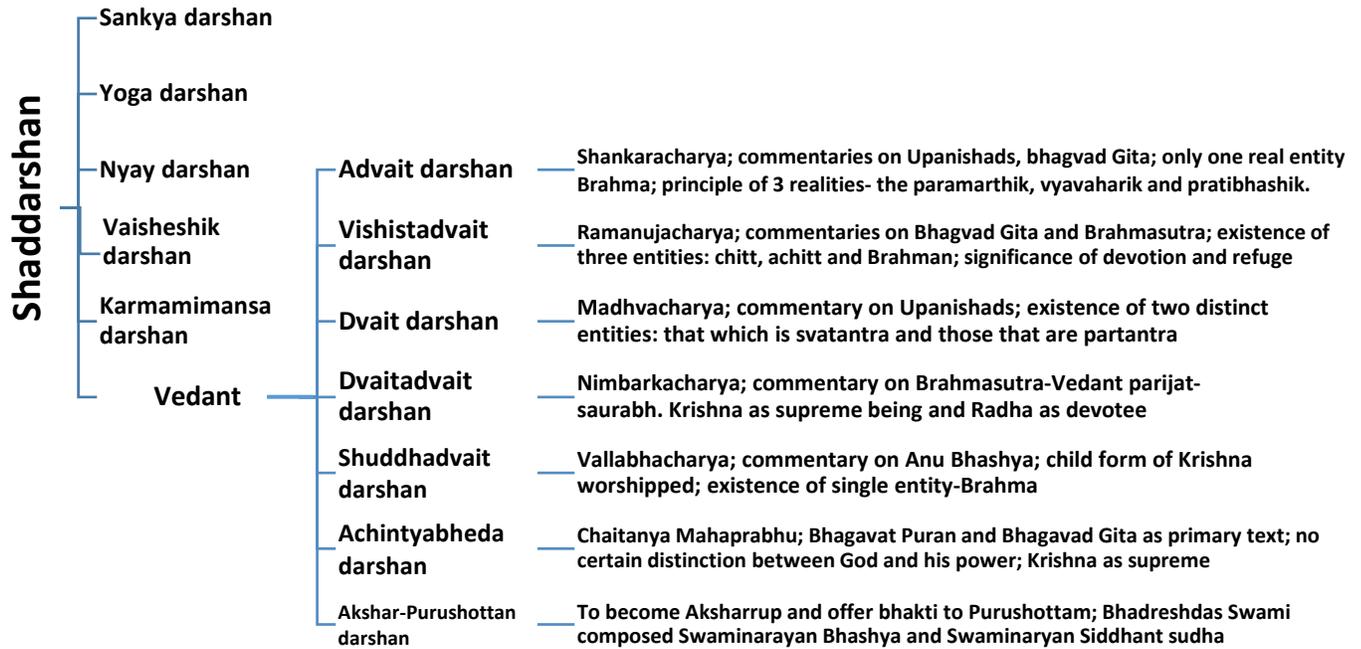


Satsang Pragna 1 Essay 1
An introduction to the philosophical status of
Akshar-Purushottam Darshan



India is a land of spirituality. It is a land where contemplation on the transcendent has perpetually flowed from Vedic time; a land where rishis are continuously absorbed in spiritual endeavors, and a land of realized sages and profound philosophical thinkers. This land has gifted the world with terms such as 'kshar'-'Akshar', 'Brahman'-'Parabrahman', 'atma'-'Paramatma' and 'Ishwar'-'Parameshwar'.

Darshan is the art of seeing-ordinary action. However, when a rishi sees, the simple act of seeing becomes much more meaningful where he contemplates on what is seen, reflects on it from different perspectives, investigates it, and discusses it. Over time, this contemplation resulted in the gradual emergence of various streams of philosophical thought within India. Within their respective times, the maharshis moulded these streams of thought into the form of sacred texts from which different darshans emerged.

Within India, there are six prominent Vedic darshans collectively known as the Shaddarshans. These six darshans are the (1) Sankhya Darshan, (2) Yoga Darshan, (3) Nyan Darshan, (4) Vaisheshik Darshan, (5) Karmamimansa Darshan and (6) Vedant Darshan.

Each of these six darshans originated at different times and their founders were also different. In order to better understand the Akshar-Purushottam Darshan, it is necessary to acquire a basic introduction of these six darshans.

(1) Sankhya Darshan-Kapil Muni is the founder of the Sankhya Darshan. He methodically compiled its principles in the form of sutras or aphorisms. From his text 'Sankhyasutra', a scholar Vignanbhikshu composed a commentary entitled the 'Sankhyapravachan Bhashya'. Even though, the 'Sankhyasutra' was the principle text of this darshan, the 'Sankhyakarikas', a text written by a scholar Ishwarkrishna became more popular. The principles of the Sankhya Darshan are propagated through the exposition and sub-commentaries written on the 'Sankhyakarikas'.

Terms such as 'prakruti' and 'purush' have been utilized within this darshan to refer to insentient and sentient entities, respectively. The Sankhya Darshan advocates that this world is created from the union of prakruti and purush.

(2) Yoga Darshan- Patanjali Rishi composed the sutras that encapsulate the principles of yoga and presented it in the form of darshan. Hence it is also called Patanjali Yoga Darshan. The Yogasutras is the principle text of this darshan. The ultimate objective of this darshan is to attain yoga. 'Yoga' is defined as the absolute concentration (nirodh) of the chitt, the inner faculty that enables one to reflect and contemplate. The darshan describes the eight steps to attain yoga which are known as ashtangyoga: yam, niyam, asan, pranayama, pratyahar, dharana, dhyana and samadhi.

(3) Nyay Darshan-Gautam Muni created the Nyansutras in which it defines 'nyay' as the examination of objects through valid means of knowledge (praman). By providing authentic reasoning and various means of knowledge, this darshan offers great contributions towards re-establishing and reinforcing eternal Vedic principles. These principles include, among others, the authenticity of the Vedas, the immortality of the atma, the existence of Pramatma, and the reality of the world.

(4) Vaisheshik Darshan-Kanad Muni wrote Vaisheshiksutras to explain this darshan, which believe in the existence of an independent entity named vishesh. The Nyay Darshan and Vaisheshik Darshan are viewed as twin darshans due to their similar beliefs. As a result, of their close resemblance, the teachings of both traditions have been collectively compiled and presented within the same texts for centuries.

(5) Karmamimansa Darshan-'Mimansa' is defined as deep thought or deliberation. Since it is necessary that a reflection on karmas (karmamimansa) precedes (is purva to) the reflection on Brahman (brahmamimansa), this darshan is also identified as Purvamimansa. This darshan primarily focuses on the methodical establishment of rites, such as yagnas, that have been advocated by the Vedas. By composing the karmasutras, Maharshi Jaimini sculpted a tradition of Vedic rituals into a systemic school of thought. Thereafter, a scholar named Shabar authored a commentary known as the Shabar Bhashya on this text. The texts of this darshan offer comprehensive explanations on numerous topics including the various types of various types of yagnas; the objects used within these yagnas; and the form of Indra, Varun, Surya, Agni, and other deities, whose favor is to be attained by these yagnas.

(6) Vedant Darshan-The Upanishads are known as Vedant and so the philosophy is the Vedant Darshan. The essence of the Upanishads is brahmavidya. For this reason, the Vedant Darshan is identified as the school of brahmavidya. In addition to the Upanishads, this brahmavidya is also explained within the Shrimad Bhagavad Gita. As a result, the Vedant Darshan also emphasizes on Gita. Maharshi Vyas compiled this brahmavidya in the form of Brahmasutras. The Brahmasutra is also often referred to as Brahmamimansa, because of its thorough investigation of the entity Brahman. Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita and Brahmasutra form the foundational scriptures of the Vedant Darshan. These three scriptures are collectively known as the Prashtantrayi.

Various branches of Vedant Darshan

Within India, a number of Darshanic traditions have emerged as branches of the Vedant Darshan. These traditions include the Advait Darshan, Vishishtadvait Darshan, Dwait Darshan, Dvaitadvait Darshan, Shuddhadvait Darshan and Achintyabhedabhed Darshan and The Akshar-Purushottam Darshan.

(1) Advait Darshan- Shankaracharya established the Advait Darshan in which he authored commentaries on the Upanishads, Bhagavad gita and Brahmasutra according to the principle of advait-non-dualism. He travelled throughout India and instituted four centers of learning (maths) - one in each of the four cardinal directions. The Advait Darshan accepts the existence of only one real ontological entity, Brahman. Brahman itself becomes bound by this illusionary maya and becomes liberated from it. It is believed that Brahman itself takes the form of the jivas and the world. In order to secure the Advait principle, the following three realities are conceived: the paramarthik (absolutely reality), vyavaharik (experiential reality) and pratibhashik (imaginative reality).

(2) Vishishtadvait Darshan- Ramanujacharya substantiated the doctrine of Vishishtadvait, or qualified non-dualism, by authoring commentaries on the Bhagavad Gita and the Brahmasutra. Later, a scholar named Rangaramanuj composed a commentary on the Upanishads based on Ramanujacharya's doctrine. The Vishishtadvait position advocates the existence of three ontological entities: chitt (sentient), achitt (insentient),

and Brahman. Brahman is forever qualified, or vishishta, by sentient and insentient creation. This doctrine is identified as 'Vishishadvait' as a result of this relationship. Ramanujacharya established his own position in his commentarial works. Within this darshan the significance of devotion (bhakti) and refuge (prapti) is emphasized, and Vaikunth is regarded as the highest abode.

(3) Dvait Darshan- Madhvacharya authored commentaries on the Upanishads and Brahmasutra. 'Dvait' means two. This darshan is identified as Dvait because it accepts the existence of two distinct real entities: that which is svatantra (independent) and those that are partantra (dependent). It believes Paramatma is independent, whereas all others-jiva prakruti, and the world-are dependent. Within it, bhakti is considered to be preeminent.

(4) Dvaitadvait Darshan- Also known as Bhedabhed Darshan, Nimbarkacharya authored commentary on the Brahmasutra entitled the Vedantparijat-saurabh. Within this darshan, Shri Krishna is worshipped as the Supreme Being and Radha is considered to be the principal devotee. The Dvaitadvait Darshan accepts the existence of the following three ontological entities: chitt, achitt and Brahman. By believing chitt and achitt to be distinct from Brahman, the position advocates a dualistic (dvait) point of view. Despite this, by understanding the chitt and achitt to not exist independently from Brahman, the position also supports a non-dualistic (advait) perspective. In this way, by being both dvait and also advait, this darshan is identified as Dvaitadvait. The Dvaitadvait Darshan recognizes bhakti as the principal means for attaining liberation.

(5) Shuddhadvait Darshan- Vallabhacharya authored a commentary on the Brahmasutra title the Anu Bhasya. Within this darshan, the child-form of Shri Krishna is primarily worshipped. There are 884 bethaks of this tradition throughout India. Similar to Shankaracharya's position, this darshan accepts the existence of a single ontological entity, Brahman. Yet, Brahman, by its own wish, becomes the jivas and the world. This is understood as Bhagwan's divine play. Even upon taking the form of the jivas and the world, Brahman continues to remain forever pure. The jivas and world are also understood as being pure, since they are forms of this pure Brahman. By this belief, the darshan is known as Shuddhadvait or pure non-dualism.

(6) Achintyabheda Darshan- Chaitanya Mahaprabhu established the Achintyabheda Darshan. Although, he did not author any commentaries, a scholar within his lineage named Baldev Vidyabhushan authored a commentary on the Brahmasutra. This darshanic tradition is known as Madhva Gaudiya, or Gaudiya, Sampraday. Within this tradition, Shri Krishna is identified as the Supreme Being and Radha is greatly venerated. The Bhagavat Puran and the Bhagavad Gita are considered to be primary texts for attaining devotion towards Shri Krishna. Paramatma is regarded as being powerful and understood to possess infinite powers. The darshan believes that it is unascertainable (achintya) to know whether there is a distinction (bhed) between Paramatma and his power or they are one (abhed). As a result of this position, this darshan is identified as the Achintyabheda Darshan.

(7) Akshar-Purushottam Darshan- The founder of the Akshar-Purushottam Darshan was neither a devotee nor an Acharya, but Parabrahman Purushottam Bhagwan Swaminarayan himself. He revealed and propagated the unique darshanic principle of becoming akshar and offering bhakti to Purushottam with dasbhav. Based on this principle, this darshan is identified as the Akshar-Purushottam Darshan. This darshan accepts the existence of the following five eternally distinct ontological entities: jiva, ishwar, maya, Aksharbrahma and Parabrahman. The teachings of Parabrahman Swaminarayan, the discourses conveyed by his first spiritual successor, Aksharbrahma Gunatitanand Swami and the teachings and biographical accounts of the Brahmswarup gurus within the Aksharbrahma lineage, are considered to be authoritative within this darshan.

Although Parabrahman Swaminarayan did not author a commentary on the Prasthantrayi, through the with and blessings of Brahmswarup Pramukh Swami Maharaj, Mahamahopadhyay Bhadreshdas Swami composed the Swaminarayan-Bhashya, a commentary on all three sacred texts of the Prasthantrayi, it has been authored according to Bhagwan Swaminarayan's teachings and the discourses of the Aksharbrahmaswarup gurus. By the blessings of Pragat Brahmswarup Mahant Swami Maharaj, Bhadreshdas Swami also authored a vad-text entitled the Swaminarayan-Siddhant-sudha. These texts substantiate Parabrahman Swaminarayan's Akshar-Purushottam Darshan from a scholarly perspective.

Satsang Pragna 1 Essay 2

Ghar Sabha-Lifeline for Understanding

- Issues that are in our control
 - Issues that are not in our control
 - 4 types of knowledge (understanding)
 - Sankhya
 - Atma
 - God
 - Karmasiddhanth
 - Conclusion explaining benefits of gharsabha
-

Life is a struggle. There is always multiplications and additions of issues and problems in life. Issues are less deleted or divided but are more multiplied and added. On a normal course of life the following are the issues that all householders face:

1. Fight, discordance and disagreement amongst family members.
2. Children issues: Bad influences, drug addictions, laziness in studies, failures in exams, marriage against parent's wishes, influence with bad company, peer pressure, arguments with parents, disrespectful to parents, insult to parents, quitting home, suicide, vices like gambling.
3. Financial Crisis: Losing job, bankruptcy in business, deception in business, decrease in household income and increase in expenses.
4. Life-death situations: Long stretch of illness of a family-member, financial burden because of illnesses, eventual family member death, excessive stress, illness and death of the main household member and as a result loss of income.
5. Natural or man-made calamity: Earthquake, Tsunami, drought, floods, war, terrorism or physical harm due to accidents, loss or death of a family member due to financial crisis.

There is an endless list of problems. Man is relentlessly and constantly trying, day and night, to get out of this problems and find solutions to them. However, if he finds solution to one problem, many others stand up. For the most part, he spends the rest his life finding and solving problems. Truly speaking, how many days of happiness and bliss would he have experienced in his life? If a person is asked for his honest introspection, he would realize that the real happiness is like a mirage that is seen from distant but is never experienced.

Such different issues can be divided into 2 categories. Hence, its solutions are also categorized into 2 categories:

Issues that are in our control....

There are certain issues that are in our control, meaning, if we wish, we can resolve those issues. If we follow the scriptural and legal laws, we will not face any issues. e.g.

- If a person does not form any addictions, there will not be any illness, there will not be any expenses, and ultimately there will not be any untimely death.
- If one controls diet, maintain a routine life style, maintains internal-external hygiene, keeps body healthy with necessary exercises, then one can keep away from many diseases.
- If one abstains from television and movies, especially if one keeps away the young children, then they would be protected from bad habits and bad influences.
- If the husband and wife follow the strict marital rules, help and cooperate each other, then family tantrums can be avoided, suicidal incidents can be avoided and serious illnesses can be avoided as well.

- If one wears helmet and wear seat belts, then one can be protected from serious accidents.
- If one abstains from gambling and betting, then one can avoid lot of destruction.
- If one follows government rules and policy, then one would never face any problems.

Hence, prevention is better than cure. Curing an illness is better than to take preventions so as to avoid having any illness. As a result of gambling, losing the kingdom, suffering from exile, going into war and killing thousands of lives and then getting back the lost kingdom was a great ordeal for Yudhishtira. What if he had not gambled? In short, living life in accordance with the scriptures and the country's law and regulations will not incur any problems.

Issues that are not in our control....

Some issues are beyond our control. We suffer without any faults from earthquakes, floods, drought, wars, terrorism, accidents, etc. In such circumstances also, we can be happy from inside, if we wear the shield of understanding. If we cannot change the situation or the atmosphere, then we can change our mental thought process. If we cannot change the atmosphere, then we have to adjust ourselves.

The boatman cannot change the direction of the wind but he has to change the sail according to the direction of the wind. We cannot stop the heat, so either we tolerate it or protect ourselves from it. We cannot stop the rain, so either we gracefully tolerate it or protect ourselves using an umbrella or a raincoat. If we cannot remove the thorns on the ground or if cannot frame the earth with leather, then the easiest solution is to protect ourselves from it by wearing shoes or slippers. In short, if we cannot change the external conditions, we have to change the internal conditions and try to be happy. This art is known as the art of understanding. To stay happy internally, one must have understanding to stay happy in any conditions, Shriji Maharaj and Gunatit gurus have preached four main types of understanding that one should have:

1. Understanding of Sankhya

Sankhya knowledge is the utmost necessary knowledge of life. It is the view of understanding the ultimate ideas of life. Explaining the importance and necessity of Sankhya knowledge, Gunatitanand Swami says: 'Learn to have Sankhya knowledge. Without learning the teachings of Sankhya, faults such as greed, lust, taste, attachment and ego, and the three miseries – due to adhyatma, adhibhut and adhidaiv – cannot be removed. Without Sankhya, *satsang* is said to be only half complete. Thus, to remain happy learn the principles of Sankhya. (Swamini Vato 1-2)

This understanding of Sankhya has different definitions. Let us try to understand some:

What is born is destined to die. Whether it be animal or human, whether he be a millionaire or competent, death is definite. When one understands this firmly, then only he is able to withstand friends and family deaths. Death cannot be disdained-with this understanding, one can have peace in heart. Death is not just only definite, but nothing is going to come with us when we die, is also definite. We have to leave everything behind. If one staunchly believes that, then when the wealth is lost or when the property is unevenly distribute between siblings then one would not have any frustration for not been fair or one would not think about earning wealth in any unlawful manner and hence many such issues would be averted.

2. Understanding of atma

- Atma is separate from the body, it does not age and is immortal, it does not born neither does it die, if one understands that firmly, then he would have pain one any family member dies.
- Atma does not become happy with any materialistic gain neither does it become sad if it does not, childhood, youth, old age, stoutness, thinness, birth and death are all aspects of the body; so they should never be thought of as belonging to the atma. On the other hand, being uncuttable, being unpierceable, not aging, being immortal, being the embodiment of gnan, being the embodiment of bliss, and being characterized by eternal existence are all aspects of the atma; they should in no way be considered to belong to the body. Instead, those attributes should be understood to belong to the atma. In explaining the importance and necessity of understanding of atma, Pramukh Swami says: 'If one is hit by a bullet, then he

dies, but when one is hit by speech form bullet, then it is more dangerous. It causes more pain. If one becomes atmarup-brahmrup, then there would be not effect of such bullets. Whatever anyone says, but it does not affect one. One has to create shield of brahmruppanu. If one creates this shield, then he would not be affected like Bhagatji Maharaj, Shastriji Maharaj and Yogiji Maharaj. They faced lot of pain and problems! They suffered many insults! People spoke against them and even beat them. In spite of all this, they did even complained. Why? Because they were atmarup. In a similar way, if we understand ourselves to be atma, Akshar, brahma, do introspection, internalize ourselves, then whatsoever blames or words we get, it will never affect us. Nothing will touch the atma.

3. Understanding of God

Just like the understanding of the body and atma, understanding of God also happens to be one of the most efficient tool for happiness. There are 2 reasons for that, one is God himself is the allusion of happiness, hence his understanding itself renders happiness and second, because of his immense happiness, other pains does not even touch us.

God is omnipresent, all-knower, the cause of the activities of all objects that possess a form. If one understands this, then one would not cause any inappropriate actions against agnaa or niyam to hurt anyone with his mind-action-words. As a result, pain which are caused by not following agnaa are averted. If one understands God to be all-doer of this world, then he would be stable in happiness or pain, respect or insult, luxury or hardship and success or failure. In relation to his Pramukh Swami says: "In any circumstances, God is the doer. No one improves or harms anyone. Whatever God does is for our own good sake. If one understands God to be the doer of good or bad, then one would experience peace, peace and peace. God resides in everyone, if one understands that then there would be no quarrels, pride, insults and everyone would live in harmony.

4. Understanding of Karmasiddhanth

Karmasiddhanth is an eternal principle like scientific principles. As you sow, so shall you reap" is a common phrase in life which concisely sums up the law of karma. Karma is the universal Hindu law of cause and effect which holds a person responsible for his or her actions and effects. According to one's good or bad actions, God rewards or punishes. The word 'karma' means human action or deed; we are constantly performing karmas whether physically, mentally, or emotionally. Nothing in this world happens accidentally or coincidentally; there is a reason behind everything though it may not be clear to us at that time. Good actions produce happiness and bad actions lead to suffering and misery in the present or next life. A person's past actions govern his present, and his present actions have an effect on his future. This means that every person is, to a certain degree, the creator of his own destiny. In this way, having an understanding of karmasiddhanth also keeps a man's mind stable in happiness and pain. In the past, in the lives of devotees like Harishchandra-Taramati, Nala-Damayanti, Narsinh Mehta, Tulsidas, Tukaram and even during Shreeji Maharaj's time, Dadakhachar, Parvatbhai, Devji bhakta from Nenpur, faced great problems; however, pain had not touched them. Even in the Gunatit tradition, the Gunatit gurus faced physical problems, unbearable insults, failures in their work; however, they experienced constant bliss and happiness. The reason for their happiness was their understanding.

Gangotri of understanding: Ghar Sabha

How do we gain this kind of understanding? How do we develop this kind of understanding? Is there any easy way to develop this kind of understanding?

Yes there is! Gangotri of understanding: Ghar sabha. Ghar sabha is a successful medium to gain this kind of understanding. Many examples of devotees can be quoted here. Doing daily ghar sabha for 30 minutes in which incidents of saints are read reinforces firm conviction of understanding. Whoever had started ghar sabha in obeying Pramukh Swami's command and has been doing it for years have experienced great mental

stability in times of hardships. This is a tried, tested and successful solution. In the same way, our present guru Mahant Swami also greatly insist on doing ghar sabha. So let us all follow his agnaa and reinforce our understanding and experience bliss and happiness in our personal and family life.

Satsang Pragna 1 Essay 3 Fasting-Science and Spirituality

Science

- What scientists say
- What Ayurveda says
- How other organisms survive through autophagy
- Mechanism of autophagy
- Scientific results on animals
- Scientific results on humans

Spirituality

- Life of rishis and sages
- Importance of fasting in other religions
- Types of fasts
- Importance of fasting in Hinduism
- 2 examples of fasting in Swaminarayan Sampradaya
- What is prayashchitta and various types of prayashchitta
- How is fast broken

American scientist and author, Benjamin Franklin, advised, “The best of all medicines is rest and fasting.” In a similar experience with Mark Twain, abstaining from food for one or two days do more for the average sick man than can the best medicines and the best doctors. Starvation was his cold and fever doctor for 15 years and had accomplished a cure in all instances.” Jack Goldstein, an American physician, suffering from ulcerative colitis only recovered after observing lengthy fasts of 30 to 40 days once a year for three years.¹

The ancient Ayurvedic texts greatly emphasize fasting at the onset of fever. In the *Ashtanghrudaya*, Vagbhatt Rishi lists the benefits of fasting: “disappearance of aggravated *doshas*, boosting of the digestive fire, weight reduction, increased vigor and *ojas* (vitality), digestion of *aam* (toxins), true hunger and thirst, and the desire to eat.” Ancient Ayurvedic texts such as the *Charak Samhita* (Sutrasthan 22/34–35) and *Ashtanghrudaya* (Sutrasthan 14/16–17) cite various fasting methods to treat diseases.

Fasting has been a survival mechanism for organisms such as insects, fish, lizards, bats, squirrels, rodents, bears, crocodiles and even shrubs and trees in which during times of drought and food scarcity, they enter into a mode of inactivity to conserve energy for survival. Some hibernate during winter, living on stored body fat. Many mammals also fast during illness or injury, such as dogs, cats, horses and cows. They survive through a process called autophagy. This word is derived from the Greek *auto* ‘self’ and *phagein* ‘to eat’. Thus, autophagy means ‘self-eating’ or ‘self-cannibalization’.

Why is autophagy important? Because it is the process by which the body cleans out damaged cells and toxins to help regenerate newer, healthier cells thus getting rid of aging cells. When autophagy goes awry, it leads to aging and many age-related diseases, including cancer. Autophagy is so beneficial that it helps in preventing diseases such as cancer, neurodegeneration, cardiomyopathy, diabetes, liver disease, autoimmune diseases and infections. Autophagy is activated during times of metabolic stress due to strenuous exercise and food restriction. Activating autophagy slows down the aging process, reduces inflammation and boosts the body’s natural ability to function. Autophagy is important for ‘cleaning up’ the body and defending against the negative effects of such stress. In a nutshell, this is the science of fasting at the cellular level, since autophagy is enhanced when a person fasts. Here, it is worth examining the results of experiments on autophagy through fasting in the quest to discover the secrets of health and longevity.

Scientists have used various fasting protocols on mice and rats which have prompted further research in humans. These include IF – intermittent fasting, TRF – time-restricted feeding, FMDs – fasting mimicking diets and PF – periodic fasting. IF is similar to the Hindu fasting *vrat* known as *dharna-parna* – food one day, fast the next day. Some of the important benefits of intermittent fasting in animals include:

1. Reduces levels of insulin and leptin (a hormone which controls satiety – the feeling of fullness after a meal).
2. Reduces abdominal fat and hence aids weight loss.
3. Reduces heart rate and blood pressure, hence protects against heart disease.
4. Increases resistance of the brain and heart to stress.
5. Reduces inflammation in the whole body.
6. Improves resistance to diabetes.
7. Protects against a group of conditions such as obesity, high blood pressure, insulin resistance, etc.
8. Improves learning and memory.
9. Delays age-related brain degeneration. (Alzheimer’s, Parkinson’s and Huntington’s diseases).
10. Gives favorable results in multiple sclerosis and cancer risk factors.

Some research on humans on CR – (caloric restriction) showed improved memory and IF showed increased levels of adiponectin – a hormone which helps to regulate body weight and fat, and also decreases insulin resistance. This induces health benefits and longevity. Scientists have so far performed trials on one meal a day, similarly to the Hindu fast of *ektana*. Their results reveal reduction of fasting glucose levels, and healthier levels of LDL and HDL cholesterol. Studies of centenarians have also shown high levels of adiponectin. These findings of science reflect the remarkable benefits to the body and brain of restricting food intake through fasts such as *ekadashi*, *ektana* and *dharna-parna*. Bearing this in mind, Hindus who faithfully observe these *vrats* may be protected from many diseases and may accrue longevity. As far as the science of fasting is concerned, the benefits can be summed up in the phrase: ‘Eat less, live healthily.’

The Spirituality of Fasting

In the ancient past, rishis and mystics lived only on air, water and mantra *japa* for life. Today, many live only on one meal a day, while others live only on fruit. A grand old Ayurvedic physician and expert on *darshan chikitsa* – facial diagnosis – claimed that many mystics in the Himalayas lived for up to 300 years, eating only one meal of cooked barley (*jav*) and *amla*. Fasting prevailed in ancient cultures and lands such as Egypt, Greece, China, Scandinavians, Indians of North America, and Aztecs and Incas of South America. It is also observed in other religions where in Jewish religion, Moses fasted for 120 days, in Christianity, Jesus fasted for 40 days and in Jainism, it is a form of *sadhana*. Muslims also observe the month-long fast of Ramadan.

Important *tithis* of fasting include *ekadashi*, *purnima*, the anniversaries of avatars and deities, such as Maha Shivaratri, Ramnavmi, Swaminarayan Jayanti, Krishna Janmashtami, Sharad Purnima, Guru Purnima and holy for months of Chaturmas. The type of fasts observed include *nirjala Ekadashi* (waterless fast, *ektana* (one cooked meal daily), *dharna-parna* (food one day, fast next day), and several forms of *chandrayan* – based on the waxing and waning of the moon. The sages of yore advocated fasting during these four monsoon months for health reasons as well, since cloudy skies, humidity and waterlogged countryside’s dampened the digestive fire. Additionally, plants and vegetables are often rendered inedible due to infestation by insects. The initial surface water run-off would sweep pollutants into rivers and water bodies. Hence, it was prudent to avoid drinking such water until healthy water arrived later, to prevent waterborne diseases. Not surprisingly, the highest number of festivals which are celebrated by fasting occur during Chaturmas.

Hindus observe such *vrats-upvases* as a form of self-denial to accrue *punya*, by pleasing one’s *ishtadeva*. The time saved from cooking and eating is spent in *bhakti* such as singing *bhajans*, mantra *japa*, *deva darshan* and so forth. Fasting induces clarity of mind which aids mantra chanting, *katha* and *smruti* (recalling Bhagwan’s divine *lila*). Most importantly, fasting purifies the *indriyas* and *antahkaran*, which in turn strengthen the *atma*.

Aspirants overcome *dehbhav* – body-consciousness – and develop control over the mind and the ten *indriyas*. The key *indriya* to be controlled, which affects other *indriyas*, is *rasna* – the sense of taste (Shikshapatri 189). In the Vachanamrut, Bhagwan Swaminarayan cites such control over the *indriyas* and mind in observing *ekadashi* (Gadhada II 8). He further says that the shastras consider this as the true *ekadashi* (Padma Puran, Uttarkand 38).

Fasting in the Swaminarayan Sampradaya

A few examples of fasting in the Swaminarayan Sampradaya are worth citing. At the age of eleven, Nilkanth Varni renounced Ayodhya for his Kalyan Yatra through Bharat. He reached Badrinath during Diwali (7 November 1792). The pujari offered him Annakut *prasad*. Nilkanth Varni then visited Mansarovar and returned to Badrinath on Akha Trij (13 May 1793), when the pujari offered him some food. Nilkanth Varni remarked, “This is my first morsel of food after you had offered me the Annakut *prasad*.” Hence, he had fasted for six months during this period. Even today, there is no human habitation in this region during winter, nor does any edible vegetation grow in the rocky, barren landscape.

The second remarkable fasting episode is of his second successor, Bhagatji Maharaj. With Aksharbrahma Gunatitanand Swami’s *agnaa*, he fasted for two days and then took only one meal on the third day for 3.5 years! That amounted to one meal every 72 hours. This *vrata* is now known as the ‘Bhagatji Vrat’. Yogiji Maharaj used to enlist 11 benefits for fasting. He used to fast about 8 to 10 times a month. During the late 50s and 60s, he routinely prescribed *nirjala upvas* to youths to develop them spiritually. Among them was Vinubhai (now, Param Pujya Mahant Swami Maharaj), to whom he often advocated two consecutive *nirjala* fasts. Once, in 1956, he even directed him to fast for five consecutive days! BAPS sadhus usually observe, on average, five to seven fasts a month.

Prayaschitta

Hindus fast for *Prayashchitta* or atonement which is an important spiritual discipline which lessens the burden of *vasana* resulting from any lapses in the observance of vows. It lightens the heart of the sincere aspirant. To subjugate lust, especially during one’s youth, Shriji Maharaj advocates *dharna-parna* and the various forms of *chandrayan* in the Satsangijivanam as *prayashchitta*. He once prescribed a month-long *chandrayan* to Premanand Swami for having halted momentarily in an alley in Surat to listen to a female singing in a nearby house.

Another vital discipline is ahimsa, especially by speech and action. For lapses in this vow, Shriji Maharaj advocated *prayashchitta* depending on the severity of the karmas as follows:

- Killing an insect, bug, etc. – one *mala*.
- Killing a mouse, rat, etc. – one *upvas*.
- Harsh speech, anger, mimicry, foul words – one *upvas*
- Injuring someone resulting in a swelling or laceration – four consecutive *upvases*.
- Breaking someone’s limb – *parak vrat* – a fast of 12 days (no food or water).

Such fasts of *prayashchitta* reflect Bhagwan Swaminarayan’s insistence on observing ahimsa in speech and physical karmas and the depth of discipline he expected from followers. With the resulting health and longevity, sages interweaved religious practice of fasting in festivals, *vrats* and bhakti rituals at regular intervals throughout the year for a man to shun in culinary temptations. Thus, people happily observe fasts as part of the festival celebrations. This serves two purposes – helps to control one’s gluttony, which benefits one’s physical health, and simultaneously divert the *indriyas*, mind and *antahkaran* towards the bhakti of Paramatma.

Breaking a Fast (Parna)

During the fast, the digestive system is weakened. It needs to be rekindled gradually. Consuming heavy foods and fluids is dangerous. These may cause indigestion, cramping, sour belching, acidity, vomiting, diarrhea or constipation. Hence, experts advise great caution when breaking a fast.

Take a glassful of lukewarm water (200 ml), add half a lemon, a pinch of rock salt (*sindhav*), roasted cumin powder or a few drops of fresh ginger juice. Sip a mouthful. Swish it inside the mouth 8 to 10 times. Then swallow gradually. In this manner, drink a whole glassful. If need to drink more, then have another half a glassful. Then, either take a walk or do some house chores. About an hour later repeat the above to drink about 1 to 2 glassfuls more. An hour later, have a light meal of just *mung dal khichdi* which is lighter to digest. If one wishes to sweeten the juice, use an artificial sweetener of stevia instead of sugar, honey, jaggery, and fresh or packaged fruit juices. These sugars do more harm than good. Those who do *dharna-parna* for a month or longer should be extremely cautious in taking sugars, dairy products and flour products during the period of the *vrata* since these may lead to hyperuricemia (and gout) which creates a host of problems. Hence, fasting only on juices, as many do during Shravan or even Chaturmas, is not advisable. Avoid yogurt for *parna* since it causes constipation. Ideally, on the day of *parna*, it is more desirable to flush wastes and dried stools from the gut rather than curtail stool motion.