

# Hindu Rites and Rituals



(Sacred Meanings and Feelings)

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE : i

**PUBLISHER'S NOTE**

On the auspicious occasion of the 75th birth anniversary celebrations (Amrut Mahotsav) of His Divine Holiness Shri Pramukh Swāmi Mahārāj, we are pleased to introduce this publication.

Our rishis and seers have given injunctions known as *vidhāno*. They are scientific, practical and for the benefit of the whole human race. The great foresight of the rishis took into account man's psyche and accordingly, they composed the *vidhānos*. But over the centuries the value of these *vidhānos* decreased due to random additions to them.

They lost their efficiency and in some cases people began to practice them as a form of earning and so the masses began to lose faith in them. In the end, these injunctions came to be associated with those who blindly followed religion. The curious and sincere seeker of truths, if he studies the original injunctions of the rishis in depth will not only appreciate their intellectual and religious bent of mind, but will also be proud of the loftiness of our religious and cultural heritage.

Here, by the inspiration of His Divine Holiness Shri Pramukh Swāmi Mahārāj, an attempt has been made to understand this rich heritage. There has long been a need for such a book in which our rites, rituals and injunctions are explained in detail. Swāmi Jnaneshwardas has taken great effort to fulfil this need. For Hindus living abroad, a great contrast exists between the Hindu environment at home and that outside. The young attending school are eager to learn about the reasons and principles underlying the Hindu rites, observances and diet. This book attempts to explain these.

**NOTE ON TRANSLATION**

Throughout this book liberty has been taken to maintain usage of some Gujarati and Sanskrit words. The reasons are threefold :

(i) Many words in Hinduism have no equivalents in English or their translated meanings may not do justice to the meanings of the original words.

(ii) To avoid repeated usage of long-winded translations.

(iii) To familiarise the non-Hindu reader with common Hindu religious terminology. For this, a special Glossary has been included.

will inevitably hammer our lifestyles. At such times, the Guru, who is the living embodiment of Dharma, guides us in interpreting and observing existing rituals. If necessary he may amend or add to them to sustain Hindu Culture.

— Author

# 1 PUJA

(Worship)

- What is Pujā ? Why do we perform Pujā ?
- Why do we perform Paramātmā's Pujā ?
- Why is there a need for a Murti ?
- What is Murti Pujā ?
- Why do we perform Paramātmā's Murti Pujā ?
- What is special about Paramātmā's Murti Pujā ?
- Why is the Guru's Murti Pujā performed ?
- Who is a Guru ? What is the need for a Guru ? How does one revere the Guru ?
- What is the Pujāvidhi ?
- Pujā Dravya
- Types of Prasād (Naivedya) usually offered.
- Pujā in other common situations.

## (1) What is Pujā ? Why do we perform Pujā ?

The word *Pujā* is derived from the Sanskrit root *Puj*, meaning, to worship, to adore. *Pujā* is the act of worshipping, encompassing a host of feelings such as faith, humility, veneration, surrenderance and thanksgiving. *Pujā* is a meeting with God.

In fact, we all do *Pujā* whether we are theist or atheist, rich or poor, learned or ignorant. Some do *Pujā* of living beings, some of inanimate objects.

If someone rescued us from drowning, would we not wholeheartedly thank him ? Wouldn't we adore the dog who awakens us when thieves try to break into our house ?

After the heroic efforts of the famous horse, Chetak, who saved Rana Pratap from Akhbar's offensive in Haldighati, Rana Pratap hugged Chetak. Was that not a show of gratitude and adoration ? In everyday life one commonly sees various forms of veneration; the craftsman revering his tools; the racing driver kissing his car or the sportsman kissing his bat or

racket.

To offer gratitude to something or someone who may have helped us in some way is *Pujā* in its simplest form.

### (2) Why do we perform Paramātmā's Pujā ?

If we are thankful to an inanimate object or an animal or a person who has been helpful to us in some way, are we not indebted to the sun on which we depend for life ? Similarly, the moon also affects life on Earth. Water itself is life giving. And despite modern technology, where would we be without rain ? Then, shouldn't we respect these occurrences of nature ? They in turn are created and sustained by God. Does not God then deserve our veneration ? We all respect and revere God. That is *Pujā*. We cannot afford to remain ungrateful towards the One who has graced us in so many ways.

We do *Paramātmā's Pujā* to show our reverence for His infinite grace. *Pujā* teaches us how to love Him. It lightens the load of His debt on us. *Pujā* develops virtues. *Pujā* gives life. *Pujā* brings about fulfilment.

### (3) Why is there a need for a murti ?

A teenager had stuck a poster of his favourite cricketer in his room. Asked why, he replied "I admire him ! I want to play like him. I get inspiration from this poster."

Call it a poster, a painting or a *murti* (idol), it inspires love, respect and goal direction in a man's heart. These virtues are kindled by the *murti*.

In the epic Mahābhārat, Eklavya became the supreme archer, guided and inspired solely by his Guru's *murti*.

### (4) What is Murti Pujā ?

When we look at the portraits of our parents, we cannot help being awed by their parental attributes of love, kindness, leadership and patience. It is a common experience that in the physical absence of a person, his statue radiates his virtuous traits.

Over the centuries, the wearing away of St. Peter's toes in the St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, due to repeated touching by visitors overwhelmed and inspired by the statue, bear testimony to this.

Some people condemn and ridicule *murti puja*. But in actual

fact, even these people do *murti puja*. Man's mind is unable to grasp something intangible. He is unable to visualise or pray to the Almighty in his imagination, on nothingness, in blank space. Those who try, fail. For, instance, what is a church ? What is the Ka'ba stone or mosque ? What is the cross on the altar in a church ? Why wear a cross on a neck-chain ? What is the statue of Mary with the child Jesus ? They are all symbolic representations and *murtis* of the Divine, and are revered and worshipped as such. The heart of believers will only feel contented and fulfilled if some tangible form is present before them. Meditating on or worshipping something invisible or subtle like blank space is not conducive to man's inner feelings and yearnings. This is precisely the injunction of the Gita (12/5):

*Kaleshodhikataraha teshām avyaktasaktachetasām,  
Avyaktā hi gatirdukhā dehawadbhīhi awāpyate.*

i.e. One who tries to concentrate his mind on the formless experiences great misery and pain.

An argument often put forward, about how an omnipresent and omnipotent God be confined in the limited space of a *murti*, is but naive. For if these people do really believe God to be omnipresent, then how can He not be present in a *murti* and be present everywhere else ?

In a similar manner, if adept yogis or *siddhas* are able to perform *par kaya pravesha* - ability to enter the bodies and minds of other people, and if such lowly and evil phenomena like ghosts and spirits have the capacity to possess people, can the omnipotent God not be able to enter a *murti*, especially if He is invoked by sacred Vedic *mantras* ?

The *Gunātī Sādhu* - the true *Sādhu* of God, also has the ability, due to his spiritual purity and greatness to invoke God in a *murti*, as revealed by Lord Swāminārāyan in Vach. Gad, I, 68.

Lastly, if earthly (*mayic*) substances can radiate radioactivity, then can God not emanate divinity through a *murti* ?

In India, people convey their respect to a *murti* by lighting a *divo* and garlanding the *murti*, and then touching its feet in deep veneration.

*Murti Pujā* is our veneration for a *murti* which inspires

virtues in us.

In this manner, in one form or other, we all do *murti puja*.

#### (5) Why do we perform Paramātmā's Murti Pujā ?

We are obliged to *Paramātmā* for many reasons. Therefore to offer our gratitude and respect, we become eager to do His *pujā*. Since He is omnipresent, how do we offer *pujā* ? Well, we do this in the same manner as we offer respects to our favourite star or statesman - by respecting his photograph or statue.

If one is inspired by the statue of a worldly figure, then surely one can also be inspired by *Paramātmā's murti* ? This develops attributes like benevolence, love, purity, truth and non-violence in our hearts. Forgetting *Paramātmā's* infinite dues on us, we become egocentric. To prevent this, it behoves upon us to remain humble and vigilant. In order to kindle *Paramātmā's* divine attributes in us, we perform His *murti puja*.

#### (6) What is special about Paramātmā's Murti Pujā ?

In the *Bhakti* scriptures of Hinduism, there is only one creator of the infinite cosmos, who is supreme, the all-doer, eternally divine, and eternally with (human) form. There are infinite *Jivas* (Souls) all bound by the ignorance of *Māyā*. For *mukti* - redemption from *Māyā*, the *Jivas* best and only way is to accept surrenderance at the feet of *Paramātmā*, and to then serve and offer humble devotion to Him. The devotee can never become God. *Bhakti* (devotion) remains the status quo before and after redemption. In other words, *bhakti* becomes the means and the goal.

This devotion and service is amenable only if *Paramātmā* is manifesting (*Pratyaksha*) on Earth. The all-merciful *Paramātmā*, for the benevolence of His *bhaktas* (devotees) does incarnate on Earth. During this period, the *bhaktas* get a chance to offer devotion, but what happens when He physically leaves this world ? He then manifests Himself through His *murti*. This *murti* is not a symbol, nor is it a medium to focus the devotees' attention. But it is to be revered as *Paramātmā* Himself. The Vedas proclaim *Paramātmā's* form to be beyond mind and speech. To facilitate *bhakti*, *Paramātmā* assumes the form of a *murti*. By focusing the mind and senses in His devotion,

worldly desires are easily subdued. In focusing the *Chitta* (mind) onto *Paramātmā*, the *Prāna* - life-force is also controlled and one attains the state of *Niroikalp Samādhi* - the highest state of realisation by the *Jiva*.

The uniqueness of *Paramātmā's murti puja* is that, through this medium, the *bhakta* experiences the bliss resulting from serving Him wherein the mind is stilled in Him, thus liberating the *bhakta* from the vitiating influences of his baser instincts.

#### (7) Why is the Guru's Murti Pujā performed ?

Throughout the world one can see statues, portraits and photographs of leaders and other famous people, who have achieved excellence in their respective fields. People are inspired by them. Some who decide to follow their footsteps may attain success. But this excellence of the leaders is only limited to their particular field. It is commonly observed that their lives are invariably steeped in the dualities of love and hate, happiness and misery, and so what is the good in looking up to them for inspiration ? The true ideal is to succeed in life, to attain the *Sthitapragna*, or *Gunātī* state or God- realisation. Such inspiration can only be obtained from a true Guru - the *Satpurush*.

The Guru's *murti puja* plays a fundamental role in cultivating the redemptive attributes in the disciple.

#### (8) Who is a Guru ? What is the need for a Guru ? How does one revere the Guru ?

A "Guru" in simple terms means a teacher. Anyone from whom we learn something is a guru. The teachers and lecturers in school or college can also be called gurus, though the word *Āchārya* is more appropriately assigned to them. The word Guru is specifically reserved for a spiritual master.

In Sanskrit, the root *gu* means ignorance or darkness and *ru* means knowledge or light. So one who leads the aspirant from darkness to enlightenment is a Guru.

In Hinduism, great importance is attached to the Guru. Every aspirant needs a Guru for guidance on the spiritual path. By his own efforts, the aspirant cannot hope to progress far. The scriptures advise :

*Tad vignānārtham sa Gurumewabhigachhet*

*samit panihi shrotriyam Brahmanishtham.*

(Mundaka Upanishad 1-2-12)

i.e. For knowing the Reality, he (the aspirant) should go with gifts to a Guru who is well versed in the Vedas and one who has realised *Brahman*.

This Guru should be revered, in fact worshipped like God :

*Yasya deve parā bhaktiḥ, yathā deve tathā gurau,  
Tasyaite kathitā hi arthāḥ, prakāshante mahātmanāḥ.*

(Shvetāshvatara Upanishad 6/23)

i.e. As one offers devotion to the Deity, one should offer devotion to the Guru. So decree the wise sages. Therein one will obtain everything there is to obtain.

In Vach. Vartal 5, Shriji Mahārāj has also stated :

"One who offers equal and intensely loving service to God, and His choicest *Sādhu* then despite being a most mediocre devotee who is destined to become a great devotee after either two births, four births, ten births or even a hundred births, he can become a great devotee in this very birth. Such is the fruit of equally serving God and His choicest Devotee."

### (9) What is the Pujāvidhi ?

*Pujā* is to offer respect. *Pujāvidhi* is the means by which one offers respect. Just as people who are brought up in different cultures have their own ways of offering respect, similarly there are different ways of offering *pujā*. Over time, these methods of veneration have been woven into the traditional fabric of the culture.

In the military, a high ranking officer is offered a salute with the hand whilst standing in the "Attention" position. This has become a ritual, a *vidhi*.

In England, on special occasions the Queen is honoured by laying out a red carpet for her to walk on. This is a form of *pujā*.

Smashing a champagne bottle during the launching of a newly built ship, cake-cutting and blowing out lighted candles in the Western tradition, are all forms of *pujā*.

Any ritual of veneration which has become a tradition is *pujā*.

In India, various forms of *pujā* are practised. For example, the scriptures have given an injunction, *Atithi devo bhava* i.e. to

treat a visitor at the door like a deity. So if a visitor arrives at one's doorstep, without any previous notification, he is to be given a welcome befitting a deity.

In ancient times, the *atithi* was initially welcomed with sweet sentiments. Then he was proffered cool water for washing and to quench his thirst. This would be followed by food. If the person seemed to be worthy of greater veneration, *kum-kum* powder and a few rice-grains would be applied on his forehead. He would then be garlanded, given good clothes, and according to contemporary custom, would also be offered rich gifts, such as milk, ghee and grains. The host would then recite Sanskrit (the commonly spoken language then) verses to convey his warm-hearted feelings for the guest. In this way, a coalescence of feelings and actions were imparted. This was the precursor of, *Panchopchār* (five ways of performing *pujā*), *Dashopchār* (ten ways) and *Shodshopchār* (sixteen ways) *pujāvidhi*. The type chosen depended on the importance of the guest.

*Shodshopchār vidhi* was more commonly practised and its sixteen steps are as follows :

1. *Ahawān* - invitation, invocation.
2. *Āsān* - to offer a seating arrangement e.g. mat, cushion, etc.
3. *Pādya* - cleaning the feet with water.
4. *Ergya* - to apply *chāndlo* and rice on the forehead.
5. *Āchman* - to offer drinking water.
6. *Snān* - to bathe him with water.
7. *Vastra* - to offer rich garments.
8. *Upavit* - to offer the sacred thread called *janoi*.
9. *Gandha* - to sprinkle perfume.
10. *Dhoopa* - to use incense sticks to make the air fragrant.
11. *Deepa* - to illuminate the area by lighting a *divo* (cotton wick immersed in ghee).
12. *Naivedya* - to offer rich foods and sweets.
13. *Ārti* - to wave *divās* in a circular motion.
14. *Pradakshinā* - to circumambulate the person or *murti*.
15. *Pushpānjali* - to offer flowers and garlands.
16. *Rajopchār* - to offer an umbrella, wisp, wooden footwear (*Pādukā*) and other similar items; and then

please the Lord or person by melodiously singing and playing musical instruments.

Today, to a lesser or greater extent, in one form or another, we still follow the above practice to welcome guests. Only the names of the *vidhis* have changed.

If we welcome home an ordinary guest, then would a *bhakta* be restrained from showering his love, when a divine personage like *Paramātmā* Himself graces his home? So with the aid of Shodshopchār and recitation of Sanskrit verses, *Paramātmā* is venerated and it is this ancient Hindu tradition which is termed *Pujāvidhi*.

**(10) Pujā Dravya - Auspicious materials used to perform puja. A list of materials commonly used is given below :**

1. Types of leaves : Banana, Tulsi, Coconut, Betel Vine, Āsopālav, Bilva (Bili), Peepal and Mango.
2. Pulses : Wheat, Rice, Mungbeans.
3. For Archan (imprinting) Kum-Kum (red) powder, Abil (white powder), Gāḍ (pink powder), Chandan (Sandalwood paste).
4. Cloth for Āsan : Red and white are considered auspicious. Sometimes yellow is also used. Black is never used in any sacred Hindu ritual because it is considered inauspicious.
5. Coconuts and Betelnuts (*Sopāri* or *Poogifalam*).
6. *Nādā Chhadi* (red string) to be tied on the right wrist of the person involved in the ritual.
7. *Kalash* (Copper vessel for holding sanctified water and the coconut).
8. Flowers.
9. *Dhoopa* (Incense sticks).
10. *Deepa* (*Divo*) - lighted wick using ghee - clarified butter.
11. *Ārti*.
12. *Ghantā* or small bell with a handle, to be rung every so often during the *vidhi*.
13. *Panchāmrut* - mixture of five substances for bathing the *murti* - milk, honey, yogurt, ghee and sugar.

**(11) Types of Prasād (Naivedya) usually offered. For some ceremonies, the type of prasād to be offered is common :**

1. Jaggery and coriander seeds (*dhānā*) - most commonly offered in any *pujāvidhi*.
2. *Shiro* - a sweet cooked using wheat flour, sugar and milk with cardamom and saffron for flavouring. Usually offered after a discourse (*Kathā*) e.g. Satyanarayan *Kathā*.
3. *Pendā* - a sweet made from milk solids and sugar.
4. *Panchāmrut* - a liquid mixture comprising of milk, yogurt, honey, ghee and sugar.
5. Fresh fruits
6. Dry fruits
7. Coconut chips sprinkled with sugar
8. Ground nuts and large sugar crystals called *Sākar*
9. Ground nuts coated with sugar candy.
10. Parched rice soaked in milk with sugar (*Dudha pauwā*) offered especially on Sharad Poonam.
11. *Mukhwās* - chewing a special mixture of herbs - to cleanse the mouth, which also act as a digestive aid, somewhat similar to eating "After-dinner mints" in the West. This mixture usually consists of : Cloves, Cardamom, Cinnamon, Betel nut shavings or strands, Coriander *dāl* and Sesame seeds.

**(12) Pujā in other ceremonies.**

In Hinduism, *Pujan* (*pujāvidhi*) is performed of something new before using it, such as a house, a car, a refrigerator, a camera, etc. The *Pujan* can be of a few mantras, or a full-fledged *vidhi* called, *Mahāpujā* which can span up to one and a half hours.

*Pujan* is also performed during ground-breaking to sanctify the area. On entering a new building, *Pujan* on the doorway is offered and smashing a coconut on the ground, rather than cutting a red ribbon. This is encouraged by H.D.H. Pramukh Swāmi Mahārāj. He also advocates the lighting of a *divo* in front of a birthday cake, symbolising enlightenment rather than blowing out lighted candles.

## 2 NITYA PUJA-I

(Daily Worship)

- What is Nitya-Pujā ?
- Why is Nitya-Pujā performed in the morning ?
- The necessity of a personal Nitya-Pujā ?
- Murtis in the Nitya-Pujā. What should the murtis be like ?
- The sequence of the Nitya-Pujā routine.
- Nitya-Pujā in light of Lord Swāminārāyan's teachings.
- Personal Nitya-Pujā and puja of the Ghar Mandir.
- Nitya-Pujā in illness and old age .
- How is the purity of puja maintained ?
- The daily deed to be performed immediately after Nitya-Pujā.
- The benefits of Nitya-Pujā.
- H.D.H. Pramukh Swāmi Mahārāj's remarks about Nitya-Pujā.

### (1) What is Nitya-Pujā ?

*Nitya* means daily. *Pujā* in Sanskrit means to adore, to worship. *Pujā* is to worship God. Therefore *Paramātmā's Pujā* performed every day is known as *Nitya-Pujā*. If someone saved us from drowning, then we would still remember him on special occasions, such as his birthday or Diwali. That is a subtle act of *pujā*. But gradually we tend to forget favours and obligations. A favour is to be remembered and returned whilst an ill act on oneself by someone should be forgotten. By remembering a favour, man becomes humble for he realises that his life depends on the help of others. Therefore, he is also inspired to help others.

*Paramātmā's* blessings on us are countless. We are greatly indebted to Him. Simultaneously, the Guru's obligations on us are also unrepayable, for he shows us the true ideals and

continually infuses strength to walk that path. Over a period of time we tend to forget the debt of *Paramātmā* and the Guru, and this retards our spiritual uplift. To prevent this, it behoves upon us to be ever vigilant. The daily performance of *pujā* of the *murti* or portrait of *Paramātmā* and the Guru is *Nitya-Pujā*. It is a blissful encounter, a meeting with God and Guru. In comparison to their profound grace on us, *Nitya-Pujā* is our way of returning love and gratitude, no matter how petty and insignificant.

*Nitya-Pujā* evokes feelings of love and adoration. On occasions it may feel mechanical or robotic. If a wick and ghee are present then someday a light will be kindled. But how can we demand a light when we have got rid of the wick ?

### (2) Why is Nitya-Pujā performed in the morning ?

The scriptures declare that the early hours of the morning are considered especially auspicious. Therefore any sacred activity performed in the morning will bear greater fruit. If we recall an ignominious character such as Ravana in the morning, then we will be influenced by evil desires, of hate and jealousy, of gaining power and wealth and becoming egoistic. On the other hand, meditating on God and the *Gunātit Sādhu* will awaken our spiritual attributes *Dharma*, *Jnān*, *Vairāgya* and *Bhakti*. The heart will be suffused with redemptive attributes - benevolence, mercy, love, tolerance, forgiveness, generosity. Then one experiences peace.

In the *Manu Smṛiti* (8-12), it is revealed :

*Brahme Muhurte Ya Nidra Sa Poonyakshayakārini.*

i.e. The sleep during *brahme muhurt* (48 to 96 minutes before sunrise) destroys our *punya* (righteousness). What progress can a man make if he is lethargic right from morning ?

There is no better auspicious time for *pujā* than early morning. After a night's rest, the mind is more peaceful than at any other time of the day. This augments concentration on *Paramātmā*. *Mantra* chanting is also implemented resolutely. With a peaceful mind, thoughts of the Divine still the mind further and make it purer. The inspirations from God and His *Sādhu*, and the goal of life can both be contemplated upon with greater clarity. In turn, the day's activities are performed with this same awareness. With such awareness, they become



devotional and the day passes blissfully, in peace. In fact the day becomes a festival. To transform the day's chores into *bhakti*, into a festival, to keep it free of misfortunes, the morning *pujā* is a must and a boon.

An important benefit of morning *pujā* is that the mind is calmed by the divine inspirations of God and His *Sādhu*. We are better able to get through the day's vexing problems at work and home. We remain spiritually charged and therefore less stressed.

### (3) The necessity of a personal Nitya-Pujā.

Some people reveal naively that one of their family members performs the *pujā* and lights a *divo* in the *Ghar mandir*, so the rest have no need to do *pujā* themselves!

To this rationale, Pramukh Swāmi Mahārāj's simple reply is,

"When we feel hungry, if someone else eats on our behalf, will that satisfy us? When we are thirsty, if someone else drinks water, will it quench our thirst? If we feel sleepy, and if somebody else sleeps for us, will we be rested? Only we can do those things for ourselves. No one can do them for us. Similarly, everyone should do their own *pujā*. By doing *pujā* ourselves, it is we who get to serve God and it is we who reap the benefits. It is the person who does the *pujā* who is strengthened, inspired and whose baser instincts are removed. For personal development and a personal session with God, a personal *pujā* is performed."

### (4) Murtis in the Nitya-Pujā. What murtis should one worship?

There is only one creator, sustainer and protector of the infinite universes and that is *Paramātmā - Purushottam Nārāyan*. For the *bhakta*, all incarnations are included in this form. In the Swāminārāyan *Sampradāya*, the form of worship (*Upāsana*) advocated is of God with His choicest *bhakta*, the *Gunātit Sādhu*. Therefore in the *Nitya-Pujā*, the *murtis* to be worshipped are of Akshar Purushottam and the *Gunātit Sādhu*.

The *murtis* should be of the whole figure. A portrait (just the face) is not suitable. Worn-out or old *murtis* should be replaced. There should be only one *murti* each of Shriji Mahārāj and of the *Gunātit paramparā*. Duplicates of different styles are unnecessary.

### (5) The sequence of the Nitya-Pujā routine.

Devotees of the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Sanstha (B.A.P.S.) are advised to follow the *Nitya-Pujā vidhi* described below: The reasons and *bhāvnā* behind each procedure are dealt with in the next chapter.

#### 1. The ideal time for *pujā*:

Ideally, one should wake up before sunrise and have a bath or shower. In countries where the timings of sunrise fluctuate - between the summer and winter months, an ideal time would be before 6.00 a.m. (A time advocated by Pramukh Swāmi Mahārāj for those living outside India). Those who are young, old or ill, can choose their own convenient times. But doing *pujā* late in the morning, or afternoon or evening, solely due to a bad habit of waking up late is unacceptable.

#### 2. Clothing:

- The clothes worn during *pujā* should be washed and preferably kept separate from those worn during the day. For males, a *dhotiyu* or *lengho* and a *gatariyu* or *jabho* are suitable. After *pujā*, both should be neatly folded and stored away. This is the *sattvic* and traditional Vedic attire handed to us by the rishis and *sādhus*. It also inspires noble thoughts during *pujā*.
- It is best not to wear a shirt and a pair of trousers, shorts or jeans during such an auspicious Hindu ritual.
- It is quite out of keeping with Hindu religious etiquette to wear a bath towel or pyjamas or *loongi* during *pujā*! When we meet a dignitary we obviously wear decent and presentable clothes. *Nitya-Pujā* is our personal appointment with *Paramātmā*. Therefore we should also cultivate appropriate mannerisms. Talking and fidgeting during *pujā* should be avoided.

#### 3. Place:

If possible, a silent environment is preferable. *Kirtan* cassettes playing in the background are allowable.

4. *Āsan* :

- An *āsan* - a piece of cloth or mat, should be laid on the floor for one to sit on. One should face either East or North. In Hinduism, these two directions are considered auspicious. (Ref. Ch. 3, No. 1)
- Next, in front of our *āsan*, another *āsan* should be laid, for the *murtis*. The *Shikshāpatri* and the *tilak-chāndlo* paraphernalia should be placed neatly on one side.

5. *Tilak-chāndlo* :

The male *bhaktas* should :

- First the *tilak* should be imprinted on the forehead using sandalwood paste.
- Then, in the middle of the *tilak*, a round *kum-kum* (red) *chāndlo* should be imprinted. The *kum-kum* should preferably not be of sandalwood paste, unless one is allergic to the *kum-kum* powder.
- Using sandalwood paste, a *tilak* and *chāndlo* should be imprinted on both the upper arms and in the middle of the chest. (Ref. Ch. 3, No. 2)

The female *bhaktas* are ordained by Shriji Mahārāj in the *Shikshāpatri* (verses 52, 53) :

- "Married women should imprint only a round *kum-kum* mark on their foreheads. Widows shall not put on *tilak* or the round *kumkum* mark."
- Unmarried women also do not imprint any mark on their foreheads.

6. Meditation (*Dhyān*) :

- One should then sit for *Dhyān* in the yogic posture of *siddhasan* or *padmasan*. If this is not possible, one can sit in the normal cross-legged posture. One should also sit up, with a straight back, since a straight spinal-cord promotes better blood flow to the brain.
- One then meditates on Shriji Mahārāj and the *Gunātīt Sādhu* - Pramukh Swāmi Mahārāj, avoiding all worldly thoughts.
- To aid concentration, one can also perform the *Om* or the *bhramari prānāyam* prior to meditation. The remarkable effects of *prānāyam* on concentrating the mind have been verified by modern researchers.

## What should one do during meditation ?

(1) *Ātma chintan* :

To think about the *Ātmā* and one's true identity, in the following way :

"I am *Ātmā*, separate from this material body (gross, subtle and causal). Shriji Mahārāj constantly resides in my *Ātmā*. Pramukh Swāmi Mahārāj, the embodiment of *Akshar Brahman* is my *Ātmā*."

(2) *Aim of life* :

One should internally vocalise the goal of one's life :

- "Under any circumstance and at any cost, I want to please Shriji Mahārāj and Pramukh Swāmi Mahārāj only."
- "By becoming *Akshar-rup* (like *Akshar*) I want to serve *Purushottam*." (*Shikshāpatri* verse 116).

(3) *Mānsi Pujā* :

- In *Mānsi Pujā* (mental visualisation) one can perform the *shodshopchār pujā* of *Paramātmā* and the *Guru*. One should try to evoke deep feelings of love and adoration from the heart during this form of meditation.

7. Arrangement of the *murtis* :

- After meditation, one should lay out the *murtis* on the separate *āsan*, as shown below:

Yogiji Mahārāj	Bhagatji Mahārāj	Akshar Purushottam Mahārāj	Shāstriji Mahārāj	Pramukh Swāmi Mahārāj
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OR

Bhagatji Mahārāj	Akshar Purushottam Mahārāj	Shāstriji Mahārāj
Yogiji Mahārāj	Pramukh Swāmi Mahārāj	

- This is followed by reciting the *āhawān* mantra - praying to God to grace the *pujā* :

*Uttish-shutho-tishtha hey Nath! Swāminārāyan Prabho!  
Dharmasuno dayasindhō sweshām shreyaha param kuru  
Āgachha Bhagwān deva, swasthānāt Parameshwara,  
Aham pujām karishyāmi sadā twam sanmukho Bhava.*

i.e. "O Son of *Dharma* ! O ocean of mercy ! O *Nath* ! O *Swāminārāyan* ! O *Prabhu* ! Please arise and redeem Your devotees. O *Parameshwar* ! O *Deva* ! O *Bhagwān* ! Please come and grace my *pujā* from Your throne in *Akshardhām*. Please be seated in front of me. I wish to perform Your *pujā*."

#### 8. *Mālā* (Rosary) and Mantra chanting:

- By doing the *darshan* of the *murtis* and keeping the mind focused on them, one should turn the *mālā*, chanting the "*Swāminārāyan*" mantra for every bead.
- One can perform five, eleven or more *mālās*, according to one's devotional fervour.

#### 9. *Tapa Mālā*:

This procedure is only performed by the male *bhaktas*.

- One should then stand up on one leg and with both hands raised high turn one *mālā*.
- \* Whilst doing this *tapa mālā*, one should visualise Nilkanth Varni - Lord *Swāminārāyan* performing austerities in Muktanath situated in the *Himalayas*. Through this, one is made aware, inspired and given strength to tolerate any hardships on the path of God-realisation.

#### 10. *Pradakshinā* (Circumambulation):

Then one performs *Pradakshinā* of the *murtis*, whilst continuing to do the *mālā*. This involves walking clockwise around the *murtis*. Walking once around the *murtis* amounts to one *Pradakshinā*. The standard is to do five or eleven. More *Pradakshinās* can be done according to one's convenience.

#### 11. *Sāshtāng Dandvat Pranām* (Prostration):

*Sāshtāng* means with eight parts of the body. *Danda* means a stick and *vat* means like, similar. So a *dandvat* is a position similar to a stick lying on the floor. In

doing *Sāshtāng dandvat pranām*, one lies down flat, on the stomach, with hands outstretched in front of the body. (Ref. Ch. 3. No. 20) Six of these *dandvats* should be performed after *Pradakshinā*. The sixth is to atone for, knowingly or unknowingly hurting a *bhakta* by mind, speech or physically during the previous day's activities. This sixth *dandvat* has been prescribed by *Shriji Mahārāj* in *Vach. Gad. II, 40*.

#### 12. Offering *Thāl* in *Mānsi* :

After the *Dandvat Pranāms*, one re-sits in the *Pujā* and offers *Thāl* (*Naivedya*) in *Mānsi*. This involves offering *prasād* to the Lord, visualising the food dishes that one personally relishes. Both palms should face upwards. One imagines holding a large decorative tray in front of the *murtis* containing exotic food dishes.

#### 13. Prayer

After offering in *Mānsi*, with hands joined in *Pranām* one should pray wholeheartedly:

*O Mahārāj ! O Swāmi ! Please protect us from the māyā of "I" and "Mine". Please protect us from our indriyas and antahkaran."* Please protect us from all types of *Kusang* - evil company. Please inspire us so we can develop firm *Atmabuddhi* with You."

Finally one touches the *charans* (lotus-feet) of the *murtis* and brings one's hands to one's eyes. This is known as *charan sparsh*.

#### 14. *Visarjan* (Farewell):

- \* The *pujā* ends by expressing thankful sentiments to *Mahārāj* and the *Gunātī Sādhus* for gracing it:

*Swasthānam gachha devesha pujāmādāya māmakim, Ishtakām-prasiddhyartham punarāgamāya cha.*

i.e. "O Lord of the Deities ! Fulfilling my wishes for success in my day's activities, You have blessed my *pujā*. Please resume Your seat in the altar of my heart and return tomorrow to re-grace my *pujā*."

#### 15. Reading the *Shikshāpatrī* :

- One should diligently read the *Shikshāpatrī* according to Lord *Swāminārāyan*'s injunctions.

- One should read a minimum of five verses and think over them, aiming to imbibe them in one's life.

#### (6) Nitya-Pujā in light of Shriji Mahārāj's teachings.

It is proclaimed in the *Gita*:

*Brahmabhootaha prasannatma na shochati na kānkshati,  
Samaha sarveshu bhuteshu madbhaktim labhate parām. (18/54)*

i.e. One who becomes *Brahmarup*, becomes eligible to offer devotion to Me.

Lord Swāminārāyan in His *Shikshāpatri* has expressed a similar injunction :

*Nijāmānam brahmarupam dehatraya vilakshānam, vibhāvayatena  
kartavyā bhaktiḥ krishnasya sarvadā. (116)*

i.e. One should identify one's *Ātmā* with *Brahman*, then by becoming *Brahmarup*, one can worship *Purushottam Nārāyan*.

In order to realise the above injunction i.e. to become eligible to worship *Purushottam* and attain His *krupā* - grace, the *bhakta* has to attain purity in mind and body. This purity can only be achieved by becoming an *Ekāntik bhakta*. An *Ekāntik bhakta* is one who has totally imbibed all four pillars of *Ekāntik Dharma* - *Dharma, Jnān, Vairāgya* and *Bhakti*.

By doing *Pujā* everyday, Shriji Mahārāj has given us an opportunity to realise *Ekāntik Dharma*. The *Nitya-Pujā* consolidates all the four factors of *Ekāntik Dharma* in the following ways:

- Dharma* (Religious Duties) - in reading and imbibing the codes of the *Shikshāpatri*.
- Jnān* (Knowledge) - the awareness and consolidation of the goal during *Atma chintan* and the prayer at the end.
- in doing *pradakshinā* and *mantra japa*.
- Vairāgya* (Detachment) - the control of the *indriyas* by doing *prānāyam* and the *Tapa Mālā*.
- Bhakti* (Devotion) : - in doing *Mānsi pujā* when we offer love and devotion to *Paramātmā* and in the prayer at the end when we ask for *bhakti* and forgiveness.

#### (7) Personal Nitya-Pujā and Pujā of the Ghar Mandir.

We have already discussed *Nitya-Pujā*. Details of the *Ghar*

*mandir* will be considered in a later chapter. (Ch.9). Both play an important role in the life of a *bhakta*. Offering worship in the *Ghar mandir* does not replace *Nitya-Pujā*. *Nitya-Pujā* has to be performed in addition to the *bhakti* one offers in the *Ghar mandir*.

In the *Ghar mandir*, the collective endeavours and devotional feelings of the whole family are involved, whereas the *Nitya-Pujā* is *bhakti* offered at the personal level. With the personal *pujā*, the pictured *murti* of *Paramātmā* can be taken by a *bhakta* wherever he goes. Therein the *Pujā's* regularity is not disturbed. But without this *Nitya-Pujā*, when one is away from home, its regularity will be disturbed, making one prone to laxity in observing one's *Dharma*.

Both the *Ghar mandir* and the *Nitya-Pujā* are necessary and complement each other.

#### (8) Nitya-Pujā in illness and old age.

When one is totally bedridden either due to severe illness or old age, when bathing is impractical, one should give one's *Pujā* to another family member, who should perform the *Pujā* on one's behalf. One can still do *mālā*, *mantra japa* and read the *Shikshāpatri*. But a minor illness such as a cold is not to be regarded as a dire circumstance and one should steadfastly endeavour to do *Nitya-Pujā*.

#### (9) How is the purity of Pujā maintained ?

The *Pujā* itself is considered sacred and as such should not be kept in a place where it might be touched by feet, shoes or house pets. It should also not be placed in the kitchen. Ideally the *Pujā* should not be touched or opened again after the morning worship until the next day.

#### (10) The daily deed to be performed after Nitya-Pujā.

After *Pujā*, one should do *darshan* of the *Ghar mandir* and then do *panchāng pranām* (Ref: Ch 3: No. 21) to one's parents. If they are not present, then one should offer *pranām* to their photographs. To the other members of the family, one should do simple *pranām* and say "Jai Swāminārāyan."

#### (11) The benefits of Nitya-Pujā :

The last two decades have witnessed great strides in the

search for relaxation techniques, whose needs have come about as a result of increasing stress in our lives. One of the most famous and practicable techniques has been Dr. Herbert Benson's "Relaxation Response", based on meditation. Dr. Benson, a cardiologist and associate Professor of Medicine at Harvard Medical School stumbled across this form of meditation in 1985 in a Tibetan monastery, where monks used the technique to maintain their body temperatures in freezing conditions.

The simplified technique is outlined here for the reader to compare with *Nitya-Pujā*. He suggests practising the technique once a day for 20 minutes to elicit the Relaxation Response.

Pick a focus word, a *mantra* or short phrase, e.g. "one" or "peace". Sit quietly in a comfortable position. Close your eyes and relax your muscles.

Breathe slowly and naturally, and repeat the focus word as you exhale.

Assume a passive attitude. Do not worry about how well you are doing. Disregard distractions. Let the thoughts and images pass on. Return to repeating the focus word.

Continue for ten to twenty minutes once or twice daily.

When perfected this method brings about healthy changes in the body such as : a decrease in heart rate and blood pressure, a decrease in the rate of metabolism, decreased rate of breathing, increased blood flow to the brain by 25 per cent and the brain's random cycles become even, called "alpha" waves, which are associated with a feeling of relaxation and well-being.

Although Benson primarily used this technique to combat stress on the mind and body, he showed that there were hidden benefits more powerful than those of relieving stress. He says, "We found that the 'Relaxation Response' can enable you to change even the most deeply ingrained bad habits. It can enable you to develop new, beneficial disciplines and enhance your health in ways which you had always felt were beyond your grasp... By eliciting the 'Relaxation Response' through meditation or prayer you can set the stage for important mind and habit altering brain change."

The bottom line is that this is astonishingly similar to *Nitya-Pujā*. The only difference is that, in *Pujā* we have *murtis* present

before us and instead of visualising an abstract word like "one", we vocalise the powerful "Swāminārāyan" *mantra*. Therefore in addition to the health benefits, *Nitya-Pujā* surpasses 'Relaxation Response', since the "God factor" is involved in *Nitya-Pujā*. *Nitya-Pujā* purifies the *Antahkaran* (mind) of *vāsanā* - lust, anger, greed, ego and jealousy. Such a purified mind is capable of achieving anything in the world, including the ultimate goal of life and the supreme spiritual benefit for the *Ātmā* - God realization.

### (12) What does Pramukh Swāmi Mahārāj say about *Nitya-Pujā* ?

*"We should bathe in the morning and then do mālā and pujā. Instead of shortening one's bathing time, we tend to cut pujā time. By shortening pujā, only we are at a loss. We should never miss pujā, and the tilak-chāndlō should be applied properly.*

*"Some people complain that, "we do not get time". But then, how do you get time to eat? If we cannot spare even fifteen minutes or half an hour for Him who has given us 24 hours, then there's no one more ungrateful than us."*

## (Varied Aspects &amp; Meanings)

- Why should one face North or East during Pujā ?
- What is the Tilak-Chandlo ? Why do it on the forehead, arms and chest ?
- The origins of Tilak-chāndlo in the Swāminārāyan Sampradāya.
- The benefits of Tilak-chāndlo.
- What is Mānsi Pujā ?
- The benefits of Mānsi Pujā.
- What is a Mantra ? Why chant mantras ?
- The Swāminārāyan mantra
- How should one chant a mantra ?
- The benefits of mantra chanting.
- What is a mālā ?
- Why are there 108 beads in a mālā ?
- How to do a mālā.
- The Sumeru of a mālā.
- Why wear a mālā round the neck ?
- What is the Tapa mālā ?
- What is Pradakshinā ?
- What is Pranām ?
- What is Dandvat Pranām ?
- What is Sāshtāng Dandvat Pranām ?
- What is Panchāng Pranām ?
- The benefits of Dandvat Pranām.
- What is Prayer ?
- What factors can be included in Prayer ?
- The things we should not pray for.
- The benefits of Prayer.
- Why should one read the Shikshāpatri everyday ?
- If feelings are more important than the actual rituals themselves, then what is the need for performing such rituals ?

## (1) Why should one face North or East during Pujā ?

One should face East for performing religious rituals such as Pujā because the sun rises in the East. The rising sun invigorates our bodies and infuses divine attributes.

One faces North especially for religious studies because the school of all schools - the Himalayas lie to the North (for those living in India) It is itself a *Devatma*. The Goddess of learning, Saraswati also resides in the North.

In addition, for Hindus, the process of progressing upwards spiritually is known as *Uttar Path*. *Uttar* means North and *Path* means the way. Therefore to progress spiritually one faces Northwards. The North is also a direction for stability, and one sits facing North to attain stability in life.

## (2) What is the Tilak - Chandlo ? Why do it on the forehead, arms and chest ?

In Indian culture, when a woman marries, in joy of getting a good husband - a guardian, she imprints a *chāndlo* on her forehead.

In the *Bhakti* movements of Hinduism, God is the *Swāmi* (Guardian) of the *bhakta*. On being fortunate to have a guardian, the jubilant *bhakta* also imprints a *chāndlo* on his forehead. The red *chāndlo* is the auspicious (*saubhagya*) fortune sign of meeting God.

The head is the pride of an individual. An individual's personality lies in his thoughts and intellect. To show respect to others a man bows his head. To those whom he deeply reveres, he bows his head right down to their feet. The *bhakta*, surrenders his head - himself at the lotus feet of God.

So, a *bhakta* with loving feelings of sacrifice and surrender, symbolically imprints the "feet" (*charan*) of his *Swāmi* on :

- i) his forehead - so that God resides in his intellect for inspiring auspicious thoughts. The centre point of all nerves is the place between the two eyebrows on the forehead. The rishis have therefore ordained for *tilak* to be done on this central area of the head to protect it.
- ii) his upper arms, symbols of strength - that God resides in them to inspire the *bhakta* to perform righteous acts.
- iii) his chest - site of the heart - symbolic of life, so that God resides in it to inspire noble feelings.

In this way, for thought, feelings and karma to become auspicious, the *tilak* is imprinted on these four parts of the body. The *tilak* is also imprinted in these four positions in *smruti* - remembrance of the four *Vyuha* forms of God, namely: Vasudev, Sankarshan, Aniruddha and Pradyumna. (*Arthadeepika-Tikā Bhāshya*)

This is the *tilak* of the *Bhakti Sampradāyas*. Each has its own way of doing *tilak*. The material used is also varied. Some make use of ash, some use red clay whilst many use sandalwood paste. In the *Swāminārāyan Sampradāya*, the latter is used. The *chāndlo* powder used to be made from lemon juice and turmeric powder. Today it is made from chemicals. But the natural form is also available in the market.

*Tilak-chāndlo* is the fortune sign of having met God and of surrenderance to Him.

### (3) The origins of *Tilak-chāndlo* in the *Swāminārāyan Sampradāya*.

In Samvat 1877 (C.E. 1821) Lord *Swāminārāyan* celebrated the *Fuldol* festival in Panchala, a town near Junagadh in Saurashtra. The colour of the clay here was similar to that of sandalwood paste. He distributed clay tablets, each the size of a small chalk-stick, to the *sādhus* to use them to do *tilak* the next day. When He saw the varied shapes and imprints of the *tilak* He was amused and decided to show them the design He had in mind. He called *Mul Aksharmurti* *Gunatitanand Swāmi*, and imprinted the *tilak* on his forehead and a round *kumkum chāndlo* in its centre. He then said, "This is our *Tilak*". The *tilak* is a symbol for the lotus feet of God (*Bhagawad Pādākruti*) and the *chāndlo* represents the *bhakta*. The *bhakta's* 'niche' is at the lotus feet of God. (*Arthadeepika - Tika Bhāshya*) This also represents the *Bhakta - Bhagwān* mode of worshipping God along with His choicest devotee, the *Gunātī Sādhu*.

### (4) The benefits of *Tilak-chāndlo*.

The *Tilak-chāndlo* signifies *dāsatva* - the *bhakta* offering devotion as a servitor. Therefore, in his heart the *bhakta* has a constant awareness that, "I am the servant of God". Thus one attains humility in life. It is said that one who is humble is liked by God, and one who is liked by God is liked by all. In

addition, one is constantly inspired to observe God's injunctions, major or minor. In case we falter, then God can re-guide us on to the right path. We are also prevented from performing bad acts and therefore strengthened morally. Unscrupulous characters will automatically avoid us. This *bhakta* will not fear being ridiculed by society, on the contrary he will feel proud to be a devotee of God. He becomes a master of his mind rather than a slave.

The collective benefits include subjugation of the baser instincts, strengthening of the *Ātmā*, and an increased faith in God.

It is for such reasons that in society, certain groups of people are made to wear uniforms, for example, the police, the military and naval forces, nurses, judges and others. By wearing white clothes, the nurse does not derive inspiration to serve any better. The judge does not become any wiser by his black cloak and wig. But an external symbol like the uniform increases the awareness of one's duty and responsibility. Similarly, the *tilak-chāndlo* constantly 'whispers' an awareness in the *bhakta*, to be a true *bhakta*, a humble servitor.

### (5) What is *Mānsi Pujā* ?

There are two modes of worship. *Pratyaksha* means 'that before the eyes'. So when God is *Pratyaksha* i.e. manifesting before us, we can worship Him by using various material offerings. But when God is not *Pratyaksha*, one can offer such materials to the *Archāswarup* - the *murti*. But in the absence of both the *Archāswarup* and material offerings, one has recourse to the *manomayi* (in the mind) *murti* with *manomayi* offerings. This is the second mode of worship known as *Mānsi pujā*. In other words, *mānsi pujā* is the mental worship of God.

In *Vach. Sarangpur 3*, Lord *Swāminārāyan* has revealed that, if the *pratyaksha pujā* and *mānsi pujā* of God are both offered with whole hearted adoration, intense love and humility, they are both equally fruitful.

Just as the *pratyaksha pujā* of God is performed with *shodshopchār* materials (ref. Ch. 1), one can do *pujā* with the same materials, mentally. One can mentally offer fruits and garments according to the seasons of the year. In *Vach. Gad. III. 23*, Lord *Swāminārāyan* has given a beautiful elaboration of

*mānsi puja.*

### (6) The benefits of Mānsi Pujā.

The added benefits of *mānsi puja* is that it fulfils the desires and feelings of devotion of our hearts. We are free to serve to God, the food dishes, garments and ornaments that we personally adore in any amount we like.

The sky is the limit. Other benefits include :

- Our worldly desires and cravings are diverted into devotional service.
- Even the poor can serve rich offerings.
- God becomes ours and He becomes like us. Then meditating on Him is easier.
- According to Vach. Gad. III. 23, love for the *pratyaksha* form of God increases.
- According to Vach. Sarangpur 3, the *manan* and *nididhyāsan* (ref. Glossary) necessary for God- realization are facilitated by *mānsi puja*.
- The stability and concentration of the mind increases and so one experiences peace of mind.

### In Health and Creativity.

Recent medical research in the field of Psychoneuro immunology (PNI) has shed great light on the effects of mental imagery or visualization on our immune system and creativity. *Mānsi puja* uses mental visualization. In fact, it is mental visualization. Today it is advocated by many Western medical scientists in healing and overcoming disease. Dr. Bernie Siegel, a cancer surgeon, in his best seller, *Peace, Love and Healing* gives an example of a nine-year old boy named Garrett Porter, who had an inoperable and incurable brain tumour. Garrett resorted to visualizing a "Star wars" scenario. In his mind he constructed a model, in which he was a leader of a space squadron fighting a successful battle against an invading evil planet - his tumour. Everyday he visualized that he was firing missiles at the planet. Five months later, his brain CT scans showed no evidence of tumour ! No other therapy had been given. Mental visualization alone had wiped out the tumour.

David Harp, Ph.D., a researcher in relaxation techniques recommends his "three-minute mini-meditation". One visualizes a beautiful mountain or sea side scene, and savours

the atmosphere. This is done for three minutes, and repeated five times a day. Harp claims that this relaxation technique includes the same relaxation and associated benefits as that of a single 20 minute session like Benson's. Again, it is hardly surprising that Lord Swāminārāyan has given an injunction to his *bhaktas* to do the "Five period *mānsi*". *Mānsi*, short for *mānsi puja*, usually takes between three to five minutes. It depends on the individual. The first *mānsi* is in the morning to bathe the Lord and offer garments and food during *nitya-puja*. The second around midday, to offer lunch. The third is at 4 p.m., when fruit and juices are offered. The fourth is in the evening to offer dinner. In the final *mānsi* at night, we offer water or milk before the Lord retires for the night in a cosy and perfumed bed. The more vivid the imagery, the better the devotion and the better the relaxation.

So, if one incorporates this in one's daily work schedule then the day's stress and tension are either minimized or obviated altogether. In fact, your work becomes your play and work becomes worship.

Harp's "three minute mini-meditation" five times a day is similar to Lord Swāminārāyan's "Five period *mānsi*." In addition to health benefits, Olympic champions use imagery in training and competitions. Runner James Robinson mentally rehearses every split second of the 800 metres he would run in races down to "the hiss of his breath and the crunch under his feet," hoping it would spell the difference between first and second place. World champion diver Greg Louganis visualizes his dives thoroughly before jumping. In the East, visualization plays an integral role in oriental acrobatics and martial arts such as Aikido and Kung Fu.

### (7) What is a Mantra ? Why chant mantras ?

When a man repeatedly thinks of something in his mind, that thought will invariably take form. "You become what you think", is an oft heard saying. Every individual accepts some ideals to become successful or attain greater heights in his field and then repeatedly thinks on them. Businessmen strive to be the best. Children aspire to be Olympic champions or scientists. In this way, only by holding onto such precise thoughts and repeatedly drilling them, can an individual attain



success. This thought can be called a *mantra*. In Sanskrit it is defined,

*Mananāt trāyate*

i.e. Constant thinking or reflection on a word or phrase which uplifts us is called a *mantra*.

That which clarifies the goal of life is a *mantra*.

The phrase "Quit India" became a *mantra* for the Indian people. Its result was that foreign rule came to an end. The *mantra* took a form.

In 1961, John F. Kennedy gave a promise to the American people, "We shall be the first to land on the moon ...". This "*mantra*" galvanized the whole scientific establishment into action. The *mantra* took a form.

Every great person in history has adopted an ideal, a course of action and stuck to it till it bore fruit. This ideal can be termed a *mantra*.

These are worldly examples of a *mantra*. Similarly, on the spiritual path to transcend *māyā*, a *mantra* is necessary. A word or sentence which glorifies *Paramātmā* is a *mantra*.

Thinking about the glory of God induces love for Him. Repeated vocalization of the *mantra* or God's glory is called *Japa*. Constantly thinking about Him will increase His glory in our hearts. So a *mantra* is also regarded as God's form.

#### (8) The "Swāminārāyan" mantra.

The word *Swāminārāyan* is composed of two words; *Swāmi* and *Nārāyan*. *Swāmi* represents *Mul Akshar Murti Gunatitanand Swāmi* and *Nārāyan* represents *Purna Purushottam Sahajanand Swāmi*, also known as Lord *Swāminārāyan*. In the *Swāminārāyan mantra*, the worship (*Upāsana*) of *Nārāyan* or *Purushottam*, by becoming *Swāmi-rup* (like *Swāmi*) or *Akshar-rup* is quite clearly indicated. This then is the meaning of the *Swāminārāyan mantra*. By chanting it, one realises Lord *Swāminārāyan*.

#### (9) How should one chant a mantra ?

For *mantra* chanting, stability and concentration of the mind are important aspects. After shutting out all other thoughts from the mind, one should chant the *mantra* for pleasing God and for one's own redemption only. A mind steeped in

worldly thoughts or disturbed by the baser instincts will not be able to concentrate on God. So the mind will also be unable to focus on the *mantra*. Its chanting will be impossible. For this, one should sit on a pure *āsana* in a quiet area. Withdrawing one's *vritti* (attention) from all material objects, then focusing the attention on the *murti* of God, one chants the *mantra*, vocalizing without disturbing others.

#### (10) The benefits of mantra chanting.

By faithfully chanting the *mantra*, glorifying *Paramātmā*, one pleases Him. He also fulfils any pious wishes of the *bhakta*. In the *Sampradāya*, it is common knowledge that when *Yogiji Mahārāj* was bitten by a cobra in Gondal temple, his Guru *Shāstriji Mahārāj* instructed all the *bhaktas* present to chant the *Swāminārāyan mantra*. The effects of the poison soon subsided. Without any side effects, *Yogiji Mahārāj* resumed his activities the very next day.

The body also benefits in other ways. The troubled mind is calmed. When this happens, its effects reverberate throughout the whole body. Relaxation occurs at all levels (Ref. Ch. 2. No. {11}).

An individual with a calm mind will also have great mental stability and poise. Decisions made with such a mind help a man progress in life. This helps establish peace and harmony with friends and relatives. In contrast, bad decisions, made by a tense and anxious mind will entail an endless series of problems in life. So *mantra* chanting provides both material and spiritual benefits.

#### (11) What is a mālā ?

Our busy daily schedule and laziness prevent us from remembering God even once during the day. Then, the *sādhus* convince us to remember God once ... five times.. eleven times a day. A need then arises for keeping a count on the number of *mantra japas* performed. The count also develops a feeling of contentment that one has performed one's fixed number of *japas* daily. As a result, to ease counting, the *mālā* (rosary) has come into being.

#### (12) Why are there 108 beads in a mālā ?

In one *pala*, one breathes six times. Two and a half such

*palas* equal one minute. Therefore a man's average number of breaths is fifteen per minute, and 900 in one hour. Therefore, in 24 hours, according to the scriptures, there will be 21,600 breaths. This is revealed in the Chudamani Upanishad (32/33);

*Shat shatāni divārātro sahasranyekavinshatīhi;*  
*Etatsankyātmakam Mantra jivo japāti sāvada.*

i.e. It is arbitrarily taken that we are awake for twelve hours and asleep for twelve hours. During the twelve hours of the day, we breathe 10,800 times (discounting the twelve hours of the night). The *bhakta* would ideally like to chant God's name at every breath. Because this is not practical, the scriptures have prescribed the *Upānshu* method. In this, the fruit of every *mantra* is multiplied a 100 fold and so during the day, 108 *mantras* are to be chanted whose fruits will amount to 10,800 - equivalent to the number of breaths taken.

*Upānshu syāt shatagunaha*

(Manu Smruti - 2/86)

In this way, turning one *mālā* of 108 beads, is equivalent to chanting God's name at every breath. With this sentiment in mind, the rishis assigned 108 beads in a *mālā*.

Another school of thought bases the number 108 on the arrangement of the universe. The sun and moon play a vital role in the life of man. The seasons occur as a result of their movements. The ancient rishis divided the sun's motion into 27 parts. The name *nakshatra* is used to describe the group of stars in each of these 27 parts. Our *japa mālā* came to be based on the series of these 27 *nakshatras*. Each *nakshatra* is subdivided into four sections called *Charan* (feet). So in the 27 *nakshatras* there are 108 *charans*. Therefore the number of beads assigned to a *mālā* is 108.

Where two ends of the series of *nakshatra* meet, that area is given the name "Mount Sumeru". In the same manner, *Sumeru* is the name given to the largest bead, of a different shape, which joins the two ends of the *mālā*.

### (13) How to do a *mālā*.

The *mālā* is held on the middle finger of the right hand. The middle finger of the right hand is used because it is connected with the heart by a subtle meridian. The scriptures proclaim the heart as the main site for God to reside in a man's body.

*Hrudi tishhadashāngulam.* (Yajur.Veda 31)

Therefore the *mālā* is held and moved on the middle finger to influence the heart. The *mālā* is not fruitful if held in the left hand. The beads are moved towards oneself, by the thumb, one by one. The forefinger should not touch the beads. For every bead moved, one should utter "Swāminārāyan". One chants the Swāminārāyan *mantra* 108 times during one *mālā*. When the *Sumeru* is reached, one should not let it pass like the other beads, but the *mālā* should be reversed at this point. Therefore one actually re-starts turning the *mālā* with the last bead of the previous round.

### (14) The Sumeru of a *mālā*.

The *nakshatras* travel in the heavens keeping the *Sumeru* as the epicentre. The *Sumeru* remains stationary. The *mālā* is a symbolic representation of the *nakshatra* series of stars. A similar importance is attached to the *Sumeru* of a *mālā*. When the *Sumeru* is reached, the devotee touches it and then reverses the direction of the *mālā* and resumes the *mantra* chanting.

### (15) Why wear a *mālā* round the neck ?

To maintain the purity of a *mālā* used for *mantra* chanting, it is ideally placed in a cloth bag called a *gaumukhi*. The right hand fits loosely into the *gaumukhi* and the *mālā* is then turned. When one finishes doing the *mālā*, it is put away along with the *gaumukhi*. But in the *gaumukhi's* absence, the *mālā* is worn around the neck rather than carrying it in one's pockets where it can repeatedly come in contact with all sorts of items, like sweets, currency, handkerchief, and so on.

There are health benefits according to the Ayurvedic scriptures. The beads if made from Tulsi, Sandalwood or Rudraksh plants or trees can radiate their medicinal properties in the neck region to prevent or treat thyroid disorders. The Rudraksh *mālā* is also famed for its healing effects on heart disease.

### (16) What is the Tapa *mālā* ?

*Tapa* means austerities. By doing *tapa*, the *indriyas* (sense organs) are controlled and their energies are sublimated, onto a higher, spiritual plane. In any field, success results only from

self-restraint and therefore *tapa* is an important factor. A person who is constantly indulging in worldly pleasures cannot hope to reach the heights of success. Even astronauts travelling into space or mountain climbers wishing to scale Mount Everest or other sportsmen, have to undergo severe training - involving both mental and physical restraints such as : eating and drinking in moderation or foregoing food, water or sleep for many days, lifting weights, running, etc. The body is purposely subjected to intensive training. In some world class sporting events, even continence is practised prior to competition. In short, to reach a higher goal one has to sacrifice some sensual pleasures. This is the modern equivalent of *tapa*.

The *bhakta* who is determined with zeal, "to realize God, at any cost, come what may," will also keep his mind controlled and subject himself to self-abnegation.

Usually, during *mantra japa* one sits in the yogic postures of either *siddhāsana* or *padmāsana* or simply cross-legged. *Mantra japa* is the consolidation of one's goal to realize God. With this awareness, one stands on one leg, raising both hands high and does the *mālā*. This is known as *Tapa mālā*. It represents the above sentiments of the staunch *bhakta*, of attaining God at any cost disregarding any pain or tribulation. Another sentiment also prevails in the Satsang.

When Lord Swāminārāyan left home at the age of eleven, and travelled through the forests of India, as Nilkanth, he performed austerities standing on one leg for over two months in Muktanath, high in the inhospitable ranges of the Himalayas. The *bhaktas* reminisce this episode, empathising with Nilkanth when doing the *Tapa mālā* in *Nitya-Puja*.

### (17) What is Pradakshinā (circumambulation) ?

Circumambulation has an interesting history in the world's cultures. It was practised by the Greeks, Romans, Celts and the Gauls. Among the last two, it was the custom of going round an individual who was considered holy. The Irish people, even today, when burying their dead, walk at least once, sometimes three times, round the graveyard, "sunwise" with the coffin. The Roman Catholic Church also uses it in the consecration of churches and in the enthroning of bishops. The Latins call it

"dextratio" and perform this in marriages. Muslims walk several times round the Ka'ba at Mecca and Christians perform the same ritual round the Holy Sepulchre at Jerusalem.

In the *Shatapatha Brahmana*, the *pradakshinā* represents the daily march of the sun, rising in the east, travelling south and then setting in the west. When the Brahmin priests perform *pradakshinā* they utter the sentiments, "Sunwise, let this sacred work of ours be accomplished," and then walk three times round sunwise.

Incidentally, circumambulation in the reverse direction is called *prasavyā* in Sanskrit i.e. going anti-clockwise, which is considered unholy.

*Pradakshinā* is a form of *pujā*, of reverence. In ancient times, man used to dance in a circular motion around his favourite friend to show his respect and joy on meeting him. Similarly, the chosen leader of a group would be placed in the centre of a circle and the others would dance around him. We can see this even today.

The greatest leader is *Paramātmā*. He is the epicentre of all activity. To offer respect, to convey one's joy in meeting Him, He is kept in the centre and man circumambulates Him. This is *Pradakshinā*.

In life, if God is kept in the centre of any activity, then no obstacle is insurmountable.

In the epic Mahābhārat, the sage Vyas has given the same meaning to *Pradakshinā*. Whoever has kept God as his guide in life, has always attained success. Whenever the Pāndavas kept Shri Krishna as their guide, they were successful. But when they gambled, they did not heed Shri Krishna's advice and paid dearly, losing their kingdom and prestige in the process.

Whilst performing *Pradakshinā* one should constantly pray to God, "O Lord ! Please remain the epicentre of all my activities." In return, we, His *bhaktas*, should promise Him that, "in life we will keep You and the *Gunātīt Sādhu* in the epicentre of all our activities."

One should do eleven or more *Pradakshinās* during the morning *Pujā*. *Pradakshinā* of *murtis* in temples is also a common ritual. Yogiji Mahārāj invariably advocated devotees in pain or distress to faithfully perform 51,101 or more *Pradakshinās* of Akshar Deri, our most sacred and miraculous

shrine, at the temple in Gondal. This invariably solaced them.

Doing only one *Pradakshinā* or one *dandvat* is considered inauspicious and insulting to the Deity.

#### (18) What is Pranām ?

Generally, when two people meet, the Western mode of greeting is to shake hands and say, "How do you do ?" or "Pleased to meet you," or plain "Hello". The Muslims say, *Salām Mālekam* and squeeze each other's hands.

The Hindu tradition is different. One does not shake the other person's hands, but brings one's palms together, in *pranām*. One also simultaneously bows one's head slightly, to pay respect to the person opposite. At the same time the name of God or a deity is always spoken e.g. *Jai Shri Krishna*, *Jai Shri Rām*, *Jai Svāminārāyan*, *Jai Nārāyan*, or *Jai Ambe*. This is the simple *Pranām*, also known as *Namaskār*.

#### (19) What is Dandvat Pranām ?

To show one's insignificance and respect towards God and His *Sādhu*, one does *Dandvat Pranām*, wherein one lies down prostrate on the floor with arms outstretched towards the *murtis*. This is akin to a stick - *danda* lying on the floor.

#### (20) What is Sāshtāng Dandvat Pranām ?

*Ashtāng* means eight body parts. *Sāshtāng* means with eight parts. In this type of *pranāms*, the eight parts of the body which should touch the floor are :

*Oorasā shirasā drushyā manasā vachasā tathā padabhyām karābhyām jānubhyām pranāmo - shtāngam mooch'yate.*

ie. : i) *Jānubhyām* - thighs, ii) *Padabhyām* - feet, iii) *Karābhyām* - hands, iv) *Oorasā* - chest, v) *Manasā* - mind, vi) *Shirasā* - head, vii) *Vachasā* - speech, viii) *Drushyā* - eyes.

(*Āhānik Sutrāvali*)

Since all of man's karmas (actions) are performed either by the mind, or the body or by speech and since every karma in life should be offered to God, the mind and speech are also included in the eight parts during *Sāshtāng dandvat pranām*. The male members offer these *pranāms* to God, the Guru and *sādhus*.

#### (21) What is Panchāng Pranām ?

*Panchāng* means five body parts : i) head, ii) hands, iii) feet, iv) mind and v) speech.

Males offer *panchāng pranāms* to *sādhus* and parents. The females offer only *panchāng pranām* to God, *murtis* and parents.

For the males, if space prevents one doing *Dandvat Pranāms*, then *Panchāng pranāms* can equally be offered. In both forms, the person doing the *pranāms*, while still on the floor should touch the feet of the revered one, then bring the sanctified hands to one's eyes. This is known as *charan sparsh* - feet touching. The *bhāvnā* behind *charan sparsh* is that one's whole self is sanctified or blessed by the holiness of the person being touched.

#### (22) The benefits of Dandvat Pranām.

In the *Dandvat pranām*, three yogic postures are involved :

i) *Namaskārāsan*, ii) *Prasaranāsan* (one foot) and iii) *Bhujangāsan*.

These help relieve backache and increase the flexibility of the spinal column. The muscles of the neck, shoulders, chest and lower back are toned. It increases efficiency of the pancreas and adrenals and helps prevent diabetes.

By monitoring the effects on blood pressure, mental poise and hormone levels, medical researchers have discovered that the *Dandvat pranām* posture has the greatest effect in maintaining an internal equilibrium.

When a man becomes angry, detrimental chemical and nervous changes occur in the body and the brain. Ego is the cause of this anger. By doing the *dandvat pranām* one's ego diminishes. Subsequently one's anger also lessens gradually. The ultimate aim is to remove ego completely. *Dandvat pranām* helps to achieve this and will result in mental peace as well as gaining physical benefits.

#### (23) What is Prayer ?

Prayer is a silent dialogue between God and the *bhakta*. It is a conversation full of loving feelings and sentiments coming from the heart of the *bhakta*. To acknowledge these feelings, we sometimes resort to the use of words. Since ancient times, man has formed a link with God by prayer. Prayer means to have a yearning to meet God, by surrendering to Him, by having

implicit faith, love and *dāsatva* towards Him.

In the Srimad Bhagvatam (8-2,3,4), the story of the distressed elephant attaining succour is quite well-known. God incarnated on Earth solely to free him from the crocodile's clutches.

#### (24) What factors can be included in prayer ?

Having grasped the real meaning of prayer this question does not arise. All feelings coming from the heart, of love and servitude towards *Paramātmā*, are collectively termed prayer. Prayers by great *sādhus* and *bhaktas* of the past may also reflect and enhance our own feelings.

Yogiji Mahārāj's famous and extremely evocative prayer in Mahelav, the birth place of his Guru Shāstriji Mahārāj, is not only a landmark in the Swāminārāyan *Sampradāya* but it also inspires us to become introspective of our own feelings towards God and the *Satsang*.

There is another famous prayer in the Satsang. During a Fuldol festival in Sarangpur, Saurashtra, the women devotees of Gujarat offered a unique prayer to Shriji Mahārāj which has been included in the scripture, *Bhaktachintāmani* Chapter 64. It begins :

*"Mahābatwānī Māyā Tamāri, Jene Āvariya Naranāri...*

i.e. You, who have delivered us from the great darkness of *Māyā*...

The women's prayer reflects the feelings of what the ideal *bhakta* should ask from God.

In Vach. Gad. I. 48; Lord Swāminārāyan shows us how to pray :

*O Mahārāj ! Protect us from our inner foes - the instincts of lust, anger, greed, temptation, ego and jealousy, and grant us the company of your devotees.*

*O Mahārāj ! O Swāmin ! O Krupāsindho ! O Sharnagat Pratīpalak ! Deliver us from evil company.*

In Vach. Gad. III. 39, He adds : "Deliver us from the *māyā* of "I" and "mine" and bless us to increase our love for You. Also, grant us the boon to associate with and love the *Sādhu* who has overcome *Māyā* and who loves You."

#### (25) The things we should NOT pray for.

Since the *bhakta* should not wish for even the four types of *Mukti* - salvation, he should obviously not wish for material or bodily comforts which are ephemeral. After surrendering his mind, body and possessions to God, he firmly believes that his *prārabdha* (fate) lies in God's will. He continues to offer devotion with joy, believing that any episodes of pain or happiness are the result of God's will. For the ideal devotee, the goal is God only, not the mundane objects or happiness.

Nevertheless, on occasions when a *bhakta* is overwhelmed with worldly misery, to prevent himself from slipping into a lower, sinful path, he can pray, for succour, to God - his Swāmi (Vach. Vartal 5). But one should not expect God's answer to comply with one's wishes. It is important to freely accept God's actions after having prayed.

#### (26) The benefits of Prayer.

Praying deepens our love for God and strengthens the pious feelings in our hearts. Love has forever learnt to give, not to ask. As this selfless love develops, simultaneously the feelings of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* ("The whole world is my family") develop. Our inner instincts of pride, jealousy and hate, are erased. Consequently, not only do we experience peace, but physical illnesses resulting from internal, mental discord either abate or disappear completely.

Modern research into the effects of prayer have revealed interesting results. Dr. Randy Byrd, a cardiologist at the University of California at San Francisco, conducted an experiment on 393 I.C.C. patients. He divided them into two groups. One group was prayed for, unknown to the patients in that group. The other group remained as it is - a control. All other factors remained the same for both groups. The results showed that the group that was prayed for, did better in three ways : the need for antibiotics, the need for intubation and the incidence of pulmonary oedema (fluid accumulation in the lungs) all decreased markedly.

In her book, *Every Man's Search*, Rebecca Beard cites the case of a female patient suffering from arthritis. She was troubled by her husband's poor English pronunciations. The physician treating her, prayed for her and also asked her to pray for relief from the disease in the following manner : " O

Lord ! I will not tell my loved ones to do things my way. I will not expect them to obey and follow my instructions. Give me the strength to only love my dear ones. I will not expect them to follow my beliefs." The woman was subsequently cured of her arthritis.

In this way prayer subdues the inner foes and this in turn circumvents the physical illnesses - whose roots are the inner foes. A greater benefit is that family quarrels and social antagonism dissolve.

Thus, there are benefits at the individual and social levels. The seeds for world peace can be sown by prayer.

Yogiji Mahārāj's prayer in Mahelav is replete with sayings about avoiding fault finding and talking pessimistically. He implores us to always talk and think optimistically, extolling the glory of God. The prayer bubbles over with divine love offered to God reflecting his own saintly and sublime state. By loving God we experience the bliss of His divine abode - *dhām*, here and now, and not just after death.

### (27) Why should one read the Shikshāpatrī everyday ?

*Shikshāpatrī* is a code of conduct for daily living. Every commercial product has a "How to use" manual book. Problems can arise if the instructions are not followed carefully. Even a common household item like a pressure cooker, can cause serious injury if used without following the instruction manual. What would be the result if we were to walk on the roads without knowing the traffic regulations? Accidents. Similarly, Lord Swāminārāyan has given us a set of rules to guide us through life without having accidents and without causing harm to others as well. The "do's" - *vidhi* and the "don'ts" - *nishedh* of living are given in the holy scripture called the *Shikshāpatrī*. Therefore it needs to be read carefully, like an instruction manual.

In Vach. Gad. III. 1. and in *Shikshāpatrī* Verse 208, Shriji Mahārāj has given an injunction to us, His devotees, to read the *Shikshāpatrī* daily. Failing that, in case one is illiterate, then one should ask someone to read it aloud. If that is not possible either, then one should worship it by doing its *pūjā* everyday.

The question may arise, that after having understood the codes, what is the need to read them everyday ? But it must be

borne in mind that the *Shikshāpatrī* is a sacred scripture - a *Dharma Granth*. *Dharma* is a concept that has to be imbibed in one's life, it has to be lived and this is quite a challenging task. Even though one may know the laws, one may not be able to practice them perfectly. One often slips due to temptation. Therefore only by daily reading, hearing and thinking on the codes and rules can one really weave them into one's fibre. Only then can one practice them with ease. Even the person who has realized *Dharma* in its entirety, observes the codes for the sake of others and will not break the rule of reading the *Shikshāpatrī* daily.

By reading the *Shikshāpatrī* daily, one is made aware to obey the codes. This will eradicate our bad attributes. It inspires us to progress higher on the path of devotion. This results in peace at heart.

### (28) If feelings are more important than the actual rituals themselves, then what is the need for performing such rituals ?

For the aspirant - *sādhak* who has still to fully kindle and consolidate the feelings - *bhāvnā*, and to maintain their continuity, all these practices need to be observed.

Agreed, that a *sādhak* who on attaining God - realization need not observe these codes, but in reality a *sādhak* who has become a *siddha* will never choose to disregard any trivial injunction. The reason for this is given in the scriptures - that of never trusting the mind :

*Na Kuryātkahirchit sakhyam manasi hi anawasthite,*

*Yad - wishrambhat chirāt chiranam chaskanda tapa aishwaram  
Nityam dadāti kāmasya chidram tamanu yerayaha,  
yoginaha krutamaitrasya patyurjayewa poonschali.*

(Srimad Bhāgwatam 5/6/3-4)

i.e. The mind being hyperactive is forever without stability. Therefore one should never trust it, such that, " I have conquered it and it will do me no harm". Even deities and great rishis such as Saubhari, who had with great effort performed great *tapas* (austerities) were ruined by trusting the mind.

i.e. A yogi who trusts his mind, gives just a free chance to enter it. Then anger and similar inner foes also invade the

mind. It is like a man who trusts his unfaithful wife - who betrays him by conspiring with a lover. Similarly the mind, invaded by lust, anger and other foes, destroys the yogi.

In addition, after becoming a *siddha* all the observances should still be followed for the sake of others. In the Gita (3/21) it is stated that :

*Yadyadācharati shrēṣṭhaha tadtadevetaro janaha;*

*Sa yatpramānam kurute lokastadanuvartate.*

i.e. People will follow in the footsteps of great men.

So any practice of a great person will generally be blindly followed by the common masses :

Therefore, if the *siddha* or a great spiritual personality himself avoids the rituals and injunctions, then the novices will also take cue and avoid them. Ultimately, this will harm the novices.

In reality, after these *kriyās* have been perfected, they do not feel burdensome. In fact, they become ingrained in one's self. The thought to ignore or transgress them does not arise.

As long as the *kriyās* feel burdensome, a chore, the feelings will never fructify. One who does not want to observe them, nor walk on the true path, will try to exhibit his intellectual ability by regarding these *kriyās* as useless and hypocritical. He will disregard and discard them. But one who has attained success in his own field, whatever it may be, will closely observe even minute rules and *kriyās* and never spurn them. Even the world's best musicians or sportsmen never miss a single day's practice nor relax their daily routines. Scientists are probably the most meticulous. They strive to prevent the slightest mistake in their research. Why? Because the results of their experiments would be authentic. Laws are either result-oriented or feeling-oriented. In the latter, the effects cannot be seen directly on the result. But its effects though invisible are nevertheless poignant and deep. In a battle, is it not enough for a soldier to *know* how to fight bravely? What then, is the need for a special uniform? He does not need to march during battle. Why, then does he practice marching everyday during peacetime? Is it absolutely necessary to salute a commander to show one's respect? Can one not have respect for him in one's heart? But all these 'rituals' and practices have a positive effect on the soldier and the result is that under even the most

critical circumstances, the soldier will never break discipline or disobey orders. Only then can the whole army collectively attain victory.

To awaken the *sādhak's bhāvnās*, to attain and perpetuate their stability, spiritual laws are obligatory. For those who have attained perfection or become *siddhas*, the need to observe laws still exists, in order to establish an ideal for others to follow.

### Do prayers really solve problems ?

*"That depends on one's faith. By having faith and keeping up one's efforts the problem will be solved. The prayer is truthful. The one being prayed to is also the Truth. One should have faith that God can see and hear the prayers of countless. One should have faith in whom one is praying to. We lose faith very easily. We expect, in this age of technology, that everything should happen instantly. But after what efforts was Edison successful in inventing the light bulb? We are aiming to become brahmarup here. For that, one should pray faithfully. God is the all-doer. Have faith. He will do the rest."*

H. D. H. Pramukh Swāmi Mahārāj.

# 4 ARTI

- What is Ārti ?
- During Ārti why are the bell, drum and conch shell sounded ?
- After Ārti, why is water from a conch-shell sprinkled around the Ārti ?
- Why do we put money in the Ārti when we take Āskā ?
- Is there a prescribed manner for performing the Ārti ?

## (1) What is Ārti ?

*Pujāvidhi*, as we saw earlier (Ch. 1) is a *vidhi* to offer respect to and welcome God. When guests come home, do we seat them in the dark? We quickly switch on extra lights. *Ārti* is a symbol of welcoming *Paramātmā*. Only through the light (*prakash*) of knowledge (of His glory) can one welcome God in one's heart. The symbol of this knowledge is light. Only in the light can one have the *darshan* of God.

So, *Ārti* is the *vidhi* that welcomes God with light. It is also defined in the scriptures that :

*Asamantāt ratihi.*

i.e. O *Parmeshwar* ! Let my total love be for You only.

*Ārti* is the prayer offered with such sentiments.

In ancient temples of India, hardly any daylight reached the inner recesses of the sanctum sanctorum. The *darshan* of God was made possible with *deeps* or *divās*. To have the *darshan* of all the parts of the Lord, the *divās* were held near each part.

The *bhakta's* inherent feelings about *Ārti* are: "Just as one can have the *darshan* of God by the flame of the *Ārti*, let me have love for Your divine self."

There is also a *bhāvnā* in this *vidhi* that "just as the wick of the *divo* burns in the *Ārti*, let my body burn away in Your service. Not only that, but to keep the flame of service burning, let there be an abundance of oil in the form of Godly love, and so let my love be sacrificed in Your service."

But God has graced all life on Earth by the gift of the *Panchbhutas* - the five elements. (see below). To maintain stability He created *Pruthvi* - the Earth. He gave *Jal* or water for life to flourish. He gave *Tej* - light in the forms of sun and moonlight, as well as *agni* - fire to cook food and the *jathar agni* - digestive fire to digest food. He also gave *Vāyu* - air as a medium for breathing and for holding *prānā* - the vital air. For movement He gave *Avakāsh-Ākāsh* - space or ether. To remember this debt of *Paramātmā* on us, we present the *Panchbhutas* at His feet in *Ārti*, by offering their symbolic representations.

Sound is a part of *Ākāsh* or space. Therefore the drum, bell and the words (lyrics) sung in *Ārti* are symbols of *Ākāsh*. The *dhup* or smoke from an incense stick is a symbol of *Vāyu*. The flame of a "*divo*" is a symbol of *Tej* (light). The water in the conch shell is a symbol of *Jal* (water). By doing the *Dandvat Pranām* the *Pruthvi* (earth) element is symbolically offered at the lotus feet of God. In this manner, *Ārti* is the offering of the *Panchbhutas* to *Paramātmā*.

With precisely these sentiments, in some temples the *Ārti* is performed using five objects which also symbolically represent the *Panchbhutas*:

- 1) Flower - *Pruthvi* (because smell is an attribute of *Pruthvi*)
- 2) Water in a conch shell - *Jal*.
- 3) *Divo* - *Tej*
- 4) *Chāmar* - *Vāyu*.
- 5) White cloth - *Ākāsh*.

The *bhakta* performs *Ārti* using these articles in this order, and feels that he has placed the *Panchbhutas* at *Parmeshwar's* feet.

## (2) Why are the bell, drum and conch shell sounded during Ārti ?

There has always been a deep tie between man's emotions and music. When a man gains something invaluable, or when he attains success in a particular field, to express his boundless joy he either runs round telling his friends or starts dancing or clapping or makes weird high pitched cries. People in ancient times resorted to such mannerisms. Over time, especially in religious matters, the joy was expressed on a grander and



aesthetic manner using the bell, drum, *zālar* (small brass gong) and conch shell.

The *bhakta* also becomes jubilant on meeting God. To express this joy, the *bhakta* is drawn into making auspicious sounds called *nād* with such instruments.

Such *nād* also has an effect on the immediate vicinity. The rhythm affects different people in different ways. A military band arouses a fighting spirit. Rock or disco music galvanizes the modern youth to dance wildly. Classical music induces a reflective mood and has a soothing effect. In this way different rhythms and sounds have their own unique effects on the brain. The collective *nād* of the bell, *zālar* and drum creates a *Māngalik* (auspicious) environment. It spreads the glory of God everywhere. All other thoughts are overcome by the *Ārti*'s captivating rhythm and the *bhakta* coalesces into the spiritual.

To hail the presence of God, and to create a divine environment conducive to *Ārti* and *Pujā*, the *zālar*, conch shell and drum are sounded.

### (3) After *Ārti*, why is water from a conch-shell sprinkled around the *Ārti*?

In the Hindu pantheon the water deity is Varuna. It is written in the Purānas that Varuna's security, in guarding anything, is unmatched. No one can get past him. When the *Ārti*'s revolutions on the Lord's divine form are completed, the *jyot* (flame) of the *Ārti* is suffused with divinity. So that this divinity remains intact, water - symbolic of Varuna, from the conch shell is poured in a clockwise ambulation - *pradakshinā* around the *Ārti*.

Then the *bhakta* places both his hands above the *jyot* of the *Ārti* for a second or so and then brings them towards his eyes and head to make a slight contact (*sparsh*). This procedure is known as *Āskā*. The underlying meaning of 'taking' the *Āskā* is that one transfers the divinity of God from the *jyot* of the *Ārti* into one's inner self, to awaken divinity within.

The water in the conch shell is also considered sacred. This is then sprinkled on the *bhaktas*.

### (4) Why do we put money in the *Ārti* when we 'take' *Āskā*?

The *Ārti*'s *jyot* becomes divine by being waved over the

divine form of God. To offer this respect towards the form of God, the *bhakta* donates money.

### (5) Is there a prescribed manner for performing the *Ārti*?

There are varied ways of performing the actual physical *vidhi* of *Ārti*. One prescribed method in the scriptures is :

*Ādau chatuhu pāda talaikadeshe dwau nabhi deshe sukruta āsya mandale sāvāngdesheshu cha saptavārum devartikum bhaktajanaha prakuryāt.*

i.e. The *bhakta* should perform *Ārti* of the *Deva* in this manner :

First, four *āvartans* (revolutions - arm holding the *Ārti* should move clockwise in a circle, in the vertical plane) at the lotus feet, then two at the navel, once over the face and finally, seven times encompassing the whole body. (Harilīlāmṛut 6/4/6). A Sanskrit name for *Ārti* is *Nirājanam*, meaning : to fully illuminate the *murti* of God. So from the method described above, we can visualise the meaning of *Nirājanam*.

# 5 KANTHI

- What is a Kanthi ?
- What should a Kanthi be made of ?
- From whom should one get Vartamān? What rules should be observed after getting Vartamān ?
- Why are there two strings in a Kanthi in the Swāminārāyan Sampradāya?
- What is the Vartamān vidhi ?
- Wearing a Kanthi in the absence of the Param Ekāntik Satpurush.

## (1) What is a Kanthi ?

*Kantha* means neck. The two strings of miniature wooden beads that a *bhakta* wears round his neck is a *kanthi*. *Kanthi* is a symbol of surrenderance - *sharnāgati* to God. The *kanthi* makes a *bhakta* aware that he has surrendered himself to God. God is now his *Swāmi* - Master.

Any individual who decides to surrender to someone, to be in his servitude, would feel the loss of his self esteem or freedom. One is then less likely to accept another's *sharnāgati*. Even the smallest animal craves to remain free. A bed of thorns in freedom would feel more softer than a bed of roses in prison. This is the reality of worldly dependence.

Even the strongest and most powerful man is helpless against the forces of nature. He is even weaker than a blade of grass. Those who cannot easily accept this fact have to bow to it in the end, when they observe natural forces at work in volcanoes, earthquakes, typhoons, tornadoes, tsunamis and drought. There is only one force of power underlying these occurrences - *Paramātmā*. There is also peace of mind in learning to accept this profound truth and therein man is better able to progress materially and spiritually. In fact, the acme of freedom is to accept God's *sharnāgati* and be subservient to Him. Accepting His *sharnāgati* crushes man's dependency on his technological prowess and scientific ingenuity. *Bhaktas*

heartily accept His *sharnāgati*, represented symbolically by wearing a *Kanthi*.

## (2) What is the Kanthi made of ?

The Hindus regard the Tulsi (Holy Basil) plant as a symbol of sacrifice, of surrenderance. Whenever a *bhakta* donates something, he constantly bears a sentiment in mind that, "This (item being donated) is not mine, it is *Paramātmā's*." So the *bhakta* also places a few Tulsi leaves with the item being donated. When *prasād* is offered to God, Tulsi leaves are also placed in each dish. With precisely the same feelings, we offer our body to God, in surrenderance : "O *Prabhu* ! This body is Yours, not mine." But instead of offering Tulsi leaves with it, we wear a *kanthi* of Tulsi wood round the neck. Nowadays Tulsi wood is rare and so another sacred wood, sandalwood is used to make the beads.

## (3) From whom should one receive Vartamān?

Which rules are to be observed after *vartamān* ? In the holy scripture *Satsangijīvan*, written during the time of Lord Swāminārāyan, by Swāmi Shatanand, the Lord says :

*Samprāpya dikshāmeḥa bhaktidharmayuktād  
guroṛbhāgāvateem narahā prāk,*

*Archām tataha prāpya taduktareetyā bhaktim vidādhyādapātindra  
Vishnoḥ.*

- *Satsangijīvan* 2/51/9

i.e. In this world, after accepting *vartamān* from the beholder of *Dharma* and *Bhakti* - the *Param Ekāntik Sādhu*, one receives the divine *murti* of God from this Guru. And by ridding laziness one offers *bhakti* to God as instructed by that Guru.

In this way by the injunction of Shriji Mahārāj, it is ideal to accept *Vartamān* and wear a *kanthi* from the *Gunātīt Sādhu*. The reason for this is that in dire circumstances or when the *bhakta* is on the verge of falling from the path of God, only such a *Sādhu* is able to uplift him by giving guidance and strength. Even the *Āchārya* receives *vartamān* from such a *Sādhu*. For example, *Āchārya* Shri Viharilalji Mahārāj of Vartal was given *Vartamān* and *Kanthi* when just an infant by *Akshar Brahman* Gunatitanand Swāmi, the spiritual successor of Lord Swāminārāyan.

After wearing the *kanthi*, the codes of conduct to be strictly observed by the new *bhakta* are : to abstain from taking alcohol and meat, to abstain from thieving and to abstain from committing adultery; to observe rules pertaining to one's station in life. He also imbibes the way of living prescribed in the *Shikshāpatra*.

#### (4) Why are there two strings in the Kanthi of the Swāminārāyan Faith?

In Vach. Vartal 5, Lord Swāminārāyan has advocated service to God along with His choicest *Bhakta*. So the two strings represent God and His *Bhakta*.

In the *Arthadeepika* commentary of the *Shikshāpatra*, Swāmi Shatanand has mentioned the same principle :

*Nanu mālā dhārane ko hetuhu? Iti chet Shri Radhakrishnasya yugalaswarupopāsakatwasoochanārtham iti awagamyatām.*

i.e. what is the reason for the two strings of the *kanthi*? It is to signify the worship of Radha and Krishna (choicest *bhakta* and God).

#### (5) What is the Vartamān vidhi ?

The newcomer to the Satsang is initiated into the Faith by a simple ceremony, akin to baptism, called *Vartamān*. Sanctified water is held in the right palm. A *mantra* is then spoken by the initiator, usually a *sādhu*. This is then repeated by the newcomer. The water is then poured away and the *kanthi* is worn. The *mantra* spoken is :

*Kāla Māyā pāpa karma yamadoot bhayādaham,  
Swāminārāyanam sharanam prapannosmi sa pātu mām.*

i.e. I have come at the lotus feet of Lord Swāminārāyan and may He deliver me from the fear of time, *Māyā*, sin, karma and evil. May He protect me.

Accepting the *sharnāgati* of God, the *bhakta* is freed from sins of all previous births and helps him to become fearless. He has no need to fear superstitious elements, ghosts, evil spirits, and omens. He is freed of karmas of the past. He places his destiny in Shriji Mahārāj's hands, vowing to live according to His commands.

The principle underlying *Vartamān* involves purification of the *Jiva* before accepting the *sharnāgati* of God. The sanctified

water cleanses by removing sins. Water itself has the attribute of spiritual cleansing. To be purified in mind, speech and action, water is held in the right palm. There is also another reason for holding water in the hand. As we saw earlier :

*Apsu vai Varunaha.*

(Taittiriya Upanishad - 15/5/6).

i.e. the deity of water is Varuna.

Whenever an oath or a vow is to be taken, it is done with *Varunadeva* as a witness by keeping water (symbolic form of Varuna) in the hand. This is known as *Sankalp*.

*Anrute khalu vai kriyamāne Varuno gruhnāti.*

(Taittiriya Upanishad 1/7/2/6)

i.e. If the vow is broken Varuna may fine a penalty.

#### (6) Wearing a Kanthi in the absence of the Param Ekāntik Satpurush.

By the injunction of the *Satpurush*, other *sādhus* can also give *vartamān* and invest the newcomer with a *kanthi*. In this way, the *kanthi* is said to be equally invested by the *Satpurush* because he is the Guru of all those *sādhus*. They just act as mediators. Similarly, senior women devotees are also eligible to give *vartamān* to new women devotees.

# 6 MANDIR

(Temple)

- What is a Mandir ?
- What purpose does a Mandir serve ?
- What is the need for building large Mandirs?
- The unique features of a Swāminārāyan Mandir.

"The temple is not an archaeological essay, but a sermon in stone, suggesting by its symbolism the rhythm of the cosmos, teaching the lessons of the universal life, and recording the sacred traditions of the Indian people." - E.B. Havell (A Study of Indo-Aryan Civilization.)

## (1) What is a Mandir ?

God is omnipresent. The *bhakta* sees, loves and reveres this God in every living being - in man, animal, or a blade of grass. He even sees *Parmeshwar* in every non-living thing, in every particle of matter. But to accept the humble and devotional service of His *bhakta*, to give bliss to him, God either personally manifests Himself on earth, or through a *murti* in a dwelling called a *Mandir*.

## (2) What purpose does a Mandir serve ?

In the temples built in conformity with the Āgam scriptures, the *murti* of God is installed by reciting Vedic *Mantras*.

The *murtis* sculpted from stone or of metal are not just sculpted statues but the manifest form of *Parmeshwar*. They are revered as such and served as the living form. Devotional service such as waking up the Lord, bathing and then adorning exquisite garments and ornaments, and offering food, are just some aspects of daily worship from morning till night, when the Lord retires for the night's rest. In this way, the *bhakta* not only enjoys the Lord's varied *darshan* during the day but also experiences bliss.

Added to this, one also comes into contact with the *sādhus* who live within the *Mandir* complex. Their purity and sublime

wisdom gives the *bhakta* solace and peace of mind, parameters rarely found elsewhere. The talks of these *sādhus*, though simple and practical are laden with profound spiritual import. Countless people are transformed; their bad habits and addictions removed. They adopt a life suffused with *Bhakti* and *Dharma*. Through the spiritual discourses (*kathā*) of the *sādhus*, the *bhaktas* are enlightened about *Ātmā* and *Paramātmā* to help them attain contentment and peace. Even lay visitors experience the presence of God in *mandirs*, where the singing of the *līlā* and *kirtans* of God extolling His glory, continuously enrich the *mandir's* atmosphere.

The construction of *mandirs* also perpetuate traditional architectural, sculpting and carving traditions dating back thousands of years. Were it not for *mandirs*, the skills and craftsmanship of Indian Culture would have died out long ago. Intricate stone sculpting and wood carvings are only incorporated in religious edifices. In India, today, excepting *mandirs*, other buildings are rarely constructed using traditional architectural techniques and stone sculptings.

A *mandir* moulds man.

A *mandir* moulds society.

A *mandir* purifies society.

A *mandir* induces morality.

A *mandir* creates stability of mind.

A *mandir* inspires *bhakti*.

A *mandir* achieves peace and happiness.

*Mandirs* uplift the lives of all.

*Mandirs* keep alive traditional architecture and craftsmanship.

## (3) What is the need for building large mandirs ?

When large cinemas, theatres, casinos, night clubs and gambling houses are built at great cost, have we ever objected? People do not raise objection to such places coming up, from which society is unquestionably going to degrade shamelessly in terms of morality and character. It seems as if people are not the least concerned when man and society are going to ruin. Why? Because deep within the recesses of man, there exists a soiled character which rationalizes him into abject silence. Those who question, "why build *mandirs*?" are

often active members of such houses.

We tend to put forward rational arguments, of building schools, hospitals and orphanages in place of *mandirs*. Agreed that they are all needed. But can a hospital do the job of a school? Will an orphanage do the work of a hospital?

Each has its own unique function. Society needs all of them. We fail to realise that all these institutions primarily depend on man. And to mould a man's character either directly or through his cultural and family heredity, there is no better educational institution than a *mandir*. To spend money for such an important 'man-moulding' school, the *mandir*, is probably the greatest asset and the healthiest contribution to society. Its great size also has an important effect.

Just consider the size of bungalows and country mansions of millionaires and superstars. We also take such good care of our political leaders. The prestige and economic status of the country will reflect the richness of their residences. So it is but natural for *bhaktas* to expect the dwelling of the *Swāmi* of all creation, to be as grand as possible. In ancient India, where the kings and maharajas were pious and of a religious disposition, they accepted *Parmeshwar* as the *Swāmi* of their kingdoms. This inspired them to build large *mandirs* and install the *murtis* of *Parmeshwar*. Today, the *bhaktas* build such lofty temples which benefit the whole society.

In August 1994, a reporter from *UK Today* - a T.V. network, asked H.D.H. Pramukh Swāmi Mahārāj the reason for building a *mandir* in London. Swāmiji replied :

*First of all it is for the many Hindus living in London. Secondly, wherever a man goes, he takes his culture and good feelings (bhāvna) with him. This temple will foster these feelings. Take away a man's feelings and he is no better than a robot. By putting constraints on his feelings, his development can become lopsided. It can be damaging for him and society. Boosting his feelings adds meaning to his life. For Hindus, a mandir provides such an environment.*

#### 4. The unique features of a Swāminārāyan Mandir. (Ref. Appendix -2)

*"A mandir increases moral values. If they prevail, then there will be peace of mind. We build homes and factories for our needs. Those are for our personal use, whereas the mandir is such a place where everyone can have equal benefit. On our doors we write, "No admission without permission," but here, everyone is "welcome". The mandir promotes universal brotherhood. The whole world belongs to God. And God belongs to all. Yogiji Mahārāj often said, "O Lord ! Do good unto all." Here there is no discrimination. We are all here for Atma-realisation and redemption. Peace of mind will be experienced here. Many problems are solved by prayer and darshan of the Lord.*

*"In this world, when someone gives us something, we are always grateful to him. Similarly we should do something for God who has given us so much. Such places are for the redemption of the people. Whoever serves here selflessly with mind, body and wealth, will be repaid infinitely by God."*

**- Pramukh Swāmi Mahārāj.**

# 7 UTSAVA

## (Festivals)

- Why celebrate Utsavas ?
- Utsavas celebrated in the Swāminārāyan Sampradāya.

### 1. Why celebrate Utsavas ?

What next ? A question often posed after watching the latest Oscar-winning film. People keep craving for something new, more creative and daring. Why? To relieve the stress, anxiety, moodlessness and information overload that is invariably created by modern living.

The brain yearns for new forms of entertainment and relaxation, to stimulate and to prevent it sinking into a quagmire of boredom. But do these forms really relieve the symptoms? It is rather like quicksand. The more one tries to extricate oneself, the deeper one sinks. The ancient rishis and seers were well aware of man's inherent nature of becoming bored easily, so they judiciously spangled the Hindu way of life with festivals. Celebrating festivals breaks the humdrum of daily living. It boosts man mentally and invigorates him spiritually. This leads to true contentment.

Boden Professor of Sanskrit at Oxford, Sir Monier Williams, who had studied Indian Culture wrote, "No country upon Earth rejoices in a longer list of holidays (*utsava*) and seasons of rejoicing, qualified by fasts (*upavāsa*, *vrata*), vigils (*jāgarana*) and seasons of mortification than India."

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the cultural heritage of India has been transmitted, not through the annals of historical texts but through festivals. In these festivals the seers also incorporated the awareness of the fleeting nature of the human body, teaching the people to use it, while health prevailed, to attain the ultimate goal of God-realization.

The seers, in laying injunctions about festivals, also bore in mind the physical and spiritual health of man. The behavioural traits like greed, hate, envy and jealousy, were sublimated by

giving them a spiritual realm - since the *bhāvnās* of most festivals were centred on devotion to God. For example, in *Vasant* (spring) and *Sharad* (post-monsoon) there is an increase in *Rajoguna* - the attribute of activity and extravagance. (Ref. Ch.12). Therefore they advocated the festival of *Fuldol* (during *Vasant*) - playing with colours and coloured water. Similarly in *Sharad*, one plays *Rās* or *Garbā* - types of folk-dancing during *Navarātri*. Even today, in the rural areas of India, the purity and orthodoxy of the *Navarātri* festival prevail, where the sexes dance separately. In the cities, 'disco dancing' and promiscuous mixing of the sexes has vilified the traditional folk-dancing.

A good example of the health consideration for the people, by the seers is in the sacred month of *Shrāvān*, during the rains. According to the Ayurvedic scriptures, constantly clouded skies and high humidity dampen our digestive fire. Therefore moderation in food intake is regarded as healthful. So the seers advocated fasting by allowing only one meal a day for the householders, the *sādhus* observing stricter forms of fasting.

During the *Sharad* season, following the monsoon, although the clouds have cleared, the solar position is such that an aggravation of *pitta* (bile) occurs in the body. This can lead to fevers of various kinds. To nullify this, milk and parched rice with sugar are recommended - *dudh pauvā*. This is the *prasād* offered to God on the evening of the Sharad Poonam festival.

Winter is regarded as a healthful season - when the digestive fire is at its peak. Tradition therefore advocates eating rich and nutritious foods. In Makar Sankranti (January 14th), the day of alms giving and kite flying, people forget their grievances and jealousies and vow to work towards a harmonious life. This is effected by giving each other sesame seed balls and jaggery. The sesame seed symbolises love and the jaggery, sweetness of speech.

Festivals also inject vigour and vitality into the cultural and religious traditions and the *bhāvnās*, and prevent them from stagnation.

Through festivals, Lord Swāminārāyan inspired His Paramhansas and devotees to the heights of aesthetic refinement by promoting art, crafts, music and the composition of *kīrtans* rich in imagery and alliteration.

Nishkulānand Swāmi, though a poet, once made a mind-boggling 'twelve-door' swing during the Hindolā Festival for the Lord. Other poets like Premānand, Muktānand, Brahmānand and Devānand composed thousands of *kirtans* encompassing festivals like Rāmnāvmi, Fuldol, Hindolā, Janmāshtami, Diwāli and Annakut. Continuing this tradition today, Pramukh Swāmi Mahārāj has also boosted Indian art and crafts in the *mahotsavas* (large festivals) in India and abroad. In the Cultural Festivals of India celebrated in London in 1985 and in Edison, U.S.A., in 1991, and the Mandir Mahotsav in London, in 1995, the artistic talents of Indian Culture peaked. The artisans constructed exquisite life-size gates, temples, floats and various Hindu symbols from only cane, paper pulp and chalk.

Explaining the purpose of holding *mahotsavas*, Lord Swāminārāyan says in Vach. Gad. I. 3, says,

"I perform Vishnuyagā (sacrifices) and, hold large congregations on festivals like Janmashtami, Ekādashi, etc. with the purpose that if anyone who attends these festivals, even if he is a sinful man, he will be redeemed and will attain the abode of God, if he recalls them on his death bed."

Festivals also serve another edifying purpose; the transformation of lawless and immoral members of society. Joban Pagi, a notorious bandit, and a sinner like the prostitute of Jetalpur became staunch disciples of Mahārāj after attending and participating in festivals.

Festivals also break barriers of status, caste or creed. They bring people together from various strata of society, from home and abroad to do *sevā*.

In the *utsavas*, the *bhaktas* get an opportunity to do *sevā* (service) and offer devotion. There are many forms of *sevā* such as : providing facilities for lodging, catering, cleaning and security for the devotees. The *sevā* increases the devotees' respect (*mahima*) for each other, creates bonhomie and *suhridbhava* (unity).

Finally, the scriptural discourses (*kathā*) held during these gatherings spiritually enlighten the devotees.

Regarding communal gatherings, today's medical research has begun to support them for maintenance of health and longevity of the individuals. Cultures and communities in

which the individuals are introverted—who keep to themselves, become more susceptible to disease. Modern societies are becoming too organised and therefore estrange people. But, people need people to maintain health.

As mentioned earlier, the brain needs stimulation. "A bored brain is just as stressed, as one from information overload," reveal Ornstein and Sobel in their book, *The Healing Brain*. Even a lonely monkey will do anything for the reward of sighting another monkey. In the Middle Ages, lords of castles paid high wages to a person who would live as a hermit near the castle - to display their genuine hermit ! Most people left after a while, even at the risk of starvation. Apparently, the lack of social interaction proved too stressful.

People also need change. Curiosity and variation keep an individual at a mental peak. Too much of the same thing also upsets the mental equilibrium. If we eat our favourite food dish every day for a week or so, we wouldn't feel like touching it the following week. To counter this, the rishis incorporated festivals at regular intervals throughout the year (Ref. Appendix-3). This prevents boredom and overload. It gives the individual *bhakta* a chance to express his *bhāvnās* towards God and the *Satsang*. This promotes spiritual health, brotherhood and unity in the *Satsang*. It provides the necessary stimulation and change which a *bhakta* needs for solace, which in turn keeps the community, harmonious and peaceful.

## (2) Utsavas celebrated in the Swāminārāyan Sampradāya.

(Ref. Appendix-3)

# 8 YAGNA

## (Sacrifices)

- What is a Yagna ?
- The types of Yagnas and their meanings.
- Yagnas performed in the Swāminārāyan Sampradāya.

### (1) What is a Yagna?

A Yagna is one of the oldest rituals in Indian Culture. It is a karma to propitiate the deities. Yagna encompasses the attributes of welcoming (*satkār*), altruism (*oṣpkār*) and unity (*sangathan*). Its foremost meaning is "to give."

The Sanskrit root of Yagna is *Yaj*, meaning to donate, to unify and to perform *Devapujā*.

The concept of a Yagna, of sacrifice can be seen working in nature, especially in the food chain, and the oxygen and water cycles of the earth's ecosystem. This has been mentioned in the Gita (3-14,15,16) :

*All living creatures (bhutās) live on food, which is produced by the help of rain. Rain results from performing yagna. A yagna springs forth from karma and karma has been advocated in the Vedas. The Vedas originated from God.*

Each step sacrifices something to produce the next step. This is the *yagna bhāvnā* of the Gita. If any of the steps become weak, or fail altogether, then the whole cycle breaks down. Each step's success relies on the *bhāvnā* of the preceding step. The rishis recognised the workings of the whole universe as one gigantic *yagna*, since everything was so intricately inter-related.

In the past, people performed *yagnas* for the fulfilment of material desires such as : health, wealth, power, sons, etc. This also involved the sacrifice of animals. From these offerings arose flesh-eating. The Brahmin priests considered this as *prasād* - sanctified food. The whole concept of sacrificing animals arose from the deliberate misinterpretations by the priests, of the injunctions prescribed in the scriptures, e.g.

### *Ajena yajeta*

i.e. perform a *yagna* using barley.

In Sanskrit *Aja* means barley, as well as a goat. So instead of using barley the priests started sacrificing goats.

The Vedas also proclaim :

### *Ma hinsyāt sarwāni bhutāni.*

i.e. Do not kill any living creature.

Animal sacrifices were denounced by Lord Swāminārāyan, who subsequently introduced non-violent (*ahimsak*) *yagnas* in 19th century Gujarat. He performed many such *yagnas* during the early years of His ministry by inviting thousands of Brahmin priests and scholars from all over the land and enjoined them to perform only *ahimsak Yagnas*. The majority were convinced. A few did rebel but failed to do anything significant.

### (2) The types of Yagnas and their meanings.

There are five main types of *yagnas* mentioned in the scriptures:

(1) *Brahma Yagna* (2) *Pitru Yagna* (3) *Deva Yagna* (4) *Bhuta Yagna* (5) *Manushya Yagna*.

The supreme *yagna* according to the Gita is :

### *Yagnānām japayagnosmi*

i.e. of all the *yagnas*, *Japa yagna* is the highest.

*Japa*, as we saw earlier (Ch. 3) is the repeated chanting of God's name. It is also the simplest and does not involve any extensive ritual.

### 1. *Brahma Yagna* :

Man harbours more desires than he has time to fulfil. He hankers after the ephemeral pleasures of wealth, power, and self-indulgence which all lead to pain and misery. People who reached the acme in their respective fields have either experienced discontentment, as did Michelangelo at the age of 90, or committed suicide like Ernest Hemingway. There is only unhappiness at the end of the road of materialism. The real goal of life has been ordained for us by Gunatitanand Swāmi, of becoming *Akshar-rup* and then to worship Purushottam. For this, the scriptures advocate *kathā* and *bhakti*. This is also known as *Yog yagna*. There is bliss and contentment in



listening to and extolling the divine episodes of God and His *Sādhu*.

*Brahma Yagna*, also known as *Jnān* (knowledge) *yagna*, also represents surrendering everything that the mind desires, to the Guru; to live solely according to the Guru's wishes.

The scriptures also contain the prayer:

*Shivasankalpamastu Mey Manaha.*

i.e. Let my mind have redemptive thoughts.

Imbibing such noble thoughts is also *Brahma yagna*.

To offer and sacrifice the body's awareness of "I" and "Mine" at the Guru's lotus feet is also *Brahma yagna*.

### 2. *Pitru Yagna* :

*Pitru* means parents, ancestors.

Since we owe a great debt to our parents, we should serve them to the best of our ability, till their last breath.

One who does not serve or obey one's parents, invites the displeasure of God and self degradation.

To sincerely serve one's parents and to make offerings in a *yagna* for one's ancestors is known as *Pitru yagna*.

### 3. *Deva Yagna* :

Life on earth functions smoothly because of deities such as Varuna (of water), Indra (of rain), Ravi (sun) and Chandra (moon).

Whatever we offer these deities in a *yagna*, are returned a thousand-fold. *Yagna* means 'to give'. Whenever we give, we are performing a *yagna*. In return, the deities are appeased and they also give in return, so they are also performing a *yagna*. This is known as:

*Yagnena yagnamayajanta devāhā.*

i.e. to perform a *yagna* with a *yagna*.

But since man does not perform a *yagna* by destroying forests, polluting air and water, slaughtering animals for food, the result can only be drought, famine, disease and overall misery. The rishis had great foresight and prescribed profound injunctions which naturally maintained a stable equilibrium in the Earth's ecosystem.

### 4. *Bhuta Yagna* :

*Bhuta* means life form.

Every living organism on Earth has a unique contribution to make in the ongoing universal *yagna* of life. It has its own niche in this intricate network. Therefore all the *bhutas* are inter-linked. Man's existence then is unquestionably dependent intrinsically on the other *bhutas* and so he cannot afford to destroy or upset this delicate yet dynamic equilibrium.

Has man been able to invent a machine whose input is grass and output milk ?

Has he devised a machine which takes in carbon-dioxide and water to give oxygen and energy ?

These are but a few examples illustrating the great debt of *bhutas* on our lives. So it behoves upon us to conserve and look after life. This is *Bhuta yagna*. Killing cattle, fish and other animals for food and other purposes is in dissonance with the *yagna bhāvnā* of the Hindu scriptures.

Today, at the age of 77, Pramukh Swāmi Mahārāj is still unflaggingly travelling the world over, performing *Bhuta yagna*, to propagate *Ahimsā* and a vegetarian diet regimen, in addition to planting thousands of trees every year.

### 5. *Manushya Yagna* :

*Manushya* means man.

"Man is the crown of creation" is an oft heard phrase. But this crown has relegated itself to the nadir, in its egocentric thirst for power. This has led to the production of super efficient nuclear devices and cruel biological weapons, which leaves a foreboding of mass genocide forever looming on our heads. Animals do not have to be reminded to live as animals. But man certainly has to be inspired to become a human being. The scriptures say :

*Manurbhava*

- Manu Smriti

i.e. O Man! Become human.

So the true *Manushya yagna* is to remove the baser instincts of anger, violence, cruelty, greed, and others from man to make him a human.

Pramukh Swāmi Mahārāj has been doing precisely this, all his life. He has been uplifting man from the depths of degradation onto the heights of humanity. He has been

performing the true *Manushya yagna* giving over body and soul to the service of mankind. He is living not for himself but for giving. Each second of his life is a *yagna*. Swāmiji has truly imbibed the ultimate *yagna - Ātmanivedanam*, sacrificing one's *Ātmā* for God and mankind and is also the living embodiment of the five types of *yagnas*.

### (3) The Yagnas performed in the Swāminārāyan Sampradāya.

Large scale *yagnas* are performed during certain festivals, where there may be 51, 64, 100, 500 or 1000 *kunds* (sacrificial pits). *Vishwa Shantih Yagnas* (World peace) are held during:

- (1) *Murti-Prāna Pratishtha* (*Murti* Installation) in a temple.
- (2) The birth anniversaries of Lord Swāminārāyan and the Guru-Pramukh Swāmi Mahārāj. *Yagnas* are also commonly performed during Hindu marriage ceremonies, with the *Agni* (Fire) deity acting as a witness to the marriage vows.

## 9 GHAR MANDIR

(Home Shrine)

- What is a Ghar Mandir ?
- What is the function of a Ghar Mandir ?
- Choosing a position for the Ghar Mandir.
- Maintaining the purity of the Ghar Mandir.
- Murtis in the Ghar Mandir.
- Pramukh Swāmi Mahārāj's remarks on the Ghar Mandir.

### (1) What is a Ghar Mandir ?

*Ghar* means a house, a home.

"My home, our home..." every individual has a soft corner for his own home even if it is just a damp ramshackle hovel. In India at least, when a relative comes home, or if someone important visits us, we go to great pains in running around to make his visit memorable. What if God Himself pays us a visit ? What if God agrees to live with us permanently ? Then our joy would know no bounds. We know that the dwelling where God resides is a *Mandir*. Similarly, God's residence in our home is known as a *Ghar mandir*.

### (2) What is the function of a Ghar mandir ?

In the *Yoga Darshan* scripture, the rishi Patanjali has described the effects of being in the vicinity of an *Ashtāng Yogi* :

*Tatsannidhān vairatyāgaha*

i.e. the *Ashtāng Yogi* does not harbour any vengeance or malice towards any living organism.

More amazing is the fact that the instinct of violence in any living being that comes near him will also fade away ! A lion or tiger will behave as meekly as a domestic cat.

Then what to talk of the *Yogi* of all *Yogis*, the beholder of all *Yogis - Paramātmā* ? Surely His presence in the *Ghar mandir* will gradually lessen the baser instincts of an individual. The whole atmosphere is transformed into a devotional one, filled

with pious thoughts. One is inspired to imbibe these thoughts in one's life. Detrimental influences of television will not encroach this atmosphere. Noble thoughts arise in children. Their faith in *Paramātmā* increases and seeds are sown for their character development. To a greater or lesser extent, sooner or later, the *Ghar mandir* will invariably inspire each individual in the home. Thus, God's residence in the home also renders it into a *Mandir*.

To make the home a *Mandir*, it is necessary to have a *Ghar mandir* for the following reasons:

- to increase cultural values.
- to deepen one's *bhakti* and service to *Paramātmā*.
- to discourage malevolent thoughts and immoral behaviour.

To prevent a quarrelsome atmosphere and turn it into a pure one such as a *Mandir's*, it is necessary to have a *Ghar mandir*. When an elderly person like a grandparent is present at home, everyone's behaviour changes for the better. His/her presence smoothen the daily affairs in the home. So naturally, if the supreme *Purushottam Nārāyan* Himself lives in the home, then one is freed from all worries. He shoulders all the worries.

Everyone may not get a chance to perform *pujā* of *Parmeshwar's* *murtis* at the *Mandir*. But at home, even His *shodshopchār pujā* can be personally availed of. The auspicious environment of the *Mandir* is thus created at home.

### (3) Choosing a position for the Ghar Mandir.

When our favourite cricketer visits us, where will we seat him? In the grand sitting room or the scullery? Be it a celebrity or a close friend, we will go out of our way to clean and decorate the house; the front garden, and spray air freshener in the rooms as well. We'll seat him comfortably. We'll offer the most sumptuous food dishes. Well, the same hospitality would be in order for our beloved *Swāmi*, the *Paramātmā* Himself. We would not for a moment think of offering Him a place under the staircase or a cupboard or recess behind the kitchen door! Wouldn't that be insulting and shameful?

If the house is large, even a special room could be set aside

for the *Ghar mandir* and *Pujā*. In a small house with restricted space, the *Ghar mandir* should be positioned in a prominent place in the main room in full view of everyone to facilitate *darshan*.

### (4) Maintaining the purity of the Ghar Mandir.

The common saying, "Cleanliness is next to Godliness" cannot be more applicable than for the *Ghar mandir*. It should be kept clean, free of odds and ends. It is interesting to note items that are deposited here :- loose coins, matchboxes, cotton, tissue packets, combs, ashes piled up from burnt incense sticks, old mail, and so on! The *Ghar mandir* should not take the form of a general store. The *pujā* paraphernalia like the *ārti* and *divā* stand etc. should be washed everyday; the incense and *divā* ashes cleared daily. The paraphernalia should then be stored in a drawer nearby to give the *murti* some breathing space! Ideally, one should have a bath or at least wash one's hands and feet before touching the *Ghar mandir*. There should not be any footwear near it or in the room.

The family member who offers *ārti* and *prasād* to the *murtis* should, if possible, have a bath before offering. Slippers or shoes should not be worn while offering.

### (5) Murtis in the Ghar Mandir.

The *murtis* should be the same as those in one's *Nitya-Pujā*, that of *Mahārāj* and the *Gunātit paramparā*. Portraits, half *murtis*, torn *murtis* should not be placed here.

### (6) Pramukh Swāmi Mahārāj's remarks on the Ghar Mandir.

"One should sit in front of the *Ghar mandir* every morning to think about the *Ātmā*. The *mandir* stills the mind. Only after doing *Nitya-Pujā*, *Ārti* and *Thāl*, should one begin the day's activities. The food one cooks should be offered first to God in the *Ghar mandir*. We are placing great emphasis on the *Ghar mandir* because; just as we would like to live in a house, God would also like to have His own house - in our homes. With God ever present in the home, He will keep a loving vigil over our activities.

"Once the *Ghar mandir* is installed, a *chaitanya mandir* (of the heart) will soon follow".

"Lord Swāminārāyan has ordained all the bhaktas, in the Shikshāpatri (verse 63) to visit the Mandir every evening. If we live afar, and cannot visit it everyday, then we would receive equal fruits by devotedly performing Ārti, Thāl and Ghar Sabhā in the Ghar mandir. By having a Ghar mandir, one is in contact with Paramātmā everyday. The Ghar mandir's presence should not obviate the need for one's personal Nitya-Pujā. If we leave home, even for a few days, we should take the Nitya-Pujā just as we would our tooth-brush and shaving kit. Regularity is the key. No matter how trivial an injunction may be, it should still be observed sincerely, with regularity. God will manifest Himself in the home, in the heart, in the family and in the Ātmā, to those who keep a Ghar mandir."

## 10 SATSANG/GHAR SABHA

(Home Discourses)

- What is the importance of the Satsang Sabhā ?
- How beneficial is the Satsang Sabhā to society ?
- What do the Gunātī Sādhus say about the Satsang Sabhā ?
- What is the Ghar Sabhā ?
- How should one do the Ghar Sabhā ?
- What are the benefits of the Ghar Sabhā ?
- What does Pramukh Swāmi Mahārāj say about the Ghar Sabhā ?

### 1. What is the importance of the Satsang Sabhā ?

*Satsang* means to keep the company of *sādhus*, to hold scriptural discourses, to read *satshastras*.

*Sabhā* is a gathering of people, an assembly.

A *Satsang Sabhā* means a gathering of devotees to hold a scriptural discourse (*kathā*).

The importance of the *Satsang Sabhā* is that it not only sows and nurtures righteous thoughts to fruition but uproots evil thoughts as well.

When man is blinded by his wanton pursuit of materialistic pleasures, he develops evil instincts. At this time, to gain money and power, he will use unscrupulous means to appeal to people's baser instincts, to trap them into evil and immorality. He will convince them that, evil is righteousness, and hedonism is the goal of man's life. This results in man being shackled by addictions and immorality. Life becomes poisonous. A thorny bed of physical, mental and family problems is inevitably created.

The *Satsang Sabhā* opens up vistas of righteousness, devotion to God and *moksha*. One is inspired to walk that path. Life becomes worthwhile. For this reason, Yogiji Mahārāj founded the weekly *Satsang Sabhā*. Outside the *Satsang*, people keep Sunday a free day, to relieve themselves of the week's

tension and turmoil. But in reality, nothing of the sort materializes. People will go to sleep late on Saturdays, and wake up late, more exhausted on Sundays. The rest of the day is then spent in eating, drinking and watching TV, all of which are mentally and physically draining. So true *shantih* results only from *kathā* (spiritual discourses extolling God's glory). This strikes the discord at the roots.

*Satsang Sabhā* is therefore the gateway to character development, spiritual upliftment and *moksha*.

*Satsang Sabhā* adds pages of *Bhakti* (Devotion), *Jñān* (Knowledge), *Vairāgya* (Detachment), and *Dharma* (Righteousness) to the annals of life.

The *Satsang Sabhā* is a treasure trove of righteous virtues. It is a bond linking awareness, introspection and attachment to God.

As well as being a religious meeting for the *bhaktas*, the *Satsang Sabhā* simultaneously functions as a social gathering. This provides social warmth to each individual. In today's society of stressed individuals, social support of this kind is absolutely necessary for the health and stability of the individual and the community. In his book, *Mind as Healer, Mind as Slayer*, Dr. Kenneth R. Pelletier, a scientist at the Stanford Centre for Research in Disease Prevention, says,

"Evidence is accumulating that positive social support is necessary for a person's heart. Supportive interactions among people and cultures may affect our ability to resist illness. A sense of belonging and affiliation appears to be a basic human need. There is now abundant evidence to show that social support may be one of the critical elements distinguishing those who remain healthy from those who do not."

## (2) How beneficial is the *Satsang Sabhā* to society?

Man is a fundamental unit of society. Society has arisen from man. The stronger the part, the stronger the whole. If man is virtuous, then society will be sublime. The *Satsang Sabhā* moulds man into a human, a *bhakta*. Only when man becomes human, do virtues such as truth, non-violence, celibacy, knowledge, and art and creativity bear fruit. Otherwise such virtues can regress into decadence. Hitler's Minister of Propaganda, Goebbels had great elocution but he

used it to misguide people. Hitler's bravery and determination were unmatched, but they were channelled into barbaric atrocities. Nuclear research resulted in the deadly atomic bomb. In contrast, Socrates' oratory helped guide people on the right path. Gandhiji's determination led people towards truth and non-violence.

In creating a sculptural masterpiece, the contribution of a hammer is important. We do indeed faithfully believe that only a good hammer can create a good sculpture. But when we expect a beautiful statue by placing a seasoned hammer in unseasoned hands, the result will be nothing more than a heap of shattered stones. All our expectations disintegrate. Therefore it is important to season the sculptor, not the hammer.

The *Satsang Sabhā* moulds the individual who uses the tool. It prepares the sculptor, so that the sculpture of society becomes a masterpiece. Only with such individuals of character can a peaceful society result.

The following Vedic sentiments become a reality through the *Satsang Sabhā*:

"*Sangachhadhwam Samwadadhvam...*" - Let us walk together, let us speak together,

"*Ishāwāsyamidam sarvam ...*" - God is present everywhere in this universe,

"*Sarvetra sukhinaha santu ...*" - Let everyone everywhere (on earth) be happy.

## (3) What do the *Gunātīt Sādhus* say about the *Satsang Sabhā*?

"*One should forego a profit of Rs. 25,000 and attend the Sunday Sabhā. Just as one opens a shop half an hour early to do business, similarly if one realises the importance of the Sabhā, then one will surely attend on time.*" - Yogiji Mahārāj.

"*By attending the Sunday Sabhā, one derives strength to eradicate one's foibles and baser instincts which are impediments on the path of redemption.*" - H.D.H. Pramukh Swāmi Mahārāj.

## (4) What is the *Ghar Sabhā*?

*Ghar Sabhā* is a handloom which brings together the threads of love, by understanding and knowledge, and weaves them to create a strong family fabric.

This fabric is prone to tearing in today's high tech and "me first" mode of living. Man's life and his interactions with

relatives and friends are not based on intellectualism alone. They are also influenced by love and emotions. These are two crucial factors in holding a family together. These common bonds constitute a family. Without them it is but a crowd. Without love, a man can become self-centred and lose his ability to tolerate other family members. He then tries to draw attention to his individuality and this creates more problems. *Ghar Sabhā* gives an individual self-esteem, a feeling of belonging, to be a fibre of the family fabric.

*Ghar Sabhā* is a bridge of love between individual members of the family.

*Ghar Sabhā* is a 'school' which educates each family member. *Ghar Sabhā* is the *Satsang Sabhā* of the whole family. *Satsang* moulds the individual. It sows the seeds of morality and teaches one to look within. It teaches one to look at one's faults and to imbibe only the good attributes of others. Devotion to God increases. One develops humility. There are untold benefits from *Satsang*. When the '*Satsang Ganga*' flows at one's doorstep, even the home becomes a *tirtha* (sacred place).

*Ghar Sabhā* is the '*Ganga*' that converts a house into a *tirtha*.

#### (5) How should one do the *Ghar Sabhā* ?

The *Ghar Sabhā* should preferably be held after performing *Ārti*, *Thāl* and after having dinner. It should last for about 20 minutes. Discuss the duration with all family members. The *sabhā* could be as follows :

1. *Dhun* - 2 minutes (Chanting the *Swāminārāyan mantra*)
2. *Kirtan* - 4 minutes.
3. Scripture reading - 15 minutes.

With time, and as the family members become more interested and involved, the duration could be increased to 30 minutes or an hour. The scriptures to be read should be light reading, such as : The Parables of Yogiji Mahārāj, the *Satsang Kathās* of Yogiji Mahārāj, the *Satsang Shikshan* examination booklets, the life histories, and Talks of Gunatitanand Swāmi. To involve the children in the *Ghar Sabhā*, they can be guided to sing *Dhun*, *Kirtans* or to read simple booklets such as *Ghanshyam Charitra*, etc.

#### (6) What are the benefits of the *Ghar Sabhā* ?

*Ghar Sabhā* strengthens family ties especially now that it is

getting harder for parents to get together with the children, since both parents need to work to make ends meet.

Lack of communication with one's spouse can gradually lead to marriage problems. *Ghar Sabhā* is an opportunity for the family to get together and discuss family problems as well. It gives cohesive support to the whole family. Sociologists call this, "Social Connectedness," which is related to individual health as well. Recent research has shown that, the greater the Social Connectedness, the healthier the individual. A study of Japanese migrants settling in California showed that those who adopted Western patterns (diet, smoking, relationships, etc.) of living, showed rates of heart disease similar to their American neighbours. But a subgroup of the Japanese migrants had very low rates of heart disease, rates similar to those of their countrymen back in Japan. The researchers, Marmot and Syme noticed that members of this subgroup lived a traditional Japanese life which has social stability and emphasizes strong social ties.

When family members get together, as they may do in extended families, the health of individual members is maintained, and if a member is ill, then healing occurs. Dr. Harold Wise, M.D., calls this "therapeutic family reunion". He believes that a great potential for healing exists in the family. He says, "for a million years people have lived in families and only in the last hundred years or so have people split up ... the oldest healing form, in tribal medicine, involved bringing the whole clan together and working things through...". But he adds a little dishearteningly, "What I'm saying doesn't click in most people's heads in 20th century America !"

In *The Healing Brain*, authors, Robert Ornstein and David Sobel reveal that, "Social support appears to offer a stability which protects people in times of transition and stress." The forms of social support shown by them include : intimate relationships with friends and family memberships in religious and other community organisations. *Ghar Sabhā* is an example of the former and the *Satsang Sabhā*, an example of the latter.

To summarize :

With *Ghar Sabhā* :

- children receive good *samskāras*.
- children's bad habits of watching T.V. for long periods are

- removed. Therefore they excel in studies.
- teenagers in the family become humble, develop respect for elders and are better able to communicate with their parents.
- addictions are removed.
- love between individual members increase, misunderstandings and quarrels lessen.
- the family remains stable and united in times of stress.
- behavioural traits which cause pain, conflict and misery such as; anger, jealousy, ego, taste and others, are removed.
- the overall working of the family smoothen.
- constant peace reigns in the home.

**(7) What does Pramukh Swāmi Mahārāj say about the Ghar Sabhā ?**

*"In the past, even parents used to tell stories from the Rāmāyana and Mahābhārat. Religious education given in schools enabled religious samskāras to be imparted to the children. In today's environment, the parents do not care, neither is religion taught in school. So such education will not be provided outside the home environment. Therefore it is necessary for such samskāras to be received at home. That is why the Ghar Sabhā is needed. Children will be influenced by the environment they are brought up in. A Satsang environment at home will mould children well. A holy atmosphere will prevail in the home and in society."*

*"Ghar Sabhā inspires and consolidates family bonds. In today's atmosphere of materialism, each individual will come home to eat and sleep at his leisure and so family members do not meet each other. Views will differ and quarrels occur at every instant. So how can there be love and unity in the family ?*

*"Harmony increases by doing Ghar Sabhā. Misunderstandings dissolve. This medication is such that there are no side effects. There are only positive improvements. So by understanding its importance the Ghar Sabhā should be held daily."*

*"It is not that all the family members cannot get together, but it is because we are not so resolved about doing it. If on occasions no one comes, then one should hold the Sabhā alone. That will still inspire others. The children receive samskāras in this way. Otherwise if they get addicted to drugs, then that's the end ! They are happy who are alert."*

# 11 BAL SAMSKĀRAS

*(Child Development)*

- What is the importance of Bal samskāras ?
- Why should children be raised in the company of their parents ?
- What are the guiding principles for Bal samskāras ?
- Which aspects of Bal samskāras should be given greater emphasis ?
- How can Bal samskāras be imparted in the Ghar Sabhā ?
- What are the responsibilities of parents towards their children ?
- How can parents contribute towards their children's meaningful education ?
- How does T.V. ruin Bal samskāras ?
- Helping children to decide which T.V. programmes to watch.
- Your home could be...
- What does Pramukh Swāmi Mahārāj say about Bal samskāras ?

**(1) What is the importance of Bal samskāras ?**

The glory of a tree is its seed. If the seed has vitality, so will the tree.

"As you sow, so shall you reap," holds true for children as well. U.S. President Herbert Hoover once commented, "Children are our most valuable natural resource." The seed for a peaceful and harmonious community is a child of character. The child of today is the citizen of tomorrow. Society will be structured on his development. The pride of our culture and whether our fortunes flourish or fade, will also depend on his character development. The child is the father of the whole of humanity. How ? The way we raise our children will in turn influence the way they raise their children and so on.

*Bal samskāras* means : the moulding of children, the making of a happy family, the firm founding of society and the creation of a peaceful world.

**(2) Why should children be raised in the company of their parents ?**

Which language does a child speak ? Love. A child only listens to the language of the heart. He has faith in love. A child first loves his mother and then the father. He will firmly believe whatever his mother teaches him. He will accept what his father says. He will not doubt those who love him. In his mother's bosom and in his father's hands, he experiences the warmth of security.

When a plant has no support, it grows haphazardly in any direction. Similarly, when a child does not receive parental support, his psycho-social growth will develop flaws.

Therefore, for the child who listens to the language of the heart - that of love, parental company is a must. In the company and comfort of his parents, a child's grasping ability increases drastically. Research has shown that those children brought up in the company of their parents developed faster than those without their parents.

A child reared by his parents is self confident, creative and of a sound mental disposition.

**(3) What are the guiding principles for *Bal samskāras* ?**

There are several aspects to a child's development :

- |                     |                          |
|---------------------|--------------------------|
| (1) Physical growth | (2) Intellectual growth  |
| (3) Mental growth   | (4) Psycho-social growth |
| (5) Moral growth    | (6) Spiritual growth     |

During childhood, the body's growth is important. At this stage, a balanced diet is necessary.

Satisfactorily answering the countless questions arising in the child's mind, in addition to the school education he later receives, will develop him intellectually.

While the body's growth is an extrinsic factor, a child's intrinsic growth depends on the balance between his intellect and feelings. When the child develops faith in God, understands the importance of morality and the feelings of others, then these factors will influence his inner development.

In addition to his intellectual progress, these aspects are just as important, if not more.

This 'inner' education is not possible in today's schools. This is effected only through parental guidance and association with *sādhus*.

**(4) Which aspects of *Bal samskāras* should be given greater emphasis ?**

(i) Example better than advice.

We all know the answer to this but we turn a blind eye to it. Why ? The reason is that, it is we who become the targets ! In relation to *Bal samskāras*, parents should put the greatest emphasis on their own thoughts and practice.

The thoughts and practice of the parents are literally passed on to the child through blood. Our ancient seers have advised that the parents' mode of existence should be pure even before the birth of the child.

In the epic *Rāmāyan*, Lord Rāma asks Laxman :

*Pushpam drushtwā falam drushtwā, drushtwā strinām cha yauvanam,*

*Trini rupāni drushtvaiwa kasya no chalate manaha.*

i.e. Whose mind is not deflected on seeing a flower, a fruit and a beautiful woman ?

Laxman answers :

*Pitā yasya shoochirbhuto mātā yasya pativratā,*

*Oobhābhyāmewā sambhutastasya no chalate manaha.*

i.e. An individual who is brought up by a father who is pure, and a mother who is chaste, his mind will not be deflected (on seeing the above three forms).

The thoughts and character of the mother are imprinted even in the foetus. This was the injunction of our ancient seers tens of thousands of years ago ! Today, medical science is only just beginning to grasp this concept.

*Bal samskāras* also depend on the environment the husband provides the wife during her pregnancy. We are all familiar with the stories of Prahlād and Shukdevji, who obtained their ideal *samskāras* in the womb. After birth, a child first emulates his mother, then the father. Parents play the most fundamental role in imparting *samskāras* to their children. Two well-known examples from Hindu culture are of king Gopichand and Sati.



Madālsa. The former, in the prime of youth, was inspired by his mother who informed him of the miserable and ephemeral nature of mundane pleasures. This induced him to forsake his kingdom to perform austerities in the forest, for God-realization.

Queen Sati Madālsa gave *samskāras* to all her four princes about the ephemeral *samsāra*. Therefore they left the rich kingdom to perform austerities in the forest, to attain God-realization.

A child is a supreme mimic. He will copy you by wearing spectacles or by folding one leg over the other to sit in an easy chair pretending to read a newspaper. He will cry to quieten his younger baby brother. He will caress his sibling's forehead, mimicking his mother ! All because he has observed this in minute detail.

Which scene would you prefer? Him mimicking *ārti* or toting a gun at you?

If you sing the *ārti*, then he will clap his hands and will gurgle a few words. If you are doing *pujā*, he will come and sit quietly next to you and observe you. If you take him to the *mandir* holding his fingers, then on the next occasion he will come of his own accord. If you do not offer *dandvat pranāms* to the *murtis* in the *mandir*, but order him to do so, nothing on Earth will make him do them unless you do them first ! Smart kid. If you observe moral values in life, then your child will definitely follow you.

Therefore it behoves upon the parents to live exemplary lives such that their imprints become the guiding ideals for the child.

#### (ii) Importance of Vernacular.

Language plays another crucial role in giving Bal *Samskāras*. Hindus living outside India would do well to talk to their children in their vernacular - Gujarati, Hindi, Bengali - as the case may be. From the day a child is born, parents should converse with him in the vernacular. In school he will inevitably learn and speak English. So parents need not worry about English. But at home, it will not be easy to impart our Hindu traditions in English. Speaking to your children in the vernacular will provide them a basic working vocabulary with which to impart our important *samskāras*. These will include

religious, cultural, ethical and moral values. For example :-  
i) respect for all elders including relatives, teachers and *sādhus*.

ii) importance of :- *ahimsā*-vegetarianism, worshipping God and *sevā* (service) for family, community and *Satsang*.

These *samskāras* and the vernacular are inter-dependent; homogeneously mixed. It is said that a culture disintegrates when its language dies out. History has borne this out amongst many communities in the world. For example, the Japanese, Vietnamese, Hispanics and Indians who have settled either in the U.S.A or U.K., who failed to maintain their original language have discovered to their horror that they are developing a cultural, familial and generational gap with their offspring.

Whilst discussing failings of language, let us consider just one, amongst many basic drawbacks of English which directly influence family life. If a child asks his parent, "Where are you going"? it sounds very rude, because of the "you" pronoun. In Gujarati and Hindi, the pronouns '*tamey*' and "*āp*" are available; equivalent to '*vous*' in French. Either would not only sound sweet but is far more respectful. These pronouns automatically ingrain in the child a deep respect for his parents and elder siblings. '*Tu*' (or '*tum*' - Hindi) equivalent to '*tu*' in French is only used for those equal or younger in age.

Therefore it is extremely important for parents to spare special time to teach children one's vernacular. It is an asset which will be amply rewarded later, especially peace of mind.

#### (5) How can Bal *samskāras* be imparted in the *Ghar Sabhā*?

A child's mentality is such that it always desires self-recognition. In the *Ghar Sabhā*, if importance is given to the child, he will feel that the *Ghar Sabhā* is his own. He will come to like it. In the *Ghar Sabhā*, the child can sing *dhun*, *kirtan* or narrate stories from the lives of Shriji Mahārāj and the *Gunātit paramparā*. This will boost his confidence. From their lives, he will learn lessons in offering *bhakti* and developing a pure character.

A question and answer quiz relating to the *Satsang* can also be devised. When the child performs well, his efforts should be appreciated sincerely.

**(6) What are the responsibilities of parents towards their children ?**

Parents might say : "We brought the child into this world. We have our rights over him." Man likes to demand his rights but shuns his responsibilities and duties.

Rights and duties are two sides of the same coin. If we wish to impose rights on our child then we should simultaneously fulfil our duties. Otherwise, the child will not remain ours.

The parental responsibilities to the child include :

- (i) Giving *samskāras*, (ii) Education  
& (iii) Nurturing.

**(7) How can parents contribute towards their children's meaningful education ?**

1. By ensuring that the child does his homework diligently.
2. When giving the child housework, one should not have a condescending or domineering tone, but one of love and sympathy.
3. After housework, if there is time, one should test him on *kirtans*, etc. that he has learnt by heart.
4. You should be aware of your child's capabilities and only have expectations in relation to these capabilities. Having greater expectations can cause harm to both you and your child.
5. You should know which subjects the child studies easily and those which he finds difficult. In his weak subjects, you should try to help him yourself or arrange for professional tuition.
6. If the child does not want to study, find out why. Seek professional help if necessary.
7. Inspire the child to develop respect for you - the parents, school teachers, elderly people and *sādhus*.
8. Your behaviour should be such that your child is inspired to study and develop his character. Let your character earn you his respect.
9. Create a home environment such that the child enjoys studying and that studies are not disturbed needlessly. During study time, ensure that the T.V. or tape recorder are switched off for those children who

are easily distracted by them.

10. As far as circumstances allow, do not introduce tuition to your child. School education, the child's efforts and your care should suffice.
11. When the child does something well, appreciate that sincerely and reward him; do not just punish him when he is naughty. Tactfully also remind him to take steps towards his higher goals.
12. Do not scold the child in front of others. Even in private, do not scold him to the extent that it hurts his feelings. Do not call him by using abusive or denigrating names. Studies have shown that an unhealthy emotional atmosphere at home can literally stunt a child's physical growth. If a child feels rejected by his parents, thereby growing up with little self-esteem, the brain's growth hormone function is hampered and so his physical growth is also retarded. This syndrome is known as *Psychosocial Dwarfism*.<sup>1</sup>
13. Talk positively to your child so that he is encouraged. Disclose to him the importance of education subtly, by giving examples of great men of history.
14. During examinations, ensure that your child does not lose confidence and does not resort to cheating.
15. Encourage and boost his creative and artistic talents by providing opportunities. Encourage him to be helpful to his friends and to develop a spirit of service to God.
16. Teach your child the importance of praying. Inspire him to pray regularly before studying.
17. In a financial crisis, never make your child an instrument for income. Do not destroy his educational opportunities and darken his future by expecting him to leave school prematurely, to work and bring home money.
18. When your child adopts a stubborn attitude, cries, does not finish his house chores, overplays and becomes unruly, have patience. Never threaten him

1. Bernie S. Siegel, M.D., *Love, Medicine & Miracles*. (London : Arrow Books. 1988) P. 67.

physically. Encourage him and deal with him lovingly. If stubbornness is the inherent nature of children, then love should be the inherent virtue of parents.

19. Do not quarrel with your spouse in front of your child. This creates fear and insecurity in the child's psyche and also affects his physical health.

### (8) How does television ruin Bal samskāras ?

We have dealt with various aspects of child development :

- (1) Physical growth           (2) Intellectual growth and  
(3) Inner growth - which includes : mental growth, psycho-social growth, moral growth and spiritual growth.

Television is primarily a medium for entertainment. It is not the plate that is important but the food served in the plate.

To appreciate this fully, one has to study the effects on child development of what is broadcasted on television.

#### (i) Effects on the Body :

The child who is entertained by T.V. will not budge from it. An average child spends 1200 hours per year watching T.V.. U.S. researcher Dr. John M. Otto has shown that T.V. radiation has a detrimental effect on pea plants.

Late hours of watching T.V., lead to inadequate sleep or insomnia and weakened sight. This sets off a series of problems : failing to do homework, waking up late in the morning, a hurried or missed breakfast, and then dozing during classes. Physical exercise also decreases. This tends to cause lethargy and an unhealthy gain in weight.

#### (ii) Effects on Education and Intellect :

An average child spends 1200 hours per year watching T.V. as compared to only 900 hours in studying. This reflects his lack of interest in studies. Surveys in the USA and UK showed that only 17 % of pupils made efforts to acquire proper education. 83 % of pupils wasted their time watching T.V. -the underlying reason for the increase in illiteracy in today's society.

Children also lose interest in reading and writing. Lack of reading drastically decreases their faculty for thinking.

The information overload from T.V. is received by the right brain, but the left brain does not get a chance to process this

mass of information and so cannot decide on what is good or bad. Gradually, the brain loses its decision making ability.

#### (iii) Internal Effects :

After a ten year survey of 100,000 children in different parts of the world, the National Institute of Mental Health in the USA, showed that American children have witnessed up to 150,000 scenes of violence and 25,000 deaths on T.V. by the age of 16.

The Consumers' Association of Penang (CAP) in Malaysia, carried out a survey which showed that in 8.5 hours of T.V. programmes, there were 736 scenes of violence.

Scenes of violence, murder, rape, and burglary greatly affect the mind. The result is that a child becomes a slave of fear, anxiety and hyperactivity. Finally he succumbs to mental disorders and ailments like apathy, moodlessness, mental derangement and various phobias. To overcome these illnesses, he resorts to drugs, cigarettes and alcohol, ironically being inspired by none other than the T.V. itself.

Watching scenes of material comforts and the "high life" induces children to crave for them. Children who watch scenes of violence and murder are inspired to kill or rob. Violence, theft, murder and scenes of rapes watched by a child have a deep and permanent effect on his vulnerable psyche. He is then inspired to emulate these acts which become the root cause of his : violent nature, apathy, loneliness, and anxiety. For example, in January 1983 in Malaysia four young kids jumped off a hilltop and a building and died. The kids wanted to fly like their T.V. hero Superman. This itself is a sign of moral degeneration.

Other detrimental effects of T.V. include : poor studying and reading abilities and loss of interest in aesthetic fields like art and music. In this way, programmes transmitted on T.V. instead of moulding the child's character retard his physical, intellectual and inner growth.

### (9) Helping children decide which T.V. programmes to watch.

- One should patiently explain the disadvantages and harmful effects of watching T.V..
- Give examples from everyday life, of those children who

have benefited from avoiding T.V.. For example, the boy in Bombay who ranked first in India in the SSC Examinations, had never watched T.V..

- Let your child prepare a time-table of how he spends his day. Let him show the time spent in watching T.V. and which important work schedules he has missed because of T.V.. Explain to him the loss incurred as a result.

- Explain the difference between the make-believe episodes of T.V. and those which are plausible. Ensure that he understands the difference so that he does not try to emulate the false ones.

- Explain the role played by goal fixing, hard work and self-effort in the lives of actors and superstars who may be your child's heroes.

- In his spare moments, inspire him to learn to play a musical instrument, to study art, to take up a hobby, sing and memorise *kirtans* and "Swāmi's Parables", or to learn Gujarati or your mother tongue, if you are non-Gujarati.

- Encourage him to develop a liking for *Satsang* from a young age. Ensure that T.V. does not take preference over *Nitya-Pujā*, *Ghar Sabhā* and *Satsang Bal Sabhā*.

- Parents should themselves either not watch T.V. or watch only in moderation to inspire their children.

- Ideally, if possible, convince your spouse and child to do without T.V. altogether and sell it. Many families in the *Sampradāya*, in India and abroad have taken this bold step and are reaping the benefits, in addition to receiving the blessings of H.D.H. Pramukh Swāmi Mahārāj.

#### (10) Your home could be that in which :

- there is a beautiful *Ghar mandir*

- *Divā*, *ārti* and *Thāl* are offered everyday

- *Ghar Sabhā* is held daily

- all the family members have a personal *pujā*

- elders are given due respect

- the children receive love and encouragement

- importance is given to education, *Satsang* and *sevā*

- the curiosity of children is satisfied with suitable answers

- guests are welcomed with warmth

- moral values are stressed

- the disagreements between husband and wife do not occur in the presence of the children

- there is an abundance of love, unity and harmony among the members

- there is no shouting and fighting

- there is tidiness and cleanliness

- no member has any bad habits or addictions

- there is no laxity and laziness.

If the home has the above qualities, then the child will surely be of good character and moral upbringing. He will be religious, loving and he will learn to maintain cleanliness. It is in YOUR hands to create a home environment such that he automatically and effortlessly receives *Bal samskāras*.

#### (11) What does Pramukh Swāmi Mahārāj say about Bal samskāras ?

*"If you do not give your child the asset of God, then your financial assets will be ruined.*

*"Those children who do not have samskāras just roam about. If parents keep good reading material at home, then a holy atmosphere of satsang will prevail. But if there are posters of film stars everywhere, then the child is bound to watch films !*

*"Some people are of the opinion that they will watch T.V. in moderation, but in reality, no such thing occurs. Once the T.V. arrives, it will destroy samskāras. Immoral scenes and commercials will always be there. When you (the parents) go to work, the children will be at home.*

*"The kid is more advanced than the father. Some people take pride in that, 'My baby boy can switch on the T.V. himself ! He is learning. We will raise him well.' But only when he visits the mandir and obtains the Satsang samskāras, will he become a good child."*

# 12 ĀHĀR SHUDDHI

## (Diet Purity)

- What is the purpose of purity in diet ?
- What is diet purity ?
- Why are onions and garlic forbidden ?
- In the Shikshāpatra it is stated that only Brahmins and Brahmachāris should avoid onions and garlic - How does this apply to the rest of the devotees ?
- What about taking medications which contain any of the forbidden items ?
- What are the diet criteria prescribed by the scriptures for Hindus ?
- A note about unfertilized Eggs and Milk.
- What is the Ekādashi fast ? What foods can one eat on Ekādashi ?
- The story of Ekādashi.
- The ideal Ekādashi.
- The five major fasts in the Swāminārāyan Sampradāya. Special fasts during the month of Shrāvan
- Why is fasting rather than feasting advocated on special occasions and festivals in Hinduism ?
- The health benefits of a Fast.
- Cleaning and Spiritual Purity of Diet.

### (1) What is the purpose of purity in diet ?

The ancient rishis revealed that man's thinking and behaviour is profoundly affected by his diet. At the root of man's moulding is his mind. Purity of mind leads to purity of thought. Purity of thought leads to purity in behaviour. To keep the mind pure, the Upanishads proclaim :

*"Āharshuddhau sattvashuddhihi satvashuddhau druva smrutih;  
Smrutirlambhe sarvagrantheenam vipramokshaha.*

(Chhāndogya Upanishad 7-26-6)

i.e. If the diet is pure then the *Antahkaran* becomes pure. When the mind becomes pure his meditation becomes stable, and when he achieves meditation all his *vāsanās* are eradicated.

For an individual to progress on the spiritual path, he needs to be freed from *vāsanās* and purity of mind. For this diet purity is needed.

Let us consider a few examples concerning diet restraint :

To keep his voice in peak condition, a singer will avoid fried foods and cold drinks. A driver or pilot has to abstain from alcohol a certain number of hours prior to driving or flying, respectively. To avoid allergies, to remove excess cholesterol and to recover from an illness, a patient will be advised to restrict his diet. These are all forms of diet purity. Similarly, to purify the inner self it is essential to observe diet purity.

### (2) What is diet purity ?

We have just seen the purpose of diet purity.

The avoidance of foods which excite our minds is diet purity. The acceptance of foods prescribed by the Hindu scriptures and the avoidance of the rest, is collectively known as diet purity.

The scriptures have sanctioned us to procure foods whose collection has not involved violence (*himsā*), water which has been filtered and other foods which have been cleaned. Meat and foods whose preparation involves *himsā* are forbidden. Intoxicating substances and foods are forbidden. Even onions and garlic, though vegetables, are also banned. Pure vegetarian foods and dairy products form the foundation of diet purity.

### (3) Why are onions and garlic forbidden ?

In order of importance, firstly, because the scriptures have ordained so and secondly because they are *tāmasic*. (ref. section 6-2 below)

In the Shiva Purāna, the devotees of Lord Shiva have been forbidden to take alcohol, meat, onions and garlic.

In the Manu Smruti (5-5) it is said that, "the brahmin who knowingly eats onions and garlic falls from the spiritual path."

The Koran says, "Those who eat onions and garlic should not come to our mosques. They should stay away from us.

They should stay at home". (*Hajrat Saheb* No.44)

Lord Swāminārāyan has also forbidden them in the *Shikshāpatrī* (62/63).

- (4) In the *Shikshāpatrī* it is stated that only Brahmins and Brahmachāris should avoid onions and garlic - How does this apply to the rest of the devotees ?

In the *Shikshāpatrī*, Shriji Mahārāj has given the common codes for renunciates, householders, *Āchāryas* and others. Then in verse 203, He adds that, further details of these religious sanctions should be understood from the other scriptures of the *Sampradāya*. One such scripture, the *Satsangijīvan*, written during Shriji Mahārāj's time, clarifies;

*Gruhasthairapi santyājyaha sansargomadyamānsayoho,  
Palāngulashunadeshcha tathā mādakavastunaha.*

i.e. Even householders should verily avoid alcohol, meat, intoxicating substances, onions and garlic.

Therefore this injunction is applicable to all the disciples and not just Brahmins or *Brahmachāris*.

- (5) What about taking medications which contain any of the forbidden items ?

In the *Shikshāpatrī* (verse 31) Shriji Mahārāj has clearly stated that :

*Yadaushadham cha soorayā sampruktam palalena wa,  
Agnāta vroottavaidyena dattam chādyam na tat kwachit.*

i.e. My disciples shall never take medicines which are mixed with liquor, meat or those which are prescribed by a physician whose conduct is not known to them.

So care should be taken and the ingredients of all medications, vitamins and health foods should be checked. Most notorious are cough and vitamin syrups which may contain alcohol and animal derivatives. Health fadists also advocate extracts of garlic to lower cholesterol. These should be avoided since there are other ways of lowering cholesterol such as diet control, exercising and taking fenugreek seeds.

#### Miscellaneous items :

Food colours, preservatives and ready to serve foods available commercially should be scrutinized for non-vegetarian substances, such as animal fat, eggs, egg lecithin,

gelatin, and alcoholic (ethyl alcohol) preservatives.

Some food colours, though attractive, are derived from unpleasant sources e.g. cochineal, used in colouring creams for cake decorating, is extracted by killing thousands of a species of American insects !

- (6) What are the diet criteria prescribed by the scriptures for Hindus ?

There are two major criteria for diet :

(A) *Ahimsā* (Non-violence) and (B) *Gunās*.

(A) *Ahimsā* :

This is non-violence in thought, word and deed. The sage Vyas says in the great epic *Mahābhārat* :

*Ahimsā Paramo Dharmaha* (3-207-7)

i.e. Non-violence is the highest *Dharma*.

Shriji Mahārāj has also forbidden His *bhaktas* to kill animals and insects (*Shikshāpatrī* Verse 11). He forbids killing for sacrifices and also lauds *ahimsā* as the highest *Dharma* :

*Devatāpitrū yāgārthamapyajādesha hinsanam,*

*No kartavyamahinsaiva Dharmaha procto-sti yanmahān.*

(*Shikshāpatrī* Verse 12)

i.e. None shall kill animals such as goats, etc. even for propitiating a diety, for non-violence in itself is avowedly held as the highest ethical code.

Eating vegetables and grains does not amount to *himsā* for in the majority of cases, there is no need to uproot the plant. e.g. removing seeds, pulses and grains does not kill the plant. There are exceptions, such as carrot and other tubers, for which the scriptures have given the injunction that only minimal *himsā* is committed as compared to taking animal life - a higher form of consciousness. The higher the level of consciousness, the greater the sin.

However, it must be borne in mind that our human bodies were designed for a vegetarian, rather than a carnivorous diet. (A detailed anatomical comparison here is outside the scope of this book).

(B) *Gunās* :

The second criterion for diet is the concept of *Gunās* or attributes. In Hindu philosophy there are three *Gunās* - *Sattva*

*Guna, Rajo Guna and Tamo Guna.*

The *Gunās* describe a state of being.

i) *Rajo-Guna* or *Rajas* : This is a state of activity, restlessness, passion, discord and extravagance.

ii) *Tamo-Guna* or *Tamas* : This is a state of inactivity, lethargy, dullness, laziness, sleep, anger and violence.

iii) *Sattva Guna* : This is a state of purity and clarity of thought, mental stability and excellence.

A person will be under the influence of either one or a mixture of these *gunās* at any particular moment. Generally, he will be in a mixture of *Rajas* and *Tamas*. Occasionally he will experience a calm - when *Sattva guna* will be presiding over the other two. The aim is to experience *Sattva guna* more often. Ultimately, one should then transcend these three *gunas* of *Māyā* to become *Gunātī*, the state of ultimate realisation.

Now, we consider diet.

All foods induce these *gunas*. Each food has its own *guna* and will induce that *guna* in the person eating that food. Foods and their *gunas* are classified in the Gita (17 - 8,9,10) into 3 main categories :

(1) *Sāttvic* (2) *Rājasic* (3) *Tāmasic*

1. *Sāttvic* foods :

- i) Nutritious e.g. milk, honey
- ii) Oily e.g. Ghee, butter, vegetable oils
- iii) *Sthir* - which mix easily with the body
- iv) Sweet and tasty e.g. sugars, foods made with milk and sugar
- v) healthy - e.g. cooked vegetables

2. *Rājasic* foods :

There are six types of *rasa* - food tastes :

- (i) Sweet, (ii) Salty, (iii) Bitter, (iv) Sour (acidic), (v) Hot (spicy), (vi) Bland (*turo*)

Except for the sweet type, all others are *Rājasic*.

In addition, foods which are hot in temperature, fried, baked, boiled, spiced, which cause burning, which cause watering and a tingling sensation in the mouth, those which induce unquenchable thirst, and those which cause pain, depression, disease and incite one's passions are all *Rājasic*.

3. *Tāmasic* foods :

Foods which are : left for more than three hours after being

cooked, have become stale, whose original taste has disappeared, are a mixture of cooked and uncooked, smell bad, are difficult to digest, very spicy, cold, half eaten by someone, contain small organisms and hair, those forbidden by the scriptures (meat, fish, eggs, onions and garlic), and those which are fermented or made by fermentation are all *Tāmasic*.

In some areas of the world, people regard fish as a sea vegetable. But this is misleading. A fish is still an animal.

The Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics makes an observation similar to the Hindu scriptures about the *Tāmasic* nature of flesh :

"The most serious indictment against flesh eating is that meat is a stimulant and its heating properties act upon the system by increasing the power of the animal in man. By meat eating, in other words, the temptation to sensuality of all kinds is strengthened."

(7) A note on unfertilized Eggs and Milk :

Although flagrantly unethical, egg distributors in India falsely and misleadingly promote unfertilized eggs as being vegetarian. A brief discussion is given here for clarity.

An egg is a living animal cell, capable of life form. It contains the blueprint of life - chromosomes. Although unfertilized it still carries out respiration and metabolism - the two fundamental biological functions which render it a living animal cell. Oxygen, carbon-dioxide and water molecules diffuse through the egg shell. This much has been declared in the standard text of the Poultry Industry, *Poultry Feeds and Nutrition* by Philip J. Scamble. When the two functions cease, the egg starts to rot. Scientists at Michigan University have further tested unfertilized eggs, by placing electrodes on them and recorded electrical activity on a polygraph, thus verifying that they are living cells. An egg is produced from the reproductive system of the hen. It is not meant to be food for the chick, but to produce a chick.

People compare eggs with milk and do not consider them as flesh. But biologically speaking, milk is not a living animal cell but merely a secretion, meant as food for the calf. Humanitarians claim that using this milk deprives the calf of

its food. In truth, only the excess milk is removed and this does not tantamount to *himsā*. It is a known fact in Animal Husbandry that if a calf suckles all the milk that a cow secretes, it will invariably develop health complications. On the other hand, if this extra milk is allowed to remain in the udders, the cow will experience great discomfort and within a day or so, will stop producing milk altogether.

As far as the Hindu scriptures are concerned, all life is held sacred. For man, they have ordained a diet in which *Ahimsā* is the foremost consideration.

**(8) What is the Ekādashi fast? What foods can one eat on Ekādashi?**

*Ekādashi* is a sacred day, occurring twice a month in the Hindu Calendar - on the eleventh day of the bright half - called *Shukla Paksha* and on the eleventh of the dark half called *Vad Paksha* (Padma Purāna, Uttar Khand 36/5/80). A fast is to be observed on this day by all Hindus. Ideally, a waterless fast is to be observed. But those who are young, ill, of age and whose work involves physical strain, are allowed to eat certain foods known as *farāri* foods by the scriptures.

*Farāri* foods include tubers (potatoes, sweet potatoes, cassava, carrots, turnips, *suran* - (a type of yam), dairy products, fruits, nuts, semolina, some vegetables (cabbage, cauliflower, tomatoes) and special type of grains (*morio*, *rājagro*). Salt may be used. They are also *sattoic* foods. Foods made from cereals are forbidden. This is also part of diet purity.

**(9) The story of Ekādashi.**

In Vach. Gad. II. 8. Lord Swāminārāyan has related the story of *Ekādashi*.

Once Lord Nārāyan was resting. A demon named Murdānav came and challenged the Lord to a duel. Suddenly a damsel appeared, evolved out of the *Ekādash Indriyas*<sup>1</sup> of the Lord. Murdānav was so attracted to this damsel that he asked

<sup>1</sup> The ten *Indriyas* (sense organs) are composed of the five Karma *Indriyas* (mouth, hands, feet, anus and genital organs) and five *Jñān Indriyas* (eye, ears, nose, skin and tongue). The ten *Indriyas* along with the mind are collectively known as *Ekādash Indriyas*.

her to marry him. The damsel agreed, but only if he agreed to a duel with her, "Whoever shall defeat me shall marry me." The demon, blinded by passion, did not think about the challenge and fought with her. The damsel killed Murdānav. Pleased with her, the Lord granted her a boon. She asked, "O Lord! As I had evolved out of your *Ekādash Indriyas*, let my name be *Ekādashi*. I am wedded to *tapas* and I desire that people should observe the *Ekādashi Vrata* (fast) and control their *Ekādash Indriyas* on this day. Lord Nārāyan agreed. Ever since, Hindus fast on the eleventh day of *Sūd (Shukla) Paksha* and *Vad Paksha* of the month.

**(10) The ideal Ekādashi.**

In Vach. Gad. I, 38, Shriji Mahārāj has elaborated that a true *Ekādashi* is when one withdraws the ten *Indriyas* and the eleventh the mind, from their worldly 'foods' and focuses them on God and devotional activities. So moderation in daily leisurely activities is also desirable.

**(11) The five major fasts in the Swāminārāyan Sampradāya. Special Fasts during the month of Shrāvan.**

These five fasts are to be strictly waterless and have been ordained as such by Shāstriji Mahārāj, the Guru of Yogiji Mahārāj and Pramukh Swāmi Mahārāj. They are:

(i) *Rām Navmi - Hari Jayanti - Chaitra Sud 9* - the births of Lord Rāma and Lord Swāminārāyan

(ii) *DevShayani Ekādashi - Ashadh Sud 11* - When Lord Vishnu starts his four month rest on the doorstep of King Bali.

(iii) *Janmāshṭmi - Shrāvan Vad 8* - Lord Krishna's birthday

(iv) *Jal Zilani Ekādashi - Bhadarva Sud 11* - when the *murtis* of Bal Mukund (Lord Krishna) and Lord Ganesh are taken on a palanquin by *bhaktas* to a river or pond. Following the *pujāvidhi*, *arti*, etc. the Lord is taken into the water for a boating ceremony.

(v) *Deva Prabodhini Ekādashi - Kartik Sud 11* - Lord Vishnu awakens from his four month rest. The *bhaktas* rejoice by offering the new harvest.

**Special Fasts during the month of Shrāvan:**

The four months of the monsoon are considered sacred. But the month of Shrāvan, is considered the most sacred of them



all. Hindus observe special fasts and perform extra religious deeds to earn greater *Punya* (merit). Usually the householders eat only once a day for the whole month. The *sādhus* usually observe *Dhārnā - Pārnā* - observing a waterless fast every alternate day for the whole month. There are other more strenuous fasting methods observed by *sādhus*.

These are all forms of diet purity.

### (12) Why is fasting rather than feasting advocated on special occasions and festivals ?

In the West, celebrations call for feasting whereas in Hinduism, fasting is advocated on holy days and festivals. According to the scriptures, the purpose of a fast is :

*Upavrutasya pāpebhyo yastu vāso gunaihi saha,*

*Upavasaha sa vigneḥa sarvabhoga vivarjitaha*

i.e. to be freed from sins, to introspect, to imbibe good attributes and to forego all the material pleasures of the *indriyas*.

This is only possible if one abstains from taking food and water. A waterless fast is known as *Nirjalā*. During *Nirjalā*, all the *indriyas* become weak, and the *Ātmā* gets a chance to imbibe redemptive attributes such as mercy, love, benevolence, forgiveness, performing austerities and others. The spiritual energy gained from avoidance of food and water is redirected towards performing extra *bhakti*. e.g. *Mantra japa*, meditation, listening to *kathā* and singing *kirtans*, which strengthen the *Ātmā*.

*Sarva bhoga vivarjitaha* means to avoid all forms of *indriya* indulgence, which also means that the day of the fast should not be spent in sleeping, watching T.V., gambling and gossiping, as all these boost the *indriyas* and nullify the fruits of a fast.

The fast is observed by God's injunction to please God. A little self-abnegation for Him will be rewarded with profound spiritual bliss and contentment.

### (13) The Health benefits of a Fast.

Fasting of various types is also practised in other world religions for spiritual and health benefits.

The health benefits of fasting are many. The Ayurvedic

scriptures proclaim that :

*Langanam Paramaushadham*

i.e. Fasting is the greatest medication.

Animals also fast when ill or wounded to aid healing. For lack of space, details of the benefits cannot be given here. Suffice it to say that fasting cleanses the body of toxins and effete material and gives the body a chance to repair itself. Longer fasts, lasting three to four weeks have been advocated by practitioners of naturopathy, especially in the USA for treating chronic diseases and afflictions such as asthma, cold sinusitis, migraines, irritable bowel syndrome, colitis, arthritis, eczema, and to resolve cysts and benign tumours.<sup>1</sup>

### (14) Cleaning and Spiritual Purity of Diet :

The raw materials from which we cook food should be washed, cleaned, sieved or filtered. Mahārāj says :

*Agālitaṁ na pātavyam pāṇiyam cha payastathā.*

(Shikshāpatri Verse 30).

i.e. None shall ever drink unfiltered water or milk.

This serves to remove small organisms.

Drinking water in public places directly from taps should be avoided, since people may have drunk water directly from these taps i.e. with their mouths touching the taps. Drinking juice from a bottle or a can which has been 'lipped' previously, or eating a sandwich or similar item, a chunk of which has been bitten off by someone, also does not conform with *āhār shuddhi*.

After cooking the food, it should be offered to God in the *Ghar mandir* to sanctify it.

*Bhaktairetaistu Krishnāyānarpita vāryapi kwachit,*

*Na peyam naiva bhakshyam cha patrakandafalādyapi.*

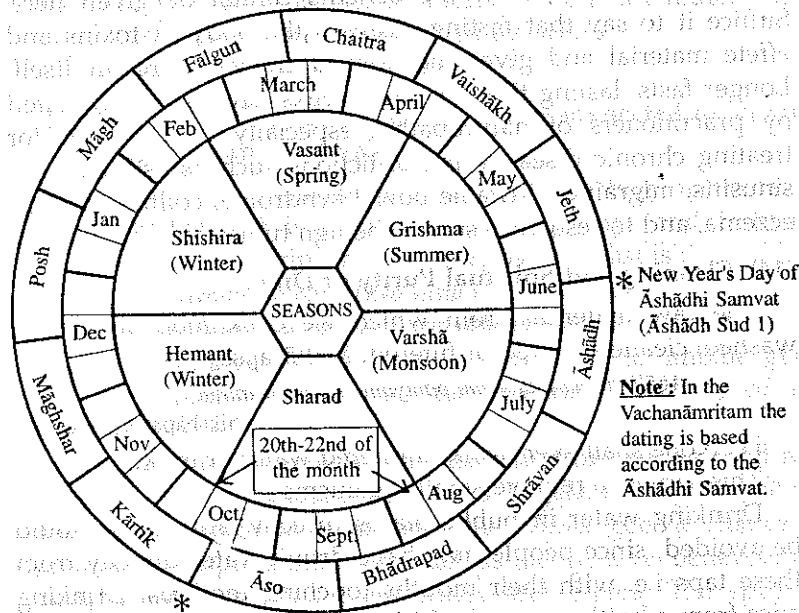
(Shikshāpatri Verse 60)

Only then, should one partake of this *prasād*, literally -blessing. This *bhakti* ritual, of offering food to God is the crown of diet purity.

1. Herbert Sheldon. M.D. *The Science and Fine Art of Fasting*. (Chicago : Natural Hygiene Press. 1978.)

## Appendix-1 : The Hindu Calendar & Seasons

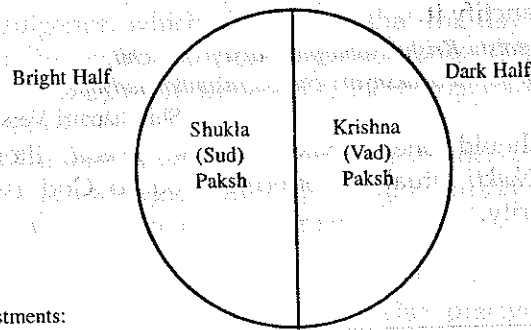
(and how it relates to the calendar we use today)



\* Hindu New Year's Day  
(of Vikram Samvat.)  
Kartik Sud 1

### One Lunar Month

Since the Hindu Calendar is lunar based, each month is divided into :



Adjustments:

60 Solar months=62 Lunar months

i.e. Every 30 months one extra month is added, which is called Adhik mās or Purushottam mās.

## Appendix-2

### The unique features of a Swāminārāyan Mandir

The pinnaced *mandirs* of the Swāminārāyan *Sampradāya* in India, generally have the following features:

(1) The Five *Ārtis* :-

Name	Meaning	Approx. times
i. <i>Mangalā</i>	Auspicious awakening	6.00 a.m.
ii. <i>Shrungār</i>	After breakfast and decoration with garments & ornaments	7.30 a.m.
iii. <i>Rājbhog</i>	After offering grand lunch.	11.30 a.m.
	N.B. Although <i>Ārti</i> is not performed, fruits are offered.	4.00 p.m.
iv. <i>Sandhyā</i>	Evening.	7.00 p.m.
v. <i>Shayan</i>	After dinner. The Lord retires for the night's rest.	8.30 p.m.

(2) The *Maha Pujā*-performed every morning between *Mangalā* and *Shrungār ārti's*, in the *Sabhā Mandap*.

(3) The Five (or Three) *Kathās*. Timings are variable in each *mandir* and the discourses are delivered by the *sādhus*.

(4) The older temples may also store extremely rare and sacred relics used by Lord Swāminārāyan such as furniture, utensils, hand-written manuscripts, hand-woven garments and clothing, palanquins and ox-carts, and other miscellaneous artifacts.

A *Sādhus' Āshram* - Living area for the *sādhus*.

A *Sabhā Mandap* (Hall) - For holding *Satsang* Discourses.

A *Dharmashālā* - Lodging facilities for pilgrims and staff members of the *mandir*.

A *Bhojanshālā* - Catering facilities for the pilgrims and the poor.

A *Gaushālā* - Cow-shed, sometimes situated separately from the *mandir* complex if space is restricted.

A *Pāthashālā* - For studying Sanskrit and *Satsang* literature

A *Sangitshālā* - For studying music.

The *Kothār* - General Store.  
The *Bhandār* - Kitchen.

### Modern additions

Offices for *Satsang* Activities like: Youth and *Bal* departments, Women's Wing, a health clinic, a library and a book-stall for *Satsang* publications.

## Appendix-3

### Festivals Celebrated in the Swāminārāyan Sampradāya during the year.

(Details of the Hindu months and seasons are given in Appendix-1.)

1. **Posh Sud 15 (Dec. Jan.)** — *Akshar Brahman* Gunatitanand Swāmi's *dikshā* Day.
2. **January 14** — Makār Sankranti. Festival of Alms-giving and Kite Flying.
3. **Maha Sud 5 (Jan. Feb.)** — Vasant Panchami - *Shikshāpatri* written by Lord Swāminārāyan. Births of Shāstriji Mahārāj, Nishkulanand Swāmi and Brahmanand Swāmi.
4. **Maha Vad 14 (Jan. Feb.)** — Maha Shivaratri - Birth of Lord Shiva.
5. **Fagan Sud 15 (Feb. Mar.)** — Fuldol, Rangotsav (Holi) - Festival of Colours. Birth of Bhagaṭji Mahārāj.
6. **Chaitra Sud 9 (Mar. Apr.)** — Shri Hari Jayanti - Birth of Lord Swāminārāyan, Rāmnavmi - Birth of Lord Rāma
7. **Vaishakh Vad 12 (Apr. May)** — Birth of Yogiji Mahārāj.
8. **Jeth Sud 4 (May Jun.)** — H.D.H. Pramukh Swāmi Mahārāj appointed as President of the Sanstha by Shāstriji Mahārāj.
9. **Jeth Sud 10 (May Jun.)** — Shriji Mahārāj returned to His divine abode - *Akshardhām*.
10. **Ashadh Sud 2 (Jun. Jul.)** — Rath Yatra - Chariot Festival. Devotees draw the chariot of the Lord through the streets.
11. **Ashadh Sud 11 (Jun. Jul.)** — *Deva Shayani Ekādashi* - Lord Nārāyan retires for a four month rest.
12. **Ashadh Sud 15 (Jun. Jul.)** — Guru Purnima - Birth of Sage Vyasa - Guru is offered *pujan*.
13. **Ashadh Vad 1 (Jun. Jul.)** — Hindolā Utsava begins - Festival of Swings, for one month.
14. **Shrāvan Sud 1 (Jul. Aug.)** — Start of Shrāvan, most sacred month. Fasting starts, for one month.
15. **Shrāvan Sud 15 (Jul. Aug.)** — Poonam. Rakshā Bandhan - tying a *Rakshā (Rākhadi)* by sister on her brother's wrist.
16. **Shrāvan Vad 8 (Jul. Aug.)** — Krishna Janmāshtmi - Birth

of Lord Krishna.

17. **Bhadarva Vad 4 (Aug. Sep.)** — Ganesh Chaturthi - *Pujan*, installing Lord Ganesh.
18. **Bhadarva Vad 11 (Aug. Sep.)** — Jal Zilani *Ekādashi* - Bal Mukund & Lord Ganesh taken to an expanse of water, *pujan* offered and boat ride.
19. **Aso Sud 10 (Sep. Oct.)** — Dashera - Burning the effigy of Ravana, a demon vanquished by Lord Rāma.
20. **Aso Sud 15 (Sep. Oct.)** — Sharad Poonam - Birth of *Akshar Brahman* Gunatitanand Swāmi.
21. **Aso Vad 14 (Sep. Oct.)** — Kali Chaudash - Hanuman *pujan*.
22. **Aso Vad 15 (Sep. Oct.)** — Amās - Diwāli - Festival of Lights; Lakshmi, Shārada *Pujan*. (Account books are offered *pujan*).
23. **Kartik Sud 1 (Oct. Nov.)** — Hindu New Year's Day. Annakut *Utsava* - New harvest - hundreds of food dishes offered.
24. **Kartik Sud 5 (Oct. Nov.)** — Labh Pāncham. Business starts officially. *Pujan* offered.
25. **Kartik Sud 11 (Oct. Nov.)** — *Deva-Prabodhini Ekādashi* - Lord Nārāyan awakens following a four month rest.
26. **Kartik Sud 15 (Oct. Nov.)** — Poonam. *Deva Diwali* - Victory of the Deities over evil. New vegetable harvest offered to the Lord (*Shākotsav*).
27. **Magshar Sud 8 (Nov. Dec.)** — Birth of H.D.H. Pramukh Swāmi Mahārāj.
28. **Magshar Vad 10 (Nov. Dec.)** — Dhanurmās begins - Lord goes to school for one month. Writing materials, books, toys and sweets offered.