

Alan Boyce, a disciple of Swami Areshananda, lived in Portland between 1973 and 1977. Swami's exemplary life, guidance, and personal instructions continue to inspire Alan's spiritual pursuit. Alan and his wife, Sylvia, now reside near Toronto, Canada.

Taped submission.

As I record the information you're looking for, I'll present my input along with my background, weaving it into my encounter with Swami Areshananda and Vedanta. Because I don't want to make statements out of context, I'll need to put them *in* context with my own life a little bit.

In 1970, I had just returned from Vietnam as a combat helicopter pilot and Marine Corps officer. Arriving in Southern California, I had hoped to find my dream place, having grown up with the idea of the Beach Boys [a pop group that sang about the idealized California life]. I was a single person and looked forward to that life with great promise. However after a couple of months in Southern California, I found myself in deep depression, not finding a purpose in life, having accomplished quite a bit at an early age. I felt totally empty.

So I began my search. I bumped into another officer who led me to a program where I began finding that there is more to life than simply what we see and hear. So I began taking classes, and that led me to a retired schoolteacher/friend who began her search earlier than my own. One day in 1971 she took me to the Hollywood Vedanta Center—which meant nothing to me at that time. But I remember the experience vividly, which began with parking the car and walking towards the bookstore, which was our destination. I passed an old swami walking with some nuns through the yard. I remember looking over at him and actually feeling a *presence*, something that I can honestly say I'd never experienced before in my life. That immediately caught my attention. We went into the bookstore where I perused a number of books and then was invited to go down to the shrine. We walked down the pathway to the shrine and sat in the seating area. Shortly I began to feel a deep presence, a deep feeling of serenity. A monk, dressed in flowing garb, came in and prostrated himself before a picture of a woman whom we now know is Sri Sarada, Holy Mother.

All this left deep impressions on my mind. Fast-forwarding a bit, I was married in Hollywood in August of 1973, and we moved to Portland, Oregon, where I worked in the securities business. I chose to live there because I had also dreamed of living in the Northwest. Late in the fall of '73, when I had had been doing my own form of meditation using incense that I'd purchased at the Hollywood Vedanta Center, my incense supply ran out. I remembered hearing there was a Vedanta Center in Portland. I checked the phone book but had no success under "Vedanta," so for a number of months I asked everyone I knew on a spiritual quest—including a number of Hare Krishnas who were very popular on the streets in those days. Finally I bumped into a fellow who said,

“Yes, I know something about that but think you’ll have to look under ‘S’ for swami in the phone book to find their location.” And sure enough, there was an address. Soon afterwards, my wife at that that time and I drove over, one late afternoon when it was dark and raining. [Editorial note: See Graze Doyle’s remembrance for an account of this first visit to the Vedanta Society of Portland.]

My response was simply that I felt *at home*. I thought, “This is not like a church; I need to investigate this further!” Swami gave us a personal invitation to the lecture that night. Again, I just had the feeling of “Oh my God, I feel so at home here! I love this, the idea of the reading and a discussion; and again, although I knew nothing of Vedanta, *I just felt at home*. We began attending lectures and having private talks with Swami. I remember a couple of instances that left deep impressions on me.

One such instance occurred during a lecture when Swami was talking about all the effort spiritual devotees must exert to build themselves spiritually before going out preaching to the world. Because I grew up in organized religion—and although I rejected being a member—this was really counter to the Christian concept of devoting yourself to the work of helping and providing for others. So I was really caught off guard and raised my hand asking, “Swami, this approach that you’re talking about tonight seems to be such a selfish approach. Everything that you are asking us to do is for ourselves. Aren’t we supposed to do more for others?”

His response was so clear and immediate: “What have you to give until you *get*? You have nothing to give!”

Swami had also mentioned in his lectures not to embrace anything unless you had checked it out thoroughly. For example, if you are seeking initiation, you should check out your guru-to-be and make sure he walks his talk. So that’s exactly what we did for the next few years. The next memorable incident would have been in October of 1976 when I approached Swami for initiation after the lecture. Not knowing, even then, all the Vedanta terminology, I said, “Swami, I would like to join the Order.” Without hesitation, and with a smile, he looked me saying, “Have you talked this over with your *wife*?” Of course, joining the Order meant renouncing the world and becoming a monk! What I meant to convey was that I thought I was ready for initiation.

So later that day, after the Sunday evening class, Swami said, “Come over here!” The two of us went into the library and we closed the door. “I want you to meditate,” Swami said. So I closed my eyes, and in my own way of meditating, just withdrew my mind inside. Immediately I felt an overwhelming presence, as if I had merged into something so grand—it can’t be explained even today. This lasted perhaps a minute, and then he said, “OK now, OK!” That experience left such a deep mark that I knew I was doing the right thing and I was on the right path.

After initiation I recall a few incidents that illustrate the seemingly opposing facets of Swami's person. Those of us who were close to him knew and felt his deep resounding love for us; and as a result Swami was quick to display a form of anger. Yet those of us who knew him well never felt any anger. It was just that his voice sounded angry, sometimes almost hostile, especially when he would criticize the American people, which he felt were a total, undisciplined lot saying, "You Americans this . . ." or, "You Americans that . . ." In spite of these outbursts, Swami's love for us was greater than all of that, and he let us know that he personally cared for us—we always *knew* he cared even though he was extremely strict. Some of us would turn aside and almost smile, even though we were being deeply scolded.

Here is an example of how Swami employed the forceful aspect. Usually the Sunday morning lectures would begin between 11:10 and 11:20. Swami always gave people plenty of time to get in and get relaxed. And God forbid if an individual came after 11:20 because they would get a scolding from the pulpit in front of the whole audience! Some friends of ours, one a high-minded Sufi, would usually arrive before us and we'd usually sit in front or behind them. This one time, they had brought a Muslim business-friend from India. During this period of time, the Indian visitor had to use the men's room, so our friend directed him to it. We were all sitting there calming our minds when all of a sudden I heard this shouting going on. Swami caught this gentleman going in or out of the men's room. Swami had come down the stairs from his room and he lambasted this man saying, "What are you doing in here? You're supposed to be in there getting ready for my lecture." Returning to the hall, I heard this visitor say, as I was sitting just behind him, "I'm never coming here again; this man isn't spiritual." He was so embarrassed—in front of thirty or forty people! [Editorial note: Some speculate that such scoldings had a beneficial result even if unrecognized by the recipient.]

Another incident demonstrates how Swami never wanted a big following. He wanted people who were devoted to his concept of what Vedanta should be. And he'd make that clear in many ways. For example, I knew that Swami bathed several times a day, so what I will say is unrelated to his personal hygiene. Swami would come dressed in clothes that were almost in tatters: there were holes in the elbows of his sweaters or dust on the sleeves from the podium. We invited a friend/realtor whom we actually bought our first house from, who wanted to come to Vedanta, to experience what we'd been sharing with her. So one Sunday she came to a lecture—and it was a very inspiring lecture, as many of them were, if you were tuned in. Immediately after the lecture she walked over to the door, without greeting Swami, as everyone did afterwards. So we followed her outside and she explained, "This is not for me. Holy men don't dress the way he does. He had holes in his sleeves, dirt on his sweater." And she never expressed an interest again. Perhaps this was one of Swami's ways of weeding out insincere people. So the number of attendees never seemed to grow—it seemed to be the same core group. Rarely would we see any new people coming because Swami didn't make it very easy for them. [Editorial note: See Doretha Stuart Moore's account of Swami

intentionally dribbling food to disenchant dapper and insincere visitors to the retreat. See also descriptions of Swami's austerity to explain his tattered clothes.]

Another memorable incident surrounded a cat called "Holy Mother's Cat" that had made the Vedanta Center its home and was given a lot of attention by Swami. (We didn't realize the importance of that cat.) One Sunday, when he'd finished greeting people after the lecture, we heard him say, "Where's Holy Mother's Cat, where's Holy Mother's Cat?" Within five minutes, he had everyone who attended the lecture walking up and down the streets, around the building, scattered looking for this cat. He was directing us with a loud voice: "I want you to find Holy Mother's Cat. Who is responsible for this?" Perhaps someone had left the door open. It was so wonderful to see a person who could focus his mind so totally on one subject, the lecture, and immediately turn it to another, giving it all the importance of the world. I'll never know what Swami saw in that cat—and perhaps it was more than met the eye—but perhaps he felt this cat was special because it had chosen the Vedanta center as its home. [Editorial note: See Pr. Brahma-prana's explanation of the cat's importance.]

These incidents clearly show that Swami never cared about being politically correct. While these actions on his part seemed to repulse other people, if you were truly a devotee of the cause, you could see the importance of the non-verbal message he was sending—so we wouldn't be put off by this kind of behavior. But you can imagine a stranger coming into a lecture for the first time and experiencing this! I sit here chuckling because it really made Swami stand out as a very special, special human being.

Here is another account that I heard told more than once. One Saturday, Swami was lecturing in town because the weather didn't permit going to the retreat. Part way through the lecture, someone rang the front doorbell. This was an absolute no-no, my God! Sarada, who is now Harananda, went to the door and let the gentleman in. The gentleman was dressed in working clothes, and Sarada told him to come in and sit down. Swami began to scold this man, as he normally would with latecomers: "Why are you late? Why didn't you come on time? You Americans . . ." This two-minute diatribe on "You Americans" continued. This fellow sat there, and as it turned out, was a driver for a delivery service! He received a very interesting introduction to Vedanta!

The last experience happened at the Saturday retreat. On the way to the retreat, my wife at that time and I got into a very heated argument, and we were both quite angry. I don't like to admit it, but it was true. With a less-than-perfect state of mind, we walked into the meeting, which was held in the smaller downstairs area owing to the small size of the group. So we were very tightly packed together. Swami was about three or four feet away. He looked at us, and it wasn't with a smiling face! He immediately picked up on our anger. So he just backed up, closed his eyes, and began repeating mantras, chanted, and repeated Sanskrit verses for at least five minutes. He had never done that before and I never saw him do it afterwards. It seemed he was clearing the air for the benefit of his

talk and lecture. Because Swami often repeated his lectures, we learned that the verbal message of his lecture was not the primary reason for his talks. It was what he was imparting to us spiritually and directly in those talks that mattered. Looking back, it seems he knew that this negative emotion in the atmosphere needed to be cleared out for him to be able to transfer this spiritual information directly to us. That was a very embarrassing moment, but what, after all, is embarrassed but our egos? It was quite a lesson for me to experience someone so cognizant of the presence of anger—and someone who also knew how to deal with it!

Next, comes the hard part: to describe what Swami meant to me and why. Over the years that I had the privilege to be in his presence, I saw *the most dedicated actions on his part to a cause—a cause that he held above everything else in this world*. His dedication was so extraordinary, no matter when or where. Swami's personal discipline was so *extraordinary*. It seemed that way *every moment* of his time. I saw him in his room, going to the restroom, in the kitchen: in all aspects, his devotion to his ideal or purpose in life was absolute. There was never a moment that wasn't a serious moment, even though in his lectures he would almost have us rolling in laughter because he had such a great sense of humor. He would laugh in his lectures too. But on a personal basis, I don't remember one time when it was humorous. It was just serious. *He was conveying to us how important this was by the way he devoted himself to this cause*. And he was a perfect exemplar.

So at the retreat, while he was present, there was no chit-chat, no worldly discussion about anything. As I mentioned earlier, he was definitely socially and politically incorrect most of the time. In his lecture, there could be a humorous moment, but immediately he was right back to the topic of the lecture, which was very serious. Similarly, in one moment, he could be so sweet, a total incarnation of what we know about Sri Sarada Devi, like he was just emanating her. But in the next moment, he could be like a lion, a Vivekananda, so powerful, so exacting, that no one would want to confront him or take him on in a discussion. Everything stopped when this lion came out—because it came out with truth, truth that could not be debated. I didn't personally see him debate anyone. I believe that he was passing on information that came through him from a higher source. In my view, he represented, from time to time, different aspects—or aspects of each holy person: Sri Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, and Holy Mother.

Swami was a teacher par excellence. He knew exactly how to take an open mind—someone who wanted to learn—and keep it open while he imparted a non-verbal message to that mind. Each time I was in his presence, I felt like I had grown a little bit, that he had imparted something very important to me. And it wasn't the words he spoke, it was the *experience*. Experience is impossible for me to share, except to say that it was a sense of knowing that *this knowledge is truth. It had nothing to do with the teacher. It was the principle he was imparting*.

Summing up my experience with Swami Aseshananda, I can honestly say that he was *the most genuine person* or holy person that I have met (and I certainly have met lots of them). Genuine in the sense that he taught that it is *not* about the teacher. The teacher is only a conduit for higher knowledge. I accept that entirely. I do not put him on a pedestal, but I deeply love and respect what he represented; it has changed my entire life. By seeing the discipline he exemplified about living the life that can take us beyond this mundane existence, his example has taken hold of my life. So that out of respect for that discipline exemplified through Swami's being, I do everything in my power to honor his example.

Swami Aseshanada was a person who walked his talk more perfectly than any other human being I've met during my 63 years of life. Swami Aseshananda lived a total spiritual existence and he exemplified for us the principles and teachings of those wonderful souls we all hold in great esteem: Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother, Vivekananda, Brahmananda, etc. Swami would quote, when he'd hear people lecturing to others: "When the flower blooms, the bees will come." This has been very meaningful for me, because I've had a tendency to do that very thing, to lecture people with whatever knowledge that I've recently acquired. For the most part, I've followed his advice until today [this recording session]. By the way, the bees haven't come yet!

I am having difficulty trying to explain the *depth* of what Swami *really* means to me. And I simply can't—it's an inner experience of feeling, and I simply don't have the talent to express through words how I really feel.

Perhaps it is enough to say that the discipline and practices Swami gave me bring great joy and happiness to my life. My life has become so much simpler, easier, and joyful as a result of the practice. *What an incredible soul Swami Aseshananda is to have given all of us his undivided attention, care, and love, asking nothing in return except our devotion to the ideal.*

Lastly, in all my meditations, I so clearly see Swami Aseshananda directing me to "*DIVE DEEP.*" This simple instruction of directing the mind to focus and penetrate through the gross outer world has given me a tiny glimpse of the wonder within us all. I feel so privileged. Swami Aseshananda so freely and frequently offered these two simple words of instruction that forever changed the lives, I am sure, of all who made it a part of their daily practice.

Submitted Summer 2008