

Anonymous Devotee

Memories of Swami Aseshanandaji

My first visit to the Portland Vedanta Center was in 1985. I was picked up at the airport by one of the brahmacharis and brought to the center. We got out of the car and I met Swami Aseshanandaji at the door of the ashrama. His appearance was remarkable: old tattered hat, dark bags under his eyes, an ochre sweater with noticeable holes in the elbows, an Indian dhoti held to his waist by a western necktie used as a belt. I had never seen a swami dress like this; I immediately thought of the old cartoon character Mr. Magoo. Yet, I felt truly welcomed; his sweet and kind words were “Mother will bless.”

I stayed for 4 or 5 days at the ashrama. I had no personal conversation with Swami, but his presence was everywhere felt. It seemed the daily shrine worship which all the residents were expected to attend had no fixed time but could occur any time between 11 and 2. It must have been challenging for the lunch cook! After the worship, we had to wait at a round table for Swami to bring plates of prasad. He handed me a plate and I immediately passed it on to the next person but Swami said, “No, it is for you!” I then realized that each plate was prepared by him for a specific person. Who knows what prayers he may have said over each plate?

When it was time for me to depart the center, one of the monks told me that Swami wanted to see me. I went to his room and he was standing there, almost awkwardly shy, as if he had something to give me. I knelt on the floor and touched my head to his feet. When I raised my head but while still on my knees, he placed both hands on my head and started chanting “Prakritim Paramam,” Swami Abhedananda’s beautiful Sanskrit hymn to Holy Mother. I thought he would recite one verse, but to my amazement (and not a little amusement, since I knew the hymn) he proceeded to chant the entire eleven verses! It must have taken more than five minutes. It was truly an unforgettable blessing and I treasure the memory.

I saw Swami a few other times. On one visit to the San Francisco monastery, we were all at the lunch table. He was sitting at the head of the table and I was sitting close to him as I helped serve the meal. There was a pause in the conversation and I looked at Swami’s face. His eyes were gazing at something, something far beyond our normal sight, as if he were seeing the infinite spirit as a matter of direct perception. We all sat quietly, not wanting to break his brief reverie. It was truly a profound sight. It has been at least thirty-five years since that day, but the memory of that look in his eyes remains vivid in my mind.

The company of holy people leaves one with the deep conviction that true spirituality is never a matter of belief or logic or dogma but rather of deep inner experience. This was tangible with Swami. I feel extremely lucky to have met him and been in his presence for a few days!

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