

Richard F. Epstein, a disciple of Swami Aseshananda and writer on religion, visited Swami Aseshananda numerous times over a twenty-year period.

Interviewed at the Vedanta Society of Southern California, Hollywood.

EW: How did you come to meet Swami Aseshananda?

RE: A friend of mine told me about Swami Aseshananda, saying that he's the most spiritually powerful man around. Once I heard about him, I definitely had it in my mind to go see him and maybe get initiation. Years earlier, in the 1960s, a monk came to me saying, "You know, Prabhavananda wants to initiate you." I said, "Oh, it's just a formality. Forget it!"

After Prabhavananda died, I began to think there was something to initiation. So I had a hunch that I should call Swami Aseshananda, which I did from my mother's house in LA, holding a scotch [alcoholic beverage] in my hand. Immediately—even then—he started balling me out: "Don't interrupt me, I take complete responsibility for you, don't interrupt me. Yes, you can come here and stay for two days, and then you have to leave. We're not a hotel here!" And my God, he balled me out without even meeting me! I had only said, "Well, I'd like to stay with you."

"What do you mean *stay*—we're not a hotel here, you can stay for two days and then you have to leave." I said, "That's fine," and I flew up to Portland. I believe that was February of 1979. One of the men who met me at the airport said rather rudely, "We're so used to picking up people and then they don't stay, they are just here on a fluke." However, this person became very nice after a short while.

EW: After he saw you were sincere?

RE: Right! One thing I remember is that I was at the table with Vera Edwards and Swami did all the cooking (or maybe he had a helper). I remember this tremendous amount of broccoli. I couldn't stop eating it—I must have had four or five platefuls. It just kept coming and I kept eating the broccoli.

EW: Did Swami put it on your plate?

RE: No, he didn't, someone brought it in. And I couldn't stop eating it.

EW: Why?

RE: I don't know. Many strange things happened there. I was hungry and the hunger just wouldn't go. Right now, almost thirty years later, every afternoon, six months out of the year, I'm eating steamed chard, the other six months steamed broccoli. It makes

me feel better. I grew to like it. I don't know what he was trying to do—you could never quite pin him down!

So the second day I was there, Swami came running out with an umbrella saying, “You might need this—it’s going to rain.” I took it and flew in ecstasy. It was the only experience [of this kind with him]. Prabhavananda gave me one in Trabuco [monastery] when he gave me a scathing scolding and then he said, “Pass the rice” at the dinner table, and I flew! It was the same feeling when Aseshananda handed me the umbrella: I took it from him and walked up and down Hawthorne Avenue with the same feeling of sattva—serenity—a floating sensation which was really incredible. You felt as though all your problems were gone. I wanted it again, but Aseshananda said, “It doesn’t last. If you want it, you have to work for it!”

So anyway, thinking that he meant what he said, I went out looking for a place to live, for rooms and things like that. He said, “Well, you better not go there now, not good enough,” and so he kept me at the center for six weeks; I was crawling the walls. Everything I found he found fault with, until I found a place in Lake Oswego, a luxurious place with the whole downstairs to myself, and he let me go.

EW: How did Swami know these places weren't OK? Did he go to inspect them?

RE: No he didn't, he just told me, “Not good enough for you.”

EW: How did it work out and how long did you stay?

RE: It was beautiful. I came in February of 1979 and left in August of 1980.

EW: Now what did you mean when you said you were crawling the walls?

RE: Well, I liked to have my nips, my [alcoholic] drinks, and it was very heavy [attending the center]. You had to sit for the reading—Mr. Bush or someone would read—then you had to go to dinner; there were also readings from *The Gospel* and something like three long lectures a week you had to sit through.

EW: It was a little too much?

RE: Well, he was accustomed to rambling. No organized lecture. Also during those long lectures, Swami seemed to have had very exceptional power. Every devotee who stayed there was required to attend. By the end of the first hour a lot of people were squirming in their seats.

EW: Did you appreciate the shrine?

RE: Well, I wasn't into meditating, and I wasn't living a celibate life then. Without Swami, I never eventually would have.

EW: Did you enjoy meditation at all?

RE: Not in those days!

EW: So what was driving you? Were you seeking truth?

RE: Something like that. A couple of months later, in April, he initiated me. I had no problem with that.

Swami used to call me. Once, while I was house-sitting, the phone rang. Sarada Chaitanya [now Harananda], one of the resident monks, was at the other end, and he said, "Swami wants to speak with you." So I waited, and when Swami came to the phone he was breathing hard, clearing his sinuses or something. "Hello. Go to h---" and he'd slam the phone down. [Epstein laughed heartily. A long-term devotee verified that she was in the room with Swami when he delivered this "directive" to Rick. She was both "shocked" and "amused," never having heard Swami use this language, but felt he must have had good reason. See also "Initiation Accounts" which describes Swami's practice of having a resident phone women devotees, only to severely chastise them for no apparent reason.]

RE: Also during the long lectures, Swami had a very exceptional power (and I think Swahananda has it too) where he'd deliver a tailor-made message, and you absolutely knew it was directed at you. He was trying to tell you something. This happened again and again, and when he stopped talking directly to me, I was bored stiff. But I had to sit through the lectures. [Editorial note: Many contributors mentioned Swami's practice of directing his remarks to an individual in the audience. See, for example, "Anonymous Experience."]

I heard that Swami even obliged a *delivery person* to stay for a lecture or something. [Editorial note: Several devotees reported how Swami chastised a delivery driver, who rang the bell during a lecture, for coming late. Many felt that when Swami blasted visitors, he was doing them a favor. One disciple remarked that Swami even chastised a ten year-old girl who was already headed towards trouble, in order to help her.]

RE: You could never take him literally. As usual, on a weekend the monks and devotees went to Scappoose, the retreat about an hour's drive from Portland, for a potluck and another of Aveshananda's lectures. On one occasion, as soon as we arrived, he called at the retreat and ordered everybody back to the monastery. You could never quite figure the man out.

Swami never went back to India and was perhaps the only swami that didn't. Shradhananda only went back once. Today they go back all the time. Aseshananda didn't care about India, he didn't shove India down people's throats; *he was there for the people who came to him*. He was so strict that one senior Indian swami in the area [name removed] said Aseshananda ran a tighter regime than they do in India. So he only had two monks, maybe a couple more who left. From the moment you woke up, you were under his thumb.

You could have that or you could have total anarchy resulting from a loose management style. As he told me on the phone before I ever met him, "I take complete responsibility for you. Don't argue with me!"

EW: In your view, what was he doing by micro-managing everyone?

RE: He was taking away lives [karma]. Most people did not renounce the world. They left him and they went back to the world. I always felt guilty because I wasn't a pure person and had no intention of being celibate outside my stays in Portland.

And one day, during a puja, I met a woman in whose house I once stayed, and I said, "I can't be in the same town with him!" She said, "You know, if you're around here long enough, you won't be able to be in the same *universe* with him!"

EW: Meaning that it was just too intense?

RE: Right!

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Swami always would tell me, "Stand on your own feet. Don't bother the swamis." He saw the day coming when the new swami would be here. His watchword to me was "stand on your own feet," which I have to do now.

Swami Aseshananda also saw the day coming when the new Vedanta would replace the old one. In my view, the new Vedanta is a product of a decision to keep the few spiritually-exalted swamis *in India*, to further the work *there*. So, in the West, lesser men arrived to replace those who had died—good men, good *sadhus*, but men of lesser power, incapable of holding the attention of the previous saints' disciples, or incapable of attracting many new devotees. In my opinion, the work is languishing because of this new policy.

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When I was sacked from a job I held in Portland, Swami was away, probably in New York, giving bramacharya [monastic vows] or something. Shortly afterwards I made a

decision to leave Portland and return to California. The day before I was to leave, he returned and I told him my decision. He was perturbed. “Why are you leaving?” he asked. “I didn’t tell you to leave.” I left anyway. I took up residence in Sacramento, but returned to Aseshananda on subsequent occasions.

In 1983, I took a leave of absence from my job in Sacramento to move back to Portland temporarily. During that winter it was very, very cold. In December, at the time of Mother’s puja, it was snowing with temperatures as low as ten degrees: everything had frozen. Swami’s mood fit the weather. On the day before the puja, he ordered somebody to mow the lawn, which was frozen. When the individual protested the state of the lawn, Swami was fit to be tied and told everybody around him how lazy that person was. Aseshananda went outdoors, got the lawn mower and started mowing through the ice. [Epstein laughs heartily.]

EW: With the pushmower?

RE: No, with the powermower, during the day, when the lawn was frozen.

During the puja, with the ice and everything, he was ordering people to leave every so often. Every hour carloads of people would show up from California, devotees from San Jose, San Francisco, Los Angeles drove up, there just was no room—jam packed, and he kept ordering people out. Some people took him seriously and packed their bags. When they were about to leave they ran into the Swami who, in a more gentle tone, said, “Wait a minute! Wait a minute. I didn’t tell you to leave!” and he ordered them back in again.

One day Swami came down the stairs as Harananda was going up and said, “Pack your bags and be out of here tonight.” And Harananda said, “OK, Swami.” Harananda was frequently ordered out! [Epstein laughed heartily. Swami Harananda described one such incident in his remembrance.]

EW: Do you have any idea what that was all about?

RE: Everything about Swami was symbolic. He was taking away future lives or paring down samskaras.

Shortly after that puja I went back to Sacramento. Swami was so incredibly accessible that I could call him up and he’d come right to the phone, and I’d tell him the problem. He’d reply, “Go to h---” and he’d slam down the phone, and some incredible thing would happen, and the problem was resolved shortly after that.

EW: You’d get a job?

RE: Right.

EW: After he told you where to go, how did you feel?

RE: I said, “Good old Swami!”

EW: You didn’t feel crushed?

RE: No, I was used to it by then.

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Once during the reading after the lectures we had to assemble in one of the rooms—we’re talking about thirty years ago so it’s a little fuzzy. Once I saw his face change, and he became The Mother. He was the spitting image of Holy Mother, and I said, “Swami, I saw your face change,” and he just smiled at me.

Swami *knew* what I was doing. And during ’83, I had a tremendous experience where I had never felt such lust in my life! It was as if he were testing me; I surmounted it and didn’t give in. Look at the Catholic saints. Walter Hilton is one of the toughest: he said temptation is very good. If you don’t succumb, you go higher. It is no worse than the barking of a hound dog. Everybody was tempted—St. Theresa really was, and so was I.

EW: How long did this persist?

RE: Just that one night, and then it abated.

EW: Did you call on Swami mentally?

RE: No, I didn’t. Before that, I was in Costa Rica with a German and his girlfriend. We were going through shark-filled waters and the motor shut off. I was screaming—I was never so scared in my life. I promised that I would stay away from women if I were spared. I only enjoyed one or two more! [Laughter] I completely renounced in 1985.

And one day, my best friend said, “If I get this contract, I’ll take you to Reno or Carson City and get you a prostitute.” Soon afterwards I was on the phone with Swami with some problem and he suddenly said, “*You’ll get a disease! You’ll get a disease!*” And he hung up. [Hearty laughter]

EW: He knew?

RE: He knew! He knew *everything!!* He had other powers as well. But as he got sicker and sicker, I would hear this huge static on the phone when I called him and his phone would go dead. And then I knew I had to stand on my own feet.

I think he arranged for me to be under Shraddhananda [in Sacramento], another powerful swami. He loved Shraddhananda. Shraddhananda got me to write [books]. I had done tremendous amounts of physical labor in Hollywood, Trabuco, Portland, and in Sacramento. I went back to Trabuco last May and tried to do it again, but my back started hurting. But Shraddhananda—every time he saw me—would say, “Get a pencil, put that hoe down and get a pencil in your hand!”

EW: Did Swami Aseshananda ever talk to you about writing?

RE: [Barking in imitation of Swami] “Get a job, you lazy American, get a job!!” After I got my SSI disability, when I went up there again, he said, “You have to get a job!” So I applied for more jobs and was always turned down.

EW: Was this disability owing to ulcers?

RE: Yes, and stress. I stayed [resided as a helper] with a powerful but disabled psychologist in Sacramento who got many people onto this program. Most people had to wait a year and a half to get on it, but I got on in a matter of months. Prior to that, I worked very hard, and I completely turned over a new leaf in my job; I did more than was expected of me and applied myself arduously. I did almost everything perfectly: the typing, the filing, etc. I felt Swami was behind this, and I couldn’t have done that without him. Because of this support, and for many other reasons, I stayed with Vedanta.

EW: Did Swami have an inkling that you’d be getting this disability pension?

RE: Oh yes, he said, “Haven’t you got your pension yet? This was *before* I got the pension or *even knew I was going to get it*.”

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RE: I had an old Volkswagen and Swami had a driver who would take him up to the retreat in Scappoose. Somehow the driver was unavailable, so Swami had me take him. He sat next to me in the Volkswagen and all he did was complain: “Come on, faster, I’m so uncomfortable, terrible, faster, can’t you go any faster?” He complained and whined all the way to the retreat. That was the longest time he was in that car. Now in 1989 I was very careless, driving out in the country around the Sacramento area: I missed a stop sign, and the next thing I remember I was in the hospital. Somebody had broadsided me going 70 mph; I saw pictures of my car and it was folded up like a tin can, a complete U. I had no protection, and the good thing was that I didn’t have a safety belt on, because the impact threw me into the back seat. I was totally unconscious—I had a concussion for 36 hours. I woke up in the hospital and the doctor said it was a miracle I was still alive. There was nothing wrong, nothing broken, only a little black and blue mark—that was all.

EW: It seems you are suggesting that you were protected as a result of Swami's time in the car.

RE: Definitely!

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Swami predicted that one day I would have a lot of money. He said, "You won't have it for a long time, but you will have it." My mother died and left me \$500,000, but she made sure it was in a trust so I could stay in the program and have medical, welfare and Social Security benefits. She was afraid she would die before I was 65, and I'd have no protection. For example, with a catastrophic illness the funds would be wiped out.

But in meditation I gathered exactly why things worked out the way they did. I have everything I need: the money I get from SSI and Social Security is more than enough to live on because my rent is so cheap. But if I *had* gotten the full money, I would have left Carpenteria, I would have taken it and gone to Costa Rica: in the back of my mind was the idea of spending it on a woman and enjoying the world. So The Mother made sure that I *didn't* [by tying the money up in a trust account]. And even if I didn't do that, I'd always be *worrying* about the money—whether I was losing money on my investments. So my brother took it out of the stock market and put it into tax-free California bonds. My cousin is the trustee, and just asks whether I need money. I get everything I need from the trust. It's a "needs trust" and perfectly legal. So my mind is not immersed in money.

EW: So this was all designed to protect you?

RE: To protect *spiritually*! I didn't think it was possible to stay on these programs and have \$500,000, but you can if it's in a trust. This way, I never think about the money. When I had my very bad period in '04, a check would come from my cousin and I would feel sick, just looking at it. So The Mother made sure that I wasn't going to enjoy myself.

The Mother says as long as you're in a body, the samskaras of various desires come up now and again; you're never free from them if you're in the body. But the idea that many Catholic saints have revealed is not to pay attention to these desires. Just do your spiritual practice and they will pass and your mind will get purer and purer. I can verify this from personal experience. Japa does work if you persist for a long time.

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