

Coral Tilton, daughter of Portland center members Julie and Bob Collins, considers herself “born into” Vedanta. She began her life’s experience with Swami Aseshananda in 1958, when Swami came to bless her arrival on the day of her birth. She currently resides in Trout Lake, Washington with her husband Dave. They have one daughter, Brittany.

Written submission.

Childhood Memories of Swami Aseshananda:

Swami Aseshananda arrived in Portland, Oregon, February 5, 1955, from the Hollywood Vedanta Center. Soon after, my parents, Julie and Bob Collins, were introduced to Vedanta and attended services at the downtown Portland temple and the Scappoose retreat. Swami adored my parents and became a very close family friend. I was born into Vedanta three years later, in 1958.

Early Memories and Swami’s Influence on My Life:

Swami was always in my life. I’ve always felt very close to him as a child and also later in life as an adult. I grew up knowing him as a part of our family and experienced a very comfortable feeling of familiarity with him. Throughout my life I always knew him simply as “Swami.”

I have been told that Swami knew me before I was born. That idea has always intrigued me—I just never understood quite how he could do that (speaking from the point of view of a child). I was told that Swami was the first visitor to see me when I was born—he came to the hospital and blessed me. It was his first experience in a maternity ward.

The Old Temple:

One of my earliest impressions I remember is being in a very beautiful and quiet room—I was probably in a crib, but I can remember standing up and looking around. It was evening, the room low lit, perhaps with votive candles burning. I recall a large (to me) bust of Buddha in the room and a pervading sense of peace and stillness. I might have been alone but was still very much “at home,” or perhaps one of my parents was there with me. Everything felt very safe and protected. I loved being in that room. I can still see the image of this in my mind—so deeply impressed is it.

Later I was able to go upstairs into the candle-lit shrine room with Swami to sit with him while he performed a worship. I loved this! It was magical and I was spellbound as Swami rhythmically intoned chants, first in Sanskrit, then in English. I loved the sound of his words. There were candles burning, the pungent scent of incense, and freshly cut flowers placed before the images of Holy Mother, Ramakrishna, and Vivekananda. I recall Swami saying that the Holy Mother especially liked red flowers. I loved the way Swami would light the incense and wave it, then wave something that looked like a feather duster: it was a very involved process. Afterwards, he sometimes would bring

out a tray of small gifts and have us choose something, such as a decorative wall plaque with a saying from Christ, a small bracelet, or a handkerchief, and he always gave us a special package of prasad to take home.

I can remember Swami coming to dinner at our home. Always happy to see us, he wore an expression of childlike delight, his face beaming in glee. His smile was utterly compassionate and loving. How I adored him! He always seemed so happy to see me. I can remember sitting next to him at dinner. Marvin (now Swami Harananda) was also there, along with a person named Don Carter—they would drive Swami over. But mostly I remember Swami.

Often we would take Swami on outings. My father would take us out to look at Christmas lights, something special he always did with us at Christmas-time, and often we brought Swami. I can remember sitting next to him in the back seat. Swami was always happy and delighted to drive around and look at the lights.

And so I came to think of him as a dear family friend whose first name was “Swami” (his last name being Asehananda, and his house, of course, was the temple). For a long time, I had no idea that Swami was the last living initiate of Sri Sarada Devi.

The New Temple:

Swami completely inspired me. Because I adored him, I strove to emulate him by setting up a small shrine in my bedroom (I was very young, maybe 12 or 13) where I meditated and read Vedantic literature. Swami had given me two or three small books in which he had written a personal message. These are still very special to me. I tried for some time to follow his path but things in life gradually took over. Moving away to college, then marriage and family created too much distance, but even so, I always held on to Swami as a guide. At the new temple, I often went to see him, to ask him questions regarding Vedanta and living a spiritual life; sometimes he would ask me to wait for him in one of the rooms upstairs, then he would come in for a private interview.

Throughout our lives, he often gave our family a special worship in the shrine—he would take us in if we asked—and afterwards he would fill up a paper bag with prasad. I can remember standing outside the little “prasad room” watching him select from candy, cookies, fruit and nuts. I didn’t understand until later how special that was. He concluded our visit with prasad without fail.

I also remember that when I was around age ten or twelve, we were taken on a tour though the new temple (my father, who was on the board at the time, was part of the decision-making process). It was a rare opportunity to walk through the two by fours and see the temple while being remodeled. Swami seemed very pleased with the workmen and their progress.

Occasionally, Swami would honor me by telling me to sit next to him at his place at the table during a meal following a special service. He would tell people what to do and where to sit, and everyone obeyed without question. There was absolutely no arguing with Swami.

I did see him bark orders at the devotees who were serving him, and that really disturbed me, because I didn't understand until later how that was part of their training: they were learning to get past the bondage of the ego. I thought it was somewhat scary and mean. But Swami never yelled at me; he was always very kind and loving to my family. He loved my parents—he would just brighten up when they were around. Swami seemed to particularly like me, so therefore I felt very special. I always believed we were connected on a deeper, soul level.

Swami:

I believe that Swami felt compassionately responsible for those who came to him, as a mother would care for her children with limitless love. I could be mistaken, but I think that's why he never went back to India. I believe he truly gave his life to stay in Portland with all of us—immersed in the material world—and that must have become extremely hard on him later in life, as he became more stern, strict and harsh with people.

Swami liked order and cleanliness. Everything at the temple was immaculate and in order. I've never seen such a clean kitchen as at the temple. He would get upset if something were in the wrong place.

Swami lived by example, easy of access, and in simplicity: he was humble, loving, very un-egotistical, unassuming and un-materialistic. He possessed a sweet and childlike innocence—a living expression of the Holy Mother. His life was a great sacrifice for all of us who knew him, and a genuine example of living a “holy” life.

Some Teachings:

“Never mind, it doesn't matter.”

Swami said that you could attain enlightenment in this lifetime, and that an association with a true spiritual teacher would help speed (awaken) the process. The true path to knowing God is through one's personal experience, through meditation, devotion, prayer, and service (karma yoga). But especially to experience God through one's feelings [perceptions] was most direct (i.e. to ‘feel’ God is to know God).

Swami taught that one should meditate twice a day during the most auspicious times, which are dawn and dusk, when night and day meet. He said that twenty minutes each time was all that was needed to begin with. He said to focus your attention on the heart chakra, and think of the image of the Holy Mother (or other auspicious image), and to repeat that name, over and over. What could be simpler?

He would say, “God is in all things” (or “The Mother is in all”). “Turn everything over to the Mother, and she will make everything all right.” “Always pray to The Mother with a yearning that cannot be quenched and make the Mother your own.”

This world is all an illusion of Maya. It must have been very difficult for Swami to be so immersed in it.

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