

**Esther Warkov, Ph.D.**, initiated by Swami Aseshananda in 1975 while a college student, regards Swami Aseshananda as the most precious influence in her life. A member of the Vedanta Society of Western Washington, she resided in Portland with her husband and younger daughter after Swami's passing.

*Written submission*

### **The Phenomenon of Swami Aseshananda**

Looking back on my life, it was Swami Aseshananda who exerted the most enduring influence. His care and example literally sustained me through life threatening challenges. Although I neglected to implement Swami's teachings, *he* always remained available during his lifetime and continues to be a vital source of inspiration. As will be seen in his many letters below, Swami so completely gave himself to nurturing a disciple—in whom *he alone* saw promise. He guided my life—as I faced one quandary after the next—with all the devotion of a loving parent. No detail was too small for his consideration, whether it involved education, relationships, or visits to Portland. Of these, he wrote how he anticipated them “with joyous expectation.” Amidst my ill-conceived choices, he nevertheless expressed his steadfast love, bestowed the blessings of Sri Ramakrishna and the Divine Mother in his many letters, and pledged his ongoing support toward realizing the highest.

Despite all Swami's attention, his willingness to accept me as a disciple has remained puzzling. Because my life choices appeared so incongruous with the values Swami embodied, I wondered whether I misrepresented myself. Now I understand it was impossible to mislead Swami. Eventually our contact diminished as I immersed myself in “ordinary” life owing, in part, to the inability to reconcile Vedanta's underlying asceticism with the social environment of the 1970s. And because I wasn't drawn to regular meditation, I wondered if Vedanta was a good match. In addition, Swami Aseshananda's world was unfathomable, the ideal so lofty and difficult to integrate, that I sought “fulfillment” in other ways. To pursue Vedanta wholeheartedly required tremendous confidence in one's judgment, to believe that the truths Swami exemplified are *real*. It seems I lacked sufficient confidence in my judgment to commit.

Nevertheless, Swami's example remained a constant irritant, a reminder of the quest that brought me to Vedanta. Swami has remained a formidable source of inspiration, especially in dire circumstances. His dictum to “renounce your identification with the psycho-physical being” emerged as the most important message one could hear, particularly in the face of life-threatening health challenges. Swami's 1976 prediction that “*Renunciation will come late in life and it will be lasting,*” has come true.

One of Swami Aseshananda's disciples observed how he, like Holy Mother, attracted the most difficult cases. Mine was one of willful resistance. While my own story is not particularly important I offer this narrative to place Swami's many letters, following, into perspective.

Born into a secular Jewish family, I became curious about religion and spirituality. Remarkably, in 1966 at the age of 14, the mysterious and captivating picture of Ramakrishna presented itself during a *high school field trip* to the Trabuco Vedanta monastery! Swami Asaktananda spoke that day. I would visit a few more times during high school and college. Seven years after the initial visit I journaled: "There is an aura of warm holiness in Trabuco monastery that reminds me of the existence of an entire realm, which is both exciting and unique in its possibilities."

Lacking the opportunity to engage with a Vedanta center while in high school, I explored the Christian path. While others prayed for expressive spiritual gifts, I asked for wisdom, indicating a preference for the path of jnana. I soon found organized Christianity troubling for both the historical acts against Jews and non-believers and for the concept of a personal god.

The next encounter with Vedanta came through a friend's reading of a Vedanta book in 1972. We somehow found ourselves at the Holland Park, London, Vedanta center. An American monk, Swami Yogeshananda, gave us prasad. Ramakrishna's enormous shrine picture greeted me again. Christopher Isherwood's introductory volume on Vedanta fell into my hands along with a small booklet on raja yoga that I read over and over while traveling student-style through Europe. While the friend went by the wayside, the "transmission" through Vivekananda's booklet did not.

After moving to San Diego, CA, to complete college, I continued to explore Vedanta. Swami Asaktananda took my quest seriously: he connected me with women monastics in Hollywood and a Vedanta study group which met in the San Diego home of Carolyn (Amala) and Joe Kenny. Occasional trips to the Hollywood center provided exposure to an intriguing and somewhat exotic world. Swami Asaktananda arranged for a short stay at the Santa Barbara convent. Swami Asaktananda was incredibly kind, respectful, and provided advice that was relevant to my generation. As a result, I sought a teacher with whom I could similarly interact.

The March 1975 consecration of the Hollywood Vedanta convent afforded the opportunity to see swamis from around the country. One swami immediately stood out—Swami Aseshananda! I remember Swami wrapped up in his chuddar over Western clothing, his scuffed shoes a symbol, I was to learn, of his austerity. But most of all, I remember his smiling face and forward-tilting posture which seemed to beckon me. *I immediately felt he was the teacher for me!* Seven months later, at age 23, I traveled to meet Swami in Portland. Within a few days I was initiated!

Swami's many solicitous letters present a unique glimpse of his care, and I include them all, interspersed with journal entries and commentary, for context.

*April 25, 1975*

*You wrote a letter to me when I visited the Hollywood Center, where I went to attend the dedication ceremony of their new convent building. I thought of you and wanted to reply but I could not find your address. Last evening I found your old letter, which you wrote me on Jan. 11<sup>th</sup> 1975. So I thought of writing to you today. Please excuse my delay.*

*I hope you are making good progress in you studies and by Mother's grace you will come out quite well in your final examination. Please be patient and work hard. May the Divine Mother bless you and draw you firmly to Her fragrant presence. Kindly accept my affectionate greetings. Yours in the Lord, Swami Aseshananda*

*Undated [Spring 1975]*

*I have received your letter of Jan. 11 and I thank you for writing to me. Your letter shows that you are a sincere person, genuinely interested in your spiritual growth. My advice to you is to work hard and get your degree in music first. Then you may think of what you should do next.*

*If you want to explore and find out for yourself you may come to Portland for a short visit and seek an interview with me. I shall be glad to talk to you. It is very necessary in spiritual life to get first-hand experience and evaluate things through the method of discrimination before one comes to a decision.*

*I shall be able to arrange for your stay in Holy Mother's House when you come for a short visit to Portland. In the meantime I wish to send you my best wishes and cordial greetings and good-luck in your studies. It is not possible to write everything in a letter. May the Divine Mother bless you and fulfill your heart's desire—is my prayer. Yours in the Lord, Swami Aseshananda*

*May 21<sup>st</sup>, 1975*

*I have received your letter. Please excuse me for the delay. I was busy making preparations for the Brahmachary ceremony of two of our monastics in the Portland monastery. Six swamis participated in the sacred ceremony which took place before dawn of May 15<sup>th</sup>. I am enclosing a program, which will tell you more.*

*Now with regard to your letter. I want to talk to you personally before I can give my opinion. I shall pray for you to my teacher, Holy Mother. She is the mother of us all. May She enlighten your heart and guide you—is my earnest appeal to Her. Have faith in Her. She will show you the way and lead you gently to the realm of light, love, and lasting happiness. Accept my best wishes and greetings. Yours in the Lord, Swami Aseshananda*

*July 17, 1975*

*I have received your letter of July 4<sup>th</sup> I appreciate your writing to me. I am going to Seattle tomorrow to see Swami Vividishanandaji who is not doing well. I shall return soon.*

*In my opinion, you should come in August when you can spend about a week or so to become somewhat acquainted with our activities here in Portland as well as at the Retreat. You will stay in Holy Mother's house very close to the Center when you come. I will make all arrangements for your stay. You should also see our retreat, where we have dedicated outdoor shrines to Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother. Probably we will dedicate Swami Vivekananda's shrine in August. When do you plan to come? Please write to me at your convenience and accept my love and best wishes. May the blessings of Sri Ramakrishna be with you always. Yours in the Master, Swami Aseshananda*

*July 26, 1975*

*I have received your letter. Hope you will not mind. I shall not be able to meet you at the Railway Depot. I have arranged with Mrs. Betty Durham who will receive you at the depot at 5 PM when the train arrives. She is tall [and] will be carrying the small magazine Prabhuddha Bharata in her hand.*

*The reason is I shall have to attend to Swami Asaktananda who phoned from Olema Retreat and said that he would visit us for a few days arriving here on Wednesday before he leaves to Seattle. There will be dinner for the Swami at 6:30 PM and there will be a talk at 7:30 PM at the Portland Center*

*I am looking forward to your coming. You will stay in Holy Mother's house. The rest when we meet at the temple. I have asked Mrs. Durham to bring you at the [sic] temple first and then take you to Holy Mother's House. May the Divine Mother bless you and be with you always, Yours in the Lord, Aseshananda*

August 1, 1975, journal entry: “Beautiful to see children flocking around Swami Aseshananda—he became child-like himself—I caught the infectious spirit and giggled along. He seems so pure—I feel Ramakrishna in him. He seems to derive so much joy from being around us. Swami Aseshananda cooks intently—an aura floated out of the kitchen. How seriously he takes his cooking!

‘Meditation is the only way to God. In samadhi, nothing can harm one, not even tigers,’ Swami said.”

The journal continues: “In spiritual heights, the companions are different. Will I ever be content with a partnered life [referring to a relationship with a graduate student uninterested in spiritual life] now that this urge is implanted? Music, work, play it all out, and die on my deathbed wishing I’d done it [spiritual pursuit]? Swami’s reprimand for going into the monastery kitchen was so sweet that I could hardly keep back the tears, yet why should it matter if a woman goes in?”

The journal entry describes how Swami “lovingly prepared and served a breakfast of scrambled eggs, toast and honey, payesh, oranges, and two cups of tea. Why two? ‘Because one bag makes two cups,’ Swami explained.” The entry describes how Swami next “fed lunch, then prasad continuously. Gardening in his tattered clothes, watering with a hose and a pot, Swami remarked, ‘I like you for your sincerity—you don’t meet other women who would be so honest with a man.’ [In retrospect, it was only his unconditional love and acceptance that could prompt such openness. Decades later, when returning to the table where Swami lovingly served me, the scene replayed with vivid familiarity, so powerful was Swami’s impression.]

“Then, very gently, Swami asked, ‘May I tell you something? Are you sure it won’t hurt you? The energy [sexual] must be re-directed ultimately.’ After some time, he sweetly inquired, ‘Have I been too demanding?’ ‘No.’ ‘Are you sure?’ he inquired, with all the solicitousness of a mother.”

Remarkably, Swami initiated me on my birthday which was also Swami Ramakrishnanada’s puja day. During the initiation ceremony Swami committed himself to my spiritual realization: he prayed that I might realize the supreme Absolute Consciousness and pledged his best to help me, to meditate and pray on my behalf always. The depth of that promise eluded my young mind (as it still does today).

For the ceremony, I learned afterwards, I was to have brought a gift for the teacher. “You must give the teacher something—here, give me this apple.” Swami handed me an apple to give back to him. This gesture speaks volumes. *He wanted nothing of gifts, and he would even provide the very gift I was to give him!* In addition, the apple became symbolic of the spiritual gift he would give me, that would in turn be re-gifted to him. *No separation between giver and recipient.*

This leads to the core of the initiation: Swami understood and fully supported my non-dual bent. While Swami had no problem with duality, my mind could not grasp bhakti nor the idea of incarnations. Swami ingeniously provided a teaching whose meaning thrilled and sustained me. Had he not, I believe I would have been lost, never to return. His teaching has allowed me to feel comfortable with a range of spiritual traditions, especially the teachings of Sri Ramana Maharshi (whom Swami Aseshananda met in India).

Back to initiation day, I wrote: “Swami then requested I prepare flowers for the worship. Next there was noon meditation and a little piano practice for the service. The two of us were virtually alone at the center and it felt very, very holy. Then Swami said, ‘I’ll give you some lunch,’ which he did before having me again practice piano. That evening Swami indicated that he approved of my musical offering. ‘Ram nam was fair. I am no expert, but piano playing was good.’” [Years later I realized that by supporting my interest in music, Swami demonstrated his love in a way I could understand.]

The journal continues: “That day Swami took pains to make sure my membership status with the society was OK (just shortly after I was discussing this with Mr. Bush, as if Swami were somehow aware of the conversation). The talk tonight was appropriate: jnana and bhakti. Pure jnana makes dry intellectual religion which will not bring one to awareness. He said to me to think and read about Ramakrishna—it would be easier. How shall I be able to stay away from Swami?” [Almost 30 years later I journaled that, “It was the call to live out all my life dramas that pulled me away from him physically, but now I have returned to Vedanta. He never left me all these years.”]

[Back to the 1975 journal entry] “He knows I like Swami Asaktananda—had me call him tonight in Seattle to say goodbye. [Asktananda returned to India.] Then just as I was debating whether to go downtown tomorrow—what would Swami think if I took the bus, etc. . . . he called and then gave me the opportunity to ask him.”

“I think I could begin to understand Holy Mother through him. I feel as though a burden has been lifted from me. I’d be a fool to stay away very long from this man.” [2009 journal update: I *was* a fool.] “I think I must put my affairs in order and make plans to exit. A few days ago things looked different—but now after finding my teacher, life is suddenly different. I was one continuous smile today. How can I repay? By meditating regularly and trying to follow all directions, he told me. I hope he yells at me soon to help me see both sides of things. I know he likes me now! Also, I was sitting wondering about how he spent parts of his life in India and lo, his talk on Ramakrishnananda became highly autobiographical. He talked about his dislike of ritual and how he began to do it when Saradananda died, as something to do.”

*Sept 24, 1975*

*I have received your letter. I have not forgotten you. Delay in replying was caused by various reasons. Your plan is all right with me. Whatever you have decided, stick to it. It will be of immense good to you.*

*Try to think of your higher self as the source of infinite strength and unbounded happiness. You will always remain in my thoughts and prayers. Think of Ramakrishna also now and then. Because he is the fountain-head of [our] inspiration and also an ideal teacher. Surely [he will] guide and lead us [to] the shore of freedom. We love him and adore him.*

*You have been accepted as a member of our society. You will know more from the devotees at Holy Mother’s house. We will celebrate Durga Puja on Sat. Oct. 11<sup>th</sup> at 10:30 AM with worship, fire ceremony, and prasad. Wish you could be with us, if not physically but in spirit. May Mother bless you. Accept my love and best wishes. Write to me when you have the mood to write. Remember me to [unclear]. Yours in the Lord, Asehananda*

*October 6, 1975*

*I have received your nice letter. What you have decided after mature thinking is all right with me. You will always find me praying for you and listening to you and wishing you well in spiritual life.*

*If you want to visit England you will have my approval if your finance permits you. You may also visit our center at the following address: Ramakrishna Vedanta Center 54 Holland Park, London. Swami Bhavyananda is in charge of the center. Please phone him in advance so that he may be available when you come to the center.*

*We will celebrate Durga puja on Saturday October 11 at 10:30 AM Homa at 12 noon—offering of flowers and prasad at 1:30 PM. Try to think of the Mother on that sacred day. Your sincerity strikes me. May the Lord bless you and enlighten your understanding and heart. We are all well. Marrie, Colleen, Sandra and little Nicky are doing well at Holy Mother’s House. They all remember you. Accept my love and best wishes. Yours in the Lord, Asehananda PS About coming to Portland I leave it to you. Sri Ramakrishna’s birthday would be all right.*

Oct. 29, 1975

*Please accept my love and Vijaya greetings. We will celebrate Kali puja on Nov. 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday. May the Divine Mother bless you and guide you. Colleen, Marrie and others at Holy Mother's house are doing well. Only the cat is not so fine. I shall be glad to hear from you. Have you received my previous letter? I shall include you in my prayers. Yours in the Lord, Aseshananda*

Journal entry Nov. 1975: "Have an ideal concept of behavior and imitate it in all acts." "Where there is no love, put love in and you will draw love out." "Strive to prefer that which is most difficult (the act of overcoming), desire nothing, desire the worst of temporal things, not the best; therefore one is led to the non-temporal." [quotes of unknown origin]

*Winter 1975 Christmas card*

*I am looking forward to your visit in December 24<sup>th</sup> with your friend Cindy. First talk to the music teacher after coming to Portland and let me know what he says. Then I shall be able to decide what I should do. It will be good to talk to Swami Bhaskarananda of Seattle and seek his help. May the Lord bless you and keep your mind fixed on the goal. May His love make you strong and fearless. Accept my love, Yours in the Lord, Aseshananda*

Dec. 30, 1975

*I wish you a very bright and meaningful New Year. May Holy Mother keep you under the orbit of Her grace and love. Yours in the Lord, Aseshananda*

Jan. 27, 1976

*I got your card from England. Hope your trip was pleasant and that you enjoyed it very much. Did you go to our London center? What about Gretz center near Paris?*

*We are all doing well here. We will celebrate Sri Ramakrishna's birthday on March 3<sup>rd</sup> with special puja and homa ceremony. May the Lord bless you and guide you. Accept my love and best wishes. Yours in the Lord, Swami Aseshananda*

Feb 9, 1976

*I have read your letter with interest. It is all right with me if you fulfill your plan of coming to Portland during Shivaratri (Feb. 28<sup>th</sup> Saturday) and Sri Ramakrishna's birthday celebrations on March 3<sup>rd</sup> Wednesday. Please let me know after you have made reservations to come either by plane or by railroad train.*

*I am not angry with you. I like your sincerity and frankness of spirit. I shall pray for you and do my best to help you in your spiritual struggles. But you should practice music as well as meditation everyday to create a habit and to discipline your mind. Nothing can be accomplished with dreamy thoughts and vague aspirations. Hard work is necessary to accelerate anything either in music or in religious life.*

*With regard to other point, you should be considerate to your friend. You should not do anything which will be a rude shock to him and to his feelings. Let him live there. Be patient. Things will be all right in time with your sympathetic understanding.*

*I am glad to know you have written to University of Washington in Seattle. If they accept you it will be nice. The rest when we meet. Please think of the Lord twice a day and seek His guidance.*

*I wish you peace, happiness and inner strength which comes from sraddha—self confidence. Atman is the source of all tremendous power and energy. May that energy come to you slowly and gradually as you struggle on and time goes on. Accept my love and best wishes. Yours in the Lord, Swami Aseshananda*

Feb. 23, 1976

*I have received your letter and read it with joyous interest. You need not have to phone me on Feb. 25<sup>th</sup> and spend money unnecessarily. Your plan is excellent. I approve of it.*

*Probably Marrie Reddick or Mrs. Vera Edwards will meet you at the Portland airport on Thursday morning February 26<sup>th</sup> at 10:54 AM United Airline flight number 380. In case you change your plane or change your flight to [an]other airline, then you can phone. But you may do whatever pleases you. That will be my joy to hear and to accept.*

*I shall talk to the devotees of Holy Mother's House again and request them to look after your needs and conveniences. You will have luncheon at the temple as before if Mrs. Vera Edwards is available.*

*It is a good idea to see what Washington University in Seattle can offer you. Why not try Lewis and Clark College which has a good reputation in Portland for its music department. The rest in person. With my love and greetings. Yours in the Lord, Aseshananda*

The rebellion started six months after initiation, according to a journal entry of February 1976: "Well, here I am back in Oregon. I wonder if exhaustion has anything to do with the lack of enthusiasm. Being in the temple was easy—felt like I never left. Upon first arriving, I was slightly overwhelmed by the fact that *here I am*—the place I've been dreaming of and idealizing about for months. Well now that I've got it, do I want it? So here I am. And it feels like I don't want it. Renunciation seems so negative for one who is almost comfortable with the world. Maybe renunciation is simple for the alienated person, or the social misfit. And all this ritual and avatar stuff!! I am constantly reminding myself that when I give the flower, it is only the Universal Life Force that I am bowing down before. [Jewish conditioning saw this as idol-worship.] I was extremely tired during the talk on the *Upanishads* and wanted only for it to end so that I might retire."

Feb. 27, 1976 journal entry: "More rain. A morning in the house, a bit of piano, some errands. Lunch at the temple. Why is Swami avoiding me? Probably waiting for me to cool off. A trip to Lewis and Clark College. Lots of young-looking people. Realized that I will be a student again soon. Study and preparation are necessary. Back to Holy Mother's House. Tired, wonder about all of this. Lectures do not hold the same fascination—seem repetitive; I yawn, squirm. Is it because of physical fatigue or mental stress? I am being utterly passive in not approaching Aseshananda."

March 2, 1976; [Regarding studying in the UK] "Swami says British schools are more creative—you must produce something original. American schools mass-produce. Only a few people can handle the British system. The intellectual plane purifies the mind—living in the realm of thought. Mumbled something about 'renunciation will come later in life and it will be solid, lasting.' [He repeated this prediction in 1978.] Adrian [partner] isn't ready to settle down. I'm free, I'm that big tree flowering in the breeze, the cricket chirping. No one can take that away from me. I am That. Loneliness is the greatest fear, but I have my inner self—my guru—and it doesn't have to be lonely like it was. My dreams [about this partner] are shattered, but they're dreams. I'll wake up to the Reality and find myself, in the meantime, *chanting my favorite song [the mantra]!*"

May 6, 1976

*I am going to San Francisco tomorrow by United Airlines and I shall return on Thursday May 13<sup>th</sup> which is also Buddha's birthday. I have read your letter. I shall be glad to see you and your friend in Portland before you leave for England.*

*It is gratifying to know that you have been selected by the Fulbright committee from many competitors of great merit. We are really proud of you. Hope you will make good your talents by hard work in the particular field of music that you will be studying for in England.*

*Don't pay much attention to dreams. They are not always reliable. They bring weakness of mind and take away interest for vital things of life—which are worth striving for. Your real self is greater than your dreams*

*and try to manifest the power of the spirit to vanish all kinds of fear from the mind. May He bless you and give you enduring strength and joy of living. Accept my love and best wishes, Yours in the Lord, Aseshananda*

*July 20, 1976*

*I am looking forward to your coming with your friend, Adrian, with joyous expectation. You need not care to worry. I shall take care of everything. Adrian will stay in the temple along with us. You will stay in Holy Mother's House. Please let me know when you will arrive in Portland and by which plane. I shall send someone to the airport—to bring you here. The rest in person.*

*I am busy with visitors and showing them around. I am not able to write a long letter. But you will be in my thoughts and prayers. Accept my loving greetings and convey them to your friend, Adrian. Same with you. All are doing well here. Yours in the Lord, Aseshananda*

Some months after this last letter, Adrian and I traveled to Wales where we both continued our studies. My attachment to him prompted me to choose Britain over Portland.

*Aerogram postmarked December 9, 1976*

*Please don't think that I have forgotten you. You were in my mind many times. I could not reply [to] your letter because it was missing. I have found it yesterday. I read the whole letter excepting the first page which was not available. Now I shall tell you my opinion. You should stick to your plans. Study as much as the school in Wales offers you and then go in for higher graduate courses either in a larger city in Wales or in London or Cambridge in England. You are a talented girl. Don't be pessimistic. Express your talents to the best of your capacity. Please do not create any conflict in your mind by thinking "what good will this study do to become spiritual?" Anything [that] makes one selfless is a spiritual act. You are to be detached living in the world. Life in a cloister or convent will not suit you because it will go against your dharma. Your dharma is to give something to other people. Adrian is a good friend of yours. Keep that friendship by all means.*

*But at the same time practice meditation and do some thinking of higher thoughts of life to know how to encounter death. Always remember you are a tangible manifestation of the spirit whom the Hindus call Divine Mother. Try to manifest the best in you by giving compassion, understanding and love in a spiritual sense to other people.*

*Also try to raise your consciousness to a higher plane. "Let your mind be as high as one of the peaks of the Himalaya mountains," said Maharaj. Let me know how your studies are going on and what you are planning to do next year. Are you angry? You should write two letters before you can expect one letter in reply from me. I shall try to be more regular in 1977 but I cannot promise.*

*I went to see Swami Vividishananda in Seattle. He is in a state of coma. But my mind was lifted up when I was in his presence—so spiritual was the atmosphere. Swami Swahananda of Berkeley will be the head of the Southern California and Hollywood Centers who will be taking [residency] on Dec 15<sup>th</sup>, 1976. I am pleased at the choice.*

*Did you have a chance to visit the London Center? If you happen to, give my greetings to Swami Bhavyananda. May Divine Mother bless you and keep you [unclear]. Yours in the [Lord] Aseshananda. PS We will celebrate Holy Mother's birthday with puja and homa [unclear content follows] on Dec. 13<sup>th</sup>. I shall be glad to hear from you, Aseshananda [Om symbol].*

Seeing the disparity in our values, I ended the association with the aforementioned partner sooner rather than later. But it wasn't easy. I journaled: "Why be involved with a man who is so undecided? When I have time, I owe it to

myself to seek out people who are more oriented towards inner growth and see how it is to be with them. I may want a more 'spiritual' partner." [Swami addressed this in his letter below.]

*Jan. 27, 1977*

*I wish to extend to you happy New Year's greetings. I have read your letter with great interest. What can I say? You are the best judge in this matter. I wish you success in your musical talents and abiding joy which comes from an introspective life. This can be gained only through self-knowledge. All that you are doing now is only a step toward that supreme goal. Your simplicity appeals to me. I know if you turn to Holy Mother, you will make great progress in spirituality. I commend you to Her benevolent care and meaningful guidance. Keep to your "Swadharma"—approach through Jnana but you should [leaven?] it with Bhakti—pure love of Divine Mother. That will create a beautiful harmony and you will never feel lonely.*

*Try to remember two auspicious days—Shiva Ratri—holy night of Shiva on Feb. 16, Wednesday and Sri Ramakrishna's birthday on Sunday Feb. 20th. If it is not too much you may inquire from our London Center and attend the special puja and services there. I know Swami Bhavyananda quite well. Introduce yourself to him and talk to him. He visited our Portland Center a few years ago. During your vacation you should try to go if possible to Gretz Center, near Paris. You may stay overnight or weekend in the Ashrama which will be helpful for you. You should write to Swami Ritajananda head of the Gretz Center before you make any plans.*

*Devotees at Holy Mother's house are doing well. Always you are welcome to stay here as long as your time permits. Beautiful sunshine is available now. Our bramacharis are repairing the Sarada Cottage at the Retreat. It will be strong and durable when it is finished. May Holy Mother keep company with you and cheer you up always.*

*I want you to be yourself. I am concerned about your health. You write that you had become [unclear]. You must take good care of your body and be strong again. Buddha used to say "Don't mistreat the horse from which you can't dismount." Accept my love. Yours in the Lord, Aseshananda (Om symbol).*

*March 30, 1977 Aerogram*

*Let me first extend to you happy Easter. Spring is here many flowers are blooming in our garden. Spring is the symbol of eternal life. An illumined soul knows that through personal experience of the Atman which never changes, never decays, never knows death [sic]. The idea of the Holy is to be found in all religions. But Vedanta alone stresses holiness of man when he is awake—wide awake to his spiritual self which is the "pearl of great price." [Coincidentally, Swami's letter was typed for this collection on Easter, 2009.]*

*Divine Mother in you will tell you what to do, where to study and how to spend the coming summer holidays. Ask Holy Mother in silence in the mood of meditation, feeling her presence in the shrine of your heart. You are to do it for nine days preferably before breakfast. Then let me know what answer comes to your mind. I believe Mother is with you. She will tell you. She will guide you.*

*I have received two letters from you. It is difficult for me to say anything now. I have to think over. You should give more facts. And you should tell me the reasons for you going to Bulgaria and eventually to Israel. Write to me again from the standpoint of your special interest in music. Are there talented professors who can help you in your studies? Has the university of Israel [sic] a fine music department which attracts students from all over the world? What about Washington University in Seattle? Antar yoga for women went off well at the Retreat. "Scorn delight and live [laborious] days" is what I have learnt from life. You cannot accomplish anything unless you work hard with [unclear] determination to overcome difficulties. The rest God will do for you. Accept my love. Yours in the Lord Aseshananda*

July 12, 1977

*I have not forgotten you. I have thought of you many times. Only now I am implementing my thoughts into action. I went to Seattle to perform worship and homa ceremony for the dedication of their new shrine at the Retreat on July 25<sup>th</sup>. The celebrations went off well. 120 people came to participate. Next day was a Sunday and I spoke at the morning services. Some of our devotees like Colleen Engle, Vera Edwards, Sandra Raley, and others also went and attended both the functions at the Retreat and in the town center.*

*We are expecting the visit of two swamis from Berkeley and New York as our guests for five days between July 21 and July 26<sup>th</sup>.*

*We are in the process of constructing a shrine for the American Indians at the Retreat. We have consulted a priest (medicine man) by the name of Eastman who has helped us in many ways. He has agreed to perform the rites and ceremonies at the time of dedication if we would invite him. You will be glad to know that Swami Vividishananda of the Seattle Center is doing fairly well. Though he is not able to communicate perhaps he recognized me when I was with him.*

*I heard that the London Center has purchased a retreat. Have you seen it? I wish you all success in your musical performances as well as in your studies. Accept my love. Write to me whether your plans for sure to Israel [sic] or come back to America has taken a definite shape. May the Divine Mother bless and keep you. I shall always pray for you. Yours in the Lord, Aseshananda.*

Sept. 1, 1977

*I have received both the letters that you have written to me. I am pleased to know that you would come to Seattle and study music in the University of Washington. You will be close to our center. That is good.*

*Now you should work diligently and write your thesis with deep interest and one-pointed attention. Social activities are to be minimized. You have talents. But that is not enough. Hard work is necessary to achieve anything meaningful in life. I wish you all success in your honest, sincere and painstaking struggle and your concentrated efforts to write the thesis in a beautiful manner. We all will be very proud of you.*

*We will celebrate Sri Krishna's birthday on Sept. 6<sup>th</sup> with reading, talk, worship and prasad. You will be with us in spirit. In the Retreat we have dedicated an American Indian Shrine. When you come here, you will see.*

*I am going to Seattle on Sept. 3<sup>rd</sup> with Mr. Bush and Br. Sarada Chaitanya. I shall have to speak on "Awakening of Spiritual Power" on Sunday Sept. 4<sup>th</sup> at the opening service of the season. Accept my love and best wishes. May the Divine Mother be with you and give you inspiration. Yours in the Lord, Swami Aseshananda*

Oct. 3, 1977

*I have received your kind letter of Sept. 22<sup>nd</sup>. I am glad to know that you have moved to an environment and an atmosphere which will be very congenial for your study and spiritual growth.*

*You have asked me a delicate and a difficult question. In my opinion you should see your parents first as soon as you come to this country. That is your first obligation which you should discharge. After seeing your parents you can write to me. Then I shall be in a position to tell you what to do next. Since [until] then you should concentrate on your thesis. Work hard. Apply yourself assiduously to the job in hand. Let all other thoughts disappear from your mind.*

*I read somewhere "scorn delight and live laborious days." This is the advice I would like to share with you. You have talents but without diligent attention and relentless work no true success can be achieved.*

*May your effort be meaningful and effective is my prayer to Him who watches over us like a fond mother. Accept my love and greetings. Yours in the Lord, Aseshananda*

*P.S. Colleen and other devotees are doing well. We will celebrate Durga Puja on Oct. 19th with puja and homa ceremony. Try to remember that day. May the Mother bless you and love you. SA*

With Swami Aseshanada's encouragement, I completed the Master's thesis in a year. Before returning to the United States, I engaged in a series of ill-conceived and perilous choices that bore testimony to the protection his initiation provided. For instance, I decided to explore my Eastern European roots by taking a train to Communist Hungary. Traveling on a subsistence budget, off I went one freezing midnight, crossing the English Channel, still with the flu, wearing a long tapestry skirt, Birkenstock sandals, a thin coat, with only a small rucksack. After being stalked in Vienna's red-light district where I stayed for reasons of economy, I luckily met an American from Seattle (!) who was also traveling to Hungary. After registering with the police, we secured a room in a Budapest apartment, and I escaped with only minor annoyances from the lecherous owner. I was able to gain access to Budapest's Central Synagogue, the second largest synagogue in the world, which was all but empty when I arrived. Dark and mysterious, I connected with my Jewish roots; it was a blessing.

Determined to get to the countryside (to commune with Bela Bartok), I hopped on an ancient locomotive, the "the peasant express." The eyes of peasant women, surrounded by bubushka scarves, were upon me. After I tentatively announced my destination, a kindly peasant woman took me out of the train to another platform; what luck! Arriving at dusk with the ground frozen beneath my sandals, I found the inn to be full—*not* as arranged! Starving, I ate ham upon a pork chop, having made it "kosher" with a prayer. Thankfully, a place was found in a village home, and the owner was not lecherous. After a few days of exploring the environs (and a good case of indigestion), I retreated to the village cemetery where I noticed a few Jewish gravestones off to the side. There I spoke mentally to Swami and had the distinct impression he said, "Come back to America, enough traveling." I felt enormously protected through this ill-conceived adventure, and others *far more perilous*.

*Dec. 8, 1977*

*I have received your letter. I went to New York to attend the memorial service in honor of Swami Pavitrnananda head of the Vedanta Society of New York. The function went off well on Thursday Dec. 1st but we will sadly miss the swami whom I have known for 50 years or more. We used to visit Sri Maharaj. One rabbi spoke [at the memorial service—unclear].*

*I am looking forward to seeing you on Dec. 26th along with your friend who will be a great help in driving such a distance. If there is any delay, please let me know. I am eager to see you on the above date. Accept my love and best wishes. The rest when we meet. No sledgehammer is necessary. [This is a reference to a joke between us.] Holy Mother will wake you up for she is the Mother of all. I am giving a puja schedule. Trust you are in good health and spirit. Yours in the Lord, Aseshananda.*

*Feb. 13, 1978*

*I have received your letter. Hope you are settled by this time and your study is going on well.*

*We celebrated Swami Brahmananda's birthday with puja and homa ceremony on Thursday Feb. 9th. Devotees enjoyed the day very much. We will have public celebration for the Swami next Sunday Feb. 19th.*

*Try to meditate for a few minutes every day. I pray to Holy Mother to hold you by the hand and guide you. How do you find the music department at the Washington University there? Does it satisfy the inmost desire of your heart? Anyway, make the best of it. Work hard and try to get the doctorate degree from [sic] and help you for your future career.*

*If you go the Center give my greetings to the assistant Swami. Please accept my love and best wishes. Because you are so near my correspondence has become somewhat [slow]. I hope this will find you in good health and spirit. Yours in the Lord, Aseshananda*

Swami and I met at the Seattle Vedanta Society monastery in March 1978, as recorded in a journal entry: “As soft-spoken as ever, Swami asked, ‘Are you happy?’ I presented my case as being between two worlds and thus devoted to neither. The cure, Swami said, is to meditate: ‘How can you know meditation isn’t good if you don’t do it more?’ He encouraged creative thought of the Divine Mother. [Swami always encouraged some tempering of the impersonal approach with thoughts of Ramakrishna and Sarada Devi.]

‘Your Dharma is to be making music in the world. Marry if you find someone who really loves you. I don’t want any divorce. Nor do I approve of men taking advantage of you. You must be two souls chosen by God.’ Aseshananda touched the OM symbol to my head, chanted, then put his hand on my head. He is the softest sledgehammer—but effective: I felt as though a great weight had been lifted from my head. ‘Come do some gardening; I would like to see you, talk with you. You are a sincere girl.’

[The journal continues] “Why did Swami like his guru? Not because the guru had attained a specific state—or for other reasons—but simply because he was a person who never cheated or swindled him. Similarly, I like Aseshananda because he is the only unselfish person I know: he doesn’t love me so I will act a certain way. There is no other person like him [in my life]. I have worked out leaving the University of Washington. Wake up to the fact that Swami is nearby. Am I going to pass up this opportunity? Even though Vedanta can seem strange, to have this irrational, unaccountable relationship must be beneficial. Beneficial, not like studying Hebrew and Arabic, but beneficial to the real thing: like why we live and why we die, and what we should know. I might as well face up to this task—the spiritual: it has been haunting me for 12 years [from age 14]. Forget the externals and focus on what it is that Aseshananda represents.”

That summer I traveled to Portland with a friend, to seek Swami’s advice about our association and educational options in the Middle East. Following that meeting, the journal entry reads: “Swami says desire is a string pulling the mind. Danger [in the Middle East] is not important. One dies when their karma is exhausted. He prefers a non-fragmented education [focusing on a research topic, European-style vs. the American generalist approach]. ‘If you want French, you go to France. You must be in the proper cultural environment [Israel, in this case]. Go to Egypt too. Dive deep! Go to the Middle East and find a good teacher—a demanding teacher. Dedication to the pursuit is critical, offer a contribution to learning, and desire to be of service.’ The sale of my piano is acceptable if it will pay for a monthly education stipend but is not to be used for luxuries. ‘Get your parents’ blessing for this choice.’ [at age 27!]

‘You need a more intellectual life-companion [not this friend]. Compassion means helping someone to stand on his own feet. Love comes from an equal position, not with one weaker.’ Swami registered an immediate negative reaction to marriage. The harshest thing Swami said in the face of this inappropriate partner was, “Go find someone on the same educational level.” [This was a real testament to his patience.]

At the time of our interview I knew I was headed down the wrong path with this young man. Still, it took a car accident to underline Swami’s point. Driving back to Seattle from Portland that dark rainy night we plummeted down the freeway embankment, having missed the offramp. (I was not the first to make that mistake, the officer consoled me.) Expecting to die, my mind’s eye saw Sarada Devi’s face, a most unexpected sight for an avowed follower of the impersonal path. “I was extremely calm,” I wrote to a friend. Miraculously, the 1973 Swedish Saab [a tank] came to rest in a bog. While I was stunned, my friend urged me to get out should the car explode. The highway patrol and tow-truck arrived, probably in response to a passing motorist; eventually the “tank” was extricated and the trip completed. I wrote: “It happened because I went to Portland to find out something but didn’t listen hard enough. I’m beginning to think this guy represents a side of myself that I must die to but am reluctant to. Will it take another car wreck? Or is this my last chance?”

Could the mind’s propensity to turn to Sarada Devi in this context be the result of Swami’s influence? Several years later, another astonishing reminder of the Divine Mother occurred when my father, an unreligious person, declared on his deathbed that, “God is a woman!” before lapsing

into silence. Some years later, I interpreted this as a message I was meant to hear, encouraging me to think of the Divine Mother.

Swami's advice to dive deep in the appropriate cultural environment led me to the Middle East to pursue my passion for its music and to obtain a Ph.D. (Swami insisted that I complete the Ph.D. as he did with other disciples, and so the [dissertation](#) was dedicated to him.) While in the Middle East, Swami seemed to have imparted a kind of fearlessness in the face of physical peril. One incident, among many, may serve to illustrate this transmission. I'd traveled half way around the world to study with a particular musician and sought him out in his environs, a crumbling tenement in Haifa, Israel. To reach his door, it was necessary to pass an enormous German Shepard, rearing on his hind legs, barking viciously, and foaming at the mouth. What to do? I shrugged, thought of Swami, ascended the staircase, opened the gate, walked past the dog, and knocked. Not in my right mind . . . .

Also not in my right mind, I succumbed to a marriage proposal from an American; I suspect Swami was eager for me to "settle down" as he wrote.

*July 8, 1980*

*I have received all your letters. Your plan is all right with me. You may marry the person you love. I understand that he loves you also most sincerely. As a token of seriousness there should be engagement with a ring. It does not matter whether the ring is costly or not. The rest will be taken care of by the Lord. I have no objection to inter-faith marriage if it is based on a spiritual basis. [unclear] marriage in terms of a bond forged by God for a definite purpose—to deepen the spiritual consciousness of each other by a tie of love—which is indissoluble.*

*You may do a little pranayama but meditating on the meaning of the mantram is most desirable.*

*In my opinion you should finish your thesis and get the Ph.D. degree. Then you may choose any place you like in America. Once you have started something you should not give it up—but stick to the end. I am glad to know that both of you are serious. That is good.*

*Please accept my love and give my greetings to your fiancé. We are all doing well. Yours in the Lord, Swami Asehananda*

*March 26, 1981*

*Om Shanith*

*I must reply [to] your last letter which I received yesterday. I wish you and your fiancé good luck. I am pleased to know that your parents will come to attend your wedding ceremony which will be held sometime in the summer of 1981. Please excuse me for not replying to your previous letter.*

*I agree with your plans with regard to Ph.D. degree. You gather all facts and necessary things from Israel and you should start writing the thesis by coming to America where you feel more comfortable than in Israel.*

*I have not forgotten you. I shall always remember you in my prayers. You should also pray to Holy Mother and ask Her to hold your hand and guide you towards the goal. We are all doing well. Several guests have come. That keeps me busy. I shall go to Seattle in April and to San Francisco in May. Trust this will find both of you in good health and spirits. Please accept my love and greetings. Yours in the Lord, Asehananda*

Upon Swami's encouragement, I returned to the US and completed the Ph.D. dissertation draft. A few years later, Swami was available to provide guidance during a visit to Seattle and wrote:

Aug. 28, 1985

*May the Divine Mother bless you. Thank you for writing me. I shall be glad to talk to you when I go to Seattle and stay there for a few days. Please accept my love and greetings and convey them to your husband. Colleen, Vera and other devotees are doing fine. The rest when we meet. Yours in the Lord, Aseshananda. [Directions for obtaining an appointment follow.]*

But soon after our appointment, I phoned Swami to report infidelity. Swami replied, "Can't you forgive him?" "Absolutely not," I told him. Eventually I headed to the Middle East, where I planned to work in my academic field. But owing to terrible choices, I barely finished my dissertation consultations and returned to the U.S., exhausted and ill at the age of thirty-three. Were it not for some unspoken help from Swami in moments of utter desperation, I surly would have perished mentally, if not physically, from a life-threatening medical emergency.

With the Ph.D dissertation completed (dedicated to Swami Aseshananda) and health somewhat improved, I moved into the next chapter of my life, motherhood. Fulfilling a *tremendous* desire, a daughter was born after a challenging gestation. Let me be clear, I was a fallen Vedantist by this time, but thoughts of Swami sustained me throughout many months of maternity bedrest.

After Mia was born, we traveled to Portland in 1989 for Swami's blessing, which he bestowed upon her. Swami, however, used this visit as one of few opportunities to mildly scold me. During the Sunday lecture, she fussed a little, and although we were sitting adjacent to the main lecture hall, Swami announced, "This is *not* a place for babies!" This was the harshest scolding I received. Perhaps Swami knew that I could not withstand his scoldings and was too immature to derive any benefit. On subsequent visits to Portland over the next five years prior to Swami's passing, I sensed a certain coolness, although he always acknowledged me. Perhaps it was his declining health, but I concluded—perhaps wrongly—that Swami had good reason to be disappointed when I chose to do things *my way*—and not *his*.

After re-marrying in my 40s, my husband, Joel, and I traveled to Portland in 1995 and 1996. Swami acknowledged us after we were announced (loudly, owing to his declining hearing). Around the time of this last visit, Mia, age five, would often ask, "I *really* want to know, is this world *real* or *not*, or is it *just a dream*?" and her eyes would become filled with tears. Had Swami blessed her with the propensity to inquire? In 1996, a few months before Swami's passing, our family of three stood at his bedside while he slept and at this last visit, I paid my respects.

A year later we adopted a daughter with an interesting Swami connection. We learned from her birthmother that had she kept the baby, she would have named her "Kiran," which was Swami Aseshananda's pre-monastic name. (One of the Hebrew names we informally gave our daughter was "Keren" meaning: ray, beam, power, ram's horn.) Our daughter was mesmerized the first time she saw a picture of Krishna. She was fascinated by Indian mythology and would sometimes privately act out scenes from *The Mahabharata* which she read on her own.

Alongside this joyous adoption, our family was pounded by events which gravely impacted our relationship with Mia. More and more things did not go according to plan. In retrospect there

seemed to be some rapid acceleration of karma that eventually compelled me, during a life-threatening illness (2001), to reconnect with Vedanta. It was also a time of reckoning, and the allure of life's entertaining distractions rapidly diminished. I concluded that Ramakrishna was the magnet that drew me to the non-dual path and Swami Aseshananda was a living exemplar of the truth we might also know.

Moving to Portland in midlife (2006) provided a symbolic break with the past. While there, it seemed as though Swami Aseshananda, who had passed away, was teaching through others in remarkable ways. For instance, one of his disciples phoned to introduce herself as a participant in this collection. She immediately offered how, whenever in distress, Swami would tell her, "Nothing happened!" For most, such advice would be preposterous, but for me, the content (and the *timing*) was so meaningful. I interpreted her statement as an affirmation of the unchanging substratum of our existence, a message of truth from Swami.

But the pounding continued. Our lives were thrown into chaos with events in our younger daughter's life. Lessons learned prompted us to become social activists late in life. Just a few months before this 2018 update, we lost Mia to suicide. The greatest attachment—to one's child—has compelled us to practice nonattachment. Swami Aseshananda's example offers hope for peace and transcendence.

\* \* \*

Swami Aseshananda *experienced* a world we can only *imagine*: he was immersed in the great monastic tradition of the Ramakrishna Order, initiated by Sri Sarada Devi, and interacted with direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. Swami Aseshananda served as a bridge between a world we know only through books and the world in which we now live. Swami's frame of reference was so very different from ours, something I scarcely appreciated before compiling this collection. No wonder Swami grew impatient with "the Americans" who were so unfocused compared with those who shaped *his* consciousness! Nevertheless, Swami was ready to shower his unconditional and compassionate love upon us, perhaps sensing our *real*—albeit hidden—desire: *to find the truth within*.

When all is said and done, one thing remains: the absolute authority that informed Swami Aseshananda's dictum to transcend our limited state and realize our true nature. This wasn't a mere recommendation—no—you sensed he'd achieved this realization and spoke as a knower of Brahman. That Swami never sought adulation for his personal achievement made him all the more inspiring.

*Revised October 2018*