

**Pravrajika Brahma-prana** has been a nun at the Vedanta Society of Southern California since January 1973. At present she is residing at the Vedanta Convent in Hollywood and helping with the Vedanta work at the Ramakrishna Vedanta Society of North Texas in Dallas.

*Interviewed at the Vedanta Society of Southern California, Hollywood center.*

### **Reminiscences of Swami Aseshananda**

Jamuna, later Deviprana, and I first met Swami Aseshananda in 1976, at the memorial service for my guru, Swami Prabhavananda. At that time, we were both nuns in the Santa Barbara convent. Shortly after, Jamuna asked Swami Aseshananda for initiation and had, upon his request, sought the blessings of all the senior swamis in the country, as a new head had not yet been selected for the Hollywood center. Senior nuns in the Santa Barbara convent then asked me to accompany Jamuna by car to Portland for her initiation.

That was a lovely two-week period in August 1976. It was a long road trip—we took one of our convent cars—and Jamuna, of course, was very nervous, as it was a momentous time for her and she had not had much association with Swami Aseshananda. So, by the time we arrived in Portland, I felt as though I had really accomplished something important by getting her there. On the morning of her initiation, Jamuna fasted, while I had a good breakfast at Holy Mother’s House where single women devotees resided. Then after the ceremony, Swami Aseshananda came into the center’s library where we were both seated and announced to Jamuna: “Now you can your breakfast.” But when he glanced over at me, he suddenly chuckled. I must have looked *very* hungry, because he good-naturedly added, “You also can take breakfast.” So I took a *second* breakfast at Swami’s invitation. Swami Aseshananda was so perceptive and motherly.

One of my sweetest memories of Swami Aseshananda was when the Portland center’s stray cat, known as Holy Mother’s Cat, passed away. When it was first brought to the center, dying of leukemia, Swami nursed it with Ganges water and mahaprasad, which literally means “great sanctified offering.” Mahaprasad is an offering from the Jagannath Temple in Puri and is considered to be very sacred and very purifying. Needless to say, the cat recovered.

Though a Brahmin, Swami Aseshananda somehow permitted Holy Mother’s Cat to go everywhere on the Society’s property, including the shrine itself. In fact, the cat became so important that daily patrols were assigned in order to make sure that it did not stray from the property into the street.

Swami always addressed the cat as “kitty” and made sure it was present for all his lectures and classes.\* He used to say that the kitty was his best student, because it simply was not necessary to verbally understand the meaning of his classes and lectures on religious topics. The cat could imbibe the tanmatras, or subtle vibrations, from the sacred subjects that were being expounded in the lecture hall. That was enough for its spiritual progress—such was Swami’s conviction. And such was Swami’s dedication to his pet “student,” that he later mentioned that he’d even given the cat a Shiva mantra!

Holy Mother’s Cat lived for quite a few years before it finally passed away. I happened to be present at that time. The ailing kitty had been taken to the veterinarian hospital where it died peacefully from old age and kidney failure. Its body was then brought back to the center. Swami asked that the cat’s body be brought into the shrine. There he knelt with the cat in his arms before the large shrine photo of Holy Mother. Swami stayed in that position for a very long time, silently kneeling before Holy Mother’s photo. We watched from the shrine doorway for what seemed like 10 or 15 minutes before he finally got up and left the shrine. Then he announced to those of us present that we would hold a memorial service for the kitty, and that everyone must attend and offer a flower. The ceremony took place out in the garden, next to the shrine. A little grave was dug, Swami chanted, said some prayers, and we each offered a flower on the grave itself. About a dozen people attended this simple, but touching ceremony.

The next day, I found Swami in the shrine pantry. He looked up at me and said, referring to the cat, “You know, it is better that they go away than that they die.” He reminisced, “When I would be out gardening and watering the plants, the kitty would suddenly dash out from under the plants. I miss that.” All such memories were coming back to Swami that day. He then explained that in such a case, when so much had been done for the kitty spiritually, its consciousness had developed to the point where it was “really on the borderline of human consciousness.” “But,” he added, “it is very difficult to explain.” That private moment and the soft expression in Swami’s eyes is one of the memories I cherish most when recalling my days with Swami Asehananda. I felt privy to be near such a great soul at such an intimate moment.

Some days later, a bird flew into one of the center’s windows, and Swami Asehananda told the monks to get a shovel and dig a grave. Seeing the parade of monks with shovels following Swami, a bystander tittered in the hallway just within the swami’s hearing. He whirled around and boldly declared, “No creature that comes on this property is insignificant!” There was a pin-drop silence. That made a deep impression on all who were present.

One time a devotee-doctor from New York had sent Swami a letter. Swami was in the habit of letting letters accumulate until after six months or so. Then he’d throw them away. There was really no time for him to respond to the huge correspondence that he received towards the end of his life—what with so many, many visitors coming from all over the United State, not to speak of the whole world, to stay at the center. So six

months after her correspondence was sent, the doctor finally phoned Swami and gently prodded, “Swami, remember that letter I sent you? There was a check in it!” She had guessed what had happened, and sure enough, Swami rummaged through the pile of letters that he had discarded in order to rescue her donation. These humorous stories only endeared the swami to his devotees.

Swami didn’t like taking money from us monastics. Since we in the Santa Barbara Convent often visited the Portland center and for several weeks at a time, we naturally felt duty bound to leave a donation for our expenses. But, goodness, Swami figured the bill to the penny—what amounted to only about three dollars a day donation! However, this amount was surely just a token payment for the generous meals we received there.

Swami Aseshananda could be very frugal, insisting that nothing be wasted. Leftovers were sometimes served again and again until they finally disappeared. He insisted that any fruits that arrived home from the supermarket bruised or defective must be returned or exchanged at the grocery store. This happened so many times that the grocery store manager came to know Vera Edwards very well. He also understood that Vera was simply fulfilling the wishes of an old and venerable swami. When cooking rice pudding for offering, Swami would stretch the recipe by adding leftover Oreo cookie crumbs so that there would be plenty for all the devotees who came to the center that day. He was so original! Plastic bags were washed and reused innumerable times, and the old broom that Swami used to sweep the temple parking lot had bristles so worn down to the wood, that we often wondered how it was able to sweep debris at all. But still Swami refused to throw out the broom!

Swami Aseshananda taught us in various unexpected ways. One time he asked me to accompany a guest to the Grotto, an outdoor Christian shrine in Portland. Having just arrived in Portland, I was quite exhausted from the airplane trip. Noticing that there were other devotees accompanying Swami’s guest, I chose to stay behind and rest. Later, however, Swami asked me why I had not accompanied the guest. So I told him that I was too tired. “You,” he said, meaning all women, “are replicas of the Divine Mother. Never say you are tired.” What a beautiful teaching—so simple. It made a deep impression. He taught me to *live* what I was aspiring towards—to reach higher and go beyond any sense of fatigue, beyond the body idea altogether.

Swami Aseshananda usually asked me to make the flower arrangements for the shrine while I visited the center. In the wall niche where Mother Kali’s image was worshipped, he would often place a disciple’s letter behind her photograph. It was his simple, direct method of offering whatever message was in the letter. I loved seeing that precious reminder to surrender everything to the Lord.

While meditating in the shrine, I could hear Swami Aseshananda in the nearby shrine pantry chopping the fruit offering for the worship. Swami used a large knife and was meticulous and deliberate in his chopping. So the rather loud rhythmic chopping noise

became a sweet part of my meditation. One time Swami mentioned that at that particular time he would specially remember his “golden years” with Swami Saradananda at the Udbodhan, where Sarada Devi used to stay when she was in Calcutta. He would remember the service he had given Swami Saradananda—pumping his water for bathing and other chores. After Mother’s demise, Swami Asehananda had served Swami Saradananda there for many years. And it was at the Udbodhan that Swami Saradananda wrote the comprehensive biography of Sri Ramakrishna, *The Great Master*.

Once upon hearing the chopping noise, I suddenly remembered that I had to ask the swami’s permission for something. I went to the threshold of the shrine pantry and looked in. Swami looked up at me. I shall never forget the expression in his eyes. It was as though my form was to him merely a shadow play compared to the reality he was experiencing within himself. What a powerful, indrawn, and blissful expression. Memories of his days serving Swami Saradananda at the Udbodhan had taken him there. We spoke briefly, then I left quickly so as not to disturb his mood.

Sometimes Swami Asehananda used the shrine as an arena for scolding his disciples. Once while he was performing the external worship, he began to talk to himself. As he offered flowers before the shrine photos and wall deities, he paced back and forth in the shrine room. Vera Edwards, Mr. Stuart Bush, and Christine were also meditating in the shrine, but they were all a little hard of hearing. Another devotee was asleep. So I was the only person who actually heard Swami’s conversation with God. He started complaining, “My two brahmacharis [monks] quarrel, just like two puppy dogs. Quarreling brahmacharis—all the time they quarrel.” Back and forth he paced, repeating his complaint to the Divine Mother, until suddenly he paused: “But I would rather have two quarreling brahmacharis than the American woman’s smile.” What a wonderful commentary on America’s projection of the model woman! I took his comment to mean that the ways we see women depicted in the media or through advertisement is a false icon of womanhood. Too often woman is portrayed as a sex symbol, rather than as a symbol of feminine divinity. Swami was always so original in the way he drove his point home.

One time while performing the worship, Swami suddenly thundered: “Get me Mr. Bush! Mr. Bush, buy me a one-way ticket to Chicago!” Mr. Bush quickly executed Swami’s request. We could then hear Swami’s voice in the shrine pantry, broadcasting his scolding to anyone within hearing: “Anyone who does not come to the shrine to meditate, does not belong in this center!” It was a very strong teaching—especially intended for a young inmate who had failed to keep regular meditation hours in the shrine. That day the young resident happened to be upstairs in his bedroom during the noon worship. This was the last straw, so Swami was dispatching him to Chicago. Swami Asehananda was uncompromising when it came to regularity in meditation.

EW: So Mr. Bush procured the ticket?

B: Whether or not the ticket was procured did not matter. What mattered was the teaching he gave that day, which I heard loud and clear. With Swami Aseshananda one got a very clear sense of what exactly was one's business and what was not. One teaching I received from him was: don't assume anything—ask first. If you hear something, ask the person directly. But it wasn't my business to know whether the ticket was procured or not. What *was* my business was to hear what he said in a very loud voice—obviously meant for everyone within hearing. And to take it to heart.

With Swami Aseshananda, meditation was key. His whole life revolved around the shrine. One time—Swami was a late-night person and got up later than other swamis—at about ten o'clock at night, I had an interview with him in Buddha Hall, a guestroom upstairs at the center. Somehow we got onto the subject of the worship and what goes on in spiritual life. He shared with me that one night when he was putting the Lord to bed, covering the holy pictures with special shrine cloths, he heard Sri Ramakrishna's voice saying, "Kiran, Kiran [Swami's pre-monastic name], your hair!" Swami then reached up to the top of his head and could feel his hair was on fire from one of the votive lights. So he quickly put it out. It was such an intimate story, meant to teach me how the worship becomes living. Through daily worship, our conversation with God becomes natural and real. And, of course, God—our chosen ideal—is always there to protect us. That evening, it was late, which added to the intimacy and intensity of that special moment he shared with me.

Swami Aseshananda would never let anybody touch the shrine: that was always his area. He always did the worship, even as arthritic as he was in his later years. That was his discipline.

EW: Did he clean the shrine or were others allowed?

B: Usually a monk prepared the sandalpaste and placed the shrine vessels on the altar. The women devotees picked the flowers, washed, and arranged them for worship. As for the holy pictures—nobody touched them, except for Swami Aseshananda. In fact, I remember one time Swami called out in a very, very disturbed voice, "Who has touched the shrine? Who has touched the shrine?" He could tell just by looking at the shrine that someone had violated his cardinal rule and had moved something on the shrine.

Once he asked me to train a young woman devotee to pick and prepare the flowers for his worship. Time passed and he happened to look out the monastery window and saw that I was doing all the picking while my trainee was standing by watching. He suddenly called out to the woman devotee: "Start picking the flowers. You learn only by *doing!*" Somehow these simple teachings have stuck with me through the years.

EW: Did Swami ever scold you?

B: No, never. In fact one time, on my way to Portland, my wallet was stolen at the airport, and one of the residents of Holy Mother's House said, "Oh, when Swami finds out, he's going to scold you!" But when I told Swami, he simply said, "Let's pray to Holy Mother." The wallet was never retrieved, but he did not scold me.

However, he could really belt out the scoldings! He could reach a pitch that could simply shatter crystal. Once on Thanksgiving Day he took it upon himself to scold the entire nation! I had just given him a Native American peace pipe to use at his Native American shrine at Scappoose [the Society's retreat]. That triggered something inside Swami. He stood at the top of the stairs in the center and Vera and I were at the bottom. We watched as he paced back and forth, scolding aloud: "I prefer to call this day 'Thankless Day, not Thanksgiving Day.'" And then he launched into a litany of scoldings against the American Nation, its values, and what atrocities it had committed against the Native Americans. Yes, Swami Aseshananda could certainly scold right and left. He used to say, "We all have our individual karma, our family karma, our national karma, and a world karma." So on that Thanksgiving Day, he was doing his part to erase some of our national karma!

Swami Aseshananda could also be as gentle as a flower petal. Once he said, "A father loves most his prodigal son, not the son who is always good." I watched Swami as he nurtured his flock with *prasad*, special dishes he himself cooked, loving advice, trips to the beach or retreats at Scappoose. He sometimes had us pick out something special, such as clothing, at the store as his present to us. He would first offer the gift in the shrine to Holy Mother and then give it to us. Those gifts were treasures. Swami played an intimate part in his devotees' lives. He once admitted, "Though I scold the Americans and say that I do not care for them, I love them. I love the Americans." Swami's life was a testament to that fact. After coming to America, he never returned to India.

Swami Aseshananda trained his disciples by his example. I noted that he seemed especially unapproachable when out gardening during the day. Whether watering or sweeping, the swami was passionate about contributing whatever he could to maintaining the center's landscape and garden. But he'd usually wear the fiercest expression. Nobody dared to approach him at that time: Swami would be sweeping with his long-handled bristle-less broom or watering the plants, dragging the long garden hose as he trudged around the building—ever so concentrated, brows furrowed in a scowl. I asked others why he looked that way, but nobody seemed to know. And no one dared to ask. So one day I waited for an opportune moment and then inquired.

"Swami, what are you thinking when you are gardening?"

"I am meditating on a shloka of the *Gita*," he calmly answered. "I take one Gita shloka and think about that. Or sometimes I think deeply about the subject for my Sunday lecture. This is called contemplation." That taught me how to use time wisely.

EW: Was he wrestling with it? Why do you think he had that kind of expression?

B: It was concentration. He was a great advocate of meditating on one shloka. That was Swami Turiyananda's teaching. "If you really want to study," Swami Turiyananda once said, "Take one shloka and meditate on it every day for a week. That is real study." So Swami Aseshananda was putting that teaching into practice, which I felt fortunate to see for myself.

EW: How often did you see Swami Aseshananda?

B: From 1976 until shortly before he passed away, I would go to the Portland center for two weeks at a time every year and spend my vacations with him.

EW: Did you stay in Holy Mother's House with Vera Edwards?

B: Yes. Vera Edwards and I are very close, and a wonderful relationship grew up over the years of being together in the most unusual circumstances.

Most of the teachings I received from Swami Aseshananda were personal, and I began to keep journals of those teachings. After an interview with Swami, I would go into the shrine, and then record everything he told me verbatim. One day after a long interview, I went into the library to record my private interview. It was at the time of noon worship, so others were in the shrine meditating. It was a dark and cloudy day and I was straining to see the page in order to record my interview with him. Suddenly I heard his footsteps on the stairs and wondered to myself, "Will he scold me for not meditating at this time?" But I kept writing. Then the footsteps stopped at the library threshold. He stood at the door and said, "What are you doing?"—in other words, why aren't you in the shrine? I replied, "Swami, I'm just writing down everything you told me." He said, "Very good," and then he turned on the light on so I could see better. This was one of the rare instances that Swami excused anyone from meditation.

Keeping a journal has a certain value. Now as I go through those old diaries I can see that certain teachings he gave at the time, which were not so prominent then, are *now* most useful and beneficial. Swami Aseshananda's teachings were unique, personal, and multi-layered. And I cannot help but marvel, "Wow, what an important message he gave then!"

One beautiful moment I shall never forget occurred after my sannyas [final vows ceremony] in 1984, when I went to Portland to be with Swami Aseshananda, as he was my sannyas guru. The swami talked privately with me about the sannyas vows and their meaning and how powerful the mantras are. What a mood that created. Out of the blue I asked him, "Swami, do you ever see Brahman?" He laughed and said, "Yes, but not when I have too many administrative responsibilities." He was in such a wonderful mood then. So I asked him further whether he had ever felt depressed or sad. He

replied, “Yes, when I am ill. Then the mind goes down a little. I’m not able to do the Lord’s work. At that time I do some japa, and then the mind rises again.”

In 1976, as Swami Aseshananda and the other swamis were leaving Santa Barbara after Swami Prabhavananda’s memorial service, he disclosed to those of us in the convent an intimate account of how he first learned of my Swami Prabhavananda’s passing. “Maybe it’s just my imagination,” he prefaced his account, “but on July 4<sup>th</sup> I was awake.” Though Swami Prabhavananda had passed away just a few minutes past midnight, the swami disclosed that he heard Swami Prabhavananda say to him, “Brother Kiran, I have gone to the feet of Maharaj [Swami Brahmananda, his Guru].” “Right after that I got the phone call from the Vedanta Society of Southern California that Swami Prabhavananda had passed away.” This was Swami Aseshananda—always cloaking his spiritual life with humility. “Maybe it’s just my imagination,” he had told us. But we all knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that it *was* his experience. Swami Aseshananda was a man of God, intimately connected with the spiritual realm. This he showed by the power of his life and teachings.

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\*[Editorial note: Swami’s relationship with Holy Mother’s Cat recalls the relationship between Ramana Maharshi’s and the cow Lakshmi who occupied a special position in his ashram. Incidentally, Swami Aseshananda reportedly saw Ramana Maharshi prior to leaving India.]