

Swami Shraddhananda

In the 1990s, Swami Shraddhananda, one of America's seniormost swamis, lived simply and quietly, incognito really, at the Sacramento center. He was a disciple of Ramakrishna's disciple, Swami Shivananda, second president of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission. While Sacramento is and was the capital of California, its culture was more truly representative of the vast agricultural community that surrounded it rather than that of a major seat of power; and it was unlike the sophisticated communities that in the 20th century generally had the intellectual and financial resources to support a Vedanta center in America. The center itself was impeccably kept and unassuming, what we call very "down home," built in the sprawling California Spanish mission style. The grounds were dotted with a number of thriving gardens and outdoor shrines which Swami Shraddhananda walked in and around daily, heat or cold, health permitting.

But beneath the setting's physical beauty, there was a powerful vibration of holiness and serenity that drew even non-spiritual people to itself. Swami Shraddhananda's private secretary, Satyamayi, told us that Swami had described the center as a "*Tirtha*, a bridge between heaven and earth."

Swami Shraddhananda himself was also a fount of tangible spirituality, his presence lifting the devotee's consciousness so that the reality of the loving Divine Presence seemed only natural, a transforming intoxication that lasted for days. Swami presented himself as the ideal grandfather—simple, loving, compassionate, playful, plain-spoken, accepting. But beneath the unintimidating mask he had chosen, he embodied tremendous spiritual power and intellectual brilliance in an abundance that might inspire crippling awe if actually understood by the devotee.

Like many of the senior swamis, he possessed the uncanny ability to know what one is thinking, even from a distance; but he rarely exposed this ability, leaving the devotee the option of attributing his insight to coincidence. However, the very few times he overtly demonstrated this power, he did it privately and with no fanfare, as though it were the most natural thing in the world and neither of us should make any fuss over it.

On one such occasion I was sitting quietly in the living room of his small apartment, exhausted after a very demanding day. I had had a wish of my own guru, but he had died without fulfilling it. That day, at great physical taxation to himself, Swami Shraddhananda graciously fulfilled that wish. As the events unfolded, the thought gradually grew in my mind that Swami was acting in concert with my departed guru, that they were one. As Swami was passing through the living room, the culminating thought came upon me that he, like the other matured gurus, were different "pillow cases" filled with nothing but God, the same God. As soon as I thought this, he spoke out of the silence, "Now do you understand?"

On another occasion he taught a small group of us visiting devotees a lesson in a unique way. After the morning activity, we had gone to lunch. There was a problem at the restaurant and our lunch, and only ours, was taking a very long time. It became obvious that the order had been lost. One of us went to the manager to complain, but with civility. The manager scrambled to get the order in progress and then came to the table to apologize. One of our party took advantage of the situation and was needlessly abusive to the man. When we returned to the center, Swami called us to his apartment and asked what we'd done out in the world. The story of going to lunch gradually unraveled under his questioning. The person who had been abusive proudly volunteered that she had scolded the manager. Swami, under the guise of digging for more detail but actually setting up his indelible instruction, said to her, [not verbatim] Now you look at me, pretend I'm that man, and say to me everything you said to him.

The sweet association with Swami Shraddhananda was a great blessing.