

Swami Damodarananda, Resident Monk of the Vedanta Society of Perth, Australia, first met Swami Aseshananda in 1940 while a student in Madras (Chennai). He met Swami for a second time at the 1987 Vedanta Convention held in Ganges, Michigan, and later in Portland.

Written submission.

Swami Aseshanandaji: Humble and Inspiring

First Meeting:

In 1939, when I was a student, I ran away for the first time. I wanted to stay with the great sage Sri Ramana Maharshi in Tiruvannamalai (south India) so as to be guided by him on the path of spiritual illumination. I was so gripped by this one thought that any other concerns about my further education, or the need to take permission from my parents, did not even cross my mind. It just flashed from within that, by the grace of God, I had an opportunity to be with a sage of atma-saksatkar (self-realization). I felt that at all costs I must go to him and offer myself at his feet in the hope of being guided by him on the spiritual path, that being the only purpose of life.

It was exhilarating for me living in the presence of the Maharshi. However, after about two months my uncle managed to track me down to Sri Ramana's Ashrama. As a result, I was forced to go to Madras where my mother was then staying with the family. Under pressure from all my relatives, I once again reluctantly agreed to become a student. Fortunately, though, our house was very close to the Ramakrishna Math in Madras, and I began to eagerly visit the Math and its various branches in Madras so that I could associate with the monks and read the good spiritual books they had in their libraries.

It was in 1940 in the Ramakrishna Mission Students' Home in Mylapore (a suburb of Madras) that I happened to meet Swami Aseshanandaji. Swamiji was then the warden of that facility. He had been a direct disciple of the Holy Mother herself and impressed me as being very sweet, always joyous and smiling, with plenty of noble thoughts to share. He received everyone with great cordiality, and I felt an immediate rapport with him. That is why I began visiting him again and again.

Swami Aseshanandaji was utterly humble and simple in his habits. I remember how one evening I arrived unexpectedly at the Ramakrishna Mission Students' Home to visit him. As soon as he became aware of my presence, he quickly began taking his loincloths down from the clothesline and putting them away so that I would not see how torn and tattered they were.

After several months of being immensely inspired by the lives and teachings of our Holy Trio (Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi, and Swami Vivekananda), as well as such noble-souled contemporary monks of the order as Swami Asehanandaji, I decided to run away for a second time. To avoid getting caught up in my family's plans for my further education, career, marriage, and other worldly matters, I went to Bangalore in the hope of being accepted there as an aspirant in the Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama. I traveled to Bangalore by train, and on the same day that I arrived, went to the Ashrama for the evening prayers. After the prayers were over, all the visiting devotees gradually left the premises until I alone remained. The President of the Ashrama, Rev. Swami Tyagishanandaji, asked me what I wanted. I told him that I wished to join the Ashrama. He said that was not possible, and perfunctorily told me to leave. I became dejected, and went to a nearby temple to take shelter for the night, since I did not know anyone in Bangalore.

The next day, I purchased a couple of packets of sambar-rice from the local restaurant, and in the evening went to the Ashrama again to attend the temple prayers. As on the previous evening, I stayed back after the prayers were finished. This time the President of the Ashrama was a little kinder toward me. When he repeated the same question of the night before, I once again told him I wanted to join the Ashrama. This time he asked me if I knew any of the swamis in the Mission. I told him that I knew Swami Asehanandaji, the Warden of the Ramakrishna Mission Students' Home in Madras. As soon as Swami Tyagishanandaji heard Swami Asehanandaji's name he became very happy. He allowed me to stay in the Ashrama temporarily until I could get a letter of introduction from Swami Asehanandaji. So I wrote to Swami Asehanandaji in Madras, and he then graciously commended me to the Bangalore President Swamiji as a sincere aspirant who had been with Sri Ramana Maharshi and deserved to be given a chance to join the Ashrama in Bangalore as a novice brahmachari who wanted to devote himself entirely to spiritual enquiry and practice. That is how Swami Tyagishanandaji and Swami Asehanandaji helped me to become a monk of this holy order, for the purpose of living and practicing the spiritual life. For this I will be forever grateful to both of them.

Second and Final Meeting:

About forty years later, in the 1980s, I happened to meet Swami Asehanandaji again in the United States. This was during the All America Ramakrishna Mission Convention held at the Chicago Retreat Center, where about 500 attendees had assembled. The Swami Asehanandaji I had known in India had been very lean and thin in stature. While still trim, the Swami Asehanandaji I saw before me this time had doubled in size! Despite his age, he was still very active, and audiences were thrilled by his vivid descriptions of life with Sri Sarada Devi and reminiscences of the other direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. He and I had a number of intimate talks together about the Holy Mother and other more general topics relating to spiritual life.

After the conference, Swami Aseshanandaji invited me to come to the Mission's center in Portland where he was the head. There were a few American youngsters there whom I thought must have been bramacharis or novices seeking to be spiritually-minded. It surprised me, however, to see how very strict he was with them, so that they could be molded all the better.

While I was there he organized for me to give a talk to the devotees in the hall. I told them about my association with him of forty-odd years earlier when he was the Warden of the Madras Ramakrishna Mission Students' Home. But due to old age his memory was by then failing, and he struggled to recall any of it.

I vividly recall Swamiji in Portland getting the small shrine ready for worship services when the offerings would be made to the holy deities. He used to sweep and wipe the floor of the shrine with a damp rag himself, crawling around on his hands and knees with a holy mantra on his tongue, periodically singing hymns to the Ever-Living Holy Mother. It is this guileless image that most readily comes to mind when I try to remember the noble Swami Aseshanandaji. He was truly a blessed child of the Divine Mother Sri Sarada Devi.

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[Editorial note: Swami Damodarananda refers to Swami Aseshananda in his article "With Sri Ramana Maharshi," *Global Vedanta*, Fall 2009, Vol. 14, No. 4.]