

Contents

Blessings from Mahant Swami Maharaj	2
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Section 1: Questions & Answers 4

Bhagwan Swaminarayan	4
Pramukh Swami Maharaj	9
Mahant Swami Maharaj	11
Guru Parampara Basic Details	17
BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha	18
Scriptures	21
General Knowledge	26

Section 2: Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) 33

The Swaminarayan Sampradaya	33
Hindu Dharma	43
Contemporary Issues	59
Social Media and Mental Wellbeing	76

Blessings from Mahant Swami Maharaj



HH MAHANT SWAMI MAHARAJ
(Swami Keshavjivandas)

હોમી મીન
પ્રમુખસ્વામી

અમદાવાદ
૧૪.૧૧.૨૨
સોમવાર

પ્રતિ,

U.K. Europe ના બાળ-કિશોર યુવક અને
સંયુક્ત કાર્યકરો.

દોઢી બાળને મુખ પાઠ શ્રુતિ સ્વતો અને
શ્રુતિ રાત્રી થાય. આપ બધા પા. બાળાને રાત્રી
કરવા 'સાત્પુરુષની રીત' અભિવેશનમાં મુખ પાઠ કરવાના
છે. બધાને બા. રહે તે અવગણિત છે અને પા. શ્રુતિ
મુખ પાઠ કર્યો છે તે એકોર સંતોષી છે. આપ બધા
પા. અભિવેશનમાં કિલોહડી ભાગ લેશો, બધામાં
રહેવું. નબળા - મોઢા ભિચારો ન કરવા. નિયમિત
સમય કાઢી મુખ પાઠ કરવો. બાળા સાથે હો માટે પાદ
રહેશે. ખાતા - ખીતા જાતા દોળા કિલોહડી મુખ પાઠ
કરવો. દાઈમ દેજલ બધાવળું. કાંઈ અધર નથી.

આપ બધા મોટ રોજ પૂજામાં પ્રાર્થના
કરીશ. સરસ મુખ પાઠ થાય.

સમગ્ર કુટુંબગણનાના દુષ્કાળ હેતુથી
ગમની સ્વામિનારાયણ.

**Ahmedabad
14-11-2022
Monday**

**Swami Shriji
P. P. Pramukh Swami**

To,

All the Bal, Kishore, Yuvak and Sanyukta karyakars of UK and Europe.

Yogi Bapa liked mukhpath very much, he would be very pleased [upon those who did mukhpath]. To please Bapa, you all too will do the mukhpath in the ‘Satpurush ni Rit’ adhiveshan. May all remain in high spirits, my blessings are with you. I too have done mukhpath, [and as a result] experience peace within. All of you should take part in the adhiveshan with enthusiasm; may you all remain in high spirits. Do not harbour timid and negative thoughts. Allocate time and regularly learn your mukhpath. Bapa is with you, therefore you will remember [your mukhpath]. Whilst bathing, eating, during all activities, do your mukhpath. Make a timetable. It is not difficult at all.

I will pray daily in my puja for everyone. You will successfully learn the mukhpath.

Heartiest Jay Swaminarayan from Sadhu Keshavjivandas

SECTION 1

Questions & Answers

Q&A on Bhagwan Swaminarayan

Q1 Describe Bhagwān Swāminārāyan's childhood in short.

- He was born on 3 April 1781 CE (Chaitra sud 9, Samvat year 1837) in Chhapaiya, to father Dharmadev and mother Bhaktimata.
- He was named Ghanshyam by Markandeya Muni.
- By 7, he had mastered the scriptures.
- At 10, he defeated pandits in a debate in Kashi.
- At 11, he left home and travelled throughout India for 7 years, 1 month and 23 days (29 June 1792 to 21 August 1799) until he reached Loj at the age of 18. During this time, he was known as Nilkanth Varni.
- At 15, he mastered ashtānga yoga in 1 year.

Q2. What did Nilkanth Varni have with him when he left home?

- A begging bowl and tumbdi (gourd)
- A small book containing the essence of all the scriptures (gutko)
- A loin cloth
- Shāligrām
- A rosary
- Palāsh-dand

Q3. What five questions did Nilkanth Varni ask wherever he went?

What is the nature of jiva, ishwar, maya, Brahma and Parabrahma?

Q4. Where and when did Ramanand Swami give dikshā to Nilkanth Varni?

In Piplana at the age of 19 in October 1800. He was renamed 'Sahajanand Swami'.

Q5. Where and when did Ramanand Swami hand over the Guruship to Sahajanand Swami?

In Jetpur at the age of 20 in November 1801.

Q6. What two boons did Sahajanand Swami ask from Ramanand Swami when he was appointed as the Guru?

- If a devotee of yours is to suffer the sting of one scorpion, then in their place, let me suffer that sting in each pore of my body, but your devotee should not suffer.
- If a devotee of yours is forced to beg, then let me take their place, but your devotee should not suffer from lack of food, clothing or shelter.

Q7. What two important events happened in the village of Kalwani?

- Bhagwan Swaminarayan initiated 500 paramhansas.
- Muktanand Swami composed the ārti.

Q8. How old was Bhagwan Swaminarayan when he gave dikshā [initiation] to 500 paramhansas?

26 years old

Q9. What sinful and immoral customs did Bhagwan Swaminarayan aim to stop?

- Drowning of new-born baby girls [dudh-piti].
- Widows immolating themselves on the cremation pyre of their husbands [sati-prathā].
- The singing of vulgar songs during weddings.

Q10. Where did Bhagwan Swaminarayan build shikharbaddh mandirs?

- Ahmedabad (1822 CE)
- Bhuj (1823 CE)
- Vadtal (1824 CE)
- Dholera (1826 CE)
- Junagadh (1828 CE)
- Gadhada (1828 CE)

Q11. For how long did Bhagwan Swaminarayan stay in Gadhada?

25 years (1805 to 1830)

Q12. What were the six objectives behind Bhagwan Swaminarayan's emergence on the earth?

These six objectives were told to Gopalanand Swami by Bhagwan Swaminarayan in Kariyani. Nishkulanand Swami wrote them down as he heard them through a crack in the door.

- i. To propagate and spread our supreme upāsana [worship] and supreme gnān [wisdom] throughout the world with the principle of Bhakta-Bhagwanni upāsana – dual reverence of God along with his choicest devotee.
- ii. To preach to the devotees of the avatāras who had preceded us to worship the pragat manifest swarup and by so doing, to send them directly to Akshardham.
- iii. To liberate Bhaktidevi and Dharmadev from the tortures of the asuras and bless them with the bliss of his swarup.
- iv. To revive and spread the long forgotten Ekāntik Dharma that consists of dharma, gnān, vairāgya and bhakti with an understanding of God's glory.
- v. To give the fruits of austerities and bhakti [devotion] in the form of our darshan to those ascetics and yogis who have been worshipping God since eternity; to fulfil the wishes of those mumukshus [seekers] who have great affection for God; and also to shower them with love.
- vi. To remain pragat through a succession of Param Ekāntik Sadhus who forever continue to guide people in this brahmānd to attain ātyantik moksha [ultimate salvation] by reaching Akshardham, the highest abode. This path to moksha is to be kept available to the seekers for eternity in this brahmānd through those Param Ekāntik Sadhus.

Q13. What were Gunatitanand Swami's important achievements?

He spread the true knowledge of Bhagwan Swaminarayan's supremacy, by convincing countless people that Shriji Maharaj was Parabrahma

Purushottam Narayan, by establishing the true upāsana of Akshar-Purushottam. He taught the way to become a staunch satsangi and helped many attain the highest spiritual state, 'brāhmisthiti'. Through his talks (also known as Swamini Vato), he transformed many people's lives for their betterment and constantly travelled to spread the principles of Satsang.

Q14. What were Bhagatji Maharaj's important achievements?

In addition to propagating the glory of Bhagwan Swaminarayan as Parabrahma, he spread the knowledge that Gunatitanand Swami was Aksharbrahma. He was the ideal for following āgnā and keeping divyabhāv; he was an ideal for householders, an excellent preacher, relentless in performing sevā and inspired many sadhus and satsangis.

Q15. What were Shastriji Maharaj's important achievements?

In 1907, he established BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha. He propagated the Vedic upasana of Akshar-Purushottam. Despite the numerous challenges, he installed the murtis of Bhagwan Swaminarayan as Parabrahma and Gunatitanand Swami as Aksharbrahma in the central shrines of five shikharbaddh mandirs (Bochasan, Sarangpur, Gondal, Atladra and Gadhada). Before he passed away in 1951, he identified Yogiji Maharaj as his spiritual successor and appointed Pramukh Swami Maharaj as the President (Pramukh) of BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha.

Q16. What were Yogiji Maharaj's important achievements?

He continued the work of Shastriji Maharaj and built two shikharbaddh mandirs (Bhadra and Ahmedabad). His selfless and unconditional love captured the hearts of youths. He initiated over 100 educated youths as sadhus including 51 youths in 1961. Yogiji Maharaj travelled outside India to East Africa and England, establishing mandals overseas and opening mandirs in East Africa and in the UK. He initiated weekly Sunday sabhas

at BAPS mandirs and centres, and also encouraged Bal and Yuva Satsang activities. Before he passed away in 1971, he appointed Pramukh Swami Maharaj as his spiritual successor.

- He taught the motto of samp, suhradbhāv and ektā.
- His life messages: ‘Bhagwan bhaji levā’ – ‘We should worship God,’ and ‘Bhagwan saḥunu bhalu karo’ – ‘God, do good to all.’

Q&A on Pramukh Swami Maharaj

Q1. In short, list the noble works of Pramukh Swami Maharaj.

- He travelled to 52 countries, visited more than 20,000 villages and cities, sanctified over 250,000 houses and wrote over 750,000 letters.
- He consecrated 2 Akshardham mahamandirs and 37 shikharbaddh mandirs amongst a total of 1,231 mandirs all over the world from 1971 to 2016.
- He strengthened the moral and spiritual values of countless people.
- He initiated over 1,000 sadhus.
- He organised major festivals around the world and spread the glory of Hindu Culture.
- By creating ‘Swaminarayan Akshardham’ in Gandhinagar and New Delhi, he has given international recognition to the glorious and rich Hindu Culture.
- He has carefully nurtured thousands of children, teenagers and youths with educational, cultural, moral and spiritual values. Through this, he developed a new generation rich in character and brightly prosperous, which is bringing new life and direction to millions internationally.
- He was awarded five Guinness World Records and selflessly served with the motto: ‘In the joy of others, lies our own.’

Q2. Where did Pramukh Swami Maharaj create shikharbaddh mandirs?

- | | |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. Sankari (1971) | 26. Bhadra (2010) |
| 2. Mumbai (1983) | 27. Limbdi (2010) |
| 3. Mahesana (1994) | 28. Godhra (2011) |
| 4. London (1995) | 29. Bodeli (2011) |
| 5. Surendranagar (1996) | 30. Robbinsville (2012) |
| 7. Surat (1996) | 31. Los Angeles (2012) |
| 8. Navsari (1997) | 32. Selvas (2013) |
| 9. Nadiad (1998) | 33. Nagpur (2013) |
| 10. Rajkot (1998) | 34. Himmatnagar (2013) |
| 11. Mahelav (1999) | 35. Kolkata (2014) |
| 12. Nairobi (1999) | 36. Jamnagar (2014) |
| 13. Tithal (1999) | 37. Mahuva (2014) |
| 14. Anand (2000) | 38. Dhari (2015) |
| 15. Sankari (2001) | |
| 16. Dholka (2001) | |
| 17. Bharuch (2001) | |
| 18. Delhi (2003) | |
| 19. Houston (2004) | |
| 20. Chicago (2004) | |
| 21. Jaipur (2005) | |
| 22. Junagadh (2006) | |
| 23. Bhavnagar (2006) | |
| 24. Toronto (2007) | |
| 25. Atlanta (2007) | |

Q3. Where and when did Shantilal receive pārshadi dikshā?

In Ahmedabad on 22 November 1939 CE (Kartik sud 11, VS 1996).

Q4. Where, when and at what age was Pramukh Swami Maharaj appointed as President of BAPS?

In Ambli Vali Pol (Ahmedabad) on 21 May 1950 CE at the age of 28.

Q5. From when was Narayanswarupdas known by the name of ‘Pramukh Swami’?

When Shastriji Maharaj made him the President of BAPS Sanstha on 21 May 1950.

Q6. When did Pramukh Swami Maharaj become Guru?

23 January 1971 (when Yogiji Maharaj passed away to Akshardham).

Q&A on Mahant Swami Maharaj

Q1. Where and when was Mahant Swami Maharaj first blessed by Shastriji Maharaj?

1934 in Jabalpur.

Q2. Which qualities of Yogiji Maharaj touched Vinubhai during the 1951 Anand Vicharan?

Yogiji Maharaj’s saintliness, humility and ability to forgive.

Q3. When and where did Vinubhai first have darshan of Pramukh Swami Maharaj?

Between 11 May 1951 and 14 May 1951 in Sarangpur.

Q4. When and where did Vinubhai first converse with Pramukh Swami Maharaj?

15 May 1951 in Gadhada.

Q5. When and where did Vinubhai receive pārshadi dikshā. What was he named?

- February 1957 in Gondal, where Yogiji Maharaj named him Vinu Bhagat.
- He also received pārshadi dikshā again on 3 July 1960 in Mumbai, when the nine yogeshwars were given dikshā.

Q6. For how many years did Vinu Bhagat remain a parshad?

Four years from 1957 to 1961. During this time, he remained in Yogiji Maharaj's seva, including vicharan abroad to East and Central Africa. He received bhāgvati dikshā on 11 May 1961 during the Kalash Mahotsav of Gadhada Mandir.

Q7. Why is he called 'Mahant Swami'?

In 1961, Yogiji Maharaj placed the 51 newly initiated sadhus in Akshar Bhuvan (Dadar, Mumbai) to study. He appointed Sadhu Keshavjivandas as the mahant (head) of all the sadhus there. Hence, he was affectionately addressed as 'Mahant Swami'.

Q8. Give 2 examples where Yogiji Maharaj extolled the glory of Mahant Swami Maharaj.

- Pramukh Swami is the greatest among all. He is the head of all. By obeying his instructions you will progress. Also, follow whatever Mahant Swami says. He will resolve your distress.
- If you worship God and abide by the instructions of Pramukh Swami and Mahant Swami, you will become like gold.
- If you wish to go to Akshardham, you will require a stamp [visa]. When Pramukh Swami and Mahant Swami give you the stamp, then nothing up to Prakruti Purush can obstruct you.
- Our Mahant Swami's spiritual state is like that of Bhagatji Maharaj. He will not take to mind whether anyone respects him or insults him.
- Whenever a sadhu is worried or distressed, he should reveal it to Mahant Swami. He will resolve your distress. The happiness of Akshardham lies here.
- By [spiritually] associating with Pujya Narayan Swami [Pramukh Swami] and Pujya Mahant Shri Keshavjivandasji, one has associated with [Shriji] Maharaj.

Q9. Give 2 examples where Pramukh Swami Maharaj extolled the glory of Mahant Swami Maharaj.

- Darshan of Param Pujya Mahant Swami fills one with profound tranquillity. Everyone is captivated by his saintliness and humility; he has always given me his fullest support. (Mumbai, 1968)
- [Manibhai Patel] has gifted us a great gem. That great gem is Mahant Swami! That is the greatest of all gifts. Mahant Swami is such that his mere darshan bestows peace. He has been blessed immensely by Yogiji Maharaj. (Atladra, 1966)

Q10. When did Mahant Swami Maharaj become Guru of BAPS?

13 August 2016, after the passing of his Guru Pramukh Swami Maharaj.

Q11. After becoming Guru, what international regions/areas has Mahant Swami Maharaj done vicharan in?

- East Africa and South Africa (2017)
- UK and Europe (2017)
- North America (2017)
- Asia Pacific Region (2018)
- UAE (2019)
- East Africa and South Africa (2019)
- UK (2023)
- North America (2023)

Q12. Which base nature does Mahant Swami Maharaj have the greatest aversion towards?

Ego. Maharaj has explained the essence that if one cultivates an egoless existence, all other virtues will follow.

Q13. Which endeavour does Mahant Swami Maharaj consider necessary for there to be personal growth in Satsang?

Vartan (putting satsang principles into practice).

Q14. What are Mahant Swami Maharaj's preferred topics of discourse?

The topics of divyabhāv, suhradbhāv/samp and avoiding abhāv-avgun.

Q15. What thought does Mahant Swami Maharaj enjoy reflecting upon and why?

Rajipo. In Vachanamrut Gadhada II 28, Bhagwan Swaminarayan says that the essence of all the scriptures is to do that which pleases Bhagwan. This principle is all encompassing.

Q16. What does Mahant Swami Maharaj enjoy engaging his mind in?

Satsang reading. As Mahant Swami Maharaj is our ideal and role model, this reveals that as karyakars, we too should engross ourselves in satsang reading.

Q17. Name seven important gifts given to us by Mahant Swami Maharaj?

1. Diksha Mantra (also known as Sadhana or Siddhant mantra)
2. Ashray Mantra
3. Swaminarayan Mahapuja Vidhi
4. Swaminarayan Arti
5. Sahajanand Namavali
6. Satsang Diksha shastra
7. Akshar-Purushottam Vadhamana in the form of the murti of Aksharbrahma Gunatitanand Swami accompanying the murti of Bhagwan Swaminarayan (Harikrishna Maharaj).

Q18. Where has Mahant Swami Maharaj opened shikharbaddh mandirs?

1. Pune (2017)
2. Dhule (2018)
3. Navsari (2020)
4. Nashik (2022)
5. Akshardham Mahamandir in Robbinsville (2023)
6. Nadiad (2023)
7. Abu Dhabi (planned for 2024)

Lifespan (B = Birth A = Antardhan)	Birthplace/ Antardhan	Father's Name	Mother's Name	Childhood Name	Bhagvati Dikshā Info
49 years B: 3 April 1781 CE B: Chaitra sud 9, 1837 AS A: 1 June 1830 CE A: Jeth sud 10, 1886 AS	Parabrahma Bhagwan Swaminarayan	Dharmadev	Bhaktimata	Ghanshyam	Tithi: Kartik sud 11, 1857 AS Date: 28 October 1800 CE Place: Piplana Dikshā given by: Ramanand Swami Dikshā names: Sahajanand Swami and Narayan Muni
	Alksharbrahma Gunattanand Swami	Bholanath	Sakarba	Muji Bhakta	Tithi: Poshi Poonam, 1866 VS Date: 20 January 1810 CE Place: Dabhan Dikshā given by: Bhagwan Swaminarayan Dikshā name: Gunattanand Swami
	Bhagatiji Maharaj	Govindbhai	Maluba	Pragji Bhakta	N/A
86 years B: 31 January 1865 CE B: Maha sud 5, 1921 VS A: 7 November 1897 CE A: Kartik sud 13, 1954 VS	Shastriji Maharaj	Mahelav	Hetba	Dungar Bhakta	Tithi: Kartik vad 5, 1939 VS Date: 29 November 1882 CE Place: Vadtal Dikshā given by: Acharya Shri Viharilalji Maharaj Dikshā name: Yagnapurushdas Swami
	Yogiji Maharaj	Dhari	Puribai	Jhinabhai	Tithi: Chaitra sud 13, 1967 VS Date: 11 April 1911 CE Place: Vadtal Dikshā given by: Acharya Shri Shripatiprasadji Maharaj Dikshā name: Jnanjivandas Swami
	Pramukh Swami Maharaj	Mumbai	Devchandbhai	Shantilal	Tithi: Posh sud 1, 1996 VS Date: 10 January 1940 CE Place: Gondal Dikshā given by: Shastriji Maharaj Dikshā name: Narayanswarupdas Swami
94 years B: 7 December 1921 CE B: Magshar sud 8, 1978 VS A: 13 August 2016 CE A: Shravan sud 10, 2072 VS	Mahant Swami Maharaj	Jabalpur	Dahiben	Vinubhai	Tithi: Vaishakh vad 12, 2017 VS Date: 11 May 1961 CE Place: Gadhada Dikshā given by: Yogiji Maharaj Dikshā name: Keshavnivandas Swami

Q&A on BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha

Q1. Who founded 'Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar-Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha' (BAPS) and why?

- Brahmaswarup Shastriji Maharaj founded the BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha in 1907 and built five magnificent shikharbaddh mandirs – Bochasan (1907), Sarangpur (1916), Gondal (1934), Atladra (1945), Gadhada (1951) – in which he consecrated the sacred image of Akshar along with Purushottam. He suffered countless hardships to propagate Bhagwan Swaminarayan's true principle that Akshar – the highest devotee – is Gunatitanand Swami, and Purushottam or Parabrahma Narayan is Bhagwan Swaminarayan.
- He revered them as Swami and Narayan and fulfilled Bhagwan Swaminarayan's utmost desire. He initiated more than 50 sadhus and gifted us Pramukh Swami Maharaj as President of the Sanstha.
- In Vachanamrut Vadtal 5, Bhagwan Swaminarayan says, "If one worships God along with his highest devotee, then one will attain God in this very birth alone rather than after a hundred births." To fulfil this wish of Bhagwan Swaminarayan, Shastriji Maharaj established the BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha.
- In Vachanamrut Gadhada I 71, Bhagwan Swaminarayan says, "When God manifests for the purpose of granting liberation to the jivas, he is always accompanied by his Akshardham, his attendants – who are formed of chaitanya – and all of his divine powers; but they are not perceived by others... Therefore, a devotee of God should realize that the form of God along with his Akshardham is present on this earth, and one should also explain this fact to others."
- In Vachanamrut Loya 7, Bhagwan Swaminarayan says: "Only one who has become brahmarup has the right to worship Purushottam."

- In the Vedras, Bhagwan Swaminarayan says: “One who believes one’s jiva to be one with Aksharbrahma and serves Purushottam is a true devotee.”
- To stay with and serve Bhagwān Purushottam, it is essential to become aksharrup (Vachanamrut Loya 7). To become aksharrup, you need to associate with the Aksharbrahma Satpurush (Vachanamrut Gadhada II 31). Bhagwan Swaminarayan dwells on this earth through the Aksharbrahma Satpurush.
- The mahima of the Aksharbrahmaswarup Gunatit Satpurush has been described in many Vachanamruts:

◇ Vadtal 3	◇ Sarangpur 10
◇ Vadtal 4	◇ Gadhada I 27
◇ Vadtal 5	◇ Gadhada I 54
◇ Vadtal 10	◇ Gadhada III 26
◇ Vadtal 11	◇ Gadhada III 27
◇ Vadtal 14	
◇ Vadtal 19	

Q2. What is the role of sadhus in society?

Sadhus strengthen society by offering solutions for challenges and encourage spiritual, educational and cultural progress. Positive ideas such as sevā, bhakti, purity, etc. are instilled through which people find peace and happiness. They endeavour to keep society intact by purifying and freeing individuals from addictions, vices and bad habits. They take one to greater spiritual heights. They help consolidate faith in God and love for all.

Q3. Name the festivals held by BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha on a grand scale in India?

- 1981 – Bhagwan Swaminarayan Bicentennial Celebrations (Ahmedabad)
- 1985 – Aksharbrahma Gunatitanand Swami Bicentennial Celebrations (Ahmedabad)
- 1989 – International Bal Mahotsav (Vallabh Vidyanagar)
- 1990 – International Yuva Mahotsav (Vallabh Vidyanagar)
- 1992 – Brahmaswarup Yogiji Maharaj Centenary Celebrations and opening of BAPS Swaminarayan Akshardham (Gandhinagar)
- 1995 – Amrut Mahotsav – 75th Birthday Celebrations of Pramukh Swami Maharaj (Mumbai)
- 2004 – 50th Anniversary Celebrations of BAPS children’s activities (Ahmedabad)
- 2005 – Opening of BAPS Swaminarayan Akshardham (New Delhi)
- 2007 – BAPS Shatabdi Mahotsav (Ahmedabad)
- 2013 – 60th Anniversary Celebrations of BAPS youth activities (Ahmedabad)
- 2015 – 150th Birthday Celebrations of Brahmaswarup Shastriji Maharaj (Atladra)
- 2018 – 150th Anniversary Celebrations of Akshar Deri (Gondal)
- 2020 – Vachanamrut Bicentennial Celebrations (Gadhada)
- 2022 – Pramukh Swami Maharaj Centenary Celebrations (Ahmedabad)

Q4. List the main festivals organised by BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha outside India.

- 1985 – Cultural Festival of India in London, UK (including the ‘Suvarna Tula Mahotsav’ of Pramukh Swami Maharaj on 20 July 1985).
- 1991 – Cultural Festival of India in Edison, NJ, USA (including the ‘Platinum Tula Mahotsav’ of Pramukh Swami Maharaj on 20 July 1991).

Q&A on Shastras (scriptures)

Q1. What are the important scriptures of the Swaminarayan Sampradaya?

- Vachanamrut
- Swamini Vato
- Shikshapatri
- Harililamrut
- Bhaktachintamani
- Harililakalpataru
- Satsangijivan
- Haricharitrाम्रुतसगर
- Satsang Diksha
- Jivan Charitras of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and the Guru Parampara

Q2. Give a brief description of the Vachanamrut.

A historical collection of 273 spiritual discourses delivered between 1819 and 1829 by Bhagwan Swaminarayan in the Gujarati language.

It is a catechism, filled with infallible logic, engaging metaphors and analogies, and divine revelations that provide philosophical and practical answers to the mysteries and questions of life. It is considered to be the essence of all the scriptures and was authenticated by Bhagwan Swaminarayan himself.

Q3. Which four paramhansas compiled the Vachanamrut?

- Sadguru Gopalanand Swami
- Sadguru Muktanand Swami
- Sadguru Nityanand Swami
- Sadguru Shukanand Swami

Q4. In which villages have the Vachanamruts been spoken? Give their quantity (in chapters).

Gadhada Section I	78
Sarangpur Section	18
Kariyani Section	12
Loya Section	18
Panchala Section	7
Gadhada Section II	67
Vadtal Section	20
Ahmedabad Section	3
Gadhada Section III	39
Additional (Ahmedabad II)	11
Total	273

Q5. Give a brief description of the Swamini Vato.

Swamini Vato is a collection of the discourses given by Aksharbrahma Gunatitanand Swami. Very often Gunatitanand Swami use to say, “These are the revelations of Akshardham. They will grant you liberation from the cycles of births and deaths. They are capable of resolving all our

doubts and misgivings. These are narrations of divine episodes related to Bhagwan Purushottam. They will eradicate the darkness of ignorance.”

These divine talks make our understanding of the Vachanamrut clear. In a way, Swamini Vato is a comprehensive commentary on the Vachanamrut.

Gunatitanand Swami has mainly dwelt upon the glory and divinity of Bhagwan Swaminarayan as the ultimate Godhead.

These talks were first published by Sadguru Balmukund Swami of Junagadh in five chapters. Krishnaji Ada later had them printed in seven chapters.

Gunatitanand Swami used to say that these talks are “as sharp as the English weapons. Even a little touch would separate the soul from maya.”

Q6. Give a brief description of the Shikshapatri.

The Shikshapatri is a sacred book of ethics. Its 212 spiritually potent verses in Sanskrit carry the essence of Hindu moral codes for everyday life, such as the basics of hygiene, how to meditate, whom to honour, whose company to avoid, the highest ideals of devotion, etc.

Q7. When and where was the Shikshapatri completed?

The Shikshapatri was completed in Vadtal on 12 February 1826 CE (Vasant Panchmi, VS 1882).

Q8. What is the most important shloka in the Shikshapatri?

Shloka 116:

Nijātmānam brahmarupam deha-traya vilakshanam |

Vibhāvya tena kartavyā bhakti(hi) Krishnasya sarvadā ||

Q9. Give a brief description of the Harililamrut.

The Harililamrut is a great landmark in Gujarati literature depicting the life and supremacy of Bhagwan Swaminarayan, and information on various sadhus and devotees. This scripture was written by the great Gujarati poet Dalpatram under the authorship of Acharya Shri Viharilalji Maharaj.

One feels like reading and listening to the verses of this scripture because it possesses all the qualities of a great literary work – the use of different metres, heart-penetrating preaching and sweet lyricism.

Q10. Give a brief description of the Bhaktachintamani.

Through the blessings of Bhagwan Swaminarayan, the great paramhansa Nishkulanand Swami composed this scripture. The divine lilā and work of Bhagwan Swaminarayan are covered in 164 chapters. Whenever Shastriji Maharaj fell ill, he would have this scripture recited to him.

Q11. Give a brief description of the Harililakalpataru.

Through the blessings and will of Aksharbrahma Gunatitanand Swami, and at the behest of Acharya Raghuvirji Maharaj, Achintyanand Brahmachari composed this Sanskrit text in which Bhagwan Swaminarayan's divine lilā is vividly described. It is an important scripture of our Sampradaya because Bhagwan Swaminarayan is described as Parabrahma and Gunatitanand Swami is described as Akshar. This text contains 33,000 Sanskrit shlokas.

Q12. Give a brief description of the Satsangijivan.

Satsangijivan was written in Sanskrit by Shatanand Muni.

There are five chapters depicting the divine lilā of Bhagwan Swaminarayan. The scripture also contains a brief history of our Uddhav Sampradaya.

Shatanand Muni has beautifully explained the concepts of dharma, gnān, vairāgya and bhakti.

Q13. Give a brief description of the Satsang Diksha.

Written by Pragat Brahmaswarup Mahant Swami Maharaj himself in Gujarati, Satsang Diksha is a concise text which forms a part of the voluminous Akshar-Purushottam Samhita. The Gujarati prose has been rendered into 315 Sanskrit verses by Mahamahopadhyay Bhadreshdas Swami.

In Satsang Diksha – based on the teachings of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and the Gunatit gurus – Mahant Swami Maharaj concisely describes upasana (the philosophical principles to be understood) and agna (the daily personal practices of devotion) to be undertaken by all devotees.

This text represents a special message directly from Mahant Swami Maharaj to all BAPS devotees, clearly revealing the path everyone must follow to attain Ekāntik Dharma and experience the eternal bliss of God, through the association of the Gunatit Satpurush.

Q14. When and where was the Satsang Diksha scripture written?

Mahant Swami Maharaj wrote this scripture in 64 days, from 30 January 2020 (Vasant Panchmi) in Navsari to 2 April 2020 (Swaminarayan Jayanti) in Ahmedabad.

On the holy day of Guru Purnima (5 July 2020) in Nenpur, Mahant Swami Maharaj performed the puja rituals of the Satsang Diksha scripture and dedicated it with profound devotion at the lotus feet of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and the Guru Parampara.

Q15. How many Vedas are there? Name them.

Four Vedas: Rig Veda, Yajur Veda, Sama Veda and Atharva Veda.

Q16. Give the names of some of our important ancient scriptures.

4 Vedas, 108 Upanishads, 18 Puranas including the Shrimad Bhagvat, Itihas granthas such as the Ramayan and Mahabharat (which incorporates the Shrimad Bhagavad Gita).

Q&A on General Knowledge

Q1. What are the two means (wings) to attain Akshardham?

Āgnā and Upāsānā

Q2. What is the ultimate aim of human life?

To become brahmarup and offer devotion to Parabrahma Purushottam Bhagwan Swaminarayan. One can attain moksha – redemption – and attain Akshardham by obeying and pleasing the pragat Satpurush, Guruhari Mahant Swami Maharaj.

Q3. What is the meaning of Akshar-Purushottam?

Akshar = Gunatitanand Swami; Purushottam = Bhagwan Swaminarayan.

We should offer upasana and devotion to Purna Purushottam Bhagwan Swaminarayan by becoming pure like Gunatitanand Swami.

Q4. What three instincts cause downfall in Satsang?

- i. Hath – Obstinacy
- ii. Mān – Ego
- iii. Irshā – Envy

Q5. What three qualities help one to progress in Satsang?

- i. Shraddhā – Perseverance or faith
- ii. Khap – Enthusiasm or yearning
- iii. Samāgam – Association of the great Sadhu

Q6. What are the three qualities of a true devotee according to Vachanamrut Gadhada II 61?

- i. Niyam – Moral habit or rule
- ii. Nishchay – Conviction of the form of God
- iii. Paksha – To be loyal and cultivate samp

Q7. What are the four principles of Ekāntik Dharma?

- i. Dharma – Righteousness
- ii. Gnān – Knowledge
- iii. Vairāgya – Detachment
- iv. Bhakti – Devotion

Q8. What four types of people does Bhagwan Swaminarayan dislike according to Vachanamrut Gadhada I 76?

- i. Krodhi – Angry
- ii. Irshāvālo – Jealous
- iii. Kapati – Deceitful
- iv. Māni – Egotistical

Q9. What are the four types of Motā Purush as described by Bhagwan Swaminarayan in Vachanamrut Vadtal 3?

- i. Divā jevā – Small flame
- ii. Mashāl jevā – Torch flame
- iii. Vijali jevā – Lightning
- iv. Vadvānal agni jevā – Underwater volcanic geothermal fire

Q10. What are the five eternal entities according to Vachanamrut Gadhada I 7?

- i. Jiva – Soul
- ii. Ishwar – Devtas
- iii. Maya – The power of God responsible for creating attachment towards the body and its relations
- iv. Brahma – Akshar; Aksharbrahma
- v. Parabrahma – Supreme God

Q11. What are the five vishays?

- i. Shabda – Sound
- ii. Sparsh – Touch
- iii. Rup – Sight
- iv. Ras – Taste
- v. Gandh – Smell

Q12. What are the five gnān indriyas [cognitive organs]?

- i. Kān – Ears (corresponding vishay is Shabda – Sound)
- ii. Sparsh – Skin (corresponding vishay is Sparsh – Touch)
- iii. Ānkh – Eyes (corresponding vishay is Rup – Sight)
- iv. Jibh – Tongue (corresponding vishay is Ras – Taste)
- v. Nāk – Nose (corresponding vishay is Gandh – Smell)

Q13. What five vartmāns are to be observed by all Swaminarayan devotees?

- i. No alcohol, intoxicants or addictive substances
- ii. No meat or non-vegetarian items
- iii. No theft or gambling
- iv. No adultery or illicit relations
- v. Never transgress dharma, and never prompt others to do the same; sincerely fulfilling one's duties

Q14. What five vartmāns are to be observed by all Swaminarayan sadhus?

- i. Nishkām – Without passion; non-lust; celibacy
- ii. Nirlobh – Freedom from covetousness; non-greed
- iii. Nissneh – Non-attachment
- iv. Nisswād – Without taste; tastelessness
- v. Nirmān – Freedom from ego; humility

Q15. What five ārtis are performed daily in our shikharbaddh mandirs?

- i. Mangalā ārti
- ii. Shangār ārti
- iii. Rājbhog ārti
- iv. Sandhyā ārti
- v. Shayan ārti

Q16. Which are the 11 niyams to be observed by all Swaminarayan devotees?

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1. Hinsā na karani jantuki | Never harm any living beings |
| 2. Paratriyā sangako tyāg | Never commit adultery |
| 3. Mānsa na khāvat madyaku | Never eat meat |
| 4. Pivat nahi badabhāgya | Never consume alcohol or intoxicants |
| 5. Vidhvāku sparshat nahi | Never associate inappropriately with widows |
| 6. Karat na ātmaghāt | Never commit suicide |
| 7. Chori na karani kāhunki | Never steal anything |
| 8. Kalank na koiku lagāt | Never falsely accuse anyone |
| 9. Nindat nahi koi devaku | Never speak ill of any deities |
| 10. Bin khapto nahi khāt | Never eat impure food prepared inappropriately |
| 11. Vimukh jivake vadanse, kathā suni nahi jāt | Never listen to discourses from those who oppose God |

Q17. Who can be called a Guru?

One who relieves us from the darkness of ignorance and gives us the light of true knowledge.

Q18. What three things give us happiness?

- i. Remembering the divine form of God
- ii. Associating with the true Sadhu
- iii. Good thoughts

Q19. Name the four endeavours (purushārtha) given in our scriptures.

- i. Dharma
- ii. Artha
- iii. Kām
- iv. Moksha

Q20. Why do we need mandirs?

- i. For peace of mind
- ii. For darshan of God
- iii. To nurture our devotion and faith
- iv. To gain spiritual knowledge
- v. To attain God's abode

Q21. What is the correct way to please God?

To serve God with mind (man), body (karma) and speech (vachan).

Q22. What are the benefits of chanting the ‘Swaminarayan’ mantra?

One gains mental peace. It awakens spiritual strength. Self-awareness and faith are developed through chanting. It makes us pure.

Q23. Why perform murti puja (sacred image worship)?

God resides in the murtis and by performing murti puja, we are serving God. Through the murti, God accepts our devotion. It consolidates our faith that God has a divine form.

SECTION 2

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

FAQs on The Swaminarayan Sampraday

Q1. What does the acronym BAPS stand for?

The full name of the organisation is “Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar-Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha”. Each term in the name holds an important significance.

- **Bochasanwasi:** The first mandir of the organisation was established in 1907 in Bochasan, a small town near Anand in the state of Gujarat in India. The term ‘Bochasanwasi’ means ‘based in Bochasan’.
- **Shri:** This is an adjective used as a prefix to a name to show respect. It also means ‘honourable’ and ‘resplendent’.
- **Akshar-Purushottam:** This signifies the Hindu concept of revering God (i.e., Bhagwan Swaminarayan) who is Purushottam with his ideal devotee (i.e., Gunatitanand Swami) who is Akshar. This is similar to Krishna being revered with Radha, Rama with Sita, Narayan with Lakshmi, and Shiva with Parvati.
- **Swaminarayan:** This refers to Bhagwan Swaminarayan, who is worshipped as God (Purushottam) by followers of the Swaminarayan Sampradaya.
- **Sanstha:** This is a Sanskrit word meaning ‘organisation’.
- The organisation is also commonly referred to as BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha or simply BAPS – spoken as an acronym, i.e., B-A-P-S, *not* as a word.

Q2. Where does the Swaminarayan Mantra come from?

Short Answer: The Swaminarayan Mantra was given by Bhagwan Swaminarayan himself. It signifies the reverence of Swami as the ideal bhakta (Gunatitanand Swami), with Narayan (Bhagwan Swaminarayan).

Long Answer: The Swaminarayan Mantra was given by Bhagwan Swaminarayan himself on 31 December 1801, 14 days after Guru Ramanand Swami passed away.

The mantra is a combination of two words – ‘Swami’ and ‘Narayan.’ Each term carries a specific meaning: Swami signifies Brahma or Akshar, i.e., Gunatitanand Swami; Narayan signifies Parabrahma or Purushottam, the Supreme God, i.e., Bhagwan Swaminarayan. Together they represent the Akshar-Purushottam upāsana that Bhagwan Swaminarayan propounded as a means to free the soul from eternal ignorance by identifying oneself with Brahma and offering devotion to Parabrahma.

Q3. What is the way of life for a Swaminarayan satsangi?

Short Answer: Followers of the Swaminarayan Sampradaya observe the five vartmāns [cardinal vows]. This means they:

- i. Do not consume alcohol or other intoxicating substances.
- ii. Do not eat meat or non-vegetarian products.
- iii. Do not steal.
- iv. Do not engage in illicit relations outside of marriage.
- v. Maintain purity of conduct.

More generally, followers also practice customs that express the higher ideals of dharma (righteous conduct as prescribed by the scriptures), gnān (knowledge of God and one’s true self), vairāgya (detachment from worldly pleasures), and bhakti (devotion to God). These can include everything from daily morning personal puja, scriptural study and fasting, to ghar sabhā and sevā.

Long Answer: The five cardinal vows [vartmāns] of followers of the Swaminarayan Sampradaya are practices that express the Hindu ideals of satya [truth], dayā [compassion], ahimsā [non-violence], brahmacharya [celibacy] and asteya [non-stealing]. These vows mean that followers:

- i. Do not consume alcohol or other intoxicating substances
- ii. Do not eat meat or non-vegetarian products
- iii. Do not steal
- iv. Do not engage in illicit relations out of marriage
- v. Maintain purity of conduct

More generally, followers practise customs that express the higher ideals of dharma (righteous conduct as prescribed by the scriptures), gnān (knowledge of God and one's true self), vairāgya (detachment from worldly pleasures), and bhakti (devotion to God). These are explained in more detail below.

Basic practices that encompass dharma:

- Followers maintain purity of diet. In addition to a strict vegetarian diet, they do not eat onions or garlic because these induce the gunas of rajas and tamas, which are known to lead to spiritual regress.
- Followers refrain from intoxicating substances such as alcohol, tobacco, marijuana and other illicit drugs.
- Followers maintain a sense of respect for their parents and elders.
- Followers donate one-tenth or one-twentieth of their earnings in the service of God.

Basic practices that encompass gnān:

- Followers read the scriptures of the Swaminarayan Sampradaya daily. It is by regular reading and contemplation that they acquire a greater understanding of the scriptural concepts of ātmā (knowledge of the self) and Paramatma (knowledge of God).

- Followers regularly attend weekly spiritual discourses and assemblies at BAPS mandirs or centres. Through these assemblies, they gain a deeper insight and knowledge of the Swaminarayan Sampradaya. As followers listen, contemplate, and imbibe these discourses into their own lives, they move closer to attaining true knowledge of ātmā and Paramatma.

Basic practices that encompass vairāgya:

- Followers fast on the day of Ekadashi – the eleventh day of each half of each lunar month. The degree and type of fast observed depends on the staunchness and health of the individual.
- Some followers also observe extra austerities during special months of the year, such as during Shravan (July/August). This may include eating a full meal only once a day or every alternate day.
- Followers strive to develop attachment only to God and not to material things.

Basic practices that encompass bhakti:

- Followers individually perform puṇā every morning. This is a devotional ritual of prayer and worship which is personally performed after having a bath and before eating or drinking anything.
- Followers attend daily ārti in the mandir or perform it at home.
- Followers offer thāl to God daily. Thāl is the devotional offering of food items to God before one consumes them.
- Followers chant the Swaminarayan mantra daily.
- Followers perform mānsi puṇā daily. Mānsi puṇā is the mental worship of God and the guru. In mānsi puṇā, the follower devotionally serves God and the guru through visualisation. The fruits of such devotion are similar to the fruits of actually serving them in person.

- Followers sing kirtans regularly. Kirtans are devotional songs which have been composed by various poets of the Swaminarayan Sampradaya and other Hindu traditions.
- Followers regularly go to the nearby mandir for darshan of the sacred deities. To perform darshan means to see the deities with intense devotion and reverence.
- Other common practices of the Swaminarayan Sampradaya include the following:
- Followers perform sevā regularly. Sevā encompasses a wide array of voluntary services in which the followers participate. Typical types of sevā include tasks as diverse as housekeeping, maintenance, preparing food, serving food, washing utensils, decoration, administration and community work.
- Followers perform regular ghar sabhā daily or weekly. Ghar sabhā is a family assembly wherein all the family members sit together for approximately 15 to 30 minutes to pray to God, engage in scriptural reading, discuss their day, and understand each other.

Followers take part in the celebration of samaiyās. Samaiyās are sacred festival days in the Hindu calendar. They range from the sanctified birthdates of God, his avatārs and the gurus, to the celebrations of Diwali, Annakut, Rath Yatra, etc.

Q4. Does extolling the Guru, not undermine the greatness of God?

Short Answer: A famous verse from the Guru Gitā, which is embedded in the Skand Puran, unequivocally states:

*Gurur Brahmā Gurur Vishnur, Gurur devo Maheshvaraha |
Guru(hu) sākshāt Parambrahma, Tasmai Shri-gurave namaha ||*

The guru is [like] Brahma, the guru is [like] Vishnu; the guru is [like] Shiva and all the devtās; in fact, the guru is [like] God – Parabrahma – himself. I bow down to such a guru.

Although God and guru are different, the guru is considered to be the manifest form of God (i.e., God fully resides within the enlightened guru and works through him). Therefore, it is in no way inappropriate for the devotee to praise him.

As an analogy, by praising the queen one does not belittle the king. Indeed, one praises the queen because of her relationship with the king. Similarly, the guru is extolled because of his intrinsic relationship with God, and so one is not belittling or undermining God, but rather praising God himself.

It should be clear nonetheless that the guru does not replace God nor does he supersede him in any way. He remains, forever, a humble servant who leads the aspirant to the liberating grace of God.

Long Answer: That the guru plays an indispensable role in Hinduism is almost universally accepted. Sacred Hindu scriptures such as the Upanishads, Gita, and Puranas all call for the need of a bona fide guru, not merely as a spiritual teacher but as the means to God and God-realisation. For example, the Mundaka Upanishad [1.2.12] urges:

Tad vignānārtham sa gurum evābhigachchhet... shrotriyam Brahma nishtham |

To realise that [brahma-vidyā, i.e., the liberating knowledge of Brahma and Parabrahma], one must surrender to the guru [i.e., the Aksharbrahma Satpurush] who has a living realisation of the scriptures and is established in God.

Thus, the guru has been described as the ‘gateway to liberation.’ In the Shrimad Bhagwat Puran [3:25:20], Kapildev Bhagwan explained to his mother Devahuti:

*Prasangam-ajaram pāsham, ātmana(ha) kavayo viduhu |
Sa eva sādhusu kruto, moksha-dwāram-apāvrutam || [Bhāgvat 3-25-20]*

If a person maintains profound love towards the ekāntik Sant of God just as resolutely as one maintains profound love towards one’s own relatives, then the gateway to liberation opens up for that person.

In their appreciation of the guru for leading them to God, the aspirants naturally seek to honour him and offer their gratitude. Guru Purnimā (Ashadh sud 15) is one day especially set aside for this. All over India, aspirants perform the puja of their guru and sing verses from the Guru Gita (which is embedded in the Skand Puran) in praise of him. One such prominent verse sung regularly is:

*Gurur Brahmā Gurur Vishnur, Gurur devo Maheshvaraha |
Guru(hu) sākshāt Parambrahma, Tasmai Shri-gurave namaha ||*

The guru is [like] Brahma, the guru is [like] Vishnu; the guru is [like] Shiva and all the devtās;

in fact, the guru is [like] God – Parabrahma – himself. I bow down to such a guru.

Although God and guru are different, the guru is considered to be the manifest form of God (i.e., God fully resides within the enlightened guru and works through him). Therefore, it is in no way inappropriate for the devotee to praise him. As an analogy, by praising the queen one does not belittle the king. Indeed, one praises the queen because of her relationship with the king. Similarly, the guru is extolled because of his intrinsic relationship with God and so one is not belittling or undermining God, but rather, praising God himself. The famous Vaishnava teacher, Vishwanath Thakur, explains:

*Yasya prasādāt Bhagawat-prasādo, yasya-aprasādān na gati(hi) kutopi |
Dhyāyān stuvanā tasya yashas tri-sandhyām, vande guro(ho) shri-
charanāravindam ||*

Without whose grace there can be no grace of God;

By displeasing whom there can be no spiritual progress;

By meditating upon and extolling whom the daily rituals to God are performed;

To such a guru's holy feet do I bow.

And so, extolling the guru is a necessary part of one's spiritual endeavours to earn the grace of God and worship him.

In all of this, it should be clear that the guru does not replace God, nor does he supersede him in any way. He remains, forever, a humble servant who leads the aspirant to the liberating grace of God.

Q5. Bhagwan Swaminarayan was well known as a social reformer. Why is he worshipped as God?

Short Answer: It is true that Bhagwan Swaminarayan worked ardently in many ways to alleviate the pain and suffering of hundreds of thousands of people during one of India's harshest periods in history.

However, Bhagwan Swaminarayan's purpose on earth was, first and foremost, spiritual. As he himself revealed: "While other avatārs of God manifested to fulfil a certain mission, I have manifested to dispel the eternal ignorance of countless souls." Indeed, among the many great spiritual works he inspired, the most significant is that he enlightened countless men and women, elevating them to the highest spiritual state of being brahmarup.

So, the question should not be 'Why do you call him God when he only served society?' Rather, a more meaningful question would be: 'Why did he serve society even though he was God?' The answer is – simply – because of his selfless love and unrelenting compassion for all.

Long Answer: It is true that Bhagwan Swaminarayan worked ardently to alleviate the pain and suffering of hundreds of thousands of people during his lifetime. He organised alms houses, dug wells, repaired roads, and reached out in times of drought, famine and plague. Indeed, his many acts of social reform have also been well documented by contemporary British officers. These include his role in putting a stop to the deplorable customs of sati (widow burning) and dudh piti (female infanticide). He prohibited violent yagnas in which animals were sacrificed and replaced them with bloodless, non-violent rituals. He empowered women, introducing them to education and devotion on par with men.

However, Bhagwan Swaminarayan's purpose on earth was, first and foremost, spiritual. As he himself revealed: "While other avatārs of God manifested to fulfil a certain mission, I have manifested to dispel the eternal ignorance of countless souls."

So how can the two be reconciled? One must first appreciate that early 19th century Gujarat was a very harsh place to be. People were oppressed by feuding landlords, and the continual scarcity of food and water meant they were constantly on the brink of calamity. Bhagwan Swaminarayan knew that poverty and starvation compelled society's rampant immorality. He realised that unless people's basic needs were fulfilled, they would be too distracted to develop a spiritual dimension in their lives. Thus, Bhagwan Swaminarayan saw social advancement as an indispensable part of his own spiritual work. He even taught sevā (working selflessly for others) as a necessary tool for one's own spiritual development.

Bhagwan Swaminarayan also inspired several significant spiritual works within his relatively short lifetime of 49 years. He initiated over 3,000 renunciants, including 500 paramhansas of the highest calibre. He built six large mandirs. He delivered spiritual discourses which were compiled in his own lifetime as the Vachanamrut scripture. He granted people samadhi, the highest state and final stage of Yoga. Most importantly, though, he enlightened countless men and women, elevating them to the highest spiritual state of being brahmarup.

So, the question should not be 'Why do you call him God when he only served society?' Rather, a more meaningful question would be: 'Why did he serve society even though he was God?' The answer is – simply – because of his selfless love and unrelenting compassion for all.

Q6. In the literature of the Swaminarayan Sampradaya, one does not find many specific references to Gunatitanand Swami. Despite this, why do BAPS devotees hold him in such high regard?

Short Answer:

- Not the case that only those who figure prominently in the shastras are great and those who are not mentioned are not.
- Many examples of great devotees of the past that have not been mentioned in prominent scriptures, e.g., Radha, Shukdevji and Jadbharat.
- Swamini Vat 5.144: “Nowhere is Parvatbhai’s name mentioned in any books or shastras, yet he was truly very great.”

Long Answer: Gunatitanand Swami says, “In Brahmā’s presence, Shukdevji, Sanak and others do not engage themselves in spiritual discussions; because they are not very well-known in that place, their words are not accepted as authority. Similarly, one who is accepted as authority may not even find a place in the shastras of the Fellowship” (Swamini Vato 4.64).

Therefore, this does not mean that only those who figure prominently in the shastras are great and those who are not mentioned are not.

Gunatitanand Swami has also said, “Nowhere is Parvatbhai’s name mentioned in any books or shastras, yet he was truly very great” (Swamini Vato 5.144).

There is no reference to Radha’s name in Shrimad Bhagavat, neither is the abode of Golok mentioned anywhere. Only Vaikunth is mentioned. But since Radha was a genuine devotee, she became prominent. Also, all devotees recognise Golok as Shri Krishna’s divine abode.

Sadguru Nishkulanand Swami has written:

*Jone Shukjine Jadbharat ko' kone motā jānyā re,
Hatā Nishkulānand e samarth, pachhi sahue paramānyā re.*

[Chosath Padi 46 in Nishkulanand Kavya]

Who had known Shukji and Jadbharat as eminent?

As undeniably great they were, Nishkulanand says, they were subsequently so recognised.

Shukdevji and Jadbharat were indeed great, but they became well known only later. Similarly, Gunatitanand Swami's and Shriji Maharaj's forms are an eternal truth and with time, their fame has spread to all corners of the globe due to their authentic glory.

FAQs on Hindu Dharma

Note: *It is important to clarify that the beliefs presented here about Hindu Dharma – while endeavouring to be representative of the larger whole – are necessarily influenced by a Swaminarayan perspective. It would be virtually impossible to provide answers to many of these questions to which every person calling himself or herself a Hindu would wholeheartedly agree. Rather, these answers offer insights into Hindu Dharma as understood and experienced through the Swaminarayan Sampradaya.*

Q1. Who is the founder of Sanatan Hindu Dharma?

Short Answer: Hindu Dharma (Sanatan Dharma) is not necessarily only a religion, but also a tradition (the way of Eternal Truth, or the Eternal Tradition) and does not have a single human founder. As the term Sanatan Dharma suggests, it is a religion based on eternal truths. Indeed, the sacred Vedas, which encapsulate this eternal wisdom, were divinely revealed by God to the ancient rishis (sages). Thus, Hindus believe that the true founder of Hindu Dharma is God himself. The word Hinduism is a more recent term used by Westerners to represent Hindu traditions.

Long Answer: Hindu Dharma, traditionally known as Sanatan Dharma (the Way of Eternal Truth, or the Eternal Tradition), does not have a single human founder. As the term Sanatan Dharma suggests, it is a religion based on eternal truths. Indeed, the sacred Vedas, which encapsulate this eternal wisdom, were divinely revealed by God to the ancient rishis (sages). Thus, Hindus believe that the true founder of Hindu Dharma is God himself. The word Hinduism is a more recent term used by Westerners to represent Hindu traditions.

Throughout Hinduism's extensive history, there have been hundreds of key figures, teaching various philosophies, writing thousands of scriptures, and promoting diverse practices. Each has played his or her role in nurturing the religion, yet none can be called its founder.

Many believe that Hinduism is so old that its origins are lost in the midst of antiquity. Western scholars have extensively debated its early history but have been unable to come to a clear resolution primarily because the diversity within Hinduism has led to disagreement over which early traditions should be considered a part of it.

What is certain however is that Hinduism is the oldest living religion in the world, with scholars accepting the Vedas as the world's oldest religious texts having been written thousands of years ago. However old they may be exactly, records show that even in that remote past, Sanatan Dharma was considered an ancient religion. In fact, most scholars accept that Hinduism is at least 5,000 years old with some believing it to be over 8,000 years old. These assertions have found growing support from recent archaeological evidence from the Indus and Saraswati valleys as well as other findings.

Q2. What is Hinduism?

Short Answer: Hinduism is the oldest living religion in the world, and with almost a billion followers, it is also the world's third largest religion. Originating from the vast Indian subcontinent, today it is spread across over 150 countries worldwide.

Hinduism, however, is not monolithic and has no one founder or central governing body. It embraces a family of many diverse traditions, each with its own distinct theology, philosophy, rituals, code of practices and value system. This diversity makes Hinduism particularly hard to define in simple, precise terms. Nonetheless, like in any family, there are some common elements and unifying themes. These include accepting God or a Supreme Reality, ātmā [the soul], dharma (the law of righteousness), karma (the law of cause and effect), the authority of the Vedas, and moksha (liberation).

Long Answer: Hinduism is the oldest living religion in the world that endures today as a healthy, spirited and colourful conglomerate of traditions.

With almost a billion followers, it is also the world's third largest religion; Hindus comprise about one-seventh of the world's entire population. Its origins lie in the vast Indian subcontinent. While it remains the majority religion in India, with over 800 million adherents, its spiritual, cultural, social and linguistic influences extend across the globe; over 60 million Hindus live outside of India in 150 different countries, including in the UK (around 1 million) and North America (around 2.5 million).

Hinduism, however, is not monolithic (characterised by complete uniformity) and has thus eluded simple definition. It has no single founder, no one scripture, no single set of teachings, no unified code of conduct and no central governing body. This was perplexing for early Western scholars of religion because they tended to perceive Hinduism through their own preconceived ideas of the nature of religion – most often in relation to Christianity and Western culture.

Hinduism, in fact, is a family of many diverse traditions, or Sampradayas, each with its own distinct theology, philosophy, rituals, code of practices, and value system. This inescapable diversity and richness, make Hinduism particularly hard to define in simple, precise terms. Nonetheless, like in any family, there are some common elements and unifying themes. These include accepting God or a Supreme Reality, ātmā [the soul], dharma (the law of righteousness), karma (the law of cause and effect), the authority of the Vedas, and moksha (liberation).

Hinduism is also responsible for many valuable contributions to the world, such as that of the original concepts and practices of Yoga, Āyurveda, Vāstu, Jyotish, Vedānta, karma, and much more.

It is important to note that the noun 'Hinduism' itself was only coined in the 19th century – by applying the 'ism' to 'Hindu' (see Q4 for a discussion of how the term 'Hindu' was derived).

Although it is not easy to define Hinduism, we can say with certainty that it is closely connected to India, its culture and its sacred texts – but it also extends far beyond them.

Q3. What are the main beliefs of Hinduism?

Short Answer: Despite the many diverse strands of Hinduism, most Hindus share some common beliefs. Here are just a few:

- There is one supreme, all-powerful loving God who is the ultimate creator, sustainer and destroyer of all things.
- God manifests on earth to revive dharma and liberate souls.
- God is present in and can be worshipped through murtis (ritually-infused sacred images).
- The goal of human life is for the soul to be liberated from the perpetual cycle of births and deaths so as to remain eternally in the service of God in his transcendental abode.

Long Answer: Hinduism embraces many diverse traditions, each with its own theology, philosophy, rituals, code of practices and value system. Despite this diversity, most Hindus share some common beliefs. These include the following:

- **Parabrahma** [Supreme God]: There is one supreme, all-powerful loving God. He is the creator, has a divine human form, is immanent, transcendent, and the granter of liberation.
- **Avatārvād** [Descent of God on earth]: God descends or manifests, on earth in various forms to revive dharma and grant liberation.

- **Karmavād** [Law of Action]: According to its past and present actions, the soul reaps fruits – good and bad – that are experienced either in this life or future lives.
- **Punar-janma** [Reincarnation]: The immortal soul repeatedly assumes or takes on multiple life-forms until it attains liberation.
- **Moksha** [Ultimate Liberation]: The ultimate goal of human life is for the soul to be liberated from the perpetual cycle of births and deaths so as to remain eternally in the service of God in his transcendental abode.
- **Guru-Shishya Sambandh** [Guru-Disciple Relationship]: The guidance and grace of a spiritually enlightened teacher is essential for an aspirant seeking liberation.
- **Dharma**: This is an all-encompassing term representing divine law, inherent nature, the path of righteousness, religion, duty, responsibility, virtue, justice, goodness and truth.
- **Veda-Pramāna** [Authority of Vedic Scriptures]: Hindus accept the spiritual authority of the four Vedas, each of which comprises the Samhitās, Brāhmanas, Āranyakas and Upanishads. Individual traditions may have their own sacred texts which derive their authority from this Vedic literature.
- **Murti Pujā** [Worship of Sacred Images of God]: Devotees worship images ritually infused with the presence of God to develop and express their relationship with the Divine.

Q4. Who is a Hindu?

Short Answer: Generally, a Hindu is a person who accepts the main beliefs of Hinduism (as stated in Q3) and espouses the basic values and ideals of satya [truthfulness], saucha [purity], dayā [compassion], ahimsā [non-violence], and brahmacharya (continence before marriage and fidelity thereafter), among others.

While remaining faithful to these values and other scriptural injunctions, a Hindu regulates his or her life according to the four main endeavours of dharma [righteousness], artha [wealth], kāma [aspirations] and moksha [liberation]. That is, each Hindu strives to live a righteous life, earn an honest living, fulfil one's aspirations through one's earnings, and ultimately, be liberated from the perpetual cycle of births and deaths.

Long Answer: Firstly, it is important to point out that the word 'Hindu' does not appear in the Vedas, Ramayan, Mahabharat, Gita, or any of the ancient spiritual texts of India. The word 'Hindu' was originally coined by eighth-century Persians to refer to the people living on the east side of the River Indus (found in present-day Pakistan), or the River Sindhu as it is known in Sanskrit. The meaning of the term was thus more geographical than specifically religious. The term 'Hindu' as denoting the natives of north-west India – known then as Hindustan – spread westward, and eventually became popular throughout the world. It was only around the 15th and 16th centuries that the term Hindu came into use in India itself, probably when practitioners felt obliged to differentiate themselves from followers of other faiths. Prior to that, the practitioners of the native religion of India called their religion 'Sanatan Dharma' – the Eternal Tradition.

Generally, a Hindu is a person who accepts the main beliefs of Hinduism (as stated in Q3) and espouses the basic values and ideals of satya [truthfulness], saucha [purity], dayā [compassion], ahimsā [non-violence], and brahmacharya [continence before marriage and fidelity thereafter], among others. While remaining faithful to these values and other scriptural injunctions, a Hindu regulates his or her life according to the four main endeavours of dharma [righteousness], artha [wealth], kāma [aspirations] and moksha [liberation]. That is, each Hindu strives to live a righteous life, earn an honest living, fulfil one's aspirations through one's earnings, and ultimately, be liberated from the perpetual cycle of births and deaths.

It is also important to note that one does not have to be born a Hindu, as is often misconceived by some, to receive the core teachings of Hinduism. Anyone who adheres to the basic beliefs and practices of Sanatan Dharma

can be considered a Hindu. Nonetheless, being part of a particular tradition within Hinduism, which may involve some sort of formal initiation, is also very helpful because it directly connects one to a world of living enlightenment.

Q5. What is ahimsā, and how does the practice of self-defence fit into the concept of ahimsā?

Short Answer: Ahimsā is the principle of non-violence (or non-injury) which discourages not only harmful actions, but also abusive words and aggressive thoughts. Underlying this principle is a profound respect for all life and the belief that God permeates all beings, including plants and animals.

This principle is the basis for a compassionate lifestyle, which includes a pure vegetarian diet.

The Hindu espousal of ahimsā, however, does not imply absolute pacifism. In certain cases where it is one's duty to protect oneself and others, self-defence is a legitimate practice.

Long Answer: Ahimsā is the principle of non-violence (or non-injury) which discourages not only harmful actions but also abusive words and aggressive thoughts. Underlying this principle is a profound respect for all life and the belief that God permeates all beings, including plants and animals. This principle is the basis for a compassionate lifestyle, which includes a pure vegetarian diet.

The principle of ahimsā is mentioned in many of the ancient Hindu texts, including the Vedas, Upanishads, Dharma-Shastras and Mahabharata.

Bhagwan Swaminarayan has also advocated ahimsā in the Shikshapatri:

- “Ahimsā is verily the highest ethical code.” [Verse 12]
- “My devotees shall not harm any living being. Nor shall they intentionally harm even small insects.” [Verse 11]

- “No harm should be inflicted on any living being, not even for the purpose of performing yagnas (ceremonial offerings) to propitiate deities or ancestors.” [Verse 12]
- “In no way should one harm or kill any person, not even for acquiring women, wealth or a kingdom.” [Verse 13]

The Hindu espousal of ahimsā, however, does not imply absolute pacifism. Hinduism recognises the right to defend one’s self, family, community and country through the most feasible and appropriate, yet least violent, means necessary. Sometimes (as in the Bhagavad Gita), force may be necessary to prevent a greater harm. Suppose, for example, that a wild animal is running ferociously to attack a group of people. The animal may need to be wounded to prevent harm to numerous people. However, self-defence should never be used to justify violence that is unprovoked and unwarranted. Random and mob violence are always condemned.

Q6. What is the ātmā?

Short Answer: The ātmā, otherwise known as one’s soul, is the essence and life-force of an individual. It – Hindus believe that the ātmā is neither male nor female – is distinct from one’s physical body and senses, and even one’s thoughts and feelings. Unlike the body, the soul is immortal and unchanging. It can take on a body of various forms (like wearing different clothes) as it passes through countless lives. The ultimate goal for each soul is to be liberated from this perpetual cycle of births and deaths, and to earn an eternal place in God’s transcendental abode.

Long Answer: The ātmā is a philosophical term used within Hinduism to identify the soul. It – Hindus believe the ātmā is neither male nor female – is the essence and life-force of an individual. It is one’s true self, distinct from one’s physical body and senses, and even one’s thoughts and feelings. Unlike the body, the soul is immortal and unchanging. It can take on a body of various forms, like wearing different clothes, as it passes through countless lives. (See Q7 below for an understanding of

reincarnation and the three bodies of an ātmā in relation to its individual karmas.) The ultimate goal for each soul is to be liberated from this perpetual cycle of births and deaths and to earn an eternal place in God's transcendental abode.

Infinite in number and subtler than an atom, each ātmā is characterised by unchanging truth [sat], consciousness [chit] and bliss [ānanda]. Within each ātmā resides God, who is also known as Paramatma, the supreme ātmā.

Q7. What is karma and reincarnation?

Short Answer: Karma is the universal, unbiased and inescapable concept of cause and effect. It links each person to his or her actions and their corresponding fruits via God. Importantly, Hindus believe that God is the granter of the fruits of one's deeds (whether good or bad), and so karma is not merely a mechanical law of action and reaction but a divinely ordered system that is infinitely fair. This reconciles (i.e., makes compatible) the ideas of free will and fate.

Reincarnation – also called transmigration – is when, upon death of the physical body, the immortal soul re-enters another life-form. This cyclic process of birth, death and rebirth continues until the soul eradicates its ignorance and is granted moksha, or ultimate liberation.

Long Answer: Karma and reincarnation are two core concepts within Hinduism.

The concept of karma is the universal, unbiased and inescapable law of 'cause and effect' central to Hindu belief. It links each person to his or her actions and their corresponding fruits via God, the granter of the fruits of each karma to each person.

There are three main types of karmas – sanchita, prārabdha and kriyamāna.

- Sanchita karmas, or the stock of karmas, are the accumulation of past deeds, both good and bad.

- Prārabdha karmas are past deeds whose consequences are already set in motion. They are the portion of sanchita karmas that are presently bearing fruit, i.e., those used to create the present physical body and shape current events and experiences. These are often referred to as simply one's prārabdha.
- Kriyamāna karmas are deeds whose consequences are in the process of being formed. These are our current deeds – including words and even thoughts – performed every day which will eventually be added to the stock of karmas (sanchita karmas) until they 'ripen' to bear fruit as prārabdha karmas, either later in the present life or in a future life.

These can be explained with a popular analogy using the various stages of growing rice. Rice harvested and stored in the granary can be likened to sanchita karmas; from this stock, a portion selected and readied for cooking and eating is like prārabdha karmas – past deeds shaping present events; meanwhile, new grains being sown in the fields which will yield a fresh crop in the future, and in turn be added to the stock in the granary for later cooking, are like the kriyamāna karmas, i.e. current deeds eventually being added to sanchita karmas until they 'ripen' to bear fruit as prārabdha karmas.

This concept of 'cause and effect' makes the individual solely responsible for his or her actions and respective consequences. Importantly, though, Hindus believe that it is God who grants the fruits of one's deeds (whether good or bad), and so the concept of karma is not merely a mechanical law of action and reaction but a divinely ordered system that is infinitely fair. This reconciles (i.e., makes compatible) the ideas of free will and fate.

The law of karma can profoundly influence current behaviour. Accepting and understanding that our actions have direct corresponding effects discourages us from performing bad karmas, for which we would have to eventually suffer negative effects, and encourages us to perform good karmas, so that we may reap their positive effects.

It is an individual's karma that determines the transmigration of the soul from one body to another, a process commonly known as reincarnation.

'Re' means again and 'incarnation' means literally 'to enter into flesh'. Thus, reincarnation – or punar-janma in Sanskrit, (meaning 'rebirth') – is when, upon death of the physical body, the immortal soul re-enters another life-form. This cyclic process of birth, death and rebirth continues until the soul eradicates its ignorance and is granted moksha, or ultimate liberation. To understand this, one must further understand the nature of the ātmā.

The ātmā is characterised by unchanging truth, consciousness and bliss. It is without beginning and has always been bound by a kāran sharir (causal body). This causal body is not a body in the physical sense. It is simply an accumulation of the sanskārs (impressions of past karmas). The pure ātmā together with this kāran sharir is sometimes referred to as the jiva. Because the jiva is without a physical and subtle body, it is unable to enjoy or suffer the fruits of its karmas, nor can it endeavour to attain and please God. Out of loving compassion, God grants the jiva a physical and subtle body according to its karmas. Then, just as a person casts off old clothes for new, the jiva casts off its old body for a new one – given to it by God according to its karmas.

Hindu scriptures explain that the jiva attains the bodies of millions of life forms in rotation, and experiences in them happiness and misery according to its karmas. However, it is only possible to attain ultimate liberation while in the human body. In the Bhugol-Khagol Vachanamrut, Bhagwan Swaminarayan vividly explains this by emphasising the rarity and pricelessness of a human birth.

Those with exceptionally good karmas subsequently attain some form of association with God or the Satpurush. One may be released from having to be reborn within this cycle of various life-forms. Instead, they would continue to take birth as humans until, by the grace of God or the Satpurush, they attain moksha.

Q8. Why are there many Gods in Hinduism?

Short Answer: Contrary to the common misconception, most Hindus believe in and worship one supreme God, referred to as Parabrahma. Yet in doing so, Hindus also acknowledge many other devtās, or divinities (often simply called 'gods'). These devtās perform various functions in the universe, but should not be confused with Parabrahma, who is the ultimate creator and sustainer of all things.

One cause of confusion may be that Hindus of different languages, cultures and times assign different names and forms to their understanding of Parabrahma. But many names or forms for the Parabrahma does not mean that there is more than one Parabrahma. This merely attests to the richness and magnanimity of Hinduism.

Long Answer: Contrary to the common misconception, most Hindus believe in and worship one supreme God, referred to as Parabrahma. Yet in doing so, Hindus also acknowledge many other devtās, or divinities (often simply called 'gods'). These devtās perform various functions in the universe, but should not be confused with Parabrahma, who is the ultimate creator and sustainer of all things.

Hindus will respect many avatars (manifestations of God on earth) and devtās. Hindus are thus often termed 'inclusive monotheists', i.e., worshippers of one Parabrahma, at the same time revering other deities.

One cause of confusion may be that Hindus of different languages, cultures and times assign different names and forms to their understanding of Parabrahma. But many names or forms for the Parabrahma does not mean that there is more than one Parabrahma. This merely attests to the richness and magnanimity of Hinduism.

Historically, many groups have been unwilling or unable to understand the true position and function of the various deities within Hinduism. Consequently, they have incorrectly labelled Hinduism as polytheistic in the sense of the ancient Roman or Greek pantheon. However, this is incorrect. Just as other religions consider themselves monotheistic while

still accepting the existence of angels and other superhuman divinities, Hinduism should be considered monotheistic in the same sense.

It should also be considered that those with Western paradigms of religion may perceive monotheism – belief in one (mono) God (theos) – as the mark of an advanced religion. But one must note that for Hinduism to be adequately understood, it should be studied on its own terms and with its own worldview. Indeed, the very concept of theos and the Divine in the Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) differs markedly from that in Hinduism. Consequently, crude comparisons of labels such as ‘monotheistic’ and ‘polytheistic’ are unhelpful when considering Sanatan Dharma.

Q9. What do the Aum and Swastika symbols mean?

Short Answer: Both are auspicious symbols of Hinduism. Aum is also a sound, composed of three syllables – A, U and M. It is the first sound of creation from which all other sounds are said to originate. It is also one of the most auspicious mantras in Hinduism, and is often chanted at the beginning and end of prayers as well as in meditation.

Swastika literally means ‘well-being’. It is symbolic of good fortune and prosperity, and so is often found in doorways of homes and shops as well as being used in decorations during festivals and ceremonies such as weddings. With its arms pointing equally in all directions, the swastika also symbolises stability and balance.

Long Answer: Both are auspicious symbols of Hinduism. Aum is also a sound, composed of three syllables – A, U and M. It is the first sound of creation from which all other sounds are said to originate. Also known as Pranava, it is one of the most auspicious mantras in Hinduism, and is often chanted at the beginning and end of prayers as well as in meditation to help concentrate on God.

Interestingly, A and U are the first and last vowels of the Sanskrit alphabet and M is its last consonant. Some therefore consider Aum to be the perfect word encompassing all truths that words can convey.

In Vachanamrut Sarangpur 6, Bhagwan Swaminarayan explains how the Aum arose – as a transformed form of the transcendental vibration which emanated at the moment of creation, and from which all other sounds, and ultimately the sacred Vedas, came forth.

The Bhagavad Gita [8.13] relates this Aum to Aksharbrahma. The Mundaka Upanishad [2.2.4] further elucidates on this using an analogy to explain the goal of life: the Pranava is the bow, the ātmā is the arrow, and Brahma is its target. Just as an arrow joins with the bow to reach its target, the ātmā should become one with (i.e., develop ātmābuddhi for) the Satpurush – who is the manifest form of Aksharbrahma – to reach Akshardham, the transcendental abode of God.

Swastika literally means ‘well-being’; ‘su’ meaning ‘good’ and ‘asti’ meaning ‘being’ combined with the suffix ‘ka’ to become Swastika. It is symbolic of good fortune and prosperity, and so is often found in doorways of homes and shops as well as being used in decorations during festivals and ceremonies such as weddings. With its arms pointing equally in all directions, the swastika also symbolises stability and balance.

As an ancient symbol of Hinduism, its roots can be traced to the Yajur Veda. It is most commonly seen with its upper arm facing right, said to be symbolising Vishnu and day, though the left-facing version is not unusual, representing night.

An important clarification is necessary here: although they appear similar, the Hindu Swastika has no connection with the official emblem of the Nazi Party, also called the Swastika. (There is usually a small difference in appearance in that the cross and arms of the Nazi emblem are rotated 45 degrees). This misappropriation of an ancient and sacred Hindu symbol can be an inadvertent cause of confusion and strife. Hindus, however, have never harboured anti-Semitic sentiments, and have historically befriended the Jewish community.

Q10. Who composed the Hindu scriptures and when were they composed?

Short Answer: The Vedas are the most ancient and most recognised of the Hindu scriptures. They are not considered to be composed by an individual in the traditional sense. Instead, Hindus believe that the Vedas were divinely revealed to the ancient rishis (sages) by God himself. The rishis transmitted the teachings of the Vedas for generation upon generation using a precise oral tradition. These teachings were eventually committed to script by scholars many thousands of years ago. The sage Veda Vyas is said to have systematised or categorised the Vedas, although he is not their author. The Vedas are universally accepted as the world's oldest religious writings, with some claiming their ideas to be more than 8,000 years old.

Other Hindu scriptures, though more recent, have also passed through a similar process of divine revelation, oral transmission and written composition.

Long Answer: Firstly, it is important to note that the many diverse traditions within Hinduism have given rise to a vast range and immense volume of scriptures. Each tradition will have its own corpus of sacred writings, both in Sanskrit and vernacular, which it considers of paramount authority. In the Swaminarayan Sampradaya, for example, this includes the Vachanamrut, a collection of 273 discourses delivered by Bhagwan Swaminarayan that was compiled in the early 19th century during his own lifetime and which he himself endorsed.

Generally, all Hindu texts tend to draw their authority from the Vedas since they are the most ancient and most recognised of the Hindu scriptures. The Vedas are considered *apaurusheya* – not humanly created. Instead, Hindus believe that the Vedas were divinely revealed to the ancient rishis (sages) by God himself. They thus fall into the category of texts called *Shruti* meaning 'that which is heard'. The rishis transmitted the teachings of the Vedas for generation upon generation using a precise oral tradition. These teachings were eventually committed to script by scholars many thousands of years ago.

The sage Veda Vyas is said to have systematised or categorised the Vedas, although he is not their author.

There are four Vedas in total: the Rig Veda, Yajur Veda, Sāma Veda and Atharva Veda. Each comprises of:

- Samhitās – hymns in praise of God and verses which contain basic instructions for ritual offerings.
- Brāhmanas – passages which expound on the sacrificial rituals and narrate religious stories.
- Āranyakas – treatises which offer more philosophical interpretations of the rituals.
- Upanishads – philosophical works that seek an underlying reality beyond the phenomenal world and emphasise spiritual insight rather than ritual.

The Upanishads are also called Vedānta – literally meaning ‘the end of the Vedas’ – since they contain the culmination of Vedic insight. Although there are over 100 Upanishads in existence, 13 are considered the most important. All these are accepted as part of Shruti.

The other category of sacred texts is the Smṛuti meaning ‘that which is remembered’. These usually help interpret the Shruti texts and are often considered no less authoritative because they are authored by revered and important figures. However, they are not believed to be ‘revealed’ in the same sense as the Vedas.

The Smṛuti texts include the various Dharma-Shāstras. These are often referred to as ancient law books, though today most Sampradāyas derive their own religious code of conduct from oral or other traditions.

The Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyaṇa are two famous Hindu epics, also known as Itihāsa, whose stories are widely known throughout India and beyond. Hindus believe the Mahābhārata, a truly voluminous work, was written by Ved Vyas. The Rāmāyaṇa was first penned in Sanskrit by Valmiki, but later versions, such as Tulsidas’s popular Rāma-charita-mānasa, appeared in Vraj and other languages.

One of the most popular Hindu scriptures is the Bhagavad Gita. This is encapsulated in the Mahabharat, and so is composed by Vyas. It narrates the dialogue between Shri Krishna Bhagwan and Arjun on the Mahabharat battlefield.

Additionally, Hinduism acknowledges the 18 Purans. These are grand narratives of various avatars and deities, and are often interluded with philosophical passages and treatises on ritual. The last and most popular Puran is the Shrimad Bhagavat Puran. Hindus also believe Vyas to have authored the Purans.

One should also mention the various agamas that give precise directives for the performance of ritual worship in mandirs. These are not so well known, but are of fundamental importance to mandir priests.

It is very difficult to ascertain even the approximate dates of all these scriptures, especially as some are contingent upon others that are often shrouded in the midst of remote antiquity. Moreover, some texts have probably developed over time. It is useful to know that most Western scholars, following Max Müller, date the (written) Vedas around 1200 BCE, though recent revisions of dating for the Vedic civilisation push this back much further to possibly 3000 BCE. Nonetheless, the Vedas are universally accepted as the world's oldest religious writings, with some claiming their ideas to be more than 8,000 years old.

FAQs on Contemporary Issues

Q1. Why do you spend money on building mandirs?

Short Answer:

- Perfect home: We spare no effort or cost in pursuit of our dream home. Hindus, as an expression of their devotion to God, similarly build elaborate mandirs for God.

- Public monuments: Millions of pounds are spent on public monuments to promote national pride and values. Mandirs promote universal values such as peace, harmony, service, charity, and faith in God.
- Labour of love: Mandirs are built on the selfless donations of the devotees, not taxpayers' money – unlike public monuments.

Long Answer: When buying a house for oneself or one's family, each person only really requires a one-room concrete box that has enough floor space to sleep on. Yet, in reality, we spend weeks and months searching for that perfect house that has the perfect style, perfect interior, perfect landscaping and perfect neighbourhood. Often, people spend years saving up money and making plans for their dream home. For ourselves and our loved ones, no cost or effort is spared for our perfect house.

Then should it be so surprising that those who love God would spare no effort or cost to make the perfect house for God? This has been the sentiment of Hindus since the time the ancient seers wrote the Shilpa Shastras that specified the proper methods of construction for elaborate mandirs. The construction of the mandir itself was an expression of devotion to God. And so the elaborate features and exquisite carvings of the mandir are simply the physical embodiments of the devotion of the devotees who constructed the mandir.

The government of every country spends millions of pounds on public monuments that have no function other than to be looked at and admired for their architecture. The money to construct such public monuments comes directly from taxpayers. Yet, such massive expenditure on public monuments is accepted and appreciated by all. The reason is that simply through their architecture and symbolism, such public monuments promote pride in one's country and its values, and thus spread a beneficial social message. In the same way, the architecture of a mandir promotes a message that is spiritually and socially beneficial. The mandir inspires purity, devotion, faith, wonder at the splendour of God, and pride in one's culture.

Importantly, the money spent on mandirs does not come from public coffers, but solely from the donations of devotees in the community who

desire to express their devotion to God through the mandir. If society admires wealthy people for the ostentatious mansions and palaces they construct to serve their own personal needs, should society not admire even more those people from all backgrounds who selflessly donate to the mandir for the socially beneficial message it promotes?

Q2. Why do you need mandirs and murtis if God is everywhere?

Short Answer:

- **Radio waves/receiver:** Radio waves are everywhere, but you need a receiver to experience them. Similarly, God is everywhere, but a mandir helps people to 'tune in' to God and have profound experiences of him.
- **Murtis:** Mandirs house murtis. Murti puja is the ancient Hindu practice of worshipping God through sacred images, ritually infused with his presence.
- **True Upāsana:** Bhagwan Swaminarayan built mandirs to uphold the correct mode of worship to God [Vachanamrut Gadhadra II 27].

Long Answer: God is certainly everywhere, but just as radio waves are everywhere yet cannot be experienced without the use of a receiver, mandirs are a means to help people easily 'tune in' to God to receive his love, blessings and inspiration.

Mandirs facilitate personal and public worship in a very powerful way. At the centre of every mandir are the murtis – sacred images – that are ritually infused with the presence of God. When a Hindu visits a mandir, he or she has darshan of the murtis. This loosely translates to 'the seeing' of the murtis. To the devout, this can be a very profound spiritual experience because it means being in close proximity with God and beholding his divine form while simultaneously receiving the blessed gaze of the Divine through the murtis. Millions attest that mandirs afford them better opportunities to pray to, reflect upon and worship God.

The Swaminarayan Sampradaya is committed to pure worship as described in the Vedic scriptures. To promote true upāsānā (mode of worship), Bhagwan Swaminarayan constructed six towering mandirs installing in them murtis of various deities, thus giving impetus to the ancient Hindu practice of murti puja – worship of God through sacred images. With reference to this, Bhagwan Swaminarayan explained: “In order that devotion to God may flourish, I have constructed mandirs installing in them the murtis of God. Even if this may lead to a slight relaxation in renunciation, it will uphold devotion to God and thus redeem many souls.” [Vachanamrut Gadhada II 27]

Mandirs, thus, are an important and necessary means of worship and devotion.

Q3. What does the mandir represent? Is it just a fancy building?

Short Answer:

- **House of worship:** All religions have their own houses of worship. A Hindu house of worship is called a mandir.
- **Definition of mandir:** ‘Mandir’ is a Sanskrit word for a place of worship or prayer. It is where the mind becomes still and the soul is free to seek the source of life, peace, joy and comfort.
- **Uses of a mandir:**
 - i. Where one learns to understand humanity, nature and God.
 - ii. Where ethics and values are reinforced.
 - iii. Where people celebrate festivals.
 - iv. Where people seek shelter in times of need.
 - v. Where talents are offered in the service of God.
 - vi. Where people unite to serve society.

Long Answer: ‘Mandir’ is a Sanskrit word for a place of worship or prayer. It is where the mind becomes still and the soul floats freely to seek the source of life, peace, joy and comfort. For centuries, the mandir has remained a centre of life – a common community place where people forget their differences and voluntarily unite to serve society.

Every religion in its own tradition builds houses of worship. It is the mandir that fuels our faith in God, strengthens our society, and teaches us to trust one another and to become trustworthy.

Schools may educate the mind, but who will educate the soul? Hospitals may mend a broken arm, but who will mend a broken heart? Cinemas and arcades may excite the mind but where will one go for peace of mind?

A mandir is a centre for learning to understand humanity, nature and God. It is where ethics and values are reinforced. It is where people rejoice together when celebrating festivals, and seek shelter and solace in times of need. It is where talents in various arts – music, literature, sculpture – are offered in the service of God.

Historically, mandirs have not just remained centres of worship, but have evolved into vast, extensive complexes encompassing many roles to serve the special needs of society. In addition to their pivotal function in religious worship, mandirs have been a place where pilgrims and the poor have turned to for food in times of need or during a natural disaster. Today, BAPS mandirs around the world are hubs of a wide range of community services, including childcare, educational guidance, family values, sports, health awareness, and much more.

Q4. Are sadhus similar to Christian saints or priests?

Short Answer:

- Sadhu (swami): a Hindu renunciant, both of the past and present.
- Saint: Christian religious person; only of the past.

- **Christian priest:** Similar to a sadhu as someone who administers rituals, looks after places of worship, preaches, and helps society. Difference lies in beliefs and the vows followed.

Long Answer: In BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha, the term 'sadhu' or 'swami' refers to a Hindu renunciant (see Q5 for further elaboration on this). It does not exclusively refer to revered spiritual persons of the past, but includes those who are present today and actively devoted to serving God and society.

In the Christian tradition, the title of Saint can be conferred only upon a venerable spiritual figure of the past.

A priest is someone who administers religious rites. This is very similar to a sadhu who often conducts religious rituals and attends to the murtis (sacred images) in a mandir. While carrying out day-to-day duties in a church and delivering sermons, priests may also care for the poor and sick. Again, this is very similar to the role of a sadhu who may serve in a mandir and travel from place to place for the moral and spiritual uplift of society, as well as to help during times of need, such as a natural disaster. They differ most, perhaps, in the vows they observe (see Q5 for a description of a sadhu's five vows).

Q5. Who qualifies as a sadhu in BAPS? What does one need to do to become one?

Short Answer:

- **Who is a sadhu:** One who has renounced all worldly attachments to seek a life of complete service and devotion to God.
- **Sadhus observe five vows:**
 1. Nishkām (non-lust)
 2. Nirlobh (non-greed)
 3. Nissneh (non-attachment)
 4. Nisswād (non-taste)
 5. Nirmān (non-ego)

- Becoming a sadhu: Personal calling, consent from parents, introductory training, pārshadi diksha (with white robes), bhāgwati dikshā (with saffron robes).

Long Answer: A sadhu is someone who has renounced all worldly attachments to seek a life of complete service and devotion to God. Upon being initiated (or ‘ordained’) as a sadhu, a person accepts five vows of observance. These are:

- Nishkām – vow of non-lust; complete abstinence from sexual indulgence, both physical and mental (see discussion on brahmacharya below).
- Nirlobh – vow of non-greed; not owning, keeping, or even touching money, nor coveting fine objects.
- Nissneh – vow of non-attachment; remaining detached from relatives and material possessions, most importantly one’s own body.
- Nisswād – vow of non-taste; to overcome cravings for tasty food.
- Nirmān – vow of non-ego; to be devoid of all false pride, hence also anger and jealousy.

Becoming a sadhu is – first and last – a response to a deeply personal and profound spiritual calling. It is a decision only the person himself can make; there can be no coercion or compulsion. However, it is mandatory that all those striving to become sadhus must secure the written permission of both parents and be of discerning age.

Having secured the consent of his parents, the young man must pass through a rigorous training course as a sādhak (currently three years) which introduces him to and prepares him for the austere life ahead. If he is able and willing to continue, he eventually receives pārshadi diksha – initiation as a pārshad – after which he adorns white robes, shaves off his hair, and receives a new name of the form ‘_____ Bhagat’. His life of spiritual training and study continues. After completing the required period as a pārshad, he receives bhāgwati diksha – initiation into the

sadhu-fold – where he now wears saffron-coloured robes and receives his final name of the form ‘Sadhu _____das’. His training and studies may still continue for a few more years before he is assigned special duties.

Q6. Why do sadhus wear saffron robes and why do we touch their feet?

Short Answer:

- Saffron clothes: Saffron colour is traditionally associated with sacrifice and renunciation. It also symbolises fire. Fire purifies and remains unaffected by other objects. Sadhus are reminded to help purify society and remain unaffected by worldly objects.
- Touching feet: Hindu way of offering respect to people of stature. In turn, one receives blessings and good wishes.

Long Answer: Saffron is a colour which is traditionally associated in Hindu Dharma with sacrifice and renunciation. It also symbolises fire. One of the names of fire in Sanskrit is pāvaka, meaning purifier. Like fire, sadhus help purify society, and provide spiritual energy and light (knowledge). For themselves, the fiery symbolism extends to the burning of all desires and being fervent against enticement. Just as objects thrown into fire take on the colour of fire, similarly, sadhus aspire to remain unaffected by worldly objects.

People respect sadhus for the immense sacrifices they undergo and their spiritual stature. One way in Hindu custom to offer respect to those of high stature is to bow and touch their feet. This is called charan sparsh. It is also a way of receiving their blessings and good wishes. Besides sadhus, charan sparsh is also performed of one's parents, elders, teachers and other noble people.

Q7. Why is celibacy so important for sadhus?

Short Answer:

- **What is celibacy:** Abstinence from sexual activity.
- **Celibacy in other religions:** Many religious traditions encourage some form or degree of celibacy, especially for their renunciants/priests.
- **Celibacy in Hinduism:** Called brahmacharya; more complex than celibacy of other religions.
- **Brahmacharya for sadhus:** A personal spiritual discipline for those who have renounced all material and emotional ties, to help them to focus all their energies on God.
- **Scriptural support:** Many important Hindu scriptures, including the Bhagavad Gita and the Daksha Smriti, prescribe brahmacharya for spiritual aspirants.
- **What brahmacharya is not:** Brahmacharya does not mean disrespect or dislike of women, nor seeing them as evil, vile, repulsive or inferior.

Long Answer: Celibacy, simply put, is deliberate abstinence from sexual activity. Most monastic orders of the world's major religions encourage some form or degree of celibacy. This includes renunciants/priests of various Jewish, Christian, Islamic, Buddhist and Jain traditions.

In Hinduism, the precise term is brahmacharya. It is more complex than celibacy or chastity as understood in other religious traditions.

For sadhus of the Swaminarayan Sampradaya, brahmacharya means much more than avoiding sexual activity. It involves avoiding all form of association with the opposite gender, both physical and mental. This is easier to understand when you consider that a sadhu has as voluntarily chosen to renounce all material objects and emotional ties in search of spiritual fulfilment. He would not want anything to deflect him from his path of total focus on God.

Brahmacharya is thus a discipline whereby all physical, mental and emotional energies of the body, mind and senses are focused entirely on a higher level of spirituality. (This is similar to many athletes, artists and other committed performers who refrain from sexual activity for a time to help them maintain concentration and energy before major events.)

The Shrimad Bhagavad Gita [8.11], one of Hinduism's most famous and widely respected scriptures, states that the observance of brahmacharya is imperative for those earnestly striving to retain and focus their energies on a higher, spiritual goal. The Mundaka Upanishad [3.1.5] also asserts: "Only by truth, austerities, complete knowledge and brahmacharya can one realise God."

Specifically, sadhus of the Swaminarayan Sampradaya observe ashtanga brahmacharya, or eight-fold abstinence from associating with the opposite gender. This has been prescribed in the Daksha Smriti [7.31-32] and Agni Puran [372.9], two important Hindu scriptures.

In all of this, it is important to iterate that the sadhus in no way despise females. On the contrary, they uphold all women with utmost respect, and are certainly not misogynists (i.e., 'women-haters'). Nor do they regard them as evil, vile, repulsive or inferior. On the contrary, they are taught to honour women and their inherently unique and indispensable role in society. Hence, nothing would hurt them more than to (even unintentionally) undermine a woman's God-gifted status, liberty or dignity.

When understood as a personal spiritual discipline, such a vow of celibacy can be appreciated as both noble and admirable.

Q8. Does the separation of women in Swaminarayan mandirs reduce their roles in the mandir? Does this not slow progress?

Short Answer:

- Check the figures: Female devotees make up more than half of the fellowship at our mandirs. If anything, their numbers and their activities are growing.

- Separate does not mean inferior: Women may have different roles, but this does not mean they are marginalised or subjugated. In fact, women in BAPS assert their own power through their own initiatives, in which numerous well-managed activities are undertaken.
- Understand the rationale: The separation of men and women at mandirs is simply a spiritual discipline to help individuals focus their energies on God.
- Spiritual nourishment accessible to all: Both men and women have access to the most important source of spiritual nourishment – the spiritual guru’s public darshan and discourses. Other major forms of worship and religious practice, such as scriptural study, fasting, chanting, meditation, etc., are equally accessible to everyone. In reality, being farther or closer is immaterial for individual spiritual development.

Long Answer: Firstly, it may come as a pleasant surprise to learn that more than half of the fellowship members at our mandirs are female, all of whom enjoy active, empowering, and spiritually-rewarding participation in mandir activities. If anything, both their numbers and their activities are growing. And so, the women themselves would be at odds to understand any claim that their progress in the mandir is being obstructed or hampered.

Secondly, it is important to clarify that separate does not mean inferior. Women may have different roles, but this does not mean they are marginalised or subjugated. In fact, the issue of equality between religious roles of women and men is more complicated than simply seeing one gender acting as superior and another acting as subordinate. For those who care to observe closely, they will find that women in BAPS assert their own power through their own initiatives and from their own well-defined spaces. Women, for example, manage their own festivals, newsletters, sporting events, cultural programmes, outings, and a whole range of departments including satsang activities, management, IT, audio-visual and photography amongst others.

Furthermore, if one understands the rationale behind the separation (note: women are not separated from men; both men and women are separated from each other), one will appreciate why there is no question of women being left behind. This is simply a spiritual discipline in a place of worship to help individuals focus their energies on God.

On a spiritual level, being separate from men or further from the sadhus has no bearing on personal faith and spirituality. In fact, our experience is that not only do females significantly outnumber the male devotees at our mandirs, but their faith, devotion and personal discipline very often surpass those of their male counterparts.

Like the male members as well as the sadhus themselves, the female devotees find their greatest source of spiritual nourishment in the public darshan and discourses of the spiritual guru, which are accessible to all. In addition, all major forms of worship and religious practice, such as scriptural study, fasting, chanting, meditation, etc., are equally accessible to everyone, whether male or female, sadhu or householder. Thus, in real terms, being separated or together or farther or closer is immaterial for individual spiritual progress.

Q9. If there is such an emphasis on the “separate but equal” principle for men and women in the Swaminarayan Sampradaya, why are there not separate mandirs for women?

Short Answer:

- **Historical context:** Women in India in the early 19th century were in a relatively unsafe environment. Separate mandirs provided a safe haven for them to worship.
- **Not necessary now:** Society has changed since then and so have the needs of women. Separate mandirs for women are simply no longer necessary.

- **Not feasible:** Factors such as land, financial constraints, etc., make separate mandirs impractical, especially in the West.
- **Same mandir; separate resources:** Pramukh Swami Maharaj and Mahant Swami Maharaj have allocated appropriate resources for both men and women in the same mandirs, where each can conduct their own activities safely and with dignity.

Long Answer: It is historically true that Bhagwan Swaminarayan commissioned a few separate mandirs for women during his lifetime. However, this needs to be considered in the context of the social, cultural and political conditions of early 19th century India. This was an era where women were in a relatively unsafe environment. He wanted to provide a private haven for them where they could worship God in the safety of their own mandir. Society has changed since then and with it, so have the needs of women. Separate mandirs for women are simply no longer necessary.

On a purely practical level, separate mandirs for women would not even be feasible. Several factors, such as the (un)availability of appropriate land and financial constraints, all need to be carefully considered.

Other factors, such as a husband and wife driving two cars to different locations in order to pray, also make separate mandirs for men and women impractical, especially in the West.

For these and many other reasons, Pramukh Swami Maharaj and Mahant Swami Maharaj have allocated appropriate resources for both men and women in the same mandirs, where each can conduct their own activities in modern classrooms, meeting areas and office spaces – safely and with dignity.

Q10. What's wrong with eating onions and garlic, particularly given the many documented health benefits of these vegetables?

Short Answer:

- **Three types of foods:** Sāttvic, rājasic and tāmasic, depending on their predominant guna.
- **Onions and garlic:** Considered to be tāmasic, i.e., they give rise to desires, and impede mental clarity and sharpness.
- **Avoided by many Hindus:** For aspirants who are seeking to rise above the body and attain spiritual perfection, health benefits of foods are outweighed by their negative spiritual effects. Hence, many strict Hindus avoid onions and garlic (and may derive their health benefits from other sattvic sources).

Long Answer: According to Hindu beliefs, foods have three basic qualities, or gunas. These are sattvagun (goodness), rajogun (passion or desire), and tamogun (ignorance or darkness). Foods which have a predominance of each quality are known, respectively, as sāttvic, rājasic and tāmasic.

Tāmasic food is food which is stale, spoilt or otherwise impure. It is believed to produce negative emotions such as anger, jealousy and greed. This category includes onions and garlic, which is why many practicing Hindus avoid them.

Rājasic food includes meat, eggs, fish, spices, hot peppers, pickles and other pungent or spicy foods. They are believed to produce strong emotional qualities, passions, and restlessness in the mind.

Sāttvic food is that which is non-irritating to the stomach and purifying to the mind. This includes fruits, nuts, whole grains, vegetables and dairy products. These foods are believed to produce calmness and nobility.

Those striving for spiritual development are advised to avoid rājasic and tāmasic foods because such foods give rise to desires and impede mental clarity and sharpness.

Onions and garlic are reported to have certain health benefits. However, for aspirants who are seeking to rise above the body and attain spiritual perfection, such physical benefits are insignificant compared to their negative spiritual effects. Besides, the health benefits of eating onions and garlic can be derived from eating other sãttvic foods or supplements.

Q11. Isn't there a conflict between religion (faith) and science (logic)?

In Hinduism, the Mundaka Upanishad classifies knowledge into two groups: parã (spiritual) and aparã (temporal); the Katha Upanishad describes the paths of shreya (spiritual progress) and preya (material). Science caters for material needs, while religion serves the spiritual needs of individuals. Both belong to two different domains; one based on reason and the other on faith. They are complementary to each other in Hinduism, yet ultimately, spiritual knowledge is considered to be superior. The great rishi-scientists of India were wedded to spirituality, yet still made extraordinary scientific discoveries and inventions.

Q12. If God exists, why is there evil in the world?

The contrast and conflict between good and evil have been in existence since the beginning of time. There are two types of jivas or souls in the world: daivi (pious) and āsuri (evil). Which category an individual falls into is determined by one's actions. People develop an evil nature when they go against the moral codes prescribed by God, guru, shastras and society. This is ultimately caused by swabhāvs and feelings of I and mine, and results in evil and suffering in the world.

Since Hinduism does not believe in eternal damnation, even an āsuri jiva can eventually be liberated from their vile nature through the association of God or a true guru.

Hinduism also guides that one should be vigilant and shun the company of immoral people, so that their corrupting attributes do not affect one's lives. Thus, despite there being evil in the world, we can protect ourselves by only keeping the company of pious people.

Pramukh Swami Maharaj has said, "A small drop of righteousness immortalises, whereas a small drop of unrighteousness, like poison, is fatal. This is the principle and mainstay of India and the world. And when a person sanctions their own unrighteous actions, then their actions should not be spread, their books should not be read or listened to; so that one can progress, be compassionate to others, enrich society with virtues and please God."

Q13. If God is all-powerful and all-merciful, then why is there so much suffering in the world?

According to Hinduism, the eight factors of place, time, karma, company, mantra, meditation, initiation and scriptures can each affect a person either favourably or unfavourably and thus can be the cause of their happiness or misery.

A person's swabhāvs (base natures) also brings suffering to one's self, their family, community, country and the world. In fact, God warns us to control these swabhāvs so that we can live in peace and harmony. Abiding by his spiritual injunctions thus ensures that we remain happy in life.

Q14. Is it not considered violence to pick and eat vegetables and fruits?

Hinduism recognises that there are jivas in plants, but they are categorised as lower life forms that do not possess a developed and greater consciousness or emotions like animals and humans do. Furthermore, humans need to sustain themselves in some way, so the Hindu shastras sanction that a vegetarian diet does not amount to violence.

Q15. If one is honest and virtuous, what is the need for religion in one's life?

By being honest and virtuous, one gains punya (merit), and subsequently attains swarg where one may enjoy material pleasures. However, once our punya is exhausted, we have to go through the cycle of births and deaths again. According to Hinduism, one cannot attain **ultimate moksha** through the observance of morality alone. For that one has to take refuge in God or the God-realised guru and perform spiritual sadhanas to earn their grace and attain ultimate moksha.

It said in our Hindu scriptures that God and Guru are pleased when one offers bhakti to God. In fact, without regular bhakti and satsang in one's life, even one who is learned will regress on their spiritual journey.

Q16. How do Hindus view other religions?

Hinduism itself is a mosaic of different sampradayas practising different belief systems and worshipping various deities, yet there is still unity and harmony. Debates between different sampradayas have remained mostly verbal and have rarely resulted in violent conflicts. This same attitude is applied in the interaction of Hinduism with other religions. Throughout India's history, communities of Parsis (Zoroastrians), Jews, Christians and Muslims have settled in India and been given the respect and freedom to worship and practise their faith. Hinduism respects all faiths and believes in interfaith harmony through the celebration of common principles. It does not forcefully convert people nor create friction, etc., but believes in "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" as per the Vedas, which means that "the world is one family".

FAQs on Social Media and Mental Wellbeing

Q1. What are the advantages and disadvantages of social media?

Social media refers to any web-based communication tools that enable people to interact with each other by sharing and consuming information. It has the following advantages and disadvantages:

Advantages

1. To develop through innovative and enhanced learning methods.
2. Opportunities for community engagement through raising money for charity and volunteering for local events.
3. To keep connected with friends and satsang activities globally.

Disadvantages

1. Loss of productivity – interrupts, disturbs and takes valuable time away from serious thinking and reading.
2. Licence to be hurtful.
3. Decreased face-to-face communication skills.
4. Creation of a skewed self-image.
5. Reduced family closeness.
6. Distractions from studies or work.
7. Private information becoming public, with potential for misuse.
8. Laziness.
9. Makes people less tolerant and more feeble-minded.
10. Corrupts young children's minds who may become addicted and are unable to live without it. They do not exercise discretion over what they watch and thus minds are polluted.

It is important to use social media with discretion so that we aren't affected by the above disadvantages. One of the biggest disadvantages from a spiritual perspective, is that it can make us more outward focussed because we become more concerned with our image and what others are doing.

We should only use it as much as is necessary and not see it as a replacement for real face-to-face interactions. It is very easy to fall into the trap of endless scrolling, but setting time limits can help. We should also be careful about what private information we post online, because it then becomes available to everyone, including potential criminals.

Q2. Observing Stri-Purush Maryada is increasingly difficult in today's world of social media. How important is self control (saiyam) for spiritual progress?

Saiyam (self-restraint) is absolutely essential to tame the senses and mind. Without self-control, one cannot hope to focus one's mind on subtler and higher spiritual aspects. Brahmacharya or celibacy, tapascharya or regular austerities, daily swadhyaya (study of shastras), and sant samagam (keeping the company of a God-realised Sadhu) are necessary to elevate oneself.

The four stages of life in ancient times were prescribed for the development and spiritual elevation of the individual. The first was brahmacharya (celibacy) which the student observed up to the age of 25 (brahmacharya-ashrama).

Observance of brahmacharya was required to aid maximum concentration in study and self-development. Thereafter, they would marry (vivaha) and in this stage, fidelity to one's spouse was important (gruhastha-ashrama). In fact, Yogiji Maharaj practically defined brahmacharya for a householder as being faithful to one's spouse.

Pramukh Swami Maharaj gave valuable guidance on using the internet and social media: "Science has advanced tremendously today. Before using anything, we should exercise the power of discretion (vivek-buddhi)

as prescribed by our shastras. Such discretion develops through the company of good people, the realised Sadhu and God. With relation to business and academic studies, digital innovation may be useful, but one has to remain very vigilant to remain uninfluenced by its dark side. Many are overconfident about themselves, thinking that nothing will happen by looking at such things. But even the great have fallen. There are examples of people who were great, from our Sampradaya and others, that have succumbed to such obstacles. You can interact on what is deemed necessary, but not on unnecessary things. There is no objection to interact on academic or business aspects. If you want to know about religion, you can interact. There is no objection to interacting about things that enhance your character, culture, faith in religion and God, and make your life good and philanthropic. But there is no benefit in interacting about things that spoil your life, family and society. This means that you should not interact, chat, watch or listen to bad things.”

Mahant Swami Maharaj echoes this when speaking on the use of mobile phones: “Pramukh Swami Maharaj’s wish is my wish and opinion. Swami Bapa believed it to be poison; but there is a need to use it. So, it must be used with proper discretion. It should be used appropriately with regards to time duration and frequency of calling. Even one who is spiritually knowledgeable (jnani) and steeped in meditation (dhyani) lapses by using it. It contains moha (attractions and delusions), which makes one forget (right and wrong). Therefore, be alert and careful. One will remain happy to the extent one exercises discretion (vivek).”

A recent documentary – The Social Dilemma (2020) – reveals how social media’s design nurtures addiction to maximise profit. It has the ability to manipulate people’s views, emotions and behaviour. It is also misused to spread conspiracy theories and disinformation. Thus, it is extremely important that we all exercise vivek, as per the guidance of our gurus.

Q3. How does satsang help us with overcoming grief and depression?

Short Answer:

- Meditation has been proved by scientific studies to be a stressbuster and shown to make life more meaningful and productive.
- Swamini Vato 1.148: Chanting God's holy name, listening to his life story or worshipping him brings inner peace and joy.
- Satsang Diksha Shlok 152: "One should understand that all which has happened, which is happening, and which will happen is solely due to Swaminarayan Bhagwan's will and only for my benefit."
- Yogiji Maharaj: "Remembering [the divine episodes of God or his realised Sadhu] dissolves all misery."

Long Answer: The symptoms of depression are intense, prolonged and interfere with a person's daily activities. These features differentiate depression from normal sadness. These problems can become chronic or recurrent, substantially impairing an individual's ability to cope with daily life.

Bhagwan Swaminarayan describes in Vachanamrut Sarangpur 18 that a person who is depressed either sleeps, cries, takes out one's frustrations on someone else, or one may even fast to overcome one's depression. In addition, he adds that when a person becomes severely depressed, one may even resort to committing suicide.

Increasing scientific evidence from studies on patients shows the efficacy of spiritual faith and practices in enabling depressed or ill people to recover from or help ward off stress and ailments. Meditation has proved to be a stressbuster and shown to make life more meaningful and productive. Besides providing peace and joy, it helps to augment the immune system.

Gunatitanand Swami, the foremost disciple and successor of Bhagwan Swaminarayan, has revealed in his discourses, "There are two means for

inner peace and freedom from agitation: one is to do bhajan and the other is to believe God as the all-doer. And when happiness comes one's way, then accept it; when misery and pain come one's way, accept them as well." (Swamini Vato 1.148) In brief, chanting God's holy name, listening to his life story or worshipping him brings inner peace and joy.

Once, Muktanand Swami, a leading paramhansa of Bhagwan Swaminarayan, was unhappy and lost his inner peace. He asked Bhagwan Swaminarayan (Shriji Maharaj) as to how he could experience peace again. The latter started narrating his birth and childhood stories. Muktanand Swami felt that Maharaj had misunderstood his question. So, he asked again. But Bhagwan Swaminarayan continued with his life's narration. Muktanand Swami expressed that he wanted peace of mind. Maharaj felt that Muktanand Swami had been unable to grasp that his own life's narration was the panacea to his problem. So, Maharaj told him to go on satsang vicharan to the villages. When Muktanand Swami was about to leave, he met Nityanand Swami, who explained to him that the actual cure for his lack of inner peace was listening to Maharaj's divine prasangs or lila.

Bhagwan Swaminarayan has explained in Vachanamrut Gadhada I 38 about remembering the divine episodes of God. Yogiji Maharaj used to often say, "Remembering [the divine episodes of God or his realised Sadhu] dissolves all misery." Thus, remembering or listening to God's divine episodes can relieve one of depression, frustration or misery.

It is also necessary to understand God as the all-doer to remain happy. Mahant Swami Maharaj has explained in Satsang Diksha Shlok 152, "One should understand that all which has happened, which is happening, and which will happen is solely due to Swaminarayan Bhagwan's will and only for my benefit." By understanding God to be the all-doer, we realise that everything is happening as per his wish and for our benefit.

Notes

Notes

