaj from a distance the transition was not problematic as such. But for those sadhus and devotees who had physically served him from close quarters mind wrenching questions arose. It was but natural.

These people were united to Yogiji Maharaj's body and soul. It was for him that they had lived and breathed. Their soul was entrusted to him. Thoughts of his passing, though inevitable, had never been entertained. That would have been blasphemous. Who else could there be but Yogiji Maharaj?

Yogiji Maharaj knew his passing would cause considerable anguish. So for some time he had quietly, and not so quietly, given hints of his going and the identity of his successor. His closest associates now mulled over those words and gradually began to accept that life had to continue and that in matter of fact Yogiji Maharaj had not left them.

It was a test of their understanding. If they had seen the divine in Yogiji Maharaj, they would recognize that same divinity present in Pramukh Swami. Confusion and grief were but natural at the loss of one's dearest. But the awareness that the loved one had not really departed but was fully manifest within another, and would continue to guide, love and caress was true understanding. It signified a mature devotion.

Pramukh Swami Maharaj was not insensitive to these emotions. He was, in fact, unassuming and straight forward. On his part there were no declarations of authority or claims to guruship. Those around him experienced Yogiji Maharaj within him and spontaneously accepted him as guru.

There was no election, no vote, no canvassing. There has never been such a tradition in the Fellowship. The succeeding guru has always been pointed to by the previous guru.

Several days after the cremation rites the mood in Gondal remained sober. Yogiji Maharaj had been mahant of Gondal for 40 years. He had helped build the mandir and surrounding complex. Each stone, tree, nook and corner had been sanctified by him. No wonder wherever devotees and sadhus looked or went, searching a quiet corner to nurse their hurt, vivid memories of a laughing Yogiji Maharaj, a serving Yogiji Maharaj, or a meditating Yogiji Maharaj materialised.

Just outside the storeroom on the bare cement seat around the *borsali* tree sat Swamishri with some sadhus. Conversation was quiet and short. Unexpectedly, Swamishri began to speak, “Yogiji Maharaj has given us responsibility to serve Satsang. Just as all of you godbrothers have given me your help till now, please help me further. We will all have to get together and work.”

The sadhus were surprised. There was no question of their not lending their every support. Indeed, without him even asking or demanding they had surrendered to him as disciples. To obey him was their declared dharma. His every wish was a command. “Swami, you are guru. We are not godbrothers! You are guru and we are your disciples. We have to live according to your commands. Yogiji Maharaj has pointed to you. It is we who have to pray to you that just as Yogiji Maharaj gave us happiness, cared for us, led us ahead and forgave our weaknesses, please also do likewise.”

It is no wonder that soon the entire Satsang Fellowship was enchanted with Swamishri. He was the natural guru.

Sadhu Bhaktipriyadas (Kothari Swami, Mumbai) recounted: “Living with Brahmaswarup Yogiji Maharaj I was convinced in my mind that only Yogiji Maharaj could attract the youths,

and through affection lead them to observe dharma, *niyams* and bhakti. No other person in this universe could do this.

“After Yogiji Maharaj’s passing, I attached my mind to Pramukh Swami Maharaj whom Yogiji Maharaj had called ‘his everything’ and the ‘very form of Shastriji Maharaj’. Nevertheless, in the beginning the feeling remained that Yogiji Maharaj was Yogiji Maharaj, Pramukh Swami Maharaj would not be able to pull minds like he did. But within a very short time Pramukh Swami Maharaj distanced this delusion.”

Sadhu Tyagvallabhdas narrated: “In the beginning, memories of Yogiji Maharaj would come. But whilst touring I had to stay with Swamishri often. Then I would get the chance to serve him personally. Just as I had served Yogiji Maharaj personally as the opportunities arose I served Swamishri. In this way love for him grew.”

Sadhu Keshavjivandas (Mahant Swami) reminisced: “When Yogi Bapa went to Akshardham I thought, ‘that’s it, the play is finished! It’s gone forever!’ But Pramukh Swami gradually took up the work in such a way that before I knew it, I was coupled to him.”

Just as sadhus initiated by Yogiji Maharaj soon found themselves mesmerized by Swamishri, older sadhus initiated by Shastriji Maharaj were similarly drawn. They had now experienced the departing of two gurus, Shastriji Maharaj and Yogiji Maharaj, and now they were witness to both those personalities merged in Pramukh Swami Maharaj.

No groups formed to disturb the harmony. There was one family, and it unswervingly followed Swamishri.

It says much for Yogiji Maharaj’s spiritual prowess, his ability to infuse honest spiritual values and ambitions, that no sadhu or lay devotee made claims to be Yogiji Maharaj’s heir.

There were no fights for property or mandir. No quarrel for throne or worship.

The world has witnessed the decline of untold competent institutions founded by sincere spiritual masters. The reasons being petty bickering, ego and the desire for good living.

Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha experienced none of these human elements. Pramukh Swami Maharaj himself had laid no stake, and when announced and accepted as guru he constantly referred to Yogiji Maharaj as guru and himself as a meek disciple. Even today, over 40 years later, he never forgets to mention Yogiji Maharaj as guru in his daily address.

Swamishri's heart reached out to embrace Satsang. He had loved Shastriji Maharaj and Yogiji Maharaj dearly, and had watched and helped as they had painstakingly built the Sanstha. He was witness to the enormous sacrifices the sadhus and devotees had made. He respected them. They were fellow travellers on a long and hard journey. And now he was to lead. He was at the helm. His companions were now under his care, and many more would join. They were part of the Sanstha family. They belonged to Shastriji Maharaj and Yogi Bapa. He felt an overriding commitment to do the utmost he could. No matter what the cost to himself.

This commitment, respect and love for Satsang and its members have stood the test of time and from the very first days have aroused in sadhus and devotees a similar commitment, respect and love towards Satsang and him.

5

Care for Sadhus

He was a burden he said. "There is no need for me in the Sanstha. I can no longer serve. So stop the dialysis." Pramukh Swami Maharaj was moved. The frail figure before him had given his whole and soul, and now this request.

As usual, the evening assembly during the Aksharbrahman Gunatitanand Swami Bicentenary Celebrations in 1985, Ahmedabad, dispersed after 9 p.m. Swamishri, as Pramukh Swami Maharaj is fondly referred to, was being driven from the stage to his accommodation. The rough track allowed for only slow speed. Brahmaaprakash Swami stood close to the nearby festival offices, waiting for Swamishri's darshan as the car passed. As the car approached Brahmaaprakash Swami shuffled onto the dusty path. The car stopped. Swamishri sat inside, amused. Instinctively Brahmaaprakash Swami pressed his palm onto Swamishri's door window. Swamishri in response did likewise from inside.

Mere tinted glass separated guru and disciple. With his hidden free hand Swamishri pressed the automatic switch lowering the window. In no time the two hands were locked in each other. Swamishri chuckled. Brahmaprakash Swami was ecstatic.

This incident, more than anything else, symbolizes the relationship between Swamishri and his sadhu disciples.

* * *

Once, Dr Swami (Sadhu Swayamprakashdas qualified as an MBBS in 1959. He was initiated as a sadhu by Yogiji Maharaj and has since been called 'Dr Swami') and Narendraprasad Swami were in Gadhada with Swamishri. Together they went to his room to discuss an important matter. As they entered Swamishri's room the lights went out due to a power failure. Swamishri however called them in. In the dark they made their way over to Swamishri and sat down. They talked in the darkness for a few minutes until the lights suddenly lit again as electric power was restored.

The two sadhus leapt up, stunned. Amazement turned to embarrassment. Swamishri was surprised. Why the sudden activity? As the two sadhus had entered the room in darkness, Swamishri had quickly pulled away the *asan* he was sitting on and arranged it for them to sit on. Swamishri himself sat on the bare floor!

Another time, Swamishri was in Nadiad. He was in the mandir and having darshan of the marble *murtis* of Shri Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj he had consecrated in 1982. It was cold and Swamishri was beginning to prostrate when Sarvamangal Swami took off his own shawl and spread it on the stone floor so that Swamishri would not feel the cold.

Swamishri stood standing, watching.

He said, "You spread the shawl, but yourself have become

unprotected. Here, wear my upper cloth.” So saying Swamishri took off his upper cloth, baring himself, and placed it around Sarvamangal Swami’s shoulders.

* * *

In 1980, during Swamishri’s oversea Satsang tour commemorating the bicentenary of Bhagwan Swaminarayan, a major assembly was organized in the Kenyatta Conference Hall, in Nairobi. To prepare for the evening assembly two sadhus, Narayanmuni Swami and another, had left early, skipping the evening meal. The next day was *ekadashi*; a waterless fast was to be observed.

The function was a huge success. The jam-packed hall was filled with Indians who had settled in Kenya. Many new people were drawn to Swamishri. His simplicity of life and purity of character were self evident. As scores of new members received *vartman* and *kanthi* at the end of the assembly, Swamishri was organizing a car to take Narayanmuni Swami and his companion sadhu back to the mandir. Swamishri knew they would be hungry. He had even had the evening meal put away safely. It would not do to have the two sadhus return to the mandir to find nothing left to eat.

* * *

Despite the several changes made to Swamishri’s schedule the 1988 summer tour of America was fast-paced and draining. A flow of devotees, old and new, met him constantly. Rapid expansion of the Satsang also meant increased administrative responsibilities. Although Satsang was growing up in the US the leaders still needed Swamishri’s guidance and direction. The tour was exhausting. Thus, it was no wonder that one night in Atlanta, Swamishri quietly fell asleep on his bed as his personal attendant gently massaged his legs. The attendant himself nodded off to sleep, his head resting on Swamishri’s feet.

Later that night, as Swamishri turned on his side, he realized that his attendant had fallen asleep. Swamishri gently cupped the attendant's head in his hands and placed it on the mattress. The movement awoke the sadhu, who jerked up. Swamishri said, "You're tired. Go to sleep."

* * *

During Swamishri's 1977 tour of South India, he had taken a number of sadhus with him. Satsang activities were few in South India. The number of devotee families could be counted on the fingers of one's hands. Thus, facilities were scarce. One night Swamishri discovered that there were not enough mattresses to go around. He immediately instructed that his own bedding be used for the other sadhus. He was happy to live as his disciples did.

Swamishri shares, because he cares. And it is because of this caring that the sadhus are drawn to him. A natural outcome of sharing is affection. As renunciates, sadhus have severed all ties with kin and family. Bonds of mutual love with their worldly relatives are cut. No two individuals are alike. The likes and dislikes are countless. Swamishri has effortlessly adapted to various situations, serving as a parent, counsellor, teacher and guru to spiritually motivate all.

As a God-realized guru Swamishri is committed to his responsibility of guiding devotees closer to God and ultimate liberation. For through him, they experience the presence of God.

The sadhus see his love and efforts as unselfish. For, in return, he demands nothing for himself, but encourages worship to Bhagwan Swaminarayan.

* * *

Swamishri was in Haridwar during the 1987 pilgrimage to the Himalayas. For him it was a lifelong desire in the act of

fulfilment. As a child in Chansad he had listened with rapt attention as Haridas, the Hanuman mandir priest, narrated stories of the mendicants who lived in the Himalayas. He, his friend Shantilal and Haridas himself had intended to leave home and spend their life in Haridwar.

But things had not turned out that way. Swamishri had accepted it as God's wish. He was now an elderly 67, yet as he walked along the ghats beside the rushing Ganga he was once again the teenage aspirant.

This was the home of holy men and the playground of gods. Mandir upon mandir greeted one's eyes, creating an intense spirituality. Thousands took the holy dip in the sacred icy waters of mother Ganga. Myriad types of renunciates sat still in meditation or offered prayers. Yes, this was Haridwar, and it was all as Swamishri had visualized.

He was on a pilgrimage with a group of 450. For most, including himself, it would probably be the first and last time such a pilgrimage would be possible. And so he wanted everyone to gain as much as possible from it.

At mid-morning Swamishri strode along the ghats at Hari ki Pedi. The group had already reserved a place near the tip of the man-made peninsula contoured with steps. The peninsula split the river into two straits, a narrow one not more than 30 metres across touching the town and the other stretching away into the distance to meet a bare landscape. The sadhus expectantly waited, facing Haridwar town and its many red-coloured mandirs.

Swamishri's arrival was greeted joyously. The group gathered around him and jostled for a closer darshan. It was obvious to the other pilgrims that a renowned sadhu had arrived for a holy bath. Swamishri stood in the crowd smiling. He was happy. The wind caught his upper cloth, wrapping it

around his stomach and blowing his dhoti as a sail. A radiant smile acknowledged the complete joy of his disciples.

Swamishri tied his dhoti and stood on the first step in the swirling water. Bending down he bathed Shri Harikrishna Maharaj as the sadhus sang Vedic verses.

To get a better view of Swamishri some sadhus had quickly crossed the nearby arched bridge on the town side. Swamishri finished bathing the Lord and then scooping water up in cupped hands he repeatedly sprinkled it on the group, systematically, ensuring no one was missed out. The sadhus across the strait saw this and shouted to Swamishri, indicating they had been left out. Swamishri chuckled at their predicament; in trying to gain benefit in one way they had lost out in another. Swamishri bent low and with considerable force flung holy water towards the sadhus who almost danced in glee. They had not been forgotten. The water did not of course reach them, but Swamishri's love had. And to the sadhus that counted more than anything else.

Swamishri stood straight, the water tugging at his feet. With a sudden gesture of his right hand he beckoned the sadhus over to him. Spontaneously, about 30 sadhus jumped into the water and swam across, the current however pulled them away from Swamishri, who smiled at their efforts to reach him. It was only when they climbed on to the ghat that some of them realized they were poor swimmers and on their own initiative would never have dared to take the plunge.

Others had already begun bathing. Still others jumped from the bridge into the river. As they were carried past Swamishri by the powerful flow they folded their hands in prayer. Swamishri replied by stretching out and patting their heads. Head after head bobbed past Swamishri who delighted in quickly patting them. It became a game. More and more

sadhus joined. Those who had already received the pat quickly scrambled out of the water a little way down and ran back to the bridge to jump again. The entire episode took on divine proportions. Bystanders watched in amazement and not a little envy, as guru and disciples passed time in divine play.

Swamishri was creating a never to be forgotten memory.

Bhagwan Swaminarayan explains in Vachanamrut Gadhada I 38, that a devotee should constantly recollect the divine episodes from the life of God. Elaborating further in Vachanamrut Gadhada I 3, he explains that remembrance of such divine actions helps one to attain the divine abode of God.

Swamishri was not playing God, but he was accepted as Gunatit Satpurush, and the darshan of such a Satpurush, Bhagwan Swaminarayan says, is equal to the darshan of God himself (Vachanamrut Sarangpur 10) and serving such a sadhu is equal to serving God, for the fruits are the same (Vachanamrut Vartal 5). This is because God is totally manifest in such a Satpurush (Vachanamrut Gadhada I 27).

* * *

Chaturbhuj Swami had been initiated by Shastriji Maharaj. He had served in Atladra mandir and Shri Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj faithfully for over forty years. Such was his attachment he could not tolerate even a single penny of the mandir being wasted. Only old age had lessened his services. So when both kidneys failed and he had to undergo regular dialysis in a Vadodara hospital, Chaturbhuj Swami was troubled. The body was old, and he felt of no use to the Sanstha.

He was a burden he said, "There is no need for me in the Sanstha. I can no longer serve. So stop the dialysis." Pramukh Swami Maharaj was moved. The frail figure before him had given his whole and soul, and now this request. Swamishri answered quietly, "Continue the dialysis. I will tour two more

villages if need be.” Swamishri was referring to his own touring. Despite an already overburdened schedule he was prepared to shoulder more travel and ask devotees for money to pay for Chaturbhuj Swami’s medical expenses. Swamishri instructed doctors and other sadhus to spare no effort in making the ill sadhu comfortable and well. Dialysis continued for a year, after which Chaturbhuj Swami peacefully passed away in a Mumbai hospital.

* * *

In 1982 Swamishri himself was ill and to recuperate had been persuaded to stay in Sarangpur. Just across from the main mandir is the Yagnapurush Smruti Mandir, consecrated around the samadhi of Shastriji Maharaj. This along with the mandir, training school and otherworldly atmosphere of Sarangpur persuaded Swamishri to agree to the requests of devotees and sadhus. The mandir here is magnificent, soaring high above the neem trees. But the village is small and rustic. Shastriji Maharaj had built the mandir to fulfil a promise by Bhagwan Swaminarayan to Jiva Khachar of Sarangpur. Swamishri at the age of 25 had been Kothari there. Those times had been hard, and only a few sadhus stayed there to serve Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj and the other *murtis*.

The remoteness and purity of Sarangpur had always attracted Swamishri. Now, spartan but adequate living quarters, a library and study facilities had been added, and lush green gardens cultivated. Sarangpur had been transformed by Swamishri into a unique training centre for novice sadhus.

Yogiji Maharaj’s ministry had seen a large influx of young, educated sadhus into the fold. However, as the Sanstha grew the need for sadhus increased. They were needed to serve the deities, tour villages, prepare publications, manage Satsang centres, minister to devotees, guide social services projects and

perform many other activities. The list was endless.

Yogiji Maharaj had prophesied, “Pramukh Swami will initiate 700 sadhus.” To train them to preach and shoulder fully their responsibility to society, he had started this training centre. Senior sadhus were appointed as guides and a curriculum had been set.

Swamishri’s timetable remained the same. The number of devotees allowed to meet him was restricted to facilitate his recovery. When Swamishri discovered that Yogamuni Swami, a newly initiated sadhu, had injured his leg during *seva* and that the leg had become infected he made it a point to visit him in the dispensary every morning and evening.

Swamishri would talk to him, and in doing so grant him the benefit of his darshan and proximity.

Even in his own ill health Swamishri has repeatedly shown greater concern for the health of others. When struck by a heart attack in 1983, Swamishri was rushed to Dr B.R. Patel’s hospital in Vadodara. Doctor Swami and Mahant Swami cancelled their touring and also rushed to Vadodara to ensure Swamishri received the best treatment. When Mahant Swami first saw Swamishri he was hooked up to life support systems. In this state Swamishri beckoned an attendant near and whispered, “Make sure you cook mung for Mahant Swami.”

* * *

During the Uttarakhand *yatra* of 1987 the group was bathing in a tiny corner at Rishikesh a mile or so up river from Lakshman Jhula – the narrow suspended footbridge that takes pilgrims to Rishikesh town proper. Swamishri was waist deep in the Ganga water. Sadhus surrounded him. Others sat on rock outcroppings engrossed in darshan as Swamishri bathed Shri Harikrishna Maharaj.

Swamishri began chanting the Swaminarayan *mahamantra*

stopping only to say a particular prayer. “Swaminarayan, Swaminarayan...Let Akshardham be finished quickly and may it be supreme...may the devotees experience happiness in body, mind and wealth...” The entire group joined in the prayers.

Mahant Swami, in his soft voice, stopped the chanting and added a prayer, “Let Swamishri’s health remain good...” Before he could add to it Swamishri interrupted, “Not only mine, Mahant Swami’s, Dr Swami’s, Ishwar Swami’s, Viveksagar Swami’s, let everyone’s health remain good.”

* * *

As hard as he is soft, Swamishri is a task master who will not rest till a constant improvement is seen in his disciples. He teaches that the making of a true sadhu lies not in the mere shaving of a head and donning ochre robes. Swamishri tirelessly teaches purity of life and honest devotion. Speaking to a group of sadhus he once taught, “There is nothing wrong in asking devotees for things to be used for Thakorji, but never ask for yourself. Never for the body, only ask for God. Even this body is for God. Make do with whatever you receive collectively in the mandir, good or bad, everything should be of equal attraction.”

He has no reservations in giving advice to or even scolding his sadhus if the situation demands. To one sadhu he wrote: “It is more important to know about saintliness than the world. Understand the glory of Swami and Maharaj... Appreciate the work that Shastriji Maharaj and Yogiji Maharaj have achieved. One may know a lot about the world, but of what use is it to us? Therefore, take your mind away from that and become an expert in the path of saintliness... Whatever business one has undertaken, one must only think on those lines... what’s the point of other thoughts? Would it be appropriate to sing songs of mourning at a wedding? Similarly it is not right to discuss

worldly matters after renouncing the world...”

Swamishri reprimanded another sadhu: “Your act of taking pictures with a camera is not right. In that regard, you have not been instructed to do so... This talk has reached my ears. If I have heard incorrectly, then please forgive me...”

Another time in a 1984 letter to sadhus he sternly wrote: “Attendance of *katha varta* and *cheshta* should be regular...” At the bottom he wrote, “Please forgive me. It is only to continue the ways of Yogiji Maharaj that I have written... (I have) written this letter so that we all may in one fraternity do *katha varta* and bhajan...”

Discussing the importance of a disciplined life he addressed the sadhus in a special meeting during the Aksharbrahman Gunatitanand Swami Bicentenary Celebrations in Ahmedabad in 1985, “Behind scolding and maybe hurting your feelings lies the main reason: that you imbibe saintly virtues. You have come for liberation, that is why I have to instruct. What else is to be said. In the outside world many do as they please, do I go to them? But you have renounced home and family, your good must be done. I want to purify all of you of worldly attachments to make you happy.”

In such cases Swamishri does not refer to material happiness but transcendental bliss, a fluent communication with God where God consciousness eclipses all worldly pleasure. By accepting a disciple Swamishri also accepts responsibility for the overall welfare of the initiate. When needed he will love and pamper, amuse and delight. And if the situation demands he will not shirk from reprimanding any one he feels has outstepped the borders of a sadhu’s decorum and thus hurt his spiritual progress.

No matter what the laxity on the part of a sadhu, though, he is willing to forgive and forget. Explaining the Vachanamrut

Gadhada I 67 in Mumbai he assured, “God and his Sadhu keep no notes of a person’s failings. If they did, nobody would gain liberation. They never look to the faults of others.”

A sadhu in Bochasan asked, “You give us beneficial and lofty teachings and yet we cannot live that way. Don’t you ever feel frustrated by this?”

Swamishri answered, “A *jiva* is *jiva*; after all, the *jiva* has turned to tread the path to God. Shriji Maharaj himself was compassionate. The *jiva* will some day become *brahmarup*. It is no small thing that he has come into divine association.”

Swamishri sees the sadhus not just as his own, but also as Yogiji Maharaj’s. Despite being their spiritual master he regards them highly as spiritual souls on their journey to God realization. That he himself has inspired them to renounce is of no significance. He says, referring to Yogiji Maharaj’s vision of 700 sadhus, “Only due to Yogiji Maharaj’s desire do they become sadhus.”

Speaking to sadhus in Sarangpur Swamishri was overcome with emotion, “You have taken these robes for Yogiji Maharaj. I want to please you, and for your good, if need be, I will do anything and not care for my body or health.”

It is not surprising that these sadhus have sacrificed their all at his feet. As he wishes they live. These sadhus, inspired into God-centred activities give their utmost and then a little more, to please him. He has kindled a devotion within them that today guides the Sanstha’s multifarious activities.

Swamishri is quick to recognize their contribution and negate his own.

As a thank you, a special ceremony had been organized in Premabhai Hall, Ahmedabad, after the grand 33-day Bhagwan Swaminarayan Bicentenary Celebrations in 1981. Leading coordinator devotees were given mementos. Blessing

the attendees Swamishri acknowledged, “The sadhus have served in the festival as well, but what memento can we give them? My bowing to them a million, million times would not suffice. They were the backbone...I merely toured the site by car and made use of a chair.”

* * *

Whenever a sadhu has a problem of any sort, Swamishri is ready to sit with him, to listen, comfort and guide. Just before the 75th anniversary of the Bochasan mandir in 1982 Swamishri fell ill. He however travelled to Bochasan to take part in the festival. A sadhu had a problem which he wanted to discuss with Swamishri. One afternoon, despite his ill health, Swamishri met him. Swamishri sat on a sofa, attentive, as the sadhu sat on the carpet expressing his worries. As soon as the private counselling finished and the sadhu had stood up, Swamishri rushed to the bathroom where he vomited three times. It was then that the sadhu realized that in order to satisfy him Swamishri had somehow managed to hold down the vomit as he had spoken. Save for seemingly to adjust his posture Swamishri had given no outward indication of his difficulty.

* * *

By joining sadhus in activity Swamishri teaches the path of nine-fold devotion. Whether the sadhu serves as pujari or *bhandari*, on the farms or in the computer department, Swamishri takes a personal interest. He has himself sat down to milk a cow, served the sadhus and even rolled chhapatis in the kitchen. If he feels there is a slight flaw to the Lord's ornaments he himself will make the necessary adjustment and teach by example. His artistic eye suggests subtle changes in their works to artist sadhus. Whatever the talent, Swamishri encourages and appreciates.

* * *

In the youth hostel run by the Sanstha in Vidyanagar, Swamishri had just finished lunch. Students had been doing darshan. As a conversation started the youths said that Swamishri should be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. “What are your feelings on this?” Suresh asked.

“These sadhus are my Nobel. What more can I ask for?” Swamishri replied, looking around at the sadhus sitting in an arch around him.

6

Guru Bhakti

*After visiting Niagara Falls Swamishri wrote
in a letter to London Yuvak Mandal,
“No wonder in this world can equal the
three wonders: Maharaj, Swami and
Yogiji Maharaj. After seeing them nothing
else remains to be seen.”*

Pramukh Swami was in Acharda village. As president of BAPS he was constantly touring the mandirs and major Satsang centres, taking care of administration matters. Whenever Yogiji Maharaj wished he would tour with him.

Yogiji Maharaj had appointed Devcharan Swami and Pragat Bhagat, a *parshad*, to travel with Pramukh Swami as his attendants. They were to look after his day to day needs. Pramukh Swami was considerate and humble, he never asked for special facilities or treatment. Both attendants were very fond of him and did whatever they could to facilitate his work. In addition, Yogiji Maharaj himself would often

praise his saintliness and devotion. Seeing him from close up it was obvious to the attendants that Pramukh Swami was spiritually elevated.

Pragat Bhagat, the younger of the two, had somehow managed to obtain a photograph of Pramukh Swami. He placed it in his daily puja and worshipped the *murti* along with the *murtis* of Shri Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj, Bhagatiji Maharaj, Shastriji Maharaj and Yogiji Maharaj.

One morning, as was routine, Pramukh Swami and Pragat Bhagat sat together doing their pujas. Pragat Bhagat would loudly sing kirtans whilst doing his own puja, demonstrating to Pramukh Swami that he had learnt off by heart the kirtans he had been told to do so. This particular morning Pramukh Swami casually glanced at the *murtis* neatly arranged before Pragat Bhagat and saw his own photograph. Swamishri was annoyed but said nothing. He silently finished telling the rosary and then circumambulated his puja. After six prostrations he reached over to Pragat Bhagat's puja and snatched up his own photograph. He tore it into tiny pieces and in disgust flung the shreds into the toilet behind them.

Pragat Bhagat recalls, "We were sitting on a large cement platform with our backs to the toilet and bathroom. Pramukh Swami Maharaj performed his own puja as I sang kirtans during mine. He wanted me to learn as many as possible and always had me singing in puja, checking that I was memorizing and revising. I'd had his photograph in my puja for about 15 days. That morning he sat to my right. After his *dandvats* he grabbed the photo and tore it into pieces. When I asked why, he began to tell me off. His words were sharp, but hung heavy with distress. I'd never seen him so upset before."

"Why did you do that?" asked Pragat Bhagat. He had valued the photograph and was hurt. The question ignited the

wrath that had been until then simmering.

“Whilst Yogiji Maharaj is present no one else’s photo can be kept! Do you not understand even this much!” Pramukh Swami was speaking rapidly, showing his extreme annoyance. After a while he slowed down. He gently explained to his attendant the principles of true *upasana*, and the unequalled and unalloyed devotion that should be owed to Yogiji Maharaj. How could anybody equate him with Yogiji Maharaj, who was the guru of all.

* * *

When Pramukh Swami was appointed president, Shastriji Maharaj had commanded that in the future Pramukh Swami should carry out his duties faithfully according to Yogiji Maharaj’s wishes. The command became deeply ingrained in Swamishri’s life. No matter what the personal cost involved or consequences, he would, without hesitation, carry out his guru’s wishes to the letter.

Ningala is a small village, but filled with the devoted. They had built a small mandir hall and invited Yogiji Maharaj to consecrate the *murtis* of Shri Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj. Yogiji Maharaj asked that Pramukh Swami assist him.

The night prior to the consecration ceremony an assembly was in progress. A messenger from Gondal mandir arrived. The messenger had brought a letter. Yogiji Maharaj read the letter and without saying a word passed it to Pramukh Swami who was sitting on a lower seat next to him. The letter asked that Pramukh Swami be sent to Gondal immediately on some urgent work.

Pramukh Swami stood up and asked Yogiji Maharaj, “Bapa! What is your command?”

“Leave at once,” said Yogi Bapa.

Pramukh Swami quickly left the assembly and instructed

his two attendants to prepare. On making inquiry he discovered that a train from Botad briefly stopped at Ningala station on its way to Gondal and beyond. Swamishri hastened to the station which was a tiny office and primitive platform several metres long.

As they waited the attendants suggested, "Swami, what if we take a taxi." It was late, and they would reach Gondal after losing a night's sleep. If Pramukh Swami had urgent work he would need to be rested.

As was usual Pramukh Swami had tucked a pillow under his arm. With the pillow he also carried a small water pot and his *pattar*. In the water pot he always safeguarded a bunch of important keys.

Replied Swamishri, "There's no need of a taxi, the train will be here soon." He did not see the need to spend extra money.

The next morning the devotees were disappointed that Pramukh Swami was not present at the ceremony. Pramukh Swami himself by leaving Ningala showed that he considered his own presence at such an important function insignificant. To him Yogiji Maharaj's wishes were of supreme worth. He had not once questioned the importance of his errand and whether it could be postponed a few hours.

* * *

In 1967, the 75th birthday celebration (Amrut Mahotsav) of Yogiji Maharaj was coming up. It was decided to celebrate the event with fanfare and elaborate festivities. Yogi Bapa was not keen on the entire idea, but in the face of overwhelming love from the sadhus and devotees his protests melted into submission.

The three-day festival was planned to climax on Vaishakh *vad* 12, the actual Hindu calendar birthdate of Yogiji Maharaj. It was a mid summer date when temperatures would reach

up to 45°C and beyond. Thousands of devotees would be attending. An entire spiritual village with accommodation, kitchen, bathrooms, assembly marquee, decoration other facilities would have to be created. All facilities including emergency utilities would have to be readily available. The location was of prime importance. An acute water shortage had developed as the last monsoon had failed. Rivers, dams and wells were drying up so complicating the decision.

The festival committee consisting of Sanstha trustees, senior sadhus and devotees decided to meet in Gondal in the presence of Yogi Bapa to select the site of festival. Opinions differed widely and a decision would have to be reached. Time was running out.

Pramukh Swami knew that Yogi Bapa favoured Gondal. He would like to be near his beloved Ghanshyam Maharaj and the Akshar Deri. The meeting began and members began to discuss possible sites. Bochasan, Atladra, Ahmedabad and others were mentioned.

At last Pramukh Swami said, “Let Swami have the final word.” The committee turned to Yogiji Maharaj. But he gave no clear opinion. He was too embarrassed with the whole affair. The members persisted until he eventually said, “Finalize whatever Pramukh Swami says.” Whenever troubled, Yogi Bapa always turned to him. He could be trusted to carry out even his unspoken wishes.

Pramukh Swami was now in the frying pan. He, however, was determined. Diplomatically he began. “Yes, there is a water problem here; that is a hundred percent true, but even then the festival should be celebrated here in Gondal...”

Mota Swami flared up, “Do you understand anything at all? You’re talking of celebrating in Gondal, but where will you get the water from?”

Two tube wells had already been sunk on mandir land, but both had failed. The mandir well had also dried up. And so the question was very real. Mota Swami thought this was no time for sentiment. It was a practical matter that begged a straightforward practical answer.

He himself was no ordinary sadhu. As a householder he had been present when Shastriji Maharaj had left Vartal. For over 40 years he had served Shastriji Maharaj at crippling personal loss. Supporting the Akshar Purushottam cause was to him the highest service to God. He was an experienced administrator, scripturally well versed and held in high esteem. After Shastriji Maharaj's demise he had renounced at the age of 75 to stand beside Yogi Bapa and assist him to steer the Sanstha. He had known Pramukh Swami as a child in Chansad, then from his very first days as a fledgling sadhu and had over the years grown to love and respect him. The feelings were mutual.

"Mota Swami, the water will come from anywhere. The festival should be kept in Gondal. Maharaj's grace will help us solve the water problem," replied Swamishri. He was adamant.

Mota Swami erupted again, "Do you have any common sense? Do you grasp anything? We've already dug several tube wells; where is the water? Tens of thousands of people will come here and die of thirst..."

The other members supported Mota Swami's arguments. To them Gondal was certainly out of the question.

Pramukh Swami again spoke up, "See here, whatever may happen, I'll fit a pipeline from Bhadar dam if need be... I'll call water tankers."

Predictably Mota Swami exploded again. But, as president, Pramukh Swami was unmoved. He was convinced and prepared. "Come what may, we shall celebrate the festival here in Gondal. Gondal is Swami's favourite soil and it is also his

wish, so let's celebrate here."

Throughout the meeting Yogi Bapa had kept a dignified silence. Finally, the committee accepted the decision. Yogi Bapa showered his blessings on all, openly expressing a special pleasure on Pramukh Swami.

* * *

Once, Yogi Bapa was touring northern Gujarat. He graced Varsoda village. Pramukh Swami was with him.

In the afternoon canvas-type sheets were hung up in a corner of the mandir hall, forming a partitioned area where Yogi Bapa and Mota Swami could rest. Pramukh Swami himself spread an ochre coloured sheet on a filthy uneven mattress, and lay down to rest, surrounded by youths who were spending their vacation with Yogi Bapa.

Whenever someone entered the mandir compound or spoke he would sit up and quickly motion for silence. He would whisper, "Bapa is resting. Mota Swami will wake up."

In the space of two hours he sat up some 15 times, wide awake in guru devotion throughout.

* * *

On 19 June 1966 Yogiji Maharaj was in Limdi, not far from Surendranagar. The next morning he was to go to Rajkot, a city four hours drive away. Pramukh Swami thought it best that Yogiji Maharaj's attendant sadhus should leave for Rajkot early. They were to prepare lunch and set up the accommodation so that Yogiji Maharaj's schedule would not be disturbed. He himself would travel with Yogiji Maharaj and see to his every need. Pramukh Swami instructed Yogeshwar Swami, "You all leave early to prepare lunch there. We will drive from Limdi to Rajkot."

Next morning, Pramukh Swami explained the arrangements to Yogiji Maharaj, who readily consented. He said to Yogeshwar

Swami, “Jogeshwar,” pronouncing the ‘Y’ as ‘J’, “obey the instructions of this Swami. And make sure you go straight to Rajkot; don’t go anywhere else, OK.”

Pramukh Swami also cautioned the group, “Don’t stop anywhere and go straight there. Have lunch ready. Bapa will be there by 12 noon.”

Four sadhus left, Yogiji Maharaj’s attendants and Pramukh Swami’s. The cooking utensils they had packed in a case were tied to the car’s roof rack.

Along their route, several kilometres off the highway, they would pass Muli. It was here that Bhagwan Swaminarayan had built his fifth mandir. The attendants not wanting to miss such a chance decided to turn off the highway and quickly visit the mandir for darshan of the deities. They calculated that with a little more speed they could still get to Rajkot in time.

When they left Muli it was already 10:30. Ahead the road dipped to allow railway tracks to pass overhead. The railway bridge however was low and as the car passed beneath it, the case and rack got caught and were ripped off. Pots, pans and ladles tumbled on to the dusty road.

The sadhus scrambled out and hastily repacked the case. Avoiding the rack they bundled the case into the car with them. The car trundled on. A few kilometres on their old and weary black Austin Morris sputtered to a conclusive halt.

The driver hitched a ride in a passing truck and came back with another car. They tied the two cars together and again began their journey. They were hopelessly late. Worry gnawed at them. What would Pramukh Swami say? Yogiji Maharaj would be hungry and waiting.

At 1:30 they finally got to Narayanbhai Sheth’s home in Rajkot where Yogiji Maharaj was to stay. On entering the house, to their amazement, they saw Yogiji Maharaj silently eating

whilst Pramukh Swami sat to one side, lovingly serving him.

They later learned that Yogiji Maharaj had arrived at 11 on the dot that morning. Pramukh Swami, realizing that the attendants had not as yet arrived, quietly seized the opportunity to serve his guru. He prepared a seat for Yogiji Maharaj who began a *katha* to the gathered devotees. In the meantime Pramukh Swami expertly prepared a delicious lunch of *rotli*, *dal*, *bhat*, two *shaks*, *thuli* and other items.

Yogiji Maharaj looked up at the sadhus. His face glowed with pleasure. He explained about the meal, “My Pramukh Swami made it. I did *katha* and he cooked! We got here at 11 o’clock and Pramukh Swami immediately began. Just taste the food. Beautiful!”

It was important to Pramukh Swami that Yogiji Maharaj not be troubled in any way. He was guru, the receptacle through whom Maharaj accepted worship and spread the correct *upasana*. To serve Yogiji Maharaj in any way was to serve Maharaj. Pramukh Swami was firm in his belief that the guru was to be given the same respect as Maharaj. And because Maharaj was totally manifest in Yogiji Maharaj he was as good as God. Yogiji Maharaj had similarly served Shastriji Maharaj and Shastriji Maharaj had so served his guru Bhagatji Maharaj, who had served Gunatitanand Swami. Each had served the guru who they saw as the personage through whom Bhagwan Swaminarayan continued to manifest on this earth. In Vachanamrut Vartal 5 Bhagwan Swaminarayan says, “By performing with extreme affection similar service of God and the Sant who possesses the highest qualities, even if he is a devotee of the lowest type and was destined to become a devotee of the highest type after two lives, or after four lives, or after ten lives, or after a hundred lives, he will become a devotee of the highest calibre in this very life. Such are the

fruits of the similar service of God and God's Bhakta."

* * *

Even now, years after the passing of Yogiji Maharaj, Pramukh Swami Maharaj never misses a chance to convey to his sadhus and devotees the greatness of his guru.

One early morning in 1987, in Sarangpur, Swamishri was taking his early morning walk in the garden. A stone paved circular path had been prepared. It was surrounded by blooming flower beds, lawns and fruit trees. Sadhus sat bordering the walkway, singing kirtans. As Swamishri approached the iron gate he saw Brahma-prakash Swami, with *potlu* in hand. He had come from Ahmedabad two days before and had now come to ask for leave to return.

Swamishri signalled to him come closer. Guessing that Swamishri wanted to speak to him Brahma-prakash Swami was about to put his *potlu* down, but Swamishri said, "It does not matter, you may hold it." With that Swamishri continued his walking, with Brahma-prakash Swami struggling to keep up next to him carrying his heavy *potlu* slung over his shoulder.

"When are you leaving? Swamishri asked. "Have you had breakfast? How many hours does it take to reach Ahmedabad?"

Brahma-prakash Swami was surprised at the questions. There really was no need for them. Swamishri chatted on, his brisk stride never breaking. With each step Brahma-prakash Swami's *potlu* felt heavier. His shoulder, unaccustomed to carrying such weight, was becoming sore. On the fourth lap Swamishri's walking period was over.

He patted Brahma-prakash Swami on the head and said, "You may leave now."

Brahma-prakash Swami could not contain himself. He asked tongue in cheek, "Bapa, if you wanted to speak to me at length at least you should have let me put my *potlu* down."

Chuckling, Swamishri replied, “It was so you would realize how Shastriji Maharaj and Yogiji Maharaj had in their time carried several *potluses* at one time and walked for miles on end.”

* * *

Another time, Swamishri was writing letters in his room in New York. Notepad on lap, sitting crossed legged on a thick cushion he was totally immersed in his *seva*. An elderly devotee sitting in front of him on the carpet commented, “Swami, when travelling in the villages in the past it was rare for you to be offered even a mattress to sit on. Even in such hard times you’ve toured extensively.”

Swamishri put his pen down. He said, “At least we got a mattress. Shastriji Maharaj and Yogiji Maharaj never even had that much. They slept on straw. In Ghogavadar Yogiji Maharaj slept in a cattle shed. Ants and other insects would bite him. The peanut crop would be stored in the house, so mice would be rampant. In other places he would clean a corner in a room and put up there. In such horrible conditions Yogiji Maharaj remained in uncaring bliss and spread Satsang. We are a million times better off to receive even this much.”

* * *

Every year devotees celebrate Pramukh Varni Din, the day Shastriji Maharaj appointed Swamishri as President of the Sanstha.

The fortieth anniversary of this occasion passed in Gondal. In the assembly Swamishri gave blessings. A microphone was placed before him as the compere requested Swamishri to speak. Several hundred devotees had gathered, and they now awaited Swamishri. He began, “Shastriji Maharaj established this Sanstha; his efforts and grandness, prowess and ability cannot be truly understood by anyone. He firmly lived by the principles brought on this earth by Shriji Maharaj, and created this Sanstha.

“In those times there were no means, and there was antagonism from the people. Even so he tolerated everything. He walked from village to village talking to the people about the Akshar-Purushottam *upasana*. He had no selfish motives...” saying this tears escaped the corners of his eyes.

The devotees sat mesmerized. It was evident to them that Swamishri was lost in devotion to his guru. In a choked voice he continued, hands fidgeting, “In setting up this Sanstha Shastriji Maharaj has performed a very great work. He tolerated so many hardships... Yogi Maharaj took great care of me. My only goal was to please him. The spiritual master does all things; we have just to become an instrument. His giving us holy service is his greatest benediction on us. All credit goes to Shastriji Maharaj and Yogiji Maharaj... I never was wise or had ability or talent.”

Swamishri’s words exposed the unfathomable love he has for Shastriji Maharaj and Yogiji Maharaj. The assembly stood up, many pondering on their own relationship with Swamishri. He was their spiritual master. Did they see him as he saw his gurus? Swamishri had not been able to restrain himself. The spontaneity of his outpouring was remarkable, all the more for its innocence. It was a lesson never to be forgotten.

A natural result of Swamishri’s guru bhakti is his high regard, even reverence, for those who have served his gurus.

Harshad Chavda as an eager youngster had served in the Gondal mandir during Yogiji Maharaj’s final years there. He would be seen constantly scurrying from here to there, carrying buckets of hot water on cold mornings, taking steaming tea up to a room, serving devotees faithfully in whichever way he could.

In 1975, Swamishri had plans drawn up for a beautiful ornate gateway to the Gondal mandir. Yogiji Maharaj had

always wanted such an entrance built. Swamishri selected a design and decided to build in red and pink stone. This was to be the first structure in such stone for the Sanstha. He asked Harshad to travel to Bansipahadpur in Rajasthan and make a preliminary survey.

Harshad Chavda remembered: “In reality, I knew nothing of stone and building. First Swami Bapa sent me to Bansipahadpur (in Rajasthan) to get stone samples for the Akshar Mandir gateway. It was *nom* (the ninth of the first half of the month), so I had fasted. The whole place was barren. I had to sleep by the well. Swami Bapa had explained everything to me in detail, not just once, but many many times.

“When I first stayed here and in Makarana for marble, he would write lengthy letters giving strength and courage. Once he wrote, ‘For years I myself have laboured with stone...’”

Soon quarrying and carving operations began with Harshad overseeing a small team of dedicated youths who managed the entire project. Even before the Gondal gateway was completed Swamishri decided that Rajasthani pink stone be used to build Akshardham Mandir and exhibition halls dedicated to Bhagwan Swaminarayan in Gandhinagar. This and other building projects kept Harshad and his team frantically busy. One day, while riding on his motorcycle he met with an accident, barely escaping with his life. He was given emergency treatment locally and then taken to Mumbai. Swamishri was visibly distressed when told of the accident. He immediately contacted the Mumbai mandir and commanded that Harshad’s every need be looked after. Swamishri wrote words of encouragement, reassurance and strength to him: “Hearing the news caused me great sorrow... have prayed to Shriji Maharaj and Gunatitanand Swami for your speedy recovery... Your agony is our anguish... In such distress, I

should be serving you because you have selflessly offered *seva* over the years with unflagging enthusiasm...continuously... day and night with no regard for hunger or thirst...no regard for your body...service with such devotion. Therefore, whatever can be done for you can never be enough... Thus, I feel sorry in not being able to physically serve you at this critical time.”

In the short span of one month, Swamishri wrote no less than four letters to Harshad! Totalling over 20 pages, the second letter read: “Don’t worry in the slightest about any of your medical expenses... Whatever the Sanstha can do for you is not enough to repay for the service you’ve given over the years. To please Yogi Bapa, you’ve paid no thought at all to hunger, thirst, insults or abuse. In the environment of Bansipahadpur – hot, cold or rainy – you’ve done work among troublemakers, even snakes... at considerable risk to your life. Your *seva* can never be forgotten and the Sanstha has benefited a great deal thanks to your dealings with suppliers and workers. Even if we have to spend a lakh (100,000) rupees or more for you, the amount is immaterial. Your life shines even more than one who has renounced the world... as you’ve sacrificed all to serve in the Sanstha at one word from Yogi Maharaj. To serve with a constant smile and tolerate is no child’s play. Krishnakant and you... both of you are truly loyal workers... What cannot be done for the two of you?”

* * *

Tribhakaka Patel was seriously ill in Bochasan. He had been serving in the mandir for 35 years. Prior to that he had settled in Kenya. When he heard that there was a need for devotees to help run the Bochasan mandir he had immediately left family and wealth and returned to India. Shastriji Maharaj commanded that he serve by writing the accounts.

When Swamishri arrived in Bochasan he walked straight to Tribhakaka's room and sat beside his bed. "Who is serving Tribhakaka?" he asked. The sadhus told that Prabodhjivan Swami was. Swamishri said, "Serve Tribhakaka well, understanding his greatness. He has served both Shastriji Maharaj and Yogiji Maharaj. It is your good fortune to have such a chance to serve him."

* * *

The editor of *The Times of India*, Balkrishnan, interviewed Swamishri. "Why are youths attracted to you?" he questioned.

Swamishri answered, "The only reason is the love and saintliness of my guru Yogiji Maharaj!"

A young boy once asked out of curiosity, "Why does everybody call you 'Bapa?'"

Swamishri answered, "Because I have been blessed by Yogiji Maharaj."

A young man wanted to learn something of Swamishri's inner most experiences.

"The greatest experience lies in my meeting God and pure persons such as Shastriji Maharaj and Yogiji Maharaj," he had explained.

When Naresh Roy of Canada Satsang Mandal praised Swamishri's managerial abilities, Swamishri said, "It is Shastriji Maharaj's grace, Yogiji Maharaj's inspiration, and so things roll on."

After visiting Niagara Falls Swamishri wrote in a letter to London Yuvak Mandal, "No wonder in this world can equal the three wonders: Maharaj, Swami and Yogiji Maharaj. After seeing them nothing else remains to be seen."

Sadhu disciples once asked, "How do you manage to remain tranquil in the midst of so much activity?"

Swamishri said, "Due to Shastriji Maharaj's and Yogiji

Maharaj's grace I experience unbroken peace."

Speaking to coordinators of the Children's Forum he guided, "See Yogiji Maharaj within each child."

When pressed to name a school, clock tower or other building after his own name he rejects all, saying, "Not mine, use Shastriji Maharaj's or Yogiji Maharaj's name."

It was the anniversary of Shastriji Maharaj's passing away. The day had been spent in devotional reminiscing. As Swamishri prepared for bed he summarized his own life, "When Yogiji Maharaj was present I never took any decision on my own. Only after Yogiji Maharaj commanded would I implement a course of action. Shastriji Maharaj had commanded me to obey Yogiji Maharaj in all things, I had firmly determined to do this. From the very beginning this was my ideal."

It is not often that Swamishri talks about himself. But when he does each word becomes scripture, pointing the easiest way to spiritual consciousness. Swamishri's life teaches the first lesson of a spiritual life – *dasatva* – believing oneself to be a trivial servant of God and guru, awarding all fame to them.

7

Neither Night, Nor Day

“Bapa, the flour mill is new. Pour a cup of millet into it!” Swamishri obliged.

“Now if you grind the millet I’ll never lack for flour again!” Swamishri clasped the handle and turned the heavy stone, grinding the millet to please the devotee.

It was usual for Swamishri to be in Ahmedabad during part of the monsoon. He had maintained this schedule almost continuously since becoming guru in 1971. Dr Rambhai Patel, of Kadi in North Gujarat, had come with a car to pick Swamishri up. A *parayan* had been organized in Kadi, hosted by Rambhai’s aunt. Swamishri had promised to grace the function on Sunday. Rambhai, however, thought it better that Swamishri arrive on Saturday evening. This would allow more new *satsangis* to meet Swamishri. But that Saturday Swamishri was to go to Kali village, just outside Ahmedabad. Rambhai returned home disappointed,

consoling himself with the thought of Swamishri gracing Kadi the very next day.

There was a tremendous thunderstorm that night and widespread flooding. Rambhai sent a car with Bhogibhai to collect Swamishri. But the road at Shertha was impassable. Flood waters rushed across it in torrents. The fields on both sides were totally submerged. Overnight, a lake had formed stretching into the distance. Only tree tops broke the monotony of water.

Bhogibhai was forced to turn back. Rambhai spoke to Swamishri on the phone and explained the difficulty. In the meantime he was searching for a vehicle high enough to negotiate the blocked road.

Swamishri himself was worried. He had promised Rambhai that he would attend the *parayan*. He did not want to disappoint him, or the others. Satsang was taking root in Kadi and the *parayan* was a good chance to meet the local people. After Rambhai's telephone he asked for the use of a Matador van owned by Ambalalbai, who lived in Mithakali, a suburb close to Shahibaug in Ahmedabad.

Soon he left with a group of sadhus. The Matador van crossed Gandhi Bridge, and then taking a right turn onto Ashram Road sped through the newly developing area of Usmanpura, past Gandhi Ashram where Mahatma Gandhi had stayed for several years, and then parallel along the high brick walls of Sabarmati Jail and so passing out of Ahmedabad onto the narrow tarmac road to Kadi.

Rambhai had found a station wagon with Khodabhai in Kundal village. He had quickly left for Ahmedabad, only to find on getting there that Swamishri had already left. Rambhai was amazed. He rushed back to Kadi and was relieved to see that Swamishri had arrived safely.

After the *parayan* Swamishri agreed to visit Budasan, a small village three kilometres from Kadi. It was raining heavily. The narrow dirty side streets of Budasan had turned into treacherous mud beds. Devotees dumped straw bundles on the mud to make a footpath of sorts. Swamishri visited several homes and returned to Kadi.

* * *

Swamishri's *vicharan* or touring is to please the devotees and inspire others on the path of righteousness and faith in God.

Once, Swamishri was in Nadiad. Plans for his first overseas Satsang tour as guru were being finalized. It was 1974, three years since the passing of Yogiji Maharaj. Swamishri's relentless touring continued unabated. He would not rest. Leaving Nadiad after *mangala arti* he stopped at Piplag and reached in time for the *rajbhog arti* in Bochasan. Lunch was up the road in Dharmaj. From there he visited Mahelav, the birthplace of Shastriji Maharaj and attended the *sandhya arti* in Vartal. After an evening assembly in Dabhan, he visited the Swaminarayan Mandir in Jetalpur, 40 kilometres away and then travelled on to Ahmedabad, arriving at the mandir after midnight having sanctified more than 150 houses through the day.

The distances involved are substantial. The roads are full of bumps and craters. Once, Swamishri was to travel from Madhi village near Bardoli to Vidyanagar, a distance of some 250 kilometres. The next day he returned to Madhi. Another time Swamishri was in Piplag. He visited some fifty homes and went to Dabhan. He was later followed by several devotees from Piplag, "Swami, some homes were left out for *padbaramani*." Swamishri put his *pagh* on and went back to Piplag to visit the extra homes. He returned to Dabhan after twelve midnight.

On 9 March 1979, Swamishri left Gariyadhar at about eight in the morning. It was *ekadashi* and so he was observing a

waterless fast (*nirjala*) – no food or water was allowed. First on his schedule were Morba, Charoliya, Kutana and Velavadar. In each he performed *padbramanis*. Next was Mekada. There he graced a procession, gave blessings in an assembly and visited homes before moving on to Mota Bhamodara. There, a new mandir had been built; Swamishri sat down in the *yagna* and later consecrated the *murtis* of Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj. A public assembly had been organized that night in Jesar. Swamishri gave blessings there at eleven-thirty, retiring to bed after twelve. He was exhausted, but his face glowed with satisfaction, since he had been able to serve many devotees.

Describing Swamishri's routine for those first ten years or so Viveksagar Swami, his constant companion, says: "The touring was a rush. It was amazing to see how Swamishri was able to satisfy so many people. But it was not only that, he was elevating the people. In each *padbramani* he would sit on a seat if one had been prepared. Else he just sat on a chair or bare bench. Sometimes he would squat on a sack. Where he sat was unimportant. He did not notice. He was more interested in the devotee, his family and his life. Swamishri would ask their names. He took a practical interest in their farming and jobs, and encouraged the children to study hard.

"*Arti* would be performed, garlands offered and Swamishri would sanctify the entire home by visiting all the rooms. If he found that the person smoked or had some other bad habit he would elicit a promise to stop. And then the next house. And the next. When out on a *padbramani* run there would be no time even for drinking water. Between houses he would talk to Satsang volunteers, guiding them on how to expand Satsang in the village.

"This was his goal. Expand Satsang and ensure that those

who had already taken the Satsang vows were strengthened in their beliefs, convictions and devotion for Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj.

“Swamishri would rise before six in the morning. Puja would be completed by eight. Breakfast would be at another devotee’s house. Walking there Swamishri would complete several *padbramanis*. After breakfast Swamishri would discourse a little on the Vachanamrut, and then begin *padbramanis* until after two in the afternoon.”

The local organizer devotees would often become frustrated and annoyed. No matter how much they tried the number of *padbramanis* would increase. Swamishri never refused anyone. If he had just sat in the car and a person said, “Swami, I’ve been left out,” Swamishri would smile and immediately get out of the car.

During lunch Swamishri would personally see to it that devotees were served. He would urge them to eat *prasad*. Lunch was always a light affair, with lots of talk and laughter. It was a time cherished by attendant sadhus, for Swamishri would sit still for twenty minutes, and then after a little *katha* he would take forty winks. And only forty winks. Late afternoon would see him visiting more villages. The procession and *padbramani* cycle would start again. Dinner was usually after eleven; if an early dinner was taken, the *sabha* would finish at midnight.

Viveksagar Swami writes: “If he passed somebody’s field, barn, crop pile, tractor, cart or other such things, he would be asked to sanctify them. If it were an oxen or buffalo, Swamishri would pat the animal. In that one touch or glance at a field, devotees would be overjoyed.

“Before lunch and after lunch, while sitting on the same seat he would listen to the problems of individuals, blessing them

and showing solutions. Even before he left a village he would meet twenty, thirty or more devotees. In between he would be instructing attendants to pack luggage, make a telephone call. This was all activity. But it was spiritual. You could feel it in the atmosphere created.

“We were almost always late. Our car was old and the roads were beaten. The driver, Damjibhai, would slowly say after Swamishri had sat down, ‘Swami, there’s something wrong with the engine...!’

“Swamishri would sternly say, ‘What were you doing until now? OK, open the hood and have a look.’ In the meantime Swamishri would begin reading correspondence. In the evening he would sing the *arti*. When we got to the next village he would put the letters away and step out into a crowd. The night assembly would begin with *dhun* at about eight. Haka Bapu would speak for 45 minutes, then Dr Swami would speak. Swamishri would begin his blessings between 10:30 and 11:00. He would finish speaking at 11:30 and then meet everyone. At the accommodation he would sing the *chestha*, and then if there was correspondence he would sit down to reply.”

In Gajera, during one day, Swamishri visited and sanctified 157 homes. In Nadri the procession finished at three in the afternoon. After lunch, *katha* and rest, Swamishri set out for *padharamanis* at six and returned at ten. He had visited 100 homes.

* * *

Thakorbbhai of Vadodara had requested Swamishri to visit his home. Swamishri was to pass nearby when he motored from Vaghodiya to Atladra and so accepted. He told Thakorbbhai to wait by the roadside. However, as with almost every day Swamishri was delayed by increased *padhramanis*. Thakorbbhai had stationed himself at the roadside rendezvous by six that

evening. Swamishri arrived at 1:30 in the morning. The devotee ran up to the car.

An attendant sadhu said, “Thakorbhai, say we come to your home tomorrow, its very late now...”

Before Thakorbhai could answer Swamishri intervened, “It won’t take long! Thakorbhai has been waiting since evening... think of him! Follow him,” he told the driver.

* * *

In Kurduvadi, Maharashtra, he visited a home at three thirty in the morning.

In the Saurashtra district Swamishri had been touring for several days. As his car passed the outskirts of a village a devotee standing by the roadside recognized Swamishri and waved. Swamishri had seen him wave and had the car stopped.

The devotee ran up to Swamishri’s window. Gasping for breath he requested, “Won’t you come to my house, Swami?” He could not be refused.

At his home he led Swamishri through all the rooms, asking him to sanctify them and scatter rose petals everywhere. He had him touch various cupboards and chests, stores and mattresses. Everything should be sanctified. Finally he pointed to a domestic flour mill operated by hand. “Bapa, the flour mill is new. Pour a cup of millet into it!” Swamishri obliged.

“Now if you grind the millet I’ll never lack for flour again!” Swamishri clasped the handle and turned the heavy stone, grinding the millet to please the devotee.

* * *

Jagdish and Jayanti of Mandala were twins. Jagdish was getting married. His father sent an invitation card to Swamishri, asking that he bless the occasion with his presence.

An attendant secretary read the request and realized it would be impractical for Swamishri to attend. He wrote a

reply to that extent and asked Swamishri to sign it and maybe write a few lines of blessings.

Swamishri signed the reply and wrote, “I will of course attend the wedding, even if only for a standing moment. Please remain pleased upon us...”

South Africa, 1991

Swamishri left Lenasia to be driven to Pietermaritzburg. Crossing a distance of 107 km in 72 minutes, he entered Himatbhai Soni’s house at 11:45 that morning.

A seat had been prepared in the front room. Swamishri sat down. A devotee touched his feet and prayed, “Swami, please grace my home.”

Swamishri quickly said to the attendant sadhus and devotees, “The *thal* is still to be prepared. By the time it is ready we will be back!” He also visited Kirit Patel’s house, and another house under construction and a sweet food shop.

“Is this shop wholly vegetarian?” he asked.

“Yes, pure vegetarian,” replied the owner. This pleased Swami. He taught that all Hindus should be total vegetarians. Swamishri always insisted that no matter what the doctors said Hindus should never eat meat or fish or eggs.

“But what of you two?” he asked the owner and his brother.

Both looked down embarrassed. Swamishri said quietly, “Just as the shop is vegetarian, one’s life should also be made so. What is the purpose of living by killing another? Firmly decide today to stop eating meat.”

Before even thinking of a spiritual life a pure diet is essential. Swamishri was going back to basics. He said the brothers and their families should regularly attend the weekly satsang assembly. It would bolster their faith and introduce them to other *satsangis*.

The very first weekly satsang assemblies had been begun by Yogiji Maharaj in the early fifties. The format is very simple. There is *dhun*, the chorused singing of the Swaminarayan *mahamantra*. There are several variations of tune. This is followed by a kirtan prayer. Then the Satsang Patrika is read, which gives details of Swamishri's touring and excerpts from his preaching. A kirtan follows. The kirtan usually consists of a devotee singing a line of a verse composed by one of Bhagwan Swaminarayan's *paramhansa* poets. The devotees chorus the line. Another line is sung, also to be chorused and so on. *Tabla*, *dbolak*, harmonium and *manjira* accompany the singing. If the tune allows, devotees keep beat by clapping hands in unison. A reading of Vachanamrut and Swamini Vato follows. If there is an experienced devotee present, he will expound on the sacred texts and talk of the greatness of God, his devotees and the holy Sadhu.

Yogiji Maharaj's vision had been bold. He desired that Satsang centres be established all over the world. He would often speak of Satsang in 'foreign'. But to devotees at the time it seemed that Yogiji Maharaj was spiritually dreaming. They could not imagine Satsang bursting through the confines of Gujarat and Mumbai, let alone India.

Pramukh Swami always listened intently. To him every word of Yogiji Maharaj was sacred truth. His every desire, no matter how crazy or impossible it seemed, was to be taken seriously. And now Swamishri himself was consolidating a vast international network of Satsang centres, where regular Satsang assemblies are conducted. In new centres, there would only be a handful, the new members sometimes at a loss as to what to do in the assembly. In established centres, like London and Edison (New Jersey), many thousands attend every week.

Swamishri was bringing to life Yogiji Maharaj's spiritual

dream. The effort required was colossal, the method painstaking, but Swamishri relied on Shri Harikrishna Maharaj. Swamishri constantly saw himself as a servant of Shri Harikrishna Maharaj. He was but an instrument in God's hands. His task was to try. That was his devotion to Bhagwan Swaminarayan and guru. The results he would leave to them.

Each individual, or family was unique, necessitating a different approach: if he had to ask one family to eat only a healthy vegetarian diet, he would have to ask another to attend *sabha*.

In Kericho, Swamishri met a young man who had entered Satsang a number of years earlier. His whole family was devoted, but the youth himself had slacked off in attending the weekly *sabha*. Swamishri asked, "Why is it like this?"

The youth replied, "Others attend the *sabha*! I feel I may start later on!" He was honest.

Swamishri knew the family well and their close links with Satsang. He was forceful, and a little sarcastic. "The shops of other people are doing well! They will look after my customers!" Do you ever think in this way? So, never miss the Sunday *sabha*."

Bhagwan Swaminarayan explains in Vachanamrut Kariyani 12, "Regardless of how lustful, angry, greedy or lewd a person may be, if he listens to these types of discourses with faith and love, all his flaws would be eradicated. For example, if a man with teeth strong enough to chew raw grams were to eat a great many sour mangoes, then he would not be able to chew even boiled rice. In the same way, if a person who is strongly overpowered by lust, anger, etc., were to listen to these discourses with faith and persistence, then that person would no longer be capable of indulging in the *panchvishays*. Moreover, the mind does not become as free of desires for *vishays* by subjecting the body

to austere observances such as *tapta-kruchchbra*, *chāndrāyan* or other vows as it does by listening to these discourses of God. In addition, your minds must not be becoming as stable while meditating or by turning the rosary as perfectly as they do while you are listening to these discourses. Thus, one should listen to the discourses of Purushottam Narayan with faith and love. There is no better method to stabilize the mind and to free it of the desires for *visbhays*.”

He further says in Vachanamrut, Gadhada III 24, “What is the reason behind a spiritual aspirant attaining noble virtues? Well, one develops an aversion for the world in proportion to the attachment one has for listening to the talks and discourses related to God; moreover, vicious natures such as lust, anger, avarice, etc., are also destroyed to that extent. Conversely, if someone is lazy in listening to those talks and discourses, then one should infer that he will not imbibe noble virtues.”

In spite of the various activities initiated by the Sanstha, Swamishri never forgets that the Sanstha was essentially spiritual in nature. Those who entered were to be spiritually educated and uplifted. This was possible only through regular listening to discourses.

Despite being the guru of hundreds of thousands, Swamishri has faced untold difficulties in his touring. Especially in the mode of transport. It was only in 1977, after acute pressure from devotees, that he allowed the use of an Ambassador car for himself. He has travelled by bus, train, rickshaw, oxen cart, and walked many kilometres where no transport was available. Indian weather conditions have many times made travel a harrowing experience. Even so, he has remained defiant in the face of all difficulties.

In Jetpur and Bavla he pushed his car which had broken down. Travelling to Bhoyka during the monsoon his tractor

stuck fast in mud. The more the driver tried, the more the huge rear wheels slipped, digging deeper into the mud, spraying everyone with foul smelling slime. Eventually, a second tractor was called to pull the stuck one out. It too sank into the soft mud. A third also became stuck. A fourth finally managed to do the job. Swamiji had stood to one side calmly and patiently watching the entire debacle.

Once, while passing through the dense jungle of Gir from Tulsishyam to Junagadh his car broke down. The isolated route was dangerous, both from bandits and lions. Swamishri spent the entire night on the road.

The first Special Train Yatra had been inspired by Yogiji Maharaj. An entire long distance train journey had been chartered; with Yogiji Maharaj, sadhus and devotees on the lengthy pilgrimage. Another was organized by Swamishri in 1972. It was also called 'Nilkanth Varni Yatra Pravas'. It was a pilgrimage which allowed devotees and sadhus to get close to Swamishri. There was also an opportunity for him to get closer to his disciples and nurture their spiritual living.

The train 'parked' in Ayodhya whilst Swamishri and the pilgrims went to Chhapaiya, the small village in Uttar Pradesh where Bhagwan Swaminarayan was born and spent his early childhood. The buses passed through a lush green farming land, only to be stopped by a broken bridge that went over an irrigation canal.

Not too far away a small coal-fired train chugged wearily towards Swaminarayan Station in Chhapaiya. Some sadhus waved their shoulder cloths at the train hoping the driver would notice and stop. He did. As the train jolted to a halt Swamishri shouted, "Get on everybody," The entire group began to run. Swamishri lifted his dhoti above his knees and, holding his *mojdi* in his free hand, ran with everyone.

“Swami, let me carry your *mojdi*,” a sadhu requested.

Puffing from exertion Swamishri replied, “You carry your shoes and I’ll carry mine... Just run!”

At the time it had been somewhat of an adventure: broken bridge, wondering what to do, running for the train. On reflection the sadhus and devotees could clearly see their guru running with his *mojdi* in hand. They felt troubled that they had been unable to offer him better transport. Swamishri was not concerned about this. His source of comfort and happiness lay in Shri Harikrishna Maharaj and the thought of being able to do Thakorji’s darshan in Chhapaiya.

* * *

Nimesh playfully wrote to Swamishri in America, “When you return, bring back a helicopter. It will help make your touring less tiring.”

In Bhadra, when Swamishri was back in India, Nimesh asked, “You didn’t bring back a helicopter?”

Swamishri said, “Maruti car or helicopter, it’s all the same! Hut or palace both the same...”

* * *

About a month before Ram Navmi in 1983 Swamishri had a heart attack. Senior sadhus and devotees got together in a series of conclaves and wrote 12 guidelines for all devotees to read, understand and act by. It concerned Swamishri’s health, and asked that the devotees not badger Swamishri to visit their villages and homes. Although Swamishri’s condition had stabilized everyone desired that he remain in good health.

The points were read out to Swamishri before finally being printed in the Sanstha’s periodicals: *Swaminarayan Satsang Patrika*, *Swaminarayan Prakash*, *Swaminarayan Bliss* and *Premvati*. The tears in Swamishri’s eyes and the paling of his cheeks spoke for him. He was unhappy. How could he stop

padbramanis and touring. But Dr Swami was firm. He was backed by the others and so Swamishri remained quiet.

News of the heart attack had spread around the world. Devotees were shocked, and a little guilty. Who had not in some little way caused Swamishri to exert himself beyond the normal call of duty! He was their strength, and until now they had not thought to consider his strength. *Dbun* was sung in all centres. Devotees in their thousands offered extra prayers and took vows. Countless hundreds of get well wishes poured into Vadodara; many devotees also arrived. They loved Swamishri dearly. Without him life was unimaginable, impossible. He had become their soul, and that soul was now seriously ill. After the first several critical days Swamishri had been transferred to the summer bungalow owned by *satsangi* brothers Alarkbhai and Siddarthbhai Patel. The bungalow was surrounded by acres of open land and gardens. It was situated in the grounds of their family business, Aims Oxygen Ltd. It was ideal. Isolated, yet with modern hospital facilities nearby.

When Swamishri was told that hundreds of devotees were arriving at Aims for darshan he was upset on two accounts. Why were they taking so much trouble on his account. And secondly, he was not being allowed to meet them. Eventually the doctors advised Swamishri to exercise every morning and evening by taking a brisk walk. Swamishri was enthusiastic. It would enable him to leave the confined room and let him meet devotees. The attendants, however, were careful. Devotees were asked to sit on a lawn a little distant from Swamishri's path. While he walked they silently had darshan. Sometimes he walked right up to them and patted a few heads, greeting and blessing. To them he appeared dazzling and lovable, and by his presence gave them determination and courage. The

devotees treasured his glances, words and every gesture; he was increasing their love for Satsang and Maharaj.

Swamishri had already asked that a *sabha* be organized every evening. The devotees should not only have darshan, but should also benefit from spiritual discourses. He also began to attend these *sabhas*. There was no stopping him. Sadhus from different mandirs also began visiting Swamishri in rotas. They were allowed into his room and had darshan as shastras were read to him or whilst he was having meals.

From a forlorn and almost depressing atmosphere Swamishri had created a spiritual retreat. Whoever came was granted darshan and returned home comforted about Swamishri's wellbeing and their own recharged spirituality. The mood was light, almost as if the heart attack hadn't happened at all. Even in illness Swamishri was disseminating spiritual consciousness. He had grasped the mundane consciousness of countless disciples over the world and pulled them inwards towards him through illness. And truly, *satsangis* had become stronger, more attuned to the true purpose of life. They thought more often of Swamishri and Harikrishna Maharaj. It had dawned on them that Swamishri was not to be taken for granted. Until now he had pleased them, helping them as a mother helps her children, visiting them, sanctifying their property and lives. Now they were grown up. They were mature enough to understand the intricacies of spiritual living and its demands. The onus was on them to strive for *moksha*. In a very real sense their sadhana had only just begun.

From Aims Swamishri travelled to Ahmedabad for a stay of 37 days. He was manoeuvring himself into his old routine. Swamishri regularly attended the *shangar arti*. He would do his morning puja on stage under a pandal erected over the lawn to the left of the mandir. In the evening he would walk on the

stands at the police stadium on the edge of Subhash Bridge.

After blessing the nightly assembly and taking dinner he attended a special assembly for the sadhus. This would end at about eleven and Swamishri would then do *pradakshina* of the entire mandir 12 times. The doctor had ordered walking as exercise, so why not mix devotion with it?

It was evident that Swamishri thought his stay in Aims and Ahmedabad had been rest enough. He again began touring, not as hectic as before, but it was still very tiring. He would not listen to doctors, his attendants or the senior sadhus. For him, his life was in the hands of Shriji Maharaj. He regarded it as his extreme fortune that he had been granted this service. He would not allow himself to squander it wallowing in comfortable rooms, in mandirs where his routine was regulated. Swamishri knew that it was only because of their love and concern that the sadhus were trying to slow him down. He appreciated their worrying, but also told them to have faith in Shriji Maharaj. For God was the giver of all joy, strength, comfort and protection.

He gradually increased his travelling. In 1984 he embarked on a lengthy world tour that covered five continents, visiting the homes of hundreds of devotees and lecturing at least once a day to huge assemblies. On his return he toured Gujarat extensively. In 1985 despite a constant fever he toured the Kanam area, visiting 95 villages in 20 days, doing over 700 *padbramanis*.

He had torn the guidelines into tiny shreds. Seniors could not say anything. Doctors were ignored, and the attendants had resigned themselves to serve him as best as they could and when possible, protect him from overexertion.

This latest spate of touring matched parts of his 1977 touring, when he had visited the arid region of Sabarkantha in

midsummer, doing 87 villages in 27 days, and then in the Surat countryside doing 90 villages in 20 days.

Some sadhus commented, "Swami! In the summer, Mumbai would be better, it wouldn't be so hot there." Since the climate there was temperate, rest would be possible.

Swamishri's reply was unexpected. He logically explained his reasons for touring the villages in summer, "The villages are better in the summer. In the monsoon the villages are filled with mud, it would be inconvenient for the devotees."

* * *

In 1989 Swamishri was forced to postpone his touring around Himmatnagar and his attending the ground-breaking ceremony for a new mandir in Khedbrahma. He was weakened by diarrhoea, vomiting and fever. Swamishri was reluctant to return to Ahmedabad, but reluctantly had to bow to pressure from the doctors and his attendants.

In Boston he had said to his attendants, "Devotees take leave to make preparations and then if we don't go what great difficulties they face! Whatever is going to happen will happen, but we should make the devotees happy."

In Ahmedabad Dr Madhubhai Patel examined Swamishri's cardiogram. There was a slight variance from the normal. He advised, "Swamiji, do not work so hard. This time the cardiogram is different. It seems you have been touring extensively this winter."

Swamishri only smiled, not saying a word. When he sat down for lunch he remarked to Krishnavallabh Swami who was serving him, "The doctor checked me up today. The doctor said that I eat too much! Eat less!"

As after the heart attack senior sadhus and devotees again came together to discuss how they could protect Swamishri's health without upsetting him. The 97th birthday celebrations

of Yogiji Maharaj were to be held in Gondal. Thousands of devotees would be attending. The seniors decided to cancel the festival and convince Swamishri to go to Mumbai for treatment.

The minutes of the meeting were read out to Swamishri by Dr Swami. When he mentioned that the Gondal function would be cancelled, Swamishri, who until now had been quiet, spoke out, "Everything has been printed and finalized. What is the point in cancelling it all? I'm not going to Gondal to exert myself. The whole world bows down at the Akshar Deri, and prays for cures and protection, and now you're telling me not to go there! What kind of logic is this? When devotees fall ill they go to the Deri and I have to go elsewhere? Don't change anything! In fact you should also ask that I go to the Deri, you should pray there that I get better..." Swamishri was talking quickly in one breath. There was no stopping him from going to Gondal.

For further rest Swamishri was taken to Sarangpur. Dr Bhuva from Bhavnagar also had a look at the ECG. He spoke with Swamishri, clearly voicing his fears, "This shows lateral extension. This means that there is less blood getting to the heart. Slowly, this will result in damage to the heart and the heart will lose its ability to function. This is a very delicate stage. You should stop touring..."

Swamishri answered, "Wherever I go I can get to sleep easily. It's not that with changing beds I have difficulty in sleeping. I sleep at twelve and awake at six in the morning... and I have some rest in the afternoon as well. *Padbramanis* are at a minimum now, and so there is no exertion. From your point of view even if I leave my room I'm exerting... This is a human body and I am old, and so some things are bound to happen..." He blessed the *satsangi* doctor and smiled, dissolving his fears.

Later, Dr Samani, Dr Kiran Doshi, Dr Panchal and Dr Bhagubhai arrived from Mumbai. Dr Samani was serious, “Bapa! The heart is a muscle. It needs a good supply of blood, therefore God has given it more than one artery. Even if one is blocked it means that the heart receives less blood, and therefore this results,” he said, pointing to the ECG indicating lateral extension.

Swamishri listened quietly, smiling in response. He said nothing.

This confused Dr Samani who had also treated Yogiji Maharaj. He asked anxiously, “You are listening, aren’t you Bapa! Or is it, ‘you do your job and I’ll do mine?’” Swamishri’s smile only broadened. He had great respect for Dr Samani and did not want to debate the point.

His living was in harmony with his beliefs. He had once told his attendants, “God looks after my health. What can I look after? God has given me this body, and he will care for it as much as he wills.”

Shastriji Maharaj in similar conditions would say, “I am an ox who belongs to Akshar Purushottam.” In rural India some of the poor cannot afford oxen to help plough their fields. They therefore hire the animals from a neighbour, and make full use of them. Shastriji Maharaj was referring to the effort the ox had to put in, for his owner and for the hirer. Swamishri had seen both Shastriji Maharaj and Yogiji Maharaj tirelessly toil for the good of Satsang. He was not about to rest. He would follow in their footsteps. Swamishri was once again setting an example.

* * *

On 6 December 1973 it was *ekadashi*. Swamishri was in Vasad, he was fasting. By 8:30 after his morning puja he had begun *padbramanis*. After the previous night’s assembly, about 15 names had been listed. By three in the afternoon Swamishri

had visited 122 houses! Along with him were four sadhus. They were thirsty and exhausted.

Doctor Swami stated, "It was the first time Swamishri had done so many *padbramanis* whilst fasting on an *ekadasbi*."

When Swamishri arrived back at his accommodation he immediately sat down to answer correspondence. After a while he said. "I think I'll rest for a while. "The attendants were more worried than amazed. This was the first time Swamishri had even hinted that he was tired. Dr Swami checked his temperature. It had rocketed to 102°F.

He asked, "Has the fever only just started."

Swamishri answered, "From this morning I've felt feverish." His voice was low and reluctant, as if he didn't want to reveal any more.

He rested for about half an hour and then at 5:30 left for Anand and Vadodara, reaching Sundalपुरa at seven. He wrote some more letters despite the continued fever. The attendants asked that he break his fast and drink a little juice. He refused. They asked that he not attend the night *sabha*. Again he refused. After his blessings the *sabha* finished at 11:45. Swamishri returned to his room and sang the *cheshta*. By the time he lay down it was well past midnight.

He sometimes says in *katha*, "Once somebody asked an arrow shooting through the air, 'Why are you running?' The arrow replied, 'I've been pushed from behind.' Maharaj, Gunatitanand Swami, Shastriji Maharaj and Yogiji Maharaj have never sat back and relaxed. They have never thought of any relaxation or comfort. Look how much they have done for us. And what have we done for them? We should think about this...this load has come from Maharaj's time...to please him we should tolerate all difficulties and sincerely believe it to be devotion."

During the 1984 world tour, Paul Greene of the BBC had asked in London, “Don’t you feel tired travelling at this age.” Swamishri was sixty-four.

He replied, “The body has been given by God. The touring is God’s work, and so I do not feel tired.”

Ten years later in 1994, he was asked by a *satsangi* youth in Atlanta during a camp, “Don’t you ever get bored with all this work?”

Swamishri was quick to answer, “Bored of what? To do this have I come. If we do something because our mind says to do it, boredom results. But doing something because the Satpurnush has commanded entails no problems. If we sincerely desire to please God and his Sadhu then boredom never comes.”

* * *

Of all Swamishri’s overseas trips, the 1977 Satsang tour was the most arduous.

Swamishri spoke: “That tour was ‘*Na bhuto na bhavishyati*’ – ‘Never experienced before and never to be experienced again’. We travelled from New York to Los Angeles, one side of America to the other, by car... all day long there would be *padbramanis*... We even drove at night. Four youths would take turns in driving. When we eventually got to the accommodation and all the sadhus got together no one had the energy to even ask, ‘How are you?’ We’d collapse into our beds and it would be morning. It was totally exhausting, but the devotees were happy; we satisfied all their expectations. They were not disappointed.”

His first overseas tour as guru in 1974 was also gruelling. For most devotees it was the first time they would be having his darshan since the passing of Yogiji Maharaj in January 1971. As in India, they wanted to honour him in the most elegant

manner they could. The mandir in London had been refurbished and the smaller canvas *murtis* of Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj were being replaced by the larger *murtis* of Dham, Dhama and Mukta that had been rescued from Tororo, Uganda.

In 1972, Idi Amin had expelled the Indian community from Uganda. Fleeing with only the clothes they had on the Indians had left behind their fortunes, taking only shattered dreams. Amin's thug army slaughtered hundreds of Indians. One took it to be the grace of God if one survived. In its own way it was a mini Holocaust.

A large number of Indians had found safety in Britain. The British government and people spared no effort to rehabilitate the refugees. Some were *satsangis*. Swamishri had to spend countless hours in private sessions, consoling, directing and inspiring. The sudden influx of Swaminarayans from Uganda to Britain, especially London, meant an almost explosive growth of Satsang activities. Swamishri was comparable to a chief executive of a multinational company, only that he had to personally delve deeply into every department, sorting out even the most trivial of problems and squabbles.

He was also preaching twice a day, one hour on the Vachanamrut immediately after puja in the huge tent in the garden of 'Fourways', West 'Hampstead', where he was staying, and another half an hour or so during the evening *sabha* at 77 Elmore St, Islington, the disused church converted into a mandir by Yogiji Maharaj in 1970. The crowds at the mandir were huge. Even the basement would be packed. For the first time in Satsang, London Satsang Mandal introduced the use of close circuit televisions for spiritual purposes.

The kids would play football on the road outside, or outside the primary school on the corner. They liked Swamishri but didn't understand or speak much Gujarati. To them the *kathas*

were long and boring. They did however jostle their way into the hall at the end and wait in the queue for a pat on the head from Swamishri. 'Daily blessings' they called it. He always smiled at them and asked their names and how their studies were getting along. He even knew several kids very well.

Morning puja was more fun, because the sadhus sang kirtans and played the *tabla* and harmonium. Best of all was on Saturday and Sunday morning. Some devotees would buy a lot of fruit that would be neatly arranged around Swamishri as he did puja. At the end he would distribute the fruit, the kids were first. He would also gather up the roses and bright chrysanthemums in his puja and one by one throw them to devotees who caught them and kept them as sanctified mementos – *prasadi*. He always threw several to the children. Although children's activities were nonexistent, Swamishri had begun building up a steady friendship and bonds of trust with the youngsters.

It was the same situation in the USA. Swamishri performed the *murti-pratishtha* ceremony of the *murtis* of Shri Dham, Dhama and Mukta, Radha-Krishna Dev and Guru Parampara in the basement of a renovated house opposite K.C. Patel's home in Flushing, New York. *Padbramanis* were continuous. In Philadelphia he began *padbramanis* after lunch at four in the afternoon and they continued till four the next morning. He was to travel to Washington DC the next day and did not want to disappoint any devotees. In rare cases Swamishri did have to disappoint, as sometimes happened in India, where they would forget a village or home. In such an instance Swamishri would immediately write a letter asking forgiveness or even telephone the concerned devotee, promising that next time he was in the area he would visit.

By the end of the tour the Satsang in USA, UK and East

Africa had become an affectionate family. If they obeyed the Shikshapatri and worshipped Maharaj as he had shown, they would become stronger and more able to serve. But he knew he would have to return, to tend the Satsang garden that was now ready to bloom. Yes, he would return to help and guide, demonstrate and correct. It was his devotion to Maharaj. Yet at the same time he felt no compunctions about leaving. He had done his utmost, Maharaj would look after the rest.

* * *

Throughout Swamishri's touring his exceedingly sharp memory enables him to recall names, places and routes heard and seen many years previously.

Once, in 1977, Swamishri was being driven in London from Elmore St. to his accommodation at 4 West Rd, Holloway. To ensure that as many devotees as possible had the privilege of driving Swamishri, a list had been drawn up. This day the youth who was driving forgot the route. Swamishri calmly directed him.

Another time in 1988 he was being taken from the cattle camp in Bhavanpura to Bochasan. It was past ten at night and he wanted to visit Dayabhai Patel who was terminally ill in Limbasi village. He told Indravadan to take the car onto the road leading to Tarapur. Once in Limbasi, Indravadan became confused. It was ten-thirty and the streets were deserted. How would he find Dayabhai's house?

Reading Indravadan's mind Swamishri said, "Take the car as I direct." Then started a series of 'rights' and 'lefts.' Within a few minutes the car stood outside Dayabhai's door.

Once in Sarangpur, the sadhus and devotees lined the open circumambulatory passage eager for darshan as Swamishri circumambulated the Yagnapurush Smruti Mandir, the samadhi of Shastriji Maharaj. Swamishri was walking round

when he saw a very ordinary looking villager.

“Vitthal!” Swamishri recalled the man’s name and talked a while with him.

The sadhus asked who Vitthal was. “A potter,” replied Swamishri, “he served in the mandir here when I was *kothari*.”

Forty years had elapsed and Swamishri had still managed to remember a potter who had briefly served with him.

* * *

Nairobi, 23 September 1994.

After breakfast, Prakashbhai Brahmabhatt came to see Swamishri. He wished to take a photograph with Swamishri holding onto his hand. He said, “Bapa, hold on.”

“We’ve held on since the time of your forefathers,” Swamishri returned. “Look, you are Prakash. Your father is Navnitbhai. Navnitbhai is Purushottambhai’s son. Purushottambhai is Prahaladbhai’s son. Then Himmatsinh, and after Himmatsinh, Haribhai. Haribhai’s name is mentioned in the Bhaktachintamani. Since then I’ve held onto your hand!” Prakashbhai was amazed. Swamishri had recalled his entire lineage up to Haribhai who had associated with Bhagwan Swaminarayan.

In 1971, when Swamishri first became guru there were not more than one hundred *satsangi* families in England. Now there are several thousand. There are mandirs spread around the country. The traditional *shikharbaddh* mandir in London is constructed out of Bulgarian limestone and Italian marble. It has helped Hindus retain their culture and moral identity. Satsang centres have been established throughout Europe.

In 1991, the grand 31-day Cultural Festival of India was celebrated on 40 acres of green land in Edison, New Jersey. In all, 3200 volunteers from throughout North America served. Over one million visitors came to the festival which displayed

to Americans and young Indians the culture, beauty and spirituality of India.

Wherever Swamishri has travelled, he has inspired the creation of Satsang centres and mandirs.

Whilst his body was healthy, Swamishri never refused a devotee's invitation. He has visited the mud huts of *adivasis* to wean them from immoral habits.

8

“It’s Me, Pramukh Swami!”

*On the third day he said to Ramjibhai,
“You have worked for success in this world
and the spiritual world. Now,” pointing to
Harikrishna Maharaj, “it is time to focus
totally on him.”*

Sundalpura village. Swamishri was feeling uneasy on the morning of 5 February 1983. It was past seven in the morning and he had a jam-packed schedule ahead. Whilst bathing he made no mention of the tightness in his chest, nor gave any physical clue. He came out of the bathroom, and while he was wearing his *dbotiyu* he felt a terrible pressure on his heart and dizzy. He was made to lie down on a cot. A local ayurvedic doctor said that Swamishri has had a heart attack.

For several years Swamishri had travelled at a hectic pace, not caring for his health. It was the attendant’s experience that Swamishri never complained. He never mentioned the various aches, pains and fevers he suffered. And when asked about

difficulties he would deny them or just ignore the questioner.

Sundalpura was a small village. The best medicines the shanty kiosks sold were malarial cures and common cold relievers. It was imperative that Swamishri be rushed to a modern hospital in close by Vadodara. His car was readied. The attendant sadhus were fraught with worry. Never had they imagined such an emergency. Yogicharan Swami was in charge. Swiftly he organized Swamishri's care and journey.

Nandkishore Swami described: "The previous night all of us had retired late, so the next morning most of us awoke a little late. Swamishri himself was up at around 6:00 a.m. He held mine and Dharmacharan Swami's hand as we led him to the bathroom by the compound wall. While climbing the several steps to the platform he put a lot of weight on our hands. This was unusual. His eyes and body showed he was tired. He asked whether I had bathed or not. When I replied in the negative he said, 'One should wake up early every morning, even if you've had a late night you should be up by at least six, so you can join yourself in bhajan-bhakti and *seva*.'

"A little while later I was doing my puja when we heard that Swamishri had suffered a heart attack."

Swamishri reclined in the front seat of the Mercedes. The cars slowly moved off, as they turned onto the road the Mercedes stopped. Sadhus watching Swamishri leaving ran to him. Had something gone wrong? No. Swamishri had a message for Narendraprasad Swami. "Go to Anand in my place. I will not be able to go now; Dayabhai and the devotees will be disappointed..."

Swamishri has spent his entire life caring for devotees. His vision and heart encompass the world and yet he still finds time to meet the individual, catering to his spiritual and social needs.

* * *

The devotees sat close to the staircase on the sea-green slate flooring that carpeted the entire Bochasan assembly hall.

Bochasan was the first mandir built by Shastriji Maharaj. The three slim spires rise from a first floor sanctum. Shastriji Maharaj had created history by consecrating the metallic *murtis* of Akshar and Purushottam in the central shrine.

The village lies in the famous 'Charotarno Chowk – the centre of Charotar, a rich farming district of Gujarat. Then, as now, the villages were dominated by landowner Patels. They were wealthy and had no shortage of leisure. Shastriji Maharaj had gained many followers and Bochasan mandir provided a safe sanctuary from which Satsang could be preached.

And spread it did. Today every Punam over 7,000 people pilgrimage to Bochasan. Scores of villages worship Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj. When Swamishri is in Bochasan devotees from tens of miles around flock for darshan, association and blessings.

Swamishri descended the steps, followed by the several sadhus who were stationed in Bochasan, serving Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj and preaching in the villages.

With an excited rumble the devotees sprang up and surged forward to surround their guru. Swamishri slowly walked on patting as many bowed heads as he could, smiling and nodding as he recognized faces in the throng.

Only Manibhai remained sitting. He was blind and could hear the elated chatter but could do nothing until given a hand. He sat patiently in the same direction he had been seated in. Through the crowd Swamishri saw Manibhai and made his way to him. He lightly placed his hand on his head.

Manibhai tilted his head back, "Who is it?"

"It's me, Pramukh Swami!"

"Swami!" Manibhai gasped. He could say no more. Nor

was there a need to. He had not been forgotten.

Wherever Swamishri went – Mumbai, Ahmedabad, London, Chicago, Lisbon – he freely distributed divine bliss to all who came. Such joy is addictive. Crowds thirsted for his darshan again and again.

* * *

When Swamishri is ill or tired, attendants serving him attempt to stop the steady stream of devotees wanting to meet Swamishri personally. He rebuffs all such protection, and goes out of his way to discourse, listen and comfort. Devotees are his life and he supports them at all times, especially when dark clouds blacken their horizons.

Swamishri was being driven to Atladra, Vadodara. He planned to celebrate Vasant Panchami there. There was to be a short stop at Jitodiya. Ishwarbhai, a long standing devotee, was on his death bed. He knew he was breathing his last and had asked that Swamishri grant him darshan. He was not refused. Ishwarbhai was lying on a cot. Half a dozen family members stood up as Swamishri entered the room. A large wooden bench had been prepared for Swamishri. On it had been spread a sheet and cushions. Next to it was a chair that supported a *murti* of Shri Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj and the guru *parampara*. A *divo* steadily burned. Swamishri sat down. On either side sat Tyagvallabh Swami and Viveksagar Swami.

Swamishri leaned forward, stroking Ishwarbhai's chest in a circular motion, coming down to the stomach and legs. He said, "You have completed whatever had to be done. It was your wish so this Thakorji has arrived," Swamishri said, pointing to Harikrishna Maharaj. "This is Harikrishna Maharaj, Maharaj himself is granting you darshan. He will grant you eternal happiness." Taking water in a spoon Swamishri carefully placed several drops between Ishwarbhai's lips.

Ten days later as Swamishri was performing *pradakshina* in Shastriji Maharaj's room in Atladra a boil on the forefinger of his right hand burst. Swamishri said, "This boil has burst and yet why is there no news of Ishwarbhai's going to Dham?" The next day, sadhus arrived from Bochasan and told Swamishri that Ishwarbhai had passed away the previous day.

* * *

Rambhai of Mojidad was diagnosed with terminal cancer. When Swamishri was informed that Rambhai wished for darshan Swamishri decided to stay three days in Mojidad, in Rambhai's house. Once there, he daily spoke with Rambhai. Imparting spiritual instruction was Swamishri's service to Maharaj and Rambhai. He wanted to ensure that Rambhai harboured no lingering attachment to the world and material family.

Souls who enter God's service in Akshardham are crystal pure, devoid of *maya*. All materialistic delusion and attachment to ephemeral objects, both living and inert, is removed. Attachment to the physical body, subtle body and causal body (*sibul, sukshma, karan*) are destroyed. The soul realizes its true nature and enjoys the blissful presence of Bhagwan Purushottam within it. Bhagwan Purushottam grants the soul a spiritual body and himself, accompanied by Akshar and numerous released souls, takes the now released soul to Akshardham. There is no more need of birth and consequent death.

Swamishri's most important service to humanity is this. Teaching God consciousness and guiding souls to *moksha*. And this is what he was now doing at a personal level in Mojidad. On the third day he said to Ramjibhai, "You have worked for success in this world and the spiritual world. Now," pointing to Harikrishna Maharaj, "it is time to focus totally on him. After

Uttarayan Maharaj will take you to Akshardham.” Swamishri spread a saffron upper cloth he had worn for the past two months over Ramjibhai. He said, “From today you have taken saffron clothes. You are now free from this material world and all its responsibilities. Pass your time in bhajan, Maharaj will take you to Dham.” Swamishri took leave.

It was typical Swamishri. Being the receptacle of God’s grace he knew exactly how to instruct Ramjibhai. By gifting him his shoulder cloth he had led him to a unique renunciation.

Ramjibhai lost all interest in affairs of the world and family. As Swamishri had commanded, he focused all his senses on Maharaj. On the tenth day after Uttarayan he called his family together and asked that they chant the Swaminarayan *mahamantra*. He touched each part of his body with Swamishri’s shoulder cloth and then tied it loosely around his head. He chanted a little and then said, “Maharaj will now take me to Dham.”

He passed away later that morning.

The next day several villagers came forward and said that they had witnessed Maharaj and Swami appearing before Ramjibhai in divine bodies. Amongst the eye witnesses were Mukundbhai, Pitambar Mistry’s wife, and Ghanshyambhai’s young daughter.

* * *

Rajendra Ajmera was in the prime of youth. Happily married for two years he was suddenly struck down by a disease. From Kolkata he was taken to Mumbai. Doctors advised he be treated in the USA. This however brought no result. Sapped of strength his condition deteriorated until finally he was brought back to Kolkata, via Frankfurt, where the strain of the journey almost took its toll. Aku, as his family called him, had only one wish. He confided to his family that he wanted

to spend an hour with Swamishri, just talking. Relatives were confused. How could they mention it to Swamishri. He was 500 kilometres away in Gujarat.

They were unaware that even before Aku had arrived back in Kolkata Swamishri had planned a long pilgrimage to Uttarakhand with a group of 450 sadhus and devotees. Kolkata was on the route.

Swamishri landed in Kolkata from New Delhi on 16 September 1987. It was night. After the customary welcome he immediately said, "Aku is ill. Let us go to his house." All the way from Delhi to Kolkata Swamishri had been thinking of Aku.

Aku's uncle, Kishorebhai, though concerned about his nephew, saw that Swamishri was exhausted. So he suggested, "He is asleep right now and he also wants to speak with you at leisure. Let's meet him tomorrow morning." It was past eleven, and the other devotees also supported Kishorebhai. Swamishri reluctantly agreed.

That night Aku's wife told him of Swamishri's arrival. The news brought light to his face. She saw his lips silently moving in conversation. Ripples of joy and contentment passed over his pale face. At ten minutes past two in the morning Aku said, "I'm going to Akshardham."

Swamishri was informed of Aku's passing immediately on waking. Tears welled up. He was upset because he did not have the chance of a last meeting.

Aku was laid out on the floor in his house. Swamishri himself performed the final rites, applying a sandalwood *chandlo* on Aku's forehead and performing *arti*. Swamishri said, "He was very lucky. He passed away whilst engrossed in bhajan. I really did want to meet him, but it was not possible. It does not matter, physically we did not meet, but our souls did."

It was obvious to all present that Swamishri had in a spiritual sense spent a leisurely hour with Aku, just talking.

* * *

Swamishri also comforts those who are bereaved. Sometimes he is frank, but honest. A young *satsangi* telephoning from the USA was jubilant. His gushing words were almost incoherent. His wife was expecting! Swamishri had been instrumental in the setting up of the marriage. Not only that, the couple had been married at a mass marriage organized by the Sanstha. Swamishri had briefly officiated at the wedding. Several weeks later the *satsangi* phoned again. What should they name him? He was convinced it would be a boy. Swamishri suggested a name.

The next phone call from their home was from the young man's father, "Swamiji, a boy has been born. But he is unconscious and has breathing troubles. The doctors say that he can only live on a life support system!"

Replied Swamishri, "In two days time the boy's situation will improve and the life support systems will be removed. The body functions will then deteriorate further." Swamishri was clear. He was not throwing a tactful, lifesaving blessing. He knew the family well and that they were resilient. He had passed through joy and distress with them over the years.

"And the boy will die," continued Swami, holding the cordless phone tightly to his ear, as if he wanted to be as close as possible to the family. "The child's soul needed a final birth at the house of a *satsangi* so he could enter Akshardham. When the child dies he will attain liberation and his soul will travel to Akshardham."

Frankness is often the best solace, especially when the family is deeply entrenched in Satsang and takes a spiritual life very seriously. Swamishri is keenly sensitive to a person's needs

and wants. His spiritual compassion recognizes the pathetic human condition, and when the time arises he provides a bedrock anchor to which individuals, families and even whole communities confidently turn to. Attending to the dead and dying is in fact but a slender dimension of Swamishri's care for devotees.

* * *

Dr Yogin Dave had travelled from Mumbai to Vadodara on hearing that Swamishri was feeling unwell. His stay was to be short. He had to return to Mumbai. Swamishri asked him, "Is your return ticket confirmed?"

"No, Swami, I'll manage to get a ticket from the station. It's no problem."

Swamishri told an attendant, "Doctor is leaving this evening. Make sure he has a confirmed ticket."

That evening when Yogin asked leave, Swamishri happily told him his confirmed ticket had arrived. His concern was a natural act of parental love. Such was also the case when once in Ahmedabad Swamishri saw the old and feeble Narayanbhai waiting for him on the stairway that descended from Swamishri's rooms to the mandir courtyard. Narayanbhai was sitting down leaning against the black-coloured pipe railing. Swamishri stepped down and sat down next to him. They conversed for a while, Narayanbhai alternatively talking and listening. After a few minutes Swamishri turned to the attendants and signalled that he wanted to stand up. They helped him and Swamishri left, leaving behind a happy old man, content that he was loved.

There was a similar conversation in Dhari, Yogiji Maharaj's birthplace. Swamishri had left the assembly marquee to visit the toilet. Ever since his gall bladder had been removed in 1981 bowel movement had become sudden and demanded

almost instant attention. He wanted to return to the assembly as quickly as possible. When he came out of the bathroom a devotee was waiting. The devotee asked if Swamishri would listen to his problem and guide him. The bathroom was along a narrow, poorly illuminated alley. The toilet was close by, but the ventilation was poor. Looking around Swamishri saw a step. He sat down with the devotee in the dirt, and totally absorbed in the conversation gave a full fifteen minutes. The devotee left assured and confident of a solution. Swamishri entered the assembly, pleased that he had been able to help.

* * *

The last nine days had been a blizzard of activity for Swamishri. It was by Shriji Maharaj's grace that his 68-year-old body, ravaged by a steady procession of illnesses, could withstand the tremendous demands he was making of it. Apart from the daily discourses and granting audience to a multitude of devotees he was busy with meetings dealing with various Sanstha activities. Early morning on 7 April 1988 he would be beginning his 12th Satsang world tour. He would not be back for more than nine months, visiting Europe, North America, The Indies, East Africa, South Africa and then back to India. It was imperative he be able to provide final guidelines and decisions.

A drought was sweeping through the country. Hundreds of thousands of livestock were in danger. Entire areas had been evacuated. The monsoons had failed successively for three years. Swamishri had decided to expand the social wing of the Sanstha to set up special cattle camps and begin other necessary relief work. He had called leading sadhus to Mumbai, and was wholly involved, giving precise instructions.

Soon the time was 11:00 p.m. and then 11:30 p.m. Swamishri would have to wake up at 3:00 a.m. to get ready

before departing to the airport. Attendants had been hovering around him for some time, hoping he would notice and call it a day. Finally he did stand up, but on catching a thought asked for a letter pad. He wanted to write to Trigunbhai Bhatt, a lower middle class devotee. He was in critical condition because of total renal failure. Swamishri had often thought of visiting him, but his schedule had not allowed it. Tomorrow he would be flying. He wrote: “Param Bhakta, Trigunbhai. It was my wish to come and meet you but circumstances have prevented me from doing so... So please forgive me... Remember Maharaj and engage in devotion... All will turn out for the best.”

Shri Pandurang Athawale had invited Swamishri to ‘Tirthraj Milan’, a massive spiritual meet at Prayag, Allahabad, at the sacred confluence of the Ganga, Yamuna and the underground Saraswati rivers. Despite a large tumour embedded in his left thigh that needed operating, Swamishri accepted.

There was no Satsang centre in Allahabad, so Swamishri stayed at the Mahanirvan Akhada. Attendants had prepared tins of snacks in New Delhi and brought them along. It would be difficult to find food stuff suitable for Swamishri in Allahabad.

On *ekadashi* three men entered the Akhada. They were devotees who had joined a discount tour bus from their village. They had also come to the Tirthraj Milan. An added attraction was the Purna Kumbha Mela – a holy event recurring every several years when devotees take a sacred dip at Prayag in the holy confluence. The devotees had heard of Swamishri’s visit and had searched him out. They were eager for darshan.

As there was no rush of devotees queuing to see Swamishri, he spent his time catching up on correspondence, sometimes interrupted by a well-wisher or curious locals who wanted darshan of the ‘great Gujarati mahatma’.

The three devotees were led to Swamishri who welcomed them. They sat before him. Swamishri wanted to know almost everything about them – names, village, how they earned a living, why they had come. His questions coaxed out all the information creating a homely atmosphere. Soon Swamishri knew them very well.

“Where have you put up here and what do you eat?” He asked. The three looked at each other. This was a topic they didn’t want to discuss, but Swamishri had asked and they would be disrespectful not to answer. With more prodding they told a tale of deceit and irresponsibility. The tour operator had promised that he would be providing hot food on the bus. Many tour operators provided such a service. This one was a rogue and after only two or three days he had just refused and said, “No more food.” The pilgrims faced the devil’s alternative. Return home and miss Prayag or continue on, but hungry. Most had not brought much money with them. But they continued.

The devotees had packed snacks, but they only had enough for four days. Now they were living on roasted grams and puffed rice. As *satsangis* they could not eat food prepared in cafeterias on way side stalls. It was not pure and they could not offer it as *thal* to Maharaj. Swaminarayan devotees are required to offer everything to Maharaj as *thal* before themselves eating. Food so offered to the Lord becomes spiritual and is termed *prasad*.

Swamishri listened carefully. He was sitting on a mattress covered with a bare sheet; his back slightly arched as he leaned forward with his eyes flitting from one devotee to another. He was quiet, lost in thought. He asked an attendant to see what was left of the *faral* lunch. Only a little for Harikrishna Maharaj and Swamishri had been cooked. There was nothing left. The others were fasting.

The devotees stood and paid their respects to the other sadhus. They had no overly concern. Swamishri also stood up. He told a sadhu, "We've brought snacks with us from Delhi. Put a little aside for Thakorji and give the rest to these devotees. It will do until they get home. For ourselves we'll do something." The sadhu hesitated. What would they offer Swami if they gave everything away? But Swami had commanded and it would have to be done. The devotees were shocked and dismayed. Swamishri insisted they take the snacks.

* * *

In 1974, for the first time since Yogiji Maharaj's return to Akshardham, Swamishri was travelling abroad. During this tour, Swamishri was honoured on countless occasions; the assembly in London's Alexandra Palace being exceptionally grand. The six-storey hall was brimming, full to its 5,000 seating capacity. Swamishri was welcomed by a stately Scottish pipe-band, and of course, to the loud cheering and clapping of thousands of loving, loyal followers. Everyone present was greatly satisfied by the grandeur and grace of the whole event.

Back in India, Swamishri graced the unassuming and timid village of Rohishala. Swamishri spent the night in the small mud-house of a poor but loving devotee. Upon waking in the morning, Subhash Patel, a youth from London, remarked, "This village mud-house is a far cry from the grandeur of Alexandra Palace, isn't it?"

"Subhash!" replied Swamishri quickly, "A hundred Alexandra Palaces are nothing compared to this. Look at the affection of this devotee!"

* * *

In Vidyanagar, Swamishri was taking rest, as he had been feverish for three days or so. He also felt very weak, as in addition to the fever, he also had diarrhoea. A sadhu brought

Swamishri's meal to the room, but Swamishri just stared at it. The sadhu requested, "Bapa! Please accept a little food."

Swamishri replied, "Only if you perform something short of a miracle will I be able to eat... I don't feel like eating anything... My mouth says no." With these words Swamishri gently pushed the food aside. He picked up the letter pad that was on one side and started writing replies to the letters in it. His illness had stopped him from eating, but could not stop him from writing letters to his devotees.

During the early years of Swamishri's touring, after the passing of Yogiji Maharaj, he was greeted with honour in almost every town and village. He would be received on the outskirts of the village and a procession would be taken out through the village, sometimes grand, sometimes bare, depending on the means of the devotees. Swamishri would be asked to sit on a bullock cart or horse-pulled buggy, an open jeep or a tractor trolley.

Devotees would lead, others would follow. Dancing and singing, chanting and throwing handfuls of coloured powder into the air the procession would last anything from an hour upwards, at any time of the day. The devotees wanted Swamishri to sanctify the entire village, and cover every side street. The important element was Swamishri. He was guru and was to be welcomed with all the *éclat* they could muster. It was also a statement to the rest of the villagers. "Here is our guru. He is unmatched in spirituality. His darshan grants *moksba*." People would line the streets and smile or just look inquisitively on. Most would join their hands in respect.

Such a reception awaited Swamishri in a village of the Sabarkantha district of Gujarat. The Indian summer heat was blistering. It was mid-afternoon and the crowd of devotees waited in the open, their white dhotis, loose cotton pyjamas

and slip on shirts glaring brilliantly in the light. Everything was ready. Only Swamishri remained to arrive. When he did there was feverish activity, a lot of 'Jais' and a lot of chaos. Swamishri stepped out of the white ambassador car to be swamped by devotees eager to touch his feet and receive a pat of blessing.

They invited him to grace the procession. Dr Swami stepped forward and began to ask the devotees to postpone it till later when it would be cooler. He was worried about Swamishri's health. Swamishri overheard him and grabbing his hand put it on the head of the chief organizer. Dr Swami pulled his hand away. "See," Swamishri said, "how hot his head has become in the sun. If these people have tolerated this much heat we should also bear a little."

The procession began, with Swamishri gladly participating.

* * *

In the Shikshapatri Bhagwan Swaminarayan instructs, "My disciples shall give in donation one tenth of their income or food grains, if that be their agricultural income, in the service of God. Those with insufficient means shall donate one-twentieth of their income either in kind or money" (147).

Devotees diligently live by this command of Bhagwan Swaminarayan. Whatever they donate through tithing is used in the service of the deities, mandir maintenance, and a host of spiritual and social activities.

Donations for a new mandir were being promised by devotees. They approached Swamishri in turn. Swamishri would ask of their total income and financial responsibilities. Was there any debt, bank loan, daughter to be married, higher purchase payments, medical bills? Considering all aspects, the devotee and Swamishri would arrive at a practical figure. A particularly poor devotee also stood in line. His enthusiasm

could not be contained and he began to promise a large sum. Swamishri began to delve deeply into the man's responsibilities and confirmed what he had already suspected. There was no practical way in which the devotee standing before him could complete his donation. Responsibilities were many and income low. Swamishri said it was better that he offered the Lord a small amount. It would do, the rest he should use providing for his family and educating his children.

"I'll beg in the streets," the devotee insisted, "but I'll give the full amount."

Swamishri instinctively reached out to pat the devotee. He was moved, and pleased. The devotee's sincere devotional attitude was correct. His offering had already been accepted by Maharaj. Shriji Maharaj had asked for donations when building the Gadhada mandir. The Kathi devotees had responded amply, but it was only when the aged Dubli Bhatt, clothed in rags, had offered his insignificant 13 paise did Maharaj show extreme pleasure and proclaim that the mandir would now be completed. The Kathis were surprised. How much had the pauper Brahmin given? Maharaj answered, "His all! You have offered considerable sums, but still have other possessions. Dubli Bhatt has offered whatever he has!"

The poverty stricken devotee standing eagerly before Swamishri was a 'Dubli Bhatt'. He had offered his all, not caring for his future. It was a sign of total surrender to God. Swamishri did not want to hurt his feelings or block his devotional fervour. He talked in quiet tones with him, managing to convince him to significantly lower the offering.

* * *

Once, in Sarangpur, the mosquito problem had escalated. A sadhu exclaimed, "There are swarms upon swarms of mosquitoes coming here!"

Swamishri at once shot back, “What is happening to the devotees?” He instructed that mosquito nets be provided for them.

* * *

Once, during his phone call to Ahmedabad from America, Swamishri talked individually to several sadhus residing there and then began inquiring about the mandir staff. One by one he recalled their names and had them called to the phone, not forgetting the unkempt Raichand Rabari who looked after the mandir cowshed.

Whenever devotees are involved Swamishri is quick to ask, “Have they been given accommodation?”

“Do they have adequate bedding?”

“Did they get hot water this morning?”

“Is there anyone left for lunch?”

Only when answers are to his satisfaction does his heart rest.

When Swamishri found out that Ashokbhai of Vadodara disliked tomatoes mixed in his *dal*, he had separate *dal* made for him. He has had special chapatis made for Natubhai of Nairobi and had a dish full of *bhajiya* from Harikrishna Maharaj’s *thal* sent to Bhaikaka, who was partial to them. On long journeys when he is offered a snack, Swamishri does not eat by himself. He himself distributes handfuls of *prasad* to those in the car. But what of the driver? Going from one town to another, Swamishri once sat in the front seat with two little lunch containers in his lap. One full with *mendu vada*, a savoury deep fried doughnut, the other containing chutney.

Swamishri would break a *mendu vada* in half, dunk it in the chutney and put it in the mouth of the driver, Indravadan, taking care not to drop anything on his clothes.

* * *

To help relieve the miseries of others due to a drought

prevailing in Gujarat, Swamishri had started to wake up at night to pray for the devotees. In a departure from his usual custom of playing down such matters, he wrote in a letter from London: “Almost half of the season is over. It is only natural that everyone is anxious. During the last two days, I have been waking up at night and sitting in the Akshar Deri to do *dhun*... Maharaj, Swami, Yogi Bapa, Shastriji Maharaj will shower their grace. There is still time...”

Swamishri’s 72nd birthday was celebrated on 2 December 1992, the concluding day of the Yogiji Maharaj Centenary Celebrations. Dasharathbhai had come to the festival in Gandhinagar. Without anyone knowing, he took a seat far off in the massive assembly arena. But he could not escape Swamishri’s eyes. As Swamishri was ceremoniously being taken around the arena in an open jeep, he stopped the jeep and called Dasharathbhai near. Dasharathbhai was unbelieving. Swamishri had picked him out from a crowd of over 50,000! Swamishri garlanded him and talked for a minute or two. Dasharathbhai went back to his seat paralyzed with emotion. He could not help himself as a flood of tears flowed down his cheeks.

9

Panch Vartman

They saw that the attendant sadhus and devotees loved Swamishri beyond belief. Several elderly patients in the wards had no visitors, even relatives did not come. And here was an Indian monk who was attracting large numbers of well-wishers.

During the early stages of Swamishri's 1977 world tour he was in East Africa. In Tanzania he met President Julius Nyerere at the Presidential Palace. Devotees explained to the President the spiritual nature of Swamishri's tour of Tanzania. Yogiji Maharaj had established Satsang centres in Mwanza, Dar-es-Salaam and other cities when he had visited in 1955, 1960 and 1970. Swamishri was following in his footsteps. The message was not new. For peace and harmony in society spiritual consciousness must evolve. Swamishri never tires of saying, "If you're a Christian become a better Christian, if you're a Hindu become a true Hindu..." He was working towards

not religious conversion but towards a change of heart, life and values.

President Nyerere was impressed. He sensed the deep spirituality nurtured by Swamishri and saw the innocent faces of his disciples. Here was a God-conscious person in his very office!

“Swamishri,” he asked, “My mother is 90 years old and is very ill. Please grace her room and bless her.”

When the President’s request was translated for Swamishri he at once told the devotees, “Tell him that because of our vow we cannot go near women.”

The devotees hesitated. How could they say no to the President? What would he say? Seeing their reluctance Swamishri again said, this time a little sternly, “Just tell him what I said. Why are you scared? Tell him that Swami has blessed her and the blessings will reach her and she will get well!”

This was not the first time Swamishri had been asked to approach a woman and bless her. Until now he had not broken the vows given by Bhagwan Swaminarayan, and he was not about to break them now. A sadhu’s duty was to live by his vows; this would benefit his own spiritual progress and help him gain the trust of the society which he was serving. The devotees plucked up the courage and quickly explained the vows all Swaminarayan sadhus take when initiated. The President was astonished at the intensity of the vow, but was pleased that such souls did exist, those who would not be trapped by the allures of the material world. He was convinced that Swamishri’s blessings from a distance were as powerful as those from close up.

* * *

Throughout Bhagwan Swaminarayan’s teachings one

finds a common thread – the physical and spiritual disciplines to be followed by his sadhu disciples. The rules of conduct for sadhus are known as the *panch vartman*, the five codes of behaviour. They are *nirlobh* (devoid of greed), *nishkam* (devoid of sexual passion), *nisswad* (devoid of desire for tasty foods), *nissneh* (devoid of attachment to body and bodily relations), and *nirman* (devoid of ego).

He says to his sadhus in the Dharmamrut, “By gaining victory over the five sins one becomes victorious over all sins. Of this, there is no doubt. Greed, sexual passion and other shortcomings are born of wrongful living – *adharma*. All my sadhus should constantly offer devotion to God. For them, this is the highest dharma, but such devotion to God is interrupted by shortcomings. The five sins – shortcomings, are enemies of the soul and are extremely difficult to be conquered even by the learned” (4.97.4-8).

Of the *panch vartmans*, Shriji Maharaj teaches that *brahmacharya* or celibacy, is the most important. In Vachanamrut Loya 6, Bhagwan Swaminarayan says that by observing *brahmacharya* all other spiritual endeavours are encompassed. Swamishri’s life is in consonance with these teachings.

* * *

Whilst in Gadhada in 1986, as usual, Swamishri visited the Swaminarayan Mandir of the old school. Bhagwan Swaminarayan had stayed in Gadhada for 29 years, using it as a centre from where he could oversee and strengthen Satsang growth. He was committed to use Gadhada as a home of sorts because of the devotion of Dada Khachar, the young Kathi ruler of Gadhada and his two sisters. Their love for Maharaj was singular and total. The mandir had been built by Maharaj himself in Dada Khachar’s *darbar*. The mandir and *darbar*, containing Maharaj’s room – Akshar Ordi – had

become a place of pilgrimage to all Swaminarayan devotees the world over. Swamishri himself never tired of visiting the sacred rooms and spaces made holy by Shriji Maharaj so many years ago.

After darshan at the mandir Swamishri visited Kanubhai Khachar, a direct descendant of Dada Khachar, who lived a little beyond the mandir periphery. Swamishri gave *vartman* to two small children and blessed them. Taking further interest in them he asked one his name.

“Surubha,” a small voice answered, Swamishri was pleased. He patted the child’s head in blessing, praying that he grows to be as devoted as his ancestor, Dada Khachar. He asked the second child his name.

“Devkuba.”

Swamishri pulled his hand away and remained quiet. Devkuba was a girl! Devotees gently carried the girl away without causing a commotion. In the joy of the moment Kanubhai Khacher had forgotten the vow of complete celibacy accepted by Swaminarayan sadhus. Swamishri quietly blessed him and took leave. He had the car taken to Akshar Ghat – the stepped platform that led into the River Ghela – built below the hillock on which Shastriji Maharaj had built the marble mandir dedicated to Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj.

Swamishri bathed in the river as was required after accidentally touching a female. When he returned to the mandir it was early evening. He fasted the rest of the day, not even drinking plain water, or taking pills for his heart condition. He perfectly obeyed the commands of Maharaj given in the Dharmamrut for such accidental lapses. Though it was no fault of his, Swamishri was saddened. To him a lapse was a lapse, and he blamed himself for not having taken greater care during the *padbhamani*. He should have asked the

devotees beforehand to be more careful. He said not a word of rebuke to the devotee whose fault it had been.

* * *

In the first week of September 1980, when fall had only just begun, Dr Hutchinson diagnosed that Swamishri had cataracts in both eyes that required urgent surgery. From America, Swamishri had been due to fly to London, and from there to India, with short halts in Johannesburg and Nairobi. It was only when he put his feet into the wrong *mojdis* did the attendants discover that he had trouble seeing.

Dr Hutchinson was serious. "The cataracts in both eyes should immediately be surgically removed," he said, "or else there was a high risk of permanent eye damage."

Extensive discussions between sadhus and devotees in America, England and India began. Where should Swamishri be operated upon. Swamishri favoured India as it would ensure that in the hospital there would be no hindrance to his vow of celibacy. Besides, he could visit London and Africa on the way, and guide the approaching Bicentenary Celebrations of Bhagwan Swaminarayan in India, scheduled for March-April, 1981. But his real concern was celibacy.

London devotees urged him to fly to London where they would ensure the best treatment and male doctors and nurses. They saw this as another chance to serve their spiritual master. Devotees in America were equally persuasive. Swamishri didn't want to disappoint anyone. Finally, Viveksagar Swami in consultation with senior sadhus in India, decided to follow Dr Hutchinson's advice and the operation would be performed in Boston at Massachusetts General Hospital.

But first, Swamishri's celibate life and its special requirements would have to be guaranteed by the hospital. On Dr Hutchinson's request a fellow male doctor agreed to help

as a nurse. The anaesthetist would be Dr J.C. Patel, a devotee. Discussing the operation with Swamishri, Dr Hutchinson asked, "Would it be all right if a female nurse approached when you are unconscious?"

"Whether I'm unconscious or in deep sleep, a female nurse should not be near," Swamishri replied. He was prepared to cancel the operation and travel to India if appropriate arrangements were not possible. Dr Hutchinson, however, ensured that Swamishri's conditions were fulfilled and the operation was performed. Even during Swamishri's stay in hospital a male nurse was assigned.

The nurses wondered at it all. For them it was a novel experience. Usually patients demanded female nurses. They saw that the attendant sadhus and devotees loved Swamishri beyond belief. Several elderly patients in the wards had no visitors, even relatives did not come. And here was an Indian monk who was attracting large numbers of well-wishers. The women prayed for him in the parking lot! The nurses saw him as a kindly old gentleman, never complaining or demanding the doctor see him frequently.

The nurses cooperated fully. They grew to respect Swamishri for his vows. He was definitely not a misogynist! When Swamishri left the hospital he sent a message of thanks and gifts to all the nurses of the ward. Without exception they were delighted and returned the thanks wishing that all patients were so 'morally upright'.

The *satsangis* and sadhus were fully aware of Swamishri's absolute detachment from worldly pleasure. Living closely with him, day to day, it was the obvious conclusion. His life was not based on gratifying the senses; he lived for God, and within God. His senses were naturally recoiled, as a tortoise

pulls in its limbs, only in Swamishri's case it was not from fear. There was nothing that could lure him into the material world. His experience of God was total. By obeying the commands of Maharaj, Swamishri was teaching the most important lesson of a spiritual life. Vows of celibacy were not to be taken lightly. Without eight-fold celibacy, a sadhu's spiritual progress would be seriously jeopardized. It was comparable to trying to climb a hill of slippery mud.

Krishna had urged and even commanded Arjuna to fight in the Mahabharat war for the purpose of *lokasangraha* – an example of righteousness. Swamishri is also living a life of *lokasangraha*. Despite lengthy travelling abroad in places where the very notion of celibacy would be sacrilegious, Swamishri has never relaxed his vows.

There are of course critics who, whilst recognizing Swamishri's unique stature, say that in today's day and age there is no room for celibacy. The editor of the Gujarati weekly *Abhiyan* in an interview asked Swamishri, "Swamiji, have you ever considered making a change (in the vow of celibacy) in these modern times? Or do you strictly believe that the vow is appropriate?"

As with so many such questions asked around the world, Swamishri answered, "Whatever vows we have are correct. There is nothing that needs to be changed. Many people have talked to me of this and I'm not concerned that I may be called orthodox. We are determined to safeguard the vows given to us by Bhagwan Swaminarayan. People may like it or not. What we have is the truth and it will make itself apparent in the future."

Despite the chances of a bad press Swamishri defended the vow of celibacy in very clear words.

Renowned social worker and longtime admirer of the

Swaminarayan faith and Swamishri, Ishwarbhai Petlikar, once suggested that the sadhus be allowed a little freedom from their celibacy. The argument was that this would greatly bolster the spread of Satsang.

He was taken aback by Swamishri's answer, "We do not believe in the spread of Satsang at the cost of our vows. If Satsang spreads all is well and good. If it does not, we are not worried. And whether Satsang spreads or not is in Shriji Maharaj's hands... Many say that because of our strict adherence our movement will not remain for long. To these people I just say that we will run things as long as they will run, and then whatever the Lord wishes... we'll remain in one corner and worship God."

As a prominent leader in both the spiritual world and social services field Swamishri is often invited to honour various assemblies, openings and functions. Most usually, he politely turns down the invitation, even when it happens to fit into his schedule. He explained why to Mr. Raval when he came to invite Swamishri to a special assembly organized by the Sayaji Hospital in Vadodara to felicitate regular blood donors. Swamishri said, "It's not that we don't want to come to the function, but a vow given by Shriji Maharaj may not be safeguarded and to accommodate us you have to make many changes, and in doing that the female volunteers may feel hurt..."

Ignoring the prestige and honour that may be his at such gatherings Swamishri assiduously avoids them, as the changes required in seating arrangements may hurt the feelings of some women.

Once, when walking to a *padbramani* in Nadiad he was surrounded on both sides and behind by youths and devotees. Suddenly a woman walked across his path. Swamishri stopped

and looked at the ground, wanting to avoid touching her. The devotees were angry with the woman. They scolded her loudly. Swamishri could not tolerate this unfairness. He at once commanded that they apologize. She had been of no hindrance. She was unaware of the sadhus' vow of celibacy. The roads were public property. Swamishri said that it was he and the sadhus who had to take care. If a woman were directly on the path then it was for them to avoid her. If the case did arise where a woman had to be asked to step aside it should be done as a humble request.

As a pastoral counsellor Swamishri routinely has to counsel family problems. His advice shows the respect he has for women.

In one instance a mother had taken her grown up son to court. The son had come to Swamishri for guidance. How should he fight the case to win? Swamishri's guidance was unexpected, "It does not matter that she has taken you to court. Whatever happens, she is your mother. Things will calm down after a while. No matter what she says or does you should remain quiet and peaceful..."

He severely reprimanded a youth in Bochasan, "A mother should never be harassed. You should never quarrel with her. She has given you birth. It is your duty to serve her now in old age, it is devotion..."

A recently married young man had become an alcoholic. His tormented spouse had run away to her parent's home. The young man asked for blessings that his wife returns. Swamishri strongly rebuked him saying it was his drinking that had driven the girl away. How could he expect her to tolerate his abuse. The young man told Swamishri that he had not drunk a drop of alcohol for a month. This pleased Swamishri, but he

did not soften up and insisted that he give up drinking forever. Whilst he did feel concern for the youth's drinking problem he was more worried about the girl's future.

Swamishri said, "She will look at your behaviour for a month. If you don't drink she will return. Don't take the wrong road. She is not your slave. Married life means supporting one another..."

It is no small wonder that although Swamishri has no direct contact with women they constitute over fifty percent of Satsang membership. The Sanstha's women's centres and girls' forums that cater to youngsters and teens are witness to thriving women's activities. Swamishri has encouraged their growth in diverse fields. He repeatedly instructs devotee coordinators that whatever activities the male section undertakes, the women's forum should also consider, and where necessary be provided with all the amenities that would be required for easy functioning.

This has resulted in, amongst other things, *Premvati*, a bi-monthly magazine oriented towards the needs of *satsangi* women, seminars, volunteer corps, cultural dance and music programmes, home industries, health and child care guidance.

Due to Swamishri's interest and guidelines the women's chapter has become a vital part of the Sanstha. Women *satsangis* regularly organize their own activities, and have even become expert preachers, possessing a depth of understanding and knowledge to match and sometimes supersede that of their male counterparts.

At the same time he warns his sadhus, "Greatness lies not in being senior, or a good preacher or speaker or singer. What does Maharaj really want you to do? If we do that then we are great. Even if others press that you take liberties in your

vows of celibacy and poverty, don't! We do not want to spread Satsang at the cost of our dharma. By sticking your hand in a sack of coal it will surely become dirty. We may gift Satsang to lakhs of people, but if we give up our vows then we ourselves won't be worth a dime. Our reputation lies in not allowing any stain to darken the name of our Sampradaya, God and guru. One can never go to bed nestling up to a snake! If a hand or leg is severed there is no great problem, but if the head is severed it means certain death. If you want to attain Ekantik Dharma and *moksha*, then the renunciation of women and wealth is a must. No liberty can be tolerated. Let society say what it wants, you should remain firm. There should be no laxity..."

At times like this, when Swamishri is urging his disciples to climb to the highest Himalayan peaks of renunciation, he speaks at speed, the words escaping from him in long sentences broken only momentarily as he breathes. His eyes dart from face to face while his animated hands stress important points. But through it all he remains calm and composed.

Just as a surgeon cannot afford to be careless, Swamishri takes the spiritual responsibility of his disciples seriously. Speaking from his own spiritual realizations and that of his gurus' he confidently shows the correct way to God-realization. He is not prepared to cut corners or soften up his message as this would lead to degeneration and not to progress.

Householder devotees are also encouraged to abide to the dharma of celibacy specified for them by Bhagwan Swaminarayan. Devotees are considered celibate when they are faithful to their spouse. They are also expected to follow various rules outlined in the Shikshapatri, such as the temporary separation of the genders during worship in a mandir and discourses.

Swamishri recognizes that lapses, due to the human

condition in which body consciousness is predominant, are inevitable, some major and some minor. He is quick to forgive and gives practical hints and lessons, as well as atonement.

The Shikshapatri whilst describing the vows of a celibate also states that when the life of a woman is in danger a sadhu should protect her by talking to her and if necessary by even touching her. In conformance with this command there have been numerous incidents where sadhus have saved the lives of women. A sadhu once caught hold of a lady falling from a moving train and another saved a girl from drowning in Gondali river flowing behind the Akshar Mandir, Gondal.

The vow of celibacy is thus a spiritual tool, not the activity of misogynists or a form of self-punishment. It is voluntarily accepted as a cardinal exercise in spiritual living, provided of course, it is practised under the watchful eyes of a bonafide spiritual master.

Although Swamishri is an ideal sadhu who lives fully within the vows given by Bhagwan Swaminarayan he is not bound by them in a spiritual body – where there is no gender, no differentiation of class. Such a body is attained when a person is God-realized, and it is through such a body that the spiritual master may directly guide female devotees in the material world and grant them the bliss of darshan.

In Palitana lived an elderly widow, Jeekuba Rajguru, who had served 41 years in the special mandir for ladies. As she lay on her death bed thinking of Maharaj and Swamishri, Swamishri actually appeared to her in a spiritual body. He commanded her to read Swamini Vato. Her son sat close by. She asked him to read to her, and then as he read and she listened, she passed away, going to Akshardham.

The 80-year-old Queen Mother of Bilada State in Rajasthan, Rajkunvarbaa, was a devout woman. Being the daugh-

ter of Daji Bapu – a faithful devotee from the time of Shastriji Maharaj and Yogiji Maharaj – she was firmly wedded to Sat-sang from a young age. For many years it had been her ardent desire that Swamishri grace her State. To fulfil this wish, she often wrote to Swamishri requesting him to come to her palace. In her letters of appeal, one is reminded of Mirabai’s deep devotion to Bhagwan Krishna. Rajkunvarbaa wrote, “How much longer I’ll live, I cannot say. Please come here... I will arrange a grand procession on an elephant. Fulfil the wish of this poor lowly servant of servants... It was my father’s wish... I want an elephant to enter my hut. Bapa! I have no words for a prayer. Please bestow your grace and arrange a programme here so that I can make due preparations. Accept this hearty prayer from this meek servant. The water here is good; you will find it suitable. My son, daughter and son-in-law will also receive the benefit of your darshan... Bapa! It is this servant’s wish... come to call me when I breathe my last.”

Just as Bhagwan Swaminarayan was moved by the devotion of Kushalkunvarbaa of Dharampur, Swamishri was also touched by Rajkunvarbaa’s devotion. In 1990, he paid a visit to Bilada State. It was as if Swamishri had gone there just for this one devotee – in the way Maharaj went to Dharampur for one devotee.

Swamishri wrote to her son, Madhavsinh Diwan: “Her unflinching devotion surpasses even that of Mira’s. Therefore we have come to give her the darshan of Thakorji, the *murti* of the Lord which has been faithfully served by Pujya Yogi Bapa for 60 years... In that way, remembering Shastriji Maharaj and Yogiji Maharaj, advise her to have darshan of the Lord...to attach her mind to the Lord, so that Shastriji Maharaj and Yogiji Maharaj can call her to stay in the eternal service of Maharaj.”

In 1989, a female devotee from Holland, Jeannette Groenen, had booked a trek to the Himalayas with a group of Dutch friends. When she discovered that the group was going to carry meat for food, she tried to discourage the idea, but failed. Subsequently, she cancelled her trip and wrote her feelings to Swamishri: "Because you are such an important part of my mind, I have the feeling that you know already, everything about me. During the day and especially during my little 'puja' I do not know how, but in a way, I'm 'talking' with you. It feels like the deepest friendship of my life. All good things I know, all the flowers I see, I send to you, for Bhagwan Swaminarayan, via my mind and heart. Distance is no problem for feelings. I thank you for being in my mind..."

Concerning her trip to the Himalayas, she wrote: "In 1989, I tried to go to Nepal or India with a group, making a trek in the mountains. I had booked already but some weeks before departure, I heard that for dinner for the group, chicken would be killed. Immediately, I cancelled the whole trip and tried to stop my strong desire of going to India..."

Swamishri was very pleased to hear about her resolute practice of the codes of conduct as laid down by Bhagwan Swaminarayan in the Shikshapatri. Through a male devotee Swamishri conveyed his reply: "Ahmedabad, 9 March 1990. Physically, she may be far away but because she is staunch in her observance of the moral codes, she is near to God and his Sadhu... Although she could not visit the Himalayas, she has matched what the sages had attained in the Himalayas – great austerities. By being steadfast in her vow of non-violence and vegetarianism, she has performed a great spiritual feat. God will bless her with spiritual rewards equivalent to what the sages received."

* * *

In 1988 a reporter asked a very frank question, "Has your

mind ever been attracted to a woman?”

Swamishri was just as frank, “Not in the past, present and future!” Swamishri’s spiritual consciousness is not something that he has gained in this life, he is eternally fulfilled; he is Aksharbrahman, commanded by Bhagwan Swaminarayan to demonstrate and teach Ekantik Dharma, and lead souls to God-realization and Akshardham.

Outside observers are fond of saying, “Pramukh Swami has no pocket! He is the master of such a vast organization and yet he has no money or property to his name!”

This is because Swamishri depends totally on God. Once, when he was travelling from Mwanza to Dar-es-Salaam somebody spread a malicious rumour that he and the accompanying sadhus were smuggling diamonds. The airport authorities received Swamishri in Dar-es-Salaam cordially enough but then asked to check all the luggage. Swamishri had nothing to hide and so he readily agreed.

No matter where he travels his basic luggage consists of an ochre coloured *potlu*. This is the standard ‘bag’ of Swaminarayan sadhus – a large square cloth with its parallel corners sewn together. Dhotis, puja, and a couple of sacred books are placed in the middle and the *potlu* is knotted closed. There is no lock or chain.

The customs people placed the several *potluses* belonging to the group on a table and opened a knot on one to reveal the simple contents. The dhotis were just long pieces of cloth to them but the puja proved of more interest. They carefully opened the puja bag and found photographic images of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and the guru *parampara*, rosary, a sandalwood stick and a small plastic bottle containing red vermilion. There were no diamonds. One after the other all the baggage was meticulously searched.

An apologetic and amazed official said, “Swami, you definitely don’t have diamonds, but you don’t even have what other travellers always have – at least 75 shillings! This is the first time we have come across such passengers!” Swamishri’s vow of poverty is included in the *nirlobhi vartman*.

Describing the *nirlobhi vartman* that a sadhu should observe Shriji Maharaj says in his Shikshapatri, “Our ascetics shall never hoard money nor shall ask others to do so on their behalf. They shall never keep another’s money as deposit. They shall never use a costly cloth or one which is dyed or printed gaudily and shall never accept expensive shawls or other rich garments though offered willingly” (188-192). Swamishri has from the very beginning shunned wealth in all its forms.

A goldsmith devotee in Ahmedabad had made a silver tongue cleaner for Swamishri. The gesture was born out of affection and a desire that his spiritual master have the best that there was available. The tongue cleaner was given to an attendant who gave it to Swamishri the next morning to clean his tongue. He at once realized that it was made of silver. He looked up and flung it into a corner. Rebuking the sadhu he said, “After so many years of travelling with me you still don’t know! Can a sadhu own a silver tongue scraper?”

This was not the first time he had become upset because someone had tried to get him to use something which he felt was unsuitable for a sadhu who had taken a vow of poverty. He was ever careful lest the slightest lapse tarnish his vows.

In 1973 when a special pilgrimage train had been chartered an attendant asked a devotee in Rajkot to buy a satin sheet which he wanted to spread over Swamishri’s seat. The devotee enthusiastically went out into the bazaar and bought an expensive patterned sheet. He was happy. He had been given a

personal service of his guru, and felt convinced that Swamishri would be pleased. He took the sheet directly to Swamishri and said, "This sheet is for you!" Swamishri was startled.

"For me? I don't want anything. Don't bring anything on my name. If you really have brought it for me, take it back!"

The devotees and sadhus who had gathered around realized the extent to which Swamishri took his vow of poverty. He was not to be tempted by rich clothes and cushions. He shunned all that was elegant and showy. And was there a need for such a cover to sit on? Would it make his train journey more comfortable. He was fine as he was. They were on a pilgrimage. He was surrounded by sadhus and devotees and had Harikrishna Maharaj with him; what more comfort or riches could he ask for.

The satin sheet was quickly taken back by the devotee who had bought it. He was disappointed that Swamishri had not accepted his gift, but glad in heart that he had the privilege to associate with such a spiritual master who truly was *nirlobhi*. He was certain that he would find another opportunity to serve his guru, in a fashion that would please him, and earn his inner blessings.

Thousands of devotees had gathered in Mahuva, the birthplace of Bhagatji Maharaj, guru of Shastriji Maharaj, to celebrate his 150th birthday. The attendant sadhus thought that on such an occasion Swamishri should change his old robes for a new set. It was fitting for the event. As a sadhu he would not accept rich silken dhotis, but what was the harm in wearing a new cotton pair?

After much pleading and persuasion Swamishri was pressed into wearing a new dhoti and upper cloth – the *gataryu*. The freshly coloured cloth looked fine. After the festival the next day

he asked for the old dhoti and *gatarayu*. The attendant replied, "I've sent them to Sarangpur." Swamishri did not reply. After several days he went to Sarangpur and after his morning bath asked for his old dhoti. The attendant had offered him the new pair to wear. He asked for the old pair.

This time the attendant replied, "They've still to be properly washed and recoloured." The idea was to prolong giving Swamishri the old dhotis in the hope that he would just accept the new pair and forget about the old.

The next morning when the attendant held out the new dhoti for Swamishri to put on he took his stance saying, "I will wear only my old dhoti." He sat down on his bed resolutely. The old dhotis were quickly brought down.

He frequently explains to disciples that the Sanstha belongs to Harikrishna Maharaj, the mandirs, land, livestock, books, everything down to the last safety pin. Nothing should be used wastefully. The Sanstha subsists on donations offered to Harikrishna Maharaj by devotees, both rich and poor. How can such sacred wealth be squandered. A sadhu should have no desires of looking good or using the best for his own use.

When Swamishri uses a tissue to wipe the corners of his eyes he is careful to use only one piece of the double sheeted tissues that come ready packed. The used sheet he keeps so he can use it again. If he drops a wooden tooth pick he will search for it himself, but not take a new one.

Once, Arunkumar of London sent an expensive gold-coloured Papermate pen from London. When given to Swamishri to write with, he asked, "Where is the black pen we usually use?"

Dharmacharan Swami replied, "This time, this type of pen has been sent."

Swamishri immediately retorted, “We’ve no need for such a fancy pen. Tell Arunkumar not to send such pens in the future. Our black pen was more than good enough for our purposes.”

Following a change in his optical prescription, Swamishri was given new glasses with a gold-coloured frame. Instead of immediately refusing, Swamishri asked an intriguing question, “Do I see through the frame or through the lens?” Then expressing his own views, he remarked, “For us, the simpler the better.” He insisted on changing the frame back to its original one.

At all times he is prepared to donate or divert the Sanstha’s funds to projects which are beneficial to society, especially the poorer sections. When he was given a large sum of money after the Suvarna Tula Mahotsav in 1985 by the London Satsang Mandal, Swamishri donated it to Charotar Arogya Mandal which was building a medical school in Karamsad, Gujarat. In times of natural disaster and drought he has been the first to offer aid and setting in motion the Sanstha’s social services wing.

A wealthy person in Mumbai heard of the four cattle camps started by the Sanstha during the Gujarat drought in 1987. He approached Swamishri and said, “I’d like to donate Rs. 100,000 to the cattle camps run by you.”

Swamishri replied, “Give the money to cattle camps run by other organizations in Amreli, Gadhada, Botad and elsewhere.”

“No, Swamiji, I want to give it to your cattle camps. I have faith in them. Who knows what might happen to my money if I donate it anywhere else!”

But Swamishri persuaded him to send the money to other organizations. He was worried that if most donations were given to the Sanstha what would the other camps do? How would they feed and care for the cattle they had taken in?

* * *

Surat, 1984

Swamishri was dining. Before him on a squat wooden stand rested his *pattar* – a wooden bowl from which Swamishri eats – and a steel dish with small bowls containing various curried vegetables and soups that had been offered to Harikrishna Maharaj, and from which Swamishri was now eating as *prasad*. An attendant had as usual taken a little food from the plate and placed it in the *pattar*. A little distance away to one side sat Ashish, the young son of a devotee. He was carefully watching. There were many tasty foods before Swamishri. Which would he eat more he wondered. It was the natural innocent inquisitiveness of a child.

“Bapa, what do you like the most?” Ashish asked.

“Whatever is offered to Thakorji in the *thal*. What do you like?” Swamishri asked him.

“Everything.”

“Your uncle’s favourite is ice cream, what’s at the top of your list?” asked Swamishri again.

“Ghari!” Ashish was referring to a cake like sweet for which Surat is famous.

Swamishri’s *nisswadi vartman* has become almost legendary in Satsang. Over the years, even before Shastriji Maharaj initiated him as a sadhu he was seen as disinterested in enjoying tasty foods. This magnified when he accepted the *nisswadi vartman* at initiation into the sadhu-fold.

Since then he has eaten from only a *pattar*, the wooden bowl from which sadhus are commanded to eat by Bhagwan Swaminarayan, after adding a little water to the food and mixing it.

Bhagwan Swaminarayan explains in the Dharmamrut: “Even persons of the highest class eat and drink things that they should not; they also eat things which intoxicate and

blind the eater to dharma and *adharma*. All this is caused by a weakness for tasty food” (Nisswadi Vartman 10).

He then goes on to say: “Sins committed by humans are incited by anger, greed, arrogance, jealousy and other grave faults, which are all in turn incited by a weakness for tasty food” (Dharmamrut Nisswadi Vartman 13).

This was the trap Maharaj did not want his sadhus to fall into. As sadhus they would be honoured and respected, loved and served by devotees. This would mean that they would be offered many varieties of tasty food. To prevent the sadhus from being intoxicated by such foods he commanded that all food eaten by a sadhu should first be offered to God. It should then be served in a *pattar* and only after adding a little water and mixing the food was it to be eaten. This would not of course take away the taste but it would at least be a daily reminder that a true sadhu finds joy not in eating but in the constant remembrance of Shriji Maharaj. He also advised that the tongue could not be mastered by eating too little or too much, but only by a vigilant diet prepared and eaten within the further guidelines he had given.

As Swamishri was President of the Sanstha and also a very senior sadhu from the point of view of spiritual accomplishment, Yogiji Maharaj always ensured that a capable attendant sadhu was constantly with him, looking after his day to day needs, not that Swamishri had any special needs.

Dharmajivan Swami once made small *rotlis* for Swamishri. When he served one in his *pattar* Pramukh Swami asked,

“Where did you bring them from.”

“I made them myself.”

“For whom?”

“You, Swami.”

“Never ever cook anything different for me. Just serve me

whatever has been made in the general kitchens for everybody else.” Swamishri said, irritated that he had been singled out. It was unnecessary he explained. Food was to be eaten, to keep the body fit and healthy so that it could be used in serving Satsang activities and private devotion. An overweight body could be a hindrance to serving God.

In 1965, the centenary of Shastriji Maharaj was celebrated in Atladra. Pramukh Swami was involved in every department, and so busy that he usually arrived for lunch at two or three in the afternoon. At other times, lunch and dinner would be together late at night after eleven. Mota Swami was told of this by a junior sadhu.

“Naranda,” he said, Shastriji Maharaj had always called Pramukh Swami by the pet name ‘Naranda,’ Mota Swami who was very fond of Pramukh Swami also used it. “You should come for your meals on time. Because of your service you’d be tired and on top of that you come late and by that time everything is cold. Sometimes there is no *dal* or *shak* left for you to eat. What can you fill your stomach with?”

Swamishri was also fond of Mota Swami. He chuckled at his concern and said, “Until I complete the service I have shouldered I get no thoughts of eating.”

From then on at lunch time and dinner time Mota Swami himself would set out to find Swamishri and make sure he ate regularly. If he could not find him he would put a little food aside for him.

A devotee in Ahmedabad had bought a new home sized grinding mill. By coincidence Swamishri was also in Ahmedabad. The devotee thought it to be appropriate to first offer to Swamishri freshly ground flour from his little mill and then begin to use it for his family. He ground some millet and asked the sadhu attendants to prepare a *rotlo* – thick chapatti-

like bread – for Swamishri to eat. The sadhus obliged. They first offered the *rotlo* to Harikrishna Maharaj in the evening *thal* and then served Swamishri who ate a little piece.

As usual, after Swamishri finished his meal, the attendants sat down to eat. With the very first mouthful they discovered to their horror that the *rotlo* was full of tiny pieces of grit. They, together with the devotee had forgotten that such flour always results from the first use of a new mill.

Swamishri had not said a word.

In Japan, during the 1984 overseas satsang tour, an *ekadashi* was to be observed in Kobe. With the *faral* the attendants made *shiro*, and served a little to him when he sat down to eat. He ate the *shiro*. Thinking that he had liked the *shiro* the attendant served a little more. Swamishri ate that as well. The attendant was delighted, it wasn't every day that Swamishri accepted a sweet twice.

After Swamishri stood up, the attendants, along with the other sadhus, sat down. With the very first serving of *shiro* the tragic mistake was realized. The *shiro* was uneatably salty; instead of sugar, salt had been used.

Nirgun Swami, who had prepared the meal, said: "It was *ekadashi* and so I thought of making a little *shiro* for Thakorji and Swami. Because of the rapid travelling we'd change kitchens within cities and countries almost every two or three days. That morning I mistook the salt label for sugar. Everything was in Japanese! From outward appearances both had the same fine grains..."

Swamishri was having breakfast one morning in Sankari. Next to him sat Bhaktipriyadas Swami (Kothari Swami of Mumbai) also having breakfast. An attendant was tearing the *dhebra* into bite size pieces and serving Swamishri. Kothari

Swami had also been served *dhebra*. He at once warned, “The *dhebra* are bitter.” He didn’t want Swamishri to be served any more. Kothari Swami washed his mouth but the bitterness remained. Swamishri had quietly eaten whatever pieces of *dhebra* had been served to him. He offered no comment.

Almost the same thing happened during Swamishri’s 63rd birthday celebrations in Mehsana. Mahant Swami was having breakfast with Swamishri. He cautioned the attendants not to serve any more cucumber salad to Swamishri, who had already eaten some, as it was extremely bitter.

“Do you find anything bitter?” the attendant asked Swamishri.

“Yes.”

“Then why didn’t you say anything?”

He received no reply.

In 1985, Swamishri was in Gondal. Mahant Swami was dining with him. Krishnavallabh Swami was serving Swamishri *dhebras* made from *dudhi* (bottle gourd). Mahant Swami stopped the attendant from serving *dhebra* to Swamishri as they were extremely salty.

The attendant asked, “Swami, why didn’t you say anything?” He had already eaten a fair portion.

“I thought that when you sit down to eat you’d find out anyway,” he replied.

In Bahrain it was a similar story. Only when the sadhus themselves sat down to eat did they discover that the curried vegetables were saltless.

That evening the sadhus asked, “The afternoon vegetables had no salt, why didn’t you say anything?”

He smiled, and then answered, “You lunched, so you now know. Whatever has been offered to Thakorji should be eaten. What is to be said in that?”

After his 60th birthday celebrations in Vadodara, Swamishri was in Bhadra. The morning after *ekadasbi* he drank a full bowl of salty milk! It was only when Indravadan took a little *prasad* from the leftovers did anybody find out. The other sadhus had all drunk either buttermilk or lemonade to break their previous day's fast.

Brahmatirth Swami once recounted: "I had the privilege to serve Swamishri as his cook for nine months during his 1988 overseas satsang tour. I had to cook three meals every day, and personally serve him when he sat down for meals. Never once did he ask for a special dish or even give a clue if something was wrong with the food. After nine months of such close service I still don't know what he likes and what he doesn't like, although I quickly came to know the likes and dislikes of the other sadhus."

Mehsana, 1991

Swamishri had just sat down for lunch. The *thal* was brought and a little served in his *pattar*. The telephone rang. A devotee wanted to speak to him urgently. Swamishri accepted the telephone and began listening, occasionally quietly saying something. Several minutes later when the call ended, the food served had gone cold, and the *rotli* made without oil or ghee had become almost elastic and unchewable. Swamishri reached forward to pick a piece up and start eating. "No, not that *rotli*," Krishnavallabh Swami stopped him, "a hot one is coming."

Swamishri replied, "No, one should make do with whatever one has been given." He looked at the sadhus sitting on the floor in front of him and continued, "One should know how to make do with whatever one has at whatever time!" He wanted them to live as true sadhus, depending only on Maharaj and Swami, deriving spiritual bliss from association with them and

not from the sense pleasures.

His own indifference to eating does not in the slightest prevent him from serving and urging devotees and sadhus to eat *prasad* on special occasions. Swamishri relishes opportunities when he can serve a popular item. He does not give them food – he gives *prasad*.

In 1974 Swamishri unexpectedly visited the Nairobi mandir kitchen. The *shak*, *dal*, ladoos and other items were ready for serving to devotees who sat on the floor in horizontal lines, with dish and bowl in front of them. Swamishri smiled. This was a chance not to be missed. Picking up the large basin full of ladoos he went down the line serving and pressing the ecstatic devotees to eat as much as they could. This was *prasad* which had been sanctified by Harikrishna Maharaj himself.

Every year, whenever Swamishri is in India, he spends the *shradha tithi* of Shastriji Maharaj in Sarangpur. And every year *dudhpak* – sweet milk – is prepared for lunch. Swamishri himself, with jug in hand, walks up and down the long rows of waiting sadhus, filling and refilling their *pattars*. Sometimes, even as the sadhu touches the *pattar* to his lips Swamishri continues to pour the *dudhpak* into the *pattar*, forcing the sadhu to drink as quickly as possible lest his *pattar* overflows.

Many a time the sadhus, concerned for his health, request him not to serve. The jugs are heavy and serving over two hundred sadhus is not a light job even for a young man. But nothing can stop him. He revels in seeing those close to his heart enjoying *prasad*.

The Bhaktachintamani and other eye witness accounts of Bhagwan Swaminarayan's life written by his *paramhansas* describe many scenes where the Lord's overflowing love again and again urged them to eat as much as they could. He would himself walk amongst them sitting in lines under trees or

under Dada Khachar's roof, serving *dudhpak*, ladoos, *jalebi* and other rich sweets. In doing so he was teaching that the food served by God or the Satpurush was the highest form of *prasad*, and by willingly accepting it one was purifying the soul of greed for food. The taste enjoyed was derived not from the food but from the divinity of the server; his smiling face, loving eyes, persuading gestures would all be embedded in the mind of the beholder, erasing gathered memories of material sense pleasures enjoyed in the past.

This form of cleansing and granting of blissful memories has continued through the guru *parampara*. When the spiritual master chooses to serve, the disciple knows it to be a rare form of grace and drops all inhibitions to freely partake of the highest *prasad*.

Thus, Swamishri in serving sadhus and devotees is continuing Bhagwan Swaminarayan's tradition.

Once, Swamishri was in Gondal towards the end of the summer. A devotee approached his attendant. "Devcharan Swami! Please serve these mangoes to Swami," he requested. He gave Devcharan Swami a couple of mangoes. Devcharan Swami extracted the pulp and offered it to Thakorji at lunch time. That afternoon, as usual, about fifteen devotees also sat down to lunch with Swamishri, who ensured that each devotee was served according to his particular liking. A little while into the meal Devcharan Swami brought a bowl of mango pulp and placed it next to Swamishri's *pattar*. At once Swamishri instructed that he serve mango pulp to all the devotees.

"There is only enough for you," explained Devcharan Swami.

Lifting the bowl up, Swamishri pushed it underneath the wooden board. The sadhus and devotees urged him take the pulp, but he refused, warning the sadhus never to make the

same mistake again. "Serve me only that which has been prepared for everyone."

Swamishri was in Sarangpur. It was 12:45 in the afternoon, and still Swamishri had not come out of his room for lunch. His cook for many years, Krishnavallabh Swami, entered the room and called, "That's enough now. Come, don't you want to eat."

Swamishri was engrossed in reading a chapter of Bhaktachintamani in preparation for his discourse that evening. Still reading the Bhaktachintamani, Swamishri said, referring to the text, "Is not this eating!"

"Is that so," said Krishnavallabh Swami who has a very friendly and outspoken relationship with Swamishri. He was not being rude, just playful.

"Yes, these are talks concerning the Lord's divine life and teachings; they are much greater than eating."

The Satpurush lives in the world for the good of souls. He lives remaining within the confines of the laws that govern earthly existence, accepting the services of disciples and fulfilling their devotional desires. But, for such a Satpurush, worship is the only food worth partaking of.

* * *

The stewardesses had been asked to stand to the side when Swamishri and the other sadhus accompanying him boarded. The other passengers watched as a sadhu carrying Harikrishna Maharaj walked carefully down the aisle, followed by Swamishri. Other attendants were busy trying to make his seat as comfortable as possible in the economy class.

Air India had provided a special male steward for the flight to London. He would look after the group. The stewardesses and some women passengers were at first apprehensive, although they had immediately seen from the orange clothes

that Swamishri and the others were sadhus and were probably going on a preaching tour.

Once into the air Swamishri began writing correspondence. No one knew or bothered to inquire into what he was doing, although it was obvious that he was the guru. They didn't know that anxious hearts, both young and old, were waiting for him in London, or that he had inspired the Cultural Festival of India, the first international festival of its kind and that he would within a few days open it to the public on the grounds of Alexandra Palace. Finishing his correspondence, he sat patiently, absorbed in private reverie with the Lord. He took his rosary in hand and began to chant.

Outside customs and immigration, he was greeted by a sea of joyous faces who didn't seem to tire of shouting, "Pramukh Swami Maharajni Jai." Many devotees paid obeisance by prostrating, others touched his feet. Swamishri smiled. He was back in London. These devotees had been nurtured by Yogiji Maharaj. In 1970 there had been only a handful of devotees. But now things were different. Now, in 1985, due to Maharaj's grace Satsang in London had grown to such an extent that the devotees had organized the month-long CFI. It was almost unbelievable.

A waiting Rolls Royce whisked him to Swaminarayan Complex, the mandir facilities in Neasden on Meadow Garth, off the four lane North Circular Road. Four thousand devotees welcomed him 'home'. The deep-rooted Satsang in London and the unshakeable faith of the devotees had created a spiritual atmosphere not different from a large centre in India such as Ahmedabad or Mumbai, and in some aspects more intense.

CFI was an outstanding success. The month-long festival maintained and run by a thousand volunteers daily attracted

thousands of visitors. The long winding road that snaked up to the lush parks used for the festival at Alexandra Palace was usually jam-packed. Radio reports had to warn potential visitors of the long delays. Unseasonal heavy showers could not dampen the enthusiasm and sincerity of the volunteers. Every morning, Swamishri himself would perform his daily puja in their presence under a giant marquee. And in the evenings he would always be present at the cultural assembly.

The biggest event was the Suvarna Tula Mahotsav. In scope and planning it had grown to a colossal size. Eventually, the Queens Park Rangers football stadium had been booked for Saturday 20 July. On that day twenty thousand devotees and friends watched as Swamishri was felicitated. The original intention had been to weigh him against gold. Swamishri had said no and refused to even discuss the point. He felt that being a sadhu it did not befit him to accept such honour. Finally he agreed to be weighed against sugar crystals. The sugar would then be weighed against gold. But, before all this, Swamishri insisted that Harikrishna Maharaj be weighed against gold.

The ceremony stretched into the evening. As Swamishri sat on one cushioned seat of the deep red velveteen scales, he held Harikrishna Maharaj in his lap. His right hand turning the rosary, lost in his own intimate relationship with Maharaj. Euphoric excitement and devotion rippled in continuous waves across the stadium.

At the end of the ceremony, Swamishri was asked to address the packed stadium. He stood up, feeling awkward and out of place on the huge red carpet stage with the exquisitely decorated backdrop that had been skilfully prepared by Bengali craftsmen. He began, "First, I bow down to Parabrahman, the source of all incarnations, Purushottam Narayan Bhagwan Swaminarayan." His voice was choked and trembled. "Because

it is he who has given me this body. I then bow to guru Shastriji Maharaj and guru Yogiji Maharaj who accepted me and whose blessings I have received. It is because of their compassion and blessings that I am standing before you. If it were not for their grace I would not be here... they gave me the chance to serve... it was beyond my capabilities, but they gave me the strength, due to which I have been able to serve..."

He continued on similar lines for several more sentences and then at length expanded on the Upanishadic tale of how the devas, having won a war against the demons were inflated by ego. God in the form of a divine being asked that they move a dry leaf on the ground. Agni deva, the fire-god, Vayu deva, the wind-god and others tried but to no avail. Later they realized that the divine being was God, and that they had only been able to win the war because God had given them the ability to. Swamishri emphasized upon the all-doership of God. Without God's wish nobody can disturb even a dry leaf he said. Maharaj is the master of the universe and it is his will that prevails. Throughout his 30 minutes he negated his own achievements, giving all fame and tribute to his spiritual masters and Bhagwan Swaminarayan. The gathered devotees experienced Swamishri's humility.

That same night at Swamishri's accommodation the tremendous excitement and joy of the day's function had not waned in the least. There was constant chatter and untiring repetition describing the proceedings, crowds and jubilation. Most devotees and sadhus outside Swamishri's room did not pay much attention as a balding middle-aged man asked to speak with Swamishri confidentially. He was admitted into the room. Swamishri was seated on a sofa writing replies to correspondence that had piled up.

The man was furious with Swamishri. He began to

complain and soon worked himself into a blind fury. His language was foul and abusive, threatening and filled with spite. An attendant sadhu attempted to have him removed from Swamishri's presence. Swamishri stopped him and bore the torrent for a full 30 minutes. He was quiet and offered no resistance or argument.

Exhausted and spent, the man finally left the room.

Swamishri instructed a sadhu, "Serve this man dinner, make sure he doesn't leave hungry." He resumed writing letters.

In the Bhagavad Gita, Bhagwan Krishna describes such a balanced state of mind as *sthitapragna* – one who remains mentally stable in the face of insult and honour, unhappiness and joy, victory and defeat. Such a one is a bonafide Satpurush (2.55-72).

That very evening Swamishri had been felicitated by the Hindu population of England, and only a few hours later he was insulted. Swamishri's response to both was one of calm detachment, experiencing neither exhilaration nor depressive anger.

Vishnubhai of Chicago described his experience in a letter to Swamishri: "My shop is in such an area that if one remains off guard for even a short while, there is a high risk of theft. The neighbourhood is notorious for its high crime rate. After closing my shop on Friday evening, I inadvertently left the key in the lock! On Saturday and Sunday the shop remains closed...so naturally I did not think about the key."

When Vishnubhai searched for the key on Monday morning, he realized what must have happened. Expecting the worst, he headed straight for the shop. The key was still in the door! He entered the shop but his worst fears were unfounded. Everything was exactly as he had left it on Friday

evening! His letter continued: “When I returned to the shop on Monday, a regular customer of mine remarked, ‘On Friday night, I was walking past here and saw a person in saffron clothes guarding your shop. But on that day, I’d been drinking and therefore passed it off as a figment of my imagination. I returned the following day and to my surprise, I saw the same watchman present.’

“A woman also came and told me that she had spotted a saffron-clothed security guard watching over my shop. I showed her a photograph of you that I keep in the shop. On seeing it, she remarked, ‘Yes...he is the one...he also had a rosary in his hand as he has in the photo.’

“Truly, if you hadn’t come to my protection, my shop most certainly would have been looted and left in disarray.”

Swamishri’s reply to the letter included the statement: “...Who are we to do anything? Shriji Maharaj is the real protector... He is the all-doer...”

Gandhinagar, December 1992

During the Yogiji Maharaj Centennial Celebrations, L.K. Advani, leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party, came to Swamishri. He asked inquisitively, “You have a unique organization here. I asked the people who is behind this grand festival and they told me it is the volunteers. I meet the volunteers, and they say it is really the sadhus’ management. The sadhus all say we have done nothing, it is all Pramukh Swami Maharaj’s inspiration. But who really...”

Swamishri finished off the sequence for him. “In fact, it’s all God’s doing.”

L.K. Advani was baffled. Never before had he seen such fabulous work with no one squabbling for the credit.

After the Himalayan Yatra with 450 sadhus and devotees

Swamishri received an angry letter from a Mr. Parmar who lived in Romford, London. He accused Swamishri of being selfish and inconsiderate of other pilgrims. He wrote that because of the large group his own family had experienced many difficulties finding accommodation. Their dates had exactly matched the group's schedule. He said his family was extremely unhappy. "You shouldn't have come with such a big group... We came to visit the holy places...but as your schedule clashed with ours, we couldn't find any decent accommodation... You spoilt our holiday and made our family miserable."

Two months prior to the *yatra* Swamishri had sent Ishwarcharan Swami to all the sites to be visited, looking at rooms and making arrangements. It had not been an instant pilgrimage, embarked upon on the spur of the moment. The planning had been meticulous. Swamishri was in no way to be blamed. It was sheer coincidence.

In an apologetic answer Swamishri wrote back, "Sorry for the inconvenience that we may have caused... It was not our intention to cause you distress. If you had told us while you were there, we would most certainly have arranged facilities for you and your family to stay. Please accept our apologies..."

A man from Ahmedabad had been wondering through the Sarangpur mandir complex for two days. He wanted to meet Swamishri, but was new and didn't know how. When he finally did he fell at his feet and burst into loud sobbing. Swamishri remained seated, stroking the distressed man's head. When he gained a little composure he began confessing, "I have spited you dreadfully, sinned so much. I have sworn at you behind your back. I called you a cunning businessman. I did all this without any experience or knowing who you were. My friends tried to make me see the truth, but I cursed even them."

“In 1985 in Swaminarayan Nagar (Bicentenary of Gunatitanand Swami) I leased a stall. My friends had hung your photo on a wall. I threw it on the ground outside and crushed it under my shoes. In the Nagar I smoked on purpose...”

As the man spoke Swamishri continued to stroke his head. After a while he became quiet. Swamishri then said, “Now that you’ve accepted Satsang everything will be forgiven. You have taken shelter of God; he will do good for you...”

Early one morning in Ahmedabad as Swamishri was taking his daily walk, two ascetics of another organization insisted on seeing him. Swamishri had not bathed as yet, but he agreed all the same. He recognized the two as the ones who had led a vicious propaganda campaign against the Sanstha several years previously. Swamishri did not say a word. They wanted funding for a project. Without a trace of enmity Swamishri agreed and gave the necessary instructions to his attendants. He refused to be intimidated by incidents that had happened in the past. He believed in letting bygones be bygones, and that a sadhu should not harbour grudges or grievances.

A non-*satsangi* was once incensed with Swamishri for no apparent reason. During a meeting he threatened, “I’ll have you thrown into jail!”

Without the least anger or excitement Swamishri replied, “We’ll worship the Lord there.”

A religious organization run by Anand Ma had organized a ‘Sayam Saptah’, a week long seminar that was attended by various Mahants, Mahamandaleshwars and senior religious leaders of other movements. As the function was held in Gondal, they also decided to visit the Akshar Mandir.

Swamishri had not been notified of their visit and as he was leaving the mandir the leaders arrived. He at once returned to his room whilst sadhus in a small hall quickly arranged a

number of mattresses for seating. Swamishri hurriedly went for a bath while the religious leaders and their attendant disciples crowded into the hall and took their places. Viveksagar Swami sat on the floor talking with the leaders. After a while Swamishri entered.

Along with their gurus the disciples had also sat on the mattresses, which were now full. So Swamishri sat on the floor with Viveksagar Swami. The leaders had never met Swamishri before.

Mahamandleshwar Brahmanandji asked Viveksagar Swami, “Where is Pramukh Swami Maharaj?” They were in a hurry to leave.

Viveksagar Swami, pointing to Swamishri sitting next to him on the floor, said, “Here he is.”

The leaders were stunned. The spiritual master of thousands was sitting on the floor in his own mandir! They quickly made room on the mattresses for him. Swamishri was unperturbed. He was perfectly happy where he was. The leaders were all gurus in their own organizations and had large followings. They deserved every respect that he could offer them. He seemed to forget that he himself was a guru and deserved the highest respect and reverence.

The Acharya of a national movement with roots dating back several centuries was on a visit to Ahmedabad. Swamishri was also in Ahmedabad at the mandir in Shahibaug. Senior devotees of the Acharya and Swamishri thought it fit that both religious leaders meet. An assembly was organized in the mandir for early evening. Swamishri directed that two seats of the same quality and size be prepared on the stage.

When the assembly began Swamishri took his place. The Acharya arrived a little late. As soon as Swamishri saw his car and the Acharya step out Swamishri came off his seat and

hurried to the leader. He stooped low in obeisance and respect.

The Acharya, tall in height and strong in body, remained erect, lifting his right palm in blessing!

Swamishri's devotees and sadhus who had crowded around were astonished. The Acharya was blessing Swamishri who himself remained unfazed. In the assembly Swamishri performed worship of the Acharya by applying sandalwood paste on his toe. Again the Acharya gave no courtesy response.

Later that evening the sadhus were discussing the event. Many devotees and outsiders had felt insulted by the Acharya. If he was a leader, so was Swamishri. And it was a matter of decorum that one spiritual leader accorded respect to another. The Acharya had behaved in a manner that was rude and insulting. It did not suit his position in society.

A young sadhu brought the discussion to Swamishri, "Swami, he didn't bow even a little. Why should we have to call such people to our mandir." The sadhu meant to say that it was not worth bowing down to such leaders.

"Do we lessen our own greatness by bowing to other people," asked Swamishri. "We should always remain a humble servant." His answer was sharp. It arrested all further talk of the Acharya. Swamishri was unaffected by his rudeness and claims to seniority. He discouraged any criticism.

Swamishri was visiting Mumbai for the first time after Yogiji Maharaj's passing away to Akshardham. The local Satsang *mandal* had been overjoyed when the news was announced. Leading devotees and sadhus immediately conferred and decided to stage a grand welcome. Akshar Bhavan, as Yogiji Maharaj had named the three-storey mandir block, stood on the traffic circle that served Dadar Railway Station – a busy junction that handles many thousands of commuters daily.

The building was meticulously cleaned and decorated, and the stationmaster had agreed to let a band onto the platform.

On the morning of Swamishri's arrival hundreds of devotees had crowded past the ticket collector to line the section of platform where the first class wagon would come to a halt. Garlands were ready and a noisy chit chat hovered in the air. Most devotees frequently turned to stare down the tracks hoping to be the first to spot the approaching train.

It arrived on schedule. The band loudly struck up a popular tune whilst devotees anxiously scanned the windows and already open doors for the giveaway saffron that would signal Swamishri's presence. The train screeched to a halt, porters vied with one another to carry luggage.

The first class carriage had nearly emptied and still there was no sign of Swamishri. A sudden shout and a rush forward pointed to him. He had alighted at the far end of the train from a third class wagon. In one hand he grasped his *pattar* bag and under his armpit he carried his customary pillow. The attendants trailed behind him bringing his *potlu* and other luggage.

Later in the mandir someone commented that Swamishri should always travel first class. He was the spiritual master and deserved the best that the devotees could offer. The attendants agreed. They said that they had insisted on first class tickets being bought but Swamishri had questioned the need for such extravagance. He had said that until now he had always travelled by third class and there was no need to change that. The important thing was to get to the destination, not the level of comfort you travelled in.

Swamishri's 59th birthday was celebrated in Rajkot. There had been a massive marquee and kitchen. The procession

through Rajkot had been tremendous and filled with a riot of colours and decorations. The next day Swamishri had been invited to grace the palace of the former ruler of Rajkot, Manoharsinh Jadeja. Malviya Sheth had given his Impala car in Swamishri's service.

Returning from the *padbramani* the car stalled on Bhupendrasinh Road. They were out of petrol. The driver was on the point of panic. He had made a drastic mistake by not filling up before the trip. Now his distinguished passenger was stranded. "Swamiji, please remain seated I'll get some petrol, I'll be back quickly..."

Swamishri was in a hurry. He wanted to pay homage at Krishnaji Ada's shrine on the banks of river Aji. And from there he wanted to get to Bhadra – Gunatitnagar.

He said, "Don't you worry. We'll go by rickshaw to another *padbramani*. You meet us there after filling up with petrol."

"But Swami," the driver countered. "Your travelling by rickshaw will look bad. If you just wait a little then..."

Swamishri was already climbing out of the car. He stopped a passing rickshaw and with an attendant told the driver where to take them. Bhanubhai Gadhia was waiting at the shrine. He was astounded to see Swamishri step out of a rickshaw. Paying obeisance he said, "Bapa, if you had told me I would have picked you up by car."

He was greeted with a smile. "First pay the driver the fare due..." He then said, "We make do with whatever vehicle is available..."

Only the day before Bhanubhai had celebrated his guru's birthday with thousands of other devotees. They had been part of the grand procession through the streets of Rajkot, and now he was witness to him travelling by common rickshaw. He himself felt humbled in the presence of such a master.

Heathrow Airport, London, 1982

Dadubhai Patel had come right up to the plane to greet Swamishri in his Rolls Royce. With Dadubhai chauffeuring, Swamishri sat in the passenger seat. Three sadhus and C.M. Patel took their places in the back. There was no room now for the guide that had come with Dadubhai. The question arose of how to find a way out of such a busy airport without someone who was familiar with the roads. Dadubhai presented the problem to Swamishri, and politely asked him to sit on the gearbox. Without delay, Swamishri moved over and called in the guide to sit in his seat and give directions. The Rolls Royce had come to welcome Swamishri, but he was sitting on the gearbox, while a navigator sat in his place!

Bob Kaplan, Member of Parliament, Canada, and once the Solicitor General, had been for several years impressed with Swamishri's work in Canada, especially Toronto. He knew of the Satsang activities and Swamishri's notable success with the youth. He arranged for Swamishri to visit Parliament where he would be honoured by the MPs sitting in session.

As Swamishri sat in the VIP gallery, Speaker John Fraser interrupted the proceedings to ask the MPs to look toward the VIP gallery. Swamishri was introduced. The Speaker asked, "Swamishri, please stand up." One hundred twenty-five members of Parliament were watching, TV cameras were sending the scene into countless homes. Swamishri remained seated. He told the attendant sadhu holding Harikrishna Maharaj to stand up and let Parliament have the Lord's darshan first. It was he who ought to be honoured. After all, he himself was just a servant of Harikrishna Maharaj. After a few seconds, Swamishri stood up, palms joined together, head slightly bowed in humble greeting.

In a similar ceremony at the Home of Commons in London Swamishri had again insisted that Harikrishna Maharaj be first held up to accept whatever honour the British Parliament desired to bestow.

Prior to returning to India from his extensive 1988 overseas satsang tour Swamishri wrote to Kothari Swami in Mumbai: “Very important... To you, the sadhus, the devotees and youths... When we return to Mumbai, please spend no money on a public reception... This is my earnest request to you all. Celebrate the Uttarayan festival with devotional hymns and spiritual talks, but please ensure that no needless expenses are incurred... If you truly want to please me then bear this in mind. Otherwise you may do as you wish... Don’t spend unnecessarily on flowers or garlands either... The simpler you make it the happier I will be.”

He had rightly intuited that the Mumbai Satsang Mandal would plan a grand ‘welcome back’ after a long eight months away from India. It was correct that disciples should love the spiritual master above all else, and serve and honour him in the best way possible. He would have done the same for Yogiji Maharaj and Shastriji Maharaj, yet for himself he felt no need for such extravagance.

Talks of celebrating Swamishri’s Amrut Mahotsav, his 75th birthday, had been gaining momentum for quite a while. The centenary of Yogiji Maharaj to be held in 1992 had been planned to be celebrated in Gandhinagar. In Bochasan, Bhagvatcharan Swami and Janmangal Swami said to Swamishri, “It does not matter if you don’t celebrate Yogi Centenary here in Kheda District, but your Amrut Mahotsav will have to be held here.”

From the very beginning Swamishri had opposed the entire concept. He gave no response and went for a bath, after which he became feverish. He said to the two sadhus, “See, you just mentioned the Amrut Mahotsav and I’m now running a temperature, what will happen when the festival is celebrated?”

The public assembly at the Gujarati Samaj Hall on Goodman Road in Singapore had been more than satisfactory. This was Swamishri’s first tour east of India (1984). Shastriji Maharaj had established the Sanstha, solidly laying the foundations. Yogiji Maharaj had taken Satsang to Africa and Britain. Swamishri was now expanding it to include other countries. Satsang was becoming global. There were no really staunch devotees, but several families had been in contact through relatives in India. The large Gujarati population in Singapore was thirsting for a taste of traditional spirituality. Swamishri was only too happy to provide. Everybody had been impressed by Viveksagar Swami’s lecture on the need for retaining a cultural and spiritual life. Swamishri’s own simple lecture had revealed his simplicity and deep spiritual experience. Other spiritual leaders and speakers from India had visited Singapore, but to the packed audience these Swaminarayan sadhus were different. Their clothes were simple, unstitched pieces of saffron-coloured cloth. They observed *brahmacharya* and did not even touch money, let alone carry a wallet or possess a bank account. Images of the Lord and gurus were prominently placed on stage. Yes, this was true spirituality, honest and sincere. At the end of the assembly Swamishri gave *vartman* to many new devotees, explaining the basic concepts of a *satsangi* family’s life.

The drive back through the city to the accommodation was hampered by traffic. Swamishri’s car was the first to arrive. The others had got stuck in the traffic. Yogicharan Swami

quickly ran to call the elevator. In the meantime Swamishri waited patiently, standing by the car. From the boot a sadhu was struggling to lift out the heavy harmonium. In one hand he was burdened by the *tabla* in a canvas bag. Swamishri saw this. He walked behind the car.

“Here, let me hold it from one side.” He bent down and lifted the harmonium even as the sadhu was saying no. Luckily, the driver arrived and took the harmonium. He could not help wondering what type of spiritual master he had been driving. He had never seen such humility before.

Somprakash Swami was in Swamishri’s personal service during the tour. In the front room of Kantibhai Kothari’s house in Hong Kong, Swamishri had been quietly watching his attendant scurrying from here to there in search of something. He was searching for a cushion to make a seat for Swamishri to sit on during lunch. Finally he had prepared the seat and invited Swamishri to sit down. Another sadhu served. After lunch Swamishri said to Somprakash Swami, “When we are in somebody’s house if you can’t find a seat don’t worry. There’s no need to rush others around just for a seat. I’ll sit on the floor and dine. Haven’t I eaten in this manner my whole life until now!”

The Akshardham project had from the very beginning been very close to his heart. In 1986 he sent Mahant Swami, Ishwarcharan Swami and some other sadhus on a visit to thirteen countries around the world. He wanted them to visit exhibitions, museums and cultural shows and learn the many different ways in which the Akshardham exhibition could be set up. When the team returned from the tour they went to Bochasan to have Swamishri’s darshan and give a report of their travels. Swamishri had been waiting for them. When he was told that they had entered the mandir and were coming to see him he

could contain himself no longer. He stood up and walked into the corridor. He saw the sadhus walking quickly towards his room. At that he began prostrating, fully stretching onto the floor. He was overwhelmed. Before he could do more Ishwar-charan Swami ran up and held him. Swamishri bear hugged them, one after the other. They had been on a gruelling six months long tour in their endeavour to make Akshardham unique. Akshardham was a huge mandir and cultural complex to Bhagwan Swaminarayan, the Lord Supreme. He felt reverence for these sadhus who were working so hard to create the finest. Swamishri was oblivious to the fact that he was the inspiring force, guiding the designing and building, step by step, creating a monument he deemed worthy of Shriji Maharaj.

In 1989 the foundations of a new mandir in Mehsana were being dug. Youth volunteers had strung out in a human chain and were quickly passing along large metal basins of earth to be dumped a little distance away.

Swamishri was walking to the assembly. By his mere presence and glances those around him felt their devotion increasing. He saw the vigorous enthusiasm of the youths and could not resist the temptation. He joined the line and to the surprise of all began passing basins. After he had delivered over 30 the sadhus and devotees asked him to stop. Why should he have to perform such service when they were there?

Shyamji was host to Swamishri's stay in Antwerp, in 1984. Once, when Yogicharan Swami came out of the toilet Swamishri had some mud ready for him to wash his hands with. There was nothing Yogicharan Swami could do but except his spiritual master serving him.

Before falling asleep one night in Bahrain he said, "Now I cannot do any *seva*. It used to be so enjoyable. When I

was in Shastriji Maharaj's service I also served the devotees, fetching hot water for them in the morning, making sure they got tea..."

After Swamishri's 1980 cataract operations and the 1983 heart attack his health had always wavered between fragile, good and not so good. His unremitting tours to the villages and the constant flow of devotees wanting personal meetings were telling. Senior disciples were now desperately racking their brains trying to find ways in which they could lessen his burden. A sadhu once suggested, albeit in desperation, "Bapa! Do as the Pope does. Stand in a balcony and wave to the people." He was saying that he could grant darshan and bless devotees periodically. It would let him rest.

He replied, "I cannot do that. My circumstances aren't the same as the Pope's. I'm a servant."

Perhaps it is because of this conviction of his that when asked by a sadhu in Sarangpur, "What do you like to become?" he answered, "I like to become a servant."

In Gondal he was doing *katha*, explaining the greatness and benefits of Satsang. He defined Satsang as, "Joining one's hands in humility before the spiritual master and obeying him implicitly."

Krishna Pandya was sitting in the front line. Being close to Swamishri for many years, he would often speak freely with him. Swamishri would take the opportunity to joke at Pandya's expense.

On this occasion Pandya said, "I can join my hands in humility."

Swamishri shot back, "But the second clause you find difficult, yes? The Satpurush may command something and your mind becomes 'except'!" He had wanted to say the English word 'upset', but pronounced it 'except'.

He was trying again when a little boy interrupted him and said, “Upset!”

Swamishri said again, “See here, this boy spoke correctly.” He then said to the boy, “You know whilst I do not know. I have not studied as far as you have and so I wouldn’t know things like this.” He was pleased that the boy had shown a good grasp of English, and was not the least troubled that he had been corrected by him.

Yogi, barely seven years old, was speaking whilst Swamishri was having breakfast in the ‘White House’, the whitewashed house in the New York mandir compound. As the boy spoke Swamishri listened. All of a sudden, remembering something, he began to talk in a low voice to the sadhu sitting next to him. Yogi stopped talking, and sat down. He was upset.

“Why did you become upset and sit down,” Swamishri asked when his conversation finished.

“I was speaking, but nobody was listening, they all keep talking.”

“Sorry,” said Swami, “I made a mistake.” The apology was spontaneous and natural. He then asked Yogi to stand up and begin again, pleasing the little devotee no end, encouraging him to speak in the mandir and in the assemblies.

Sadhus and devotees who knew Swamishri as a teenager and watched him over the years earn the divine pleasure and grace of first Shastriji Maharaj and then Yogiji Maharaj say that the virtue of humility, without expectation of honour or fame, had been born to him. They recount instances such as the time when at a devotee’s house in Mumbai, he himself spread sheets over mattresses.

Kishorbhai Dave narrated: “In 1971 I had bought an

apartment in Parle. As yet the building had not been completed fully. I asked Swamishri to grace the apartment, so we could immediately move in when it was ready. Electricity and water connections had not been given so we had to take everything from our old house. Swamishri arrived on time, but we had not finished preparations. The mattresses had been laid but the top sheets were left. I was confused. I ran around a little frantically trying to do everything at once. But Swamishri himself began laying the sheets on the bare mattresses. I was so embarrassed...

In Gondal he sat down to make *rotlis* for devotees and in Kashi he sat down to fry *puris*. He also seen cleaned toilets after the Jal Jhilani Festival in Sarangpur. Pragat Bhagat still remembers the time when his finger had an abscess and so Swamishri washed his dhotis for him.

Houston, 1988

Pravinbhai asked, "In the assemblies these sadhus praise you in your presence. And yet we experience you to be without the slightest ego. How can you remain like this?"

Swamishri was taken aback. The question had been asked, and an answer had to be given. He was unassuming and spoke slowly, "Whatever happens is due to God's grace. It is only when you feel that 'I am doing it all' that ego comes."

"When does this thought, 'Whatever happens is due to God's grace,' come to you?" Pravin questioned.

"It never leaves me," Swamishri replied humbly.

* * *

Although Swamishri was present in the satsang assembly the mood was sombre. The first floor hall of the Mumbai mandir was packed, with hundreds of other devotees crowded onto the ground, second and third floors where they watched

a tearful farewell on close circuit television. The next morning he would be boarding an Air India flight to London.

The Mumbai mandir had been the materializing of a dream for the Mumbai devotees. Yogiji Maharaj had bought a small three-storey building in Dadar, just across from the railway station. It had been cramped but served the purpose of providing a spiritual sanctuary for the vast Mumbai metropolis. The building was drab to say the least. The first floor had at first been bought, followed by the other two. Yogiji Maharaj placed over 60 sadhus there for Sanskrit studies and Satsang activities. This was a boon to Mumbai. The young ascetics were educated and devoted. They had associated for several years with Yogiji Maharaj as undergraduates and now they were eager to share with others whatever they had gained spiritually. Step by step Satsang increased from several families to hundreds. Thirty-five years ago Dadar had been a remote suburb, distant to most devotees. Many had at first questioned Yogiji Maharaj's move. Why not purchase a building or land near the city or closer to where *satsangis* lived. But Dadar had proved ideal beyond all questions. Today it is a main part of the city. Thousands of people use the railway station each day. Major roads feed Dadar and bus routes are plentiful.

After Yogiji Maharaj, Swamishri also gave great impetus to Satsang. The Dadar mandir soon became too small to cater to Satsang needs. A larger, better designed mandir was crucial for further expansion.

After much effort, buildings adjoining the mandir were bought and plans for a grand stone mandir proposed. Swamishri was only too happy. The main mandir and adjoining halls, kitchens, libraries, studios, etc. would be built in phases. Swamishri selected Rajasthani pink stone as the primary building material for the mandir.

The mandir had been built, but was already cramped. He was given the microphone after the garlands. Down to the youngest child the devotees watched in bated silence, not daring to take their eyes off him lest he somehow disappear. Swamishri could sense and see the sadness on the faces before him. Dressed in his saffron dhoti, he watched the devotees in his kindly, fatherly way.

He said, “The joy and distress of coming and going are the questions of a spiritually ignorant person. If one is God conscious there is no material happiness nor material distress. There is no India and there is no abroad.”

The devotee should constantly crave the immediate presence of God and the spiritual master. Such desire was the fruit of spiritual love. But as Krishna taught the *gopis*, it was more important to remember the Lord constantly in one’s heart, mind and soul.

When God conscious, the soul continually experiences the nearness of God and the spiritual master. Although physically the disciple may be many thousands of miles distant, in the reality of spiritual experience he is before the Divine, enjoying spiritual bliss. This is what Swamishri was teaching during his farewell. He wanted everyone to achieve continual God consciousness, the highest of all spiritual states. In such a state they would always be together. There was no separation, no matter what the circumstances.

As a bonafide spiritual master Swamishri was teaching his disciples true spiritual life. His message was undiluted, and yet not bitter to taste. He always expressed genuine affection for those around him. Everyone was certain he loved them, both sadhus and devotees, perhaps more than they could comprehend, and yet he remained unattached. His love was not material. He saw their efforts to earn Maharaj’s pleasure,

and their constant battles against *maya* in their bid to attain God consciousness. This was cause enough for them to earn his love. In their spiritual struggle he was confident of their ultimate victory. It was really all very simple. He loved them because they loved Maharaj.

When he returned from the tour on 12 January 1989, he said, "It's as if we had never gone abroad!"

Swamishri had once told a devotee, "A sadhu should have no attachment to his birthplace. We want to worship God, and that can be done everywhere. After once renouncing the family, if we still harbour love for them then what have we renounced?"

He encourages his sadhus to develop such *nissneh*, "The soul has no family and caste. If after renouncing your family you retain affection for them you become bound. The Sanstha is the effect. Satpurush is the cause. Be tied only to the Satpurush and God. There is nothing worth wallowing in this material world."

Swamishri never talks about his family. At their very mention he stops all conversation. He has never returned to his birthplace, Chansad. The only information about his childhood is what has been learned from his mother, Diwaliben, and sisters. When he was informed that his father, Motibhai, had passed away he immediately bathed, as specified in the Dharmamrut. When Diwaliben passed away he did similarly.

He himself is very reluctant to talk about his life before becoming a sadhu and even afterwards. For the benefit and joy of disciples he at times does reveal fragments of his past.

In Bochasan the sadhus once asked, "When you left home did you feel any unhappiness?"

"No," he replied. "It was not that I was forced to leave home."

This detachment from his family was evident from a young age. As a youngster he was affectionate and obedient, and revered his parents. He gave full respect to his brothers and sisters and was always cordial and friendly with other relatives. But his heart he had given to Shastriji Maharaj. He could not love anyone to the degree that he adored his guru.

Involved in spiritual life from the start, his daily visits to the mandir, association with Shastriji Maharaj, the sadhus and the devotional atmosphere of his home had strengthened his spirituality.

Bhagwan Swaminarayan teaches in Vachanamrut Gadhada I 44, “The *jiva* has a misconception in that it does not believe itself to be the *jivātmā*, i.e. distinct from the body; instead, it believes itself to be the body. To illustrate how the body clings to the *jivātmā*, consider a person who wears a *dagli* after having it sewn by a tailor. That person then begins to believe, ‘The tailor is my father and the tailor’s wife is my mother.’ Such a person would be considered a fool. In the same manner, the *jivātmā* is given a *dagli* in the form of this body, which is born sometimes to a Brahmin couple; sometimes to a low-caste couple; or in any of the 8.4 million life forms. Therefore, a person who believes the body to be his true self and believes the parents of that body to be his own parents is called a fool.”

As a child Swamishri had evidently understood this. The sadhus who had asked the questions had also left home. They knew it was not easy. They had experienced the pangs of separation from mother and father, each to a greater or lesser degree. They had renounced and were *tyagis*, but Swamishri, they realized, was the model *tyagi*. He lived within the commands of Shriji Maharaj, “Be at all times detached from worldly ties of love.”

His message to devotees is the same. Although their ashram

dharma instructs devotees to live with their family and serve it responsibly, attachment should only be reserved for God and the Satpurush. Sitting on the lawns under the high-rise hotel at Niagara Swamishri wrote to the London Yuvak Mandal. He had just seen Niagara Falls, one of the wonders of the world:

There are countless wonders in life. But there is no wonder that can equal Maharaj, Swami and Yogi Bapa. After seeing them nothing else remains to be seen...

Carlos Vegas had heard of Swamishri from a friend. He was interested enough to visit Swamishri in Los Angeles. He sat a little distance away from Swamishri who was busy. When he finally had the chance to speak to him, Carlos said, "This is the first time I'm experiencing tranquility, and this, only in your presence. I have a house, car, money, I have everything..."

Before he could finish Swamishri spoke, "I have God." He seemed to be speaking from a world that was his own. His voice carried conviction that came from experience. He continued, "I have no money, I have God, and in that comes everything."

10

God First

“God cannot be seen like that. You have to keep faith in the words of the spiritual master and exert yourself spiritually. I can see God within my guru. Is there anything more to be said?”

God may come before us in any form he pleases to!”

As with every month, ever since he had become a sadhu, Swamishri in keeping with tradition was having his head shaved on the 13th day of the bright half of the month. Devotees and sadhus often sought things which he had used and thus made sacred. In particular, they asked for a few strands of his shaved hair. They wanted a little something that would remind them of their spiritual master. Although sometimes they managed to get a piece of an old dhoti or a *datan* stick – when he had all his natural teeth – discarded by him, there were very few who could boast of having a little hair. He never gave it and positively discouraged even the desire. He would trust no one

and himself threw the shaved hair into the toilet and flushed it. Swamishri held a similar attitude to his finger and toe nails. When trimmed he himself would throw them away.

Pragat Bhagat, an attendant for many years, had never managed to get a little of Swamishri's hair. That morning he made plans, but Swamishri realized his intentions and made sure he didn't get any. Always able to freely speak with Swamishri, Pragat Bhagat said, "I have hair from Yogiji Maharaj's tuft; so what is the need for your hair? Even if you make an offer I wouldn't accept!" He was joking.

Swamishri replied, "Yogiji Maharaj's sacred hair is worth millions of rupees."

"If I gave you the hair would you give me a million rupees?" asked the attendant.

"What need do I have of Yogiji Maharaj's hair, I have Yogiji Maharaj himself!"

The sadhus listening to this dialogue were jolted. Pragat Bhagat was silenced. Yes, they reasoned, Swamishri possessed Yogiji Maharaj. The sadhus had for years seen his life and actions from close quarters. It was not an empty boast but a spiritual reality. He had spared no effort in his devotions, he was spiritually realized and continually experienced the total presence of guru and God. He never transgressed their wishes.

In 1994 a teenager in London asked, "In the midst of so much activity how do you remain so fresh."

Swamishri quietly answered, "Whatever I do, I do because I have been so commanded. The responsibilities are not my burden but God's. Whilst serving I constantly remember the *murti* of Maharaj and Swami."

The teenager had not expected such a revealing answer. Swamishri did not often speak in such a manner. His words provided an insight into his spiritual consciousness. He was

teaching the ideal method of serving Maharaj and Satsang. Remain within his commands, forget not the divine image and believe Maharaj to be the all-doer, this would help to remain humble. It was when the 'I' and 'My' arose that tensions started and one forgot God and the spiritual master.

A devotee in Bochasan innocently asked, "Swami Bapa, all day long you patiently meet devotees and listen to their tales of unhappiness and problems. When do you do bhakti?"

Swamishri was amused. He laughed and answered. "I perform bhakti continuously, without a break. Every moment I think of Maharaj and Swami, and along with that I also serve society in this manner. I have come to distance the distress of those who are unhappy."

The devotee had a shallow concept of devotion as being limited to attending *arti* or doing puja or turning the rosary. He learnt that the highest devotion was an unbroken communion with God, and that Swamishri possessed this.

When he arrived for *padbaramani* at a devotee's shop, the devotee proudly asked, "Bapa, do you like this shop?"

He replied, "What is there to like, everything is dust." The devotee was humbled. He realized that to Swamishri the material pleasures and symbols of status were dust. Things of this world were temporary. He said dust would return to dust but God was eternal. He was the fountainhead of all true bliss and so by going to Him we would experience eternal happiness.

In 1977, in London, the children persuaded Swamishri to fill in a personal data form. Next to hobbies, they pressed him to write 'cricket', bearing in mind his interest in the sport as a child.

Instead, Swamishri chose to write, "Worshipping God and inspiring others to do likewise."

During 1987, in Anand, whilst on a visit to a doctor's surgery, Swamishri wrote a recommendation for the doctor's young son on a prescription pad, "Devotion to God – daily."

* * *

The trustees of the Sanstha had come together for an important meeting. The talk turned to the Sanstha's relief work during the 1987-88 drought and how even the government had praised Swamishri's expertise as a relief worker and manager. Some officials had said that the government relief work should also be given over to the Sanstha to handle.

A trustee commented that it was all just talk. Nobody would ever release such responsibility.

Swamishri interrupted, "Even if they want to give it to us, we're not ready to accept. We have come to worship God and help others do the same."

He was redirecting the trustees. Teaching the true purpose of the Sanstha and their own lives. Social work was essential and would be developed extensively to help all communities, but a greater service was to create God consciousness. If through Satsang the people were taught correct values and spirituality the world would become a better place to live in. There would be harmony and peace. The importance of his words was not lost on the devotees. They saw that Swamishri had no material ambition to make a name for himself, as he had said, he had come to worship and to help others do the same.

London, 15 May 1994

David, his twin brother Daniel, and Richard had come from Sussex especially to meet Swamishri at the mandir in Neasden. They were disciples of 'Godavari Ma' of Nasik, India. Swamishri asked their reason for coming. David began, "Four days ago, you appeared to me in my dream. You explained to

me what *nirvikalp samadhi* is. You even blessed me with a brief experience. Does your *nirvikalp samadhi* stay 24 hours a day?”

Swamishri said frankly, “We walk, we talk, we do everything – but we keep God with us. So yes, it does.”

David asked, “How can I achieve that?”

“By the guru’s grace,” Swamishri said instantly. “You can achieve it by being faithful to the guru’s commands.”

During another visit to see Swamishri, on 10 September, they told the sadhus, “Many times Bhagwan Swaminarayan and Pramukh Swamiji have given us darshan in our dreams.”

* * *

Mumbai, 1988

Swamishri was leaving on his 12th overseas tour. Many sadhus had gathered. One asked, “When you leave we feel unhappy and begin to count the days till your return. When you leave a mandir do you feel similarly.”

“I have no ‘coming and going’ that I have to count days. Am I a person of this material world that I have attachments? Do you see me as attached to any place, object or disciple? If you are not bound then you are also not of this world, but of the divine.”

In Gondal when asked if he felt relieved after leaving Sarangpur – where he had given almost constant attention to the sadhus and *parshads* – he showed his balance of mind by saying, “Whether we be in a jungle or in a palace, we experience the same. There may be many around us or only a few, but it is the same...”

* * *

His satsang travels in the area around Bharuch was tiring and all the more difficult because of the uneven roads. Dust was everywhere. Whenever the sadhus got the chance they washed to feel fresh and clean. Swamishri told them, “Just as the dust

disturbs us, Harikrishna Maharaj will also be disturbed and feel exhausted after travel. Every afternoon before lunch and in the evening before dinner, bathe him in cool water...”

During his last days Yogiji Maharaj had given responsibility for Harikrishna Maharaj’s *seva* to Swamishri. To both of them the *murti* was Maharaj himself. Whenever the sadhus overlooked this in their ignorance Swamishri would remind them and ensure that He was properly served. Harikrishna Maharaj was not an inert divine power that was contained within the metallic image. To Swamishri God was living in every sense of the word. The Lord had become ‘available’ to devotees through the *murti*. By serving the *murti* they were serving God, there was no distinction.

Swamishri graced the evening assembly in Ahmedabad. He had climbed the mandir steps from the north, and after having darshan of the marble *murtis* of Shastriji Maharaj and Yogiji Maharaj, enthroned in two small shrines at the back of the *pradakshina*, he entered the main mandir sanctum and had darshan of all the *murtis*. As usual he descended into the assembly using the southern steps, reserved for sadhus and male devotees. The assembly had already begun and a sadhu was discoursing. The hall was full and the stage had been well decorated. Swamishri’s and Harikrishna Maharaj’s seats were in the centre of the stage. Swamishri climbed the carpeted stage steps and approached his seat, bowing and joining hands in greeting to the sadhus and assembly.

From a distance he saw that the sadhus who arranged the seats had mistakenly set Harikrishna Maharaj’s throne several inches behind his own. This was not the first time such a mistake had been made. Swamishri was upset; he directed his ire at Premvadan Swami. “My seat should never be placed

forward of Thakorji's! Fit this into your mind, understand it. Why cannot you remember such a simple thing. Not only today, but for all times keep this point in mind..." He refused to sit down until the necessary change was made.

Premvadan Swami recounted: "I usually made the stage arrangements and was always very careful to have Harikrishna Maharaj's seat before Swamishri's, and a little higher. This was the way he always wanted it. That day I was busy elsewhere and so other sadhus had made all the preparations. Swamishri didn't know this. His unhappiness was marked. We could see it on his face. He noticed the lapse from a distance, as if he were used to checking it every day."

In Swamishri's anger they could see his sincere humility. How could he ever sit on a seat more prominent than Thakorji's, his beloved Lord.

Swamishri had been taken to Dr Ghanshyambhai's dispensary in Kisumu to receive a cholera vaccination. As the doctor made preparations Swamishri was having darshan of Harikrishna Maharaj placed on a table opposite.

"Swami," the doctor said, "you'll have to take this pill." It was to prevent any unwanted reactions the vaccine might cause.

"Show it to Thakorji first," said Swamishri at once. The pill was held in front of Harikrishna Maharaj for a few moments. Swamishri said the pill was now sanctified. Although it was not necessary to offer medicines to Thakorji, he should be shown medicines to sanctify them. Ghanshyambhai was surprised. He knew that whatever Swami ate or drank was first offered to Thakorji. He had heard that even objects which he used daily such as shoes and spectacles when first bought were offered to the Lord, but medicine? The experience was new, and Swamishri had been so natural about it. Swamishri popped the pill into his mouth and then looking straight

up, almost at the ceiling and closing his eyes momentarily, he swallowed.

The climb to Kedarnath at over 12,000 ft. was arduous. The narrow track that trailed up the mountainside was slippery with mud and loose stones. To the left the valley dropped several hundred feet into the river that almost bounced down from glaciers above the Kedarnath mandir. The sadhus had begun trekking at the very first sign of sunrise. The morning weather was wet and misty and it remained so throughout the day, clearing only briefly to give a flash view of the brilliant mountains rising in the not too far distance.

Swamishri had been carried up in a carrier made by inserting strong sticks through the supports of a deck chair. It was a 28 kilometre round trip. By four in the afternoon darkness was descending with light rain. By five, it was almost dark but most of the sadhus had returned. They were dangling their feet in the hot water spring at Gauri Kund, the little shanty village that served as a base camp. The spring had been excavated hundreds of years ago to form a square pool about 25 ft. across and 15 ft. deep, with steps leading down. The water welled up from the ground, releasing steam that hung heavy in the air. A low drone filled the area as the sadhus crowded into the small area, wanting to relax aching limbs by soaking in the water.

A loud 'Jai' signalled Swamishri's arrival. At his age the doctors had advised against the climb. The thin altitude, the weather and strain were all bad for his heart. But he had been undeterred. This was a pilgrimage so how could he back out due to a little body difficulty? Bhagwan Swaminarayan had climbed to Kedarnath as a twelve-year-old after leaving home. Swamishri intended to follow and worship at the sacred shrine.

The doctors did not insist upon him. They realized that it

was Swamishri's devotion and reverence for holy places that was propelling him. If he wanted to go they would let him. And as his servants they would do everything in their power to make his journey safe. They thus had taken with them medical kits and oxygen bottles. Swamishri had surrendered to the will of Harikrishna Maharaj. He was not worried in the least, but appreciated the concern everybody felt.

Nothing untoward had happened. Swamishri was helped off his chair and led to the Kund. The sadhus jostled for better darshan.

Swamishri descended several steps. An attendant had taken his shoulder cloth. Swamishri said, "First let us bathe Harikrishna Maharaj. He must be tired." Harikrishna Maharaj had been carried up to Kedarnath by a sadhu. The water was hot so Swamishri had cold water brought and the two mixed. For the next ten minutes he carefully bathed the Lord, rubbing and massaging every tiny limb of the *murti*, helping him to relax and enjoy the warm water. The sadhus watched on, singing Vedic mantras. They felt their own devotion increasing just by watching the perfect devotee, their spiritual master, engrossed in serving the Lord. The mood was reverential.

Other pilgrims stood behind on tip toe watching the entire scene. The auspiciousness of the moment wafted through the air attracting more pilgrims. The locals said this was the first time such a guru had bathed there and performed such devotion. It was also the first time so many sadhus had bathed there at one time. Little did they know that Pramukh Swami Maharaj was a world respected spiritual master.

After ensuring that Harikrishna Maharaj was rested, Swamishri himself descended into the water and began bathing, sprinkling water over the sadhus and pilgrims all around, praying for their happiness and wellbeing.

Thal was being sung by three or four sadhus. Swamishri came that way followed by about 60 more sadhus. This was his first time in Vadagaam. The clear air, open spaces and greenery were a welcome change from the smog and constant din of Ahmedabad. He sat down in front of Harikrishna Maharaj and joined in the singing.

The *murti* had been placed on a small wooden seat. In front of him, on a little higher platform, there was a large dish full of delicious food. Swamishri saw this in one glance. He took a cushion and gently lifted Harikrishna Maharaj up and placed it under him. There now, the Lord was higher than the dish and would find it easier to dine. He lost himself in the singing of *thals*.

After the cataract operations in Boston Swamishri was brought to New York. Pravinbhai Patel of Staten Island bought Swamishri the new pair of spectacles he would have to wear for a while.

“Present them to Thakorji first to sanctify them and then bring them here,” Swamishri told an attendant sadhu. When this was done he said again, “Now bring Thakorji here.” When Harikrishna Maharaj arrived Swamishri put the new spectacles on and first had his darshan. He seemed to be saying that he had been gifted new sight by the Lord and with his new eyes he wanted to have darshan. Swamishri then looked around at the sadhus and then at the devotees.

Swamishri was in Ambardi. He had stayed the night at Bhimabhai Patel’s house. The next morning after breakfast he left for Nana Jhinhuda. The remaining sadhus left a little while later. They thought that Swamishri had taken Harikrishna Maharaj with him. Swamishri’s attendants thought that the sadhus had kept Harikrishna Maharaj with them.

In Nana Jhinhuda, a morning assembly had been organized. At 11:30 lunch was ready and two sadhus went to the assembly to collect Harikrishna Maharaj to offer him *thal*. Everybody soon learnt that he had been forgotten at Bhimabhai's house.

The sadhus sent Indravadan with a car to Ambardi to fetch him. Worry was carved on every face. In Ambardi, Bhimabhai's wife refused to part with Harikrishna Maharaj, "Swamishri would never forget Thakorji, he has left him behind for me!" It took Indravadan several minutes to convince the lady that the sadhus had forgotten the *murti* and that Swamishri would remain hungry. Finally she agreed to part with Harikrishna Maharaj, but only after she had made a *thal* of *shiro* and *puri* and offered it to the Lord.

By the time Indravadan got back to Nana Jhinhuda it was three o'clock. Swamishri had not eaten or rested. He had continued to meet devotees.

When Harikrishna Maharaj's arrival was announced he looked up, relieved. But then he discovered that an Ambassador had been sent to pick up the *murti* of Maharaj. This was too much. He was extremely annoyed. Scolding the attendant sadhus he said, "For whom is the Mercedes? Only Thakorji! It is not for me. You should have sent the Mercedes for him!"

* * *

London, 3 April 1984

Peter Snowden, a freelance photographer, had come to the mandir to see Swamishri. Vivekjivan Swami asked him, "Would you like to ask any questions?"

"I have this opportunity but I don't know what to ask," Peter replied somewhat off-balanced. "I am really honoured. I am a Baptist and it is really odd for me to come to a Hindu mandir." Then he stared at Swamishri for a few moments and

said with exhilaration, “Swamiji’s eyes! They’re fascinating! His eyes are wonderful. I cannot look into his eyes.”

Peter took a few photographs of Swamishri, particularly close-ups of the eyes. Then with traditional British manners, he asked, “Can I touch Swamiji?” Swamishri just watched on innocently as the photographer carefully stretched out his hand. Peter then had a photograph taken of himself with Swamishri.

When he left the room, he was shaking his head in disbelief. “The experience was mind-blowing! My mind was silenced. He seems very peaceful and calm. I can’t describe him. Whether my boss will pay me or not is immaterial. I have gained a personal experience. Tomorrow I’ll go to church and in our meeting when we are asked of any special experience I’ll talk about Swamiji.”

New York, 20 July 1988

A picnic had been arranged in the luscious greenery of Homedale Park. All the devotees had brought their own food and were sharing it among themselves in one corner of the park. Under a tree in another corner, Swamishri sat, waiting patiently for his lunch to arrive.

Meanwhile, a short distance away, a young American was playing with his three- or four-year-old son. The young boy’s attention was pulled away. He kept staring towards the tree. His father tried to coax his attention back, but the boy was not interested in playing anymore. He began to pull his father to the group of sadhus. His father, probably thinking it to be impolite, pulled his son back. But the attraction was too much for the young child, and he eventually succeeded in dragging his father to Swamishri.

The American thought that it was the strange dress and shaven heads that must have caught his son’s eye, but the

child went straight to Swamishri, not stopping to meet any of the other sadhus. Both father and son respectfully bowed to Swamishri. That was all the boy really wanted. Gleefully he ran away.

San Fernando, Trinidad, 29 June 1988

The Prime Minister of the West Indies, Mr. Robinson, had come to the satsang assembly, but with only an hour to spare. As the hour passed away, Dharmavatsal Swami approached him to escort him out of the assembly. Mr. Robinson politely asked, "Is it OK if I stay a little longer?"

He stayed till the end of the assembly. When Dharmavatsal Swami asked the reason for allowing himself to stay and disturb the rest of his tight schedule, he said, "I feel great peace here. This is the first time in my life I have experienced such peace."

* * *

A new youth in Rajkot asked, "Have you seen God?"

"That is the reason for my blissfulness and because I have seen him I talk about him," Swamishri answered candidly.

The youth was surprised. "Is God before your eyes?" he questioned again.

"Yes, he is before me."

"Then show him to me."

"God cannot be seen like that. You have to keep faith in the words of the spiritual master and exert yourself spiritually. I can see God within my guru. Is there anything more to be said? God may come before us in any form he pleases!"

The youth left, deeply moved by Swamishri's revelation.

London, 24 July 1990

Swamishri was in a jolly mood as he entered the mandir. He had just flown back from New York. After his bath, Swamishri

came into the assembly hall to do his puja at the unusual time of 11:15 a.m. After the sadhus had finished the second kirtan, a devotee stood up and called loudly, “Purna Purushottam Narayan Pramukh Swami Maharajni Jai” – Hail to God Supreme Pramukh Swami Maharaj. He shouted this out twice.

Immediately Swamishri changed colour. His merry mood was eclipsed by a stern and serious face. His eyes said it all. Swamishri called out to the devotee in mid-puja, “Who is Supreme God?”

“Pramukh Swami Maharaj!” the devotee called back.

Swamishri was not pleased at all. He began to explain to the devotee without even stopping to put his rosary down. With emphatic gestures Swamishri retorted, “Get this fixed in your understanding. Supreme God is Shriji Maharaj! God can be said to reside in the Satpurush, who is the form of God, but never ever call him God. It is not our doctrine. Whenever you say the ‘Jais’, it is always ‘Sahajanand Swami Maharajni Jai’ first, then ‘Akshar Purushottam Maharajni Jai’, and then Shastriji Maharaj and Yogiji Maharaj.” Pointing to the *murtis* in the mandir shrine, Swamishri added, “Otherwise this is degrading Maharaj. Supreme God is Shriji Maharaj and only Shriji Maharaj.”

Solemnly, Swamishri finished the rest of his puja. After which he began an earnest discourse. Clearly, Swamishri was still upset. “Sometimes out of love and excitement we get carried away. But everybody should understand the philosophy of our Satsang. Shriji Maharaj is the one and only God. We are all his servants. The glory of the Sadhu is due to God. Shastriji Maharaj made things crystal clear. If he were God, then why did he not install his own *murti*?”

“Say the ‘Jais’ properly and in the correct order. Without God, even Akshar cannot be called God. And Shriji Maharaj

is independent. He is not God because of anyone else. Sing the glory of Shastriji Maharaj and Yogiji Maharaj using Shriji Maharaj's glory. This should be understood properly and also explained to others.

“Nandaji (former Labour Union President, then later Home Minister and twice Caretaker Prime Minister of India) told Shastriji Maharaj, ‘I haven't met Bhagwan Swaminarayan, so I'll turn the rosary with your name.’ Shastriji Maharaj told him blankly, ‘Even I say the rosary chanting Bhagwan Swaminarayan's name. If you want to go to Akshardham, then you'll have to chant his name.’

“Why did Yogiji Maharaj serve this Thakorji for 60 years?” He was speaking of Harikrishna Maharaj. “Swamishri could have told the devotees to worship him, and they would have listened. But no. He always taught devotion to Shriji Maharaj.

“This devotee (who said the Jai) is very loving and has a lot of admiration for us and the Lord. But be careful not to make this mistake ever again. ‘The Sadhu is God's form, and God gives bliss through him’, say that...”

Khambhala Hill Hospital, Mumbai, 11 April 1986

The doctors and sadhus gathered around Swamishri's bed anxiously. A tumour the size of a fist had been removed from his left thigh. At first it was thought that it may be malignant, but the last test had cleared all doubts. The tumour was harmless.

As Swamishri tried to shake off the drowsiness somebody gently slipped his spectacles onto his face whilst someone else brought forward the tumour now contained in a bottle.

“Here's the tumour.” Swamishri wasn't interested.

“Where's Maharaj?” he asked. When Harikrishna Maharaj was brought forward he folded his hands in prayer.

The drowsiness would still take a while to wear off. So the attendants and doctors urged Swamishri to rest and themselves moved to a corner of the room. Swamishri tried to sleep, but could not. After a while he folded his hands in prayer and seemed to be saying something. Then he began to keenly listen, letting his hands drop. This folding of hands and talking, listening and smiling continued for 20 minutes. The attendant sadhus watched in fascinated silence from a distance. That Swamishri was intensely involved was obvious.

A few days later the sadhus asked Swamishri what he had been doing. He confessed, "I was doing darshan of the *murtis* in all our mandirs." He had visited Sarangpur, Gadhada, Gondal, Ahmedabad and other mandirs.

Badhada, 1983

Dharmavihari Swami was walking with Swamishri from house to house. One or two devotees were also tagging along. After sanctifying the first house and on their way to the next, Dharmavihari Swami began to hear a soft, sweet chanting of the Swaminarayan mantra. He was startled. Swamishri's lips or throat were not moving, so where was the chanting coming from? Dharmavihari Swami's curiosity heightened. He strained his ears, discovering that the rhythmic melody was escaping from Swamishri's body.

After continuing problems from gallstones, Swamishri had an operation to remove his gall bladder in 1981. Swamishri remained in hospital for a few days after the operation. One night, Dr Kiran Doshi heard the humming of 'Swaminarayan, Swaminarayan,...' from Swamishri's room. He went to investigate, and came to Swamishri's bed. Swamishri was fast asleep. Dr Doshi lowered his ear to

Swamishri and confirmed that the Swaminarayan mantra was flowing from Swamishri.

New York, August 1991

The Cultural Festival of India had come to a grand finale several days before. Now Swamishri was preparing to fly to Toronto. The devotees had acquired an extra two blocks of property next to the mandir to extend the mandir hall and kitchen facilities. Swamishri had been invited to open the extension.

He had final darshan of the *murtis* in the New York mandir and prostrated fully before them. As he was leaving news came that the flight was two hours late and would now leave at 12:30 in the afternoon.

One of the sadhus asked, "Should we try to prepare lunch?" By the time they arrived in Toronto it would be very late afternoon, past Swamishri's lunchtime.

The question slightly irritated Swamishri. He replied, "Why 'try' for the body? Instead, 'try' for worship! If we do something like that then our stomachs will be filled. How can food satisfy us?" The sadhus saw that to Swamishri worship was real nourishment.

A devotee once asked, "How do you manage to remember Harikrishna Maharaj continuously for 24 hours a day?"

Swamishri said, "He takes so much care of us, how can we not remember him? Before him we are nothing. Harikrishna Maharaj is everything. I'm just his servant."

After the evening assembly in Nadiad he asked, "Has the *sandhya arti* been performed?" He was referring to the fourth *arti* of the day performed at about 7:30 in the evening.

A sadhu not wishing Swamishri to exert himself said, "Bapa!

The sadhus will do the *arti*, there is no need for you to attend.”

This irked him. “You people are now telling me not to go to the *arti*. When I say I want to go to the mandir for darshan, never say no. In everything I am now being tied down, but we’ve come for worship! If I cannot do that what else can I do? How am I supposed to continue life?”

11

With Satsangis

Alienated from India and her culture, these kids had grown up alone in the playgrounds and streets while their parents worked the tills. They barely spoke or understood Gujarati and knew next to nothing about a spiritual life or the Swaminarayan Sampradaya.

Edison, August 1991

“There now, if the photos have been taken, stand up,” said Swamishri to the smiling youths clustered around him. They were part of the *satsangi* youth cultural dance team that had entertained tens of thousands of visitors during the Cultural Festival of India (CFI). This photo was a memento for them all.

Speaking for all the kids, Jeyur said, “Bapa, your proximity is so wonderful that we don’t feel like moving out of your lap.”

The assembly had ended and Swamishri was walking slowly back to his room behind the kitchen. His route was lined on both sides by throngs of devotees wanting a last darshan for the day. Swamishri was meeting those close by. He saw the Nepalese *satsangi*, Lalbahadur.

“Why haven’t you come till today? For the last four days I had you in mind and thought of inquiring about you but kept forgetting. You should come every day.”

Lalbahadur touched his guru’s feet. He was lost in thought. From the hundreds of youths in Vadodara Swamishri had remembered him and knew that he had not been coming to the assembly.

A father brought his teenage son to Swamishri in Bochasan.

There was a complaint. The teen was apprehensive. He hadn’t wanted to come in the first place but his father and mother had almost dragged him out of the house.

“Bapa, he doesn’t believe in God!” complained the father.

Swamishri was not shocked. Many people didn’t believe in God. The youngster stood silently waiting for the verbal whipping he fully expected. Instead, Swamishri asked, “Do you live an ethical life?”

“Yes.”

“Do you do wrong?”

“No.”

“Any addictions?”

“No.”

“Meat, alcohol?”

“No.”

“Then you do believe in God!” Swamishri concluded, and then added, “Some things we observe because we’re afraid of the government or the community. Likewise, we should do all things conscious that God is watching. Believe that God is the

doer behind all things, this will give you strength and courage.”

The teenager bowed his head for a pat on the head. Swamishri’s conclusion and remarks were acceptable to him. Here was a person, he thought, who really understood him.

Bachubhai, a lower middle class devotee of Khambhat, had come to Swamishri for help. “Bapa, my son has started drinking regularly. I used to drink as well but after your first darshan I managed to stop. My body and life have both bettered. But now my son has started, be compassionate on him.”

“Bring him here to me,” Swamishri said.

“I did once, but he hasn’t stopped.”

“Then bring him again. I’ll talk to him. At least if he comes to the mandir he’ll make friends with the sadhus. We’ll tell him once, and he’ll stop and then start again, so we’ll tell him a second time, and then again several more times and so after a time he will drop the habit...”

Bachubhai was taught a lesson in patience. Swamishri was saying that each person had his own pace, whether entering Satsang or kicking a habit. Understanding and patience were better tools than fuming and pestering.

His perception of the growing mind allows him to take an interest in and appreciate the service and devotion of those around him. In the village of Lati one evening, a devotee brought several freshly cut foot-long babul sticks to be used as *datan* by the sadhus. Swamishri picked one up and holding the two ends bent it, testing its suppleness. Until 1977 he had daily used a *datan* to brush his teeth and so knew that the fresher *datans* were best. He tested several more as the sadhus watched, and then said. “The fibres of a *deshi datan* are best.” This is because one end of a *datan* is chewed to mush the fibres which are then brushed against the teeth. The *deshi datan* has more fibres.

“Swami, select one for Thakorji,” requested Indravadan. A

fresh *datan* was offered to Harikrishna Maharaj in the morning before he was bathed.

“You choose! You do it every day!”

Indravadan pressed and so Swamishri carefully inspected the bundle and picked out the best one. Indravadan turned and left. Swamishri said of him, “He’s very particular and does good service. He prepares Thakorji’s *datan* daily and even warms the water for his bath in the morning. He bathes Thakorji, he fills my jug, cuts the vegetables...”

Los Angeles, August 1988

It was Rakshabandhan. The Hindu community of the city had decked out in their finest and many were visiting the BAPS mandir on Pellisser Road, Whittier.

The soft, pale red carpet lay hidden below the mass of humanity that overflowed through the doors. Swamishri seemed effulgent sitting cross-legged on his raised red velvet seat to the right of the painted marble *murtis* of Akshar Purushottam Maharaj.

Hundreds of millions of simple woollen or stylized *rakhdīs* in India at this time would be adorning the wrists of boys and men, tied by affectionate sisters. The *rakhdi* symbolizes the brother protecting his sister. Migrating Hindus had brought to America their culture and religion and were not about to relinquish the beauty of their heritage. Early this morning sisters had tied the *rakhdīs*, and now as the devotees formed a long orderly queue Swamishri himself was tying *rakhdīs*. The spiritual master was promising to protect his disciples.

A young man walked past Swamishri not waiting for the *rakhdi*. “Hey, take the *rakhdi*,” called Swamishri. The festival was a joyous occasion and he was having just as much fun as the rest.

“But Swami, you tied one on my hand in Chicago,” the youth replied. A few days previously in Chicago the festival had been symbolically celebrated in Swamishri’s presence. The youth did not want to trouble Swamishri again.

“That’s true, but today is the real day,” he said. And then laughed, saying, “I have to be careful, don’t I? To tie you down and make sure you don’t wander away!”

The youth held out his wrist and strengthened his bond to his guru.

* * *

The seventies had been boom time for Indians, especially Gujaratis, in the United Kingdom. Their shops and sub post offices were doing a roaring trade. Bank balances were healthy, the children went to the best schools and the men drove luxury Japanese cars.

Swamishri’s 1977 summer tour was thus very well received. It was a time of rapid Satsang expansion and so the requests for *padbramani* was staggering. No one was refused. Quite a few youths would be at 4 West Road, Holloway, Swamishri’s accommodation, by 5:00 a.m. Sometimes they would get a chance to gently massage his body and were always allowed into his bathroom to help him bathe. Whilst one youth poured water over Swamishri’s shoulders another gently rubbed his hands or calves for a few seconds and then moved on to let another youth have a chance to serve. Swamishri seemed not to mind the hustle and bustle, the constant changing of hands. In London or anywhere else he now had no private life left.

The youths would then rush to the Islington mandir in their cars. After Swamishri’s puja there, they would accompany him on his *padbramanis*. The official entourage would consist of only three or four cars. The first would lead. The second carried Harikrishna Maharaj, Swamishri and a sadhu and the third

would follow with another couple of sadhus. The several other cars would be unofficial and crammed with youths trying to memorize the licence plate of the car ahead and keep a keen watch on it. They followed, interested only in Swamishri.

Harikrishna described: “We had great fun. Jashkaka and C.M. Kaka thought we were a nuisance so we stopped going into the houses and waited outside for Swamishri. After the *arti* and puja he would walk out and we would form a corridor for him to walk through. He always came out with some *prasad* and filled our outstretched hands. He would sit down in his car and close the door himself, and be driven off. We would run to follow. Sometimes we’d lose him but quickly find him again. It was like a game. Once even Bapa whispered that it was OK for us to go along.”

The youths did not realize it but the ‘game’ was transcendental. Just by driving around London with Swamishri and taking *prasad* from his hands they were developing bonds of affection that would hold them in good stead for the future. For that is what Swamishri was planning for. The youths were rough and tough. Sometimes they were rowdy and coarse. But that was to be expected. Alienated from India and her culture, these kids had grown up alone in the playgrounds and streets while their parents worked the tills. They barely spoke or understood Gujarati and knew next to nothing about a spiritual life or the Swaminarayan Sampradaya.

Their biggest positive point was the respect and love they had for Swamishri. They knew that Swamishri wanted them to attend the Saturday evening *yuvak sabha* and so they did that. Although they found the *katha* boring the kirtans were good. Some had even started singing, using hand written diaries filled with kirtans that had been transliterated into English by some of the elders who could read Gujarati.

Since 1974 Sureshbhai and other senior *yuvaks* had been given charge of the *yuvak mandal*. Things were now systematic. The weekly assembly started at 5:30 in the evening and ended promptly at 7:30. The youths sat in neat horizontal lines. Table tennis tables had been bought and football and cricket started. Best of all was the *prasad*. The variety of snacks was endless. Soft drinks were also soon added to the menu.

Seva was also introduced. The youths swept the light blue linoleum of the mandir hall and washed the basement floor. They cleaned the giant utensils used for cooking and even kept the mandir lights and PA systems in order.

Hi-fi systems had come of age and a tremendous demand for kirtan audio cassettes arose. The youths, used the slanting mandir hall after midnight as a recording studio.

A small group, Hemant, Dinkerbhai, Narottam and others, had taken on the responsibility. They sat in circle, a cheap recording microphone before the singer and his chorus. Another mic would be given to the harmonium player and the *tabla* player. Rameshbhai sat in as sound engineer and technician. Everything was deadly serious. They didn't know what to title the cassettes and so just labelled them alphabetically, A, B, C, and so on. The cassettes sold like hot cakes!

They also bought a small printing press and every three or four months brought out a magazine called *Swaminarayan*.

An important lesson had been learnt. If they wanted to, they had the ability to do great things for Satsang. A need had arisen and they had met it. Maharaj and Swami would always be there and help them serve Satsang. The youths realized, perhaps for the first time, that they were part of a spiritual mission, an international movement. They were together not just for good times and tasty *prasad*; they had a loving obligation to Maharaj and Swamishri.

Swamishri said they all still had a lot to learn. He asked that they read the Satsang Examinations booklets that had recently been translated into English, and sit the exams every July. These booklets contained a systematically arranged basic course in Satsang history and beliefs. The exams and books had been inspired by Swamishri immediately after Yogiji Maharaj's passing. Satsang knowledge was essential to a *satsangi's* happy future. An ocean of spiritual knowledge awaited their discovery, he explained over and over again. *Seva* was just as essential. How could they expect the elders to do all the back-breaking work. No, that was their responsibility.

Sometimes in the evening before he left the mandir, Swamishri would descend into the basement where the youths were serving and himself served *prasad* to them. Once, he sat a group in a broad semicircle on the floor and asked each *yuvak* to spread a sheet of newsprint in front of himself. Swamishri then served each one handfuls of delicious *jalebis*. There was lots of shouting and calling and laughing as everyone urged Swamishri to serve more and more to their neighbours.

Youth activities had taken off in a big way. The youths had realized that there was practically no limit to what they could do for the mandir and Swamishri. They were everywhere; in the kitchens, decorating the stages, providing transport, handling public relations. If a job needed to be done, the youths were ready.

Swamishri looked on pleased. Everything necessary for a spiritual life in London was here: the mandir, the books, the devotees, the enthusiasm. He wanted the young men and women to take advantage of it. More than being a visiting lecturer or a formal guide, Swamishri was the spiritual father of his young disciples. They accepted him as their real father and he found them loving and devoted, willing to help and sacrifice. Swamishri always reciprocated.

The London Yuvak Mandal organized a sponsored run. They thought it better if they had some funds to better run their activities. They did not want to be a burden on the mandir. Over 50 youths participated in the run from Swamishri's accommodation in Holloway to the Islington mandir. They were in two groups. The smaller group intended to run all the way. The larger group had decided to relay the distance. Groups of six to seven youths running a mile or so in turns.

The run was a tremendous success. Devotees and friends had responded well. The Yuvak Mandal had its funds to tide over another year.

In the evening, the small group that had run all the way was introduced to the assembly. Swamishri expressed great pleasure at their determination. These were no trained athletes, just ordinary youths, who had accomplished what they had set out to do.

Later that night, many youths had gone to 4 West Road. It had become a routine; they were there when Swamishri retired for the night and also when he awoke.

The youths were lounging on the carpet in the long living room that opened into the garden when Swamishri arrived. He saw that his young disciples were waiting so he immediately crossed into the room. As he walked the group parted, leaving an aisle for him to pass along. He sat down on the curved shiny black sofa. He was exhausted, but his eyes shone with light.

The runners, Subhash, Tilesh, Ashok, Bhavesh and the others stood in front of him. Expectedly, the talk turned to the run. Swamishri listened as the youths talked. In their happiness and contentment he saw their spiritual progress. He felt grateful. Out of the blue he began to praise the runners and their efforts. Looking straight at Ashok he said, "He must be tired." With that Swamishri slipped off the sofa and crouched

on the floor, he took Ashok's calves in both hands and began pressing and massaging.

Pramukh Swami Maharaj was massaging his disciple youth's legs. Ashok was confused. Quickly he pulled away, embarrassed, not knowing what to say. Swamishri looked up a little amused, as if saying, "Why did you move away?"

* * *

The teenagers had in many aspects formed the backbone of the CFI in 1991, America. They had been there during the construction stage and were spread throughout the various departments during the actual festival, serving in whatever capacity they were assigned.

Swamishri had attended all three days of the Youth Convention and had blessed them. He appreciated their services and understood the hardships and frustrations they suffered. Most had abandoned summer jobs and vacations to help out. Swamishri was ready to meet them and discuss problems or chat a while. Kalpesh and Mihir of Los Angeles both served in the exhibitions as guides. They were part of a large team that had attended a crash course in Indian culture, just so they could serve better. Kalpesh wanted to speak to Swamishri and ask his blessings for further studies. Mihir tagged along. He had never met Swamishri privately before and was apprehensive.

Swamishri was taking lunch. Both were allowed to enjoy the darshan. After Swamishri had finished, a sadhu escorted the two to him. Kalpesh introduced himself and received blessings. Mihir was more awkward. Red in the face he half bent, half knelt. Swamishri took his hand and shook it.

"How are you?" he asked in English.

"Fine," replied Mihir.

"What is your name?" Swamishri again asked.

Soon Mihir had introduced himself. He felt completely at home. He received his blessings.

On the lawn outside the trailer the two teens could not contain their joy. They leaped up into the air shouting, “He met us, he met us!”

“He shook my hand,” shouted Mihir, “he really shook my hand and spoke to me in English.”

Pramukh Swami Maharaj was once walking towards the mandir through the car park of the New York mandir when he caught sight of two teenage brothers standing to one side. They belonged to a respected *satsangi* family of many years. Unruly shoulder length hair, patched jeans and a bored look told of their lack of Satsang. Swamishri called them over. They gave him their ‘who us?’ look and strolled over. Swamishri asked how they were and whether they came to the mandir regularly.

He then said, “You should listen to your parents and serve them around the home. Be respectful to them, they have brought you up. We should not forget their goodness to us, do you understand me?” He was speaking in Gujarati and wasn’t sure whether the message had got through. It hadn’t. Both were casually looking around ignoring Swamishri. So he shook one by the shoulders and again spoke to them. The situation was awkward but Swamishri felt it his responsibility to try and change the brothers.

Another time two youths met Swamishri in Ashton-under-Lyne in England. Mother, they said, was a good *satsangi* but father was *kusangi*. He never gave a penny for the upkeep of their house. In fact, mother had brought the two brothers up, working during the day whilst they were at school. Father now wanted to divorce. What should they do?

Swamishri consoled and instructed, “It does not matter now. Both of you are grown up. Don’t let him hit your mother, you

should stand in between. Father has never given happiness to your mother. She has suffered on your behalf to enable you to study, she brought you up and so now it is your responsibility to give her peace of mind. Never do anything behind her back. Tell her everything. Don't fall into any affairs with girls. Earn some money and look after your mother.”

Mahendrabhai of Surat brought a friend along for darshan. The young man asked, “Parents for years nurture us, raise us, give us their love, satisfy our needs and still when a particular person comes into our life (through marriage) we take our parents as worthless. Why do we become obsessed to such an extent?”

The question was clear and had arisen from a deeply felt personal anguish. Swamishri softly replied, “At the root is infatuation. We talk about the love our parents gave us, but in truth it is not as we say. Deep in our hearts we are not convinced of its truth. We don't really have all that great a regard for them. No matter how much we fall in love elsewhere it should not be at the cost of our parents...”

“How can such conviction be learned?”

“By spiritual reading and association with a true sadhu. If you scorn your parents when they're old, where are they to go? To keep them happy is our responsibility.”

* * *

He once told students, “To look good is modernity, and to become good is spirituality.” On a similar theme he addressed the students staying at the Akshar Purushottam Chhatralaya (APC) in Vidyanagar, “Self-control is disagreeable at this age. To roam freely and live an open life we see as good. But dharma restrains us. This is something which is very good for us. Doing puja, reading the Vachanamrut and the Shikshapatri are all things that we don't enjoy doing though they are the

very activities that improve us. At this age self-control is a must. The teenage years can throw a person anywhere.

“When we do something in secret it is our life that we are spoiling. At present we feel good, later we’ll be unhappy. Spiritual activities are to be started when young. Let it be a little boring or frustrating. If you pray you will be given strength. Those kids who do not take care ruin their lives. And then unhappiness and tension. When older they feel sorry. *Niyams* are not binding us; they are good for us...”

Commenting on a youth’s TV habit, Swamishri said doubtfully, “Maybe sometimes... but learn something good from it...all the characters portrayed are artificial, the actors become Narsinh Mehta one day and a crook the next... We should become original...” To Shashank who wanted to gain merit grades in school Swamishri recommended that he watch no television, not even cricket. “Watch when you’re older,” he explained, “this is the time to study.”

Gadhada, 13 March 1995

While Swamishri was taking dinner, Dharmacharan Swami arrived with a parcel. The parcel contained over 1,100 letters written by young *satsangi* boys and girls from Mumbai. These children had decided to cut down on watching TV, at least until their exams were over. They had written to inform Swamishri of their intentions and to ask for his blessings. Dharmacharan Swami showed Swamishri the parcel and explained, “Anandjivan Swami has written a covering note asking you to sanctify the letters by your mere *drashti* as opposed to reading them all.”

Swamishri expressed his pleasure at the commitment taken by the young children and added, “Anandjivan Swami has written this so as not to cause undue trouble for us...but the kids have put in a lot of work writing and have all sincerely

decided to give up TV. What effort is there for us in looking through the letters? Open the parcel later and we'll check the letters out."

In June 1994, Swamishri participated in a convention for children and youths at a park in Pocono Mountains, Pennsylvania. When the youngsters were playing sports during their break, Swamishri came out to meet them. He watched them play basketball, baseball and cricket. The youngsters could not contain their delight. They were well aware that as a child, Swamishri had played cricket in his home village of Chansad. They requested Swamishri to play with them. Seventy-three-year-old Swamishri politely refused their offer...once, twice...but these were young children. They did not want to pass off this opportunity so easily. Eventually, due to their insistence, Swamishri took a cricket bat in his hand. The children bowled, Swamishri batted. To please other youths, Swamishri also tried his hand at baseball. How could those present ever forget such a divine spectacle? To please the youngsters, Swamishri played with them as if he were one of them. The 60-odd year age difference evaporated into thin air.

About 20 days later, Swamishri mentioned that his right shoulder was giving him pain. Subsequently, a diagnosis of frozen shoulder, secondary to a tendon injury was made. The injury had been sustained during the few batting strokes that Swamishri had made when playing cricket and baseball. He required intensive physiotherapy for about 11 months. Due to his age, recovery was painfully slow.

Two months after the injury, when Swamishri was in Boras, Sweden, he received a phone call from New Jersey. He was informed that 75 children and youths had taken a vow to stop watching television. They had felt that their guru had sacrificed so much for them, having sustained an injury in the process of

trying to please them. They were well aware of Swamishri's dislike of them watching TV and felt the least they could do was to give that up. Swamishri was immensely pleased with their devotion. He wrote: "11 August 1994, Boras. To please Maharaj and Swami and as per Yogiji Maharaj's wishes, you've all taken pledges not to watch TV. Remain firm in this matter... also your schoolwork will improve...you will get good grades. Keep up your determination to follow this *niyam*. If someone tries to force you or your mind tries to tempt you, remember Yogiji Maharaj at that time and engage in devotion...but never ever watch TV. With blessings."

Jayesh was overjoyed when Swamishri came to bless his wedding at Watford Town Hall, London. To just briefly attend the wedding did not satisfy Swamishri, he was more concerned about the couple's future spiritual life together. He was to the point, gentle and convincing, "May you ever retain your love for God and the Satpurush. And let your business also flourish. For your progress you have my blessings. Jayesh, your friends are nice people and all vegetarian. From now onwards do not keep friends who are anyhow. And if there are any like that, they should be convinced in mind that there is no way in which they can influence you. If once you give in to friendship and say yes to something wrong, every bad habit will follow. To be firm from the very beginning is best."

Though addressed to Jayesh all the *satsangi* youths attending the wedding knew that they were not exempt from Swamishri's warning. Jayesh had been just an instrument.

A *satsangi* teen in Edison, New Jersey, had started eating meat. Swamishri wanted him to stop. "I've heard you've started eating hamburgers," he said to the boy sitting before him. "Please stop now," Swamishri made the request.

The youth didn't want to and so had an argument ready. "A cow gives milk, and a cow also gives meat. If there is no problem in drinking milk what is wrong in eating meat," he argued.

"Everything is wrong!" replied Swamishri strongly. "There is a difference between milk and meat. Taking milk from a cow does not cause it pain, meat does. Should we do anything that gives a person pain or should we be doing things that give no pain?"

The question induced the teen to think a while. He concluded that Swamishri was right and accepted a vow not to eat meat again.

Swamishri never tires of telling devotees and others, "Meat does not mean just beef, but includes all types of flesh from all animals. Fish, seafood and eggs are included in the meat category. God has gifted man with the earth that is bountiful in fruits, grains, roots and vegetables. Where is the need to kill an animal for food? Should such *himsa* be performed? The western world promotes eating meat in the name of health! Does this mean that the rest of the world is unhealthy?"

A London youth showed him a doctor's prescription saying that he should eat eggs. "The doctors will tell you and so will your friends," Swamishri retorted. "Look at me, I don't take meat and I'm still alive! No one is dying! Our rishis lived in the Himalayas with bare bodies and for thousands of years. Do you know this? There is so much else to eat. Take milk and ghee. They are more nutritious than eggs and build the body. Why have you fallen into this *himsa*? Say someone cuts your body, how much will it pain? Don't these animals suffer? The Europeans stayed 150 years in India, did they adopt any of our ways? Here, take a vow... We'll have to safeguard our heritage!" He poured a little water into the youth's right palm;

the youth promised to stop eating meat.

Nilesh of Los Angeles sent 25 dollars as a donation for the cattle camps run by our Sanstha during the Gujarat drought of 1987-1988. He had written: "I raised funds at school... Collected a total of 25 dollars so far... Please use this to feed the starving animals."

Acknowledging his devotion, Swamishri wrote: "You deserve to be congratulated and have our blessings. In spite of your young age, you worship God and took initiative in offering this service. To think of the good of others is the healthiest thought of all. Make sure you only eat vegetarian food and encourage others to do the same."

Safeguarding heritage has become a critical issue for Indians living abroad. Within Indian culture lies spirituality and its attendant morality and family traditions. Language plays an important part, for it is the mother tongue that most effectively passes on culture from one generation to another.

During a youth camp in New York in July 1990 Swamishri began his blessings to the assembled teenagers, "I'll speak in Gujarati. Try and understand a little. Our mother tongue and culture are entwined. Culture makes us human, different from animals. Learn Gujarati, read Gujarati, keep trying, so you can also read our shastras..." The kids clung to his every word.

Seven-year-old Priyesh of London sent a letter written in broken Gujarati. He had asked regarding some personal matter. Swamishri's reply gave him guidance but also included a reference to his use of language: "...it was a pleasure to read your words written in Gujarati."

* * *

Mukesh Thanki had recently graduated from Vidyanagar. He had come for darshan and asked, "Why does my mind waver and my life remain unstable? Why can I not remember things?"

Pramukh Swami Maharaj knew Mukesh well as he had stayed at APC, Vidyanaagar, and was somewhat of an amateur poet. He replied, “Do you turn the rosary?”

“I’ve decided to do whatever you say from today,” Mukesh promised.

“From the time you stayed in the hostel in Vidyanaagar, I’ve been saying, ‘turn the rosary, do puja, *tilak-chandlo* and prayer.’ Without these, stability and an unwavering mind will never become real. You want to become a millionaire in a moment, but don’t want to work for it... ‘Just give me a pile, God!’ How can this be? For that you have to obey all the commands, involve yourself in bhajan-bhakti and then the Lord is pleased.”

“I don’t care for God, to have you is enough...” Mukesh declared.

Swamishri was startled. The words hurt him. “What was that? You don’t care for God? Without God where would you and I be? This air, water, food, strength, intelligence, who gives it all? I care only for God. You should as well keep faith in him in all your work...”

A youth was depressed. He met Swamishri in Los Angeles, pouring out his frustration and growing apathy. “Swami, I’ve been doing Satsang for years, I live by all the *niyams*, but in business or jobs I have had no success...now I’m losing faith in religion.”

Swamishri put the letter he was writing down and leaned forward in concern. “There’s no need to lose faith. Krishna himself was with the Pandava brothers and yet unhappiness came upon them! Dada Khachar was a devotee of Shriji Maharaj himself. There was a landowner problem which could only be cleared by the king in Bhavnagar. Every time Dada Khachar went to Bhavnagar, Maharaj would bless him and say

he would be given his property back, but even so that never happened until Maharaj went back to Akshardham. Dada didn't lose faith in Maharaj, or lose his love. You shouldn't become sad, devotees experience hardship – that is God's way. Whatever has been destined for us we should suffer, don't lose hope. Pray to God and try your best...those who don't worship God also become unhappy.”

Due to a misunderstanding a youth had stopped coming to Satsang. He felt deeply offended and wanted nothing more to do with the mandir, sadhus and devotees. He said he wasn't interested anymore and there was no one worth respecting in Satsang!

His father was distressed to the point of tears. Swamishri comforted him, praising his son and not mentioning his recent change at all. Back home the youth's father told his son the fine words Swamishri had used for him. This softened his resolve. The next day he came to meet Swamishri and broke down crying in his lap.

“Don't be so upset,” said Swamishri stroking the youth's head. “Seeing you unhappy makes me unhappy. You know Yogiji Maharaj and also love me. Try and forget the whole incident. Satsang is our family. Dada Khachar lived with five hundred sadhus. Surely even he experienced such sour things. But he didn't lose his regard for them. I have no bias in my mind towards you and neither does the *kothari*. The sadhus have so much affection for you. If ever something like this happens again come and see me, tell me. I feel so much peace today because you came...”

Ever since he had heard about the youth Swamishri had felt anxious. The Satsang family was large and all types of people were joining. Each came with the goal of ridding themselves of ego, jealousy, envy, anger and a whole host of faults that were making them unhappy. But till these inner enemies remained,

there would always be misunderstandings and a clash here or there. People so easily forgot themselves: who they were, what they stood for, their aspirations. Total and constant introspection was a must, but some even forgot that. They lost the regard and pleasure they first developed when they were new *satsangis*, and then as they began seeing faults with others and making spiteful comments their faith lost its potency, with their eventual leaving.

Wherever possible Swamishri personally talks to such misguided souls. He tells sadhus and devotees to care for such people and not to lose them. This is his compassion. Because of Satsang a person is working towards God consciousness. Walking away from Satsang is delaying that goal by so many more births.

* * *

A teenager from London had travelled to India to be with Swamishri. One day as he took his blessings Swamishri's eyes were arrested by the T-shirt the youth was wearing. Swamishri touched a line on the T-shirt with his finger saying, "What's this? Yesterday you had a T-shirt with something about Jordan written on it, but look at this!" The T-shirt had jumbled red letters of the alphabet printed all over it. "It looks as if you've been in a fight and are bleeding all over! We should print our slogans..."

Swamishri wanted him to concentrate all his thoughts on his spiritual goals. Of what use was a T-shirt or any other piece of clothing that did not only not help, but positively hindered spiritual thoughts. How much better it would be, he reasoned, if the children wore T-shirts with quotes from the shastras, in this way they would be reminded of who they were and what they were doing.

* * *

A London devotee was consulting Swamishri about marrying his son a second time. Swamishri said quite forcefully, "There is nothing wrong with him marrying again but there are some things you must understand concerning how you treat the newly arrived girl and how you help her settle down. Your own wife and both of your daughters will have their own habits and ways...the new girl should be loved as a daughter and everything in the home should be done with unity. If she doesn't know how to do something, teach her. You may be traditional in your ways and she may be modern. How do you expect to get along? First you must match your habits and ways. You have to let some things go. If you talk to her with love she will be encouraged. Some people never show affection. In such an atmosphere will she then want to stay? Doesn't she need comfort and support?" He was teaching parenthood and responsibility to a 55 year old, because it was necessary in his home and so many others around the world.

A photographer *satsangi* youth in Atladra complained to Swamishri about his new sister-in-law and his own mother who never stopped fighting. Swamishri had the father and brother called. He told them frankly, "Make your wife understand, and you make your wife understand," he said looking at the elder son and father. The mother-in-law should cooperate and so should the daughter-in-law. The mother-in-law should shelter the girl as her own daughter. She has come from another family, and should be helped so that her love grows for her in-laws and she becomes attached to them. The daughter-in-law should realize that now 'these are my parents as well'. She should not insult them, and she may also have to tolerate a little. Both have to keep a broad outlook, a large heart."

* * *

Once when in Navsari, Swamishri stayed at Jasubhai's bungalow. A Sikh youth, Indrajit, had decorated the exterior of the home with exquisite decoration lights.

He asked Swamishri, "Do you like the decoration?"

"Yes, it's fine," answered Swamishri.

"Next time you come," said Indrajit, "I want to make the lighting even better." Swamishri placed his hand lightly on the Sikh's chest and advised, "It is better first to illuminate your heart. By decorating things our own beauty does not grow, there should be a light within..."

Suresh was driving Swamishri in his new sports car through Wembley in London. Swamishri had agreed to sanctify it, fulfilling Suresh's long-standing desire. As Suresh steered the car through the busy streets, Swamishri began telling the rosary and speaking with Suresh.

During the conversation he asked casually, "Do you do puja?"

"No, Swami," Suresh was honest. "After I shower I chant a little, that's all."

"Please do puja," Swamishri said, "and only then go to your shop. Just as you love cars, now also love to worship God." Suresh agreed at once, persuaded by his guru's mildness, and devotion to spreading Satsang. Here was Swamishri, sitting in the front passenger seat of a sleek sports car and he was not in the least interested in its acceleration and comfort. Instead he held a rosary and was asking him to do puja!

Two friends, Sandeep and Harish, living at APC, Vidyanagar, met Swamishri. Sandeep still hesitated in applying the *tilak-chandlo* to his forehead during his morning puja. Swamishri was talking to him. "What problem do you have? If someone is preventing you let's negotiate with him..."

"No, no. It's not like that," said Sandeep. "I myself feel it is

best to do the *tilak-chandlo* only when I have improved my life by living by Satsang's dharma and *niyams*."

"Your life will become ordered when you start applying the *tilak-chandlo*. Once you start you will gain the mental strength to continue."

"When I go on tour the food always contains powdered onions and garlic. You just cannot tell. There's no option but to eat, that's when I feel that I shouldn't wear the *tilak-chandlo*."

"Does it ever occur to you that you should not eat the food! When only such food is available you can always fast. Drink milk. You'll survive. You should be firm in your beliefs. Whether there are onions in the food or not, we should never eat 'outside' food. People can live on milk and other things for months. Frankly, because you have a weakness for such food you eat it, apart from that there is no other problem."

Swamishri knew Sandeep well and was not about to let him break Satsang rules. He was a good *satsangi* at heart, but was having difficulties because of his laxity. This was the time for improvement. Swamishri would not allow him to hide behind a false modesty.

Sandeep admitted that Swamishri's analysis was correct, "Yes, once the food is there before me, my mind is tempted."

"The mind has to be controlled. It is not that you cannot resist the temptation. God helps those who control their minds!" Swamishri was speaking powerfully. If he had wanted to he could have been softer, but a stronger approach was in need here, and he would not shy from correct teaching.

Seeing a youth's bare forehead in Bochasan, Swamishri called him close, applied a neat round *chandlo* to his forehead and asked why he hadn't done it himself that morning.

The youth answered, "My father says that it looks odd when I go to his office."

“Odd!” Swamishri was amazed. The *tilak-chandlo* was a sacred mark of great beauty. Bhagwan Swaminarayan had first applied it to Gunatitanand Swami’s forehead in Panchala and stated, “This is my *tilak*,” meaning that Gunatitanand Swami was Akshar, the Satpurush through whom Maharaj himself was totally manifest. The *tilak* and *chandlo*, amongst other things, symbolized Akshar and Purushottam, the Lord and his ideal servant. And now people called this priceless gift ‘odd’. Swamishri began to powerfully defend the *tilak-chandlo*, “Your father is an architect, right? Tell him that all his designs look odd, and to stop designing. Will he listen to you? People think it odd that you’re studying. What do you do? Stop studying? The world doesn’t agree with what you eat (vegetarian diet). So what do you do? Die of hunger? The world doesn’t like your clothes, so do you walk around naked? Don’t look to the world and worry about what people will say. Does God and his Sadhu like this? Yes! Then do it... Why bother with anyone else? If you wait to take permission from the world then you can never do Satsang or perform devotion or help the world...”

A young engineer, Mitesh Patel, went to settle in the USA at the insistence of close relatives. Prior to leaving, Swamishri had told him, “Write a letter to me from America every month... Even if you don’t write, I’ll still write to you.” Swamishri did write regularly to Mitesh as promised, his letters often stretching to over 20 pages long. A few excerpts from the collection are reproduced here: “We’ve got this body to please Bapa (Yogiji Maharaj)... Gunatitanand Swami has said in his talks: ‘This body is for us to achieve two things... to become *aksharrup* and unite with Purushottam Narayan.’ Therefore aim to accomplish this. This body and this world are all false. Only God and his Sadhu are the truth... Therefore aspire to

please them. – 1

“Today in the assembly, Vachanamrut, Kariyani 2 was read. Shriji Maharaj says that in this world, there is no other sadhu like this and no other God like Maharaj in the universe... If one realizes this, then one will never notice the drawbacks of others. If you keep this firm in your heart, then you will experience no problems during your work or service in the mandir... Therefore cultivate an understanding like Sitaji’s, as mentioned in Vachanamrut, Gadhada III 11...so that one never finds fault with God or his realized Sadhu. With such understanding, one’s enthusiasm will never waver. (Swamishri also wrote episodes from the life of Sitaji and Mulji Brahmachari in great detail.) – 2

“The environment over there may be tempting...if one is not vigilant, the potential for problems is great... Therefore take care...keep your eyes cast downwards when walking on the streets and continue your devotion. If some difficulties arise, then don’t lose heart but be mindful not to make the same mistake again. You have met Bapa (Yogiji Maharaj)... he will give you bliss. Don’t give in...be bold and speak words of courage. If one is steadfast, then the Lord will surely help him... We’ve also prayed for you from here. – 3

“Today Vachanamrut, Gadhada III 21 was read... It explained that the reason for seeing drawbacks in others is excessive love to one’s body and its relations...due to the feeling that I am this body. In reality, we are *atma*... devotees... the servants of God. Realize this and remain content. If one realizes the self as *atma*, then others’ flaws will not be noticed; neither will one get attached to other things apart from God. Read this Vachanamrut and ponder over it deeply... In the way a lizard in the light of a lamp watches small insects and eats them up, *atmic* consciousness when awakened, drives away

any undesirable thoughts.... Ponder over these words time and time again. – 4

“Gunatit is the abode of the Lord. A Gunatit or God-realized Sadhu beholds Shriji Maharaj from head to toe. Develop firm attachment to such a Sadhu. Besides that everything in the infinite worlds is comparable to piles of ashes...all is insignificant...perishable...there is no happiness in that.” – 5

This correspondence between Swamishri and Mitesh commenced in June 1978 and continued until April 1981 when Mitesh was initiated as a sadhu during the Bicentenary Celebrations of Bhagwan Swaminarayan in Ahmedabad.

* * *

Kanti and Suresh of Ahmedabad having completed college were serving in Akshardham during the building phase. Swamishri called them to Bhadra with the intention of granting them the benefit and joy of his personal proximity and service.

Once, during lunch, Suresh was reading to Swamishri from Yogiji Maharaj’s biography. Swamishri looked up and began to speak, “When serving always remember Maharaj, and serve properly. Cultivate firmly such knowledge and understanding that you will never be troubled or confused. One should never experience these things. You have come to this spiritual college to become *brahmarup*. People will slander you, insult you, but tolerate it all. In this way you will overcome body consciousness – the attachment and firm belief that your real self is the body and not the soul,” Swamishri completely forgot he had sat down to lunch; he continued, “Take care to introspect constantly. Don’t believe yourself to be a sahib, this is most important... Make do with whatever is available. You may get a bed or have to sleep on the floor, so what? We want to please God; that is our goal. Look to Yogiji Maharaj’s life for inspiration... If you eat whatever is available in the kitchen

and expect nothing special, you'll be happy. We should eat only to fill the stomach, not to enjoy the sense pleasure of taste..."

Vidyanagar, 1990

Twenty-one thousand young men and women listened in rapt attention to Swamishri conclude the five-day International Youth Festival. For almost a year these youngsters had diligently prepared for the convention and take part in the 21 competitions. Many had memorized the complete Vachanamrut or the Swamini Vato. Others had learnt Sanskrit verses, and kirtans. Those with oratory skills had prepared speeches and discourses. Now it was all over. Prizes had been distributed the previous evening. Swamishri had said that everyone who attended the festival was a prize winner. Some people were gifted with God-given talents, but what was more important was the effort put in and the sincerity of the preparations.

The farewell was going to be a sad affair. Swamishri was trying to make it as light as possible. He was deeply touched. So many thousands of youngsters were actively applying spiritual principles to their lives, and these were just the representatives. Thousands more had been left behind at home.

The summer sun was relentless. The huge marquee erected on the grounds of Shastri Medan had become suffocating, although it was still morning. Seniors had planned that when Swamishri finished his blessings the assembly would end. Swamishri, however, instructed that each youth be allowed to come forward and meet him personally. The announcement was greeted with thunderous applause by the audience.

Patting each individual, smiling, talking and blessing, Swamishri sat on his seat for two hours. Dust hung in clouds around him, making the heat even more unbearable. Someone commented, "How hot it is!"

Swamishri smiled. He said, "Instead of wondering at the heat look to the efforts of these youngsters." When finally the last had passed, happy and contented, Swamishri stood up at 2:00 p.m., his eyelashes caked with dust.

Swamishri was in Ahmedabad and had been asked by Chhabildasbhai Kachvala to sanctify his new home and dine there. His invitation was accepted.

Chhabildasbhai was concerned for his son, Raju. A year earlier he had told Swamishri of his son's craze for buying clothes. He already had two hundred pairs of shirts and trousers.

Before Swamishri sat down to dine he asked Raju whether he had bought any new clothes in the past year. He was pleased when Raju replied in the negative.

Later, a still worried relative whispered in Swamishri's ear, "Swamiji, please talk to Raju...he has collected so many clothes..."

Swamishri replied, "I worry about him more than you do! To you he is a relative. But to me, he is my *satsangi*..."

Once, while Swamishri was reading letters, the son of Shivabhai of Ahmedabad came for darshan. He wanted to say something but hesitated. Swamishri discerned this. With one eye still on his letters, Swamishri said, "Whatever you want to ask, go ahead." The youth asked five questions in a row. As Swamishri had continued reading his letters, the youth had doubts about whether Swamishri had listened to his questions properly. But this curtain of skepticism was soon drawn when Swamishri finished dealing with the mail. He started talking to the youth and answered each question in order one by one. Only then did those present realize the extent of Swamishri's capacity to concentrate.

Ahmedabad, August 1993

Swamishri's face showed surprise when he stepped through the wide swing door that opened into his meeting lounge. The teenagers were sitting in neat rows and as the door was closed behind Swamishri, on cue they began to sing Sanskrit verses. Devan and Dhaval from Florida had the best voices and so they led the singing, holding the microphones. The verses had been picked from the Upanishads, Gita, Shikshapatri and Stotra Sindu. Swamishri looked from one to the other, checking whether each was singing by heart or reading. Most were singing by heart. Their pronunciations were remarkably clear. He was pleased. Imagination defied the scene. Just a month ago these kids had landed at Ahmedabad Airport, tired and apprehensive. For some this was their first trip to India. A youth camp had been organized in Ahmedabad for them and they weren't sure whether they would enjoy it or not.

For a few days the sadhus had talked to them about Satsang and Hinduism, they had gone on picnics and a tour of the Swaminarayan mandirs, seen Akshardham, learnt some verses and had completed minor research projects. For the past four to five days they had been giving short speeches in English and Gujarati.

Mitul had gallantly struggled to finish his Gujarati speech on Shastriji Maharaj. Swamishri had listened carefully, almost willing him on. Sagar had also spoken in Gujarati. Kartik spoke on a vegetarian diet in English. Swamishri had watched and listened in a kindly, fatherly way. These were his spiritual children, trusting him to lead them into a spiritual life, helping them to retain their Indian roots and escape the great American melting pot. Swamishri knew that they would not be able to follow all the rules of a *satsangi's* life, though he was hopeful that they would quickly learn. The teens appeared

not much different from any other group of US highschoolers who might have assembled at any number of happenings; spiritual, cultural, musical or whatever. The kids in turn watched him curiously. How would he respond to their singing of Sanskrit verses?

He smiled a ray of appreciation and their hearts beamed back. These were his boys, his *satsangis*. In America there were hundreds more like them, boys and girls. They didn't know much about Satsang, but wanted to. They were trying. Some had promised to stop watching television. All had said they wouldn't eat meat. Most already did regular puja and attended special assemblies in their mandirs across America.

Yes, the future was good. Maharaj had blessed America. These kids and their friends were not ordinary. Now they had set out on the road to satsang and things would be easier. He would still have to spend a lot of time with them. Yogiji Maharaj's grace would help them. Satsang would spread throughout the States and these kids would help spearhead it. Maybe some would also become sadhus. Several already had.

12

Laugh and Make Play

“I quickly began to inhale and exhale. With great skill he managed to keep balance, all the while laughing almost uncontrollably. ‘It feels like an escalator,’ he said...”

Executive engineer Mr. Jethva had invited Swamishri to stay at his home while in Ukai. The actual dam built across the River Tapi between two hills rose to a colossal height. Ukai had now become a scenic spot. The countryside was a rich green and sparsely inhabited.

Mr. Jethva worked at the dam. One night he invited colleagues home for darshan and satsang in Swamishri’s presence. A little assembly was organized in the house, and on a broad bench a seat for Swamishri had been prepared. He sat in the middle and had Dr Swami and Mahant Swami sit on either side. The assembly had already started when Narayan Bhagat (Viveksagar Swami) entered. Mahant Swami insisted he sit on the bench so as to make introductions easier. Everybody on the

bench moved a little to accommodate him.

With that the bench collapsed. Swamishri and the two senior sadhus flipped over backwards, head first feet in the air! The horrified engineers rushed to their aid. They helped Swamishri up. He was laughing uncontrollably! He found the whole accident hilarious. The serious business of satsang had been going on and then... whoop, the backward flip. His sense of humour had saved the day.

Almost twenty years later, in a convention at Lonavala, outside Mumbai, Swamishri was writing letters in the assembly when Viveksagar Swami was recounting this incident, "And as they moved a little the bench collapsed and they flew over backwards..." As he heard this, Swamishri burst into laughter, leaned back and raised his legs and hands to demonstrate to the audience how he had fallen. Laughter rippled across the hall.

* * *

The youths were happy and expectant. It was Sunday morning and Swamishri had accepted their invitation to grace the weekly assembly that Yogiji Maharaj had started so many years ago. In fact, Ahmedabad Yuvak Mandal was unique. It had the distinction of being inaugurated seventeen times before roots had finally stuck and begun to grow. Over a period of several years Yogiji Maharaj had with great patience seen his efforts collapse sixteen times. He would appoint a committee, show them how to run the assembly, say words of encouragement, bless the youths, and within a couple of weeks of leaving Ahmedabad he would hear that the assembly had stopped. On his next stay he would try again.

It was now the mid-eighties, and the Ahmedabad Yuvak Mandal had become one of the most active in the world, and today several hundred youths had packed into the mandir hall.

After Yogiji Maharaj, Swamishri had continued encouraging

the organization of Yuvak Mandals. By 1981, when the Bhagwan Swaminarayan bicentenary had been celebrated there were 10,000 youth volunteers who had sacrificed over a month of their time for service in the festival. During the centenary celebrations of Yogiji Maharaj in 1992, 17,000 youth volunteers had served.

Ahmedabad Yuvak Mandal had organized a quiz named, 'Ame anek, mana ek' – 'We may be many, but are of one mind.'

The first question was asked, "You are wearing a Rado wrist watch. When you come to touch Swamishri's feet he sees the watch and says the watch would look fine on Thakorji's wrist. What would you do?"

One after the other the contestants answered. A sadhu chipped in, "What they should answer is that 'along with the watch I'd also give my hand'." This meant that the youth was fully giving himself in the Lord's service as a sadhu, renouncing the world and family. There was laughter on all sides.

Swamishri said, "These people have already given their hands elsewhere!" He was referring to their wives and marriage. The entire assembly burst into applause and laughter. Yes, he was so right. Yet he made so light of their material attachments!

One morning in Ahmedabad as Swamishri was having breakfast, talk turned to how Swamishri manages to remain lighthearted in the midst of so much activity. On the spot, in every circumstance, he seems able to see the funny side and can create out of sometimes utter dejection a bubbling humour. Brahmavihari Swami quoted from the 5th chapter of the Swamini Vato.

"Yes," Swamishri agreed, "This is something rare and precious. Maharaj was always making everybody laugh. First he made them (*parambansas*) perform austerities and then when they had passed through that phase he himself would come

and serve them tasty food when they sat down to eat. He fed them a lot, celebrated festivals, played *rās*, gave knowledge and enabled them to love him. It is only when God and the Satpuruṣh become like us that we enjoy the bliss of their association. If you cling too closely to decorum then what joy is there? And here at all times you can laugh and make play of all kinds!”

One afternoon in Sarangpur he was sitting in the Sant Ashram. A sadhu pointing to another said, “He’s always making us laugh!”

Swamishri replied, “Once you have met God and his Sadhu what else is there to do but laugh!”

Another time he had said, “I feel happy when I see all of you laugh...”

In 1986, a Mumbai-based journalist had asked him, “Have you ever felt remorse?”

“Never,” Swamishri had answered directly. Despite being the president of an international organization and a spiritual master responsible for the spiritual lives of countless disciples, he does not worry or become tense, but remains as fresh and fragrant as a newly blossomed rose. Had he not told Carlos Vegas in Los Angeles, “I have God.”

He often tells devotees that the supreme all-doer is God, and by accepting this we should bravely face whatever hardships God decides to test us with, and graciously enjoy whatever happiness he blesses us with.

* * *

A devotee should always live a life fully within the commands of God. The devotee is a servant and God is his master. When the master commands the servant he becomes responsible for all consequences. Swamishri is the ideal servant, his sense of humour teaches his disciples the way to become a true servant of God.

In Mumbai one evening after the assembly, Swamishri was taking the small lift to his fifth floor room. The sadhus had run up the stairs. Most had climbed to the fifth floor and were waiting for Swamishri. Some were waiting by the elevator exit on the third floor. As the elevator came up they began to loudly mimic the sound of a puffing train, “Chug, chug, chug, chug...” Others began to copy the cries of vendors and station boys selling their fruits and snacks. After Swamishri passed them they rushed up to the fifth floor and stood in a line as wagons, holding each other’s shoulder cloths, one standing behind the other.

Stepping out of the elevator Swamishri instantly read the game. He became the locomotive and stood at the head of the line. The sadhu behind him held Swamishri’s shoulder cloth.

Swamishri ordered Krishnapriya Swami, “You be the guard’s wagon which is last. Guards are fat like you!”

He then ‘chugged’, the wagons following behind, walking to his room. When they reached the bathroom he stopped. “That’s it, the station’s here. All wagons separate,” he called. He was like a grandfather playing with his grandchildren.

Swamishri visited the bathroom. When he came back the sadhus were still giggling. A warm glow of wellbeing and closeness pervaded the atmosphere. With a gesture of his hand Swamishri said, “Happy and jesting in this way we’ll all surely get to Akshardham.”

It was a promise. A game had been played but a message had to be learnt. To reach God’s divine abode and reside there eternally in his presence one had to follow the Satpurush, one had to hold on to him and follow wherever he led. He was the locomotive who could pull the soul from the cess pool of sense pleasures that it has been wallowing in for innumerable births.

Swamishri was in Ahmedabad, taking his early evening

walk in the meeting lounge that led to his bedroom. The two longer walls were lined by sadhus singing Chosath Padi, the 64 Gujarati verses composed by Niskulanand Swami, describing the attributes of a bonafide sadhu and a pseudo-sadhu. Swamishri paced the hall long ways, his stride never once breaking. After the Chosath Padi, one or two kirtans were sung. The time allotted for walking had just about finished, but Swamishri kept walking. Brahmaaprakash Swami called, "Bapa, it's time to finish." Swamishri waved in the negative. Narayancharan Swami, Swamishri's personal attendant, also called that time was up, only to be ignored.

Brahmaaprakash Swami thought of doing something. As Swamishri walked away from the wall with the entrance and exit doors, he stood up and sat exactly in the middle of the lounge directly in Swamishri's path.

Swamishri turned beneath the mahogany-coloured air conditioner grills. He saw Brahmaaprakash Swami and smiled, but continued walking at his usual lively pace.

Brahmaaprakash Swami described: "I had decided not to move. If he stepped to my left I would dive at his feet and if he stepped to my right I would dive there as well and with both hands embrace his feet. To my surprise Swamishri came straight towards me at the same speed. He wasn't slowing down in the least. He walked right up to me and stopped, his feet touching my crossed legs. Now what? Seconds passed. The other sadhus were laughing. I looked up and could only see Swamishri's soft stomach shaking and hear him laughing as well. He placed one hand on my head. I thought he was blessing me. He put his other hand on my head. Overjoyed that he was blessing me I bowed to accept and felt a sudden weight on my head. In a split second the pressure was gone."

The entire lounge erupted into laughter and applause.

Swamishri had leap-frogged over BrahmaPrakash Swami's head, who looked up to find that Swamishri had disappeared. Swamishri walked up to the opposite wall, and returned to say, "Now the time is up."

* * *

Krishnapriya Swami recounted: "We were in Pavai Vadi, Mumbai. Swamishri was touring the land and asking questions. It was an inspection of sorts. Wanting to amuse Swamishri, we lay down carelessly in the cowsheds copying the posture adopted by wandering mendicant sadhus sleeping on railway platforms. When Swamishri entered the shed we pretended not to notice and remained on the ground, eyes closed. He walked up to us and with his toe prodded my large stomach."

I said, "Swaminarayan *hava bhar de*" (Swaminarayan is filling air) as I slowly inflated my stomach. It ballooned to quite a size! Swamishri put his foot on it. Viveksagar Swami said, 'Even if you stand on him nothing will happen to him.'

"Holding Viveksagar Swami's shoulder for support Swamishri stood on my stomach. I quickly began to inhale and exhale. With great skill he managed to keep balance, all the while laughing almost uncontrollably. 'It feels like an escalator,' he said, 'we stand still and the steps move!'

"I will never forget that time of sheer joy. It was unbeatable. Who else but Swamishri would become so childlike with his spiritual children and take the time to play."

13

A Leader

“Lying in bed last night a thought came to me. I think if we do this...” He then began to explain details of his plan. Tracing lines on the architect’s drawings, he showed...

Atladra, 1965

The centenary celebrations of Shastriji Maharaj were being celebrated. The next day the festival was to begin. The huge marquee had been raised. Now only the walls behind the stage remained. Pramukh Swami had successfully guided the other departments to preparation. Kitchens, accommodations, water supply, security, the list of his involvement seemed endless. Wherever a problem arose the first thought that came to everybody was, “Where is Pramukh Swami?” He was able to find practical solutions and answers where none seemed to exist. Day or night, he was always available and never lost self-control despite the most gigantic of botches by those under him.

“Swami, please go to sleep now. It’s late. We’re all going to stay up with these bricklayers anyway,” the volunteers requested. The next day was the opening of the festival that Yogiji Maharaj had inspired.

Pramukh Swami quietly refused. He was tired, but he also had a responsibility to see the entire festival through. Besides, he might be needed for an emergency. He could also keep the volunteers company, for the night would be a long one.

Early in the morning the wall was complete. Pramukh Swami stood up. He bathed, finished his puja and returned to the festival site to oversee the inauguration by Yogiji Maharaj and Mota Swami.

Pramukh Swami’s leadership qualities had touched the hearts of all the volunteers. They were ready to work very hard at a mere word from him. They knew that he would be with them, always supporting and guiding. He was only forty-four. There were others older but even they had readily accepted him as leader.

These sadhus and devotees had seen him during the 1961 Suvarna Kalash Mahotsav in Gadhada. The scorching heat of the summer had been made worse by an unseasonal wind which was uprooting tents and ripping through pandal ceiling cloths. He had remained calm and confident – redirecting construction work, assessing damage, making modifications.

Haka Bapu stated: “Pramukh Swami’s skinny frame could be seen flying with the speed of lightning from here to there, making sure that preparations were satisfactory. Whether the pandal was being put up or water lines being checked, Pramukh Swami was there, even in the kitchens, accommodations or greeting guests. There was always a smile of pleasure on his face, no hint of tension or burden. After the devotees had lunched on the main day I saw him pulling a large cart and

filling it with dirty leaf-plates.”

It was no wonder that Yogiji Maharaj constantly remembered him and would sometimes refuse to eat without his presence. Yogiji Maharaj had total confidence in Swamishri’s abilities and will to get the job in hand completed properly and on time.

Yogiji Maharaj had willed that a magnificent one-spired mandir be built in Bhadra over the birthplace of Gunatitanand Swami. Bhadra, a remote village not far from the Jodiya seaport, was in truth a collection of tiny ramshackle huts the people called houses. Water was a continuous problem. The River Und a kilometre away, though large, was seasonal. Water flowed for a few weeks in the monsoon and then dried up, seeping quickly into the ground through its gravel bed.

Under great difficulty Pramukh Swami had guided the buying of land around Gunatitanand Swami’s house. The mandir was built and the *murti-pratisbtha* date given by Yogiji Maharaj. Thousands of devotees had been invited. Facilities would of course be sparse, but adequate. The only major concern was water. The village wells were almost dry and could not even begin to meet the festival needs. Pramukh Swami decided to bring water from a well on the far bank of the river by pipeline. That 1962 summer was particularly hot. In the blazing heat Swamishri toiled away with some volunteers and labourers to fit a pipeline over 5,000 ft. long. He remained patient and smiling throughout. This same ability he demonstrated during Yogiji Maharaj’s 1967 Amrut Mahotsav in Gondal.

Perhaps it was only Yogiji Maharaj who had not felt the slightest of doubts when Shastriji Maharaj had appointed Pramukh Swami as president of BAPS at the young age of 28. Shastriji Maharaj had said that he had never regretted any of his decisions and would not regret this one. By appointing

Narayanswarup Swami as president he said he was ensuring the fluent growth and management of his Sanstha for the next fifty years. Those present at that simple ceremony had watched those words bear fruit over the decades.

Pramukh Swami had won their confidence and hearts. He was always the first to concede that Yogiji Maharaj's blessings had watched over his service and the sadhus and volunteers had given him their unalloyed cooperation. If something went wrong, he would shoulder the blame.

Gandhinagar, 3 December 1992

The day after the Yogiji Maharaj Centennial Celebrations had concluded, Swamishri arrived to an assembly arranged specially for the 11,000 volunteers who had given their all during the festival. This was the climax of the festival for them. Through these volunteers Swamishri had worked a miracle. The volunteers were eternally indebted to Swamishri for gracing them with such an opportunity to serve him. In a meagre and humble attempt to express their gratitude, a special collective ritual called *pushpanjali* had been arranged. Each volunteer was given rose petals to hold. Totally focused on Swamishri, they rose to their feet. After auspicious Vedic verses were sung, they ceremoniously threw the rose petals towards Swamishri. For a few seconds it rained roses as petals floated to the ground.

Swamishri began his blessings, "In return for your service, I pay you my sincerest respects. Even a million *dandvats* are not enough... You all showered rose petals on me, but I would like to return the..." Swamishri's words broke off. His voice choked and eyes filled with tears. He gathered a handful of roses and petals from a plate to his right and showered them upon the volunteers.

Silence reigned. Everybody was stunned by the unexpected. It were as if each petal had been perfumed with peace, and Swamishri was gifting that peace into the hearts of every volunteer and sadhu. All those months of spiritual sweat and toil had been paid back a million-fold.

* * *

The Aksharbrahman Gunatitanand Swami Bicentenary Celebration in 1985 was the second mammoth public festival that Swamishri had inspired and organized. Two hundred acres of neglected land owned by Gujarat University had been transformed into a cultural wonderland. The gateway at the entrance area gently curved to a span of 110 ft. The centre pillars were reminiscent of the grand columns supporting the Roman coliseum.

Late one afternoon the left wing of the gateway caught fire. The wooden supports, plywood and burlap materials went up in smoke. Stringent fire precautions had been taken and so only the left wing was burnt down. Nobody was hurt.

The gateway now looked unbalanced and awkward without its limb, only a shadow of its former glory.

Swamishri visited the scene in the evening. He didn't stay very long for the damage was obvious. His presence comforted the volunteers who were cleaning the burnt remains away.

Seniors had already begun discussing the next line of action. The gateway in its present handicapped state would not do at all. The 59-day festival had still to run another month. It was best, they said, that the right wing be dismantled. This would leave the centre portion. It was better than nothing they reasoned. Reconstructing the destroyed wing was out of the question. The job would take over six weeks. Besides, who had the necessary skill to redo all the decoration which had taken the Bengali artisans several months. And they had gone

back to Kolkata anyway.

The mood that night among the sadhus and devotees was melancholy. The festival had taken a few years in the planning. Now this disaster. Everybody was surprised to see Swamishri in a light mood. He freed the choked atmosphere. They could see he had put the incident behind him, depending, as always, on Maharaj.

He discussed the alternatives with seniors and then told the sadhus to rebuild it. They were new and inexperienced to this type of work. Could it be done? Yes, decided Swamishri. Not only could it be done, but it would be done, and in record-breaking time. There was no arguing against him. Drawings were made of the twin right wing and then inverted to make drawings of the left. Over 150 sadhus put their will to the task. In seven days the gateway was rebuilt to its former magnificence.

The sadhus were overjoyed. Swamishri had tapped a strength and talent within them that they hadn't even dreamed of. He had shown tremendous confidence in them. They had replied handsomely.

The same was also the case with the American Satsang Mandal. In 1988 they had put forward a proposition that they wanted to celebrate a Cultural Festival of India, similar to the one held in London in 1985, but much bigger. It was only after Swamishri had said yes and they began to probe into the complexities of such a privately sponsored project that they discovered its leviathan dimensions. Swamishri gave encouragement and guidance. There was no backing out. It would be the perfect way to link American ingenuity with India's culture and spirituality. The two could be combined to mind blowing results. He wanted the project to become a part of the Brahaswarup Yogiji Maharaj Centenary Celebrations coming up in 1992.

In July and August 1991, the one million visitors that flocked to the 40 acres site in Edison, New Jersey, were witness to the phenomenal management skills the North American *satsangi* volunteers had developed. They said it was Swamishri's vision and courage that had given them the audacity to mount such a festival. They often refer to the vast amounts of correspondence and scores of meetings and telephone calls through which Swamishri guided the CFI from India, only arriving in the US two days before the inauguration.

On 11 August (the festival opened on 12 August) he made a tour of the site, his expert eye catching things the volunteers had missed. He was pointing out things that if corrected would add lustre to the entire festival. During the evening *sabha*, arranged specially for the volunteers, he called a sadhu who was sitting backstage and asked, "Who is in charge of putting up the sign boards?"

The question caught the sadhu off guard. As the question sunk in he realized that not a single board had been prepared. In the confusion of last minute finishing everybody had forgotten the obvious.

"Who is going to know who organized the festival?" Swamishri asked. "Say somebody wants to visit the exhibition, or have a snack, do you want him to wander around the whole *nagar*? Put up signboards everywhere."

At the end of the *sabha* he again told the sadhu, "Make sure those boards are prepared and put up." The next morning he mentioned the boards after his puja and reminded the sadhu once again that evening. With so good a follow-up it was no wonder that within a couple of days scores of sign boards had been made and set up around the site.

Swamishri was in the middle of writing a letter to Atmaswarup Swami. By a happy coincidence, Atmaswarup

Swami happened to phone Swamishri at that time. They discussed the matter over the phone. After ending their conversation, Swamishri continued to write the unfinished letter. Narayancharan Swami remarked, "You've already spoken to him... What's the point of writing now?"

Swamishri said, "The letter is almost complete anyway. Why not finish it off!" This lighthearted reply probably hid Swamishri's experience that details by mouth are easily forgotten or overlooked compared to information written in black and white. He was making sure the message was understood.

Yogiji Maharaj's Centenary was an even more complex festival than the CFI in America. Goliath in proportion and heaven-like in beauty, the festival was attended by over six million people. One hundred and eighty acres of barren land was transformed into a cultural oasis. There were 250,000 sq. ft of lawns, and 110,000 flowers and bushes were planted. Fountains, ponds and rock gardens added beauty. Accommodations were provided for 360,000 people. For them were constructed 1,500 urinals, 590 lavatories, 1,365 bathrooms, 891 long wash basins, and to keep the entire festival smoothly functioning 122 kilometres of intercom wiring was laid. A full dish of *prasad* was served to 5,200,000 guests! It became a common joke among the 23,000 volunteers to point at the two concrete chimneys of the Gujarat Electricity Board opposite the festival site when people asked where all the food was cooked. One for *dal* and the other for boiled rice!

* * *

Some youths in New York once performed a concert of devotional songs and subsequently sent a recording to Swamishri along with photographs of the event. Swamishri's reply was the art of sincere appreciation at its best: "We've heard your cassette...seen the photos of the instrumentalists

and singers. It was a pleasure... Heard your kirtan '*Bhav sāgarnā neera...*' ...also Mahesh's '*Guru mālyā guna vālā...*' The others were also sung nicely, I never knew that Neelkamal could play the violin...saw his photo... Damodar Parmar also sings well..."

The youths were tremendously motivated and inspired to continue such concerts. They also began to teach the children and so a talented group of musicians and singers developed.

* * *

For the first several days of the monsoon in 1983, Swamishri was in Sarangpur. Every day the sadhus and *parshads* would ask him some questions. They wanted to know how they could best develop their spiritual lives and become sadhus in the true sense of the word. They wanted to know how Swamishri had coped in his early days as a sadhu, his relationship with his guru, and anything else as their spiritual master, he might wish to tell them.

One sadhu asked, "Do you have any special wishes that you want to see fulfilled?"

He was referring to Yogiji Maharaj who would often talk of his spiritual desires for promoting the spread of Satsang. During his last illness in Mumbai Hospital he had even dictated a list, "To make a gateway for the Akshar Mandir, build a college, make two gold *sinhasans* for the Lord in Gondal..."

"Yes," replied Pramukh Swami Maharaj, "Akshardham."

This hi-tech cultural monument to Bhagwan Swaminarayan took thirteen years to construct in Gandhinagar, Gujarat. It was phased so that adequate time and space could be allocated to the exhibitions.

As Swamishri had revealed, it was his special project. His ideas, suggestions and push were a constant presence on the site. He selected Rajasthani pink stone as the primary building

material and also suggested that the *shikhar* be octagonal. He insisted that the monument face the north and then had the main steps shifted although their construction had already begun. The vast empty space in front of the monument was also his idea. It would enhance the beauty of the monument he had said. The exhibitions he directed should be the finest in India. They should be of world class level. So he sent a team of six sadhus on a world tour to survey exhibitions and shows.

Use whatever technology you need he had instructed. Science should be used in the service of religion and culture. He saw the need for more land and the need for phasing. Swamishri would frequently meet with the designers, engineers, builders, artists and even the work crews. At other times he would write or speak on the phone.

The Akshardham mandir was to be surrounded by a *parikrama* – a circumambulatory passage. Where the two ends of the *parikrama* met in front of the mandir there were plans for a magnificent gateway. It would however obstruct the view of the mandir from the garden and also took up a lot of space. For months the problem had been discussed and examined but no practical solution could be found.

One night when Swamishri next came to Gandhinagar the problem was put before him. He listened to all the points and said, “When I come on site tomorrow we’ll discuss the point.” The next day he met with everyone where the proposed gateway was to stand. He said, “Lying in bed last night a thought came to me. I think if we do this...” He then began to explain details of his plan. Tracing lines on the architect’s drawings, he showed, “At this point where you propose to join two ends of the *parikrama* – let us leave it open. Opposite the mandir there is no need of a gateway. Instead keep the whole thing open. Where the *parikrama* ends raise a podium to a

height that matches the height of the *parikrama*. There is no need of the podium being higher. Put the gateway facing 'J' Road. Build a hall, through which visitors pass on their way to this point. This is what I feel, but let us do whatever everybody thinks fit..."

The group was stunned. In just a few minutes Swamishri had not only solved the problem but had opened up new ideas and concepts. And with the opening only months away he was suggesting they make major design changes!

The Akshardham project was vast in scope, each department depended on another for it to be able to finish allocated stages on time. Sometimes skilled craftsmen were not available and so schedules had to be reshuffled, further delaying major dates.

During the final months work was conducted in three shifts. If even one person were to fall ill or flag, serious consequences were felt. Swamishri, who had worked with craftsmen for many years completing the mandirs built by Shastriji Maharaj, called a special *sabha* of the craftsmen and carpenters. He was happy with their work and efforts. He blessed and thanked them speaking in Hindi, "All of you believe this work to be your own. The opening ceremony is fast approaching, lakhs of people will come to see your craftsmanship. If we do not finish on time all of us will have to look down...for the next two months please try and forget your children and families, time is precious, a day is a year; now there are only two months left. You are doing all this for God. He will look after your lands and families. He will bless you..."

Edison, New Jersey, 20 August 1991

Jim lived across the road from the Middlesex County College, where the Cultural Festival of India had been celebrated. Due to the thousands of visitors rushing in each

day, many people had parked their cars in the neighbouring streets of the festival ground. Some locals had come together in opposition, and even printed their protest in a local newspaper. When Swamishri called him in, Jim began what he had come to say, “We owe you an apology. We did a lot against you all, but now we realize our mistake. I’ve come on behalf of our neighbourhood to congratulate you. Your festival was superb. We got a chance to see India’s great culture, and we were thrilled. I used to come everyday, but today I’ve come especially to say sorry. We were wrong in causing such an uproar. We understood later. In hindsight, we even gave an official apology in the papers, but they didn’t print it. We’re really sorry.”

Swamishri listened calmly and replied, “It’s not important whether the newspaper printed your apology or not. Your genuine feelings are enough for us. God will be pleased and you will find peace.”

Jim added, “There is a French saying, ‘When two people part, they leave a part of each other.’ We will cherish the part you have given us in our hearts forever.”

Swamishri endorsed, “This is what Indian culture is all about.”

* * *

A particular problem was once to be decided upon by a court. Harishbhai Dave, General Secretary of the Sanstha, consulted a senior advocate and initiated the necessary paperwork. He informed Swamishri of the advocate’s advice.

Swamishri listened and then asked a few questions. Finally he said, “Our presentation of the facts to the court show that we are correct, but even then the decision will not come in our favour. There is no chance at all. But if you present the facts in this way...” He explained in depth how to plead the case. And

sure enough with the facts presented in a new light the court favoured the Sanstha.

The senior advocate and Harishbhai were astonished to see Swamishri's grasping and analytical power, in spite of the fact that he had received no professional training in matters of administration and law.

For a number of years a certain misunderstanding with another organization had not been settled satisfactorily. The questions were administrative. Eventually the organization proposed that a meeting be convened and the issues considered. Swamishri had suggested such a meeting before but the proposal had then come to nothing. Naturally, he readily agreed to the meeting.

At the appointed place the organization had collected together its trustees, lawyers and responsible seniors. Swamishri was accompanied by two sadhus and three devotees. From the beginning the organization representatives began opening files and referring points dating back some fifty years! They were very well prepared. When they had finished he began answering their questions and suppositions. He did not open any files or turn to the sadhus or devotees for prodding. His arguments were logical, supported by a detailed knowledge of the subject matter despite the years that had passed. At the end of the meeting a representative of the organization could not help saying, "Until now we had heard a lot about Swamiji's spirituality. Today, we have come to realize that he is a very capable president as well. Today we have seen his fantastic decision-making power and razor sharp intelligence."

Harishbhai narrated: "The meeting was very successful. It was all very cordial and friendly. Everybody was happy with the outcome. After the meeting some more decisions concerning our Sanstha had to be made. Swamishri asked me to remain

while he finished his evening Yoga exercises. When he called me he was his normal relaxed self. The decisions that had to be taken were of great importance and would affect the future of the Sanstha. But within five minutes Swamishri had decided on all points and had me leaving! It was incredible. The decisions were all logical and later proved correct. I was reminded of another incident when in the space of an 80-minute meeting he gave decisions on 56 different matters!”

The Satsang centre in London had purchased some quality land in Harrow for the purpose of building a traditional mandir. Despite many attempts by devotees, permission to build a mandir on the site was eventually refused. Naturally all the devotees were disappointed, especially after so many years of wrangling with the local authorities. For many, this untimely setback proved intolerable. With the decision against the Sanstha’s favour, the individual who stood to lose the most from all this was Swamishri himself. When Swamishri received the news by phone in Atladra he remained calm and composed.

To ward off feelings of dejection among the devotees, Swamishri lost no time in writing a nine-page letter to London. Swamishri’s profound understanding becomes apparent as one reads the letter: “This has been the method from Maharaj’s time... Whatever he may be doing, it is for the good... Such incidents are a test for us...to test our faith, our understanding, our devotion and our spirit of service. Maharaj wants to make us spiritually strong... Whatever he does will turn out for the best... Therefore don’t lose heart.”

The Satsang centre quickly picked up momentum following this temporary setback. What Swamishri had written at that time may have been difficult to digest, but the truth of his words rings in our ears when one examines the situation today

– the opening of a beautiful spired mandir, built in traditional Indian style in Neasden, London, in August 1995.

His profound love for devotees and his managerial acumen are amply illustrated by the 14-page letter he wrote to Rajeshwar Swami in Atladra, regarding the cremation rites of C.M. Patel, Chairman of UK Satsang Mandal, who passed away in London in January 1994. Swamishri arranged for the body to be flown to Mumbai and from there to Atladra.

Swamishri wrote, “Devotees, relatives and the sons of C.M. Patel will be coming with his body. They will arrive at Vadodara airport at 7:30 a.m. The body will be packed in a coffin. Please ensure that it leaves the airport at the earliest opportunity; to hasten this, meet the necessary officials beforehand to get permission.

“Send about five cars to the airport for the accompanying devotees... Keep a long vehicle such as a Matador for the coffin itself.

“From the airport, send the cars to our youth hostel. The devotees may want to freshen up there...therefore have the bathrooms cleaned in good time.

“Ensure that the devotees’ baggage is kept safely under lock and key in a room. Keep two reliable people to look after the luggage.

“The field, where the cremation is to be performed, should be totally cleared so that all can sit comfortably... Keep a few chairs on one side for the elderly devotees to use.

“Keep separate arrangements for the women devotees as well – so that they can also be present.

“Conduct the ceremony adjacent to the spot where the final rites of Mota Swami (a senior sadhu from the time of Shastriji Maharaj and Yogiji Maharaj) were performed... Have firewood

placed there in advance...five to seven pieces of sandalwood... Also keep ghee and sesame seeds at hand.

“Prepare a special bier for the body to be placed in the traditional way. If necessary, employ a carpenter. When I come, show the bier to me personally...in case any changes need to be made.

“Arrange the body in a room adjacent to the main gateway of the mandir. Build the marquee towards the school... Also make a stage with arrangements for microphones so that an assembly can be held.

“I have written whatever has come to mind...anything else that needs to be arranged besides this, please go ahead...”

14

Bettering People, Bettering Society

“Then as a religious organization, is it appropriate that you pamper the ‘something for nothing’ weakness of the people by organizing bingo. If religious people like us let people play bingo then youngsters will think that religion has given freedom to gamble.”

A devotee from Jamnagar sent a letter to Swamishri who was in Mumbai at that time. Swamishri took the letter in his hand. He read it, or to put it another way, he tried to read it. He turned it around a couple of times attempting to decipher what had been scribbled. He passed it on to Dharmacharan Swami who was sitting next to him, “See this... Can you understand any of it?”

Dharmacharan Swami attempted to read the letter, but he too was unable to make head or tail of it. Swamishri gave it one more try but met with no success. He wrote to the devotee

in question: “Received your letter... We tried to read it but were unable to understand it. Please rewrite another letter.”

A few days later, Swamishri received a neater version from Jamnagar. This time, he was able to read the letter and give appropriate guidance.

Swamishri is determined to help wherever he can. His patience and understanding have enabled him to serve society and God.

* * *

The young man was very angry. He could barely control himself. For some time now he had been having quarrels with his parents. He had enough he said. Now was the time to act. How much longer was he supposed to tolerate.

Swamishri was in the small town of Vakaner. The young man stood in front of him bristling. “I’m going to teach those people a lesson. I’ll become so wayward by drinking and doing other things that it’ll open their eyes.”

“That’s being stupid,” replied Swamishri.

“Then am I supposed to tolerate all their outrages silently like a dumb person?”

Swamishri remained unmoved. He began to speak, “Listen, what right do you have to punish your parents? To open your parent’s eyes you want to drink. Who is to lose though? You yourself will have to suffer the fruits of your actions. And God is there to look to the behaviour of your parents. If you become addicted you yourself will become very miserable. Start a business yourself, do something else, but don’t take such steps against your mother and father; what face will you show to society?” He continued in a similar vein for a while. The youth calmed down and began to digest Swamishri’s words. At the end he accepted the advice. He would tolerate whatever problems his parents caused him and wait for happier days.

Introspection by the young man was necessary. This he could only do if there was a semblance of peace in the house. Swamishri knew this. He also knew that the fault was on both sides. If the son realized his own faults this would help his parents to change.

This was not the first time Swamishri had spent so much time with a family member, hoping that the family would not disintegrate. Family values, he says, are being eroded by a lack of tolerance. When four people get together under one roof there is bound to be friction. With understanding, respect and tolerance there is no family difficulty that cannot be faced and resolved with success.

A well-to-do Mumbai family was on the verge of collapse. The father had recently passed away and his sons were quarrelling over the inheritance. Many relatives had attempted to intercede but the brothers would trust no one. To them, everybody had a selfish motive. Finally, the case was brought to Swamishri. He called the brothers and after two months of negotiations a satisfactory sharing of property was agreed upon.

A teacher was plagued by violent outbursts of anger. His young daughter once switched on the radio. He asked her to switch it off. When the girl thought that her father had fallen asleep she again switched the radio on. He was however awake. In reckless fury he jumped up and threw the radio onto the floor, destroying it.

Another time his son was riding his cycle in the yard. When told to sit down and do some schoolwork the boy ignored his father. At once the teacher grabbed the cycle. He turned it over and with a piece of wood began bashing it. Several days later he had to sell it to a salvager.

The family was disturbed by his uncontrollable anger and lived in fear of his violence. Through a friend the family came

into contact with several *satsangi* families. When Swamishri was in Bochasan they went there for darshan.

The teacher explained: “It was the first time I was meeting him. I found myself telling him about my anger and how it terrified everyone. Bapa put his hand on my head and said, “Chant ‘Swaminarayan, Swaminarayan’, your anger will go.” He blessed me. Since then for the past four years my anger has almost disappeared. Swamishri changed my life. I’m indebted to him for life.”

An acutely distressed widow sent a message through a devotee to Swamishri, “Please tell Swami to change my Kamal. He has become addicted to beer, keeps company with other addicts, and now cannot remain without drinks. He steals money from the house and beats his wife. When I ask he never hesitates to beat me wildly... What can I do? I see no road ahead. I cannot bear to see the unhappiness of his ten month old child... I’m so worried for the future... I’m so unhappy...”

Swamishri heard the story. He was moved. He had Kamal brought to him and sat him down for a while. The two talked over the problems. Kamal doing most of the listening. He promised to try and change for the better. But Swamishri would not let him return home. To go home would be falling into a trap he said. Friends would be waiting.

“They will take you back to your old habits. The temptation will be too great,” Swamishri warned. Kamal was confused. Swamishri told him to stay with him. He could tour with him for a while under his watchful eye. For the next month Kamal stayed by Swamishri’s side. Every day the two would talk a little. Kamal grew in strength and conviction. His repentance was complete. Swamishri sent him home confident that he could now battle temptation successfully.

Another family had been saved. This pleased Swamishri.

This was the way he could help society, by reintegrating fragmented families.

The family is the basic building block of a healthy society. If families are in trouble, society is in trouble. And this was what he saw, read about and heard daily. Over the years Swamishri had come across thousands of cases like this, which he found, with a little help, could be cured.

“Nobody in my family understands,” a retiree had complained to Swamishri. He had decided to sue for divorce and live separately from his wife and sons. “My sons don’t care for me, so I’ll live off my pension. The kids and their mother have ganged up on me and are ready to kill me. I won’t stay with them...”

The situation had arisen largely due to his own stubbornness. He had rashly filed divorce papers and naturally his sons had taken sides with their mother.

Swamishri was annoyed with him. In no uncertain words he said, “Why have you gone so far. You should have at least told me first!”

“Bapa, you’re *antaryami* – you know everything!”

“If you really believe that then forget this whole business. When you die are you going to take anything with you? You’re old now. It’s time to worship God. The children are there to take care of all matters. Just look at the mess caused by your argument. What is the point of your being a *satsangi*? Are *satsangis* of Maharaj and Swami like this? Now, forget everything.”

“As you say, Swami. You are pleased with me, aren’t you?”

“Of course I am. When you’re happy I’m happy...”

“Bapa, because you stepped in the problem has been solved, otherwise, there was no way that a solution could have been arrived at,” the man said.

Swamishri burst out laughing. He leaned back satisfied that there would be marked improvement in the old man's behaviour. "It's final now. The decision has been taken in God's court, in Akshardham, and that is where we all want to finally go."

After four years of constant bickering the family sat together that night, each civil to the other, content in the knowledge that Swamishri was taking an active interest in their difficulties and could be relied upon as an unbiased counsellor.

* * *

The converted church in Islington had served the Swaminarayan Hindu Mission well for eleven years. However, now it was too small. A drab warehouse in Neasden had been transformed into a beautiful mandir and in 1982 Swamishri was invited to London to reconsecrate the *murtis* that had been removed from Islington.

Swamishri also made the trip to Leicester. The programme was tight. His stay in the UK this time was brief, mainly for the new mandir. A lot of other work had also cropped up. It was inevitable that once Swamishri himself was available all problems would be brought to him. One evening, during a *sabha* at Granby Halls in Leicester, he was catching up on some correspondence. At that time Anandwarup Swami came on to the stage with an Englishman.

"Bapa, this is Frank. He wishes to talk to you," said Anandwarup Swami. Swamishri put his pen down. He was ready to listen and offer a little help if he could. That was why he wrote personal answers to all the letters he received. He wanted to help. Whether a person was a Hindu, Christian or Muslim did not concern him. The human condition was the same everywhere. There was ignorance. If ignorance were removed and replaced by God consciousness there would be

supreme joy. Swamishri wanted to teach this truth to everyone. But first he had to attend to problems which the people experienced as overwhelming. They were not really problems, just wrong understanding. Correct understanding would make the journey to God all the more feasible. As in school, one had to start from kindergarten.

Swamishri looked at the individual in front of him sitting on the carpet. Yes, he was unhappy; he could see that straight away.

Frank began to speak, "I had a son who was 17 years old. My wife and I thought he needed psychiatric treatment so we took him to a psychiatrist. The psychiatrist said my son was mentally unstable and should be put into a hospital. We did, but my son was extremely shocked. When we would meet with him he always asked why, and would stamp his feet and say he wasn't mad and why was he locked up in the hospital. We used to comfort him. One day he climbed the seven-foot hospital wall and ran away. There was a house nearby, he climbed onto the roof and tied a rope around the chimney. The other end he tied around his neck, he jumped and hanged himself, he committed suicide..." Frank broke off. When he regained his composure he continued, "Since then I've been so unhappy. His mother also has no peace of mind. We don't know what to do. We feel that he killed himself because of us. People say that, 'You didn't fully love him.' We feel guilty. What can we do?"

Swamishri was touched. Frank was sincere and truly distressed. He asked, "Did you give him affection?"

"Yes, Swami, we loved him a lot."

"Did you hold back on his treatment?"

"Not a bit, we were ready to do anything for him."

"Then look, Frank, you have nothing to worry about. Your

heart is clear. You are not the reason for his suicide. Believe it to be God's will. Don't bear the burden anymore. If you do you will remain in tension. He has gone and will not come back. Go to your church every Sunday and you will find peace. Pray there. Your son is not to blame and neither are you."

He then told Anandswarup Swami to tell Frank to make a small donation to his church.

As he was leaving the hall a sadhu asked, "How do you feel now, Frank."

"Peace...peace...peace..! All my tension has disappeared. I feel a peace that I have never experienced before," he answered.

Frank told his vicar about his meeting with Swamishri. The vicar was touched that a Hindu monk had managed to comfort Frank, and he had even told him to give a little something to his church. The vicar asked Frank to relate the whole incident at the next Sunday morning service. Frank and his wife were changed. They soon learned to accept the death circumstances of their son and to continue their own lives. Both became active churchgoers and just as Swamishri had advised, they began to pray.

* * *

Chandubhai Patel had built up a comfortable life in Uganda. In a letter from Pramukh Swami Maharaj, his brother-in-law had been warned to leave the country as the future held trouble. Both families had gone to London. Chandubhai settled down in Welwyn Garden City. A kindly neighbour, Mr. Stringer, helped them in anyway he could. He was a pensioner and lived alone.

In 1974 Swamishri visited Chandubhai's home. Mr. Stringer was also invited. The Englishman was so impressed he asked Swamishri to grace his house next door. His invitation was accepted. When Swamishri heard of his lonely life he at

once commanded Chandubhai to regularly inquire after his neighbour and to care for him in illness.

In 1984, Mr. Stringer again met Swamishri in Neasden. Chandubhai was still taking a keen interest in his welfare. Mr. Stringer thanked Swamishri for his kind gesture and Chandubhai's perseverance.

Parmanandbhai's large house in Mumbai had been selected as a suitable resting place for Swamishri to recuperate after his gall bladder removal surgery.

One evening a labourer came for blessings. Swamishri asked his name. He was from Uttar Pradesh and had delivered a basket of mangoes to the house.

"What do you do for a living?" Swamishri asked.

The young labourer hesitated and then said, "I work for a mango merchant."

"What does he pay you?" The labourer's clothes were shoddy and dirty.

"For every one basket I deliver he gives me ten rupees. In a whole day I never get more than two orders."

"Don't you have farming land back home in your village?"

"No. My mother and father are poor. Brother earns but he does not care for them." Tears welled up in his eyes.

"Have you studied?"

"Swamiji, I'm a D.H.M.S." He was a homeopathic doctor. "Swamiji, I'm poor, even then I've saved money here and there and managed to get a degree, but now I don't have the money to start a dispensary. I've been here for six months and live in the Vadala ghettos. There's no one as unhappy as me..."

Swamishri felt sorry for this poor boy who had suffered so much. He called Ramcharan Swami, "Ask our *satsangi* doctors to help him. He can help as a medicine dispenser." Turning

to the boy he said, “Come here tomorrow evening with your certificates.”

That evening Swamishri himself requested the doctors to find a job for the boy.

A father was worried about his only son. First he refused to marry. When he did finally agree, he contacted a girl from a newspaper marriages column and after only one meeting decided to marry her.

Swamishri spoke to him. He was concerned for the father and son. Marriage, he said, was not a commitment to be taken lightly. The Hindu concept of marriage was different from the western tradition. It was not two people that were coming together, but two families, “It’s good that you’ve at last decided. You’ve met and talked a little, but I feel that if she were *satsangi* it would be better. She’s unknown to you, so it is proper to first check her background. Will she mix with your family, be of help...and of course, will she help care for your father? All this is to be considered as well. Your mother is not present now. Consider everything and do as you think fit. If she has a good background and she can look after your house and father in place of your mother, then I see no problem?”

Swamishri spoke as a relative. He did not show annoyance or bias. His words struck the young man as sensible. He waited a while and soon found that the girl, nice as she was, was not suitable to him as a life partner.

During a youth *sabha* in London at the Neasden mandir, Swamishri cautioned, “Once you are married be careful that you don’t divorce. For the rest of your lives you have to look after one another and if the case be, tolerate. Decide firmly on this. Once marriage has been solemnized in the mandir there

should be no thought of separating. Until death you have to remain together.”

He had received many cases of youths who had jumped into marriage and were now saying that it wouldn't work. This was not acceptable to Swami. The *grihasta ashram* was based on a loving bond between husband and wife. Together, the two would serve their parents and raise their children to be good *satsangis* and citizens. If the parents were role models the children would learn true virtue and grow up to be responsible, and in turn, nurture responsible kids of their own.

He feared for the future. The institution of marriage was coming apart. He said one of the reasons was, “Our youngsters are aping western materialistic values and traditions.” Love, he explained, was a vital part of marriage, but it was something that grew between two people who in the confidence of one another's sincerity were working towards a common goal. Quarrels and misunderstandings, hardships and lean days were all part and parcel of marriage. A joint struggle to overcome difficulties was true marriage. Learning to accept the other's weaknesses was critical. It was a give and take process. To find a perfect partner you would have to become perfect yourself. If you wanted a Sita you would have to become a Rama. He said expectations were too high and efforts almost nil. ‘I don't like her. She's lazy. Can I divorce?’ No! Of course not. Marriage is not a game.

“It would be excellent if a compromise can be sorted out. Usually the fault lies with both, but a *satsangi* should be able to tolerate hardships. The boy should think, ‘What would I do if my sister were in a similar condition?’ The mother should also think, ‘What would I do if the girl were my own daughter?’”

There were occasional marriages which due to the gross

misbehaviour on the part of the husband or wife even Swamishri opined should be annulled. The person's behaviour was not befitting that of a *satsangi*. Harm and torment were being caused to individuals and whole families. Yes, chances should be given for improvement, mistakes could always be rectified and forgiven, but if the behaviour continued with no sign of change then divorce could be the answer.

It would be better to find a true *satsangi* partner. Swamishri took a very strong stance against infidelity. There was no room for such things in a *satsangi* family. '*Ek nari sada brahmachari*' – the shastras say that a man who is faithful to his wife is a true celibate.

He had also heard about the astronomical extravagance that marriages had become. The same was true in India. It had now become a case of, 'I can spend more than you.' Swamishri saw the answer in collective weddings. Every year, he decided, "We will organize such weddings, where at a minimum cost, and yet with full Vedic rituals and tradition couples can get married. Whether you marry your boys and girls spending millions of rupees or in the collective wedding, the main goal is to get them married! Because they marry in a collective wedding is their marriage void?"

In 1989, a *samuh lagna* – collective wedding – had been held as part of Swamishri's 69th birthday celebration in Bharuch. During a *sabha* Dr Swami spoke strongly against the practice of dowry. When he finished he asked all those in the *sabha* who had decided not to take dowry to raise their hands. Several hands rose. Swamishri was writing letters. He looked up and said, "Tell everyone to raise their hands." Dr Swami repeated this message from the stage. At once twenty

thousand hands shot up, vowing in Swamishri's presence not to take dowry.

At the 1990 five-day youth convention in Vidyanagar another 20,000 youths also promised not to take dowry. In various public assemblies and in private Swamishri has spoken against dowry. He particularly addresses the in-laws to whose house the newly married girl goes. The girl, he says, should be treated as a daughter. She is not a commodity or a money machine. The in-laws should not pressurize their son to ask for money. The practice is not civilized, nor is it becoming of a *satsangi*.

Bhagwan Swaminarayan, as a part of his social uplift work, had stopped the rampant practice of *dudh piti*. A newly born girl was immersed in milk until she drowned. This was because the parents were afraid that they would not be able to afford her marriage in the future. Swamishri has censured the new form of *dudh piti* with an equal vengeance. Increasingly, couples through sonography and other gender tests learn the gender of their unborn offspring in the first few weeks of pregnancy. If the child is not what they want, they have an abortion.

"It is *dudh piti*," says Swamishri, "a form of killing. No one has the right to kill another individual, whether born or unborn." To counter this non-Hindu evil practice he has encouraged non-dowry marriages and *samuh lagna*. He refuses to bless devotees who ask his permission for abortion. To a *satsangi*, life is sacred, a God-given gift.

* * *

Youth development projects have always been a priority with him. Today's youngsters will be tomorrow's leaders of society. If they are trained correctly, given good character and vision,

a bright future for society is ensured. Inspired by Swamishri, the Sanstha runs youth centres and children's centres in which tens of thousands of children and youths participate. For their education a number of hostels have been set up, where ideal living and studying conditions have been created. The Sanstha has sponsored the building of numerous colleges and schools, including a large donation to the Charotar Arogya Mandal that helped to build a medical school in Karamsad, near Vidyanagar.

Today, Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha is hailed as the home of youth creativity, where thousands of morally conscious youngsters have locked hands with spirituality to produce a peaceful revolution for a better life.

Weekly satsang meetings are a regular feature. The curriculum concentrates on developing the efficiency of the youth through programmes that nourish talents, sharpen intellect and stimulate creativity. And all these are cushioned in an atmosphere that furnishes moral and spiritual dedication. Perhaps, one of the reasons why more and more youngsters willingly join the Sanstha is that the assemblies are conducted in a manner that appeals to the modern mind. Lectures, group discussions, seminars, audio-visual presentations, field trips and research projects satisfy their quest for knowledge. Creative arts are promoted through cultural dances, dramas, yoga, sports, historical outings and social work programmes. Courses in Character Development and Effective Leadership have enjoyed remarkable popularity. A culmination of youth energy is often felt in the International Youth Conventions, held every few years, wherein youngsters from America, England and Africa and throughout India, all come together for healthy competitions in talents and creativity.

The youngsters become so morally motivated that they naturally abstain from all the scourges of society and lead a pure, addiction-free life. They lend themselves to help remould society. Almost every youth member is an enthusiastic social worker. From touring to uplift the rural tribal areas to holding international festivals of enormous cultural and spiritual importance, the youngsters plan and manage all the activities with sincerity and precision.

Commenting on the volunteerism she saw at the CFI, in America, Dr Flora Edwards, President of Middlesex County College, NJ, said, "I have witnessed something in the past few months that I would have difficulty telling another colleague in this country because they would never believe me. Two physicians closed down their practices for three months to do this! And then someone took a leave of absence, an unpaid leave of absence from his job. I see young people, lots of young people. They're going to MIT, Stevens Institute of Technology, Rutgers and Stanford. 'What have you been doing with your free time?' 'I have been working on this for months!' You don't get credit for it! You don't get money for it! That is a concept that is so different in a materialistic society."

President George Bush thanked in his letter, "The Cultural Festival of India provides a wonderful opportunity for participants to learn about this fascinating land in South Asia and the unique music, art, craftsmanship, and folklore that Indian Americans have brought to the United States. This month-long festival also reflects its organizers hopes of building a better tomorrow... I applaud the many volunteers who have made this event possible."

A unique research facility equipped to study culture and society has been set up as a permanent part of Akshardham,

Gandhinagar. The Akshardham Centre for Applied Research in Social Harmony, AARSH, aims not only to bring out interesting research but to produce leaders equipped with the practical skills to help society in various ways such as de-addiction and safeguarding the environment.

* * *

On 3 May 1990, Bochasan mandir was host to a unique convention, the 'Dalit Mahasammelan.' The convention saw the participation of the Harijan castes, dubbed untouchables by the orthodox caste system. That the *harijans* were allowed into the mandir and served *prasad* after the assembly was in itself a revolutionary step. Several other local religious leaders were also invited.

Mahant Baldevdas, a Harijan guru of Jhanjharka Savgunnath, shared the stage with the other leaders. He was invited to lunch with Swamishri. The Harijans represented more than 150 villages scattered across the districts of Kheda, Panchmahal and Vadodara.

In his blessings Swamishri said, "From the very beginning the Hindu religion has not supported discrimination. Hinduism has seen the world as a family. The discrimination we see was a later pollutant. The soul has no family or caste. Every soul has within it the presence of Paramatma. The distinctions of this world are to be forgotten. This is very necessary for the uplift of society and our country. If we work for it we will surely move ahead. You need help but effort will be required on your part. By dropping whatever bad habits you have you will become happy. In God's eyes no one is big or small. These are the beliefs of our mind, not God's. If we are strengthened with dharma then no matter what comes our way we will survive. Bhagwan Swaminarayan did not change the religion of the people, but changed their lives..."

Swamishri's efforts to remove the effects of a corrosive caste system includes educating both the 'higher' castes and the 'lower' castes. The 'higher' must learn to accept the 'lower' on an equal standing, understanding that these humans deserve equal rights. The 'lower' castes must work for their progress. They cannot expect to be accepted by the rest of society if they continue to practise things which modern society regards as obnoxious and primitive.

In this respect he has had unparalleled success. By himself visiting the huts of tribal people – the *adivasis* – and speaking to them directly in their homes he has helped them to live more sociable lives which are God-centred. Swamishri has instructed teams of sadhus and devotees to continually tour the *adivasi* areas, in particular Silvassa and Panchmahal, setting up Satsang centres where the *adivasis* can first learn to rid themselves of a primitive lifestyle and then worship God. He has encouraged an academic education and various home industries in their communities.

Several *adivasi* and 'lower' caste youths have also accepted initiation as sadhus at Swamishri's hands. These sadhus are on an equal standing with all the others in the Sanstha.

A mini revolution has swept through the areas toured by the Sanstha's sadhus. Many have accepted Satsang.

* * *

Houston, August 1988

Mr. R., an American who regularly went to a yoga centre once came for Swamishri's darshan. Swamishri was pleased to learn that Mr. R. had good knowledge of the Upanishads, and daily practised yoga. He was interested in a spiritual life. On discussion Mr R. admitted that two or three times a week he also ate meat and drank alcohol. This was contradictory to his spiritual efforts. Swamishri asked him to stop eating meat and drinking.

“That is something I cannot do. And if I should, with what view should I stop,” Mr. R. asked.

“What view? Poison! Do you ever feel like taking poison? We don’t smoke or drink and yet we experience unfettered joy.”

“I’ll try.”

“Not try. You have to stop. If there are benefits to smoking and drinking, show me.”

Mr. R. could not reply. He began to sweat and breathe heavily.

Although Mr. R. did not know it at the time, Swamishri is highly motivated to help de-addict any addict who comes before him. Sometimes he is strong and unremitting, at other times he gives permission to quit in stages.

Mr. R. was a good man. Swamishri had seen a spiritual light within him and knew that his drinking, smoking and meat-eating were holding him back. He would use all arguments in his favour to try and convince Mr. R. to change his living habits.

“You have so much spiritual knowledge and also study the Upanishads and yet you live a life like this. What can I say?”

“I’m a slave of my habits and tastes.”

“That is why you cannot leave all this. If you listen to what I say you will be able to control your habits. Take a vow. If you continue to smoke and drink you will not move ahead spiritually. You meditate, but such habits disturb meditation. Addiction is attachment. The minutest of thoughts will stop your progress. This obstacle will hurt you everywhere. Drop it.”

Again Mr. R. was silent and began to wipe his forehead. He said, “What can I say Swami! I came to you for a drop of compassion and here you are trying to drop me into an ocean.”

Swamishri laughed. “If you do stop, what do you think will happen to you?”

“If I stop smoking and drinking. I’ll be caught up in fear, tension, unhappiness, worry.”

“You’re caught up now. You’re a coward. You’re worried just by the thought of stopping. Convince yourself that nothing is going to happen to you by stopping.”

“If I cannot keep my promise, I’ll be sinning.”

“You drink sin! By calling yourself spiritual and continuing these habits you are sinning.”

Mr. R. could not answer. Swamishri continued, “People take drugs, do you approve?”

“No”

“You are on your way to drugs. Do you approve?”

“No”

“Then stop! Why the delay!” This was the first time in his life that Mr. R. had met someone like Swamishri. He was moved. Swamishri had nothing to gain by being so insistent. When he looked up he saw that Swamishri was smiling. There was no anger, just compassion. He promised to try, and asked for blessings, going down on his knees and touching his head at Swamishri’s feet.

“When you succeed, write to me,” Swamishri told him.

Once, after breakfast in Sarangpur, Swamishri was meeting devotees who had gathered for darshan from the surrounding villages.

An elderly man asked for blessings.

“Do you have a bad habit?” Swamishri asked.

“Yes, I smoke bidis, but that is a necessity. I cannot do without them.”

“Try and stop now.”

“No, if I do my soul will be distressed. I don’t want to do that.”

“Your addiction is taking you on a wrong road.”

“What? Never!”

“Even if you’re a devotee an addiction will take you on the wrong road.”

“Everybody else maybe, but not me.”

“You’re defeated and have no strength, that’s why you’re saying this.”

“Since I was very young, ten years old, I have been smoking. Now I’m 62. When I work the water wheel on the well, and I’m resting between work periods I smoke a bidi.”

“Do you still work the water wheel?”

“Not anymore. But I still have to keep a stock of bidis. What can I give the labourers. If I give them bidis they work better.”

“You’ll die of your addiction.”

“That’s OK. We have to die one day any way.”

“Why not try and reduce the number of bidis you smoke. You smoke two bundles everyday. From now onwards smoke just five or six bidis a day.”

“That’s more like it. I’ll leave off slowly...”

Swamishri blessed him.

Arvindbhai Patel of Vadodara was a hardened alcohol addict. As he came into closer contact with Swamishri he found a new direction in life and his domestic troubles seemed to disappear out of the window. Not only did he give up alcohol, but he also inspired many of his close friends to do the same. He wrote to Swamishri: “28.3.93...8:00 p.m.... My brother-in-law from America arrived at my house. He had brought some alcohol with him which he offered to me. He tried for half an hour but I refused to drink. He told me that if I didn’t have the drink, then he’d never step in my house again for as long as I lived. I replied, ‘May Pramukh Swami Bapa’s wish prevail.’ From 1.2.94 to 20.2.94 he stayed in India and also visited Vadodara... yet he never came to my house... Whatever Bapa wishes.”

Seeing Arvindbhai's changed attitude, a friend of his from Mumbai had decided to entice him by hook or by crook. He called Arvindbhai to Mumbai. There he tried to persuade him but Arvindbhai remained resolute in his conviction, "Whatever you may do...with Pramukh Swami's strength I'll never disgrace myself." Arvindbhai later wrote: "21.2.94... Sarang Disco Bar near Santa Cruz... From 7:30 to 9:30 in the evening, I was made to sit among 14 young females who were serving alcohol and dancing... Disco dancing...the fragrance of perfume...an intoxicating environment. Apparently they had decided that whoever succeeded in getting me to drink would win a prize of Rs. 500 in cash. Anyone who cared to even try would receive Rs. 10 on the spot. All the girls present tried their best to convince me, but I remained firm. Even the bar owner tried to entice me by giving me authority to do absolutely anything I wanted to do – free of charge. I told him, 'If you want to give me poison, I'll cheerfully drink it but I'll never fall victim to alcohol or prostitution.' With your grace, victory was mine..."

"The bar owner asked, 'Who is your guru?'"

"I replied, 'Pramukh Swami.'"

"He immediately asked, 'The one from Dadar?' (The BAPS Mandir in Mumbai is situated in the area of Dadar)

"Those who had witnessed this spectacle talked among themselves, 'If his disciple is such, then how great must the guru be.'... Prior to my transformation, whenever I came to Mumbai, I would easily spend 4000 to 5000 rupees at such places..."

Mr. B. of Ahmedabad, a young married man with children, was taken by friends and relatives to Swamishri in Mumbai in 1987. He was on drugs and could now not throw the habit.

He had lost a number of jobs and had begun to steal and sell household items to feed his heroin addiction. Swamishri talked to him at length comforting and strengthening. Mr. B. had lost all will power and now he was about to lose his family. For the next several months he met Swamishri periodically, slowly kicking his habit. It wasn't easy, Swamishri knew this, and so boosted his confidence. Love and understanding were the rewards he gave. Two years from the first meeting Mr. B. met Swamishri again in Sarangpur. He had managed to kick hard drugs but had started opium and mandrake pills. Again in 1990 he met Swamishri in Sarangpur who this time told him to stay. The opium he had brought with him he gave to Swamishri who had it thrown away.

Withdrawal symptoms persisted for four days. He could not eat or sleep. Every day he met Swamishri who would encourage him and help him strengthen his resolve. After a while he began to eat and started sleeping a little. As with all addicts though, he was crafty and had managed to smuggle bidis into the mandir.

This he admitted to Swamishri, "I smoke only three a day now...and now I'll only smoke two."

"There's no need for even two," Swamishri reasoned with him. "Throw this sin away. If you get a really strong desire to take something go and get some cloves from the store room and put them in your mouth." Saying this he took Mr. B. to Shastriji Maharaj's room and stood him before the *murti*. "Touch his feet, pray...from today even the bidis go...here take this rose, if you feel like smoking, eat a petal."

During Swamishri's 40-day stay in Ahmedabad through January 1995, Mr B. again met Swamishri who was walking to his room after morning puja. Mr. B admitted that the habit had begun again! Swamishri talked to him, hoping and

praying that Mr. B could find the sense and strength to stop destroying his life and that of others around him. He himself would not give in. He would not allow Mr. B to admit defeat; that was not the way of a sadhu.

During the Bicentenary Celebrations of Aksharbrahman Gunatitanand Swami in Ahmedabad in 1985, the International Convention for Better Living was organized. It was inaugurated by the Dalai Lama. The cultural exhibition inspired many to change their lives for the better. One such person was Joseph Muturia, Kenya's Assistant Minister for Lands and Settlements, who had come to the festival at Swamishri's invitation. Before an audience of over 50,000 people, the minister was inspired to declare, "Though, as a Christian, I am allowed to take alcohol, I declare that henceforth, I shall abstain from taking any alcoholic drinks for the rest of my life."

After returning home, he wrote to Swamishri: "My pledge not to take a beer is growing stronger every day! In fact, I am stronger than ever over this friend of mine called beer. My family is really thankful to the International Convention for Better Living held in India... I feel also very strong at my work, both in my Ministry and my Constituency. I have no time to waste! Thank you once again and please pray for me!"

Leaders of an area of Surat city came to Swamishri. Their talk turned to the change in living styles and habits. The leaders said that where they lived over one lakh rupees of alcohol was drunk everyday. Swamishri at once urged them to try and do something about it. He said that even if they stopped drinking only on *ekadashi* it would save them two lakh rupees a month. In a year they would have enough money to build a school, raise a water tank or start a small hospital! The money saved

could be used for the benefit of the people. Were not more schools and hospitals needed?

Arvind Dave described: “Swamishri was in Bangalore in the winter of 1990. I heard he was here and that he was a great spiritual master so I decided to go and meet him. I wasn’t a *satsangi*, and smoked twelve packets a day. Before the first time I met him I had a smoke. He must have smelt my breath but he didn’t say a word. He just took my right hand and from a little plastic bottle squeezed some water into my palm, said a mantra and put a *kanthi* around my neck! ‘Now that you have a *kanthi* you are a *satsangi*,’ He said. ‘You have taken shelter of God. You have now to live a life that God likes, one that is pure and without bad habits and extravagance, devoid of bad company. Turn five *malas* chanting ‘Swaminarayan Swaminarayan’ everyday. You will become happy.’

“He put his hand on my shoulder and looked straight into my eyes! His voice was captivating. I could say nothing. I felt my addiction being drawn from me! From that day on I have never felt like smoking. It’s such a relief! To their last breath my mother and father had tried to stop me, only to fail. Mother had me go on many pilgrimages, to Tirupati, Dwarka, the Himalayas, but even then I could not stop. Swami Bapa saved me.”

After lunch at a devotee’s house Swamishri was being driven to another house for rest. The Mercedes slowed on a corner. Ahead of the car was a scruffy looking shepherd leisurely walking with a bidi in his mouth.

“That’s our Popat Bharvad of Manjipura!” Swamishri exclaimed. He had the car stop while he lowered his side window and shouted over to the astonished shepherd. Who was calling him by name from that nice white car? He ambled

over, only to see Swamishri smiling at him.

“Bhagat! Now you’re a man of God, a *bhagat*, you shouldn’t be smoking bidis,” Swamishri said. Popat dropped the smoking bidi and asked for blessings. Swamishri had recognized him even after so long!

This personal crusade of Swamishri has taken on gigantic proportions. During the mammoth festivals which the Sanstha arranges every few years, special de-addiction centres are set up. Staffed by sadhus and devotees, in front of a *yagna vedi* visitors are persuaded to shed addictions, drugs, bad habits and other anti-social behaviour. Symbolically the undesired trait, pledged on a piece of paper is burnt in the sacrificial fire. Names and addresses are taken for future follow-up work.

Houston, 17 August 1984

Swamishri met with Catholic Bishop John Markovsky. He was describing church activities to Swamishri, and mentioned that they ran four high schools, a university and a hospital. This interested Swamishri. The activities were similar to what he himself was doing back in India. As one administrator to another he asked the Bishop how he raised funds.

“We have bingo sessions,” replied the Bishop.

“Has the Bible given permission to play bingo,” Swamishri asked. He was referring to gambling in general.

“There is no such reference,” admitted the Bishop.

“Then as a religious organization, is it appropriate that you pamper the ‘something for nothing’ weakness of the people by organizing bingo. If religious people like us let people play bingo, then youngsters will think that religion has given freedom to gamble. He may only play a dollar now, but in the future will be tempted to stake more. Then he will be enticed to steal for his purposes.”

“Man is after all only a human,” the Bishop replied. “He needs some sort of entertainment. And anyway it is mostly the elderly who come to play bingo.”

“Can’t you organize another form of entertainment. If they want a social life they should get together in church. Let him do whatever he wants to do outside, but on church premises such things should not go on. Religion should turn people away from stealing, gambling and drugs.”

“Swamiji! Your teachings are very high. One should live by them,” said the Bishop.

* * *

Whenever Swamishri meets the Chief Minister or any other member of the Gujarat Government, he invariably raises the issues of cow slaughter, the fishing industry and alcohol prohibition. When the ban on cow slaughter was passed, Swamishri wrote an eight-page letter to the then Chief Minister, Chimanbhai Patel: “24 September 1993. You and your cabinet deserve to be congratulated for imposing a total ban on cow slaughter. You have received blessings for this matter from many sympathizers. To ensure strict enforcement of this law, please educate all the officers, officials and the police department... only then will the ruling be effectively implemented...”

To safeguard the sanctity of places of pilgrimage, Swamishri wrote in the same letter: “Regarding the fishing industry, important sacred places such as Dwarka, Prabhaspatan and Palitana are at present major sites for the industry... We recommend that these operations be moved elsewhere.”

Swamishri also mentioned the issue of pollution, internal as well as external: “Another important point, proposal and request... You are taking great care in fighting pollution in Gandhinagar, but as well as combating external environmental pollution, it is just as important to consider internal pollution.

Gandhinagar is named after Gandhiji, who was a firm believer in purity and non-violence. He prohibited alcohol...in this matter, please pass some law to enforce the prohibition... That is our humble request... When Gandhinagar becomes pollution-free, externally and internally, its beauty will be enhanced. With that, the thoughts of future politicians will also remain pure and healthy...and peace will prevail in the State.”

When Swamishri learnt that the government had granted permission to the McDonalds fast food chain to open branches in India, he immediately wrote an emphatic letter to the President of India. He asserted his views and outlined the consequences of allowing a franchise, which openly advocates cattle slaughter, into the country. “Mumbai, 15 March 1993. ...shocked and sad to hear of the Government’s decision to support and encourage the wholesale slaughter of innocent animals through the commissioning of the McDonalds food chain restaurants in India. The Prime Minister should not only serve and protect the people of India as his subjects, but also the animals – for they, too, are subjects in their own right...”

The Rama Janmabhumi issue, regarding the birthplace of Bhagwan Rama in Ayodhya, is probably the most hotly debated question of recent times. Having led to numerous conflicts between Hindus and Muslims, it has not been easy to find a solution to this delicate problem. Many leaders, political and religious, have written to Swamishri regarding this issue. One respected leader wrote a letter expressing his opinions to Swamishri. Swamishri’s reply conveys his views and his wish to see a peaceful solution: “In Gujarat and the rest of India, communal rioting is widespread...this is something to be truly ashamed of. But in that, neither Hindus nor Muslims are to be

blamed. Communal conflicts have been taking place for some time – even when the question over Ayodhya wasn't with us. Instead of sitting together on one table to solve this problem, the politicians keep it burning and bring up new questions... all to keep themselves in power.

“It is not right to blame Hindus or religion for this problem. The sadhus do their work and will continue to do so, but those who have become blind and deaf with power are unable to see or hear. Internal discord will lead to the destruction of the family, society and the country. The cruelties being inflicted on innocent citizens today are a matter of shame for our country.

“The Ayodhya question has been dragging on for 40 years now. Not one leader has seriously understood the issue or sincerely tried to tackle the problem. If all the parties concerned came together and worked for a mutual solution, the matter would have been satisfactorily resolved by now...

“Sit together and cooperate...but no one wants to do that. They only want to create internal disunity among each other – a means to grab or hold on to political power. In the process, it is the people who suffer. It is a fact...in plain black and white. We pray to God that mutual understanding develops and that peace prevails in Bharat (India).”

Swamishri asserted his strong views.

The Mayor of Baltimore, Mr. Kurt Schmoke came to the 1992 Yogiji Maharaj Centennial Celebrations. In his first meeting with Swamishri, the following conversation developed:

Kurt Schmoke: “At the moment, I'm working on driving out illiteracy from the city of Baltimore.”

Swamishri: “That's very good. But do not forget to also teach about God and religion.”

Kurt Schmoke: “That's difficult.”

Swamishri: “Difficult but necessary. If he learns to read, but reads bad books, then of what use is it? If he learns to speak, but also learns to swear, then what good has come from it? If he reads, he reads good material. If he speaks, he says nice things.”

Kurt Schmoke: “Politics comes in the way.”

Swamishri: “You are the Mayor, a politician. It is in your hands. Make a way.”

The Mayor was touched by Swamishri’s benevolent intentions, and remarked at the end to the interpreter, “You know something? I get this feeling that I’ve known him for long.”

In the aftermath of the terrible earthquake in Maharashtra in 1993, the village of Samudral was one of many villages left totally devastated. Swamishri undertook the mammoth task of reconstructing a new village from scratch. During the foundation stone-laying ceremony of this project, Swamishri was in Gondal. At the Akshar Deri, he performed the necessary rituals and sent some bricks to Samudral with a letter: “Five bricks have been sanctified at the holy Akshar Deri using the flowers from the consecrated footprints of Shriji Maharaj. Also, holy water has been sprinkled on these bricks... Use them for the new houses which are to be built in the village. We have prayed here at the Deri that good, strong houses are quickly constructed. The donors, the workers, the villagers...may they all experience peace...may they foster love for religion...may the village become an ideal one, so that there are no problems for thousands of years.”

On the garden wall of a large bungalow close to the Sankari mandir were sitting several poor ploughmen. They were

passing time in idle gossip and smoking bidis. Swamishri said to them, "All of you should come to the mandir every day for darshan. The mandir is not only for Patels but for you as well. Spend a few moments in the mandir, sit in the bhajan and your weariness will go. I'd be disappointed if other villagers take benefit of the mandir and you don't. We're not asking for your money. To our mind by coming to the mandir and just joining hands in prayer you are donating lakhs of rupees."

* * *

Ramsang Bapu bowed low to Swamishri. This was a chance of a lifetime. He was a sinner, and he knew that. Now it was a chance to change. Swamishri had accepted his request to grace his house. Villagers must have told him of his atrocities. What would he say?

Swamishri was in the village Odarka. It was not the first time he had visited. The villagers had told him of Ramsang Bapu and his crimes. In fact, the entire village was hot-blooded. Several families had recently entered Satsang. So it was but natural for Swamishri to accept. He would not discriminate. He said it was his responsibility to try and change people for the better.

Ramsang Bapu was notorious. Once he had tied a man to a horse and pulled him through the village. Everybody had gathered together but no one could say a word or lift a finger in protest. He would usually be in a drunken stupor. When not, he would hunt deer and rabbits, and then party with fellow thugs. Sometimes they slaughtered goats that belonged to local shepherds. Whenever there was a crime in the area the police would go to him for information. The matter ended there. People said his friends had committed several murders.

Swamishri entered Ramsang Bapu's house and sat down. Ramsang Bapu sat opposite. Introductions were given and then

Swamishri began to talk. Ramsang Bapu accepted whatever he heard and took *vartman*. A *kanthi* was tied around his neck, and the vows of a *satsangi* explained. He was not to eat meat or eggs. Alcohol and intoxicants were also out. Even bidis were not permitted. He would have to control his violent nature and not bully the villagers. All of this he could not do alone. Swamishri said that years of bad living could only be corrected if God was asked to help. Prayer in the form of 51 daily *malas* was essential, and to build up spiritual knowledge and make sure that he associated with devotees he was to attend the regular Sunday Satsang *sabha*. Ramsang Bapu agreed. He did want to change. It was his luck that Swamishri was prepared to accept the likes of him as a disciple and initiate him into Satsang life. The change was seen by his friends as an attack of short term guilt consciousness. They were proved wrong. Ramsang Bapu had changed. He also visited his former friends and convinced them of their wrongdoings and to accept Satsang.

“Take Swami Bapa as a guru. He can help you and reintroduce you to normal village life,” he advised.

Swamishri was once asked, “Many unsocial elements in society have been observed to change dramatically once they have come into your contact. How do you do this?”

He answered, “It is God’s work. The Satpurush is benevolent and is himself pure, without faults and viscious nature. His presence creates a purifying atmosphere. Just by his darshan people change, become peaceful. Everybody wants to change and to that you add the contact of the Satpurush and so change is assured.”

Rishubha of Talaja was similar to Ramsang Bapu. He ran a parallel government to the official one in the area. Late one night he was walking down a road hopelessly drunk when his

eyes caught sight of a discarded bicycle tyre. He thought it was a dead snake.

“Who is the wretch who has insulted *naga devta*?” he shouted.

His anger and shouts collected a small group of people. He announced that they would all together cremate the ‘snake’. Nobody dare tell him that his snake was an old tyre.

“What are you staring at? Bring good ghee from the Vania.”

“His shop will be shut at this time,” someone ventured.

“Then wake him up!”

The ghee was brought and a small procession carried the ‘snake’ to the river and cremated it to Rishubha’s satisfaction. He commanded everyone to have the customary bath. It was past midnight and winter!

Swamishri visited his house, gave him *vartman* and *kanthi*. He said, “You are a *darbar*. It is your duty to protect the people. Instead of that what have you been doing?”

It was enough. Rishubha became a *satsangi*, following in Ramsang Babu’s footsteps.

Eight hundred years ago Sejakji led his people out of the desert lands of Marwad and settled in Sorath. They were the Gohils, a warrior people, uncouth in their ways and quarrelsome. They picked Ghogha as a suitable site to restart their lives and so they came to be known as the Ghoghari Gohils. Centuries passed and the people split into groups and factions. But the main village remained Odarka. Today it has a population of only 700 people.

At some time a group had split from the Ghoghari Gohils and moved a few kilometres away to found Kukad village.

They called themselves the Govindani Gohils, but due to internal squabbling broke into three factions.

The land between the two villages was hotly fought over.

One summer evening as the sun descended a shout went up in Odarka that the Gohils of Kukad were ploughing the debated land. Before all the Ghogaris could get together some of them with swords ran to the trouble spot. A heated argument began. "Why are you ploughing our land?"

"Here then," answered the Govindanis, "everywhere and always causing trouble..." They raised their guns and before the Ghogaris could even raise their swords they were dead. Three other Ghogaris appeared. They were also shot. With that the Govindanis raced away. A little while later the Ghogari's came in force. But they were too late. Six of their people already lay in pools of blood. Just then an innocent Govindani Vaghari passed by; they emptied their outrage on him. The poor man didn't have a chance. Later the Govindani Gohils erected a memorial stone for him, where he had died. The Ghogaris also raised memorial stones to Satubha, Motisinh, Nondhabha, Dosabha and his two sons, Bhimsinh and Tapubha.

After the slaughter, hatred between the two villages increased. The enmity also spread to other villages which were related to both. Odarka had thirty-three villages in support. Govindani had twelve. The two warring tribes refused to even drink the water of the 'other side'.

The Maharaja of Bhavnagar Krishna Kumarsinh under whose rule the villages fell attempted to father a truce but met with no success. He rehabilitated the Ghogaris in eleven villages in the Bhal area. Fighting and killing continued. The British, even by imposing laws and punishment could not improve the situation. The villages were left to their fate. After India gained Independence further efforts were made by local governments, but to no effect. The animosity was too deeply embedded. The memorial stones were regularly looked after.

After Ramsang Bapu of Odarka had become a *satsangi*, a

friend of his told the story of the feud to Swamishri who at once decided that the whole thing had gone too far. He told Janaksinh, Ramsang Bapu's son, to begin talking to both sides. He even gave a date. Talks started, they were encouraging. Both villages had been visited by Swamishri and the people knew that he could be trusted to be fair and remain neutral. But internal disputes in the two villages delayed things.

In April 1990, leaders from both sides met with Swamishri in Bhavnagar. He warmly welcomed them both and urged them to come together in peace. "Where there is unity there is wealth. Your ancestors have been liberated, that is certain. God has now come into your lives. Believe that Bhagwan Swaminarayan himself is bringing you together."

The leaders looked on speechless. Swamishri's saintliness glowed. They could not refuse him.

Three days later on 12 April the two parties gathered together where the Ghogharis and the Vaghari had been slain. They stood in their groups, with Swamishri in the middle. *Panchamrut* had been prepared. Swamishri had the memorial stones of the Ghogharis bathed with it. He did not forget the Vaghari's stone that lay a little distance away. Sadhus chanted Vedic mantras from the *Purush Sukta*. Both sides were convinced that truly their ancestors were now liberated.

Pots of water that had been brought from the villages were exchanged. Each drank to the other's health, hugging and laughing. Generations of killing had finally come to a halt.

Eighty-year-old Jijibha was present at the ceremony. His grandfather had been one of those killed two hundred years ago. He had never dreamt that reconciliation was possible.

Jijibha narrated: "No one but Pramukh Swami could have done this. There was no way to peace. He took great interest and care. Even the first time he came to Odarka he had

mentioned the dispute. At his hands our ancestors have been granted liberation. Until now with every try at reconciliation there would be a split. This time nothing like that happened. This is all Pramukh Swami's power."

* * *

Prof. Raymond Williams, former Professor of Religion at Wabash College in the USA, has extensively researched and written on Hinduism, particularly the Swaminarayan Sampradaya. For his research on spiritual counselling, he interviewed Swamishri on 23 July 1985 in London. He asked Swamishri why he gave advice about matters, such as, family and business with which he had no direct contact.

Swamishri replied, "If we take an interest in the activities and affairs of the devotees, this creates a bridge of love, bringing them closer to God. The purpose is not to establish them in business as such, but through love, to draw them closer to God. Only if their problems of family and business are solved will their love develop.

"It is the normal procedure of God and his Sadhu to see that through love of the guru, the devotees give up their attachment to wealth and possessions. The guru destroys the discord within and establishes concord with God. The basic purpose is to lead the person to God and to eradicate attachment to worldly life. This cannot be achieved without love."

15

A Friend in Need

"This morning I was injured at a government labour camp. I had no money for dressing my wounds so I applied turmeric powder... Tomorrow, this young boy will go to work in my place." The sadhus looked at the boy next to him. He was only seven years old.

"While my mother digs the ground this boy will carry and dump the earth away. Then we'll get paid at the end of the day, from which we'll buy grains for food."

Parts of central India buckled and lurched when an earthquake struck in the early hours of 30 September 1993. The terrifying force, 6.4 on the Richter scale, put more than 30,000 people to sleep forever in parts of Maharashtra. The earth had shuddered with an explosive roar and a violent convulsion swept across the southern sector of the Deccan Plateau. It was India's worst earthquake since Independence in

1947 and ranked as among the 10 most destructive quakes of this century. Scores of villages were flattened, causing untold mayhem and anguish. The feeble houses of mud, brick and local stone collapsed like cardboard houses, crushing and burying the sleeping occupants under tons of debris. Death and destruction were on a mass scale.

On hearing of the disaster, Pramukh Swami Maharaj, made an urgent phone call from Sarangpur, instructing the sadhus and volunteers of the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha in Dadar, Mumbai, to rush to the aid of the earthquake victims. Under the guidelines and suggestions given by Swamishri, sadhus and volunteers made plans and preparations with military speed.

On the night of 1 October, a team of 25 sadhus and volunteers under Ghanshyamprasad Swami left for the quake-hit area. They distributed two tons of *puri* and two tons of cooked potatoes. Pramukh Swami Maharaj kept in touch with the Dadar centre to get updates on the relief work and responded with fresh instructions. He soon sent 10 more sadhus and 50 more volunteers to join the relief project. More food supplies and raw materials were immediately rushed to the site of the disaster. In 4 jeeps, 2 Matador vans and 4 trucks, 10 tons of sugar, 10 tons of vegetable oil, 10 tons of milk powder, 10 tons of flour, 4 tons of biscuits and 4 tons of clothes were sent off from Dadar mandir. Other voluntary organizations also offered their assistance.

From the local council of Patoda, a guest house was given for use to the Sanstha. The kitchen was opened there to feed the afflicted. To meet the escalating food demands, a kitchen was also opened in the village of Barshi. The sadhus and volunteers of the Sanstha camped at Kondjigad and Samudral for the relief work. The work here was directed by devotees

like Shri Markandbhai Patel, Karsanbhai Patel, Ramnikbhai Thakkar and Dilipbhai Patel of Mumbai. Medicines to the tune of Rs. 250,000 were collected by a devotee, Dr Kiran Doshi, and supplied to the relief centre. Medical doctors, devoted to the Sanstha, Dr Sanjay Patel, Dr Vajjar (Mumbai) and Dr Vrajlal P. Patel (Ahmedabad) rushed to Samudral to help the sick and injured.

As the Sanstha's sadhus and volunteers visited other affected villages, a clearer picture emerged of how the people could best be helped. Ration cards were given to each family. Appropriate measures of tea, biscuits, flour, millet, rice, vegetable oil, ghee, potatoes, sugar and clothes were given. To facilitate living and hygienic cooking standards, tents, soft plastic for flooring, dishes and cooking utensils, a stove and a paraffin lamp were provided. Besides this, hair oil, soap, clothes and other essentials were also provided. To keep them warm, Solapuri bedsheets and blankets and huge trunks for storage were also handed out.

The planning and organization of the relief work by the Sanstha impressed the Government of Maharashtra and in response to this they decided to allocate the responsibility of rehabilitating some of the villagers. Finally, the Government asked Swamishri to adopt the villages of Samudral and Kondjigad. They wanted the Sanstha to provide new housing facilities, in effect build a new village.

Lt. Yashpal Yadav, Officer in Command at the military camp in Kondjigad, said, "The efforts put in by Dr Patel and Shri Swaminarayan Mandir organization in helping the earthquake victims of the village Kondjigad (P.O. Salegoan, Dist. Osmanabad) is highly appreciable. The sense of basic management and the ability to go into details is certainly admirable. The conduct, the way of functioning of the staff in

the organization is again a place where I personally feel that each time I come in contact with them, I have learned something new and good only. The organization is self-contained in all respects, may it be the field of conduct, supervision, cooperation management. The cooperation extended by Dr Patel is unforgettable. The unselfish devotion and dedication to the work itself shows the gravity of the sincerity of the men and the organization.”

But first, basic relief work still needed to be done. The volunteer work was a challenge. Working amidst the revolting stench of decay, rain and the resulting muddy grounds was not easy. In spite of all personal discomforts, rough living and eating, the sadhus and volunteers never for once thought of retreating. The first few days were hectic and exhausting. Besides caring for Samudral and Kondjigad, the Sanstha also provided aid in other neighbouring villages. Pramukh Swami Maharaj had instructed that whatever was required should be provided but the relief work should not be discontinued or suffer breaks. As a result the Sanstha exhaustively thought of even the smallest and subtlest of requirements. As news of the Sanstha’s work filtered through, various organizations, associations, companies and donors began donating in kind and cash.

The mandir in Dadar, Mumbai, had turned into a buzzing relief depot where materials and food grains were collected, recorded and systematically sent off. In Mumbai about 450 volunteers and sadhus worked under the direction of sadhus who were in constant touch with Swamishri.

As the scope of relief work increased the demand for food spiralled tremendously. And so 25 tons of flour, 10 tons of sugar, 10 tons of mung and lentils, 18 tons of *juwar*, 23 tons of rice grains, 16.5 tons of wheat, 12.5 tons of vegetable oil,

8 tons of milk powder, turmeric powder, salt, chilly powder, jaggery and essential spices were transported to Samudral and Kondjigad. Swamishri commanded 40 more sadhus to stop their studies and join the relief work. They were accompanied by 250 more volunteers.

The Government further requested the Sanstha to extend its relief operation to two more villages, Kadodara and Limbavada. Here again the ration card system was employed. The success of the system was seen by Government agencies and quickly adopted.

Members of Medicines Sans Frontiers, Dr Peter and Dr Berand Liv and his party, came to India to offer relief to the earthquake-afflicted victims. While touring they visited the Sanstha's relief camp and were very impressed. They observed that the volunteers worked without any shelter and thus enquired, "Where do you stay during the night?"

"Right here in the open," replied the sadhus.

"But there are bugs on this farmland; how do you manage to stay here?"

The sadhus replied, "We believe this service is given by God, so God will look after us." The Dutch party became friends. They offered tents, carpets, plastic and blankets for the volunteers.

"We will also provide you with medicines, and an inflatable 15,000 litre water tank so that you can serve better." This unexpected God-given assistance proved invaluable.

Ramesh Trivedi described: "On 2.10.93 we went to provide food in Samudral and some neighbouring villages. In the village of Tavisgadha a miracle had occurred. The villagers told us that on 2.10.93 the Swaminarayan sadhus and devotees saved us. We were trapped and they freed us. However, the surprising thing was that on 2.10.93 no Swaminarayan sadhus or devotees had

reached the village. Still the surviving residents of the village including an old woman, mentioning your name (Pramukh Swami's) said, 'This Maharaj and his devotees saved me and brought me out of the rubble!' It was a divine experience."

Pramukh Swami Maharaj asked that a special cremation rite be held for those who had perished. With tears in their eyes, the villagers of Samudral participated in the ceremony, in which holy water from the Ganga and Akshar Deri (Gondal) had been specially brought. This water was also sprinkled on the remains of the houses and on all the cremation sites of those deceased. The whole town was given lunch of sweet *bundi*, chapatis, rice, vegetables and *dal*; and thus relieved of their ancestral debt – the *pitru tarpan*. This incident will forever remain in their hearts.

Their family members were called to participate in this sacrament and thereafter on the 12th and 13th day they were also given a feast. A few days after this rite, families of the dead from seven villages were assembled and for the liberation of their loved ones a *yagna* was held and chapters from Garud Puran were read out. The participants were pleased and appreciated Swamishri's concern and understanding.

Pramukh Swami Maharaj appealed to the people of Gujarat to help the relief operations in any way they could. He said: "One shudders when one hears accounts of the devastation from relief workers. From the experience and observations of this organization and its volunteers it can be said that the consequences of the earthquake in Maharashtra is so severe that whatever is done to remedy the situation would not suffice. This relief work is not merely the duty of the government alone. Relief and rehabilitation work should be contributed to by social, educational, industrial, religious and other organiza-

tions. All should come forward and offer assistance. Even individuals, small or great, should donate for this cause. Those who cannot volunteer for the relief operations should help those who are working there. If we fail to help in such a humanitarian cause then the spirit of humanism will die and depart.

“In such catastrophic situations there should not be partisanship, nor distinctions of caste or tribe, discriminations of rich and poor or whatever barriers that divide or give cause to reluctance. This disaster has hit our country, therefore as citizens of this country it is our solemn duty to help and serve the unfortunate. To help the ailing and poor is the fabric of our culture and country. Even during emergency situations, to help an enemy who has surrendered is the character and culture of our country. From ancient times to our present modern age, this tradition of charity has been an inheritance from our sages, sadhus and incarnations.

“The government has suggested that we adopt two villages and help the victims, but the Sanstha’s relief work includes twelve villages. In fact, the task is so herculean that merely supplying the basic necessities of food and medicine is not enough. One has to revive the livelihoods and homes of so many families who have lost everything. It shatters our hearts to hear, from sadhus and volunteers, reports of the damage wreaked by the earthquake.

“It behoves upon this organization to see that even your smallest contribution reaches an orphan or a victim in Latur and Killari.

“Charity is a meritorious deed and to help is our moral duty and it would please God. He will bless you for this service. We pray to God to inspire us, to give us strength and intelligence to collectively help the victims overcome this disaster.”

* * *

With the volunteers sent by Pramukh Swami Maharaj he also commanded a number of sadhus of the movement to go and minister to the deceased and living. The sadhus provided a warm shoulder and a sympathetic heart which absorbed emotional anguish and hurt. The sadhus walking over the rubble, comforting the grief-stricken, became symbols of love, hope and strength. They sat with individuals and groups, rejuvenating mauled lives and shattered dreams. The villagers slowly rose out of their shock, took stock of the situation and began to pick up the shattered remains of their lives.

* * *

Even as the villagers were wondering about the future, the Sanstha's architects and engineers, coupled with social scientists were designing an entire village, complete with houses, schools, bazaars, gardens, hospitals, places of worship, etc. With the happy agreement of all concerned it was decided to rename Samudral, Swaminarayan Nagar.

On 7 November 1993, sadhus of the Sanstha laid the foundation bricks of the new village. The bricks had been specially sent from Gondal, Gujarat, by Pramukh Swami Maharaj after first performing Vedic rites and sanctifying them.

And then on 9 November 1993, with full Vedic ceremonies and chanting, the rebuilding project was begun.

On Sunday, 2 July 1995, Swamishri visited the quake-hit area. The Sanstha had entirely rebuilt Samudral village. Swamishri, in the presence of major donors and helpers, performed the opening ceremony. He was driven to the first of two mandirs. There, he consecrated the *muris* of Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj, Narsinh Bhagwan, Rakmai Vithoba and the Swaminarayan guru *parampara*. In smaller shrines were installed Shri Ganapatiji and Hanumanji. Over 9,000 villagers had gathered for the ceremony. Swamishri was taken for a tour

of the village. Everything that an ideal village should possess was provided: wide roads, hospital, village government, cremation area, waterworks, mandirs, gardens, shops, etc. Swamishri was pleased to see that the villagers were happy. He urged them to follow a religious life and make Swaminarayan Nagar, as Samudral had been renamed, into a village that would be the envy of all others.

* * *

Gujarat, 1987-88

For three continuous years the monsoons had failed. Drinking water had dried up along with the crops. Fields lay barren and cattle were dying for lack of food. People were evacuating villages in droves, abandoning land, house and livestock. A drought had hit Gujarat in all its fury.

For several weeks now, talk of the devastating drought had hung depressingly in the air. Swamishri listened carefully to all the talk, at times asking questions or making comments.

During Swamiji's travels in the villages and towns of Saurashtra he saw the stark horrors of the drought. The scene at Ratanpura Camp, where 500 calves were being looked after, was pathetic. As Swamiji was being shown around the camp, the herd of calves followed him. Swamishri enquired why. One of the organizers explained, "The calves have not had anything to eat for the last three days. They are following you because they think you've brought some food."

Swamishri was moved to tears. He could not reply.

That evening Swamishri returned to Gondal. He called Jnanprasad Swami and told him what had happened at Ratanpura Camp and added, "I couldn't bear to see the plight of those calves. Ring up Yogiswarup Swami and tell him to send six truckloads of fodder to the camp tomorrow morning."

A man from the Gondal vicinity came to Swamiji, fell at his

feet and narrated his woeful story about the drought.

“I’m ruined!” he said, “I have bullocks, but not a penny’s worth of fodder to feed them with. I’ve been to many places crying for help but I have been refused. Now I’ve come to you. Please help me!”

Swamiji told him not to worry. “We have decided to save the dying cattle. In a short while we will be opening cattle camps. We’ll look after your bullocks.”

Swamishri’s profound compassion reached out to the helpless cattle, and their owners. Even during his daily routine one would sometimes find him sitting quietly, thinking. When asked what he was thinking about, he’d reply, “About alleviating the suffering of cattle and their owners.”

Firsthand news of the drought was given to Pramukh Swami Maharaj. The regions of Kutch and Saurashtra were hardest hit, suffering the severest drought in the last 100 years. In response to the plight of the farmers, Swamishri initially set up a cattle camp in Dangra, near Rajkot, in September 1987.

Swamishri soon began personal visits to the drought-affected areas in Saurashtra. He visited many cattle camps organized by various institutions in the wake of the calamity. Having seen the bizarre picture of the drought, Swamishri’s heart throbbed with compassion. He decided that the Sanstha, too, must set up cattle camps that were well-planned and properly managed. He called a meeting of sadhus in Gondal. The places where the camps should be set up were decided; they were Bochasan, Bhavanpura, Atladra and Sankari. Swamishri commanded that the camps should be ready and opened within ten days. Though it seemed an impossible deadline to meet, Swamiji was insistent that the camps be ready. Cattle were dying he said, there was no time to be lost.

He blessed the sadhus saying, “Presently, we find many

cattle camps run by other institutions. But they have many problems – water and fodder are not served regularly to the cattle and they have no shelter from the cold and heat. Without any shade the cold winter will cause an inflammation of their bone joints and the summer heat, inspite of feeding fodder will render them weak and fatigued. We want to set up cattle camps where we can fulfil and provide these three facilities as much we can... We want to serve and help the farmers. We will not be doing it for the sake of name and fame. God will help us if we put in some efforts.

“The sadhus will have to sacrifice their time and energy. Believe this to be our devotion and meditation to Shriji Maharaj. Though the government will give us only a subsidy of Rs. 3 per head of cattle, we will spend Rs. 15 per every head of cattle and make them strong and ready for next year’s farming season.”

For one-and-a-half months 350 bullocks were looked after at the Dangra camp. The sadhus there were aware of the problems and difficulties in running a cattle camp. They suggested that 350 were more than enough to look after. But Swamiji did not agree. He said, “I want to look after 100,000 head of cattle! It isn’t impossible. I’ll tell 300 sadhus to join in this service. We just can’t sit and watch thousands of cattle die. Just look at their suffering!”

Swamiji’s spirit to serve and save the dying cattle was colossal. When he heard that the state government had decided not to subsidise the cattle camps in the districts of Surat and Kheda he said to Ishwarcharan Swami, “Don’t worry about not getting the subsidy. We shall still accept and look after the cattle in our camps. It doesn’t matter if we have to bear the extra cost.”

A beehive of activity began. Three hundred sadhus and

hundreds of youths and devotees started a round-the-clock effort to construct the camps. Many of the sadhus were actively engaged in various other services like gathering good fodder, surveying drought-hit villages to decide which farmers were most affected and needed help, making arrangements for transporting cattle to the camps, organizing drives for donations in towns and cities... A new chapter had unfolded. Swamishri's words had mobilized the entire Sanstha to render a yeoman service to society.

Volunteers were enrolled for running the four camps. The student sadhus in Ahmedabad and Sarangpur dropped their studies temporarily and started a drive for donations in the towns and cities of Gujarat. Thousands of devotees, youths and members of the *bal mandal* also joined in this *seva* to save thousands of dying cattle. The cattle camps were inaugurated according to Swamishri's deadline on 17 October 1988. After hearing reports of the severity of the drought from sadhus travelling in villages, Swamishri resolved to start a sanctuary for the afflicted cattle.

Swamiji's prudence in opening the camps in Charotar and Valsad District turned out to be highly economical and advantageous. There was an abundance of water and fodder in these areas, bringing costs down drastically.

Prior to opening the cattle camps Swamiji had instructed the sadhus to find out the average daily food requirements for a single head of cattle, the types of fodder and nourishment for the different breeds, where good quality fodder could be obtained, its cost... Swamishri wished that every animal that arrived in the camp be nourished not only to good health, but be made strong and robust, ready for tilling the land when sent back home.

The cattle were generously nourished on fresh corn, *juvar*, fresh *bajri* and *lajko* – a type of grass. Several times a day in large portions, a total of 18 kg of food was given to every head of cattle. Later, with instructions from Swamishri, it was increased to 21 kg. All the four camps had a minimum 15 days stock of fodder.

The owners of the cattle were also taken to the camps. The farmers were provided with food and shelter. Visits by a doctor, barber, shoemaker and a tailor were arranged specially for them – all free of cost. Toiletries were provided free of charge and postal services were arranged for them. These facilities were provided so that no need for them to leave the camp would arise, thus enabling them to offer maximum attention and service to the cattle.

The then Governor of Gujarat R.K. Trivedi praised the work by saying, “It has been my good fortune that I have worked for almost two years in Chhapaiya, the birthplace of Bhagwan Swaminarayan. Thirty-five years have passed since then and I did not realize that his message was still ringing throughout India, or that great men like Pramukh Swami Maharaj were spreading that message across the world.

“After coming into Gujarat to work, I’ve tried to get acquainted with the benevolent work of the Sanstha. I thoroughly inspected the Bochasan Cattle Camp, and I can say with pride that the efficiency and integration I saw there has not been matched by any of the other charity organizations. The main reason behind this can only be the love and care of the sadhus. They not only involved themselves in menial tasks, but they made it their duty to come closer to the cattle owners and even the animals themselves. Not a single fault can be found. Even after three years of famine, Gujarat’s livestock has been saved, and all credit must go to organizations like this. So

I'd like to express, on behalf of the State, my dearest gratitude and congratulations.”

Seventy-year-old Megha Bapa from Thana Pipali in Junagadh district, a peppy old man, inspite of his age served twelve hours daily. When asked about how he was being looked after, Meghabhai's eyes glistened with tears. After a while he said, “Even my sons have not looked after me with such love and care. If I hadn't come here my bullocks would have died. I had no money left to look after my cattle.”

“Do you ever get tired or bored after serving such long hours?” Meghabhai was asked.

His eyes moistened again, “Tired? Never! How can you get tired or bored while serving! If Swami is never bored of his mammoth work then why should I in my small services!”

The drought brought Bhurabhai to the Bochasan Cattle Camp. He brought with him a companion worth Rs. 200 – opium! During the next few days the sadhus found out about the seriousness of his addiction. They asked him to give it up. Bhurabhai refused. He was adamant. His affinity for opium was so strong that he saw it as impossible. To him it was his life-breath. The tables turned on the arrival of Pramukh Swami Maharaj to the camp. An assembly was held. Swamishri talked emphatically on the dangers and futility of addictions. When he finished blessing the assembly, several farmers came forward with outstretched hands to take a pledge of non-addiction.

Bhurabhai was one of them! Swamishri's words had hit him hard. Swami placed his loving hand on his head and sympathized with him. Bhurabhai gave up his addiction and resolved never to take opium again. He took the remaining opium and buried it deep in the ground. At the age of 75 a change in direction had been ushered into his life. For the

next three days Bhurabhai went through painful withdrawal symptoms. His entire body screamed with aches and pain. He was restless all day and all night. The doctors advised him to give it up gradually. But Bhurabhai was firm. He fought it off with a soldier's spirit. He boldly said, "I shall not defile my mouth with opium!" And so on the fourth day Bhurabhai emerged victorious.

* * *

Four devotees from Sangavadar went to Gondal for darshan. When they saw that Swamiji was in Gondal they were overjoyed. Swamishri asked, "How is everything?"

"Swami, things are miserable because of this monstrous drought. But on the other hand we feel reluctant to send the cattle to our cattle camps!"

"Why is that?" Swami asked.

"Swami, how can we burden the mandir by sending our bullocks to the cattle camps!"

The devotees had always served and given their yearly tithes to the mandir. And now they couldn't allow themselves to be served by the mandir. They felt it was unfair to receive free help from the mandir.

Swamishri explained, "Tell me, who has provided the things we have in this mandir? It is you, the devotees. You have all sacrificed and donated a lot of things for the sake of Thakorji and now that you are in need, we are helping you. We are giving you what you have given us! There's no reason for you to hesitate. Send your bullocks to our camp in Bochasan."

* * *

Whenever he was invited to open camps he never made any delays. To inaugurate a cattle camp run by Chhotubhai Ajmera in Gondal, Swamishri left Bochasan one day earlier than scheduled. He said if he delayed it by a day, it would

mean one more day of suffering for the cattle. Chhotubhai was informed of his coming. After a tiring six-hour journey Swamishri arrived at Gondal mandir. He opened the camp that afternoon.

During the Sunday meeting in Gondal, Swamiji said, “One just can’t bear to see the ravages of this drought... Just listening to the suffering gives one the shivers... You just can’t bear to see the snaps of the devastating drought...”

His only objective was to save the famished bullocks and make them ready for farming before the monsoon arrived the following year. This was only possible through personal care.

Festivals were scaled down tremendously and the money that would have been spent was funneled into the drought relief. The occasion of Sharad Purnima celebration in Gondal was cancelled and instead an assembly was held in Bochasan. Swamiji blessed the devotees saying, “In the wake of this terrible drought I request those of you who can, to grow *juvar* and fodder on your farms for the dying cattle. It is a time when we should share our bread, give half of it for the sake of our animals. God will be pleased. We humans can migrate or leave the drought-stricken area and find food elsewhere, but the helpless animals cannot. They are at our mercy and we must help them as much as we can. Sow whatever is needed for your livelihood and plant fodder for the cattle in the remaining part of your land.”

* * *

While in Sarangpur a devotee from Velavadar told Swamiji, “Our volunteers have accepted to look after the famished cattle of people who had opposed our sadhus while preaching in our village!”

Swamishri replied, “If they couldn’t leave their evil ways, then why should we forfeit our goodness! God will show them

the path of goodness.”

A Sai Satsang Mandal in Mumbai had collected Rs. 100,000 by singing bhajans in trains. They came to offer the donation to Swamishri. He, however, told the leader to give their donations to the Gadhada Panjrapol. The money was needed there.

He cared also for the local sanctuaries in Gadhada, Botad, Amreli, Raapar, Mandvi, Jamnagar and other places. Despite the heavy cost of running the Sanstha's camps Swamishri even donated 100,000 sheafs of fodder to the sanctuaries in Gadhada and Amreli.

The students staying at APC in Vidyanagar decided to donate money. To save up many of them stopped having breakfast, some saved by not spending money on ironing their clothes, many walked to college and donated their transport fares and some gave up their extravagant habits and donated the money. They collected a sum of Rs. 46,000. Many students donated money by sacrificing their school trips. Children too, joined in by not using firecrackers for Diwali and not flying kites on 14 January, the kite festival. Devotees reduced their daily requirements and donated their savings for the dying cattle.

Sadhus visited different schools and colleges and appealed to the teachers and students to collect donations for the cattle camps. As more and more institutions and people in general became aware of Swamishri's work, they started donating for the good cause.

Swamishri took personal interest in the running of the camps. He visited the camps at least three times during the first six months. This charged the spirits of the volunteers and farmers serving there.

In a meeting in Bochasan a decision was made to purchase and distribute 800,000 kg of grains. Swamishri said, “If we

need to buy another 20-30,000 kg of grains, then do so. I shall travel to towns and villages and appeal for donations.”

* * *

Relief was also sent to the cattle owners who had no harvest during the last three years. An almshouse in Dangra and a centre for buttermilk in Bhadra were initially opened.

Buttermilk was to be distributed to a proposed 70,000 people daily, but it had shot up to 100,000. Swamishri wrote a letter to the sadhus saying, “Don’t worry. If more and more people find relief from drinking buttermilk then don’t hesitate to open more distribution centres.”

To Devcharan Swami, he said, “I’d like you and some teachers to go to the homes of students studying in our *gurukul* school in Gondal, and Bhadra High School. Find out which parents are unable to make ends meet and then give back their childrens’ school fees. And don’t take any fees for the next year either. Provide them with the necessary textbooks and exercise books at our cost. If their parents are short of grains, make arrangements for that too! Don’t worry about the cost! We must help them in their hour of need.”

To Jnanprasad Swami, Swamiji said, “Sowing time has arrived for the farmers. Those who don’t have the means to buy seeds and fertiliser should be provided with them.”

A few days before Swamiji left on an overseas Satsang tour he insisted, “Now with the monsoons approaching, the farmers will be getting impatient to take their bullocks home. Make sure that we provide two months of fodder to those who don’t have the means to look after their cattle. And if a farmer’s bullock has died in our camp then give him another instead.”

People who were given buttermilk said, “Pramukh Swami has done a wonderful service to us. When we have only a little

water to drink, Pramukh Swami bought water and provided us with buttermilk... If Swamiji hadn't provided us with the buttermilk then we would have been blinded by the heat and our daily diet of chapati and hot red chillies... Pramukh Swami treats everyone equally. He provides protein biscuits in equal amounts to all, whether they be Brahmin, Harijan or Muslim.

Every day, a total of 195 centres served buttermilk to 150,000 people. The hardest hit districts, where the maximum distribution was made, were Jamnagar, Junagadh and Rajkot.

Grains were distributed by volunteer devotees in 232 villages. Before the project commenced, the volunteers made a register of families severely affected by the drought in every village. Once this was ready, a team of sadhus and volunteers distributed grains to 15 villages every day. At night the team would return exhausted from the day's heat and travelling. The following day they would start again covering more villages. They worked for days, distributing grains to the hundreds of poor families in the villages they visited. The distribution was personally done by the sadhus and volunteers in every village.

* * *

The sadhus went to the village of Giri, Jamnagar district. They gathered the predominantly Rajput – warrior class – population at the local school. The sadhus urged them to come forward and take the grains. But no one moved. The village had been under the clutches of the drought for the last few years. They all needed grains. A Rajput then said, “Swami, we will not take the grains! We Rajputs have never begged or taken another's grains in our whole life. And you being sadhus – God's people – we can't take it from you!” So saying the Rajput broke down in tears.

“But this is God's *prasad!*” the sadhus explained. In spite of a lot of pressing, the people didn't take the grains. Eventually

their young children were given the grains. The Rajputs felt embarrassed. They allowed their children to take the grains under the condition of returning them to the sadhus in the future.

One hot afternoon, the sadhus, arrived at a village called Toda. They met a boy who was a student at the Sanstha's *gurukul* in Gondal.

“What are you doing here?” the sadhus asked.

The twelve-year-old boy told his tale with tears in his eyes, “This morning I was injured at a government labour camp. I had no money for dressing my wounds so I applied turmeric powder... Tomorrow, this young boy will go to work in my place.” The sadhus looked at the boy next to him. He was only seven years old. The older boy continued, “While my mother digs the ground this boy will carry and dump the earth away. Then we'll get paid at the end of the day, from which we'll buy grains for food.” He said he was leaving school, because he had no money for his fees. The sadhus assured him that he would be exempted from all fees and be provided with free meals, living accommodation and textbooks. The sadhus left, giving him a share of grain.

Before the four cattle camps were opened, Swamishri had already donated hundreds of tons of fodder to many Panjrapols, Gaushalas and cattle camps. Amreli and Gadhada each received 100,000 sheafs of fodder, 500,000 sheafs were given to a Gaushala in Raapar in Kutch. Fodder was also donated to many farmers in 60 villages in the districts of Jamnagar, Amreli and Bhavnagar.

16

Spiritual Teachings Made Simple

“That’s a trick mirror, so you see teeth. If you really have teeth you should be able to see them as plainly as you can see the palm of your hand without the mirror!”

In Gondal, after his afternoon siesta, Swamishri was seated in his room surrounded by a group of sadhus. It was after four, and an attendant had placed before him a tray of dry fruits and fresh fruits. The *thal* had been offered to Harikrishna Maharaj and now Swamishri was being asked to accept a little.

This was a daily routine that the sadhus looked forward to everywhere. It was a time when they could have Swamishri to themselves. Everything would be informal. There would be mild chit chat, somebody would crack a joke and everybody, including Swamishri, would laugh loudly. It was a time where Swamishri could add his personal touch, he would sit with the sadhus around him and warmly reciprocate – nothing could

equal these intimate meetings. *Prasad* would be distributed to all present. Swamishri would serve handfuls, sometimes selecting a particular fruit for a particular sadhu.

The ten minutes so spent have over the years become precious moments of closeness. At times Swamishri takes the opportunity to teach a simple lesson, adopting the method according to the sadhus present.

Amongst the sadhus before him in Gondal was little Ramji Bhagat sitting in a corner. Swamishri called him closer and gave him some *prasad*. He himself had only taken a piece of apple.

“Swami,” said Devcharan Swami, “please take something yourself.” Swamishri picked up a slice of orange and broke it into two. One piece he popped into his mouth, the other he gave to Ramji Bhagat. Again Devcharan Swami said, “Bapa, you eat the orange. Ramji has teeth and so he can eat fruits such as guava.” Devcharan Swami was referring to a hard seeded fruit, similar in shape and size to an apple. There was a giggle around the room. Ramji Bhagat was often a target of playful teasing. He always rose to the occasion.

“Ramji, do you have teeth?” asked Swamishri seriously.

“Yes, Shaami,” Ramji Bhagat had difficulty pronouncing ‘Swami’.

“Can you see your teeth?”

“No, Shaami.”

“Then why do you say that you have teeth?” The sadhus were looking from one face to the other.

“But Shaami, when I look in the mirror I see teeth. Yes, I do have teeth.” Ramji Bhagat was convinced of the fact.

“That’s a trick mirror, so you see teeth. If you really have teeth you should be able to see them as plainly as you can see the palm of your hand without the mirror!”

Everyone burst out laughing, Swamishri and Ramji Bhagat the most.

“Shaami, teeth cannot be seen, but I do have them!”

A broad smile filled Swamishri’s face. He taught, “See how convinced he is that he has a full set of teeth! We should have a likewise conviction of having attained the association of God.”

* * *

Expounding on the difficult philosophical subject of *maya*, Swamishri brought the subject down to earth. He separated the philosophy from the practical and in his usual simple language made available to the unlearned devotees before him spiritual knowledge of the utmost importance. He said, “What is *maya*’s web like? Even the most powerful become entangled. Think of it as a group of gamblers. They see you approaching from a distance and so begin a game. One of them stakes a rupee, it’s all pretence and he wins ten. You stand for a moment to watch and the thought comes: ‘Looks like it’s worth playing. Everyone’s winning, so why won’t I.’ You stake all your money, and lose it. That’s how we get stuck in the web. There are many such enticing traps in the world. The outside appearance is good; showcase goods are always different, just by seeing them we give an order. But the goods sent home to us are rubbish, not of the same quality. Timber merchants hide cracks in wood by careful filling with paste. The wood looks okay and so a customer buys, but at the first stroke of the plank the crack is seen. *Maya*’s web is like that, tempting and baiting, decoying. On the surface there is brilliance and inside, darkness. A person who has knowledge of *atma* and Paramatma is never trapped by *maya*.”

He illustrates the deceitful ways of the world and its ultimate nature of worthlessness with clear similes drawn from daily life. “In the olden days if we were ploughing land in a

village owned by a *darbar* ruler, and had built good homes on the land, even then nothing would really be ours. The *darbar* may have a dream in the middle of the night and give orders for us to clear out by morning! We would have to leave. Our circumstances in this world are the same. Without warning we'll have to depart at any time. It's all right if you involve yourself in the dealings of day-to-day life, but at the same time always bear in mind where the *atma* is really to go and sit."

* * *

He graphically shows how we change our behaviour once we have understood the greatness of a truth. "If the Prime Minister were to wear simple clothes and come to this *sabha* without all his entourage, becoming quite ordinary, and he sits right next to you squeezing in, then you at once tick him off. 'Hey you! Get up, pushing in right in the middle!' But then someone identifies him to us as the Prime Minister. Then? We'd stand up immediately, 'Welcome! Welcome! I'm very lucky to have met you!' We'd take him home, offer him tea and snacks."

Swamishri goes on to say that we should similarly understand the greatness of God and the Satpurush who appear as normal humans, just like us. But, they are different. Once we perceive their true virtue and stature our love for them changes, our behaviour improves.

* * *

Entering Satsang can be difficult for some. An almost complete change of life is required. Bad habits have to be replaced with good ones, self-discipline and control have to be learnt, sometimes painfully. Swamishri presses home the need for patience. He explains, "Once an ox is old enough he has to be broken. This is done by inserting a thick string through its nose. At first the ox pulls the strings out. And if he does allow

it to remain he only walks a few paces and then refuses to walk on. But the farmer then carefully trains it and soon the ox cooperates. And then whenever you yoke it to a plough, water wheel or a cart, it quietly goes everywhere. When the neck becomes strong and callous the yoke does not hurt. Similarly, when one is new to Satsang it is difficult to do daily puja, reading, *ekadasbi*, come to the mandir and other such things, but after a while we become strong and it all becomes natural, the mind becomes stable.”

Satsang, Swamishri says, should be considered ‘home’. If this is done then spiritual life becomes easier. The chances of falling from Satsang are reduced. “Satsang should be done for the liberation of the soul. When we go to the mandir we may be treated sociably or just ignored. Not everyone in the mandir is the same. However, if we believe Satsang to be our home then there is no problem. Don’t we slave away for our wives and children day and night? And even then when we return home in the evening is anyone waiting at the door with a garland, ‘Come, come! You really are working so hard!’ Do they say ‘Thank you’. Even a glass of water we have to fetch ourselves. But home is home, so we never feel hurt. In the same way, if we believe Satsang to be home and if Satsang has touched our souls, then there will be no obstacles that can hinder us.”

* * *

Swamishri is very clear about *achar-vichar* – religious thought and conduct – for aspirants. He stresses the need for pure behaviour, “It is only when first dharma is firmly entrenched in one’s life that later God’s darshan can be had. If we possess land that is fertile and covered with wild growing bushes and trees, and on that land we throw the finest of seeds, would crops grow? No! First the land has to be cleared of all

trees. Similarly, as long as our minds remain dirty, impure, we will not be able to serve the Lord. This is why we have been commanded to have pure *achar-vichar*.”

* * *

How does the Satpurush help an aspirant to God consciousness? Swamishri clarifies using an everyday law of nature, “As long as there is the pull of gravity whatever we throw up is always going to come down. But once it is out of gravity’s attraction it will not fall back. Likewise, as long as we believe ourselves to be in truth this body, and have overwhelming fondness of money and family, and are attracted to the material world we are consigned to the cycle of birth and death. The Satpurush removes our worldly likings and ignorance; he liberates us from the pull of the world and delivers us in the service of the Lord.”

* * *

Although the shastras go to great lengths in singing the glories of the Satpurush and his relationship with God. When such a Satpurush talks of their special bond it becomes a very delicate matter. Misunderstandings are easily born. The truth, however, cannot be hidden or brushed aside. To do so would be to damage the sincere aspirant’s spiritual progress. Swamishri is often asked questions relating to his own spiritual realization, and in particular, to his role as the Satpurush and his relationship with God. His words are better heard than read, for his voice conveys a rare egolessness.

Dr Sudhirbhai Patel of Bryan, Texas, wanting to clear up a problem he was experiencing in his daily puja asked, “I have never seen Shriji Maharaj and so it is impossible for me to imagine him, or see him in my morning meditation and *mansi* worship during puja. I have, however, seen you. Is it all right for me to imagine you in my *mansi* worship?”

Swamishri replied, “Our Lord is Shriji Maharaj. We have faith in him. *Mansi* puja is to be performed with his *murti* in our mind and heart. If we have, however, met a guru who is God-realized, then because of our association with such a guru we can also reach God. Such a Satpurush has a unique relationship with God. Because he has seen God such a Satpurush can be remembered during puja. If we want to worship sacred water from the Ganga then we worship the jar containing the sacred water. This is because the jar contains the sacred Ganga water. Likewise, God is totally present in a true Satpurush, so by worshipping him, God is in true fact being worshipped.

* * *

Once, Swamishri was walking back to his room after the evening *sabha* in Atladra when a man fell at his feet in a bundle and began sobbing. Swamishri gently lifted him up. The man said, “If you had not talked in the *sabha* today (of my drawbacks) I would have permanently fallen from Satsang. Because of a volunteer I had become spiteful of Satsang. You talked of things that were buried in my heart. Today you have cut to shreds all my doubts.”

Swamishri had not directly addressed the *satsangi*, indeed, he seldom does to anyone. His message is universal, but there are always unknown people in the crowd who benefit from the discourse.

His sentences are bare and simple, devoid of dressing. His style of speaking is forthright, with none of the mechanical manipulation of a professional speaker. Yet his words possess a cutting edge that finds the target and penetrates to the heart.

Bhailalbai of Javaraj had his doubts about the Akshar Pusushottam *upasana* preached by Shastriji Maharaj. He wrote a letter to Swamishri expressing his scepticism. To clear his misunderstanding, Swamishri penned a five page letter: “The

upasana preached by Shastriji Maharaj is not at all contradictory to the principles laid down by Shriji Maharaj.”

Explaining the relationship between Akshar and Purushottam, Swamishri continued: “Without Akshar, Purushottam cannot exist – that is not correct. Akshar is the abode of Maharaj (Purushottam), his devotee and his servant. The supporter of Akshar is Maharaj. However, Maharaj’s abode is Akshar and it is essential to attain oneness with Akshar (become *aksharrup*) to offer worship to Maharaj... not to worship Akshar as such but to worship Maharaj. Vachanamrut Loya 12 describes the highest category of faith in the Lord... We pray for this knowledge daily after the evening *arti*... ‘*Nirvakalp uttam ati nischay tav Ghanshyam*...’

“In Vachanamrut, Loya 12, Maharaj talks of this knowledge... A devotee possessing the highest category of *nirvakalp nischay* has realized that millions of macrocosms, each encircled by eight spheres, appear like atoms before the infinite greatness of Akshar. This Akshar is the divine abode of Purushottam Narayan. One has to attain oneness with Akshar to offer worship to Purushottam.

“In Vachanamrut, Gadhada I 21, Maharaj talks about the two forms of Akshar. One is the abode and the other remains in the service of the Lord. The abode form of Akshar is Akshardham, where Maharaj resides. It seems that this abode is acting as a support to Maharaj and therefore Maharaj’s greatness may seem somewhat diminished, but this is not the case. If God is seated on a horse, it seems as if the horse is supporting him, but actually God’s importance has not lessened; in reality, he is the support of the horse... In this way, Maharaj is the ultimate support of Akshar. Maharaj is independent and if he wishes, he can also exercise his powers to merge Akshar in himself and support the *muktas* independently. Therefore

a swami-*sevak* – master-servant – relationship exists between Maharaj and Swami. Maharaj is the master, the controller. Akshar is his servant. This is our *upāsana*.”

In this way, Swamishri clarified the relationship between Akshar and Purushottam, clearing any misunderstanding that Akshar is higher than or on par with Purushottam.

17

With Blessings

*Some choose to talk to him, either in person
or over the phone. Some listen to him speak in
public, others in private. Some merely pray from
a distance. Others just think of him, yet even in
that they find a solution to their problems.
And others choose to write to him.*

To have a *rakbdi* put on one's wrist by Swamishri on Rakshabandhan probably ranks as one of the most privileged events for a devotee in his life.

Naturally, there was something of a mad rush to reach Swamishri.

A young boy joined the confused rush to receive Swamishri's personal blessings. As he approached Swamishri, he tried to raise himself by getting on his toes, but he failed to keep his balance. At the same time, people on either side of him were pushing to come forward. Three times he tried and three times he lost his balance and was swept away by the crowd.

What now?

All the boy wanted was to merely touch Swamishri. With each failure, his hopes began to wane, but then his mind jumped at another idea. He moved to the side away from the chaos and scribbled a short note for Swamishri.

When the rush lightened, he tried again. He approached Swamishri. Getting on his toes, he stretched out both hands high, holding the note above his head. Swamishri's attention was pulled to the child. He bent down a little and understanding the child's gesture, took the note from his hands and blessed him. The kid's joy knew no bounds.

The assembly over, Swamishri returned to his room. Although it was no more than a simple note written haphazardly by a young child, Swamishri had faithfully kept the scrap of paper. At the first opportunity, he read the note and placed it for safekeeping in his *pagb*.

Two days passed uneventfully. After finishing his evening meal on the third day, Swamishri called one of the local sadhus. He showed him the note, "Here, read this..."

Before the sadhu could start reading, Swamishri spoke, "You think that 'the higher we seat Swami on a *sinhasan*, the greater his prestige'. But why bother with such pomp? The least you can do is to arrange the seating in such a way that the child and I could meet each other freely. One's greatness is in no way elevated by sitting on a high *sinhasan*."

Swamishri was not pleased as it went against his natural desire of meeting his beloved devotees. Despite his exalted God-realized spiritual status, out of compassion Swamishri has become like us – a human – and reaches out to us so that we can reach out to him.

Some choose to talk to him, either in person or over the phone.

Some listen to him speak in public, others in private.

Some merely pray from a distance.

Others just think of him, yet even in that they find a solution to their problems.

And others choose to write to him, anything from a short note scribbled on the back of a postcard to a fancy letter typed and sent by fax.

People of all beliefs and backgrounds write to Swamishri for almost every conceivable reason. Some write for inspiration; some write with questions, others with afflictions; some write for advice, others for blessings; some write to confess and lighten their hearts, while there are those who simply write to say hello.

Well-known tax collector and social worker, Hiralal Sodha of Mumbai wrote to Swamishri: “Despite your heavy schedule, you have never lapsed in answering your letters... Truly, this is proof of your greatness. When I was in Rajkot recently, I had to say a few words about a certain sadhu belonging to a different organization. I spoke frankly that this sadhu had lapsed in replying to his letters while Pujya Shri Pramukh Swami, despite his busy schedule, reads every letter thoroughly and gives an immediate reply to each one...”

“I consider it to be one of my life’s great privileges that I have received a letter from you, written in your own handwriting.”

Despite his busy schedule and heavy responsibilities as the spiritual guru and administrative head of the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha, Swamishri still cares enough to read and reply to the most trivial of letters. Many devotees who receive a letter from him are overjoyed beyond belief, believing that Swamishri has paid a personal visit to their home.

Swamishri's letters are written not to flatter, but out of genuine warmth from within. They are written to comfort, guide and advise – in the hope that yet another soul out there in the material world will somehow benefit.

His words may not be fancy or long, his sentences may be grammatically incorrect and his writing barely legible, yet these words somehow manage to penetrate the heart. Letters of the alphabet come together to form words and words come together to make a letter. In turn, these letters come together to build bridges enabling Swamishri to embrace countless individuals.

Over the years, Swamishri has read and replied to over 700,000 letters. He reads or writes about 50 letters daily, devoting an average of two hours a day to counsel and comfort through his pen. And this is in the midst of all his other activities: constant travelling, attending assemblies, meeting devotees and attending administrative meetings.

* * *

They seemed to have everything that one could possibly hope for: happy in the eyes of others, luxurious home, foreign car and their own retinue of servants. Yet something was missing. Discontentment reigned and a feeling of emptiness pervaded their lives. The pressures of modern living had begun to take their toll within the family. Discord was rife and relations between husband and wife, parents and children were strained to say the least. Higher education, money and authority had led to inflated, obstinate egos. None were willing to bend before the other.

Swamishri's words of wisdom, written on paper, reached that home: "Everyone has a different nature, but we should learn to live with each other...that is important. The business is there...but take a little time out to care for the family

needs...to help each other out.

“In the home, all belong to one family. Don’t believe that each member is separate from the others. Speak and behave in such a manner that mutual love and friendship develop. The children are grown up. Give them your love in the best way possible... Conversely, behave so that they also develop love for you...

“As you have affection for your own daughter, develop the same for your son and his wife...then all will stay calm.”

The atmosphere in the home changed to one of quiet and cooperation. Even today the letter remains framed, hanging high on a wall, for all to receive inspiration from.

A devotee from Mahanagar faced a major crisis at home. Totally lost as to what step to take next, he and his family had hardly cared to eat for two days. Their son had run away from home and the family had no idea where he had gone.

The root of the problem? The father wanted his son to marry, and to that end he had already found him a potential partner. On the other hand, the son preferred to wait until his business was stable; therefore he rejected any idea of marriage at the present time. The father, however, failed to understand his son. Consequently, he started firing false accusations at the boy that he had already found someone on his own accord. As a result, the son chose to escape the situation and left home. Low and disheartened, he felt the easiest way out would be to take his own life.

At this crucial hour, what he had picked up from Satsang came into use. He came to Swamishri who was in Nadiad at the time, and fully explained his side of the story. Swamishri offered a sympathetic ear. He advised the boy to return home and wrote to his father: “Regarding your son...presently he does not wish to get married. If he is unduly pressured, then there will be a problem in the future. Therefore don’t

insist, even a little, in this respect. Don't jump to any false conclusions that he has a relationship with another girl or that he wants to marry elsewhere. When the time comes, he will marry according to his choice – but only with your agreement. Therefore don't rush or put your foot down at the present time. Keep calm... You are an active member of the Satsang. You listen to and give discourses day in and day out. The fruit of these talks is for you to stay calm and not become angry. Please accept this advice willingly. With blessings..."

The letter worked wonders in bridging the gap and dissolving the misunderstanding between the two individuals in question.

Swamishri's letters encompass a whole range of topics, but place special emphasis on spiritual upliftment. He has given his all for this activity, without undue care for self convenience or regard for suitable circumstances.

In Mumbai, Swamishri was having difficulties with his dentures due to a gum problem. To have this sorted out, he went from the mandir in Dadar to a dentist in Kolaba almost daily. On one occasion, as Swamishri was getting into his car, a devotee handed him a letter. Swamishri read the note while travelling. He wished to write an immediate answer, but his letter pad was not at hand. Swamishri asked a sadhu to tear a page out of his dairy. On that sheet, Swamishri penned a reply while the car was making its way through the jam-packed Mumbai traffic. As soon as Swamishri arrived at the mandir, he arranged for the note to reach the devotee for whom it was intended.

During a festival in Surat, the youths could not hold back their enthusiasm when a devotional song was being sung. They got up to dance a traditional step on stage, little realizing that the stage was nothing more than a few wooden planks

put together. Movements on the stage shook Swamishri's seat, but even in this situation Swamishri remained totally calm and continued his letter writing.

While walking from the main mandir compound to the Yogi Smruti Mandir in Gondal, a devotee handed Swamishri a note. Swamishri opened up the folded piece of paper and started to read it while walking. Not caring to look at the ground, Swamishri stumbled on the way and had to stop. There and then, Swamishri gave a verbal reply to the devotee and proceeded on his way to have the darshan at the Smruti Mandir.

Mumbai, 12 June 1990

Swamishri had to go for an X-ray at Dr Dixit's laboratory in Mumbai, again concerning ill fitting dentures. During the journey he began reading letters in the car. Arriving at his destination, Swamishri learnt that the doctor was held up in making preparations for the X-ray. He immediately asked for his letters. When the call came, Swamishri stood up without even taking his eyes off the letter in his hand. He continued reading while being helped into the X-ray room and paused only for the X-rays of his mouth to be taken. He had to lift his face up slightly for the X-rays and a total of five pictures were taken. Throughout the whole procedure, his hands held the letters, which he still continued to read in the odd moments between the X-ray shots.

In 1977, Swamishri wrote a letter from abroad during his hectic foreign tour, which summed up his situation: "There is no end to travelling and no end to the mail... I have to deal with the letters at all times...in the car...when sitting...even when in bed... Only then are we able to manage. But with (Yogi) Bapa's strength, we are able to cope."

In the same year, a spiritual convention for all the sadhus of the Sanstha was organized in Sarangpur. Swamishri sent his blessings and guidelines via a letter from America. At the end of the letter, he added: “10 October 1977. Please forgive me... this letter has been written much too long. Blessings should be in short but what can we do? Presently we are travelling from Chicago to Mississippi. We have 800 miles to cover...long journey, long talks, long writing... All night will pass in travelling. We’ll reach our destination early tomorrow morning.”

During an outdoor assembly in Sarangpur, Swamishri was seated cross-legged on his seat. With the letter pad supported on his left knee, Swamishri was writing letters one after another. A grasshopper landed on his right knee. Swamishri continued as if totally unaware of this. A young sadhu came forward and frightened the insect away. Still Swamishri continued to write without looking up, probably not even realizing that someone had just come right up to him.

In Atladra, when Swamishri was writing letters, a mouse somehow found its way into his room. The sadhus discreetly made attempts to catch it but the mouse’s quick responses saved it from being caught. During the commotion, the rodent managed to hide somewhere. The sadhus were still after the mouse when Swamishri finished his work.

By the expression on their faces, Swamishri realized that something was up. He casually asked, “What are you looking for?”

“A mouse.”

“Here it is!” So saying, Swamishri lifted his hand to expose the mouse, which had been playing under his *gatariyu* or upper cloth!

Following his evening meal in Bhavnagar, Swamishri was

seated next to his bed reading letters. Directly above his head was a light bulb. For some reason, the bulb happened to fall from its holder, brushing Swamishri's shoulder before rolling on to the floor. Not even the slightest stir was observed on Swamishri. After Swamishri had finished the letters, Bhadrash Swami informed him about the bulb.

Surprised, Swamishri asked, "When did it fall?"

"When you were busy reading!"

Narayancharan Swami commented, "We have to praise your balance of mind..."

Swamishri laughingly said, "If one's mind is constantly on God, then how can one realize?"

* * *

Rushdi, a Muslim living in Beijing, China, asked for Swamishri's advice: "I want your advice to my problems. Dear Maharaj! My problem is that, since I started school in the year 1964, I have never made any progress in education, not because I am not working hard. I have tried my best as a human being but...no success. I have suffered a long time now..."

Swamishri replied: "Whichever God you may believe in, remember him daily and continue your efforts... You will surely attain success... If one is pure hearted, all will turn out for the best."

To us some questions may seem trivial, but in the eyes of the asker, they may be of paramount importance. Swamishri fully realizes this and is therefore able to patiently understand.

A devotee from Bhavnagar asked: "My baby daughter is unable to eat any white-coloured food... Please give blessings..."

An ordinary farmer from Bhaarparaa wrote: "I have started digging a well. Bless us that we receive plenty of water..."

A youth from Sarsavani asked: “I wish to purchase a Bajaj scooter... Could you offer suitable guidance?”

A devotee from Jamnagar asked for advice on what to do with his three-wheeled rickshaw that kept breaking down frequently.

Once Swamishri received five postcards from a person who chose to remain anonymous. The postcards were all written on the same date from the same place: “I am turning bald... Please give blessings for my hair to regrow...”

A mandir president writes regarding purchase of land for a potential mandir... A youth from the UK asks about maintaining a vegetarian diet when studying away from home... A devotee wants tips on how to stop noticing the drawbacks of others... A teenager from America asks for advice on how to maintain his satsang in the relatively hostile atmosphere of high school... A child seeks guidance on how to stop his dad from drinking heavily... A youth wants to know what to do if his pride swells up when singing on stage.

* * *

During a journey from Mumbai to Amalsad, Swamishri started to read a 72-page letter! Amalsad arrived but the end of the letter was still many pages away. In the assembly that followed in Amalsad, Swamishri finished reading the letter and immediately wrote a reply.

Swamishri was travelling by air from Mumbai to London on the first leg of his 1994 overseas tour. He got up to pass water, but as the lavatory was occupied, he had to wait outside. In the couple of minutes that elapsed while he was standing, Swamishri managed to leaf through three letters.

* * *

During the early 1980's, Swamishri's hectic touring was at its climax, sometimes covering up to ten villages a day. Despite

such a heavy schedule, whenever Swamishri ordered *kantbis* from Ahmedabad, he wrote the request himself caring to include even apparently minor details. In a letter to Satyapriya Swami, who was handling that particular department at the time, Swamishri wrote: “Send *kantbis* which have been strung together with nylon threads... Send beads which are not too thick nor too thin...”

* * *

Mr. Rama of South Africa sent a letter in English. Seeing the letter, Swamishri remarked, “His previous letter had been written in Gujarati... Why in English this time?”

* * *

For many years Swamishri has been writing replies on specially prepared letterheads. On the left hand side of this paper is a margin. Swamishri has a habit of crossing this margin when writing. His writing also tends to slope upwards. Due to a heavier mail load and a busier schedule, over time, Swamishri’s writing has become a little larger in size. If only a few details are left to be written on a letter, he often turns the paper around 90 degrees and writes horizontally in the margin. In some cases, if the margin is already full and he still wishes to write a few words, he adds them in between two lines that he has already written.

Swamishri makes a point of sanctifying any important letter or legal document before the Lord’s *murti* prior to posting. He insists on keeping all letters that he receives, for at least 15 days – in case they need to be referred to or in case of a mishap where the reply may be misplaced or lost in the post. Very important letters Swamishri prefers to keep and personally look after. He tears up any personal or confidential letter immediately after reading it or if the writer of the letter is present, he returns it to him personally.

He prefers letters that are written to the point without any unnecessary details. If letters giving reports of sadhus' travels or devotees' activities are received, he listens to them while taking his meals. When an inspiring letter, which may be of use to others is received, he often reads it out to those present.

When given a stack of letters to read while travelling by car or while sitting in an assembly, he has a tendency to put the elastic band (used to keep the letters together) around the big toe of his right foot. He later reuses the band to keep the letters together. If his letter writing is interrupted by a phone call or someone wanting to meet him, he holds on to his pen – keeping it between the big toe and second toe of his right foot. On some occasions, he has been known to inadvertently leave aside his pen without recapping it, only to realize later that it has stained his clothes.

Sometimes the sadhu handling the correspondence asks Swamishri about each letter, after which Swamishri gives a reply to each one in turn. At other times, Swamishri reads a whole stack of letters and later gives the answers at a convenient time. The secretary notes the details as suggested by Swamishri and pens a reply. These letters are then given to Swamishri, who adds to them as he feels necessary – this may be anything from one line to a few pages. At the end of the letter, Swamishri gives his blessings and signs the letter: “Jai Swaminarayan, With blessings...Shastri Narayanswarupdas.”

18

Wings of Gold

*Knowledge cannot be had from books alone.
Association with the holy Sadhu is a must.
If by mere reading one could become a doctor,
why do children have to go to school? To obtain
spiritual knowledge you will have to associate
with the Sadhu.*

Revealing truths from Swamishri's discourses that help in daily spiritual life.

Dharma

- Dharma is that which spreads love for one another.
- There would be no differences if each studied their Dharma. By becoming deeply spiritual you will never want to make another unhappy or snatch away another's property. We are all *atmas* – souls.

Vayam amrutasya putrāḥ! – We are all sons of the Eternal!
Of which caste is the *atma*? Which is its family? Which is

its country? Dharma teaches that the body, for which we perform all manner of hurtful things, is itself not going to live always. Then why do wrong, believing 'this is mine and this is yours'? Share one another's fortune and misfortune, help one another rise. All this is taught by dharma.

- Dharma is only one – humanity and *sadachar*.¹

Satpurush (Guru)

- The guru is the gateway to *moksha*. He possesses God.
- Through the guru God can be attained. Such an Ekantik Sadhu takes one to God.
- What is supreme liberation? It is having attained God or his Sadhu.
- God is everywhere, but only by associating with one in whom he is manifest is liberation a reality.
- Associating with the bonafide spiritual master is studying at the college of *brahmic* knowledge.
- Maharaj is manifest through the Param Bhagwat Sant. Only by realizing his true glory and nature can one experience the transcendental bliss of having seen God face-to-face.
- The true Sadhu is the path to God. Such a Sadhu helps us in this world and for the next; he liberates us.
- Through the Satpurush's words flows immortalizing nectar sweeping away the ignorance of so many.
- But even though there are heaps of books, knowledge cannot be gained from them. A true Sadhu and his holy association are wanted for that.
- Satpurush – the Sant – is the manifest form of dharma, *jnan*, *vairagya* and bhakti.

1. *Sadachar* possesses a broad meaning and does not only include virtuous living in the context here. *Sadachar* includes the spiritual qualities of dharma, *jnan*, *vairagya* and bhakti in their perfect practice.

- As long as doubts remain toward the Satpurush, the light of Brahman is not seen.
- The respect we reserve for God should also be given to the Satpurush.
- *Nischay, nishtha, swarupnishtha, upasana* and *pativrata* bhakti should all be genuine and strong as they are vital if one is to bond with the spiritual master.
- An aspirant who lives within the commands of the Satpurush can attain the divine bliss of Akshardham on this very earth. There can be no room for doubt: Will I suffer? What of my wife and children? The desire to succeed at all costs. Once you have dived in there should be no looking back. Focus on the Satpurush and continue your efforts, you will have no setbacks.
- It will be known by others that we have not comprehended the importance of the Satpurush's commands if we continue as we wish and not according to his will. The fruits of associating with the Sadhu will not be ours.
- The Satpurush may preach or may not preach, but inspiration should be taken from his life.

Sadachar (Character)

- Without character and morality as the first step, no one can attain God.
- Character is the foundation, if it is kept firm and intact the monument of life built upon it will be unshakeable. If character is lost, the monument will soon tumble. Keep all thoughts and actions pure.
- Our character is like money. If character is there our other wealth will remain.
- Youth should think first of character. They should have no addictions. All those who have become great have

first moulded their character – built their life. There is no outcome if you serve society with a lack of character. Even if you talk to somebody you cannot hope to influence him if you are lacking in character.

- Immorality may give you great gains, but a dry piece of bread earned through moral means will guarantee peace of mind. Do not become lazy and negligent. Fruits obtained without effort do not give peace and joy. Do not be trapped by greed and superstition. Walking through life in consonance with instructions given by God will ensure that we are not met by unhappiness.
- Failings should be abandoned. Addictions, temperaments, prejudices, harmful thoughts and actions and whatever should all be renounced. Through the centuries the wealth of character is what India has given to the world. If everyone together decides to rid themselves of failings then the world would become faultless. Stop looking at the faults of others and grasp only their virtues.
- To seat God in one's heart one's life must be pure. *Sadachar* purifies one's life. Dharma brings man closer to man. Money does not bring men closer, nor is peace of mind possible. Only God and his Sadhu can grant peace. A man who lives by God's law will find peace even in the jungle. If we become good, the world also becomes good.

Satsang

- Only through satsang can one discriminate between the eternal and ephemeral.
- Satsang enables us to enjoy the bliss of one's *atma*.
- Identify good company and bad company. In expectation of a peaceful life we search for good neighbours, in the

same way when entrusting oneself, one's soul, a true Satpurush is to be sought.

- 'I and mine' leave as we practice satsang. By enjoying what God has given us with the belief, 'this isn't mine', one does not become attached.
- Soap cleans the body, but what of deceit and fraudulence that remain in the mind? Satsang is the soap that cleanses the mind.
- When satsang wisdom becomes deeply embedded, one can think of the Lord in all activities.
- At first, working the fields is bone-aching, but after a while becomes easy. Similarly, satsang in the beginning is hard, but then becomes simple.
- As a man finds more success his desires increase. Satsang repels such desires.
- For countless births we have been intoxicated with the world. This satsang removes that craving. Can such intoxication be cured in three or four days? Unbroken Sant *samagam* leads to a cure.
- Attaining this Satsang is the fruit of all past spiritual efforts. But we do not understand this truth and are so attracted to yoga, *tapa*, *tyag*. Once we have understood the greatness of satsang no other spiritual endeavours are required.
- When thirsty only water can quench one's thirst, not even pearls and diamonds can. In the same way, only satsang grants inner tranquility. Many have houses and cars and other wealth, but they suffer inner turmoil. This is because the soul is not fed what it wants.
- Satsang wipes away trash such as anger and passion that coat the soul.
- There are many rarities in the world. Satsang is the rarest.

- Unbroken Sant *samagam* gives inner strength. The soul is strengthened. To the very last breath should we do Sant *samagam*. Just as we need food every day we should do satsang every day. Grain nourishes the body, satsang nourishes the soul. Without satsang the soul becomes weak.
- A person is made indiscriminate by the excitability of his sense organs. He is infatuated and so watches actors and then when all the junk has collected within, he becomes confused and upset. The Satpurush talks of happiness and distress. He is caring and affectionate and soon calms us. Others only increase the inner fires. That is why we should remain distant from the world and always do Sant *samagam*.
- Knowledge cannot be had from books alone. Association with the holy Sadhu is a must. If by mere reading one could become a doctor, why do children have to go to school? To obtain spiritual knowledge you will have to do Sant *samagam*.
- After entering Satsang one recognizes one's drawbacks and begins efforts to remove them. As one continues *samagam* one receives strength, and drawbacks are overcome.
- A person possessed by the enemies of passion, anger and greed is called an asura. Rid yourself of such evil through Sant *samagam*.
- Why satsang? To wash away our inner faults. A drowning man can only drown another, satsang teaches us to swim.

Bhakti

- Many offer devotion, but without *sadachar* they experience no peace.

- What is devotion? Never seeing the Lord as one with human qualities, understanding that ‘happiness’ has been given by God, and that ‘distress’ has been also given by God, and thus never feeling spiteful or prejudiced towards anyone – this is devotion.
- If we devote ourselves to God the trash within us will leave.
- One should become a humble servant, as did Hanumanji, and then offer devotion. Only when the ‘I ness’ has been eradicated can we experience the bliss of God.
- Knowingly or unknowingly, if one drinks nectar one becomes immortal. Similarly, devotion is always fruitful.
- Obeying the commands of God manifest through the Satpurush is bhakti. Yogiji Maharaj would command the youths to pick pebbles in the fields! Doing so was bhakti. When a *seva* such as the cutting of vegetables needs to be done and at that time we sit in meditation we are not offering true bhakti. Such bhakti is of no use.
- Devotion to God enables one to control the mind.
- Never look to the words of others. Are we hurting them by offering devotion to God? If a person does not approve of our job or vocation do we resign? Of course not! Similarly, you do should satsang.
- Festivals increase our devotion to God.
- Centre God in all your activities. Serve society but keep God before you. Never forget God.

19

Interviews

Parents have also to understand their responsibilities. They should not push their children to do exactly what they want all the time. They should try to understand them and let them develop. Seniors should trust the young.

Selections from various interviews with Swamishri.

Orlando, 27 June 1994

Question: Has a bad thought ever come to you?

Swamishri: Only thoughts of God come, and thoughts that good happens to all.

Q: Have you ever sinned?

S: How was that ever possible? I've been in Satsang since birth!

Racine, (USA) 8 August 1988

Reporter: Do you have any experience of what a woman is

like? (Sexuality implied)

S: Not in *trikala*. I have never experienced such things.

Mumbai, 4 October, 1989

Q: Is there any past occurrence which when comes to mind depresses you?

S: (Laughing) Unhappiness is forgetting the spiritual master and the coming to one's mind of thoughts other than that of God.

Viveksagar Swami: He is asking about you personally.

S: No, there is no such problem. I constantly experience bliss and only more bliss.

Q: How can we increase our powers of concentration for meditation, studies and whatever?

S: Efforts have to be made daily. This is not something that can be perfected in a day. Concentration comes slowly. Because of worldly pursuits and attachment to them disturbances to concentration are inevitable. But with determined effort and Sant *samagam* one's *vrutti* becomes still.

Q: What is meditation?

S: It is thinking of God's glory. Contemplating on God's divine glory, his works and reflecting that, 'God who is everywhere is also within me', is meditation.

Q: What is *samadhi*? (Referring to the reward of perfect eight-fold yoga.)

S: That is difficult but if you do Satsang you achieve *jnan samadhi*. After this you see nothing but God, there is spiritual comprehension.

Q: What is meant by Brahmajnan – knowledge of Brahman?

S: The Satpurush is Brahman, to understand his spiritual glory and perfection is *brahmajnan*, to believe that God is fully manifest in him is *brahmajnan*.

Q: When does the 'inner-eye' open?

S: The inner eyes are said to be open when you have assimilated spiritual knowledge. The bonafide spiritual master, who should be *brahmaswarup*, gives this knowledge. Hanumanji had such eyes so he recognized Rama. Tulsidas could not. But when Hanumanji explained and Tulsidas understood he also recognized Rama. When the Satpurush gives knowledge the inner eyes open.

Kolkata, 6 April, 1986

Q: How can a person gain control over his mind?

S: Through the nine types of devotion.

Sarangpur, January, 1986

Q: What is the secret behind your greatness?

S: The grace of my guru and God; without their grace one cannot become great.

Q: You have met many people across the world. Who has really impressed you and won your respect as being a 'true man'?

S: A sadhu respects all people, he disrespects no one.

Q: When do you become angry?

S: A sadhu has no anger.

Q: Even then, do you recall any time when you may have become angry because of a gambler, adulterer, or another who could not give up their vice due to personal weakness?

S: Anger never comes, but in such circumstances I do feel that what is happening is not right. And then I leave it to God's will. I want to help such people, so I try. If there is a need to be strict, I am, but at the end of it all I leave it to God.

Q: What is the secret of your success?

S: There is only one reason or secret, the singular goal of earning the spiritual master's blessings. If he is pleased then

we progress. If he is not pleased there is no trace of progress. In the main, my gurus (Shastriji Maharaj and Yogiji Maharaj) were bonafide and I lived according to their commands.

If you examine the lives of those who have got ahead you will see that they have always given prominence to their guru and obeyed them implicitly. We can see this in the lives of Bhagatji Maharaj, Shastriji Maharaj and Yogiji Maharaj. The same applies for all those devotees in the past who have found even a little success: the guru's pleasure, his grace and his blessings are a must.

Nobody has progressed due to their solitary efforts or intelligence or education or scholarship or talents.

Mumbai, 20 September 1989

Q: I read the shastras but derive no satisfaction. What should I do to destroy my inner enemies of anger, passion, ego and others?

S: Spiritual progress is only to be had by association with a true guru. Only he can direct.

Q: People go to great efforts to build mandirs today, but what can be done to build a mandir for one's soul within?

S: Sant *samagam* is needed. Association with a true spiritual master builds a living mandir.

London, 4 September 1994

Q: When we get home we feel at ease, relaxed. Where is your home, where do you feel at ease?

S: Wherever God and his devotees are is my home. Where there are devotees and sadhus, and discourses are in progress – that is home. Shastriji Maharaj has said that one's true home is Akshardham. This is my family (gesturing to the seated devotees and sadhus); living with them is 'home'. I am at

'home' in India and abroad. I believe the homes of devotees and places of worship to be homes and so I never experience in any place the feeling that I'm in a strange place. Wherever I go I see a house of mine!

Q: How do you manage to remain so fresh amid so much activity?

S: By not feeling that, 'I am doing,' or 'I have accomplished this', and by believing God to be the cause of all, one is not burdened. 'I am not the doer. God is the doer,' with such faith we should do all *seva*. By doing this you will experience bliss 24 hours a day. Forgetting body consciousness one should perform all activity by remaining focused in God and guru.

Q: What is the purpose of your birth on earth?

S: There can be only one purpose and that is to spread the ideals and beliefs established by God when he incarnated (Bhagwan Swaminarayan, 1781-1830). God desires the good of all, that all offer devotion and all experience peace. To worship and encourage others to worship, that is the only purpose. By devoting themselves to God, people will become happy, religious values increase, morality increases, unity and harmony increase; these are the intentions of spiritual leaders. Such saints remove prejudices, attachment to worldly pleasures, 'I-ness and My-ness' and other unholy desires and replace them with holy virtues. A real human is he who never hurts another, is not prejudiced to others and has no attachment to worldly sense pleasures. These are the messages of sadhus and this is the purpose of their work on earth.

Q: Death is a certainty for everyone living. Even then, people are afraid of death. Why?

S: Because there is ignorance. When they realize that the soul has a different existence from that of the body they will lose their fear.

Q: What should the younger and older generations do to remove friction between them?

S: This is an eternal problem. The youngsters should see their seniors as experienced people who have gone through life in all its facets. Rama left the forest on the command of his father, he did not argue. Rama is an ideal for youth to follow. It is the responsibility of youth to keep faith and confidence in their seniors. They should be given due respect and not seen as orthodox. To oppose them and behave in other similar ways is not our culture.

Parents have also to understand their responsibilities. They should not push their children to do exactly what they want all the time. They should try to understand them and let them develop. Seniors should trust the young and only to help step in with their experience when problems arise. Only then will the youngster feel satisfied that he has achieved something; this leads to his development.

Q: Society is in need of highly educated youngsters such as engineers and accountants. Do you not feel that it is mis-harnessing the youth power of our country by making such youths sadhus?

S: There is absolutely no harm being done to society. On the contrary they come in great use to society in a variety of ways. They can use their special talents and strength in spiritual and creative ways to inspire society and present ideals to be followed. Also, whether a doctor or a lawyer, the final goal of human existence is *moksha*. True progress lies in the rise of the soul.

If there are good sadhus, then a virtuous society will result, people will change their lives for the better, spirituality will be fostered; thousands will shed vices and be inspired to worship God.

Q: Do you predict the future? What does the future hold for us?

S: For one who worships God and stays within his commands, the future is always bright.

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

S: If we live a virtuous life, there will be no bad effects on us of the 21st century. 'Sat Yuga is coming,' we hear the clarion call everyday, but by living within the bounds of dharma and *niyams*, staying away from alcohol, theft, corruption, etc., we are already living in Sat Yuga. If our life is pure we are in Sat Yuga. As long as individuals do not progress within, we, in spite of being in the 21st century, are in the Stone Age.

Q: There are wars in the name of religion, why?

S: Religion teaches only good. Quarrels and fights are caused by man's own selfish ego. Religion does not teach how to fragment or divide. The quarrels are not between religions, but between politicians.

Q: How is world peace possible?

S: If people become more religious and all religions help one another, world peace can be established.

20

Impressions

“In revered Pramukh Swami Maharaj, we have a ‘maryada-purush’ of our times. We see him as an ideal sadhu. Swamishri is also an ideal guru to his innumerable disciples and followers the world over.”

The heartfelt opinions and inner experiences of some of today’s leaders who have met with Swamishri.

His Holiness Pramukh Swami Maharaj is an embodiment of holiness, of ‘shanti’, ‘prem’ and ‘gurukripa.’ I had the most happy privilege of coming into personal contact with this gracious spiritual luminary who, by his personal example as well as loving precepts is guiding countless thousands of devotees and followers along the path of ‘dharma’ and spiritual living that leads towards the highest welfare of the human being.

Revered Maharaj is a saint worthy of being adored. His personal life and day to day ‘vyavahar’ is such that he serves as

a lofty example for sadhus and sanyasins to follow. Because, in spite of his being the revered head of the world famous moral and spiritual movement that originated nearly 200 years ago, I have observed in Maharaj such a rare simplicity of nature, humility of deportment and a total absence of self-importance. This is beautiful to behold and this always gives me great joy whenever I have the occasion of coming into his presence. His onerous responsibilities sit lightly upon his shoulders due to his surrender to the Supreme Guru Shri Swaminarayan Bhagwan and due to his conviction of being merely an instrument in the hands of the divine to carry out the divine will. It is really a sight for the gods to see worshipful Pramukh Swamiji Maharaj always with the deity of his adoration without whom Swamiji never moves out and who is given a seat of honour and a place of prominence upon any stage or dais that Pramukh Swami Maharaj may be occupying during all important events. The prime importance is always given to the deity.

He has a rare aura of saintliness, friendliness and universal love ('vishwa-prem') that is tangibly felt when you come into his presence and proximity. All have heard Bhagwan Sri Ramchandra referred to as a 'maryada Purushottam'. In revered Pramukh Swami Maharaj, we have a 'maryada-purush' of our times. We see him as an ideal sadhu. Swamishri is also an ideal guru to his innumerable disciples and followers the world over. He is an ideal spiritual leader to the generality of the present day humanity. In him we also find a lofty example of an ideal devotee. At the same time, Maharaj Shri exemplifies an ideal discipleship of his great Guru-parampara.

He is an inspiring spiritual leader, an able organizer in the spiritual India of today. 'Daivi Sampada' shines in him and is seen in the manner in which he gives respect and reverence to those who go to meet him. He is at once a great devotee

of the divine, a saint of eminence and an ideal person and an embodiment of goodness and 'dharma'.

Pujya Swami Chidanand

Divine Life Society, Rishikesh

Your Organization (Sanstha) is doing great service to mankind by spreading the message of goodness and joy. It is indeed commendable that the Swaminarayan Movement has not limited its work to the Movement alone, but has gone out in society, conducted a door to door crusade against the evils of society to promote peace and harmony.

His Holiness Dalai Lama

When I met Shri Pramukh Swami Maharaj I got the feeling of meeting a spiritually mature soul. I had no opportunity of meeting him many times or being with him for a long time but my short contact with him was enough to know that he is an embodiment of spiritual love, humility and simplicity. Such developed personalities only can bring emotionally nearer all sections of the society and instill in them a sense of brotherhood and binding force – the feeling of the presence of God in every human being. He loves all. Therefore, he gets love from all and in abundance.

Pujya Swami Vibhudeshtirthji Maharaj

Madhavacharya Admaar Math, Udupi

Shri Pujya Pramukh Swami Maharaj, the rarest jewel to adore the spiritual crown of our country, requires no introduction. The fifth hierarch of Bhagwan Swaminarayan, this great saint has carved out a niche for himself by his humane qualities. Spiritual life, normally, is turned inward and is primarily concerned with the realization of God, and

leads the soul towards the path of Becoming. But this need not preclude the possibility of giving service to humanity, and this is exemplified by the Swamiji. He has given a new meaning to the ideal of sainthood by his extraordinary feeling for his fellowmen. It is the Dhammapad which says: "A supernatural person is not easily found, he is not born everywhere. Whenever such a sage is born, the race prospers." And how true are these words! The number of persons who have been benefited by the grace of Swamiji is legion. The Swamiji finds God in service to humanity, and the human race has prospered, thanks to the Swamiji.

Pujya Varad Yatiraj Jeer Swami

Head, Ramanuj Sampradaya, Sriperambudur

Oh! What a humble man, what a divine man! I'm yet to see such people in abundance. One of the very rare souls that our country has. One of the most impressive men I have met in my life. Pramukh Swami is very dedicated, very spiritually high.

Pujya Swami Atmanand

President, Ramakrishna Mission, Raipur

The greatest religion is one which promotes chanting of God's name and doing of noble deeds. I feel that this lesson has been exemplified here. Your work dispels hatred and lights the lamp of love and harmony.

Shri Giani Zail Singh

Former President of India

The Supreme Lord Narayana, in all reality, assumes, because of mercy, the body of a mortal and lifts up the worlds sunk in the ocean of misery with his hand in the form of scriptures.

A study of the life of H.H. Pramukh Swami Maharaj will

reveal the truth of this text. It will show how he is really an incarnation of Bhagavan Swaminarayan; how he moves with all, young and old, literate and illiterate, and how he imparts the spirit of God consciousness to all, by his life, teachings and precepts. This he does also by discourses, seminars, institutions, periodicals and religious books. Being unattached by nature to all worldly things he spends all that is offered to him by his disciples and admirers for the benefit of human beings and creatures.

Dr Shrinivas Raghavan

Eminent Scholar of Ramanuja Vedanta

You are good pious people. If the whole world took you as an example it would be a better place, free of crime, of war and self-destruction. I believe you have valid answers to life's toughest questions.

Bob Kaplan

Member of Parliament, Canada

If the salvation of India and of the human race is to be achieved it can only be through the great ideals which I find being propagated here. I wish there were more organizations like these.

Nani Palkhivala

Eminent Economist and Advocate of India

21

Timeline

*A chronology of important dates and events in
the life of Pramukh Swami Maharaj*

- 1921 7 December (Magshar sud 8, VS 1978)
Born in the village of Chansad near Vadodara, Gujarat;
named Shantilal.
- 1929 16 May (Vaishakh sud 8, VS 1986)
Commences school.
- 1939 7 November (Aso vad 11, VS 1995)
Leaves home to become a sadhu.
- 1939 22 November (Kartik sud 11, VS 1996)
Initiation into *parshad* order by Shastriji Maharaj,
Ahmedabad.
- 1940 10 January (Posh sud 1, VS 1996)
Initiated into sadhu order by Shastriji Maharaj at
the Akshar Deri, Gondal; named Narayanswarupdas
Swami.

1939-1946

Sanskrit studies, *vicharan* with Shastriji Maharaj, various services in the mandirs.

1943

Construction work of new mandir in Atladra.

1946-1950

Kothari of BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir, Sarangpur.

1950 21 May (Jeth *sud* 4, VS 2006)

Appointed as Pramukh (President) of Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS) by Shastriji Maharaj, Ahmedabad.

1951 10 May (Vaishakh *sud* 4, VS 2007)

In Sarangpur, Shastriji Maharaj returns to Akshardham. Yogiji Maharaj becomes spiritual guru of BAPS.

1953 23 November to 18 December

Shastriji Maharaj Special Train Yatra to North India with Yogiji Maharaj.

1959 24 October to 3 July 1960

Overseas Satsang Tour to East Africa with Yogiji Maharaj.

1961 12 May

Kalash Mahotsav, BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir, Gadhada. Yogiji Maharaj initiates 51 youths into the sadhu order.

1965 6 February

Shastriji Maharaj's Birth Centenary Celebrations, Atladra.

1967 4 May

Yogiji Maharaj's Amrut Mahotsav (75th birthday celebrations), Gondal.

1968 27 November

Pramukh Swami's 48th birthday celebrated in presence of Yogiji Maharaj, Mumbai.

- 1969 **22 April**
Murti-pratishtha in BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir,
 Bhadra by Yogiji Maharaj.
- 1970 **5 February to 7 July**
 Overseas Satsang Tour to East Africa and the UK
 with Yogiji Maharaj.
- 1971 **23 January (Posh vad 11, VS 2027)**
 In Mumbai, Yogiji Maharaj returns to Akshardham;
 cremation rites in Gondal.
 Pramukh Swami Maharaj becomes spiritual guru of
 BAPS.
- 1971 **4 June (Jeth sud 11, VS 2027)**
Murti-pratishtha of BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir,
 Sankari.
- 1972 **8 July**
 Launch of annual Satsang Examinations.
- 1973 **3 December**
 Kalash Mahotsav, Ahmedabad; initiation of 56 youths
 into sadhu order.
- 1974 **29 March to 3 January 1975**
 Third overseas Satsang Tour: Kenya, Tanzania, Zambia,
 UK, USA, Canada, South Africa, Mauritius.
- 1974 **4 August**
Murti-pratishtha of BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir, New
 York.
- 1975 **19 October**
 Inauguration of Yogi Smruti Mandir, Gondal.
- 1977 **4 June to 3 February 1978**
 Fourth overseas Satsang Tour: UK, USA, Canada, S.
 Africa, Kenya, Tanzania
 Mandirs consecrated in Leicester, Wellingborough,
 Ashton, New York, Dar-es-Salaam, Mwanza.

- 1979 **3 to 5 May**
Fifth overseas Satsang Tour: Nepal.
- 1980 **7 May to 11 December**
Sixth overseas Satsang Tour: Kenya, Tanzania, UK, USA, Canada, Africa.
- 1980 **September**
Cataract operation, Boston.
- 1981 **7 March to 13 April**
Bhagwan Swaminarayan Birth Bicentenary Celebrations, Ahmedabad; 37-day festival. Initiation of 207 youths into sadhu- and *parshad*-order.
- 1981 **19 April**
Inauguration of Yagnapurush Smruti Mandir, Sarangpur.
- 1981 **8 September**
Gall bladder operation, Bombay.
- 1982 **18 to 25 March**
Seventh overseas Satsang Tour: United Arab Emirates.
- 1982 **31 March to 29 April**
Eighth overseas Satsang Tour: UK; Opening of new *hari* mandir in Neasden, London.
- 1983 **5 February**
Pramukh Swami Maharaj, aged 62, suffers heart attack, Sundalpur.
- 1983 **12 December**
Murti-pratishtha of BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir, Mumbai.
- 1984 **23 March to 4 October**
Ninth overseas Satsang Tour: Kenya, UK, Italy, Belgium, Holland, Portugal, USA, Canada, Fiji, Australia, Japan, Hong Kong, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore.
Mandirs consecrated in Preston (UK), Chicago and Los Angeles.

- 1984 **7 April 1984**
Meeting with Pope John Paul II, Vatican City.
- 1985 **20 March to 14 April**
10th overseas Satsang Tour: United Arab Emirates.
- 1985 **10 July to 22 August**
11th overseas Satsang Tour: UK; Cultural Festival of India, Alexandra Park, London (16 July to 18 August).
- 1985 **20 July**
Pramukh Swami Maharaj honoured in Suvarna Tula Mahotsav, QPR Stadium, London.
- 1985 **22 October to 19 December**
Aksharbrahman Gunatitanand Swami Birth Bicentenary Celebrations, Ahmedabad. Initiation of 200 youths into sadhu- and *parshad*-order.
- 1987-1988
Cattle camps and famine relief activities in Gujarat.
- 1988 **7 April to 12 January 1989**
Twelveth overseas Satsang Tour: UK, France, Portugal, Spain, Switzerland, Austria, West Germany, Sweden, Norway, USA, Canada, Trinidad, Kenya, Tanzania, Zambia, South Africa, Mauritius.
Pramukh Swami Maharaj honoured in British and Canadian parliaments.
Mandirs consecrated in Atlanta and Houston.
- 1989 **22 to 26 May**
International Children's Convention (Adhiveshan), Vidyanagar; 15,000 children participated.
- 1990 **22 to 26 May**
International Youth Convention (Adhiveshan), Vidyanagar; 21,000 youths participated.
- 1990 **14 June to 12 November**
Thirteenth overseas Satsang Tour: UK, USA, Canada.

Mandirs consecrated in Boston, Toronto, Birmingham (UK).

1991 **8 June to 18 October**

Fourteenth overseas Satsang Tour: UK, USA, Canada, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, South Africa. Mandirs consecrated in Edison, Eldoret, Kampala, Jinja, Johannesburg.

1991 **12 July to 11 August**

Cultural Festival of India, Edison, New Jersey, USA; Over 1 million visitors.

1991 **20 July**

Pramukh Swami Maharaj honoured in Platinum Tula Mahotsav, Edison, New Jersey.

1992 **30 August**

Inauguration of The Swaminarayan Independent Day School, Neasden, London.

1992 **30 October to 2 December**

Yogiji Maharaj's Birth Centenary Celebrations, Gandhinagar. Initiation of 125 youths into sadhu- and *parshad*-order.

1992 **2 November (Kartik *vad* 8, VS 2049)**

Inauguration of Swaminarayan Akshardham, Gandhinagar.

1993-1994

Relief and rehabilitation activities following earthquake in Latur, Maharashtra.

1994 **29 April to 1 October**

Fifteenth overseas Satsang Tour: UK, USA, Canada, Sweden, Czech Republic, Kenya. Mandirs consecrated in Orlando, Dallas, San Jose.

1994 **8 to 16 October**

International Youth Volunteers Convention, Vidyanagar.

- 1994 **10 December**
Murti-pratishtha of BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir,
 Mahesana.
- 1995 **15 July to 31 October**
 Sixteenth overseas Satsang Tour: UK, Kenya, France,
 Germany, South Africa.
- 1995 **20 August**
Murti-pratishtha of BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir,
 Neasden, London.
- 1995 **25 November to 31 December**
 Pramukh Swami Maharaj's Amrut Mahotsav (75th
 birthday celebrations), Mumbai.
- 1996 **18 June to 6 November**
 17th overseas Satsang Tour: USA, UK, Pacific, Far East –
 Adhiveshan at Catskill
- 1996 **7 December (Kartik *vad* 12, VS 2053)**
Murti-pratishtha of BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir,
 Surendranagar.
- 1996 **16 December (Magshar *sud* 6, VS 2053)**
Murti-pratishtha of BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir,
 Surat.
- 1997 **27 March to 25 April**
 18th overseas Satsang Tour: Gulf Countries.
- 1997 **21 October to 11 November**
 19th overseas Satsang Tour: UK.
- 1997 **9 November**
 Received at St. James' Palace by HRH Prince Charles,
 The Prince of Wales.
- 1997 **10 November**
 Welcomed at Buckingham Palace by HRH Prince
 Philip, The Duke of Edinburgh.

- 1997 21 December (Magshar *vad* 7, VS 2054)
Murti-pratishtha of BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir,
 Navsari.
- 1998 22 February (Maha *vad* 11, VS 2054)
Murti-pratishtha of BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir,
 Nadiad.
- 1998 4 July to 8 November
 20th overseas Satsang Tour: USA, UK, Africa.
- 1998 7 July
 Swamishri undergoes heart bypass surgery, New York,
 USA.
- 1998 26 November (Magshar *sud* 7, VS 2055)
Murti-pratishtha of BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir,
 Rajkot.
- 1999 22 January (Maha *sud* 5, VS 2055)
Murti-pratishtha of BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir,
 Mahelav.
- 1999 31 July to 21 October
 21st overseas Satsang Tour: Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania,
 South Africa, Israel, Egypt. Mandir consecrated in
 Durban, South Africa.
- 1999 29 August (Shravan *vad* 3, VS 2055)
Murti-pratishtha of BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir,
 Nairobi.
- 1999 15 December (Magshar *sud* 7, VS 2056)
Murti-pratishtha of BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir,
 Tithal.
- 2000 9 June to 6 November
 22nd overseas Satsang Tour: USA, Canada, UK, France,
 Portugal.
- 2000 8 July
 Guinness World Records recognize Pramukh Swami

- Maharaj as having constructed the most mandirs. In December 2007, total was 713 mandirs.
- 2000 29 August
Pramukh Swami Maharaj addresses the Millennium World Peace Summit of Spiritual Leaders at the United Nations, New York, USA.
- 2000 4 October
Meeting between Pramukh Swami Maharaj and President Bill Clinton, Florida, USA.
- 2000 3 December (Magshar *sud* 7, VS 2057)
Murti-pratishtha of BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, Anand.
- 2001 6-25 April
Pramukh Swami Maharaj's 23rd overseas Satsang Tour: Gulf countries.
- 2001 18 May (Vaishakh *vad* 10, VS 2057)
Murti-pratishtha of BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, Sankari.
- 2001 6 June
Awarded Rotary International, Mumbai's highest accolade 'Service Above Self'.
- 2001 21 July
Pramukh Swami Maharaj and BAPS receive 'G.D. Birla International Award for Preservation of India's Heritage & Culture'. Presented by vice-president of India, H.E. Krishna Kant.
- 2001 25 November (Kartik *sud* 10, VS 2058)
Murti-pratishtha of BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, Dholka.
- 2001 9 December (Kartik *vad* 9, VS 2058)
Murti-pratishtha of BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, Bharuch.

- 2002 **7 January**
Swaminarayan Mahamantra Bicentenary Celebrations, Gadhada.
- 2002 **17 January to 26 February**
24th overseas Satsang Tour: Asia-Pacific. BAPS Swaminarayan Mandirs consecrated in Perth, Sydney and Auckland.
- 2003 **6 February (Maha *sud* 5, VS 2059)**
Murti-pratishtha of BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, New Delhi.
- 2004 **8 February**
50th anniversary of BAPS Bal Mandal. Celebration at Swaminarayan Akshardham, Gandhinagar, in the presence of Pramukh Swami Maharaj and H.E. APJ Abdul Kalam, President of India. 20,000 children attended. Broadcast live to over 150 countries.
- 2004 **23 April to 29 October**
25th overseas Satsang Tour: UK, USA, Canada, Africa. Hari mandirs consecrated in Lenasia, South Africa and Gabarone, Botswana.
- 2004 **25 July (Adhik Shraavan *sud* 8, VS 2060)**
Murti-pratishtha of BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, Houston.
- 2004 **8 August (Adhik Shraavan *vad* 8, VS 2060)**
Murti-pratishtha of BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, Chicago.
- 2005 **5 October (Aso *sud* 3, VS 2061)**
Murti-pratishtha of BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, Jaipur.
- 2005 **6 November (Kartik *sud* 5, VS 2062)**
Public opening of Swaminarayan Akshardham, New Delhi, by Pramukh Swami Maharaj, H.E. President Dr

- APJ Abdul Kalam, Prime Minister Shri Manmohan Singh, Opposition Leader Shri L.K. Advani and Lt. Governor of Delhi Shri B.L. Joshi.
- 2006 3 May (Vaishakh *sud* 6, VS 2062)
Murti-pratishtha of BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, Junagadh.
- 2006 19 May (Vaishakh *vad* 7, VS 2062)
Murti-pratishtha of BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, Bhavnagar.
- 2006 18 October to 18 November
26th overseas Satsang Tour: UK.
- 2007 7 May to 16 October
27th overseas Satsang tour: East Africa, USA, Canada, UK.
- 2007 22 July (Ashadh *sud* 8, VS 2063)
Murti-pratishtha of BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, Toronto, Canada.
- 2007 26 August (Shravan *sud* 13, VS 2063)
Murti-pratishtha of BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, Atlanta.
- 2007 13-17 December
Grand finale of BAPS Centenary Celebrations, Ahmedabad.
- 2008 6 December (Magshar *sud* 8, VS 2065)
Swamishri's 88th Birthday Celebration, Tithal.
- 2009 31 December (Posh *sud* 15, VS 2065)
Aksharbrahman Gunatitanand Swami Diksha Bicentenary Celebration, Dabhan.
- 2009 25 November (Magshar *sud* 8, VS 2066)
89th Birthday Celebration, Bochasan.
- 2010 3 April (Chaitra *vad* 5, VS 2066)
Inauguration of Satchitanand Water Show, Gandhinagar.

- 2010 19 May (Vaishakh *sud* 6, VS 2066)
Murti-pratishtba of BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir,
 Bhadra.
- 2010 28 May (Vaishakh *vad* 1, VS 2066)
Murti-pratishtba of BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir,
 Limbdi.
- 2010 4 July (Jeth *vad* 7, VS 2066)
 Swamishri inaugurates the 'BAPS Swaminarayan
 Research Institute', New Delhi.
- 2010 10 July (Jeth *vad* 13, VS 2066)
 Swamishri performs first *arti* of the 30-foot high *murti*
 of Neelkanth Varni, New Delhi.
- 2010 13 July (Ashadh *sud* 2, VS 2066)
 Swamishri performs the inaugural rituals of the new
garbhagruh of Swaminarayan Akshardham, New Delhi.
- 2010 13 December (Magshar *sud* 8, VS 2067)
 Swamishri's 90th Birthday Celebration, Mumbai.
- 2011 12 March (Fagan *sud* 7, VS 2067)
 Swamishri performs the *murti-pratishtba* rituals of the
 BAPS Swaminarayan Mandirs in Godhra and Bodeli.
- 2011 31 August (Bhadarva *sud* 3, VS 2068)
 In Mumbai, Swamishri performs *shilapujan* for the Maha-
 mandir at Swaminarayan Akshardham, Robbinsville, USA.
- 2011 2 December (Magshar *sud* 8, VS 2068)
 Pramukh Swami Maharaj's 91st Birthday Celebration,
 Mumbai.
- 2012 16/17 January (Posh *vad* 8/9, VS 2068)
 Swamishri launches the Diamond Jubilee Celebrations
 of BAPS Youth Activities, Mumbai, established by
 Yogiji Maharaj in 1952.
- 2012 5 June (Jeth *vad* 1, VS 2068)
 Swamishri inaugurates 'Akhil Bhartiya Yuva

- Adhiveshan' in Sarangpur, as part of the Diamond Jubilee Celebrations of BAPS Youth Activities.
- 2012 15 June (Jeth *vad* 11, VS 2068)
Swamishri has pacemaker implant, Ahmedabad.
- 2012 5 July (Ashadh *vad* 2, VS 2068)
In Ahmedabad, Swamishri performs *murti-pratishtha* of *murtis* for BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, Nagpur, Maharashtra, India.
- 2012 22 July (Shravan *sud* 3, VS 2068)
In Ahmedabad, Swamishri performs *murti-pratishtha* of *murtis* for BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, Robbinsville, NJ, USA.
- 2013 4 January
Swamishri blesses Golden Anniversary Celebration of BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, Ahmedabad.
- 2013 6 January
Swamishri blesses celebration of BAPS Youth Activities Diamond Jubilee, in Ahmedabad.
- 2013 7 February (Shravan *sud* 3, VS 2069)
In Ahmedabad, Swamishri performs *murti-pratishtha* of *murtis* for BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, Silvassa, Gujarat, India.
- 2013 15 March (Fagan *sud* 4, VS 2069)
In Ahmedabad, Swamishri performs *murti-pratishtha* of *murtis* for BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, Kolkata, West Bengal, India.
- 2013 11 April (Chaitra *sud* 1, VS 2069)
Swamishri initiates 28 youths as *parshad* and 45 as sadhu *diksha*, Ahmedabad.
- 2013 10 July (Ashadh *sud* 2, VS 2069)
In Sarangpur, Swamishri performs *murti-pratishtha* of BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, Himmatnagar.

Glossary

A

adivasi	tribal
akshar mukta	liberated soul in Akshardham
aksharrup	one who has realized one's true self as <i>atma</i> and attained the qualities of Akshar
antaryami	'Inner knower'. Power of God to reside within a <i>jiva</i> , <i>ishwar</i> , etc.
arti	worship ritual of waving lighted wicks before the <i>murtis</i> of God
asan	seat
ashram	stage of life. Traditionally in Hinduism, there are four in total, each with their corresponding duties and responsibilities. Specifically, <i>brahmacharya</i> , as a student and celibate; <i>grubastha</i> , as a householder with a family; <i>vanprasth</i> , as an elderly advisor, literally implying 'taking to the forests'; and <i>sannyastha</i> , as a recluse, literally implying 'throwing away' or 'putting aside', i.e. renouncing the world.
atma	soul

B

bajri	millet
bhajiya	fried delicacy made of gram flour
bhandari	chief cook
bhat	cooked rice

borsali	tree with fragrant tiny flowers
brahmacharya	practice of eight-fold celibacy and being immersed in Brahman (Paramatma)
brahmajnan	knowledge of Brahman
brahmarup	possessing qualities similar to Brahman
brahmic	pertaining to Brahman
bundi	sweet food item

C

chadar	cotton shawl
chandrayan	strict form of fasting where one's intake of food in the form of morsels is regulated by the waxing and waning of the moon.
cheshta	verses describing the person, habits and likes of Bhagwan Swaminarayan, composed by senior <i>paramhansa</i> disciples. All devotees sing the <i>cheshta</i> before going to sleep at night

D

dal	spicy soup of dissolved pulses
dandvat	prostration
darbar	court of residence belonging to a king or feudal ruler, traditionally with a central courtyard surrounded by rooms with verandas. Also refers to a person of the Kshatriya class
datan	thin, soft stick cut from certain trees used for cleaning teeth
dhebra	fried food item made from millet flour

dholak	type of drum
dhotiyu	lower garment worn by men
dhun	repeated singing of God's name
divo	a lighted wick in an earthen or metal crucible filled with ghee
drashti	seeing
dudhpak	sweet, thickened milk with rice

E

ekadashi	eleventh day of each half of the month, on which a fast is observed
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F

faral	a special diet of fruits and certain foods sanctioned for Ekadashi fasts
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G

garbhagruh	the inner shrine of a mandir where the <i>murtis</i> are installed
guruhari	guru who is the form of God
gurukul	residential school

H

Hari	name of Bhagwan
harijan	a low member of the community traditionally engaged in cleaning public places
himsa	injury – by mind, action or speech

J

jalebi	a sweet delicacy
jiva	self or soul

jivātmā	see <i>jīva</i>
jnan	knowledge of God
juvar	durra

K

kanthi	double-threaded necklace, usually made of small tulsi beads, received by <i>satsangis</i> upon initiation into the Satsang Fellowship, and worn as a sign of their affiliation to Bhagwan Swaminarayan
katha	spiritual talks or discourses
kothari	chief administrator of a mandir
kusangi	a person who is bad company, i.e. a bad influence on one's spiritual progress, and leads one astray from Satsang

M

mahamantra	a great mantra
mahapuja	elaborate Vedic worship rituals of Bhagwan Swaminarayan, Gunatitanand Swami, <i>muktas</i> , incarnations and deities
mandal	group
mangala arti	first <i>arti</i> of the day, performed at sunrise
manjira	small cymbal
mansi	mental worship. Form of worship in which one devoutly performs puja, offers <i>arti</i> , <i>thal</i> , etc. to God mentally
maya	anything that deviates one from the worship of God

mendu vada	fried delicacy
mojdi	traditional pair of shoes
moksha	liberation. Deliverance of the <i>jiva</i> from recurring births and deaths and the experience of God's divine bliss
mukta	liberated soul
murti	sacred icon of God that is worshipped
murti-pratishtha	traditional Vedic ceremony in which <i>murtis</i> or images are ritually installed in a mandir

N

nischay	faith in God
niyam	moral habit or rule; spiritual codes of conduct taken voluntarily or as prescribed by shastras or the Satpurush

P

padhramani	visit by sadhus to sanctify homes or other premises
pagh	headgear worn by a sadhu
panch vartman	five moral vows taken at time of initiation into the Sampradaya by a householder or ascetic
panchvishays	five sense objects of enjoyment for the five senses
paramhansa	male sadhu of the highest order, characterized by his ability to discriminate between <i>sat</i> and <i>asat</i> —just as swans were traditionally considered to be able to distinguish between milk mixed with water.

parampara	tradition of spiritual successors
parayan	spiritual discourse
parikrama	circumambulation of deity, guru, holy place or river
parshad	first stage of initiation into the ascetic life in the Swaminarayan Sampradaya; a renunciate wearing white clothing – with name ending in ‘Bhagat’
pativrata	chaste wife
pattar	wooden bowl for eating
potlu	a piece of cloth used as a bag
pradakshina	circumambulation
prasad	food that has been offered to the <i>murti</i> of God
puri	fried food item
pushpanjali	ritual offering of respect through showering of flowers or petals

R

rajbhog arti	<i>arti</i> performed after offering lunch to the deities
rakhdi	decorative thread made of cloth to be tied around the wrist of brothers by their sisters as a symbol of protection
ras	a Gujarati folk-dance
rotli	chapatti
rotlo	a basic unleavened bread-like staple food of many parts of Gujarat, made generally of millet flour that is kneaded and patted into a flat, circular shape before being cooked on an earthen or metal hot plate

S

sabha	assembly
sadguru	true guru or senior sadhu
samadhi	transcendental experience, usually of God or his abode, in which consciousness of the body and surroundings is lost
samagam	to associate with a sadhu by listening to discourses, etc.
sandhya arti	<i>arti</i> performed of the deities at dusk
satsangi	member of the Satsang fellowship. One who practises satsang
seva	voluntary spiritual service
sevak	one who performs <i>seva</i>
shaks	cooked spiced vegetables
shangar arti	second <i>arti</i> of the day, performed after breakfast has been offered and the <i>murtis</i> have been adorned with garments, ornaments and garlands
shikhar	traditional spires on a mandir
shikharbaddh	mandir with spires, in which five <i>artis</i> are performed daily and daily worship of the deities is performed by sadhus
shilapujan	worship of special stone slabs during foundation stone-laying ceremony
shiro	sweet food item
sinhasan	throne for God
sud	bright half of lunar month
swarupnishtha	conviction in the true form of God

T

tabla	drums
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tapa	austerities
thal	offering of food to the deity. Also refers to bhajans sung whilst offering food to deity
thuli	type of cooked wheat grains
tilak-chandlo	'U' shaped mark made with sandalwood paste and a round mark of kumkum in its centre; denotes one's allegiance to the Swaminarayan Sampradaya
tyag	to renounce

U

upasana	to offer worship to God by believing him to be the cause of all incarnations, eternally with divine form, the all-doer and manifest
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V

vad	dark half of each lunar month of the Hindu calendar
vairagya	detachment. An aversion or strong, persistent dislike, generally for the world and its <i>mayik</i> pleasures, i.e. the <i>panchvishays</i>
vartman	moral vows
vicharan	spiritual touring
vishay	sense pleasure
vrutti	mental inclination

Y

yagna	fire ritual
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yagna vedi

yatra

yuvak mandal

yuvak sabha

yuvak

sacrificial pit

pilgrimage

youth satsang centre

youth assembly

youth

Sources

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2. *Amrut Saritaa* (Gujarati) by Sadhu Viveksagardas.
3. *Yauvanna Surud* (Gujarati) by BAPS Sadhus.
4. *Divinity* (English) translated by Sadhu Paramtattvadas, original Gujarati, *Purna Divyataa* by Sadhu Anandswarupdas.
5. *With Blessings*, (English) translated by Sadhu Yogvivekdas from original Gujarati by BAPS Sadhus.
6. *Brahmopanishad* (Gujarati), a large volume of essays portraying aspects of Pramukh Swami Maharaj's life written by various sadhus and devotees.
7. Various issues of the monthly *Swaminarayan Bliss*, and its counterpart Gujarati, *Swaminarayan Prakash*.

The above publications have been printed and published by Swaminarayan Aksharpith. They are available on sale at all BAPS Swaminarayan mandirs and outlets around the world.

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