

Introduction and Acknowledgements

The encounter with a spiritual luminary like Swami Aseshananda has been characterized as a deeply profound, life-transforming experience. Coming into Swami Aseshananda's orbit defied comprehension, we're told, because it was so unlike anything one had experienced. To further complicate matters, while we saw Swami Aseshananda, what he *truly represented* remained unknown to us. "It is difficult for us to understand those who have realized God. They see what we cannot see because they have experienced what we only hope to experience," Swami wrote in the opening paragraph of his book *Glimpses of a Great Soul*, referring to his mentor, Swami Saradananda. Although Swami Aeshananda never claimed to be a spiritual luminary, he acknowledged the difficulty understanding persons like Swami Saradananda and the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna whom he met. Nevertheless, Swami Aseshananda counseled that despite our inability to comprehend such great teachers, "if we surrender ourselves to such individuals, keep their company and follow their teachings, they will heighten our awareness and shape our lives." (Preface xi)

This collection bears testimony to the life-transforming impact when Vedanta's highest ideals manifest in an exemplary teacher, Swami Aseshananda. As the last remaining monk of the Ramakrishna Order initiated by Sri Sarada Devi, Swami Aseshananda was one of a few spiritual luminaries from a bygone era. Now, as many Vedantists note the changing nature of Vedanta in the West, Swami Aseshananda's example of sadhana (spiritual practice) is especially instructive.

The purpose of this project, then, is to preserve the memories, stories, and experiences of those who knew Swami Aseshananda. We rely upon interviews and personal accounts from swamis, pravrajikas (nuns), residents of the Portland monastery, women who lived in homes belonging to the Portland center, disciples, devotees, and visitors, among others. Our earliest account, from Swami Damodarananda, provides a rare glimpse of Swami Aseshananda at work in India during the 1940s. Swami Yogeshananda sheds light on Aseshanandaji's role as Assistant Swami in Southern California in the early 1950s. Next, we learn about Swami Aseshananda's work at the Portland center beginning in 1955 from his first disciples, most now in their eighties and nineties. Swami Aseshananda's tireless devotion to seekers over the ensuing decades until his passing in 1996 is chronicled by disciples, devotees, and visitors from around the world.

Swami Aseshananda eschewed any form of personal adulation or glorification, and as we shall read, went to great—and sometimes amusing—lengths to prevent it. Furthermore, if one did admire Swami, he swiftly redirected that love toward the Divine. One disciple suggested that Swami might have scolded me for compiling this volume, lest it glorify him, but added, "I can't think of anyone more deserving than Swami to have a disciple keep memories of his life alive." How, then, do we tell the story of Swami Aseshananda in a way that honors his selflessness? The solution has been

whenever possible, to focus on the *ideal* Swami represented rather than our subjective observations of his achievements.

As contributors recount their experience of Swami, a consensus emerges. Many feel Swami demonstrated an exemplary balance between the paths of bhakti and jnana, that is devotion and knowledge. Swami's uncanny ability to answer deeply compelling questions before they were asked is another trait frequently mentioned. Devotees often commented that Swami's lectures were occasions to deliver individually-tailored messages to members of the audience. Swami's lack of body-consciousness, his disinterest in personal material possessions, and his ability to communicate an experience of overwhelming unconditional love were noted by many. Several devotees described Swami's tendency to lapse into stuttering or silence—as though taking direction from another source. Many commented that a hallmark of Swami's genius was his ability to treat each person in a manner which best suited his or her needs. Still others told how Swami removed deep emotional wounds, substance addictions, or fears without uttering a word—and sometimes upon first meeting—thereby transforming lives.

As will be seen, a unique aspect of Swami's "mission" was his association with women devotees who resided in two nearby Portland homes known as Holy Mother's House and Sarada House. These working women, some with children, others retirees, focused on spiritual practice, provided for the Portland center's diverse needs, and served guests from around the world. One long-term resident recalled how Swami deftly modulated the energy in these homes: "Inside this whirlpool of accelerated karma, there was an infinite purity that everyone felt. Swami was the Holy Mother of the center because, like Sarada Devi, he was surrounded by difficult people, but through his unconditional, non-judgmental attitude, they were transformed."

During the course of gathering remembrances, many asked the reason for this undertaking. The impetus for this collection was, in a sense, Swami himself. Despite a self-imposed "missed opportunity" to be with Swami, his example remained a constant irritant. One disciple aptly described his own missed opportunity when he wrote: "Swami lived for sixteen *years* after I lost [contact with] him, and I didn't really reconnect with him all that time. What a shame, what a fool. A 'First Class Fool.' (All honk who have been called that!). This loss is so great my mind just balks at comprehending it." Like this disciple, I was eventually compelled to take stock of my association with Swami Asehananda and the phenomenon he represents.

What better way to learn more about Swami than to question those who knew him? So what began as an irritant in the mind evolved into a compelling opportunity to both learn about Swami from many different perspectives and to contemplate the message of these reminiscences. Similarly, some contributors remarked that the opportunity to reflect upon Swami was in itself a kind of "blessing," while others found the process to be a valuable occasion to revisit unresolved thoughts about their experience of Swami

Aseshananda and Vedanta generally. Because respondents naturally placed Swami Aseshananda in the context of their own lives, we receive “real life” accounts of the challenges Vedantists in the West face. Such accounts are not a part of mainstream Vedanta literature and offer valuable insight and encouragement when we see others encountering similar challenges along the path.

The collection’s methodology was simple. A letter soliciting either a written remembrance or a recorded interview went out. Because this project lacked publicity from the local center, likely contributors were identified with help from interested devotees. Regrettably, some potential contributors could not be found. Still others declined participation because they felt incapable of describing Swami Aseshananda. An important part of the methodology was my role as a “neutral observer.” Since I only visited occasionally Portland during Swami’s life, I was unknown to most of the contributors and so remained free from the interpersonal history that inevitably informs such groups.

Preserving the voice of each contributor was of central importance, so editing has been minimal with any editorial remarks enclosed within square brackets. The contributors’ personal wishes regarding content, form, capitalization, etc. have been honored. Each participant shaped his or her biographical statement, reviewed the contribution before publication, and submitted a signed release. The project was informally launched in 2007 with contributions from two senior disciples, Vera Edwards and Marina Sanderson, both over the age of ninety. As submissions arrived, Vera Edwards read each one and provided valuable feedback.

This collection does not attempt an historical account of the Portland Vedanta Society or a narrative of Swami’s life and teachings. (An overview of Swami’s life appears in a contribution at the end of the book along with additional resources.) Rather, we prefer the story of Swami Aseshananda to unfold in the words of the contributors and in the minds of the readers.

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