CONTENTS:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Pujā (Worship)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Nitya Pujā-I (Daily Worship)</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Nitya Pujā-II (Varied Aspects &amp; Meanings)</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Ārti</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Kanthi</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Mandir (Temple)</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Utsava (Festivals)</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Yagna (Sacrifices)</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Ghar Mandir (Home Shrine)</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Satsang / Ghar Sabha (Home Discourses)</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Bal Samskāras (Child Development)</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Āhār Shuddhi (Diet Purity)</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Appendix-1 - The Hindu Calendar &amp; Seasons</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Appendix-2 - The Unique Features of a Swāminārāyan Mandir</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Appendix-3 - Festivals In The Swāminārāyan Sampradāya</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Glossary</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Index</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 vidhānō. 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 vidhānōs. But over the centuries the value of these vidhānōs 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 fulfill 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 Puja? Why do we perform Puja?
- Why do we perform Paramatma’s Puja?
- Why is there a need for a Murti?
- What is Murti Puja?
- Why do we perform Paramatma’s Murti Puja?
- What is special about Paramatma’s Murti Puja?
- Why is the Guru’s Murti Puja performed?
- Who is a Guru? What is the need for a Guru? How does one revere the Guru?
- What is the Puja Vidhi?
- Puja Dravya
- Types of Prasad (Naivedya) usually offered.
- Puja in other common situations.

(1) What is Puja? Why do we perform Puja?

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

In fact, we all do Puj whether we are theist or atheist, rich or poor, learned or ignorant. Some do Puja 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 Akbar’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 Puja in its simplest form.

(2) Why do we perform Paramatma's Puja?

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 Puja. We cannot afford to remain ungrateful towards the One who has graced us in so many ways.

We do Paramatma's Puja to show our reverence for His infinite grace: Puja teaches us how to love Him. It lightens the load of His debt on us. Puja develops virtues. Puja gives life. Puja brings about fulfillment.

(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 Mahabharat, Eklavya became the supreme archer, guided and inspired solely by his Guru's murti.

(4) What is Murti Puja?

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):

Kaleshodhikaaraha tesham aavyakatasaktatehasam,
Aavyaktā hi gaurdhih kham dehawadbhhīh avāpyate.

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 Gunatit Sadhu - the true Sadhu of God, also has the ability, due to his spiritual purity and greatness to invoke God in a murti, as revealed by Lord Swaminarayan in Vach. Gad. I, 68.

Lastly, if earthly (magic) 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 diva and garlanding the murti, and then touching its feet in deep veneration.

Murti Puja is our veneration for a murti which inspires
virtues in us. Then we can become God Himself with the help of our own devotion.

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

5) Why do we perform Paramāṭmā's Murti Pujā?

We are obliged to Paramāṭmā 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 Paramāṭmā's murti? This develops attributes like benevolence, love, purity, truth and non-violence in our hearts. Forgetting Paramāṭmā's infinite dues on us, we become egocentric. To prevent this, it behaves upon us to remain humble and vigilant. In order to kindle Paramāṭmā's divine attributes in us, we perform His murti pujā.

6) What is special about Paramāṭmā'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 jīvas (Souls) all bound by the ignorance of Māyā. For muktī - redemption from Māyā, the jīvas best and only way is to accept surrenderance at the feet of Paramāṭmā, 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 Paramāṭmā is manifesting (Pratyaksha) on Earth. The all-merciful Paramāṭmā, 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 Paramāṭmā Himself. The Vedas proclaim Paramāṭmā's form to be beyond mind and speech. To facilitate bhakti, Paramāṭmā 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 Paramāṭmā, the Prāṇa - life-force is also controlled and one attains the state of Nirokālaṃ Samādhi - the highest state of realisation by the Jīva.

The uniqueness of Paramāṭmā's murti pujā is that, through this medium, the bhaktā experiences the bliss resulting from serving Him wherein the mind is stilled in Him, thus liberating the bhaktā 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 what is the good in looking up to them for inspiration? The true ideal is to succeed in life, to attain the Śthila-pragna, or Gunātī state or God-realisation. Such inspiration can only be obtained from a true Guru - the Satpurush.

The Guru's murti pujā 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 Achārya 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 vijnānarádhram sa Gurum evaṁ abhyhitgachhet.
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, *Panchopachār* (five ways of performing puja), *Dashopachār* (ten ways) and *Shodhopachār* (sixteen ways) pujaṇīdhi. The type chosen depended on the importance of the guest.

*Shodhopachār vīdhi* was more commonly practised and its sixteen steps are as follows:

1. Ṇauṁ - invitation, invocation.
2. Āṣā - to offer a seating arrangement e.g. mat, cushion, etc.
3. Pāḍa - cleaning the feet with water.
4. Ērga - to apply *chāndlo* and rice on the forehead.
5. Ācchham - to offer drinking water.
6. Snāṇa - to bathe him with water.
7. Vaśtra - to offer rich garments.
8. Uparit - to offer the sacred thread called *janai*.
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. Pradakshina - to circumambulate the person or mūrti.
15. Pushpāṇjali - to offer flowers and garlands.
16. Rajöphār - to offer an umbrella, wisp, wooden footwear (*Pādukā*) and other similar items; and then

(Shvetāśvatara Upanishad 6/23)

1. *Yasya deve paraḥ bhaktih, yathā deve tathā guruvi,  
Tasyaite kathā hi arthāhā, prakāśhante mahāmanah.*

(Mundaka Upanishad 1-2-12)

1. *Samiti paniḥ shrotṛiyam Brahmanishtham.*
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 Paramātma Himself graces his home? So with the aid of Shodashopchār and recitation of Sanskrit verses, Paramātma is venerated and it is this ancient Hindu tradition which is termed **Puja Vidhi**.

10. **Pujā Dravya - Auspicious materials used to perform pujā.** A list of materials commonly used is given below:
   1. Types of leaves: Banana, Tulsi, Coconut, Betel Vine, Asopālava, Bilva (Bill), Peepal and Mango.
   3. For **Archan** (imprinting) Kum-Kum (red) powder, Abil (white powder), Ġāl (pink powder), Chandan (Sandalwood paste).
   4. Cloth for **Åsan** : 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 Poojisalam).
   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. **Deepam** (Dīvo) - lighted wick using ghee-clarified butter.
   11. **Āarti**.
   12. **Ghanti** or small bell with a handle, to be rung every so often during the **vidhi**.
   13. **Panchātmruti** - 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 (**dāhī**l) - most commonly offered in any **puja vidhi**.
   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. **Pendī** - a sweet made from milk solids and sugar.
   4. **Panchātmrut** - 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 pauti**) offered especially on Sharad Poornami.
   11. **Mukhvas** - 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. **Puja in other ceremonies.**

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

**Puja** is also performed during ground-breaking to sanctify the area. On entering a new building, **Puja** 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 Swāmī Mahārāj. He also advocates the lighting of a **dīvo** in front of a birthday cake, symbolising enlightenment rather than blowing out lighted candles.
2 NITYA PUJA-I

(Daily Worship)

- What is Nitya-Puja?
- Why is Nitya-Puja performed in the morning?
- The necessity of a personal Nitya-Puja?
- Murtis in the Nitya-Puja. What should the murtis be like?
- The sequence of the Nitya-Puja routine.
- Nitya-Puja in light of Lord Swaminarayan’s teachings.
- Personal Nitya-Puja and puja of the Ghar Mandir.
- Nitya-Puja in illness and old age.
- How is the purity of puja maintained?
- The daily deed to be performed immediately after Nitya-Puja.
- The benefits of Nitya-Puja.

(1) What is Nitya-Puja?

Nitya means daily. Puja in Sanskrit means to adore, to worship. Puja is to worship God. Therefore Paramatma’s Puja performed every day is known as Nitya-Puja. 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 puja. 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.

Paramatma’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 Paramatma and the Guru, and this retards our spiritual uplift. To prevent this, it behoves upon us to be ever vigilant. The daily performance of puja of the murti or portrait of Paramatma and the Guru is Nitya-Puja. It is a blissful encounter, a meeting with God and Guru. In comparison to their profound grace on us, Nitya-Puja is our way of returning love and gratitude, no matter how petty and insignificant.

Nitya-Puja 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-Puja 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 Gunatit Sadhu will awaken our spiritual attributes Dharma, Jnan, Vairagya and Bhakti. The heart will be suffused with redemptive attributes - benevolence, mercy, love, tolerance, forgiveness, generosity. Then one experiences peace.

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

Brahme Muhurte Ya Nitra Sa Pnoyakshayakari.

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 puja 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 Paramatma. 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 Sadhu, 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 diya in the Char 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 base 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 Paramātma-Purushottam Nārāyan. For the bhakta, all incarnations are included in this form. In the Swāminārāyan, Sampradāya, the form of worship (Upāsanā) advocated is of God with His choicest bhakta, the Gunāhit Sādhu. Therefore in the Nitya-Pujā, the murtis to be worshipped are of Akshar Purushottam and the Gunāhit 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 Gunāhit paramparā. Duplicates of different styles are unnecessary.

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

Devotees of the Bochasanwāsī Shri Akshar Purushottam Sanstha (B.A.P.S) are advised to follow the Nitya-Pujā vidhi described below: The reasons and bhavānā 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 dhotī or lungi and a gatariyu or jabha are suitable. After pujā, both should be neatly folded and stored away. This is the satvic 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 Paramātma. Therefore we should also cultivate appropriate manners. 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 Shikhāpatri 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 Maharāj in the Shikhāpatri (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 kum-kum 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 Maharāj and the Gunātīt Sādhu -Pramukh Swāmi Maharāj, avoiding all worldly thoughts.
   - To aid concentration, one can also perform the Om or the bhramari prāṇāyām prior to meditation. The remarkable effects of prāṇāyām on concentrating the mind have been verified by modern researchers.

What should one do during meditation?

1. **Atma 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 Maharāj constantly resides in my Ātmā. Pramukh Swāmi Maharāj, the embodiment of Akṣhar Brahma is my Ātmā."

2. **Aim of life:**
   - One should internally visualise the goal of one’s life:
     - “Under any circumstance and at any cost, I want to please Shriji Maharāj and Pramukh Swāmi Maharāj only."
     - “By becoming Akṣhar-rup (like Akṣhar) I want to serve Purushottam.” (Shikhāpatri verse 116).

3. **Mānī Puja:**
   - In Mānī Puja (mental visualisation) one can perform the shodshopchār puja 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 Maharāj
   - Bhagatji Maharāj
   - Akṣhar Purushottam Maharāj
   - Shāstriji Maharāj
   - Pramukh Swāmi Maharāj

   OR

   - Bhagatji Maharāj
   - Akṣhar Purushottam Maharāj
   - Shāstriji Maharāj
   - Pramukh Swāmi Maharāj
This is followed by reciting the āhavān mantra - praying to God to grace the puja:
Utish-shho-tishtha hey Nāth! Svāminārayān Prabhū!
Dharmasūtra dayasindho sveshām shreyahā param kuru
Āgachha Bhagavān deva, swasāhāndī Parameswara,
Aham pujaṁ karishyāmi sadā twam saṃmukho Bhava.
i.e. “O Son of Dharma! O ocean of mercy! O Nath! O Swāminārayān! O Prabhū! Please arise and redeem Your devotees. O Parmeshvar! O Deva! O Bhagavān! Please come and grace my puja from Your throne in Akshardhām. Please be seated in front of me. I wish to perform Your puja.”

8. Mālā (Rosary) and Mantra chanting:
- By doing the darshan of the murtis and keeping the mind focused on them, one should turn the mala, chanting the “Swāminārayān” 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 Varnī - Lord Swāminārayān 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 Pradakshina. The standard is to do five or eleven. More Pradakshinās can be done according to one’s convenience.

11. Sāshtāṅg Dandvat Pranām (Prostration):
Sāshtāṅg 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 Sāshtāṅg 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 dandavats 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 Mānsī:
After the Dandvat Pranām, one re-sits in the Puja and offers Thāl (Nāivedya) in Mānsī. 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 Mānsī, 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 indriyās and antakṣaraṇa. Please protect us from all types of Kusāṅ - evil company. Please inspire us so we can develop firm Atmabuddhi with You.
Finally one touches the charanam (lotus-feet) of the murtis and brings one’s hands to one’s eyes. This is known as charan sparsh.

14. Visarjan (Farewell):
The puja ends by expressing thankful sentiments to Mahārāj and the Gunātīti Śādhus for gracing it:
Swasthānām gocchha devesa pujaṁadāya nāmakāṁ, Ishtakām-prasāddhyartham punarāgamanāyā cha.
i.e. “O Lord of the Deities! Fulfilling my wishes for success in my day’s activities, You have blessed my puja. Please resume Your seat in the altar of my heart and return tomorrow to re-grace my puja.”

15. Reading the Shikshāpatri:
- One should diligently read the Shikshāpatri according to Lord Swāminārayān’s injunctions.
One should read a minimum of five verses and think over them, aiming to imbibe them in one's life.

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

It is proclaimed in the Gita:

Brahmahobhaqha prasannatma na shochati na kānkshati,
Samaha sarveshu bhuteshu madbhiqthin labhate parām. (18/54)

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

Lord Swāmīnārāyan in His Shikshapatri has expressed a similar injunction:

Nijātmānam brahmarupam dehatraya vilakshanam, vibhāvyatena
karavyā bhaktili krishnasya sarvadā. (116)

i.e. One should identify one's Ātma 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 krupa - 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, Jñān, Vairāgya and Bhakti.

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

i) Dharma (Religious Duties) - in reading and imbibing the codes of the Shikshapatri.

ii) Jñāna (Knowledge) - the awareness and consolidation of the goal during Ātma chintan and the prayer at the end.

iii) Vairāgya (Detachment) - the control of the indriyas by doing pratiṣñyam and the Taṇḍ Mālā.

iv) Bhakti (Devotion) - in doing Mānsi puja when we offer love and devotion to Paramātma and in the prayer at the end when we ask for bhakti and forgiveness.

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

We have already discussed Nitya-Puja. 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-Puja. Nitya-Puja 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-Puja is bhakti offered at the personal level. With the personal puja, the pictured murti of Paramātma can be taken by a bhakta wherever he goes. Thence the Puja’s regularity is not disturbed. But without this Nitya-Puja, 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-Puja are necessary and complement each other.

(8) Nitya-Puja 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 Puja to another family member, who should perform the Puja on one's behalf. One can still do mālā, mantra japa and read the Shikshapatri. 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-Puja.

(9) How is the purity of Puja maintained?

The Puja 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 Puja should not be touched or opened again after the morning worship until the next day.

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

After Puja, one should do darshan of the Ghar mandir and then do panchāṅg 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 Śwāminārāyan.”

(11) The benefits of Nitya-Puja:

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 1965 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-Pujä. 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-
Pujä. The only difference is that, in Pujä we have murtis present
before us and instead of visualising an abstract word like
"one", we vocalise the powerful "Śwāminārāyan" mantra.
Therefore in addition to the health benefits, Nitya-Pujä
surpasses 'Relaxation Response', since the "God factor" is
involved in Nitya-Pujä. Nitya-Pujä purifies the Antahkaran
(mind) of kāla - 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 Śwāmi Mahārāj say about Nitya-
Pujä?

"We should bathe in the morning and then do mālā and puja.
Instead of shortening one's bathing time, we tend to cut puja time.
By shortening puja, only we are at a loss. We should never miss
puja, and the tilak-chándlo 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 Śrī who has given us 24 hours, then there's no
one more ungrateful than us."
3 NITYA-PUJA-II

(Variety Aspects & Meanings)

- Why should one face North or East during Puja?
- What is the Tilak-Chandlo? Why do it on the forehead, arms, and chest?
- The origins of Tilak-chândlo in the Swaminarayan Sampradaya.
- The benefits of Tilak-chândlo.
- What is Mânsi Puja?
- The benefits of Mânsi Puja.
- What is a Mantra? Why chant mantras?
- The Swaminarayan 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 Sāśṭāng 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 Shikshāpatra 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 Puja?

One should face East for performing religious rituals such as Puja 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 Uttara 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 chândlo on her forehead.

In the Bhakti movements of Hinduism, God is the Swâmi (Guardian) of the bhakta. On being fortunate to have a guardian, the jubilant bhakta also imprints a chândlo on his forehead. The red chândlo is the auspicious (saubhayya) 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 Swâmi 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 Vasudeva, Sankarshan, Aniruddha and Pradyumna. (Arthadeepika-Tika Bhāṣya)

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 Śvāminārāyaṇ 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 Śvāminārāyaṇ Sampradāya.

In Samvat 1877 (C.E. 1821) Lord Śvāminārāyaṇ 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 Śvāmi, 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 (Bhagavad Pādakruti) and the chāndlo represents the bhakta. The bhakta’s ‘niche’ is at the lotus feet of God. (Arthadeepika - Tika Bhāṣya). This also represents the Bhakta – Bhagwān mode of worshipping God along with His choicest devotee, the Gūmati Sādhu.

(4) The benefits of Tilak-chāndlo.

The Tilak-chāndlo signifies dāsatava - 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 Puja?

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 puja. In other words, mānsi puja is the mental worship of God.

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

Just as the pratyaksha puja of God is performed with shodshopchar materials (ref. Ch.1), one can do puja 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 Śvāminārāyaṇ has given a beautiful elaboration of
The benefits of Mānṣi Puja.

The added benefits of mānṣi puja is that it fulfills 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 nididhyālsan (ref. Glossary) necessary for God-realization are facilitated by mānṣi 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 Psychoneuroimmunology (PNI) has shed great light on the effects of mental imagery or visualization on our immune system and creativity. Mānṣi 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 bhakta to do the “Five period mānṣi”. Mānṣi, short for mānṣi puja, usually takes between three to five minutes. It depends on the individual. The first mānṣi 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 mānṣi 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 mānṣi.” 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.

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:

Manast troyate

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 maya, a mantra is necessary. A word or sentence which glorifies Paramatma 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 “Swaminarayan” mantra.

The word Swaminarayan is composed of two words; Swami and Naraayan. Swami represents Mul Akshar Purushottam Gunatitanand Swami and Naraayan represents Purushottam Sahajanand Swami, also known as Lord Swaminarayan. In the Swaminarayan mantra, the worship (Upanishad) of Narayan or Purushottam, by becoming Swami-rup (like Swami) or Akshar-rup is quite clearly indicated. This then is the meaning of the Swaminarayan mantra. By chanting it, one realises Lord Swaminarayan.

(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 asan in a quiet area. Withdrawing one’s vritti (attention) from all material objects, then focusing on 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 Paramatma, one pleases Him. He also fulfills any pious wishes of the bhakta. In the Sampradaya, it is common knowledge that when Yogiji Maharaj was bitten by a cobra in Gondal temple, his Guru Shastriji Maharaj instructed all the bhaktas present to chant the Swaminarayan mantra. The effects of the poison soon subsided. Without any side effects, Yogiji Maharaj 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 mala?

Our busy daily schedule and laziness prevent us from remembering God even once during the day. Then, the sadhus 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 japa performed. The count also develops a feeling of contentment that one has performed one’s fixed number of japa daily. As a result, to ease counting, the mala (rosary) has come into being.

(12) Why are there 108 beads in a mala?

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 shatam divaraatra sahasrayevkavinsathyat.
Etasanyamakam Mantra jivo japati sarvadaa.

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. But this is not practical, the scriptures have prescribed the Upanshu 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.

Upanshu syat shatagunaka.

(Manu Smruti - 2/86)

In this way, turning one mala 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 mala.

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 mala 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 charms. Therefore the number of beads assigned to a mala 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 mala.

(13) How to do a mala.

The mala 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.

Hrudiy tishhadashagnalam.
(Yajur Veda 31).

Therefore the mala is held and moved on the middle finger to influence the heart. The mala 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 "Swaminarayan". One chants the Swaminarayan mantra 108 times during one mala. When the Sumeru is reached, one should not let it pass like the other beads, but the mala should be reversed at this point. Therefore one actually re-starts turning the mala with the last bead of the previous round.

(14) The Sumeru of a mala.

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

(15) Why wear a mala round the neck?

To maintain the purity of a mala 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 mala is then turned. When one finishes doing the mala, it is put away along with the gaumukhi. But in the gaumukhi's absence, the mala 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 mala is also famed for its healing effects on heart disease.

(16) What is the Tapa mala?

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 siddhasan or padmasan 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 sentiment of the staunch bhakta, of attaining God at any cost disregarding any pain or tribulation. Another sentiment also prevails in the Satsang.

When Lord Śvāminārayan 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-Pūja.

(17) What is Pradakshina (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 Latinus 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 pradakshīna represents the daily march of the sun, rising in the east, travelling south and then setting in the west. When the Brahmin priests perform pradakshīna 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 prasāyana in Sanskrit i.e. going anti-clockwise, which is considered unholy.

Pradakshīna is a form of pūjā, 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 Paramārtha. 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 Pradakshīna.

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

In the epic Mahābhārata, the sage Vyas has given the same meaning to Pradakshīna. 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 Pradakshīna 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 Guṇātīti Śādhū in the epicentre of all our activities.”

One should do eleven or more Pradakshīnas during the morning. Puja, Pradakshīna of murtis in temples is also a common ritual. Yogi Mahārāj invariably advocated devotees in pain or distress to faithfully perform 51,101 or more Pradakshīnas of Akshar Derv, our most sacred and miraculous
shrine, at the temple in Gondal. This invariably solicited them.

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

(18) What is Prāṇām?

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 hand, but brings one's palms together, in prāṇām. 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 Swāmināraṇya, Jai Nārāyaṇa, or Jai Ambe. This is the simple prāṇām, also known as Namaskār.

(19) What is Dandvat Prāṇām?

To show one's insignificance and respect towards God and His Śādhu, one does Dandvat Prāṇām, 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 Śāsthāṅg Dandvat Prāṇām?

Ashtāṅga means eight body parts. Śāsthāṅg means with eight parts. In this type of prāṇāms, the eight parts of the body which should touch the floor are:

- Oorasa - skiers
- Dhrishya - eyes
- Manasa - mind
- Vachas - speech
- Tathā - feet
- Padabhyaṁ - feet
- Karābhyaṁ - hands
- Tathā - feet

(i.e., i) jānubhyāṁ - thighs, ii) padabhyaṁ - feet, iii) karābhyaṁ - hands, iv) oorasa - skiers, v) manasa - mind, vi) vachas - speech, vii) dhrishya - 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 Śāsthāṅg dandvat prāṇām. The male members offer these prāṇāms to God, the Guru and sādhus.

(21) What is Panchāṅg Prāṇām?

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

Males offer panchāṅg prāṇāms to sādhus and parents. The females offer only panchāṅg prāṇāms to God, murtis and parents.

For the males, if space prevents one doing Dandvat Prāṇāms, then Panchāṅg prāṇāms can equally be offered. In both forms, the person doing the prāṇāms, 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 bhāumā 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 Prāṇām.

In the Dandvat prāṇām, three yogic postures are involved:

i) Namaskāraṇa,
ii) Prasāranāsa (one foot), and
iii) Bhujāngasāsa.

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 prāṇām 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 prāṇām one's ego diminishes. Subsequently one's anger also lessens gradually. The ultimate aim is to remove ego completely. Dandvat prāṇām 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 bhaktas. It is a conversation full of loving feelings and sentiments coming from the heart of the bhaktas. 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  đâśatva 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 Paramâtmâ, are collectively termed prayer. Prayers by great sâdhus and bhaktas of the past may also reflect and enhance our own feelings.

Yogiji Maharâj’s famous and extremely evocative prayer in Mahelav, the birth place of his Guru Shâstriji Maharâj, is not only a landmark in the Swâminarâyan Sampradâya 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 Fuldo festival in Sarangpur, Saurashtra, the women devotees of Gujarat offered a unique prayer to Shriji Maharâj which has been included in the scripture, Bhaktachintâmani Chapter 64. It begins:

“Mahââhâvamâi Mâyâ Tamâri, Jere Āvârijâ Narañâri…”

i.e. You, who have delivered us from the great darkness of Mâyâ…

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

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

“O Maharâj! 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 Maharâj! O Swâmin! O Krupâsindho! O Sharnagat Pratipalâk! Deliver us from evil company.

In Vach. Gad. III. 39, He adds: “Deliver us from the mâyâ of “I” and “mine” and bless us to increase our love for You. Also, grant us the boon to associate with and love the Sâdhu who has overcome Mâyâ 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 prârabdha (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 Swâmi (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 Kutumbhakam (“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 Mahârâj'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 - dhâm, here and now, and not just after death.

(27) Why should one read the Shikshâpati everyday?

Shikshâpati 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 Swâmínârâyana 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 Shikshâpati. Therefore it needs to be read carefully, like an instruction manual.

In Vach. Gad. III. 1. and in Shikshâpati Verse 208, Shriji Mahârâj has given an injunction to us, His devotees, to read the Shikshâpati 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 puja 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 Shikshâpati 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 Shikshâpati daily.

By reading the Shikshâpati 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 - sâdhak who has still to fully kindle and consolidate the feelings - bhâvanâ, and to maintain their continuity, all these practices need to be observed.

Agreed, that a sâdhak who on attaining God - realization need not observe these codes, but in reality a sâdhak 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:

Nâ Kuryâtâkahirchi sakhyam manasi hi anawashhite.  
Yad - wishrâmbhat chirât chironam chaskanda tata aishwaran  
Nityam daddi kâmasya chidram tamanu yeraaya,  
yoginâh krutamaitrasya paryurjaya eva poonaicha.  
(Srimad Bhâgwatam 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 lust 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:

Yadyadacharati shreṣṭhāha tadadevetaro janaka,
Sa yatpramāṇam kurute lokastadānuvartate.

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 kriyas 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 kriya 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 kriyas 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 kriyas 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 bhāvanās, 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 brahmārūp 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.
But God has graced all life on Earth by the gift of the Panchbhitas - 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 Vayu - air as a medium for breathing and for holding prana - the vital air. For movement He gave Akash - space or ether. To remember this debt of Paramatma on us, we present the Panchbhitas at His feet in Aarti, by offering their symbolic representations.

Sound is a part of Akash or space. Therefore the drum, bell and the words (lyrics) sung in Aarti are symbols of Akash. The dhip or smoke from an incense stick is a symbol of Vayu. The flame of a "dico" is a symbol of Tej (light). The water in the conch shell is a symbol of Jal (water). By doing the Dandvat Pranam the Pruthvi (earth) element is symbolically offered at the lotus feet of God. In this manner, Aarti is the offering of the Panchbhitas to Paramatma.

With precisely these sentiments, in some temples the Aarti is performed using five objects which also symbolically represent the Panchbhitas:

1. Flower - Pruthvi (because smell is an attribute of Pruthvi)
2. Water in a conch shell - Jal.
3. Dico - Tej
5. White cloth - Akash.

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

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

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 Māṅgalik (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 Puja, 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 Purāṇas 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 - pradaksinā 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 chatuḥ pāda talakadeshe dwau nabhī deshe sukrutā dīya mandale sarvāṅgadeshe cha saptāvarūm devartikum bhaktajānahe prakuryā
d. 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. (Harilīlāmṛta 6/4/6). A Sanskrit name for Ārti is Nirājamā, meaning : to fully illuminate the mūrti of God. So from the method described above, we can visualise the meaning of Nirājamā.
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?

Kanthā 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 - Paramātman. 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 Paramātman’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 Śwāmi Shatanand, the Lord says:

- Samsārpaṇya: dikshāme - bhaktidharmayukti gurubhāgavate dhana prāk,
- Archān ato ākāśa prāpī tadaktaeśe bhakton vaidhyādapatindra Vīshnoḥ.

i.e. In this world, after accepting vartamān from the beholder of Dharma and Bhakti - the Param Ekāntik Śādhu, 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 Shrīji Mahārāj, it is ideal to accept Vartamān and wear a kanthi from the Gunātit Śādhu. 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 Śādhu is able to uplift him by giving guidance and strength.

Even the Achārya receives vartamān from such a Śādhu. For example, Achārya Shri Vhairalajī Mahārāj of Vartal was given Vartamān and Kanthi when just an infant by Akshar Brahman Gunatitanand Śwāmi, 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 Shikshapatri.

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

In Vach. Vartal 5, Lord Swaminarayan 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 Shikshapatri, Swami Shatanand has mentioned the same principle:

\[ \text{Nāma mālā dhārāte ko hetuḥ? Iti cheti Shri RadhaKrishnasya yugalaswaruppāsākaśivasoocchāndārtham iti awagamayātām,} \]

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:

\[ \text{Kālā Māyā pāpa karma yamadohi bhavādham, Swaminarayanam sharanam prapannamī sa pūta mām.} \]

i.e. I have come at the lotus feet of Lord Swaminarayan 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 becomes 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:

\[ \text{Apsu vai Varunaḥ.} \]

(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.

\[ \text{Annute khalā vai kriyamāne Varuno gruhānāti.} \]

(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.
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.

What purpose does a Mandir serve?

In the temples built in conformity with the Agam 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 sadhus 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 sadhus, 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 (kathas) of the sadhus, the bhaktas are enlightened about Atma and Paramatma to help them attain contentment and peace. Even lay visitors experience the presence of God in mandirs, where the singing of the lilas 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 sculptures.

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.

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 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 Swāmī 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 Swāmī 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 Swāmī Mahārāj the reason for building a mandir in London. Swāmīji 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 (bhāmās) 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)
7 UTSAVA

(Festivals)

- Why celebrate Utsavas?
- Utsavas celebrated in the Śvāminārāyan 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 quacksand. 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, ārat), 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 bhārūnas 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 Ful dol (during Vasant) - playing with colours and coloured water. Similarly in Sharad, one plays Rās or Garbha - 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 vitifed the traditional folk-dancing.

A good example of the health consideration for the people, by the seers is in the sacred month of Shrāvan, 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 - dūth pavaṭ. This is the prāśād offered to God on the evening of the Sharad Poornam 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 bhārūnas, and prevent them from stagnation.

Through festivals; Lord Śvāminārāyan inspired His Paramhansās and devotees to the heights of aesthetic refinement, by promoting art, crafts, music and the composition of kirtans - rich in imagery and alliteration.
Nishkulānand Swāmi, though a poet, once made a mindboggling ‘twelve-door’ swing during the Hindolā Festival for the Lord. Other poets like Premānand, Muktānand, Brahmanand and Devānand composed thousands of kirtans encompassing festivals like Rāmnavmi, Fuldol, Hindolā, Janmāśhtami, Diwāli and Annakut. Continuing this tradition today, Praunik Swāmi Maharāj has also boosted Indian art and crafts in the mahotsavas (grand 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 Swaminarayan says in Vach. Gad. I.3, says, “I perform Vishnuyāga (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 Pāgī, a notorious bandit, and a sinner like the prostitute of Jetapur became staunch disciples of Maharāj 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 bhāmās 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 Swaminarayan Sampradāya.

(Ref. Appendix-3)
8 YAGNA

(Sacrifices)

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

(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 (oopkār) and unity (sangathan). Its foremost meaning is “to give.”

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

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 (bhutas) 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 bhūmā 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 bhūmā of the preceding step. The rishis recognised the workings of the whole universe as one gigantic yagna, since everything was so intricately interrelated.

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 prasad - 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 hinsyay sarwāni bhūtāni.
i.e. Do not kill any living creature.

Animal sacrifices were denounced by Lord Swaminarayana, 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. Manusya Yagna

The supreme yagna according to the Gita is:

Yagnānām japa-yagnose

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 fulfill. 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 Swāmī, 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 devāh._

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_ _bhūvā_ of the Hindu scriptures.

Today, at the age of 77, Pramukh Śwāmi 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 Smrutī

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 Śwāmi 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). Vishnu Shatish 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 Swāmī 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 Swāmī 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 Ashtāṅg Yogi:

Tattannidhan vairayāgaha

i.e. the Ashtāṅg 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 - Paramāttmā? 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 pūjā of Parmeshwar’s murtis at the Mandir. But at home, even His shodshchopār pūjā 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 ārī 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 ārī 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 Guṇātīt 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, Ārī 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 Shikshapatri (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 Ārati, 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 infraction 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 Gunaṭīt 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 sthāstras.

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 shanti results only from kathā (spiritual discourses extolling God’s glory). This strikes the discord at the roots.

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

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

The Satsang Sabha 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 Sabha 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 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 Sabha 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 Sabha 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. Gandhi’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 Sabha 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 Sabha:

“Sangachchadhwami Samwadadhwai...” - Let us walk together, let us speak together,

“Ishāwasyamidam sarvam...” - God is present everywhere in this universe,

“Sarvetra sukkhāna santu...” - Let everyone everywhere (on earth) be happy.

(3) What do the Gunātīt Śādhus say about the Satsang Sabha?

“One should forego a profit of Rs. 25,000 and attend the Sunday Sabha. Just as one opens a shop half an hour early to do business, similarly if one realises the importance of the Sabha, then one will surely attend on time.” - Yogji Maharaj.

“By attending the Sunday Sabha, one derives strength to eradicate one’s foibles and base instincts which are impediments on the path of redemption.” - H.D.H. Pramukh Swami Maharaj.

(4) What is the Ghar Sabha?

Ghar Sabha 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 Sabha gives an individual self-esteem, a feeling of belonging, to be a fibre of the family fabric.

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

Ghar Sabha is a ‘school’ which educates each family member. Ghar Sabha is the Satsang Sabha 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 imbibé 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 Sabha is the ‘Ganga’ that converts a house into a tirtha.

5) How should one do the Ghar Sabha?

The Ghar Sabha should preferably be held after performing Aarti, Thali and after having dinner. It should last for about 20 minutes. Discuss the duration with all family members. The Sabha could be as follows:

1. Dhan - 2 minutes (Chanting the Swaminarayan 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 Maharaj, the Satsang Kathas of Yogji Maharaj, the Satsang Shikshan examination booklets, the life histories, and Talks of Gunatitanand Swami. To involve the children in the Ghar Sabha, 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 Sabha?

Ghar Sabha 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 Sabha 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 compatriots back in Japan. The researchers, Marmot and Syme noticed that members of this subgroup lived in 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 Sabha is an example of the former and the Satsang Sabha, an example of the latter.

To summarize:

With Ghar Sabha:
- children receive good sanskaras
- 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 smoothens, constant peace reigns in the home.

(7) What does Pramukh Swami Mahārāj say about the Ghar Sabha?

"In the past, even parents used to tell stories from the Rāmāyana and Mahābharat. 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 Sabha is needed. Children will be influenced by the environment they are brought up in. A Saiśing environment at home will mould children well. A holy atmosphere will prevail in the home and in society." 

-Ghar Sabha 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. Vices will differ and quarrels occur at every instant. So how can there be love and unity in the family?

"Harmony increases by doing Ghar Sabha. Misunderstandings dissolve. This medication is such that there are no side effects. There are only positive improvements. So by understanding its importance the Ghar Sabha 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 Sabha 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 SAMSKRĀS

(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 Sabha?
- 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 Swami 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 sanskāras 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—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 sanskāras?

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 sanskāras 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 sanskāras, 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 Rama asks Laxman:

Pushpatam drushthā Falam drushthā, Drushthā dirinām cha yavvanan,

Trīni ṅupāni Drushthāya kasya no chalata manah.

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

Laxman answers:

Piśa yasya shohirbhuto mād yasya pativrataḥ,

Oohābhyāmēva sambhutasāya no chalata manah.

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 sanskāras also depend on the environment the husband provides the wife during her pregnancy. We are all familiar with the stories of Prahlad and Shukdevi, who obtained their ideal sanskāras in the womb. After birth, a child first emulates his mother, then the father. Parents play the most fundamental role in imparting sanskāras 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 pūjā, 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 prādāns 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 serva (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 tāmēr 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 Maharaj and the Gunātīt parampara. 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 fulfill 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 those 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 Disinhibition.
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. If 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.

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-Puja, Ghar Sabha and Satsang Bal Sabha.

- 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 Śāmi Mahārāj.

(10) Your home could be that in which:

- there is a beautiful Ghar mandir
- Divā, ārti and Thāl are offered everyday
- Ghar Sabha is held daily
- all the family members have a personal puja
- elders are given due respect
- the children receive love and encouragement
- importance is given to education, Satsang and seva
- 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 attains the Satsang samskāras, will he become a good child."
i.e. If the diet is pure then the Antahkarana becomes pure. When the mind becomes pure his meditation becomes stable, and when he achieves meditation all his vīśamās are eradicated.

For an individual to progress on the spiritual path, he needs to be freed from vīśamās 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 Purāṇa, 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 Swaminārāyan has also forbidden them in the Shikhāpatri (62/63).

(4) In the Shikhāpatri 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 Shikhāpatri, 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:

Gruhasthāraṇī sāntājñāha, sansargomadāyanāṃṣayohmah,
Paḷāṅgaluṣhānadeshchāh tathā mādakavastumahah.

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 Shikhāpatri (verse 31) Shriji Mahārāj has clearly stated that:

Yadauṣṭhayam cha sooryāṃ samprakṣāma paḻālēna wā,
Agni vroṭtaviṇāyena dattam chādyma na tāi 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 fanatics 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) Gunas.

(A) Ahimsā:

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

Ahimsā Paraṇo Dharmā (3-207-7)

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

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

Devatāpīrā yāgārhamāpyājādeschā hinsanam,
No kartavyamahinsiṇa Dharmā procto-sti ṣaṃmahān.

(Shikhāpatri Verse 12)

i.e. None shall kill animals such as goats, etc. even for propitiating a deity, 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) Gunas:

The second criterion for diet is the concept of Gunas or attributes. In Hindu philosophy there are three Gunas - Sattva
Guna, Raja Guna and Tamo Guna.

The Gunas describe a state of being.

i) Raja-Guna or Rajas : This is a state of activity, restlessness, passion, 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 gunas 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 Gunālīt, 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. Sattvic foods
   i) Nutritious e.g. milk, honey
   ii) Oily e.g. Ghee, butter, vegetable oils
   iii) Sīlā - 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
   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. Scambler. 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 Purāṇa, 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, _suraṇ_ - (a type of yam), dairy products, fruits, nuts, semolina, some vegetables (cabbage, cauliflower, tomatoes) and special type of grains (_morio_, _rāguro_). Salt may be used. They are also _sattvic_ 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 Śvāminārayan 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 _Ekādashi Indriyas_ of the Lord. Murdānav was so attracted to this damsel that he asked 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 _Ekādashi 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 _Ekādashi Indriyas_ on this day. Lord Nārāyan agreed. Ever since, Hindus fast on the eleventh day of _Śūḍ_ (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 Śvāminārayan Sampradāya:

**Special Fasts during the month of _Śrāvan_**

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

(i) _Rām Navimi_ - Hari Jayanti - _Chaitra Sud 9_ - the births of Lord Rāma and Lord Śvāminārayan

(ii) _Devi Shāyani Ekādashi_ - _Aṣadhi Sud 11_ - When Lord Vishnu starts his four month rest on the doorstep of King Bali.

(iii) _Jannāṣṭhmi_ - _Śrāvan Vad 8_ - Lord Krishna’s birthday

(iv) _Jal Zilāni Ekādashi_ - _Bhadara 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 _pujānī, ārī, 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 _Śrāvan_**

The four months of the monsoon are considered sacred. But the month of _Śrāvan_, is considered the most sacred of them
all. Hindus observe special fasts and perform extra religious deeds to earn greater Pumya (merit). Usually the householders eat only once a day for the whole month. The sādhus usually observe Dāhānā-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:

Upavartasya pāpebhya yastu vāsā gunaiḥ saḥ,
Upavasaha sa vigneyaha sarvabhoga vivarjitaḥ

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 Nirjala. During Nirjala, 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 java, meditation, listening to kathā and singing kirtans, which strengthen the Ātmā.

Sarva bhoga vivarjitaḥ 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:

Langavanam Paramasukhadham
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.¹

(14) Cleaning and Spiritual Purity of Diet:

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

Agātam na pānvyam pānvyam cha payastathā.

(Sikhṣāpati 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.

Bhaktaye tatraḥ Kṛṣṇāyāṁ arpaṇaṁ vāryapi kwachit,
Na pṛyaṁ nāhva bhakṣyaṁ cha patrakandafalādyapi.

(Shikhṣāpati 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 I. 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)

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

- **Bright Half**
  - Shukla Paksham (Sudha Paksham)
  - Krishna Paksham (Vada Paksham)

- **Dark Half**

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

1. **The Five Ārīs:**
   - **Name** | **Meaning** | **Approx. times**
   - **Mangalā** | Auspicious awakening | 6.00 a.m.
   - **Shrungār** | After breakfast and decoration with garments & ornaments | 7.30 a.m.
   - **Rājbhog** | After offering grand lunch. Although Ārī is not performed, fruits are offered. | 11.30 a.m.
   - **Sandhyā** | Evening | 4.00 p.m.
   - **Shayan** | 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 Ārīs, in the Sabha 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 Śādhus' Ashram - Living area for the sādhus.
- A Sabha Mandap (Hall) - For holding Satsang Discourses.
- A Dharmashālā - Lodging facilities for pilgrims and staff members of the mandir.
- A Bhojashālā - 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 Sangitashālā - For studying music.
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 Swaminarayan Sampradaya during the year.

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

9. Jeth Vad 10 (May Jun.) — Shriji Mahārāj returned to His divine abode - Akshardham.
of Lord Krishna.


19. Aso Sud 10 (Sep. Oct.) — Dashera - Burning the effigy of Ravana, a demon vanquished by Lord Rama.


