

Ron Bartlett, composer, percussionist, film sound mixer, first met Swami Aseshananda in Hollywood in 1985 and visited him several times in Portland. Ron credits Swami Aseshananda with insightfully guiding him to find his guru, Swami Swahananda. A member of the Hollywood center from 1986, Ron has composed music for DVD projects and serves in various sound-related capacities.

Written submission.

Swami Aseshananda was a very powerful influence in my life and continues to be an inspiration in my heart. Vedanta was very new to me when I met Swamiji in 1986. I had only been to a few lectures and started to read a little about it when I heard that a very special swami was coming to the Hollywood center to give a talk. I was very excited not only to hear what he had to say, but to find out what he was like. I was not disappointed: his lecture was intense yet endearing, spiritually powerful while making the whole audience laugh out loud. There was an incredible glowing mood in the room during and after the lecture.

We were all very fortunate to get the chance to have a one-on-one meeting with him afterwards. Everyone stood in line for his or her chance. When I walked in to meet Swami Aseshananda, I was so nervous I didn't know what to say. All my questions, all my thoughts vanished except for a joyous thrill that filled my heart. Swami spoke very softly and gently like a loving grandmother. Here was this powerful speaker a moment ago treating me with such quiet, welcoming love.

Swami asked me whom I worshiped. I said I didn't follow anyone in particular, that I was searching for something and felt lost. He ran down a list of possible avatars and deities but I shook my head no, trying to be honest because I hadn't ever worshiped any of them yet. His eyes lit up, and with a big smile he asked, "How about the light in your heart?" I nodded yes. "Yes, worship the light in your heart," he said. This gave me a great sigh of relief: not only because he told me something that helped a great deal but because he wasn't pushing any set practice or religion on to me. I really felt he was there only to lift me up spiritually, which he did beyond any expectations.

I asked very innocently if Swami would be my guru, my teacher. Much to my surprise he said no. My ego soared up and I thought to myself, "Why wouldn't he teach me? Wasn't I good enough?" All these questions raced through my mind in a brief second. I started to walk out thinking we were done. Then a small voice of compassion beckoned me back as he said, "Come, come, come." I asked, "What?" thinking that there was nothing else for us to talk about. He motioned for me to come near him and I knelt down in front of him. He took out a small picture of Holy Mother from his pocket and placed it on my head. He chanted something over and over a few times which I couldn't make out and then told me I could go. He then said something that really stuck with me: "The Mother's blessings will be with you."

At the time I had no idea what just happened. My head was swimming with emotion. My heart was burning with a blissful fire that I feel right now as I repeat this story. Swamiji gave me a great gift that day, one that I will never forget!

But this wasn't the end of my great fortune with Swamiji. I spoke with Swami Aseshananda on the phone a few weeks after that, still filled with emotion and questions. I brought up the question of him being my guru again and he asked me the name of the Swami at the Hollywood center. I thought to myself he must know his name, why ask me? I replied, "Swami Swahananda." "Baba!!!" he said in a tone of great relief. I got the message. I went to Swami Swahananda, and by his grace he became my guru.

Ironically, I grew up in Portland, Oregon, just twenty minutes from the center where Swami lived. Yet, I had no idea—until I moved to Hollywood—that Vedanta even existed. So when I went back to visit my family at Christmas time, I thought how amazing it would be to see Swami in Portland. I called ahead and he said it would be fine to come to the vespers worship. I wasn't sure what to expect.

When I arrived, I found the center located in a beautiful old house. It was dark and no one spoke as I entered. I went into the shrine room where all the devotees were meditating. Swami came in shortly afterwards, very slowly. His clothes were a bit disheveled as he kept pulling up the cloth around his neck. He chanted and rang a bell as he continued with the ritual. I watched in amazement feeling the overwhelmingly intense spiritual atmosphere in the room wash over me.

After vespers we went into the living room for a very intimate talk about Vedanta. It was very proper: all of the male devotees were on one side of the room and all of the females on the other. Everyone seemed so peaceful and filled with bliss. Mr. Bush, one of his close devotees, started to read from a book. Swami would interrupt him from time to time with a personal story or specific insight relating to what was being read. He then went off into his own talk about Vedanta. I noticed that pictures of Swami Vivekananda and Holy Mother were directly behind him, and it appeared as if they were speaking through him the entire time.

As Swami spoke, I couldn't resist an overwhelming feeling to drift off into a wonderful internal feeling of pure bliss. To this day, I don't remember anything else that Swami said during that time until I heard the word "*Musician!*" It was like a bolt of lightning that hit me square in the chest. I thought I was going to fall over in my chair. I awoke to see everyone staring at me with a really big smile. I was shocked and a bit embarrassed that I had drifted off. I didn't fall asleep during the talk, but I wondered what had just happened? I never felt so alive, engulfed with a peaceful bliss in my entire life! I went home to California the next day still filled with the same feeling of that night. I felt changed. I remember telling my friend, "I hope this feeling never ends!" I was so happy. I just couldn't believe the power this man had to affect me in such a great way. There was no doubt whatsoever that this man was *truly* enlightened!

I went back next year to see Swamiji again at Christmas time. I got there just in time to hear his lecture. Much to my surprise there was only one other person in the audience. I couldn't believe it. It felt as if I had a private lecture that night. Swamiji spoke with great power, his fist in the air almost shouting at the world. His words hit me like waves of intense knowledge. At one point he shouted to the room, "If no one will come to hear me speak I shall talk to the tree!!!" There, off to the side of the room was a beautifully decorated Christmas tree shining with lights. He spent the rest of the lecture talking to the tree. Inside I laughed at the situation with the utmost respect. As he talked I began to recite my mantra over and over. As I did this, hearing his words I looked down at the floor. I had a strange but wonderful experience of the floor slowly falling away as the feeling became more and more intense. It was an incredible night. I went home feeling once more filled with bliss.

I saw Swamiji a few more times after that. I took my mom to meet him and he blessed her after the lecture. Walking into the center one time I remember seeing Swamiji mowing the lawn. I couldn't believe what I was seeing! Here was a ninety-two year-old man, who seemed to have trouble merely walking, pushing a heavy lawn mower all over the yard. I asked one of the monks if he needed some help. He said no, no he does that all the time and enjoys it.

There was an old tree in the yard whose limbs hung over the neighbor's house. One day the neighbor got upset and told Swami that he should cut it down. He refused. They ended up in court and Swami explained to the judge that the tree was older than all of us and had the right to be there more than anyone. The judge agreed and the tree stayed.

Swami Aseshananda was an amazing person, to say the least! His knowledge and vibrant spiritual inspiration was felt all over the world. He taught and influenced many people over the years, truly changing lives forever. For me, I will never forget him. I'll remember him for what he said, but even more for how he touched my soul. My thanks for his gift of peace and pure bliss can never be expressed in words.

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