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Written submission.

Swami Aśeṣhananda As I Saw Him

When I was a resident of the Vivekananda Vedanta Society of Chicago and of the Vivekananda Monastery and Retreat in Ganges, MI, during the 1980s and 1990s, Swami Aśeṣhanandaji visited Chicago and Ganges several times, and I also had the good fortune to visit Portland a few times. I remember two interesting incidents that happened during his visit to Chicago and Ganges for the massive Vedanta convention in Ganges in 1987. There were about 700 lay devotees and about 20 swamijis, including Swami Ranganathanandaji, visiting from various countries to participate in that convention. During the convention, there was a homa (fire ceremony), and Swami Aśeṣhanandaji, being the senior-most swami, was performing the homa. I made all the necessary preparations for the homa. He very kindly asked me to sit next to him and to assist him in actually making the offerings. I considered this a great blessing.

The other, somewhat humorous, incident happened in Chicago. One morning I was serving breakfast to Swami Aśeṣhanandaji and all the other visiting swamis. I ventured to make this remark: “Maharaj, I have heard that you severely scold people in Portland. But here you are so gracious and forgiving!” I was ready to receive a scolding. Instead, he said with a smile: “In Portland, I am a terror. Here, I am a guest, and so I am nice.”

During one of my visits to Portland in the 1980s, I stayed at the Vedanta Society for a week in the holy company of Swami Aśeṣhanandaji and other monks. The Swami treated me with great kindness and bestowed his blessings on more than one occasion. I remember two incidents during this visit that left a deep impression on me.

It was a Sunday morning and preparations were being made by Mr. Bush and Mr. Thomas for Swamiji’s Sunday service. When the devotees started assembling in the chapel, I went and sat in the front row, not wanting to miss any of his words and wanting to be as close to him as possible. When the Swami arrived on the podium, just before he took his seat, he asked Mr. Bush to keep another chair next to his chair on the podium. I did not know for whom the second chair was meant. To my utter surprise, the Swami asked me to sit next to him on the podium. I could not say “No.” I timidly went and sat next to him, facing the audience. He told me that I’d have to speak for a few minutes at the end. My heart began to beat wildly, as I did not have a speech ready. I did not have the courage to open my mouth in his august presence. He gave an inspiring talk in his

leonine voice. Instead of attentively listening to his speech, I was busy preparing a short speech in my mind. Towards the end of his speech, somewhat abruptly he announced: "Now Swami Brahmrapananda will talk."

I was very nervous, but somehow managed to speak for a few minutes. I commented on a verse in the fourth chapter of the Bhagavad-Gita, and explained how "all karma" will be burnt by the fire of Self-Knowledge. My interpretation of the term "all karma" was somewhat different from Sankara's interpretation. I did not know this at that time. Swamiji did not say anything. In the evening, just before Arati, I was in the library. Swamiji was on his way to the shrine for the evening worship. He quietly came to me and very kindly explained Sankara's interpretation. I felt ashamed and embarrassed for not knowing the correct interpretation according to Sankara.

At the end of that trip, another incident happened that showed the Swami's enormous kindness and love even for someone like me who was a novice in spiritual life. This happened on the day I was to return to Chicago. The Swami asked Mr. Thomas to arrange for my transportation to the airport. When I went to take leave of him a few minutes before leaving for the airport, he said, "I will also come to the airport." What happened after that left a deep impression on my mind. He asked several devotees, men and women, to accompany us to the airport in two cars. After I checked in, I said to the Swami, "Maharaj, now I shall go the gate and wait for the boarding. Wouldn't you like to return to the ashrama?" He said he would wait until I boarded the plane. We all went to the gate [this was long before 9/11 when anyone could go right up to the boarding gate]. We all sat down, waiting for the boarding announcement. Once more I requested the Swami to return to the ashrama, as he need not have to wait till I board the plane. He said he would wait. When the boarding was announced and my row number was called, I gathered my carry-on bag and started to enter the plane; the Swami was standing there as close to the gate as possible, with his hands folded, his torso and head slightly bent forward, and his face full of compassion and love. I remembered that this was how the Holy Mother would take leave of visitors from out of town, standing outside and looking somewhat sad as long as they could be seen.

On a few of these occasions when I met him, either in Portland or in Chicago and Ganges, I received his special blessings and some very practical instructions, for which I am ever grateful. On one such occasion during my visit to Portland, I prostrated before him and sought his blessing, saying: "Maharaj, I did not have the good fortune to see the Holy Mother. I have seen you; and to me, seeing you is the same as seeing the Holy Mother." In response, he bestowed his very special blessings on me. I feel extremely fortunate to have known him.

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