

Doretha Stuart Moore, a disciple of Swami Aseshananda, lived at the Vedanta Society's retreat and women's residence, and was active at the center between 1974 and 1989.

Interviewed in Portland with friends Bessie Keens and LeNoir Kali Hayward.

LeNoir Kali Hayward and her husband Harold, disciples of Swami Aseshananda from 1974, resided in the Portland area.

Bessie Keens, a disciple of Swami Prabhavananda, lived in one of the women's residences belonging to the Portland Vedanta center for approximately three years during the 1980s.

EW: Doretha, how did you first meet Swami Aseshananda and was there anything memorable about that occasion or your first impressions?

DM: I first met Swami when my son came up from Hollywood for a visit. He was a member of the Hollywood Vedanta Center. I was then living and working in Vancouver, WA. He said, "Let's go over and see Swami Aseshananda—he's a disciple of Holy Mother." And I said, "And *who's* Holy Mother?" And he said, "Well, you'll find out."

So we went to the temple, and I thought, "If anyone asks me for my name or telephone number, I'll never come back." And of course, no one did. This was probably 1974 or '75. On the way home, my son ask me what I thought, and I replied amiably, but without great emphasis, that I thought it was interesting. Curiously, in the week or so that followed, I found that Swami had made more of an impression on me than I realized, because I kept thinking about him.

So, one Sunday after my son had left, I thought that since I had nothing in particular to do, I would go over to the temple to attend another lecture. On the way I encountered a lot of traffic, which made me at least 10 minutes late. Thinking Swami was going to be on time, I thought maybe I shouldn't even go in, as I'd disturb people, but I went anyway, and slipped in quietly. So in the course of the lecture, Swami said, "You know, sometimes people think 'Oh, maybe I shouldn't even go, I'm going to be late, something like that.'" And I said in my mind, "*Excuse me*—he couldn't have known that I was thinking *that*, could he?" Well of course I know *now* that he *did*!

EW: Did anything in particular strike you about Swami the first time you saw him?

DM: I was impressed by the fact that he didn't ask me for my name and phone number. He just nodded graciously as I walked out the door, and that was not what usually happened in other churches where I'd been.

EW: Did you think it was just a coincidence that he knew what you were thinking on the second time you saw him?

DM: No, I thought it was really *very strange*—that surely, he couldn't have known what I was thinking. But much later I would come to know that such occurrences with him were common—of course he knew!

EW: What happened after that second encounter? How did your relationship with Swami evolve?

DM: Periodically I would go back to the temple on Sunday. I thought I should at least have an interview with him, so I asked him as I was leaving on one Sunday, "Could I talk with you, Swami?" And he said, "Will you come on Sunday?" I said, "Yes, I can." The next Sunday I did go back to the temple, and I was hanging around, waiting, and everyone had disappeared. Swami came out from somewhere and said, "Did you want something?" I said, "Oh, I was going to have an interview with you, Swami." He said, seemingly annoyed, "I don't ever interview anyone on Sunday, I'm busy, I have all these things to do. And I said, "Oh, I'm very sorry, I guess I misunderstood." And very, very sweetly—*so* sweetly—he said, "When can you come?" And I said, "Whenever you say, Swami." So Swami said, "You come Tuesday night."

That Tuesday I arrived a little early at the temple and walked in, but there wasn't a soul around anywhere. I had entered the temple through the front door and walked around and then saw many pairs of shoes outside a closet in the hallway. I thought, "God, where *is* everybody?" I didn't know they were in the shrine. So I went back and sat in the foyer, and Swami came out of the shrine, opening the door to the foyer, and said, "Just a minute, I'll be down." He was wrapped in his chaddar as usual. When he came down to come back into the foyer, he had jacket, a tie, and I thought, "I hope he didn't do that just for me!" But I guess he did, understanding, it would seem, my fastidious nature.

The minute he walked in the foyer, I just dissolved in tears. Looking back, I don't think I'd ever felt the presence of so much love. It was overwhelming and I apologized, "Oh, I'm *so* sorry, I don't know what is happening to me, I'm *so* sorry." "That's all right, that's all right," he replied.

We had the interview, and he asked, "Who is your ideal of God?" And I said, "Well, I guess Jesus—he's the only one I know about." And he said, "I'll ask you to meditate on Jesus," followed by a short pause. "No, no, I want you to meditate on Sri Ramakrishna. He has accepted your son [who was a former monk in the Ramakrishna Order] so you meditate on Sri Ramakrishna." He told me what to say, and he said to come back in a couple of weeks.

I did what he told me to do, and he when I returned, said he, “All right, I’ll give you initiation.” And I thought, “Well, gee, I didn’t ask for that and I don’t even know what that is!” I thought, to myself, “Well, OK”

EW: Did you think it was strange that he asked you to meditate on Ramakrishna—did you know anything about Ramakrishna?

DM: Well, I had known about him through my son.

EW: Had you read any books about him?

DM: No, I hadn’t read anything. But in the few lectures I attended, I had heard the name, so I followed Swami’s instructions without knowing anything. He then offered initiation: he told me what to do, to bring some fruit, to take a bath, which I would have done anyway, to get a chaddar, and I thought, “Where am I going to get *that*?” Somehow I found out I could just get a piece of material and get it hemmed. I went back to the temple, and there was another young lady and a young man who were initiated the same day, but we went in to the shrine separately and at different times. I was so impressed, not knowing anything about initiation or what he was doing, but the one thing that stayed with me was that Swami said, “I will always do my best to protect you.” And I thought, “Whoa—that’s really something, I think!” And of course I know now that really *has* been something.

EW: So you were living in Vancouver, WA. When did you go live closer to Swami?

DM: For whatever reason, which I didn’t then know [laughter indicating that the reason was of Swami’s doing], my work in Vancouver ended and Swami asked me to take my furniture and move out to the retreat. I thought, “Oh my God, what have I gotten into? I’m not going to move out *there!*” But of course I wound up at the retreat, living there!

When Swami first asked me to live at the retreat, he said that if I needed anything done at the cottage, just to let him know. When I returned with my list, which contained fifteen items, such as gravel to the porch from the driveway, and other things, I gave it to him, and he looked at it and said, “This is all nonsense!” He tossed my list aside.

I don’t know how to describe his influence in words, but suffice to say that I wouldn’t have done what just anybody asked me. I was an independent woman who had always had a professional position in my work. I was very fastidious in my surroundings. Once, he said to me, “Oh, Dorita (as he called me) you are too fastidious.” In hindsight, I can see that he was training me to adjust to whatever circumstances came my way.

That cottage was just the most primitive place I had ever seen, and I couldn’t imagine living there with that horrible house next door to it. It was the original house there, so ugly and dilapidated. When I lived in the cottage, I tried everything I could do to mask

the view of the old house, for example planting something in the window. The shower knobs in the cottage went the wrong way, and the stairs indoors were all at unequal heights. I thought, *“My god, this is crazy!”*

EW: How did you feel about living that lifestyle, in seclusion?

DM: Well, it was terrible. I was the only person out there. Swami said he would have different women devotees come out every night to stay with me, which they did, and I’m sure that some of them didn’t like that either.

EW: What about the Sandersons?

DM: They had moved out and I had moved in.

EW: How long did you last there?

DM: It seemed like forever. But I don’t know. It was probably about three years. One night he called and said whoever was supposed to come out that night couldn’t make it. But he said, “I can protect you there as well as anywhere.” I guess I had the good sense to say, “I know that, Swami.” And I went to sleep and had no problems.

EW: Was your job to maintain the retreat grounds?

DM: No, just to be a presence there. I didn’t do anything. When guests came out, if they were staying at the retreat, I’d usually fix breakfast for them. I remember once I made so many different dishes that the lady said, “Oh my, I don’t think we can eat all of this!” And of course I’m not a cook, so I don’t know how I managed to do that! I also did worship in the meditation cottage, which had broken floors and finally they got so bad that we didn’t do worship there anymore. It was really pretty dilapidated. But I had meditation every day in the cottage, which was known as Holy Mother’s Cottage.

LKH: My children and other families’ children loved to spend time with Doretha out at the cottage. They’d stay overnight. Sometimes the power would go out, and they loved the candles.

EW: Does anyone know about the “Temple Dome Fiasco” that Marina Sanderson alluded to?

LKH: Yes that was something that distressed Swami enormously. Some people changed the dome; I believe some people wanted to surprise Swami and may have removed it in order to paint. He was extremely distressed and they had to put it back to its original condition. [For further information on this infamous event, see Miscellaneous at the end of this collection.]

DM: One time, Swami called to say that one of the women scheduled to come out with me for the night couldn't come. [Reading from her journal] This was in February of 1981. "Adra Hayward and Jessie Harris [children] stayed with me at the retreat. Swami said they would be my bodyguards: 'They are strong, intelligent, and talented.' We put on make-up and manicured our nails."

One time, when I was going to California, with Swami's permission, to visit a friend, he asked me to bring the cat into Portland from the retreat. So I went up to the temple, got the cat, put it in my car, and when I got down to the gate—I had to open my door to open the gate—but the cat jumped out of the car and into the woods. Nowhere could I find that cat, although I looked and looked. I thought, as I was driving into town, without the cat, "Well, he really should have had *two* people, one to hold the cat and one to drive." So all the way in, I was thinking, "What am I going to tell Swami—I don't have the cat?" I knew I would tell him what happened, but what would be his reaction?

So when I got to the temple, I waited a few minutes downstairs, and Swami came down the stairs and said, "Dorita where's the cat?" [She imitates a groan of discomfort] "Well, Swami, when I opened the car door to open the gate, the cat jumped out and I tried to find him, but I couldn't." And he said, "Oh well, probably should have had two people." And I thought "Right!" [In other words, Swami knew what she was thinking and let her know by repeating her thoughts.]

EW: Did Swami yell at you much over those years?

DM: Oh yes. Once Swami Tathagatananda was visiting from New York and I took Swami and possibly Vera in the car to go sightseeing. In order to let them out of the backseat, at one point, I got out of the car and put my purse on top of the car. When we got back in, I started off and had to stop again, saying, "Sorry, I have to get my purse off the car." And Swami said, "Dorita, you are you so stupid!" And I said, "I know Swami, it's just awful."

EW: Did you find his scolding wounding?

DM: No, for some reason I never questioned why he scolded me, and I got quite a few scoldings! I had been told that it erases some of your karma when a holy man scolds you. I don't think I was ever bothered by Swami's scoldings, except once, after a puja, when I was not sensitive to Swami's mood and asked some mundane question. He retorted, "Don't bother me with that kind of thing now!" I got mad and slammed the door when leaving. Normally, I just let it roll off because I knew it was probably doing me some good. But I know other people had different reactions.

Anyway, as we continued on our way back to the temple, Swami would be giving me directions, block by block. When we got back to the temple, Swami Tathagatananda

said, “Do you think you could have found your way back without Swami’s instructions?” I replied, “Yes, I’m sure I could have, but that was not the point.”

EW: Bessie, you are a disciple of Swami Prabhavananda and I know you came to live in one of the women’s houses in Portland after your guru passed on. What was your relationship with Swami like? Did he scold you?

BK: I thought Swami was very sweet. I didn’t go to him for information because he wasn’t my guru. I don’t recall him yelling at me a lot but I remember one time I was a little late taking a guest to the airport. Swami really gave me a talking too; he was kinda’ mad. He didn’t realize that my son and possibly his wife, I recall, were in the next room and heard all this. He really apologized after that when he saw them.

Swami appointed me to prepare flowers for the noon worship once a week, and I really enjoyed that. My inclination towards worship developed through this opportunity.

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EW: Doretha, you have some sayings of Swami’s in your journal, yes?

DM: [Consulting her journal, she continued.] Quite often Swami would repeat his version of Descartes: “I doubt, therefore I think, I think, therefore I am,” and Swami would always say, “Mr. Descartes put the cart before the horse. You exist first, identify with the mind, *then* think, then doubt.”

And from William James, who apparently met Swami Vivekananda, Swami quoted: “You sow a thought and reap an action, you sow an action and reap a habit, you sow a habit and reap a character, you sow a character and reap a destiny.”

And about Holy Mother he said, “I did not know when I first met her that she was the Divine Mother Herself: that came later.”

Once during Swami Prabuddhananda’s visit from San Francisco, Swami said, referring to Holy Mother, “It was *she* who gave me the key to illumination.”

“Puja has many meanings. The flower on the head of the worshipper means the Divine within. Just playing with fire and water purifies the worshipper.”

Swami Asehananda quoted a rabbi he once knew: “Roses are red, violets are blue, if it weren’t for Christmas, all would be Jews.” That was one of his favorite sayings.

One of Swami’s sayings was, “What you learn in pain you teach in song.”

“Don’t beat the horse from which you cannot dismount,” referring to taking care of your body. “It is your chariot.”

“Do whatever you must do to stay. The Ramakrishna boat is moving and you have to stay on the boat or get off.” In other words, you’re either going to stay with Ramakrishna and Vedanta, or leave it. You have to make up your mind to stay with it. He probably said this in the foyer, where he spoke informally.

“Thought is the mother of action. Destroy in the early stage three things: debt, fire, and disease. In other words, stay on top of these things.”

“Death is an auspicious time because it determines the future of man.”

“Sometimes after reading the *Chandi*, I eat breakfast with jet speed.”

“Never betray your partner,” referring to fidelity.

“When you call on God and there is no answer you’re dialing but you do not have the right number. What is the right number? Devotion.”

Swami also said: “When we face our aversions, we will free ourselves of our opposite attachment.”

“God is like a mother who comes to a child when he or she calls.”

DM: One day in February of 1985 [she recalled, reading from her journal], we were standing outside the shrine folding our chaddars when Swami came out of the shrine pantry and said, “There are three sources of happiness. I’ll tell you in the other room,” meaning the area where we had prasad. After he gave us prasad, he smiled, and sitting in his chair said, “Three sources of happiness—this just came to me as I was cutting the fruit: one, don’t identify with the thought waves of the mind, two, don’t seek special favors, and three, be one among the many, not one above the many.”

Once a plate of fruit slipped off the tray onto the floor as Swami was placing it on the table prior to sorting it for offering, and he turned and said, “Vera Edwards, I told you to buy a larger tray!” He picked up the fruit, took it to the shrine pantry, washed it off, returned it, and offered it. Vera went that afternoon to look for a larger tray, found one, but Swami told her to forget about it because it cost twelve dollars—it was too expensive!

EW: I heard that Vera was often the target for other people’s scolding.

DM: Oh, absolutely!

Shortly after I started coming to the temple, I noticed at the first puja how candies, fruits, and sweets were offered on different kinds of dishes. The girls in my office had given me a crystal dish, but I had no particular desire to keep it, so I thought maybe they could use it at the temple. I took it to Vera with some candy I had bought and told her that I wanted to give it as an offering. The next Sunday, Vera said, “Doretha, Swami said to take your dish, we don’t need it!” He couldn’t have known I was trying to get rid of it, could he? But of course he knew! He didn’t want to accept, as an offering, something I was just trying to get rid of. This level of mental intimacy was a constant.

LKH: [The conversation turned to another subject.] Swami was always such an unusual sight to see at the airport. Even in the summer he’d be wearing the cap with the earflaps and a big overcoat. In those days, when we were still allowed by airport security to be at the gate, we’d all be assembled waiting to say good-bye. And suddenly Swami and Mr. Bush would rush in at the last moment with a flurry, and we’d scramble to take the dust of Swami’s feet and pranam him. “Have a good trip, Swami.” “Ah, yes, yes, yes,” he’d say.

BK: Because some of the devotees would come late, they would miss this little ceremony, and seeing his plane take off. Timing was everything.

EW: Could we turn to the question of how Swami molded and impacted your life?

DM: My association with Swami gave me the first true realization that God was immanent in my life. I was raised in a loving Christian family, and certainly felt Jesus was important, but I didn’t have an experience of this until I met Swami. And I felt that religion was not just something you do at worship on Sundays, but to be always aware of God’s presence in your life. Swami made God real to me.

EW: How did you reconcile the concept that Christianity is the only way with Vedanta’s pluralistic approach?

DM: I didn’t seem to have a problem with that at all because I hadn’t been going to a Christian church for many years. I continued to believe Jesus was divine, and still do, thinking that Christianity is a true path to God, but I had trouble with the exclusiveness that is taught. I think there are many paths to God. However, with Swami, I simply felt he *knew* me completely and I never questioned that what he was doing was for my own good. Nothing was for *his* benefit.

EW: You said he helped make God real to you. Would you say he did it by his own example or by imparting that understanding to you?

DM: Probably by imparting that understanding to me, but as well by his own example. Certainly he was very helpful to me in my life, and in retrospect I see that he helped more than I knew at the time.

EW: Did you ask him for advice about your life and what to do?

DM: No, I didn't have to. He seemed to know what to say by answering my questions before I asked them.

EW: Did you ever feel inclined to disobey his advice?

DM: Well, when I went to the retreat I certainly *questioned* it!! No, I never disobeyed his advice. For instance, once when I was traveling to Seattle, Swami asked me to seek the blessings of Swami Vividishananda, who was at the center there and had been in a coma for a long time. Swami Aseshananda said, "When you go up there, tell him that Swami Aseshananda said for you to come get his blessings." So one of the monks took me up to his room and he was obviously not talking. I thought, "Well, Swami told me to say this, so I'm going to say it." So I said to him, "Swami, Swami Aseshananda asked me to come and ask you for your blessings." I thought, "Well, OK, I did it." And when I left the temple to go back to my car, I just felt like I was surrounded by so much love and tears came to my eyes, so I guess he knew I was there.

After I lived in Sarada House [one of the women's residences] for several years, it seemed to me that it was time to leave. I felt I was going with Swami's blessings and moved back to California to live and work. After several years I met a gentleman I had known many years before. When I came back to Portland for a visit I was wearing the engagement ring given to me by my future husband. I wondered what Swami would think about it. When I bowed down to him, he touched my ring and I knew that it was a blessing.

LKH: However Swami did disagree with certain people's marital choices, especially when there were cultural and educational gaps. He recognized, perhaps, that marriage is enough of a challenge as it is, without adding other challenges. He was also raised in a caste system and that may have affected how he viewed marriage between different races. My understanding is that Swami did not recommend interracial marriage owing to the challenges.

DM: There's one incident I'd like to relate. One day at the retreat—Swami would often sit with us after lunch and talk—there was a couple from Seattle visiting that day. She was a very elegant lady and he was a handsome and gentle person. They came with guests, thinking that their friends would enjoy hearing Swami. But Swami did everything he could possibly have done to turn those people off. He spilled food on his sweater, and had food on his chin, and you could just hear them thinking, "Why is *anybody* listening to *him*?" We all knew what Swami was doing. There was no way he was trying to impress these people! When he didn't want to encourage people to come around, he would act in such a manner that it would drive them away.

EW: Yes, this illustrates what I have heard repeatedly from those who knew Swami, that he had absolutely no interest in impressing people or seeking any kind of adulation. On the contrary, this incident shows just how far Swami would go to avoid any kind of admiration or attention to his person. Conceivably, those who came to admire him that afternoon actually were blessed when their expectations were obliterated, according to some who also witnessed similar scenes.

Over time, did you reach certain conclusions about Swami?

DM: I concluded that Swami had a living relationship with Holy Mother. While I was downstairs in the temple, I heard him chanting to Holy Mother [while in his room upstairs] as though he were talking with her. This really impressed me.

I am very grateful that I was privileged to meet Swami and to have him for my teacher. He changed the course of my life!

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