

Anonymous initiate of Swami Aseshananda

Written submission.

Experiences from One Initiate's Sixteen-Year Encounter with Swami Aseshananda

My relationship with Swami evolved quickly from that of sweetness to one of frequent scoldings. The scoldings began early on, even before I was initiated. I'd heard about Swami, that he was "old school," and that his scoldings could be brutal. I knew then that if I ever entered into a student-teacher relationship with him things were going to get rough. And they did. At first the scoldings were gentle, almost teasing, loving. But it got rough very quickly and they never failed to sting. I also never failed to react, at least internally and often externally. The reaction was, of course, almost always negative; hurt feelings and stalking off. He always seemed to do it in front of as many people as possible so that the humiliation was as complete as the bitterness I came to feel at times.

Why was he doing it? What had I done wrong? Most often, I was thrown out of the temple by being told to "Go home!" This no doubt left some of the people there to wonder who the jerk was. This went on for quite a period of time, maybe two or three years, over and over again. Sometimes it was so loud it shook you. Such a big voice from a small body! But through all of it I trusted Swami, having sensed long before his seemingly total commitment to those who had come to him. Why would he expend so much energy on his students for so little gain, working over egos and serving them *prasad* daily for almost as long as he lived in Portland? Could anyone be more selfless and all giving?

So I took the punishment but was always trying to figure out what I was supposed to be learning. Gradually it began to dawn on me that it was my *reaction* to the scoldings (e.g. 'one hand clapping' below) that was the problem, although Swami never verified this verbally. As that understanding grew in clarity, the dreaded humiliation and resentment began to recede until there was almost no reaction at all to further scoldings. Then one day, in the hallway between the kitchens, he again told me to, "Go home," but this time in a teasing, playful way. We both laughed and it was over. The pounding had left me stronger and a little less sensitive.

I asked Swami three times for initiation. I don't remember what he said the first time but the second time he said, "Mother hasn't talked to me about you yet." I was very disappointed and promised myself that I wouldn't ask again, resigning myself to remain uninitiated. Very shortly afterward, within a few days and in the most ingenious way, he let me know that I should ask again. I remember being in awe of the intelligence from which those words had come, words that, sad to say, I was unable to remember almost immediately. Shortly after that I did ask him again, and with a touch of playfulness he

said, "I'll think about it." Then within days, he asked me to come for a pre-initiation interview, one week before I was eventually initiated.

Upon arriving at the temple the evening of the interview, I was taken by Sarada (now Swami Harananda) upstairs to Buddha Hall, where he set up two chairs a short distance apart and facing each other. Swami's chair was against the wall looking towards the center of the room. After a period of time Swami came in and took his seat. He said that he'd asked me to come because he wanted me to agree to some things before he was willing to initiate me. I think there were four or five questions that he asked me, all of which I agreed to. As we sat there in stillness I was initially expecting the conversation to continue but it never did. Time passed and I gradually became aware of a luminous glow which came from and surrounded him. His face, radiant and blissful, looked upward behind closed eyes. I haven't in my life, before or since, witnessed that kind of beauty.

Love seemed to emanate from him as though liquid. Probably he was no longer aware of my presence but by then I'd become euphoric myself although my mind wasn't quiet. I had begun to seriously question my worthiness to be there with him, and this in turn made me feel like an intruder. As that feeling became increasingly uncomfortable, I decided it would be best to leave. So I went to the door but was unable to open it because it was stuck at the top. I'd been through that door many times before but in my nervousness had forgotten that downward pressure on the knob would release the top. So I turned back to Swami asking, "Swami, how do you get out of here?" But he was utterly still and didn't answer. His body was there but he didn't seem to be in it. I turned back to the door and remembering the downward pressure, opened it and left, euphoria intact. I never saw Swami like that again.

During his lectures, Swami would encourage us to do our own thinking regarding spiritual questions. At some point I had become interested in the Zen koan "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" Without even knowing the purpose of a koan, I had decided to try to come to some reasonable understanding of its meaning. And I did this fairly single-mindedly for quite a period of time. Then, suddenly the answer was there in great clarity. Even if the following wording isn't as it came to me then, the sound of one hand clapping would be the same as the sound that occurs when one ego doesn't react to the action or noise of another, it's nothing. No friction. Rightly or wrongly, I was completely satisfied with this solution.

The next evening I was at the temple for the evening reading. Swami as usual was doing his commentary on the reading when at some point he digressed and began talking about "one hand clapping." I was so stunned by the impact of what I was hearing that I wasn't able to concentrate completely on his response and am unable to repeat exactly his affirmation, or even if he affirmed my interpretation in its entirety. I only remember that there was a positive quality to what he was saying. He seemed pleased. That was the only time I remember him speaking about any koan.

Coincidental? I didn't really think of it that way. I came to understand this incident as an example of Swami's way of teaching and offering encouragement for those periods of concentrated effort, which for me weren't often enough. These kinds of experiences with him were not uncommon when the mind was focused properly. It was as if he was encouraging me to interact with him in this way, through hard work. Stuart Bush once said to me that Swami's ability to intuit his students' minds was a result of his connection or oneness with the Universal Mind.

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