

**Alice Levine**, a disciple of Swami Aseshananda from 1970, lived in both women's residences belonging to the Portland Vedanta center for a total of twelve years. She currently lives in Santa Barbara, CA, where she works as a senior corporate accountant.

*Written submission.*

The very first time I set eyes on Swami Aseshananda, in 1959, was in Seattle, Washington, where I was living at the time. Mom (Vera Edwards) was with Swami and a group that had traveled to Seattle to see Swami Vividishananda. She was going to spend the night at my house and we both expected she'd be deposited at the curb. Swami Aseshananda, however, insisted on coming in, so the entire entourage appeared on my porch. When I opened the door, the group stepped across the threshold as though there was no doubt they would be welcomed in my home. At the time I was twenty-two with three little girls and a husband with problems. I had no clue what an important part of my life these people would eventually become.

I visited the Seattle Vedanta center a few times and when in Portland I went to the center there. Swami Aseshananda seemed to take an interest in me, more than I would expect from my mom's minister. He gave me books bearing his inscriptions—first, *In the Hours of Meditation*, and then *The Eternal Companion* about Swami Brahamananda. After moving back to Portland I found myself going to the temple and to Swami.

One Sunday I was in the center of the audience during Swamiji's lecture, pondering all the things I wanted to know about—physics, world geography, music, etc. It was as though Swami walked over the heads of those sitting in front of me, and standing above and in front of me, looking right into my eyes, said, "Know That by Which Everything is Known." I was startled and amazed, and decided to take that remark seriously. I began to study Vedanta.

Eventually, in 1970, Swami asked me if I wanted initiation. I really didn't know what that meant but I said "yes." He told me to come on a certain morning—that was all. I didn't know I was supposed to bring anything. When I arrived he handed me flowers and fruit to offer and took me into the shrine. It was a sweet experience as he whispered the mantra into my ear and asked me to repeat it to him. He then said not to say it out loud to anyone ever again and to go somewhere alone and not talk to anyone the rest of the day.

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Several years later one Friday evening I was driving home in my red BMW. I was working as a real estate broker for a builder of energy efficient houses and the next day I was to give a public talk and endorsement for this particular builder. Due to some very bizarre circumstances and unbeknownst to me, my driver's license had been

suspended—having moved I didn't receive the notification. I was pulled over by a patrolman for some minor violation but he told me to get out of the car, handcuffed me behind my back, and took me to jail. I was put into a "holding cell" and given the opportunity to make a phone call. The bail was \$600 dollars cash or the equivalent, which I didn't have. I called Swami and told him I was in jail. He said, "No, no, jail's not good!" Then I heard him calling for Mr. Bush and talking to him as well as everyone in the temple house about how much money was there. He sent Mr. Bush to the jail with the \$600 bail. Because I couldn't drive until my license was straightened out, I couldn't make my presentation the following day. As it turned out, the builder was a crook and was taking deposits for peoples' houses and not buying the materials. When I discovered this I called my brother-in-law attorney and we put the builder in jail.

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Swami told me to meditate on my own death. By coincidence I was reading the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. I continued this meditation for a year and actually had the experience of dying. It was amazing and I was no longer afraid of death or much else. One day I came to pick flowers for the worship and Swami was out in the yard by the pump house. He motioned me over and I saw a squirrel lying on the ground, obviously in distress. The squirrel appeared to have fallen out of the tree and was dying. Swami sang a chant to the dying squirrel and we stayed there until the dying process was finished. I had the idea that he wanted me to observe the entire event and he wanted to observe me observing.

Swami started giving me chores like vacuuming the carpet in Bramananda Hall where the Sunday school was held. He stood and watched me vacuum and I was careful to be efficient and to concentrate. He seemed satisfied that I was vacuuming according to his standards and walked off. I was also to make the worship preparations on Fridays. Many times I would call at the last minute and beg off or be late. He was always so kind to me but one day he said, "Can't you be on time a little?" Responsibility seemed to come easier for me after that.

The devotees seemed to ask questions of Swami and so I thought that must be what I was supposed to do. One day in the shrine pantry after the worship I asked Swami a mundane question about what I should do about something. He put his hand on his hip and looked at me with "that look" and said, "I shoot elephants not mosquitoes."

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I looked as though I "had it together" but actually had little self-esteem. Swami would pat me on the head and say, "You're a good girl." At the time I was thirty. He seemed not to scold me as much as some. Perhaps he knew I was a little fragile and had to be built up first.

When Swami was getting ready to purchase the second women's house, he had a meeting of the women and asked if any would like to move into the new house. Without stopping to think, I spontaneously said I would. A few days later he asked me to write my reasons for wanting to live in Sarada House. I sat in the foyer and answered as honestly as I could and how I thought it would be. After a while he came down for a talk with me and said, "You are so idealistic," in an uncomplimentary tone. He had not *even* read what I had written.

I did move into the new Sarada House and at one time we had six women living there. Along with the members of Holy Mother's house we took care of the many guests that came to see and study with Swami. Sometimes we had as many as thirteen people in the house. We took turns fixing meals—we were not to take people out for dinner or buy prepared foods. I was often overwhelmed as I was working and had not cooked much, especially for that many people. This experience trained me to have equanimity and to be able to handle difficult situations, a lesson which has served me well in my life.

The women who lived in the house went to vespers every evening, to classes on Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday. There were also two talks on Sunday and during the summer a Saturday service at the retreat. The Sunday lecture was never cancelled because of the Saturday service! *Swami poured himself out for our benefit. He gave it his all so we could become enlightened!*

Sometimes I complained about having to go to the center so much and made excuses for not going. Then I would remind myself that Swami was doing this for us. He had nothing else to gain spiritually—it was all for *us*.

Eventually after living in Sarada House for eight years I had enough community of life. I was working for a company owned by General Electric and had an opportunity to take a position in Chicago. It was a significant promotion and my mind turned outward. I left Sarada House and made the move to Chicago. I probably needed the experience of being successful at something, of being totally self-sufficient and responsible. I moved back to Portland six years later, before Swami left us.

My relationship with Swami Areshananda was and is the most important relationship in my life. His love for me was so pure and unconditional—I have never experienced anything even close to that again. When we met I was scattered, unaware and confused about the meaning of this life and how to live it.

Swami's teachings to me were and are to untangle myself from this web of maya, to see it for what it is, and to see through it to the truth. The means, he told me, are to always be conscious, conscious of what my mind is doing and to discriminate between what my mind thinks it wants and what I, the Self, is and is not. He taught me to bring my mind back to a true thought at every opportunity—whether that thought was the mantra or, if the circumstances permitted, an experience of the I AM.

On the practical level Swami taught me to be strong, to think clearly, to discriminate and to love with dispassion. On a deeper level he showed me a mystical path demonstrating that this life is not what it seems, that clinging to the spiritual path with all one's strength creates a field of action resembling a normal life, but which is all for the purpose of burning up desire and gaining liberation.

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