

**Bert Cornick**, a disciple of Swami Aseshananda from 1978, had almost daily contact with Swami through 1996. Bert served the Portland center as treasurer from 1983 to 2001.

*Written submission.*

**The first meeting with Swami Aseshananda:**

In 1974, I had just moved up to Medford, Oregon, from Sacramento, California, and married my second wife, Elaine. She was in charge of a mental health program run by the county. It was through her work that I met Steve, who told me about a swami, or teacher, he was seeing in Portland. I had been on a long-time spiritual search which has included Unity Church, Religious Science, several New Age movements, and lots reading material—but I still felt something was missing. Around 1978, we moved from Medford to Eugene where I picked up a copy of an intriguing book titled *Autobiography of a Yogi*. I wanted to find out more about the Eastern religions.

I remembered that my friend Steve had told me about his teacher, so I called Steve to see whether it might be possible to meet his teacher, Swami Aseshananda. He said he would be happy to introduce us: why didn't we come up on the following Sunday for his lecture at the Vedanta Society in Portland? So that Sunday we made the drive to Portland from Eugene to hear the swami.

Although I did not understand very much of what he was talking about, the rest of the people seemed to, and most were enjoying it. What I did sense by listening and watching the swami talk was the deep sincerity that he put into his words. I felt the presence of someone with *total conviction*, I saw someone who was trying to impart this knowledge to his listeners!

After the lecture was over, Steve took us through the line to meet the swami and he was very polite and warm to us. After we left the Vedanta Society, Steve invited us over to his apartment for lunch and we had just started eating when the phone rang. Steve said, "It's Swami Aseshananda and he wants to talk to Bert." So I picked up the phone and the swami explained that Steve had told him I was a contractor, and he would like to get my opinion on something. Swami then said they were planning to paint the temple and there were two schools of thought about what color to paint it. Some people wanted to paint the same color that it was, while others wanted to change the color to something new. Swami asked, "What do you think?" I replied, "Well, how long has it been that color?" He answered, "Over 20 years." So I said, "Well, maybe it would be nice to paint it a new color." With that he said, "*See, you American want to change everything!!*" *And he hung up the phone!* I thought to myself, "Well, that was an interesting conversation." The other interesting thing about this incident was when Swami called he never asked Steve if I were there; he just said, "Let me speak to Mr. Cornick."

It was several weeks before we could get back up to Portland to hear the swami speak again, and as we were going through the line after the lecture, he looked up at me and remarked, “Well, you’re back. I thought you would not come back after I scolded you.” My reply was, “It will take more than one little scolding to get rid of me, Swami!” And that’s how our relationship began!!

### **My relationship with Swami:**

We lived in Eugene until 1980 and would try to drive up every weekend for the Saturday retreat or the Sunday lecture. Shortly after I met the swami, I asked for a private meeting to find out more about how to meditate. He gave me some instruction, said to work on it, and come back again after I had practiced. I may have mentioned something about getting initiated to him at the time, but he said that would have to wait.

So this went on for five years. Every year I would make an appointment for a private conference and every year he would ask me how the meditations were going. He would then give me more instruction and tell me to come back next year. It became a game between us to see who could hold out the longest. Then one day during a lecture, he used the metaphor of a man who had fallen behind a tall wall, needing the help of another man to get out. The first man dropped a rope down to the second man and helped pull him out.

I then decided this was the time to act! So I made an appointment to see Swami and during our conversation I asked him to give me initiation. He came back with his usual response, “We will have to think on it.” I retorted, “No—you *have* to give me the rope *now* and help me climb over the wall!” His response was, “Well, okay, but we will have to pick an auspicious date.” He did that, and I finally was initiated after five years.

What I found most interesting about Swami Aseshananda was his ability to read people like an open book. Each person who came into contact with him was treated according to their disposition and received yoga instruction appropriate to their nature. For example, if you were a karma yogi like me, you got plenty of work to keep you busy. If you were a bhakti yogi, you had plenty of worship and time in the shrine. If you were a jnana yogi like my friend Steve, you received a different teaching.

Some people would come for a few weeks and Swami would ask them to be initiated while others had to wait years to be initiated. If you came with an open mind and an open heart, Swami would always give you something—and many times it was a *good scolding* to lessen the grip of the ego!

### **Karma Yoga:**

The swami knew what the best path was for each of his students, and since my path was karma yoga, I received lots of work to do around the temple, the retreat, and the two women’s houses. This was a real blessing for me because it brought me into contact with Swami Aseshananda almost everyday. I had my own contracting business at the

time, so I could arrange my schedule to be able to be at the temple about four or five days a week. Swami would call me and tell me he wanted this or that done, then I would pick up the necessary materials and do the work. Then when I was finished I would stop back by the temple, if I weren't there already, and take prasad. This usually consisted of the blessed food that had been given out at the noon worship. He also gave me a can of applesauce that had come from the big apple tree next to the temple.

This went on for several years, and then one day as he was handing me another can of applesauce to go along with the twenty or so that I already had at home, I said: "The price has gone up." He said, "Do you want two cans now?" I replied, "No, from now on I want one can of applesauce and then I want you to take Holy Mother's picture to the table and give me a blessing along with the applesauce!" From that day forward, I received one can of apple sauce and a blessing with Holy Mother's picture. Once you made a bargain with the Swami, he never forgot.

### **The Suitcase:**

Swami Aseshananda always took Mr. Bush's suitcase whenever he traveled anywhere, and since it was a very old suitcase to begin with, it would stay closed only with a rope tied around it. So I decided that Swami needed a new suitcase. The problem was I knew he would not accept a new one if I just brought it over and gave it to him, so I devised what I *thought* was a clever scheme!

I went shopping and bought a brand new suitcase, then drove over to the temple and made sure there was no one around to see me take it inside. I put it in the shrine pantry next to the shrine where Swami cut up the prasad. But just as I was leaving, one of the monks saw me go out the door and drive away. Well, when I got home the phone was ringing and it was Swami Aseshananda, and was he in a *bad* mood! He was shouting at me and letting me know, in no uncertain terms, that under no circumstances would he accept the suitcase as a gift because he was a monk and monks could not accept gifts. He also told me to come to the temple immediately because he had not finished scolding me.

When I arrived at the temple I could hear Swami shouting clear outside, and then when he saw me, he shouted some more to make sure everyone within earshot could hear him. Then he ordered me to go sit down in the library and wait. In a little bit he marched into the library and started all over again in a loud voice about me bringing the suitcase and that he would not accept it under any condition. He always liked the person to sit down in the chair while he was scolding, and he would stand up and tower over the person while he shouted.

Well, after he had made his point, he then came closer to me and lowered his voice so no one else could hear and said, "I know that you were trying to help me by giving me that new suitcase, but let me tell you why I can't take it. I always take that old suitcase because it reminds me of Mr. Bush, and that's the reason I cannot accept a new one. I

have used that suitcase on every trip since I came to Portland. Do you understand?” I said, “I understand, Swami, and I can accept that on one condition!” He asked, “What’s that?” I replied, “That you let me go upstairs, get the suitcase and take it to the luggage shop to have it repaired.” He looked at me, smiled and said that would be okay!

### **The Dentist:**

One morning I got a call from Swami Aseshananda who sounded quite upset. It seemed he had been to Mr. Bush’s dentist the day before and the dentist wanted to pull all of his teeth because they were in bad shape. Swami did not want any part of that. He asked me about my dentist and could I make an appointment to see him to discuss the matter?

I called my dentist, set up an appointment, explained what was going on, and that the swami would like to save his teeth if possible. Mr. Bush took Swami to the appointment. My dentist said he would be happy to look after Swami’s dental problems and that it would not be necessary to pull all of his teeth.

Swami went on several appointments with the dentist and things seemed to be going along fine until one morning I got a call from Swami. He said that he had an appointment that day to have his teeth cleaned, but I would have to call and cancel it because a woman was scheduled to do the teeth cleaning and he could not allow that as a monk. I was quiet for a moment and then I said, “Well, Swami, just think of her as the Mother herself and everything will be OK!” It was quiet on the other end of the phone and then Swami said, “The Mother... that’s good. Okay. I will go. You don’t have to cancel the appointment.”

### **The Visit of Nityaswarupananda:**

We were blessed with a visit from Swami Nityaswarupananda who was also a disciple of Holy Mother’s and her only other living disciple besides Swami Aseshananda. He was a very friendly, outgoing person and stayed at the Portland temple for over a month. During this time I went to the temple as often as possible to have lunch and visit with the swamis and monks.

On one of my visits towards the end of his stay, Swami Nityaswarupananda mentioned that he lacked the opportunity to see much because he had to fly everywhere he went. He was due to visit the Sacramento center next and wished that he could drive there instead of flying. So I spoke up, saying I would be happy to drive him to Sacramento if Swami Aseshananda would approve of it. Swami N. then called Swami A. into the room and told him that he would like me to drive him instead of flying. Swami A. said that that was fine with him if that’s what the Swami N. wanted.

After I left the temple and arrived home, the phone rang and it was Swami A. and he was *not* happy. He told me in no uncertain terms that he wanted to see me at the temple right away. When I arrived at the temple Swami ushered me into the library sat me down in the chair and begin to shout at me. “What right have you to interfere with our travel

plans? The Swami is not a guest in *your* home and now you have created a lot of trouble by sticking your nose in!”

I knew that Swami A. was giving my ego a little test to see how much investment I had in taking Swami N. to Sacramento, so I responded, “If you don’t want me to take him to Sacramento, Swami, then I won’t do it!” His replied, “You can’t tell him what to do. Swami N. is a senior monk in the Order and a direct disciple of the Holy Mother herself. If he wants you to drive him to Sacramento, then you must do it!”

### **Swami’s Sense of Humor:**

Swami Asheshananda had a very good sense of humor and once in a while I enjoyed teasing him. I always made it a point not to do it where anyone else could overhear us. My favorite spot to talk with Swami was the shrine pantry where he prepared prasad. One day, when Rajneesh was frequently in the news with stories about his ashram in eastern Oregon, I told Swami, “Well, I have found a new guru and he has over 60 Rolls Royce cars. You don’t have any cars, in fact you don’t even have a *driver’s license!*” His response was: “Well, if he is so wonderful why don’t you go and be with *him!*”

Another time I teased Swami, “I have found a new path to illumination.” He replied, “What’s that?” I said, “First you have to find an illumined soul and then you sneak up behind him and grab him by the ankles and don’t let go!” His response was: “Yes, but you have to do some work too!”

### **Good-Bye:**

Towards the last days of his life, Swami spent most of his time in bed. Many of us took turns helping to nurse him around the clock. It was a wonderful opportunity to see how a holy man deals with the death of his body. As I recall, he spent three or four months in his final passing and it was a real blessing for all of us that had the privilege to serve him during that time.

One night when we all knew that the end was very near, I had a very clear dream that I was standing outside the door to Swami’s room. When I knocked on the door, Swami said in a strong voice, “Come in!” As I went into the room, I expected to see him on his bed where he had been for the past several months, but instead he was standing in the middle of the room dressed in his suit with his overcoat and his old aviator cap, the outfit he wore outside. He motioned for me to come and stand in front of him, reached into his pocket, and took out the picture of Holy Mother that he always kept with him. He placed it on my head and gave me a blessing. Swami said, “Good-bye, I’m leaving now,” and turned and walked away.

Most dreams I have are not memorable, but this dream was so clear that I will never forget it. Swami had come to me to say good-bye on the very night that he passed on!

**In Conclusion:**

Meeting Swami Aseshananda and having a close personal relationship with him was the most meaningful event of my life. He was the *real thing* and everyone that came into contact with him went away blessed. Swami had the ability to see into a person's heart and he could change a life with a look or a touch. I know of several instances where this happened, and I know that he *certainly* changed my life

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