

EDUCATIONAL INSIGHT

Akshar-Purushottam School of Vedanta



BY SWAMI PARAMTATTVADAS

A BAPS Disciple of Guru Pramukh Swami Maharaj and Mahant Swami Maharaj





A presentation of the Swaminarayan philosophy, which was recently recognized as an authentic school of Vedānta, in line with yet distinct from the philosophies of Shankara, Ramanuja, Maḍhva, Nimbarka, Vallabha and Chaitanya

This is the story of a rare occurrence in Hindu sacred literature, the appearance of a distinct school of Vedānta. It has been hundreds of years since such a happening, and the Hindu world celebrates. In this Educational Insight, the monks of the Swaminarayan Fellowship share a summary of their philosophy and the amazing events that gave birth to this philosophical revelation, a story inspired by Pramukh Swami Maharaj, captured in a five-volume Sanskrit commentary by his disciple Swami Bhadreshdas and reconciled with academic authenticity by Swami Paramtattvadas. While the subject is technical and complex, readers will find it fascinating to step into this theological realm and watch as history unfolds before our eyes.



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The practice of earnest inquiry has long been embedded in Hindu devotional life and intellectual discourse. For example, the *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* opens with the following series of questions: “What is the cause? Is it Brahman? From where are we born? By what do we live? And on what are we established? Governed by whom, O you knowers of Brahman, do we live in pleasure and pain, each in our respective situation?” Such lofty questions represent a heartfelt quest to know ourselves, the world around us, and the supreme power by which everything is enlivened, sustained and can be ultimately transcended for eternal freedom and bliss. This perennial seeking of spiritual knowledge and liberation, when grounded in the sacred authoritative texts of the *Brahmasutras*, *Upanishads* and *Bhagavad-Gita*—collectively known as the *Prasthanatrayi*—is known as the classical system of Indian thought called Vedānta.

Vedānta as Darshan: The *Vedas* are considered the highest scriptural authority in Hinduism. *Vedānta*, as the name indicates—*Veda* + *anta* (literally “end”)—refers to the conclusive essence of the *Vedas* that is enshrined in their final set of treatises, the *Upanishads*. Together with the *Brahmasutras* and the *Bhagavad-Gita*, which further clarify and consolidate the teachings of the *Upanishads*, these three sets of scriptures comprise Vedānta Darshan.

Vedānta is classified as a darshan because it is described as the art of seeing. *Darshan* is derived from the Sanskrit verb-root *drś*, to see,¹ which in a deeper sense means to perceive or know.² *Darshan* thus literally means seeing, and can also mean “that by which one can see,” i.e., the eyes. In a fuller, cognitive sense, a darshan is a system of wisdom and practice that helps one know, experience and realize the truth; it provides a vision and insight into the reality of ourselves, the world and God. Of the six ancient systems of Indian philosophy, classically called the Shad-Darshan, Vedānta is the most prominent and widely practiced today.

Darshans within Vedānta: Within Vedānta Darshan itself there emerged several individual schools of thought, each one also identified as a darshan. A tradition arose in which each school established itself according to the teachings of the *Prasthanatrayi*; only then would it be accepted as an authentic school of Vedānta. Hence, exponents from each of the Vedānta schools formulated commentaries on the *Brahmasutras*, *Upanishads* and *Bhagavad-Gita*, providing their own interpretations of the complex texts to demonstrate that their doctrines were grounded in the original revelatory sources, thus validating their school of thought. [Continued on following page.]

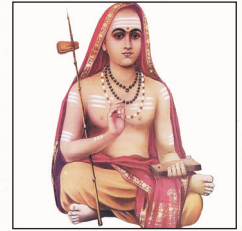
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In a special chair that lifted him high in the air, His Holiness Pramukh Swami Maharaj performs the pran-pratishtha (infusing ceremony) for the huge murti of Bhagwan Swaminarayan at the Akshardham temple in New Delhi, India





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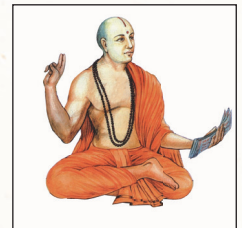
Shankara



Ramanuja



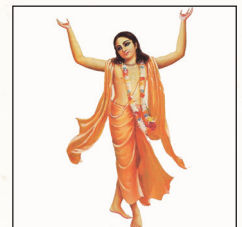
Nimbarka



Madhva



Vallabha



Chaitanya



Swaminarayan

A Distinct School of Vedānta

Hinduism has been blessed with magnificent scholars over the centuries who have written commentaries on the *Prasthanatrayi* and established or consolidated their respective schools of Vedānta. Among these, some of the most notable exponents and the distinct darshan they each propounded include the following: Shankara's Advaita Darshan, Ramanuja's Vishishtadvaita Darshan, Madhva's Dvaita Darshan, Nimbarka's Dvaitadvaita Darshan, Vallabha's Shuddhadvaita Darshan, and Chaitanya Mahaprabhu's Achintyabhedabheda Darshan.³ Akshar-Purushottam Darshan, as revealed by Bhagwan Swaminarayan, is positioned within this rich tradition of Vedānta darshans.

In line with this hallowed tradition, His Holiness Pramukh Swami Maharaj, the previous spiritual guru of BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha, instructed Bhadreshdas Swami in 2005 to write Sanskrit commentaries on these sacred texts. Bhadreshdas Swami, one of the leading scholars of our time, had already been studying Swaminarayan texts, Sanskrit and the classical schools of Indian philosophy for over 24 years under the inspiration and guidance of Pramukh Swami Maharaj. With his guru's blessings and his own scholarly expertise and tremendous hard work, Bhadreshdas Swami completed the mammoth task in less than three years, offering the five-volume, 2,000-page classical commentaries to Pramukh Swami Maharaj before the end of 2007. Titled *Swaminarayan Bhashyam*, these commentaries provide a word-by-word explanation and elaboration of the *Brahmasutras*, ten principal *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad-Gita* according to the teachings of Bhagwan Swaminarayan.

Bhadreshdas Swami subsequently composed the *Swaminarayan Siddhanta Sudha*—a classical *vadagrantha*, or didactic treatise that offers a systematic and comprehensive exposition, justification and defense of the Akshar-Purushottam Darshan's theological and philosophical principles. He offered this work to His Holiness Mahant Swami Maharaj in 2017. Together, these classical texts have helped Akshar-Purushottam Darshan be recognized among scholarly communities in India and abroad as a distinct, authentic school of Vedānta.

Scholarly Impressions

The scholarly works of Bhadreshdas Swami have received worldwide critical acclaim from eminent experts of Indian philosophy, theology, Indology, Sanskrit and other related fields, where they have both praised the literary value of the texts and recognized Akshar-Purushottam Darshan as a distinct school of Vedānta.

The late Professor N. S. Ramanuja Tatacharya, former Vice-Chancellor of the prestigious Rashtriya Sanskrit Vidyapeeth at Tirupati and award-winning researcher at the French Institute of Pondicherry, was one of the most senior and renowned scholars in India on Navya-Nyaya and Ramanuja Vedānta. He writes: "In the past, eminent *ācāryas* such as Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, Madhva and Vallabha have put forth immense effort to establish Advaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita, Dvaita and Śuddhādvaita, respectively. They have done this by composing commentarial texts based on the *Prasthanatrayi* according to their own teachings and corresponding schools of thought.... Sadhu Bhadreshdas' complete commentary on the *Prasthanatrayi*, entitled the *Svāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam*, is exemplary of this continued tradition. The work presented by Sadhu Bhadreshdas is a monumental exposition of a novel philosophy and is a priceless contribution to the world."⁴

Professor Tatacharya further explains, "Although some of the principles of Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, Madhva and others of the Vedānta tradition are similar to one another, there are many principles... that are characteristic of these schools of thought, and hence, distinguish them from one another. The Svāminārāyaṇa tradition is also to be understood as being distinct for these same reasons."⁵ Furthermore, "Although Swaminarayan did not himself compose commentaries on the *Upanishads*, *Gita*, or any other sacred texts, he often cited and offered his interpretations on them in his discourses. These interpretations of the verses were distinct from those offered by *ācāryas* including Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja, who preceded him and offered their own interpretations according to their respective schools of thought. Swaminarayan's expositions were unprecedented and novel; thus, many were unaware that his *sampradāya* has its own distinct philosophy."⁶

The late Professor Radhakrishnan Bhatt, former Head of

Vedānta Philosophies Compared

Time of Inception	Exponent	Name of Darshan	Metaphysical Entities	Key Features
8th century	Shankara	Advaita	One: Nirguna Brahman	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * The attribute-less, formless Brahman is the only reality¹ * The universe, its constituents and all individual selves are unreal² * Brahman and the individual self are metaphysically non-dual³ * Knowledge is the only and ultimate means to realizing one's identity as Brahman⁴
11th & 12th	Ramanuja	Vishisht-advaita	Three: Chit, Achit & (Saguna) Brahman	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Individual souls and the universe exist as distinct metaphysical categories, but are ultimately wholly dependent on God, as the body is on the soul⁵ * Brahman has a divine form⁶ and infinite positive attributes⁷ * Bhakti is the ultimate means to attaining liberation, but is aided by the knowledge of God's glory (gnan) and performance of one's duties (karma)⁸
12th or 13th	Nimbarka	Dvaitadvaita	Three: Chit, Achit and Brahman	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Krishna is the supreme being and Radha his principal devotee⁹ * Individual souls (chit) and maya (achit) are distinct from Brahman (dvaita), yet cannot exist independently without Brahman (advaita)¹⁰ * Bhakti is the principal means for liberation¹¹
13th & 14th	Madhva	Dvaita	Two: Swatantra-tattva and Paratantra-tattva	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Vishnu is the sole independent entity¹² * All other entities, including the universe and individual selves, are real but dependent on Vishnu for their existence¹³ * There is a five-fold substantial difference within realities: 1) between the jivas and God, 2) between insentient matter and God, 3) within jivas, 4) between jivas and insentient matter, and 5) within different forms of insentient matter¹⁴ * Bhakti, founded upon knowledge of God's glory, is the means to liberation¹⁵
15th & 16th	Vallabha	Shuddh-advaita	Three: Chit, Achit and Brahman	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Brahman is the singular metaphysical entity to exist¹⁶ * Brahman, by his own will (lila), becomes the jivas and world¹⁷ * Brahman remains forever pure, despite his association with jivas and maya, and jivas and maya are understood as pure, because of their association with Brahman¹⁸ * Complete refuge in and nine-fold bhakti of Krishna is the primary way to liberation¹⁹
16th	Chaitanya Mahaprabhu	Achintya-bhedabheda	Three: Chit, Achit and Brahman	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Krishna is the supreme Godhead²⁰ and is worshiped alongside Radha²¹ * Chaitanya is the combined manifestation of Radha and Krishna²² * The difference (bheda) and non-difference (abheda) between God and the individual selves, the universe, and his powers is inconceivable (achintya), as between fire and its sparks²³ * Bhakti-rasa is the ultimate means and end²⁴
19th	Bhagwan Swaminarayan	Akshar-Purushottam	Five: Jiva, Ishwar, Maya, Akshar (Brahman) and Purushottam (Parabrahman)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Swaminarayan is Parabrahman Purushottam, the highest reality²⁵ * Akshar is distinct from Purushottam and greater than all else except Purushottam²⁶ * Purushottam remains present on earth through Akshar, who takes the form of the living guru, for the continued liberation of countless souls²⁷ * The way to and fruit of liberation is to realize oneself as Akshar and offer devotion to Purushottam with loving servitude²⁸

Footnotes

1. Shankara, *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* 3.2.14; Shankara, *Upadeśasāhasrī* 1.109.
 2. Shankara, *Upadeśasāhasrī* 17.13-21; Grimes (ed.), *The Vivekaśūdhāmaṇi of Śaṅkarācārya Bhagavatpāda* 20, p. 70.
 3. Shankara, *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* 4.4.4.
 4. Shankara, *Bhagavadgītābhāṣya* 9.1-3.
 5. Ramanuja, *Sribhāṣya* 1.2.2.
 6. Ramanuja, *Sribhāṣya* 1.2.1.
 7. Ramanuja, *Sribhāṣya* 3.2.11.
 8. Ramanuja, *Vedārthasaṅgraha* 238.
 9. Sarma, *An Introduction to Mādhva Vedānta*, p. 50.
 10. *ibid.*
 11. *Viṣṇutattvavivirṇaya*.

12. Prabhāñjanācārya, Vyāsanakere and Vādirāja, *Mahābhārata Tātparyanirṇaya of Śrī Madhvacārya: With the Commentary of Śrī Vādirājatīrtha / Anandatīrtha Bhāgavatpāda* (Bangalore: Sri Vyasa Madhwa Seva Pratisthana, 1998), 1.85, p. 40.
 13. Nimbarka, *Vedāntaparījātasaurabha*
 14. Srinivasa, *Vedāntakaustubha*.
 15. Srinivasa, *Vedāntakaustubha*.
 16. Devarshi Ramanath Shastri, *Shuddhadvaita Darshan*.
 17. Vallabha, *Tattvārthadīpa* 65.
 18. Hariyāya Gokulanātha, Richard Barz (tr.), *The Bhakti Sect of Vallabhacharya* (Faridabad: Thomson Press, 1976), p. 79, and *Shuddhadvait Martand* 27-28.

19. Devarshi Ramanath Shastri, *Shuddhadvaita Darshan*.
 20. O. B. L. Kapoor, *The Philosophy and Religion of Sri Caitanya* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1994), p. 101.
 21. Graham Schweig, "Krishna, the Intimate Deity" in Edwin Bryant and Maria Ekstrand (eds), *The Hare Krishna Movement: The Postcharismatic Fate of a Religious Transplant* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), p. 19.
 22. Steven Rosen, "Who Is Shri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu?" in Edwin Bryant and Maria Ekstrand (eds), *The Hare Krishna Movement: The Postcharismatic Fate of a Religious Transplant* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004),

p. 63.
 23. Ravi Gupta, "Where One Is Forever Two: God and World in Jiva Gosvāmī's Bhāgavata-sandarbhā" in Ravi Gupta (ed.), *Caitanya Vaiṣṇava Philosophy: Tradition, Reason and Devotion* (Ashgate, 2014), pp. 35-60.
 24. Schweig, *Krishna, the Intimate Deity*, p. 20-22.
 25. *Vachanamruts* Gadhada 2.13, Gadhada 3.31, Gadhada 3.38 and Amdavad 7.
 26. *Vachanamrut* Gadhada 2.3.
 27. *Vachanamrut* Gadhada 1.71.
 28. *Vachanamruts* Loya 12 and Gadhada 2.3.



Sanskrit Research and Publication at Karnataka State Open University in Mysore, deduced from the *Brahmasutra Swaminarayan Bhashyam*: “By studying this commentary, one concludes that the Svāminārāyaṇa *sampradāya* and the Akṣara Puruṣottama Siddhānta is an independent tradition that is based on the ancient Vedic principles. The tradition’s principles greatly differ from Rāmānuja’s Viśiṣṭādvaita, Vallabhadāsa’s Suddhādvaita and the philosophy of Madhva, Nimbārka and other Vedānta darśana.”⁷

On 31 July 2017 in Varanasi, India, prominent members of the Shri Kashi Vidvat Parishad,⁸ after studying the *Swaminarayan Bhashyam* commentaries and the *Swaminarayan Siddhanta Sudha*, concluded that “Sadhu Bhadreshdas is an acharya and a contemporary commentator in the lineage of commentators on the *Prasthanatrayi*” and “it is in every way appropriate to identify Shri Swaminarayan’s Vedānta by the title of Akshar-Purushottam Darshan. Therefore, we all unanimously endorse that this Akshar-Purushottam Siddhanta revealed

by Parabrahman Swaminarayan is a Vedic siddhanta that is distinct from Advaita, Vishishtadvaita, Dvaita and all other schools.” In commemoration of this historical contribution to Vedānta Darshan, the Shri Kashi Vidvat Parishad presented a written proclamation attesting to the above, which they presented again, as an engraved copperplate, in New Delhi on 13 August 2017.

At the 17th World Sanskrit Conference at British Columbia University in Vancouver, Canada, in 2018, Bhadreshdas Swami presented a succinct introduction to Akshar-Purushottam Darshan in the inaugural session, outlining its salient features and roots in the *Prasthanatrayi*. The assembled scholars welcomed the lucid presentation and applauded the *Swaminarayan Bhashyam* and *Swaminarayan Siddhanta Sudha* as a major contribution to the world of Sanskrit literature. Further sessions also saw various academic papers presented on Akshar-Purushottam Darshan and a panel discussion of leading Sanskrit scholars of Western and Indian academia on the *Swaminarayan Siddhanta Sudha*.⁹

This 16-page educational Insight offers a brief overview of this distinct school of Vedānta called Akshar-Purushottam Darshan.



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Footnotes

1. Gajanan Balkrishna Palsule, *A Concordance of Sanskrit Dhātupāṭhas* (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1955), p. 186.
2. Sayanacharya, *Mādhyamīyā Dhātuvṛtti [a treatise on Sanskrit roots based on the Dhātupāṭha of Pāṇini]*, Dwarikadas Shastri (ed.) (Varanasi: Prachya Bharati Prakashan, 1964), 1,707, p. 286.
3. Surendranath Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, Vols 1-5 (London: Cambridge University Press, 1922-1955).
4. N.S. Ramanuja Tatacharya, “Sādhu-Bhadresādāsa-Vīracita-Prasthanatrayī-Svāminārāyaṇa-Bhāṣyam-Saṅkṣipta-Paricayah,” *Journal of The Oriental Institute*, 66.1-4 (September-December 2016 to March-June 2017), 280.
5. *ibid.*
6. *ibid.*, 280-281.
7. N. Radhakrishnan Bhatt, “Brahmasūtra-Svāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam,” *Journal of the BAPS Swaminarayan Research Institute*, 1.1 (2018), 179.
8. The Shri Kashi Vidvat Parishad is a highly esteemed, time-honored council that has been formed for the protection of Vedic dharma. It adjudicates on matters of Vedic teaching and research, carrying authority throughout India. The council comprises some of the most illustrious scholars in India from a wide array of fields, including grammar, logic, poetics, philosophy and literature.
9. *The 17th World Sanskrit Conference: Conference Programme*, pp. 27, 32 & 33.

Left: Shastriji Maharaj (1865-1951) clarified Akshar-Purushottam Darshan and initiated its propagation worldwide, popularizing it with the name *Akshar-Purushottam*. He is the founder of BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha. *Right:* Swaminarayan (seated on right) is revered as Purushottam, the Supreme Reality, who works through and is revealed by his worshipful sadhu, Gunatitanand Swami (*left*). The fellowship regards him and all subsequent successors as Akshar, i.e. perfect vessels of Swaminarayan.

The Divine Life of Bhagwan Swaminarayan

Bhagwan Swaminarayan is Parabrahman Purushottam, the highest existential reality. He manifested on Earth in human form on 3 April 1781 in the tiny village of Chhapaiya, near Ayodhya, in north India. He chose to be born into a modest, pious family, to mother Bhakti and father Dharmadev. They named him Ghanshyam, though he would be known by many names throughout his life, including Neelkanth, Sahajanand Swami, Shrihari and Shriji Maharaj.

Ghanshyam brought great joy to his family and everyone who met him. But even as a child, it was obvious that he was no ordinary human. He sent animals into trances, overcame evil beings with his miraculous powers, and often revealed his higher purpose on earth—to liberate countless souls from their ignorance and grant them the eternal bliss of God. Once he brought a catch of fish back to life, teaching the fisherman that ahimsa is the

highest ethical code, and inspiring him towards a life of non-violence and compassion.

Dharmadev tutored Ghanshyam in Vedic literature, the *Puranas*, the epics, and other key texts of Hindu wisdom. Ghanshyam’s divine genius meant he quickly mastered the sacred scriptures. When he was only 10, he won a debate with the pundits of Varanasi, employing incisive scriptural testimony and irrefutable logic.

On 29 June 1792, having served his parents to their final breath, 11-year-old Ghanshyam renounced his home and family to embark upon a spiritual journey of epic proportions. For seven years and almost 8,000 miles, Ghanshyam traveled the length and breadth of India, crossing into Nepal and Tibet (China), and through Myanmar and Bangladesh. During this time, he came to be known as Neelkanth. Barefooted and alone, carrying no

The Philosophy: Akshar-Purushottam Darshan

Sources: God, Guru and Scripture

Bhagwan Swaminarayan was Parabrahman Purushottam. He himself revealed Akshar-Purushottam Darshan, which is an exceptionally significant feature of this darshan. God himself is describing what he is and how to realize him. Indeed, when he manifested on earth just over two hundred years ago, he is *showing* who he is, making the revelation especially gracious, direct and powerful.

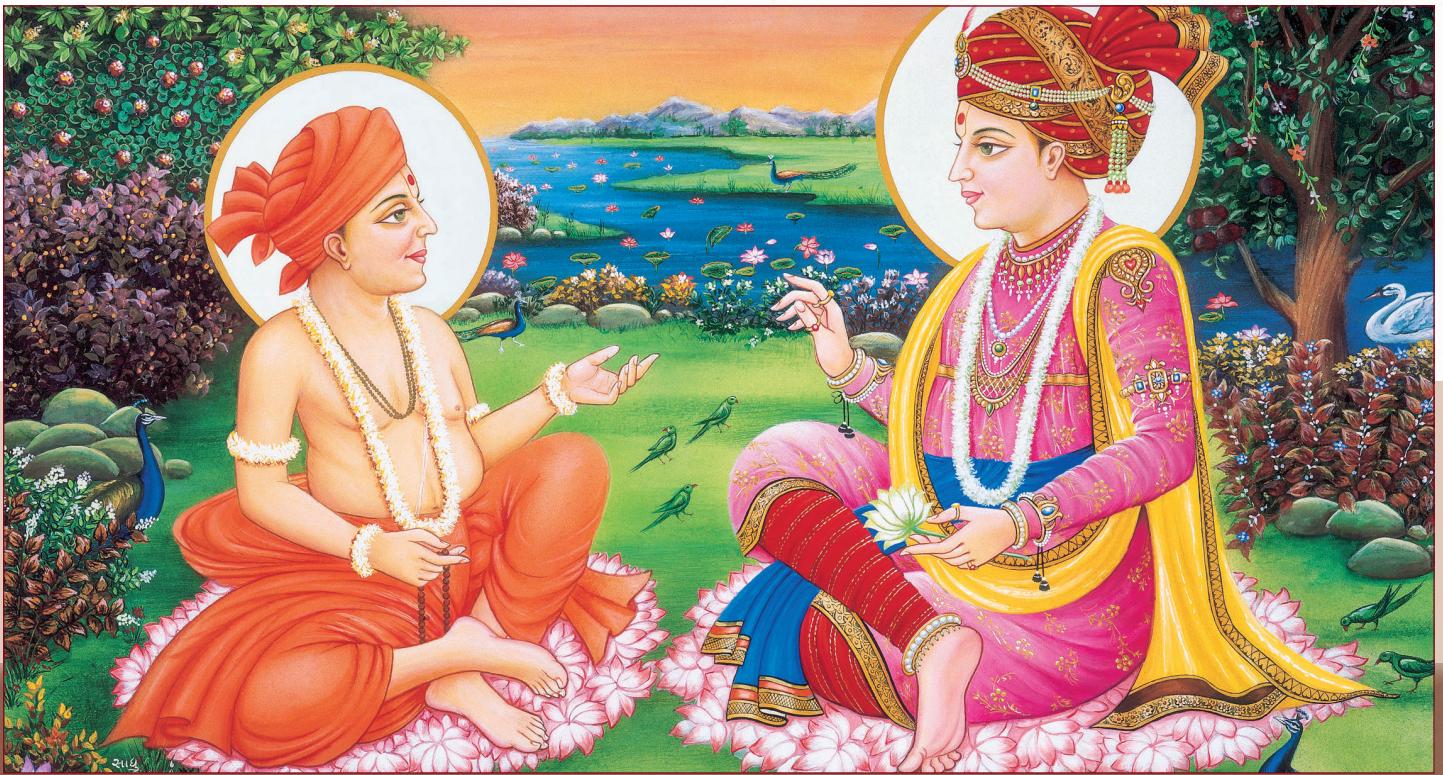
During his manifestation on earth, Bhagwan Swaminarayan delivered extensive discourses in which he articulated the doctrines of Akshar-Purushottam Darshan. These discourses were meticulously documented by four of his most senior and learned swamis.

This compilation came to be known as the *Vachanamrut*. Bhagwan Swaminarayan's teachings from the *Vachanamrut* thus form one of the most important sources of Akshar-Purushottam Darshan.

According to a central Hindu belief, it is imperative to seek a qualified guru to understand such scriptural wisdom. For example, the *Mundaka Upanishad* instructs:

*Tadvijñānārthaṃ sa gurum evābhigacchet
samidhpaniḥ śrotriyaṃ brahma niṣṭham |*

“To realize that [higher knowledge], imperatively go, with sacrificial wood in hand, to only that guru who is the knower of the true meaning of revealed texts, who is



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maps, no food and no money, he crossed raging rivers, faced ferocious animals, and survived the freezing winter of the Himalayas. Wearing nothing but a loincloth around his waist, he trekked to Kedarnath, Badrinath and Gangotri, navigating the treacherous mountainous terrain at heights of more than 19,000 feet and enduring temperatures that regularly plummeted to -20° C (-4° F). He even reached Mount Kailash and Lake Manasarovar in Tibet.

During the monsoon of 1793, Neelkanth arrived in Pulhashram, near Muktinath, in Nepal. For 68 days, Neelkanth stood on one leg in yogic posture, performing austerities in torturous weather to bless the world with his purity and goodness. By the age of 14, Neelkanth had mastered ashtanga yoga.

Wherever Neelkanth traveled, he blessed the land and liberated spiritual aspirants along the way. His journey was a story of courage, kindness and enlightenment.

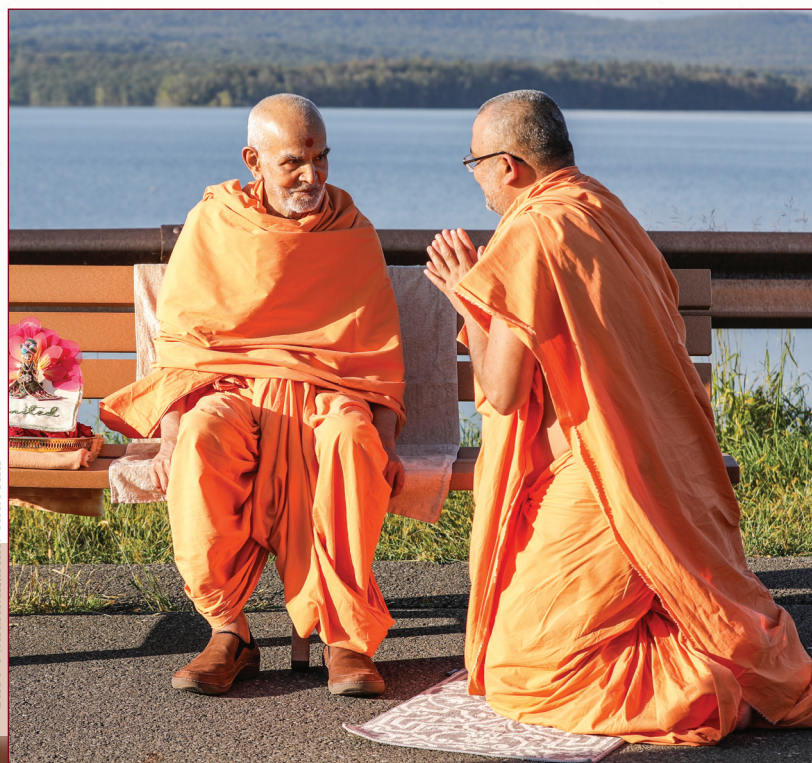
On 21 August 1799, Neelkanth arrived in western Gujarat, from where, as Sahajanand Swami, he went on to establish the Swaminarayan Sampradaya in 1801 at the age of 20. One of his first works was to introduce a powerful new mantra for daily worship. It often sent people into samadhi, a trance-like state where they enjoyed divine visions, including seeing Sahajanand Swami as the supreme reality. Its widespread popularity led to Sahajanand Swami becoming synonymous with that mantra, *Swaminarayan*.¹

Bhagwan Swaminarayan spent the next 28 years traveling around Gujarat, ushering in many religious and social reforms and spearheading a spiritual awakening. He preached against superstitions, addictions and violence, he served the poor and needy, and he championed the welfare of women, children and the underprivileged. For example, he admonished malpractices such as *sati* (widow immolation) and *dudhpiti* (female

Brahman, and who is firmly established [in God].”

That is, only the guru who is the living form of Brahman (“*brahma*”) and fully established in Parabrahman (“*niṣṭham*”) can have the most direct and perfect realization of scriptural truths (“*śrotriyam*”), making him the most qualified and able to convey them.¹ To be precise, according to the *Bhagavad-Gita* at 4:34, such gurus are not only knowers of the revealed truth (“*jñāninaḥ*”), but direct seers (“*tattvadarśinaḥ*”) of it.²

In Akshar-Purushottam Darshan, the guru is the human embodiment of Brahman on earth and is referred to varyingly by such names as *Sant*, *Ekantika Bhakta* or *Satpurush*. In being a pure and complete vessel of Parabrahman, through whom Parabrahman Purushottam reveals himself and leads devotees to himself, the Aksharbrahman Guru serves as the perfect medium to correctly explain the meaning of the scriptures. Thus, Bhagwan Swaminarayan proclaims the guru throughout the *Vachanamrut* as the exclusive authoritative guide to scriptural knowledge and spiritual realization. For example,



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infanticide), encouraged education and established places of worship for all women.

His charismatic life, profound teachings and works of edification attracted followers from all over India and a spectrum of religious and cultural backgrounds. During his lifetime, he amassed an estimated fellowship of more than two million, and ordained around 3,000 swamis, 500 of whom were of the highest monastic order, called paramhansas. They worshiped him as God.

Bhagwan Swaminarayan garnered the respect of British officials and Christian clergy, including the Governor of Bombay, Sir John Malcolm, and the Bishop of Calcutta, Reginald Heber. Bishop Heber writes about Bhagwan Swaminarayan in his journal of 1824-25: “His morality was said to be far better than any which could be learned from the Shaster [scriptures]. He preached a great degree of purity, forbidding his disciples so much as to

after delivering an exceptionally important discourse on the nature of God, in particular alluding to himself as Purushottam, Bhagwan Swaminarayan appends his address with the following caveat: “However, such discourses regarding the nature of God cannot be understood by oneself even from the scriptures. Even though these facts may be in the scriptures, it is only when the Satpurush manifests on this Earth, and one hears them being narrated by him, that one understands them. They cannot, however, be understood by one’s intellect alone, even from the scriptures.”³

As perfect vessels of Parabrahman Purushottam, the life and teachings of the Aksharbrahman Gurus also serve as vital sources of Akshar-Purushottam Darshan, including, for example, the *Swamini Vato* of Gunatitanand Swami. The *Siddhanta Alekh* written by Pramukh Swami Maharaj,⁴ a succinct creedal treatise of Akshar-Purushottam Darshan, is another example of an exceptionally valuable and venerable source of theological revelation.

The *Swaminarayan Bhashyam* and *Swaminarayan Siddhanta Sudha* also have a prime place within the corpus of primary sources for Akshar-Purushottam Darshan, having been commissioned, guided and ratified by gurus Pramukh Swami Maharaj and Mahant Swami Maharaj.

It is through this revelation of Parabrahman Purushottam Bhagwan Swaminarayan as received through the Aksharbrahman Gurus and the scriptures they explain that one is able to properly understand Akshar-Purushottam Darshan. Currently, that guru is Mahant Swami Maharaj.

Ontology: The Five Eternal Entities

Ontology is the study of being; the philosophical inquiry into the nature of reality and existence. A discussion of any classical school of Vedanta Darshan invariably begins with such an inquiry into its basic entities of existence or realities: Which metaphysical entities does it accept as real? The answer to this fundamental question more often than not reveals much about the school’s basic premises and beliefs. For example,

Left: Swami Bhadreshdas kneels to receive blessings from the present guru, Mahant Swami Maharaj. *Right:* Swaminarayan as a child debates with the pundits of Varanasi.

look on any woman whom they passed. He condemned theft and bloodshed; and those villages and districts which had received him from being among the worst, were now among the best and most orderly in the provinces.”²

Bhagwan Swaminarayan’s moralizing impact on the lawless populace of that time led the British to gift him some land in Ahmedabad to build a temple. Between 1822 and 1828, Bhagwan Swaminarayan consecrated six majestic temples. He also inspired the creation of scores of scriptural texts, including the *Vachanamrut* [see sidebar on p. 48-49], and thousands of bhajans. He was hailed as a patron of the arts and education, while also reviving several Hindu institutions of devotion and festivity, but devoid of the indiscipline and indignity that had crept in over centuries of negligence or misinterpretation.

When Bhagwan Swaminarayan visibly left this Earth on 1 June



Shankara posited a singular, attribute-less Brahman, which necessarily requires the visible world to be unreal and illusory.⁵ In contrast, Ramanuja argued for a Brahman that qualifies sentient and non-sentient entities, allowing for the world to be real as well as individual souls to be distinct from God.⁶ Madhva, on the other hand, propounded a Brahman that is radically distinct and independent from all else.⁷ Uniquely, Bhagwan Swaminarayan revealed that there are five metaphysical entities that are eternal and forever distinct from one another:

- | | |
|---|----------------------|
| 1. Purushottam (also known as Parabrahman) | 3. maya |
| 2. Akshar (also known as Aksharbrahman & Brahman) | 4. ishwar |
| | 5. jiva ⁸ |

Strikingly, he posited *two* Brahmans—Aksharbrahman and Parabrahman. How can this be? And what implications does this have for

such a system of Vedanta? The ensuing discussion based on Bhagwan Swaminarayan's teachings and the *Prasthanatrayi* commentaries will help explain some key aspects of Akshar-Purushottam Darshan while affirming its position as a distinct and authentic school of Vedanta.

Akshar and Purushottam in the *Vachanamrut*

Akshar and Purushottam are the two ontological entities expounded throughout the *Vachanamrut*, which covers every aspect of their nature, function, relationship, means of knowing, etc. Below are excerpts from two separate discourses in which Bhagwan Swaminarayan reveals the essence of Akshar-Purushottam Darshan.

In *Vachanamrut* Loya 12, when outlining varying degrees of faith, Bhagwan Swaminarayan explains that a person with the highest level of resolute faith "realizes that countless millions of brahmands [planetary realms], each encircled by the eight barriers, appear like



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1830, he had already become an epochal figure of public stature and adoration. Henry George Briggs, a notable 19th-century British historian and traveler, wrote in his famous *The Cities of Gujarastra* in 1849, "As the announcement of his death was winged, one wail—loud, piercing and bitter—rang throughout Gujarat, upon the signal calamity which was believed to have befallen the country."³ Manilal C. Parekh, a Gujarati Anglican theologian and historian, wrote: "Indeed, so remarkable are the life and work of Swami Narayana that it is no exaggeration to say that these constitute a very important chapter not only in the religious life

of India, but in the history of Religion in general. In him, Hinduism approximates to the Perfect Form of Religion as in few others, and his life, work and the movement he led have few parallels in the entire range of history."⁴

1. The *Swamināyana-Siddhānta-Sūtrā* explains at pp. 8-9 that in the Swaminarayan mantra, Swami refers to Akshar, and Narayan refers to Purushottam. In other words, Swaminarayan is synonymous with Akshar-Purushottam and thus an encapsulation of Akshar-Purushottam Darshan.
 2. Reginald Heber, *Narrative of a Journal through the Upper Provinces of India from Calcutta to Bombay 1824-1825* (London: John Murray, 1828), Vol. 3, p. 29.
 3. Henry George Briggs, *The Cities of Gujarastra: Their Topography and History; Illustrated in the Journal of a Recent Tour, with Accompanying Documents* (Bombay: James Chesson, 1849), p. 239.
 4. Manilal C. Parekh, *Shri Swami Narayana: A Gospel of Bhagavata Dharma or God in Redemptive Action*, 3rd edn. (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1980), p. ix.



mere atoms before Akshar. Such is the greatness of Akshar, the abode of Purushottam Narayan.” He then immediately states: “One who worships Purushottam realizing that [Akshar] to be one’s own form can be said to possess the highest level of resolute faith.”

Bhagwan Swaminarayan reiterates this doctrine in *Vachanamrut Gadhada 2.3*. This time, when defining *brahmagnan*, he uses *Brahman* for Akshar and *Parabrahman* for Purushottam. He first describes Brahman as “the cause of all,” as its “support,” and that which “pervades all through its indwelling powers.” When describing Parabrahman, Bhagwan Swaminarayan expounds:

“Transcending that Brahman is Parabrahman Purushottam Narayan, who is distinct from Brahman, and is the cause, the support and the inspirer of even Brahman.”

Bhagwan Swaminarayan thus clearly distinguishes Aksharbrahman from Parabrahman, and clarifies Parabrahman as superior to Aksharbrahman.

Bhagwan Swaminarayan goes on to add in the same discourse:

“With such understanding, one should develop a oneness between one’s *jivatma* and that Brahman, and worship Parabrahman while maintaining a master-servant relationship with him. With such understanding, *brahmagnan* also becomes an unobstructed path to attaining the highest state of enlightenment.”⁹

This is the essence of Akshar-Purushottam Darshan, which is comprehensively described and established throughout the *Vachanamrut*.

Akshar and Purushottam in the *Upanishads*

Brahmagnan is synonymous with *brahmavidya*, which is the focus of the *Upanishads*. For example, the *Mundaka Upanishad*, which forms a part of the *Atharva Veda*, lauds *brahmavidya* as the “highest”¹⁰ and “foundation of all forms of knowledge.”¹¹ It then defines it explicitly in the following verse:

*Yenākṣaram puruṣam veda satyaṁ provāca
tām tattvato brahmavidyām ।*

“*Brahmavidya* is that by which Akshar and Purushottam are thoroughly known.”¹²

(Above) Pramukh Swami Maharaj (center, seated on black chair) with several hundred of the more than 1,000 BAPS sadhus; (right) Swami Bhadrashdas has been honored for his historical contributions to Indian philosophy by more than 150 universities and academic institutions around the world; (opposite, below) devotees struggle to pump several feet of flood waters out of Swami Bhadrashdas’ basement office where years of work was damaged

The *Swaminarayan Bhashyam* substantiates this definition by citing profusely from the entire *Mundaka Upanishad* and other *Prasthanatrayi* passages. For example, the distinction and relationship between Akshar and Purushottam is evident in the *Mundaka Upanishad* at verse 2.1.2. It states:

Puruṣaḥ... akṣarāt parataḥ paraḥ ॥

“That Purush’ [i.e., Purushottam] is... greater than Akshar, which is greater than others.”

The *Swaminarayan Bhashyam* explains that Akshar is described here as greater than all other beings and things—*jivas*, *ishwars*, *maya*, even liberated souls—*except* Purushottam, thus confirming the mutual distinction and relationship between Akshar and Purushottam.¹³ Bhagwan Swaminarayan also repeatedly describes Purushottam’s supremacy in relation to Akshar, often using the adjective *aksharatit* (transcending Akshar),¹⁴ demonstrating that Akshar is the highest benchmark by which to understand Purushottam, but one which he still surpasses. In other words, it is only after understanding the greatness of Akshar that one can truly appreciate the greatness of Purushottam. That is, it is essential to know both Purushottam (Parabrahman) and Akshar (Aksharbrahman) to master *brahmavidya*.

In further support of the two types of Brahman, the *Swaminarayan Bhashyam* cites from the fifth chapter of the *Prashna Upanishad*. Here, in reply to the question posed by Satyakama pertaining to the after-life, Pippalada states:

Etad-vai satyakāma paraṁ cāparaṁ ca brahma yad-aumkāraḥ ।

“That, O Satyakama, which is the syllable of Aum, is verily the higher and lower Brahman.”)

The dual classification of “higher” and “lower” confirms the meta-

One Monk's Tale of Sacrifice & the Guru's Grace

Bhadreshdas Swami (b. 1966) is the author of *Swaminarayan Siddhanta Sudha* and the five-volume *Swaminarayan Bhashyam* commentaries. He was barely 14 when His Holiness Pramukh Swami Maharaj initiated him into the BAPS monastic order in 1981. The ensuing 38 years of spiritual tutelage under gurus Pramukh Swami Maharaj and then Mahant Swami Maharaj, as well as guidance from senior swamis, engaged Bhadreshdas Swami in a rigorous program of devotion, austerities, studies and academic research. Above all, by the gurus' grace and blessings, he developed into one of the world's leading scholars of Vedanta and an internationally acclaimed expert of the Swaminarayan Hindu tradition.

But Bhadreshdas Swami's journey has been far from straightforward. In 2007, while writing the *Swaminarayan Bhashyam* commentaries, a flash flood struck the village of Sarangpur, in India, where he stayed. Within minutes, his basement study was completely submerged, ruining his entire library and more than 2,500 pages of research notes he had painstakingly compiled. These notes contained all of his arguments and definitions of key philosophical terms that would form the framework of the commentaries he was writing. Despite attempts to salvage the mud-sodden pages, they were lost forever. Shocked and desperate, he called guru Pramukh Swami Maharaj, who was traveling in America at the time. Pramukh Swami Maharaj lovingly reassured him, "Everything that you weren't supposed to write has been washed away. Now when you write, Bhagwan Swaminarayan and our gurus will write everything through you." What had been a colossal task before—Pramukh Swami Maharaj had requested all five volumes of the commentaries to be ready by December of 2007, in time for the centennial celebrations of BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha—seemed near impossible now. But with the grace and blessings of his guru and his own indomitable faith, Bhadreshdas Swami returned to writing. Within six months, working 18 to 20 hours a day, the commentaries were ready.

Bhadreshdas Swami followed this magnum opus with another mammoth undertaking, the *Swaminarayan Siddhant Sudha*—a classical treatise that offers a systematic and comprehensive exposition, justification and defense of Akshar-Purushottam Darshan. Together, these works of philosophical genius have led to a string of qualifications and accolades making Bhadreshdas Swami one of the most decorated Indian scholars of our time.

The historical significance of Bhadreshdas Swami's work can hardly be overstated. His Sanskrit opus is unique because: 1) it is the first such commentarial work in a school of Vedanta for 150 years; 2) it is the first complete set of commentaries on the *Prasthanatrayi* (*the Brahmasutras, Upanishads and Bhagavad-Gita*) by a single acharya in 1,200 years; 3) and it is the first time ever that a single acharya has authored both a complete set of *Prasthanatrayi* commentaries together with a *vadagrantha* of their darshan tradition.

Bhadreshdas Swami's monumental work has been widely recognized and critically acclaimed by eminent scholars around the world, including from over 150 universities and academic institutions in India,



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Europe and North America. They hail his work as being exquisitely lucid, fascinatingly original and profoundly compelling, recognizing him as a modern-day "Acharya" in line with Shankaracharya, Ramanujacharya, Madhvacharya, Nimbarkacharya and Vallabhacharya.

Bhadreshdas Swami remains immersed in study, research, writing, teaching and devotion. He is currently working on a classical commentary of the Vedas, treatises on Yoga Darshan and Samkhya Darshan, and an agamic treatise on devotional practices according to Akshar-Purushottam Darshan. Bhadreshdas Swami continues to travel the world engaging with scholars and delivering academic presentations. He teaches Nyaya, Vedanta, History of Indian Philosophy, and classical Indian music to swamis at the BAPS Swaminarayan Sanskrit Mahavidyalaya in Sarangpur.

Yet for all his accomplishments and the honors heaped upon him, Bhadreshdas Swami unfailingly attributes all the credit to his gurus. He says, "Whatever I have written, it has only been possible through the blessings, love and constant guidance of guruhari Pramukh Swami Maharaj and Mahant Swami Maharaj. Whenever I sit down to write, I pray to them and I feel their presence, as if they are writing through me. So I have no hesitation in acknowledging—without their wish, none of this would have been possible." Bhadreshdas Swami thus opens his commentary on the *Brahma-Sutras* with the acknowledgement that his work is "by the guru's grace; for the guru's grace."¹

For a detailed account of Bhadreshdas Swami's extraordinary journey in writing the *Swaminarayan Bhashyam* commentaries through the grace of his gurus, see pages 54-57 of the April/May/June 2014 issue of HINDUISM TODAY.



physical distinction between “*para*” Brahman, i.e., Parabrahman, and “*apara*” Brahman, i.e., Aksharbrahman. This distinction between the two is especially evident when the fruit of meditating on *Aum* is described in the same verse as attaining “either” of them.¹⁵

Akshar and Purushottam in the *Bhagavad-Gita*

The two entities Akshar and Purushottam are evidently established in the *Bhagavad-Gita* by these two very names. Indeed, the eighth chapter of the *Bhagavad-Gita* is titled “Aksharbrahman Yoga,” while the fifteenth chapter is titled “Purushottam Yoga.” Both chapters hold key discussions about Akshar and Purushottam. For example, Arjuna asks in the opening verse of the eighth chapter,

Kim tad brahma (What is Brahman?)
Krishna replies simply: *Aksharam brahma*
(Akshar is Brahman.)¹⁶

The eighth chapter then goes on to describe the glory of Akshar as a divine place entered by those who practice brahmacharya and are without desire, and as proclaimed by the knowers of the *Vedas*.¹⁷

In the fifteenth chapter, the *Bhagavad-Gita* succinctly and clearly describes the nature of Purushottam and its distinction from Akshar and other entities. As the *Swaminarayan Bhashyam* explains, there are two types of beings in the world: *kshar* and *akshar*. All those bound by *maya* are *kshar*, i.e., subject to change; whereas the one who is unchanging—forever beyond *maya*—is Akshar. The Supreme Being is distinct from and superior to both *kshar* and Akshar; he is called Paramatma and known in the world and *Vedas* as Purushottam.¹⁸



Akshar and Purushottam in the *Brahmasutras*

The *Brahmasutras* is an esoteric text of aphorisms that elucidate Brahman. It seeks to clarify, systematize and harmonize the meaning of the *Upanishads*, hence its focus of study is also “brahmavidya” or “brahmagnan.” The first aphorism, “*Athā'to brahmajijñāsā*,” holds the key to unlocking the various schools of Vedanta. Every acharya, while describing Brahma according to his own particular system, deconstructs *brahmajijñāsā* in largely similar ways, that is, to mean “the desire to know Brahman,” where *brahma* in the Sanskrit compound is in the singular. The *Swaminarayan Bhashyam* commentary on this aphorism provides a remarkable new interpretation, claiming that the *brahma* in *brahmajijñāsā* denotes not just Parabrahman but also Aksharbrahman; that is, taking *brahma* not in the singular but in the dual case. This makes the subject of *brahmagnan* both Aksharbrahman and Parabrahman, also known as Akshar and Purushottam. The *Swaminarayan Bhashyam* substantiates this interpretation by citing several passages of the *Upanishads* and *Bhagavad-Gita*, a few of which have been mentioned above.¹⁹

In this way, some of the fundamental and key distinguishing doctrines of Akshar-Purushottam Darshan are established and articulated in the teachings of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and the *Prasthanatrayi* scriptures.

Mukti and Sadhana

The goal and fruit of all darshan is liberation from the ravaging influence of *maya* so that one is free of all suffering and can experience supreme bliss.

In Akshar-Purushottam Darshan, such liberation, or *mukti*, is more than a state of being *maya*-free and released from the pain and limitations of the incessant cycle of births and deaths. It is a new, higher spiritual state—indeed, the highest, perfect spiritual

Left: His Holiness Mahant Swami Maharaj, the present guru of the BAPS Swaminarayan Fellowship; *right:* Sacred images of Parabrahman Purushottam Swaminarayan and his unbroken lineage of spiritual successors, the Brahmaswarup Guru Parampara.

A Living Guru Lineage

Akshar-Purushottam Darshan was revealed and established by Bhagwan Swaminarayan during the early 19th century. It has been protected, sustained and advanced till today by an unbroken succession of Aksharbrahman Gurus—the Guru Parampara. *Parampara* literally means “one after the other,” a succession. The *Halayudhakosha*, a famous Sanskrit lexicon, defines the term *sampradāya* as “gurukramah,” a lineage of successive gurus. In the BAPS Swaminarayan tradition, this succession has continued unabated for over 200 years, from Gunatitanand Swami (1784-1867), Bhagatji Maharaj (1829-1897), Shastriji Maharaj (1865-1951), Yogiji Maharaj (1892-1971) and Pramukh Swami Maharaj (1921-2016), to the present guru, His Holiness Mahant Swami Maharaj (b. 1933). The BAPS Swaminarayan fellowship believes that today Bhagwan Swaminarayan wholly dwells in and works through Mahant Swami Maharaj.

Having a living guru with perfect realization ensures that the tradition, while steadfast in its timeless core beliefs, remains fresh through an active process of reflection and interpretation, by which theological insights and spiritual practices are tested, protected and transmitted.



state—that is enriched by the complete realization of Parabrahman Purushottam. It entails not merely the dispelling of ignorance, but the positive receiving of Aksharbrahman's qualities, so one is perfectly faultless and fulfilled, absolutely free of all worldly desires and ego, and forever engrossed in unhindered devotion to God while experiencing his limitless, unending bliss. Bhagwan Swaminarayan calls this preeminent spiritual state being aksharrup or brahmarup ("like Akshar or Brahma").²⁰ It is described in the *Bhagavad-Gita* as *brahmi sthiti*²¹ or being *brahmabhuta*.²²

This state of liberation is of two types:

Jivan-mukti, meaning "living mukti," is attaining and experiencing the state of *aksharrup* while alive, in this very body.

Videh-mukti is liberation after death, enjoying the superlatively blissful darshan of Purushottam in Akshardham along with the personified form of Akshar and other liberated souls (muktas).

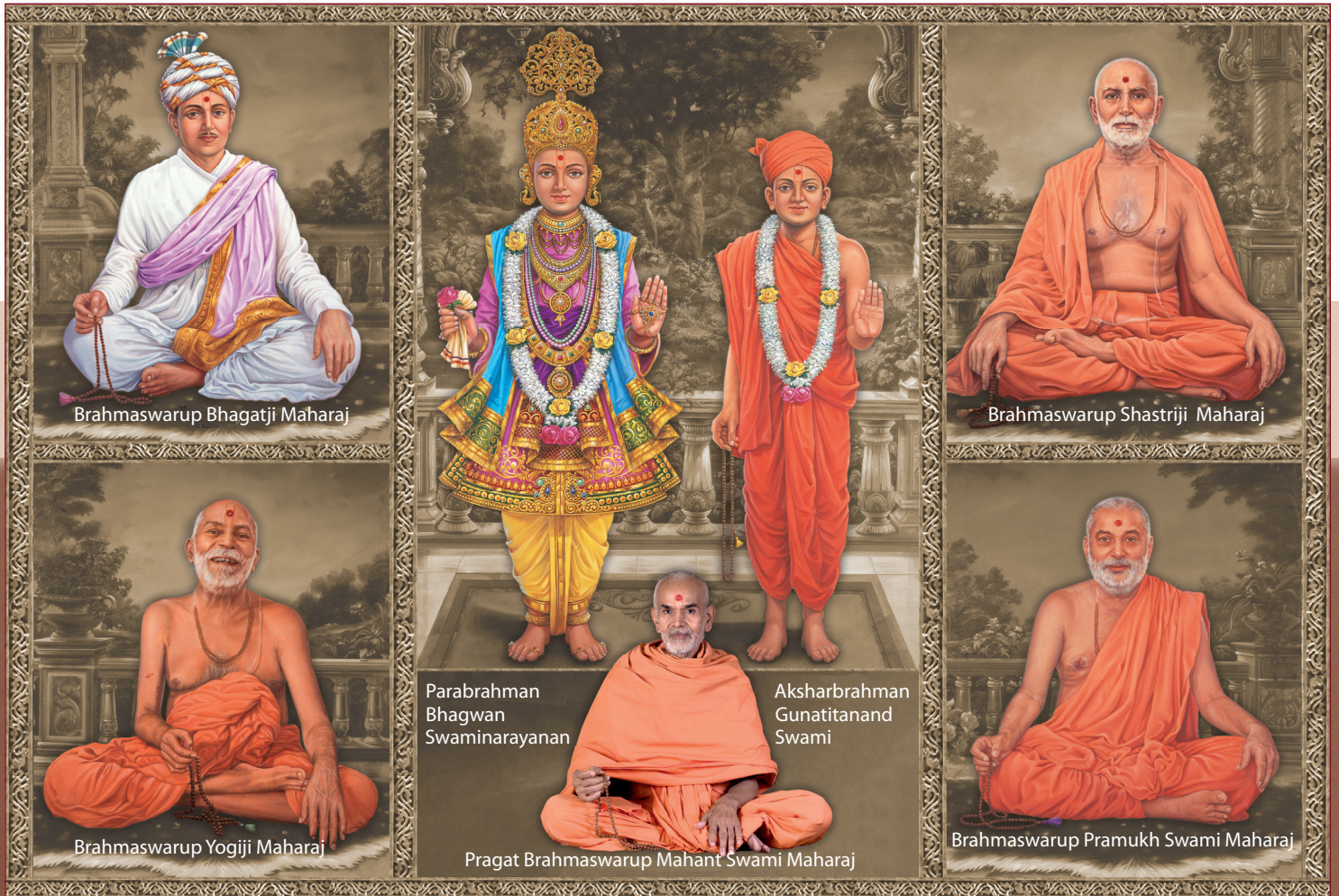
While the location of the experience might be different, the

experience of bliss for both muktas is the same.

The way to mukti is called *sadhana*. Bhagwan Swaminarayan explains this extensively throughout the *Vachanamrut*, as do the Aksharbrahman Gurus through their teachings and lives. Primarily, it entails the complete loving association of the Guru through thought, word and deed.²³ This incorporates Ekantika Dharma, a four-fold system of praxis (spiritual endeavors) defined by Bhagwan Swaminarayan as comprising the following:

1. **dharma**: leading a righteous life by observing the moral codes of the scriptures;
2. **gnan**: realizing oneself to be the atma, distinct from the body;
3. **vairagya**: being dispassionate towards worldly pleasures; and
4. **bhakti**: offering selfless devotion to God while realizing his greatness.

This *sadhana* is summarized in the *sadhana* mantra provided by Mahant Swami Maharaj: *Akṣaram aham Puruṣottamadāso'smi*. It is



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In fact, the very definition of *sampradaya*, even if translated as "tradition," points both ways—not just to the past but, ironically, also to the future. When elaborating upon the second half of the *Bhagavad-Gita* verse 4.34: *Upadekṣyanti te jñānam jñāninas tattvadarśinaḥ*. ("Enlightened seers of truth will preach that knowledge to you."), the *Swaminarayan Bhashyam* is keen to point out the use of the future

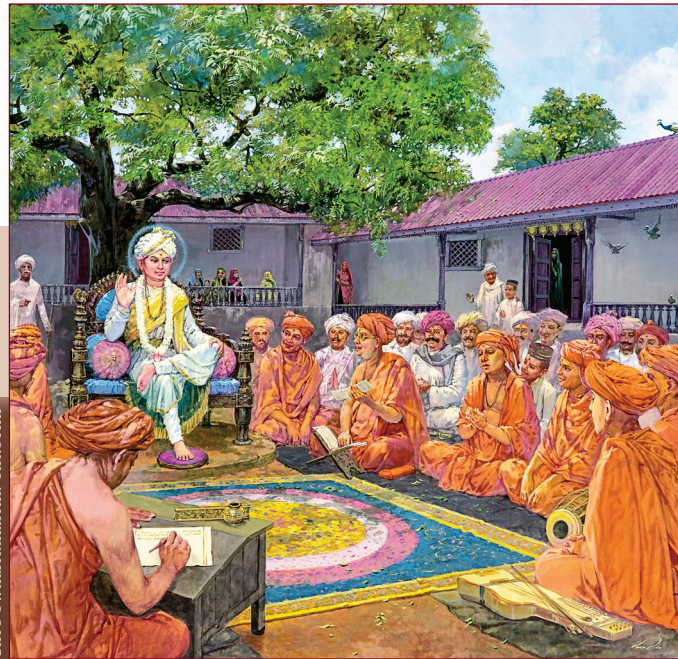
tense in the verb *upadekṣyanti* (will preach) and the plurality in the nouns *jñāninaḥ* (knowers) and *tattvadarśinaḥ* (seers of truth). The verse thus affirms the succession of Aksharbrahman gurus who will continue to transmit this revelatory knowledge to generations of seekers indefinitely into the future.



chanted by devotees daily, reminding them to offer devotion to Bhagwan Swaminarayan as Purushottam—albeit through his most accessible form, the current Aksharbrahman Guru—after qualitatively realizing oneself as Akshar by spiritually and lovingly associating with that same Aksharbrahman Guru. This is the essence and foundation of Akshar-Purushottam Darshan, by which all of its doctrines are illumined and consummated.

Living Darshan

Darshans are a way of life, not just a topic of philosophical debate. Indeed, the success of any system of thought is how it is applicable to and implemented in daily life. True to this, the Akshar-Purushottam Darshan is a living tradition being practiced by hundreds of thousands of devotees around the world today. It is lived out in their daily acts of devotion, such as the personal nitya puja with which they each start their day, the religious markings they apply, the two-stranded kanthi of tulsi beads they wear around their necks, the darshan they enjoy of the murtis at mandirs, at home or online, the arati they sing, the discourses and bhajans they listen to, and much more. All these are reflective of and imbued with the doctrines of Akshar-Purushottam Darshan. Indeed, in thousands of mandirs, homes and hearts, there thrives the daily worship of Parabrahman Purushottam Bhagwan Swaminarayan as exemplified by the Aksharbrahman Gurus.



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The Vachanamrut

The primary sacred scripture of the Swaminarayan Sampradaya is the *Vachanamrut*. It is a collection of 273 discourses delivered by Bhagwan Swaminarayan between 1819 and 1829. These discourses were meticulously documented and compiled by four of his most learned and senior disciples—Gopalanand Swami, Muktanand Swami, Nityanand Swami and Shukanand Swami—and later presented to him for review and personal verification (see, for example, the mention in *Vachanamrut* Loya 7). This compilation came to be known as the *Vachanamrut*, which literally means ‘immortalizing ambrosia in the form of words.’

This vitality and flourishing of Akshar-Purushottam Darshan is possible because of the living guru. The *Swaminarayan Siddhanta Sudha* concludes with this very thought, that the principles expounded at length in the text are lived and experienced by devotees in their daily lives through the association of the Aksharbrahman Guru. In fact, it stresses, there are many devotees in the Swaminarayan community who have been and are perfectly fulfilled by their absolute conviction in Akshar-Purushottam Darshan. They are unburdened by any lack of knowledge of the scriptures, because they have the direct association of the guru, which exceeds millions of such texts. Indeed, it asserts, nothing is greater than the blessed association of the Aksharbrahman Guru through whom devotees experience the supreme love, bliss and inner fulfillment of Parabrahman Purushottam Bhagwan Swaminarayan here and now.²⁴

Footnotes

1. Sadhu Bhadreshdas, *Mundakopaniṣat-Svāminārāyaṇa-Bhāṣyam* 1.2.12, pp. 253-256.
2. Sadhu Bhadreshdas, *Śrīmad-Bhagavad-Gītā-Svāminārāyaṇa-Bhāṣyam* 4.34, p. 110.
3. *Vachanamrut* Gadhada 2.13.
4. This can be found as an appendix, “Theological Principles of BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha: Creedal Statement by Pramukh Swami Maharaj,” in Swami Paramattvada, *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hindu Theology* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 321-325.
5. John A. Grimes, *The Vivekacūḍāmaṇi of Śaṅkarācārya Bhagavatpāda: An Introduction and Translation* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2004), verse 20, p. 70.
6. S.S. Raghavachar, *Vedārtha-Saṅgraha of Śrī Rāmānujācārya* (Mysore: Sri Ramakrishna Ashrama, 1968), verse 117, p. 90.
7. Deepak Sarma, *An Introduction to Mādhva Vedānta* (London & New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 50.
8. *Vachanamrut* Gadhada 1.7 and *Vachanamrut* Gadhada 3.10.
9. See also Bhadreshdas Sadhu, “Brahmajñāna in Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana and Viśiṣṭādvaita Darśana,” *Brahmavidyā: The Adyar Library Bulletin*, 81-82 [Śrī Rāmānuja’s Sahasrabī Volume] (2017-18), 471-488.
10. Sadhu Bhadreshdas, *Mundakopaniṣat-Svāminārāyaṇa-Bhāṣyam* 1.1.5, pp. 236-237.
11. *Ibid.*, 1.1.1, p. 232.
12. *Ibid.*, 1.2.13, pp. 256-257.
13. *Ibid.*, 2.1.2, pp. 258-261.
14. *Vachanamrut* Gadhada 1.31, Gadhada 1.42, Gadhada 1.51, Gadhada 1.66, Gadhada 1.78, Sarangpur 5, Gadhada 2.13, Gadhada 2.18 and Gadhada 2.31.
15. Sadhu Bhadreshdas, *Prāśnopaniṣat-Svāminārāyaṇa-Bhāṣyam* 5.2, pp. 214-216.
16. Sadhu Bhadreshdas, *Śrīmad-Bhagavad-Gītā-Svāminārāyaṇa-Bhāṣyam* 8.3, pp. 173-177.
17. *Ibid.*, 8.11, pp. 182-185.
18. *Ibid.*, 15.16-18, pp. 314-316.
19. Sadhu Bhadreshdas, *Brahmasūtra-Svāminārāyaṇa-Bhāṣyam* 1.1.1, pp. 3-12.
20. For example, *Vachanamrut* Gadhada 1.21 and *Vachanamrut* Gadhada 2.20.
21. Sadhu Bhadreshdas, *Śrīmad-Bhagavad-Gītā-Svāminārāyaṇa-Bhāṣyam* 2.72, pp. 68-69.
22. *Ibid.*, 18.54, pp. 360-361.
23. *Vachanamrut* Vartal 4.
24. Sadhu Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇa-Siddhanta-Sudha*, p. 459.

Left: During his life, Swaminarayan delivered hundreds of discourses in various villages, all dutifully recorded by his disciples and compiled as the *Vachanamrut*.

The text is divided into ten sections, based on the various villages and towns in which the discourses were delivered. The sections are chronological in order and named as follows: Gadhada 1, Sarangpur, Kariyani, Loya, Panchala, Gadhada 2, Vartal, Amdavad and Gadhada 3, with an additional section including discourses from Amdavad, Ashlali and Jetalpur. Each individual discourse is also called a “*Vachanamrut*,” and these are arranged chronologically and numbered sequentially within each section. *Vachanamrut* Vartal 11, for example, is the eleventh recorded discourse delivered by Bhagwan Swaminarayan in the town of Vartal.

Ingeniously, each *Vachanamrut* opens with an introductory paragraph meticulously describing the setting of the assembly in which the discourse was delivered. Even at the risk of sounding repetitive, the compilers invariably recorded the date, the place, and a mention of the audience seated in the assembly. In many instances, they also noted the time of day and described the clothes and adornments worn by Bhagwan Swaminarayan. In some instances, they even described the seat upon which he was seated and the direction in which he was facing. All this lends considerable historical authenticity to the sacred scripture.

In literary style, the *Vachanamrut* is highly dialogical and didactic, with most discourses taking the form of a question-and-answer

What Are the Five Eternal Entities?

Jivas

Jivas are distinct, individual souls, indivisibly minute in size and innumerable in quantity. Each one is bound by maya, which shrouds the jiva's radiant self that is composed of existence (*sat*), consciousness (*chit*) and bliss (*anand*). They are doers of good and bad karmas, and experiencers of the fruits of those karmas.

Ishwars

Ishwars, by the will of Purushottam, are assigned various tasks of creation, sustenance and dissolution within a particular *brahmand* (planetary realm), of which there are countless millions. Compared to jivas, ishvars have greater power, knowledge and lifespan, but like the jivas, ishvars, too, are shrouded by maya since the beginning. Compared to Akshar and Purushottam, however, ishvars are utterly powerless. Like jivas, ishvars also are doers of good and bad karmas, and experiencers of the fruits of those karmas.

Maya

Maya is characterized by the three *gunas*—*sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. It is eternal while continually mutating. As an instrument of Purushottam, it constitutes the base substance from which this material world is formed. It also forms the ignorance in the form of "I-ness" and "my-ness" that shrouds jivas and ishvars, causing them to be

BAPS SWAMINARAYAN SANSTHA

bound in the incessant cycle of birth and death. Akshar and Purushottam are eternally and entirely untouched by maya and transcend it, yet they also pervade it and control it. Maya is the only non-sentient (non-living) entity of the five; the other four are all sentient (living).

Akshar

Akshar, also called Aksharbrahman and Brahman, is distinct from and subordinate only to Purushottam; it transcends jivas, ishvars and maya. Like Purushottam, it is one, eternal and a sentient entity. It is forever divine, replete with infinite redemptive virtues, devoid of all qualities of maya, and forever faultless. The form, qualities, powers, etc., of Akshar are dependent only on Purushottam. By the



Right: As a child, Swaminarayan trekked barefooted through mountains and forests, fearless of the dangers that might lurk, carrying his yoga *danda* (staff) and *kamandalu* (water pot).

session, where either Bhagwan Swaminarayan asks the questions or members of his audience do, sometimes at his urging. Even if he begins a sermon unprompted, he would sometimes question his own explanation to confirm if his audience had understood him correctly or to anticipate and answer opposing views in advance. More often, though, his aspiring seeker-followers, ranging from senior monks to lay farmers, would be braced with questions from their current readings of Hindu texts or their own personal application of those teachings. As Bhagwan Swaminarayan would answer, sometimes a series of follow-up questions or counter-questions would ensue as they probed for further clarity or refinement in their understanding of his teachings. This orality (speaking) and reciprocal aurality (listening) between Bhagwan Swaminarayan and his disciples situates the *Vachanamrut* in the ancient Upanishadic tradition of a guru-disciple dialogue.

Bhagwan Swaminarayan spoke in the local language of Gujarati, presenting complex concepts in simple, lucid terms, drawing extensively on popular stories from the *Puranas* and epics, and employing analogies and day-to-day examples. He also cited profusely from the

Upanishads, *Bhagavad-Gita*, *Bhagavata Purana*, and various other authoritative Hindu texts.

Most importantly, the *Vachanamrut* is accepted within the Swaminarayan tradition as the primary revelatory scripture by which its doctrines are established and articulated. This abiding status of the *Vachanamrut* is grounded on the distinctive belief of the devotees that Bhagwan Swaminarayan, as the self-manifestation of Purushottam, is both the source and subject of divine knowledge comprised within it. In other words, in the *Vachanamrut*, it is God talking about God.



eternal will of Purushottam, Akshar is the cause, support, controller, indweller and *shariri* ("soul") of the entire insentient and sentient creation.

Although Akshar is one entity, it serves in the following four ways:

1. **Abode:** Akshar takes the form of the divine abode of Purushottam, known as Akshardham. There is only one such Akshardham; it is eternal and forever transcends the three *gunas* of maya. Only liberated souls who have become *aksharrup* ("like Akshar") are able to enter it.
2. **Sevak:** Akshar also serves Purushottam in Akshardham as an exemplary devotee. Like Purushottam, Akshar has a divine human-shaped form complete with two arms and other features. He remains forever engrossed in the worship of Purushottam and is the ideal for the liberated souls worshipping Purushottam in Akshardham.
3. **Divine Light:** This is a form of ethereal space, known as Chidakash. It is extremely radiant, and is an all-pervading form of Akshar that permeates, envelopes and upholds the infinite *brahmands*.
4. **Guru:** Akshar manifests in human form as the Guru, with Purushottam, in every *brahmand*. He is the eternal and complete vessel of Purushottam. Through his divine association, he establishes in jivas and ishvars the highest level of resolute faith in Purushottam and elevates them to the state of *aksharrup* so that they may offer perfect devotion to Purushottam. He thereby grants them eternal liberation from the bondage of maya, releasing them from the cycle of birth and death and ultimately granting them an eternal place in Akshardham where they experience the highest bliss of Purushottam. Purushottam remains forever manifest through an unbroken succession of such Aksharbrahman Gurus, by whom he grants liberation and devotees experience his highest bliss. While this succession continues forever, the path to ultimate liberation remains open through only one such Guru at any one time.

Purushottam

Purushottam, or Parabrahman, can be understood through the following four aspects of his being:

1. **Sarvopari ("supreme"):** Purushottam is the supreme being, the highest existential reality; one and unparalleled. He is forever beyond time and space—he is eternal and all-pervading—and forever limitless in his power, knowledge, splendor, bliss and virtues. He is always completely free of any defiling qualities of maya, hence "*nirguna*," and is replete with countless superlatively excellent auspicious qualities,

hence also "*saguna*." He is the cause of and master of all *avatars*; he is the *avatari*. An *avatar* manifests when, by his special wish, he pervades an ishvar for a particular task, but that *avatar* is, by its very being, distinct from Purushottam. Purushottam is also distinct from, transcendental to and the lord of even Akshar.

2. **Karta ("doer"):** Purushottam is the ultimate all-doer. Nothing can happen without his will. In fact, he is the *shariri* ("soul") of the entire world; just as a soul is to an otherwise inert body, Purushottam indwells, enlivens, supports and governs everything, including the mayic world, jivas, ishvars, liberated souls, even Akshar. He is both the efficient cause (agent) and material cause (substance) of the world, thus its ultimate creator, sustainer and dissolver. While permitting jivas and ishvars to act according to their free will, and inspiring them to will, know and do, he is also the dispenser of the fruits of their karmas.
3. **Sakar ("with form"):** Purushottam is eternally human in form yet fully divine. In his abode, Akshardham, he is seated on a divine throne in his eternally divine, extremely radiant and human-shaped youthful form, complete with two arms and other human-like features. There he is worshipped by the personal form of Akshar and infinite brahmic-bodied, *aksharrup* liberated souls. Without relinquishing this transcendental distinct form, Purushottam pervades the infinite *brahmands* through his immanent form by his divine powers.
4. **Pragat ("manifest"):** Purushottam cannot be perceived by mayic senses and minds. Yet, while remaining in Akshardham, he manifests in each *brahmand* with all his divine virtues, powers, etc., in human form and becomes visible to all. This is by his own divine resolve and out of loving compassion, to fulfill the wishes of his beloved devotees and for the ultimate liberation of infinite jivas and ishvars. That manifest form of Parabrahman Purushottam is Bhagwan Swaminarayan. Even after he retracts his earthly manifestation, he forever remains fully manifest through the Aksharbrahman Guru, making possible his worship in a manifest form and the path to ultimate liberation here and now.

The above summary is based on Pramukh Swami Maharaj's creedal treatise, *Svāminārāyaṇ Darśanā Siddhānto Alekh*, and summarized from Swami Paramtattvadas', *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hindu Theology* (Cambridge University Press, 2017).

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Dynamic fellowship: (below) A weekly satsang assembly at the BAPS temple in London, UK; (right) BAPS has currently built over 1,200 temples worldwide, of which 44 are large, traditional mandirs, like this one in London.





BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha Today

Shastri Yagnapurushdas, better known as Shastriji Maharaj, was the third guru of the Guru Parampara and the founder of BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha. He is credited within the tradition for clarifying Akshar-Purushottam Darshan and initiating its propagation worldwide, popularizing it with the name Akshar-Purushottam.

In the early 1900s, against seemingly insurmountable challenges and with barely any means—he had no money, no other resources, hardly anything to even eat at times—and with only five swamis and a handful of devotees, Shastriji Maharaj began work on establishing mandirs dedicated to Akshar-Purushottam Darshan.

To formally propound Akshar-Purushottam Darshan, he established Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS) in 1907. Through incessant traveling, discoursing and letter-writing, he tirelessly explained the meaning of Akshar-Purushottam to devotees and seekers wherever he went.

By the time he passed away in 1951, Shastriji Maharaj had built five glorious mandirs, consecrating within them the murtis of Gunatitanand Swami (Akshar) and Bhagwan Swaminarayan (Purushottam) in the central shrines, thereby elucidating and immortalizing the doctrine of Akshar-Purushottam Darshan. He had also sown the seeds of BAPS outside of India, sending sanctified portrait images for a mandir in Nairobi, Kenya.

Shastriji Maharaj was succeeded by Yogiji Maharaj. Between 1951 and 1971, Yogiji Maharaj propagated Akshar-Purushottam Darshan around India, in East Africa, and also in Britain, where he inaugurated the first Swaminarayan Hindu mandir in the West, in Islington, north London, in 1970.

Pramukh Swami Maharaj, who had been appointed president of BAPS as a 28-year-old by Shastriji Maharaj, succeeded Yogiji Maharaj in 1971. He worked tirelessly until passing away in 2016, building more than 1,100 mandirs and expounding Akshar-Purushottam Darshan around the world.

The current guru of BAPS is Mahant Swami Maharaj. He travels the world, discoursing, writing letters and meeting people, inspiring them towards the beliefs, practices and values of Akshar-Purushottam Darshan. He also continues the tradition of building mandirs dedicated to Akshar-Purushottam Darshan. In 2017, he performed the groundbreaking ceremony for a traditional stone temple in Johannesburg, South Africa, and Sydney, Australia. In April of this year, he did the same for the BAPS Hindu Mandir in Abu Dhabi.

BAPS currently has 44 traditional spired mandirs and more than 1,200 other mandirs across a global network spanning North America, Britain, mainland Europe, Africa and the Middle East, the Asia-Pacific, and all of India. These mandirs welcome millions of worshipers, pilgrims, visitors and seekers every year. They are vibrant hubs of devotion, service, learning, festivity and community outreach—but above all, they are edifices of Akshar-Purushottam Darshan, dedicated to the worship of Parabrahman Purushottam Bhagwan Swaminarayan as exemplified by the Aksharbrahman Gurus.¹ Each week, these mandirs are host to more than 3,850 satsang assemblies that teach this upasana (form of worship) and instill such Hindu values as personal integrity, family harmony and social responsibility. They are served by more than 1,000 BAPS swamis and 55,000 dedicated volunteers.

1. Bhagwan Swaminarayan explains in *Vachanamrut* Gadhada 2.27 that the very purpose of building mandirs is to uphold *upasana*.

BOOK REVIEW

Illuminating the Philosophy of BAPS

Swami Paramtattvadas offers a technical, yet approachable, analysis

BY SHANNA N. PATEL

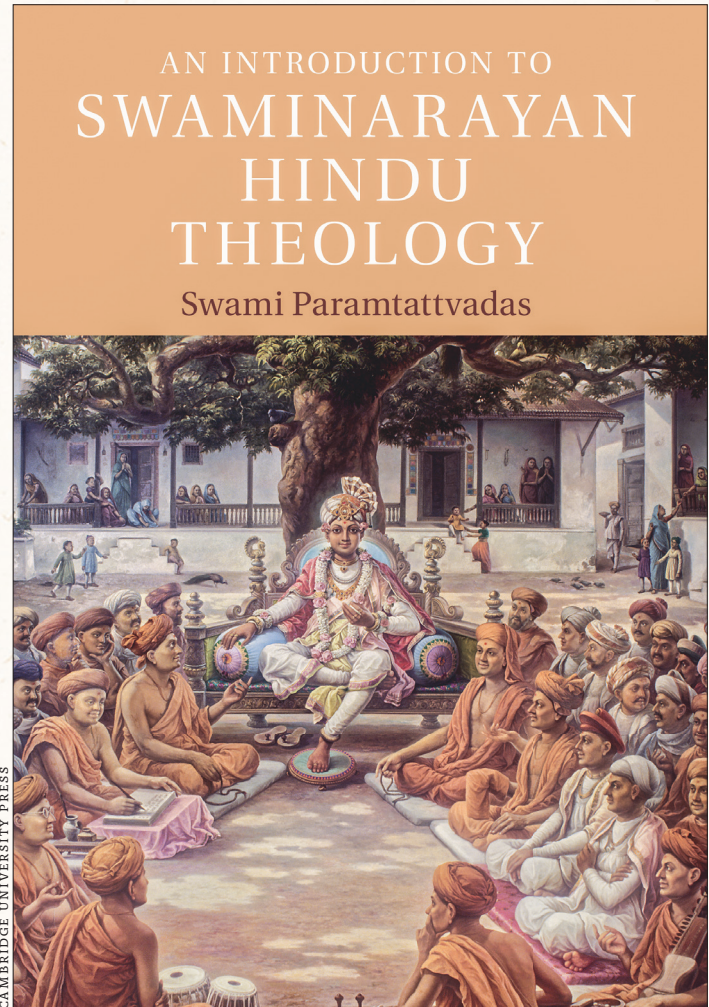
Swaminarayan Hinduism maintains a significant presence both in India and the Hindu diaspora. Founded at the beginning of the 19th century by Sahajanand Swami—referred to by followers as Bhagwan Swaminarayan—the tradition now has millions of followers. The lineage has become well-known for its ornate temples around the world, of which there are over a thousand. Despite its being a highly recognizable face of Hinduism, relatively little academic work has been done in English on the Swaminarayan sampradaya's core beliefs. *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hindu Theology* sets out to systematize and document the doctrines that undergird its expressions of devotion and faith.

With a unique personal and educational background, the author is well-placed to examine the Swaminarayan belief system and present it in an engaging manner to varied readerships. Swami Paramtattvadas was born and brought up in the United Kingdom and subsequently renounced his lifestyle in 1992 to be ordained as a swami of the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS), one of the largest denominations of the Swaminarayan sampradaya. He subsequently completed 14 years of studies in India, both in a traditional ashram and in a modern university setting. Equipped with a strong background in Sanskrit and Vedanta, he then entered the Western academic world to study theology and religious studies at the University of Oxford, completing his doctoral thesis under the supervision of Gavin Flood, Professor of Hinduism at Oxford. Swami's book is a developed form of that thesis. As Professor Francis X. Clooney, a comparative theologian of Harvard Divinity School, rightly points out, the author's deep immersion within the tradition and his unique perspective allow him to bring together his Western and Indian disciplines to treat the subject systematically yet accessibly.

Echoing the views of eminent scholars of Hinduism such as Clooney and Julius Lipner, Paramtattvadas first establishes the pressing need for scholarly exploration in English of core Hindu beliefs by practitioners—that is to say, Hindu theology by Hindus. Such an exercise, expressed in accessible academic English, not only “take[s] Hindu theology beyond its usual national and linguistic borders” but also, crucially, “affirms the viability, validity and value of Hindu theology more generally.” His methodology is described as “systematic theology,” which draws on the basic framework of classical theological analysis. Recognizing that the task involves the translation of deep ideas and concepts, which is much more difficult than simple linguistic translation, the author does well in finding a happy middle between the use of native expressions and common English theological terms.

Paramtattvadas employs a two-part structure in his book. First, he presents the tools and sources of theology that prepare the reader to engage with the principles of Swaminarayan Hinduism in a meaningful way. With this background, he proceeds in the second part to dive deep into the defining aspects of the tradition's theological system. He explains that this structure “allows the book to cover the three key topics associated with classical Vedantic inquiry: *pramanamimamsa* (epistemology), *tattva-mimamsa* (metaphysics) and *muktimimamsa* (soteriology).”

In the afterword, the author discusses various avenues for scholarly enquiry for those with an interest in Swaminarayan Hinduism, Hindu doctrine more generally, and (inter-religious) comparative theology.



The book's well-organized structure is complemented by Paramtattvadas's lucid writing style; the book will thoroughly engage scholars of theology and those with familiarity in Vedanta while providing a challenging, yet rewarding, read to the layperson.

Theology as an academic discipline is, in simple terms, the attempt to understand the Divine. Paramtattvadas points out that before we can begin such an endeavor, we must ask, “Can God be known at all?” He goes on to juxtapose statements of *shastra* that, on the one hand convey the imperceptibility and ineffability of God, and on the other emphasize the imperative of knowing or realizing God. Here, he introduces the key tool of (Swaminarayan Hindu) theology: revelation. The author explains that God can only be properly known when He reveals Himself. In addition to the scriptural sources of revelation (i.e., the sermons of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and his subsequent lineage of gurus) where God “tell[s] us what He is like,” Paramtattvadas posits that revelation also includes the instances where God “show[s] us who He is.” For the latter, therefore, the author includes the



COURTESY BAPS SWAMINARAYAN (NOT FROM BOOK)

“self-manifestation of Parabrahman in the person of Swaminarayan” and the continued presence of God in the guru. While establishing revelation as the highest *pramana*, Paramtattvas coherently explains the vital roles of reason, praxis and tradition as tools in theological exploration.

Central to any Hindu school of the thought is its understanding of metaphysical entities. Monism defines Sankara’s thought, just as Ramanuja makes a case for his “jiva-jagat-jagdish” trio. Swami Paramtattvas explicates Bhagwan Swaminarayan’s philosophy of five distinct and eternal metaphysical entities: *Parabrahman*, *Aksharbrahman*, *maya*, *ishvara* and *jiva*. In addition to being endowed with the commonly attributed characteristics of being omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, omnibenevolent, etc., Parabrahman in Swaminarayan theology is above all recognized as being *pragata* (manifest before one’s eyes), *sakara* (eternally possessing a form), *sarvopari* (supreme to all), and *karta* (cause and support of all). Knowing God is the foremost principle of Swaminarayan Hindu theology; Paramtattvas contends that all religious endeavors must be grounded in, revolve around, and have as their aim the complete knowledge of God.

The author elaborates in detail on each of the five entities. Perhaps one of the most noteworthy aspects of the Swaminarayan tradition is its distinction between two types of Brahman: Parabrahman and Aksharbrahman. Paramtattvas clarifies this unique Swaminarayan understanding, offering scriptural support from *Swaminarayana-Bhashya*, the tradition’s Vedanta commentaries, and notes that both entities manifest in human form. Most interestingly, he discusses the notion that Parabrahman maintains a substantive presence on Earth through Aksharbrahman in the form of the Brahmasvarupa Guru. Indeed, we discover that the guru is wholly central to the Swaminarayan theological system in his chapter on *mukti*. Paramtattvas explains that the means to liberation is to realize oneself as “brahmarupa” by spiritually associating with the Aksharbrahman

Initiation: (above) On January 20, 1810, at a grand *yajna* in the village of Dabhan, Swaminarayan blesses Guntitanand Swami, revealing him as Akshar and his first spiritual successor; (left) book cover of *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hindu Theology*, published by Cambridge University Press in 2017

guru in order to offer perfect devotion to Swaminarayan as Parabrahman.

This book is a comprehensive introduction to Swaminarayan Hindu theology that will be an enlightening resource for many a reader. It is worth noting that the publication has received significant acclaim from esteemed members of the academia. At a book launch for the event in America, Professor Raymond Williams, who himself has worked on the Swaminarayan tradition for almost 40 years, praised the book, saying it is “written in beautiful English, and it is accessible and compatible with the best of Western scholarship.” Indeed, the book was recently subject of a specially commissioned review essay in the esteemed *Harvard Theological Review* in which respected professor of comparative theology at Boston College, Catherine Cornille, correctly summarizes that the book is “a very important contribution to Hindu thought” in general and “an invaluable resource for those belonging to the tradition.” Both scholars speak to the accessible tone employed by Swami Paramtattvas as well as the rigorous and systematic way in which he approaches the subject. Professor Cornille goes on to write, “The vitality of a tradition may be seen to lie in the willingness and ability of its own intellectuals to reflect creatively on the meaning of the tradition in light of both past and present theological ideas and thus to move the tradition forward.” Swami Paramtattvas has not only enriched our understanding of Swaminarayan Hinduism but has invigorated a desperately-needed discourse on Hindu theology in the scholarly world, a discourse in which a Hindu voice is a welcome addition.