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Does Character Count: Moral Self-fashioning in the Swadhyaya and Chinmaya Mission Movements

Abstract

Swadhyaya and the Chinmaya Mission are two rapidly growing modern Indian religious movements that have developed a contemporary discourse on the moral self--a theory and practice centered on the cultivation of an ideal human being--deeply grounded in the religious traditions of India. This discourse stands in stark contrast to conceptions of modern secular self-identity that lie at the heart of theories of modernization. Yet, it is nevertheless the case that religion is indeed only one among many competing sources of morality and authority in modernity, as modernization theorists predicted. This project asks the critical question of what makes a religious discourse on self-fashioning so remarkably appealing to the millions of Swadhyaya and Chinmaya Mission participants in modern Indian society. Based on one year of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Mumbai, India from February 2012--May 2013, this dissertation draws attention to the everyday lived practice and lived experiences of religion and ethics among followers. I demonstrate that the particular teachings of the two movements, rooted in the Hindu scriptures, provide new ways of understanding and perceiving the self, the other, and human existence that act both as a source for ethical being as well as a guide for practical living. I show that the appeal of the two movements lies in the specific ways in which their particular discourse and praxis facilitate the transformation of the self and argue that the appeal of theistic sources in modernity cannot simply be understood in terms of a religious impulse inherent to humanity or as a matter of belief or non-belief. In contrast to abstract theoretical accounts of a modern secular self-identity, this dissertation demonstrates how the modern self understood, fashioned and experienced in relation to the teachings and practices of Swadhyaya and the Chinmaya Mission challenges some of the key markers associated with modern self-identity, including self-sufficient humanism and individualism.

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DOES CHARACTER COUNT: MORAL SELF-FASHIONING IN THE
SWADHYAYA AND CHINMAYA MISSION MOVEMENTS

Purvi K. Parikh

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ABSTRACT

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Purvi K. Parikh

Justin McDaniel

Swadhyaya and the Chinmaya Mission are two rapidly growing modern Indian religious movements that have developed a contemporary discourse on the moral self—a theory and practice centered on the cultivation of an ideal human being—deeply grounded in the religious traditions of India. This discourse stands in stark contrast to conceptions of modern secular self-identity that lie at the heart of theories of modernization. Yet, it is nevertheless the case that religion is indeed only one among many competing sources of morality and authority in modernity, as modernization theorists predicted. This project asks the critical question of what makes a religious discourse on self-fashioning so remarkably appealing to the millions of Swadhyaya and Chinmaya Mission participants in modern Indian society. Based on one year of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Mumbai, India from February 2012—May 2013, this dissertation draws attention to the everyday lived practice and lived experiences of religion and ethics among followers. I demonstrate that the particular teachings of the two movements, rooted in the Hindu scriptures, provide new ways of understanding and perceiving the self, the other, and human existence that act both as a source for ethical being as well as a guide for practical living. I show that the appeal of the two movements lies in the specific ways in which their particular discourse and praxis facilitate the transformation of the self and argue that

the appeal of theistic sources in modernity cannot simply be understood in terms of a religious impulse inherent to humanity or as a matter of belief or non-belief. In contrast to abstract theoretical accounts of a modern secular self-identity, this dissertation demonstrates how the modern self understood, fashioned and experienced in relation to the teachings and practices of Swadhyaya and the Chinmaya Mission challenges some of the key markers associated with modern self-identity, including self-sufficient humanism and individualism.

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Introduction: The Modern Self in Indian Religions

Contrary to the predictions of scholars of both religion and modernity of a secular and disenchanted modern self, religion continues to inform and constitute a significant aspect of the everyday lives of more than half of the world's population today. Yet, it is nevertheless the case that religion indeed exists as one among many competing sources of morality and authority in modernity, as modernization theorists predicted. Drawing on one year of ethnographic fieldwork in Mumbai, India conducted between February 2012 - May 2013, this dissertation examines the reasons that individuals are drawn to two rapidly growing contemporary Indian religious movements—Swadhyaya and the Chinmaya Mission—and what makes a religious discourse on self-fashioning so remarkably appealing to its millions of followers in modern Indian society. Based on a close ethnographic study of the everyday lived practice and lived experiences of religion among practitioners, I show that the particular teachings of the two movements, rooted in the Hindu traditions, provide new ways of understanding and perceiving the self, the other, and human existence that act both as a source for ethical being as well as a guide for practical living, and argue that the appeal of theistic sources in contemporary society cannot simply be understood in terms of a religious impulse inherent to humanity or as a matter of belief or non-belief. Instead, it should be understood in terms of the concrete ways in which it enables particular modes of existing and especially co-existing in the context of the intricacies, realities, and contingencies of everyday modern life in which religion is practiced. In contrast to abstract theoretical accounts of a modern secular self-identity, I demonstrate that the modern self understood, fashioned, and experienced in

relation to the teachings and praxis of Swadhyaya and the Chinmaya Mission challenges some of the key markers associated with modern selfhood including self-sufficient humanism and individualism.

Religion, Secularization and Modern Self-Identity

The global resurgence of religious movements in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries led to a reformulation or outright rejection of earlier theories of secularization that posited the separation of religion from the public spheres of society and the decline of religion as central features of modernity.¹ Some scholars sought to redefine the role of religion in modernity in order to salvage earlier versions of the secularization thesis. Jose Casanova, for example, argues that the deprivatization of religion, evident in the conspicuous manifestations of politicized religion around the world, for example, in the Islamic revolution of Iran and the public re-emergence of Protestant fundamentalism in American politics, does not undermine the secularization thesis.² He shows that the demand for the privatization of religion is based on the modern liberal presupposition that religion must remain private and separate from politics and the public sphere in order to ensure the individual freedom of conscience definitive of modern liberalism. Against this, he argues that there are forms of public religion that are compatible with the functionally differentiated spheres constituting modern society and that do not violate

¹ For earlier theories of secularization, see Peter Berger, "The Process of Secularization," in *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Random House Inc., 1967), 105-125; Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London: Routledge, 2007); Charles Taylor, "Modes of Secularism," in *Secularism and its Critics*, ed. Rajeev Bhargava (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 31-53.

² Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

individual freedom. Casanova conceptualizes the public role of religion in modernity in terms of its participation in the public sphere of civil society by taking public stands and offering critiques of liberal secularism. In this view, the public role of modern religion consists in its critique of modern normative structures, of modern liberal values, and of the autonomy of the secular spheres of modern society each equipped with its own set of norms and principles, irrespective of its effect on society.³

Rather than defend or reject the secularization thesis, Charles Taylor has more recently argued for an alternative conception of “the secular” in his massive work, *The Secular Age*, in contrast to his earlier prescriptive account.⁴ Taylor defines secularity as a particular context of understanding in which belief in God is no longer axiomatic and unchallenged, but rather, one possibility among others.⁵ Taylor argues that the modern secular age in which both belief and unbelief are available options was made possible through major transformations in our self-understanding and in the rise of the modern self. First, Taylor argues that in contrast to an earlier “porous self” vulnerable to spirits, external forces, and causal powers, which it sees as existing in reality, the modern “buffered” self is one for whom there is a set boundary between what is within the mind

³ Against Casanova, Talal Asad has persuasively argued that the deprivatization of religion cannot simply be understood in terms of promoting public debate. He shows that the public sphere is not a neutral space but rather constituted by a certain discourse and set of core values and assumptions that may constrain or limit the influence of religion in the public sphere. Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 181-201.

⁴ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

⁵ Various scholars have argued that religion exists as one among many competing sources of authority in modernity. See, for example, Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 179; Peter Berger, “The Process of Secularization,” *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of A Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Random House Inc., 1967), 138.

and without and can take a stance of disengagement from everything that is external. The distinction between the internal and external gives rise to the capacity of self-control and self-discipline. Second, in contrast to early, pre-modern societies where individuals were deeply embedded within society, for example, in early forms of religion and religious life where they were unable to conceive of themselves and their identity outside of a particular social context, the modern social order is one in which individuals constitute and define the social orders in which they exist. That is, the modern social order is one in which society exists for the individual and not vice versa. Taylor argues that the rise of the modern social order gives undoubted primacy to the individual and is one in which the modern self is seen as a self-sufficient human agent where self-sufficiency is understood in terms of the rational capacity through which the individual can create his own order. Taylor argues that the transformation in our practical self-understanding from a porous and socially embedded self to a buffered, autonomous, and self-sufficient human agent has helped naturalize an understanding of the world as immanent and disenchanting in contrast to transcendent and enchanted. He thus argues that it is in the nature of this self-sufficient immanent order that the world can be conceived of without any reference to God and one in which exclusive humanism and unbelief become a widely available option.

Taylor's reconfiguration of "the secular" builds on his earlier account on modern self-identity, where he argues that the development of the modern secular self must be understood in relation to the replacement of theistic moral sources by secular sources in

modernity.⁶ He says that this removal became necessary “when and to the extent that it seemed to people that these moral sources could only be properly acknowledged, could only thus empower us, in their non-theistic form. The dignity of free, rational control came to seem genuine only free of submission to God; the goodness of nature, and/or unreserved immersion in it, seemed to require its independence, and a negation of any divine vocation.”⁷ According to Taylor, the shift from an “age of belief,” which he defines as one in which all credible moral sources involved God, to the modern age of unbelief or the modern secular age, emerged as a result of the availability of moral sources that no longer required God. In contrast to secularization theories that project the inevitable decline of religion as a result of historical developments such as industrialization, technological advancements, the rise of science, and urbanization essential to modernity, he argues that secularization must be understood as a product of the availability of non-theistic moral sources.

Other scholars rejected the validity of the secularization thesis. Peter Berger, for example, has argued that the worldwide resurgence of religious movements proves that the secularization thesis is false and shows that the modern world is in fact “massively religious.”⁸ Berger suggests that the worldwide resurgence of religion can be explained in two ways. First, religious movements have a great appeal in contemporary society

⁶ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

⁷ Taylor, *Sources*, 315.

⁸ Peter Berger, ed., "The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview," in *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 9. This position stands in contrast, as acknowledged by Berger himself, to his earlier work where he argued that secularization is necessary for the modernization of society.

insofar as they promise to provide a sense of certainty that modernity undermines.⁹ Second, the global resurgence of religion is to be understood as a form of resistance against an elite culture that adheres to a secular view of reality. Ultimately, the phenomenon of religious resurgence, according to Berger, demonstrates the continuing place of religion in human experience. Berger argues that all the resurgent movements despite differing in their critique of the secular order share a common perspective towards secularity, namely, that “human existence bereft of transcendence is an impoverished and finally untenable condition.”¹⁰ He argues that this is due to a “religious impulse...the quest for meaning that transcends the restricted space of empirical existence in this world,” which he describes as an inherent feature of humanity.¹¹ In addition, Berger argues that the religious movements that have flourished and succeeded most in modern society around the world are conservative or traditionalist movements and those that have tried to adapt to modernity and secularity have failed.

Other scholars, and more accurately, proponents of the idea of “multiple modernities,” have argued that contrary to conventional secularization theories, it is inaccurate to understand the history of religion in modernity in terms of a singular narrative of decline and marginalization. Robert Hefner, for example, argues that modernity has witnessed multiple and varying forms of religious change and that

⁹ For a similar argument on religion, see Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford: Stanford University, Press, 1991), 207.

¹⁰ Berger, *The Desecularization*, 13.

¹¹ Ibid. For similar arguments for an autonomous religious essence, see, for example, Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in *The Interpretation of Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 87-125; Wilfred Cantwell Smith, "'Religion' in the West" in *Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 15-50.

religions undergo pluralization rather than decline in modernity.¹² He shows that the processes of urbanization, mass migration, technological advancements and globalization central to modern society have produced a highly pluralized and porous society, one in which religions are consequently faced with the problem of maintaining a sense of coherence and legitimacy in the pluralized context of the modern world. Based on an examination of contemporary changes within Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism, Hefner argues that the most successful religious reconfigurations in the modern pluralistic world are those that “have chosen not to reimpose an organic union of religion and state on the unsettled modern landscape,” as in the case of Hindu nationalism or the Islamic state, and “have instead moved down-market to develop organizations closer in ethos and organization to mass society’s working and middle classes.”¹³

In contrast to the scholarship above that has sought to address the problem of religion and modernity through either a rejection or reformulation of secularization, Talal Asad has shown that the very attempt to define secularism fails to elucidate the different ways in which the concept of “the secular” and the doctrine of secularism mediate the way we live in the modern world.¹⁴ In contrast to earlier scholars who argued that secularism is indispensable to modernity, Asad shows how the formation of the secular

¹² Robert Hefner, "Multiple Modernities: Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism in a Globalizing Age," *Annual Review of Anthropology*, no. 27 (1998): 83-104. Also see S.N. Eisenstadt, "Multiple Modernities," *Daedalus* 129, no. 1(2000): 1-29.

¹³ Hefner, *Multiple Modernities*, 89.

¹⁴ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 1-36. In a similar way, Asad argues that any attempt to define religion in terms of a transhistorical essence does not allow one to understand the ways in which power shapes religion. See Talal Asad, "The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category," in *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 1993), 27-54.

enables a particular arrangement of power in modern society, namely, one that authorizes the modern nation-state, instead of religious institutions, to define and delimit all aspects of modern society including the place of religion. Asad demonstrates, for example, how the doctrine of secularism enables the modern nation-state to make citizenship the basis for identity and thereby mediate, through transcendence, different identities built on class, gender, and religion. Through it, the loyalty of the individual comes to be defined exclusively towards the nation.¹⁵

Furthermore, Asad has demonstrated the ways in which the modern secular nation-state has come to define what counts as “truly human” and thereby prescribe and curtail different practices. He argues that the project of “human rights”—central to the modern secular nation-state—entails the reconstitution of the human in a particular way, showing that the “inalienable” rights that have come to constitute the essence of a human being are based on a secular conception of nature, namely, one that is independent of any concept of God. These rights, moreover, are perceived as constituting an individual’s sovereignty to be recognized and protected by the sovereign state. The doctrine of secularism separating the individual right to belief from the authority of the state is conceived as the means by which the sovereign state could recognize and protect the individual’s sovereignty. The secular nation-state thus becomes central to securing human rights through the creation and enforcement of human rights laws and as such becomes the definer of “human rights” and what is or is not “human.” He argues that in modern secular society, the question of what counts as human “is regarded as a political

¹⁵ Asad, *Formations*, 193.

and moral question and not a scientific or theological one.”¹⁶ The state’s project of defining moral life through law is justified, moreover, by the argument that while secular law enables individuals to constitute themselves as modern subjects, religion confines the process of self-construction. Thus, the concept of “the secular” allows the state to define and shape an individual’s life and to deem any attempt by religion to do so as intolerable. According to Asad, the processes by which people are transformed into a certain kind of being are made possible through the exercise of political power “that often presents itself as a force redeeming and recovering ‘humanity’ from ‘traditional cultures.’”¹⁷

The notion that religion or tradition confines the process of self-making central to modernity is conspicuous in Anthony Giddens' account of modern self-identity.¹⁸ According to Giddens, the self in modernity creates its identity through a process of “reflexivity,” in which it continuously makes and remakes him or herself in light of newly available forms of knowledge. Central to his notion of reflexivity is the rejection of tradition, which he conceives as a static and unchanging entity.¹⁹ He argues that the self in modernity is not a passive entity shaped and bound by external forces. In contrast to the self of pre-modern cultures, the modern self is freed from traditional forms of authority such as religion and kinship systems that were “the source of ‘binding

¹⁶ Ibid., 157.

¹⁷ Asad, *Formations*, 154.

¹⁸ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).

¹⁹ For two excellent arguments against the notion of tradition as a static entity, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 221-222; and John Wallis, *The Brahma Kumaris as a Reflexive Tradition: Responding to Late Modernity* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2002).

doctrines' as well as of forms of behavior endowed with normative compulsion."²⁰ As such, Giddens argues that insofar as modernity is marked by the availability of a plurality and multiplicity of authoritative sources on the basis of which to create and recreate the modern self, an individual who identifies with a dominant authority such as religion gives up the kind of reflexivity and doubt central to modernity.

The literature highlighted above illuminates some of the central ways in which the relationship between religion and modernity has been analyzed from within the social sciences through the framework of the secularization thesis and in relation to theories about modern self-identity. It shows both that the modern world is not nearly as disenchanted as earlier scholars predicted and that religion exists as one among a multiplicity of sources of authority and morality in modernity. The modern self, moreover, is characterized as free, autonomous, and the primary locus of agency and authority, in contrast with a pre-modern self, bound by "traditional" forms of authority—paradigmatically, religion and God. In addition, the resurgence of religious movements in modernity is theorized in terms of an inherent human need for transcendence, and the success of these movements is understood either in their rejection or acceptance of modernity. The arguments of scholars like Taylor, Berger, and Hefner presuppose a particular understanding of religion as a matter of belief or faith, a notion that is a product of specific discursive processes that took place within Christendom as demonstrated by recent scholarship²¹ and is problematic as it precludes an understanding of the specific

²⁰ Giddens, *Modernity*, 195.

²¹ See for example, Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Post-colonial Theory, India, and "The Mystic East"* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Jonathan Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions,

practices through which religious subjects are formed and the appeal of a particular religious discourse, as I illustrate in this dissertation.²²

Religion, indeed, has not declined in modern society and undoubtedly exists as only one among many sources of authority and expertise from which individuals may choose in shaping themselves. Yet, this scholarship fails to account for why individuals find theistic sources to be a compelling foundation for self-fashioning. It fails to account for the specific ways in which theistic textual sources continue to shape and influence, in crucial ways, the modern self and why. By asking and ethnographically examining the central question of what makes a religious discourse compelling to the self-fashioning practices of Swadhyaya and Chinmaya Mission participants, my project grounds the study of religion in modernity in the particular ways that the modern self is understood, experienced, and refashioned within two contemporary Indian religious movements in contrast to more abstract theoretical accounts offered by modernization theorists.

Chinmaya Mission, Swadhyaya and Modern Hinduism

The Chinmaya Mission and Swadhyaya are two understudied but rapidly growing contemporary Indian religious movements focused on the project of self-development.²³

Religious,” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 269-284; Talal Asad, “The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category,” *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1993), 27-54; Wilfred Smith, “‘Religion’ in the West,” *Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 15-50.

²² See Talal Asad, “Reading a Modern Classic: W. C. Smith’s ‘The Meaning and End of Religion,’” *History of Religions* 40, no. 3 (2001): 205-222. Saba Mahmood makes a similar argument in her study of a modern urban women’s mosque movement in Egypt, demonstrating the centrality of bodily practice to the cultivation of faith and the formation of the Muslim self. Saba Mahmood, “Feminist Theory, Embodiment and the Docile Agent,” *Cultural Anthropology*, 16 (2001): 201-236.

The Chinmaya Mission and Swadhyaya have developed a contemporary discourse on the moral self—a theory and practice centered on the cultivation of an ideal human being—deeply grounded in the religious and spiritual traditions of India, and specifically Hinduism. Both movements are rooted in Hindu spirituality and share the idea that there is a power animating the world and the people in it and the ultimate goal of life is *mokṣa*—freedom from the cycle of birth and death. The process of achieving liberation involves a continual evaluation and cultivation of the self and begins with acquiring “correct” knowledge that is perceived as located within the Hindu scriptures. Accordingly, discourses on scripture including the *Vedas*, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, and the *Upaniṣads* constitute the foundation of both movements.

The Chinmaya Mission was started by the followers of Swāmi Chinmayānanda in 1953 and now has 300 centers in India and around the world.²⁴ The Chinmaya Mission follows the *guru-śiṣya paramparā*, an ancient Indian pedagogical tradition in which teachings are transmitted from a *guru* (teacher) to a *śiṣya* (student). In particular, the Chinmaya Mission belongs to the *Daśanāmi Sannyāsa* tradition, a monastic order established by the eighth century Advaitin saint, Ādi Śaṅkarāchārya, and in particular, to the lineage of the *Śrīṅgeri Maṭha* in Karnataka, India. It is rooted in and defines its purpose in terms of teaching *Advaita Vedānta* primarily through the teachings of Ādi

²³ Although the Chinmaya Mission does not use the phrase “self-development,” I find it to be a useful way of describing their practices. The words “evolvment” and “evolve” were frequently used during lectures to describe a similar phenomenon. For example, one of the public lectures (*jñāna yajña*) titled “*Asato Mā Sat Gamaya: Towards Truth, Excellence, Happiness*,” that took place on March 3, 2013, ended with the phrase, “Let us evolve.”

²⁴ The description of the Chinmaya Mission below is based on the various lectures that I attended as well as information collected from the movement’s literature and official website: “Central Chinmaya Mission Trust,” accessed February 8, 2014, <http://www.chinmayamission.com>.

Śaṅkarāchārya, the *Upaniṣads* and the *Bhagavad Gītā*.²⁵ This is evident in its mission statement: “To provide to individuals from any background, the wisdom of Vedānta and the practical means for spiritual growth and happiness, enabling them to become positive contributors to society.”²⁶ The knowledge of Advaita Vedānta is seen as integral to the development and inner transformation of the self. In particular, the Chinmaya Mission describes the contemporary predicament of human life as one of not knowing one’s true identity and nature. It teaches that while most individuals identify themselves with their bodies, this is a false identification. The self is not the body but rather the *atman* or soul that is identical with the universal self, *brahman*, and whose nature is absolute bliss (*sat*), knowledge (*cita*), and truth (*ānand*). As such, the Chinmaya Mission teaches that individuals search externally for happiness due to a lack of awareness of their true nature and identifies the goal of life as evolving to a state where one realizes its own nature as that of absolute happiness. It refers to this process of discovering one’s true identity as “self-unfoldment,” and the ethical cultivation of the self is perceived as an important means for achieving it.

The Swadhyaya movement was initiated in 1956 in Mumbai, India by Pandurang Śāstri Athavale and now has a presence in various countries across the world including Asia, North America, Africa, Europe, the Middle East, Australia, and the Caribbean.²⁷ It

²⁵ *Advaita Vedānta* refers to the non-dualist tradition within the Vedanta school of Hindu philosophy, according to which *Brahman* (consciousness) is the only reality.

²⁶ “Mission,” accessed February 6, 2014,

<http://www.chinmayamission.com/chinmayamission.php>.

²⁷ Although Athavale began giving lectures in 1942, the movement did not take shape until 1956 following a World Philosopher’s Conference in Japan in 1954. According to the movement’s literature, Athavale was offered an opportunity by the 1927 Nobel Prize winning physicist, Dr. Arthur Holly Compton, to come to America and teach the philosophy of the *Bhagavad Gītā* after

commands a following of several millions of people with most of its participants coming from a Gujarati or Maharashtrian background.²⁸ Unlike the Chinmaya Mission, Swadhyaya does not associate itself with any particular tradition or lineage and while it emphasizes the importance of knowledge, it is primarily a devotion (*bhakti*) based movement. Swadhyaya's discourse is centered on the idea that a divine force, an "indwelling god," resides in all human beings. The recognition of an inherent divinity is perceived as providing a strong foundation on which to build personal dignity and as a universal link—the common divine essence—between the self and others. The notion of an indwelling god is not new in the history of Hinduism; however, Swadhyaya puts it to novel use, actively attempting to refashion individuals on that basis for the express purpose of redefining and strengthening human dignity and human relations. In this respect, while Swadhyaya's discourse is centered on the self, it is less focused on the idea of a mistaken identity central to other contemporary Indian religious movements such as the Brahma Kumaris, Radhasoamis, and including the Chinmaya Mission.²⁹

listening to his lectures at the conference. Athavale declined the offer believing that he had to begin his mission in India first. Thus began the Swadhyaya movement. Rajendra Kher, *The Silent Reformer* (Pune: Vihang Prakashan, 2009), 9-15. A similar description can be found at: Cesar R. Bacany, "Pandurang Shastri Biography," *The Ramon Magsaysay Award Foundation*, accessed February 5, 2014,

<http://www.rmaf.org.ph/newrmaf/main/awardees/awardee/biography/277>,

²⁸ Although an exact number is not known, this claim is based on several records made public by Swadhyaya. According to one such record, 2.2 million youth between the ages of 16-30 participated in the annual "*Geeta Jayanti*" competition held by Swadhyaya. See, "2.2 million youths participate in Geeta Jayanti," accessed February 6, 2014,

<http://www.swadhyay.org/index.htm>. According to another record, three million participants took part in the *Kṣatriya Sanchalan* event that took place in Gujarat in 2005. "Celebration of 3 'Kshatriya Sanchalans,'" accessed February 6, 2014, <http://www.swadhyay.org/index.htm>.

²⁹ See Lawrence Babb, *Redemptive Encounters: Three Modern Styles in the Hindu Traditions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

In this dissertation, I examine the lived experiences and practice of religion among Swadhyaya and Chinmaya Mission participants and illustrate the ways in which this experience is multiple and varied, and rooted within the specificities of everyday life. I show that while the discourse on self-development is rooted within a larger discourse on Hindu soteriology, engagement in these movements cannot simply be understood in terms of a desire for liberation but rather in terms of the kind of being the teachings and practices enable. Participation in these two religious movements is not simply a question of how to live well but also how to live in and face the contingencies of everyday life. In this respect, this project aims to move away from traditional sociological and ideological studies of religious movements, and from the focus on Hindu nationalism prevalent in recent scholarship on modern Hinduism, towards a study of the everyday lived experiences of religion and ethics as manifested in the practices of self-making and moral being in the Swadhyaya and Chinmaya Mission movements.

The scholarship on modern Hinduism has been occupied around debates over the status of the category “Hinduism.” Over the past two decades, some scholars have argued that Hinduism as a single religious entity was constructed, invented or imagined by British scholars and colonial administrators in the nineteenth century and was not significant prior to this.³⁰ Richard King, for example, has argued that “Hinduism” is a

³⁰ See Romila Thapar, “Syndicated Hinduism” in *Hinduism Reconsidered*, ed. Gunther-Dietz Sontheimer and Hermann Kulke (New Delhi: Manohar, 2001), 54-81; Robert Frykenberg, “The Emergence of Modern ‘Hinduism’ as a Concept and as an Institution: A Reappraisal with Special Reference to South India,” in *Hinduism Reconsidered*, ed. Gunther-Dietz Sontheimer and Hermann Kulke (New Delhi: Manohar, 2001), 82-107; Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Post-colonial Theory, India, and “The Mystic East”* (London: Routledge, 1999); Brian Pennington, *Was Hinduism Invented?: Britons, Indians, and Colonial Constructions of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press,

false imposition or “superimposition” of a monolithic and uniform religious entity upon a heterogeneous set of diverse Indian myths, beliefs, rituals, and laws that is based on the “monotheistic exclusivism of Western Christianity.”³¹ King argues that the notion of Hinduism as a single unified religion located within a few sacred texts was produced based on the Judeo-Christian presuppositions of British Orientalists and missionaries.

Some other scholars argue that the notion of a single Hinduism is an ideological construct that has served to advance specific political agendas. For example, Jack Hawley argues that Hinduism is in fact a nineteenth century British construction that constituted a significant aspect of European ideology and in particular, a means to justify conversion and colonial expansion.³² In a similar way, Romila Thapar has argued that the notion of a single Hinduism and a single Hindu community is false and has been employed to support the goals of the Hindu Right.³³ She argues that proponents of Hindu nationalism seek to draw in as many people as possible and demonstrates how a particular construction of Hinduism—one that insists on uniformity and collides all differences—becomes important to building a substantial Hindu community. Thapar argues that the claim that a single Hindu community has always existed is nothing more

2005); Heinrich Stietencron, “Hinduism: On the Proper Use of Deceptive Term,” in *Hinduism Reconsidered*, ed. Gunther-Dietz Sontheimer and Hermann Kulke (New Delhi: Manohar, 2001), 32-53. Brian Smith, *Reflections on Resemblance, Ritual and Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

³¹ King, *Orientalism*, 104.

³² Jack Hawley “Naming Hinduism,” *Wilson Quarterly* 15, no. 3 (1991): 20-34.

³³ Romila Thapar, “Imagined Religious Communities? Ancient History and the Modern Search for a Hindu Identity,” *Modern Asian Studies*, no. 23(1989): 209-231.

than “a modern search for an imagined Hindu identity from the past” and that various religious groups rather than a single religion constituted early Hinduism.³⁴

In contrast to these scholars, others have argued that Hinduism as a single religion does in fact exist and is not a modern construction. These scholars have argued that there is an underlying unity within the diverse sects, practices, and beliefs within Hinduism and that an awareness of a common Hindu identity existed in India prior to British colonialism.³⁵ David Lorenzen, for example, demonstrates that a sense of a single Hindu religious identity existed prior to the nineteenth century and was conspicuously marked out and recognized through the rivalry between Muslims and Hindus between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries.³⁶ He shows, moreover, that pre-1800 European accounts of Hinduism viewed Hinduism in much the same way as scholars of the British colonial project and argues that what is believed to be a nineteenth century European construction existed much earlier.

The second approach in the study of modern Hinduism has been to argue that the colonial encounter between the British and Indians in the nineteenth century created the

³⁴ Ibid., 210. Thapar shows that there existed multiple communities determined by various identities such as locality, language, caste, occupation, etc., and argues that the notion of community was not absent in India’s early past. However, what was absent, argues Thapar, is the notion of a uniform “Hindu” religious community. She argues that texts such as the *Dharmaśāstras* point to the existence of different communities based on location (a village), occupation (guilds), and caste but none of which were united necessarily through a common religious identity.

³⁵ Wendy Doniger, “Hinduism by any other Name,” *Wilson Quarterly* 15, no. 3(1991): 35-41. For approaches that have sought to define a unity within Hinduism, see Gunther-Dietz Sontheimer, “Hinduism: The Five Components and their Interaction,” in *Hinduism Reconsidered*, ed. Gunther-Dietz Sontheimer and Hermann Kulke (New Delhi: Manohar, 2001), 305-324; Lawrence Babb, *Redemptive Encounters: Three Modern Styles in the Hindu Traditions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

³⁶ David Lorenzen, “Who Invented Hinduism?,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 41, no. 4 (1999): 630-659.

specific circumstances for the emergence of a reconfigured Hinduism.³⁷ These scholars argue that a particular form of Hinduism and Hindu self-awareness emerged in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries due to a confluence of a number of factors including the presence of Christian missionaries and British colonial policies, and the development of indigenous socio-religious reform movements during the period of British rule. For example, Kenneth Jones demonstrates how the assertion of Western superiority and the threat of Christian conversion following the allowance of missionaries on the Company territory led to the development of various religious reform movements by English-educated Bengali elites such as Rammohan Roy and Dayananda Saraswati and the effort to reformulate Hinduism. In a similar way, Wilhelm Halbfass has argued that missionary activity and specifically its patronizing attitude towards Hinduism significantly influenced the ways in which Hindus conceived of and represented their tradition.³⁸ Halbfass argues that the colonial encounter led to a new representation of Hinduism as a universal religion grounded in a reinterpretation of the traditional concept of *dharma*. In particular, he illustrates how the adoption and use of the concept of *dharma* by Protestant missionaries in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to postulate the superiority of Christianity led to its reinterpretation and centrality to modern Hinduism. Halbfass argues, moreover, that “modern” Hindu thought, represented by

³⁷ Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988); Kenneth Jones, *Socio-religious Reform Movements in British India* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Geoffrey Oddie, “Constructing ‘Hinduism:’ The Impact of the Protestant Missionary Movement on Hindu Self-Understanding,” in *Christians and Missionaries in India: Cross-Cultural Communication Since 1500*, eds. Robert E. Frykenberg and Alaine M. Low (Michigan: W. B. Eerdmans, 2003), 155-182.

³⁸ Wilhelm Halbfass, ed., “Reinterpretations of Dharma in Modern Hinduism,” *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), 334-348.

individuals such as Rammohan Roy, Keshab Chandra Sen, Vivekananda, and Dayananda Saraswati must be understood in terms of the encounter between India and the West.³⁹ According to Halbfass, modern Hindu thought, variously expressed as “Neo-Hinduism” or “New-Vedanta,” cannot be reduced to either traditionalism and orthodoxy or “a mere mimicry of Western models” but must be understood as standing between these two poles.⁴⁰

Resonating this body of scholarship, scholars have more recently examined the ways in which Hinduism continues to be reconfigured and represented in contemporary Indian religious movements. Scholars have demonstrated how Hinduism has been redefined in various ways as a result of modernization and the transnationalization and globalization of Hindu religious movements in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.⁴¹ For example, scholars have shown the various ways in which Hinduism has been reconfigured and redefined as a result of the particular interface between Hinduism and America created by the arrival of Hindu gurus and their movements in America.⁴² Other scholars disagree on whether contemporary Indian religious movements can and

³⁹ Wilhelm Halbfass, ed., “Neo-Hinduism, Modern Indian Traditionalism, and the Presence of Europe,” *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988) 217-246.

⁴⁰ In particular, Halbfass shows how the work of Vivekananda is reflective of the specific historical situation of the encounter between India and the West. This is evident for example in Vivekananda’s central teachings that the East and the West should complement one another as the West represents the epitome of material progress and the East the source of spirituality. Halbfass argues that while Vivekananda’s teachings and practical programs were derived from within the Hindu tradition, and specifically, from Vedanta philosophy, they were shaped to a large extent by Western models. One example of this is his idea of practical Vedanta—the theory that the doctrine of non-dualism as found in *Advaita Vedanta* is the “true” source for social action.

⁴¹ For an insightful account on the Sathya Sai Movement and globalization, see Tulasi Srinivas, *Winged Faith: Rethinking Globalization and Religious Pluralism through the Sathya Sai Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

⁴² Cynthia Humes and Christopher Forsthoefel, eds., *Gurus In America* (New York: SUNY Press, 2005).

should be categorized as “Hindu.” Scholars such as Lawrence Babb, Raymond Williams and Maya Warrier argue, for example, that these movements represent “modern” forms of the Hindu tradition that have helped the tradition survive.⁴³ Others such as Mark Juergensmeyer, however, have argued that while the Radhasoamis movement is a modern form of Hinduism, it should be understood as a “genuinely new religion.”⁴⁴ Others like Smriti Srinivas argue that the Sathya Sai Baba movement should not be perceived as “Hindu” or “neo-Hindu” and instead as an “alternative modernity.”⁴⁵ Many of these scholars argue, moreover, that the appeal of these religious movements lie in their compatibility with modernity and their endorsement of autonomy, choice, freedom, individualism, science and/or rationality.⁴⁶

I draw on the scholarship on contemporary Indian religious movements insofar as it shows that the type of religion fostered by these movements is radically distinct from Hindu nationalist ideology. However, unlike this body of scholarship that seeks to account for the experience of religion in contemporary India (often taking Western modernity as the ideal type), my project does not employ “Hindu,” “modern,” “religious” and “traditional” as distinct and incompatible analytic categories. Instead, I explore the ways in which followers themselves perceive and evaluate these categories in the context of their everyday practices of self-fashioning. I ask: what kind of being are Chinmaya

⁴³ Lawrence Babb, *Redemptive Encounters: Three Modern Styles in the Hindu Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); Maya Warrier, *Hindu Selves in a Modern World: Guru Faith in the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission* (New York: Routledge Curzon, 2005); Raymond Williams, *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hinduism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

⁴⁴ Mark Juergensmeyer, *Radhasoami Reality: The Logic of a Modern Faith* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 227.

⁴⁵ Smriti Srinivas, *In the Presence of Sai Baba* (London: Brill, 2008).

⁴⁶ See Warrier, *Hindu Selves*.

Mission and Swadhyaya participants attempting to become and why? In what ways are they trying to cultivate themselves? What makes theistic sources a compelling foundation for self-fashioning? How does the desire of individuals to cultivate themselves in relation to a religious tradition challenge secular-liberal presuppositions about modern self-identity and the values of individualism and exclusive humanism? In this respect, my dissertation aims to shift the study of modern Hinduism towards the everyday lived practices of religion and ethics in modernity.

Ethics, Self-fashioning and Hinduism in Modernity

This dissertation draws on recent scholarship on the history of ethics in the West and in South Asia that departs from understanding ethics in terms of a set of rules, laws, duties and texts alone.⁴⁷ In contrast to the rule-centered approach that has dominated ethical thinking and theorizing in the West for the past two centuries,⁴⁸ philosophers have

⁴⁷ James Laidlaw, *Riches and Renunciation: Religion, Economy and Society among the Jains* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); James Laidlaw, “For an Anthropology of Ethics and Freedom,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 8(2002): 311-332; Leela Prasad “Ethical Subjects: Time, Timing, and Tellability,” in *Ethical Life in South Asia*, eds. Anand Pandian and Daud Ali (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2010) 174-190.; Leela Prasad, *Poetics of Conduct: Oral Narrative and Moral Being in a South Indian Town* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007). Leela Prasad, “Constituting Ethical Subjectivities,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, ed. Robert Orsi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 360-379. Anand Pandian, *Crooked Stalks: Cultivating Virtue in South India* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2009); Ali, Daud and Anand Pandian, ed. *Ethical Life in South Asia*, (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2010); Michel Foucault. “On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress,” *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul, trans. Robert Hurley, (New York: The New Press, 1997); Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007); Michelle Molina and Donald Swear, eds., *Rethinking the Human* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2010); Veena Das, “Moral and Spiritual Striving in the Everyday: To Be a Muslim in Contemporary India,” in *Ethical Life in South Asia*, ed. Anand Pandian and Daud Ali (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2010), 232-252.

⁴⁸ For example, in his famous eighteenth century ethical treatise, Immanuel Kant formulated a universal moral law—the Categorical Imperative—grounded in a priori reasoning arguing that

recently argued that ethics should be understood in terms of ethical practice and not simply in terms of rules of what one ought or ought not to do. For example, Pierre Hadot has argued that ethics is concerned with spiritual practices aimed at transforming one's mode of being, seeing, and existing in the world and should not be perceived as mere abstract theorizing.⁴⁹ The cultivation of the self, according to Hadot, takes place through the practice of spiritual exercises whose goals are self-realization and self-transformation. Following Hadot, Michel Foucault persuasively argued that ethics should be understood as the kind of relation one has with oneself and in terms of the particular ways in which individuals constitute themselves as moral beings.⁵⁰ In particular, ethics should be understood in terms of four aspects, according to Foucault. The first is concerned with what he calls the "ethical substance," the part of the self including feelings, desires, and actions that are worked on by ethics. The second aspect is the "mode of subjectivation" described as the reasoning by which people are motivated to fulfill their moral obligations or to act morally. Modes of subjectivation include divine laws revealed through a text, natural laws and aesthetics, for example. The third aspect concerns the particular means by which we constitute ourselves as ethical subjects, what Foucault calls "self-forming activity" or the "techniques of the self." The fourth aspect concerns the kind of subject one seeks to become by acting morally or what Foucault describes as the

morality is a matter of obedience to rules and prescriptions and the task of ethics is to determine those laws in accordance to which "everything ought to happen." Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor and Jens Timmermann (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁴⁹ Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

⁵⁰ Michel Foucault. "On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress," *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: The New Press, 1997).

“telos.” I draw, moreover, on theories of virtue-ethics that emerged in the twentieth century as a critique of modern moral philosophy’s occupation with rules and laws and instead emphasized the role of virtue and character in moral theory.⁵¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, for example, has argued that the more important question for morality is “what sort of person am I to become” rather than what rules should we follow and why.⁵² Building on this scholarship, each of my chapters focuses on a particular aspect of what it means to be human and to live well as explicated by the movements and their participants and the particular practices that individuals engage in in order to become a certain kind of being.

Drawing on the conception of ethics as a practice of self-cultivation, anthropologists and historians of South and South East Asia have recently offered a more nuanced understanding of ethics. Particularly telling is the work of Leela Prasad who draws our attention to the ethics of the everyday and argues that moral being is not simply a matter of adhering to authoritative texts.⁵³ Based on a number of everyday conversations that emerged through her study, she demonstrates the multiple ways in which individuals understand, negotiate, and express the normative in the context of their everyday lives and identities that are deeply embedded in family, tradition, and the community. Prasad shows how daily and spontaneous conversations reveal key conceptions of moral being in the everyday as well as the gap between prescribed and

⁵¹ Elisabeth Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” *Philosophy*, 33 (1958). Bernard Williams, B., *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana, 1985).

⁵² MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 119.

⁵³ Leela Prasad, *Poetics of Conduct: Oral Narrative and Moral Being in a South Indian Town* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

lived conduct. Drawing on her work, I show how conversations recounting everyday exchanges with the local vegetable seller or auto-driver or daily interactions with staff and colleagues at the workplace and at home, or spontaneous conversations that took place on train rides or walks to and from Swadhyaya centers provide key insights into the actual lived experiences of religion and ethics among Swadhyaya participants and why they find theistic sources to be a compelling foundation for self-fashioning. In addition, I highlight the intricate relationship between religious teachings and everyday lived practice and demonstrate that while both the Chinmaya Mission and Swadhyaya are rooted in the Hindu scriptures, the notion of “scripture” varies from participant to participant, especially in Swadhyaya.

In this respect, the work of Veena Das is insightful as she argues that ethical being must be understood in terms of the concrete specificities and uncertainties of everyday life, what she calls the “rough and tumble of everyday life,” and specifically in relation to the other.⁵⁴ In her study of ethical being among Muslims of an urban low-income Delhi neighborhood populated by both Hindus and Muslims, Das argues that the ways in which individuals relate to one another, especially in the willingness to learn from others in the context of the everyday, constitutes a form of moral striving and moral being that goes beyond the issue of cultivating certain commonly established virtues. As such, Das demonstrates that ethical being cannot only be understood in terms of how one relates to oneself, but also in terms of how one relates to others. Thus, while this project builds on

⁵⁴ Veena Das, “Moral and Spiritual Striving in the Everyday: To Be a Muslim in Contemporary India, in *Ethical Life in South Asia*, ed. Anand Pandian and Daud Ali (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2010), 232-252.

the conception of ethics as a matter of how one relates to the self, I also draw on the work of scholars like Veena Das and Charles Hallisey who argue that ethics must be understood not only as a matter of how one relates to oneself but more importantly, how one relates to others.⁵⁵ This notion of ethics of how one relates to others is particularly important when understanding the notion of family (*parivār*) central to Swadhyaya and the practice of “selflessness” among Swadhyaya participants as discussed in Chapter Two and the idea behind working together (*yajñīya kārya*) central to both Swadhyaya and the Chinmaya Mission as discussed in Chapter Three.

In addition, this scholarship illuminates the importance of tradition for ethical formation as well as the social and cultural dimensions of moral traditions and ethical being.⁵⁶ In particular, I draw on the work of Gavin Flood who shows that the ideal of the ascetic self in Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism is always constructed in accordance to tradition-specific notions of the self and what tradition sees as the ultimate goal of life.⁵⁷ Similarly, Nancy Eberhardt, through a detailed ethnographic account of the different stages constituting an ideal human life for the Shan people of the Mae Hong Son Province of Thailand, shows that Shan understandings of the trajectory of the life course are closely tied to local understandings of selfhood.⁵⁸ Eberhardt also draws important

⁵⁵ Charles Hallisey, “Between Intuition and Judgment: Moral Creativity in Theravada Buddhist Ethics,” in *Ethical Life in South Asia*, ed. Anand Pandian and Daud Ali (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2010), 141-152. Charles Hallisey, “Buddhism,” in *The Life of Virtue*, ed. Jacob Neusner (Belmont: Wadsworth/Thompson Press, 2001), 112-134.

⁵⁶ Daud Ali and Anand Pandian, eds. “Introduction,” in *Ethical Life in South Asia* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2010), 1-18.

⁵⁷ Gavin Flood, *The Ascetic Self: Subjectivity, Memory and Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁵⁸ Nancy Eberhardt. *Imagining the Course of Life: Self-Transformation in a Shan Buddhist Community* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006).

distinctions between Shan theories of selfhood and the life course and modern Western notions of the self showing how these differences lead to quite distinct understandings of moral being and moral development. Building on this scholarship, I show how a particular conception of the self and human existence grounded in Hindu philosophy and soteriology undergirds the practices of self-cultivation and self-fashioning in both Swadhyaya and the Chinmaya Mission.

This project is also informed by and builds on insights drawn from poststructuralist and feminist critiques of the secular-liberal principles of agency, autonomy, and freedom. In particular, I draw on Michel Foucault's work on freedom and ethics.⁵⁹ Against the modern liberal discourse of freedom and agency which presupposes (a desire for) autonomy from relations of power and subordination, Foucault argues that power relations entail freedom and in fact create and enable the capacity for action by which a subject can become an agent. Accordingly, Foucault defines ethics as a practice of freedom centered on the cultivation of the self and argues that a subject constitutes him or herself as an ethical being through practices of self-fashioning based on "models that he finds in his culture and [which] are proposed, suggested, imposed upon him by his culture, his society, his social group."⁶⁰

In a similar way, the work of Saba Mahmood is particularly telling as she argues persuasively that the practice of cultivating Islamic virtues such as shyness and modesty—explored by her within a women's mosque movement in Egypt—enable a

⁵⁹ Michel Foucault. "On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress." And "The Ethics of the Concern for Self as Practice of Freedom," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: The New Press, 1997).

⁶⁰ Foucault, *Ethics*, 291.

certain mode of being and becoming in the world that reflects a form of moral agency rather than an act of passivity or subjugation as perceived and eschewed by modern liberal thought. She demonstrates that normative liberal assumptions about freedom, autonomy, and agency—namely, that agency presupposes autonomy and autonomy presupposes absolute freedom from external forces—precludes an understanding of the ways in which human agency can operate within structures of power relations.⁶¹ Central to the secular liberal conception of agency is the capacity to act from one’s own will and presupposes the absence of external obstacles such as custom, tradition, or God. In contrast to this understanding, Mahmood, following Foucault, argues for an understanding of agency as the “capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create.”⁶² In contrast to the notion of agency understood as an act of resistance to relations of domination, Mahmood argues that the conception of agency as something enabled through relations of subordination allows us to understand the ways in which individuals “work on themselves to become the willing subjects of a particular discourse.”⁶³ Through her analysis of the practices of the mosque participants, she draws our attention to the specific ways in which individuals cultivate themselves into certain kinds of beings with specific types of desires and thoughts by acting in accord with the Islamic tradition.

Similarly, Gavin Flood has argued that contrary to the modern liberal demand for self-assertion and autonomy and its rejection of tradition as “authoritative, oppressive

⁶¹ Saba Mahmood, “Feminist Theory, Embodiment and the Docile Agent,” *Cultural Anthropology* 16, no. 2 (2001): 201-236.

⁶² Mahmood, “Feminist Theory,” 203.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 210.

structures of authority and power,” the ascetic self represents a form of agency even while conforming to tradition.⁶⁴ Flood argues that although the ascetic self is not autonomous as it is always constructed in conformity to tradition, agency is central to the formation of the ascetic self insofar as the subordination of the will to tradition always occurs through an assertion of the will. He argues that the eradication of will through an act of the will is not a contradiction and instead, a central feature of the ascetic self. In this respect, I also find the work of Alasdair MacIntyre particularly helpful as he argues that the ethics of modern liberalism according to which freedom, moral agency and autonomy are central to moral life fails to provide a rational justification for our moral commitments.⁶⁵ MacIntyre argues that the recovery of morality in the modern world is only possible through the rejection of the modern ethos of secular liberalism. As such, he conceptualizes a theory of virtue based on the Aristotelian ethical tradition.

Building on this scholarship, my project seeks to move away from privileging either the autonomous self or the subjugated self in order to understand the practices of the participants in Swadhyaya and Chinmaya Mission in terms of an ethical self and the desire to cultivate oneself into an ideal human being according to the Hindu tradition. I examine the ways in which ethical subjectivities are formed in the context of everyday lived experiences through diverse modes of social interaction and practices of self-cultivation. As such, this project resembles the recent writings in the anthropology of religion that examine religion in terms of practices and disciplines of ethical cultivation

⁶⁴ Flood, *Ascetic Self*, 252.

⁶⁵ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

rather than as a matter of belief or doctrine.⁶⁶ However, my project is different from this scholarship insofar as I demonstrate the particular ways in which not only ethical being comes to be constituted, but how everyday non-moral conceptions of the self are shaped and constructed in relation to the teachings and practices of the movement, and argue that the latter is equally important in understanding the compelling force of these movements.⁶⁷ My project shows how modern self-identity is shaped and constructed within two modern Indian religious movements and the ways in which religion comes to be seen as a source not for only ethical being but for practical everyday living.

Swadhyaya in Context

One of the central aims of Swadhyaya is to restore or “resurrect” what it interchangeably refers to as “Vedic religion,” “Vedic culture” or “Vedic way of thinking, way of life, and way of worship.”⁶⁸ Athavale criticized contemporary practices of Hinduism as being confined to temples and rituals and “corrupt” due to various accretions, and sought to purify it through a revival of Vedic teachings and values found in the *Vedas*, the *Upaniṣads*, and the *Bhagavad Gītā*. He says, “mankind is fettered by rituals, poverty and various discriminatory customs based on colour, caste, and creed...There is only one remedy to break these manacles and free my brother. The ancient, glorious and divine

⁶⁶ For example, see: Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Charles Hirschkind. *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

⁶⁷ See sections on “*Dharma as Life-Oriented Education*” and “*Dharma as Asmitā Jāgruti*” in Chapter Four.

⁶⁸ See Pandurang Shastri Athavale, *The Systems: The Way and the Work* (Bombay: Sat Vichar Darshan Trust, 1994), 22.

Vedic culture, currently eclipsed by obscurity and darkness, will have to be revived.’⁶⁹

In this respect, Swadhyaya’s critique against what is perceived as a corrupt and degenerate form of Vedic religion is in many ways reflective of the criticism launched by modern Hindu reformers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries against contemporary Hinduism and similar to their attempt to restore or revive “true” Hinduism through a return to what they perceived as its core, the ancient scriptures. Like many of these reformers, Athavale derived his authority through an acceptance of Vedic authority and on the basis of which he sought reforms in the Hindu tradition. Swadhyaya is also similar to early modern reform movements like the Arya Samaj and Brahmo Samaj in its emphasis on science and rationality and in its attempt to make the teachings of the scripture available and accessible to all strata of society.

More broadly speaking, Swadhyaya can be seen as a continuation of the tradition of socio-religious dissent in South Asia that began as early as the sixth century BCE with Jainism and Buddhism, followed by the rise of *bhakti* movements in medieval India, and evident in nineteenth and twentieth century Hindu revival movements that called for the creation of an egalitarian society and rejected the primacy of rituals, but also a modification of this tradition.⁷⁰ Unlike these movements, however, Swadhyaya does not

⁶⁹ Pandurang Shastri Athavale, quoted in *The Silent Reformer*, by Rajendra Kher (Pune: Vihang Prakashan, 2009), 153, 171-172.

⁷⁰ Here, I draw on the work of Kenneth Jones who has argued that the “socio-religious” movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in India must be understood in light of the history of socio-religious movements in earlier times which called for the creation of an egalitarian society, rejected the primacy and role of priests and rituals, rejected idolatry, promoted monotheism, and sought to educate women and redefine their roles in society. Jones argues that the rejection of these elements should not be seen simply as a response to Christianity’s condemnation of the latter or a creation of India’s interaction with Christianity and the western civilization. Instead, the socio-religious movements that emerged during the colonial period in

reject the caste system,⁷¹ polytheism, idol worship, or the primacy of Brahmins in its reconfiguration of Hinduism. Instead, Athavale has sought to revive and redefine some of the traditional Hindu institutions and practices such as temples, “icon worship” (*mūrti puḷā*), *ekādaśī*, *yajña* and Brahmins along with Hindu symbols and festivals through his discourses and pragmatic experiments (*prayogs*).⁷² More importantly, central to Athavale’s attempt to revive the Hindu tradition is the project of self-development.⁷³ According to Athavale, Swadhyaya refers to the philosophy and practices that helps transform and develop the self. That is, Swadhyaya’s program of religious reform is centered on the transformation of the self and Swadhyaya explicitly distances itself from projects of social reform. In this respect, Swadhyaya is different from earlier modern religious movements such as the Brahmo Samaj and the Arya Samaj that sought to bring about social reform through and along with religious reform.⁷⁴ However, although

the nineteenth century should also be seen both as a continuation and modification of the tradition of socio-religious dissent in South Asia. Kenneth Jones, *Socio-Religious Reform Movements in British India* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

⁷¹ Unlike earlier reformers like Mahatma Gandhi and Dayananda Saraswati, Athavale did not seek to change the meaning or structure of the caste system. While accepting the caste system as a necessary division of labor in order to ensure the livelihood of all, he stressed human equality on the basis of the concept of an indwelling God. Athavale was a strong critic of Untouchability and sought to break barriers between people of different castes and backgrounds through pragmatic practices such as *bhāvpheri* and the notion of a family (*parivār*). See section on “Pity versus *Bhāva*” in Chapter Two and the section on “*Asmitā*” in Chapter Four.

⁷² See Pandurang Shastri Athavale, “Resurrection of the Vedic Culture,” *The Systems: The Way and the Work* (Bombay: Sat Vichar Darshan Trust, 1994), 22-43.

⁷³ In this respect, Swadhyaya stayed away from any form of political engagement or politicized religion seen in other contemporary movements such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and the Shiv Sena. In contrast, Swami Chinmayanandaji was one of the cofounders of the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP). However, he broke away from the VHP soon after its establishment and the Chinmaya Mission no longer associates itself with it. Almost all of the informants whom I interviewed were unaware of the link between Swami Chinmayananda and the VHP, and their reasons for engagement were not politically motivated and were instead rooted in an interest and desire to learn the *Bhagavad Gītā*.

⁷⁴ See Jones, *Socio-Religious Reform Movements*, 2.

Swadhyaya insists that it is not a social movement, its active attempts to build bonds of brotherhood and community across the socio-economic and caste spectrum in India has social implications.

Through its emphasis on self-cultivation and reformulation of *bhakti*, Swadhyaya offers an alternative to traditional forms of religiosity associated, for example, with temple visits, Hindu rituals or singing *bhajans*. However, neither Swadhyaya nor the Chinmaya Mission marks the kind of radical departures from their parent tradition, Hinduism, distinguishing them from New Religious Movements (NRMs) such as the Jehovah's Witnesses or the Soka Gakkai of Japan, for example, that are seen as unacceptable by the dominant established traditions, Christianity and Buddhism, respectively.⁷⁵ Pankaj Jain notes that unlike New Religious Movements in the West, Swadhyaya has not faced any opposition from older Hindu organizations or gurus and does not offer new models of salvation as seen in Japanese New Religions.⁷⁶

While Swadhyaya is different from earlier Indian religious movements in its focus on self-study and self-fashioning, the phenomenon of self-transformation is not entirely unique to Hinduism or India. The notion and project of self-transformation is integral to most major religious traditions across the world all of which offer “ritual programs”

⁷⁵ The term “New Religious Movements” is used by sociologists of religion to characterize religious movements of modern origins that exist at the fringe of the dominant religious culture of a country due to differences on key beliefs and behavior patterns with the latter. See Gordon Melton, “An Introduction to New Religions,” in *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements*, ed. James Lewis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 24-25. Other attributes of “new religious movements” according to Melton include violent or illegal behavior, a distinctive diet such as veganism, medical restrictions including a prohibition against blood transfusions, separatism, or a different sexual ethic.

⁷⁶ Jain, *Dharma and Ecology*, 25-26.

aimed at transforming the self.⁷⁷ David Shulman and Guy Stroumsa note, for example, that “there does seem to be a universal theme at the heart of all religious cultures of the world that has to do with effecting structured transitions in the inner world of the living subject, who seems to always require such change.”⁷⁸ In addition, the project of transforming the self is not only present within most major religious traditions, but was also central to the ancient Greek philosophical traditions.⁷⁹ In this respect, the project of self-fashioning is neither unique to Hinduism or India nor is it specifically modern. However, I would argue that Swadhyaya’s particular discourse and praxis of self-fashioning consists of elements that are specifically Hindu or Indian and that Swadhyaya is a modern project to some extent.

As I mentioned earlier, Swadhyaya’s religious discourse on self-fashioning is deeply rooted in the Hindu traditions. The notion of an indwelling God central to this discourse is drawn from the *Bhagavad Gītā* and the *Upaniṣads*, for example. Athavale draws on and incorporates different elements of the Hindu tradition including concepts, symbols, and practices, although redefining and modifying them within the framework of self-cultivation. For example, in Chapters Two and Three, respectively, I show how reformulated notions of *bhakti* and *yajña* are central to Swadhyaya’s discourse and praxis of self-fashioning. In addition, Swadhyaya follows the ancient Indian oral pedagogical tradition whereby Swadhyayis receive their teachings through the oral discourses of

⁷⁷ David Shulman and Guy Stroumsa, eds., “Introduction: Persons, Passages, and Shifting Cultural Space,” in *Self and Self-Transformation in the History of Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 6.

⁷⁸ David Shulman and Guy Stroumsa, *Self and Self-Transformation*, 3.

⁷⁹ See Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

Athavale, albeit through the use of modern technology such as the videocassette and more recently, DVDs.⁸⁰ Moreover, Swadhyaya's program of self-transformation is also aimed at breaking barriers of caste and problems associated with Untouchability that are specific to India and Hinduism and not necessarily modern.

In addition, the vocabulary and language of communication in the movement is local, namely, Gujarati, Marathi, and Hindi. Although there is no dress code, women typically wear traditional Indian clothing, either *sāris* or *salwār kameez*. Swadhyaya also follows the Indian tradition of having men and women sit on separate sides of the room. During all Swadhyaya activities, women sat, conversed, and worked with other women, and men sat and worked with other men following traditional Indian social norms regarding gender relations, with occasional instances of communication between the two genders. Some activities like the youth circles have separate male and female meetings, *Yuvā Kendra* and *Yuvati Kendra*, respectively.

Swadhyaya is a product of modernity insofar as its particular theory and praxis of self-fashioning arises from and seeks to address problems that are specifically modern. As I demonstrate in my chapters, Swadhyaya's discourse on self-fashioning—centered on the cultivation of the virtues of selfless love and affection and gratitude, and the sublimation of the ego—stems from Athavale's attempt to address what he perceives as problems arising from the modern culture of individualism, consumerism, and capitalism. In this respect, Swadhyaya can be described as a modern phenomenon and similar

⁸⁰ See Little, "Video Vacana."

attempts to address modern life are seen in contemporary religious movements both within and outside of India.⁸¹

Moreover, recent studies of contemporary religious movements across different religious traditions have illustrated the centrality of self-transformation in these movements. Katherine Wiegele, for example, has argued that experiences of self-transformation among the followers of the El Shaddai Catholic movement in the Philippines are central to understanding the appeal of the movement's prosperity theology.⁸² In the context of India, moreover, Lawrence Babb has shown that the construction and reconstruction of the self is central to the Sathya Sai Baba, Brahma Kumaris and Radhasoami movements.⁸³ In addition, Swadhyaya's development of a modern ethical discourse rooted in the religious traditions of India closely resembles the revival of Islamic ethics in contemporary Islamic movements such as those in Egypt and Pakistan and modern Buddhist revival movements.⁸⁴ In particular, Swadhyaya's discourse on self-development resembles the call for individual awakening or

⁸¹ For example, see Maya Warrior, *Hindu Selves in a Modern World: Guru Faith in the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission* (New York: Routledge Curzon, 2005) and Mark Juergensmeyer, *Radhasoami Reality: The Logic of a Modern Faith* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991). Also see the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement in Sri Lanka described below.

⁸² Katherine Wiegele, *Investing in Miracles: El Shaddai and the Transformation of Popular Catholicism in the Philippines* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005).

⁸³ Lawrence A. *Redemptive Encounters: Three Modern Styles in the Hindu Tradition*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

⁸⁴ For recent scholarship on the Islamic revival, see for example, Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Ira Lapidus, "Islamic Revival and Modernity: The Contemporary Movements and the Historical Paradigms," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*. 40.4 (1997): 444-460. For Buddhist revival movements, see George Bond, *The Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka: Religious Tradition, Reinterpretation and Response* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1992).

“personality development” in the Sarvodaya Shramadana movement in Sri Lanka.⁸⁵

The development of personality in the Sarvodaya Shramadana movement is based on the cultivation of the Four Divine Abidings in Buddhism: loving-kindness (*metta*), compassion (*karunā*), sympathetic joy (*mudita*), and equanimity (*upekkha*), and one can see a striking similarity between the emphasis on selfless love and respect for others in Swadhyaya and loving-kindness, the principle of cultivating love for all beings, in Sarvodaya. Sarvodaya also encourages its participants to relate to one another in a way that emphasizes unity based on the principles of generosity, kind speech, useful work, and equality, also known as the *sangaha vathhu*, in contrast to the individualism and competitiveness central to modern life.⁸⁶ However, one key difference between Swadhyaya and Sarvodaya is that the discourse on self-development in the latter emphasizes an ethic for social service and social action. The cultivation of the ideals of loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity takes place through concrete actions aimed at assisting the rural poor through Sarvodaya’s work camps known as *shramadāna*.⁸⁷ In contrast, Swadhyaya distances itself from any kind of social work. Moreover, as noted by Ananta Kumar Giri, a significant difference between Swadhyaya and the Sarvodaya Shramadana movement in Sri Lanka is the latter’s call for

⁸⁵ George Bond, “A.T. Ariyaratne and the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement in Sri Lanka,” in *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*, eds. Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. King (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996), 129.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 127-128.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 126-127.

both individual transformation and the transformation of socio-economic structures whereas Swadhyaya has refrained from addressing the latter.⁸⁸

While the experience of self-cultivation and self-transformation is central to contemporary religious movements around the world, this experience is multiple and varied in complex ways much like the experience of modernity.⁸⁹ I argue that Swadhyaya is unique because its theory and praxis of self-fashioning is not concerned with the transformation of the self alone. Instead, it seeks to redefine the modern self in terms of its relationship with the other through concrete practices rooted in the notion of devotion and aimed at creating bonds of brotherhood between modern selves. In this respect, the project of self-transformation in Swadhyaya is also distinct from the type of personal change and growth central to modern self-help groups aimed at resolving specific problems related to addiction, illness, or bereavement, for example, or for personal redemption.⁹⁰ The emphasis on building a community on the basis of the notion of divine brotherhood in Swadhyaya, moreover, distinguishes it from the sense of community definitive of self-help groups where individuals gather on the basis of a shared problem and seek aid and support from others.⁹¹ While this kind of mutual support may be one of the by-products of participation in the Swadhyaya community, it does not constitute the foundation of the movement. Also, as I demonstrate in the

⁸⁸ Ananta Kumara Giri, *Self Development and Social Transformations? The Vision and Practice of the Self-Study Mobilization of Swadhyaya* (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2009), 18.

⁸⁹ Arjun Appadurai, "Public Modernity in India," in *Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in a South Asian World*, ed. Carol Breckenridge (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 1-20.

⁹⁰ Alfred Katz, *Self-Help in America: A Social Movement Perspective* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993), 10.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 33.

subsequent chapters, participants' reasons for joining Swadhyaya and the Chinmaya Mission remain far from those arising out of a personal crisis or problem. However, one important similarity between Swadhyaya and self-help groups is that they share a common goal to positively influence the self-conception of its members, and participation in these movements often leads to an increase in self-esteem and self-reliance as I illustrate in Chapter Four.⁹²

The body of scholarly work on Swadhyaya is limited, consisting of an edited volume by R.K. Srivastava, a few introductory articles, a book-length monograph by Ananta Kumar Giri and a recent study by Pankaj Jain.⁹³ Giri's work provides the most comprehensive account of Swadhyaya based on ethnographic fieldwork in India; however, his analysis focuses on Swadhyaya in rural India alone and on a critique of contemporary theories on and approaches to development. In a similar way, Jain's recent study on Swadhyaya focuses on Swadhyaya's socio-economic projects in Indian villages. While both of these works offer important insights into rural Swadhyaya, very little is known about urban Swadhyaya participants and the role and experience of Swadhyaya

⁹² Ibid., 30-31.

⁹³ R.K. Srivastava, ed., *Vital Connections: Self, Society, God* (New York: Weatherhill, 1998). Anindita Chakrabarti, "Soteriological Journeys and Discourses of Self-transformation: the Tablighi Jamaat and Svadhyaya in Gujarat," *South Asian History and Culture* 1 no. 4 (2010): 597-614. Gita Dharampal-Frick, "Swadhyaya and the 'Stream' of Religious Revitalization," in *Charisma and Canon*, ed. Vasudha Dalmia, Angelika Malinar, Martin Christof (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 274-292. Paul Ekins, *A New World Order: Grassroots Movements for Global Change* (London: Routledge, 1992), 130-134. John Little, "Video Vacana: Swadhyaya and Sacred Tapes," in *Media and the Transformation of Religion in South Asia*, ed. Lawrence Babb and Susan Wadley (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995). Pankaj Jain, *Dharma and Ecology of Hindu Communities*, (Vermont: Ashgate, 2011), 17-49. Ananta Kumara Giri, *Self-Development and Social Transformations? The Vision and Practice of the Self-Study Mobilization of Swadhyaya* (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2009). Director Shyam Benegal made a movie on Swadhyaya in 1991. See, *Antarnaad*. Directed by Shyam Benegal. Mumbai: Suhetu Films, 1991.

teachings and practices in urban life. My project examines Swadhyaya in the urban context of Mumbai and focuses on the specific ways in which selfhood and ethical being come to be constructed and reconstructed in relation to Indian religions in modern society.⁹⁴

Methodology and Chapter Outline

From February 2012 to May 2013, I researched the primary activities of Swadhyaya and the Chinmaya Mission. My primary method of research was participant observation and structured and unstructured interviews with everyday lay participants. In particular, I employed a phenomenological approach to ethnographic research, attempting to understand participants' subjective experiences and how they interpret and make meaning in the contemporary world while also attending to the interrelated cultural, social, psychological, and economic dimensions of their everyday lives.⁹⁵ Accordingly, I found it appropriate to organize my chapters around categories used within the two movements in order to better understand the everyday experiences of religion and ethics from the point of view of practitioners, and to draw attention to local and particular understandings of selfhood and the human, which inform their participation and problematize conventional notions of the self and the human.

The majority of my informants from both movements were middle-aged men and

⁹⁴ The Chinmaya Mission has received even less attention from scholars except for a limited number of articles. See Reid Locklin and Julia Lauwers, "Rewriting the Sacred Geography of Advaita: Swami Chinmayānanda and the Sankara-Dig-Vijaya," *The Journal of Hindu Studies* 14, no. 2 (2009): 179-208. Nancy Patchen, N., *The Journey of a Master: Swami Chinmayānanda: The Man, the Path, the Teaching* (Bombay: Central Chinmaya Mission Trust, 1994).

⁹⁵ Robert Desjarlais and Jason Throop, "Phenomenological Approaches in Anthropology," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 40 (2011): 97, doi: 10.1146/annurev-anthro-092010-153345.

women. There were a few elderly individuals and some young adults between the ages of 25 to 35 as well. The informants in both groups were a mix of old (10+ years) and new participants and came from different socio-economic backgrounds. Interviews were conducted using three languages: Gujarati, Hindi, and English.

This project began as an ethnographic study of the Swadhyaya movement based in Mumbai (formerly Bombay), India. It was motivated by an interest in the self-fashioning practices of Swadhyaya participants and the question of what it means to live well. However, in the course of fieldwork, I incorporated the study of another contemporary Hindu spiritual organization, Chinmaya Mission, for comparative purposes. After arriving in India, I spent one month conducting preliminary ethnographic research at the Mumbai centers of some of the other modern Indian religious movements including the Brahma Kumaris, Ramakrishna Math and Mission, the Sathya Sai Baba Organization and the Chinmaya Mission alongside my primary research on Swadhyaya in order to get a better sense of the expanding religious landscape of urban Mumbai. I attended weekly classes at the Ramakrishna Math and Mission in Khar and took the opportunity to talk to some of the monks and participants there. In addition, I completed a one-week course in the Brahma Kumaris organization in order to learn about the group, to have access to their daily classes, and to speak to some of its participants.⁹⁶ Simultaneously, I began attending the weekly classes offered at one of the Chinmaya

⁹⁶ This course provides a background of the Brahma Kumari cosmology, Raja Yoga, and an introduction to some of its key concepts. The class takes place on an independent basis and is conducted by one of the sisters of the organization. It is a mandatory course for anyone who wants to know more about the group and to attend the daily *Murli* classes. I took the course at a Brahma Kumaris hospital that offers services to patients at a lower cost. Interestingly, anyone who worked at the hospital was also required to take this course.

Mission centers. After one to two weeks of attending classes at each of the different organizations, I noticed a number of striking similarities between Chinmaya Mission and Swadhyaya. Both groups held classes aimed at all different age groups and were given similar names. For example, they both have a youth group called *Yuvā Kendra*. The children's center in Swadhyaya is called *Bāl Saṃskār Kendra* and *Bāl Vihār Kendra* in the Chinmaya Mission. The Chinmaya Mission also offers lectures on the *Bhagavad Gītā* and the *Upaniṣads* that resonated the discourses in Swadhyaya in terms of its emphasis on the development of the self.⁹⁷ The similarities made me wonder whether there were any connections between the two groups or whether they had influenced one another in their formation as they both began to take shape in the 1950s. Over time, as I attended more Chinmaya Mission classes, I noticed that while both groups were focused on self-development, rooted in the Hindu scriptures and a shared goal of reviving Hindu culture, there were sharp differences in terms of their rhetoric, constituencies, organizational and logistical structure, use of media and technology, mode and language of communication, and in the scope of their activities. Although I did not come across any scholarship on the Chinmaya Mission while preparing for fieldwork, I decided to incorporate it into my research as its similarities and differences to Swadhyaya made it a compelling point of comparison.⁹⁸ Research on the Chinmaya Mission, however limited, has helped me to think of modern religious movements and the modern experience of

⁹⁷ The Ramakrishna Mission also offers weekly classes on the *Bhagavad Gītā* where one hears about character development but it is not the driving force of the movement. The project of self-development is central to Swadhyaya and the Chinmaya Mission.

⁹⁸ For example, while the Chinmaya Mission uses mass publicity for its events, for example in its use of newspaper advertisements and posters, facebook, twitter, etc., and Swadhyaya uses no form of external publicity, the numbers in Swadhyaya overwhelmingly outweigh attendance at the Chinmaya Mission.

religion not just in terms of ethical practice, but more broadly, in relation to everyday practical living. It also helped provide a more critical perspective on Swadhyaya for me both as a former participant and as a researcher. I hope that this will reflect in the pages that follow.

Swadhyaya consists of a number of core activities conducted at local Swadhyaya centers throughout India and the world on a weekly basis where individuals come into contact with its teachings. While all of the activities are conducted in a similar manner following the format and instructions passed down from the central administration, and the teachings remain the same everywhere, the particular localities in which they take place present different contexts for study. I chose to research Swadhyaya participants and activities in Mumbai, India because Mumbai presents an ideal context to study the intersection of religion and modern selfhood in India as it is at the forefront of modernization in Indian society. Furthermore, Mumbai is home to the foundation of Swadhyaya, the Shrimad Bhagavad Gītā Pāṭhaśālā, where the founder, Pandurang Śāstri Athavale, delivered lectures for several decades and has some of the oldest Swadhyaya participants who were involved in Swadhyaya while Athavale was alive. I researched four primary Swadhyaya activities (1) *Video Kendra* (viewings of the founder's lectures), (2) *Yuvatī Kendra* (youth center), (3) *Mahilā Kendra* (center for women) and (4) *Bhāvpheri* (devotional visits).

The central activity in Swadhyaya is the viewing of the founder's lectures (*pravachan*). Athavale delivered lectures on the Hindu scriptures at the Shrimad Bhagavad Gītā Pāṭhaśālā (hereon, Pāṭhaśālā) from 1942 to 2003. These lectures were delivered in Hindi, Gujarati, and Marathi. Since his passing, video-recordings of

Athavale's lectures are viewed at the Pāṭhaśālā every Sunday morning from 10 -11 am.⁹⁹ The Pāṭhaśālā was set up by Athavale's father, Vaijnath Śāstri Athavale, in 1926 to revive and propagate Vedic culture and was passed down to him in 1942. Approximately 2,000 people now gather to listen to the weekly discourses. Two large screens along with a few small televisions are set up around the Pāṭhaśālā, an old building that consists of a main floor where the lectures were originally delivered from a dais, *Vyāsapīṭha*, and a ground floor that serves as additional space to seat participants.

In addition to the Pāṭhaśālā, Athavale's discourses are viewed weekly at local centers known as *Video Kendra*. *Video Kendra* primarily takes place in spaces rented from schools and local temples. Swadhyaya does not own private centers used exclusively for Swadhyaya activity except for the Pāṭhaśālā and its education institute, Tattvajñāna Vidyāpith, in Thane, Mumbai. Athavale's lectures can only be viewed at the Pāṭhaśālā or during *Video Kendra* and are not available for purchase. Unlike most other contemporary Indian religious movements that sell DVDs or audio recordings of the leader's lectures, Athavale's recordings are not available for purchase nor are they broadcasted on television. They can only be seen at a Swadhyaya center on the designated day and hour of the week. Participants explained that a certain sanctity and respect for their *guru* is upheld by not allowing lectures to be bought and seen at one's leisure. They also emphasized the importance of coming together to meet one another and developing an intimate relationship as discussed in Chapter Two as well as for dissolving one's ego as I illustrate in Chapter Three.

⁹⁹ The recordings shown at Pāṭhaśālā every Sunday are of his Hindi lectures. Additionally, his Marathi lectures are shown twice each month on the day of *Ekādaṣi*.

I attended the viewing of Athavale’s lectures at Pāṭhaśālā every Sunday and at a local *Video Kendra* reputed to be one of the most active Swadhyaya centers in Mumbai.¹⁰⁰ While Pāṭhaśālā represents the larger Swadhyaya community, *Video Kendra* consists of a significantly smaller group of individuals that often work together in planning, preparing, and facilitating Swadhyaya events at the local level. The *Video Kendra* that I attended had anywhere from 50-75 attendees each week and lasted for one hour.¹⁰¹ It took place in an outdoor hall of a school and was constituted by people from both the lower class—for example, individuals living in slums and chawls—and lower castes as well as average middle class families.¹⁰² Participants sat on cotton sheets spread across the concrete floor under a few fans. Women and men sat on opposite sides, some with notebooks ready to take notes on Athavale’s lectures, and almost all of who were found waving off mosquitoes at some point during the lecture! Typically, a small number of participants, mainly those in charge of facilitating the activity and their spouses, would be present on time while the rest trickled in during the course of the hour.

The activity would begin promptly at 9:15 pm with the recitation of a Sanskrit prayer led by one of the female participants, regardless of the number of attendees present.¹⁰³ Following the cue, everyone else would join in the recitation of the prayer.

¹⁰⁰ I do not name the specific suburb here to protect the confidentiality of my informants. In the dissertation, I replace actual names with pseudonyms for this reason as well.

¹⁰¹ Initially, I attended four different *Video Kendras* each of which took place on a different night of the week anywhere from 9-11 pm. I decided to continue observing at the video center closest to my residence due to safety concerns.

¹⁰² As I describe below, this is in sharp contrast to the Chinmaya Mission where all members are from middle and upper middle class backgrounds.

¹⁰³ This prayer is recited at the beginning of almost all Swadhyaya activities; the verse is drawn from the Sanskrit hymn, *Kṛṣṇāṣṭakam*, devoted to the Hindu deity Kṛṣṇa, and composed by the eighth century Advaitan saint, Ādi Śaṅkara. It is: “*Vasudeva sutam devam, kamsa cānura*

The prayer was followed by the singing of a devotional song, known as *bhāvgīt*, which was then followed by the recitation of a Sanskrit hymn (*stotra*) from the Swadhyaya prayer book, *Prārthanā Prīti*, and select verses from the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Many of the participants carried their own *Prārthanā Prīti* and the *Bhagavad Gītā* in order to follow along. After the recitation was completed, the video player was switched on to view Athavale's lecture. Athavale begins with a short benediction, followed by the recitation of the particular verse that will be the basis for his lecture, and continues with an hour-long discourse. The discourse ends with another short prayer after which the video was turned off. The activity ended with the singing of *ārati*. While *ārati* is traditionally performed by revolving a plate with a light (*divo*) in a circular motion in front of an idol, it was typically sung by itself in Swadhyaya. On some days, *ārati* was sung along with a video recording of Athavale and his wife performing *ārati* at the Swadhyaya temple at Tattvajñāna Vidyāpith.¹⁰⁴

The lecture was viewed on a small television set and speakers were set up around the hall. Besides the television set, there was a set of pictures of four Hindu deities seen at each Swadhyaya activity and arranged in the following order: Yogeśvar, Śiva, Pārvati

mardanaṃ, devaki paramānandaṃ kṛṣṇaṃ vande jagad gurum." This verse is also a part of the prayers recited in the Chinmaya Mission. It constitutes the fifth verse of the *Gītā Dhyānam* found at the beginning of Swami Chinmayānanda's commentary of the *Bhagavad Gītā* and is recited at the beginning of study classes and lectures on the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Swami Chinmayānanda, *The Bhagavad Gita: Chapters I and II* (Mumbai: Central Chinmaya Mission Trust, 2008), 1-26.

¹⁰⁴ The same format is followed in all Video Kendras in India and across the world. John Little has argued that the use of video technology has enabled Swadhyaya to become a transnational religious movement centered on a sacred communal experience that traditionally depended on the physical presence of a sacred teacher. Little, *Video Vacana*, 256.

with baby Ganeśa, and Athavale.¹⁰⁵ I listened carefully and wrote down the lecture as accurately as I could remember and write while all the people around me looked with intrigue at my attempt to write down as much as possible along with my odd style of holding a pen. By the end of my year, everyone in this *Video Kendra* was aware of the way I held my pen! Due to the impossibility of transcribing the lectures verbatim, combined with the prohibition of recording devices, the slowness in my writing speed and, at times, my inability to grasp or understand what was being said at the very moment it was being said, my notes and understanding remain incomplete. Although the reasons for not permitting video or tape recording were not made explicit, there was a general concern for how the material would be utilized outside of its given context. As I discuss in more detail in Chapter One, the privatization of knowledge is quite conspicuous in Swadhyaya and in sharp contrast to the kind of open access found in the Chinmaya Mission.

Second, I conducted participant observation at two *Mahilā Kendras*. *Mahilā Kendra* is an hour-long activity that takes place on a weekly basis throughout the year except during the months of May and June. It is designated specifically for women, especially new women, as a way of introduction to Swadhyaya. One of the older facilitators of these groups explained that *Mahilā Kendra* serves as the starting point for Swadhyaya activity in many locations where Swadhyaya does not exist. Not all women who attend *Mahilā Kendra* attend the local *Video Kendra* to view Athavale's lectures and

¹⁰⁵ *Yogeśvar*, one of the names attributed to the Hindu deity, Viṣṇu, in Chapter 11 (*Viśvarūpa Darśan Yoga*) of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, is the main deity in Swadhyaya. However, *Yogeśvar* is accompanied by *Śiva*, *Pārvati* and *Ganeśa* in the Swadhyaya pantheon. In this way, Swadhyaya aims to transcend sectarian differences.

for some, it is their only point of contact with Swadhyaya. *Mahilā Kendra* follows the same format of *Video Kendra* except that the video recording of Athavale's lectures is replaced with a live lecture (*cintanikā*) by a female facilitator. The recitation of prayers and hymns and the singing of *bhāvgīt* last for about thirty minutes and a lecture is presented in the remaining thirty minutes. *Mahilā Kendra* follows a particular syllabus based on a sequence of books that are available for sale at Swadhyaya centers.¹⁰⁶ The subject in both of the *Mahilā Kendras* where I conducted participant observation was the *Mahābhārata* along with occasional lectures on Indian festivals. In particular, characters from the *Mahābhārata* were used to discuss different virtues over the course of the year.

The *Mahilā Kendras* were located in two very different communities and constituted by two different strata of society. One was located within a chawl community consisting of emigrants from rural Gujarat.¹⁰⁷ All of the people living there were farmers originally but migrated to Mumbai for better job opportunities. The men are the primary and only income earners in these families and run small clothing businesses. The women in this community are housewives and most were illiterate with the exception of one or two women who attended school up to the eighth grade. As one woman explained, she has never seen the inside of a school building. Similar to the women, the men of this community have received very little education if any. Approximately 30-35 women

¹⁰⁶ These books are also the subject of the annual Swadhyaya exam. However, they were unavailable at the time of my fieldwork. One participant explained that the entire stock of Swadhyaya literature was undergoing editorial work.

¹⁰⁷ A chawl is a type of living arrangement in India occupied primarily by people from lower socio-economic backgrounds. This particular chawl was different from the more common type of chawls in India found in the form of a building with a number of tenements. Most of the homes in this chawl consisted of one room that functioned as a living, dining and sleeping space, and a kitchen. Some had a second floor that I learned was built illegally.

attended this *Mahilā Kendra* regularly, a handful of which were key informants. The second *Mahilā Kendra* took place in the parking lot of a posh community and was constituted by middle-class women, the majority of whom have completed college. There were 10-12 participants on average. Most of the women in this center were much older than the women at the other *Mahilā Kendra* and relatively new to Swadhyaya. In addition, I attended two other *Mahilā Kendras* when time permitted. The current leader of Swadhyaya, Jayshree Talwalkar, conducted one at the Pāṭhaśālā; the wife of one of my key informants led the second one. While the local *Mahilā Kendras* had a much smaller attendance, the one conducted at Pāṭhaśālā had 250-300 regular attendees. There is no counterpart activity for males.

Third, I observed two *Yuvatī Kendras*. Like *Mahilā Kendra*, *Yuvatī Kendra* is an all-female activity but for younger women between the ages of 16-30, and follows a specific syllabus as well. There is a male counterpart known as *Yuvā Kendra* that I was not able to gain access to as a female.¹⁰⁸ *Yuvatī Kendra* was described as a platform for

¹⁰⁸ According to the Swadhyaya website, there are 15,000 youth centers around the world including India, the United States, United Kingdom, Singapore and the Middle East. In India, *Yuvā Kendra* is present in the states of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Hariyana, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. One of the primary *Yuvā Kendra* activities includes an annual speech competition on the *Bhagavad Gītā*, known as “*Geeta Jayanti*.” The number of participants last recorded for this competition is 2.2 million. See, Sanskriti Vistarak Sangh, “Swadhyaya Parivar and the Power of Youth,” and “Recent News,” last modified 2010, accessed April 1, 2014. <http://www.swadhyay.org/index.htm>. During the Swadhyaya celebration of India’s Republic Day, also known as Yogeshwar Day, that took place at Pāṭhaśālā on January 20, 2013, it was announced that 3.3 million (33 lakh) individuals participated in the 2012 competition. In a similar way, the Chinmaya Mission has a local, regional, national and international Gita Chanting Competition that is open to individuals of all ages and has included over 6 million participants since its beginning in the 1980s, according to the organization’s website. Similar to Swadhyaya, the purpose of the competition is to inspire individuals to learn *Gītā* verses and to apply them in their own lives. “What we do,” Central Chinmaya Mission Trust, 2014. Accessed January 1, 2014. <http://www.chinmayamission.com/balavihar.php>

young people to engage in meaningful discussions about culture, religion, and contemporary life. Each week, the topic of discussion alternates between three main categories: the study of historical characters, both Indian and non-Indian, the study of different virtues, and debates on various topics. A few group leaders, usually two to three, chosen by those before them facilitate the activity. The topic of the day is preceded by the singing of devotional songs and followed by the recitation of Sanskrit *stotras* similar to *Mahilā Kendra*. The sessions also include games, quizzes and a thought of the day recited at the end.

The Yuvatī Kendras that I researched took place in the homes of one of the facilitators in both groups. One Yuvatī Kendra was located in the same chawl community where I researched one of the *Mahilā Kendras*. The other was located in the home of a middle class Swadhyaya family and the majority of the ten to fifteen women who attended were also from middle class backgrounds. When I began attending initially, more than half of the participants were married and some had children. They had completed college and most were housewives. There were also a handful of younger girls who were either in the equivalent of junior and senior year of high school, or in college or recently graduated and working. Towards the end, there were almost as many younger girls as young wives and young mothers in the room. In contrast, young married women many of whom attended three or four years of school and younger girls who stopped attending school after the twelfth grade constituted the same activity located in the chawls.

While I was able to regularly conduct participant observation at the above activities, my research of *bhāvpheri* took place more sporadically depending on when I

was able to participate. I was unable to participate in the weekly *bhāvpheri* conducted by the members of my local *Video Kendra* due to certain women-specific rules set by Swadhyaya.¹⁰⁹ However, I was able to join *bhāvpheri* groups on other occasions. I accompanied a group of local and nonlocal Swadhyayis¹¹⁰ on a weeklong *bhāvpheri* conducted in celebration of the founder’s birthday. In the last few months of fieldwork, a new *bhāvpheri* project, *Ekādaśi bhāvpheri* was introduced to the women of my local center. It took place twice a month on *Ekādaśi*.¹¹¹ I participated in these visits paying close attention to what was being said and how it was received. I also spoke to male participants who participated in regular *bhaktiphari* once a month and others who previously took part in it to understand the reasons for their engagement. As I show in Chapter Two, I paid close attention to how individuals described what they were doing and the reason behind it in order to understand how and why *bhāvpheri* is perceived as a practice of self-development.

In addition to these primary activities, I attended various Swadhyaya events. The first was the celebration of the arrival of spring, known as *Vasanta Utsav*. This event is mainly focused on and celebrated by the children who attend *Bāl Saṃskār Kendra*. It is

¹⁰⁹ For example, I was told that as a single female, I would not be to accompany a group consisting entirely of males without the presence of another older female.

¹¹⁰ The term “Swadhyayis” refers to Swadhyaya participants.

¹¹¹ *Ekādaśī* is a traditional day of fast observed by Hindus and falls on each bright and dark fortnight of every month of the Hindu calendar. According to Athavale, the “true” meaning of fasting on *Ekādaśī* is to offer our five sense organs, motor organs and the mind, a total of 11 parts of our personality to God and not simply refrain from eating certain foods as traditionally done. Swadhyayis observe *Ekādaśī* by doing *bhāvpheri* on that day. Those who are working and cannot do *bhāvpheri* when *Ekādaśī* falls on a working day offer their day’s earning in the service of God. See Sat Vicar Darshan, *The Systems: The Way and the Work* (Mumbai: Sat Vichar Darshan, 1994), 30. The *Ekādaśī bhāvpheri* referred to above is a recent activity created specifically for women. The idea is to dedicate each *Ekādaśī* day, from 9 am to 5 pm, to doing *bhāvpheri*. The group of women whom I joined for this activity typically went from 10 am to 5 pm.

an event primarily organized and facilitated by Swadhyaya women who conduct classes for these children. The second event was *Pāthutsav*, a major celebration among Swadhyayis of the anniversary of the day on which the idols of the three central deities were installed and consecrated at the central temple of Swadhyaya. This event was preceded by days of preparation by both the men and women. I regularly attended the preparation sessions held at different homes where women met to make decorations and where I was able to begin conversing with some of these people in an informal setting.

Chinmaya Mission

The Chinmaya Mission conducts various activities to impart the philosophy of Advaita Vedānta. I conducted research at three of these activities: 1. *Jñāna Yajña*; 2. *Yuvā Kendra*; and 3. *Pravachans* (lectures) and Study Classes.¹¹² The core Chinmaya Mission activity is the *Jñāna Yajña*, a series of public talks on different scriptural texts including the *Bhagavad Gītā*, *Upaniṣads*, *Śrīmad Bhagavatam* and the *Rāmcaritmānas* that take place throughout India and around the world and used to “invigourate and inspire the

¹¹² During the course of fieldwork, I focused on practices that the majority of lay participants engage in. In addition to these, the Chinmaya Mission offers a number of courses including a residential Vedanta course, a postal and E-Vedanta course, a two-week and six-week residential Vedanta course for householders interested in an intensive study of the scriptures known as the *Dharma Sevak Course*, and a *Purohita Course* that trains priests in the “correct” performance of rituals. The Chinmaya Mission also has a number of schools (76) and colleges (7) and an International Residential School that constitute the Chinmaya Education Movement that began in 1967. These schools provide an academic education combined with spiritual knowledge rooted in Vedantic philosophy and Indian culture. The Chinmaya Mission also has several institutes including the Chinmaya International Foundation—a research facility for the advanced study of Indology and Sanskrit—a hospital in Bangalore including a diploma program for nurses, and the Chinmaya Institute of Management that avails management training modules to the corporate sector.

masses for Vedantic scriptural studies and consequent contemplation on them.”¹¹³ Traditionally in Hinduism, “*yajña*” refers to a Vedic ritual in which oblations are made to a ritual fire, *Agñi*, and accompanied by the singing of Sanskrit hymns. Drawing on this idea, the Chinmaya Mission describes a *jñāna yajña* in the following way: “Scriptural study, and regular contemplation on the deeper import of the teachings heard, kindles the fire of knowledge in an intelligent spiritual seeker, who thereafter offers his false values and negative tendencies as his oblations into this fire.” They were originally conducted by the founder, Swāmi Chinmayānanda, who delivered the first public discourse in 1951 in Pune, India, and continue to be conducted by the current leader, Swāmi Tejomayānanda, and trained *āchāryas* (teachers) of the mission.¹¹⁴ Swāmi Chinmayānanda conducted 576 *jñāna yajñas* during his lifetime.¹¹⁵ Earlier, Swāmi Chinmayānanda conducted lecture series that were 30 to 40 days long. Now, they are much shorter lasting not more than one week and consist of 60-90 minute early morning

¹¹³ Central Chinmaya Mission Trust, “Chinmaya Jnana Yajnas,” *Activities*, accessed April 15, 2014. <http://www.chinmayamission.com/jnana-yagnas.php>. Although the *yajñas* are free of charge, participant are often encouraged to offer a *guru dakṣiṇā*, a monetary offering, to the teacher on the last day of the *yajña*. During each of the *yajñas* that I attended, those who offered *guru dakṣiṇā* were given “*prasād*” in the form of a small Chinmaya Mission booklet.

¹¹⁴ The Chinmaya Mission has established an educational institute in Bombay at the Sandeepany Sandhyalaya Ashram, which hosts a two-year residential Vedanta course used to train future male and female *āchāryas* (teachers) of the mission. After completing this course, individuals decide between serving the mission and returning home. Those who decide on the former are initiated into the Chinmaya Mission monastic order as *brahmachārins* (celibate teachers) and are given a new first name and the last name, “Chaitanya.” They are placed at different Mission centers throughout India and the world and assigned a particular responsibility. The title “*Swāmi*” (for males) or “*Swāmini*” (for females) is given to those initiated into the *Sannyāsa* order upon selection by the head of the Chinmaya Mission. *Swāmis* are considered more advanced in their level of spirituality and are distinguished from *brahmachārins* through their orange colored robes; *brahmachārins* wear yellow. One of the centers I observed was headed by a *brahmachārini* (a female celibate) and the second center by a *swāmi*.

¹¹⁵ Central Chinmaya Mission Trust, “Swami Chinmayananda,” *Who We Are*, accessed April 15, 2014. <http://www.chinmayamission.com/swami-chinmayananda.php>

and/or evening talks. I attended four 3-day and two 5-day *jñāna yajñas*. These public talks took place in various locations including a college auditorium, gardens, and rented halls as well as at official centers owned by the Chinmaya Mission.

My research on the Chinmaya Mission began at one of the local centers in the same suburb where I conducted research on Swadhyaya, but in a different locality. This center was in a converted apartment owned by the Mission and all of the participants were from middle and upper-middle class English-speaking families. This center also served as the home of the *āchārya* who was in charge of it. Each of the centers that I attended were air-conditioned, modernized, and had built-in bookshelves that showcased the large number of books produced by the Chinmaya Mission and available for purchase.¹¹⁶ There was a small stage in the front of both of the centers that I observed where a large picture of Swāmi Chinmayānanda was placed. This center also had an idol of the Hindu deity, Kṛṣṇa, on the stage while the second center had an idol of *Ganeśa*. I attended as many of the classes offered by the *āchārya* there. Each of these classes was devoted to the teaching of a particular text; they included *Bhaja Govindam* by Ādi Śaṅkarāchārya, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, and the *Rāmāyaṇa*. While these classes were co-ed, I also attended a women's only class, known as *Devi Group*, led by the same *āchārya* on another text by Ādi Śaṅkarāchārya, *Vivekachūḍāmaṇi*.

¹¹⁶ For example, based on an official Chinmaya Mission book price list, there are 120 books in Hindi and 99 books in Marathi. There are a larger number of books in English as well. In addition, the Chinmaya Mission publishes monthly international magazines for children, youth, and adults as well as local pamphlets. All Chinmaya Mission happenings can be found in the magazine, *Tapovan Prasad*. The prices of these books along with DVDs reflect the movement's upper-class constituency. For example, DVDs of Swami Chinmayananda's lectures on the *Bhagavad Gītā* are priced at \$500.

Each of these classes followed the same format and lasted anywhere between 1-1.5 hours. They began with the recitation of “Om” three times, followed by a short prayer, followed by the main lecture, and ended with another short prayer. Interestingly, the prayer said at the beginning of Chinmaya Mission classes is the same as the prayer said by Athavale at the end of his discourses, and the ending prayer of the former is recited at the beginning of Athavale’s discourses.¹¹⁷ The first group of classes took place at the mission center and the Devi Group class took place at the home of one of the participants who was also the vice-president of that local mission center. Towards the end of my fieldwork, I also attended the viewing of a recorded series of talks on the *Bhagavad Gītā* by Swāmi Chinmayānanda that were screened on a weekly basis. This class, however, was cancelled shortly after it began due to other upcoming Chinmaya Mission events. Anywhere from five to twenty individuals attended these classes. While these classes take place on a weekly basis, they end at the end of each text that is being studied and the start of new classes is contingent on the *āchārya* as well as public demand, something pointed out to me by a particular *āchārya*. This is different from the consistency and regularity with which the weekly *Video Kendra*, *Mahilā Kendra* and *Yuvatī Kendra* take place in Swadhyaya.

In addition to these classes, I researched “study group” classes where participants do an in-depth study of a particular Vedāntic text for which there is a given sequence. Participants are encouraged to follow this sequence and discouraged from jumping to a

¹¹⁷ These are “*Om pūrṇamada pūrṇamidaṃ pūrṇāt pūrnamudacyate pūrṇasya pūrṇamādāya pūrṇam eva vaśiṣyate*” and “*Om saha nāvavatu, saha nau bhunaktu, saha vīryaṃ karavāvahai tejasvināvadhitamastu mā vidviṣāvahai, om śāntiḥ śāntiḥ śāntiḥ.*” The former is from the *Ísavāsya Upaniṣad* and the latter is from the *Katha Upaniṣad*. This is not new however, as *śānti mantras* are generally said at the beginning and end of religious discourses in India.

“higher” level text before studying the fundamentals. These texts consist of Swāmi Chinmayānanda’s commentaries on various texts by Ādi Śaṅkarāchārya including *Tattvabodha*, *Ātmabodha*, *Bhaja Govindam*, *Vivekachūdāmaṇi*, the *Bhagavad Gītā* and the *Upaniṣads*, as well as some original texts including *Kindle Life* and *Self-Unfoldment*. While the former classes take the form of a lecture, “study group” classes involve group discussions on a particular text. I attended a few sessions of a study group class on the *Īśavāsyā Upaniṣad* at another local center located in the most expensive part of Bombay. The constituents at both of these centers came from upper middle and upper class families.

In addition, I researched the *Yuvā Kendra* activity at the latter center. *Yuvā Kendra* represents the youth wing of Chinmaya Mission, similar to the *Yuvā Kendra* in Swadhyaya. It is a weekly class conducted for individuals between the ages of 16-28. The particular class was a 1.5-hour discussion on a book written by Swāmi Chinmayānanda, *Self-Unfoldment*. I attended this class and one other class at the Sandeepany Sandhyalaya for youth, both of which were discontinued due to low attendance shortly after I joined. In this respect, unlike my yearlong attendance at Swadhyaya classes, my attendance at Chinmaya Mission classes was limited to a shorter time frame because I incorporated the study of Chinmaya Mission a few months into my research, but also because of the lack of regularity of Chinmaya Mission classes.

Furthermore, while lectures and study classes are conducted both in English and vernacular languages including Hindi and Gujarati, English is the primary mode of communication in the Chinmaya Mission. All of the *yajñas* and classes that I attended, except for one lecture class, were conducted in English and all communication between

members took place in English as well. In fact, many of my Chinmaya Mission informants explained that they felt more comfortable with English and preferred listening to lectures on the scriptures in English. This was one of the primary reasons why they found the Chinmaya Mission appealing. All of the Chinmaya Mission members in Mumbai came from well-educated families and showed a strong command of English. This was strikingly different from the majority of Swadhyaya participants very few of whom were fluent in speaking English and some who were illiterate. In this respect, while the Chinmaya Mission is open to all, it explicitly targets the educated and elite classes of Indian society.¹¹⁸

Many of the Chinmaya Mission study groups that I attended or came to know about through conversations with class facilitators were primarily run and populated by women. In the two centers that I observed closely in Mumbai, it was the women who did the majority, if not all of the planning, coordinating, and facilitating of events. There were various possible reasons that contributed to this. For example, the predominant culture of “housewives” in India allows women more time to get involved in extra-curricular activities. This along with the fact that most working men in India, and especially in Mumbai, do not come home until after 9 pm are significant in explaining possible reasons why more women were involved than men in activities that took place during the weekdays. However, with the exception of one female member who explicitly said that her husband is not interested in “this kind of stuff,” it was not clear whether

¹¹⁸ This is not my own claim, but something that was explained to me by Chinmaya Mission members. The *āchāryas* explained that Chinmayānandaji targeted the educated classes of society based on the notion that if these ideas are absorbed and practiced by them, the rest of society will follow.

there was an actual gender divide in terms of interest in this subject matter. For example, Chinmaya Mission zonal meetings and the *jñāna yajñas* had a seemingly equal presence of men and women. Moreover, the majority of the individuals who come to train to become *āchāryas* of the Chinmaya Mission in the two-year residential Vedanta program were male.

While women typically oversaw many of the local *yajñas* and activities in the Chinmaya Mission in Mumbai and played various administrative roles like president and vice president, men were in charge of most of the administration and facilitation of Swadhyaya activities with the exception of female specific activities like *Mahilā Kendra* and *Bāl Saṃskār Kendra*. In this regard, one of the interesting differences between Swadhyaya and Chinmaya Mission activities was that many of the weekly Swadhyaya activities and meetings were scheduled fairly late, most beginning after 9 pm, as a way to accommodate the working schedules of male participants. While the late hours helped accommodate men, it restricted, to some extent, participation by women who were either living in joint families where they were the only Swadhyaya members and did not have family support or for single women for whom it was unsafe to travel alone during those hours. For example, as a single woman in Mumbai, there were many instances where I was not able to attend certain Swadhyaya activities because of the late timings and related safety concerns. For this very reason, *Mahilā Kendra* took place during the afternoon.

The gender hierarchy in Swadhyaya's administration did not affect my research primarily because my project focuses more on the everyday aspects of the movements, particularly conversations and interviews with everyday lay participants, and less on the organizational and institutional dimensions of Swadhyaya. However, Swadhyaya's

traditional attitude towards gender relations affected, to some extent, the scope of my research and this dissertation. While I was able to interview a number of male Swadhyaya participants, my daily interaction and participant observation took place with and among female participants and activities. I also did not have access to male-specific activities like *Yuvā Kendra*. In a similar way, although there were no gender-specific restrictions in the Chinmaya Mission, which in many ways is more liberal than Swadhyaya, the fact that most of the Mission's weekly activities were facilitated and heavily populated by women has resulted in an unintentional but apparent emphasis on female participants in the dissertation.

In Chapter One, I show how three practices central to Swadhyaya constitute an integral aspect of the ethical cultivation of participants, and the centrality of the notion of self-development to a particular conception of the human rooted in Hindu philosophy and soteriology. I show how participation in these practices both initiates and facilitates the ethical formation of its participants and argue that the appeal of these practices of self-cultivation lie in them being understood as a means to be human. I also argue that being human not only consists in the cultivation of the self but also in the recognition of the difficulty and failure to do so.

In Chapter Two, I focus on the virtue of selflessness central to Swadhyaya's theory and praxis and argue that while selflessness is intimately connected to a particular theory and practice of religiosity, its appeal must be understood in relation to what is perceived as a moral problem in modernity. I argue that the notion of an indwelling God is seen as a compelling foundation for self-fashioning because of the ways in which it enables one to relate meaningfully to the other. Moreover, I show that the practice of

bhāvpheri is a crucial aspect of the construction and experience of a particular self-identity where the self is understood as fundamentally related to the other, as well as an effort to build selfless relationships, thereby problematizing the primacy given to individualism in the scholarship on the modern self.

In Chapter Three, I illustrate the ways in which the virtue of gratitude is perceived as central to what it means to be human and show that the practice of gratitude is central to the experience and construction of a certain kind of self-identity rooted in theistic sources and one that requires the acceptance of the self's dependency on an "other." I argue that the appeal of the latter lies in the kind of ethical being it facilitates. I illustrate how acts of gratitude instill a sense of greater purpose in life while facilitating the cultivation of humility perceived as lacking in contemporary society. In addition, I illustrate how specific acts of gratitude in Swadhyaya and the Chinmaya Mission are closely linked to the practice of reducing one's ego and working in unity with others, both of which challenge the notions of self-sufficient humanism and individualism seen as central to the modern understanding of the self.

Finally, in Chapter Four, I illustrate three ways in which religion is understood and perceived by participants and argue that these are key to understanding the appeal of theistic sources. Based on various examples from everyday life, I demonstrate how the scriptures come to be perceived as a source for a "life-oriented education." I illustrate the role of theistic textual sources in different aspects of everyday life, and argue that the appeal of the movements and scriptural sources does not only lie in the contrast it offers to the values and lifestyle espoused by modernity, but also in the way that it facilitates daily practical living. I demonstrate how Athavale's discourses on the *Bhagavad Gītā*,

Veda, and the *Upaniṣads* are incorporated into the everyday dynamics of family life and used as a guide for creating healthier relationships. Along with the teachings, specific practices prescribed in Swadhyaya such as the *Mādhav Vrund* experiment and the recitation of Sanskrit verses through the medium of *prārthanā* are seen as a source for improving family life. In a similar way, I illustrate how the scriptures come to be seen as a useful source for handling and managing the contingencies and complexities of everyday life such as work pressure and family emergencies. In the second part of this chapter, I demonstrate how Athavale's teachings, particularly the notion of an indwelling God, are seen as a source for human dignity (*asmitā*) and inner strength that provides a new sense of self, and argue that it is this new sense of self, which enables one to transcend the contingencies of everyday life engendered by one's socio-economic status or one's caste, for instance, and to deal with life in general, that explains the appeal of Swadhyaya teachings and practices.

Scholars have recently pointed out that Religious Studies is at a crossroads.¹¹⁹ On the one hand, scholars of religion have deconstructed many of the central categories and terms that it once took for granted. This is evident, for example, in the subfield of modern Hinduism as demonstrated earlier. On the other hand, there is the recognition that religion continues to play an important role in the everyday lives of millions of people in India and around the world contrary to predictions of a disenchanted modernity. How then does one explain, "what religion does to and for" people and communities?¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ Robert Orsi, ed, *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 1.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

The chapters that follow are based on my research at each of the primary activities of the Swadhyaya and Chinmaya Mission movements and the many conversations I had with participants. Following scholars like Leela Prasad and Veena Das, I try to illustrate the everyday lived experiences of religion and ethics among my informants as “religions are lived, and it is in their living, in the full and tragic necessities of people’s circumstances, that we encounter them, study and write about them, and compare them.”¹²¹ I show that while the notion of self-development is rooted within a larger discourse on Hindu religiosity and soteriology, the appeal of the teachings and practices of these movements cannot simply be understood in terms of a desire for salvation or an inherent religious impulse. The everyday lived experiences of participants show that the movements’ discourses provide a new way of understanding and perceiving the self that serves as a source for both ethical being and practical living.

¹²¹ Ibid., 13.

Chapter 1: Being and Becoming Human through Self-Cultivation

“*mānav mānav thai—etalu bas che*” (that a human lives like a human, that is enough)

Participants often said that “Dada made us humans” or “Dada brought humanity (*mānavatā*) to humans.”¹²² Others mentioned that Dada “took us from being animals (*paśutva*) to being humans (*mānavatva*).”¹²³ Many participants proudly proclaimed, “I am not an animal, I am not a bird, I am a human (*nāhaṃ paśu, nāhaṃ pakṣi, ahaṃ manuṣyaḥ*).” In this chapter, I begin by examining the notion of what it means to be human among Swadhyaya and Chinmaya Mission participants and illustrate how the concept of self-development (*jīvan vikās*) is rooted within a larger discourse on what it means to be human. Then, I show how participation in three primary Swadhyaya practices is perceived as contributing to the development of participants. I show that insofar as Swadhyaya practices are associated with self-cultivation, and self-cultivation is associated with being human, the practices are integral to what it means to be human and to live well among adherents. I demonstrate that for Swadhyaya participants, engagement in Swadhyaya is central to their self-cultivation and to what it means to be human and argue that the experience of religion in modernity cannot simply be understood in terms of belief or non-belief or as a matter of an inherent “religious impulse,” but in terms of ethical practice and an effort to practice a particular notion of

¹²² “Dada” is a Marathi term meaning elder brother and is used as the primary form for addressing or referring to Pandurang Śāstri Athavale. The suffix “ji” was often added to “Dada,” as in Dadaji, as a form of respect.

¹²³ “*Paśutva*” literally translates to the quality of being an animal and “*mānavatva*” to the quality of being human in Sanskrit.

what it means to be human.¹²⁴ I also argue that being human should not only be seen in terms of cultivating the self but also in the acknowledgement of the difficulty or failure to do so.

I'm Not an Animal!

Participants often contrasted themselves with the rest of society whose central tenet they described as “eat, drink and be merry (*khāvo pīvo majā karo*).” They described this lifestyle as a “materialistic life (*bhogvādi jīvan*),” and argued that such a life is no different from the life of an animal. In contrast, they perceived themselves as doing something more meaningful with their lives by engaging in the practices of the Swadhyaya and Chinmaya Mission movements. Participants argued that although one must certainly enjoy life, there must be something more, “a plus,” that differentiates their life from that of an animal or a life consumed by material and worldly enjoyment alone. For instance, Kiranbhai¹²⁵ said, “An animal life (*paśutva*) involves a life of eat, drink and be merry. One should have fun but not only do this. The development of the soul is also important. *Nāhaṃ paśu, nāhaṃ pakṣi, ahaṃ manuṣyah*. I am a human.”¹²⁶

In a similar way, Pritibahen from the Chinmaya Mission said, “Life is not here to be simply enjoyed. Life is here for a much higher purpose. If life were to be enjoyed, I

¹²⁴ I draw on the work of Talal Asad who has argued that any conception of religion as faith or belief precludes an understanding of the specific practices and forms of discipline through which religious subjects are formed. See, Talal Asad, "Reading a Modern Classic: W. C. Smith's 'The Meaning and End of Religion,'" *History of Religions* 40, no. 3 (2001): 205-222.

¹²⁵ The words “*bhai*” and “*bahen*” are Hindi words attached to the end of names to address a male as a brother and a female as a sister, respectively. Swadhyaya participants referred to each other as “*bhai*” and “*bahen*,” an important aspect for maintaining the family spirit (*parivār bhāvanā*) central to Swadhyaya. I discuss the latter in Chapter Two.

¹²⁶ While this is a transcription of a conversation that took place in Gujarati, the italicized phrase often repeated by participants and heard in Athavale’s lectures is in Sanskrit.

would be born a dog in a very rich family. Dogs are having a great time. What's wrong with a dog's life? But I'm here for a little bit more than that.”¹²⁷ Resonating Pritibahen's perspective that a life focused solely on worldly enjoyment does not constitute a human life, Kinaribahen spoke of the law of evolution based on the teachings of Athavale:

Dadaji (Athavale) speaks of the law of evolution. There are four ways in which a human being is born: law of evolution, law of attraction and repulsion, law of universal necessity, and one other. In law of evolution, you go from an amoeba to a human being. Through it, a human being is produced...But do you want to sustain your human birth or start back from an amoeba? The decision is in your hand. God has set up the human body such that you have the ability to decide. The choice is in your hands. You decide. As a mother, I give my son ten rupees. If he throws away, rips or spends the money on alcohol and cigarettes, I will not give him money again. Naturally, I will not give him money again. So similarly, *bhagavān* (God), the higher authority, is also my parent. He is also my mother and father. If after giving a human birth, if I only use it for worldly happiness (*bhautika sukha*), then there is material happiness in every *yonī* (life form).¹²⁸ So that higher authority will decide that if you only want this happiness, then go back to an amoeba. The choice is in your hand, but, God says be ready for the consequences. In between, God, that higher authority does not say anything. He does not tell you that you should do this. The higher authority has given you a certain number of years, 30, 40, 70. So after that, you have to decide what you will do in between those years. *Śaṅkarāchārya* wrote the *Śaṅkara Bhāṣya* at the age of 34. He achieved so much at such a young age. And when we die at the age of 70, we haven't done anything. So we have to decide what we are going to become. The choice is in your hands.

In a similar way, reflecting on her own life, Leelabahen said, “Before, I used to have fun going out. Even now, I enjoy going out but things have changed, little little...I was a normal, like they say, ‘*kyā khāyā, kyā piyā, mazā kiyā, picture mein gaye* (Ate great food, had great drinks, had fun, went to the movies)’...You should certainly do all that. It is not prohibited. You should certainly enjoy and have fun. But along with that your goal

¹²⁷ This is a transcription of an interview that took place in English. All interviews with Chinmaya Mission members took place in English unless otherwise noted.

¹²⁸ In Sanskrit, the word *yonī* means “vagina” or “womb” and represents the goddess Śakti in the Śākta traditions of India. It literally means “source” also. In Hindu philosophy, it is also used to refer to the different forms of life such as insects, fish, animals, etc. that a human being goes through before obtaining a human birth or *manuṣya yonī*.

becomes clearer in life. Even if you behave with someone in a certain way, at that time, it will come up that this behavior is not appropriate. It was not like that before.” She continued, “I have work. I have to go to my office. But, will I only to this? Do I just keep earning for bread and butter? What am I doing for my real goal in life?”

Participants like Kiranbhai, Kinaribahen and many others expressed a moral consciousness and attention towards how they are living their lives often contrasting it with what they perceived as the prevalent way of thinking about and approaching life in modern society. In particular, participants emphasized the importance of self-development (*jīvan vikās*) as a key distinguishing factor between a human and an animal. They explained that human birth is a rare phenomenon, something that takes place after many births. Sheilabahen, for example, explained that one obtains a human life after eighty-four million life forms including previous births as ants, sheep, and cows, something she learned through Athavale’s lectures.¹²⁹ And therefore, she said, “human life is the best (*manuṣya jīvan śreṣṭha*).”¹³⁰ The same idea was taught during a Chinmaya Mission class on an eighth century poem written by Ādi Śāṅkara called the *Vivekachūḍāmaṇi*.¹³¹ Following a word-by-word translation of the Sanskrit into English, the teacher (*āchārya*) explained that the first verse beginning with “*Jantunāṃ nara janma durlabham*,” states that among all creatures, human life is rare.¹³² The teacher expounded

¹²⁹ According to the *Vedas*, there are 84 million life forms, one of which is the human life.

¹³⁰ This view can be found in Pandurang Shastri Athavale, *Trikal Sandhya* (Sat Vichar Darshan Trust, 2009), 1.

¹³¹ This was a women’s only class known as *Devi Group* in the Chinmaya Mission.

¹³² This verse was also quoted by Pandurang Shastri Athavale to emphasize that human birth is rare and priceless (“*amulya*”). Other adjectives used to describe human birth include the best (*śreṣṭha*); God’s priceless gift to mankind, a result of God’s compassion (*prabhu kripā*) and of

that only humans have the ability to change their own destiny and drew attention to the way that individuals commonly use this rare opportunity. She said, “Our focus is not on improving myself and so we brood over non-essential matters.”¹³³ That is, since human birth is seen as a rare phenomenon, and only humans have the ability to develop, it becomes important to see that human life is not wasted.

In particular, participants explained that humans alone have a mind and an intellect that they must develop in order to be considered humans. This was reflected, for example, in the following explanation given by Sunilbhai on what it means to be a good human being (*sāro mānas*). He said,

First, what does a good human being mean? Before that, he needs to be a being. He needs to be a human being (*manuṣya*). Whom do you call a human being? According to the *Bhagavad Gītā*, “*āhāra* (eating), *nidrā* (sleep), *bhaya* (fear), *maithun* (sex).”¹³⁴ Dadaji says that these four things are common to all living things in this world. The *Bhagavad Gītā* does not consider a man who only does these four things a human being. This is an animal (*jānavar*). A human being is different. Why? Because a human being has a mind (*manas*) and an intellect (*buddhi*) that other living things don’t have. Now the mind and intellect that have been given by God are common to all mankind. God also gave man the power (*śakti*) to make the mind *progressive*. When a person is born, how developed is his mind? 0.1%. Then when he turns five, it is 1%; when he is ten, it is 2 %, etc. If his mind develops like this, then we will call him a developed human. If a seventeen-year-old person thinks the same way as a seven year old, then can we call the former developed? No. Will we call him a human being (*manuṣya*)? No...So first and far most, a person should develop his or her *manas* and *buddhi*.¹³⁵

good actions performed in one’s previous birth. See, Pandurang Shastri Athavale, *Trikal Sandhya* (Mumbai: Sat Vichar Darshan Trust, 2009), 1-2.

¹³³ This class, like most of the other Chinmaya Mission classes took place in English. Thus, the quote is not a translation.

¹³⁴ He realized that the quote was not from the *Bhagavad Gītā* soon after he said it, but, unable to cite the correct textual source, he referenced Athavale from whom he had heard it. This verse is from the *Śrīmad Bhagvatam* and often cited in lectures and by participants. It is: *āhāra-nidrā-bhaya-maithunaṃ ca sāmānyam etat paśubhir narānāṃ dharmo hi teṣāṃ adhiko viśeṣo dharmeṇa hīnāḥ paśubhiḥ samānāḥ*. According to this verse, eating, drinking, fear and sex are common to both humans and animals. Religion is what makes humans unique and without religion, humans are the same as animals.

¹³⁵ This is a translation of an interview that took place in Hindi. The italicized English words were used by the participant himself.

For Sunilbhai and many other participants, the importance of developing the mind is understood in terms of what was perceived as the basic difference between humans and animals, namely, that humans have a mind and intellect and, more importantly, the ability to develop (*vikās*) and discriminate (*viveka śakti*). Snehabahen, for example said, “When I was born, let’s say I was on the fifth floor. So then living as a human being, did I go down to the third floor or up to the seventh floor? That is important. So that is called [a] human being. It is not possible to go upward or downward in all life forms (*yonis*) because the mind and intellect are not in every life form. Only humans have a mind and intellect.” While not all participants shared the view that humans alone have a mind and intellect, they agreed that only humans have the capacity to cultivate themselves into a higher level of being. According to Kaminibahen, for example, “It is not that a dog does not have an intellect since when you give him food he will come to you and if you hit him with a stick he will back off. But we have the ability to think (*vicār śakti*). That is, I can become something, I can change.” Similarly, some other participants explained that a human is one who thinks, “*vicāraśīl*,” and one who has the capacity to think, “*mananāt manusyāḥ*.” The notions of changing and becoming both allude to the idea of development seen as a distinct ability among humans.¹³⁶

¹³⁶ This idea was reinforced during one of Athavale’s discourses where he explains that God took the form of a human being because unlike the sun, moon, mountains, etc., humans have the ability to become anything they want. He explains that the sun has been given its luster (*tejasvitā*); the moon has been given its calm nature (*śītalatā*), the mountain has been given its depth (*gambhirtā*), and a tree has been given stability (*sthiratā*) and that if a human being wants, he or she can acquire all of these things. Two other participants later repeated this conception of a human being during interviews. Pandurang Shastri Athavale, “*Ved Mantra*,” lecture 133, May 3, 1987. Seen June 18, 2012.

That the development of the mind is crucial to distinguishing between a human and animal was also expressed in the following. In particular, Leelabahen emphasized the importance of controlling the mind. She said,

There are many ways of looking at it but a very simple basic way would be, do I have to continue to be a slave to my mind? If I continue, if I am born that way, and by the time I die I am still giving into my animal instincts, then what is making me different from an animal? An animal is programmed to be in a particular way and cannot change his program. I also say that that's the way I am. Take it or leave it. And that's the way I die. Just because I have an intellect which gives me the ability to take decisions doesn't make me any smarter than the animal because anyway, that is something that nature has given me. What have I done with the intellect? So, I have to be able to go beyond basic animal tendencies. When I'm saying animal tendencies, it's just that if I have been born just to come enjoy life and die, if that is my only purpose of life, then what is differentiating me from an animal? Maybe the smartest animal? Maybe I can then compare myself with the smartest species that's available. But then I'm not really much smarter. I have to be able to go beyond that. If I'm able to go beyond that and not be a slave to everything that my mind says it must do and if I learn to control my mind and then learn to go beyond it, then I have served some kind of purpose of having been born a human. Otherwise I've wasted a human life.¹³⁷

In a similar manner, Shraddhabahen related the following story to emphasize the importance of controlling the mind. It was a story about the ancient saint Jaimini. There was a *śloka* in the *Veda* that was given to him by Veda Vyāsa that said that no matter how much control you have over the senses, it may lose control at times. So, Jaimini asked Vyāsa how this can be. That is, how can a person with such strong control over his mind become a victim of his senses? He didn't believe it. Later that evening, it was raining heavily and Jaimini was inside his hut. He noticed a young lady standing under his roof completely wet and a result of which her clothes had become transparent. So Jaimini became tempted and invited her in. He then asked her whether she was married or single. She told him that she was single but that she would only get married under one

¹³⁷ This is a transcription of a record interview with a Chinmaya Mission member that took place in English.

condition: if the guy she marries gets down on his four knees and carries her on his back around the *yajña* (sacred fire) for four rounds while imitating the sound of a donkey. He reasoned that no one else is looking and that it was no big deal in acting like an animal. So he got on his four knees and imitated a donkey for the first four rounds around the fire altar. As soon as he finished the lady disappeared and Vyāsa appeared. Shraddhabahen explained that Jaimini realized how even a person like himself which such strong control over the mind can slip and become a victim of his senses, and thereby behave like an animal.

Prior to telling this story, Shraddhabahen shared the following incident to elucidate this. She prefaced the story by telling us that she frequents her downstairs neighbor and shares Swadhyaya thoughts with her even though she is not a Swadhyayi. During a recent visit, the neighbor's house was going under reconstruction so Shraddhabahen asked her whether they would be using their shower. The lady told her that they are throwing it away and so Shraddhabahen asked for it since the one in her own house was not working well and her husband did not think that they needed one to begin with. Her neighbor gave her the showerhead but soon after taking it Shraddhabahen was disappointed at herself. She thought, "For all these years I have controlled my mind, how did I let it slip this time? How did I take something for free? How did I become *lāchār* (she explained this word as seeing something that someone else has and that one doesn't have and wanting it)?" She said that no matter how much control you have over your mind, the test of true mind control is how it acts in front of temptations. She said the true test is "*pralobhano ni sāme na jukvu* (to not fall in the face of temptations). *Manas nā lalchai*—to see something that you want and can have but don't take. This is the true test."

So a few days later she returned the showerhead and honestly admitted her mistake.¹³⁸

In both of these examples, the notion of developing the mind through controlling it is closely associated with what constitutes a human being and distinguishes him or her from an animal and I argue that it is this association between development and being human emphasized by the two movements that makes the teachings and practices a compelling guide for self-fashioning.

In addition, participants explained that the mind must be developed because it is the only thing that carries over from one birth to the next. Sheilabahen, for example, explained that only three things will go with her when she dies—her mind, intellect and action (*karma*)—and therefore, she needs to put in effort to purify them. This was resonated by another participant who explained that the mind is the only “vessel” that individuals bring with them when they come into this life and the only thing that they take with them when they leave and go to their next life. That is, when we are born, we begin right where we ended our previous life, referring to the state of the mind and intellect, and thus it is important to cultivate the mind in our current birth. She explained that the mind carries *saṃskāras* (imprints) from its previous births and is constantly

¹³⁸ In relating this experience, Shraddhabahen reflected the practice of introspection, *ātma-nirīkṣan*, central to the self-cultivating efforts and goals of Swadhyaya participants. This was the first time that I had met her. Other Swadhyayi women had told me that I should meet with Shraddhabahen and her husband for my research because they are a good exemplar of Swadhyaya thought and practice. After hearing this experience and many others during other conversations, I wondered whether it was this form of active introspection, consciousness of one’s actions, and efforts to practice what she has learned evident in Shraddhabahen’s life that made these other women see her as a good person for me to speak to. The experience shared above along with many others that she voluntarily shared in future meetings all reflected the same kind of critical reflection on her thoughts and actions, a practice of introspection, as well as an attempt to fix what she saw as a wrongdoing on her part. This form of introspection was also evident in another informant and is central to understanding what the development of the mind entails.

picking up imprints at each moment, both good and bad, and so one must purify and strengthen it. She said that the mind picks up so many imprints throughout the day that can act as “distractions” and so it is important to regularly purify the mind. This was summed up nicely by Vithalbhai who said, “In the process of becoming a human being, you have to do *vikās* (development). Where did the mind come from? It is the product of years and years of births and rebirths, *janma janmāntar*. It is five to ten thousand years old. We need to purify it. Make the mind pure (*śuddha*).”¹³⁹

The purification of the mind is also central to the Chinmaya Mission discourse, but its importance is framed in a somewhat different manner. According to the Chinmaya Mission, the contemporary predicament of human life is that one does not know his or her “true” identity, which is an unchanging essence known as *brahman*. The Mission teaches that while most individuals identify themselves with their bodies, this is a false identification. The self is not the body but rather the *ātman* (soul), an unchanging essence, whose nature is absolute truth, knowledge and bliss, *sat*, *cita*, *ānanda*, respectively. They identify the goal of life as evolving to a state where one realizes its

¹³⁹ It is important to note that in addition to the reasons given so far, participants also emphasized the importance of developing the mind explaining that it is the only thing that God asks humans to give Him. Kanakbahen, for example, said, “In the *Gītā*, God only asks for one thing, your mind. ‘*Mayi eva mana ādhatsva*.’ How can we give a mind that is full of jealousy, hatred, and so forth? Even when a neighbor comes and asks to borrow a small vessel, I make sure to clean it before giving it to her.” For Kanakbahen, it is important to clean the mind of its vices because it is the only thing asked of humans by God and is to be offered to Him. Here, she is referring to the *ṣatripu*, six enemies, often cited by participants when speaking about purifying the mind. They are *kāma* (indulgence), *krodha* (anger), *moha* (attachment), *mada* (intoxication), *matsar* (jealousy), and *lobha* (greed). The verse quoted here is verse eight of chapter twelve of the *Bhagavad Gītā*. “*Mayi eva mana ādhatsva*” translates to “place your mind in me alone.” Another verse often quoted in this regard is verse thirty-four from chapter nine of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, “*manmanā bhava mad bhakta*,” meaning be one whose mind is in me. In his exegesis on this verse, Pandurang Shastri Athavale says that this *śloka* takes humans upwards. A variant of this verse is found in chapter 18, verse 54.

own nature as that of absolute happiness and in order to realize the latter, one must silent the mind and in order to do, one has to purify it. That is, one must get rid of all agitations that arise when one acts immorally or unethically. A pure mind is thus necessary, according to the Chinmaya Mission, to meditate and experience one's true nature.

While explaining the importance of self-development, each of the participants above raised the question of what it means to be human. According to them, a key component of being human is development, and in particular, the development of the mind.¹⁴⁰ However, while they emphasized the idea of “being human,” and the centrality of self-development to the latter, it is evident that a particular understanding of human life grounded in Hindu thought and the notions of karma and rebirth undergird the notion of “development” explicated above.¹⁴¹ In this respect, the Kantian notion of ethics understood in terms of an adherence to a universal moral law grounded on the notion of a universal human nature does not allow one to understand the ways in which particular and local understandings of selfhood and what it means to be human inform the self-

¹⁴⁰ The next three chapters discuss other aspects of “being human” and “development” within the Swadhyaya and Chinmaya Mission movements. These include, cultivating the virtues of gratitude, selflessness, and dignity.

¹⁴¹ Thus, it is important to note that although participants described their self-cultivating practices in terms of becoming a “better person” or “better human being” and not in terms of becoming a “better Hindu” or “more religious,” their practices are undergirded by a specific notion of what it means to be human that is rooted within Hindu thinking. Here, the work of Gavin Flood is especially insightful as he shows that moral being always takes place within a particular cosmological tradition. Gavin Flood, *The Ascetic Self: Subjectivity, Memory and Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004). In addition, I also find Foucault's notion of ethics as practices undertaken for self-cultivation that are found within one's local context insightful in understanding the practices undertaken by Swadhyaya participants. Michel Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern for Self as Practice of Freedom,” *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: The New Press, 1997).

cultivating practices of individuals and the ways in which religious practice constitutes an important aspect of ethical formation and ethical being.¹⁴² In what follows, I will show how three primary Swadhyaya activities are seen as facilitating the development of the mind and argue that the link between development and being human is key to understanding why modern individuals engage in these activities. For many participants, engaging in Swadhyaya activity is central to their conception of what it means to be human and a reflection of their effort to be human. Following scholars like Flood and Foucault, I show that ethical being takes place in relation to a particular tradition, namely Swadhyaya and the Chinmaya Mission, and a particular set of practices found in that tradition.

Śravaṇam: Listening to Scripture and the Cultivation of a Good Human Life

Every Sunday morning, hundreds of Swadhyaya participants would arrive at the Shrimad Bhagavad Gītā Pāṭhaśālā to listen to the video-recorded lectures of Pandurang Śāstri Athavale on the *Vedas*, *Upaniṣads*, and the *Bhagavad Gītā*.¹⁴³ Participants argued that it

¹⁴² In her insightful study of the women’s mosque movement in Egypt, Saba Mahmood demonstrates how the practice of wearing a veil among the Muslim women is essential to cultivating the Islamic virtues of shyness and modesty. She writes, “one veils not to express an identity but as a necessary, if insufficient, condition for attaining the goal internal to that practice—namely, the creation of a shy and modest self.” Saba Mahmood, “Feminist Theory, Embodiment and the Docile Agent,” *Cultural Anthropology* 16 (2001): 201-236.

¹⁴³ Participants who arrived early enough would get to sit on the second floor of the Pāṭhaśālā where Athavale delivered his lectures from a traditional white dais and is therefore perceived as a sanctified space. The dais from which Athavale used to deliver lectures from now holds a large picture of Athavale and each Sunday, Swadhyaya Kendra begins with the placing of a large flower garland on his picture. The room capacity for the second floor said 1200 but it was clear that the close seating arrangement allowed for many more. Individuals would sit extremely close to one another in order to make sure that the maximum amount of people was able to sit with women sitting to the left of the dais and men to the right. There was hardly a time where there would be space remaining to sit on the second floor once the recording began. Children were not

is important to listen to “good” thoughts (*sārā vicār*) in order to live a “good” life and that the development of the mind requires and begins with good thoughts.¹⁴⁴ Shrutibahen, for example, explained that the kind of thoughts one has determines the kind of life h/she will live and therefore it is important to acquire “good thoughts.” While a few of us were sitting and waiting for the rest of the women to arrive for *Ekādaśī bhāvpheri*, Shrutibahen said, “We use the best soap to cleanse our bodies. But, what about our mind and intellect?” She then narrated the following story told by Athavale to elucidate the importance of good thoughts.¹⁴⁵ It was the Indian New Year, an auspicious time for Indians. A chubby man was standing on the third floor balcony of his three-story bungalow while a small Brahmin child was standing down below looking up at him and laughing. Here, she interrupted the story to explain the “high place” of Brahmins in Indian society and said that they are the promoters of good thoughts in society.¹⁴⁶ The chubby man called the child up to ask him why he was laughing. The child refused to tell him at first saying that it will hurt him. But, when he insisted, the child replied saying

allowed on this floor. Parents with children sat on the first floor. There were at least another 1,000 participants who sat downstairs. There were at least 2,000 attendees each Sunday.

¹⁴⁴ The word “*vicār*,” which literally translates to “thought” or “idea,” was often used to refer to Athavale’s teachings.

¹⁴⁵ Participants often resorted to stories that they had heard from Athavale’s lectures to make their point. In our short car ride while dropping Vithalbhai, a very senior participant, at his home after speaking for a few hours about Swadhyaya, he said that Dada taught us values and how to live by telling us stories in the beginning and that if Dada began talking philosophy, no one would have come.

¹⁴⁶ In this respect, Swadhyaya does not reject the authority of Brahmin priests unlike earlier socio-religious reform movements including the Brahmo Samaj and Arya Samaj. It states that a class of men dedicated to the preservation of Vedic religion and culture is “essential for the well-being of society.” However, Athavale encourages individuals from all strata of society to perform the duties of a brahmin, defining a “true brahmin” in terms of his or her actions and not simply by birth. Pandurang Shastri Athavale, *The Systems: The Way and the Work* (Mumbai: Sat Vichar Darshan, 1994), 3.

that he was laughing at the thought of how they would bring this chubby man down when he dies since the staircase in the bungalow is narrow and windy. The man was surprised and disappointed that this small child, who was a Brahmin, had such thoughts. So he decided to call the boy's father and complain. When he did, the father said that one would not have to worry about how to bring the chubby man down. He said, "It won't matter how he is brought down once he is dead. You can just cut him into three pieces and bring him down." The man was shocked that even the father had such bad thoughts (*kharāb vicār*). So he called the boy's grandfather who suggested that the first two options were irrelevant and that instead, they could just burn the house down since the chubby man has no offspring to pass it on to. Shrutibahen explained that the point of the story is that such irrelevant thoughts had dominated this family for three generations and that it is important to maintain good thoughts for three generations.¹⁴⁷ She said, "We have to decide what kind of life we want to live, what kind of thoughts we want to think about and live by, and what kind of thoughts we want to give our children. It is very easy to get distracted and to stray from one's goals." And added, "For this, we need to make the mind stronger for which we need good thoughts."

In a similar way, Rajubhai linked "good thoughts" to a "good" person and "bad" thoughts to a "bad" person. He said,

Man changes through thoughts—good or bad. A bad person becomes bad through bad thoughts and a good person becomes good through good thoughts. But the difference is

¹⁴⁷ Although she did not reference Athavale directly here, the notion that it will take three generations before the results of good thoughts are seen is commonly heard in Athavale's lectures. Participants also mentioned that it will take three generations before the affects of Swadhyaya come into fruition. In this regard, Swadhyayis also speak of how Athavale is the product of the four generations that preceded him and compare this to Lord Rāma who they described as being the product of four generations of great kings that preceded him.

that bad thoughts do not have to be told. People pick up bad thoughts on their own without trying. But good thoughts need to be told. And effort (*prayāsa*) is necessary to pick up those thoughts. Dadaji gives the following example. Milk is good for children. Tea is not good. But, no matter how young a child is, you will never need to tell him to drink tea. He will drink it on his own. But we have to work so hard to get him to drink milk. Milk is good for him but he doesn't know that...Anyone can pick up the bad. Much effort has to be there to pick up the good. And we will have to think before putting in the effort (*samajakar prayāsa karanā hogā*).¹⁴⁸

For these participants, knowledge is key to live a good life and to become a good person and the cultivation of a good life requires great effort. Participants emphasized that the kind of thoughts one has determines the kind of person they will be. In particular, the source for good thoughts and ethical being was seen as located within the Hindu scriptures. Mayuribahen, for example, spoke of the importance of the knowledge of the scriptures in order to learn the difference between good and bad, right and wrong, and thereby become a “good human being.” She said,

We say that when something gets rusted, we soak it in kerosene. Why? So that the rust gets removed. Similarly, in the *Gītā*, God says to do *buddhi yoga* with the *buddhi* (intellect), something only human beings can do. Give the intellect the thoughts of *Veda*, *Gītā*, *Rāmāyana* and *Mahābhārata* everyday. Give the intellect thoughts for a minimum of one hour in twenty-four hours. Only then can you become a good human being (*sārā mānas*). Just like the only way I can make lentils or rice for dinner is if I have the knowledge on how to make these things. Just as I should know that if I am making *halwā* (an Indian dessert), and if I put salt in it, it will not make *halwā*. Similarly, God has said that *Prahalad* did not listen to his father and saw God in the form of Narasiṃha, but Rāma did listen to his father. So do I follow Rāma or Prahalad? At that time I have to decide whom to follow. We respect both, both are higher characters, so whom do we follow? So at that time, I need to listen to thoughts in order to know whom I should follow when. So without listening to *vicār*, the solution will not come that *I should be a human being* (emphasis added).

She continued,

Dadaji says that to live a good life, become a human being (*mānas*), become a good human being (*sāro mānas*), become a divine human being (*daivi mānas*), and then become God (*deva*). But slowly, go up one step. First we have to become a human being. And to become a human being, without thoughts we cannot become a human

¹⁴⁸ This conversation took place in Hindi.

being...So what should we put in our thoughts? Thoughts alone can change a person. Dadaji says that when the thoughts of a person changes, only then does the person change. Without thoughts changing, it is impossible for a person to change. And to change those thoughts, I have to pick up the thoughts of morals, ethics, *Mahābhārata*, *Rāmāyana*, *Veda nā vicār*, *Gītā nā vicār* because only then will my thoughts change and if my thoughts change, I will be able to live a good life and a more divine life.

Here, again, the emphasis is on becoming a human being first and both the idea of being a human being as well as how to be a human being is derived from listening to the teachings of the scriptures.¹⁴⁹ The acquisition of good thoughts is associated with being and becoming human. Mayuribahen equates the thoughts of morals and ethics with the *Veda*, *Gītā*, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyana*. Resonating Mayuribahen, Chiragbhai emphasized the knowledge of the scriptures as the ultimate source for knowing how to live like a human being. He said,

[In the *Vedas*], God himself tells us how we should live. *The Veda* is the creation of God. The difference between human life and animal life is that humans can think and analyze things. Animals don't know how to live. They simply know how to eat, drink and sleep. In order to be able to think, one needs thoughts (*vicār*). *Veda* equals *vicār*. *A human being's life is based on thoughts*. If one's thinking is right, one will automatically do the right thing. For proper thoughts, one needs a proper source (emphasis added).

In a similar way, Mihirbhai explained that the scriptures in particular are important saying, “What is the extent of your knowledge? Today we meet many different people of whom ninety-five percent have bad thoughts (*kharāb vicār*) and five percent have good thoughts (*sārā vicār*).” He described a bad thought as any thought involving how to cheat others and continued, “So you need somewhere from where you can get good

¹⁴⁹ Kinaribahen clarified what she meant by “being a human first” when she mentioned a common phrase shouted to reckless drivers, “be like a human being (*mānas jevo thā*).” She explained that the reason why that is said is because, although we have two eyes, two hands, and two legs like a human being, we lack the qualities of a human being. She mentioned that according to Athavale, a human should have the following qualities: *santoṣa* (contentment), *samarpan* (dedication), *sneha* (love), and *sevā* (service) and said that it is only when one develops certain qualities that h/she can be called a “human being.” In this respect, being human is identified with the cultivation of various virtues.

thoughts. For this, you read the *Gītā*, *Veda*, *Upaniṣads*, which answers all of your questions.”¹⁵⁰ For these participants, there is a perceived link between being human, being a good human being, and the Hindu scriptures. In this respect, moral being always takes place in relation to a particular tradition.

While all Swadhyayis emphasized the importance of the *Veda*, *Gītā* and the *Upaniṣads* for the ethical life and some actively read the scriptures directly or Athavale’s commentaries on them, most relied on Athavale’s weekly discourses to acquire the knowledge of and understand the scriptures.¹⁵¹ In fact, a few participants explained that they have never read or touched the *Veda*, but for them, “Dada is *Veda*” and whatever Athavale teaches is *Veda*. Vinaybhai, for instance said, “We don’t know *Veda*, Dada teaches us *Veda*.” Interestingly, during an interview with another participant, I learned that he did not know what the *Veda* and *Gītā* were until his contact with Swadhyaya. Rajivbhai began talking about his involvement with Swadhyaya. For the last twenty-two years up until his contact with Swadhyaya, Rajivbhai explained that he did not know “*bhagavān ni vāto* (ideas related to God).” They did not light incense (*divo/bati*). All they knew was that when Divāli comes they made *shiro* (an Indian sweet). He said, “After Dada’s *vicār* (thoughts) came to their village, people began talking about God. Then we found out what *Gītā*, *Veda*, and *Upaniṣad* are.” For some

¹⁵⁰ Here, participants described the scriptures as a source for living an ethical life. In addition, as we will see in chapter four, participants also explained that the knowledge of the scriptures provides a “life-oriented education,” teaching them how to live and face life. They contrast this with the current education system that they described as “career-oriented.”

¹⁵¹ Athavale has two major commentaries available in textual form, one on the *Bhagavat Gītā* in the book, *Gitamrutam*, and the second on the *Bhāgavat Purāṇa* that can be found in *Vyas Vicar*. Participants often read these two particular books in preparation for the last of seven Swadhyaya exams, known as the *Prem Vardhan Parikṣā*, discussed below.

participants, then, “good” thoughts are not necessarily associated directly with the scriptures but rather indirectly through Athavale’s teachings and are generally described as “thoughts about God (*bhagavān nā vicār*).”¹⁵²

In particular, Swadhyayis argued that although there are many “*gurus*” (teacher) who also give lectures on the scriptures, it is important to listen to Athavale because his words have an affect on the lives of his audience.¹⁵³ They explained that this is because Athavale practiced everything he said. Sushmabahen, for instance, said, “Why is it that our words (*śabda*) do not have an affect (*parinām*) on others? And why do Dadaji’s words have an affect on us? It is because Dadaji did *bhāvpheri* before telling us to do *bhāvpheri*. His words have power because he has done everything he has said. If we do not do something but tell others to do it, they will not do it. *So we have to bring these things into our own life first*” (emphasis added). This thought was also shared by

¹⁵² This is in sharp contrast to Chinmaya Mission participants. While members of the Chinmaya Mission also rely on Chinmayānandaji’s commentaries on the scriptures, many entered the organization specifically because they wanted to learn and understand the scriptures unlike some Swadhyaya participants who were unfamiliar with the scriptures prior to their contact with Swadhyaya. That is, while many of my Swadhyaya informants became involved in Swadhyaya through other family members, or through their marriage into a Swadhyaya family and were not necessarily looking for something to join, more than half of my Chinmaya Mission informants came across the Mission in search of a guide to learn the scriptures, particularly the *Bhagavad Gītā*, or because they were looking for something to do once their children were old enough to take care of themselves. In addition, it is important to note that while all Chinmaya Mission members come from well-educated backgrounds, some of my Swadhyaya informants were uneducated and illiterate and therefore even just the idea of learning about the scriptures was elusive and somewhat foreign to them until they were introduced to Swadhyaya and continues to be so even after many years of involvement.

¹⁵³ Although many Swadhyaya participants perceive Athavale as their “*guru*,” Athavale did not give initiation (*dikṣā*) like traditional gurus.

Snehabahen who stressed the importance of listening and listening to Athavale in particular.¹⁵⁴ She said,

One can read, but in the *mandir* (temple), Dadaji kept *śravanam* (listening) as the first step. *Śravan* is placed ahead of reading. *Śravan* means to listen. Listen to whom? Listen to those in whom these thoughts have been digested. So, *sants* (saints), *mahants* (great people), *āchāryas* (teachers), *vidvāns* (intellectuals). Why should I listen? For this Dadaji gives the example of Eknāth. A mother once came to Eknāth and told him that her son eats too much *gol* (jaggery) and asked him to tell her son not to eat it since he follows whatever Eknāth says. Eknāthji told her to come back after seven days. So, after those seven days when she comes, Eknāth simply puts his hand over the child's head and says, "Son, don't eat *gol* starting from tomorrow since you have worms in your stomach and the doctor has said no." The son goes back home and stops eating *gol* immediately. Two days later, the mother says to Eknāth, "If this is all you had to do to get him to stop eating jaggery, why didn't you do so seven days ago?" Eknāth told her "at that time, I myself was eating a lot of *gol* so my saying it would not have had the same effect." So whatever *āchāryas*, *gurus* and *sants* say to us is said after they have applied it in their own lives. Their lives have reached a high place and we get a quicker current through their electricity. *That's why we should listen to their vicār (thoughts). Listening has a huge affect in our life.* That is why Dadaji gave us Swadhyaya. To regularly come and listen once a week. *Dirgha kāla nairantarya...*How should you listen? *Satu dirgha kāla*, for a long time. Many times we go to Swadhyaya for two years and then stop. We consider this *dirgha kāla* (long time). Listen for 25 years! *Nairantarya*—every week, without any breaks. And *satkāra sevitam*. Listen with respect (*satkāra*). Listen with the attitude that I want to apply this in my life. Don't listen with an ego. When we sit, we should sit upright. We should not be sleepy. *Dr̥ḍhabhumi*, meaning I want to bring this in my life. If these four things are there, the listening has an affect on you. *This is all expected in a human life.* (emphasis added)

Referring to Patanjali's *Yogasūtras* (1.14), "*sa tu dirgha-kāla-nairantarya-satkāra asevitah dr̥ḍhabhumiḥ*," Swadhyayis like Snehabahen emphasized the importance of listening consistently for a long time saying that development is a result of constant and consistent practice over a long duration. They often mentioned that it takes twelve years to cultivate and acquire one virtue (*guṇa*) based on what they heard in Athavale's lectures. Sushmabahen, for example, used to take the 7:19 am bus from Borivali to South

¹⁵⁴ However, she along with other participants also mentioned that they listen to lectures by a popular teacher from the Brahma Kumari movement, B.K. Shivani, that are broadcasted daily on television. Snehabahen often spoke highly of B.K. Shivani's ability to explain things in a clear and simple manner and encouraged other Swadhyayis to watch her lectures.

Mumbai to listen to Athavale’s lectures on the *Bhagavad Gītā* that took place at 9 am every Monday through Wednesday at the Pāṭhaśālā.¹⁵⁵ When I asked her why she went to listen to the lectures, she explained that whatever she heard made sense to her and that Athavale would say things that would touch her heart—“*dil ne sparśi le*”— and that it’s only when something touches you, that it has an affect on you. She spoke of the difficulty of changing one’s *svabhāva* (nature) and explained that small changes come through constant listening. She described this as “hammering” saying that if you just hit a nail once, it will not go in all the way, and that you have to keep hitting it in order for it to go in completely. Similarly you have to keep listening in order for an idea to sink into your head. “Then it will have an affect on you,” she said.

Similar to Sushmabahen, a few participants used the phrase “*sparśi le*” when talking about Dada’s *śabda* (words) and while it was difficult for them to explain what caused the words to move them, it offers one possible reason why participants felt that they remembered more by listening. Maheshwaribahen, for example, said that although she may have only understood one out of the hundred sentences said by Athavale during his lecture, when she likes a thought, when it touches her heart (*dil ne chue*), she never forgets it and tries to practice it. Here, the act of constant listening is related to changing one’s nature and thus considered central to one’s self-development. Listening to Athavale in particular was perceived as facilitating the latter.

¹⁵⁵ The majority of Swadhyayis traveled to Pāṭhaśālā via trains out of convenience and for some, due to their financial circumstances. A limited number of participants also traveled in their own cars. Those who took the train typically walked from the Charni Road train station to Pāṭhaśālā, located near C P Tank. During the various informal conversations I had with individuals whom I met along this path as they were walking to the Pāṭhaśālā, I learned that many traveled from long distances within Mumbai and took the train as early as 6:30 am in order to reach on time to listen to Athavale’s lecture. For some, the travel time was 2 hours each way.

Another participant described the weekly viewings of these lectures as a necessary “bondage” (*bandhan*) for self-development and contrasted it with the seminars of another Hindu spiritual guru, Jaya Rao, that are contingent on the presence of sponsors and therefore irregular.¹⁵⁶ For these individuals, attending the weekly Swadhyaya lectures on a consistent basis is important because it is perceived as a necessary practice for self-cultivation.¹⁵⁷ This was evident even more so in the case of those participants

¹⁵⁶ In fact, attending Swadhyaya Kendra is the only means to gain access to Athavale’s lectures. Unlike most other contemporary Indian religious movements that sell DVDs or audio recordings of the leader’s lectures, Athavale’s recordings are not available for purchase. They can only be seen at a Swadhyaya center on the designated day and hour of the week. Participants explained that a certain sanctity and respect for their *guru* is upheld by not allowing lectures to be bought and seen at one’s leisure. For example, Vithalbai said, “While other groups give out DVDs, we do not give our cassettes to anyone because if we watch it at home with our legs stretched out towards the television with a bowl of *bhelpuri* (Indian snack) in our hands, this is a form of disrespect of the person speaking. It is *apmāna* (insult) of our Dada.” He added that once material becomes available at home it loses some value. Although Swadhyaya does not make DVDs or cassettes of Athavale’s lectures available for purchase or for viewings outside of the designated viewing time and space, transcriptions of earlier lectures have been published in the monthly magazine, *Tattvajñāna*, which goes out to those Swadhyayis who subscribe for it. As far as I know, there are fewer restrictions on who can subscribe. This is in sharp contrast with the Chinmaya Mission that makes a large effort to make as much of their teachings available to the public as possible. DVDs of Swami Chinmayānanda’s lectures on the *Bhagavad Gītā* are available for purchase to anyone, for example. DVDs of the *jñāna yajñas* that I attended were also made available for purchase during the *yajña* itself. The audience was urged to sign up for a DVD. The current leader, Swami Tejomayānandaji, in fact came up with the idea of developing a television serial, called *Upanishad Ganga*, in order to take the teachings of Vedanta to a wider audience and to the doorsteps of individuals. The serial was first telecasted in March 2012 on the Indian network, Doordarshan. DVDs of this television series are also available for purchase. In this respect, the Chinmaya Mission and Swadhyaya hold very different views about the authority over and privatization of material that they both claim is not new, but rather taken from the scriptures. In Swadhyaya, the privatization of material is especially conspicuous; however, this varied depending on whom one speaks to. Some participants eagerly volunteered and shared old material used in workshops held by Athavale along with other books that are no longer available. Others were more hesitant and would mention that I would have to seek permission to access current teaching material used in different Swadhyaya activities, something I was ultimately denied access to.

¹⁵⁷ The idea that some form of bondage is necessary for one’s development is similar to Foucault’s argument about the need to subject oneself to something in order to cultivate oneself into a certain kind of person. It rejects the secular assumptions about moral autonomy and agency espoused by modern liberalism. See Michel Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern for

who did not completely understand the lecture and was made conspicuous during a spontaneous train conversation with a few Swadhyayi women. On the train ride back from Pāṭhaśālā on a hot summer Sunday afternoon, Kamlabahen, Rajeshwaribahen and some other women asked me what the lecture (*pravachan*) was about. At first, I was confused by the question and wondered whether they were testing to see what I had understood and remembered from the lecture. So I smiled and said, “I am sure you know since you were there too.” Both Kamlabahen and Kshamabahen smiled and humbly said, “We only understand bits and pieces.” I immediately realized that the reason why they asked me to talk to them about the lecture was because they are illiterate. Most of the women from this community, except for one, have never stepped inside of a school.¹⁵⁸ This immediately made me wonder why these women who are from a lower socio-economic class in society, evident for example in the fact they live in chawls, spent a considerable amount of money (approximately 50 rupees) to travel from their homes, via a bus and train and at times a taxi, to come to Pāṭhaśālā if they did not comprehend what was being said in the lectures. So I asked why they come if they only understand a little bit, especially when it’s on a Sunday morning, a day and time that most of the world

Self as Practice of Freedom,” trans. Robert Hurley, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*. Ed. Paul Rabinow. (New York: The New Press, 1997). Also see Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007); Saba Mahmood, “Feminist Theory, Embodiment and the Docile Agent.” *Cultural Anthropology*. 16.2(2001) pp. 201-236; Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Gavin Flood, *The Ascetic Self. Subjectivity, Memory and Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004). This view is also common within most monastic traditions like Buddhism.

¹⁵⁸ However, there were other women from this community who were also uneducated but were able to understand the lecture. It is also important to note that even those who were fully educated and literate struggled to understand the lecture, albeit, for different reasons.

associates with “sleeping in.”¹⁵⁹ The women gave two reasons for why they come. First, they said, “By coming and listening regularly, we understand a little bit. But, if we sit at home, we’ll never learn or understand any of it.” Second, they said that even though they don’t understand much they feel that “there is something good (*kaiñka sāruiñ che*)” in this.¹⁶⁰

This was resonated and further explicated by another participant while explaining her participation in Swadhyaya Kendra. She also comes from the same community as the women above and is illiterate. She said,

We especially need these thoughts (*vicār*) because without it there is no self-development (*jīvan no uddhār*). Where do we go if we want good thoughts (*sārā vicār*)? There is Mahilā Kendra, Video Kendra, and Pāṭhaśālā. It’s only if we go there that we will get good thoughts. Only then will we find out how we should live our life. If we just keep sitting at home, no will come to give us such thoughts. And even if they do come, they will come for ten minutes. They will tell us these thoughts and we will like them. But, if we go to get them, then self-development (*jīvan vikās*) will happen. Development (*vikās*) will not happen by sitting at home or it will not happen as much. And if we develop, whom do we do it for? We do it for ourselves, for our life. If I go simply because you’re going, then we will not understand much. But if we ourselves feel that I want to go, then development will happen.

Then, as I continued to ask her more questions for clarification, she said, “I understand why I should go but I’m unable to tell you because I have never spoken before. But I

¹⁵⁹ For instance, during a conversation with another Swadhyayi, Seemabahen spoke of how she began attending Pāṭhaśālā in 2011 and said that before that when her husband would tell her to come, she would say no because she wanted one day for resting (*ārāma*). She said she would wake up late, not go for a walk and just have a relaxed morning and told her husband that once she starts coming she will come consistently but is not ready to make the commitment just yet. Again, here there is an association of attending Pāṭhaśālā and commitment.

¹⁶⁰ They also perceived the activity of going to Pāṭhaśālā as a selfless activity. They both said, “today everything is done out of *svārtha* (selfish) and that there should be one thing that we do that is selfless (*nivārtha*), without any selfishness. To do something where one will not get anything in return.” For them, this includes going to Pāṭhaśālā. Thus, for these women, regular attendance in Pāṭhaśālā is also seen as a practice for developing the virtue of selflessness. For a detailed explanation on the emphasis among Swadhyayis to perform selfless activity, see Chapter Two.

certainly feel that I should go to Swadhyaya. There is development for us in going. We don't go for anyone else. We go for our own self." Although Paribahen was unable to go into more detail about her participation in Swadhyaya, it was evident that listening to Swadhyaya teachings by going to Pāṭhaśālā and Mahilā Kendra was understood as central for her development and the reason why she went even if she did not always understand what she heard. She revealed several aspects perceived as important to the development of the self in the few minutes that she felt comfortable talking. First, similar to the participants above, she perceives good thoughts as central to one's ethical formation and Swadhyaya is seen the source for these thoughts. Second, cultivation requires self-effort. That is, one must go to get the thoughts in order to develop. In this respect, participants often quoted the *Bhagavad Gītā* (6.5), "*uddharet ātmanātmānam, nātmānam avasādayet,*" explaining that only they can uplift themselves. Third, she identifies motives as an important factor in cultivating the self arguing that if she goes to Swadhyaya Kendra simply because someone else she knows is going, the listening will not have an affect on her. That is, self-development will only take place if one goes with that specific motive in mind.

In a similar way, various other participants spoke about the importance of paying attention to one's motives when going to Swadhyaya Kendra and the idea that self-development does not take place if one's motives are misplaced. Gitabahen, for example, explained that change in one's nature (*svabhāva*) through Swadhyaya is dependent on one's reasons (*hetu*) for going. She said, "Is one going for time pass or because one has the desire to improve oneself?" She said that if she remembers a point she heard in pravachan, she tries to apply it in her daily life when relevant. For Gitabahen,

Swadhyaya is associated with a positive change in one's behavior. While speaking about the affiliations of her different family members with different religious groups, she mentioned that she is also influenced by her brother-in-law who follows the "self-realization philosophy" of Paramahansa Yogananda. But, she said that although he has been following it for many years, there is no change in his nature (*svabhāva*) and that changes in one's nature come through Swadhyaya. Although she clarified that the change is dependent on one's motives when I asked her whether everyone who listens changes, what I want to draw out is the link that she draws between Swadhyaya and self-development, like many of the participants above.

The link between listening to Athavale's teachings and self-development was further elucidated in the ways in which the exposure to Athavale's teachings enabled participants to think about and reflect on their own lives. One participant, for example, spoke of how each person naturally has a desire for *pada* (high position), power and *pratiṣṭhā* (status). She said,

They have the ambition (*mahatvakāṅkṣā*) to become great (*śreṣṭha*) or for *māna* (respect) or *motai* (status). Humans naturally hunger for these. We need to sublimate them. Dada is the one who explains that your motive should be pure. [A] guru is needed to make you even think about this and give you guidance (*mārga darśan*). It is simple, effortless, to throw water from top to bottom, but, extremely difficult to pull water from bottom to top. Similarly, to reach God, it is difficult and therefore I need a guru to give guidance. To become excellent (*utkr̥ṣṭa*), man needs help. In any path, whether it is that of (knowledge) *jñāna*, action (*karma*) or devotion (*bhakti*), man can't stay alone. He needs someone. How should this person be? He should be one who makes me perform the best action (*śreṣṭha kṛti*).

In a similar way, Jignabahen explained that it is when one is exposed to good thoughts that one begins to think about their own life and how they should live. She said, "How have I lived in the past and how should I live? When you get good *vicār* (thoughts), then you think about yourself and ask, 'am I like that?' The thinking starts. But in order for

this to happen, the *vicār* has to be there first. How should I live? We find out what an ideal life is like through Swadhyaya.”

The connection between a guru, good thoughts and the practice of introspection was resonated in another conversation I had with Nirmala Tai¹⁶¹ and her husband. Nirmala Tai said, “Before we came to Swadhyaya, we were doing our own development. We acquired an education (*vidyā*) and we would behave nicely with others. Meaning, the superficial things.” Here, her husband jumped in and said,

Can the mind of a person who thinks that “I am good (*maiñ acchā hūñ*)” be considered pure (*śuddha*)? His mind is not pure. If it were, he would know himself and never call himself *acchā* (good) because he knows what his shortcomings are. Now today, people don’t feel that they have anything missing in them. Everyone thinks, “We’re such good people.” So until you understand that you are missing things, your development will not start. We do feel that we don’t have a bungalow, car, that I don’t have anything *bhautika* (material), I don’t have 15 lakhs. Everyone feels shortcomings when it comes to materialistic things. But no one feels the absence (*kami*) of virtues. *Mahāpuruṣa* (great men) are pained by this. That is also a matter of development. To be pained by one’s condition. To try to find out a little bit about my condition and to be pained that my condition is not good, this is the beginning of development. These are all preliminary steps.

His wife jumped in and added, “And it wasn’t until we found a *guru*, until we heard Dadaji, that we began doing *ātmanirikṣan* (introspection). We felt that we are good the way we are.” The husband said, “And that is why we need a Guru. He tells us. Dadaji says that you want a *guru* mainly because he shows you the path.” In this respect, in contrast to secular liberal assumptions about moral agency, for many of these participants, moral being requires particular forms of “subjectivation” to a higher and external authority¹⁶²

¹⁶¹ “Tai” is a Marathi word used to respectfully address a sister or an elder female.

¹⁶² See Michel Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern for Self as Practice of Freedom,” trans. Robert Hurley, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*. Ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press,

The examples above show how the practice of listening, by attending Swadhyaya Kendra, is perceived as intimately connected to one's development and thereby to being human. They illuminate how an engagement with the practice of listening facilitates and enables a form of introspection, an attention to the self and the kind of life one is living, that serves as a foundation and catalyst for the cultivation of the self and is key to understanding why individuals find the discourses offered by Swadhyaya to be a compelling source for self-fashioning. They show how the conception of a human being and ethical being come to be conceived in terms of and in relation to Swadhyaya and the Hindu scriptures. It is in this respect that the scriptures are seen as a compelling foundation for self-fashioning in contemporary society. Next, I will show how the next step of devotion, after *śravan*, known as *manan* (thinking) and *kirtan* (speaking), is associated with self-development and ethical practice.

Manan and Kirtan: Contemplation and Putting Human Virtue into Action

In addition to attending Swadhyaya Kendra to listen to Athavale's lectures, participants engage in *bhāvpheri* (devotional visits), an activity in which they visit the homes of other individuals with the purpose of building selfless relationships. As I argue in more detail in the next chapter, although scholars tend to categorize *bhāvpheri* as a form of

1997). Also see Saba Mahmood, "Feminist Theory, Embodiment and the Docile Agent," *Cultural Anthropology* 16, no. 2 (2001): 201-36. Her example of a pianist who submits him or herself to a strict regime of training under the guidance of a virtuoso pianist in order to become an expert is telling in this matter. She says that the form of agency required of the pianist in order to become an expert, that is, the capacity to play the piano well, requires that the pianist is willing to be taught. It requires a form of docility that "carries less a sense of passivity and more that of struggle, effort, exertion, and achievement." In this way, Saba Mahmood challenges the legitimacy and universality of the modern liberal understanding of human agency and demonstrates the problems such a conception creates for understanding moral being within non-liberal traditions.

proselytization, it is evident that participants who engage in *bhāvpheri* view it as an important means for developing the self and are not always concerned with preaching or conversion in all cases.¹⁶³ In particular, conversations revealed that *bhāvpheri* is often seen as a practice to make one’s own understanding more clear. Central to *bhāvpheri* is the practice of *kirtan* and *manan*. *Kirtan* involves telling others or talking about the heard knowledge in both Swadhyaya and the Chinmaya Mission.¹⁶⁴ *Manan* involves reflecting on the knowledge that one hears. Participants explained that listening alone is not sufficient for self-cultivation. The practice of *kirtanam* is key in order to both make the knowledge more clear in one’s own head (become more established in the knowledge) and as a catalyst for one to put the knowledge into practice, and therefore for one’s development. This was evident for example whenever participants would say “Good, my *samjhan* (understanding) became *pākuṇ* (firm)” or “Good, I did my Swadhyaya too” after finishing talking to me about Swadhyaya.

Listening is to be followed by *manan*, the practice of thinking or reflecting on what one hears, which is to be followed by *kirtan*, the practice of speaking the knowledge or telling others. For many Swadhyayis, *manan* took place through *kirtan*, that is,

¹⁶³ I use the words “not always” because I am fully aware of the tendency to preach and the desire to have others join Swadhyaya during *bhāvpheri*. However, as I have argued in more detail in the next chapter, perceiving *bhāvpheri* simply as a form of proselytization alone does not allow one to understand the kind of development it facilitates and empowers. Anindita Chakrabarti has argued that *bhāvpheri* should be understood as a tool for both ethical formation and the spread of the movement. Anindita Chakrabarti, “Soteriological Journeys and Discourses of Self-transformation: the Tablighi Jamaat and Swadhyaya in Gujarat.” *South Asian History and Culture*. 1.4 (2010): 597-614.

¹⁶⁴ The more common form of *kirtan* is chanting and is central to devotionism in India. It is also often accompanied by *bhajan*, the singing of songs.

reflection took place through the act of telling others. According to Kailashbahen, for example,

That is why *kirtanam* is next. *Kirtanam* is to tell someone what you have heard. When does reflection (*manan*) take place? When you keep telling others. If I keep telling others to do *Trikāl Sandhyā*, then when I go to a restaurant to eat, I will keep in mind that I have to pray to God before eating.¹⁶⁵ I say *Trikāl Sandhyā* at home loudly but do I remember to say these *ślokas* when I go out to eat? That is my exam. When I tell others to do *Trikāl Sandhyā*, it has an affect on my mind. It leaves an imprint on my mind. So imprints are more important.

Kailashbahen spoke about how after returning from Athavale’s lectures, she would go to the homes of two to three families that she knew and tell them what was said in the lecture. It did not matter to her whether they liked it or not or whether they understood it but that whatever she said then became “*pākuṇ* (firm)” in her own mind. She said, “And that is the purpose of *bhāvpheri*. To make the ideas clear in one’s own mind.” She also added that when you tell others to do something even if you don’t practice it yourself, it helps you to do that thing more. She said, “When I tell others, the virtue (*guṇa*) comes into me. Even if the virtue is not in my behavior (*ācharan*), still say it! Then it will come.” Various participants expressed this view including Krishnakantbhai according to whom *jīvan vikās* (development) happens through the act of telling someone. He said, “By telling someone something 100 times, my own development (*vikās*) also happens. We go to tell others, but we improve (*kahevā bijā ne jaye, sudare āpade*). We have to bring what we say into our doing (*ācharan*). I do and let others do. If I tell others that God is within me, then I can’t drink. The benefit (*phayado*) is mine.” This was also resonated in something said by Anilbhai at the end of an informal interview. He said,

¹⁶⁵ *Trikāl Sandhyā* is a set of Sanskrit verses compiled by Athavale from the *Bhagavad Gītā* and the *Upaniṣads* and consists of three prayers that are to be said in the morning, before meals and before going to sleep. See chapter three for more details.

“Why did I give you this lecture? It bites my inner self (*ātmā*) if I don’t follow. When telling others, I have to change myself.” Thus, although Swadhyayis emphasize the importance of listening to someone who has already applied the ideas in his or her life, or in colloquial terms, someone who practices what they preach, like in the case of Athavale, they preach what they would like to practice in order to practice what they preach. In this respect, *bhāvpheri* is an important constituent for ethical formation.

That *kirtanam* is a benefit for oneself more than anyone else was resonated among Chinmaya Mission members, especially its study group *sevaks* (volunteers). An important aspect of the Chinmaya Mission and its pedagogy are its “study group” classes where members gather to discuss a spiritual text that is being studied under the guidance of a study group “*sevak*” or volunteer. During my discussion with a few of the study group *sevaks* in Mumbai who lead classes on a weekly basis, they all spoke about how they learn more than the students and acquire greater clarity through their role as facilitators.¹⁶⁶

Along with the practice of *kirtan*, the study group classes constitute the practice of *manan* and *cintan* or the study component central to the Chinmaya Mission. The study

¹⁶⁶ In a similar way, the teachers of the Bal Saṃskar Kendra (BSK) classes for children in Swadhyaya often spoke of how this activity is more for their own learning than for the children. For example, while walking to the train station after Pāṭhaśālā, I asked Smitabehen whether she likes doing BSK. She said, “It is more for us than for the kids. As a kid, we didn’t get BSK so we get to learn the stories for ourselves. And the stories are about *guṇas* (virtues) so we get to learn about them.” She told me that each month of BSK is focused on a particular virtue and that there are 8 stories in total per virtue, 2 stories per class. “When you tell someone else about the *guṇas*, your understanding becomes clearer and stronger. But it’s not enough to just tell the kids. One should try to understand the virtue and bring it into one’s own *ācharan* (behavior) or else there’s no point.” She named some virtues including *tatparatā* (eagerness) and *dhairya* (patience). Later when I asked her to say more about the virtues, she couldn’t remember and said that this is why it’s important to do Swadhyaya mindfully, “*dhyāna se*,” and not just for fun.

group classes offer an opportunity for individuals to study and reflect on what they have heard. As such, they are different from lectures in that they provide members an opportunity to think about, discuss and ask questions about what they heard previously. This is seen as an important step for understanding the knowledge. Swāmi Chinmayānanda explains the importance of the study group classes in the following. “Mere listening will not add to your beauty. These ideas are to be reflected upon deeply and digested slowly. This process is hastened only when you discuss what you have studied with others. Study Groups constitute the heart of our Mission.”¹⁶⁷

Study group classes facilitate *manan* and *cintan* for both the facilitators and the students. Shivanibahen, for example, spoke of how she goes through a number of different lectures by different gurus and *swāmijis* from the Chinmaya Mission that are available in DVDs on the text that she is teaching in her class, transcribes the lectures and studies them in preparation for her own class. In a similar way, Sunilbhai, who has been involved in the mission for four decades and leads a number of classes in Mumbai spoke of how being a study group *sevak* forces him to study and reflect on the text and how the process of constant thinking and reflection leads him to imbibe the ideas into his daily life. He said,

Then in my daily work as my study increased quite a lot, I thought, well, I must be in that meditative mood is what the scripture is telling me. It's not meditation from 7-8 in the morning or sometimes 6. You have to be in a meditative state 24/7 which means you do *manan* constantly of what you're reading, let it run through your mind, let the logic of it run through your mind and it best happens when you're teaching in the study class. If you're the study group *sevak*, you're running it through your mind. Now after the class and some other [times] I'm driving the car, it's running in my mind. Now I enjoy that more than sitting and chatting on some useless subject to somebody. So we found that

¹⁶⁷ Swami Chinmayānanda, <http://www.chinmayamission.com/chinmaya-study-group.php> accessed on Nov 14, 2013.

this semi-meditative state that we feel on a daily twenty-four hour basis is helping me a great deal for quietness in my mind. The *sāstra* is telling get detached from things. It's automatically making me detached. If somebody says oh I like this very much in the house, I just pick it up and give it to him. I very easily do it. I don't feel oh this was a gift given from somebody so I got some psychological attachment to it. Nothing. My wife is even better than me. She'll give it even before me...So I like it. I appreciate it very much. So to articles and things very easily we detach. So there's no attachment much to anything.¹⁶⁸

While for Swadhyais it was the act of telling others that helped them apply the ideas in their own lives, here Sunilbhai speaks of how the constant study of and reflection on the knowledge, central to the Chinmaya Mission, leads to the corresponding behavior. This was also shared by Sudhaji who explained that constant studying and reflection automatically brings changes in oneself such as making one more compassionate. "You tend to look at the coin from the other side as well," she said. "If you're seriously studying, it just happens. You don't even have to go looking for these changes. It just happens." Pritibahen, another long time Chinmaya Mission devotee, further explicated the importance of constant study in the following way. She said,

See, we have certain ideas in our mind so to kick out those ideas and put in new ones, you have to make an effort. The mind doesn't let go so easily. The old ideas. So it's a constant. It's not that once you've understood the principle, it's there. There are levels. Even in gratitude, I may give gratitude, okay to my mother. You know, she taught me cooking. But then you have to have levels of gratitude. As you start studying more and more and more, the levels get deeper and deeper. Gurudev had told us you know whenever we used to have *Gītā Jñāna Yajñas*, you know Gurudev's, after every *yajña* he would say, like I remember I wrote it in my book also. We were doing chapter seven here at Azad Medān. When it was over he said, "read it eleven times." Means once you've heard it, one more reading and you think you've understood. NO. Eleven times. Three verses a day. Finish reading it, come back again, finish reading it, come back again. And I did it once. That time I wasn't taking classes. I did it several times, not eleven. Even the seventh time, I would say, "Oh, I never read this part. Or I never understood this. I never noticed this point." So this knowledge is not like tables (referring to multiplication tables) where you know it, you know it. It's not like that. There are depths. There are levels in the knowledge. *And that comes with constant upgrading yourself, all the time.*

¹⁶⁸ This conversation took place in English.

Although there were no formal “study classes” among Swadhyayis, the practice of *manan* and *cintan* was seen most explicitly among those Swadhyaya participants who were preparing for the annual Swadhyaya exam known as the *Vidyā Prem Vardhan Parikṣā*. The *Vidyā Prem Vardhan Parikṣā* consists of seven exams that are taken sequentially and based on a number of books published by Swadhyaya.¹⁶⁹ The idea behind these exams is to study the knowledge as a means to understand it and help implement it in one’s life.¹⁷⁰ One participant explained that the exams were created to help us remember the meaning behind *stotras* and to bring the thoughts into our lives. “*Vānchan, manan, cintan...*” She explained that the exam is a way to get people to read a little bit, think about what they’ve read and eventually applying it into their lives. “The exams help you understand the meaning behind the hymns that are said so that whenever you say them, you remember the reason behind them.” Another participant explained that through things like BSK and *Vidyā Prem Vardhan* exams, the soul gets purified. She said, “When we study for the exams, we really try to understand the material and if we understand it, then we think about ourselves and things like, “why am I here?” and “what is my goal?” In one’s day to day life, if we say something bad or act hypocritically, we become conscious.”

¹⁶⁹ Only two of the twenty-six books were available for purchase at the time of my fieldwork. I was told that the majority of Swadhyaya books were undergoing revisions and editing and therefore they were not available.

¹⁷⁰ One participant explained that while it is an exam for the exam takers, the exam is also a form of *bhakti* (devotion) for those who help to facilitate it in different ways including printing the exam, distributing it correctly to different locations, administrating the exam, checking the final exam papers, and making certificates. The exam is conducted around the world wherever Swadhyaya has a presence. There is a ceremony at the Pāṭhaśālā for the top five highest grades on the exam. During the exam celebration of 2013 that I attended, the highest scorers came from the Middle East, America, and different parts of India and received a certificate from the current leader, Jayshree Talwalkar. Approximately 10,000 individuals registered for the 2013 exam.

Dhyāna: Meditation and the Cultivation of Human Character

In addition to the practices of *śravan*, *kirtan* and *manan*, another practice central to self-cultivation in Swadhyaya and the Chinmaya Mission is meditation (*dhyāna*) and referred to as *mūrti pūjā* (“idol worship”) in Swadhyaya.¹⁷¹ Although mediation is not practiced as much as the former two, both practitioners and non-practitioners emphasized its centrality to ethical cultivation. Maheshbhai described *mūrti pūjā* as the “purification of the mind.” He explained that there are two parts of the mind, the conscious mind and the subconscious mind. The former can be developed through reading good books, listening to good thoughts and *bhāvgīts*, and having good company, and *mūrti pūjā* is performed to develop the subconscious mind. He said, “The subconscious mind picks up a lot of bad *vikāras*, *vāsanā* (desires), and so forth. Idol worship uses the power of imagination which is God given. By concentrating on God, the mind is automatically purified. If you put your mind in front of God, it will be purified.” He quoted the *Gītā*, “*mayyeva mana ādhatsva*,” in support of this claim. He further explained that when one concentrates, one begins recognizing one’s weaknesses and negative thoughts and as a result life begins changing. “If one gets angry quickly, he will think whether his anger is justified the next time he feels angry. When the mind becomes calm, one begins thinking about life. It is difficult to concentrate without an object. Thus we need a *mūrti*,” he explained. “It is more difficult to concentrate on the *nirguṇa nirākār* (formless) form of God.”

¹⁷¹ Although, Swadhyayis translate *mūrti pūjā* as “idol worship,” the term refers to the practice of meditation and concentration more than an act of worship as the literal translation implies. See Pandurang Shastri Athavale, *Mūrti Pūjā* (Mumbai: Sat Vichar Darshan Trust, 1986).

In a similar way, Vithalbhai emphasized that concentration is key for purifying the mind. When I ask what has kept him involved in Swadhyaya for the last thirty years, he said, “Man should become a human being and man should go near God.” For these, he said,

One must do Swadhyaya...Make the mind pure (*śuddha*). When does it purify? When does the dirt (*mela*) go? What color is a coal? Black. It came from fire so if you throw it back where it came from, then it will become white. Our mind came from God. It is God’s gift. If we give it back to where it came from, the color will change. Give it back to where it came from (*Jhemā thi āvayu, ene āpavānu*). The mind is everything. In the *Gītā*, God says *man manā bhava*. Give me your mind. There is a process for this. To give your mind to God, you have to sit with God, do God’s work and just like God loved millions, love others. Then, our mind gets purified. A person should sit in front of God for fifteen to twenty minutes daily. God can be any form you like—Yogeśvar, Mātāji, etc. It doesn’t have to be Yogeśvar. Sit and talk with God. ‘God you gave me *buddhi* (intellect), *mā* (mother), *bāpa* (father), *bahen* (sister). You anchored me towards this path of *jñāna* (knowledge).’ When you talk to God, your mind is in him.

He explained that this is just like how my mind was in him while we were conversing. But, he said, “We don’t talk to God. We talk to everyone else but not God.” In a similar way, Shailabahen also emphasized the importance of making a habit of concentration in order to develop the mind. She said,

We say that some people are easily able to live a good life and there are others whom we keep telling and yet they live bad lives. This is because our minds have imprints. That is why Dadaji says that there are different paths for us to wash these imprints. There is a different method to clean clothes and another one to clean the mind (*manas*) and intellect (*buddhi*). To clean the mind, one has to do concentration. Make the mind single-pointed (*ekāgra*). Develop a daily habit to concentrate. If you concentrate on God, the mind will slowly get cleansed. The mind has brought so many imprints from past lives and to clean this mind, you have to sit for concentration every early morning for thirty minutes. First concentration, then meditation.

Shailabahen explained that building a relationship with God is key in order to be able to concentrate on him. She said that for the former, one can recite hymns (*stotras*) and try to see God’s hand in one’s everyday life. She explained that God is always there with us but we lack the right perspective to notice Him. “He is always there helping us out but

we don't see him. We don't have the right outlook. The more we see God's hand in our lives, the more our attachment to him increases which makes it easier to concentrate on him." She explicated this further by explaining that the reason why I am able to think easily about my sister in America while being this far from her in India is because I have a relationship with her. She said that we have to build a similar relationship with God by seeing how He helps us everyday, by saying hymns (*stotras*), doing *prārthanā*, which she explained as sitting in front of God and praying, not something done while walking around, and attaching one's actions to God. She said that it's difficult to concentrate on such a big power (*śakti*) like God and so for this one must create the right atmosphere. She described these things as a way of preparing the mind to concentrate on God. Through concentration, the mind and the intellect become pure. In addition, as indicated in the last sentence of the quote above, according to Shailabahen, it is impossible to jump directly to meditation prior to concentration and said that this was the reason why many individuals found it difficult to follow the methodology of the Brahma Kumaris that begins with meditation.¹⁷²

¹⁷² The Brahma Kumari Organization is another contemporary Indian spiritual group that emphasizes the practice of Raja Yoga. A few other participants shared the view that Athavale's method is sounder than those of other contemporary spiritual organizations who ask their participants to jump straight to meditation and explained this as a reason for why they find Swadhyaya compelling. According to Amishbhai, for example, while the end goal of the Brahma Kumaris and Swadhyaya is to achieve *samādhi* (the ultimate stage of self-realization), the approaches are different and those of the others groups are defective. He explained that according to the philosophy of these other groups, one has to just believe that they have achieved realization and act accordingly. He said, "How is that possible? They don't believe in a sequential process of realizing the self. One just jumps to the end. How can one just pretend or act like they've achieved *samādhi* without actually achieving it, without following the steps to get there? In contrast he said, "Swadhyaya offers a concrete approach to self-realization, a step by step process." He described this as waking up early when the world is still quiet, when one's own mind is fairly quiet and to close one eyes and sit in front of an idol. While sitting with one's eyes

Shivambhai who expressed regret in his inability to incorporate concentration into his daily life spoke about the practice in the following manner.

Modern neurophysiology tells us that [the] conscious mind is actually a very small construct of the brain and there are a lot of other things going on that we don't have a good idea on why that's happening...There is this concept of meditation. Not just acting well but also purifying your mind so it becomes second nature to do that. You have to...I think what Dadaji used to tell us in Swadhyaya (is that) if you just do *bhaktipheri*, if you just try to do that active explicit devotional service and you don't do the internal meditation, it is as if your one foot is in a boat and the other is in water. You're not on stable ground, essentially. The Buddhist, even though they don't have some kind of...well I don't know that much about Buddhism, but some kinds of Buddhism don't believe in the Bodhisattva; they only believe in the concept of *nirvāna*. Even those schools have meditational practices because they realize that right action without right thinking and right feeling will not in the end save you...It doesn't work if you're just a good Samaritan and you help others because the motive, the intent, might be polluted. So until you're able to clean [the] inside and outside, it may not give you that spiritual profit that you're looking for.¹⁷³

A little later in our conversation, when I asked Shivambhai how he implements the ideas he learns from Swadhyaya in his everyday life, he spoke of the importance of purifying the mind through meditation for the cultivation of human character. He said,

Another would be, evaluating ideas from the viewpoint of ethics, morality, not just short term, is this going to help us achieve a goal in a manageable goal. But maybe we forgo an opportunity because we cannot gain it ethically. I have this divine spark in me and it is evaluating whether every action I'm doing is adding to my relationship with *Shankar bhagavān* or not. And the problem is that you're not as conscious as you could be. So the more you meditate, the more you dedicate some time in *bhaktipheri*, the more conscious you become about these aspects. So it becomes more second nature. So in fact, there's this concept of *śil* (character) in Indian thought, again, source attributed to Pandurang Śāstri. The way he described *śil* was nature and the way to develop nature is through constant practice but also dedicating some practice. So you have spikes and then you also have your daily practice. So daily practice should include, though it doesn't for

closed, he said, "try to build that picture of the idol using one's own imagination, then create a movie" which he described as imagining one talking to God, playing with God, etc. He said that through this, the mind becomes powerful, sensitive and progressive, a phrase often used by Athavale in his lectures when speaking about the mind. He said that many new approaches are coming up but that any approach should be tested before given to people. He said that the method of *mūrti pūjā* given by Athavale is given in the Vedas and based on the experiences of the *Rsis* (ancient seers).

¹⁷³ This was one of the only conversations that took place in English with a Swadhyayi.

me, meditation and it should include evaluating every idea, every interaction that you have, constantly you have that filter or that thought process going on that, hey, is this helping me? Is it helping me get closer? What would the scriptures say to this action that I'm taking? And its imperfect but practice gets you further and further along.

In the examples above, it is evident that along with meditation, the primary Swadhyaya activities including Video Kendra and *bhāvpheri*, as well as the annual exam, are perceived as intimately connected to the practice of self-cultivation. I argue that insofar as self-development is understood as constitutive of what it means to be human and what it means to live well as I demonstrated in the first part of this chapter, these practices constitute an important attempt to be and become human among its participants. However, being human should not only be understood in terms ethical development but also in terms of the difficulty in or failure to cultivate oneself into a “human being,” as I illustrate next.

Ācharan: The Gap between Knowing and Doing

While participants shared the view that change comes automatically through listening, they simultaneously emphasized that listening without applying the thoughts in one's life is of no use. While articulating the gap between where they were in life and where they wanted to be, participants emphasized the importance of actual lived practice. Veerabehen described the importance of application, *ācharan*, in the following way.

It is only fun when the thoughts are applied in one's life. There is no fun in only listening. If I go and learn how to make pizza but don't make it, there's no fun. But if I come home and make it and feed it to my family, others will compliment you. Similarly, it is only by applying *Pujya Dādāji's* thoughts in one's life that one knows that human life can become good (*sārun*) and that we should think about something in our human life, something that we can only do as humans and not as any other species.

According to Veerabehen, it is through the application of Athavale's teachings in one's life that one realizes that they can develop, “become good,” something that only human

beings can do. That is, it is through listening to the teachings that one learns that only humans have the ability to develop and thus they should do something, but that knowledge alone does not make you “good.” Practice is key. Another participant explained that it is only when you put the thoughts into action that the former is considered as being heard by you. She gave a telling example of a mom who asked her son to give her water. She said it once, then twice but he remained on the sofa without moving. It was on the third time that he got up and gave her water. She explained that it is not that he didn’t hear it the first two times but it is only when you put what you hear into action that it is considered heard.

In a similar way, Niranjambhai explained the importance of practice in the following conversation I had with him and his wife, Nidhi Tai.

Niranjambhai: There is a person in our society who did a BA in Sanskrit and studied the *Bhagavad Gītā* and we go to him. He tells us, "I studied the *Bhagavad Gītā* so much [that] I got a gold medal. What will you be able to tell me about the *Bhagavad Gītā*?" So, fine, what will we tell him? But, he doesn’t even have a relation with his own neighbors.

Nidhi Tai: He has all eighteen chapters memorized.

Niranjambhai: But he never goes to his neighbor's home and his neighbors never come to his house. And for months and years, he does not talk to anyone in the society. *Is this the life of a human being? Just like an animal stays inside his cage, he stays within the four walls of his house. Can we call him a human?* (emphasis added)

Nidhi Tai: He yells at his grandchildren. We can hear him.

Uncle: Forget about that part. But he is seventy years old. *Now if he lives such a life, will we call him a human?* What's the point of getting a gold medal in *Bhagavad Gītā* then? What did you do? Nothing. There is no development.

For Niranjambhai, a human being is defined in terms of his or her behavior. What Niranjambhai is alluding to here is what another participants described as *pustakya jñāna*, book knowledge. That is, knowledge that is not put into practice is useless. This perspective was resonated by another participant who said, “If you have knowledge and

don't follow it, it is equivalent to ignorance (*ajñāna*). If a child goes to school and doesn't learn anything, he will fail. Similarly, if we go to Kendra and don't pick up anything and bring it into our life, it is useless. To bring a change in oneself, you have to *ghas* (stretch) your *buddhi* (intellect). You have to bring it into your behavior (*ācharan*).” Participants articulated a strong association between application and self-development. In a similar way, Krutibahen said,

We may get those good thoughts in our lives, but how do we implement them? Dadaji teaches that. That if you have good thoughts, but you need to implement them in your life. It only matters then. There are many people who have good thoughts but no one implements them. At that time, Dadaji taught us that we should digest those thoughts in our life. You know how we say that this person in Swadhyaya has really digested the thoughts. You know, we say that often.

Here, Krutibahen points to a visible difference between those who have understood Athavale's thoughts, evident in their behavior or *ācharan*, and those who simply come and listen to the lectures. In this respect, a true understanding of the thoughts that are heard, what Krutibahen refers to as digesting the thoughts, and ethical development is reflected in and measured in terms of behavior.

While acknowledging the importance of implementing what they hear, participants also expressed awareness of the difficulty of putting what they hear into practice illuminating another aspect of what it means to be human. This was evident, for example, during a conversation with Bharatibahen and her husband. While I was speaking to Bharatibahen on the train ride back from Pāṭhaśālā, I noticed that her husband, Maheshbhai, was very quiet. Then at one point, when his wife and I stopped talking, he said, “Today I got the answer to a question that I have had for many years: Whether we should do Swadhyaya intellectually (*buddhi thi*) or emotionally (*hṛdaya*

thi)?” Referring to Athavale’s pravachan from that day, he went on to explain that Dada said two things. First, we must develop an intellectually based trust (*viśvās*) in God; the foundation of our trust in God must be absolutely strong and therefore it should be something that has been accepted by the intellect. In order to build that kind of trust with God, one needs to build a relationship with God, which is where the emotional aspect comes in. After explaining this, he said, “I am telling you all this but it does not mean that we have that kind of trust in God. It is very difficult. If one small thing happens, our trust wavers. We should ultimately feel that God, *tu hi, tu hi, tu hi* (only you, only you, only you)—100 % trust that God will take care of me.” So I asked why we need to develop this trust in God. He said, “Because he sustains our entire body. Who are we without him? We don’t do anything.” And added, “But it’s very difficult to have this kind of trust in God.” He asked, “Do we have this kind of trust on God?” and said that we listen for an hour and the moment we go home and our aunt or uncle call, our mind becomes disturbed. He explained that we have to make the mind *sthir* (unwavering) in all circumstances, mentioning the virtue of “*sthita prajña*” from the *Bhagavad Gītā*. He said, “The change doesn’t come simply between the time it takes to travel from Marine Lines to Borivali (referring to the train ride from Pāṭhaśālā to his house). Just because we talk about it now, doesn’t mean we apply it in our lives. *The application is very hard*. But, little by little, we will get there also.” Similar to other participants, he quoted, “*Bahunām janmanām...*” from chapter seven of the *Bhagavad Gītā* explaining that change takes time.

A little later in our conversation, he explained that actions speak louder than words. In speaking about *bhāvpheri*, he explained that a *saṃbandha* (relationship) has to go two ways.

Just because I come to you to build a relationship doesn't mean that you will want to build one with me. In order for the other person to want to build a relationship with me, I have to make my speech (*vāṇi*), behavior (*vartan*), and thoughts (*vicār*) in harmony with one another. Harmony in *vāṇi*, *vartan*, and *vicār* comes through *bhāvpheri/bhaktipheri*. Whenever we go for *bhāvpheri*, the other person is always doing *nirikṣana* (observation) of us. How is our behavior? Our speech? If we go and start talking about Swadhyaya, he will not care to listen. If we go and put our feet up and try to talk to him, he will not be interested. The other person will look at how we are and then decide whether he wants to build a relationship with us.

Here, again, the emphasis is on the development of the self and *bhāvpheri* is seen as a place for practicing self-cultivation.

While no participant failed to speak about the importance of what they perceived as good thoughts and the need to listen to and apply them as well as the difficulty in the latter, very few spoke about the actual implementation of these ideas, or rather the failure to, as honestly as Surajbhai. It was during my last conversation with a very humble and loving old Swadhyaya couple that Surajbhai opened up and shared the following. He spoke of how everyone likes Athavale's thoughts because there was never any selfishness (*svārtha*) in what he did, and that "Dādāji's thoughts (*vicārs*) are the thoughts of God," and anyone who hears them likes what they are hearing and feel that this is good. But, that out of the one *crore* (ten million) Swadhyaya participants around the world, 80% of those who listen like what they are hearing and think that it is good; 10 % are trying to bring the thoughts into their actions (which he said is also very important); and 10% actually live the thoughts. He described the latter group as including individuals who do God's work even if there is no money in the house and mentioned that he has seen such

people in the villages. He continued saying that what Athavale says is very difficult for common people like us to follow. “The kind of thing that Dada is talking about is almost impossible. For example, to always stick to the truth no matter what. It’s nearly impossible to be that perfect. Even if we decide that we will follow *sat* (the truth), circumstances will come when we compromise. It’s very easy to compromise when it comes to values and principles.”

Reflecting on his own life, he said that although he has been listening for many years, it has all been “above head.” That is, the knowledge has stayed in the mind and has not permeated into his body in the form of action. He said that it was only in the last six months when he began to feel that he no longer wants to do anything bad and explained that this was a result of him realizing that he only has fifteen or twenty more years of life left and therefore wants to live it well, and that “no good can come out of lying or cheating.” Old age and the realization that death is near in particular make him want to live the rest of his life well. And so he said that the desire to live well came out of necessity (*agatikatā*) and not through the understanding (*samjhan*) that was there all along. The proximity to death made him put his knowledge into practice. While he was saying this, his wife interrupted saying that it happened because he has been listening to the thoughts for so many years. But, he immediately rejected her attempt to make justifications and corrected her saying, “We’ve been listening for many years, but it has had no affect (*parinām*) on his life.” The *parinām* or change arose from his situation, namely old age and the proximity of death, what he described as “*paristhiti janya sthiti*,” a condition arising out of one’s circumstances. He said, “It shouldn’t be that one does good because there is nothing else left to do.” He said that it is good that the thinking

that I should not do anything wrong has come into action but wished it was put into his behavior not this late in life.

He continued to explain that it was not that he was evil before Swadhyaya but that he would always think of how to make ten dollars out of five or twenty out of ten using whatever means. He said that ten percent of him was like that but the change came slowly and now he has no desire for any wrongdoing. He said there is a “*zamīna āsamāna*” (heaven and earth) difference between being able to vocally persuade someone that this is the best way to live and impress me, for example, and actually living that life. “I will no doubt be able to convince you that this is how we should live. But this is different than actual behavior (*ācharan*). Whether it has come into my life is different. *And that’s the problem. Most people feel these ideas are great but they are not put into practice.*” He added that it is an extremely slow process to change oneself. At the end of our conversation, when I told him that I didn’t believe that his behavior only changed in the last six months given how humble and loving he was, he disagreed saying that it is only in the last six months that he has developed a desire to only do good.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷⁴ A few other participants spoke about the importance of thinking about death in a manner that resonated with what Surajbhai said above. Kanakbahen, for example, said, “That is why Dadaji has said, “*janma mrutyu jarā vyādi.*” Learn how to see death every morning when you wake up. This is said in the *Gītā*. Seeing death is not inauspicious. It is *mangalamayi* (auspicious). When I wake up and see that I have been given a human life so I have to live well. And I will have to go at anytime, so I should be ready for it (death), at anytime. If you have to go anytime, then you have to always be prepared.” In a similar way, Shailabahen gave the following example of Eknāth to delineate the importance of thinking about death as it relates to behavior changes. One time, a person asked Eknāth how is it that he never does anything bad or evil. Eknāth responded by telling the guy that he will die in eight days. Now since Eknāth was seen as having *vākya siddhi*, that is, whatever he says comes true, the man got scared and gave all of his possessions to his family. But, when the eighth day passed and he was still alive, he became angry and went to Eknāth and asked him why he told him that. Eknāth asked him, “What did you do in these 8 days?” He said that he did not lie, cheat, say means things to others, and so forth. Eknāth thus

The various examples above demonstrate how the ethical subjectivities of participants come to be constituted through their participation in activities such as Swadhyaya Kendra, *bhāvpheri*, study classes and meditation. Their participation both initiates as well as facilitates ethical formation. That is, the understanding of what it means to be a human being and how to live a good life is informed by Swadhyaya teachings and Swadhyaya practices are perceived as the means to cultivate oneself into a human being, first, and then a good human being. Thus, insofar as these practices are associated with ethical being and ethical being is perceived as central to being human, the reasons for participation must be understood in terms of the particular discourse on what it means to be human. That is, engagement in Swadhyaya activities can be understood as an effort to be human according to the Hindu tradition. However, I argue that the effort to be human is not only evident in cultivating the self, but also in the inability or difficulty to do so. The experience of religion in modernity, then, cannot be understood simply in terms of belief or transcendence but rather in terms of concrete practices of self-development and a larger project of defining the human. In the remaining chapters, I focus on three virtues seen as central to what it means to be human, beginning with the virtue of selflessness.

explained that he acts the way he does because he always keeps death in front of him. At the end of the story, Shailabahen quoted “*janma mṛityu jarā vyādi dukha doṣa anudarśanam*” saying that we should think of birth, death, old age, and disease every morning. “Then you won’t behave badly during the day.”

Chapter 2: Selflessness—Redefining the Self and Other through Devotion

The practice of cultivating the self into an ideal human being consists of the cultivation of selflessness. The notion of selflessness, variously described using the Sanskrit terms *nirapekṣa* (without expectations), *nisvārtha* (without selfishness) and *nirākāṅkṣa* (without desire for something), is central to Swadhyaya's discourse on the moral self and was often used by participants to explain their everyday practice of ethics and religion.¹⁷⁵

In what follows, I will examine the practice of cultivating selflessness through what is described as selfless work (*nisvārtha karma*) in Swadhyaya and the relationship between the concept of God and being selfless as conceived by participants. Based on various participant testimonies, I argue that although the practice of selflessness constitutes a significant element of the religiosity practiced by Swadhyayis and while the importance of selflessness is rooted in a larger discourse on salvation based within the Hindu tradition, the appeal of the practice must be understood in light of what is perceived as a moral problem in modernity and the kind of self-transformation it enables. I demonstrate how the development of selflessness is a conscious effort made against what is perceived as a growing selfishness inherent in all aspects of contemporary life as well as towards cultivating oneself into a better human being. I will begin by examining what participants described as the nature of contemporary relationships and illustrate how the

¹⁷⁵ The cultivation of “selflessness” is central to both Swadhyaya and the Chinmaya Mission. This chapter, however, focuses primarily on the notion and practice of selflessness in Swadhyaya. While the discourse on selflessness is closely connected to the concept of God in Swadhyaya, this is not necessarily the case in the Chinmaya Mission. However, although Chinmaya Mission teachers and members claim that selflessness can be cultivated without the concept of God, the connection to God was often times expressed as an important factor for doing selfless work in conversations with both the teachers and members as explicated in Chapter 3.

concept of devotion is perceived as a compelling foundation for how one relates to the “other.” Next, I will show how selfless relationships are integral to the virtue of selflessness that constitutes a central aspect of the religiosity expounded by Swadhyaya and practiced by participants. Last, I will show how participants practice the cultivation of selflessness through their engagement in the central Swadhyaya activity of *bhāvpheri* and argue that the reason for their engagement must be understood in relation to what participants described as the nature of contemporary relationships, the lack of a source to connect individuals, and the alternative that theistic sources offer to what is seen as a moral problem in contemporary society.

Commercialization and the Modern Self

When discussing the current state of society, participants often spoke about the nature of contemporary relationships in terms of selfishness (*svārtha*). They said that selfish motives underlie each of our relationships; that is, the relationship exists because there is something to gain from it. Participants often quoted the three kinds of friendships described by Athavale to describe modern relationships—“friendship for profit,” “friendship for benefit” and “friendship for principle”—and argued that most, if not all, relationships exist on the basis of one of these three factors.¹⁷⁶ According to one Swadhyayi, a determining factor in most relationships today is whether or not the other person is of use to me (*upayogi*). Bharatbhai said,

¹⁷⁶ R.K. Srivastava, ed., “Introduction,” in *Vital Connections: Self, Society, God: Perspectives on Swadhyaya*, (New York: Weatherhill, 1998), 3-4.

What makes *bhāva* last? What is *bhāva*? *Bhāva* is to have *emotions* towards anyone.¹⁷⁷ We have affection towards others but there is some utility (*upayuktatā*) or some other reason behind those emotions. For example, I may need you for something or you may be useful in the future and, so, I maintain a relationship with you. We have love (*prem*) for our neighbors and perhaps it's not for the same reason that Christ told us that we should love our neighbors.¹⁷⁸ But we know that in times of difficulties, only my neighbors will be able to help me so I have *bhāva* towards my neighbor. But deep down (*sātmā parde*), my *bhāva* is that of *upayuktatā* (utility), namely, that this person will be of use to me on different occasions or in times of need.¹⁷⁹

Another Swadhyayi alluded to the perceived effects of capitalism while describing the nature of contemporary relationships. Nitinbhai said,

What has happened now is that everything has become *commercial*. Everyone looks at the other with a commercial eye (*najar*). How will I benefit from this person? Let's say we went to a businessman's party and you are introduced as a Reserve bank officer. If anyone around you hears this, they will intentionally come to you and meet with you, talk with you, give you their card and take your card. The only thing on his mind is that this person works in the Reserve bank so how can I use him. That is the reason he came to you. People only think about how they can use others. How much will the other person benefit me? We see that here in our area. I've seen that when I go to the local vegetable seller (*bhājiwālā*) and am purchasing vegetables at which point a car comes and a lady comes out from the car to purchase things. The *bhājiwālā* will not even look at me. He will put my vegetables aside and run after her because he knows that I will only purchase ten rupees worth whereas she will purchase one hundred rupees worth [of produce]. So even his way of looking (*najariyā*) has changed. So everything has become *commercial*.¹⁸⁰

Nitinbhai explained that things have become commercial because the importance of money has increased. He continued,

The importance of money has increased so much that now everything is weighed in money. Nothing else is left. There is no value for quality, no value for morality, no

¹⁷⁷ While “*bhāva*” is defined as emotion here, the more common translation of the Sanskrit term is being or existence.

¹⁷⁸ In addition to Jesus Christ, participants quoted or referred to figures from other religious traditions including Noah, Moses, and Abraham based on Athavale's lectures. Athavale teaches that Jesus Christ and the Buddha are the eleventh and twelfth incarnations of the Hindu deity, Viṣṇu.

¹⁷⁹ The majority of the quotes in this chapter come from interviews and conversations that took place in Gujarati. This was especially the case with interviews conducted with Swadhyaya participants. Therefore, all non-English italicized words were said in Gujarati unless otherwise noted. Italicized English words were used by the participants themselves and are not translations.

¹⁸⁰ The italicized words in this quote were said in Hindi.

value for man, nothing. Just money. Dadaji says that in our country, everyone is a capitalist. The rickshaw driver (*rickshāwālā*)¹⁸¹ is also a capitalist because when there are ten customers standing and there is only one rickshaw, he will say no to the first five customers because he wants a longer distance worth more money...He will not look at the fact that this person is old or this person is sick. He looks at how he can earn more. When it rains in Mumbai, this becomes very apparent. You will not get a rickshaw. They will only go where they will receive the most money. To take advantage of someone's need, to exploit someone, this is today's key word. This is today's life. And this is the *commercial* man.¹⁸²

These examples draw attention to a particular way of perceiving (*najariyā*) the other that is seen as less virtuous and therefore problematic. In addition, the selfishness described above as characteristic of modern relationships can be understood in light of what participants perceive as a growing selfishness in the modern man or what Nitinbhai characterized as the commercialization of man. Participants describe the contemporary “modern” culture in terms of a shift from a culture of “we” to one in which there is a growing emphasis on the individual self.¹⁸³ According to Niralibahen, for instance,

Today, man (*manuṣya*) has become self-centered, namely, "me and mine, first." Before, people used to think about others. If we look at our culture (*saṃskṛti*), a third person comes first, and then a second person, and then I (*huṃ*) come. People had that threefold thinking and if we look today, families are breaking...One cannot find the connection that should be there with people. Today, for example, if I'm walking on the road, and if a person has met with an accident, I will not even stand. I may think, who wants to deal with the police and who is he to me in any case? What is my connection to that person? Whatever will happen to him will happen. It has nothing to do with me. I'm busy in my work and so I will leave. That is the thinking of today's people that as long as it is

¹⁸¹ A “rickshaw” is a three-wheel vehicle commonly found in India and is a popular mode of public transportation especially in Indian cities.

¹⁸² One may argue that the behavior of the rickshaw drivers is justified given the meager income of driving rickshaws and the fact that he needs the money to feed his family. That is, one may argue that their selfishness is a result of a broken system and less of a problem of moral character.

¹⁸³ It is important to note the resemblance between the shift described by participants and what Charles Taylor described as the rise of a “modern moral order” through a process of “disembedding” that gave “unprecedented primacy to the individual.” Charles Taylor, *The Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 146. For a similar argument, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 33. However, as we will see below, participants attribute modern individualism to an absence of feeling connected to others and not in terms of the development of the notion of a self-sufficient human agent as described by Taylor.

happening to the other person and not to me, I will not bother. So, man's thinking has become *basically* self-centered (*svārthi*).

This was resonated in a similar conversation with a Chinmaya Mission member.

Sheetalbahen said,

The problem goes down so deep. We've become a society that is so looking into I, me, myself only, to a large extent. You see that a lot now. I care about my family. I care about my things so whatever is mine...In the big cities you see the definition of my family is my spouse and my kids. Even my parents beyond a point don't figure in that. In a smaller city, that number might extend to twenty, maybe twenty-five. But what was the basic thing of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*¹⁸⁴ where you see the world as your family is just not there.¹⁸⁵

These responses point to an absence of a feeling of being connected to the other where the “other” refers to other human beings and not to a particular group of people. In particular, Swadhyayis explained that modern selfishness and apathy is a result of a missing link that connects two human beings, a bond that is not determined by its utility but rather by something greater. Kapilbhai summed this up nicely. He said, “Without a relationship, you will not do anything for others.”

Redefining Relationships through Devotion (*bhakti*)

The most basic and fundamental teaching in Swadhyaya is the idea that a divine force resides in all human beings, an “indwelling god,” an idea that emerges out of a particular interpretation of verse 15.15 from the *Bhagavad Gītā* and is closely connected to the concept of devotion (*bhakti*).¹⁸⁶ This verse states that God is seated in everyone's heart.

¹⁸⁴ “*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*” is a Sanskrit phrase according to which the whole world is one family. The phrase is found in both the *Hitopadeśa*, verse 1.3.71, and the *Panchatantra*, verse 5.3.37.

¹⁸⁵ All conversations with Chinmaya Mission members took place in English and therefore this is a transcription of the recorded interviews.

¹⁸⁶ The verse is *sarvasya cāham hṛdi sanniviṣṭo mattaḥ smṛtir jñānam apohanam ca vedaiś ca sarvair aham eva vedyo vedāntakṛḍ vedavid eva cāham*. It translates to: I am seated in everyone's

Drawing on this verse, Athavale defines devotion in terms of an outlook or attitude where one sees the inherent divinity in oneself and in others. The recognition of an inherent divinity is perceived as providing a strong foundation on which to build personal dignity and as a universal link—the common divine essence—between the self and others.¹⁸⁷ Participants described this link as “divine brotherhood” (*daivi bhrāṭṛbhāva*) and “the brotherhood of man under the fatherhood of God.” A longtime participant, Karanbhai, contrasted this type of self-identity with what he perceives as the values espoused by modern secular democracy. He said,

Without devotion (*bhakti*), what will be the foundation? How do you connect one human to another human? There needs to be a relation and Dada explained this as divine brotherhood (*daivi bhrāṭṛbhāva*). This relationship is that of the blood maker. Your blood maker and my blood maker is one. Devotion is to be joined to God (*bhagavān sāthe jodaiyela*)...In the US, democratic values helped develop certain standards such as self-respect but the idea of God is needed because one needs to think about others. In the US, people only think about themselves. To think about others, one needs a relationship.

While the veracity of the claim that individuals in the United States “only think about themselves” is less significant, Karanbhai articulates one of the central teachings in Swadhyaya according to which self-identity is understood not only in relation to the self but in terms of how the self is related to others. “To be is to be related,” said Karanbhai, quoting Athavale.¹⁸⁸ Karanbhai draws attention to the secular underpinnings of modern democratic values and what he sees as their limitation. In this respect, he points to one of

heart, and remembrance, knowledge and forgetfulness come from Me. I am to be known by all of the *Vedas*. I am the compiler of *Vedānta* and I am the knower of the *Vedas*.

¹⁸⁷ While this chapter focuses on the latter aspect, Chapter 4 examines the link between the concept of an inherent divinity and dignity.

¹⁸⁸ This quote is often heard in Athavale’s discourses but the source is not clear. It is also seen in the speeches of Jiddu Krishnamurti, “The Mirror of Relationship,” Third Public Talk, June 9, 1940, accessed April 22, 2014, <http://www.jiddu-krishnamurti.net/en/1936-1944-the-mirror-of-relationship/krishnamurti-the-mirror-of-relationship-42>

the ways in which the doctrine of secularism has come to define the human in modern democracies as demonstrated by Talal Asad.¹⁸⁹ As we will see in what follows, Swadhyaya participants argue that the concept of an indwelling God provides an essential link between individuals that is otherwise missing in everyday life. The founder describes its theory thus: “It is the awareness of this divine presence in all and the resultant sacred relationship that can bring man closer to man, with selfless affection for one another, and can succeed in bringing about the much-needed harmony among various classes and groups in society.”¹⁹⁰ In this respect, although the central focus of Swadhyaya is the transformation and development of the individual self, self-identity is defined in terms of the fundamental relatedness of individuals to one another.¹⁹¹ This stands in contrast to the individualism associated with modern self-identity according to which the self seeks to maintain independence from others.¹⁹²

During an interview, Mayurbhai spoke about the importance of feeling connected to other human beings, what he referred to as “interconnectedness,” and explained why the concept of an indwelling God is integral to it. “Interconnectedness,” according to Mayurbhai, is the awareness that it is because of some farmer far away who is sweating and toiling that food grows and is made available to him along with the truck driver who

¹⁸⁹ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 127-158.

¹⁹⁰ Pandurang Athavale, “Dada’s Vision,” in *Vital Connections: Self, Society, and God: Perspectives on Swadhyaya*, ed. Raj Kishan Srivastava (New York: Weatherhill, 1998), 55-59.

¹⁹¹ The emphasis on the self was often explained by participants in relation to a particular translation of the term “swadhyaya” as “the study of the self.” In Sanskrit, “svādhyāya” more commonly refers to the study of scriptures.

¹⁹² See Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991) and Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, and Scott Lash. *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994).

transports the food from rural villages to cities, undergoing various hardships along the way.¹⁹³ Or the fact that it is because of someone who is working across the world that he has access to things like the Internet in Mumbai where he lives. He says that this “feeling” of interconnectedness must be there first and foremost, but knowing that these other individuals exist is not enough to create that feeling because one will think, “that’s his work, that’s what he does.” How then does one connect oneself to these people who are at a distance? He explained,

Even though I have not seen anyone, there are so many farmers that I have never met, or so many transport people, so many people who make bridges, even the person who built this building (referring to his apartment building). I’ve never seen him. But, how can a connection be made between all of these people? So I think that our sages (*rṣimunis*) gave a supreme essence (*param tattva*). It is something above human beings. If it is a person (*vyakti*), it (the connection between you and the other) may break if you see a fault in the person.

According to Mayurbhai, the fact that person X is a human being and person Y is a human being cannot serve as the basis for connecting two individuals. The link between any two people, he says, must be above any one individual human being because human beings are not immune against mistakes, faults and shortcomings that may lead to a break in the relationship over time. Instead, he explained that such a link can be provided by what he referred to as a “supreme essence,” and clarified as the concept of an indwelling God. Later in our conversation, Mayurbhai revealed how he uses this idea in his everyday life. He explained that since his home is in close proximity to the train station, most rickshaw drivers are unwilling to take him from the station to his home after work, and as a result he feels angry and complains to the police. But, he also tries to see the

¹⁹³ This recognition is also important for the cultivation and practice of the virtue of gratitude discussed in Chapter Three of this dissertation.

situation in a different way, namely that the rickshaw driver is acting in the same way that he himself does whenever he changes or quits his job. He said, “Just like I leave one job for another. I want more money. It is just a business. So, he thinks the same way. He will take the customer with the longer distance. He is not wrong. I should not get angry towards him at that point.” He then explained that although he and the driver have the same reasons for acting this way, he gets angry with the driver but not himself because he does not have a relationship with the driver. He said, “What are the reasons for my hatred (*dveśā*)? I have the same reasons for acting the same way. Then, do I ever get angry with myself? Do I ask myself, why I quit the job? I don’t do it because I love myself, and I try to see that [same] connectedness in him. How can I connect myself? For this Dadaji explains that there is one Rāma in everyone and one person runs everyone's body. So what he is doing is not wrong. My hatred should not be for him.”

While Mayurbhai spoke about the importance of the concept of an indwelling God for feeling connected to those at a distance or the “other” in general, Akashbhai spoke about it as an important basis for relationships at the workplace. He said,

What I observe is that while there are theoretical constructs that talk about interpersonal relations at work, that how you should respect the other and treat them respectfully, I feel that since I have been exposed to the ideas of our scriptures, those ideas come much more naturally. Perhaps not only because they come from a figure of authority but the spiritual nature of them indicate that if you were to believe the entire concept, you know, there's this concept that there is always an internal auditor or internal witness who is witnessing you interacting with other human beings...once you internalize that concept where you really truly start believing in that, then it's not something that comes to you second hand that “hey, it will probably further my career.” You know those kinds of reasons go away and it's really more about intrinsically this is really the right thing to do because if I don’t do it, then I have a higher price to pay. And there is a greater gain for me than just success in career and so forth. That will happen, that will follow. So that’s an example of how the same idea once it's internalized and once you start believing in it or for whatever reason you start believing in it, that becomes a much more powerful driver for actual behavior and you develop much more consistency, much more rapidly also, then if it were something that you've read or someone like a management guru of interpersonal

relations told you. They tell you, “Hey this is good to do.” You may say, “hey but I see this person getting ahead doing behaviors that are contrary so maybe I should be doing that as well”...Or for instance, I don’t need to be polite to a person who brings in food to a meeting but I make it a point to look them in the eye and say “thank you” to them because I recognize that they have the same driver, *Yogeśvar Bhagavān*, inside them as I do as well. So as a result, it drives me to be polite because I realize that this spirit is an advanced spirit because it has gotten human life after a lot of struggle. So it’s worthy of respect. What I notice among my peers, for instance, (is that) they will be polite, very courteous to people who matter, but not to people who do not matter. And I think it’s because that driver is missing.¹⁹⁴

In this statement, Mananbhai reflects an active form of consciousness about the way he perceives the “other” in his workplace. His perception is undergirded by the notion of an indwelling God, what he describes as an “internal witness” and a “driver.” In particular, he distinguishes between respecting others because they have an inherent divinity within them and respecting only those seen as having a benefit for oneself. The former represents a contrast to the kind of commercial eye (*upayogi dr̥ṣṭi*) described earlier as prevalent in modern society. His way of looking at the female staff is quite different from the perception of his colleagues who look at others in terms of their utility and act nicely only towards those seen as having any.¹⁹⁵ According to Mananbhai, the concept of

¹⁹⁴ This is a transcription of a recorded conversation that took place in English. It was the only conversation with a Swadhyaya participant that took place entirely in English. The notion of humans as “advanced spirits” is important in both Chinmaya Mission and Swadhyaya and integral to their discourse on self-development as discussed in detail in chapter one of the dissertation.

¹⁹⁵ It also represents a contrast to what other participants described as *bhoga dr̥ṣṭi*—seeing someone as an object to be used for oneself—perceived as prevalent in contemporary society. For example, Jivanbhai spoke about the importance of having a pure eye towards others (*dr̥ṣṭi nu pāvitra*). He emphasized that the *dr̥ṣṭi* of men in particular should be pure and said that he considers all the females whom he works with in Swadhyaya as Dada’s daughters and therefore, his sisters. At one point during an interview, he said that he was meeting with me because I am Dada’s daughter. The idea of having a pure *dr̥ṣṭi* was explained as one of the two important aspects of ethics by another participant. He spoke about the recent rape incidences in India and explained that the reason behind them is that a man feels that a woman is for him to use. His *najar* (way of looking) towards women is impure and described this kind of outlook as “*bhoga dr̥ṣṭi*” and contrasted it with *bhakti dr̥ṣṭi* (devotional outlook). He said, “But the moment he

an indwelling God provides a “stronger driver” to act ethically towards others.¹⁹⁶

That is, the other is to be respected on the basis that there is an inherent divinity within them and based on the understanding that human beings are “advanced spirits” who have received a human birth after a lot of struggle.

The idea that the concept of an internal God serves as a source for respecting others was also shared by Sonalbahen according to whom ethics follows when you see God in others. She said,

Just as I have *Íśvar* (god) in me and just as *Íśvar* runs my life, he runs the lives of others. Just as He is in me, He is within others. The fact that He is within me is my *svamāna* (self-respect) and the fact that he is in others is *parasanmāna* (respect for others). Both *svamāna* and *parasanmāna* should be taken care of. Just as I take care of my own *svamāna*, I have to take care of the self-respect of the opposite person. But why should I look after both my own and the *svamāna* of the other? Why should I live in a good way? And why should others live in a good way (*sāri rite jihavānu*)? Because just as God is within me, God is within the other.

She continued to explain that to live like a human being means that one does not consider the other as an “other.” “He is mine,” she said.¹⁹⁷ Participants explained that an important teaching in Swadhyaya is that “the other is not other, he is my divine brother” and that the fact that the other has God in them just as they do makes them worthy of the same respect. She continued,

Pujya Dadaji always explains to not understand the other as an other (*bījo ne bījo nā samaj*). The other is a brother given by God. Brotherhood of man under the fatherhood of God. That is, the other is not other. A human being is one who does not consider the other person as an other but lives with the feeling of brotherhood (*bhaicāra*). If there is a

knows that she is my sister, his *dr̥ṣṭi* will change.” He defined development in terms of going from *bhoga dr̥ṣṭi* to *bhakti dr̥ṣṭi* where one sees God in others.

¹⁹⁶ Later he explained that the *Bhagavad Gītā* provides a “gps” that says, “Avoid that. That’s a pitfall. If you go there you are going to end up with a lot of mud and garbage on your cart. Go through this route. So this route would be, respect others because they have that divine being in them and they have a spirit animating them so respect them.”

¹⁹⁷ As I argue in Chapter One, the notion of what it means to be human is key to understanding the appeal of the discourse and the practices that Swadhyayis engage in.

young girl, she would be seen as one's daughter. If there is a woman, you consider her a sister. If it is an elderly woman, you consider them a mother. It is to not keep God limited to a temple (*mandir*) or the sky (*ākāśa*) or the temple at home, but, as a human being, to see God everywhere (*sarvavyāpak*).¹⁹⁸

In this example, the notion of an indwelling god is understood as providing a very specific link between the self and the other, described in terms of the “brotherhood of man under the fatherhood of God” and not only as a basis for respecting others. In a similar way, Mansibahen explained that while it is not necessarily the case that we are happy when we meet our friends because we see God in them, the concept of an indwelling God becomes very important when dealing with others (*bijā sāthe*), especially strangers. She explained that typically we will speak in whatever manner to strangers unlike with our friends and people we know. However, the idea that God is in others, she said, helps us think about others and to try and understand them. “It help us try to understand why they are the way they are instead of reacting and to think about why they may have said what they said.” She elucidated her point by drawing attention to a few examples. The first example was about traveling on a Mumbai train that is notorious for being overcrowded. She said, “You will make space for the person standing because you will think that she too must be tired, that she too will want to sit,” and explained that this thinking comes from the idea that God is in her. She said even if there isn't space, you will move over and try to make space. According to Mansibahen, thinking about others

¹⁹⁸ I noticed an attempt to develop and maintain this kind of an outlook within Swadhyaya during fieldwork. I observed that males addressed females by adding “*bahen*” (sister) to the end of their names and vice versa. Women affixed “*bhai*” meaning brother at the end of the names of the men they were addressing. Throughout fieldwork, I did not come across an instance where either gender addressed the opposite gender without these suffixes. It was also the case that Swadhyaya women addressed other Swadhyaya women by adding the suffix “*bahen*” and males addressed other males by adding the suffix “*bhai*.”

is a virtue that is made possible through the understanding that God is in others. In the second example, she drew attention to a common attitude held towards domestic servants known as “*chusvāni vṛtti*.” She explained that it would mean making the servant work every second of the eight hours that you are paying them for. She said, “Instead, if I have the perception (*dṛṣṭi*) that God is in them, I will tell them to rest for an hour because they must be tired” and added that this is different from feeling pity (*dayā ni vṛtti*). “Dadaji says that pity (*dayā*) is a patronizing word (*tuccha śabda*). There is a difference between letting the servant rest out of pity, because you feel bad for them, and out of the understanding that God is in him. He has life (*jīva*) in him too.”¹⁹⁹ Here, again, the emphasis is placed on how you perceive the other and thereby treat him or her. A similar application of the concept of an indwelling God was evident in the following example given by another participant. He said,

Today, if you go on the train, you see that one person is yelling at another. Now, I won't yell back at him. I will understand that something is probably bothering him, he may have some problem. I will not talk to him *but my way of looking at him, my perception of him, will be a little different* than the other 99 people on the train. This is because of the understanding that he and I are related. As a result, my way of looking at him will be a little different. This is the difference.

Furthermore, an interview with another Swadhyaya participant revealed the interplay between modern self-centeredness and the concept of an inherent divinity. Nirmala Tai said:

When the feeling (*bhāvanā*) that God is sitting within me comes, then universal brotherhood (*viśva bandhutva*) is developed. Then, it is possible. We have experienced this through the medium of Swadhyaya. Otherwise, we would have never met one

¹⁹⁹ The distinction made between seeing others out of pity versus seeing them as inherently divine is important for understanding the distinction made by Swadhyayis between Swadhyaya and social work. A discussion of this difference is provided in the section labeled “*bhāva* versus pity” towards the end of this chapter as well as in the last section of Chapter Four on dignity.

another. Right? Because today it has become such that after closing our doors, we are separate and the rest of the world is external. We are inside. This is what happens. As a result, there is no interaction (*len den*) between individuals. We make the attempt to meet others only if there is a dire need or if some difficulty came about or if it's because we share a friendship and we want to go travel with our friends or for a picnic, then we'll go. If not, there is no need. Me, my life, and TV.

This was an interesting interpretation of our relationship. For Nirmala Tai, what brought the two of us in contact with one another, what connects the two of us is this notion of divine brotherhood that forms the basis of Swadhyaya. For her, the “feeling” of an indwelling divinity links her to others for reasons other than those motivated by personal necessity or a previously established friendship. Because, as she said, what other reason is there aside from those motivated by some form of selfish gain for two people to meet or for her to leave her home and her television? What other reason is there for two people to interact? In contrast, my relationship with her was one between a researcher and an informant, an interviewer and an interviewee. There was a clear selfish motivation behind my presence both at the Swadhyaya center where we met and our current meeting at their home, namely, collecting data. My relationship with Nirmala Tai was, in fact, a live example of the kind of relation described by many of my Swadhyaya informants as characteristic of modern relationships. There was a clear selfish reason for why I had gone to “meet” her.²⁰⁰

²⁰⁰ The criticism against selfishly motivated relationships compels one to think about the motives underlying one's interactions with others. What is the reason behind each of the relationships one establishes and maintains throughout one's life? The interview with Nirmala Tai along with interviews among participants with whom I developed a close relationship created a kind of personal/ethical dilemma for me. I felt that “pinching” that my informants spoke about whenever I conducted interviews because I was cognizant of the fact that I was meeting with these people to collect data and not just for the sake of meeting them, that is, meeting them selflessly. This is evident in the following fieldwork journal entry written after meeting with an informant:

She spoke of how important it is to meet people. I think she said that she isn't able to. She said she wishes to meet a lot of people but it doesn't happen. How long it takes to

The examples above demonstrate two interrelated ways in which the concept of an “indwelling God” provides an alternative basis for how one relates to and perceives the other. First, the concept of an indwelling god is seen as a basic foundation for connecting one human to another without an eye for benefit and in contrast to what was described as the “commercial” and consumerist nature of modern relationships. Second, it enables a particular way of perceiving and relating to the “other” as a person worthy of respect. The examples above reveal not only how the concept of an indwelling God affects the way one perceives others, but also how the feeling of being related or connected to others affects one’s perception and behavior towards them. In this respect, these examples demonstrate why the concept of an indwelling God is seen as a compelling source for self-fashioning and stands in contrast to Charles Taylor’s argument about the replacement of theistic moral sources by secular sources in what he describes as the “secular age.”²⁰¹ I argue that the compelling force of Swadhyaya’s discourse and praxis on selflessness explicated below must be understood in light of what was described above as the nature of the modern relationship between the self and other and the way in which the concept of devotion and theistic sources more generally are perceived as providing an alternative foundation.

actually know someone. How much time you have to give for that. She spoke of how most people will meet for a selfish reason. They will say sweet things and then ultimately get whatever job they need from you done. So it immediately made me conscious of the fact that I too am meeting with her for a selfish reason. So I told her what I was feeling and thinking. How we learn that we should meet people on a selfless basis but due to the nature of my research, I am always meeting her for a selfish reason. And how I think about this each time I meet with her but can’t help it because it is the reason I have come to India and my time is limited. I mentioned that I will also write about this in my thesis. She smiled.

²⁰¹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007) and *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

In Swadhyaya, the moral self is understood not only in terms of how one relates to oneself but also how one relates to others. In particular, the virtue of selflessness—central to the moral and religious discourse of Swadhyaya—is understood as a matter of how one relates to other human beings. As we will see below, the practice of selflessness involves cultivating selfless relationships with others, namely, one in which there are no expectations or selfish motives. In this respect, ethical being is rooted not only in one’s relationship with oneself as argued by Michel Foucault and Pierre Hadot, but also as a matter of how one relates to others as argued by Charles Hallisey, following Paul Ricoeur’s conception of ethics as living well with and for other.²⁰²

Selfless Love and Selfless Affection

In Swadhyaya, the virtue of selflessness consists of developing a particular way of looking at and connecting with individuals without an eye for benefit. In particular, selflessness consists of developing selfless love (*nivārtha prem*) and selfless affection (*nivārtha bhāva*) for the other. According to one Swadhyayi, cultivating selfless affection towards others is a mark of development. He said, “Development (*vikās*) means that your selfishness decreases. You have affection (*bhāva*) towards others.” The notion of *bhāva* and *prem*, specifically, selfless love and selfless affection, is central to the religious discourse on self-fashioning in Swadhyaya and a key reason for why individuals

²⁰² Michel Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress” and “The Ethics of the Concern for Self as Practice of Freedom,” trans. Robert Hurley, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*. Ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1997); Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995); Charles Hallisey. “Between Intuition and Judgment: Moral Creativity in Theravada Buddhist Ethics” in *Ethical Life in South Asia*, ed. Anand Pandian and Daud Ali (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2010) 141-152. Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 172.

are drawn to the movement. Shivanibahen, the group facilitator of one of the *Yuvati Kendras* that I observed, for example, spoke of how when she first began attending the *Yuvati Kendra* in Pune where she was born, she found it to be boring.²⁰³ But, the one thing that she liked was the love (*prem*) she received from the other girls. She said that it made her want to go back and that, “This is one of the great things Dadaji has created. Here there is selfless love which has a different feeling.” Referencing that week’s discourse by Athavale, she said that Swadhyaya is not simply about listening to the lecture, but also about meeting one another. She added that it’s not necessary that one comes because they find Dada’s lectures (*pravachan*) appealing.²⁰⁴

Another Swadhyayi, Kishanbhai, spoke about how he used to get annoyed that Swadhyayis kept coming to his house on devotional visits. Then, slowly, his wife began to go to Swadhyaya also and to irritate her, he would lock the door when she would come home and make her wait outside. Eventually he thought that if she is going, there must be something to it and began going himself. He explained that what he liked when he went was the selfless love and affection that he experienced. He said, “We have a family of 70-80 members right here in Mumbai but we get more love from Swadhyayis than we do from them. If a family member comes over, you will think he has come for a selfish reason. But when Swadhyayis come over, you know that it is only out of their love and without any selfish intention.”

²⁰³ “*Yuvati Kendra*” refers to the weekly female youth gatherings in Swadhyaya.

²⁰⁴ This view was resonated among many of the other girls and women who attended the *Yuvati Kendra* facilitated by Shivanibahen during a *Yuvati Kendra* session where they were asked what they like about *Yuvati Kendra*. Almost half responded that they like the aspect of meeting one another selflessly.

The centrality of the concepts of *prem* and *bhāva* in Swadhyaya was explicated during an interview with a very old member of Swadhyaya. When I arrived at his office in South Mumbai, the first thing that Sapanbhai said was that there is much more *bhāva* and *prem* in the villages than in the city. He spoke of what he called the “dryness” in the *Swadhyaya Kendra* in Mumbai compared to those in the villages.²⁰⁵ He asked, “Do those who have been a part of Swadhyaya for a long time show care towards newcomers?” And said that they should. Sapanbhai explained that Athavale was concerned with creating affection between people (*bhāva nirmān*). “People have become dry,” he said, and that *bhāva* is developed through constantly meeting one another. He explained that the foundation of Swadhyaya is to meet one another (*maḷavāṇu*) and that Swadhyaya Kendra is the meeting place for Swadhyayis.²⁰⁶ He mentioned a conference that Athavale attended in Germany in celebration of St. Nicholas’s birthday where he explained that the true work of religion (*dharma*) is to bring man closer to man.²⁰⁷ This was also mentioned by another participant who explained that the original purpose of religion was to increase *prem* and *bhāva* between people. When I asked Sapanbhai to define “*bhāva*,” he said that it is difficult to define and described it in the form of the

²⁰⁵ “Swadhyaya Kendra” refers to the central Swadhyaya activity where participants gather on a weekly basis to watch Athavale’s lectures at local centers.

²⁰⁶ Meeting (*malavāṇu*) is described as one of the four pillars of Swadhyaya. See, Sat Vichar Darshan, *The Systems: The Way and the Work*, (Bombay: Sat Vichar Darshan Trust, 1994), 9. Interestingly, Sapanbhai spoke of the difference between the current “flat” or apartment culture of Mumbai where the doors of all homes are shut and the older chawl system. “*Bhārat*,” according to him, is a “village culture. In the villages, one only stays home to eat and sleep and is meeting with someone else the rest of the time. Our culture is to meet each other. People will only become close by meeting one another.”

²⁰⁷ During lecture 102 on the “*R̥g Veda Mantra*” delivered on July 13, 1986, Athavale mentions that one of the functions of *dharma* is *bhāva jāgruti*, or awakening affection in people. Also see Pandurang Śāstri Athavale, *The Systems* (Mumbai: Sat Vicar Darshan, 1994), 16.

question, “How is a person from within (*mānas andar thi kevo*).” He also used the word “*rujutā*” meaning straightforwardness. He said that when there is intimacy (*ātmīyatā*) between individuals, which he defined as “the other is not other,” there is affection. In other words, affection towards others exists when you feel connected to them. The decrease in affection towards others is perceived to be a result of increasing selfishness, which, as discussed above, is understood as a by-product of not feeling connected to others. Here, again, one’s relationship with the other is seen as key to the cultivation of *bhāva*.

Another Swadhyaya participant who worked very closely with the founder emphasized the importance of selfless love. According to him and other participants, Swadhyaya is “the work”²⁰⁸ because it consists of selfless love and selfless work. He explained that Athavale whom he endearingly referred to as “Dadaji” selflessly loved millions of people and explicated the importance of practicing selfless love in the following way.

God (*Prabhu*) or some power, call it Kṛṣṇā, Rāma, Allah, Jesus, has loved billions of people. God gave us a nice body, healthy eyes, understanding. God made me a good person. This all represents God’s love (*prem*) for us. God makes me sleep, digests my food, gives me strength after eating and creates hunger. This is God’s love for me. This is selfless love from God. It is pure (*pavitra*). If I love twenty people, then I have worshiped (*upāsanā*) God properly.

Here, Kiranbhai articulated the concept of God expounded by Athavale. The idea of loving others selflessly comes from a particular understanding of the notion of God seen in the text above. Athavale teaches that there is a power that maintains and sustains one’s existence—namely, who wakes us up, digests our food, and gives us sleep—and who has

²⁰⁸ Participants often used the term “the work” to describe the uniqueness of Swadhyaya.

given all the things that individuals take for granted such as air, water and sunlight. They call this power God. Athavale explains that God gives all of these things selflessly, without any expectations and that they are an expression of God's selfless love towards all beings. Thus, Swadhyaya participants explain that it is their duty as human beings to be grateful (*kṛtajña*) towards this power. Athavale teaches that one way of expressing gratitude is by developing a similar selfless love for others.²⁰⁹ Moreover, Athavale teaches that the virtues of gratitude (*kṛtajñatā*) and having affection (*bhāvamayatā*) are the defining characteristics of a human being.²¹⁰ In this respect, the practice of loving others selflessly is understood not only as a way of worshiping God, but key to being human. As argued in Chapter One, a particular discourse on what it means to be human is central to understanding why participants engage in Swadhyaya activities.

Kiranbhai continued to explain that since God's job is to love people, it becomes our job also. He said, "When does a marriage between a girl and guy happen? When the families are good and when the horoscopes (*kuṇḍali*) of the bride and the groom meet. When will my horoscope meet with God's? When I do what God does. Then I will meet God, feel God's touch (*sparśa*)." He then spoke about the thirteenth century Maharashtrian saint, Namdev, who ran after a dog with clarified butter (*ghee*) who ran off with his bread saying that it doesn't have ghee on it. Kiranbhai said, "This is love for animals. Then, can't we love humans?" He specified, moreover, how selfless love is put

²⁰⁹ As we will see in the next section, Athavale has developed a specific practice known as *bhāvpheri* for this purpose.

²¹⁰ According to Athavale, a true human being has four virtues (*guṇa*): *kṛtajñatā* (gratitude), *bhāvamayatā* (affection), *asmitā* (self-dignity), and *kāryapravaṇatā* (devotion to action). The translations provided here reflect how they are explicated in Swadhyaya. Pandurang Śāstri Athavale, *Trikal Sandhya* (Mumbai: Sat Vichar Darshan, 2009), 2. See Chapter Three of this dissertation for a detailed discussion on the virtue of gratitude and Chapter Four on *asmitā*.

into practice. He said, “If I love my son, there is no merit (*punya*) because it is something I have to do. But if I love twenty of my son’s friends, it will become good action (*karma*). Then god helps you. You love them without any expectations. I love you with all thy faults.” Here, the emphasis is placed on developing selfless love towards “others” with whom one does not share a natural relationship. He cited the thirty-six qualities of a devotee described in chapter twelve of the *Bhagavad Gītā*. The first virtue (*guṇa*), he explained, is “*adveṣṭā*,” which he translated as, “love others, don’t hate others,” and that “*adveṣṭā sarva bhutānām*” means to love all beings. He also mentioned “*akāran prem*,” which he defined as to love without any reason, and said that he would not have this understanding without Athavale. He added, “God is love and love is God,” referring to the well-known bible verse frequently quoted by Athavale in his discourses, to emphasize the importance of love. When I asked what one needs to be able to practice this kind of love, he said, “You need an inner feeling,” resonating what Sapanbhai described as “*bhāva*” earlier. Then, towards the end of our conversation, he explained one other way in which to express selfless love. He said, “If I want to have this love for you, I will get your number from Manjula aunty (the woman who had come with me for this interview) after you leave India and call you just because. *No reason (em aj)*.”

While Kiranbhai spoke of selfless love as a matter of loving others without having any expectations, Meerabahen described selfless love as unconditional love through the following example. As a newly married wife, Meerabahen quickly noticed that everyone in her husband’s family mistreated her mother-in-law including her father-in-law who often spoke disrespectfully towards her. She explained that there is a custom during

Divālī where she and her in-laws exchange presents.²¹¹ So during one *Divālī*, she went to her father-in-law and asked whether she could ask for something. Her father-in-law said “of course.” Meerabahen explained that this was because she was the first daughter-in-law in the family and therefore a favorite. So, she asked him to not use profanity while speaking to his wife going forward. He responded with anger and began cursing even more. He also began to speak disparagingly of Meerabahen and her parents. He was so angry that he refused to eat throughout the remainder of the day. Then later that night when it was time to eat dinner, he refused again. Meerabahen, aware of this, went to him and asked him to eat saying, “How can we eat if you haven’t eaten?” Happy to hear this, he eventually ate. Meerabahen explained that while pointing out a mistake, one should still love that person just as before, that is, unconditionally. She showed this by not letting her father-in-law’s behavior affect her love towards him. She said,

Selfless love (*nivārtha prem*) is not when you are friends with someone one day and then on another day when they say something that was hurtful, you stop being their friend. You have to respond to them with that same love you had for them on the first day. That person will automatically realize his/her wrongdoing. Your behavior shouldn’t change towards them. God has so much selfless love for us. Whether or not we think about him, or even if we curse him, He runs our bodies. We should try to do this kind of *prem* on at least one person in our life.

The first part of this explanation speaks to a very common issue that comes up in everyday life in regards to one’s relationship with others. It points to the conditional nature of relationships where friendship lasts as long as there is no conflict or offense and how one’s attitude towards and love for the other changes depending on their behavior and what they say. What Meerabahen is describing here is a deeper basis for friendship,

²¹¹ *Divālī*, also known as *Dipāvalī*, is the festival of lights celebrated by Hindus by the lighting of lamps and the exchange of gifts.

namely one that is not determined by what the other person says and is instead rooted in unconditional or selfless love for the other. Furthermore, she explained that the notion of an indwelling God is important for developing this form of selfless love because without it one will not be able to let go of the wrongdoings of others. She said that you can love others in this way without the concept of an indwelling god but then the conflict that took place with someone will remain in your mind. “Every time you see that person, you think of his or her faults (*doṣa*). You don’t forget that he said this to me. It keeps stinging you (*dan̄kha*) that he did this.”

Similar to Meerabahen, participants argued that the concept of devotion is necessary to practice selfless love and affection. According to Nirajbhai, selfless love is only possible on the basis of devotion. He said,

When the foundation is devotion (*bhakti ni bethaka*), the love (*prem*) lasts. In a normal relationship, there are expectations and when they are not met there is misery (*dukha*). The purity (*pavitratā*) of a relationship is maintained when it is based on devotion. Normally, when a sister goes to tie a *rākhi* (bracelet traditionally made from thread) on her brother, she expects that he will give her something. Then when he doesn’t give or gives something she doesn’t like, it bothers her. A divine relation or a selfless relation is without any expectations. It is one in which I don’t have a right (*adhikāra*) in a relationship. There is love but no power (*sattā*) or sense of rights (*adhikāra bhāvanā*).²¹² Wherever there is prem typically, there is the mentality that the person should listen to me, do as I say, follow my choice, etc. (*mānavu joie*). When expectations are there, there are likes and dislikes.

While Nirajbhai emphasizes the notion of a divine relationship discussed at the beginning of this chapter as the basis for practicing selfless love, Kavinbhai argued that selfless love will only last if God is in its foundation. He said,

²¹² According to the literature, this type of relationship is described as “true friendship” in the *Bhagavad Gītā*. See Pandurang Śāstri Athavale, *The Systems: The Way and the Work* (Mumbai: Sat Vichar Darshan, 1994), 11-12.

If we take the example of Jesus, when people were nailing him to the cross, what did he say? He said, 'please God forgive them. They don't know what they're doing.' That is, this kind of love (*prem*) where one has love for those who are hurting me, beating me, giving me pain, can only be said by an *īśvarvādī* (theist) or a realized soul. Today, if I was giving you difficulties, you will easily say that why is this person giving me difficulties without any reason? Depending on how developed (*unnata*) you are, you will have *tiraskāra* (contempt) at one stage and *karuṇā* (compassion) at a higher level.

He explained that a person will let it go once, twice, but on the third time he will want to hit the individual causing him pain or get him back in some other way. Instead, if he realizes that by doing anything wrong towards this person, he will be hurting the God within him, he will act otherwise.

The virtue of selflessness, understood in terms of practicing selfless love and affection, is thus intimately connected to the concept of God in Swadhyaya, and the idea of an inherent divinity is perceived as necessary for the cultivation of the former. As we will see below, this understanding of God forms the basis for one of the primary practices in Swadhyaya. The concepts of *prem* and *bhāva*, moreover, undergird Swadhyaya's religious discourse and are central to the ways in which Swadhyaya is understood and perceived by its participants and therefore key to understanding its appeal in contemporary society.

Selfless Work: Swadhyaya and *Bhāvpheri*

The primary practice in Swadhyaya for cultivating selfless love and affection for others is known as *bhāvpheri* and *bhaktipheri*. *Bhāvpheri* refers to local devotional visits involving meeting other human beings with the understanding of divine brotherhood;

Bhaktipheri involves going to another village or town.²¹³ *Bhāvpheri* constitutes the primary practice of *krutibhakti*—action done for or devoted to God—a concept central to how devotion is understood and practiced in Swadhyaya.²¹⁴ Participants contrasted *krutibhakti* with what was perceived as contemporary forms of devotion including going to the temple, offering flowers, doing *ārati* and lighting incense. Hansabahen, for instance, explained that all of the things typically offered to God, whether it is a flower, water or fruit, are given to us by God. For her, *bhakti* is not done simply by giving things or money to God. Instead, “*Bhakti* is that which is done by the body (*śarīra*). God does so much for us. Giving our time to God counts as *bhakti*. Today, the one thing people say they don’t have is time.” According to Hansabahen, devotion is meeting other people with love and affection on the basis of a divine relationship (*daivi sambandha*). Participants claimed that it is this form of devotion that distinguishes Swadhyaya from other religious organizations and makes it “the best (*śreṣṭha*)” among others.²¹⁵

As we will see below, *bhāvpheri* is perceived as selfless work (*nisvārtha karma*) insofar as the time spent in doing *bhāvpheri* is perceived as time devoted to God and to doing God’s work (*prabhu kārya* or *bhagavān nu kām*). In addition to constituting the religiosity and devotion practiced by participants, the significance of “selfless work” was

²¹³ The first of these devotional visits took place in 1958 when a group of 19 young men traveled from Bombay to the villages of Gujarat. According to some scholars, the Swadhyaya movement began with this first *bhāvpheri*. Giri, *Self Development*, 4.

²¹⁴ In Swadhyaya, “*krutibhakti*” is translated as “devotional activism.” See “Swadhyaya Pariwar,” accessed on July 13, 2013, <http://swadhyay.org>.

²¹⁵ However, it is important to note that Swadhyayis do not reject traditional Hindu rituals such as going to a temple, lighting incense, praying, etc. In fact, the performance of these rituals are considered an important means to develop a relationship with God and many of my informants performed these rituals on a regular basis. However, they emphasized the importance of not limiting devotion to the performance of such rituals, which they described as “*karmakānda*.”

also explained in the context of the theory of liberation (*mokṣa*). Shilpabahen explained that there are four kinds of actions. The first is selfish (*svārthi karma*) where one performs an action because there is some benefit for him in doing it. The second kind of action is that which is performed for others, namely, with whom there is a relationship, e.g. parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, etc. (*parārthi karma*). The third kind of action is that which earns merit (*punya*) and is called *paramārthi karma*. The examples given for this kind of action were donating to charity and social work. The last kind of action is action done for God, *parameśvārthi karma*, and constitutes selfless work. She said,

Pujya Dadaji says to do *parameśvārthi karma* (action for God). *Parameśvārthi karma* means to love without any expectations (*nirapekṣa prem*). *Parameśvārthi karma*, as explained by Pujya Dadaji, is when you cross your *umro* (threshold of a house) only with God in mind, that which is *nisvārtha* (without selfishness) and *nirapekṣa* (without expectations). Pujya Dadaji explains that we should do *nirapekṣa* and *nirākāṅkṣa karma*, which God takes, the *karma* of whose account does not come to us. *Nirapekṣa* and *nirākāṅkṣa karma* is the best kind of work (*śreṣṭha karma*). That *karma* does not disturb you. You don't have to encash it. Good work such as social work requires that you are born again to encash those *karmas*. “*kṣīṇe punye martyalokam viśanti*,” meaning you have to come back down.²¹⁶ A person who has done a lot of good work (*sāru kām*), for example, a person who donated millions of dollars... Giving millions of dollars to charity is good but he gave it egoistically. He gave it with an ego *bhāvanā*, that “I gave it.” Then everyone comes and says to him, “Wow, you gave this much money. It's such a great thing because of which so many hospitals have been built and so many people will benefit from. You had these ashrams built. Wow, what a great thing you did.” Different people found out and the merit was *encashed*.

According to Shilpabahen, when an action is done for God, the results of that action belong to Him as well. That is, one detaches oneself from the fruits of his or her actions by performing the action for God, therefore making it selfless. It is important that one

²¹⁶ Here, she is quoting a part of verse 9.21 of the *Bhagavad Gītā*. The full verse is: *te taṃ bhuktvā svargalokaṃ viśālaṃ kṣīṇe punye martyalokaṃ viśanti. Evaṃ trayīdharmam anuprapannā gatāgataṃ kāmakāmā labhante*. According to her, one must come down to earth, that is, be born again in order to reap the fruits of good actions while the verse states that one comes down to earth after the fruits of his or her meritorious actions have been exhausted.

performs such actions in order to obtain liberation from the cycle of birth and death since any action offered to God will not cause the performer to be born again to reap the results. Thus, the place of God at the foundation of the practice of selflessness is also key for one's liberation and therefore any action done selflessly, that is, for God, is considered the best kind of action.²¹⁷

The importance of selfless work was further described in the following way. According to Nathibahen, work done with an expectation lacks fragrance (*sugandha*). Referring to a famous example given by Athavale, she explained that when one goes to a bank to deposit a check, he or she gets money. However, if you take that same check back and deposit it again, you will not get anything. In the same way, she said, if you do selfless work in this birth, that is, work without wanting any results, then God will keep note of it. She explained that typically when we do something in this lifetime, we are rewarded with money and promotions for example. That is, we enjoy the fruits of our actions in this very lifetime. She said, "So then what will God have left to give you when you go up? You already got the money, house and car that you wanted." She then gave another example to explain the significance of selfless work. She said that if someone comes to our house and does not take anything from us, we have more respect (*ādara*), affection (*bhāva*) and love (*prem*) for that person. That is, there is something more appealing about a person who simply comes to visit you without wanting anything,

²¹⁷ Another participant explained this somewhat differently. Quoting parts of two separate verses from the *Bhagavad Gītā* (verse 12.10 and 18.2), Premalbhai said, "Do all this, but tell God, 'I don't want anything in return.' When you do this, God automatically gives it back to you. He doesn't keep it. God gives it back in the form of a nice car, house, happiness, etc." He explained that when a young child comes and gives you (an adult) his chocolate, you will not take it. Instead, you will give it back to him to eat. Similarly, God will not keep our results. He will give it back.

without any personal motivation, than someone who comes for a selfish purpose. She said, “We will like them more and will in fact want to give them something or do something for them. Similarly if we do selfless work, God will like it more. Man does God’s work when he realizes that God too works for us selflessly. When we do selfless work, we feel an internal happiness (*ānand*). That happiness is God.” In a similar way, there is a certain respect and love that grows towards a God who is similarly seen as acting selflessly on one’s behalf. While the former example expresses concern for the next life, the latter example reflects the moral appeal of selfless work. It is seen as something with “fragrance.”²¹⁸ Amibahen shared a similar feeling. She said,

Here, you are so busy, you work, you hardly have time and still you take out your time, money, to go for *bhaktipheri*. At that time, you don’t want anything. You don’t expect anything. Expectations are zero. And yet, you go. Why? To go to meet the other person who is a part of our family. You go with the understanding that the other person is a part of our family. So at such a time, you feel, how is this possible? What is the need to take out my time to go for God’s work when I don’t even know what I’ll get in return? Practically, have I ever seen God? No. I don’t know what is going to come with me. Yet, when you see this in Swadhyaya, that such things happen, it feels good.

In his discourses, Athavale emphasizes selfless work and selfless love and teaches participants to meet other human beings simply for the sake of meeting them and not for any selfish purpose through the practice of *bhāvpheri*. However, conversations with informants about *bhāvpheri* revealed how complex the practice of selfless work is and the difficulty in cultivating the virtue of selflessness. While most participants explained the importance of *bhāvpheri* in terms of it being a form of either selfless work or God’s

²¹⁸ The association of “selfless work” with fragrance or “*sugandha*” was also expressed by another participant. She spoke of *bhaktipheri* as a hardship undertaken voluntarily (*upādelu dukha*). She gave the example of sandalwood (*chandana*) explaining that it is only when you rub it (*ghas*), does its fragrance come out. “I work hard for my son, husband, family. This is for one’s enjoyment (*bhog pūrti*) and therefore there is no fragrance (*sugandha*). When I do selfless work (*nīsvārtha kām*), there is fragrance (*sugandha*).”

work, actual praxis differed from person to person. Some went to share the teachings of Swadhyaya while others went to pay obeisance (*namaskār*) to the God within the other person.²¹⁹ Some went to cultivate the feeling of divine brotherhood and others went to “improve” (*sudhārvā*) the lives of those they visited. During my participant observation of *bhāvpheri* with several different groups of individuals, moreover, it was evident that the purpose behind these visits was to invite new people for an upcoming Swadhyaya event or to inform them about Swadhyaya and the closest Swadhyaya centers.²²⁰ In many cases, participants would begin by saying that they were there to meet them simply based on the understanding of a divine brotherhood taught by Athavale but added that there is a Swadhyaya center nearby by the end of the visit. As a result of this, scholars often exclusively view *bhāvpheri* as a proselytizing or missionary activity. While fully aware that this form of *bhāvpheri* is common among many Swadhyayis, in what follows, I examine the practice of *bhāvpheri* as a means to cultivate the virtue of selflessness.²²¹ I illustrate why individuals perceive *bhāvpheri* as a selfless act as well as the difficulty in

²¹⁹ For example, while speaking about *bhāvpheri*, many participants mentioned that they go to share what they have learned in Swadhyaya with others. They explained that just how you tell your friends when there is a sale going on at the local supermarket or recommend a good movie, similarly, they go to share what they perceive as good ideas with others. In particular, Swadhyayis often speak about the role of God in their lives through the teaching of *Trikāl Sandhyā*, a set of Sanskrit verses compiled by Athavale and central to Swadhyaya thought, during *bhāvpheri*. Through it, they remind others of what they perceive as the presence of God in their lives. See Chapter Three for more details.

²²⁰ I should add the disclaimer that this observation is based on *bhāvpheri* that I attended that happened to be around the same time as an upcoming Swadhyaya event. I was not allowed to accompany the weekly *bhāvpheri* groups because I was told that according to the rules, single women are not allowed to go for night bhavpheri unless there is another woman present in the group.

²²¹ However, it is also important to note that these devotional visits have indeed played a central role in spreading Swadhyaya teachings and creating a mass movement and continue to do so.

cultivating selflessness, and how some individuals reconcile the notion of selflessness and the desire that the people who they do *bhāvpheri* among come to Swadhyaya. In each of these examples, participants contrasted “*bhāvpheri*” with selfishness.

Most informants began by saying that individuals do not leave their homes unless it is for a selfish reason, unless there is something in it for them. In contrast, they said that there is no selfish motive when they leave their homes for *bhāvpheri* and described it as a selfless act (*nivārtha karma*). They explained that there is no selfish or material gain in the time that they spend doing *bhāvpheri*. Reflecting on his *bhāvpheri* experience, for instance, Vijaybhai said,

When we talk of selfless work, we also wonder, in what ways have we changed after doing selfless work for 15 years. Our elder Swadhyaya brother explains to us that 15 years ago, you used to leave your home. For what purpose did you leave your home each time, back then? For whom? For oneself. We went for work, we went to buy groceries, we went to the movies, we went to travel, to meet a friend, to go to the village to visit family. Whenever we went, we went for our own work. But, today, why do I go out of my home? I don't go for selfish reasons, for work concerning myself. This means that there is a big difference in you. That I am no longer going out for my own work. I am going out for others. That is, God's work. Now, when I go to another's home, I will use my strength (*śakti*) to walk. I will climb 3-4 flights of stairs to get to their flat. I will sit and talk to them. I will talk about God through the strength that God has given me. And will return after thirty minutes. So in this, I didn't do anything for myself. I did not use my strength for my own purpose. When I leave the house, I say a prayer (*prārthanā*) and tell God that I am going to do your work and left and did his work alone for that hour and returned. So I did not spend one hour of my life for myself. Therefore, I did something selfless, right? This is a matter of training the mind that today I worked selflessly for one hour and going forward I will do it for two hours, three hours, etc. The more and more selfless work I do, the more my development will happen.

For this informant, doing “God’s work” in the form of sharing ideas about God with others is considered selfless work because there is no personal gain involved. Here, *bhāvpheri* is understood as a form of training the mind to do something for someone other than oneself—a practice of cultivating selflessness perceived as an important part of one’s development. This understanding was resonated in an interview with Nikhilbhai

who explained that *bhāvpheri* is a practice of training the mind to perceive others in a selfless way, that is, without any selfish motives. When I asked him whether one has to consciously remind him or herself that X is God's child when you meet them, Nikhilbhai said,

Not necessarily. The reason why we have to remind ourselves is because it is not our nature (*svabhāva*) or habit (*tev*). But one day, our nature should become such that whenever you talk to someone, you do it selflessly. Ordinarily, our interaction (*vehavār*) with any person is because it is beneficial (*upayogi*), or a necessity, or if they are related to us, or formally since we are living in this society. We say, "Hello, how are you," even if we don't really care. It is *above neck*. Nothing is meant from within (*andar kasu halatu nā hoi*). Those who do this will do this. But our inner feeling should be that I have no expectation (*apekṣā*) from anyone. In spite of not having any expectations, I have met this person and the relationship that I have met him through is that he is a life (*jīva*), I am also a life (*jīva*). He is an *ātmā*, a pure soul, and so I behave with him accordingly. If I do this, I will be able to maintain my purity.

Nikhilbhai draws attention to the importance of a relationship when going for *bhāvpheri* and meeting others without any expectations. He alludes to the idea of an indwelling God, which serves as a basis for performing selfless work. The connection between a divine relationship and selfless work was reinforced by another participant in the following way.

Selfless work is only possible through spirituality (*ādhyātma*). I don't want anything yet I do this work. This test is only possible in spirituality because selfless work means to do work for others. Now to do work for others, why should I work for him? Who is he to me that I should do something for him? Until I don't have a relation with him, I will not work for him right? So there needs to be some kind of relation with him. And when the topic of *sambandha* (relationship) comes, then spirituality comes because relations cannot be formed without it. What is my relation with X? Who is he to me? We are not related by blood. What other relation is there? Now, we say, he is *Bhāratiya*. He is also Indian. I too am Indian and so I help him. If this is the case, then why does one Indian kill another? Why does one Indian cheat another Indian? This is what we see today. If you are both Indian, then why can't you live like brother and sister? They can't. Someone else may say, "We belong to the same lineage (*vaṃṣa*)."
So then why is it that people of the same lineage kill one another? Why can't they build a relation between them? Because *svārtha* (selfishness) comes in the middle. In this universe, there is no

element (*tattva*) that can join two people.²²² There is only one *tattva* that can do this and that is the relation of devotion or that of spirituality. Spirituality is the only element that can join two people.²²³

According to Kanubhai, to do something for someone other than oneself, referring to the practice of *bhāvpheri* where one goes to meet others, requires that one has a relationship with that person and the only basis on which to join two individuals is the understanding of the indwelling God concept.

When I went to Babubhai's home for an interview, unknown to me, he had invited two other Swadhyayis to join us so that they could share their own experiences about Swadhyaya with me. One of the gentlemen spoke about a recent six-day *bhaktiphari* that he went for in a neighboring village of Mumbai constituted primarily by a fishermen community. He described what their typical day was like and said that in the six days that they spent there, they received "so much love (*prem*) and affection (*bhāva*)." So Babubhai interrupted and asked whether I knew what "*prem*" and "*bhāva*" meant. I asked him to explain. He explained that when the community came to drop off these individuals at the train station after spending six days together, they were crying. He asked, "What must have happened in those six days that brought them so close together? There was no giving or taking of anything (*len/den*). What did they talk about that made these people feel this way?" He described this as affection (*bhāva*). Babubhai explained that Dada gave the path of *bhāvpheri* to develop and make affection last between people. The *bhāva* spoken about by Babubhai is an emotion that does not have any selfishness at its basis. It is selfless affection. That is, the affection did not grow out of giving or

²²² The Gujarati word "*bāndhavu*" was used to say "to join."

²²³ He defined spirituality in terms of *work* that has God at its foundation.

receiving anything material. It grew out of individuals meeting one another for the sake of meeting one another on the basis of the understanding of a divine relationship between all human beings. Babubhai added that this “seed of affection (*bhāva nu jaraṇu*)” is only seen in Swadhyaya. “One doesn’t go to *bhāvpheri* to get something. They go selflessly,” he exclaimed.

In a similar way, Premalbai emphasized that the most important aspect of *bhāvpheri* is to give warmth and love to others. He said that if the purpose of going is to get people to come to Swadhyaya, then, it is no longer selfless work. He said that if you tell the people you’re meeting to come to Swadhyaya, it is “conditioned thinking.” The ultimate goal of *bhāvpheri*, he explained, is not to get people to come to Swadhyaya. It is to meet them. He said, “Dada gives us the strength to love (*prem karavāni śakti*). It’s no problem if you don’t give thoughts (*vicār*). Today, what is needed? Love. A child grows through warmth (*humph*) and love (*prem*). *Prem* has decreased because people have become more selfish (*svārthi*). No one has time...we should always give love and warmth (*humph*) to people. We should encourage people. Make sure that no one is sitting (*besi nā rahe, ubho karavāno*).” Premalbai continued to explain that in order to practice this form of love, one should keep fifteen to twenty relationships where one does not want anything from those people and emphasized the importance to set a time every week to go and meet them consistently (*niyamita*).²²⁴ He said, “No coffee from them

²²⁴ Here, Premalbai is alluding to the Swadhyaya *prayog* known as *vinśati* where *bhāvpheri* is conducted among a group of twenty families on a regular basis.

either. Just to meet. Then the love is pure.”²²⁵ He added that when you go for *bhāvpheri*, there will be times when no one will listen. No one will offer you coffee. But, he says, “We will still go again. We came to give love. *Lena dena bandha hai, phir bhi ānanda hai* (there is no giving or taking yet there is happiness). Dada teaches us this love.”²²⁶ It is evident that for Premalbai, *bhāvpheri* is the practice of meeting and loving others selflessly and building selfless relationships.

Similarly, Naganbhai explained that the purpose of building selfless relationships with others is to increase one’s ability to love, which he perceived as a form of self-development. He explained that typically our love operates in a “limited field.” That is, we have love for our family and friends. But through *bhāvpheri*, he explained that relationships with unknown strangers are established and one’s love increases. He said, “Other is not other, but my divine brother. The mind develops. Instead of just loving fifteen people, he now loves fifty. This kind of love is divine. Through it, there is upliftment.” For Naganbhai, the practice of selflessly loving others through *bhāvpheri*

²²⁵ One rule observed by Swadhyayis during *bhāvpheri* in order to maintain the selflessness of the act is to not accept anything from those whom they are visiting except a glass of water. As far as I was told, accepting of water was allowed in order to not offend the lower castes who may think that Swadhyayis are refusing the water because of other reasons such as impurity.

²²⁶ One often hears Swadhyayees exclaiming “*lena dena bandha hain, phir bhi ānanda hain*,” a Hindi expression meaning that even though there is no giving or taking, there is joy. It is a “rule” practiced among Swadhyayees in order to maintain a selfless relationship between them. This Swadhyaya “rule” was made apparent to me when one day, soon after my sister had given birth to a baby boy, I brought over a box of sweets as per Indian tradition when visiting one of my informants who I had developed a close relationship with. She immediately said that we don’t give or take in Swadhyaya and repeated the above aphorism. Ultimately, she accepted it because she saw that I had brought it with love. During another interview, Kirtibahen told me that she does not do *bhāvpheri* at the homes of the children whom she tutors. She explained that this is because there is no “*len den*” (giving or taking) in Swadhyaya and since she gets paid for tutoring she keeps the two separate. She said that she didn’t want materialism to mix with her spiritual life.

and thereby increasing one's capacity to love is a form of cultivating the self in light of what is perceived as the modern tendency to focus on oneself. Naganbhai also mentioned that *bhāvpheri* provides a starting “field” where one can practice to love others selflessly—without any expectations—and emphasized that it is a starting point and should not be the ending point. He explained that a divine or selfless relation is one without any expectations and that it is harder to love one's own family members selflessly because we have pre-established expectations from them. For example, he said that if he is the oldest member in the family, he will think that the others should listen to him or do as he wishes. He reasoned that it is easier to practice selfless love during *bhāvpheri* because the people are completely new and thus there are less expectations involved whereas it is much more difficult to let go of expectations from one's own brother or sister. For him, *bhāvpheri* is a start and then you practice this form of selfless love within your own family.

In a similar way, Shilpababen, explained that *bhāvpheri*, which she described as “the path to go to God,” is her “spiritual practice (*sādhanā*)” and the study of it (*abhyāsa*) is when we practice it in our own families. She said, “How do I live in my own house? The main point of Swadhyaya is whether the teachings are applied in one's own family. Is there any change in my own life? We have expectations from our family.”²²⁷ Referring to another Swadhyaya male whom she considers her divine brother and ties a *rākhi* (bracelet tied traditionally on the Hindu festival of Rakṣābandhan) without any

²²⁷ As discussed in Chapter Four, the concept of religion and the performance of religious rituals are understood as closely linked to the development of the self in Swadhyaya. Participants argued that religion and self-development must be intimately connected.

exchange of gifts as per tradition, she said, “If I can practice this kind of relationship with Kanubhai, then why can’t I do it with my own brother and sister? When a divine relationship is there, then there is a change in the blood relationship.”

The idea that *bhāvpheri* is a starting place to practice selfless love towards others was also expressed by Kiranbhai. He said,

If I join a Swadhyaya group and go for *bhāvpheri*, is that my *bhāvpheri* alone? Is 8:30-9:30 pm every Wednesday the only time for my *bhāvpheri*? No, it is a combined effort (*yajñiya prayatna*) to practice selfless love (*nirapekṣa prem*). But I have to take it to my 24 hours throughout the day. From the one hour that I walk selflessly, the one hour of practice (*abhyāsa*), the happiness (*ānand*) and satisfaction (*santoṣa*) that I experience makes me want to bring it into my social dealings (*vehavār*), into my personal life, into my character, into every minute.

Kiranbhai expressed a certain kind of happiness and contentment in doing *bhāvpheri* that makes him want to cultivate that form of selflessness in other aspects of his life.

Tellingly, Kiranbhai also added that if you try to love everyone at the same time, that is, without a specific field of practice, you will most likely not succeed. He said,

If you try to practice “*adveṣṭā sarva bhutānām*” all at once, you will not be able to stand in the face of familial and social obligations (*vehavār*).²²⁸ When you reach that developing stage where you have trust that God takes care of you, where you have a relationship with God, then you will not have all these questions. But to get there, I have to study somewhere. So this is one group where I can practice being selfless. And I slowly take the happiness (*ānand*) I get there to society. The point is not to change people. It is to change myself.

For him and others, *bhāvpheri* is a place (*sthāna*) for practicing selfless love and affection. The cultivation of selflessness requires the undertaking of specific practices such as *bhāvpheri*. You practice selfless love in one place and then apply it elsewhere.

In this respect, for Kiranbhai and Swadhyayis, the practice of *bhāvpheri* is undertaken to

²²⁸ He is referring to verse 12.15 in the *Bhagavad Gītā* cited earlier by another participant while describing “selfless love.”

cultivate the self into a certain kind of being. The emphasis here is on practices of self-cultivation and self-transformation and not so much on adhering to a particular moral code or law. However, another participant expressed concern about not being able to do so. Nikunjhai said, “It doesn’t happen. We go far and talk to strangers. We will go to another village and talk to the people there (referring to *bhaktipheri*) but we are not able to talk to our own relatives.” Similar to Shilpabahen, he explained that development is determined by whether we are ultimately able to expand the field of practice of *bhāvpheri* to include our own families and build selfless relationships within one’s own home and regretfully said, “This is the test and we have not developed that much on this test.” Here, Nikunjhai acknowledges a gap between what should be the case and reality and the difficulty in developing selflessness further revealed in the cases that follow.

Similar to Kiranbhai, another Swadhyaya female, Kinaribahen who engages in *bhāvpheri* said that she feels happy when she goes to meet someone because it is based on selfless affection. She said that when there is a selfish motive involved, one is happy when expectations are met but disappointed when they are not. Referring to *bhāvpheri*, she explained that when you go to selflessly meet others and have a simple conversation with them, it doesn’t have to be about anything specific and that through this interaction, you learn about what others’ lives are like. You learn whether they have any problems.²²⁹ In other words, you move from focusing on yourself and your own life to

²²⁹ For example, she spoke of her mother-in-law, Dayabahen, who recently met with a lady she had been visiting previously through *bhāvpheri*. When she went over she found out that the lady was depressed and worried because her husband had not been going to work for a few days, followed by her son. She had not been cooking for those few days because of all of this. She cried in front of Dayabahen and shared her difficulties with her. Kinaribahen explained that people open up like this only with those whom they feel close with and whom they trust. She

others. However, the difficulty of going to meet others selflessly through *bhāvpheri* was evident in something she shared a little later in our conversation. Kinaribahen spoke of how initially she would feel that her motive in going for *bhāvpheri* was selfish. She mentioned reading an opinion's column in the paper that stated that there is no entirely selfless action and said that she agreed with the columnist. She explained that after visiting someone several times, there is some expectation that the young girl will come to the weekly female youth gathering (*Yuvatī Kendra*) on the third visit. The fact that she goes to this person's house after she has passed the tenth grade and is now eligible to come to *Yuvatī Kendra* is because she wants her to come. There is a selfish motive. But, she went ahead to describe this as "higher selfishness" explaining that she will not gain or lose anything if the girl comes to *Yuvatī Kendra* and thus it is not the kind of selfishness in which she herself has something to gain. She goes with the intention that others should have these good thoughts as well, a sentiment shared by many Swadhyaya participants, and yet one that contradicts the notion and practice of selflessness.

In a similar way, Lakshmi Tai expressed the desire that her close friends and family come to Swadhyaya, something that she perceives as good, and sadness over the fact that they do not. She described this as a pain (*dukha*) shared by many Swadhyayis. She said,

said that most other people will gossip and spread such news whereas her mother-in-law tried to offer solutions to the problem. She said that we Swadhyayis keep things to ourselves and try to help solve the issue at hand. She said that when we go for *bhāvpheri* and learn of something bad happening, we should share our good thoughts and offer solutions if any through them. She said we help with our hearts because we are not going to these people with any selfish motives.

There are people who know that we have been going for twenty years and feel that this is good, but even then, they do not come. What is the meaning of this? The experience of every Swadhyayi is that no matter how many good things we do and how much we progress forward, our family members do not have much respect for it or we are unable to change them even a little. I am very sad (*dukhi*) about this matter. If we cannot make our entire family Swadhyayi, then what is the point of us being Swadhyayi?

Earlier in our conversation, Lakshmi Tai and her husband suggested that I should meet with and interview an elder veteran Swadhyayi whom they respected very much and said that he would provide “better” answers to my questions. Referencing that individual, she said, “Do you know what he would say regarding this issue? He will say that we should not keep any expectations. Be selfless (*nirapekṣa*).” The fact that she said, “*He will say* that we should not keep any expectations” as opposed to “I know that we should not keep any expectations,” for instance, revealed some of the difficulties in letting go of one’s expectations and being selfless in actual life, and thereby pointing to the gap between ideals and actual lived practice in everyday life. For Lakshmi Tai, it is something that another person says we should do but not something she endorses herself. It reveals the difficulty of escaping the “I,” namely, what I want. To be selfless literally means to drop the self or I. The idea of meeting others selflessly, according to Athavale, or to behave selflessly towards them by selflessly loving them means to have no expectations. However, the importance of “me” and “mine” has seemingly come to be ingrained into the very fabric of contemporary society such that the virtue of selflessness remains elusive even for those who are attempting to practice it. This became evident again when conversing with another participant who spoke about how she has been going for *bhāvpheri* in her building for the past ten years and expressed disappointment at the fact that only one person out of the twenty to thirty families that live there comes to

Swadhyaya Kendra, and that too inconsistently. It perhaps points to the affects and influence of capitalism on the modern person. Why would one possibly do something without acquiring something in return or without having any expectations?

The idea of selflessness also seemed to evade Bhanuben even while she pointed to what she perceived as certain mistakes in doing *bhāvpheri*. She said, “We should go to everyone’s house and share these thoughts with them” and that it is not important whether they come or not but important to continue meeting them. “If they come, they come. You can tell them with love (*prem thi*) but you can not force them.” She explained that today, people (referring to other Swadhyayis) don’t ask those whom they are visiting in *bhāvpheri* how they are doing or how their children are doing. Instead, they immediately start talking about Swadhyaya teachings (*Swadhyaya nā vicār*). She said that people would definitely not come that way. She explained that you should get to know them and then slowly tell them about Swadhyaya. She said, “You can tell them that there is an awesome Kendra where you learn about culture, human qualities, etc., and then if they want to come, they will come.” She said that it’s important to also meet non-Swadhyayis because even if they do not come to Swadhyaya they are her brother and sister because of their shared relation to God. However, during various other conversations throughout the course of fieldwork, it was apparent that it was very important to Bhanubahen whether a person comes to Swadhyaya or not. For example, she spoke of her village and said that it is difficult to do Swadhyaya there due to the presence of various other religious groups and sects. She mentioned that those who are a part of these other groups do not come to Swadhyaya.

Vivekbhai further elucidated the difficulty in Swadhyaya's theory and practice of selflessness in relation to human nature. He said,

Nirapekṣa prem (love without expectations) are wrong words. To best explain it, we use the word “*nirapekṣa*” but no one is *nirapekṣa*. Even God himself is not without expectations (*nirapekṣa*). Dada explains that God says, “*yo mad bhaktaḥ sa me priyaḥ* (this devotee is dear to me).” That is, God also has likes and dislikes. When there is *sagun sākāratā* (form), there will be likes and dislikes. But this idea is just showing us the highest level (*toch ni sthiti*). It is way beyond us. We have to work with “enlightened self-interest.”²³⁰ That is, we have to do this work (*bhāvpheri*) in order to become developed (*unnata*)...I may not be able to live with another with *nirapekṣa bhāva* (affection without any expectations), but I can stay with higher affection (*unnata bhāva*). I can have good thoughts. [I can] have a relationship without any objective achievement or gain (*phāyado*), or with the attitude that Maganbhai will come in use for me so I will maintain a relationship with him (*upayuktatā no bhāva*). Instead, if I practice (*abhyāsa*) that he is a brother (*bhai*) from my family (*parivār*), he is a brother given by God, if I bring this into my behavior (*vehavār*), then I will experience that joy (*ānand*).

According to Vivekbhai, it is difficult to love without expectations but one can try to see the other without the kind of commercial outlook described at the beginning of this chapter. He draws attention to the subtle difference between selfless love (*nisvārtha prem*) where one loves another without any selfish motives and loving without expectations (*nirapekṣa prem*). He says that while the latter is difficult, the former can be practiced by seeing others as a brother or sister “given by God,” that is, based on the notion of the “brotherhood of man under the fatherhood of God.” In this way, Vivekbhai points to the connection between divine and selfless relationships, alluding to the importance of the notion of devotion to the practice of cultivating selflessness discussed earlier. What he describes as developed affection (*unnata bhāva*) is affection without any selfish motive. Vivekbhai also illuminates another important aspect of the practice of selfless love in Swadhyaya, namely, that the practice of selfless love and developing

²³⁰ The notion of “enlightened self-interest” refers to the kind of selfishness involved in doing something for one’s development. Participants explained that it is “enlightened” selfishness because it is for one’s self-development and not for any material gain.

selfless relationships is not practiced only towards the people that they meet during *bhāvpheri* but also among Swadhyayis themselves. Maganbhai and Vivekbhai attend the same *Video Kendra* and what Vivekbhai mentioned about perceiving Maganbhai as a brother from his family is a reference to the Swadhyaya *Parivār* (family). Swadhyaya identifies itself not as a movement or an organization but as the Swadhyaya family in which individuals are related to one another on the basis of the “brotherhood of man under the fatherhood of God.”²³¹ According to Athavale, “My model was that of parent-child relationship and love among children of one family... The need was to remind man of the idea of divine nearness. He had to learn that the unit of relevance for us is not only our biological family but also the family of man.”²³² This is evident, for example, in the fact that all Swadhyayis add the suffix “*bhai* (brother)” or “*bahen* (sister)” at the end of

²³¹ Although there are no official presidents or secretaries in Swadhyaya—something intentionally done by Athavale to avoid elections and anything resembling a government organization—insofar as Swadhyaya developed a board of trustees headed by the daughter of the late founder, Jayshree Talwalkar, it has the form of an organization. According to one participant, prior to the formation of Swadhyaya, Athavale had gathered the heads of different *sampradāyas* (religious groups) and organizations and asked them whether they thought that something is missing in the work that they are doing. They all agreed that something else needs to be done and asked him who would head this group. Athavale said, “God.” But each of these individuals had a desire to become the president of the new group. So they asked, who among them would be the president. Athavale told them that if they run an organization that way, it would be no different than *lok sabha* and that as a result there would be a new person every few years, an election for that person, and everything else that is involved in an election. So he left and went to colleges and spoke to the eighteen youths who embarked on the first *bhāvpheri*. While Athavale managed to insulate Swadhyaya from the politics of election for most of his life, Swadhyaya witnessed its first power struggle when Athavale passed down his leadership to his daughter, Jayshree Talwalkar. The power struggle and its ramifications were not mentioned by any informants during the course of fieldwork; however, it resulted in many of Athavale’s main supporters and trustees leaving Swadhyaya.

²³² Pandurang Śāstri Athavale quoted in *Self-Development and Social Transformations* by Ananta Kumara Giri (United Kingdom, Lexington Books, 2009), 6-7.

the name when addressing a fellow Swadhyayi.²³³ According to Manubhai, the sense of family (*parivār bhāvanā*) is one of the main foundations of Swadhyaya. He said, “This *parivār bhāvanā* is built on the basis of devotion—the idea that he is my brother — that precludes any selfish motives as seen in most existing relationships. You meet others not for selfish reasons but because you see them as your brother or sister...What’s the point if people just come to Swadhyaya and then leave without talking to one another? The purpose of Swadhyaya is not simply to listen to lectures but to meet each other.”²³⁴ In this respect, the practice of building selfless relationships is integral not only to *bhāvpheri* but an integral aspect of how Swadhyaya defines and perceives itself, and distinguishes itself from other contemporary religious movements.²³⁵ The family spirit was perhaps best reflected in the following,

And I find it amazing that when we are admitted in a hospital, for example, if one of our Swadhyaya family members is admitted, then our relatives do not come as fast as do our *parivār* (referring to Swadhyaya) people. And it is so amazing that during the waiting hours, you will mostly see Swadhyaya people present. So at that time, they will call you and ask you. They will show concern. Whereas in today's busy life, who has the time to call you and ask about your health or the health of your loved ones? When is that possible? That is only possible through Swadhyaya *parivār*. And why is it possible by them? Because everyone's thoughts are like one and everyone's thoughts are good. And thus it is possible. Dadaji has created such a family where everyone has *ātmīyatā*

²³³ Also see Daniel Gold, “The Swadhyaya Parivar: Contemporary Religious Community in the Image of the Traditional Family,” in *Vital Connections: Self, Society, God*, ed. Raj Krishan Srivastava (New York: Weatherhill Inc., 1998), 172-196.

²³⁴ In order to maintain the sanctity of these relationships, one rule encouraged among Swadhyayis is that they don’t become business partners. However, it was clear that not all participants followed this rule. Another rule is to only invite five Swadhyaya families to occasions in one’s family in order to make Swadhyaya less of a social network.

²³⁵ The idea of a family is also present in the Chinmaya Mission. The first sentence of the Chinmaya Mission pledge for example is, “We stand as one family.” During a *jñāna yajña*, the latter was used to emphasize the importance of cultivating “togetherness” between people. However, while the term “family” was also used to describe the Chinmaya Mission by a few members, it was something that was frequently mentioned by all Swadhyayis and integral to how they related to one another as well as how they understood Swadhyaya.

(intimacy) towards one another. In spite of having such a busy life, they put in the effort that despite being busy I want to do this.

***Bhāva* versus Pity**

The idea of building selfless relationships with others on the basis of selfless love and affection was often times contrasted with going to others out of pity or empathy. Girishbhai told the story of a *bhāvpheri* incident among a Dalit community.²³⁶ There was an individual named Lankesh who owned a betal leaf shop at the entrance of the village. Lankesh, being a Dalit, had great animosity towards *savarna* people (people within the caste system) and did not allow them to enter the community. The moment new people were in town, he would send his men to find out why they had come. One day when he noticed that upper caste men were visiting his community, he asked one of his workers to find out who they were. They came back and told him that these individuals were coming to their town to visit the people and drank the water at their houses. Girishbhai explained that the fact that these upper castes individuals were drinking water at the homes of Dalits was seen as a sign that they were harmless since it was not normal for “*savarna*” people to drink water at the homes of the so-called “untouchables.” One day, Athavale had gone to this village to visit the people and learned about Lankesh and his children. He said that he wanted to meet them. So a Swadhyayi went to Lankesh and told him to come to the temple to meet Athavale. Lankesh said that he would go but that he does not believe in God. When he arrived at the temple, Athavale told him to stand up

²³⁶ “Dalit” is the name used by individuals who were traditionally regarded as “untouchables” to refer to themselves. In Swadhyaya, individuals from the “untouchable” or Schedules Castes are referred to as “*bhāvalakṣi*,” a name given by Athavale. One participant explained that the name means that this group of people should be looked at with love and affection (*bhāva*).

and hugged him. Lankesh began crying. He cried for twenty or so minutes and when others got up to console him, Dada said to let him cry. Girishbhai described this as tears of affection (*bhāva nā ānsuñ*) and explained that Dada did not go to these people out of pity. He explained that this *bhāva* is not out of pity (*dayā*) or empathy (*karuṇā*), and described it as selfless affection (*nisvārtha bhāva*).

There were four people in the room at the time of this conversation. Girishbhai, myself and two other Swadhyayis from the Dalit community, Kamalbhai and Anishbhai. Both Kamalbhai and Anishbhai put the example given by Girishbhai into perspective by saying the following: “Dada looked at humans as humans (*mānav ko mānav jaisā dekhā*). Not as the person with two cars or three houses but as a human being who has the same god within him as everyone else. Dada taught us how to look at another human being as a human being first.”²³⁷ Anishbhai added that Girishbhai used to visit their homes for *bhāvpheri* and meet them and that they had no idea that Girishbhai was such a wealthy man (*moṭo mānas*) with a large house because “these unordinary (*asāmānya*) people come to us as common (*sāmānya*) people.” Anishbhai explained that he is a Dalit and that no one would come to their house or even talk to his kind of people. So when educated and *savarna* (caste) men went to them for *bhāvpheri*, they initially thought that these people must have come to get their votes since that is the only reason why people would go to visit them. But then as these men came over and over again without asking

²³⁷ See the section on “dignity” in Chapter Four for a detailed discussion on how the notion of an indwelling God is perceived as the basis for human dignity among individuals across the socio-economic spectrum in Swadhyaya.

for anything, out of selfless love, they were completely touched. He said that this is only seen in Swadhyaya.

While Anishbhai and Kamalbhai spoke of *bhāvpheri* from the perspective of Dalits, Nayanbhai described the practice from the opposite perspective of an upper class individual. Nayanbhai who is a retired lawyer said, “Why should I go to the home of a *Vāgri* person?”²³⁸ He explained that forming a relationship with the other is an important factor for one’s development and that the reason why he should meet individuals from lower caste and whom he ordinarily would have no other reason to meet and interact with is because they too have God within them. He said,

The other person who is below me, who is dirty, bad, I have to go to him, talk to him, sit with him, and develop a relationship (*sambandha*) with him. If I do this, only then am I developed. This too is a test. So to develop this relationship, what other path can there be? Can it be through reading books? A person who reads the *Gītā* his entire life, does prayer (*pārāyan*) everyday and keeps sitting in his home and doesn’t go to other people, he is not developed. He is not developed until he goes to other people. He has to get up and go to others. This is the only path. Until then, he is not developed. Until he goes to another person, his development cannot happen.²³⁹

²³⁸ *Vāgri* refers to a scheduled caste in India, previously referred to as the “Depressed Classes” during the colonial period. During the colonial period, members of the *Vāgri* caste were designated as “criminals” under the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871.

²³⁹ Earlier during the interview, he expanded on the need to form relationships with others in spite of caste and class differences. He said, “The second test is a person can’t live alone. Man is a *social animal*. But whenever another comes near him, they are unable to live together. In the entire universe, when you put two people together, there are always issues. There are various reasons for this. For example, physical, because no two people look the same. One is white, one is black. One is short, one is tall. There are differences. One is strong, one is weak. The one who has strength looks towards the weak condescendingly (*tuccha dṛiṣṭi*). And he who is weak looks towards the strong with fear. Similarly, there are differences in intellectual strength; some have more some have less. Some have more knowledge, some have less. Some have more money, some have less. Some live in America, some live in a poor country. Some live in Africa, some live in Bhārat (India), Mumbai, Pune, a village, etc. Any Mumbai person who sees a village person will consider the latter “dirty” and think, “Why should I talk with him. He is inferior. Why should I speak with him?” Development does not happen because of these differences. Now, we see many intellectuals, for example people who know Sanskrit and who can teach Sanskrit. But for them, they will only teach those who come to them. “I will not go to them. Why? He is a useless person. He lives in a hut, in a small house. I will stay in my house and he will have to

He emphasized the importance of going to others without wanting anything, that is, selflessly. Another Swadhyayi spoke about the monthly *bhaktipheri* he goes for among the fishermen community in similar terms. Rajeshbhai showed me a video recording of his time during *Vrati Bhaktipheri* where he and some other Swadhyayis went to visit the fishermen of a village. The video showed Rajeshbhai picking up fish with his hands and inquiring about the different kinds of fish collected in the house. He spoke of how the smell of dead fish would typically make him nauseous and that it is only after Swadhyaya that he would even consider talking to the fishermen community. He currently spends a night every month at the house of one of the Swadhyayi fishermen in the village they visit.

Referring to Athavale’s lecture on our train ride back from Pāṭhaśālā, Karanbhai spoke about the class differences in society. He said that some have three businesses while some have one. Karanbhai then brought up a point mentioned by Athavale in the lecture from that morning that there are three things that separate people—wealth (*sampati*), power (*sattā*), and weapons (*śastra*)—and that the only thing that can bring

come here.” So, whenever two people come together, there is difference (*bedha*), and because of this difference, a relationship (*sambandha*) between the two is not possible. That person who goes beyond this difference and tries to form a relationship with another person is developed. This is also a yard stick or standard for development. Like this, there are many standards for determining if someone is developed. We have many saints (*sadhu/sants*) who are developed. You see all these qualities in them. They don’t believe in differences. No matter who goes to them, they look and treat at everyone in the same way. This is a big quality. They don’t treat people differently based on how much money they have or based on their caste (*jāti*). That is why they are developed. So this is what people should do. Now, we can’t become a great person (*mahāpuruṣa*), but, if we learned a little bit in this lifetime and tried to lessen this difference, then we are one step above the 99.99% of ordinary people. Then, we can say that our development has begun.”

people together is a relationship. He said, “We have to build a relationship based on the blood maker’s relationship. By meeting one another, we get warmth (*humph*) and become closer.” This was resonated by another participant following a *bhāvpheri* session in a chawl area. Amibahen is a young participant in her early to mid-thirties who comes from an upper middle class and well-educated background. After spending the day doing *bhāvpheri*, as we were leaving this community to go home, Amibahen mentioned that if it weren’t for Swadhyaya, she would have never gone to meet these individuals. Later during an informal interview, she explained this further. She said, “God’s work (*bhagavān nu kām*), in reality, is that we do not go to teach anyone. When we go for *bhāvpheri*, when we go to the home of a person whom we have never seen, whom we have never met, and at that point we think, why have I come to meet you? Because, we are the children of one God. *Let you be any caste, any creed*. That is not important. But we are the family of one God. When we get that feeling, it feels really good.”

These examples reveal caste and class based differences that constitute a significant part of life in Indian society and continue to determine how individuals, especially from lower castes, are perceived and treated.²⁴⁰ Moreover, they illustrate how the understanding of an indwelling God and the emphasis on building selfless

²⁴⁰ Textual scholarship and modern ethnographic research on India have shown that Indian society consists of endogamous groups known as “castes” or *jāti* that are hierarchically arranged based on the opposition between purity and pollution. Brahmins or the priestly caste are at the top and seen as the purest caste. The Untouchables are seen as the most polluted caste, as they perform menial tasks such as removing excrements, and therefore constitute the bottom of the hierarchical structure. Although Untouchability is now illegal in India, Untouchable castes constitute approximately one fifth of India’s population. Gavin Flood, *Introduction to Hinduism* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996), 61. Although caste distinctions hold less significance now, they continue to constitute a major aspect of both personal and social identity in cities and rural India, and especially in the latter. See Christopher Fuller, *The Camphor Flame* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 11-16.

relationships with the other has served as a basis and catalyst for connecting individuals across different castes and class within the Swadhyaya community. However, it is important to note that although Athavale rejects caste-based discrimination and is a harsh critic of the ill treatment of the so-called Untouchables by society,²⁴¹ he is a strong supporter of the traditional fourfold Vedic class system known as the *varnāśramadharmā*.²⁴² In this respect, although Athavale sought to bring about socio-religious reform and “purify” religion²⁴³ reflecting a continuity with the nineteenth and twentieth century Hindu reform movements led by modern Hindu thinkers including Rammohan Roy, Dayananda Saraswati, and Vivekananda, he did not reject the caste system.

Along with the rest of the examples in this chapter, these examples demonstrate an attempt to build relationships with individuals with whom one would not otherwise interact or have a reason to interact with and thereby move away from the modern focus on the self. They illustrate an attempt to refashion the self so as to include the other.

²⁴¹ For example, he says, “There is no dearth of cultural foundation or highly spiritual philosophical thoughts which lead one to the ultimate emancipation in my country; yet human beings are still subjected to discrimination and we could not eradicate those customs or system which discriminates one human being from another. On the contrary, the “haves” and “have nots” are going to be an integral part of a society. But the society has no right to humiliate these deprived people or to forcefully make them more submissive, humble and timorous.” Pandurang Śāstri Athavale, quoted in *The Silent Reformer* by Rajendra Kher (Pune, Vihang Prakashan, 2009), 16.

²⁴² According to Athavale, the purpose of the *varna* system was to ensure the material prosperity of all the members of a society and was not related to any religious reasoning or motivation as many have criticized it to be. Rajendra Kher, (Pune, Vihang Prakashan, 2009), 217-218. For Athavale’s views on the *varna* system, see Pandurang Śāstri Athavale, *Sanskṛuti Chintan* (Mumbai: Sat Vichar Darshan, 2006), 57- 85.

²⁴³ For example, he says, “I want to purify the religion... The religion, now, has gathered rust of atrocious customs, corrupt rituals, caste discrimination, etc.” Pandurang Shastri Athavale, quoted in the *Silent Reformer* by Rajendra Kher, (Pune, Vihang Prakashan, 2009), 171.

Here, self-development is understood in relation to the other. In this respect, participants explained that insofar as the primary purpose of *bhāvpheri* is to build a relationship with others, there is a large difference between *bhāvpheri* and missionary activity. Ketanbhai, for example, said,

According to what we have heard, we have not gone to see anything for ourselves, missionaries go with a particular mission; they go with some instructions. One instruction is to bring others into their religion. Whether or not this is the case, we don't know. The second reason to go is to lessen the sorrow (*dukha*) of the other person. They give him material happiness (*bhautika sukha*). For example, he is hungry so give him roti (bread). He doesn't have clothes, give him clothes; give him medicine, etc. and through this influence that person (*prabhāva dālo*). They work in this manner. That is the form of their work. When we go, we go only simply to form a relationship (*sambandha*) with the other person. We sit with them. The God within us and the God within you is the same. We don't give anything. If we do have to give something, we give thoughts (*vicar*), and we listen to them and then return. This is the only work we do, nothing else.²⁴⁴

Is Selfishness a Modern Moral Problem?

The discussion above demonstrates that the practice of cultivating selflessness among Swadhyaya participants is intimately connected to their religiosity. That is, practicing selfless love and affection is seen as God's work and as a form of expressing gratitude to God. It also illustrates that the significance of the notion of "selflessness" lies within the Hindu theory of karma and liberation. More importantly, however, the various testimonies in this chapter illuminate how the self-cultivating practices of Swadhyayis are set against what are perceived as modern moral shortcomings. For example, the practice of selfless love and selfless affection was described in contrast with the perceived selfishness of the contemporary person. The idea of taking out time to meet others

²⁴⁴ According to both Chinmaya Mission and Swadhyaya participants, the most important thing that a person needs is thoughts. They argue that correct knowledge addresses the root of the problem whereas the giving of material objects only resolves problems superficially. See chapter one and chapter four for discussions on the importance of thoughts in both movements.

without any personal incentives was contrasted with the commercial relationships seen as prevalent in modern society and the problem of a lack of time. The idea of creating and maintaining a feeling of affection between individuals was contrasted with what was seen as the “dryness” of the modern man. The discourse on selfless love and affection points, moreover, to the basic human need for love and warmth from others, what participants described as *prem* and *humph*, perceived as absent today. In this respect, by placing the notion and practice of selflessness central to Swadhyaya in the context of what was described as the current state of modern society, I argue that it is a combination of one or more of these factors in modern society that makes theistic sources a compelling force for moral self-fashioning. The particular notion of God and “God’s work” explicated by Swadhyaya avails participants a value system different from that associated with modern individualism and extolled by modernization theorists. The concept of an indwelling God in particular allows individuals to live in what they consider to be a morally uplifting way. In contrast to Charles Taylor’s argument about the replacement of theistic moral sources by secular sources, it is precisely because of the rise of new understandings of the self, especially modern individualism, as well as the modern capitalist economy, that Swadhyaya participants view religion as a necessary and compelling source for modern self-fashioning.²⁴⁵

During an interview, Kantabehen mentioned that she had heard that America is great and asked me to describe how it is different from India. I told her that everything is organized and systematic and that rules are enforced among many other differences. I

²⁴⁵ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007) and *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

quickly added that while all these things are there, you will not get the love (*prem*) and affection (*bhāva*) that you experience in India. She replied saying, “So then, where is the true human being (*To, sācho mānas kyā, kharo mānas kyā*)? What’s the point where there is no intimacy (*ātmīyatā*), and *prem* and *bhāva*?” She mentioned a saying in Gujarati, “*haiyā ne haiyu male*,” emphasizing the importance of meeting one another. She explained that when one heart (*haiyu*) meets another heart, (self-dignity) *asmitā*, love (*prem*), affection (*bhāva*) and intimacy (*ātmīyatā*) grow. She said that a person grows when he or she receives that love and affection from another. He can stand up on his feet (*ubho thai shake*). But, she too expressed awareness that intimacy between people was slowly decreasing in India and attributed it to the growing emphasis on money in modern society.

Chapter 3: Gratitude and the Sublimation of the Self

In Chapter Two, we saw that the practice of developing selfless love and affection through the medium of *bhāvpheri* constitutes a central aspect of the moral self in Swadhyaya and a key expression of gratitude towards a supernatural power perceived as the epitome of selflessness. As such, the cultivation of selflessness is closely connected to the cultivation of another equally important aspect of the moral self in Swadhyaya and the Chinmaya Mission, gratitude (*kr̥tajñatā*). In Swadhyaya and the Chinmaya Mission, the notion of gratitude is rooted in the recognition of the self as inherently dependent on an other for its existence. In particular, the discourse in both Swadhyaya and the Chinmaya Mission draws attention to the centrality of a power, God and *brahman* (consciousness), respectively, in and for one's existence. This discourse stands in stark contrast to theories of a secular and disenchanted modernity and to the notion of a self-sufficient human agent.²⁴⁶ In *A Secular Age*, for example, Charles Taylor argues that the modern social order is one in which the self is seen as a self-sufficient being and the rise of this understanding along with the notion of a buffered self has helped naturalized the understanding of the modern world as disenchanted.²⁴⁷ In this chapter, I illustrate that the self-understanding among Swadhyaya and Chinmaya Mission participants problematizes the very notion of a disenchanted, secular and self-sufficient modern self and argue that that the appeal of the discourse and praxis on gratitude lies in the kind of self-

²⁴⁶ The notion of disenchantment was famously used by Max Weber to describe the displacement of belief by an increasing rationalization central to modern society. See Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946) and *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Routledge, 2007).

²⁴⁷ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 540.

transformation, namely a new way of understanding and experiencing the self, it enables. The first part of this chapter aims to contextualize the practice of gratitude in relation to everyday understandings of the self and what it means to be human expressed by participants. Then, I demonstrate that engagement in *sevā* in the Chinmaya Mission and *krutibhakti* in Swadhyaya is the central form of practicing gratitude among participants and that the specific discourse on and contours of these activities aim to minimize the primacy of the individual self and instead create and strengthen unity and a sense of brotherhood between individuals. In the last section, I draw attention to the distinction drawn by participants between the type of work they engage in through Swadhyaya and the Chinmaya Mission and social work and illustrate that the former is seen as superior and compelling insofar as it is intimately connected to the sublimation of the ego and the transformation of the self.

Gratitude and the Enchanted Self in Modernity

Among Swadhyayis, the desire to cultivate the virtue of gratitude is rooted in a new understanding of the self that stems from the knowledge of an internal power that sustains one's existence, namely, the knowledge of an indwelling god. This knowledge and the practice of expressing gratitude towards this power provides a sense of purpose and meaning in life that was seen as previously missing among participants, one that involves going beyond daily responsibilities and instead involves reflecting on metaphysical questions regarding the nature of the self and existence, and working towards cultivating oneself. In particular, the practice and appeal of gratitude must be understood in terms of the larger discourse on what it means to be a human being as explicated by Pandurang

Śāstri Athavale and what participants described as the distinction between a human and an animal. This was captured best in the following quote by Girishbhai who described the typical mode of living in terms of an ordinary routine consisting of being born, attending school, marriage, procreation and death. He said,

We live like animals, doing the same things they do. We have forgotten that we are human beings (*mānas*). A human being thinks about how I should live my life. You learn how to live your life through *Rṣis* (ancient seers). We live like animals. Our lives are penetrated by so many bad thoughts (*kharāb vicār*) and to get rid of them we need good thoughts. How is our life? Like Dada says, we were born on Monday, graduated on Tuesday, married on Wednesday, had kids on Fridays and died on Sunday.²⁴⁸ Our life is just like that. Our life is full of selfishness (*svārthamayi*). We run after things for ourselves. We are running after our *svārtha* (selfishness). But without the God within us, we would not even be able to run after our own *svārtha*. *So what have we done for Him?* (emphasis added)

Girishbhai whose son Nikhil attends a school established by Swadhyaya in Gujarat, explained that his son will not become a doctor or an engineer by going to this school but “he will learn how to be a human being (*mānas*).”²⁴⁹ He explained that there are doctors and engineers but not humans and said, “They do not know who God is, have never thought about who makes the sun and moon rise, who pumps the body’s blood from head to toe, who runs our life. People who don’t think about this are not human.” He continued, “We all have *samsāra* (family) to take care of but together we should have *bhagavān nā vicār* (thoughts about God),” which, he further described as “*hum konā*

²⁴⁸ Here, Girishbhai is referring to the English nursery rhyme, “Solomon Grundy,” often cited by Athavale in his lectures to describe the life of an average individual.

²⁴⁹ Individuals attend this school after completing the seventh grade and do not receive a higher formal degree by attending. The son mentioned that while they are taught subjects like math and science, the emphasis is on learning languages. They learn Hindi, Sanskrit and English. They also have to prepare for the annual Swadhyaya exam as a part of their cultural (*Sanskritik*) learning. In addition, twice a week for three hours each, they are given time in the field to learn and practice farming. He explained that the reason for the establishment of this school was to create a generation of boys who are both educated and therefore able to earn a livelihood and who will also do “God’s work.” The school also trains these boys to start their own business.

thaki chu (because of whom do I exist)?" He continued, "If God is not in me and does not run my life, does not make my blood, I would not survive." According to Girishbhai, thinking about one's own existence and recognizing the role of God is essential to being human. In addition, one of the most important aspects of being human, according to Athavale, involves cultivating the virtue of gratitude (*kṛtajñatā*) towards God, expressed in the last sentence of the quote above, "So what have we done for Him?" That is, in addition to the recognition of a power that sustains one's existence, gratitude requires some form of concrete action, as we will see in greater detail below.

Girishbhai lives in a ten-by-ten room with a small, attached kitchen and bathroom in a chawl community with his wife and three children. He migrated from a village in Gujarat where the family farming business was not sufficient to make ends meet for both his brother's and his own family. Girishbhai came to Bombay in hope to find another source to make a living and now owns a small garment shop run by a few employees. During our many conversations at his house, Girishbhai often spoke about the advantage of owning one's own business because it gives one the freedom to do "God's work," which for him refers to Swadhyaya work. He explained that he would not be able to leave work to go for *bhāvpheri* if he was working for someone else and had office work left to do. His wife explained that if Girishbhai were working under someone, he would never be able to leave early to go for Swadhyaya activities. But, now he can simply pull the shutters of his garment shop and end the day early whenever he needs to be somewhere else to do "God's work."

Girishbhai has not received more than a third grade education and does not completely understand Athavale's lectures. Yet, Girishbhai is a dedicated Swadhyayi

who is always one of the first to arrive and engage in Swadhyaya activity. Although he did not speak of his various responsibilities in Swadhyaya, I learned from others that he handles many of the activities that take place in his community and keeps his shop closed for days at a time during certain Swadhyaya events like *Pāthutsav* that require great preparation. He attends each viewing of Athavale's lecture both at the Pāṭhaśālā and at his local center on a regular basis. As I will illustrate later in this chapter, for Girishbhai and various other individuals, participating in Swadhyaya activities, what he refers to as God's work, is perceived as a means to practice gratitude towards God and is rooted in what they learn and understand about the self and what it means to be human through Athavale's teachings, and thereby differentiate themselves from animals. Participation in these activities provides an extra and seemingly more fulfilling purpose in their lives, in addition to the attention to *samsāra* that is expected of human beings.

This was resonated among other participants who explained that a human being is one who thinks about the question, "*hum konā thaki chu* (because of whom do I exist)?" Shantibahen, for example said, "We realize that we are not dogs or cats" and gave the following example given by Athavale. There was a man who had a basket of radishes. A dog would come, take a radish and run away. Then come again and take another. So the man became curious and went to look at where the dog was going with the radishes. He saw that the dog was bringing it to his wife and kids. She asked, "What more do we do than this? Do we do anything more significant (*viśeṣa*) than this? Everyone does *samsāra* (has a family life). But there is something more significant than this like thinking about how our body works, who we are...I have an intellect to think about who

runs my body. In a verse from *Charpat Panjarika stotra*, it says ‘*kastam koham.*’²⁵⁰

Who am I? Who are my parents? Where did I come from? You should forget the world for sometime and think about this.’

During each of our many conversations, Manibahen expressed a strong conviction about what she referred to as God’s *upakāras* (favours) on human beings and the importance of doing something for Him in return. She asked, “Can a person who doesn’t remember God’s *upakāra* (favours) be *sāro* (good)? Dada says a person who doesn’t harm his neighbors. But minus God, is he good?” In her heavy *kāthiyāvādi* accent, she said, “*kāto kādhyāno gan na bhule.*”²⁵¹ The literal meaning of this Gujarati adage is that you don’t forget the person who removed your thorn. That is, you never forget when someone has helped you. She gave the following example to elucidate this saying. There was a criminal who had escaped from a prison and was being chased by police. While he was running, he saw a lion lying on the road so he stopped to see what was wrong. He saw that the lion had a thorn stuck in him and was in extreme pain so he helped to take it out. In the process of helping the lion, he got caught. Manibahen explained that during those times, a criminal was punished by putting him in front of hungry lions to be eaten. So following procedure, the criminal was placed in front of a group of lions. However, when he was placed in front of the lions, one of the lions recognized this person as the same individual who had helped him earlier and therefore did not eat him. Manibahen

²⁵⁰ *Charpat Panjarika* is a Sanskrit hymn written by Ādi Śankarācharya and found in the Swadhyaya prayer book, *Prārthana Prīti*. There is a popular book on this hymn in the Chinmaya Mission known as *Bhaja Govindam* often referred to by participants as a practical guidebook on life.

²⁵¹ *Kāthiāvād* is a part of the Saurashtra region in Gujarat. There is a large Swadhyaya following in this region.

said, “Animals display gratitude in this manner. We are humans and God has done so many things for us. We should not forget. He made us humans. Without believing in God, *vikās* (development) will not happen. One who forgets God’s *upakāra* cannot be human. God does so much for us. We are not human if we don’t do anything in return.” She frequently used the phrase, “*bhagavān thaki*,” referring to the idea that she exists because of or through God.

For Swadhyayis, there is a strong correlation between being human, recognizing the role of God behind one’s existence and expressing gratitude. In particular, gratitude is perceived as a defining aspect of a human and is rooted in a particular understanding of the self derived from Swadhyaya teachings. Whether or not they have received any formal education about the human anatomy or how the body functions, Swadhyayis often spoke about God as the power that makes one’s blood and enables blood flow through the body. In particular, participants often mentioned *Trikāl Sandhyā* in order to explain God’s role in one’s daily life. *Trikāl Sandhyā* is a collection of Sanskrit *ślokas* from the *Bhagavad Gītā* and the *Upaniṣads* compiled by Athavale into three prayers to be said in the morning, before meals and before going to sleep. These prayers are meant to remind one of God’s central role in one’s life, namely, it is God who gives one’s memory upon waking, who digests the food one eats, and who gives peace enabling one to sleep at night, and are said as an expression of gratitude towards Him. The first prayer is said in the morning as an expression of gratitude for one’s memory or *smṛtidāna*. It is:

karāgare vasate lakṣmīḥ, karamūle sarasvatī I
karamadhye tu govindaḥ prabhāte karadarśanam II

samudra vasane devi parvata-stana-mandale I
viṣṇupatnī namas tubhyaṃ pāda-sparśaṅ kṣamasva me II

vasudeva-sutaṃ devaṃ, kaṃsa-chānūra-mardanam I
devakī-paramānandaṃ, kṛṣṇaṃ vande jagad gurum II

The second prayer is said before eating, expressing gratitude towards God who is perceived as the bestower of energy through the digestion of the food that is eaten, or *śaktidāna*.

yajñāśiṣṭāśinaḥ santo, mucyante sarvakilbishaiḥ I
bhuñjate te tvaghaṃ pāpā ye pachantyātmakāraṇāt II

yat karoṣi yadaśnāsi, yajjuhoṣi dadāsi yat I
yat tapasyasi kaunteya tat kuruṣva madarpaṇam II

ahaṃ vaiśvānaro bhūtvā, prāṇināṃ dehamāśritaḥ I
prāṇāpānasamāyuktaḥ pachāmyannaṃ chaturvidham II

Om saha nāvavatu saha nau bhunaktu saha vīryaṃ karavāvahai I
tejasvināvadhītamaṣtu mā vidviṣāvahai. II

Om śāntiḥ, śāntiḥ, śāntiḥ

The third prayer is said before sleeping and expresses gratitude for being given a peace of mind, *śāntidāna*, that enables one to sleep.

kṛṣṇāya vāsudevāya haraye paramātmāne I
praṇatakleśanāśāya govindāya namo namaḥ II

karacaraṇakṛtaṃ vāk kāyajam karmajam vā I
śravaṇanayanajam vā mānaṣam vāparādham II

vihitamavihitam vā sarvameṭat kṣamasva I
jaya jaya karuṇābdhe śrī mahādeva śambho II

tvameva mātā ca pitā tvameva
tvameva bandhuś ca sakhā tvameva I
tvameva vidyā draviṇaṃ tvameva
tvameva sarvaṃ mama deva deva II

Although the literal meanings of these prayers do not directly translate to the idea that God provides memory, digestion and peace, participants recited the prayers confidently and proudly and explained their meanings as such. Whether or not participants knew the

literal meaning, for them the verses are a reminder of God’s central role in the functioning of three important aspects of the body—memory, digestion, and sleep. *Trikāl Sandhyā* is a central practice in Swadhyaya and recited in order to cultivate both the recognition of another force in one’s life and a sense of gratitude towards God. That is, *Trikāl Sandhyā* should not be understood simply as an expression of gratitude towards God, something that presumes belief in the idea of an indwelling God. Rather, it is recited in many cases in order to help develop and maintain this understanding. According to Jīvanbhai, for example, “This mentality that god is with me is developed through *Trikāl Sandhyā*; the mentality that I am not alone and that God is with me all the time. Who wakes me up? Who digests my food? Not me! This is the first step in diluting one’s ego. The understanding that someone else does these things for me.” This was also resonated in something shared by Rajeshwaribahen. She spoke about how she practices reciting *Trikāl Sandhyā* to remember God at the three crucial junctions in a day, that is, to show gratitude for giving her memory, for digesting her food and for giving her peace in order to sleep. She explained that as a doctor she has learned how the body works and that when a person dies, all of his or her organs are still in the body. “The body is still there but the person is considered dead. So what kept it alive in the first place?” According to her, there must be an energy which she calls God and which others may refer to as something else. She explained that this energy keeps one’s heart pumping, blood flowing, etc. and that God does all things automatically. Therefore, she believes that God is within her. “God is what keeps me alive,” she said and that we must be grateful to Him. She mentioned developing an “attitude of gratitude.”

Another participant, Amibahen, spoke of how she learned about the role of God through Swadhyaya. She said,

I have gotten this basically through Swadhyaya thought...And why have I received this human birth? Why did God select me to be a human being? Why was I not born as another animal? Why a human? Because we have some responsibilities. God works for us twenty-four hours a day. Even now, the fact that I'm talking is because of God's grace. Otherwise, I would not be able to talk. So at that time one feels that we should do something for God out of gratefulness. And God is also in those people who are becoming further and further away from God, and they also feel that I want to do *ārati* or say God's name. But, they have been swept away by the modernization of life. At that time, Swadhyaya thoughts are very useful, handy. They bring you back on track. The track that you've gone astray from, Swadhyaya brings you back.

She continued,

Bhagavān, God, is at my center focus. God runs my life constantly, 24/7. Without any expectations, God runs my life. And God is within me. This *samjhan* (understanding) comes because of that power. Otherwise, if I achieved a good goal in my business, I will think, "I did this. I did this myself. I went on my own to talk to this person and that person. I took the business myself. I did everything." The "I" comes in everything. But when you go to Swadhyaya, the understanding that you get is that you did it because God gave you hands, legs, and an intellect. So you will do it but you get the understanding that there is a God sitting within you who helps you, who gives you thoughts, who gives you intellect. For instance, I can discuss business matters with you today because He has given me that brain and I'm using it. So God is in your center focus.

Each of these examples problematizes the notion of a self-sufficient and disenchanting modern self insofar as the self is understood as pervaded by a supernatural power without which it would cease to exist. Furthermore, they reflect an understanding of the self that does not insist on the primacy of the individual. In a similar way, Neeta Tai reflected a similar self-understanding. Referring to verse 15.15 of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, she said, "You learn, '*mattaḥ smṛtir jñānam apohanam.*'²⁵² Everyone gets *jñāna* (knowledge) and *smṛti* (memory) from Me (God). And if I press a button, they will be covered...After

²⁵² The entire verse is: *sarvasya cāham hr̥di sanniviṣṭo mattaḥ smṛtir jñānam apohanam ca vedaiś ca sarvair aham eva vedyo vedāntakṛḍ vedavid eva cāham*. It translates to: I am seated in everyone's heart, and remembrance, knowledge and forgetfulness come from Me. I am to be known by all of the *Vedas*. I am the compiler of *Vedānta* and I am the knower of the *Vedas*.

reading this, you find out that I am nothing. He has given it to me. We do not know when He will press what button. So then as a result of this, you do not have an ego (*ahaṃkāra*) about this either. But until there is ignorance, until one does not take the *Gītā* in their hand, one thinks that ‘I have this, I have this’ because of which we feel that I am something.”

Her husband, who was sitting in the room next to us, interrupted her as she was talking and reminded her of a story from the *Upaniṣads* that illustrates this idea so she stopped and asked whether I knew the story. When I said no, she continued to tell me. She explained that the story shows how all the *devas* (gods) had developed an ego after winning a war.²⁵³ They began saying, "*asmākam eva vijayah*," meaning, the victory was because of us alone. They were having a party, drinking *soma*, and dancing. God saw this and decided to test them. He went to the hall where the gods were having a party in the form of a *yakṣa*. The gods saw him and did not recognize who this person was, so, Indra told the others to go and check who this person was and where he came from. Agni went first. God asked Agni, “What is your name? Who are you? What do you do?” Agni replied saying, “I can burn everything.” So God asked him to burn a car. Neeta Tai explained that when Agni tried, he was not able to because God took his *śakti* (power) from him. The same thing happened with the wind god, Vāyu, who was unable to blow away the objects given to him by God, and to the water god, Jala Devatā. God took the power out of each of *devas* sent to him by Indra. She stopped here and related the story to what she was talking about earlier.

²⁵³ This story is drawn from the *Kena Upaniṣad*.

Similarly, in this way, we have *bhagavān ki śakti* (God's power) within us. And if you do not believe in it, then you will not experience this quickly based on today's situation (*āj ki tor*). There will not be a test like the one God performed on the gods to help eliminate their ego...That kind of experience is not possible come today. As a result, people do not believe in this power quickly and therefore their ego keeps increasing. It does not lessen and as a result we do not recognize that "*hum kisi ke haiñ, hum kisi ke kāran, kisi ki śakti ke kāran se jiha rahe haiñ* (we belong to someone; we are alive because of someone, because of someone's power)." This should be the case. *Hum kisi ke haiñ isi lie hamārā sab kuch chal rahā haiñ* (It is because we belong to someone that we are alive)...So therefore, we should bring this *bhāvanā* (feeling) in ourselves, whether or not we have experiences, because what the *mahāpuruṣas* (referring to Athavale) say is based on their own experience. They have experienced the fact that everything is functioning because of God's power. We do not have this experience because we are not as connected to God. The more connected we are, the more experiences we can have.

While members of the Chinmaya Mission did not invoke the notion of God, they often spoke of gratitude in terms of recognizing the role of others in one's existence and described it as central to what it means to be human resonating the Swadhyaya discourse.²⁵⁴ In addition to being linked to a larger discourse on what it means to be human, the appeal of the notion and practice of gratitude also lies in the kind of humility

²⁵⁴ Although most Swadhyayis did not speak of this notion of gratitude towards others, Neeta Tai spoke about it when describing what it means to live a good life. She said,

We should have *kṛtajñatā* (gratitude) towards everyone. What all do we do when we want to drink tea? For one cup of tea. How is tea made? Is it simply that which is made at our home? No. You need gas. There are so many people involved: the gas company, the person who prepares gas, the one who sends the gas cylinder to us. Then, milk. Those who milk the cows, the people who come to deliver the milk. Second, sugar: those making the sugar and those bringing it to us. Water. For our Bombay, water has to specially be brought from outside. It's not the case that we get it from a well. Meaning, so many people are involved just for one cup of tea. Right? Therefore, we should have *kritjñatā* towards all of these people in our mind. In earlier times (*purāṇā zamāna*), people used to do farming. Farmers used to say to do *pranāma* to the cows, to mother earth--she gives us food, etc. All that is there indeed, but city people also have all these other people who get important and necessary things to us towards whom we have a duty to be grateful. So we should live harmoniously with all these people who do service for us, we should remember them. *Samāj jivan* (social life) is not possible alone. So to live together with everyone, the effort to think about giving to others—this is all in our hand. Such a life can be a good life.

it teaches in contrast to the self-sufficient humanism espoused by modernization theorists. One very old participant of the Mission in Bombay explained that

If there's no gratitude, then you're an animal man. It's gratitude that makes you a man-man. And gratitude has to be learned. See the thing is you know those three *guṇas*—*rajas*, *tamas*, *sattva*. So this gratitude belongs to the *sāttvik* aspect of life. These are the *guṇas*. These are the three moods of the mind. It's how the mind functions. Very highly active, passionate, I want, I did this, I'm the leader. People who are always I, I, I, they are the *rājasik types*—the leaders. *Tāmasik* ones are least amount of work and maximum amount of comfort. They may consider their wife and children. Ok they're there, but left to themselves, I first. They are the *tāmasik* people. And *sāttvik* people are those when you understand, when you realize that you are what you are because of the effort of so many people, then you give gratitude.²⁵⁵

Similar to the discourse among Swadhyaya participants, gratitude is key in differentiating a human from an animal according to Chinmaya Mission members. Furthermore, Vandana explained that gratitude is something that is taught, something that “needs to be told” and gave the following example given by Chinmayānandaji. She said,

Once he (Chinmayānandaji) got off at the airport and he had to give a *yajña* (public lecture) somewhere. So instead of the normal person coming to pick him up, another man came. And he says, “Gurudev, can we go to your place.²⁵⁶ We will just take a detour if you don't mind.” He said okay. So they went. So he wanted to show him his new factory so he says, “You know Gurudev I'm a self-made man. I had nothing. I came to Bangalore with 500 rupees.” (So the normal story) “and now look at my factory and all.” So Gurudev said to him, “This is all your work?” He says “yes, all my effort.” He says “wonderful. Where did you buy the bricks from?” He said, “I don't know. That the contractor brought.” Where did you get this from? He said, “so and so brought.” You made the machine yourself? “No, no, no Gurudev. I imported it from Germany.” Where is the land from? “It's my grandfather's.” So he (Gurudev) says, “what have you done? Ok, you had 500 rupees so you were smart enough to put it somewhere. How do you grow your 500 rupees? He says, “no I met a friend who invested it for me somewhere and then that company grew very big so I got very good dividends.” Gurudev said, “It was your friend's intelligence who got you that money.” He said yes. “You're grandfather gave you this and he gave that and he gave that. What have you done?” So, Gurudev used to tell us these stories. He says don't ever say that I have done this. Look, understand if you are today, how many people have helped you around you to be what you are today. So for example, I had a nice lunch at home and my sister-in-law told me “oh what a lovely dish you've made.” So normally I'd say, “yeah, yeah, thank you thank you.” I said, “I've just gone and done the *tadkā* (tempering). My two maids inside, poor

²⁵⁵ This is a transcription of an interview that took place in English.

²⁵⁶ Participants often referred to Swami Chinmayānanda as “Gurudev.”

things, they've been sitting and chopping and cutting and frying and everything. I just went and put it together and that too the recipe is my grandmother's. So I have not done anything. I just supervised that the way she told me, it has all been put together. So it's not just me. It is her recipe, their effort, and my supervision." You also start feeling, you know, that I'm getting all the glory but who's actually has done it. So like that. When you hear something, and the same thing, the big factory or a small lunch, [the] principle stays the same. Then you start losing it [the "I"] more and more.²⁵⁷

In a similar way, Soniyabahen said,

And this concept of "I've achieved this" and "I've done this" and "This is mine." Who is that "I" that I'm so proud about? It's nothing to be proud about. That "I" is *brahman* and I'm limiting myself and taking on the doership of that *brahman* onto this limited being and saying that I have done it. Have I really done it? It's not just me who has accomplished something. Like they give us this example, when you're cooking food and you put a dish on the table and you say I made it. What did you actually do? You didn't sow the seeds for the vegetables. You didn't harvest those vegetables. You didn't grow those vegetables. You went and just picked it up from somewhere and assembled the *masālās* (spices); you have not made them. You've just assembled something together and you're taking such credit for it? How many other people have been involved in making that one dish which you solely are taking credit for? It makes you feel small but not in a bad way. Like you're a part of a huge fabric. You don't consider yourself THE FABRIC! You are a part of something.²⁵⁸

Here, Soniyabahen is alluding to a basic Chinmaya Mission teaching that is rooted in *Advaita* philosophy and according to which there is a power, *brahman*, that sustains the life of a human being. In the Chinmaya Mission, *brahman* is translated as "consciousness" and understood as the power that animates or "enlivens" the self and without which the self is dead. In this respect, both the Chinmaya Mission and Swadhyaya teach that there is a power within that sustains one's existence. The Chinmaya Mission refers to it as *brahman* or consciousness whereas Swadhyaya refers to it as God. In both Chinmaya Mission and Swadhyaya, gratitude arises through an understanding that the existence of some power enables one's existence. In Swadhyaya, gratitude is expressed towards this power, God. Among Chinmaya Mission members,

²⁵⁷ This is a transcription of an interview that took place in English.

²⁵⁸ This is a transcription of an interview that took place in English.

gratitude is expressed towards the Guru, Swāmi Chinmayānanda, who teaches this knowledge and thereby provides a new understanding of the self.²⁵⁹ In addition, the examples above illustrate how this recognition of the role of and dependency on an other in one's daily existence presents a critique of the notion of self-sufficiency perceived as a central aspect of the modern self and instills a sense of humility. In what follows, I will illustrate how acts of gratitude performed by participants towards their Guru or God facilitate the development of the self by reducing one's ego and the primacy of the self.

Sevā and Krutibhakti: Practices of Gratitude and the Sublimation of the Self through Yajña

While the recitation of *Trikāl Sandhyā* is one of the foundational practices in Swadhyaya aimed at cultivating and expressing gratitude, participants explained that the recognition and acknowledgement of God's role in one's life alone is not a sufficient expression of gratitude. According to Swadhyaya participants, action must follow recognition and for some, action is key to creating this recognition. In Swadhyaya, the primary kind of action that is perceived as an expression of gratitude towards God is known as *krutibhakti*, "devotional activism." According to many participants, it is what distinguishes Swadhyaya from all other contemporary Indian religious groups and contemporary practices of religion (*dharma*) and devotion (*bhakti*). While Athavale teaches that traditional Hindu rituals such as *pūjā*, *ārati* and *dīvo* are an important aspect of devotion, he teaches that this alone is not enough. According to Athavale, the former

²⁵⁹ For example, Swami Tejomayānanda has written a hymn dedicated to Swami Chinmayānanda entitled *kr̥tajñatā* (gratitude) parts of which were often recited at the beginning of a lecture. The topic of the morning sessions of one of the *jñāna yajñas* that I observed was *kr̥tajñatā* and devoted to an exposition of this hymn.

is important in helping to develop a relationship with God and to create an atmosphere for one to meditate and concentrate on God. However, this form of devotion, understood as *bhāvabhakti*, must be accompanied by *krutibhakti*. In Swadhyaya, *krutibhakti* refers to a specific set of activities created by Athavale as a means to express one's gratitude and devotion towards God. As seen in Chapter Two, a primary form of *krutibhakti* is *bhāvpheri*. In addition to *bhāvpheri*, another important form of *krutibhakti* is *śrambhakti* where participants offer their *śrama* or physical effort to God as a form of worship. In Swadhyaya, "*śrambhakti*" is translated as "labor as devotion."²⁶⁰ The primary form of *śrambhakti* is participating in Swadhyaya's socio-economic experiments known as *prayogs* and is mostly found in the villages. Athavale has developed a number of experiments based on the *Bhagavad Gītā* verse (18.46), "*Yataḥ pravṛttir bhūtānāṃ yena sarvaṃ idaṃ tataṃ, sva karmaṇā taṃ abhyarcya siddhiṃ vindati mānavaḥ.*" The literal translation of this verse is that the person who worships Him, who is the source from which all things are born and that which pervades all things, by performing his or her own duty attains perfection. Drawing on this verse, Athavale teaches that God can be worshipped in various ways and is not limited to the offering of flowers and incense or the lighting of a lamp. In particular, he teaches that one can worship God by offering one's efficiency to Him in the form of farming for farmers and fishing for fishermen, for example.²⁶¹

²⁶⁰ Athavale, *The Systems*, 100. One participant explained this by saying that if a non-Swadhyayi person was given a basket full of flowers, incense, a spade, and a stethoscope and asked to identify items that can be used to worship, he or she would point out the flower and incense whereas a Swadhyayi would say that all of the four objects can be used for worship.

²⁶¹ One such project is known as *Yogeśwar Kṛṣi* where farmers express their devotion through farming. One participant explained that participating in this project counts as doing God's work

While these socio-economic projects are primarily limited to village Swadhyayis, there are other forms of *śrambhakti* specific to urban followers. In Mumbai, for example, it is commonly associated with the preparations for Swadhyaya events like *Pāthutsav*, an annual event that takes place at Tattvajñāna Vidyāpith.²⁶² *Krutibhakti*, in the form of either *bhāvpheri* or *śrambhakti*, is perceived as the ideal form of devotion that all participants try to engage in as an expression of gratitude towards God. As one participant put it, “When you develop the feeling that God is within me and runs my body, you want to do something for God.” In particular, he said to offer some time to God. This was resonated by another participant who said, “Whatever action I do, God is a partner. *Tu nā chalāve* (if you don’t run my body), how can I survive?²⁶³ You run this body. So for you, I must do this. So I should go.” In this respect, Swadhyayis speak of God as an active partner in one’s daily life.

When I brought up the Chinmaya Mission and its similarities to Swadhyaya during an informal interview with Kirtibahen, a long time dedicated Swadhyayi, she

because it is done with the understanding that they should do something for God since He runs their body. She explained that the farmers who do farming there are not doing it to get something in return. She explained that typically, a farmer farms in his field to earn a livelihood. But he comes to *Yogeśwar Kṛṣi*, or God’s farm, to work for God. She said that people offer water and food to God, but God is the one who has given them the efficiency to do these things. She said, “What can we give God? He has given us everything we have. So, we can offer our efficiency.”²⁶²

For example, during my fieldwork observation, I participated in preparations for the *Pāthutsav*. Preparations were done with a group of other women and involved making decorations out of old fabric for a large exhibition. Each year an exhibition is created based on that year’s theme. The theme for the 2013 *Pāthutsav* was *sthīratā* (stability) and each of the 9 zones in Mumbai were given a different aspect of the theme to display for the exhibition. In addition to preparing decorations, I also accompanied a few women the day before *Pāthutsav* at the *Vidhyāpith* where our task was to help clean the field where the exhibition was going to be set up. Despite working for long hours and in extreme heat, all the women expressed joy in working together, an important aspect of these activities.

²⁶³ The italicized words were said in Gujarati.

immediately responded by saying that the biggest difference between Swadhyaya and every other existing religious group is *krutibhakti*.²⁶⁴ She said,

Dada has given *krutibhakti*. When you love something or someone, you do something for them. You love your husband [and] kids so you work hard for them. You do things for them. One must do something for those whom they have love towards. So, if we have love for God, we must do something for Him. What can we do? Bring other people closer to him. It is okay if we do not offer a flower or do *ārati*. The world is full of lost children, people who have forgotten their relation with their real parent, God.

She explained that in everyday (*vehavārik*) terms, if I helped a mother find her son, she would be happy and grateful. “Similarly, if I bring God’s children closer to him, it will make Him happy.” Here, Kirtibahen is referring to the practice of *bhāvpheri*. In a similar way during another conversation, Kirtibahen explained that if she sits her husband down on a pedestal, does his *ārati*, tells him that he is the best, but doesn’t give him food when he is hungry, she is not doing what really matters. She said, “This isn’t right because I’m not doing my real duty or what he actually wants of me. It would have been okay if I didn’t do his *ārati*.” Here, there is an implicit critique of what is perceived as the emphasis on rituals in contemporary Hinduism often referred to as *karmakānda*.²⁶⁵

In a similar way, Shantibahen expressed the idea that love towards something must translate to action also. She said,

When do we love our child? Do we love him if at the age of sixteen he is still sitting at home and not doing anything? When a young child says, “*mā, mā* (mommy, mommy),” it’s fine. But if he continues to say this as an adult and not do anything, a mother will not like it. Similarly if we just keep praising God without doing anything for Him, will it

²⁶⁴ While the concept of “*krutibhakti*” may be unique to Swadhyaya, similar practices exist in other Indian religious movements under different names such as “*sevā*” in the Chinmaya Mission.

²⁶⁵ See Chapter 4 for a detailed discussion on how religion (*dharma*) is understood and defined in Swadhyaya.

make him happy? God says, “why did I send you on earth?” To sing praises of God is not enough. God’s work is “*paritrānāya sādhanām...*” So I should do that.²⁶⁶

I asked what she meant by this. She explained that if we all sit around and do nothing, nothing will change. “If we just sit thinking that our small action will not make a difference, then nothing will change. If I don’t put a little bit of sugar in the salty ocean, it will always remain salty.” Although Shantibahen was speaking generally about the importance of expressing gratitude through action, the remainder of our conversation made it clear that she was referring to the practice of *bhāvpheri*.

While gratitude is not explicitly associated with devotion or God in the Chinmaya Mission, a similar understanding about the relationship between gratitude and action was prominent among its members. According to Nilimabahen, when there’s gratitude, there is a desire to do something for that person. She said,

See, like I told you, that gratitude is one of the biggest attitudes that you can develop because we are what we are today because of (the) efforts of so many people...So with gratitude comes *sevā* (service). When someone has done so much for you, you want to do [something] for them. So then when you're doing something it's not that, “See, I’m doing this for you.” It is flowing out of gratitude. So similarly what I’ve gained from Gurudev (Swāmi Chinmayānandaji) is so much that whatever I do is not enough I would say. So whatever I do, it just flows out of gratitude and not that I’m doing this and I’m doing that. There's no such thing. So sometimes, I always feel that whatever he sends to me, I do.²⁶⁷

In the Chinmaya Mission, the primary object of gratitude is the Guru, Swāmi Chinmayānanda, and similar to Swadhyaya’s *śrambhakti*, the primary form of expressing gratitude in the Chinmaya Mission is taking part in the organization’s activities, known as

²⁶⁶ Here, she is quoting a famous verse from the *Bhagavad Gītā* (4.8) where Lord Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna that he takes birth to protect good people, destroy evil, and reestablish *dharma*.

²⁶⁷ This is a transcription of a conversation that took place in English.

sevā or service.²⁶⁸ It consists of different forms of service such as leading a study group as discussed in Chapter One or volunteering for a few hours at the local center doing administrative work. In addition, a primary form of *sevā* is volunteering for the *jñāna yajñas* that involves a number of different tasks and responsibilities. For example, the work is allocated among different teams including stage decoration, selling of Chinmaya Mission books, publicity, and *bhikṣā*.²⁶⁹ Service for the *yajña* also includes hosting the Swāmi who conducts the *yajña*. In what follows, I will illustrate how this active form of expressing gratitude, *krutibhakti* in Swadhyaya and *sevā* in the Chinmaya Mission, is key for another aspect of self-development in both movements, namely the sublimation of the ego, based on various participant testimonies, participant observation and self-reflection, and argue that the appeal of these practices lie in the kind of self-transformation they enable.

The notion of *krutibhakti* is central to the form of religiosity practiced in Swadhyaya. *Krutibhakti* is perceived as concrete acts of gratitude towards God and is key in the practice of devotion. Each form of *krutibhakti* begins and ends with the

²⁶⁸ The notion of *sevā* is also central to the Ramakrishna Mission, but it is different in that it refers to social service in the latter. For a detailed study of *sevā* in the Ramakrishna Mission, see Gwilym Beckerlegge, *Swami Vivekananda's Legacy of Service: A Study of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). There is also a separate social service wing in the Chinmaya Mission known as the Chinmaya Organization for Rural Development, or CORD. For more details about CORD, see "Chinmaya Organization for Rural Development," Central Chinmaya Mission Trust, accessed January 3, 2014, <http://www.chinmayamission.com/cord.php>.

²⁶⁹ Traditionally, *bhikṣā* was obtained by going door to door to ask for alms. In the Chinmaya Mission, the Swāmis go for *bhikṣā* at the homes of pre-chosen individuals to obtain meals during the duration of the *yajña*. Specific instructions including dietary restrictions are given to those interested in hosting a *bhikṣā*. At the end of each of the *bhikṣā* that I attended, a basket of fruit was offered to the Swāmi which he then blessed and gave back individually to anyone who went to obtain his blessings.

recitation of a prayer said to remind one of the purpose of the act and to dedicate it to God. Participants engage in *krutibhakti* based on the understanding that they should do something for God. The purpose of these activities, moreover, is described as becoming closer to or reaching God. And yet, what essentially takes place in the process and as a result of it is the development of the self. In this respect, the practice of religion in Swadhyaya is intimately connected with concrete acts of self-cultivation.²⁷⁰ Although Athavale sought to “purify” Vedic religion similar to the Indian religious movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the kind of religious reform represented by Swadhyaya is concerned with the transformation of the self and the self’s relationship to the other.

When speaking about *bhāvpheri*, participants emphasized that it is great because it is a means through which the self develops. According to Kantabahen, for instance, there is no doubt that other people (referring to those in other religious organizations) do good things, but, “Dada’s activities (*kṛti*) are the best.” She explained that this is because “No one else has given such an activity through which a person’s likes (*rāga*), dislikes (*dveṣa*) and ego (*aham*) get dissolved.” Here, the best kind of acts of worship and devotion are perceived as those that facilitate the cultivation of the self. She explained that when you leave your house to go visit other people during *bhāvpheri* and they shut the door on you saying that they do not have time, “It’s a slap on the face” and that your ego slowly dissolves through this process. Her husband added that one does not get rid of one’s ego but it reduces through the process. Another participant clarified this point

²⁷⁰ See section on “*Dharma as Jivan Vikās*” in Chapter Four.

during a separate interview where she spoke of how earlier she used to feel offended and insulted when people would say “no” to them during their visits and shut their doors. Rakhibahen explained that there are many vices in our mind such as jealousy, anger and hatred and through *bhāvpheri*, one gets rid of them in the following way. “When you go for *bhāvpheri* and someone says ‘no’ to you, and this happens over and over again, you develop a habit (*ādat*) that it’s okay if they say ‘no.’ When someone says ‘no’ to you, your ego gets a hit. So you learn to accept insults (*apamāna*). You create the habit of being *sthita-prajña*, that is, not thrown off balance by either *sukha* (happiness) or *dukha* (suffering).”²⁷¹

Another participant gave the following example to elucidate how engaging in *bhāvpheri* is a practice of reducing one’s ego by learning to adjust to and work with others. Kanchanbahen described a successful *bhāvpheri* as when the five happy people who go for *bhāvpheri* return together with that same laughter and joy that they set off with. She said,

When you come together for a few days, you get to know a person’s faults. Otherwise, you just know the good things. But to learn to tolerate (*sahan*) the faults of others and for others to tolerate one’s own faults, *this is the purpose of bhāvpheri*. Whether there was any difference in the village where *bhāvpheri* was done is irrelevant. The purpose is whether these five people can work together and be happy despite knowing one another’s faults.²⁷² (emphasis added)

This was resonated in a conversation with Rakeshbhai. He explained that everyone who comes for *bhāvpheri* has a different nature and said, “We may or may not like certain

²⁷¹ *Sthita-prajña* literally means one whose wisdom is stable. For a detailed discussion on the virtue of *sthita prajña* as articulated by Pandurang Śāstri Athavale, see Sat Vichar Darshan, *Bilva Patra* (Mumbai: Sat Vichar Darshan Trust, 1999).

²⁷² This is another example supporting my argument in Chapter Two regarding the nature of *bhāvpheri* as a practice that cannot simply be seen as a form of proselytization.

things about a person. But, through the relationship of brotherhood (*bhai no sambandha*), we go with that person. We learn to accept the personal habits of others. Through this, development happens. People have different *svabhāva* (nature)...For people to stay with one another for four to five days where so many of their habits are revealed is only possible through *sārā vicār* (good thoughts).”

The process of working together with others alluded to above, known as *yajñīya kārya* in Swadhyaya, is at the foundation of all forms of *krutibhakti* and central to reducing the ego. The phrase “*yajñīya kārya*” is derived from the Sanskrit word *yajña*, which traditionally referred to a Vedic ritual or sacrificial rite in which oblations are made to a sacred fire accompanied by the chanting of Vedic hymns. According to Athavale, the “true purpose” behind performing a *yajña* has been lost. He explains that one of the purposes of performing a *yajña* is to bring individuals from different parts of society together and strengthen unity among them through an act of worship. “*Yajña* promotes brotherhood of man under the fatherhood of God.”²⁷³ Accordingly, an important factor and requirement in doing *bhāvpheri* and all other Swadhyaya activities is that it is done in a group and not alone. As such, the specific form of acts of worship and devotion such as *bhāvpheri* form the basis for practices of self-cultivation. Kiranbhai, for example, said that we go together in *bhāvpheri* “to turn the I to we.”

In a similar way, *śrambhakti*, the second form of *krutibhakti*, is done in a group setting. Smitabehn explained that working together with others through Swadhyaya and

²⁷³ Sat Vichar Darshan, *The System: The Way and the Work* (Mumbai: Sat Vichar Darshan Trust, 1994), 31-34. A similar interpretation of *yajña* is found in the Chinmaya Mission as we will see below.

krutibhakti brings about changes in one's nature and helps sublimate one's ego. In particular, she gave an example of a time when Dada was going to come and everyone had gathered to prepare for the event. She said, "One woman says X, one says Y, one may say 'you're wrong.' In this environment, by working together, we learn to tolerate (*sahan*) one another. You develop a habit to listen to someone saying negative things to you. Your ego lessens because you learn to say, 'Let's do it your way.'" She explained that Athavale would tell them that he does not need these decorations but that it is important that they work together. She said that by developing the habit to listen to negative things such as when someone criticizes your work, it helps keep you calm in other situations such as when your mother-in-law or elder sister-in-law say something that you don't like instead of reacting. "When you develop a habit, it becomes your *svabhāva* (nature) and your nature carries over into your next life. We don't always realize how our nature is changing through *krutibhakti*." She said she's noticed changes in herself in the last ten years and others have noticed them too.

Alluding generally to *bhāvpheri* and *śrambhakti*, another participant explained that Athavale created a *parivār* or family precisely so people can learn how to work together and reduce their ego in the process. According to Bharatibahen, a person who never gets angry has not necessarily achieved self-development (*jīvan vikās*). She defined "*jīvan vikās*" as diluting one's ego and learning to accept others. She said, "He has to be able to maintain this (that is, not get angry) while living and working among forty other people," and explained that the reason why Dadaji created a family (*parivār*) is "so that we learn to love others along with their likes and dislikes and in the process dilute our ego." In this respect, ethics should not simply be understood as a matter of

cultivating certain virtues but also in terms of the willingness of individuals to work with one another.²⁷⁴

In a similar way, the idea of working together with others was referred to as the “*yajña spirit*” in the Chinmaya Mission and was often emphasized when participants spoke about service. Similar to its use in Swadhyaya, the term “*yajña*” in the Chinmaya Mission does not literally refer to the Vedic ritual involving offering oblations to Agni. Instead, it is used to evoke a spirit of teamwork and to emphasize unity. In particular, members emphasized the “*yajña spirit*” in relation to organizing and carrying out a *jñāna yajña* and the importance of working together for a greater or “higher cause,” namely, the Chinmaya Mission motto of spreading the knowledge of Vedānta. When I asked Stelabehen, for example, why she serves the mission, she gave various reasons all of which emphasized keeping the ego in check. She said,

One of them is that something that has given you so much, you want to give back. And you realize that at the end of the day, whatever you're giving back is really such a small drop in the ocean. It's very miniscule compared to what I have gotten back, gotten from the Mission. And you also understand that there are so many more people doing so much more than you have the ability to do and to provide. So the reality check is a nice thing for the mind, for the ego, which, keeps patting itself ever so often. *Humility is a good thing*. And another very important reason is that Gurudev talks about how the word *yajña* came about and he talks about the *yajña spirit*. I find it remarkable. Working in any of the *jñāna yajñas* is a true example of the *yajña spirit* that Gurudev talks about and one has to do it to feel that. Before one actually jumps into it, it's just like a swimmer just sitting outside trying to figure out what swimming is all about. You don't get into it, you don't realize. The feeling of exhilaration that you get of having done something with complete teamwork, completely with the team spirit, where you saw for example, it's not like all of us are the same or we're on the same wavelength. We are people on different wavelengths thinking different things, different ideas. But they all have a common vision. They're all working for a common vision and for that much time, at least, we all completely dissolve our differences and we're only out there to help one another to

²⁷⁴ See Veena Das, “Moral and Spiritual Striving in the Everyday: To Be a Muslim in Contemporary India, in *Ethical Life in South Asia*, ed. Anand Pandian and Daud Ali (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2010), 232-252.

achieve that one higher purpose, one purpose that we all have. That fact, the fact that we work together and the fact that we dissolve our differences, gives so much peace and so much satisfaction when the job is well done that I think, honestly, nothing can beat it...The *yajña* spirit that Gurudev talks about, and you actually feel it, it's palpable. It's amazing.²⁷⁵

In this way, working in the *yajña spirit* enables a new way of experiencing the self in relation to others that is found to be compelling. Nishabahen shared a similar experience in working with others to organize a *yajña* lecture series when I asked her why she couldn't practice the *yajña* spirit at home among her family members. She said,

Because in doing it outside (for the Chinmaya Mission), you're meeting so many different people who you're suppose to work with together to organize one *yajña*. You cannot do it on your own. There are going to be differences. There are going to be personality clashes. It may not be differences but you just cannot get along. But you have to get along because it is not in your interest. It's for a higher goal. Once you learn to deal with those differences...Technically you're supposed to learn here (referring to her home) and take it out, but, I'm learning there and bringing it here.

Both Nishabahen and Stelabahen expressed a recognition of the clashes in personality or the ego that take place when a group of people work together and the importance to go beyond one's own ego and work together with others. They also reflect the importance of having a specific field in which to practice self-cultivation. Similar to the way in which the notion of devotion in Swadhyaya serves as a basis for working together, the idea of a higher cause or goal enables individuals with different personalities and individual egos to work together.

The purpose of performing a *jñāna yajña* was further illuminated at a volunteers' meeting, following a particular *yajña*.²⁷⁶ The meeting was held to recognize and appreciate the efforts of those who helped organize the *yajña*. The Swāmiji who was the

²⁷⁵ This is a transcription of an interview that took place in English.

²⁷⁶ I attended two such meetings following two *yajñas* conducted in two different sections of Mumbai. The content was the same in both meetings as the same Swāmiji conducted them.

speaker at the *yajña* explained the purpose behind doing a *jñāna yajña* in the following way. He said,

Yajña means teamwork. When people come together, there will be friction. But, in a *yajña*, every team member must feel like they are a part of one team. Members should identify themselves with the team. As a part of the whole, it is each member's responsibility to maintain the whole. Also, the responsibility of the team is on each member. Member should not wait for a phone call to see whether something needs to be done, for example; the attitude that they will call me if they need help. In corporate terms, coming together is the beginning; staying together is progress; working together is success. Today, joint families are being broken. *The individual is becoming more important.* The biggest problem today is individual greed, *individual importance.* Individual differences are less important. Do I know all of my team members? As a team, how can I keep the team together? Is our team growing? It shouldn't just be about organizing and completing the *yajña*. There should be oneness. This happens when one extends beyond oneself to others. In Vedānta, we learn about oneness. *Karma yoga* such as this helps us realize this oneness.²⁷⁷ *The more we come together, the more we will grow.*²⁷⁸ (emphasis added)

The idea of developing oneness while working together resonates with what Rakeshbhai, in Swadhyaya, described above about working together during *bhāvpheri* despite differences and based on the understanding of being related to others. Here, again, the Swāmi emphasizes the importance of moving away from the focus on the individual self towards creating bonds of unity with others. Then, based on verse twenty-six from chapter 18 of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, he spoke about the qualities of a *sāttvik* worker.²⁷⁹ One of the qualities that he spoke about was *anahaṃvādī*, in contrast to the belief that this

²⁷⁷ “*Karma yoga*” is the title of the third chapter of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, and refers to the idea of performing actions without being attached to the results of those actions. It was often invoked by participants to describe their service in the Chinmaya Mission. According to this Swāmi, the translation of “*karma yoga*” as actions without any expectations is a misinterpretation. Instead, he argues that “*karma yoga*” means that one should act without insisting on the results of one's actions.

²⁷⁸ This was a live transcription of the Swāmi's lecture and therefore I may have left out some words in an attempt to write as quickly as possible. This particular Swāmi is known for conducting corporate workshops in Mumbai; hence, the reference to the corporate world.

²⁷⁹ The verse is: *muktasangah anahaṃvādī dhṛtyutsāhasamanvitaḥ siddhyasiddhyor nirvikārah kartā sāttvika ucyate.* According to this verse, one who acts with detachment, without a false ego, is unaffected by success and failure and full of fortitude and enthusiasm is endowed with the quality of goodness.

work (referring to the *yajña*) will not get done without me, also known as a false ego.

He said,

It's important to keep in mind who needs whom? Seeker should be clear: does the Mission need me or do I need the Mission? I need the Mission for the purification of the mind (*citta śuddhi*). Work will go on with or without us. Always remember, that the opportunity to serve is by God's grace. Today, people feel that who will take care of their family without them. Things will get taken care of with or without you. *Ahaṁkāra* (ego) of *sevā* (service) is to think that the Mission depends on me.

He gave an example of when Swāmi Tejomayānandaji, the current head of the Chinmaya Mission, had a stroke prior to a large *yajña* and said that none of the scheduled programs were cancelled despite this. He continued, "We must know that I am important but not indispensable. Through this understanding, the team will grow. The danger of having a small team is this type of ego. People will think, I do so much, nothing will get done without me. The whole purpose of doing *sevā* is destroyed because of this thinking."

This meeting took place after the first day of the first *yajña* for which I volunteered as a part of my participant observation. I volunteered for two *yajñas* that were conducted back to back in two different parts of Mumbai in order to gain a better understanding of the people who volunteer and the reasons behind it. While I did some general volunteering with the second *yajña*, I was a part of the decorations teams for the first *yajña*. The team consisted of a middle-aged woman who was in charge and myself. Even before we reached the actual site where the *yajña* was going to take place, I began to notice some things about her while we were loading the supplies into a car that bothered me immediately. Then as we were setting up the decorations on the stage, I noticed more differences and my own ego coming in the way of us working together reflected below in an excerpt from my field notes dated 3/4/2013.

I also noticed that there were certain things about Kavitaaji's personality that bothered me. She would tell me what to do (like carry and bring boxes down, load them onto the car) and not do it herself. It didn't feel like we were working as a team at first. It was more like two strangers who were teamed together. On the first day, we were just two people getting the stage setup. There was no relationship or rather I saw no attempt on her side to get to know me. It was all about getting the stage set up. Then she told me that for the next day, she asked another aunty (lady) to help out so I felt a bit offended. It seemed like we had it under control. But I realized that I am quite young compared to them and since I'm new to the organization and therefore unaware of how things are done, I was seen as a little kid who needed to be told what to do. I accepted that I had to be told what to do since I did not in fact know how things are done...The next morning, there was a volunteers meet with the Swāmi where he spoke about the attitude of a seeker or worker. He spoke of how we should do our volunteer work as an offering to God. He reminded the volunteers of the kind of attitude each team member should have towards the team and pointed out some natural problems bound to come up when volunteering. Many of the things he said resonated with the feelings I had the previous day while volunteering. My attitude towards working, my feelings towards Kavitaaji, etc. He also spoke about how volunteering is not about me. This is not about me. It's about the cause. So the ego needs to be diluted. That evening as I was helping set up the stage, when some of those same feelings came up, I was reminded of what the Swāmi had said during the meeting, and it caused me to change my attitude towards what I was doing. Of course, I didn't share the same conviction and feelings about the cause as mission members, but my attitude towards Kavitaaji changed a bit. I realize that my ego was in the way and I tried having a more "we" attitude. I became more willing to listen to her. And as I became conscious of this I wondered to what extent this same process was occurring in others. It was a lesson in ego dilution: learning how to listen to others and to be told what to do. When someone tells you what to do, it immediately hits your ego. Doing work that you've never done, work that requires you getting a little dirty or working a little harder than usual is also a lesson in ego dilution. Having a team player attitude is a lesson in ego dilution. Accepting that I don't know and that I have to listen to someone else who does know is also a practice of lessening the ego.

Through my own participant observation, I experienced many of the same feelings related to one's ego and working with others expressed by the participants in the examples above. My own experience helped me to understand how participation in these activities enables new way of understanding and transforming oneself. Furthermore, it revealed how the practice of listening—central to both Swadhyaya and the Chinmaya Mission as seen in Chapter One—can serve as a catalyst for self-cultivation insofar as it draws attention to the self.

Other Forms of Reducing the Ego

In addition to the different expressions of gratitude above that simultaneously serve as a practice for reducing one's ego, Swadhyaya participants explained that the practice of reducing the ego is central to other forms of engagement as well. The idea of gratitude, or the recognition of the hand of another in one's daily existence, is closely connected to another important practice of reducing the ego, *aham* or *ahaṃkāra* often spoken about in lectures and by participants in both groups and delineated in the various examples given above. The corollary, among Swadhyayis, to the understanding that I exist because of someone is the idea that "I belong to someone." Swadhyayis explain that the form of our ego has to be changed from "I am something" to "I belong to God." According to Nirmala Tai,

We need to lessen our *ahaṃkāra* (ego) or we have to change the *svarupa* (form) of our ego because we belong to someone (*hum kisi ke haiñ*). We have to change its form in this manner. Otherwise, we will be like Rāvana. Rāvana was also very big. He was very smart. He gave *svara* to Vedas. He was a good singer. He had everything. But, he used to think that "I am everything." In spite of not having Ravan's qualities, some people still have this ego. The thought that "We are something" (*hum kuch haiñ*) should not come.²⁸⁰ Otherwise, we hurt others because of our ego and we stop our own development. We remain where we are because we feel that we already have everything we wanted. We do not realize how much there is to gain. We feel that we are something based on whatever we have achieved. Your progress stops. Or by thinking that "we are something" we become an obstacle to others. This also happens. I feel this way.²⁸¹

Another Swadhyayi, Chintanbhai who also spoke about the importance of changing the form of the ego explained that the *mahatva* (significance) of Swadhyaya is to lessen one's ego. He said, "One should sit in the one hour of Swadhyaya Kendra as the son of God (*prabhu no dikaro*) and leave everything else outside." Chintanbhai explained that there

²⁸⁰ It is important to note that this is not a rejection of oneself but rather a criticism against arrogance.

²⁸¹ This is a transcription of an interview that took place in Hindi.

are two things that separate us from God, our ego and desires, both of which need to be transformed.²⁸² He described this as spiritual development saying that our ego should not impede our development. “What is Swadhyaya?,” he asked and described it as “ego conversion.” He said that the ego of ordinary people is based on objects such as money, intellect, and beauty and that Swadhyaya converts this to a “divine ego,” the idea that I am God’s son and that you are God’s son. “Through this the ‘I’ is connected to the ‘other.’ The ‘I’ is a type of division but when you turn the ‘I’ over horizontally, it becomes a bridge between two people.” While Chintanbhai and I were talking, Chintanbhai’s wife mentioned that he writes *bhāvāgits* (devotional songs) for Swadhyaya. Chintanbhai smiled humbly and spoke of the importance of keeping them anonymous as a practice to dilute one’s ego. He said he writes them and then gives them to God.

Resonating Chintanbhai, Kirtibahen explained that Swadhyaya, among other things, is the practice of putting your ego aside. Expressing a teaching fundamental to Swadhyaya as well as an understanding shared by many Swadhyayis, Kirtibahen explained that everyone, however rich or poor, educated or illiterate, comes and sits on the same ground for the one hour of Swadhyaya as the “children of God.” She said that a rich person is not given a chair to sit on and continued.

Athavale teaches that one’s ego should be like clothing. You should be able to remove it at will. One should know when to leave one’s ego behind and when to keep it. The right *bhāvanā* (understanding) behind one’s ego should be that everything that I have is due to an inner source of strength—indwelling God. *Prasād ni bhāvanā*—everything that I have has been given to me. It lessons the mentality of possession, of claiming everything as the result of one’s own efforts, “mine.”

²⁸² This idea is a central part of Swadhyaya teachings and practices. See footnote 28.

In a similar way, Seemabahen spoke of the importance of reducing one's ego. She said,

So today if I do something good, what is the reason behind it? I am. I, I, I. The "I" comes. But where is "we," I and my God itself?"... It's not wrong but it's not complete. It's very incomplete... Yes. It happens that when I do this...we have to be very carefully in this because the ego comes. The ego comes immediately that I am doing such great work. I am helping people. I am doing this. I am doing that. The "I" comes in everything. But when you do it for God, there is no "I." In the latter, you only see the connection with God. You ultimately have to go to God. It will take many lifetimes to get there. But ultimately, my goal is my god. And it shouldn't always be about I, I, I did this. That is a major difference.

She said that we all have an ego and that Dada has taught us not to eliminate this ego but to change it. My ego should be that "I am god's child, that god is within me, that God gave me a human form in this life, etc." She said in order for us to bring these thoughts into our minds, Dada gave *Trikāl Sandhyā*.

Social Work versus Self-Development

The emphasis on reducing the ego seen as an important aspect of self-development among Swadhyaya and Chinmaya Mission members is significant in understanding their criticism against social work. The primary argument expressed by participants against social work is that it serves to augment one's ego and is therefore different from the kind of selfless work they engage in through *krutibhakti* and *sevā*. The discourse on reducing the ego is closely related to the idea of selfless work. The forms of service and devotion described above are understood as selfless work. As seen in Chapter Two, a selfless action is one that is not motivated by a selfish gain or selfish desire. It is an action in which there is nothing to gain for oneself. In Swadhyaya, selfless actions are made possible by performing the action for God. In a similar way, in the Chinmaya Mission, a selfless action is made possible by either offering it to God, *śvara arpana buddhi*, or by dedicating it to a higher cause or higher goal, understood in terms of the Chinmaya

Mission's mission to spread Vedantic knowledge. According to Chinmaya Mission members, the purpose of selfless action is to reduce one's ego and desires. Nitabahen, for example, explained that whether the social work performed by non-government organizations (NGOs) can be considered selfless work is determined by whether it boosts one's ego. She said,

It is selfless work but whether it's achieving the complete purpose of selfless work, I don't know, for the person who's doing it. For the person he's reaching out to, he's managing to do something but for himself, whether it's fanning his ego or whether it's making him more humble and more empathetic. It might even be making him more empathetic but whether it's making him feel superior to the others who don't do that kind of social work, I don't know. Because very clearly I don't believe that do good and be good is enough. You have to know why you're doing it.

According to Nitabahen, the kind of work done by NGOs serves what she called an "outer purpose," namely, helping others, but not the "inner purpose" of selfless work, which she described as diluting the ego. She places emphasis on one's motives and intentions and draws attention to the affect of an action on the self. She continued to speak of the importance of having a higher purpose when serving in order to reduce the ego. She said,

Have something which is higher than you. If it really comes back...if I'm doing social work and it all comes back to me, that, "Oh, I did it," then five people might have benefited through the work that happened through my hands; I've not benefited from it. I might have worsened for all you know. *Bhāvanā* (the feeling behind doing something) is important, *bhāvanā* is very important. Like I said, the reasons why I'm doing what I'm doing are very important. Your saying brings to mind an example. I remember if you watch Gurudev's video of his Bhagavad *Gītā* talks that he had, the last talks which are recorded in the US. When he talks about this lady whom he meets in one of his trips and she says that she's going to an organization and this person is doing a lot of social work. And she's very proud of the fact that she's going and telling him. So, he's very happy. He said, the next time when I go to meet her and I see her,...he says to her, "So, how's your social work going on?" She said, "You know swāmiji, I stopped it." He asks her, "why, why did you stop doing it?" She said, "They were so ungrateful, these people. They wouldn't even give me a cup of coffee after all the work I did." And he turns around and says, "that rascal." You know how Gurudev used to talk. Referring to that person, he's saying "What a rascal she was. Better than her is the sweeper or the janitor in the

company who at least pays for his coffee, pays that ten cents or whatever it is for the coffee. Look at this person. She's going there, supposedly."

She explained that the point he was making was that this person who is supposedly doing social work is expecting a coffee in return. She said, "So in fact, the equation in your mind is that I do this and I get a free coffee. Or...people are so grateful towards me that I've done that work." She said that according to Chinmayānandaji, it's better not to do any work than to work in that manner. She continued, "He says it very clearly in that talk of his...It's really funny and how it puts things in perspective for us. *How sometimes we think that we're doing selfless work but in the back of our hearts we are hoping that somebody recognizes us.* So alertness is a very important quality that is required because we keep slipping. The mind is such. We keep slipping." Here, Nitabahen points to the importance of being wary of the underlying desire for recognition that often accompanies the performance of any kind of action, particularly one that involves helping others, resonating the importance of heeding to the motives behind one's actions emphasized by Swadhyayis as seen in chapter two.

In a similar way, Swadhyayis argued that there is an underlying desire for fame, recognition, power, etc. behind the work conducted by social workers. When I asked about the difference between Swadhyaya and social work and whether the latter can be considered selfless work, Sureshbhai cited the well known example given in Swadhyaya about a person who dug wells in a village and went back a few months later to get the votes of the villagers, saying that deep down (*sātame parde*), there is always some kind of a desire (*abhilāśā*) for *aham* (ego), *kīrti* (fame), and *lobha* (greed). They distinguished this kind of work from *sat kārya* (correct action) that they said is determined by its

motives and associated with Swadhyaya. This was repeated by another participant who described the difference between social work and spiritual work as, “Social work is done with the ego in mind. Social workers, in their *sātame parde*, desire *yaśa* (fame).”²⁸³ When I asked whether this is always the case, Pravinbhai said, “It’s the only way social work gets done. Any social work that is done without God can only be done because the ego is there.” A little later, he added the following,

I have to change the *preranā* (inspiration) behind my *kṛti* (action). What is the motive behind my *kṛti*? Dada says to dress my motive with the cloth of *bhakti* (devotion). If I want to do social work, if I do it with the understanding that they are the children of God, they are my brothers, you will get good results but you will also develop in the process. *Vikās* (development) will also take place. What does it mean when you say development will take place? It means you will go closer to God. Today, having a human life, my first duty (*kartavya*) is that I make my *manuṣyatva* (humanness) *sārthaka* (meaningful) and while doing this go closer to God. This is man’s *karma puruṣārtha*. The first goal as a human being is to go from being *manuṣya* (human) to *deva puruṣa* (godman) and to become dev. This is the path to development.

In a similar way, Sameerbhai argued that there is a lack of social and individual development in social work because of the absence of *bhakti bhāvanā*, the attitude of devotion. He said, “Dada insists that *bhakti* should be the basis of social work. Reformers have an ego. If their expectations are not met, there is frustration. Swadhyaya is not social work.” According to Sameerbhai, when something is done out of devotion, such as *bhāvpheri*, the frustration is not there. He said, “When one goes for *bhaktipheri*, one goes for their own devotion. There is no expectation from others. One does not go for others, but for one’s own development. Dada says, I go to strengthen my own understanding, “*māru pāku karavā javu chu*,” and not to change or improve someone. There is no expectation there...A social worker will think, ‘I’m telling them this for their

²⁸³ This participant equated spiritual work with work done based on devotion.

own good but no one is listening.’ There is no expectation like this in *bhaktipheri*.”

Dada has said that it doesn’t matter whether others listen or give respect. Then, during another conversation, he said,

The difference between social work and Swadhyaya is that in social work, there is *reformer ni bhumikā*. There is the mentality that I know something more than those that I’m going to help. Or the mentality that I have more qualities or that I’m going to improve others. In *bhakti*, the attitude is that he is my brother. When you consider others your brother, then you automatically go to help them. But you don’t go to improve them. In *bhakti*, there is no superiority or inferiority complex. When I go as a teacher or preacher, there is a distance between me and him. But when one has a brotherly attitude, this does not happen.

When I said that it may not be the case that all social workers go with a superiority complex, Sameerbhai said that they may not but those being helped may feel like they are inferior and helpless. Other participants expressed this view as well. Sureshbhai, for instance, described social work as “enlightened self-interest.” According to him, one does social work with the mentality that I should help them because what if I were in the same situation. He said, “there is no *nisvārtha bhāvanā* (selfless thinking) in this. He continued, “Why should I go to others? What is my motivation? Why should I go to another human being? There may be a hidden *svārtha* (selfish motive) that I should get some *māna* (recognition). If I am doing something for him he should care for me or he should think that I am a nice person. *Upakāra karvāni bhāvanā* (the attitude of doing a favor for someone) is wrong. It is the attitude that I am big and you are small.”

Similarly, according to Akashbhai,

Dadaji goes one step ahead. I do something because I feel pain (*pidā*) towards others. Like you said, the NGO opened in order to guide the people who come from outside because they will have difficulties otherwise. The *vṛtti* (thinking) is good. The intention is also good; they may also be working free of cost to help the people. But Dadaji always teaches that God is also within him. He is God's child and I should make sure that no child of God has to suffer. If I work seeing God there, then my ego will never come in between. Sometimes I may feel that I helped this person, good thing. But so that my ego

doesn't increase, so that I don't have that proud feeling in my self-study (*sva nā adhyāya mā*). Instead, one should feel that of course I have to do this. This is my *sahaj svabhāva* (natural tendency). Today, why were NGOs created? It used to be natural that if someone comes and asks, I guide them. Today, that's not happening because everyone is doubtful about whom to ask. So, ngos grew as a platform or any institute. They are not wrong. But the *bhāva* that if someone asks me and if I know, I should indeed help them... That's why Dadaji calls it *Bhagavat Kārya* (Divine work). So what the NGOs do may be selfless work but their attitude is that the other person is helpless and I should help him. Instead, it should be that he is God's child so I must help him (*karavuj joie*). That is my *svabhāva*, my nature. That should happen. That's why Dadaji has joined God to each of our *kṛti* (action) and *prayogs* (activities). Over a period, my *aham* (ego) should not develop. I should have *svābhimāna* (self-esteem) but not arrogance.

The examples above make evident that the criticism against social work is not necessarily against helping others, but against the lack of attention given to the development of the self.²⁸⁴ Participants argue that the more important kind of action is one that helps reduce the ego and that the "right" kind of action is one that is not motivated by a desire for recognition or fame. According to participants, the desire for fame, praise and recognition perceived as an underlying motive behind doing social work stems from one's ego, and the ideal form of action is one that is selfless and therefore detached from one's ego. According to Swadhyayis, this kind of action is possible when it is rooted in devotion and offered to God. According to Chinmaya Mission members, it is possible by either offering it to God or by dedicating it to a higher cause.

Throughout this dissertation, I argue that Swadhyaya and Chinmaya Mission's religious discourse and praxis is effective because of the kind of self-transformation it enables. In this chapter, I show that the discourse on and practices of gratitude are

²⁸⁴ In his monograph on Swadhyaya, Ananta Kumara Giri has argued that the emphasis on cultivating the self in Swadhyaya provides an alternative discourse to the contemporary discourse on human development that focuses on the other. See Ananta Kumara Giri, *Self Development and Social Transformations? The Vision and Practice of the Self-Study Mobilization of Swadhyaya* (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2009), pp. 29.

compelling because they enable a new way of understanding and experiencing the self that is perceived as providing a greater sense of purpose and moral being. The practice of gratitude requires that one recognize that he or she is not entirely self-sufficient and that daily existence depends on the presence of an internal power as well as others. I show that the appeal of this understanding of dependency lies in the kind of humility it helps one experience in contrast to the primacy otherwise placed on the self. In this respect, my argument is different than feminist and poststructuralist critiques against liberal secular assumptions about the nature of moral agency. While building on their argument that tradition does not undermine agency and autonomy and is indeed central to ethical being, I show that here the case is not simply about reviving or recuperating tradition in modernity, but about a particular discourse on the self that rejects the very notion of self-sufficiency.

Chapter 4: Human Dignity, Self-Development and the Art of Living

Thus far, we have seen how the notions of gratitude and selflessness are central to the moral subjectivities of Swadhyaya and Chinmaya Mission participants. In this chapter, I illustrate three ways in which participants understand and perceive religion and theistic textual sources and argue that these are key to understanding why participants find Swadhyaya and Chinmaya Mission's particular religious discourse to be a compelling source for self-fashioning and for understanding the contemporary role of religion in everyday life. In particular, I show that the appeal of theistic sources among the participants of Swadhyaya and the Chinmaya Mission should be understood in terms of both ethical formation as well as everyday practical living.²⁸⁵ First, I show how "religion (*dharma*)"²⁸⁶ is associated with ethical being through an examination of the notion of "*jīvan vikās* (self-development)"²⁸⁷ and how this understanding forms the basis for criticism against contemporary expressions of religious life in India among the participants of Swadhyaya. Second, participants of both Swadhyaya and the Chinmaya

²⁸⁵ As I will demonstrate in this chapter, my approach to the study of Swadhyaya is different from that of other scholars who have approached the study of religion as a matter of ethical practice insofar as I take non-moral conceptions of the self to be equally important in understanding the role that religion plays in the lives of its participants. For example, Saba Mahmood has shown how a similar conception of religion, that is, "religion as ethical formation," informs the religious practices undertaken by the women of the mosque movement in Egypt. Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 40-56. Also see, Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and the Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

²⁸⁶ Although there is no exact equivalent for "religion" in the Hindu tradition, the word "*dharma*" is used to designate religion in general as well as particular religions. See Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1988), 310. The first definition of "*dharma*" in Apte's Sanskrit-English dictionary is "religion" as well. Vaman Shivaram Apte, *The Practical Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1998), 855. Participants often used "*dharma*" to denote "religion."

²⁸⁷ The term "*jīvan vikās*" is translated as "self-development" within Swadhyaya.

Mission argued that the movements provide a “life-oriented” education, namely knowledge on “how to live life” or the “art of living,” perceived as absent in the contemporary education system. I examine how this “life-oriented” education informs the everyday life of individuals and show how the scriptures come to be seen as the source for this knowledge. Last, I demonstrate how religion comes to be associated with the notion of “human upliftment” by examining the concept of *asmitā* (dignity) and the ways in which it informs modern self-identity and self-understanding. Together, I show that the concepts of development, a life-oriented education, and “human upliftment” constitute an important aspect of how participants understand and perceive religion, and are key to understanding why religious sources are seen as a compelling force for modern self-fashioning.²⁸⁸

²⁸⁸ The primary association of Swadhyaya with these three elements—the development of the self, *asmitā*, and a life-oriented education—can be understood in terms of Athavale’s definition of religion (*dharma*). According to Athavale, religion is not something that is simply concerned with the afterlife but rather that which deals with both worldly (*aehik*) and spiritual (*pāramārthik*) affairs. That is, “*dharma*” deals with both this world (*ihaloka*) and the afterlife (*paraloka*). He gives the following verse from the *Vaiśeṣika sūtras* in support of this definition: “*yato abhyudaya niḥśreyas siddhiḥ sa dharmah.*” This verse states that *dharma* is that through which there is the attainment of material prosperity and spirituality. The emphasis on and importance of self-development in this life is to ensure a good life in one’s next birth and this can be seen in light of Athavale’s interpretation of religion as that which deals with the afterlife. The elements of *asmitā* and a life-oriented education constitute the this-worldly aspect of *dharma*. Pandurang Shastri Athavale, *Sanskriti Chintan* (Mumbai: Sat Vichar Darshan Trust, 2006), 7. Athavale’s emphasis on lived religion is further seen in the following, “We do not want a philosophy which is purely theoretical and which merely discusses utopian ideas and theories. We do not want a philosophy which is merely otherworldly; instead, we want a philosophy which is practical, one that can be useful in our daily lives, i.e. we want a philosophy that can be lived.” Sanskriti Vistarak Sangh, “The Life Oriented Philosophy,” accessed April 1, 2014, <http://www.swadhyay.org/index.htm>.

Dharma as Jīvan-Vikās (self-development)²⁸⁹

Every Thursday, in the sweltering heat of the afternoon, women would gather for *Mahilā Kendra* at the home of a Swadhyayi participant, Seemabahen. Seemabahen's house is located within a community of fifteen to twenty other homes sectioned off into a "society," also known as a "*chāwli*." A number of such societies constituted this particular chawl and the majority of women who attended the weekly lectures (*chintanikā*) came from these different societies. As I began to regularly attend this *Mahilā Kendra*, I developed a close relationship with many of the women and spent a great deal of time over the course of fieldwork in this particular community both during and outside of *Mahilā Kendra*. Both before and after *Mahilā Kendra*, or whenever I went to visit some of these participants at their homes, I would notice their neighbors, mainly the women, gathered in front of one of their homes singing *bhajans* (devotional songs), especially in the early evening hours of the day. I also noticed that my informants were not among them. As I inquired about this with my informants, I learned that singing *bhajans* was a common activity and expression of religion among the residents of this community. I learned that a specific time was set aside and designated for singing these devotional songs.²⁹⁰ When I asked my informants whether they too participate in this singing, some said that they participated occasionally depending on whether it was convenient for them while others said that although they used to take part previously,

²⁸⁹ It is important to note that the majority of my Swadhyayi informants used the word "*dharmā*" or the more colloquial term, "*dharam*" to speak of "religion." The words "*Hindu*" and "*Hindu dharmā*" were rarely used. This is a striking difference from the Chinmaya Mission that emphasized "*Hindu dharmā*."

²⁹⁰ There was no association of the designated time with auspiciousness or inauspiciousness but rather chosen at a time that was convenient for the women.

they no longer do. These women and their spouses unanimously expressed the view that this form of religious expression, which they described as an act of singing and clapping one's hands, does not lead to self-development (*jīvan vikās*), which they identified with Swadhyaya.

Rajeshbhai, for example, spoke of how he used to be extremely involved in *bhajan* sessions known as *bhajan maṇḍalīs*. He was one of the main individuals hosting them and mentioned that they would purchase all sorts of musical instruments to accompany the singing and that the instruments were stored at his house. He mentioned that these singing sessions were held late into the night causing neighbors to complain and said that while it is okay to do *bhajans* within a limit (*maryādā*), “it is not good if others have to suffer due to our singing.”²⁹¹ He then explained that the reason why he and his family no longer participate in the singing of *bhajans* is because there is no development (*vikās*) through such singing and that development happens through Swadhyaya, something repeated by many of the female Swadhyaya participants in this community. He said,

What *vikās* (development) do we get from *bhajans*? In *bhajan maṇḍalīs*, there is only saying, no doing. In Swadhyaya *kārya*, there is the understanding that whatever I do is actually done by God, not me, and that it's not enough to just say this. To do Swadhyaya (*Swadhyaya karavun eṭale*, in Gujarati) means to listen to *pravachan* (Athavale's lecture) and then tell someone. *Jīvan vikās* happens by telling someone.²⁹²

²⁹¹ He recalled an instance when one of his neighbors called the police because of the noise created by the loud singing and instruments during a *bhajan mandali*. He said that they shut everything down when the police came but immediately resumed the singing as soon as they left. Reflecting back on this, he said that this was “really bad” on their part. He explained that if the child living next door had an exam the following day, the disturbance from the noise might have caused him to fail his exam as a result of not being able to focus and study.

²⁹² Here, he is referring to an idea discussed in chapter one, under the section on *manan* and *kirtan*, of how the act of telling others to do something or that a particular thing is good or bad leads one to implement that idea in their own life and therefore contribute to their own

He emphasized that both the people who do *bhajans* and those who go to Swadhyaya have trust (*viśvās*) and love (*prem*) for God but that Swadhyaya is about self-development. During another conversation, Rajeshbhai expressed a similar critique against the contemporary celebrations of *Śivarātri* that had recently passed at the time I was visiting his family.²⁹³ However, he expressed a slightly different definition of *jīvan vikās* than the one he asserted earlier. He said,

It's not that people don't love God. If you observe a temple on *Mahāśivarātri*, thousands of people are lined up to offer milk to the idol. The problem is that they don't know the right path (*sācho rasto*). For example, if I want to go from here to Kurla station, I have to know the path of how to get there. That is, they don't know how to make good use of the milk. People will pour milk over the *śiva linga*, which will eventually end up in the gutter when their own child is starving at home. There is no *jīvan vikās* in doing this. To know this difference is *jīvan vikās*. *Sāchīm samajan* (right understanding) is *jīvan vikās*. What *punya* (merit) does one get from spilling milk on a stone? Swadhyaya teaches to give that milk at a good place. For example, to one's child. Development (*vikās*) is the understanding that one should not let milk go to waste. What will God get if we pour milk on him?²⁹⁴

In the first example, Rajeshbhai defined self-development in terms of a positive change in behavior. In the second example, self-development was defined in terms of having the “correct” or “right” understanding (*sāchīm samajan*) in contrast to contemporary forms of religious worship such as those seen during the *Mahāśivarātri* festival where milk is poured over the idol of Lord Śiva. In both of these examples, ethical being, denoted by the use of the term “*jīvan vikās*,” is understood in terms of a change in one's behavior and

development (*vikās*). He gave the following example, “By telling someone something one hundred times, my own *vikās* also happens. *Kaheva bijā ne jai e, sudare āpade* (We go to tell others but it is we who become better). We have to bring what we say into our *ācharan* (behavior). I do and let others do. If I tell others that God is within me, then I can't drink. The *phāyado* (benefit) is mine.”

²⁹³ *Śivarātri* is a Hindu festival dedicated to Lord Śiva that takes place during the Hindu month of *Phālgun* (February/March), and celebrated especially by followers of *Śiva* (*Śaivas*).

²⁹⁴ All conversations with Swadhyayis took place in Gujarati unless otherwise noted.

a “correct” understanding about religion, both of which are associated with Swadhyaya teachings and practices. The association between *dharma* and self-development, acquired through his engagement with Swadhyaya teachings and practices, forms the basis of his critique against other forms of religious expression that are perceived as not facilitating the transformation of the self and provides one explanation for why he and many other participants see Swadhyaya’s religious theory and practice as a compelling guide for self-fashioning.

Kirtibhai, a longtime Swadhyayi, described the relationship between religion (*dharma*) and development in terms of the quality of one’s family life. He spoke of people who have been going to the temple (*mandir*) regularly for years and those who participate yearly in the famous Hindu pilgrimage, *chārdhām yātrā*, two prevalent and prominent forms of religious life in India, and argued that such practices are a “waste” if they do not translate to an improvement in one’s family life. He said that people go to *mandirs* and *chārdhām yātrās* for years but when we see their social and familial conditions, which are in a bad situation, all the *yātrās* go to waste. For Kirtibhai, there is no use in undertaking pilgrimages if they do not bring any positive change in one’s family life and he explained that the lack of proper results is because of a lack of understanding (*samaj*), resonating what Rajeshbhai expressed above. According to Kirtibhai, the problem is that individuals use their intellect when it comes to family, earning a livelihood, etc., that is, for worldly pursuits, but never for spiritual (*ādhyātmik*)

or religious (*dhārmik*) purposes, and therefore religion is practiced without the right understanding.²⁹⁵

He then gave another example to explicate this further. He spoke of a common tradition among older Maharashtrians of going to Pandharpur on two big *Ekādaśis*, one of which is *deva śayani ekādaśi* that falls on the eleventh lunar day of the Hindu month, *Aśada*.²⁹⁶ He explained that millions go consistently for twenty-two years with faith and said, “Why don’t we see change (*parinām*)? There is no change in their family (*kautumbik*) situations.” He said that only those who are close to the families of these individuals know this. He explained that the common perception is that this guy is “religious (*dhārmik*)” because he goes to Pandharpur and then went on to explain what he understood as the actual significance of Pandharpur as explained by Athavale. He explained that in the *Pānduraṅgāṣṭakam stotra*, there is a devotee (*bhakta*) named Pandulik who God himself comes to meet.²⁹⁷ Pandulik tells God that he has to wait because he is taking care of his parents. Accordingly, Kirtibhai explained that the significance of Pandharpur is “*mātru devo bhava, pitru devo bhava*,” that is, one should

²⁹⁵ This can be understood in light of Athavale’s insistence that “*dharma*” must be based on the intellect. He says, “religion (*dharma*) is indeed dependent (*ādhārita*) on feeling, desire, faith, devotion and love, but we should not forget that there should be intellectual thought (*baudhik vicār*) in its foundation.” Pandurang Shastri Athavale, *Sanskriti Chintan* (Mumbai: Sat Vichar Darshan Trust, 2006), 5. In this respect, Athavale also speaks of developing an “intellectual love towards God,” one that is based on an understanding of God’s role in one’s everyday existence, in contrast to a relationship with God based on fear or a selfish desire. Pandurang Shastri Athavale, *The Systems: The Way and the Work* (Mumbai: Sat Vichar Darshan Trust, 1994), 15.

²⁹⁶ Pandharpur is located in Southern Maharashtra and famously known for the *Vithoba* Temple, dedicated to the deity *Vithoba*, who is considered an incarnation of *Viṣṇu*. In this example, Kirtibhai is referring to the famous *Pandharpur Ashadi Wāri Yātrā* that takes place on this day.

²⁹⁷ The *Pānduraṅgāṣṭakam stotra* is a hymn written by Ādi Śankarāchārya and is found in the Swadhyaya prayer book. Pandurang is another name for *Vithoba*.

respect and care for one's parents as God.²⁹⁸ He said “*Applicable karavo nathi, dekhāvo che,*” that is, people do not want to apply anything; it is all a show.²⁹⁹

Kirtibhai articulated one other example to further support his argument that religious (*dhārmik*) activities should affect some form of development or improvement. He recalled an incident when he had gone for *bhaktipheri* in a village in Jamnagar, Gujarat that has a prominent Swāminarayan community.³⁰⁰ When he met with one of the teachers (*sant*) from the Swāminarayan organization (*sansthā*) and asked him about his thoughts on the current state of religion (*dharma*), the teacher told him that religion has doubled from an earlier time. Kirtibhai then asked what the state of demonic thinking (*āsūrī vṛtti*) is in comparison to the previous period. The teacher replied saying, “It too has doubled.” Kirtibhai paused here, looked at me for a reaction and then laughed exclaiming that how can it be that *dharma* has doubled but bad thoughts have increased in today's society. He told the teacher, “If this is the case, then, we are doing something wrong when it comes to religion.” Kirtibhai ended the story there and said that what we perceive as “religious” from the outside is not actually so from the inside. He used the term “hollow” (*khokalu*)³⁰¹ to describe the current form of religion.

²⁹⁸ “*mātru devo bhava*” and “*pitru devo bhava*” are *mantras* taken from the *Taittiriya Upaniṣad* and compiled into *Bodha Vachans* that are taught to children in *Bal Samskar Kendra*. The former means, “be one for whom the mother is God” and the latter means, “be one for whom the father is God.”

²⁹⁹ As seen in chapter 1, the notion of application or *ācharan* is central to the understanding of development among Swadhyayis.

³⁰⁰ “Swaminarayan” is the name of a religious movement that was started by Sahajananda Swami in the nineteenth century. He also referred to the Swaminarayan movement as a “*panth*” and “*sampradāya,*” names used to designate a sect, denomination or tradition.

³⁰¹ Kirtibhai criticized other religious organizations on the same basis arguing that there are a number of sects that have been existing for many years but “we don't see any results (*parinām*). He said that in contrast, we see tangible results due to Swadhyaya which has only been in

According to Kirtibhai, religion should have a positive affect on one's life, evaluated by the condition of one's family life and one's thinking. For Kirtibhai, going on a pilgrimage or to a temple is an external form, what he calls a "show" of religion, and is useless unless it has an affect on a person's behavior and life. In this view, whether or not a person is religious (*dhārmik*) is determined by whether his acts of religious expression have an affect on his behavior and whether it leads to his development (*jīvan vikās*). Here, however, development is understood not only in terms of the ethical cultivation of the self, but in terms of the quality of one's family life. Underlying Girishbhai and Rajeshbhai's critique is a notion of religiosity that differentiates between external forms or expressions of religiosity and religion as self-development.³⁰² This is a reflection of the notion of *dharma* explicated in Swadhyaya. According to Athavale,

Dharma means upholding (*dhāraṇā*). *Dharma* teaches the art of how to live life. Today, a person is only religious (*dhārmik*) for the time that he is inside of a temple (*mandir*) irrespective of how he behaves outside of it. True *dharma* is not only inside temples, but whether a person is religious (*dhārmik*) is decided based on how the person behaves not only in temples, but how he lives outside of the temple and what his attitude (*vṛtti*) is behind each of his actions.³⁰³

Here, how a person lives his or her life on a daily basis and the motives behind his actions are seen as more important in determining the religiosity of an individual than external performances of religious acts. It is in respect to this understanding of religion

existence for the last 50-60 years. He said, "We see results right before our eyes. We see village after village transforming." In contrast to this kind of comparison between Swadhyaya and other religious groups and critique of the latter, another participant suggested that I should not criticize any other organizations in my thesis. He said they are all doing good things and that the efforts by Swaminarayan to build temples are important in today's society where people are moving away from religion.

³⁰² A similar critique is also found among the participants of the women's mosque movement in Egypt. See Saba Mahmood, *Politics*, 51.

³⁰³ Pandurang Shastri Athavale, *Trikal Sandhya* (Mumbai: Sat Vichar Darshan Trust, 2009), 1-2.

that participants emphasized the importance of “*ācharan*,” applying what one learns in one’s life, when speaking about self-development, as seen in Chapter One.

A similar critique was launched against another contemporary form of religion manifested in religious movements (*dhārmik sansthā*). Binabahen, for example, spoke of the “*Hare Kṛṣṇas*,” referring to the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), explaining that they provide free food and as a result many people go including workers and nearby residents for free meals.³⁰⁴ Although I did not agree with her that ISKCON feeds people for free because they are concerned with how to get more followers, her next point provided an important insight into her understanding of religion. She said, “But no one thinks about whether people’s lives are changing through the institutions. Did any change come in your life (*Jīvan mā badalāvṇ āvayo*)? Are you becoming better? No one thinks about self-development (*jīvan vikās*)!”

The emphasis on the link between religion and self-development was also resonated in what Nikhilbhai explained as “real” (*sāchoṇ*) *dharma*. He said there are a countless number of *āśrams* (hermitage), *sampradāyas* (religious sects), *bapus* (referring to Murari Bapu, Asaram Bapu and Aniruddha Bapu), and *gurus* in India but that they all teach rituals (*karmakānda*), which, he further described as doing something in order to receive something. “If you do this, you’ll get that,” he said. According to Nikhilbhai, there is superstition, magic, etc. in these sects and that merely performing *pujā pātha* (an expression used to refer to acts of worship and the reading of religious texts) is not

³⁰⁴ She mentioned that people run to wherever they get free things, which she described as “*mafatyā vrutti*,” in Gujarati. She was alluding here to the Swadhyaya principle, located in the *Gita Sandesh*, that states, “do not take anything for free (*mafatnu laish nai*).”

enough. Similar to Binababen's argument, he said that these groups offer free food during their lectures to attract people and that the people who attend go for the free food and for some entertainment. He said, "What's the use if it isn't leading to any change in oneself?" According to Nikhilbhai, individuals go to these groups because they get something and because they offer a path that is "easy" and "does not require much work." In contrast, "You aren't given anything in Swadhyaya. There is no *prasād*³⁰⁵ in Swadhyaya...In Swadhyaya, Dada taught religion from the *Vedas* and *Upaniṣads*." He explained that Swadhyaya is about "self-study" which he further described as a change in one's behavior (*vartan meṇ parivartan*). He said, "If one doesn't become better afterwards, what's the use? There should be some change for the better when comparing the before and after."

Another participant, Maheshbhai spoke about the social dimension of religion, saying that contemporary forms of religious institutions are more focused on social work and that "we see less of spirituality (*ādhyātma*) in this," where he defined spirituality in terms of the development of the mind and intellect. He mentioned that other groups run schools and hospitals and said that in today's society, *dharma*, which he reworded as "religion," and social work are mixed. Then he went on to describe other dimensions of contemporary religion and asked whether the "upliftment of man" which he further described as the development of virtues, the overcoming of weaknesses, and the

³⁰⁵ *Prasād* refers to a religious offering that is made to a deity, usually some form of food, that is then considered to be blessed and consumed by the followers. While Nikhilbhai is right in pointing out that traditional forms of *prasād* such as small sugar cubes (*sākar*) or nuts, for example, are not distributed at the end of Swadhyaya events, I learned that the facilitators of various Swadhyaya activities including *Yuvati Kendra* and *Bāl Saṃskār Kendra*, receive a non-traditional form of "*prasād*" for their dedication. The two forms that I came across included a sitting mat (*āsan*) and a water jug.

strengthening of mental power, are seen today as a result of “*dharma*.”³⁰⁶ He said that this should be the result of spirituality (*ādhyātma*). “*Dharma* has become an establishment focused on rituals. Today, religious (*dhārmik*) institutions are more focused on social work. Their direct concern is not with man’s inner development.” According to Maheshbhai, *dharma* and spirituality, terms that he used interchangeably, should lead to the “upliftment” or development of individuals.³⁰⁷

The critique against contemporary manifestations of religion in Indian society expressed in the examples above emphasize the importance of a particular conception of religion, one that relates religion to self-development (*jīvan vikās*) where the latter is understood in various ways including a decrease in evil thinking, the development of virtues, the strengthening of the mind, having a correct understanding, a positive change in one’s behavior, and a healthy family life. This notion of religion was associated with Swadhyaya, which was often described as an example of “true” religion and spirituality. As seen in the previous chapters, each of the practices that Swadhyayis engage in, whether it is *bhāvpheri*, *śrambhakti*, listening, studying for exams, or meditation, is concerned with the development of the self in the form of cultivating virtues such as

³⁰⁶ For example, he spoke of the increasing dimension of publicity in contemporary religious movements. He explained that since we’re living in a highly media age, there is much publicity through television (different gurus talking), workshops (*shibir*), and conferences. He also said that there is a lot of “showmanship,” explaining that different gurus hold workshops/retreats and *kathās* (performance of story-telling) at luxurious places like hill stations and five-star hotels. He also spoke about the political uses or “misuse” of religion by politicians and leaders and how this has led to communal riots. He also distinguished between individual and collective forms of religion. He described individual *dharma* in terms of “*dhārmik* activities” such as concentration, worship (*pūjā*), prayer, and reading for their self-development and mental peace (*mānasik śānti*), and the celebration of festivals like *Janmāṣṭami* and *Pajuṣan* in Jainism as examples of collective forms of religion.

³⁰⁷ Later in this chapter, we will examine another conception of the word “upliftment” explicated by participants and central to their understanding of religion.

gratitude and selflessness and purifying and strengthening the mind. The association of religion with *jīvan vikās*, a connection or link learned and experienced through an engagement with Swadhyaya teachings and philosophy, is significant because it illustrates how notions of ethical being are informed by and facilitated through contemporary religious discourses and practice and therefore why the latter is seen as a compelling source for self-fashioning.

In addition, the appeal of the notion of religion as self-development can be understood in light what some participants described as the purpose of the latter. According to some participants, the cultivation of the self, described as self-development, is important to ensure a good birth in one's next life. That is, the concept of self-development is closely related to the concepts of rebirth and *karma* and located within a larger discourse on soteriology. For example, according to Bharatbhai, "development (*vikās*) is for our next birth. We must have done something in previous births in order to be born as a human being. In order to have a good next birth, we have to do something good in this birth. If a dog thinks that I want to do something good so that my next birth is good, he cannot do anything. The same goes for all other animals. Only a human can do this." In a similar way, Maheshbhai said, "We will be born again. Do we want to be born as more developed than our current state or worse? We get results based on karma." He gave an example given by Athavale of a butcher, who kills and is well-off and a "*sāttvik*" farmer who is starving and said, when one sees this, the question of "Is there a God?" arises, and that "for this, one must believe in the law of karma. Dada has explained that the butcher is reaping the fruits of his past deeds." He said, "Only karma will come with us. *Jīvan vikās* is key." In this respect, the appeal of religion as self-

development can be understood in relation to individual concerns regarding the afterlife (*paraloka*).³⁰⁸ However, as I show next, religion's continual presence in modernity cannot simply be understood in terms of a concern about the afterlife.

***Dharma* as “Life-Oriented” Education**

A second way in which religion is understood among participants is in terms of a “life-oriented education.” Participants argued that the current education system is “career-oriented” or “job-oriented,” and not “life-oriented.”³⁰⁹ They argued that today's education system teaches one how to obtain a job and earn money but it does not teach one how to live life or the “art of living (*jīvan jīvavāni kalā*)” as some participants called it. In what follows, I will illustrate the different ways in which participants defined a “life-oriented” education and show how the latter was associated with the knowledge acquired through the Swadhyaya and Chinmaya Mission movements. I draw attention to the different aspects of everyday life that participants spoke about when explaining why they find the scripture-based teachings of these two movements to be a necessary guide for how to live their life. Although members of the Chinmaya Mission did not use the term “life-oriented,” they similarly argued that the current education system does not prepare them for life outside of one's career and that this knowledge is provided by the Chinmaya Mission.³¹⁰

³⁰⁸ However, as argued in chapter one, the importance of religion and self-development among participants must also be understood within the larger discourse on what it means to be human.

³⁰⁹ Some Swadhyaya participants also used the word “bread-oriented” to describe the focus of today's education system on earning an income.

³¹⁰ For example, during an interview with a prominent *Swāmi* of the Chinmaya Mission, he distinguished between “academic knowledge,” which he described as “objective knowledge,” and “subjective knowledge,” referring to knowledge about the self, which he said is needed to help

Śānti/Santoṣa

According to some participants, knowing how to live life involves knowing how to develop peace (*śānti*) and the feeling of contentment (*santoṣa*) in and towards life.³¹¹

As I was sitting and talking to Madhubahen in their living room, her husband, Naveenbhai, arrived from work. She told him that I had come to India to learn about the *Veda* and *Upaniṣads*.³¹² Before I could clarify what I was researching, Naveenbhai began to explain that the *Veda* and *Upaniṣads* teach that there are two kinds of education — “bread-oriented” and “life-oriented.” He explained that the former is important because it allows one to get a job and earn money in order to sustain his or her life but that a life-oriented education teaches people how to make their lives flourish (*samvṛddha*). He also mentioned that in today’s education system, referring to the Indian

one “handle” life. He gave the example of Kerala, a state in India that has a 100% literacy rate and yet also has the largest number of suicides. He said, “So you’re [an] educated, literate state, but not ready to live life. So, now this paradox has hit them hard. You’re educated and yet you are not ready to live life...I study 20-25 years in a university, post graduation, even PhD and things like that. I come back and I’m still not able to deal with life. So there should be something which gives me to handle life, which teaches me how to manage my mind, how to channelize my emotions...So in our culture there were two types [of knowledge]. One was called *parā vidyā*. Another was called *aparā vidyā*. *Parā* means supreme knowledge. So, *aparā* is of the world, not supreme, objective knowledge. *Parā*—supreme, spirit, subjective knowledge. So people understood that objective knowledge alone is not enough. You don’t handle life because life becomes extremely difficult. You need to be trained with subjective knowledge. This kind of an awareness has come...It’s a beginning. Therefore, there are people coming towards spirituality because they need that to handle life. Only objective knowledge or the academic knowledge is not sufficient enough to handle life.” He explained that the Chinmaya Mission teaches this knowledge. (This interview took place in English)

³¹¹ It is important to note that when speaking of peace, participants were referring to a state of the mind, one that lacks worries and tension, and not social or political peace.

³¹² I had asked her earlier why she thought that the thoughts of the *Veda* and *Upaniṣad* are important to her. In turn, she told her husband that I was here to study the *Veda* and *Upaniṣad*.

education system, children are constantly worried about what percentage they will get.³¹³ “There is tension,” he said. “It doesn’t give the mind peace (*śānti*). For peace, one needs a life-oriented education.”

A little later in our conversation, Naveenbhai spoke about some of the people whom they visit during *bhāvpheri*, describing them as “highly educated” and “people with big houses and cars,” but, “disturbed.” He explained that one may have a house, food, car, etc. but that the mind will not be “*fresh*,” that is, free of worry and tension, without devotion (*bhakti*). According to Naveenbhai, a “life-oriented education” is that which gives the mind peace and the source of this knowledge is the scriptures. For example, he explained how developing a relationship of trust with God helps one worry less and therefore have more peace. He quoted the *Bhagavad Gītā* (15.7), “*mamaivāṃśo jīva loke*” explaining that God has said, “I am God’s child,” followed by “*ahaṃ pitā jagataḥ*,” referring to (9.17), saying, “So, there is a relationship.” He explained that God is our father, “*parampitā*,” and that if this is the case then God will take care of me in the same way that my parents look after me because of our relationship and therefore there is no cause for worry. He said, “Once there is trust (*viśvās*), there are no worries.” He further explained that this relationship (*sambandha*) should be developed through the tools given by Swadhyaya such as *Trikāl Sandhyā*. According to Naveenbhai, the *Bhagavad Gītā* and the tools provided by Swadhyaya to understand it enable one to live a tension-free and peaceful life.

³¹³ This is because, in India, the percentage determines one’s entry into different fields and career paths. For example, only those who receive a certain percentage are allowed to apply to medical school.

Although Sharadabahen did not refer directly to the scriptures, she used the phrase “*bhagavān nā vicār* (ideas about God),” a term often used as a synonym for Swadhyaya teachings to describe the source that enables her to be content and at peace. Sharadabahen is a very loving and caring woman who lives with her family in a small and conspicuously under-constructed one-room tenement with a small-attached kitchen and an even smaller foyer at the entrance of their home. I always noted that she consistently seemed content during our various interactions at *Mahilā Kendra*, on train rides to and from Pāṭhaśālā, and during each of our meetings at her house. She often spoke about Mumbai, which she described as “fast-paced” and a place where everyone wants more money, and said that there is a lack of contentment (*asantoṣa*) here. “There is no *śānti!*” During one conversation where we were talking about some of the differences between America and India, she said, “You can decorate your house nicely, have good roads, and dress yourself up nicely. All that is materialistic (*bhautika*). But one does not get peace (*śānti*) from that. People are still unhappy.” According to Sharadabahen, one does not get peace or happiness (*sukha*) from having a nice house and cars and that people who have these things are still unhappy, resonating what Naveenbhai expressed earlier. Instead, Sharadabahen explained that the knowledge that she acquires from Swadhyaya, which she associated with “being in the company of good thoughts,” enables her to be happy and at peace. She said,

Because we got *bhagavān nā vicār*, we have everything. Through *bhagavān nā vicār*, we remain content (*santoṣa*). If we feel content, first, our physical strength will not decrease. Even when we have everything, we keep saying, “I don’t have this, I don’t have that.” And if the other person has a lot, we are unable to be okay with it. Jealousy (*īraṣyā*) arises in one’s mind. If our thoughts are not good, jealousy will arise. We will think that so and so has X and I don’t have it. As a result, we are harming our own bodies. But a

person who has understood *bhagavān nā vicār* will feel content. They live a good and healthy life due to that contentment.

Resonating Sharadabahen, Meerabahen explained that she developed a sense of contentment with whatever she has after coming to Swadhyaya and being familiarized with its thoughts. Similar to Sharadabahen, Meerabahen lives in a one-room tenement with very few accommodations. She said, “People ask how it is possible to live without a fridge or a television” and said, “It’s possible! Of course it’s possible!” and explained that this thinking came after joining Swadhyaya. Then she spoke of how women generally gossip and compare what they have to others and are keen on getting whatever they do not have. She mentioned that women in her community probably have fifty to one hundred *saris* (traditional Indian wear for women) each and said, “What’s the use? We can only wear one *sari* each day. Five or six are enough. What’s the use in gathering all these *saris* when they are easily available for purchase whenever one wants it!” In a similar way, her husband said that anyone who comes to his house will think very little of it, but he said, “What will I do with a mansion?” He said he’s content with what they have. For both Sharadabahen and Meerabahen, the knowledge provided by Swadhyaya is “life-oriented” in that it teaches them how to be content and at peace in life, and is knowledge that is based on the scriptures (*bhagavān nā vicār*).³¹⁴

³¹⁴ Like Sharadabahen, Meerabahen comes from a lower middle working-class background. Neither owned a television when I first met them (Meerabahen’s family had one by the time I was leaving one year later), nor possessed a refrigerator, a house phone line (although there was at least one mobile phone in each of the households), etc. During and after such conversations, I would often wonder whether this “life-oriented” knowledge, based on which individuals felt content with whatever they had however little it may be, was an example of what Marx dubbed the “opiate of the masses,” knowledge that creates an illusion of being content. Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, trans. Annette Jolin and Joseph O’Malley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970 [1843]). However, this argument stands corrected in light of a

Chinmaya Mission members who came from very different socio-economic backgrounds than the participants above also associated the teachings of the scriptures with a peace of mind. When I was surprised to find out that Manojbhai is seventy-seven years old, I told him that he looks great for his age to which he said, “Thanks. I think it’s the scriptures. The study and keeping myself peaceful and calm helped brought about this benefit of health.”³¹⁵ While describing his involvement with the Chinmaya Mission both within and outside of India, Manojbhai spoke of how the scriptures have made him more peaceful and said that it is the peace of mind that resulted from this knowledge that has kept him engaged in the Chinmaya Mission for the past three decades. He explained how on the one hand, as a CEO, it was expected of him to produce tangible results for his company. On the other hand, his study of the scriptures was telling him to act without any attachment to the results of his actions. Manojbhai went on to explain that as an upper-level executive of a firm and someone who had developed close-knit relationships with valuable business partners, there were many opportunities for him to bribe and cheat in order to ensure profits and thereby a hefty bonus for himself, but, following what the *Bhagavad Gītā* explains as the “right thing to do” brought him more peace. Alluding to the concept of *karma yoga* in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, he said,

I’m not asking for a result which is okay by the scripture but how the hell do I work? I’m supposed to get some result. I’m striving for some result, some bonus. I have to get so much money. I have to do this. Then you find it like a conflict. Because the more you study, the more you discuss with the teachers (*Swāmis*), the more you begin to realize that, okay, the Lord has said in the *Gītā*, what you deserve to get, you will get. I am

similar association of peace with scriptural knowledge among people from upper social-class backgrounds in both movements.

³¹⁵ All interviews with Chinmaya Mission members took place in English and therefore the quotes are transcriptions and not translations.

there. You do what is right. Don't worry about your getting. Your getting, you will get. Even if you don't want it, I'll give it to you. You don't worry what is going to come to you. What is due to you is from your *karmas*. You will get it anyway. Don't do any motivated action or any selfish action or any devious method trying to get something for yourself. It is meaningless. You're just doing wrong *karmas* (actions), which will eventually hit up on you. That's what it's teaching. Now, when you start actually doing that and then you find you struggle for some success in business and you fail. You've got competition everywhere. And you wonder that "okay, I didn't win it for the company so maybe the company will reject me or it may have an affect on my career"... So the fear is, the company after sometime, if you're a nonperformer...private companies ask you to get out. Who are you to them? You're in a foreign country. But then I said if the lord is saying you will get what you deserve anyway, that's not what you're struggling for. You're struggling to do things right. Did you do the business for the company in the right way? Some employer is paying you. Did you neglect your duty and go home and sleep? No. Were you struggling your hardest? Were you using all of your brainpower for the benefit of the company? If the result didn't come, that's not in your hand anyway. You are the instrument of the Lord and you are doing. Did you do it following the rules of *dharma*? Don't worry about any results. So I thought to myself, fine don't worry about any results, and I worked.

A little later he explained how working in this manner made him worry free. He said,

And actually it keeps your mind very peaceful because if you have cheated somewhere, you're all the time afraid that somebody will come and hit you on your head one day or other day. Like this, I was never afraid of anything. If I didn't do well, I'd say, I didn't do well. End of the story. And if I did well, I say, I did well in the right way. There's nothing anybody would say. I never paid money to anybody, I never cheated in any fashion, I never bribed anybody in my life. So I was always at peace. Now that always at peace itself was a proof to me that I was on the right path. Whatever I'm learning and implementing must be right. It's giving me peace of mind.

For each of these participants, the teachings of the scriptures acquired through Swadhyaya and the Chinmaya Mission enable them to live more peacefully in their everyday life. It is in this sense that they can be seen as providing a life-oriented education. For these participants, the question of how to live life is associated with how one can be content and at peace in life, an answer to which is provided to them through the scriptures.

Family Life

While speaking about a recent *bhaktipheri* trip, Surajbhai brought up a particular family that he met in the community that they visited, describing them as an "ideal family

(*ādarśa parivār*).” He explained that the relationship between the daughter-in-law and the mother-in-law was like one between a mother and daughter.³¹⁶ They both listened to one another and were not offended when one told the other to do something. He spoke of how they coordinated and worked together. He then began speaking generally about the daughter-in-law/mother-in-law issue prevalent in India and said, “Forget about anyone else, just in my own family, if my wife says something to my mother, she doesn’t like it.” An elder Swadhyayi, Satishbhai, who was also sitting with us went on to describe this family as one that consisted of a “gold medalist mother,” “gold medalist father,” “gold-medalist sister,” etc, and said that today’s education system does not teach you how to become a great father, mother or son. He said that education takes up approximately the first twenty-five years of one’s life, but does not teach you the knowledge you need to use in your everyday life and in your family, namely, for the rest of your life. He described this as a sad situation for today’s education system and said, “Only Dada teaches this.”³¹⁷ Although Satishbhai did not go on to explain this further, Kantabhen openly spoke about her relationship with her daughter-in-law, Nila, and elucidated how Swadhyaya teachings contribute to a healthier relationship. She explained that in order for there to be a good relationship between her and Nila, there has to be love (*prem*) and affection (*bhāva*), and she must exemplify the kind of behavior that she expects from Nila, both notions that she acquired from Swadhyaya. She said,

³¹⁶ In India where the joint-family system is prevalent, the relationship between a daughter-in-law and mother-in-law is notoriously known to be one of hostility.

³¹⁷ Swadhyayis often express this by describing the modern person as a “first class doctor, second class husband, third class father, and fourth class son.” That is, a person who excels in his career due to his education but fails in his other roles in life.

First, you have to develop love (*prem ubho karavon pade*). For example, a daughter-in-law leaves her mother behind and calls me “mother.” Now how do I make her my daughter? She is indeed a daughter-in-law but if she gets the love of a mother from her mother-in-law, she will consider me her mother. This happens if you have good thoughts. This *vicār* (teaching, referring to Swadhyaya teachings) teaches you love (*prem*)...For example, when Nila first came to this house, they (Nila and her husband) used to sleep upstairs and we would sleep downstairs. I would have the clothes washed before she would be up in the morning. Everyday, she would say, “Mom, if you wake up early and wash the clothes, what will be left for us to do? You don’t have to wake up early and wash the clothes.” I told her that I do it because I am able to. “You learn.” So now she has learned to do it on her own. She always tells me, “I can’t cook the way that you cook. What should I do?” I tell her, “Learn!” If I keep telling her, “put this, put that, don’t do this, that’s not right, etc.” then she will not learn. So how does one learn? Through behavior (*vartan*). The first thing is that it should be in my behavior, in my *āchār*. Just yesterday, Dadaji said at Pāṭhaśālā, that another person will only pick something up from you if it is a part of your character, if they see it in you. No one will do something because they have been told to do so. It has to be in your behavior. They will see it and then do it. If I tell my daughter-in-law that you have to get up early and wash the clothes and do this and that, she will get annoyed. But if I just start doing it, then she will automatically feel that if my mother-in-law is getting up early to do all this work, then I should just wake up early and help her. Then we can complete the task quickly by working together.

Here, Kantabehn explains how she is able to navigate her family life based on ideas that she acquires in Swadhyaya through Athavale’s discourse. As we saw in Chapter Two, the notion of love (*prem*) and affection (*bhāva*) are central to the discourse of Swadhyaya and closely associated to the notion of religion espoused by Athavale. The basis of developing this form of love towards others, moreover, is the idea of an indwelling God.³¹⁸ In this respect, it is evident that for some participants the appeal of the teachings acquired through Swadhyaya is not exclusively rooted in a concern with the afterlife, but with this life, with everyday life, with family life.

³¹⁸ The application of this idea was also evident in learning about Karanbhai’s relationship towards his wife. While conversing with Karanbhai and his wife about whether and why they think Swadhyaya teachings, *vicār*, are necessary in their life, Karanbhai illuminated one way in which Swadhyaya teaches him how to act towards his wife and live in harmony with her. He said that because of the understanding that God is with me, he does not fight with his wife because “she also has God inside of her.”

This was reflected in something shared by both Kamleshbhai and Rameshbhai as well. While explaining the significance of Swadhyaya's *Mādhav Vrund* experiment where Swadhyaya families purchase and look after a plant for 100 days between the months of July and October, Kamleshbhai spoke of how it helps to create and maintain the family spirit (*kutumba bhāvanā*). He explained that one part of the activity involves reciting a Sanskrit hymn, *Nārāyaṇ Upaniṣad*, while watering the plant each morning and that the entire family is supposed to come together for the recitation. He explained that there are numerous conflicts between wives and mother-in-laws as well as husbands and wives in contemporary society and that having to say the prayer together forces the family to come and sit together despite their conflicts. When I jokingly asked how this experiment would work if the two members who were fighting did not come and say the prayer together, both Kamleshbhai and his wife immediately said that everyone will have to come together since this is a family activity. His wife added that once individuals have "these thoughts," one of the two fighting members would compromise instead of trying to prove him or herself wrong. Both Kamleshbhai and his wife recite the hymn each morning.

In a similar way, Rameshbhai explained that one way in which he applies Swadhyaya teachings in his everyday life is by reciting the morning prayer (*Prāthav prārthanā*) with his family and that through this, the family spirit is maintained. During one of our conversations, he mentioned that one's family life (*kautumbik jīvan*) develops through Swadhyaya saying, "*bhakti* (devotion) is still very far from reach, but our family

life is certainly improving.”³¹⁹ A little later when I asked how “development” (*vikās*) takes place through “God’s work,” he explained that when he goes with others for *bhāvpheri*, he hears and learns about things related to family life (*kautumbik vāton*), different lifestyles, business development, etc. He gave an example of how he learned that having a *bhajan* once a year for their deceased mother makes a particular family happy, something he had never thought about before, and that after listening to some new ideas like this one, he feels that he should do this too. He explained that in this way, there is development in one’s family life. Here, the significance of Swadhyaya practices is perceived in terms of its influence on one’s family life. Both of these examples show not only how Swadhyaya’s theistic discourse but also its practices such as *Mādhav Vrund* and *bhāvpheri* penetrate and shape everyday life.

Another example of this life-oriented education as it relates to family life was given by Pritibahen who spoke about the difference between her own family and her husband’s family. She was speaking about how, in her view, many people in today’s society are selfish and said that even siblings think ten times before sacrificing something for each other. They fight over small things and misunderstandings. Then, reflecting on her own life, she said that she finds that people who are not in Swadhyaya are different from those who are. She specified that she notices a stark difference between the atmosphere and quality of relationships at her parents’ home, a non-Swadhyayi household, and that of her in-laws who have been involved in Swadhyaya for three decades. She explained that the relationship between her two brothers is very different

³¹⁹ This is a paraphrase of what he said because he was not comfortable in my using a recorder.

from that between her husband and his elder brother who lives in the apartment with them. She spoke of how they always look out for and make sacrifices for one another. She repeated something that she mentioned during a previous conversation of how being able to live in a joint family for so many years without any “big issues” is “only possible because of Swadhyaya thoughts” and because everyone in her husband’s family is involved in Swadhyaya.³²⁰ She said, “It is only when you are joined to *sadvicār* (good thoughts) that you begin to think about others. Or else, our natural tendency is to be selfish.”³²¹

In a similar way, Shivanibahen spoke of how the knowledge that she has acquired through the Chinmaya Mission enables her to understand her father’s behavior and respond appropriately. She said,

So an example if I’m living in a joint family or even if I’m living with my dad, even if I see my dad, if I see that he’s getting more and more insecure, more and more fearful or more and more worried, it doesn’t bother me anymore. Just deal with it. Because initially what would happen was first, you get agitated. Why is he getting...first you start to question. The very fact that you start to resist that the other person is uhhh you know, what I view as unnecessarily indulging in unnecessary worry, you know, decreases my capacity to help him because I am very busy first resisting the situation. But, here, very simple thing. A book like *Bhaja Govindam*, again, to quote it, tells me that man has attachments, different attachments at different stages of his life. He doesn’t realize his true nature because of which he keeps depending on something outside of himself to make him happy and the attachment that he has in old age is worry. It says it, so, what’s

³²⁰ Pritibahen lives in a one-bedroom apartment that is shared between her, her husband, their son, and her husband’s parents’ family including his parents and his older brother, wife and their two children. She has been living there for the past eight years following her marriage. It is important to note that not all Swadhyayis who live in joint-families feel this way about their living situation or live harmoniously.

³²¹ It is important to note that the point of these examples is not to show how the family life of participants is improving because of Swadhyaya but rather to show how the teachings of Swadhyaya and scriptures come to be seen as providing a “life-oriented” education because they inform and influence the everyday dynamics of family life and in turn how the conception of religion or dharma comes to be linked to the notion of a “life-oriented” education. It is to demonstrate the ways in which a religious and spiritual discourse seeps into and guides everyday conduct.

the big deal. If he's worrying, I mean, he's only going as per his nature. Yes, man has the capacity because man has been given the intellect to go beyond what he's programmed to do, but then that's to apply to me. That's not something that I'm supposed to apply to everybody else. They will go at their pace. And I shall go at my pace. So I have the choice having understood to try to accelerate at least my process of evolution or my pace of evolution. But, I have no control over anybody else to change their pace or process of evolution.³²²

Prior to this, she was explaining how the teachings provide clarity and said, “See, once there is clarity in your basic outlook to life, it seeps down into every sphere of your life.”

Shivanibahen was referring to what she has come to learn about the mind, how it functions and about human nature through a study of the *Bhagavad Gītā* and other texts such as the *Bhaja Govindam* by Śaṅkarāchārya and Vedānta philosophy more generally.

She said,

I have yet to come across anything that is more practical than that simply because it tells me about myself. My study has shown me a mirror to myself. I am born, I get a washing machine home, I get any gadget home, I get a user manual with it. But I don't get a user manual with myself. I come and I just have to learn to deal with myself and the system of dealing with others is myself. Once I understand what the human being is all about, I start to understand myself and I start to understand other people. So resentments decrease, expectations decrease, clarity increases because you realize this is the way human nature is. What's the big deal. If somebody's behaving like this, what's the big deal? That's the way it is. Some people are that way. Big deal.³²³

She also spoke about how this knowledge has helped her deal with some difficult challenges her family underwent. She delineated a time in her life, a “turning point,” during which both her mother and mother-in-law were diagnosed with cancer within six

³²² This is a transcription of a recorded interview that took place in English. In contrast to Meerabahen and Sharadabahen mentioned earlier as coming from lower socio-economic backgrounds, Shivanibahen comes from a well-educated, English-speaking, upper middle class family. She lives in one of the posh areas of Mumbai.

³²³ For example, she described some of what she learned about the mind in the following way: “Because they taught me what the human mind is all about. How it functions? How it can be the devil and I don't even know and how it can be my friend if I made it my friend if I just learned to tame it. So because, love is also an emotion that comes from the mind so it's not really only the enemy. It's just that that I have to make it my friend. So that is all that I've learned from the scriptures. Everything that's come really has come from the scriptures.”

months of one another and explained how the teachings helped her to deal with it in a particular manner that she found to be better than what she described as the more typical way of responding to such issues. She said that the knowledge that she acquired by attending Chinmaya Mission classes gave her the strength to see through a difficult time. She gave the following explanation of how one other book along with the *Bhaja Govindam* helped her. She said that she learned several things.

1. That this is not the end; it is not necessarily the end. It's your identification or how you see it. It also taught you to an extent that though we talk about the law of karma, sometimes we take it in a very negative way. In the sense that we think of it as...like I still remember when I used to be talking to my mum and she was in terrible pain, so she used to say that I must have done something terribly wrong in my past life but it was like beating herself over. One was a physical trauma and one was a mental trauma...I remember going to class or asking somebody (I don't know who I asked) and they kind of put in perspective that it's something that you choose between births...I mean you can't today be responsible for what you have done or incidences that you have no memory of but at the same time since it's the same entity, really, in the larger picture, there has to be an action so there has to be a consequence. So if you're having to face it, the interesting thing is that there is nobody out there who is sitting out and making out stuff to you, kind of like, anybody distributing stuff to you. It just is. It's something that you choose. That ok, there is going to be a life and ...it's kind of the withdrawals you make. You have a bank balance and you decide that for this particular trip, I'm going to withdraw so much and this is the kind of denomination that I want to withdraw in. So it explains things so you don't "woo." I didn't get into the typical state of "Oh my God, why my mum? Why my mum-in-law? Why did this happen? Why me? Why two things happening together?" All that never happened.

The type of knowledge that Shivanibahen is describing is one that teaches her how to perceive the events in her life and thereby determine how to respond to them appropriately. She mentioned the "law of karma," in particular, a lens through which various participants in both movements understand, perceive, and interpret their lives. The law of karma is central to Indic religion and philosophy and is the principle that the present is a result of actions performed in the past and the future is determined by the actions performed in the present.³²⁴ It is closely related to the idea of rebirth in Indian

³²⁴ The concept of karma also forms an important aspect of other religious traditions including Buddhism. See, Charles Hallisey, "Buddhism," in *Comparing Religious Traditions: The Life of*

thought and the idea that moral actions produce good consequences and immoral actions leads to unfavorable results. As such, it is often employed as a guiding principle for how to conduct one's life and as a principle for moral action.³²⁵ In this case, however, the law of karma serves less as an ethical source and more as a practical guide for how one perceives and in turn deals with the various situations that life puts one in. In the case of Shivanibahen, it taught her that the difficulties that she is dealing with now are some result of a past action of her own and therefore she must deal with them. Here, the law of karma teaches her how to "handle" life in the sense of teaching her how to perceive life and deal with it.

Related to the concept of karma, participants often spoke about the concept of *runānubandha* to explain the reason behind the meeting and interaction of any two people, and in turn illuminating how the knowledge serves as a lens for dealing with one's family as well as one's encounters with others. According to Swatibahen, for example, all close relationships such as those between a husband and wife, siblings, and children and parents are a result of our past lives, which she described as *runānubandhan*. She explained that one often wonders how people come to choose their life partners. "There is the question of how one knows that he or she is *the one* among the entire world." And said that this is all a result of past lives, and promises made in past lives. She explained that since all of our current relationships are a result of some past

Virtue, ed. Jacob Neusner A (Wadsworth: Wadsworth Publishing, 2001), 112-134.

³²⁵ This understanding of the law of karma, for example, undergirds one reason why participants engaged in the various activities of the two movements, as seen earlier.

interaction that requires completion, one should not complain about why they were given a certain mother or a certain sister. She said,

Dadaji has explained that whatever happens and whenever it happens, it happens due to *runānubandha*. Dadaji taught in a very simple language that we are given our brothers and sisters due to *runānubandha* and so learn how to freeze the giving and taking that needs to be completed in relation to our past relationships. And because Dadaji explained this, you delete your complaints... When do you complain in human life? When there is an absence (*achat*) of thoughts (*vicār*) and understanding (*samara*). But through thoughts (*vicār*), Dadaji explained to us that instead of complaining, learn to see the plus wherever it is there. So instead of complaining, you learn to see where there is more love.

Then, one day while we were sitting in a rickshaw on our way to *bhāvpheri*, Swatibahen mentioned that her mother-in-law was quite sick and that she recently took her to the doctors. She also mentioned that her other two sister-in-laws suffer from bad health and are not able to take care of their mother-in-law as much, and so, she mainly takes care of her. In the many hours that we spent together speaking about Swadhyaya and life in general and developing a close relationship, Swatibahen had never mentioned anything about taking care of her mother-in-law even though she had been doing so all long. That is, she never complained about having an ill mother-in-law whom she has to take care of or the fact that she has two sister-in-laws who are unable to. This was the first time that she brought it up, and that too, in order to explain why she would not be able to present at an upcoming Swadhyaya event. During another conversation, she again spoke about the importance of completing the giving and taking that was left over from one's previous lives and "past ties." She said,

Then a person is born on earth through the law of attraction and repulsion. Attraction and repulsion means that I have certain past ties with a person and I am born because of those ties (*runānubandha*). I have to add, subtract or freeze that *runānubandha*. That is in my hand. So at that time I need the understanding. I can be bound to a person out of love and out of hate. Kṛṣṇā says that instead of love and hate, be in between and pick up devotion (*bhakti*), the understanding that whatever has been given has been given by

God. *Gītā* tells you that whatever takes place happens because of God. Whatever has happened has been done by God. And whatever is going to happen will be done by God. That is *bhakti*.³²⁶

Could her positive attitude and behavior towards her ill mother-in-law, something also conspicuous in her attitude towards her husband and son be a reflection of an effort to embrace and love those in her life and also to complete whatever was left from their past ties and thereby “freeze” her account? For Swatibahen, the concepts of *runānubandha* and *bhakti* learned through Athavale’s discourses provide an important understanding on how to deal with the members of one’s family. In a similar way, as I thanked a Chinmaya Mission member for showing me around the Sandeepany Sadhanalaya Ashram where she works for sharing her experiences with me and appreciating her for the time she took out for me, she responded saying that that we must have had an incomplete interaction, some giving or taking left from our former lives that we were now completing, and therefore she had no issue. That is, she did not perceive our meeting and interaction as a chance occurrence but rather as a completion of a transaction in the past and therefore she embraced it instead of seeing it has a burden or an act of kindness. I would argue that it is in this sense, in providing a lens through which to deal with the people that one encounters in life, especially their families, that the notions of

³²⁶ A subtly different view was expressed by her husband who said:

“To put it simply, if there are four people in a house, you may get along with one and not get along with another. There may be someone who you really don’t get along with. So what do we think? That we have met because of *runānubandha*. We have come together because there is a giving and taking (*len/den*) of karma. This is one way of thinking. *Jñāna* (knowledge) says that we have asked for these relationships in past births (*janmāntare*). I have asked for this situation and therefore I have received it. *Bhakti* says that God you have seen my development (*unnati*) in this situation and therefore you have placed me in it. *Bhakti* is when you place God in the center of whichever situation and relationship that you have in this life and it takes you towards development (*unnatātā*) or else there will be fights.” This again reflects how a particular understanding of *bhakti* learned through Swadhyaya affects family life.

runānubandha and *karma* constitute one aspect of the “life-oriented” education provided by Swadhyaya and the Chinmaya Mission.

In addition, some participants described this life-oriented education in terms of short phrases that they learned from Swadhyaya. When I asked Seemabahen why she finds Swadhyaya teachings important, she responded by saying that they are “useful (*upayogi*)” in her everyday life. She mentioned, “*wait nu śikṣaṇa* (learning to wait)” as something taught by Athavale and said, “Today, people want things no matter what needs to be done to get it.” She explained that before, she used to have the mentality that “I need this no matter what” and that “These thoughts (*vicār*) teach you to wait. If not today, then tomorrow.” Towards the end of our conversation when I brought this up again she explained further. She described the kind of thinking that exists today in terms of “buy, borrow, or steal” to get whatever you want and said, “Dada says, jam yesterday, jam tomorrow but no jam today.” Here, she explained that it is important to teach a child to wait and not give in to their demands. According to Seemabahen, the frustration that students face today after failing an exam and committing suicide as a result is because they have not been taught to wait. She said, “Those who have *wait nu śikṣan* never commit suicide. *Wait nu śikṣan* is that I may not be happy today but God will give me happiness (*sukha*) in the future. With this understanding, you will never fall back in life. When you are made to wait, your desire (*moha*) for that thing lessens and you learn that you can live without it.”

The examples above delineate the different ways in which Swadhyaya and the Chinmaya Mission are perceived as providing a “life-oriented” education. It is evident that the question of how to live life is not simply an ethical or soteriological one but a

practical one related to the intricacies and realities of everyday life. This was perhaps best summarized by Bharatibahen who said, “When we are young, we have a very innocent picture of what life is like — you grow up, get an education, get married, have children, and then watch our children do the same thing. One doesn’t realize all the obstacles that pop up and complicate life and that it is precisely during those times when one is confused that Swadhyaya provides guidance through its thoughts.”³²⁷

Dharma as *Asmitā Jāgruti*

A third way in which participants described Swadhyaya was in terms of “human upliftment” and “human empowerment.”³²⁸ For example, one participant said, “Other groups are opening hospitals, schools, which is all good, but what about human upliftment?” He said that Swadhyaya is “working on humans.” The terms “empowerment” and “upliftment” were often associated with a particular form of understanding the self, referred to as “*asmitā*” or “*ātma gaurav*.” In Sanskrit, “*asmitā*” literally translates to “I-ness” or egotism and in Swadhyaya is translated into English as “ego-consciousness.” In Swadhyaya, it is further defined as the awareness that “I am great, but the other person is not small or lowly,” and in terms of “self-respect,” “self-confidence,” and “self-resistance.” Athavale describes *asmitā* in the following way: “A man must be fully aware of his intrinsic ability, worth, and value. He must feel that he

³²⁷ This is one of the rare interviews with a Swadhyayi that took place in English.

³²⁸ This aspect can also be seen as a part of the life-oriented education discussed above but deserves a separate section as I hope to demonstrate in what follows. Although the English phrase “human upliftment” was only used by one participant, I find it to be a useful term to capture what participants described as *asmitā*.

can do it, can become “That;”³²⁹ can make it; that he can change, create and acquire.”³³⁰ In this respect, the word “*asmitā*” is often translated as dignity within the movement. Furthermore, Athavale teaches that *asmitā*” is one of four virtues (*guṇas*) that constitute a “true” human being³³¹ and defines the purpose of religion as that of awakening self-dignity (*asmitā jāgruti*).³³² In what follows, I will illustrate how Swadhyaya teachings inform and enable a particular conception of the self in relation to the notion of *asmitā* that guides everyday life. I show that the association of the latter with Swadhyaya informs the conception and experience of religion among its practitioners and argue that it constitutes an important reason behind their engagement.

Kamleshbhai and his wife, for example, described the main focus of Swadhyaya as “getting individuals to stand on their feet (*mānas ne ubho karavāno*, in Gujarati).” They spoke of a person’s need for good thoughts (*sārā vicāro*) explaining that a person can be made to stand on his own feet through good thoughts, and primarily through the idea that “god is within me.” The notion of an indwelling god is seen as the foundation for building *asmitā* (dignity), which they further described as the mentality that “I am not

³²⁹ This is a reference to the famous “*tat tvam asi*” phrase from the *Chandogya Upaniṣad*, where “*tat*” refers to the universal self. It is considered one of the four *Mahāvākyas* or “Great Sayings” of the *Upaniṣads*.

³³⁰ Pandurang Shastri Athavale, *The Systems: The Way and the Work* (Bombay: Sat Vicar Darshan Trust, 1994), 15-16. In this respect, the notion of *asmitā* in Swadhyaya is different from that of Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutra* (2.3 and 2.6) where it is understood as a form of affliction (*kleśa*). In 1.17, *asmitā* is stated as an aspect of *Samprajñāta Samādhi*.

³³¹ Pandurang Shastri Athavale, *Trikal Sandhya* (Mumbai: Sat Vichar Darshan, 2009), 2.

³³² According to Athavale, the purpose of *dharma* is two-fold: “*asmitā jāgruti* (awaken self-dignity)” and “*bhāva jāgruti* (awakening emotions).” Pandurang Shastri Athavale, “*Ṛg Veda Mantra*,” Lecture 102 7/13/1986 (viewed 2/10/2013). For a detailed discussion on the latter aspect, see chapter two.

helpless (*lāchār*).”³³³ Kamleshbhai mentioned that people readily put out their arms for help because they see themselves as helpless. He then spoke of a recent earthquake that took place in India saying that it is not enough to simply go and give food, water, or stoves. According to him, the people who have lost their homes and entire families need emotional support—“warmth (*humph*),” “love (*prem*)” and “affection (*bhāva*)”— and mentioned that Swadhyayis took turns going there and spent days at a time with victims of the earthquake, accompanying them to their farms. He said, “What other organization does this?” He explained that Swadhyaya gives material things but does not stop there, but people are concerned with how much money Swadhyaya has donated to earthquake relief or flood relief. “For them, money is important. But Swadhyaya is concerned with the upliftment of man.” According to him, Swadhyaya takes care of all aspects of life. He said, “It is common sense that good thoughts will be useless to a poor hungry man and that no hungry man is going to be interested in ideas with an empty stomach. But, it is important to enable a person to stand up on his own. This will not happen by simply giving him food or any other material help.”

According to Kamleshbhai, Swadhyaya provides a foundation for human dignity through its teachings, especially through the notion of an indwelling God. A similar view was expressed while a group of us were sitting after Swadhyaya Kendra at a Swadhyayi’s house one night. Praveenbhai mentioned that a friend recently asked him why they, the Swadhyayis, do not do social work instead of *bhāvpheri*. Another Swadhyayi who was sitting there and looked up to as a great source of knowledge responded saying, “As

³³³ As I will show below, the idea that “I am not helpless” constitutes an important aspect of the self-understanding and dignity of many Swadhyaya participants.

Dadaji said in today's lecture (*pravachan*), we are not trying to improve society or to make any objective changes. We simply want to become dear to God. It's subjective." According to this participant, underlying all social work is the thought that "I am here to help the helpless. That you are weak and I am here to help you." He said, "A person does not become stronger by giving him food. It does not allow the person to think that I too can stand up and become something. It doesn't make a person *unnata* (uplifted). Giving a person food does not give him *asmitā* that I can stand up on my own."³³⁴

³³⁴ This critique against social work is somewhat different from the critique described in Chapter Three. There, the critique against social work was against its focus on the development of the other and not one's own development. Here, the critique is against the approach that social workers are perceived as employing towards helping others. A similar critique against the work of non-government organizations was articulated by Chinmaya Mission members who emphasized the importance of addressing the cause instead of the effect and said that the Chinmaya Mission addresses the root of the problem by providing knowledge. One participant articulated this in the follow way: "The Mission does not attend to the effect (such as being poor, sick, etc.). It attends to the cause of poverty and sickness. That is, why is this person poor or sick? For example if there is bad water in a village, the problem will not get solved by giving people good water for a day. To attend to the cause here means putting a purification system so that they will continuously get water. Chinmaya Mission says that the cause of suffering is a lack of knowledge of [the] scriptures. One needs to remove one's ignorance through knowledge. Through this knowledge, there are changes in one's life patterns. One will obviously not stop being sick after having the knowledge but one realizes that one is not the body and that it is the nature of the body to go through changes. One has to touch the cause of sorrow. This NGO (referring to the Chinmaya Mission) does that. Other NGOs deal with the effect. Knowledge is the ultimate removal of distress." This view was resonated during an interview with a Swāmi of the mission as well who said, "See there are different kinds of services. One is serving the effect and one is serving the cause. Chinmaya Mission serves the cause more than the effect. Like for example, let us say, there are destitute children, destitute women. What is the cause? Lack of values in a human society is the cause. Building the destitute a home and giving them care is serving the affect. But if you educate humans with a better standard of life, this will not happen. You educate with a family value, with a bond—love and respect—then this will not happen. So you have to look at the spiritual organizations like Ramakrishna Mission, Chinmaya mission, and many more organizations. If they were not around, how many more orphans or drug attics or destitute, or how many more rapes would be in a society? So these organizations prevent even before it can happen by keeping the mankind better. So we serve the cause. So Chinmaya Mission is doing that kind of a service." In this respect, knowledge is perceived as crucial in both Swadhyaya and the Chinmaya Mission.

In both of the examples above, “human upliftment” is described in terms of providing a source for human dignity (*asmitā*), a particular self-understanding that enables a person to stand on his own two feet.³³⁵ Many of my informants spoke about *asmitā*, directly or indirectly, when speaking about Swadhyaya, but perhaps it was made most tangible through the following everyday experiences shared by them. For instance, during one of our many conversations, Nathibahen was explaining the different things that they do at *Vrukṣa Mandir* where she goes as a part-time priest (*pujāri*)³³⁶ on the first weekend of each month.³³⁷ She spoke of how all the participants get to know one another and said that since she is from Mumbai, the home of Pāṭhaśālā, Tattvajñāna Vidyāpith, and “Didi,”³³⁸ everyone is eager for her to tell them about Swadhyaya happenings in Mumbai. Then, she spoke of how different people learn from one another by sharing their experiences and gave the following example. She said, if there is a woman who is “fully educated and literate” but afraid to speak at the *Haldi Kumkum Milan* in her locality, and she comes to find out that an uneducated and illiterate woman like Nathibahen is going to present at her local *Haldi Kumkum Milan*, which she described as a “big event,” then this will motivate her to “not be afraid” and give her the enthusiasm

³³⁵ In this respect, Swadhyaya is distinct from “self-help” and “self-improvement” groups prevalent in the western parts of the world.

³³⁶ According to Athavale, anyone who is willing to serve in a temple is a priest. These individuals include people from all strata of society. Since individuals take turns serving at the temple, they are known as “part-time priests.” Pandurang Shastri Athavale, *The Systems: The Way and the Work* (Mumbai: Sat Vichar Darshan Trust, 1994), 102.

³³⁷ *Vrukṣa mandir*, or tree-temple, is one of the socio-economic experiments developed by Athavale where Swadhyayis work as a form of their devotion to God. Nathibahen lives in Mumbai, and travels to Gujarat monthly via train, a 15-hour train ride each way, to serve her part as a *pujāri*. For more details on this project, see Pankaj Jain, *Dharma and Ecology of Hindu Communities: Sustenance and Sustainability* (Vermont: Ashgate, 2011), 31-39.

³³⁸ “Didi” means elder sister in Hindi and is used to address the current leader of Swadhyaya, Jayshree Talwarkar, the daughter of Pandurang Shastri Athavale.

(*utsāha*) to do it.³³⁹ She tells these women, “they can do it too!” Then, she said to me, “You are working so hard to become a teacher but Dadaji made me a teacher without any education, without any prerequisites. Who else would make an illiterate person (*anapaḍha*) a teacher?” She was referring to her role as a teacher (*sanchalak*) at *Bāl Saṃskār Kendra* (BSK).³⁴⁰ Later during that day when I went back to her house, she mentioned that Dada accepted them “just as they were (*jevā atā evā*).” She said, “Who else would accept uneducated people like us (*amārā jevā anapaḍha*)?” She explained that Athavale not only accepted them (*svikāryā*), but made them his own (*apanāyā*), and increased their “worth (*mūlya*)” and “dignity (*gaurav*)” by giving them the “right understanding (*sāchiṃ samaj*)” that God is within them.³⁴¹ We stopped here, as it was time for *Mahilā Kendra*. Then, as we were walking over, she said that Athavale taught them that “women are not weak” and that they have the power to create a new life just like God has created the world. She explained that women have God inside of them so

³³⁹ Haldi KumKum is a tradition celebrated by married women in India, especially in Maharashtra, by exchanging turmeric (*haldi*) and vermilion powder (*kumkum*), symbols of their status as married women, and praying for their husband’s longevity. Swadhyayi women celebrate this tradition annually through local gatherings known as Haldi Kumkum Milan. The gatherings involve one to two short speeches (*chintanikā*) on the role of women and Swadhyaya and the attendees receive a card with a thought written on it in the form of *prasād*. Following one such Haldi KumKum celebration that I attended, Anitabahen explained that prior to Swadhyaya, she would host Haldi KumKum celebrations at her house where she would invite her friends and neighbors for an informal gathering. She said that women would come, gossip, and leave and that she would gift them some kind of a vessel. She mentioned that different people gave different things depending on what they could afford. She explained that in such gatherings, the hostess ends up spending a large amount of money on presents to give to her guest, but that Dada taught her that you can also give a the gift of a good thought, a *vāhn of vicār* (*vāhn* is a Marathi word used for the gift they give). During the celebration that I attended, there were two speeches, 15-20 minutes each on the topics of Sumitrā, a character from the Rāmāyaṇa, and Swadhyaya. There were 114 women at this celebration and the one where Nathibahen spoke had 140 women.

³⁴⁰ Bal Samskar Kendra or “child-development center” refers to a section within Swadhyaya dedicated to children. Pandurang Shastri Athavale started it in 1954.

³⁴¹ Swadhyayis use the word “dignity” and “*gaurav*” interchangeably. For example, they celebrate Athavale’s birthday as “*Manuṣya Gaurav Din*” or “Human Dignity Day.”

they should not feel “weak (*hīn*),” “inferior (*dīn*)” or “helpless (*lāchār*).” She said, “Today women do the lowliest (*nicha*) of work out of helplessness (*lāchāri*). But why should we feel helpless if such a strong *śakti* (power) is within us?”³⁴² She confidently said that she has no fear and can speak in front of anyone. At the end of the *Mahilā Kendra*, I learned that her and her husband were chosen from their local Swadhyaya center to explain a section of the exhibition displayed at the annual *Pāthutsav* event in the form of *lakṣmi nārāyan*.³⁴³ When I asked her about this, Nathibahen spoke a little bit about what she will be explaining while standing at the exhibition. She spoke confidently.

During another conversation, Nathibahen was explaining what she learns from Swadhyaya, and at one point said, “Then, do you know the entire *Gītā Sandeśa*? You *must* have read it? Do you have it memorized?!” She recited the Gujarati version proudly ending with “*laghu granthi bāndish nahi*.”³⁴⁴ When I asked her what this meant, she explained the following.

³⁴² Although Swadhyaya encourages women to have a positive perception of themselves, “to live with self-respect,” and teaches that women are equal to men according to Vedic culture, it extols the traditional role of women as family care-takers and criticizes women who “cherish independence and freedom more than their attachment to home and family.” Interestingly however, it encourages women to not limit themselves to fulfilling their traditional roles and to become the “custodians of religion and culture.” Pandurang Shastri Athavale, *The Systems: The Way and the Work* (Mumbai: Sat Vichar DarshanTrust, 1994), 68-79. Also see, “Mahila Kendra,” accessed April 1, 2014, <http://www.swadhyay.org/index.htm>.

³⁴³ *Lakṣmi-Nārāyan* refers to the Hindu deity, *Viṣṇu*, and his consort *Lakṣmi*.

³⁴⁴ The *Gītā Sandeśa* consists of a collection of short phrases that have been interpreted as the message or “*sandeśa*” of the *Bhagavad Gītā* by Athavale. It says: *Karyā vagar kai maltu nathi – Mafat nu laish nahi. Karelu phogat jatu nathi – Nirāśa thaish nahi. Kāma karvāni śakti tārāmā che - Laghugranthi bāndhish nahi. Kām karto jā, hāk mārto jā, madad taiyar che - Viśvās gumāviś nahi*. I found the entire message through another participant. It translates to: You don’t get anything without working, do not take anything for free. Nothing goes to waste, don’t become hopeless. You have the strength within you to work, do not feel inferior. Keep working, help is ready, do not lose hope.

It refers to the thinking that "I am superior and you are inferior (*huṅ moti ane tu nāṇi*)." If you have to go with someone, it is the thought that "Oh gosh, how can I go with such a rich person?" It doesn't matter if he is rich. The god that is within him is also within me. It doesn't mean that I am inferior compared to him. He is wealthy but the one residing in him and the one residing in me is one. The amount of sunlight that the sun gives to me is the same as what I get. We both get the same amount of rain. This applies to everything. If he were in fact bigger, then wouldn't things be different for me? Wouldn't he get more? So we are both equal on the basis of God. The minister's son will be bigger on the basis of money, power, etc. but everyone is the same when it comes to God.

Here, the concept of *asmitā* was defined in terms of self-worth and in contrast to the thinking that I am inferior. Then, when I asked her whether she ever felt this inferiority, she related her experiences while working together with other Swadhyaya women who come from higher socio-economic backgrounds. She said,

Yes. I used to think that I don't mix in with these rich people. They all wear heavy, fancy saris. Mine are a bit *halki* (light). If I wear the same sari to this person's house, they will think that these people don't have any other saris. This is *laghu grantha*. I used to feel that way when I did not have these thoughts. Now, I go even with a casual sari on. But, I dress appropriately. I didn't know how to put on a safety pin so I used to feel that I couldn't mix in with the rest. But look (pointing to the safety pin on her sari), after coming to *kārya* (Swadhyaya), I learned how to put on this pin. We have to work together but we shouldn't feel that her sari is 5000 rupees and mine is 500. Perhaps, her 5000 rupees sari will not look good on me the way my 500 rupee sari does. Look, my capacity is less so if I roam around in saris worth 5000 rupees when we barely have enough money to make ends meet at home, the sari will not suit me. So I will not hold this type of *laghu grantha* (feeling of inferiority). This is such a great thought. Before anything else, I first memorized the *Gītā Sandeśa*. Then, *Trikāl Sandhyā*, then *Sāyam Prārthanā*, then *Prāthav Prārthanā*, then *Rāma Rakṣā Stotra*, *Nārāyan Upaniṣad*, *Śrī Suktam*.³⁴⁵ I memorized the *Gītā Sandeśa* first. I can tell anyone that I know the *Gītā Sandeśa*!

Prior to our first interaction and conversation, I had seen Nathibahen performing the role of an old grandmother in a play by the *Bāl Saṃskār Kendra* kids at the annual *Vasanta*

³⁴⁵ Each of these prayers can be found in the Swadhyaya prayer book, *Prārthanā Prīti*. *Sāyam Prārthanā* and *Prāthav Prārthanā*, refer to the evening and morning prayers, respectively. I often joined the recitation of the evening prayer with my informants and their family members, which took place a designated time each day.

Utsav celebrated by Swadhyaya.³⁴⁶ This year, she also presented one of the two speeches at their local Haldi KumKum celebration in her community and as mentioned above, her and her husband were chosen from their local Swadhyaya center to speak at the annual *Pāthutsav* event at Tattvajñāna Vidyāpith attended by thousands of Swadhyayis. Nathibahen comes from a lower socio-economic background and evident in the quotes above is her awareness of this fact and the fact that she is illiterate.³⁴⁷ However, this awareness of her socio-economic status is supplemented by another described variously in terms of dignity and self-worth and in the fact that she does not see herself as weak, indigent, or helpless, an understanding acquired through Swadhyaya and specifically, through the concept of an indwelling God. This conception of the self is strengthened moreover by the different responsibilities she has been given in Swadhyaya as a BSK teacher, a speaker at public event such as Haldi Kumkum Milan and *Pāthutsav*, and so forth.³⁴⁸ I would argue that more than anything else, it is this kind of self-respect, value, and worth acquired through Swadhyaya teachings that plays a significant role in explaining why participants find theistic sources to be compelling for self-fashioning.

This was reinforced during another conversation as well. During an informal interview with a dedicated and veteran middle-class Swadhyayi, Jayeshbhai was

³⁴⁶ *Vasanta* marks the arrival of Spring and is celebrated in Swadhyaya by the children of Bal Samskara Kendra through an annual event called “*Vasanta Utsav*” in which they perform plays and dances.

³⁴⁷ During our conversation, she mentioned that their family income is approximately 10, 000 rupees (roughly, 160 US Dollars) and earlier it was 7,000 Rupees.

³⁴⁸ In addition, the teachers of the children’s center (BSK) meet for Study Circle during the months of March and April of each year in preparation for the next term of BSK. Nathibahen explained that the study circles are kept at the home of a different *sanchalak* each week on a rotating basis and how because of this she got to see what it’s like to live on the twenty-second floor of a building, referring to the home of an upper-middle class Swadhyayi. Then, she proudly mentioned that the next Study Circle is going to be at her house, a one room tenement in a chawl.

explaining the idea of “*ātma-gaurav*,” which he described as, “The god who runs the universe is within me so how can I just be common (*sāmānya*)? I am something.” Immediately, another Swadhyayi, Manharbhai, who was also sitting there added, “Dada looked at humans as humans (*mānav ne mānav jaisā dekhā*), not as the person with two cars or three houses, but as a human being who has the same God within him as everyone else. Dada taught us how to look at another human being as a human being first and not as a beggar or rich person, as a pretty or ugly person.” Manharbhai shared that he is a “*bhāvlakṣi*” and that his main occupation was that of a sweeper.³⁴⁹ He explained that no one would come to their house or even talk to “his kind of people” because of their status in Indian society, but because of Swadhyaya, he gained some worth. “I am something (*huṅ kaink chu*),” he said. He said that because of these thoughts, he is now an assistant manager and soon to be manager. He added, “Even if I don’t have power (*pada*) or status (*pratiṣṭhā*), I am something because God is within me,” reflecting how the idea of an indwelling God is perceived as a basis for dignity.

Manharbhai also mentioned, “We didn’t know that we could do *bhakti*,” alluding to the exclusion of the “untouchables” and lower castes from traditional Vedic society and rituals and their prohibition from entering temples and other religious sites which exists to this day. This was also shared by another participant who had never been to a temple (*mandir*) prior to Swadhyaya. Manojbhai explained that this was because Brahmins did not let their caste go inside temples. As a result, he had never seen an idol

³⁴⁹ *Bhāvlakṣi* is the name given by Athavale to the “untouchable” class. Jayeshbhai explained that these are the people commonly considered “untouchables, *āgri*, *vāgri*,” and who Gandhi called “*harijan*.”

(*mūrti*) of God and did not know what God looked like. He explained that it was after Athavale's thoughts came to their village that people began talking about God. He said, "Then we found out what *Gītā*, *Veda*, *Upaniṣad* are." In a similar way, referring to the fishermen community, Navinbhai mentioned that the notion that they are sinners (*pāpi*) has been ingrained in certain communities since the beginning for many generations. He explained that when a fishermen's son is walking with his father and passes a temple and asks his father what "that is" pointing to the temple, the father tells him that "we cannot go in there because we are sinners." So Navinbhai said that this mentality, one that has been passed down through generations, gets ingrained from the very beginning and therefore the work of breaking these barriers is going to take a lot of time. He explained that Athavale went to them and told them that their occupation is not a sin, it is something passed down to them through their father, "*pāp no dhandho nathi, tārā bāp no che.*" That is, what you have received through tradition. He told them that they too could pray to God at a time when they were not allowed in temples. Navinbhai explained that Swadhyaya is doing the work of dissolving such distinctions between the different people of society—the *āgris*, *vāgris*, *ādivāsis*, upper classes, etc.—and said, "It is only in Swadhyaya that we see lower class and upper class people working together and sitting together."³⁵⁰

This was reflected in something said by another participant while some women were casually conversing towards the end of Swadhyaya Kendra. One of the women who is in charge of coordinating activities and communicating messages from the

³⁵⁰ This was evident for example in *Video Kendra* and *Pāṭhaśālā* where individuals from both slums and middle class homes sit next to one another.

administrative level to the local level was telling the others how great the recent *Vasanta Utsav* event was and emphasized that almost all of the children that performed in the program were from a particular slum. Kaminibahen spoke of how as BSK teachers they have to first teach these children how to speak properly because their everyday language (*bhāṣā*) is different. She was laughing as she told us how the children would pass the mike to one another and say things in their own dialect and mentioned that one of the young girls got scared because she had never been on stage like many of the other kids. Another woman who was standing there said, “Yes, because people don’t accept such people.” Kaminibahen then mentioned that Vijaybhai, one of the Swadhyayis who lives in that slum, held a party at his home for all the young children who participated to celebrate their efforts. Whenever I met with and spoke to the Swadhyaya participants from this slum, it was evident that there was a sense of dignity in being able to engage both themselves and especially their children in activities that they were ordinarily excluded from. I would argue that in addition to the idea of an indwelling God, the inclusion of individuals from a space from which they were previously neglected and excluded constitutes an important part of the dignity of individuals from lower castes and it is in providing a basis for self-dignity that Swadhyaya is seen as a compelling source for self-fashioning.³⁵¹

³⁵¹ Manojbhai, for example, was chosen as the representative of his local center to take part in a ceremony performed to consecrate the idols for the temple at Tattvajnāna Vidhyāpith during the Pāthutsav event of 2012. In 2006, the Pāthutsav was organized and attended by 75, 000 Dalits. Sanskriti Vistarak Sangh, “Swadhyaya Parivar Celebrates Sanvatutsav at Bhavnirzar,” accessed April 1, 2014, <http://www.swadhyay.org/index.htm>. Some participants also expressed the view that the reason why Christian missionaries were able to convert masses, who were mainly from the lower castes, is because the latter were neglected and excluded by mainstream society.

While the self-understanding of some Swadhyayis was inflected by their socio-economic status as in the case of Nathibahen, and for some it was inflected by their status in Indian society as in the case of Manharbhai, the notion of an indwelling God also constituted an important source for dignity among participants who were neither from a lower socio-economic class or lower caste. While riding on the train back from Pāṭhaśālā, I was sitting with a Brahmin middle-class couple, Kaminibahen and her husband, both of whom joined Swadhyaya in the last five to ten years. We were generally speaking about Swadhyaya when Kaminibahen mentioned that for her, “Swadhyaya is the best.” So I asked her whether she has been to any of the other religious organizations. She mentioned that she has heard what other *gurus* have been teaching on television channels like *Sanskar*, and said she doesn’t enjoy it, “*majjā nathi āvati*.” She explained that other groups emphasize external forms of devotion, *bāhiya bhakti*, such as rituals whereas “Dada has done the job of uplifting mankind.” She spoke of how by listening constantly to Swadhyaya thoughts she developed self-confidence, which has helped her in all aspects of life. She mentioned business, dealing with one’s family, one’s husband’s family and social obligations. Like some of the participants above, she specifically mentioned the idea that “I am not helpless (*lāchār*)” and said that the one line which says, “you are not inferior (*dīn*)” has stuck with her. She said, “I don’t have to bow down in front of anyone.” Then, although I did not hear her clearly, she said something along the lines of “when you come out of a certain situation, you realize the value of this (referring to Swadhyaya teachings).” She said, “You should not put your hand out to others like a beggar” and that “you should not do something that is an insult to yourself.” Seeing that she was struggling with words in trying to explain herself, her

husband interrupted and said, “*ātma gaurav* (self-dignity).” Kaminibahen smiled and said, “*Aaaahn, ātma gaurav!*” indicating that this is what she was describing.

Sagarbhai supplemented what his wife was saying by referring to the lecture from earlier in which he explained that Dada said, “You should not consider yourself weak or helpless. Even a person living in a hut should have the dignity (*ātma gaurav*) that I am something because God is within me.” I then turned to him to ask what he likes about Swadhyaya, that is, why does he go? He replied saying that it’s not possible to answer in just one word but for him, “It is the thought that God is with me and that I can stand on my own.” He explained that prior to Swadhyaya, he never imagined such an idea as God is within me. He said that we know that thoughts have the power to uplift a person and that he’s listened to other gurus, but no one else has taught this idea that God is within you. Then just as he mentioned the “I can do attitude,” our stop came and we had to get off the train.

While the examples above illustrate a particular understanding of the self that focuses on the ideas of self-worth and self-dignity the following example emphasized another aspect of *asmitā*, namely inner strength and courage. Darshanabahen, who comes from an upper middle class English speaking family, explained that the “main thought (*vicār*)” that drives her is that God is within her. When I asked her what other thoughts besides the concept of an “indwelling god” comes from the teachings of the Hindu scriptures, she said, “What other thought do you need aside from this!” According to Darshanabahen, one can live his or her entire life based on this one thought. She explained that in life we need both physical strength and mental strength and that we can

get physical strength by eating, exercise, etc., but, where will we get mental strength from? She said,

Life is full of struggles and you need strength to face it. Where will you get this strength? You have to go to a power (*śakti*) that is stronger than you, whether you call it God, Allah, Jesus. And in the *Gītā*, Lord Kṛṣṇā has said that He is within us. “*Sarvasya cāham.*” I get strength from knowing that God is within me. And to get this idea hammered in one’s head, one needs a *guru*. Through a *guru*, one hears the thoughts of the *Veda*, *Upaniṣad*, and gets strength. The *guru* gives you the path for how to live your life, how to develop your mind (*manas*), intellect (*buddhi*), and soul (*ātmā*). This is important because we believe in rebirth. Rebirth (*punar janma*) is spoken about in the *Gītā*. By being near good thoughts, that God is within you, you gain 100% trust (*viśvās*) that God is within you.

For Darshanabahen, the teachings of Swadhyaya, and in particular, the idea of an “indwelling God,” is perceived as a source of strength to face life and integral to her conception of herself. The understanding that a larger power is within her gives her the courage to face life’s difficulties. She explained that life has not been easy for her and mentioned, without going into any detail, that there was a point in her life between 2003 and 2008 when she went through various struggles. She described this period as being “full of rough patches” and said that it is this thought of an indwelling God that helped her through it. She added that even during this difficult time she did not stop going to Pāṭhaśālā or stop fulfilling her responsibilities at the local Swadhyaya center because she and her husband felt that “this is important.” She said that if she had not continued at the time, her present life would have been “frustrating and depressing.” During another conversation, she said that for two hours a week, you are in the company of good thoughts that give you a positive outlook and explained that because of these thoughts, she feels that “no one can do anything bad to me because God is within me.” In this, Darshanabahen articulates a particular understanding of herself that derives from the notion of an indwelling God and one that she finds to be compelling. This was further

instantiated by her status on Whatapps, a mobile messaging application, “All is well in my world. God is with me, within me.”

Similar to Darshanabahen, a young boy, Niraj, explained that the idea of an internal God helps one through any situation, what he described as “*taki śake.*” While I was sitting and chatting with Niraj and his two sisters all of whom are in college except the eldest sister, I asked them whether others their age are interested in *dharma* and spirituality. All three siblings said that today all the youth are into enjoyment but the moment they are faced with a challenge, they fall. Niraj said, “They don’t know how to face it. But if God is within me, then I can handle any situation. It gives me courage. These thoughts are needed in order to be able to face all situations. No other thoughts. If I failed this test, I’ll past the next one.”

The examples in this section illustrate how Swadhyaya teachings are associated with a particular positive understanding of the self, known as “*asmitā.*” They demonstrate the ways in which the notion of an indwelling God forms the basis of the dignity (*ātma gaurav*), confidence (*ātma viśvās*), and courage of individuals from all strata of society. Although the sense of self-worth and self-confidence expressed in the examples may not be representative of how individuals understand and perceive themselves in every situation and at all times,³⁵² the link between Swadhyaya and self-understanding, and particularly between the notion of an indwelling God and dignity, was reinforced in the overwhelming number of times that Swadhyayis mentioned the phrases

³⁵² For example, Nathibahen may not feel inferior at Swadhyaya Kendra when she is among individuals from the middle or upper classes, but this may not be the case when she is in a non-Swadhyaya setting like a mall or a wedding and among people from different strata of society.

“I can do it,” (*kara sakatā huṅ*), and “I can become” (*ban sakatā huṅ*) during interviews, informal conversations, and Swadhyaya activities. This view stands in stark contrast to what Charles Taylor has argued about modern self-identity. He says, “The dignity of free, rational control came to seem genuine only free of submission to God; the goodness of nature, and/or unreserved immersion in it, seemed to require its independence, and a negation of any divine vocation.”³⁵³

In this chapter, I have argued that the appeal of religious sources on the self-fashioning practices of participants lies in a combination of three different factors that are associated with the former. I demonstrated how Swadhyaya’s religious discourse and practice are perceived as a source for ethical thinking and being, practical living, and dignity, and that a combination of all three are central to the way in which religion is understood and practiced by its participants and for understanding why theistic sources are seen as a compelling source for modern self-fashioning. In this way, I show that the continuing significance of religion to the everyday lives of individuals in contemporary society cannot simply be explained in terms of a belief in transcendence or an inherent “religious impulse,” but the specific ways in which religious sources facilitate both ethical and practical living in the everyday. And although the perception of the scriptures as providing knowledge on how to live and handle life was shared by both Swadhyaya and Chinmaya Mission adherents, I would argue that the emphasis on *jīvan-vikāś* and especially *asmitā* are unique to Swadhyaya, and are central to understanding the role of theistic sources in the development of modern self-identity.

³⁵³ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 315.

Conclusion: Self-Transformation in Modern Indian Religions

The rise of religious movements around the world beginning in the 1960s drew the attention of scholars across different fields not because they were “new” to the history of religions, but because they emerged precisely at a moment that was predicted to see a decline in religion. The resurgence was seen as a sign of the continuing significance of religion in modernity and scholars sought to explain the success or failure of these movements in terms of their adaptation to or rejection of modernity. Some scholars argued that the success of contemporary religious movements was contingent on their adherence to orthodoxy and rejection of modernity while others contended that adaptation to the demands of modernity was key to their success and appeal. Some other scholars argued that religious movements have a great appeal in modernity insofar as they promise to provide a sense of certainty that modernity undermines. In a similar way, scholars of Indian religions have sought to explain the appeal of contemporary religious movements in India in terms of their compatibility with modernity. Some scholars, for example, have argued that the appeal of these movements lies in their emphasis on autonomy of choice and individualism versus traditional religious communities seen as a form of bondage. Some have argued that it is a blend of traditional and modern elements that explains their appeal. Some others have argued that the movements offer a particular way of perceiving and dealing with modernity. In an important way, this scholarship has revealed a common feature among contemporary religious movements across the world, namely, their attempt to address the perceived problems of modern urban life and values. Indeed, I demonstrate that one of the primary appeals of Swadhyaya and the Chinmaya

Mission lies in the contrast it offers to the values espoused by the prevailing forces of modernity—materialism, consumerism, capitalism, and individualism—in modern Indian society.

While building on this scholarship, however, my project moves away from traditional sociological and ideological studies of religious movements towards a study of the everyday lived practices and experiences of religion and ethics among Swadhyaya and Chinmaya Mission participants in order to understand why religious sources are seen as a compelling foundation for self-fashioning in modernity. Based on numerous conversations and interviews with everyday participants, I demonstrated the specific ways in which the self is understood, experienced, and refashioned in relation to the teachings and praxis of Swadhyaya and the Chinmaya Mission, and have argued that the self-fashioning practices of Swadhyaya and Chinmaya Mission participants challenge some of the key characteristics associated with the modern self. Rather than argue whether the movements are “modern,” “Hindu” or “traditional,” this dissertation demonstrates the role that Swadhyaya and Chinmaya Mission’s religious discourse and praxis plays in the everyday life and self-fashioning of the modern self. I show that the appeal of the two movements lies in the specific ways in which their particular philosophies and praxis facilitate the transformation of the self. And while the phenomenon of self-transformation is not unique to Swadhyaya or the Chinmaya Mission, I have argued that the particular kind of transformation central to these two movements, and especially Swadhyaya, is unique in its focus not only on the self but also on the particular relationship between the self and the other.

Throughout the chapters, I demonstrated that Swadhyaya and Chinmaya Mission teachings and practices are integral to the constitution of the moral subjectivities of participants and the cultivation of the ethical self and have argued that the experience of religion in modernity cannot simply be understood in terms of a matter of belief or non-belief or an inherent religious impulse, as scholars have contended. In Chapter One, I illustrated that the discourse on the moral self and self-development is intimately connected to a particular conception of the self and human life rooted in the Indic religious and philosophical traditions and linked to the notions of karma and rebirth. The central practices of listening to the scriptural-based discourses of the two movements on a regular and consistent basis, reflecting on and physically telling this knowledge to others, and meditation are perceived as a necessary means for self-cultivation, where self-cultivation is understood as central not only to living well, but to being human according to the Hindu traditions. I argued that the link between self-development and being human is key to understanding the drive behind the self-fashioning practices of participants.

Chapters Two and Three demonstrated how individuals engage in practices of self-cultivation that have an explicitly theistic basis through their participation in Swadhyaya's various projects including *krutibhakti* and *Trikāl Sandhyā*. In Chapter Two, I showed that the notion of an indwelling God, central to Athavale's discourse on the self, is seen as a compelling foundation for modern self-fashioning because of the ways in which it enables the self to perceive and relate to the other in a meaningful manner. The centrality of the notion of a family (*parivār*) in Swadhyaya and the practice of *bhāvpheri* are integral to constituting and experiencing the link between the self and

the other, and more than individual salvation, the project of self-transformation in Swadhyaya is concerned with creating bonds between the self and others on the basis of selfless love and selfless affection. As such, the contemporary engagement in religious movements cannot simply be explained in terms of a sense of lost or alienation in modern society or a longing for a sense of community as suggested by some scholars,³⁵⁴ but also in light of the concrete ways in which theistic sources enable and encourage modern selves to relate to and interact with one another in the everyday in a meaningful manner and in contrast to the values and lifestyle espoused by modern individualism and capitalism. In a related way, in Chapter Three, I illustrated how the practice of cultivating gratitude among Swadhyaya and Chinmaya Mission participants is rooted in the recognition of the essential role of an “other”—*brahman* in the Chinmaya Mission and an indwelling God in Swadhyaya—in one’s daily life and existence and argued that the appeal of the movements’ religious discourses lies in the ways in which they enable the self to be experienced in a new way, namely in contrast to the primacy placed on the self and on self-sufficiency in modern society. I showed, moreover, that central to the practices of *sevā* in the Chinmaya Mission and *bhāvpheri* and *śrambhakti* in Swadhyaya, which constitute the primary expressions of gratitude in these movements, is the practice of sublimating the ego that also enables the self to be transformed and experienced in a new way.

³⁵⁴ For example, See Mark Juergensmeyer, *Radhasoami Reality: The Logic of a Modern Faith* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 224. Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 219-49.

In Chapter Four, I illustrated three ways in which religion and theistic sources are understood and perceived by participants and argued that Swadhyaya's appeal lies in Athavale's particular conceptualization of religion. The appeal of Swadhyaya lies in Athavale's insistence on the link between religion and self-development (*jīvan vikāś*) in contrast to traditional and popular or local forms of religious expression such as Hindu rituals, pilgrimages, *bhajans*, and temple visits perceived as "hollow" or superficial forms of religiosity. However, here and throughout the dissertation, I illustrated that unlike modern Hindu reformers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Athavale did not reject traditional Hindu practices and institutions, and instead sought to reconceptualize them within his discourse on religion and self-transformation. In this chapter, in particular, I argued that Swadhyaya's teachings and practices are compelling insofar as they link individuals from different caste and class backgrounds to new understandings and experiences of self-worth and dignity. For Swadhyayis, dignity is seen as located within the notion of an indwelling God and not in one's rational capacity, as scholars of modernization have argued.

Moreover, Swadhyaya and Chinmaya Mission teachings are compelling insofar as they are perceived as useful in navigating the dynamics of everyday life. However, while the teachings in both movements are rooted in the Hindu scriptures, the meaning and role of "scripture" varied from one Swadhyayi to another and the way in which the two movements connect individuals to Sanskrit religious texts illustrates an important difference between them. While the Chinmaya Mission brings individuals in direct contact with the teachings of the Hindu scripture, albeit through the commentaries of Swāmi Chinmayānanda, Athavale connects Swadhyayis to scripture in a more indirect

manner. In the Chinmaya Mission, members engage in a literal study of the scriptures through weekly lectures and study group classes where trained teachers and volunteers provide a verse-by-verse exposition of a particular text. In contrast, while the primary Swadhyaya activity is centered on Athavale's discourses on the scriptures, the emphasis is less on a literal study of scripture and more on its embodiment in the everyday through a set of pragmatic practices.³⁵⁵

In addition, the emphasis on Sanskritic religious literature, learning, and reciting Sanskrit *ślokas* in Swadhyaya, and the prominence of Sanskrit theological ideas such as *karma*, *saṃsāra*, and *mokṣa* in conversations with everyday Swadhyaya participants makes it tempting to see Swadhyaya as an example of Sanskritization.³⁵⁶ In some ways, one cannot deny the role that Swadhyaya plays in bringing Sanskritic ideas and texts to the lower and non-Brahminical castes. Athavale and the current leader, Didiji, express great pride over the fact that illiterate farmers and women are able to recite Sanskrit *ślokas*. However, Athavale did not encourage them to raise their caste status nor is the adoption of Swadhyaya beliefs and practices limited to the lower castes. Swadhyaya participants come from different caste and socio-economic backgrounds. More importantly, conversations with Swadhyaya participants reveal that the appeal of its theory and practices such as the recitation of Sanskrit *ślokas* lies in its perception as a medium of ethical cultivation and not for changing or increasing one's status in society.

³⁵⁵ Although Athavale encourages a more direct study of scripture through the annual Swadhyaya exam, the exam is less central to the lives of the majority of everyday participants.

³⁵⁶ M.N. Srinivas introduced the term Sanskritization in the 1950s to denote a dynamic process by which lower castes seek to raise their social status in the caste hierarchy by emulating the practices and beliefs of the higher castes, primarily Brahmins. M.N. Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966). M.N. Srinivas, "A Note on Sanskritization and Westernization," *The Far Eastern Quarterly* 15, no. 40 (1956): 481-496.

While one of Athavale's primary purposes is to awaken human dignity through the medium of religion and participants perceive the notion of an indwelling God as a source for human dignity, there is a subtle difference between human dignity and the desire to raise one's social status. While the former is concerned with how one perceives and values oneself, the latter is concerned with a higher recognition in and by society. In this respect, John Little, drawing on J. A. B. van Buitenen's conceptualization of Sanskritization, has argued that Swadhyaya's appeal and authority lies in its goal to recover and reestablish India's original past.³⁵⁷ Accordingly to Little, Athavale did not encourage individuals to raise their caste status "but to recover what he believes to be an ancient truth, an ancient way of life."³⁵⁸ While I agree that Swadhyaya's discourse on and mission of recovering what it perceives as Hinduism's original and ideal past is key to Athavale's appeal and authority, I would argue that everyday articulations by participants about their engagement in Swadhyaya show that the appeal of Swadhyaya goes beyond both Srinivas's and van Buitenen's notions of Sanskritization. In this respect, I agree with Anindita Chakrabarti that "focusing an anthropological gaze on

³⁵⁷ John Little argues that instead of understanding the process of Sanskritization in terms of a "limited motivation" of lower castes to raise their status by adopting Sanskrit beliefs and practices, J. A. B. van Buitenen's notion of Sanskritization as a process in which "a person or a group of people consciously relates himself or itself to an accepted notion of true and ancient ideology and conduct" offers a more useful way to conceptualize the process. J.A.B. Van Buitenen, "On the Archaism of the Bhagavata Purana." *Krishna: Myths, Rites, and Attitudes*: 35, quoted in John Little, "Video Vacana: Swadhyaya and Sacred Tapes," (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 265.

³⁵⁸ John Little, "Video Vacana: Swadhyaya and Sacred Tapes," in *Media and the Transformation of Religion in South Asia*, eds. Lawrence Babb and Susan Wadley (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 265-266.

religious movements helps us see religious movements as not tautologically culminating into ‘Hinduization’ or ‘Islamization,’” and in a similar way, Sanskritization.³⁵⁹

Although my study of the Chinmaya Mission was limited, I would make a similar argument about the movement’s relation to Sanskritization based on my interviews with everyday participants. Similar to Swadhyaya, the Chinmaya Mission encourages Sanskrit learning and its discourses introduce participants to the ideas of *karma* and *dharma*. In addition, the Chinmaya Mission defines its mission as that of spreading the teachings of *Advaita Vedānta* to society. However, Swāmi Chinmayānanda does not encourage participants to change or raise their caste status. Chinmaya Mission members come from well-respected upper-middle and upper class backgrounds and many voluntarily went to the Mission to learn about the *Bhagavad Gītā* without any desire or intention to raise their caste status. As I illustrated in Chapter Four, moreover, one of the primary appeals of studying the scriptures among Chinmaya Mission members lies in its practical use in everyday life.³⁶⁰

³⁵⁹ Anindita, Chakrabarti, “Soteriological Journeys and Discourses of Self-transformation: the Tablighi Jamaat and Swadhyaya in Gujarat,” *South Asian History and Culture* 1, no. 4 (2010), 598.

³⁶⁰ Reid Locklin has recently argued that while it is difficult to argue that modern Advaita movements like the Chinmaya Mission engage in Sanskritization in the literal sense, the Chinmaya Mission’s discourse on personal transformation and self-improvement through the study of the “higher” teaching of Advaita Vedānta represents an example of Sanskritization. Reid Locklin, “Up, Over, Through: Rethinking ‘Conversion’ as a category of Hindu-Christian Studies,” *Religion and Culture Web Forum*, May 2012, 28-34.
<http://divinity.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/imce/pdfs/webforum/052012/LocklinHCCConversionFINAL.pdf>

The Self and Religion in Modernity

My research speaks to two scholarly audiences: those invested in the study of secular and global modernity and those researching the role of religion in contemporary society. Swadhyaya and the Chinmaya Mission are two modern Indian religious movements that explicitly link themselves with the project of self-fashioning. At the center of both movements is a modern religious discourse on the moral self rooted in the teachings and authority of the Hindu scriptures. Through a close ethnographic study of the everyday lived practices of religion among its participants, I have illustrated how the modern self in these two movements is constructed in relation to the Hindu traditions. In this respect, this dissertation moves away from contemporary approaches to the study of religion and modernity that have sought to redefine and reconceptualize secularization and accounts that have sought to explain the continual presence of religion in modernity in terms of an inherent religious impulse or the need for transcendence. Scholars like Talal Asad have insightfully shown the ways in which the formation of the secular authorizes the modern nation-state, instead of religious institutions, to define and delimit all aspects of modern society including one's identity and what it means to be human, arguing that the study of religion in modernity must include a study of "the secular." Other scholars have argued that modernity must be understood in terms of a particular context in which religion exists as one among a plurality of sources of authority. It is indeed the case that religion is no longer hegemonic in the modern world, existing as one among many sources of authority and expertise from which individuals may choose. However, central to the latter argument present in a number of approaches to the study of religion and modernity is the presupposition of a modern self that is free from external forms of authority like

religion and tradition, and the locus of agency and autonomy. As such, this scholarship does not account for modern forms of self-fashioning that are rooted in the acceptance of religious authority and why a particular religious discourse is seen as a compelling source for self-fashioning in the presence of a plurality of authoritative sources that are available in modernity.

Building on the contemporary scholarship on ethics that has sought to move away from understanding ethics as a matter of rules and laws, this dissertation has focused on the everyday lived experiences of religion and ethics among participants in order to understand why a particular religious discourse on the moral self is seen as a compelling foundation for self-fashioning in relation to the contingency, complexity, and reality of everyday modern urban life. The appeal of Swadhyaya and Chinmaya Mission teachings and praxis lies in the particular conception of the self and human existence that it provides for its participants, which serves both as a guide for ethical being and practical living. As such, the appeal of these movements cannot simply be understood in terms of their general compatibility or rejection of modernity or continuity with tradition, but in the specific ways that the movement's religious discourse and praxis enable a particular way of experiencing the self in modernity.

Swadhyaya, Chinmaya Mission and the Moral Self

While there are a number of differences between Swadhyaya and the Chinmaya Mission, both movements converge in their explicit goal to transform the self based on the knowledge of the scriptures. I have tried to draw parallels between the various testimonies offered by participants in the two organizations in order to explain why

religious sources are seen as a compelling foundation for self-fashioning while drawing attention to some of the key differences between the two movements. In particular, while there is a stark difference in the constituencies and the rhetoric of the two movements, the discourses and the testimonies of participants both draw attention to the question of what it means to be human and what it means to live well. As I argued in the first chapter and demonstrated through testimonies in the remaining chapters, the cultivation of the self through the cultivation of virtues like gratitude and selflessness is significant insofar as it is perceived as a central feature not simply of living well but as constitutive of what it means to be human. The discourse on the moral self is rooted within a larger discourse on Hindu soteriology that presupposes a particular essence of human nature. In this respect, in its emphasis on the development of character and virtue in relation to a particular understanding of human existence and the goal of liberation, the moral discourse in Swadhyaya and the Chinmaya Mission resembles the Aristotelian ethical tradition that emphasized the centrality of virtues to an ideal human life, and to attaining the human telos of *eudaimonia* (happiness). In his recent theory of a virtue-based ethics, Alasdair MacIntyre draws on the Aristotelian moral tradition arguing that any conception of the good must be understood in terms of the notion of a practice, the narrative unity of human life, and of a moral tradition. In particular, he argues that in the absence of a human telos, moral life will have an element of arbitrariness and that the rational justification of virtues lies precisely in their enabling one to live a unitary life in relation to a certain telos. While the Swadhyaya and Chinmaya Mission discourse on development is rooted within a particular understanding of human nature and the goal of *mokṣa*, I have argued that the appeal of a religious discourse on the self-fashioning of the

majority of participants should be understood in the ways in which it enables a particular mode of being and existing in the everyday that is not necessarily contingent on or concerned with a final telos. However, by demonstrating the centrality of the question of how to live well and the emphasis on the cultivation of virtues in Swadhyaya and the Chinmaya Mission, I envision this dissertation as the groundwork for a comparative study of the local and particular virtue ethics embodied by contemporary religious movements and ethical theorizing in the Western philosophical tradition.

In addition, each of the chapters in this dissertation points to a particular understanding of the “human” or being human as conceived by the participants of the two movements. The first three chapters focused on the notion of being human in relation to the cultivation of the self and specific virtues like gratitude, selflessness, and affection. Furthermore, in Chapter One, I illustrated that being human is not only to be understood in terms of the cultivation of the self but also in terms of the difficulty and the gap in doing so. The last chapter demonstrated how the notion of the “human” is also understood in terms of how one deals with the contingencies of practical living such as one’s family and work life along with dealing with human illnesses. For some, the “human” is understood in terms of the different kinds of attachments one has throughout life and for others the “human” is understood in terms of dignity and self-worth where dignity is rooted in the understanding of an inherent divinity. For some, “being human” is intimately connected with developing a selfless relationship with others and for others it is associated with cultivating gratitude. In this way, this project grounds thinking about “the human” in the local and particular (religious) life worlds of Swadhyaya and

Chinmaya Mission participants in contrast to universal and secular claims about the human, human rights, and human dignity.³⁶¹

Furthermore, the focus on self-development in the Swadhyaya and Chinmaya Mission movements raises interesting questions regarding the notion of human development and social work. While human development defines the focus of both social work groups and religious movements like Swadhyaya and the Chinmaya Mission, their approaches are different. According to Swadhyaya and the Chinmaya Mission, the key to human development lies in “correct knowledge” and not in the distribution of material things like food and water. In particular, although dignity remains an important constituent of human development in both Swadhyaya and the contemporary development discourse, it is seen as rooted in different sources. In Swadhyaya, dignity is rooted in a new understanding of the self whereas it is defined in terms of access to credit, healthcare, water, and housing, for example, in current development models.³⁶² While Swadhyaya has inspired self-development among many of its participants and has enabled them to overcome a sense of powerlessness based on the notion of an indwelling God, the notion of development among the urban participants whom I interviewed was divorced from any form of social development.

As noted by Ananta Kumar Giri, Swadhyaya’s focus on the development of the self offers a fresh alternative to the dominant discourse on development. He writes,

³⁶¹ Michelle Molina and Donald Swearer, eds., *Rethinking the Human* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

³⁶² See for example, Muhammad Yunus, *Banker to Poor: Micro-Lending and the Battle Against World Poverty* (New York: Public Affairs, 1999); Also see, “What is Patient Capital,” <http://acumen.org/ideas/patient-capital/>, accessed April 20, 2014.

Half a century ago, development began as a hope for a better human possibility but in the last fifty years, this hope has lost itself in the dreary desert of various kinds of hegemonic applications and projects of intervention carried out by state, multilateral donor agencies and now agents of market. But in all these projects of interventions and applications development was mainly for the other, namely, for the poor and miserable other in one's society and in the so-called Third World. In this context, the vision of Swadhyaya challenges us to realize development as multi-dimensional relational revolutions where development is not only for the other but also for the self.³⁶³

However, Giri also criticizes Swadhyaya for its exclusive focus on self-development and lack of social engagement and argues for “a greater dialogue between the discourse of *bhakti* (devotion) and social work, self-development and social development” in Swadhyaya.³⁶⁴ The gap between self-development movements represented by Swadhyaya and the Chinmaya Mission and the development work conducted by social workers was evident throughout the course of my fieldwork. Swadhyaya explicitly claims that they are not social workers. This was evident for example in a statement made by a dedicated Swadhyayi who said, “We are not social reformers nor are we trying to help women.” In fact, one of the striking similarities between Swadhyaya and the Chinmaya Mission and one of the primary reasons why I chose to study them is precisely their emphasis on the development of the self and the need for “correct knowledge,” and their explicit distancing from social work. In various parts of this dissertation, I drew attention to some of the criticisms against social work expressed by participants where the underlying criticism was against the lack of attention to the development of the self. I have also suggested that a closer look at this criticism shows that the criticism is not so much against what social workers are doing but rather on how they are doing it and as such, I

³⁶³ Ananta Kumar Giri, *Self-Development and Social Transformation? The Vision and Practice of the Self-Study Mobilization of Swadhyaya* (United Kingdom: Lexington Books, 2009), 29.

³⁶⁴ Giri, *Self-development*, 291.

would argue that both Swadhyaya and social work organizations would benefit from talking with one another instead of creating a distance. While the focus on self-development is an important one as pointed out by Giri, I too empathize with his call for a greater dialogue between self and social development in Swadhyaya.³⁶⁵

Limitations and Further Study

This project is based on one year of ethnographic fieldwork in Mumbai, India and as in the case with any ethnographic research, the process of building relationships of trust that enable access to data takes time. Various other contingencies related to everyday life in Mumbai also impeded this process at times. This was especially the case with some of my male informants whose busy work and commute schedules led to the postponing of a number of scheduled interviews that ultimately did not take place. In addition, as a female, I was unable to gain the kind of one-on-one interaction with male informants that I had with female informants. Within Swadhyaya activities that were co-ed, my interactions were often limited to female participants due to traditional social norms towards gender relations observed in Swadhyaya. Interviews with male informants usually required the presence of another female and limited to some extent the quality of the interviews. In a similar way, I was unable to participate in activities where I would be the only female; the presence of another older female was required. In addition, as a single young female, my ability to conduct participant observation in certain Swadhyaya activities like *Video Kendra* that took place in the late evenings at multiple locations was

³⁶⁵ As noted earlier, while Chinmaya Mission also insists on the importance of self-transformation, it has a separate wing dedicated to social service.

restricted due to safety concerns. Participant observations at other locations would have allowed me to broaden my pool of informants.

While no amount of time would have changed some of the above limitations that were due to specific cultural and local contingencies, there were other aspects of Swadhyaya that I was unable to research due to a lack of time and hope to expand on in the future. In the course of fieldwork on Swadhyaya in Mumbai, India, and particularly conversations with participants, some of who emigrated from these locations, I came to learn of Swadhyaya's prominent presence in other cities bordering Maharashtra including Daman and Vāpi, and across other parts of Gujarat including cities like Bhāvnagar, Surat, and Rājkot. These cities represent not only some of the fastest growing cities in the world but also cities with a strong and growing Swadhyaya population and thus represent further opportunities for researching urban Swadhyaya. In addition, as a few participants pointed out to me, participation in Swadhyaya in cities like Mumbai even for Swadhyayis is limited due to the number of hours that go into commuting to and from work, and as such, the experience of urban Swadhyaya in India alone is marked by the contingencies of one's particular locality and therefore multiple and varied.

Furthermore, Chinmaya Mission and Swadhyaya have an active youth wing that I was unable to fully research during the course of my fieldwork due to a lack of time, but would like to research further in a follow-up project. During my fieldwork, I met a number of young adults who took part in Chinmaya Mission's Youth Empowerment Program—a two and a half month residential Vedanta program for college graduates followed by one year of service—and were volunteering in different Chinmaya Mission activities across Mumbai throughout the course of my fieldwork. Many of these

individuals were a part of Chinmaya Mission's youth wing (*Yuvā Kendra*) and participated in weekly study classes where they undertook a study of Vedāntic texts under the guidance of a Swāmi. In addition, they take part in a number of workshops, camps, festival celebrations, and pilgrimages all of which aim to impart the knowledge of Vedānta. There was a striking similarity between them and the individuals in Swadhyaya's *Yuvā Kendra* in terms of their dedication, their interest in learning about Indian religion and culture, as well as their lifestyle. As I mentioned in the introduction, 3.3 million youth between the ages of 16-30 participated in Swadhyaya's annual *Gītā* speech competition in 2012. In a similar way, youth in the Chinmaya Mission participate in its annual "Geeta Chanting" competition and produce and execute plays on Vedāntic teachings. What explains the growing youth involvement and interest in contemporary Indian religious movements and theistic textual sources? What is the relationship between urban youth and modern Indian religions? What makes a religious discourse appealing to the self-fashioning of urban youth? Is the experience uniform across India and different religious groups?

In a similar way, the increasing number of female participants in Swadhyaya and the Chinmaya Mission presents an exciting scope for a future follow-up study on women and gender in contemporary Indian religious movements. Active female participation in Swadhyaya and Chinmaya Mission activities marks an important "break" from traditional gender roles assigned to women in Indian society. The majority of my female informants lived in joint families with their in-laws or came from more conservative families in which they were expected to stay home and take care of the house and not allowed to work. Women who lived in joint families shared an initial apprehension in participating

in Swadhyaya and Chinmaya Mission activities. For example, Sheetalbahen from the Chinmaya Mission expressed her initial anxiety in attending Chinmaya Mission classes since it required that she leave her traditional role as a housewife for the duration of the class. She said, “For the longest time, my interaction was limited to just one class once a week. I mean I wasn’t comfortable. I was I think a little, what’s the right word for it. I would be a little nervous, a little scared about doing it because I used to live with a family here with my in-laws. I still do but I wasn’t sure how well it would be received if I did it.”³⁶⁶ Sheetalbahen explained that she comes from a traditional family where she is expected to seek permission to visit her parents, for example. In a related way, one of my Swadhyaya female informants explained that for the longest time, her mother-in-law was “against” Swadhyaya and did not approve of her participation in Swadhyaya activities, and it was not until her husband became involved in Swadhyaya a few years later that she was slowly allowed to participate in other Swadhyaya activities. Both of these women are currently active members and facilitate classes in their respective organizations. There was also a large number of Swadhyaya women and girls who did not live in joint families but who came from more conservative families where they were expected to stay home. Interestingly, however, while they were prohibited from working, they were allowed to leave their homes to participate in Swadhyaya activities. Moreover, even within the patriarchal structures in both organizations, some women acquired a type of authority—for example, in the form of teachers, facilitators, and organizers of classes and activities—that they lacked in their own homes. The initiation of females into Chinmaya

³⁶⁶ This is a transcription of an interview that took place in English.

Mission's monastic order also represents the changing role of women in modern Indian religions. In this way, participation in the Chinmaya Mission and Swadhyaya movements avails female followers a new way of understanding and experiencing the self in modernity and represents an important field for exploring the evolution of female gender roles within modern Indian religions and Indian society more generally. This is different, however, from the kind of rejection of traditional female roles found in the popular Brahma Kumaris movement.³⁶⁷

The project of self-transformation has constituted a key aspect of most of the world's major religious traditions and is conspicuous in modern religious movements within and outside of India and Hinduism. And yet, the experience of self-transformation is varied and multiple in complex ways much like the experience of modernity and therefore worthy of scholarly attention. In this dissertation, I have argued that the religious discourse and praxis on the moral self in Swadhyaya and the Chinmaya Mission is unique because it aims to not only transform the self, but also to redefine the relationship between the self and other and build bonds of brotherhood between individuals. The self-fashioning practices in Swadhyaya and the Chinmaya Mission are concerned with transforming the inner worlds of selves, but also the everyday concrete interactions that take place externally between the self and the other. This project is far from a comprehensive study of the Swadhyaya and Chinmaya Mission movements, but it marks the beginning of a much needed comparative study of the everyday lived

³⁶⁷ See Lawrence Babb, *Redemptive Encounters: Three Modern Styles in the Hindu Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

experiences of participants in contemporary religious movements not only in India but around the world that focus on the project of the development of the self.

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