THE BAPS SWAMINARAYAN RESEARCH
JOURNAL
बी.ए.पी.एस. स्वामिनारायण शोधपत्रिका

Volume 1 - Issue 2

December 2022

The Vacanāmṛta: A Unique Praśnopaniṣad

Prof. M. M. Agrawal
Professor Emeritus of Sanskrit
Delhi University

Disclaimer: Statements and opinions in the articles and reviews published within the BAPS Swaminarayan Research Journal are those of the respective authors and contributors and not of the Journal or the BAPS Swaminarayan Research Institute, New Delhi. Neither the Journal nor the BAPS Swaminarayan Research Institute makes any representation, expressed or implied, in respect of the accuracy of the material published within this journal and do not accept any legal responsibility or liability for any inaccuracies, errors, or omissions that may have been made.

https://doi.org/10.70855/bsrj/1.2-5
e-ISSN: 3048-9741
https://research.baps.org/journal

pp. 49-134

THE VACANĀMṚTA: A UNIQUE PRAŚNOPANIṢAD

PROF. M. M. AGRAWAL
Professor Emeritus of Sanskrit,
Delhi University

ABSTRACT

The Upaniṣads and numerous sacred texts of Hinduism employ the question-answer dialogue to convey revelation. A survey of these texts identifies several of their notable features. These question-answer dialogues are often conducted between an able teacher (guru) and an eager student, where the student poses questions while the guru responds to them. The frequent use of questioning as a means for acquiring revelation indicates the tradition's acceptance, if not enthusiasm, for questioning. One also notices an immense variety among the participants of these dialogues, suggesting an inclusive understanding of *adhikāra*—the entitlement for receiving revelation and gnosis. These works also depict a close and respectful relationship between the guru and the receivers of revelation. The Upaniṣads and many other sacred texts of Hinduism share these features among the question-answer dialogues contained within them.

This work seeks to demonstrate that Svāmināràyaṇa's (Swaminarayan's) Vacanāmṛta, a foundational sacred text of the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana, not only shares many of the same methods of instruction as the Upaniṣads and other sacred texts of Hinduism, but also contributes to the

diverse question-answer pedagogy depicted within them.

Containing 274 spiritual discourses delivered by Parabrahman Bhagavān Swaminarayan (the founder of the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana), the Vacanāmṛta holds immense authority within the tradition. Much of Swaminarayan's revelation within this text is structured in the form of question-answer dialogues. By exemplifying the importance of questioning, diverse participation, inclusive understanding of *adhikāra*, and a respectful relationship between the guru and the receivers of revelation, these dialogues are characterized by many of the same features seen among other Hindu sacred texts.

The dialogues within the Vacanāmṛta also introduce distinctive aspects to the familiar question-answer pedagogy. Swaminarayan's unique metaphysical identity within the tradition, dual role as both the responder and the questioner, instructive methods for addressing responses, enthusiasm to entertain and address counter-questions, and instructions on the art of posing questions introduce many novel features to the classical model of the question-answer dialogue. The identity and role of the receivers of revelation also present distinct aspects. For instance, Svaminarayan's discourses are revealed to not just a few but instead an assembly, which at times consists of a variety of disciples or at other times comprises of focused groups. In addition, the text documents disciples employing exceedingly diverse methods of questioning. Along with enacting their traditional role as the questioners, the receivers of revelation are also encouraged by Swaminarayan to respond to questions.

Upon investigating the expression, function, and significance of the various features of the question-answer dialogues recorded in the Vacanāmṛta, this work concludes that the discussions between Swaminarayan and his audiences not only share but also contribute to the diverse pedagogy of Hindu sacred works.

INTRODUCTION

The Vacanāmṛta is *amṛta* or nectar in the form of the *vacana* of Bhagavān Svāminārāyaṇa (Swaminarayan). It consists of 274 spiritual discourses delivered by Swaminarayan from 1819 CE to 1829 CE. As the first specimen of Gujarati literary prose, it depicts not only the culture but also the oratory style of the language two centuries ago.

The Vacanāmṛta serves as the *magnum opus* of the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana, the philosophical position of the Svāminārāyaṇa Saṃpradāya. Within the *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā*, a *vādagrantha* of Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana, the author, Sadhu Bhadreshdas Swami, affirms its significance by stating:

> "The sacred text of the Vacanāmṛta is revealed by Hari (Parabrahman) himself, as are the Upaniṣads, *Bhagavadgītā*, and *Brahmasūtras*. They are the four foundations for substantiating the [Akṣara-Puruṣottama] doctrine."[1]

The author identifies the Vacanāmṛta as encompassing the words of Parabrahman. It is identified as one of the four foundational texts (*prasthānānāṃ catuṣṭayam*) of the *darśana* (school of thought). Elsewhere he further substantiates,

> "The Vacanāmṛta, Gunatitanand Swami's auspicious talks (known as the Svāmīnī Vāto), and the texts documenting the lives of the guru *paramparā* (the lineage of gurus) are known as the *prasthānatrayī* (the three foundations) [of the tradition (*saṃpradāya*)]."[2]

Among the tradition's own sacred texts, the Vacanāmṛta is celebrated as one of the foundational works of the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana.

The text also occupies a unique position in Vedānta *darśanic* thought

---

1. "Vacanāmṛtaśāstraṃ yat sākṣāddhariprabodhitaml Upaniṣat tathā Gītā Brahmasūtraṃ tathaiva call siddhāntasthāpanāyedaṃ prasthānānāṃ catuṣṭayaml" (Sadhu Bhadreśadāsa 5)
2. "Vacanāmṛtaśāstraṃ hi vārtāśca Svāminaḥ śubhāḥl gurucaritragranthāśca prasthānatrayamucyatell" (Kārikā 261) (Sadhu Bhadreśadāsa 172)

as it takes the place of a unique commentary on the Upaniṣads, though not in a conventional sense or form. For this reason Sadhu Bhadreshdas Swami describes it as "the establisher of the doctrine expressed in all sacred texts."[3] The work expresses the philosophical and theological principles of the Upaniṣads distinctly revealed by Swaminarayan within a relevant and coherent framework.

Although some work has been conducted on the content of Swaminarayan's revelation in the Vacanāmṛta—his unique position on the nature of the self (*ātman*), Brahman (Akṣarabrahman), Parabrahman (Puruṣottama), liberation, and the means to its attainment—there is little, if any, investigation on the pedagogical methods he employs to convey these teachings. This work examines Swaminarayan's use of questioning to convey philosophical and theological teaching. By elaborating on the different methods of questioning within the Vacanāmṛta and accompanying features and implications, this paper presents insights on Swaminarayan's distinct method of conveying revelation.

Based on the analysis conducted in this work, I conclude that Swaminarayan's use of learning through questioning introduces new features to the already familiar pedagogy of the Upaniṣads and other sacred texts of Hinduism.

LEARNING THROUGH QUESTIONING

Conveying knowledge through answers to questions is not a new form of pedagogy. We find that knowledge or gnosis is expressed within numerous classical Indian works through the question-answer dialogue. For instance, Patañjali's *Mahābhāṣya*[4]—an extensive treatise on Pāṇini's *Aṣṭhādhyāyī* that holds exceptional authority within the world of Sanskrit grammar (*vyākaraṇa*)—is predominantly structured as a question-answer dialogue between Patañjali and his students. Other *vyākaraṇa* commentaries and sub-commentaries such as, the *Kāśikavritti* by Jayāditya and

3. "sakalaśāstrasiddhāntanirṇāyaka" (Sadhu Bhadreśadāsa 172)
4. (Patañjali)

Vāmana,[5] Vāsudeva Dīkṣita's *Bālamanoramā* and Jñānendra Sarasvatī's *Tattvabodhinī*,[6] also substantiate descriptions of Pāṇini's aphorisms (*sūtras*) and associated descriptions (*vṛttis*) through elaborate responses to self-posed questions.

Within the Vedānta *darśanic* traditions, we find knowledge, or rather gnosis, expressed within sacred literature is also revealed within a question and answer framework. The Upaniṣads serve as the foremost and perhaps ideal example of the timelessness of learning through questioning. Understood as *apauruṣeya*—uncreated by man or eternal—the Upaniṣads are filled with examples of question-answer based learning in which a *śiṣya* (pupil) acquires knowledge by posing questions to the guru. For instance, within the Kaṭhopaniṣad, which principally revolves around a conversation between Naciketā and Yama (the deity of death), Naciketā uses two of his received three boons to inquire about *agnividyā*[7]—the knowledge that leads to liberation—and what happens after death.[8] The remainder of the Upaniṣad is occupied in Yama's response to these and subsequent questions Naciketā poses.

The Kenopaniṣad similarly begins with the following series of questions asked by an unnamed disciple (*śiṣya*) to a similarly anonymous guru: "What impels the mind to seek out its desires; what urges the *prāṇas* (the vital airs) to act accordingly; what compels speech to be articulated; and what deity directs sight, sound, and the other senses?"[9] The Upaniṣad continues by presenting the guru's response to each of these inquiries.

The title of the Praśnopaniṣad itself indicates the significance or rather the centrality of *praśna* (questioning) throughout the Upaniṣad. The Upaniṣad is structured according to the questions asked by six

5. (Vāmana and Jayāditya)
6. (Śarmā)
7. (Kaṭha. 1.13) (Śāstrī 5)
8. (Kaṭha. 1.20)(Śāstrī 5)
9. (Kena. 1.1) (Sādhu, *Īśādyaṣṭopaniṣatsvāmināryaṇabhāṣyam* 32–33)

disciples: Kabandhī Kātyāyanaḥ,[10] Bhārgavaḥ Vaidarbhiḥ,[11] Kauśalyaḥ Āśvalāyanaḥ[12] Sauryāyaṇī Gārgya,[13] Śaibyaḥ Satyakāma,[14] and Sukeśā Bhāradvāja;[15] to their guru Pippalāda Ṛṣi. Each chapter (or Praśna) begins with one disciple asking a question and continues by recording the guru's response.

Revelation in the Muṇḍakopaniṣad is also presented within the structure of a question and answer dialogue. The Muṇḍakopaniṣad begins with Śaunaka asking Aṅgiras, "By knowing what can one know all of this?"[16] In response, Aṅgiras continues throughout the rest of the Upaniṣad by revealing the content and nature of *brahmavidyā*.

Upon extolling the unique relationship between a guru and a disciple, the Taittirīya Upaniṣad expresses the knowledge of Brahman through the revelation of Varuṇa, Bhṛgu's father. The Upaniṣad depicts Bhṛgu approaching his father and inquiring, "Respected [father], instruct me on Brahman."[17] After Varuṇa's revelation Bhṛgu once again approaches him and requests, "Respected [father], instruct me on Brahman."[18] Bhṛgu asks the same question several times in the proceeding verses,[19] to which Varuṇa patiently responds with greater detail after each iteration.

Revelation through dialogue is also a repeated feature within the Chāndogyopaniṣad. Instead of employing a question and answer session between a guru and a disciple, the Upaniṣad narrates a discussion of *udgītha* among seekers of knowledge. Śilaka Śālāvatya, Caikitāyana Dālbhya,

10. (Pra. 1.2) (Śāstrī 11)
11. (Pra. 2.1) (Śāstrī 12)
12. (Pra. 3.1) (Śāstrī 12)
13. (Pra. 4.1) (Śāstrī 13)
14. (Pra. 5.1) (Śāstrī 14)
15. (Pra. 6.1) (Śāstrī 15)
16. "kasminnu bhagavo vijñāte sarvamidaṃ vijñātaṃ bhavatīti" (Mu. 1.1.3) (Śāstrī 16)
17. "adhīhi bhagavo brahmeti" (Tai. 3.1.1) (Śāstrī 28)
18. "adhīhi bhagavo brahmeti" (Tai. 3.2.1) (Śāstrī 28)
19. See, for example (Tai. 3.3.1, 3.4.1, 3.5.1) (Śāstrī 28, 29, 29)

and Pravāhaṇa Jaivali[20] respond to questions posed by one another—a question-answer dialogue erupts among them. In the fourth *adhyāya* (chapter) the Upaniṣad also narrates a question-answer conversation between the disciple Jānasruti and Raikva.[21] Then later it depicts a similar type of dialogue between Satyakāma Jābāla and Hāridrumata Gautama;[22] Upakosala Kāmalāyana and the Gārhapatya,[23] Anvāhāryapacana,[24] and Āhavanīya fires,[25] followed by Satyakāma;[26] and then in the fifth *adhyāya* between the knowledgeable King Pravāhaṇa and Gautama.[27] From Chā. 5.11 onwards Prācīnaśāla, Satyayajña, Indradyumna, and Jana discuss the nature of *ātman* and *brahman*[28] and approach King Aśvapati, who instructs them. Similarly, the beginning of the *sixth adhyāya* presents an inquisitive Śvetaketu seeking counsel from his father Udālaka.[29] Within the seventh *adhyāya*, Nārada approaches Sanatkumāra in search to become *ātmavid* (the knower of the *ātman*).[30] The Upaniṣad then concludes in the eighth *adhyāya* with the famous 101-year-long question-answer session between Prajāpati, Indra, and Virocana.[31]

The Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad also contains numerous question-answer dialogues including those between Yājñavalkya and Maitreya;[32] Yājñavalkya and Gārgī;[33] and Yājñavalkya and Janaka.[34] Yājñavalkya

20. (Chā. 1.8.1) (Śāstrī 38–39)
21. (Chā. 4.1.1-4.2.5) (Śāstrī 53–54)
22. (Chā. 4.9.1-3) (Śāstrī 56)
23. (Chā. 4.11.1-2) (Śāstrī 56)
24. (Chā. 4.12.1-2) (Śāstrī 57)
25. (Chā. 4.13.1-2) (Śāstrī 57)
26. (Chā. 4.15.1-4.17.10) (Śāstrī 57–58)
27. (Chā. 5.3.1-7) (Śāstrī 60–61)
28. (Chā. 5.11.1) (Śāstrī 62)
29. (Chā. 6.1.1-7) (Śāstrī 66)
30. (Cha. 7.1.1-5) (Śāstrī 71)
31. (Chā. 8.7.2) (Śāstrī 81)
32. (Bṛ. 2.4.1, 4.5.4, 4.5.14) (Śāstrī 97, 120, 121)
33. (Bṛ. 3.6.1, 3.8.3, 3.8.6) (Śāstrī 104, 107, 107)
34. (Bṛ. 4.1.2-4.1.7, 4.2.1, 4.3.2-7, 4.3.15-6, 4.3.33) (Śāstrī 111–13, 113, 114, 115, 116–17)

is also asked a barrage of questions from Hotṛ Aśvāla,[35] Ārtabhāga,[36] Bhujyu,[37] and others at the beginning of the third chapter. Prajāpati's hermeneutically insightful instruction to the *devas*, *manuṣyas*, and *asuras*[38] and King Pravāhaṇa's guidance to Gautama[39] are also instances in which revelation is expressed as responses to posed questions.

Even within Puranic literature we find numerous examples of gnosis framed within often nested question and answer dialogues. For instance, the *Agni-Purāṇa* recalls Vyāsa's recollection of a dialogue between Vasiṣṭha and the deity Agni;[40] the *Nāradīya-Purāṇa* recalls Śaunaka's discussion with Sūta, who in turn recalls Nārada's conversation with Sanatakumāra;[41] and the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* recollects a conversation between Śaunaka and Sūta, who in turn recalls the dialogue between Vyāsa's son Śuka to King Parikṣit, the grandson of the Pāṇḍava prince Arjuna.[42]

Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata*, a celebrated *itihāsa* (historical) work, is similarly organized as a question and answer dialogue. Structured as an immensely nested frame narrative, the text is positioned as Ugraśravas' recollection of Vaiśampāyana's narration of the work to King Janamejaya, the great-grandson of Arjuna. Ugraśravas expresses this narrative to a group of *brahmins* lead by Śaunaka and responds to any questions that are posed.[43] Within the narrative itself, there are numerous examples of knowledge conveyed using a question and answer framework. Yudhiṣṭhira's conversation with Yakṣa[44] found within the "Vana-Parvan,"

35. (Bṛ. 3.1.3-3.1.10) (Śāstrī 101–02)
36. (Bṛ. 3.2.1-3.2.13) (Śāstrī 102–03)
37. (Bṛ. 3.3.1-3.3.2) (Śāstrī 103)
38. (Bṛ. 5.2.1-3) (Śāstrī 122)
39. (Bṛ. 6.2.5-7) (Śāstrī 128)
40. (Vyāsamuni, *Agnipurāṇam*)
41. (Vedavyāsa, *The Nārada-Purāṇa*)
42. (Vedavyāsa, *Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇam*)
43. (Sukthankar, *The Mahābhārata*; Hegarty 25)
44. (Iyer)

the vastly revered *Bhagavad-Gītā*[45] positioned within the "Bhīṣma-parvan," Yudhiṣṭhira's questions to Bhīṣma in the "Śānti-Parvan,"[46] and Vidura's counsel to Dhṛtarāṣṭra in the *Viduranīti*, located in the "Udyoga-Parvan,"[47] are a few of the more famous examples of such dialogues.

Revelation through question and answer is also found, albeit sparsely, among the various narratives of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Within Vālmīki's account, the conversation between Rāma and his brother Bharata in the 100th *sarga* of "Ayodhyā-kāṇḍa" presents advice on the art of ruling.[48] Śrīmadgosvāmī Tulasīdāsajī's *Śrīrāmacaritamānasa* recalls a brief dialogue between Rāma and Śabarī, an elderly ascetic disciple from a lower caste, on the nine forms of devotion ("navadhā bhagati" (*bhakti*)).[49] Later, Vālī's questions to Rāma about the reason for his own death presents a subtle lesson on ethics and morality.[50] The *Adhyātma-Rāmāyaṇa*,[51] a work found within the *Brahmāṇḍa-Purāṇa*, and hence attributed to Veda Vyāsa, allegorically presents the *Rāmāyaṇa* narrative from an Advaita Vedanta lens. The fifth *adhyāya* of its "Uttarakāṇḍa" recalls what is identified as the "Rāmagītā," a conversation between Rāma and his younger brother Lakṣamaṇa.[52] The *Yoga-vāsiṣṭha*, a work accredited to Vālmīki that recalls the extensive council imparted by Vasiṣṭha to Rāma,[53] is also structured within the framework of a question and answer dialogue.[54] These and other passages from sacred texts demonstrate the not only timelessness but also prominence of revelation and learning through the framework of a question-answer dialogue.

45. (Sargeant and Chapple)
46. (Sukthankar, *Śāntiparvan*)
47. (Caudharī)
48. (Mudholakar and Mukhopadhyaya 942)
49. (Tulasīdāsajī 572–73)
50. ("Kiṣkindhākāṇḍa" 17-18) (Mudholakar and Mukhopadhyaya 1468–87)
51. (Maharṣi)
52. (Maharṣi 366–75)
53. (Grierson 11)
54. (Vālmīki)

These dialogues also serve as implementations of Kṛṣṇa's instruction to Arjuna in the fourth *adhyāya* of the *Gītā*: "By offering prostrations (*praṇipātena*), *by asking questions* (*paripraśnena*), [and] through service (*sevayā*), receive that [wisdom] (*brahmavidyā*)."[55] Although the term 'praśna' itself means *to inquire*, the prefix 'pari' is adjoined in the sense of *parita*, meaning *much* or *plenty*. Here, Kṛṣṇa advises that many questions ought to be asked by the disciple. Kṛṣṇa's mention of 'paripraśnena' highlights a noteworthy feature of the guru-*śiṣya* relationship. Contrary to presumption that the knowledge of spiritual truths is to be accepted without examination, Kṛṣṇa advocates that realization does not requisite unreflected acceptance where questioning is discouraged or frowned upon. To Kṛṣṇa it is quite the opposite. Asking many questions is not only permitted but also encouraged. Inquiry is promoted as an important, if not necessary, instrument for acquiring knowledge and dismissing doubt, speculation, and misunderstanding. Even though Kṛṣṇa's direction in Gī. 4.34 is intended for acquiring *brahmavidyā*, his positioning of inquiry as a means towards acquiring knowledge of spiritual mysteries demonstrates the acceptance and significance of a question-answer-based method of learning.

Nevertheless, Kṛṣṇa is careful to qualify inquiry with two criteria: "praṇipātena" and "sevayā." 'Praṇipāta' refers to offering prostrations to the guru. Although the term refers to a physical act, its sentiments are far from corporal. Bowing symbolizes several sentiments. It is foremost an expression of humility—the renunciation of one's pride, prejudices, and preconceptions; the acceptance of one's inabilities and lack of experience or knowledge; and the acknowledgment of the guru's authority. Folding one's hands and bowing the head signifies surrenderance not only to the instruction and the will of the guru, but also to the means that they employ and to the end to which they lead.

Kṛṣṇa then reveals "sevā" as the third means towards acquiring the

55. "tadviddhi praṇipātena paripraśnena sevayāl" (Gī. 4.34) (Vyāsa 89)

wisdom of the guru ("sevayā"). As with 'praṇipātena' and 'paripraśnena', Kṛṣṇa's mention of *sevā* has several implications. The first is to physically be in service of the guru—to help the guru with any tasks that they may require assistance with and even perform menial service. In addition, 'sevā' also refers to *sevana*—the more subtle act of being in association with the guru. It involves, among other things, being in the guru's company, closely observing the guru's actions and values; understanding their intentions and inner wishes; realizing the guru's actions as righteous and taking inspiration from them; perceiving the guru's self-control, confidence, faith in Paramātman, devotion to their own guru and Paramātman, and attempting to imbibe such qualities into one's own life. Performing *sevā* of the guru affords the disciple a glimpse of their values, endeavor (*sādhana*), and wisdom. The disciple gradually attains the guru's favor, idolizes them, and by doing so ultimately transforms.

Questioning comes in many forms and is motivated by numerous intentions. Some questions seek to curb an interest or curiosity, some to learn, appreciate, or understand; whereas some ask to implicate, accuse, or discredit; some inquire to test or measure; some to instigate, aggravate, or even to dishearten; some to instigate conversation or pass time; and some even to display their self-attested wisdom or expertise. However, when questioning is qualified by *praṇipāta* and *sevā* (or *sevana*) it is characterized by a sense of urgency, a deep yearning to transform oneself, to become free from one's present condition, and become like the guru. At its core, *paripraśna* is motivated by and intentioned in a sincere yearning for personal change. Questioning of this sort is advanced by Kṛṣṇa and exemplified in the readings from sacred texts mentioned earlier.

PEDAGOGICAL ASPECTS OF CLASSICAL INDIAN QUESTION-ANSWER DIALOGUE

An analysis of the question-answer dialogues from sacred texts such as those presented above affords great insight into various pedagogical methods and mechanisms characteristic of classical Indian learning. Prior

to engaging with Swaminarayan's Vacanāmṛta, I would like to spend a little time presenting a rudimentary analysis of the pedagogical features of the many readings mentioned earlier. Doing so will provide an approximate framework from which to compare features of the dialogue presented within the Vacanāmṛta and highlight its distinctive aspects.

First, it is noticeable among the examples mentioned earlier that there is great diversity among those who pose questions and those who respond to them. Children such as Naciketā, the unnamed students of Sanskrit grammar under the tutelage of Patañjali, the six disciples of Pippalāda Ṛṣi in the Praśnopaniṣad, and Śvetaketu and the adolescent Satyakāma Jābāla from the Chāndogyopaniṣad—all young disciples—pose questions to their respective gurus. Householders such as Jānasruti from the Chāndogyopaniṣad; the elderly, unlearned, and those of a low caste such as Śabarī from the *Rāmāyaṇa*; *kṣatriya* princes like Arjuna in the *Bhagavadgītā*, kings such as Janaka from the Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad, Parikṣit from the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa*, Janamejaya from the *Mahābhārata*, Vālī from the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and even Dhṛtarāṣṭra from the *Viduranīti*; and deities such as Indra and Virocana from the Chāndogyopaniṣad also take on the role of the eager pupil in search for wisdom. *Ṛṣis* and *munis* such as Śaunaka from the Muṇḍakopaniṣad, Bhṛgu from the Taittirīyopaniṣad, Gautama from the Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad, Śaunaka from the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa*, Nārada from the *Nāradīya-Purāṇa*, and once again Śaunaka from the *Mahābhārata* and divine manifestations (*avatāras*) such as Rāma from the *Yoga-vāsiṣṭha* also become inquisitors. Despite their spiritually elevated standing, they are also identified as receivers of revelation. Perhaps their noble positions serve to establish requisites for receiving and understanding revelation or to dissuade the self-righteous from delusioned feelings of content.

In addition to variances in age, spiritual insight, and caste, members of both genders are recorded to have participated in dialogue. Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad's narrative of the dialogues between Yājñavalkya and Maitreya in Bṛ. 2.4.1, 4.5.4, and 4.5.14 and Yājñavalkya and Gārgī in

Bṛ. 3.6.1, 3.8.3, and 3.8.6, in addition to the identification of Gārgī as a *viduṣī*[56]—a learned female pundit—who asks in order to, among other things, evaluate Yājñavalkya's intellect, is a prime example of not only gender-independent participation but also acceptance of the authority of both genders. What is even more astonishing is that many of the classical commentators fail to even highlight this point, perhaps suggesting that such participation was commonplace, if not expected.[57] From these examples, it becomes apparent that participation within question-answer dialogues is not limited or restricted to any specific age, gender, social order, or mode of life.

There is also great diversity among the teachers who respond to the questions posed. *Ṛṣi-munis* such as Pippalāda from the Praśnopaniṣad, Aṅgiras from the Muṇḍakopaniṣad, Hāridrumata Gautama, Udālaka, and Sanatkumāra from the Chāndogyopaniṣad, again Sanatkumāra from the *Nāradīya-Purāṇa*, Sūta from the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa*, Vaiśampāyana and Ugraśravas from the *Mahābhārata* and the *Harivaṃśa*,[58] and Vasiṣṭha from the *Rāmāyaṇa* present counsel to their disciples. Teachers also included kings such as Aśvapati and Pravāhaṇa from the Chāndogyopaniṣad, pundits or sages such as Yājñavalkya from the Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad; warriors such Bhīṣma from the "Śāntiparvan" of the *Mahābhārata*, and householders (*gṛhastha*) such as Vidura from the *Viduranīti*. Deities such as Yama (Dharmarājā) from the Kaṭhopaniṣad, Varuṇa from the Taittirīyopaniṣad, the Gārhapatya, Anvāhāryapacana, and Āhavanīya fires and Prajāpati from the Chāndogyopaniṣad, once again Prajāpati from the Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad, Agni from the *Agni-Purāṇa*, and Yakṣa from the *Mahābhārata*, along with divine manifestations (*avatāras*) such as Kṛṣṇa from the *Bhagavad-Gītā* and Rāma from the *Rāmāyaṇa* also

56. (Sādhu, *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣatsvāmināyaṇabhāṣyam* 174)
57. See, for example: (Śaṅkara 422–26, 439–54), (Śaṅkarācārya 492–96, 512–29), (Sādhu, *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣatsvāmināyaṇabhāṣyam* 174–77, 186–99), (Raṅgarāmānuja 153–55, 166–74), (Basu 298–306, 328–50)
58. (Harivaṃśa 1.6-7) (Vyāsamuni, *The Harivamsa* 5–6)

present revelations. There are also instances, as in the Kenopaniṣad, in which the identities of both the disciple who inquires and the guru who responds are left anonymous.

In addition to questions asked by a disciple to a guru, there are also narratives of questions asked among a group of seekers. For instance, Śilaka Śālāvatya, Caikitāyana Dālbhya, and Pravāhaṇa Jaivali's conversation in the Chāndogyopaniṣad discuss *udgītha* by asking questions to one another. Yājñavalkya's conversation with Hotṛ Aśvāla, Ārtabhāga, Bhujyu, and others at the beginning of the third chapter of the Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad is also, at least *prima facie*, presented as a discussion among peers.

Among these various dialogues, we find that questions are asked for several reasons. For instance, Naciketā's inquiry in the Kaṭhopaniṣad is motivated by a genuine desire for realization. In other instances, questions, such as Vālī's question to Rāma in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, are asked to understand the actions of the divine. Questions, such as those posed by Patañjali's students, are asked to clarify misunderstandings or understand the significance and inexplicit intentions of aphorisms. In other instances, questions are posed to instigate narratives, as with King Janamejaya and Śaunaka in the *Mahābhārata* and King Parikṣit in the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa*. Sometimes questions are asked to resolve a pressing, deep internal turmoil or a moral dilemma, as with Arjuna in the *Bhagavad-Gītā* and Yudhiṣṭhira in the "Shanti-Parvan" of the *Mahābhārata*; whereas in other instances similar questions are repeatedly asked to prompt responses that are either different, more specific, or from an alternative perspective. For instance, Indra's repeated inquiry on the referent of 'ātman' in the Chāndogyopaniṣad prompts Prajāpati to answer differently each time. Each response not only serves as a test, but is also catered to Indra's own readiness and worthiness. In another instance, repetition is used to further revelation. Satyakāma's willingness to learn about the nature of *brahman* within the Chāndogyopaniṣad is responded

by a *ṛṣabha* (bull),[59] *agni* (fire),[60] a *haṃsa* (swan),[61] and a *madgu* (a type of aquatic bird),[62] each revealing a different aspect of *brahman*. Later in the same Upaniṣad, Nārada's repeated inquiry of "if there is anything greater" prompts Sanatkumāra to reveal more and more superior entities.[63] Some questions, such as those posed by Hotṛ Aśvāla, Ārtabhāga, Bhujyu, Gārgī and others in the Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad and Yakṣa in the *Mahābhārata*, serve as a test.

From this brief overview, it becomes apparent that there is a great variety among the questions asked and many implications that can be deduced from them. Questions presented provide insights into what is considered important to the individual and the community; the nature of the relationship between the questioner and the responder; the significance of discussion, reason, questioning, and authority in acquiring spiritual truths; the requisites of participation; and the erudition of both the questioner and the responder. I have touched upon only a few of these implications with regards to the sacred works mentioned above.

I would now like to focus my attention on the Swaminarayan's Vacanāmṛta to examine the different methods of questioning utilized within the text and the deductions we can make from them. In this analysis I will present similarities between Swaminarayan's pedagogy in the Vacanāmṛta and the question-answer dialogues within the sacred texts discussed above. At appropriate times in the discussion I will also highlight distinctive pedagogic features of the Vacanāmṛta along with the insights they provide.

59. (Chā. 4.5.1-3) (Śāstrī 55)
60. (Chā. 4.6.1-4) (Śāstrī 55)
61. (Chā. 4.7.1-4) (Śāstrī 55)
62. (Chā. 4.8.1-4) (Śāstrī 55–56)
63. (Chā. 7.1.5, 7.2.2, 7.3.2, 7.4.3, 7.5.3, 7.6.2, 7.7.2, 7.8.2, 7.9.2, 7.10.2, 7.11.2, 7.12.2, 7.13.2, 7.14.2) (Śāstrī 71–76)

QUESTIONS-ANSWER DIALOGUE IN THE VACANĀMṚTA – AN INTRODUCTION

Swaminarayan's revelations within the Vacanāmṛta are predominantly positioned within two types of frameworks. The first contains revelation that is identified as *kṛpāvacana*—speech that is expressed out of unmerited favor or beneficence. Within these discourses Swaminarayan presents revelation without being prompted. These *kṛpāvacana* typically begin simply with: "Thereafter, Śrījīmahārāja (Swaminarayan) stated."[64,65] Throughout the Vacanāmṛta, there are a total of 162 instances in which Swaminarayan offers such *kṛpāvacana*.

We find such forms of revelation also within the Upaniṣads. For instance, when Satyakāma Jābāla's task of nurturing cattle is completed, a *ṛṣabha* (bull),[66] *agni* (fire),[67] a *haṃsa* (swan),[68] and a *madgu* (a type of aquatic bird),[69] each reveal an unprompted aspect of brahman, presumably out of beneficence or *kṛpā*. Although the *ṛṣabha* and others do not share the same significance to Satyakāma as the devotees would have for Swaminarayan, revelation out of *kṛpā* or grace is a theme that is familiar to Upaniṣadic pedagogy.

The second framework in which we find revelation, consists of teaching that is inspired by questioning. Throughout the Vacanāmṛta there are a total of 456 questions that are posed. The following is a table detailing the number of questions asked in each chapter and by whom.[70]

64. "pachī Śrījīmahārāja bolyā je..."
65. See, for example the beginning of GP. 3-10. (Svāmināyaṇa 4–11)
66. (Chā. 4.5.1-3) (Śāstrī 55)
67. (Chā. 4.6.1-4) (Śāstrī 55)
68. (Chā. 4.7.1-4) (Śāstrī 55)
69. (Chā. 4.8.1-4) (Śāstrī 55–56)
70. This table has been derived from one that appears in Appendix 1 of the Vacanāmṛta. (Svāmināyaṇa 667)

Questions Asked by:	Vacanāmṛta Chapters												Questions Asked by Ascetics: 261
	GP.	S.	Ka.	L.	P.	GM.	V.	A.	As.	J.	GA.	Total	
kṛpāvacana	40	6	5	3	5	45	5	3	1	5	44	162	
Swaminarayan	22	4	7	47	1	29	8	2	0	1	17	138	
Muktānanda Svāmī	32	12	5	8	0	17	4	1	0	1	11	91	
Gopāṇānanda Svāmī	5	0	2	2	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	11	
Nityānanda Svāmī	4	4	3	11	0	0	2	1	0	0	0	25	
Śukānanda svāmī	3	0	0	3	0	2	1	1	0	0	11	21	
Brahmānanda Svāmī	8	0	2	3	0	2	1	0	0	1	0	17	
Other Ascetics	41	15	8	15	2	8	0	0	0	0	7	96	
Devotees	17	2	2	1	2	5	11	7	0	2	8	57	
Total	172	43	34	93	10	108	33	15	1	10	99	618	

Among the questions asked there are several different types, each providing unique insights. Although they can be analyzed in many ways, we will discuss them in terms of the identity of those asking and answering questions (the who) and the methods they employ (the how). By presenting an integrated examination of these, this work investigates the dynamics of the question-answer dialogues of the Vacanāmṛta and highlights the pedagogical insights they afford.

THE TEACHER OF THE VACANĀMṚTA

The teacher or guru within the Vacanāmṛta is clearly Swaminarayan. Within the text he is often referred to by the name 'Śrījīmahārāja', 'Svāmī Śrīsahajānandajī Mahārāja', or simply 'Mahārāja.'[71] As with the Upaniṣads and other sacred texts mentioned above, questions are ultimately directed towards the guru and the guru serves as the conclusive voice of all teaching. The guru is understood to possess authority on all matters addressed. The *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* affirms:

> "The words of Hari (Parabrahman) and the guru are understood by all to be authoritative. Sacred texts that incorporate their teachings and are in accordance with their explanations are [also] authoritative."[72]

71. See, for example: (GP. 1, GM. 2, GP. 2) (Svāminārāyaṇa 1, 352, 3)
72. "Harergurośca yaḥ śabdaḥ pramāṇaṃ nikhilo mataḥl tadupadiṣṭaṃ sacchāstraṃ

Bhadreshdas Swami asserts the authority of the guru's teachings within the tradition. As with other sacred works, the teacher is also treated with great respect, admiration, and reverence.

Unlike many of the other sacred works, except for the *Bhagavadgītā* and excerpts from the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata*, the guru within the Vacanāmṛta holds special significance to the receivers of revelation—those seated within the assembly. Within the tradition Swaminarayan is understood as Parabrahman Puruṣottama himself. As a result, Swaminarayan is not just identified as the guru for the audience of the Vacanāmṛta; he is also identified as Hari (Parabrahman).

The *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* repeatedly proclaims the same identification. While describing the form of Parabrahman it explains: "That very Parabrahman Paramātman is Bhagavān Swaminarayan, or Sahajanand Swami, the son of Bhakti and Dharma."[73,74] It later reaffirms the identification by declaring Swaminarayan as the supreme entity. It states, "That entity (viz. Parabrahman), who is above all and above even that which is above all, is this very Śrī Sahajanand, or Swaminarayan himself, above whom there is none."[75] This identification is also repeatedly expressed within the Vacanāmṛta by the narrator of the text (the voice of the compilers), disciples seated in the assembly, and by Swaminarayan himself.

The voice of the compilers of the Vacanāmṛta presents itself throughout the text within the introductory paragraph of each "Vacanāmṛta" and occasionally when presenting contextual details leading up to

---

pramāṇaṃ tatkṛtāऽrthakam॥" (Kārikā 255) (Sadhu Bhadreśadāsa 167)

73. Swaminarayan's mother was named Bālā (better known as Premavatī or Bhakti) and his father's name was Devaśarmā (also known as Dharmadeva). (Dave 8, 7) The mention of 'Bhakti' and 'Dharma' made here refer to Swaminarayan's parents: Bhaktimātā and Dharmadeva.

74. "sa eva Sahajānandaḥ Svāminārāyaṇo hariḥ। Paramātmā paraṃ brahma bhaktijo dharmanandanaḥ॥" (Kārikā 177) (Sadhu Bhadreśadāsa 98)

75. "soऽyaṃ Śrīsahajānandaḥ sarvopari parātparaḥ। Svāminārāyaṇaḥ sākṣād yasmānna vidyate paraḥ॥" (Kārikā 218) (Sadhu Bhadreśadāsa 130)

Swaminarayan's revelation. It also takes on a significant hermeneutic role by guiding the reader to accurately decipher Swaminarayan's teachings, especially those in which he modestly portrays himself. At the end of such revelations, the narrator's voice serves as a voice of clarity. For example, in GP. 44 the narrators elucidate: "Śrījīmahārāja spoke in this manner for the purpose of enlightening his devotees, but in reality, he himself is the manifest form of Puruṣottama Nārāyaṇa."[76] Elsewhere, they similarly state, "Thus, Śrījīmahārāja spoke for the sake of his devotees, while he himself is Puruṣottama Nārāyaṇa."[77] Similar hermeneutically insightful statements are also seen at the conclusion of GA. 30 and 39.[78] Within these readings, the compilers are clear to announce Swaminarayan as Parabrahman Puruṣottama Nārāyaṇa.

The Vacanāmṛta also records the conviction of those present in the assembly. For instance, V. 18 comments:

> "Upon hearing this discourse, all of the *sadhus* (ascetic disciples) and *satsaṅgīs* (devotees) understood that... no one transcends this Śrījīmahārāja, the son of Bhakti and Dharma.[79] It is only he who is our *iṣṭadeva* (God), and it is only he who is our guru."[80]

The compilers comment that members of the assembly also understand Swaminarayan as the supreme being. They even qualify 'Śrījīmahārāja' with the pronoun 'this' and the subordinate clause 'the son of Bhakti and Dharma,' perhaps to ensure that there would not be a misunderstanding

76. "evī rīte Śrījīmahārāja bolyā te to potānā bhaktane śikṣāne arthe che ema jāṇavuṃ ane pote to sākṣāt Puruṣottama Nārāyaṇa che." (GP. 44) (Svāminārāyaṇa 84)
77. "evī rīte [potānā] bhaktajananī śikṣāne arthe Śrījīmahārāje vārtā karī ne pote to sākṣāt Puruṣottama Nārāyaṇa che." (L. 13, 14) (Svāminārāyaṇa 296, 300)
78. (GA. 30, 39) (Svāminārāyaṇa 610, 633)
79. It is well known in the tradition that Swaminarayan's parents were named Dharmadeva (Dharma) and Bhaktimātā (Bhakti).
80. "evī rītanī vārtāne sāṃbhalīne sarve sādhu ne satsaṃgī te ema samajatā havā je...'ā bhakti-dharmanā putra Śrījīmahārāja che paṇa e thakī para koī nathī ane e ja āpaṇā iṣṭadeva che ne guru paṇa e ja che.'" (V. 18) (Svāminārāyaṇa 531)

of the referent of 'Śrījīmahārāja'. The use of 'only' in the proceeding sentence further emphasizes that their devotion and reverence is exclusive or *ekāntika.* P. 6 presents in a similar tone: "Hearing this discourse, all of the *sadhus* and devotees realized Śrījīmahārāja as the cause of all, thus strengthening their *upāsanā* (conviction)."[81] In addition to the compilers of the text, the audience of the Vacanāmṛta also understands Swaminarayan as the manifest Parabrahman Puruṣottama Nārāyaṇa.

Swaminarayan's revelation in GM. 13 works in two ways. It first affirms the audience's conviction in Swaminarayan. Within his revelation Swaminarayan states,

> "Despite that form (the form (*mūrti*) of God in Akṣaradhāman) being dark in complexion, it does not appear so because of the immense brilliance [that surrounds it]. It appears extremely white; and that form has two hands and two captivating feet. However, it does not have four, eight, or a thousand hands. That form (*mūrti*) is pleasing [to look at] (*saumya*), possesses human-like shape, and is young (*kiśora*). That form is sometimes seen as standing among the brilliance [that surrounds it]; it is sometimes [seen as] sitting, and sometimes seen as walking... that form you also see; however, it is not entirely understood by you."[82]

Having described the form (*svarūpa*) of God in Akṣaradhāman, the divine abode of Parabrahman or Puruṣottama, the "Vacanāmṛta" then concludes

81. "evī rītanī vārtāne sāṃbhalīne sarve sādhu-haribhakta te Śrījīmahārājane viṣe sarvakāraṇapaṇuṃ jāṇīne upāsanānī dṛḍhatā karatā havā." (P. 6) (Svāmināryaṇa 342)

82. "te mūrti ghanaśyāma che topaṇa atiśaya teje karīne śyāma nathī jaṇātī, atiśaya śveta jaṇāya che. ane te mūrti dvibhuja che ane te mūrtine be caraṇa che ane atiśaya manohara che, paṇa cāra bhuja ke aṣṭa bhuja ke sahasra bhuja te e mūrtine nathī. e mūrti to ati saumya che ane manuṣyanā jevī ākṛti che ne kiśora che. te e mūrti kyāreka to e tejamāṃ ūbhī dekhāya che ne kyāreka beṭhī jaṇāya che ne kyāreka haratī-pharatī dekhāya che... te svarūpane to tame paṇa dekho cho paṇa tamārā samajyāmāṃ paripūrṇa āvatuṃ nathī." (GM. 13) (Svāmināryaṇa 383–84)

with the narrator's following observation:

> "In this manner, Śrījīmahārāja described his true identity, though indirectly, as Purushottam. Upon hearing this revelation, the *sadhus* and devotees accepted the fact that the form described amidst the divine light is, in fact, Śrījīmahārāja himself."[83]

The narrator's voice once again affirms that the disciples assembled before Swaminarayan understand him to be "that form in Akṣaradhāman," viz. Parabrahman Puruṣottama.

The above reading not only affirms the audience's conviction in Swaminarayan as Puruṣottama, but it also records Swaminarayan's self-revelation as such. In the reading from GM. 13 above, Swaminarayan also identifies the form of God in Akṣaradhāman as "that form you also see." Swaminarayan makes a similar identification in a passage from GA. 31 where he states: "God's form in Akṣaradhāman, which is *guṇātīta* (above the qualities of *māyā*), **is present before you**."[84] He specifies which form on earth he is discussing when he states elsewhere, "That form in the center of the brilliance [in Akṣaradhāman] **is this Mahārāja before you**."[85] He also states, "Such supreme (*sarvopari*) God, out of compassion [and] for the liberation of the *jīvātmans* (selves), having manifest on this earth, is visible to the eyes of all, **is your chosen deity** (*iṣṭadeva*), and **accepts your service**."[86] These references to the 'seen form,' the 'form before you,' 'this Mahārāja before you,' and 'your chosen deity (*iṣṭadeva*)'

83. "evī rīte Śrījīmahārāje potānā bhaktajananī śikṣāne arthe parokṣapaṇe potānā Puruṣottamapaṇānī vārtā karī. tene sāṃbhalīne sarve sādhu tathā haribhakta te ema ja mānatā havā je, 'je tejane viṣe mūrti kahī te ja ā Śrījīmahārāja pratyakṣa pramāṇa che." (GM. 13) (Svāminārāyaṇa 387)
84. (GA. 31) (Svāminārāyaṇa 612)
85. "je tejane viṣe mūrti che te ja ā pratyakṣa mahārāja che." (GM. 13) (Svāminārāyaṇa 387)
86. "evā sarvoparī je Puruṣottama Bhagavāna te ja dayāe karīne jīvonā kalyāṇane arthe ā pṛthvīne viṣe prakaṭa thayā thakā sarva jananā nayanagocara varte che ne tamārā iṣṭadeva che ne tamārī sevāne aṃgīkāra kare che." (GA. 38) (Svāminārāyaṇa 627)

are references that Swaminarayan makes to himself; thus, identifying himself as Parabrahman Puruṣottama.

This identification has certain implications in the question-answer dialogues taking place within the Vacanāmṛta. First, revelations provided by Swaminarayan in the Vacanāmṛta are understood within the tradition as *parāvāṇi*—the words of the Divine; and *śruti vacana*—the words of *śruti*. As a result, Swaminarayan's discourses are understood to have significant authority. The text's standing as *śruti vacana* implies that it possesses authority equal to the Vedas. The *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* affirms:

> "This (the Vacanāmṛta) compilation of the manifest Parabrahman's teachings **is truly a Veda**. For this reason, it is itself authoritative."[87]
>
> "The word of Bhagwan Swaminarayan **is the Veda itself**. The guru, moreover, is the fifth Veda. Therefore, their words are preeminent."[88]

Considered as a Veda, the text is understood as authoritative in itself. For this reason, the text is also identified as "the divine Vacanāmṛta."[89] The text's divine origin and consequent exceptional authority renders it as divine. It is no wonder that the Vacanāmṛta is regarded as one of the authoritative and foundational texts of the tradition.

The tradition's understanding of Swaminarayan's identity as Parabrahman also demonstrates its recognition of the Divine's interest in human affairs. It demonstrates the Divine's active engagement with questions and issues that concern devotees—humans who have deficiencies, limited knowledge, and an unebbing curiosity. This involvement suggests that he is not only patient but also willing to listen, understand, and address the human condition.

---

87. "idaṃ hi sākṣātparabrahmopadeśasaṃgraharūpo Veda eva। ata eva svataḥpramāṇaṃ।" (Sadhu Bhadreśadāsa 172)
88. "sākṣādvedo bhaved vākyaṃ Svāmināārāyaṇaprabhoḥ। guruśca pañcamo Vedastacchabdaśreṣṭhatā॥" (Kārikā 260) (Sadhu Bhadreśadāsa 172)
89. "divyaṃ ca Vacanāऽmṛtaṃ।" (Sadhu Bhadreśadāsa 414)

By nature of Swaminarayan being present (*pratyakṣa*), his revelation is understood to possess an authority that is unprecedented. Understood as the supreme entity, his hermeneutical and exegetical authority also supersedes other interpretive claims. Furthermore, the *Svāmināràyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* describes him as "antaryāmin"[90,91] and as the one who "grants to all the fruits of their actions (*karma*) and the power to know, act, and desire"[92]—both descriptions that affirm him as omniscient. By being understood as all-knowing, his positions on matters are rendered absolute. Additionally, as the present God, his revelation is also understood to be most appropriate and most relevant. It is understood that his revelation to whom, when, and by what means is most suitable. As such, his voice holds a tone of not only resolution and finality, but also one of relevance and appropriateness.

A Teacher Posing Questions

In this discussion I have described Swaminarayan as the teacher or the guru and not as simply the one who responds to or answers a disciple's questions. I have done so intentionally to demonstrate a distinctive feature of the Vacanāmṛta. Within many, if not all, of the sacred works discussed earlier, the identity of the questioner is synonymous with that of the disciple. The Vacanāmṛta, however, is not restricted to this identification. Within it, both the teacher and the disciple ask questions. I will discuss the questions of Swaminarayan's disciples later in this work; I would like to instead currently analyze the role of the teacher as the questioner. As detailed in the table provided earlier, among 456 questions posed within the Vacanāmṛta, Swaminarayan, the guru, asks 138 (30.3%) of them. This suggests the significance of Swaminarayan's

90. 'Antaryāmin' refers to one who controls while pervading within. It is inferred that one who is *antaryāmin* is also omniscient (*sarvajña*).
91. (Kārikā 170) (Sadhu Bhadreśadāsa 98)
92. "...sarvakarmaphalapradaḥl sarvajñānakriyecchānāṃ śakterdātā..." (Kārikā 174) (Sadhu Bhadreśadāsa 98)

role as the questioner.

The questions asked by Swaminarayan come in several different forms. Some inquire about the nature, characteristics, or definitions of concepts. For example, within GP. 44 "Śrījīmahārāja asks, "What is the characteristic of having affection towards God;"[93] GA. 39 records: "Addressing all of the *paramahaṃsas* and *satsaṅgīs*, Śrījīmahārāja said, "What is God's *māyā*;"[94] and in GP. 50 Swaminarayan seeks to define *kuśāgrabuddhi* (sharp intellect).[95]

In addition to asking such questions, he also sometimes explains the basis for his questioning. For instance, in GP. 69 "Śrījīmahārāja asked the *munis*, "What exactly is *dharma*? Please base your reply on the scriptures."[96] Here, he presents a criterion for the answers he expects—they must be authenticated by revelations from sacred texts, and as a result, not mere conjectures or unjustified hypotheses. He then adds: "The question arises because even the kings of the past who indulged in violence did not harm those who took their refuge, nor did they allow others to harm them. So, is the wrongdoing committed by hurting others considered the same as the wrongdoing of hurting a person who has sought one's refuge?"[97] His question on the nature of *dharma* is founded on a deeper moral dilemma which he seeks to resolve.

Some questions ask for summations or superlatives. For example, in GP. 1, the very first "Vacanāmṛta," "Śrījīmahārāja asks, 'Which is the

93. "Śrījīmahārāje praśna pūchyo je, 'Bhagavānane viṣe sneha hoya tenuṃ śuṃ rūpa che?'" (GP. 44) (Svāmināŕāyaṇa 82)
94. "Śrījīmahārāje sarva paramahaṃsa tathā sarva satsaṃgī āgala vārtā karī je, 'Bhagavānanī māyā te kaī che?'" (GA. 39) (Svāmināŕāyaṇa 628)
95. (GP. 50) (Svāmināŕāyaṇa 93–94)
96. "Śrījīmahārāja bolyā je, "dharma te kenuṃ nāma che eno śāstranī rīte karīne uttara karo?" (GP. 69) (Svāmināŕāyaṇa 135)
97. "je hiṃsaka rājā hatā te paṇa śaraṇe āvyo hoya tene māratā nahi ane māravā paṇa detā nahi. māṭe śaraṇe āvyo je jīva tene māryānuṃ jema pāpa che, tema bījāne māryānuṃ pāpa che ke nathī?" (GP. 69) (Svāmināŕāyaṇa 135–36)

most difficult of all spiritual endeavors?'"[98] and later in GP 20. he asks, "Who is the most ignorant of all ignorant people?"[99]

Other questions ask members of the audience to perform self-evaluations (introspection) and announce their reflections. For instance, within GA. 28 Śrījīmahārāja asks Brahmānanda Svāmī, Śukamuni, and Surā Khācara: "What flaw do you possess which would have you suffer a setback?" and in GM. 27 Śrījīmahārāja asks Muktānanda Svāmī, "What causes anger to arise within you?" In GM. 39 he similarly requests: "Please reveal to me the virtues (*guṇa*) which are natural to you—virtues that do not recede even under the influence of adverse places, times, actions, company, and other circumstances."[100] Upon asking the assembled disciples to reveal their nature, Swaminarayan sets his own example by revealing his own qualities. The "Vacanāmṛta" records, "Having said this, Śrījīmahārāja began himself, 'Here, let me first tell you the virtues that are natural to me."[101] The audience's willingness to respond to such inquiries and the Vacanāmṛta's telling account of it, even though many of the compilers themselves are recorded as revealing their own evaluations, is a testament to the authenticity of the text and the openness, honesty, and trust among not only Swaminarayan and his devotees but also the disciples present in the audience.

Some questions are analytical. Through analysis and reflection, they are aimed at making distinctions and highlighting subtleties. For example, within GP. 35 Swaminarayan presents a case study of sorts by comparing one who has "little intelligence [but] does not falter when it comes to safeguarding his own liberation"[102] to one "who is very intelli-

98. "Śrījīmahārāje praśna pūchyuṃ je, 'sarva sādhanamāṃ kayuṃ sādhana kaṭhaṇa che?'" (GP. 1) (Svāminārāyaṇa 1)
99. "ajñānīmāṃ atiśaya ajñānī te koṇa che?" (GP. 20) (Svāminārāyaṇa 30)
100. "deśa, kāla, kriyā, saṃgādike karīne paṇa je potāmāṃ evo guṇa hoya te jāya ja nahi, evo jene je svābhāvika guṇa hoya te kaho?" (GM. 39) (Svāminārāyaṇa 440)
101. "ema kahīne Śrījīmahārāja bolyā je, 'lyo, ame amārāmāṃ evā svābhāvika guṇa rahyā che te kahīe...'" (GM. 39) (Swāminārāyan 440)
102. "thoḍī buddhi che topaṇa potānā kalyāṇane arthe je jatana karavuṃ temāṃthī

gent; so much so that he can point out mistakes even in great men; but he does not walk on the path of liberation."[103] By presenting contrasts, he instigates reflection on the significance of worldly intellect and, in doing so, redefines the nature and significance of "true intellect."

He initiates a similar thought experiment in GP. 14, where he describes a renunciant having specific qualities and a householder who has others and asks who is superior among them.[104] Within L. 12 he inquires about the nature of six types of conviction (*niścaya*) in God.[105] GP. 32 records a heterogeneous line of questioning that both analyzes and makes such analysis relevant by instigating personal reflection. Seeking to emphasize a distinction between the various ways of experiencing objects of the sense, Śrījīmahārāja poses: "In this world, a materialistic individual who is attached to the sense objects (*viṣayas*) cannot survive without indulging in them. Moreover, just as that disbeliever indulges in *viṣayas*, similarly, a devotee of God also indulges in *viṣayas*. However, the two are different. In what way are they different?"[106] Upon elaborating on the distinction, he asks the *paramahaṃsas* seated before him to reflect on their own condition. After a series of questions Swaminarayan announces, "Let the seniors amongst you answer these questions after due deliberation..."[107] Disciples are then encouraged to express their self-reflections.

Swaminarayan's analytical questions also include presenting contradictions that mandate a revaluation of presumed relationships among

pācho paḍato nathī" (GP. 35) (Svāmināŕāyaṇa 61)

103. "buddhi to ghaṇī che ane moṭā moṭāmāṃ paṇa khoṭya kāḍhe evo che toya paṇa te kalyāṇane mārge cālato nathī..." (GP. 35) (Svāmināŕāyaṇa 61)
104. (GP. 14) (Svāmināŕāyaṇa 18–19)
105. (L. 12) (Svāmināŕāyaṇa 291)
106. "ā saṃsāramāṃ je viṣayī jīva hoya te paṃcaviṣaya vinā rahī śake nahi, te jema e vimukha jīvane paṃcaviṣaya che tema harijanane paṇa paṃcaviṣaya che, paṇa temāṃ bheda che. te bheda kema che?" (GP. 32) (Svāmināŕāyaṇa 54)
107. "e sarve praśnano uttara potānā aṃtaramāṃ vicārīne moṭā moṭā ho te karo" (GP. 32) (Svāmināŕāyaṇa 55)

prevalent notions. For example, within GA. 3 he asks whether compassion and affection remain for God's devotees when one attains *ātmajñāna* (knowledge of oneself as the *ātman*) and *vairāgya* (detachment).[108] The question's inexplicit tone suggests that compassion and affection are mutually incompatible with *ātmajñāna* and *vairāgya*; however, the task of the disciple is to explain how they are not only compatible but also congruous. Swaminarayan asks for a similar resolution in V. 11 when he inquires: "As long as one has not realized the greatness of the *satpuruṣa*,[109] one does not attain the state of being *brahmasvarūpa*;[110] yet, without *ātmā*-realization (realization of the self), one cannot realize the greatness of the *satpuruṣa*. Hence, there seems to be a paradox. Explain the means to resolving this paradox."[111]

The final type of analysis-oriented questioning that I would like to highlight involves those in which Swaminarayan engages his audience in acts of interpretation or seeks to draw out exegetical or hermeneutical principles. Swaminarayan's inquiry in GA. 32 serves as an example. The text describes: "Thereupon Śrījīmahārāja asked Muktānanda Svāmī and the other ascetics, 'Please explain the meaning of the verse 'viṣayā vinivartante nirāhārasya dehinaḥ...॥'"[112,113] Swaminarayan's proceeding exposition expands upon the intended meaning of the verse and its

108. (GA. 3) (Svāmināārāyaṇa 548)
109. Within the tradition, 'satpuruṣa' refers to the manifest form of Akṣarabrahman, who guides disciples towards becoming, like him, divine and free from *māyā* (ignorance) and offering supreme devotion towards Puruṣottama.
110. Here, to be *brahmasvarūpa* refers to attaining qualitative oneness with Akṣarabrahman, which involves (1) acquiring the divine qualities of Akṣarabrahman that are needed for performing supreme devotion to Puruṣottama and (2) becoming free from *māyā* (ignorance).
111. "jyāṃ sudhī e satpuruṣano mahimā ene na jaṇāya tyāṃ sudhī brahmasvarūpane viṣe sthiti paṇa na thāya ne ātmāne viṣe sthiti thayā vinā satpuruṣano mahimā paṇa na jaṇāya. māṭe paraspara virodha āvyo, te virodha ṭale te upāya kaho." (V. 11) (Svāmināārāyaṇa 516)
112. (Gī. 2.59) (Vyāsa 59)
113. (GA. 32) (Svāmināārāyaṇa 612–13)

implicit instruction on curbing the senses. In GP. 64 Swaminarayan undertakes a more macro-level and conceptually involved approach towards interpretation. He begins his inquiry with the observation: "The *śrutis* mention that the *ātman* (self) and Akṣara[114] are the body (*śarīra*) of Purushottam, who is God.[115]"[116] He then asks "How can that *ātman* and Akṣara be described as the *śarīra* of God?"[117] and "Just as the body of the *jīva* (self) is mutable and entirely distinct from the indweller, the *jīva* itself; there should be a similar degree of difference between Puruṣottama and the *ātman* and Akṣara which are the *śarīra* of Puruṣottama. Please explain in which way they are different."[118] Identifying the *ātman* and Akṣara as ontologically distinct from Puruṣottama, Swaminarayan seeks for an explanation or rather a reinterpretation of *śruti* revelations. It is as if he intends for his disciples to present a verbal commentary of sorts on the *śruti* statements he has in mind. Nudging them along, he presents a parallel relationship between the *jīva* and the body.

In L. 8 Swaminarayan presents a significant hermeneutical principle on receiving revelation. He asks, "Is there anything in the eight scriptures,

---

114. According to Swaminarayan, Akṣara (Akṣarabrahman) is offered as a distinct ontological entity from Parabrahman. Like Parabrahman there is only one Akṣarabrahman, who is eternally beyond the influence of *māyā*. Its form (*svarūpa*), qualities, and supremacy is dependent on and secondary only to that of Parabrahman. By Parabrahman's eternal wish, Akṣarabrahman is the cause, support, controller, and pervader (*śarīrin*) of all inanimate creation, *jīvātman,* and *īśvarātman*.

115. See, for example: "yasyātmā śarīram" (Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad Mādhyandina Pāṭha 3.7.30) and "yasyākṣaraṃ śarīram" (Subālopaniṣad 7) (Śāstrī 246)

116. "Puruṣottama evā je Bhagavāna tenuṃ śarīra ātmā tathā Akṣara che, ema śrutie kahyuṃ che." (GP. 64) (Svāmināràyaṇa 123)

117. "ātmā ne Akṣara te kevī rīte Bhagavānanuṃ śarīra kahevāya che?" (GP. 65) (Svāmināràyaṇa 123–24)

118. "jīvanuṃ śarīra to jīva thakī atyaṃta vilakṣaṇa che ne vikāravāna che ane dehī je jīva te to nirvikārī che, māṭe deha ane dehīne to atyaṃta vilakṣaṇapaṇuṃ che; tema Puruṣottamane ane Puruṣottamanā śarīra je ātmā ne Akṣara tene viṣe atyaṃta vilakṣaṇapaṇuṃ joīe, te kaho kema vilakṣaṇapaṇuṃ che" (GP. 64) (Svāmināràyaṇa 124)

which include the *Śrīmadbhagāvata* and other sacred works, that should be disregarded, or should everything be imbibed?"[119] At first glance it would appear that by posing the question, Swaminarayan is inclined to advocate that parts should be disregarded; but, this is not the case. Instead he affirms that all revelation within these works are true. Why does he then bother to pose the question? Swaminarayan's intention is to introduce the principle of *aṅga* (inclination). He explains:

> "In all those scriptures there are countless incidents, and through all those incidents, the inclinations of the devotees who have attained God are described. Therefore, they are all suitable to be imbibed. However, among all these incidents, only those incidents that match one's own inclination should be imbibed. The others, however, may be disregarded with the understanding, 'These talks are true, but they are for the benefit of other devotees; they are not for me.'"[120]

Through these and other such questions, Swaminarayan encourages his disciples to reason about, interpret, expand upon, and learn discretion when dealing with revelations from sacred texts.

Although there are several different types of questions that Swaminarayan poses, I have focused my discussion on select ones to emphasize specific aspects of his inquiries. Given his unique ontological position, Swaminarayan's questions are not intentioned in self-learning; after-all, he is understood within the tradition and to his audience as Puruṣottama, and hence, as omniscient. Instead, Swaminarayan's questioning takes on the role of instruction. Through questioning he, among

119. "Śrīmadbhāgavatādika je āṭha satśāstra temāṃthī koī tyāga karavā yogya che ke sarve grahaṇa karavā yogya che?" (L. 8) (Svāmināŕāyaṇa 280)

120. "e sarve graṃthamāṃ paṇa aneka prakāranāṃ prakaraṇa che. te sarve prakaraṇe karīne Bhagavānane pāmyā je bhakta temanāṃ aṃga khyāṃ che, māṭe e sarve grahaṇa karyā yogya che. paṇa sarva prakaraṇamāṃthī je prakaraṇa potānā aṃgamāṃ malatuṃ āvatuṃ hoya tene grahaṇa karavuṃ ne bījāno tyāga karavo ane ema jāṇavuṃ je, 'e che to sācuṃ paṇa e bījā bhaktane arthe che, paṇa māre arthe nathī.'" (L. 8) (Svāmināŕāyaṇa 280)

other things, expresses the nature and characteristics of foundational concepts, draws attention to the significance of specific principles by presenting summations and superlatives, emphasizes moral principles, highlights subtle distinctions, grounds analysis in personal reflection, resolves conflict, reevaluates preconceived relationships among concepts, and draws out hermeneutical and exegetical principles.

Instructive Methods

Upon asking questions like those described above, Swaminarayan entertains responses from his audience. His methods of replying to these responses also serve to instruct. Although in some instances Swaminarayan is satisfied with the response given,[121] in others he finds the resolution provided agreeable and continues by either substantiating or adding to the proposed answer. For example, in K. 2 Swaminarayan asks younger *paramahaṃsas* the nature of the intellect of those who continue to perceive faults in the present form of God and his devotees. Satisfied with Bhagavadānanda Svāmī's response, Swaminarayan remarks, "What he says is appropriate; that is the correct answer to the question"[122] and then continues to substantiate the answer provided. In another "Vacanāmṛta," upon receiving an answer to his question on how to discern a deceitful person, "Śrījīmahārāja accepted the answer, but questioned further."[123] Then having received the anticipated answer, "Śrījīmahārāja confirmed, 'That is the correct answer to the question.'"[124] Later in the same "Vacanāmṛta," Swaminarayan acknowledges Devānanda Svāmī's answer to the question: "Which single fault transforms all of a person's virtues to faults?,"[125] by stating: "That is true, but I had another answer in

121. See, for example: GM. 25; GA. 11, and 14. (Svāminārāyaṇa 414, 565, 576)
122. "e ṭhīka kahe che. Eno uttara e ja che…" (K. 2) (Svāminārāyaṇa 223)
123. "e uttarane Śrījīmahārāje mānyo ane pachī pote bolyā je…" (L. 16) (Svāminārāyaṇa 306)
124. "Śrījīmahārāje kahyuṃ je, 'e ṭhīka uttara karyo.'" (L. 16) (Svāminārāyaṇa 306)
125. "evo kayo eka avaguṇa che je, jeṇe karīne sarva guṇamātra te doṣarūpa thaī jāya che, te kaho?" (L. 16) (Svāminārāyaṇa 306)

mind."[126] He then reveals the answer and in doing so provides a unique perspective to the question that was asked. Swaminarayan similarly adds to the answer provided by Muktānanda Svāmī to the question he poses in GA. 2.[127] Such substantiations or additions serve to not only broaden the scope of the asked question but also suggest that although there may be many correct answers to any given question, there are some that precede others—they are more relevant or significant than others.

In some instances, Swaminarayan presents a further complication, requiring the answering disciple to reassess their answer. In GM. 4 Swaminarayan begins by asking: When *dharma* described by sacred texts comes in conflict with devotion (*bhakti*) to God, which of the two is to be maintained? Brahmānanda Svāmī replies, "If God is pleased by upholding devotion, then devotion should be upheld; and if he is pleased by upholding *dharma*, then *dharma* should be upheld."[128] Although it is an answer that cannot be contested, Swaminarayan wants to address an issue that is specific to a different circumstance. Upon receiving the above response, Swaminarayan qualifies, "For those who have found the incarnate form of God, it is of course appropriate for them to do only that which pleases God. But what should one do when God is not incarnate?"[129] Such stipulation focuses the question away from the easy (obvious) answer and mandates an evaluation of a more pressing, less easily resolvable issue.

In other "Vacanāmṛtas" Swaminarayan is unsatisfied with the answer provided. When this occurs, he sometimes counters the answer postulated by his disciples. For example, in V. 17 when Swaminarayan

126. "e uttara paṇa kharo; paṇa ame to eno uttara bījo dhāryo che..." (L. 16) (Svāminārāyaṇa 306)
127. (GA. 2) (Svāminārāyaṇa 545)
128. "jo Bhagavāna bhakti rākhye rājī hoya to bhakti rākhavī ane jo dharma rākhye rājī hoya to dharma rākhavo." (GM. 4) (Svāminārāyaṇa 347)
129. "jene prakaṭa Bhagavāna malyā hoya tene to jema Bhagavāna rājī hoya tema ja karavuṃ e ṭhīka che, paṇa jyāre Bhagavānanuṃ parokṣapaṇuṃ hoya tyāre kema karavuṃ?" (GM. 4) (Svāminārāyaṇa 347)

asks how an enlightened person is said to have conquered the senses and faculties (*jñāna-indriyas* and *karma-indriyas*, respectively) when the senses (*indriyas*) of the enlightened do not behave in a different manner from those who are not enlightened; Muktānanda Svāmī responds: "It seems that a person conquers his *indriyas* when he attains *nirvikalpa samādhi*."[130] Thereafter, Swaminarayan refutes, "Even one who has attained *nirvikalpa samādhi* indulges in the five sense objects (*pañcaviṣayas*) through the *indriyas* just like everyone else; so how can they be said to have conquered their *indriyas*?"[131] Despite his many attempts, Muktānanda Svāmī is unable to resolve Swaminarayan's objection. The "Vacanāmṛta" records that Swaminarayan ultimately answers the question himself. Nevertheless, Swaminarayan's objection presents an important consideration when understanding the nature of *nirvikalpa samādhi*: specifically, how one who is in the state engages with their *indriyas*, and what does controlling the *indriyas* consist of in the first place. Such objections serve to clarify and instruct on the nature of relationships between principles and identify both distinct and distinguishing characteristics of these principles.

GP. 14 similarly describes Swaminarayan's objection to an answer. Within this "Vacanāmṛta" Swaminarayan initiates a thought experiment where he describes a renunciant having specific qualities and a householder who has others and asks who is superior among the two. Muktānanda Svāmī advocates that the renunciant is better, but then Śrījīmahārāja presents a counter-argument. He states, "The renunciant has renounced of his own accord, out of frustration; so how can he be better? The householder, on the other hand, has stayed at home because of God's command; so how can he be inferior?"[132] When Muktānanda

130. "nirvikalpa samādhi thāya tyāre jitendriya thāya ema jaṇāya che." (V. 17) (Svāminārāyaṇa 524)

131. "nirvikalpa samādhivālāne paṇa paṃcaviṣaya grahaṇa karavā te to saunī peṭhe indriyo dvāre ja grahaṇa thāya che; māṭe jitendriyapaṇuṃ kema che?" (V. 17) (Svāminārāyaṇa 524)

132. "olyo mūṃjhāīne potānī mele bhekha laīne nīsaryo che te kevī rīte śreṣṭha che? ane gṛhastha to ājñāe karīne gharamāṃ rahyo che te kevī rīte nyūna che?" (GP.

Svāmī is unable to resolve the counter, Swaminarayan provides a resolution.[133] By presenting God's command as a relevant distinguishing feature among the two (the renunciant and the householder disciple), Swaminarayan's objection instructs, albeit indirectly, on the significance of such commands.

Swaminarayan similarly presents counterpoints to responses in GP. 35, 39, 44, 69, 71; S. 13, 14; K. 5; GM. 34; V. 20, and J. 1.[134] In each of these "Vacanāmṛtas" Swaminarayan's opposition highlights specific elements that are relevant to the answer he has in mind. The characteristics, significance, or relationship of these elements with other, expressed or otherwise latent principles within the asked question serve as important points of instruction. Swaminarayan's objections function to instruct about nuances to the discussion at hand.

Reflecting broadly on the objections raised by Swaminarayan, these counter-responses demonstrate several of notable features. First, they suggest that prior to posing a question, Swaminarayan has a specific solution or revelation in mind. His questions are, for the most part, focused on a specific revelation; they are not presented from ignorance, inquisitiveness, or curiosity; and they are preceded by his own reflection on the subject. Second, they demonstrate Swaminarayan's awareness and consideration of the relevant implications of the positions postulated by members of the audience. This analysis not only insinuates foresight on behalf of Swaminarayan but also attests his inclusive understanding of the nature and relationships of the principles under consideration. Furthermore, such objections indicate Swaminarayan's willingness to engage in analysis and rational evaluations. This is suggested by his use of reasoning to counter or reject a proposed resolution. Such reflection indicates a certain accepted dynamic, or rather coalescence, between

14) (Svāmināārāyaṇa 18–19)

133. (GP. 14) (Svāmināārāyaṇa 18–19)

134. (GP. 35, 39, 44, 69, 71; S. 13, 14; K. 5; GM. 34; V. 20, and J. 1) (Svāmināārāyaṇa 61, 70, 82, 135–36, 143–44, 200–01, 203–04, 229, 432, 532–33, 653)

revelation and reasoning. Specifically, to Swaminarayan revelation is not irrational.

Resolutions to Posed Questions

As we have seen in the examples above, when the members of the audience are unable to respond to the question posed, Swaminarayan takes it on himself to provide an adequate solution. For example, when he asks what the most difficult spiritual endeavor is, "The *brahmacārīs*, *sadhus* and householders answered according to their own understanding, but none could give a satisfactory reply. Śrījīmahārāja then said, 'Allow me to answer.'"[135] The "Vacanāmṛta" then continues by describing Swaminarayan's response to his own question. Similarly, within numerous instances in L. 5, 6, 8, and GA. 11,[136] Swaminarayan responds to his own questions when the *paramahaṃsas* and devotees are unable to provide a suitable resolution. GA. 36 describes, "Everyone answered according to their understanding, but the question was not answered satisfactorily. So, then Śrījīmahārāja said in reply…";[137] whereas GA. 29 recalls: "Śrījīmahārāja asked Śukamuni a question… Śukamuni attempted to answer the question but was unable to do so satisfactorily. Answering the question himself, Śrījīmahārāja said…"[138] In a similar tone, GP. 44 focuses on one *paramahaṃsa's* response when it states: "Thereupon Brahmānanda Svāmī attempted to describe the nature of affection but was unable to do so satisfactorily. Hearing his reply, Śrījīmahārāja commented, 'You have not even come close to describing affection. You say it is remaining

135. "sarva brahmacārī, sādhu tathā gṛhastha temaṇe potānī samajaṇa pramāṇe uttara karyo paṇa thayo nahi. pachī Śrījīmahārāja bolyā je, 'lyo ame uttara karīe.'" (GP. 1) (Svāminārāyaṇa 1)
136. (L. 5, 6, 8; and GA. 11) (Svāminārāyaṇa 259–62, 262–68, 276–80, 564–65)
137. "sarvee potānī buddhi pramāṇe uttara karyo paṇa e praśnanuṃ samādhāna na thayuṃ. tyāre Śrījīmahārāja bolyā je…" (GA. 36) (Svāminārāyaṇa 623)
138. "Śrījīmahārāje Śukamunine praśna pūchyo… Śukamunie eno uttara karavā māṃḍyo paṇa thayo nahi. pachī Śrījīmahārāje eno uttara karyo…" (GA. 29) (Svāminārāyaṇa 607)

detached from the body and the world (*brahmāṇḍa*), but that is not the characteristic of affection; rather, it is the characteristic of detachment (*vairāgya*). In fact, affection is…'"[139] and then continues by presenting Swaminarayan's resolution to his own inquiry. Here, instead of simply revealing the answer, Swaminarayan reflects on the response by explaining how Brahmānanda Svāmī's characterization deviates from the solution. By explicating the inaccuracy, even erroneous responses are rendered as instances of instruction.

Within other instances, members of the audience appeal to Swaminarayan to resolve the question at hand. K. 7 describes: "The *munis* (ascetic devotees) answered according to their understanding, but Śrījīmahārāja's question was not answered satisfactorily. So, all the *munis* folded their hands and said to Śrījīmahārāja, Mahārāja, you will have to answer that question." K. 12 similarly articulates: "Each of the *munis* gave an answer according to their level of intelligence, but the question was not answered satisfactorily. They then said to Śrījīmahārāja, 'Mahārāja, you will have to provide the answer.'" L. 2 and S. 14 follow suit in stating:

> "Muktānanda Svāmī replied as well as he could, but Śrījīmahārāja's question was not answered satisfactorily. So, the other *paramahaṃsas* requested, 'Mahārāja, you will have to answer that question.'"[140]
>
> "Śrījīmahārāja asked another question… Svayaṃprakāśānanda Svāmī attempted to answer the question but was unable to do so satisfactorily. Thereupon, all the *munis* said, 'Mahārāja,

139. "Brahmānaṃda Svāmīe snehanuṃ rūpa karavā māṃḍyuṃ paṇa samādhāna na thayuṃ. pachī Śrījīmahārāja bolyā je, 'tamane to snehanī diśa ja jaḍī nahi ane tame je piṃḍa-brahmāṃḍathī niḥspṛha rahevuṃ tene sneha kahyo e snehanuṃ rūpa nahi, e to vairāgyanuṃ rūpa che. ane sneha to enuṃ nāma je…'" (GP. 44) (Svāmināráyaṇa 82)

140. "Muktānaṃda Svāmīe jevo āvaḍyo tevo uttara karyo paṇa Śrījīmahārājanā praśnanuṃ samādhāna thayuṃ nahi. pachī bījā paramahaṃsa bolyā je, 'he Mahārāja! e praśnano uttara to tame ja karo.'" (L. 2) (Svāmināráyaṇa 252)

please be kind enough to answer this question yourself.'"[141]

Throughout the Vacanāmṛta, whether the question is self-posed or asked by another, Swaminarayan is depended upon to resolve each question. In the above instances and many others, Swaminarayan, as the teacher or guru, ultimately resolves all inquiry.

Acknowledging Swaminarayan's Answers

Throughout the Vacanāmṛta it is evident that the answers that Swaminarayan provides are accepted by the audience. For instance, K. 5 recalls, "The *munis* replied, 'Mahārāja, your reply is most appropriate.'"[142] K. 12 similarly describes: "Having heard this answer, the *munis* remarked, 'Mahārāja, you have given a precise answer. No one besides you could have answered that question.'"[143] To the audience, Swaminarayan is the final authority for the resolution of all their inquiries. Although this does not come as a surprise given his metaphysical identity within the tradition, it does not follow that his responses are esteemed solely based on such authority. There are two primary reasons that suggest this.

The first becomes evident upon investigating the responses that Swaminarayan's answers instigate from those who are not of the tradition—those who do not accept his metaphysical identity as Parabrahman Puruṣottama. The participation of those not within the tradition introduces a feature unique to the Vacanāmṛta's question-answer dialogue. In addition to describing discourse between Swaminarayan and his disciples, the Vacanāmṛta also documents dialogues that Swaminarayan has with audiences that are not of the tradition. Investigating their reactions to Swaminarayan's responses suggest the legitimacy of these responses

141. "Śrījīmahārāje pharīne praśna pūchyo... pachī Svayaṃprakāśānaṃda Svāmīe praśnano uttara karavā māṃḍyo paṇa thayo nahi. pachī sarve muni bolyā je, "he Mahārāja! eno uttara tame kṛpā karīne karo."" (S. 14) (Svāminārāyaṇa 204)

142. "munie kahyuṃ je, 'he Mahārāja! yathārtha uttara thayo.'" (K. 5) (Svāminārāyaṇa 230)

143. "sarve munie kahyuṃ je, 'he Mahārāja! yathārtha uttara karyo, evo uttara bījā koīthī thāya nahi.'" (K. 12) (Svāminārāyaṇa 246)

independent of Swaminarayan's identity within the tradition. This investigation has the added benefit of also illustrating diversity among the participants in the question-answer dialogues between Swaminarayan and his audiences—a point that I will elaborate on later in this work. At this point it suffices to mention that the Vacanāmṛta is distinctive from many of the sacred texts mentioned early in this work, in that it records the *darśana's* founder engaging in conversation (specifically, a question and answer discussion) with adherents of other *darśanic* positions—an example of what modern religious studies scholars would perhaps categorize as interfaith dialogue.

A survey of the reactions to the question-answer dialogues between Swaminarayan and members of other *darśanic* traditions—those who adhere to other *darśanic* viewpoints or do not possess proclivity towards the tradition or Swaminarayan—substantiates that Swaminarayan's responses or resolutions are accepted as well-founded even among those who do not adhere to the principles of the tradition. For instance, in GP. 46 a Vedāntī *brāhmaṇa* named Bhaṭṭa Māheśvara from Rājakoṭa, a city in Gujarāta, asks Śrījīmahārāja how *ākāśa* becomes assimilated during the state of *samādhi*—a state of intense concentration or meditation. Swaminarayan presents a description of *ākāśa* that is unprecedented and unique to his own *darśanic* position. Nevertheless, his description and validation elicit the following response: "Thereupon, the Vedāntī *brāhmaṇa* and all of the devotees replied, 'None of us have any doubts at all now.'"[144] The Vedāntī *brāhmaṇa's* response reflects the rationality of Swaminarayan's answer. Swaminarayan's revelation is an informed, sensible, and justified reflection that results in an appreciative rereading of sacred texts and the resolution of inquiry.

Within GA. 10, the question-answer dynamic shifts. The "Vacanāmṛta" describes Swaminarayan engaging in dialogue with a *brāhmaṇa* pundit from the Mādhvī Saṃpradāya (a tradition advanced by

144. "te Vedāṃtī brāhmaṇa tathā sarva harijana bolyā je, 'have koīne leśamātra saṃśaya nathī.'" (GP. 46) (Svāmināārāyaṇa 88)

Caitanya Mahāprabhu and that is also known as the Mādhvagauḍeśvara Saṃpradāya, Mādhvagauḍīya Saṃpradāya, or more simply, as the Gauḍīya Saṃpradāya). Unable to respond to Śrījīmahārāja's questions, the pundit announces: "Mahārāja, the question you have raised is logical. There is no one on this earth capable of answering your question."[145] Swaminarayan's use of questioning here is unique in that it is not intended to inquire or instruct, but rather put forth a counter-argument to the pundit's *darśanic* position. The pundit's response suggests that the effect of Swaminarayan's reasoning is not only decisive but also convincing.

GP. 39 recalls a similar effect when it describes Swaminarayan asking a Vedāntī *brāhmaṇa*—an adherent of the Advaita Darśana—a question regarding the Advaitin position on the nature of *brahman*. Like the question posed in GA. 10, the question is not intended to inquire or instruct, but rather to put forth a counter-argument. Swaminarayan ends his with: "Now, if you have any doubts in what I have just said, please say so;"[146] to which the Advaita *brāhmaṇa* is described as responding: "'O Mahārāja, O Lord, O Svāmī!... The explanation you have given is of course precise. There is no room for any doubt whatsoever.'"[147] As with the conversation with the pundit from the Mādhvī Saṃpradāya, Swaminarayan's questioning is applauded for its reasoning and not solely his authority within the tradition.

Counter-Questioning – By Disciples

The second reason that suggests Swaminarayan's responses are not exalted solely on his metaphysical authority is founded on the numerous instances of counter-questioning that are recorded in the Vacanāmṛta.

145. "he Mahārāja! tame je praśna karyo te satya che ne tamārā praśnano uttara karavāne ā pṛthvī upara koī samartha nathī." (GA. 10) (Svāminārāyaṇa 561–63)
146. "ā ame vārtā karī temāṃ tamane āśaṃkā thatī hoya to bolo?" (GP. 39) (Svāminārāyaṇa 71)
147. "Vedāṃtī brāhmaṇa bolyo je, 'he Mahārāja! he Prabho! he Svāmin!.. tame je uttara karyo te yathārtha che, emāṃ āśaṃkāno māga nathī.'" (GP. 39) (Svāminārāyaṇa 70–71)

It would be incorrect to assume that Swaminarayan's audience never entertained doubt, had uncertainty (*āśaṅkā*), or counter-questioned Swaminarayan's responses. They did and quite often. Along with Swaminarayan's revelations, the Vacanāmṛta records these interruptions. These counter-questions not only served to clarify, reassess, and resolve, but also advocate that revelation is in the end to be received by those that are, after all, rational humans. As any experienced instructor knows, doubts and speculations can only be resolved, if they are announced and then appropriately addressed. These interruptions guide revelation towards that which is relevant and pressing. They demonstrate urgency and emphasize aspects that are felt necessary to address.

The act of counter-questioning or posing objections to responses itself suggests that there is some element of discontent that has yet been unaddressed. Objections in themselves are typically founded on reasoning in light of some misunderstanding, unrealized clarity, or perceived inconsistency that originates from, for example, an alternative authority, such as one's reading of accepted sacred texts, conflicting experiences, or a conflict with Swaminarayan's own previous revelation. Since these types of counter-questions are themselves deeply founded on reasoning, their resolutions also demand the same level of rationale. Swaminarayan's patient consideration and rational responses to such objections and its acceptance by the audience attests that his resolutions are not venerated solely on his metaphysical identity; they are also well-reasoned, methodical, and judicious.

There are numerous instances throughout the Vacanāmṛta in which such counter-questions are raised and addressed. For example, in response to Muktānanda Svāmī's question on the purpose of spiritual endeavor when the *śrutis* proclaim that liberation can only be attained by *jñāna* (realization), Swaminarayan states, "'Jñāna' means *to know*."[148] To this, Nityānanda Svāmī intervenes by raising doubt (*āśaṅkā*). He argues: "If

148. "jñāna te jāṇavānuṃ nāma che." (L. 7) (Svāmināārāyaṇa 269)

'jñāna' means merely *to know*, then the whole world knows God through sacred texts, yet everyone does not attain liberation."[149] Nityānanda Svāmī's inference provides Swaminarayan the opportunity to clarify the nature of knowledge.

Nityānanda Svāmī also presents a doubt (*āśaṅkā*) in L. 15, which recalls: "Thereupon Nityānanda Svāmī raised a doubt: 'Mahārāja. It is said that the *jīva* (self) pervades the whole body but resides specifically within the heart. How, then, should one understand the fact that awareness is not present everywhere equally?'"[150] Through such questioning, Nityānanda Svāmī seeks to reconcile philosophical reflection with one's own experience.

In GA. 29 Śukamuni raises a doubt when he counter-argues Swaminarayan's revelation that "if someone who is deficient in detachment (*vairāgya*) does renounce, then their renunciation will not endure throughout their life."[151] Śukamuni counters: "Generally, though, we see that a person develops detachment even though they did not possess it initially. How can this be accounted for?"[152] Swaminarayan then continues by explaining how such detachment is attained. Śukamuni's counter-position presents the consideration of an alternative aspect or feature of *vairāgya* and the means for attaining it.

In K. 1 when Swaminarayan responds to Caitanyānanda Svāmī's question on how God, who is *guṇātīta*,[153] can be perceived by the senses

149. "jāṇavuṃ e ja jñāna hoya to śāstre karīne Bhagavānane sarve jagata jāṇe che, teṇe karīne sarvenuṃ kalyāṇa thatuṃ nathī." (L. 7) (Svāmināŕāyaṇa 269)

150. "tyāre Nityānaṃda Svāmīe āśaṃkā karī je, 'he Mahārāja! tyāre ema kahevāya che je, jīva je te sāmānyapaṇe sarvadehamāṃ vyāpīne viśeṣapaṇe hṛdayākāśamāṃ rahyo che, tyāre sarve ṭhekāṇe sarakhuṃ jāṇapaṇuṃ nathī jaṇātuṃ tenuṃ kema samajavuṃ?'" (L. 15) (Svāmināŕāyaṇa 300–01)

151. "maṃda vairāgyavālo tyāga kare to eno tyāga deha paryaṃta nabhe nahi" (GA. 29) (Svāmināŕāyaṇa 607)

152. "bahudhā to ema pratyakṣa dekhāya che je, āne vairāgya na hato ne pachī thayo, tyāre enuṃ kema samajavuṃ?" (GA. 29) (Svāmināŕāyaṇa 607)

153. 'Guṇātīta' refers to being beyond (uninfluenced by and not made from) the three qualities of *māyā*.

and the mind, which are created from *māyā*, Bhajanānanda Svāmī counters by stating: "Why then, Mahārāja, does the Vedic verse claim: 'From where speech returns along with the mind without having attained?'[154]"[155] Bhajanānanda Svāmī's inquiry attempts to reconcile Swaminarayan's revelation with Bhajanānanda Svāmī's own reading of sacred texts. Swaminarayan's response is telling. The "Vacanāmṛta" describes that Swaminarayan responds with delight ("prasanna thakā bolyā").[156] Perhaps he is pleased to have been counter-questioned or elated at Bhajanānanda Svāmī's ability to reference a specific passage from scripture. Whatever his reason, Swaminarayan then explains:

> "*pṛthivī* (elemental earth) resides in *ākāśa* (ether) but does not become like *ākāśa*; *jala* (elemental water) also resides in *ākāśa* but does not become like *ākāśa*; teja (elemental fire) also resides in *ākāśa* but does not become like *ākāśa*; and *vāyu* (elemental air) also resides in *ākāśa* but does not become like *ākāśa*. In the same way, the mind (*mana*) and speech (*vāṇī*) do not attain God."[157]

Swaminarayan uses an analogy to explain that since the various elements are more gross (*sthūla*) than *ākāśa*, although they live within *ākāśa*, they do not become like it. Similarly, since the mind (*mana*) and speech (*vāṇī*) are more *sthūla* than God, they do not attain him. After Swaminarayan's response, Nityānanda Svāmī presses even further by recalling revelation from sacred text that describe the possibility of attaining Brahman (acquiring the qualities of Brahman). He counters "Mahārāja, the *śrutis*

154. (Tai. 2.4.1) (Śāstrī 26)

155. "he Mahārāja! ā śrutimāṃ ema kema kahyuṃ che je, 'yato vāco nivartante aprāpya manasā sahall'" (K. 1) (Svāmināārāyaṇa 221)

156. (Svāmināārāyaṇa 221)

157. "jema pṛthvī ākāśamāṃ rahī che paṇa ākāśanā bhāvane nathī pāmatī ane jala ākāśane viṣe rahyuṃ che paṇa ākāśanā bhāvane nathī pāmatuṃ ane teja ākāśane viṣe rahyuṃ che paṇa ākāśanā bhāvane nathī pāmatuṃ ane vāyu ākāśane viṣe rahyo che paṇa ākāśanā bhāvane nathī pāmato; ema mana-vāṇī Bhagavānane nathī pāmatāṃ." (K. 1) (Svāmināārāyaṇa 221–22)

and *smṛti* claim: 'One who is free from [the] blemishes [of *māyā*] attains qualities like those of Brahman'[158] and 'Many who have been purified by austerities in the form of knowledge (*jñāna*) have attained my qualities.'[159]"[160] Swaminarayan then responds by explaining the context in which these revelations are to be interpreted and, in doing so, offers an important hermeneutical lesson.

In addition to asking for clarifications, reconciling experience with teachings, and resolving differences, Swaminarayan's disciples also were candid about not comprehending specific teachings. Within GM. 10 Acintyānanda Svāmī asks, "Of the three: knowledge (*jñāna*), detachment (*vairāgya*), and devotion (*bhakti*), which has greater significance in fostering affection for God?"[161] Swaminarayan thereafter responds, "Here, I will answer that question and also describe the characteristics of *jñāna*, *vairāgya*, and *bhakti*..."[162] and continues by describing the nature of each in great detail. After he finishes his response, Muktānanda Svāmī asks, "Mahārāja! I have not yet quite understood which of the three of *jñāna*, *vairāgya*, or *bhakti* has the greater power in fostering affection for God."[163]

K. 1 presents a similar inquiry. When Bhūdharānanda Svāmī asks whether conviction is formed in the inner faculties (*antaḥkaraṇa*) or the *jīva* (self), Swaminarayan presents an elaborate explanation of the relationship between the intellect (*buddhi*) and the *jīva*. Unable to understand how Swaminarayan's response addressed the question, Nityānanda Svāmī

158. (Mu. 3.1.3) (Śāstrī 18)

159. (Gī. 4.10) (Vyāsa 81)

160. "he Mahārāja! śruti-smṛtimāṃ ema kahyuṃ che je, 'niraṃjanaḥ paramaṃ sāmyamupaiti' 'bahavo jñānatapasā pūtā madbhāvamāgatāḥ|'" (K. 1) (Svāmināārāyaṇa 222)

161. "jñāna, vairāgya ane bhakti e traṇane viṣe Bhagavānanā svarūpamāṃ prīti thayānuṃ viśeṣa kāraṇa koṇa che?" (GM. 10) (Svāmināārāyaṇa 374)

162. "lyo, e praśnano uttara ame karīe ane jñāna, vairāgya ne bhakti tenuṃ rūpa juduṃ juduṃ kahīe..." (GM. 10) (Svāmināārāyaṇa 374)

163. "he Mahārāja! jñāna, vairāgya ane bhakti, ene viṣe Parameśvarane viṣe prīti thavānuṃ kene viṣe adhika daivata āvyuṃ te samajāṇuṃ nahi?" (GM. 10) (Svāmināārāyaṇa 376)

inquires, "Mahārāja! What is the answer to the original question in what you have just said?"[164] Swaminarayan thereafter clarifies his response.

Swaminarayan is also open to questions that speculate the application of his teachings. When he advises in S. 2 that one's mind should be entirely focused on God, Nirvikārānanda Svāmī questions the practicality of his instruction. He states, "Mahārāja! We must travel and speak to people all over the country. As a result, our mind does not remain concentrated."[165] His inquiry seeks to understand how the mind can be entirely focused on God while simultaneously being engaged in day-to-day affairs—seemingly counter-intuitive pursuits. Swaminarayan's response presents a means to both.

In all these examples, objections are put forth or clarifications are requested to resolve some form of discontent. Each discussion moves forward, only when Swaminarayan remedies the issue at hand through insightful, reasoned expositions. The willingness of the audience to engage in such relentless questioning and Swaminarayan's accompanied responses attest the robustness, rationale, and persuasiveness of his resolutions. As a result, even though Swaminarayan holds a unique epistemic position within the tradition, his revelations are rational, methodological, and prudent.

In addition to reaffirming the sensibility of Swaminarayan's responses, the above examples establish Swaminarayan's attitude towards such counter-arguments and interruptions. All the examples depict Swaminarayan patiently entertaining, attentively listening, and un-disparagingly responding to the inquires that are made. In certain instances, as in K. 1 described above, he even expresses delight when questioned in this manner. There is a noticeable absence of frustration, disappointment, and judgment in all his responses. Such agreeability would presumably encourage his disciples to openly present such questions. In addition to disciples posing doubts (*āśaṅkā*) on their own, Swaminarayan is also

164. "he Mahārāja ! emāṃ te śuṃ uttara thayo?" (K. 1) (Svāminārāyaṇa 219)
165. (S. 2) (Svāminārāyaṇa 177)

recorded to have invited such reflections and inquiries. For example, at the very beginning of L. 18, Swaminarayan preludes his revelation by stating, "If any doubts arise in what I will say, please ask."[166] Swaminarayan is not only unapprehensive and tolerant of such questioning but also reminds his audience that he welcomes it.

Robust Questioning – By Swaminarayan

In addition to entertaining counter-questions from the audience, Swaminarayan also presents such questions to his own revelations. Although, unfamiliar to the corpus of sacred literature (viz. those mentioned above), the style is reflective of the discussions presented within commentarial literature and argument-based elaborations or discussion in *darśanic* works. It is a style that is commonly associated with the discussion style of the Naiyāyikas (adherents of the Nyāya-Darśana), perhaps more specifically to the Navya-Naiyāyikas, and thereafter implemented in expository and inter-*darśanic* discussions of the other schools of thought, including those within *vyākaraṇa*—Sanskrit grammar—and Vedānta. Within works of this kind, a counter-position is often considered and responded by the proponent using a number of lexical indicators including: "*na ca* [x] *vācyam* [y]" or "*nanu* [x] *na ca* [y];" where the counter position is expressed in place of 'x' and its response is provided in place of 'y.' Swaminarayan considers and responds to counter positions put forth as self-posed questions that are similar to this model.

For example, within K. 8, Swaminarayan's revelation of the minute or subtle (*nirguṇa*) and immense (*saguṇa*) form of God is interjected with the consideration of the following doubt (*āśaṅkā*): "Then someone may doubt, 'In his *nirguṇa* form, God is subtler than the extremely subtle, and in his *saguṇa* form, he is more vast than the extremely vast. What, then, is the nature of the original form of God, who assumes both of these

166. "ame ā vāta karīe temāṃ jene āśaṃkā ūpaje te pūchajyo." (L. 18) (Svāmināārāyaṇa 312)

forms?'"[167] Swaminarayan also considers the opposing position in GM. 45, where he anticipates: "But someone may doubt…"[168] and in GA. 9 in which he states: "However, someone may doubt…"[169] Swaminarayan continues these "Vacanāmṛtas" by resolving his own posed counter-positions.

V. 17 introduces a different type of opposition. Within this "Vacanāmṛta" Swaminarayan anticipates a response to his question and presents an opposition to that response. Upon posing a case study intended to evaluate the merits of a renunciant—who engages in the path of action (*pravṛtti*) but is from time to time overwhelmed by depravity—compared to one who engages in inaction (*nivṛtti*) and remains unaffected, Swaminarayan, before anyone has a chance to respond, counters:

> "If you say, 'If they follow the path of *pravṛtti* by God's command then they will not become attached to anything,' then one can argue, 'If one drinks *bhāṅga*[170] by God's command, does that mean he will not become delirious? Of course, they will become delirious.' How, then, can that renunciant follow the path of *pravṛtti* and not become attached to anything? That is the question.'"[171]

Occasionally, Swaminarayan will also anticipate a question within his revelation, not to present an opposition, but to introduce and resolve a question that would naturally follow. For instance, in GA. 18,

---

167. "tyāre koīkane ema āśaṃkā thāya je, 'Bhagavāna nirguṇarūpe to ati sūkṣma karatāṃ paṇa sūkṣma che ane saguṇarūpe to ati sthūla karatāṃ paṇa sthūla che, tyāre e beya rūpanuṃ dharanāruṃ je Bhagavānanuṃ mūla svarūpa te kevuṃ che?'" (K. 8) (Svāmināyaṇa 236)
168. "temāṃ koī ema āśaṃkā kare je…" (GM. 45) (Svāmināyaṇa 449)
169. "tyāre koīka āśaṃkā kare je…" (GA. 9) (Svāmināyaṇa 560)
170. *Bhāṅga* is an edible mixture made from the buds, leaves, and flowers of the female cannabis plant.
171. "ane tame kaheśo je, 'jo Parameśvaranī ājñāe karīne e pravṛtti-mārgamāṃ rahe to baṃdhana na thāya.' te upara e āśaṃkā che je, 'Parameśvaranī ājñāe karīne bhāṃgya pīe to śuṃ gāṃḍo na thāya? jarūra gāṃḍo thāya.' māṭe e tyāgī kevī rīte pravṛttimārgamāṃ rahe to baṃdhana na thāya? e praśna che." (V. 17) (Svāmināyaṇa 525)

while responding to Akhaṇḍānanda Svāmī's question: "How long does the influence of actions (*karmas*) performed in past lives persist for a person who becomes a devotee of God?;"[172] Swaminarayan anticipates: "However, one may ask, 'How does one recognize whether those ingrained desires have degenerated?'"[173]

By asking such questions, Swaminarayan encourages deep reflection and analysis. By attempting to resolve informed questions, a disciple learns to think creatively and critically, how to construct resolutions, foresee complications and inconsistencies, and productively use reasoning—a much more difficult and daunting task than attempting to dismantle a position or simply pose questions or speculations. Through such robust questioning, Swaminarayan also exemplifies features of skillful inquiry. By anticipating responses, expressing challenges to those responses, and considering objections, he implicitly conveys how to articulate meaningful, informed questions through one's own example.

Instruction on the Art of Questioning

In addition to such indirect instruction, Swaminarayan also takes a more direct approach to convey the art of inquiry to his disciples. L. 8 records him instructing younger *paramahaṃsas* on how to ask precise and informed questions and answers them. It specifies, "Thereafter, Śrījīmahārāja, upon calling the younger *paramahaṃsas*, began teaching them how to ask questions and began to answer questions himself."[174] In other "Vacanāmṛtas" he corrects the asked question by highlighting nuances among possible responses. After the devotee Cīmanarāvajī presents his question on what causes the *jīvas* to attain various bodies during

172. "ā jīvane pūrvajanmanāṃ je karma te karmanuṃ jora Bhagavānano bhakta thāya topaṇa kyāṃ sudhī rahe che?" (GA. 18) (Svāmināārāyaṇa 580)
173. "tyāre koīka ema pūchaśe je, 'vāsanā jīrṇa thaī kema jaṇāya?'" (GA. 18) (Svāmināārāyaṇa 580)
174. "pachī Śrījīmahārāja nānā nānā paramahaṃsane teḍāvīne pote praśna śīkhavavā lāgyā ne pote uttara karavā lāgyā." (L. 8) (Svāmināārāyaṇa 276)

creation, Swaminarayan begins by stating, "You have not been able to ask the question properly."[175] He then continues by presenting possible answers and highlights deficiencies within each of them to demonstrate how to present a more informed question. Upon substantiating the question in this way, he continues by answering it himself.

GP. 51 also presents an instance in which Swaminarayan clarifies the question being asked. The "Vacanāmṛta" begins with Pūrṇānanda Svāmī asking: "All of the senses (*indriyas*) and mental faculties (*antaḥkaraṇas*) are *māyika*,[176] while Bhagavān is beyond *māyā*; then how can one cultivate the conviction of God through the *māyika antaḥkaraṇas*?"[177] Swaminarayan rephrases his question by presenting it as an argument. He clarifies, "*Māyika* objects can be realized by *māyika* means, and if one has realized God through the same *māyika* mental faculties (*antaḥkaraṇas*) and senses (*indriyas*), then it implies that God must also be *māyika*. That is your question, is it not?"[178] By altering the conclusion to one that is objectionable or unacceptable, Swaminarayan makes the question more pressing. In addition, by specifying: "[Only] *māyika* objects can be realized by *māyika* means," he clarifies an implicit premise of the argument, allowing him to concentrate the proceeding analysis on its evaluation. Swaminarayan's alternative rendering serves as a lesson on how reassessing a question can identify the core issue at hand and provide insight on its resolution.

Swaminarayan presents a similar exposition in K. 1 regarding Caitanyānanda Svāmī's inquiry: "God is beyond the mind and speech; he is *guṇātīta*. How, then, can the *māyika* senses (*indriyas*) and inner faculties

175. "e praśna tamane pūchatā āvaḍyo nahi." (V. 6) (Svāmināārāyaṇa 506–07)
176. 'Māyika' refers to *of māyā* or *that which is created from māyā.*
177. "sarve indriyo ne aṃtaḥkaraṇa te to māyika che ne Bhagavāna to māyāthī para che, teno māyika aṃtaḥkaraṇe karīne kema niścaya thāya?" (GP. 51) (Svāmināārāyaṇa 95)
178. "māyika vastue karīne māyika padārtha hoya te jaṇāya; māṭe māyika je aṃtaḥkaraṇa ane indriyo teṇe karīne jo Bhagavāna jaṇāṇā to e Bhagavāna paṇa māyika ṭharyā, e rīte tamāro praśna che?" (GP. 51) (Svāmināārāyaṇa 95)

(*antaḥkaraṇa*) perceive Him?"[179] As in GP. 51, Swaminarayan presents a reworking of the question, which involves a detailed description of the causal power of God, and concludes with: "How can such a God be known by the senses (*indriyas*) and inner faculties (*antaḥkaraṇa*)? Is that your question?"[180] The *paramahaṃsa* thereafter reaffirm, "Yes, Mahārāja, that is the question."[181] Swaminarayan then presents a response that is quite different than the one he provided in GP. 51. Having emphasized the causal power of God within the question, he responds by stressing the role of God's sovereignty in a *jīva's* (the self's) realization—a *jīva* comes to realize God because it is God's wish that they do. Swaminarayan exemplifies how reworking a question can serve to both clarify and provide direction towards its resolution.

Opening the Floor to Questions

To take advantage of the significant role of the question-answer dialogue in not only conveying relevant revelation but also resolving inquiry, addressing misconceptions, and instigating informed reflection, Swaminarayan encourages his disciples to engage in such discussions. For example, he begins numerous "Vacanāmṛtas" with the instruction, "Begin a question-answer dialogue"[182] and continues by either asking a question or entertaining one from the audience. GP. 78 describes Swaminarayan gathering young ascetics who are studying and instructing, "All of you

179. "Bhagavāna to mana-vāṇī thakī para che ane guṇātīta che, tene māyika evāṃ je indriyo-aṃtaḥkaraṇa te kema pāme?" (K. 1) (Svāminārāyaṇa 220)
180. "evā je Bhagavāna te je te e indriyo-aṃtaḥkaraṇe karīne kema jāṇyāmāṃ āve? e tamāro praśna ke nahi?" (K. 1) (Svāminārāyaṇa 221)
181. "he Mahārāja ! e ja praśna che." (K. 1) (Svāminārāyaṇa 221)
182. "have to praśna-uttara karo" (GP. 30, 32) (Svāminārāyaṇa 50, 56); "praśna-uttara karo" (GP. 41, 49, 55, 59; GM. 36, 60; V. 4) (Svāminārāyaṇa 73, 92, 101, 109, 436, 471, 502); "kāṃīka praśna-uttara karo" (V. 2) (Svāminārāyaṇa 496); "kāṃī praśna-uttara karo" (J. 2) (Svāminārāyaṇa 657); or "lyo praśna-uttara karīe" (GM. 43) (Svāminārāyaṇa 446).

students, please ask me questions."[183] In L. 2 he opens up invitation to all that are present: "Those who wish to ask a question, please ask;"[184] whereas in L. 7, where he states: "Today, please ask complex questions so that we may talk,"[185] and GP. 57, where he requests: "Those of you who know how to engage in a question-answer dialogue may ask one question each,"[186] he is more specific in his requests. In several "Vacanāmṛta," viz. GP. 56, 71; GM. 1, 17, 34; and GA. 14,[187] he requests the *paramahaṃsas* to stop singing devotional songs (*kīrtana-bhakti*) and instead begin a question-answer dialogue. Among them, in GM. 34 he uses reflection and discussion to enliven the soporific mood of those present in the assembly.[188] He later in V. 5 expresses a similar intention when he suggests, "Please ask complex questions in order to shake everyone's lethargy."[189]

183. "tame sarve vidyārthī mane praśna pūcho." (GP. 78) (Svāmināŕāyaṇa 164)
184. "valī jene praśna pūchavo hoya te pūcho." (L. 2) (Svāmināŕāyaṇa 253)
185. "āja to bhāre bhāre praśna pūcho to vāta karīe." (L. 7) (Svāmināŕāyaṇa 269)
186. "jene praśna-uttara karatāṃ āvaḍe te eka eka praśna pūcho." (GP. 57) (Svāmināŕāyaṇa 106)
187. "Śrījīmahārāja requested, 'Please conclude singing devotional songs, and let us conduct a question-answer session for a while'" ("Śrījīmahārāja bolyā je, 'kīrtana rākho ane ghaḍīka praśna-uttara karīe...'") (GP. 56); "Śrījīmahārāja said, 'Now let us conclude the devotional songs, and begin a question-answer session amongst yourselves'" ("Śrījīmahārāja bolyā je, 'have kīrtana-bhaktinī samāpti karīne māṃhomāṃhī praśna-uttara karo.'") (GP. 71); "Śrījīmahārāja then said to the *paramahaṃsas* who were singing devotional songs, 'Please stop singing for the time being, and conduct a question-answer session'" ("Śrījīmahārāje kīrtaniyāne kahyuṃ je, 'hamaṇāṃ kīrtana rākho ne praśna-uttara karo.'") (GM. 1); "Śrījīmahārāja said, 'Please stop the devotional songs, and let us begin a question-answer session'" ("Śrījīmahārāja bolyā je, 'kīrtana gāvavāṃ rahevā dyo, praśna-uttara karīe.'") (GM. 17); and "Śrījīmahārāja said, 'Please end singing, and let us begin a question-answer session.'" ("Śrījīmahārāje kahyuṃ je, 'kīrtana-bhakti samāpti karo ne praśna-uttara karīe.'") (GA. 14) (Svāmināŕāyaṇa 102, 141–42, 348, 395, 570)
188. GM. 34 explains, "Śrījīmahārāja then said, 'Please stop the devotional songs, and let us conduct a question-answer session in order to dispel drowsiness.'" ("Śrījīmahārāja bolyā je, 'kīrtana rākho, praśna-uttara karīe to ālasa maṭe.'") (GM. 34) (Svāmināŕāyaṇa 432)
189. "vāṃkaḍā vāṃkaḍā praśna karo je, jeṇe karīne saunuṃ ālasa ūḍī jāya." (V. 5)

In other "Vacanāmṛtas" he requests those seated before him to engage in discussions among themselves. For example, in S. 2 and K. 4 he opens the discussion to the audience by instructing: "Begin a question and answer session amongst yourselves."[190] In certain instances, as in K. 1, 12; L. 9, 16; P. 3, and 4, he limits participation of dialogue to just the ascetics in the audience. In these "Vacanāmṛtas" he either directs his request towards the *paramahaṃsas*[191] or announces, "May all of the *paramahaṃsas* engage in a question-answer session amongst themselves."[192] In other instances, as in L. 13, he asks the senior *paramahaṃsas* to engage in a dialogue with one another[193] and in yet another "Vacanāmṛta" he requests younger *paramahaṃsas* to do the same.[194] In GA. 21 he specifically requests two individuals to engage in discussion.[195] In GP. 70 he also engages the devotees present in the assembly by stating, "The senior *paramahaṃsas*, please ask each other questions; or if a householder has a question, they may ask the *paramahaṃsas*."[196] In GP. 49 he does something different altogether. He groups the *paramahaṃsas* into pairs and asks them to conduct question-answer discussions. The "Vacanāmṛta" describes,

---

(Svāminārāyaṇa 504)

190. (S. 2, K. 1, 4) (Svāminārāyaṇa 174, 217, 228)
191. See, for example: (K. 1, 12) (Svāminārāyaṇa 217, 245)
192. (L. 9, 16; P. 3, 4) (Svāminārāyaṇa 281, 305, 328, 333)
193. "Śrījīmahārāja then requests the senior *paramahaṃsas* to ask questions amongst themselves." ("Śrījīmahārāje kahyuṃ je, "moṭerā moṭerā paramahaṃsa paraspara praśna-uttara karo.'") (L. 13) (Svāminārāyaṇa 293)
194. "By Śrījīmahārāja's command, the junior *paramahaṃsas* had come to the front of the assembly and were asking and answering questions amongst themselves." ("Śrījīmahārājanī ājñāe karīne nānā nānā paramahaṃsa āgala āvīne praśna-uttara karatā hatā.") (K. 2) (Svāminārāyaṇa 223)
195. "Then Śrījīmahārāja requested Gopālānanda Svāmī and Śukamuni to begin a question-answer session." ("Śrījīmahārāje Gopālānaṃda svāmīne ne Śukamunine praśna-uttara karavānī ājñā karī.") (GA. 21) (Svāminārāyaṇa 584)
196. "moṭā moṭā paramahaṃsa māṃhomāṃhī praśna-uttara karo tathā koī haribhaktane pūchavuṃ hoya to paramahaṃsane pūcho." (GP. 70) (Svāminārāyaṇa 137)

> "Śrījīmahārāja then asked the *paramahaṃsas*, 'Arrange yourselves into pairs and begin a question-answer dialogue.' Thereafter, the *paramahaṃsas* conducted a question-answer session amongst themselves for quite some time as Śrījīmahārāja, while listening to them, examined their intelligence."[197]

A little later in the text, GP. 65 records a similar occurrence:

> "Śrījīmahārāja said, 'Now all of the senior *sadhus* seated here will answer each other's questions, since doing so reveals one's level of intelligence.'"[198]

In addition to revealing another variant of questioning recorded in the text, these "Vacanāmṛtas" explicate an alternative reason behind Swaminarayan's enthusiasm for conducting question-answer dialogues. In both instances he expresses that engaging in such dialogue not only clarifies misconceptions, identifies nuances, and resolves uncertainty, but also serves as a test of those involved. Such discussions present a unique opportunity to observe both the questioner's ability to identify nuances, discern opposing positions, and appropriately formulate inquiry and the responder's ability to comprehend and provide both convincing and constructive resolutions to the issue at hand.

Despite encouraging discussion among the audience, Swaminarayan is keen to interject and even reprimand when the discussion strays from upheld principles. GP. 77 presents a prime example in which he quickly corrects an otherwise spiraling question-answer session. When one participant begins to devalue the significance of upholding righteous conduct on the grounds of having conviction in God, Swaminarayan abruptly censures, "A person who forsakes rightful conduct (*dharma*)

197. "Śrījīmahārāja paramahaṃsa pratye bolyā je, 'have to be be jaṇa thaīne sāmasāmā praśna-uttara karo.' pachī ghaṇī vāra sudhī paramahaṃse paraspara praśna-uttara karyā, tene sāṃbhalatā thakā Śrījīmahārāja temanī buddhinī parīkṣā karatā havā." (GP. 49) (Svāmināyaṇa 93)

198. "Śrījīmahārāja bolyā je, 'have jeṭalā moṭā moṭā sādhu cho te paraspara praśna-uttara karo; kema je, praśna-uttara karo tyāre jene jevī buddhi hoya te jāṇyāmāṃ āve.'" (GP. 65) (Svāmināyaṇa 126)

under the pretext of the knowledge (*jñāna*) of God should be considered to be demonic."[199] Upon explaining the relationship between having conviction in God and upholding such righteous behavior, he once again rebukes:

> "From today onwards, then, whosoever, upon forsaking the five religious vows of *dharma*, solely advocates the strength of devotion (*bhakti*) or realization (*jñāna*), is a blasphemer of the guru and guru's word. Anyone who even talks of such a lapse in *dharma* should be called a non-believer and told, 'You have sided with demons, and we shall not accept it (your position).' Upon uttering these words, the talks of such an unrighteous person should be dismissed."[200]

Salvaging the situation, Swaminarayan explicates the need for upholding *dharma* while maintaining the significance of devotion (*bhakti*), conviction (*niścaya*), and realization (*jñāna*). He concludes his response by veering his disciples away from the contrary position by expressing extreme aversion for it. In doing so he not only provides a lesson on discernment but also expresses his preference for a specific position and an aversion for another.

Conclusions

When compared to the teachers within many of the sacred texts mentioned earlier in this work, Swaminarayan's role within the Vacanāmṛta is unique in many ways. First, in contrast to the position of the teacher in the Upaniṣadic dialogues, Swaminarayan is recognized as Parabrahman Puruṣottama to his audience. Second, unlike most, if not all, of the

199. "Bhagavānanā jñānanī oṭya laīne je dharmane khoṭā karī nāṃkhe tene asura jāṇavo." (GP. 77) (Svāmināŕāyaṇa 160)

200. "ājathī je koī paṃca vartamānarūpa je dharma tene mūkīne jñānanuṃ ke bhaktinuṃ bala leśe te guru-drohī, vacanadrohī che. ane evī dharmabhaṃga vāta je koī karato hoya tene vimukha kahevo ane ema kahevuṃ je, 'tame to asurano pakṣa līdho che te ame nahi mānīe,' ema kahīne te adharmīnī vātane khoṭī karī nāṃkhavī." (GP. 77) (Svāmināŕāyaṇa 161)

other sacred works, the identity of the questioner is not synonymous with that of the disciple. Throughout the Vacanāmṛta, Swaminarayan both responds to and asks questions himself. His questions, however, are intentioned in altogether different purposes than those asked by his disciples. They are aimed not at resolving some ignorance or satisfying an inquiry or curiosity, but instead conveying some teaching. His questions, among other things, instigate reflection on the nature and characteristics of foundational concepts, draw attention to the significance of specific principles by presenting summations and superlatives, emphasize moral principles, highlight subtle distinctions, ground analysis in personal reflection, resolve conflict, reevaluate preconceptions and relationships among presumed concepts, and draw out hermeneutical and exegetical principles. In addition, the Vacanāmṛta also notes that Swaminarayan engages in questioning to test and sharpen the intellect of members of his audience and to provide instruction on how to ask questions and resolve them.

Swaminarayan's responses to the audience's answers also serve to instruct. He substantiates or adds to agreeable resolutions and rejects others by (1) providing a unique perspective, (2) presenting further complications, (3) countering the answers provided, (4) highlighting distinguishing features between the topic of discussion and the answer provided, or (5) drawing attention to specific elements that ought to be considered. Swaminarayan's responses demonstrate not only his enthusiasm for conveying instruction but also his inclination for analysis and rational evaluations, ultimately suggesting the tenability of his own revelations.

As the teacher, Swaminarayan provides the final answers to all posed questions—whether they are asked by the audience or by himself. Although his answers are accepted by the audience, they are not revered solely because of his unique metaphysical identity as Parabrahman Puruṣottama. This becomes evident by (1) the discussions he has with outsiders—those who belong to other *darśanic* schools and do not recognize him as

God—and (2) the presentation and consideration of counter-questions and objections that are posed by his disciples. Swaminarayan's patience and even encouragement for such counter-questions also demonstrates his willingness to engage in reflection and analysis. This is furthered by his own consideration of objections to his revelations and his enthusiasm for teaching his disciples how to formulate meaningful questions. Such training results in not only (1) a more robust line of questioning and (2) an informed and focused revelation, but also instruction on (3) thinking creatively and critically, (4) foreseeing complications and inconsistencies, and (5) the productive use of reasoning.

Because of the many merits of engaging in question-answer dialogues, it is not surprising that Swaminarayan shows immense enthusiasm for them. Within many "Vacanāmṛtas," he actively engages the audience in such dialogue and monitors the discussion, ensuring that it does not deviate from the essential principles of revelation. By doing so, he both presents discernment on how to effectively use reasoning and conveys its limitations.

RECEIVERS OF REVELATION IN THE VACANĀMṚTA

Throughout the Vacanāmṛta the receivers of revelation are the devotees of Swaminarayan. The text documents discourses that are delivered by Swaminarayan to an audience, consisting of both ascetic and non-ascetic followers. Swaminarayan also occasionally holds special assemblies in which he addresses specific groups of followers. In yet other instances he focuses his revelation on a specific group among a larger, more inclusive audience. According to the dialogues of the Vacanāmṛta, it is evident that, like within the sacred texts mentioned earlier in this work, there is participation of a great variety of individuals among these audiences. Unlike previous works, however, this participation consists of both asking questions to Swaminarayan and one-another and resolving inquiries posed by Swaminarayan or other members of the audience. As a result of this complex exchange, the receivers of revelation in the

Vacanāmṛta cannot be simply identified as the questioners. Because of this alteration in the dynamics of the familiar question-answer dialogue, Swaminarayan's distinguished use of learning through questioning introduces distinct features while remaining committed to the classical pedagogic style of Indian sacred texts.

Devotees of Svāmināŕāyaṇa

As elaborated earlier in this work, the receivers of revelation view Swaminarayan as Parabrahman Puruṣottama Bhagavān and accept his revelation in the Vacanāmṛta as *parāvāṇi*—the divine word of God. Consequently, these receivers possess great reverence for the teacher. This is important for several reasons.

First, as we discussed earlier in this work, pedagogical methods within classical Indian question-answer dialogues presume that although learning through questioning is promoted, it ought to be qualified by "praṇipāta" and "sevā." In addition to recording dialogues between Swaminarayan and his audience, the Vacanāmṛta also records instance or acts of reverence expressed by members of the audience. GM. 6 and GM. 65 describe the audience sitting with folded hands eagerly waiting for Swaminarayan to speak.[201] GP. 20 describes a similar gesture when Swaminarayan calls everyone's attention and announces his desire to pose a question. It states, "All the devotees state with folded hands, 'Please Ask.'"[202]

The Vacanāmṛta also recounts devotees expressing obeisance prior to posing questions. For instance, K. 7 narrates, "Hearing these words of Śrījīmahārāja, all of the householders present in the assembly folded their hands and asked..."[203] GM. 1 and GA. 14 record Muktānanda Svāmī

201. (GM. 6, 65) (Svāmināŕāyaṇa 361, 484)
202. "sarva haribhakte hātha joḍīne kahyuṃ je, 'pūcho.'" (GP. 20) (Svāmināŕāyaṇa 30)
203. "Śrījīmahārājanī vāta sāṃbhalīne je gṛhastha sarve sabhāmāṃ beṭhā hatā temaṇe hātha joḍīne pūchyuṃ je..." (K. 7) (Svāmināŕāyaṇa 233)

folding his hands in reverence prior to asking his question.[204] Paṭela Kānadāsajī and Brahmānanda Svāmī express the same gesture before posing their questions in V. 2 and J. 2, respectively.[205]

Acts of reverence are also noted when the audience requests Swaminarayan to respond to his own posed question. For instance, K. 5 narrates:

> "The senior ascetics (*sadhus*) answered according to their own understanding but were unable to answer Śrījīmahārāja's question satisfactorily. As Śrījīmahārāja raised doubts to their answers, their answers were all refuted. The *munis* then **folded their hands** and requested, 'Mahārāja, only you are capable of answering this question.'"[206]

K. 7 and K. 12, thereafter, similarly record:

> "The *munis* answered according to their understanding, but Śrījīmahārāja's question was not answered satisfactorily. So, all the *munis* **folded their hands** and said to Śrījīmahārāja, 'Mahārāja, you will have to answer that question.'"[207]
>
> "The *munis* collectively attempted to explain to the best of their understanding, but none could provide a satisfactory answer to Śrījīmahārāja's question. Thus, they **folded their hands** and said, 'Mahārāja, this question can only be answered by you.'"[208]

---

204. (GM. 1, GA. 14) (Svāmināŕāyaṇa 348, 570)
205. (V. 2, J. 2) (Svāmināŕāyaṇa 496, 655)
206. "moṭā moṭā saṃta hatā temaṇe jenī jevī buddhi teṇe tevo uttara karyo, paṇa Śrījīmahārājanā praśnanuṃ koīthī samādhāna na thayuṃ ane Śrījīmahārāje āśaṃkā karī te sarvenā uttara khoṭā thaī gayā. pachī muni sarve hātha joḍīne bolyā je, 'he Mahārāja! e praśnano uttara to tame ja karo to thāya.'" (K. 5) (Svāmināŕāyaṇa 229)
207. "pachī jene jevo bhāsyo tevo sarve munie uttara karyo, paṇa Śrījīmahārājanā praśnanuṃ samādhāna thayuṃ nahi. pachī sarve muni hātha joḍīne Śrījīmahārāja pratye bolyā je, "he Mahārāja! eno uttara tame karo.'" (K. 7) (Svāmināŕāyaṇa 234)
208. "pachī muni sarve malīne jenī jevī buddhi hatī teṇe tevo uttara karyo paṇa Śrī-

These "Vacanāmṛtas" describe devotees expressing their reverence by folding their hands and offering reverential salutation or prostration. Other "Vacanāmṛtas" recall ascetic and devotees offering other forms of reverence. For example, GM. 9 describes, "Ānandānanda Svāmī had just performed his (Swaminarayan's) *pūjā* (worship);"[209] while GA. 3 records, "Harajī Ṭhakkara performed *pūjā* of Śrījīmahārāja with sandalwood paste mixed with saffron and other auspicious offerings."[210]

As discussed earlier, *praṇipāta* and *sevā* do not merely refer to outwardly expressions of reverence; they are also characterized by a deep sense of admiration, homage, and veneration. For members of the assembly such sentiments were second nature because of their unique understanding of Swaminarayan as Parabrahman. K. 6 offers an ideal example of the devotion that Swaminarayan's devotees had for him. The "Vacanāmṛta" begins:

> "A devotee from the port of Dīva had come on that occasion. She requested Śrījīmahārāja to allow her to perform his *pūjā* (worship). Accepting her request, Śrījīmahārāja came down from his ornate seat, approached the devotee and accepted her *pūjā*."[211]

Later in the "Vacanāmṛta," Swaminarayan endorses the immense love and devotion this devotee from Dīva has for him.

The devotion that Swaminarayan's followers possessed were not only exhibited through outwardly acts of devotion and reverence but also through the acceptance of Swaminarayan's teachings and the willingness

---

jīmahārājanā praśnanuṃ samādhāna thayuṃ nahi. pachī muni sarve hātha joḍīne bolyā je, 'he Mahārāja! ā praśnano uttara to tame karo to thāya.'" (K. 12) (Svāmināārāyaṇa 246)

209. "te same Ānaṃdānaṃda Svāmīe pūjā karī hatī." (GM. 9) (Svāmināārāyaṇa 368)
210. "Harajī Ṭhakkare Śrījīmahārājanī kesara-caṃdanādike karīne pūjā karī." (GA. 3) (Svāmināārāyaṇa 547)
211. "pachī Dīvabaṃdaranā haribhakta āvyā hatā. teṇe Śrījīmahārājanī pūjā karyāne arthe prārthanā karī. pachī Śrījīmahārāje te siṃhāsana uparathī ūtarīne ne te bhaktajana sāmā jaīne tenī pūjā aṃgīkāra karī." (K. 6) (Svāmināārāyaṇa 230)

to imbibe these teachings within their lives. GM. 28 records such an expression. Upon describing Swaminarayan's declaration of his own ardent desire to serve devotees and request that all those present to do the same, the "Vacanāmṛta" continues by stating:

> "Thereupon Muktānanda Svāmī and all the other devotees **folded their hands in prayer** and said, 'Mahārāja, we also wish to keep such a resolution.' Having said this, all of the **devotees pledged and bowed at Śrījīmahārāja's feet**."[212]

GM. 58 describes a similar event. Upon recalling Swaminarayan's instruction for Muktānanda Svāmī to continue to preach and author texts on the *saṃpradāya* (fellowship) and his *iṣṭadeva* (Swaminarayan himself) throughout the rest of his life, the "Vacanāmṛta" states:

> "With great respect for these words of Śrījīmahārāja, Muktānanda Svāmī **resolved to devoutly abide by them**. Then, folding his hands, he bowed before Śrījīmahārāja."[213]

Such explicit and committed acts of devotion emphasize that the receivers of revelation within the Vacanāmṛta were not just inquisitors, students, or even admirers but devout disciples of Swaminarayan. They were invested in his teachings and sought transformation and redemption through them.

This brings us to the second point of significance. By being devout followers of Swaminarayan, the receivers of discourse pose relevant, practical questions to resolve real-world, pressing, and personal issues. This imposes a sense of urgency among their inquiries. Their questions are intentioned not to instigate conversation, satisfy some philosophical or theological curiosity, simply understand, clarify a confusion, or interpret

212. "pachī Muktānaṃda Svāmī ādika je sarve haribhakta hatā temaṇe hātha joḍīne kahyuṃ je, 'he Mahārāja! amāre paṇa e ja niścaya rākhavo che.' ema kahīne sarve haribhakta vinatie sahita Śrījīmahārājane page lāgyā." (GM. 28) (Svāmināyaṇa 421)

213. "pachī e je Śrījīmahārājanuṃ vacana tene Muktānaṃda Svāmīe ati ādara karīne māthe caḍāvyuṃ ane Śrījīmahārājane be hātha joḍīne namaskāra karyā." (GM. 58) (Svāmināyaṇa 469)

a text. A survey of their questions suggests that their questioning was instead motivated in personal change and attaining ultimate liberation.

GP. 4 demonstrates this eagerness. Within this "Vacanāmṛta" when Swaminarayan advises: "Devotees of God should not harbor jealousy amongst themselves;"[214] Ānandānanda Svāmī is quick to reveal: "But Mahārāja, even then, jealousy still remains."[215] This response expresses a pressing concern and Ānandānanda Svāmī's desire to seek its resolution. Addressing the issue, Swaminarayan continues throughout the remainder of the "Vacanāmṛta" to reveal how one should overcome jealousy and narrates an example of how Muni Nārada overcame his own jealousy of Tuṃbaru.[216]

Later in GP. 12 when Swaminarayan reveals the soteriological significance of realizing entities (attaining *tattvajñāna*), Muktānanda Svāmī immediately asks, "Mahārāja, how can their nature be known?"[217] The significance and abstractness of philosophical revelation is rendered practical by his inquiry. GP. 20 presents a similar account. When Swaminarayan reveals that the most ignorant of all is one who fails to recognize one's own true form, Śukamuni asks, "Is it truly in one's own hands to see one's own self? If it is, why does the self (*jīva*) remain ignorant?"[218] Śukamuni's question addresses an immediate concern that arises: If self-realization is not one's choice, then is one blameworthy for one's own condition? By presenting these and other concerns, it is evident that, within the Vacanāmṛta, discussions and therein revelations are not purely cerebral engagements, but guides to pragmatic, personal reflection and implementation.

214. "Bhagavānanā bhaktane paraspara īrṣyā na karavī." (GP. 4) (Svāmināŕāyaṇa 5)
215. "he Mahārāja! īrṣyā to rahe che." (GP. 4) (Svāmināŕāyaṇa 5)
216. This account is revealed in the Liṅgamahāpurāṇa. For a detailed reference, see footnote 19 in the Vacanāmṛta. (Svāmināŕāyaṇa 6)
217. "he Mahārāja! emanuṃ svarūpa kema jāṇyāmāṃ āve?" (GP. 12) (Svāmināŕāyaṇa 12)
218. "potānuṃ svarūpa jovuṃ te śuṃ potānā hāthamāṃ che? ane jo potānā hāthamāṃ hoya to jīva śīda atiśaya ajñānī rahe?" (GP. 20) (Svāmināŕāyaṇa 31)

The final point I would like to discuss regarding the reverence that Swaminarayan's disciples had for him concerns the significance it bears on his disciples' willingness to counter-question Swaminarayan's revelation. As we have seen earlier, devotees within the audience not only occasionally present speculation and counter-question revelation but also are encouraged to do so by Swaminarayan. This would typically seem contrary to the disciples' understanding of Swaminarayan's unique metaphysical position. One would expect unquestioned or absolute affirmation. However, the dialogues between Swaminarayan and his followers demonstrate that conviction need not exclude inquiry or cross-questioning; after all whom better to address one's doubts and speculations than God himself. By documenting these complex dialogues, the Vacanāmṛta challenges norms by introducing new aspects of the relationship between not just a guru and a *śiṣya* but also, more relevantly, God and his disciple.

Having identified the receivers of revelation as the disciples of Swaminarayan and elaborated on the implications of this identification, I now turn to the nature of the assemblies that Swaminarayan addressed.

Addressing the Many

The disciples—the receivers of revelation—in the Vacanāmṛta are numerous. As in texts such as the *Mahābhārata* (where dialogue is conducted between Ugraśravas and a group of *brahmins* lead by Śaunaka), the Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad (specifically dialogues such as those between Yājñavalkya and Gārgī, Hotṛ Aśvāla, Ārtabhāga, and others), the Praśnopaniṣad, and others, revelation within the Vacanāmṛta is typically directed to not just one individual but all those that are present. When the audience of a teaching consists of many, there is an implicit tendency to speak not in terms of one individual, but universally and irrespective of differences among the audience. For example, in many instances in the Vacanāmṛta, we find Swaminarayan announcing the relevance of revelation to both male and female members of the audience. Specifically, in GP. 18, GM. 33, and GM. 35 he directs his teachings to both genders

by qualifying them with the phrase: "...whether one is male or female."[219]

In some instances, to emphasize relevance to specific members of the audience, he provides listings of classifications of the audience by qualifying statements such as: "all ascetics... all [male] devotees... all female devotees,"[220] "all of the *munis* and *brahmacārīs* and householder *satsaṅgīs*[221] and *pārṣadas*[222] and residents of Ayodhyā;[223]"[224] "householder and renunciants;"[225] "If a senior *sadhu* (ascetic) or a junior *sadhu* becomes angry;"[226] "If one is a *paramahaṃsa*... if one is a woman... and if one is a householder in the fellowship (*satsaṅga*);"[227] and others.

These details also highlight the great variety among those present in the assembly. In most of the "Vacanāmṛtas," we find that both ascetics and devotees are assembled before Swaminarayan.[228] In some instances, as in GP. 17, Swaminarayan is specific to categorize all those present. Within this "Vacanāmṛta" he specifies, "I want to conduct this matter in such a manner that it encompasses all *satsaṅgīs* (members of the

219. See, for example: "bāī athavā bhāī" (GP. 18) (Svāmināārāyaṇa 27), "strī athavā puruṣa" (GM. 33) (Svāmināārāyaṇa 430), "strī-puruṣane" (GM. 35) (Svāmināārāyaṇa 434)
220. "saṃta sarve ... satsaṃgī sarve... bāīo haribhakta" (GP. 63) (Svāmināārāyaṇa 119)
221. 'Satsaṅgī' refers to those who are members of the fellowship (*satsaṅga*).
222. Within the tradition, 'pārṣada' refers to a class of renunciant devotees.
223. Swaminarayan here is referring to his extended family members, who have come from the city Ayodhyā.
224. "sarve munimaṃḍala tathā brahmacārī tathā gṛhastha satsaṃgī tathā pālā tathā Ayodhyāvāsī" (GM. 45) (Svāmināārāyaṇa 448)
225. "gṛhasthāśramī ne tyāgī" (GM. 53) (Svāmināārāyaṇa 459)
226. "krodha jo moṭā sādhune ūpaje athavā nānā sādhune ūpaje" (A. 8) (Svāmināārāyaṇa 650)
227. "paramahaṃsa hoya... strī hoya... bījā je satsaṃgī gṛhastha hoya..." (GM. 35) (Svāmināārāyaṇa 434)
228. See, for example: GP. 1, S. 1, K. 1, L. 1, P. 1, GM. 1, V. 1, A. 1, GA. 1, As. 1, and J. 1 (Svāmināārāyaṇa 1, 172, 217, 247, 318, 348, 493, 535, 542, 651, 653)

fellowship), *paramahaṃsas*, *sāṅkhya-yogīs*[229] and *karma-yogīs*."[230] In such assemblies both male and female ascetic and non-ascetic devotees are described as being present.

Specialized Assemblies

In addition to such open assemblies, the Vacanāmṛta also records specialized assemblies, which consist of, for example, only ascetic devotees. GP. 27's introductory paragraph records that Swaminarayan's revelation occurred at the residence of the *paramahaṃsas* and specifies the audience before him by stating, "At that time, an assembly of *paramahaṃsas* had gathered before him."[231] GM. 19 similarly records an assembly at the *paramahaṃsas*' residence consisting of, once again, only the *paramahaṃsas*.[232] Within these "Vacanāmṛtas" the subject of discussion typically focusses on concerns particularly relevant to ascetics. L. 8 is somewhat different than the above "Vacanāmṛtas" in these respects. It begins by addressing all the *paramahaṃsas*, however later, Swaminarayan gathers just the junior *paramahaṃsas* and addresses them exclusively. The "Vacanāmṛta" describes: "Then Śrījīmahārāja gathered the junior *paramahaṃsas*, and he himself asked and answered questions."[233] Swaminarayan's audience within the remainder of this Vacanāmṛta consists of only junior *paramahaṃsas*. In addition to describing all-male audiences, the Vacanāmṛta also records Swaminarayan addressing an audience consisting of only female

229. The glossary of the Vacanāmṛta specifies a 'sāṅkhya-yogi' as a 'term for a devotee who has renounced his/her worldly duties... and is sincerely striving for liberation... [The term] often refers to female renunciants when used in series with *paramahaṃsas*." (Svāminārāyaṇa 744)

230. The glossary of the Vacanāmṛta specifies 'karma-yogi' as a "term used for a householder devotee who has not renounced his/her worldly duties outright... but is nevertheless sincerely striving for liberation." (Svāminārāyaṇa 276)

231. "...potānā mukhāraviṃdanī āgala paramahaṃsanī sabhā bharāīne beṭhī hatī." (GP. 27) (Svāminārāyaṇa 45)

232. (Svāminārāyaṇa 400)

233. "tyāra pachī Śrījīmahārāja nānā nānā paramahaṃsane teḍāvīne pote praśna śīkhavavā lāgyā ne pote uttara karavā lāgyā." (L. 8) (Svāminārāyaṇa 276)

devotees. GA. 15 documents Swaminarayan having attended an assembly of female disciples where he emphasized the importance of performing the form of devotion (*bhakti*) that is favorable to one's preferences and inclination.[234] Such special assemblies allow Swaminarayan to conduct focused revelations.

Focused Revelation

The Vacanāmṛta also records discourses in which Swaminarayan directs his revelation towards specific persons, among all those present in the assembly. Within GP. 65, for example, "Śrījīmahārāja called the senior *paramahaṃsas* near him,"[235] an act that highlights the primary recipients of revelation. GM. 3 similarly records, "Śrījīmahārāja silenced the audience and said, 'Those of you who are senior *paramahaṃsas*, please come to the front as I wish to speak to you;"[236] and a little later, GM. 13 documents: "Śrījīmahārāja said, 'O *paramahaṃsas*! All the seniors that understand please come to the front.'"[237] In certain "Vacanāmṛtas" Swaminarayan directs his teachings towards younger members of the audience. K. 2, for example, reveals: "By Śrījīmahārāja's command, the junior *paramahaṃsas* had come to the front of the assembly and were asking and answering questions amongst themselves."[238] Although GA. 19 does not describe a change in seating arrangements, Swaminarayan's teachings and instructions are clearly focused towards the ascetic devotees seated within the assembly. This is suggested by Swaminarayan's conclusion in the "Vacanāmṛta" which states, "The message of this discourse should

234. (GA. 15) (Svāminārāyaṇa 576)
235. "...ane Śrījīmahārāja kathā karāvatā hatā te same moṭā moṭā paramahaṃsane potāne samīpe bolāvyā." (GP. 65) (Svāminārāyaṇa 126)
236. "moṭerā moṭerā paramahaṃsa ho te āgala āvo, vāta karavī che." (GM. 3) (Svāminārāyaṇa 354)
237. "Śrījīmahārāja ema bolatā havā je, 'he saṃto! je moṭerā moṭerā ho ne vātamāṃ samajatā ho te āgala beso...'" (GM. 13) (Svāminārāyaṇa 382)
238. "Śrījīmahārājanī ājñāe karīne nānā nānā paramahaṃsa āgala āvīne praśna-uttara karatā hatā." (K. 2) (Svāminārāyaṇa 223)

daily be said to and listened by the *paramahaṃsas* and the *sāṅkhya-yogī* devotees. Specifically, the senior member of a *maṇḍala*[239] should daily narrate this talk, and others should listen."[240] Passages like these demonstrate Swaminarayan's awareness of his audience, the circumstances that effect their reception of his teachings, and implicitly even the effects his announcement has on others who are present within the assembly.

Inclusive Participation

In addition to addressing a wide range of audiences, Swaminarayan also engages in question and answer dialogues with a great variety of participants among them. In certain "Vacanāmṛtas" he presents a question to only the ascetic devotees. For instance, GP. 78 narrates: "Śrījīmahārāja then said, 'All *sadhus*, please listen. I wish to ask a question.'"[241] In others, such as in GM. 27, which states: "Thereafter, Śrījīmahārāja asked Muktānanda Svāmī the question…,"[242] and GM. 66, which describes: "Having said that, Śrījīmahārāja asked Nityānanda Svāmī…,"[243] he asks a question to a specific *paramahaṃsa*. In some "Vacanāmṛtas" he directs his questions to just the senior *paramahaṃsas*;[244] whereas in others he directs them to younger ascetics.[245] In S. 15, which records: "Thereafter,

239. Swaminarayan's ascetic devotees were organized in groups called *maṇḍalas*.
240. "ā prakaraṇanī je vārtā tene saṃtamaṃḍala tathā sāṃkhyayogī haribhakta samasta temane nitya pratye kahevī ne sāṃbhalavī. tenī vigata je, jenā maṃḍalamāṃ je moṭero hoya tene nitya pratye ā vāta karavī ane bījāne sāṃbhalavī." (GA. 19) (Svāminārāyaṇa 583)
241. "pachī. Śrījīmahārāja bolyā je, 'sarve saṃta sāṃbhalo, eka praśna pūchīe chīe.'" (GP. 78) (Svāminārāyaṇa 163)
242. "pachī Śrījīmahārāje Muktānaṃda Svāmīne praśna pūchyo je…" (GM. 27) (Svāminārāyaṇa 417)
243. "ema kahīne pachī Śrījīmahārāje Nityānaṃda Svāmīne praśna pūchatā havā je…" (GM. 66) (Svāminārāyaṇa 486)
244. See, for example, GM. 66 which describes: "Thereafter, Śrījīmahārāja said, 'Today, I want to ask questions to the senior ascetics.'" ("pachī Śrījīmahārāja bolyā je, 'āja to amāre moṭā moṭā saṃtane praśna pūchavā che.'") (Svāminārāyaṇa 485)
245. See, for example: Kā. 2. (Svāminārāyaṇa 223)

Śrījīmahārāja said, 'Here, I shall ask a question...'"[246] he asks questions to both ascetics and devotees seated before him.[247] He also specifically calls upon particular devotees to respond as in GA. 28, which states, "Then Śrījīmahārāja asked all three: Brahmānanda Svāmī, Śukamuni, and Surā Khācara, a question...;"[248] V. 11, which describes: "Next, Śrījīmahārāja posed a question to Dīnānātha Bhaṭṭa and all of the *munis;*"[249] and GM. 62 which records Swaminarayan asking his nephews Ayodhyāprasādajī and Raghuvīrajī to pose questions.[250]

Swaminarayan also receives and responds to questions asked by a great variety of both ascetics and unordained disciples. Among the ascetic disciples, erudite and pundit ascetics, such as Nityānanda Svāmī;[251] the renowned poet, architect, musically gifted, and administrator Brahmānanda Svāmī;[252] senior ascetics, including Gopālānanda Svāmī[253] and Muktānanda Svāmī;[254] Swaminarayan's personal assistant and acclaimed author Śukānanda Svāmī;[255] student ascetics, such as Nirmānānaṃda Svāmī and Prajñānānaṃda Svāmī;[256] and even elderly renunciants, such as Ātmānanda Svāmī[257] are all recorded in the Vacanāmṛta

246. "pachī Śrījīmahārāje bolyā je, 'lyo, ame praśna pūchīe je...'" (S. 15) (Svāmināryaṇa 206)
247. See also GA. 37. (Svāmināryaṇa 624–25)
248. "pachī Brahmānaṃda Svāmī tathā Śukamuni tathā Surokhācara e traṇane Śrījīmahārāje pūchyuṃ je..." (GA. 28) (Svāmināryaṇa 604)
249. "pachī Śrījīmahārāje Dīnānātha Bhaṭṭa tathā munimaṃḍala samasta pratye praśna pūchyo..." (V. 11) (Svāmināryaṇa 516)
250. "Śrījīmahārāja then called for his nephews, Ayodhyāprasādji and Raghuvīrajī, and said to them, 'You may ask me questions.'" ("pachī Śrījīmahārāje potānā bhatrījā je Ayodhyāprasādajī ne Raghuvīrajī temane bolāvīne kahyuṃ je, 'tame amane praśna pūcho.'") (GM. 62) (Svāmināryaṇa 475)
251. See, for example: (S. 6) (Svāmināryaṇa 186)
252. See, for example: (Kā. 6) (Svāmināryaṇa 231)
253. See, for example: (Kā. 6) (Svāmināryaṇa 242)
254. See, for example: (L. 1) (Svāmināryaṇa 250)
255. See, for example: (L. 11) (Svāmināryaṇa 289)
256. See (GP. 78) (Svāmināryaṇa 164–65)
257. See, for example: (GP. 38) (Svāmināryaṇa 69)

to have engaged in question-answer dialogues with Swaminarayan.

Additionally, the Vacanāmṛta records questions asked by a great variety of devotees. For example, Surā Khācara asks a question in GA. 28,[258] Somalā Khācara in GP. 71, S. 2, and S. 3,[259] Mātarā Dhādhala in GP. 71,[260] Kāśīdāsa from the village Bocāsaṇa in K. 7,[261] Govardhanabhāī Śeṭha in GP. 1,[262] Āśajībhāī in J. 2 and 4,[263] Pāṭīdāra Bhagubhāī from the town Bhādaraṇa in V. 10,[264] Cīmanarāvajī in V. 6,[265] Kākābhāī from the village Rojakā in GP. 72,[266] Nājā Bhakta in GP. 75 and V. 5,[267] Rājabāī in GA. 25.[268] Śobhārāma Śāstrī in V. 1, 7, 15, and 16,[269] Dīnānātha Bhaṭṭa in V. 1,[270] Mayārāma Bhaṭṭa in GP. 2,[271] Rāmacandra Vāghamoḍiyā of Vaḍodarā in V. 14,[272] Swaminarayan's nephews Ayodhyāprasādajī and Raghuvīrajī in GM. 62,[273] Harajī Ṭhakkara in GP. 1,[274] Kānadāsajī Paṭela from the village Būvā in V. 2,[275] Kuberasiṃhajī Chaḍīdāra in A. 5,[276] Prāgajī Dave in A. 7,[277] Puruṣottama Bhaṭṭa in GM. 64,[278] and the *brahmin* Vālā Dhruva of

258. (GA. 28) (Svāminārāyaṇa 604)
259. (GP. 71, S. 2, 3) (Svāminārāyaṇa 142, 174, 179)
260. (GP. 71) (Svāminārāyaṇa 142)
261. (K. 7) (Svāminārāyaṇa 233)
262. (GP. 1) (Svāminārāyaṇa 2)
263. (J. 2, 4) (Svāminārāyaṇa 657, 661)
264. (V. 10) (Svāminārāyaṇa 513)
265. (V. 6) (Svāminārāyaṇa 506)
266. (GP. 72) (Svāminārāyaṇa 148)
267. (GP. 75, V. 5) (Svāminārāyaṇa 158, 505)
268. (GA. 25) (Svāminārāyaṇa 596)
269. (V. 1, 7, 15, 16) (Svāminārāyaṇa 493, 510, 522, 523)
270. (V. 1) (Svāminārāyaṇa 495)
271. (GP. 2) (Svāminārāyaṇa 3)
272. (V. 14) (Svāminārāyaṇa 521)
273. (GM. 62) (Svāminārāyaṇa 475)
274. (GP. 1) (Svāminārāyaṇa 2)
275. (V. 2) (Svāminārāyaṇa 496)
276. (A. 5) (Svāminārāyaṇa 644–45)
277. (A. 7) (Svāminārāyaṇa 648)
278. (GM. 64) (Svāminārāyaṇa 481)

Vaso in GP. 44.[279]

In addition to devotees, the Vacanāmṛta also records question-answer dialogues between Swaminarayan and followers of other *darśanic* schools. We have already become familiar with some of these from previous discussions. GA. 10, for example, records a dialogue with a scholarly *brahmin* of the Mādhvī Saṃpradāya,[280] GP. 39 describes a conversation Swaminarayan has with the a Vedāntī *brahmin* (one who follows the Advaita Vedānta school of thought),[281] GP. 42 addresses several Vedāntins,[282] and GP. 46 recounts an exchange with a Vedāntī *brahmin* named Māheśvara Bhaṭṭa, who poses a question to Śrījīmahārāja.[283]

The question-answer dialogue within the Vacanāmṛta is conducted not only between the teacher and the disciple, but also among disciples in the presence of the teacher. As we have seen earlier in this work, Swaminarayan often asked for members of the audience to ask questions among each other.[284] In the running narrative of the text, the compilers of the Vacanāmṛta describe members of the assembly conducting these sessions. For instance, GP. 49 recalls, "...the *paramahaṃsas* conducted a question-answer session amongst themselves for quite some time;" K. 2 narrates, "...the junior *paramahamsas* had come to the front of the assembly and were asking and answering questions amongst themselves;" and K. 12 records, "...the *munis* asked questions amongst themselves for quite some time."[285]

Along with such general descriptions, the Vacanāmṛta also documents instances of questioning between specific members of the audience. For example, GP. 65 records Svayaṃprakāśānanda Svāmī and

279. (GP. 44) (Svāminārāyaṇa 82)
280. (GA. 10) (Svāminārāyaṇa 561–63)
281. (GP. 39) (Svāminārāyaṇa 70–71)
282. (GP. 42) (Svāminārāyaṇa 76–79)
283. (GP. 46) (Svāminārāyaṇa 85–88)
284. Recall the discussion from the section titled "Opening the Floor to Questions" located earlier in this work.
285. (GP. 49, K. 2, 12) (Svāminārāyaṇa 93, 223, 245)

Paramānanda Svāmī asking questions to one another; GP. 70 documents both Kākābhāī and Jasakāvālā Jīvābhāī asking Nityānanda Svāmī; in K. 2 Moṭā Śivānanda Svāmī asks Moṭā Yogānanda Svāmī; within K. 4 Gopālānanda Svāmī asks Bhajanānanda Svāmī; in L. 9 Ātmānanda Svāmī questions Akhandānanda Svāmī; L. 13 records Gopālānanda Svāmī asking Brahmānanda Svāmī; in P. 3 and P4 Munibāvā questions Brahmānanda Svāmī; and within GA. 21, by Swaminarayan's specific instruction, Śukamuni asks a question to Gopālānanda Svāmī.[286] Swaminarayan also occasionally redirects questions asked to him towards members of the audience. For instance, GP. 31 recalls Yogānanda Svāmī posing a question to Swaminarayan, who then calls for Muktānanda Svāmī and Brahmānanda Svāmī and requests them to respond to the asked question.[287] All these readings describe members of the assembly asking one another questions and responding to them in Swaminarayan's presence. This form of convening and participation is unlike what we ordinarily see in the sacred texts introduced earlier in this work. Despite being unconventional, such involvement introduces an element of active participation of the audience, especially when questioning is directed towards specific individuals.

The Vacanāmṛta's account of the questions asked and the answers given by members of the audience highlights many features of the dialogue undertaken in Swaminarayan's presence. First, just the sheer diversity among those participating in question-asking and response-giving suggests the openness and all-inclusive nature of the conversation. Ascetics and householders; those from higher social orders (castes) alongside those from lower ones; those of royalty and wealth alongside others stricken by poverty; members of both genders; older, senior disciples in addition to younger, newer disciples; educated pundits together with those who have never seen a day of formal instruction; distinguished authors and poets

286. (GP. 65, 70, 70; K. 2, 4; L. 9, 13; P. 3, 4; GA. 21) (Svāminārāyaṇa 126–28, 137, 139, 224, 228, 280, 293, 328, 333, 584)

287. (GP. 31) (Svāminārāyaṇa 52)

who have penned thousands of compositions and those who are illiterate; musicians and attendants; and insiders and outsiders—all not only openly participate in dialogue but also are recorded as having done so.

Such participation further reveals Swaminarayan's unrestricted position on *adhikāra*—the right to receive revelation or the knowledge of spiritual truths. With such diversity among the audience that sits before Swaminarayan and those participating in conversation, questioning, and responding suggests Swaminarayan's willingness to convey revelation and spiritual truth to all those who are willing to listen. Although this study is limited to the Vacanāmṛta, there are numerous accounts within biographical works on Swaminarayan and other historical works of the tradition that further substantiate Swaminarayan's willingness to openly convey discourse and teachings. Such openness was by far not the norm within the communities in which such assemblies took place. The diversity of participation within the Vacanāmṛta reflects Swaminarayan's unprejudiced, inclusive, and revolutionary attitude.

A Diverse Pool of Questioning

With such variety among the audience and those participating in question-answer dialogue comes distinct perspectives, presumptions, expectations, and capacities. Because of such diversity, we find that, just as there is with Swaminarayan's inquiry, there is great variety among the types of questions posed by his disciples. Some questions inquire about the nature, characteristics, or definitions of concepts. For example, in J. 4 Āśajībhāī asks Śrījīmahārāja to clearly reveal the nature of the *jīvātman* (self),[288] in GP. 11 Brahmānanda Svāmī asks, "What is the nature of *vāsanā* (attachment)?,"[289] and in GP. 71 Mātarā Dhādhala asks, "What is the characteristic of jealousy?"[290]

Some questions are moral inquires—they pertain to discerning

288. (J. 4) (Svāmināārāyaṇa 657)
289. "vāsanānuṃ śuṃ rūpa che?" (GP. 11) (Svāmināārāyaṇa 11)
290. "īrṣyānuṃ śuṃ rūpa che?" (GP. 71) (Svāmināārāyaṇa 142)

rightful from wrongful conduct. P. 5 expresses an example of such an inquiry. Within this "Vacanāmṛta" Svayaṃprakāśānanda Svāmī asks, "When is conceit appropriate, and when is it not appropriate? When is humility appropriate, and when is it not appropriate?"[291] This question presupposes that conceit and humility are not inherently vices or virtues and that their moral worth or depravity is dependent upon the circumstances in which they are enacted. Other such ethical inquiries of the sort are found throughout the text.

As with Swaminarayan's questions, some of those asked by disciples also ask for summations or superlatives. For example, in GP. 57 Muktānanda Svāmī asks, "What is the most extraordinary means of attaining liberation?,"[292] in S. 5 he asks again, "Which method of eradicating worldly desires is so powerful that that method alone incorporates all other means?,"[293] and in GM. 10 Acintyānanda Svāmī asks, "Of the three: knowledge (*jñāna*), detachment (*vairāgya*), and devotion (*bhakti*), which one plays a more significant role in fostering affection for God?"[294]

The postulation of hypotheticals or case studies, as employed by Swaminarayan, is also used by disciples in their inquiries. Svayaṃprakāśānanda Svāmī in S. 3 utilizes a case study to shed light on the significance of different types of worship (*pūjā*). He asks, "Mahārāja, suppose there is a devotee who physically performs *pūjā* of the manifest form of God with various types of *pūjā* implements. Also suppose there is another devotee who performs *mānasī pūjā*—worship that is offered mentally—of God using various imaginary implements. Who is better

291. "kaye ṭhekāṇe māna sāruṃ che ne kaye ṭhekāṇe sāruṃ nathī ne kaye ṭhekāṇe nirmānīpaṇuṃ sāruṃ che ne kaye ṭhekāṇe sāruṃ nathī?" (P. 5) (Svāminārāyaṇa 340–41)

292. "mokṣanuṃ asādhāraṇa kāraṇa te śuṃ che?" (GP. 57) (Svāminārāyaṇa 106)

293. "vāsanānī nivṛtti thayāno evo śo jabaro upāya che je eka upāyane viṣe sarve sādhana āvī jāya?" (S. 5) (Svāminārāyaṇa 183)

294. "jñāna, vairāgya ane bhakti e traṇane viṣe Bhagavānanā svarūpamāṃ prīti thayānuṃ viśeṣa kāraṇa koṇa che?" (GM. 10) (Svāminārāyaṇa 374)

among the two devotees?"[295]

Some questions seek to resolve doubts. For example, an ascetic disciple asks in GP. 77, "Please explain why a pious person's death appears to be unpleasant in comparison to an ordinary person's death, which appears to be pleasant?"[296] Within L. 7 Muktānanda Svāmī looks to resolve an apparent conflict of interests. He explains:

> "The *śrutis* state: 'There is no liberation without knowledge (*jñāna*)'[297] and 'Only by knowing him (God) does one transgress death; there is no other path for attaining [liberation].'[298] These Vedic verses proclaim that the *jīva* (self) attains liberation only when it realizes the knowledge of God. If liberation can only be attained by knowledge (*jñāna*), why do sacred texts also prescribe other spiritual endeavors for attaining liberation?"[299]

Other questions, like the one asked by Muktānanda Svāmī in L. 7 above, are founded on making sense of revelation within sacred texts. These questions seek to not only interpret these texts but also understand how they are integrated with one another and provide a consistent

---

295. "he Mahārāja! eka bhakta to nānā prakāranī pūjā-sāmagrī laīne pratyakṣa Bhagavānanī pūjā kare che ane eka bhakta to nānā prakāranā mānasika upacāre karīne Bhagavānanī mānasī pūjā kare che, e be bhaktamāṃ śreṣṭha te koṇa che?" (S. 3) (Svāmināràyaṇa 179)
296. "je sāro hoya tenuṃ aṃta same sāruṃ na dekhāya ne jevo tevo hoya tenuṃ aṃta same sāruṃ dekhāya che enuṃ kāraṇa kaho. e praśna che." (GP. 77) (Svāmināràyaṇa 161)
297. "ṛte jñānānna muktiḥl" (*Hiraṇyakeśīyaśākhāśruti*—according to the corresponding footnote in the Vacanāmṛta, this recension is not available in written form) (Svāmināràyaṇa 269)
298. "tameva viditvāti'mṛtyumeti nānyaḥ panthā vidyate'yanāyall" (Śvetāśvataropaniṣad 3.8) (Śāstrī 137)
299. "śrutimāṃ kahyuṃ che je, 'ṛte jñānānna muktiḥ' 'tameva viditvāti'mṛtyumeti nānyaḥ panthā vidyate'yanāyall' e śrutimāṃ ema kahyuṃ je, 'Bhagavānanuṃ sākṣāt jñāna thāya tyāre jīvanuṃ kalyāṇa thāya che.' tyāre śāstramāṃ je bījāṃ sādhana kalyāṇane arthe batāvyāṃ che tenuṃ śuṃ prayojana che? kema je, kalyāṇa to jñāne karīne ja thāya che?" (L. 7) (Svāmināràyaṇa 269)

account of revelation. In this regard, there are several questions within the Vacanāmṛta that seek to elaborate exegetical or hermeneutical principles as they pertain to the interpretation of sacred texts. For example, GP. 52 begins by describing that during the assembly earlier a reference was made to understanding God's form (*svarūpa*) through four sacred texts. Thereafter, Muktānanda Svāmī presents a hermeneutical question on how to understand God's form according to these texts.[300] On a similar note, GP. 45 describes Gopālānanda Svāmī's inquiry on how to reconcile *prima facie* conflicting revelations on the form of God. He asks, "Mahārāja, many Vedāntins claim that God does not possess a form. Moreover, they cite Vedic verses that support only that belief.[301] On the other hand, devotees of God such as Nārada, Śukajī, and the Sanakādika claim that God does possess a form.[302] Of the two, who is correct?"[303]

Other questions focus on addressing intuitive concerns with specific interpretations of sacred texts. For example, GP. 14 presents an inquiry that seeks to understand revelation that challenges the significance of accepted devotional practices. Within this "Vacanāmṛta" Muktānanda Svāmī asks Swaminarayan,

> "The *śrutis* state, 'Whatever one's mental state is like at the

300. (GP. 52) (Svāminārāyaṇa 97)

301. See, for example: "apāṇipādo javano grahītā paśyatyacakṣuḥ sa śṛṇotyakarṇaḥ" (Śvetāśvataropaniṣad 3.19), "aśabdamasparśamarūpamavyayam" (Kaṭha. 3.15), and "aśarīram" (Kaṭha. 2.22). (Śāstrī 137, 8, 7)

302. *Śruti* revelations that depict Parabrahman as having form include: "ya eṣo ऽntarāditye hiraṇmayaḥ puruṣo dṛśyate hiraṇyaśmaśrurhiraṇyakeśa… tasya yathā kapyāsaṃ puṃḍarīkamevamakṣiṇīll" (Chā. 1.6.6-7), "haitasya puruṣasya rūpaṃ yathā māhārajanaṃ vāso" (Bṛ. 2.3.6), and "yadā paśyaḥ paśyate rukmavarṇaṃ kartāramīśam" (Mu. 3.1.3). (Śāstrī 37, 96, 18)

303. "Gopālānaṃda Svāmīe pūchyuṃ je, "he Mahārāja! keṭalāka vedāṃtī ema kahe che je, 'Bhagavānane ākāra nathī' ane tevā ja pratipādananī śrutione bhaṇe che. ane keṭalāka je Nārada, Śuka, Sanakādika Sarakhā Bhagavānanā bhakta che te to Bhagavānanuṃ sākārapaṇuṃ pratipādana kare che. te e bemāṃthī koṇa sācā che?" (GP. 45) (Svāminārāyaṇa 84)

> time of one's death, such will be one's state after death.'[304] They claim that if one's mind is fixed on God at the time of death, one will attain a favorable fate after death; otherwise, one will not. This seems to be the interpretation of that Vedic verse. If this is so, what is the significance of the devotion (*bhakti*) one has performed throughout one's life?"[305]

Presenting such interpretive complexities provide the opportunity to reveal not only hermeneutical principles that characterize Swaminarayan's reading of sacred texts but also Swaminarayan's interpretive position on familiar classical debates.

As with Swaminarayan's questions, some questions posed by the audience are also anticipatory; they foresee resolutions and highlight inadequacies in pursuing them. For instance, GP. 13 records:

> "Nityānanda Svāmī asked Śrījīmahārāja, 'Is there only one *jīva* within each body, or are there many? If you say there is only one, then when the branches of banyan, peepul or other trees are cut and planted elsewhere, exactly the same type of tree grows there as well. Has that one *jīva* been dissected into two, or has another *jīva* entered the new tree? If you say that it is the same *jīva*, then how has the *jīva*, which is whole and indivisible, been cut?'"[306]

Nityānanda Svāmī's consideration of a possible resolution and its

304. "ante yā matiḥ sā gatiḥl" (*Hiraṇyakeśīyaśākhāśruti*) (Svāmināyaṇa 19)

305. "śrutimāṃ ema kahyuṃ che je, 'ante yā matiḥ sā gatiḥ' evī rīte kahyuṃ che, je aṃtakāle Bhagavānane viṣe mati rahe to gati thāya ane na rahe to na thāya; evo e śrutino artha bhāse che. tyāre je bhakti karī hoya teno śo viśeṣa che?" (GP. 14) (Svāmināyaṇa 19)

306. "Śrījīmahārājane Nityānaṃda Svāmīe praśna pūchyo je, 'deha deha pratye jīva eka che? ke aneka che? ane jo eka kaheśo to vaḍa, pīṃpara ādika je vṛkṣa che tenī ḍāḷakhīo kāpīne bīje ṭhekāṇe rope che tyāre tevuṃ ne tevuṃ ja vṛkṣa thāya che. e te eka jīva be prakāre thayo? ke bīje jīve praveśa karyo? ane kaheśo je, 'e to eno e jīva che,' to jīva to akhaṃḍa che ane acyuta che te kapāṇo kema?'" (GP. 13) (Svāmināyaṇa 16–17)

associated implication demonstrates the kind of foresight expressed by Swaminarayan in V. 17. Furthermore, Nityānanda Svāmī's inquiry is not merely speculative but empirical in that it is grounded in common observation; and as a result, is accompanied by a sense of practicality, if not urgency. Such informed, robust, and practical questioning is reminiscent of the questions employed by Swaminarayan.

Responding to Questions

In addition to asking questions, members of the audience also respond to questions posed by Swaminarayan and even other members of the audience. Although numerous examples have already been provided earlier in this work, it serves to recall a few to demonstrate, at the least, variety among those who responded. Throughout the text, there many examples of disciples responding to posed questions. For example, GP. 14, 67; L. 7, 10; GM. 17, 43, 58, 66; V. 3, 17; and GA. 2[307] record Muktānanda Svāmī responding to different questions posed by Swaminarayan. Brahmānanda Svāmī presents an answer to Swaminarayan's question in GM. 66.[308] He later attempts to answer Gopālānanda Svāmī's question in L. 13.[309] GP. 31 begins with Yogānanda Muni asking a question to Śrījīmahārāja. Instead of responding, Swaminarayan passes the question onto others. The "Vacanāmṛta" records:

> "Śrījīmahārāja did not answer the question immediately; instead, he called for Muktānanda Svāmī and Brahmānanda Svāmī. He had them listen to the question, and then requested, 'Please answer this question.'"[310]

Thereafter, Muktānanda Svāmī and Brahmānanda Svāmī collectively

307. (GP. 14, 67; L. 7, 10; GM. 17, 43, 58, 66; V. 3, 17; GA. 2) (Svāminārāyaṇa 18, 132, 269, 287, 395, 447, 468, 489, 500, 524, 545)
308. (GM. 66) (Svāminārāyaṇa 486)
309. (L. 13) (Svāminārāyaṇa 293)
310. "pachī Śrījīmahārāje eno uttara karyo nahi ane Muktānaṃda Svāmī tathā Brahmānaṃda Svāmīne teḍāvīne e praśna saṃbhalāvyo ne pachī kahyuṃ je, 'eno uttara tame karo.'" (GP. 31) (Svāminārāyaṇa 52)

respond to Yogānanda Muni's inquiry. Gopālānanda Svāmī answers Svaminarayan's question in GM. 25 and 66.[311] Later, he along with Muktānanda Svāmī respond to Swaminarayan's question in V. 3,[312] and both Gopālānanda Svāmī and Brahmānanda Svāmī together respond to Swaminarayan's inquiry in GA. 14.[313] GA. 12 records Caitanyānanda answering Swaminarayan's question and GA. 21,[314] thereafter, records Gopālānanda Svāmī answering a question posed by Śukamuni.[315] Nityānanda Svāmī is described as responding to Kākābhāī's question in GP. 70,[316] Jasakāvālā Jīvābhāī's question later in the same "Vacanāmṛta,"[317] and Swaminarayan's question in L.7.[318] Towards the end of the text, J. 1 recalls the devotee Puruṣottama Bhaṭṭa responding to Swaminarayan's inquiry.[319] The Vacanāmṛta records many such responses by those seated in the assembly. It is noteworthy that the examples provided here include responses offered by *paramahaṃsas* and non-ascetic devotees to both Swaminarayan and one another.

In addition to recording specific responses provided by members of the audience, the Vacanāmṛta also provides generalized descriptions of attempted resolutions. These are often presented in nondescript terms. For example, GP. 56 describes Swaminarayan presenting a question on why Kṛṣṇa in the *Bhagavadgītā* identifies the knowledgeable (*jñānin*) as superior to the other three types of disciples.[320] The "Vacanāmṛta" then describes, "The *munis* attempted to answer the question but were unable

311. (GM. 25, 66) (Svāmināārāyaṇa 414, 487–88)
312. (V. 3) (Svāmināārāyaṇa 500)
313. (GA. 14) (Svāmināārāyaṇa 575)
314. (GA. 12) (Svāmināārāyaṇa 565)
315. (GA. 21) (Svāmināārāyaṇa 584)
316. (GP. 70) (Svāmināārāyaṇa 137)
317. (GP. 70) (Svāmināārāyaṇa 139–40)
318. (L. 7) (Svāmināārāyaṇa 270)
319. (J. 1) (Svāmināārāyaṇa 653)
320. See (Gī. 7.16-17) for a description of the four types of disciples discussed by Kṛṣṇa.

to do so satisfactorily."[321] GP. 64 similarly describes, "All of the *munis* answered according to their understanding, but no one was able to offer a precise answer."[322] In a similar tone, GP. 69 records, "The *munis* attempted to reply according to their own understanding, but due to queries raised by Śrījīmahārāja, no one was able to offer a satisfactory answer."[323] Although details of the attempted resolutions and the objections to them are not provided, it is apparent that many attempts by several members of the audience were made.

Along with such nondescript accounts, the Vacanāmṛta also, in certain instances, reveals the identity of those unable to answer precisely or to Swaminarayan's satisfaction. This detailing brings forth noteworthy features of the text and attests to the integrity of those who participated in the question-answer dialogues that unfolded. GP. 65 serves as a good example because of the alternating questioning that it recalls. Within it Svayaṃprakāśānanda Svāmī and Paramānanda Svāmī pose several questions to one another. Svayaṃprakāśānanda Svāmī begins by asking: "How is *ākāśa* created and destroyed?"[324] The text then records, "Paramānanda Svāmī attempted to answer the question but was unable to do so satisfactorily."[325] Later in the same Vacanāmṛta, the roles are reversed: Paramānanda Svāmī poses a question to Svayaṃprakāśānanda Svāmī, who then is also unable to successfully respond.[326] Thereafter, Paramānanda Svāmī asks another question with the same result. The

321. "e praśnano uttara munie karavā māṃḍyo paṇa thayo nahi." (GP. 56) (Svāminārāyaṇa 102)
322. "pachī sarve munie jenī jevī buddhi teṇe tevo uttara karyo, paṇa yathārtha uttara koīthī thayo nahi." (GP. 64) (Svāminārāyaṇa 123–24)
323. "pachī eno uttara jema jene bhāsyo tema teṇe karavā māṃḍyo, paṇa Śrījīmahārāje āśaṃkā karī eṭale koīthī uttara thayo nahi." (GP. 69) (Svāminārāyaṇa 136)
324. "ākāśanī utpatti ane laya te kaye prakāre che?" (GP. 65) (Svāminārāyaṇa 126)
325. "Paramānaṃda Svāmī e praśnano uttara karavā lāgyā paṇa thayo nahi." (GP. 65) (Svāminārāyaṇa 126)
326. "e praśnano uttara Svayaṃprakāśānaṃda Svāmīe karavā māṃḍyo paṇa thayo nahi." (GP. 65) (Svāminārāyaṇa 127)

"Vacanāmṛta" continues by describing Svayaṃprakāśānanda Svāmī asking another question to Paramānanda Svāmī. Before Paramānanda Svāmī can respond, Svāmināràyaṇa intervenes by stating, "Even you probably do not know the answer to that question."[327] The sincere recording of these repeated attempts along with the names of those who failed to provide a satisfactory response reaffirm the candidness of the text.

The text's mentioning of names also attests to the accepting attitude and sincerity of those who attempted to respond. This honest admission is apparent in Yogānanda Svāmī's disclosure in K. 2. Within this "Vacanāmṛta" when Sivananda Svāmī asks him a question, Yogānanda Svāmī forthrightly admits, "I do not think I can answer that question."[328] He is not only candid about his abilities but also unreserved about it being documented.

The sincerity of the responders is further attested by their willingness to continue their attempts regardless of their past failures. Despite being unable to successfully answer a question, they do not become unresponsive or shy away from future attempts. Svayaṃprakāśānanda Svāmī serves as an excellent example. Even though he is described as being unable answer in GP. 65, he is not discouraged to attempt to answer other questions in later "Vacanāmṛtas." For instance, the text records his attempts to answer questions in S. 13; S. 14, where he attempts to answer four different questions; and S. 15, where he answers twice.[329] Despite being unable to fully answer the posed question, he persists to do so.

The legitimacy of the disciples and the text is further validated by the editors' (compilers') willingness to include their own failures in responding to questions. The editors include such descriptions without making any attempt to conceal; and they do so repeatedly throughout the text. For example, in L. 2 when Swaminarayan asks: "In this fellowship (*satsaṅga*), when does a devotee become… convinced of his own liberation

327. "eno uttara to tamane paṇa nahi āvaḍato hoya." (GP. 65) (Svāmināràyaṇa 128)
328. "eno uttara to mane āvaḍe ema jaṇātuṃ nathī." (K. 2) (Svāmināràyaṇa 224)
329. (S. 13, 14, 15) (Svāmināràyaṇa 200–01, 202–04, 206–07)

in this very life?;"[330] Muktānanda Svāmī is unable to successfully answer. Even though Muktānanda Svāmī is a senior *paramahaṃsa* and an editor of the text, the "Vacanāmṛta" records, "Muktānanda Svāmī replied as well as he could, but Śrījīmahārāja's question was not answered satisfactorily."[331] L. 16 and GM. 4 notes similar occurrences when they recall, "Thereafter, Muktānanda Svāmī began to answer the question but could not reply satisfactorily."[332] GA. 3 is unique in that it records Muktānanda Svāmī, Śukamuni, and Nityānanda Svāmī—all compilers and editors of the Vacanāmṛta—as unsuccessfully responding to the posed inquiry. It states, "Muktānanda Svāmī, Śukamuni, Nityānanda Svāmī and other *paramahaṃsas* answered according to the extent of their understanding, however, none could give a satisfactory reply to Śrījīmahārāja's question."[333] Similarly, GA. 13 records: "Gopālānanda Svāmī, Caitanyānanda Svāmī, Nityānanda Svāmī, Muktānanda Svāmī, Brahmānanda Svāmī, Śukamuni, and other senior ascetics answered according to whatever they felt was correct but were unable to answer the question satisfactorily."[334] The detailed recording of these instances substantiate the authenticity of the Vacanāmṛta in addition to the honesty and legitimacy of both those who attempted to answer and the editors and compilers of the text.

The Vacanāmṛta's recollection of members of the assembly

330. "ā satsaṃgamāṃ haribhaktane kyāre... deha chate ja potānuṃ kalyāṇa manāī jāya?" (L. 2) (Svāminārāyaṇa 252)
331. "pachī Muktānaṃda Svāmīe jevo āvaḍyo tevo uttara karyo paṇa Śrījīmahārājanā praśnanuṃ samādhāna thayuṃ nahi..." (L. 2) (Svāminārāyaṇa 252)
332. "pachī Muktānaṃda Svāmīe e praśnano uttara karavā māṃḍyo paṇa thayo nahi." (L. 16) (Svāminārāyaṇa 305); "pachī Muktānaṃda Svāmīe e praśnano uttara karavā māṃḍyo paṇa thayo nahi." (GM. 4) (Svāminārāyaṇa 357)
333. "pachī Muktānaṃda Svāmī tathā Śukamuni tathā Nityānaṃda Svāmī e ādika paramahaṃse jenī jevī dṛṣṭi pūgī tevo teṇe uttara karyo paṇa Śrījīmahārājanā praśnanuṃ yathārtha samādhāna thayuṃ nahi." (GA. 3) (Svāminārāyaṇa 548)
334. "Gopālānaṃda Svāmī, Caitanyānaṃda Svāmī, Nityānaṃda Svāmī, Muktānaṃda Svāmī, Brahmānaṃda Svāmī, Śukamuni ityādika moṭā moṭā sādhu hatā temaṇe jevuṃ jene jaṇāyuṃ tevo uttara karyo, paṇa e praśnanuṃ samādhāna na thayuṃ." (GA. 13) (Svāminārāyaṇa 568)

participating by responding to questions is a unique feature of the question-answer dialogue that occurs. Despite the liberties and the associated risk of divergence and fallacy that typically accompany such involvement, Swaminarayan's position as the guru serves to anchor discussion. Swaminarayan's mediating role, expressed as the resolving voice, ensures that even though resolutions are openly expressed and considered, the appropriate, final position is ultimately reached, and the intended revelation is expressed. This form of assembly and guided participation works in two ways: (1) it promotes and facilitates productive reflection and analysis (2) while maintaining the eminence of revelation and the features of the guru-*śiṣya* (teacher-student) relationship expressed within the sacred works mentioned earlier.

Conclusion

The Upaniṣads and other sacred works of Hinduism convey considerable amount of revelation using the question-answer framework. The use of such dialogue is a familiar tool within Indian pedagogy. Its implementation within these works introduces several noteworthy features of the relationship between a *śiṣya*—the eagerly questioning student—and the guru—the bestower of revelation and wisdom.

The allowance for students to pose meaningful, well-intentioned questions urges the reconsideration of the presumption that pupilage mandates unquestioned submission. The abundance of question-asking in the Upaniṣads and other sacred works such as the *Bhagavadgītā* suggest the opposite: questioning plays an integral role in learning. Nevertheless, works such as the *Gītā* qualify the admittance of questioning with sentiments featured in *praṇipāta* and *sevā*, ensuring that inquiry is motivated by pure intentions, sincerity, and personal transformation.

Question-answer sessions within sacred texts also attest to diverse participation. As demonstrated in the beginning of this work, disciples from both genders and various age groups, social orders, and modes of life actively engage in question-answer dialogue. Such diversity also

suggests an inclusive understanding of *adhikāra*—entitlement for receiving revelation and gnosis.

The Vacanāmṛta shares many of the same principles and methods of instruction as the Upaniṣads and other sacred texts of Hinduism. Among its teaching methods, the question-answer dialogue is an important means for conveying revelation. The text also presents features regarding the relationship between the guru and the *śiṣya* (pupil) that are like those found within other sacred texts. For instance, within its discourses, informed questioning is not only permitted but also encouraged. The text also records immense diversity among the participants of its dialogues, deep reverence for Swaminarayan—the teacher—among the student-disciples, and genuine intentions among the receivers of revelation.

Despite these similarities—despite remaining committed to many of the features of the Upaniṣadic pedagogy—the Vacanāmṛta also introduces distinctive elements of learning through questioning. As seen in the analysis of sacred texts at the beginning of this work, the guru typically plays the role of the answerer, whereas the student plays the role of the dutiful inquisitor. However, the relationship between the guru and the disciple described within the Vacanāmṛta does not easily fit into this mold; the relationship between the guru and the disciple in the Vacanāmṛta is much more complex for several reasons.

First, the identity of the teacher within the Vacanāmṛta is understood to be Parabrahman Puruṣottama Bhagavān. Swaminarayan's unique position as Parabrahman introduces new elements to the discussions and revelations presented in the text. Revelation of the Vacanāmṛta is understood as *parāvāṇi*, and as a result, maintains authority on equal footing with that of the *śrutis*. This authority is further substantiated by the predominant relevance of the revelation offered. Swaminarayan's revelation is understood to be most appropriate in terms of what is revealed to whom, when, and by what means. The voice of the teacher holds a tone of not only resolution and finality, but also one of relevance and appropriateness.

Second, unlike the typical paradigm of the other sacred works discussed in the introduction of this work, the guru in the Vacanāmṛta—Swaminarayan—is not synonymous with the one who only responds to questions. Instead, Swaminarayan, as the teacher or guru, engages in both answering (expressing revelation) and questioning. He plays the role of both the inquirer and the responder. Shared among these dual roles is Swaminarayan's role as an instructor. He instructs by both responding to questions and presenting revelation and asking questions in return.

The Vacanāmṛta also introduces an additional aspect to the relationship between the guru and the disciple by describing Swaminarayan's specific instructions on formulating questions. Throughout the Vacanāmṛta, not only are disciples encouraged to ask questions, but they are also informed on how to formulate and present them more meaningfully. Through various means, Swaminarayan offers both subtle and explicit lessons on the art of asking informed questions.

Additionally, within the Vacanāmṛta disciples are encouraged to express counter-questions or doubts when receiving revelation. Such open conversations allow for misunderstandings or discrepancies to be clarified and appropriately addressed. Although such interruptions lead discussions in unexpected ways, such diversions are welcomed, since revelation, after all, is intended to be personal. Such discussions also attest to the open, unrestricted, and honest relationship between Swaminarayan and his disciples.

Finally, in addition to posing meaningful and well-informed questions, the disciples in the Vacanāmṛta are also encouraged by Swaminarayan to take on the role of the responder. As we have seen, Swaminarayan does not simply answer all questions that are presented but instead insists that his disciples first attempt at an answer. These attempts serve as learning experiences, which instigate the receivers of revelation to think creatively, reflect rationally, and express their attempted resolutions persuasively. As a result, like the guru, the disciple also plays dual roles: as both an informed questioner and a thoughtful responder.

By introducing these features to the question-answer dialogue, the discussions between Swaminarayan and his audiences recorded in the Vacanāmṛta contribute to the diverse pedagogy of Hindu sacred works. Because of Swaminarayan's distinct implementation of the question-answer dialogue, in addition to the Vacanāmṛta's eminent authority within the tradition, it would not be an overstatement to identify the text as a unique Praśnopaniṣad.

Swaminarayan's discourses in the Vacanāmṛta are noteworthy, however, not only for their unique dialogical methods, but also for the content elaborated within them. Although, this work has intentionally avoided dwelling on the *darśanic* principles and discussions revealed in these discourses, it is evident from many of the questions reproduced in this work that a study of Swaminarayan's doctrine—the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta—would be an immensely rewarding endeavor. Swaminarayan's insightful and unique revelations on the nature of spiritual endeavor (*sādhana*), liberation, the self (*ātman*), Brahman, Parabrahman, and the relationships between them, provide immense insights into his unique *darśanic* position. The recent introduction of Mahāmahopādhyāya Sadhu Bhadreshdas Swami's *Prasthānatrayī-Svāmināràyaṇabhāṣya*—a comprehensive Sanskrit commentary on the Upaniṣads, *Bhagavadgītā*, and *Brahmasūtras* according to Swaminarayan's revelations in the Vacanāmṛta—and the *Svāmināràyaṇasiddhāntasudhā*—a *vādagrantha* of the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana—introduces a sense of urgency for studying not only Swaminarayan's Vacanāmṛta, but also these texts' presentation of Swaminarayan's unique contributions to Vedānta thought.

ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviations of the Titles of Sacred Texts

Bṛ.	Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad
Chā.	Chāndogyopaniṣad
Gī.	Śrīmadbhagavadgītā
Kaṭha.	Kaṭhopaniṣad
Kena.	Kenopaniṣad
Mu.	Muṇḍakopaniṣad
Pra.	Praśnopaniṣad
Tai.	Taittirīyopaniṣad

Abbreviations of Vacanāmṛta Section Titles

A.	"Vacanāmṛta Amadāvāda"
As.	"Vacanāmṛta Aślālī"
GA.	"Vacanāmṛta Gaḍhaḍā Antya"
GM.	"Vacanāmṛta Gaḍhaḍā Madhya"
GP.	"Vacanāmṛta Gaḍhaḍā Prathama"
J.	"Vacanāmṛta Jetalapura"
K.	"Vacanāmṛta Kāriyāṇī"
L.	"Vacanāmṛta Loyā"
P.	"Vacanāmṛta Pañcālā"
S.	"Vacanāmṛta Sāraṅgapura"
V.	"Vacanāmṛta Varatāla"

WORKS CITED

Basu, Major B. D. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad with the Commentary of Śrī Madhvācārya*. 2nd ed., vol. 14, Dr. L. M. Basu, 1933.

Caudharī, Guñjeśvara, editor. *Viduranīti*. Caukhambā Sūrabhāratī Prakāśana, 2012.

Dave, Harshadrai T. *Bhagavāna Śrīsvāmināràyaṇa*. 4th ed., vol. 1, Swaminarayan Aksharpith, 2004.

Grierson, SIr George A. "On the Adbhuta-Ramayana." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1, 1926, pp. 11–27.

Hegarty, James. *Religion, Narrative and Public Imagination in South Asia*. Edited by Gavin Flood, 1st ed., Routledge, 2012.

Iyer, K. Balasubramania. *Yaksha Prasna*. 2nd ed., Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1989.

Maharṣi, Vyāsa. *Adhyātmarāmāyaṇa*. Translated by Munilāla, 12th ed., Gita Press, 2017.

Mudholakar, Shastri Shrinivasa Katti, and Satkari Mukhopadhyaya, editors. *Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki*. Parimal Publications, 1983.

Patañjali, Maharṣi. *Pāṇinīyavyākaraṇamahābhāṣyam*. Edited by Bhargava Sastri Bhikaji Josi, Reprint, vol. 1, Caukhambā Saṃskṛta Pratiṣṭhāna, 1987.

Raṅgarāmānuja. *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣat*. Edited by Hari Nārāyaṇa Āpaṭe, 1st ed., Ānandāśramamudrālayaḥ, 1911.

Sādhu, Bhadreśadāsa. *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣatsvāmināràyaṇabhāṣyam*. 1st ed., Swaminarayan Aksharpith, 2012.

---. *Īśādyaṣṭopaniṣatsvāmināràyaṇabhāṣyam*. Swaminarayan Aksharpith, 2009.

Sadhu Bhadreśadāsa. *Svāmināràyaṇasiddhāntasudhā*. Swaminarayan Aksharpith, 2017.

Śaṅkara, Ācārya. *The Upanishad-Bhashya: Brihadaranyaka Chapters III & IV*. Sri Vani Vilas Press, 1910.

Śaṅkarācārya. *The Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad with the Commentary of Śaṅkarācārya*. Translated by Svāmī Madhvānanda, 3rd ed., Advaita Ashrama, 1950.

Sargeant, Winthrop, and Christopher Key Chapple, translators. *The Bhagavad Gītā*. Twenty-Fifth-Anniversary Edition, State University of New York Press, 2009.

Śarmā, Śivaprasāda, editor. *Vaiyākaraṇasiddhāntakaumudī Bālamanoramātattvabodhinīvibhūṣitā*. Caukhambā Vidyābhavana, 2008.

Śāstrī, Paṇḍita Jagadīśa. *Upaniṣatsaṃgrahaḥ*. 5th ed., Motilal Banarasidass, 2006.

Sukthankar, Vishnu S. *The Mahābhārata*. 1st ed., vol. 1, Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1933.

---. *The Mahābhārata*. 1st ed., vol. 13–16, Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1933.

Svāminārāyaṇa, Bhagavāna. *Vachanamrut*. Edited by Gopalanand Swami et al., 26th ed., Swaminarayan Aksharpith, 2009.

Swāminārāyan, Bhagawān. *The Vachanāmrut*. Edited by Gopālānand Swāmi et al., 3rd, revised ed., Swāminārāyan Aksharpith, 2006.

Tulasīdāsajī, Śrīmadgosvāmī. *Śrīrāmacaritamānasa*. Translated by Hanumānaprasāda Poddāra, Reprint, Gītāpress, 2069.

Vālmīki, Maharṣi. *The Yogavāsiṣṭha of Vālmīki*. Edited by Wāsudeva Laxmaṇa Shāstrī Paṇsikar, 1st ed., vol. 1, Nirṇya-Sāgar Press, 1911.

Vāmana, and Jayāditya. *Kāśikā*. Edited by Jaya Shankar Lal Tripathi and Sudhakar Malaviya, 1st ed., vol. 1, Tara Printing Works, 1986.

Vedavyāsa, Maharṣi. *Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇam*. Edited by Dr. P. Radhakrishna Sarma, 1st ed., vol. 1, Sri Ch. Venkatapathy Raju, 1989.

---. *The Nārada-Purāṇa*. Reprint, vol. 1, Motlal Banarsidass Publishers, 1995.

Vyāsa, Veda. *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā*. Gītāpress, Saṃvat 2066.

Vyāsamuni, Śrīmaddvaipāyana. *Agnipurāṇam*. Edited by Hari Nārāyaṇa Āpaṭe, 1st ed., Ānandāśramamudrālayaḥ, 1900.

---. *The Harivamsa*. Edited by Parashuram Lakshman Vaidya, 1st ed., vol. 1, Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1969.