

Eric Foster, a disciple of Swami Aseshananda since 1974, lived as a candidate for the monastery first at the Scappoose retreat, then in the Portland center until 1979. He also resided in the Berkeley Vedanta center, at that time led by Swami Swananda. He currently lives in San Francisco and works as a software engineer.

Interviewed by telephone.

I really enjoyed reading Vera Edwards's remembrance [sent upon Eric's request] and interestingly, I met Swami just nineteen years after she did, when I was nineteen years old. But unlike Vera, I had heard about Ramakrishna, and I was looking for a spiritual form of life that might involve an organization or a compelling teacher. So when I was in Salem visiting a friend and reading *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, I learned that there was a Vedanta society in Portland and went to visit. From reading *The Gospel* I took Ramakrishna to be pure—teaching from the heart with a true inner realization—and that an organization or teacher based on him could be what I was looking for.

I showed up at the Vedanta center with my pack on my back (or I may have taken it off and leaned it against the house) and Stuart Bush answered the door. I don't recall exactly how I explained my interest in being there, but he invited me into the library. Swami came and met with me. We actually talked very, very little. He asked me if I were interested in spiritual life, and I said yes. He asked my age, and I said nineteen, and he said something like, "Oh, you really should be twenty-one before making a decision."

EW: So he was already sizing you up as a monk?

EF: He received me as someone interested in becoming a monk although I didn't think I was presenting myself that way. He fundamentally turned me over to one of the householders, Jim, who served Swami. Swami asked Jim to allow me to stay in his house temporarily as a guest, and to help me find a job, which I did in the Sheraton Hotel where Jim worked.

I immediately began to attend all of Swami's talks and he said things that sounded astonishingly true and genuine to me. I think it may have taken me two weeks to make up mind that not only was he totally honest and authoritative, but presented himself as a candidate for being a guru, for actually taking responsibility, as they say, for someone's spiritual life, and having the *authority*, as Ramakrishna said, to play that role. I joined, basically. The protocol was to live on your own as self-supporting, carry out a spiritual life following the instructions of the swami, and to do service according to your capacity, which I did. After two years he invited me to live at the retreat, while keeping my job. After another year or so he invited me to give up my job and live in the center. That was called a "pre-probationer" on the path of being a monastic. I became one of three monastics in the temple.

During this time, Swami's following was extremely small. What impressed me about the people there was that most of them had been there for many years, some as many as twenty years. This was far different from other spiritual families I had visited. It was a place where people were normal, intelligent, not fanatics or extreme. Secondly, they were dedicated, practicing with a teacher that they had a healthy relationship with, and they'd been doing it for many years. That was remarkable, especially to someone who was only nineteen.

EW: How did you come to be initiated?

EF: That occurred the following spring in May 1975.

Swami's routine included nightly meditation and vespers service, followed by prasad to the devotees who came to the library. The monastics received their prasad elsewhere. One story that is meaningful to me pertains to waiting in the library for Swami to prepare the prasad after meditation. It was a very intense, quiet, intense meditative experience, wonderful to sit there, to hear him chopping things, doing this labor by hand for those who came to meditate.

The library had two lights switches, one for a central light above the table, and another that lit the area under the shelves in the back. One of Swami's predominate themes/characteristics that he emphatically expressed, all the time, was frugality. For the common person, his frugality verged on lunacy. His frugality was unbelievable. He wore clothes until there were more holes than actual clothing. In *many* ways he practiced frugality. One of the ways involved the lights in the library. As an older man, he wasn't always precise or agile in his movements. He wanted only one light to be on in the library, not both—that would be wasteful. But he never actually learned which one he wanted. Virtually every night he would come by and fiddle with the lights: turn on one, turn off the other, until he got the one he wanted. One time he fiddled with the lights until they were both off and we were in total darkness. After a few heartbeats, he found the light switch, turned it on again, and turned to go away as he always did when he was done. But this time, after he turned to go away, he turned back just a little bit so you could barely see his eyes. His eyes were always deeply shrouded by the surrounding dark sacks that he got from malaria when he was younger. But at this angle, at this moment, those eyes had a glint that I'd hardly ever seen, and all he said was, "Economy, no?" Three or four people in the room burst out laughing, and he walked away. That's my story. I love to tell it, but I don't know whether it means anything to anyone else.

EW: Do you think Swami was poking fun at himself a little?

EF: Of course! This was something that we never got to see him do on any regular basis. We sat there in silence out of respect, in darkness, without saying, "Swami, please

turn the light back on.” No, we wouldn’t say anything like that. [Laughing] We sat there in silence.

The other light story was “perennial” because it occurred in the chapel where Swami gave lectures three or four times a week. It was Stuart Bush’s responsibility to set the lights right. Swami wanted the lights in a way that actually was impossible. He wanted to be able to see the audience and they to see him, and he wanted to give the lecture without the light glaring in his eyes—but it was unreasonable to have no light at all on him. Virtually every time he began to speak he would ask Stuart to readjust the lights, because there was no arrangement that was actually satisfactory. So Stuart would fiddle with the lights, and what he did had absolutely no relationship with what Swami asked. He just fiddled with them until Swami said, “Stop, OK.”

EW: Since it was impossible to get the lights as he wanted them, do you think Swami used this light ritual as a means to work on Mr. Bush? Many people reported how Swami would use such situations to help individuals in their development.

EF: It’s a subtle thing; it’s not as blatantly clear as a deliberate program to work on someone’s ego. Swami actually did nothing just for that purpose. There was always a substantial meaning behind everything he did even though the application of that meaning may be out of proportion to the practicality involved. He never made up something just to crunch someone’s ego. There was a reason for every scolding, for every request. This may have been a long-running battle, an issue of contention between a teacher and a student over how something should be done or what it should mean. It wouldn’t have been my business to ask Swami to explain anything.

EW: After moving into the monastery, were there any vows to be taken?

EF: No, there were no formal vows at that point. But to live around Swami is to live a vow. To come more than a few times, to look to him for spiritual guidance is to take a very severe vow—to be serious about living up to your own inner truth, and to be willing to be checked, to be corrected, if you failed that at any moment.

EW: Did you feel at the age of nineteen that you might have been a little young to make a commitment to that path before working through worldly desires?

EF: It’s hard to say. I’d asked Swami and he replied that all things one experiences in life are not as important as purifying oneself through spiritual effort and practice. The availability of his spiritual experience before you was so intense that measurements about qualifications or considerations about whether you were ready paled in significance. He’s there, he sees you, he sees what he can show you, and I think all those things blew all other considerations away. Maybe not fairly: you could say rationally that my life would have been better if I held off trying to be a monk, finished

college instead, had a few romantic affairs; who knows, that's just making up a life story. No one knows.

EW: Did you go with the intention of becoming a monk or just seeing where things would lead? That does seem a young age to become a monk.

EF: That's not young in the cultural context Swami was living in. In his cultural context, young age is wonderful for devoting oneself as much as possible to spiritual practice, to being good, performing service, purifying the mind, no matter what it means for what you do afterwards. The question of becoming a monk or not was not the most important thing. The most important thing was meditating, thinking of God, dedicating your attention and all of your desires to your highest ideal, to do your best, and to make the best benefit of this teacher, his presence, his instruction. He lived in our material world as someone who constantly believed in God and felt that God was real. It wasn't more important, it was *the only importance!* All this other stuff was extremely peripheral. To hear him talk, to watch him work, to hear him interact with other people, after awhile, when you knew what he was doing—you felt that God *is* real. That's more important than deciding whether you're going to be a monk or a householder, or get a job, or have a career or not.

EW: At that point, were you not basing your thinking on what Swami had experienced and what he exemplified? Weren't you still taking a leap of faith that the experience was real and true?

EF: Actually he didn't teach or claim experiences other than the validity of spiritual principles, of the nobility of the great teachers and their vision. The level of spiritual experience he may have attained was not a part of his daily conversation or teaching at all. His teaching was that spiritual life is valuable, and that to realize God is the purpose of life, and that Sri Ramakrishna is genuine and that Sri Ramakrishna's help is real and available to us if we purify ourselves, work sincerely, and are honest.

These things aren't matters requiring a leap of faith, they are matters of *deciding* to live according to things that are obviously true but are hard to follow. His example was not to show that invisible spiritual truths were true if you believed in him. What his example showed was that *you* could follow these truths. If you spent time with him, he influenced you to follow them, to care about God, to be sincere, to serve others, to be humble, to be loving, to be fearless, to hold your view high not low, to take the high road, not the low road. "Never stoop to conquer" was one of his favorite expressions. It means always living your life devoted to the highest ideal you can imagine, sticking to it, and never compromising for your own weaknesses.

So I don't feel I need to have nirvikalpa samadhi to live practically, as if the whole universe were one. Although I've not been able to do this very well, when I think of it, this is very satisfying. You may not have the experience of a highly advanced spiritual

person who has vast control of his mind and behavior, inner vision, all these things you might imagine he attains through spiritual practice—if you just do the right thing whenever you have a choice, you are practicing the truth.

EW: Several devotees commented that Swami Aseshananda worked with people whose life circumstances were difficult, in many cases touched by tragedy, and that he had the power to help such people.

EF: Yes. It seemed that he treated everyone with the same consistency, maybe with more intensity if the occasion required, but he never shut anyone out for being out of line. He corrected everyone, even for the smallest infraction. It was beyond amazing how large was his capacity to lift up people, and treat them consistently with love and attention, no matter what they did.

I recently listened to a recording of one of Swami Aseshananda's lectures on Swami Saradananda. A recording always has some reality in it, but if you really did see the person daily for years and listen to him for thousands of hours, then watching a video or hearing a recording is much, much more like a living presence. Some of his words bring him right back in front of me.

I wanted to cover the subject of Swami's scoldings. It seems to me that I was a prime target while there—so much so that people who visited from other centers reported to me that I was the main person who was being scolded almost all the time during their visit. I can see two reasons why I deserved scolding.

One was that when I looked at Swami, and I communicated with him by my actions, and listened to him, I saw that he was for *real*. He *really* was a teacher and it *really* was of spiritual value to be in his presence, and to serve him by following his instruction. That meant I was making a huge claim of my own qualification to live a spiritual life and that everything I did had to measure up to that. I was claiming that I had enough substance in myself, I had enough integrity to say Swami is true, Swami is real, that his teaching is accurate, authoritative, and justified. I had to live up to this, therefore I had to behave really, really well. If I did anything less than my highest ideal, as I understood it, then I deserved to be corrected, called on it, and challenged to do it right, on everything.

For example, one of the things he constantly scolded people about was forgetting to wash their hands after touching food or their shoes. Many American devotees believed these things didn't matter, so if they did them it was only a casual gesture of affection or respect. In other words, they weren't observed by devotees out of *dedication*. Swami was dedicated and he taught people to be dedicated; he was intolerant of carelessness in his presence. So he would scold you if you did not wash your hands after touching your shoes. I deserved that scolding because I accepted the path of paying attention all the time, caring enough about life, revering it all the time.

The second reason why I deserved scolding was because it hurt my feelings. As I constantly tried to do my best, he called me out, criticized what I did, and my feelings were *hurt*.

EW: Many said Swami's scoldings did not bother them, and sometimes they almost smiled to themselves, because they understood his loving motivation for the scoldings.

EF: I had my hurt feelings because I did not understand him correctly. If people have told you they understood him correctly, that is very wonderful and good for them if they could hold that attitude and live up to it all the time. I was far from it. I was an immature person with low self-esteem and over-sensitive to approval or rejection from others. I could not stand being disrespected, insulted, criticized, or humiliated. I was intolerant of criticism and therefore he applied it to me. *I would never get over it until I'd been through enough that I would decide to get over it.*

EW: How long did that take and how did you cope with the scoldings?

EF: I think we were in a steady state struggle for most of my time there [6 years] and I finally got over it in my last year, for the most part, partially through the process of self-reflection and through reaching out to other people who demonstrated a better way of relating to him—rather than resenting his scolding.

EW: Could you share your view of Swami's scoldings in relation to his Bengali culture?

EF: Swami's scoldings, I was told, were typical of an Indian mother, at least an Indian motherly spiritual teacher. This information came from a young man, an American, who visited the Vedanta center while I was there and was a disciple of Gayatri Devi, Swami Paramananda's foremost monastic disciple, and spiritual leader of the Vedanta center in La Crescenta [California]. This young man was totally at ease with Swami's behavior. He said it was just like his guru. But in our culture people don't talk to each other in a harsh way; we are measured in our criticisms and objections. There is no relationship of love that involves one person constantly correcting the other. The only example we have in our culture is the bad boss. Our parents don't actually do that with their children. Apparently motherly Indian teachers do, at least Bengali ones.

EW [jokingly]: Oh, I must have been a Bengali mother in my last life, because I'm prone to that parenting style. Maybe it's an influence from Swami.

EF: On a related subject I had the opportunity to see another very senior Vedanta swami perform the scolding role on his devotee in front of me during a breakfast. It was one-hundred percent loud, harsh, and critical; the person receiving it was very defensive, combative, but also recognized that she was being instructed spiritually. It was a marvelous experience to be once again in the presence of a scolding swami, even though it wasn't for me. Other times it *has* been for me. I've often felt that I had a sign on my

head that only senior monks of the Ramakrishna Order could see saying “Scold Me!” [Eric then mentioned two other senior swamis who scolded him after being in their presence only a few minutes.]

EW: Swami must have helped you get over that sense of inferiority.

EF: It’s true that as much as it still stings me when people criticize or try to humiliate, it’s certainly good to have had the experience that someone—who loved me more than anyone in the world has or ever could love me—has scolded me, criticized me, corrected me, more than anyone else ever has.

EW: [The conversations then turned to recordings of Swami’s many lectures.] Even if we were able to collect Swami’s lectures, they might be repetitive because they were reportedly given not for their factual content, but as occasions to work on the listener.

EF: The lectures were ritualistic: an exercise in thinking about God according to these subjects, to re-instill, re-instill, re-instill memory, purpose, and determination.

EW: Maybe one day there will be a place on the internet where all this material will be freely available.

EF: An historical Vedanta in American Society would be a viable project. Many individuals have written small histories. Every Vedanta center is a rich storehouse of memories, stories, and records of how Vedanta teachings have affected people and how they’ve realized teachings in all kinds of different ways. Even on the smallest scale, just going out and *meeting* people who have met these swamis and were inspired by them to practice spiritual life has been a wonderful treat, even in the small doses that I’ve been able to experience.

EW: Yes, this is precisely how I feel about interviewing the devotees who were inspired by Swami Aseshananda.

EW: [The conversation turned to the last few years of Swami’s life.] Were you still living in Portland at the time?

EF: Yes. Although I had grown apart from the Vedanta society for many years, I would come sometimes during the period when Swami Aseshananda would not give the main lecture but say a few words after Swami Shantarupananda’s lectures. In this period I introduced him to my wife, Aliza. She became Swami Shantarupananda’s first initiate and is now very dedicated and active in the San Francisco center, much more than me. We were involved in the Portland center from 1990 to 1993, the year we left Portland, but came back around 1995. In Swami’s last days, his inner circle invited me to help care for him physically. So I did and was part of those last days.

[Eric provided the following reflection written shortly after Swami's passing.]

Twenty-three hours did Swami Aseshananda lie in his bed, adorned with flowers, surrounded by devotees, in his room for them to come to pay their respects and pranams. Reading from holy scriptures, particularly *The Gospel*, went on aloud constantly. Grief and shock permeated the air as we, who knew him so well for so long, finally faced the end of a chapter we could not conceive of ending. Instead of lying there, in need of some service, providing us the unthinkable opportunity and blessing to be able to continue serving his ailing body, he lay there gone. Glaring photo-lights, the loud reading, and stunned devotees seated in attendance added to the unreality of it.

Swami would say: "Imagination becomes realization!" Now it is up to us to imagine his presence, guidance, and inspiration without anymore the regular physical affirmation of his real existence. He was flesh-and-blood, a human being among us, friend and parent to us, yet one whose every moment showed that God was real. He was one such that we would not believe possible—had we not seen, heard, and felt ourselves: a completely pure, convincing, authoritative, and infinitely loving, giving teacher, friend, mother/father. He cared for us, served us, loved us, instructed us, against seeming infinitely stubborn stupid resistance and incompetence. Yet he didn't care: he loved us.

I could not stay long. I left to go to the shrine, where I know he would also send me if he were speaking. "There is nothing like life." But one of the lessons of his life was that the shrine was *real*, that Ramakrishna and Holy Mother and Swamiji were *there*, and it was a blessed opportunity to sit there and think of them. Do japa if that is all one is capable of. *Be there.*

The next day, with Swami Aseshananda in his open casket, Swami Shantarupananda conducted a gathering in the chapel with prayers and singing, followed by an emotional tour of the grounds, carrying Swami and opening his casket at the major focal points of his devotions. From the main shrine (through the open windows with the drapes open, too difficult to bring him through the halls), past the shrine garden and down to the Buddha shrine, then to the front where a car awaited to take him away. Swami would have scolded and shouted and ordered all to do the impossible: manage all that without trampling on garden areas or breaking shrub limbs, and everyone would have indulgently done their best, to no avail, and Swami would accept finally, and grudgingly, that it was impossible, and that after all they will grow back.

Seeing the car drive off with Swami's body in there, never to return in that form, was especially wrenching. He devoted himself so completely to this plot of land as his field of work, worship, and devotion. Every inch of it he cared for. Every bird that died here was sacred and called for a devotional burial, complete with candle, incense, flowers, and chanting. Every leaf, every needle, every cottonwood cotton ball had to be picked up diligently in honor of the temple's cleanliness and the safety of devotees, even the neighbors. Every plant that drooped, especially every flower stalk, had to be supported,

without exception. Even the rhododendrons, that naturally drop their outside branches to the ground, had complex horizontal supporting stakes to lift them up, needing of course to be redone every year as the plants tried their best to thwart the good being done to them. Now Swami was being taken away, finally, without the ability to protest or object, from the post he had determined, decided firmly to never leave. *Swami took no vacation. Vacation from what? God? He needed none!*

February 2009