

Eve Prior and her husband, Jim Prior, became disciples of Swami Aseshananda in 1967. Eve is a native of Portland, OR.

Written submission

During the peak of the 1960s I was in my early twenties and living in Portland. Being drawn up in the excitement of that time, along with my soon-to-be husband, we spoke constantly, it seems in my memory now, about such things as the nature of Reality, Consciousness, Being. I loved reading *The Oracle*, a short-lived San Francisco-based newspaper that was full of these ideas. And so after an acquaintance mentioned he had been to a lecture by a Hindu monk at the downtown YWCA, I went with another friend to hear him speak. Of that first exposure to Swami Aseshananda I remember very little—I was neither drawn to, nor compelled at that point to pursue the matter any further.

Months passed and my partner J. and I married. Some time after that, at the suggestion of that same acquaintance, we obtained a copy of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, which we read, or read parts of. More months passed, and then I think we just reached the end of living such an unstructured life. We knew about Swami, his connection with Sri Ramakrishna, and we knew his phone number. So one afternoon in early summer 1967 while I was at work, J. made the call, and Swami said to come right over, which he did, to Swami's apartment on NW 25th Avenue. They talked, and Swami suggested he come again, and to bring me with him. Of that meeting, what I remember is Swami sitting in an easy chair in the living room with the two of us sitting in straight-backed chairs in front of him. Swami made it clear that if we wanted to make progress in spiritual life there was no other way but by hard work, that there were no easy short-cuts.

I had absolutely no reservations in my mind about Swami. Although nothing *extraordinary* passed between us, either then, or at any other time, it seemed self-evident he was the real McCoy. How I came to this conclusion so readily is hard to explain. I should add that from that time until his passing away in 1996 I never observed anything to contradict this initial impression. And although at this first meeting Swami was very kind to us, he also had a formidable no-nonsense presence. He appeared to be completely focused upon spiritual matters only.

We immediately began attending all the lectures, evening vespers, Saturdays at the society's retreat near Scappoose, and when fall began, the pujas. Activities with our friends came to an end, and although this was not imposed by Swami, there really wasn't room for both. Both J. and I grew up in Portland, both sets of our parents were living in Portland, and we regularly saw them. We both had full-time jobs. So there was very little left over time for a social life. Further, the old life didn't fit in with the new. So began the rigorous schedule we would follow for about the next six to seven years.

That coming winter we took initiation. And not too long after that the property for the new temple was purchased. When the restoration work was completed a year or so later,

Swami moved out of the apartment and J. and I found a rental house in the Hawthorne neighborhood close to the temple.

In the early “honeymoon” days, although Swami could be strict with us, he was mostly very sweet. One summer afternoon when Swami was still at the apartment, and we were there for vespers, I was wearing a sleeveless dress with a flamboyant print. I was concerned Swami would suggest it wasn’t appropriate; instead, when I went into the kitchen where he was preparing prasad, he commented upon what a nice dress it was. (Unprecedented! I never again heard him say anything like that to anyone.) Another day there I bumped into the coffee table and broke its leg. When I told Swami, certain he would blow up at my carelessness, he acted as if it were nothing, nothing at all.

That saying, “Harder than a thunderbolt, softer than a flower” describes Swami’s style perfectly. Some people got mostly thunderbolts, some mostly the softness (these tended to be people who didn’t come regularly and who in general had a more relaxed relationship with Swami). I experienced both sides, as did many others, although for the most part Swami didn’t personally come down hard on me, at least not in a direct, obvious way. Everyone had their own special relationship with him, each very different from everyone else’s.

Early on I asked Swami if I should keep my eyes open or closed during meditation. He said I should keep them closed as otherwise I would be looking around and thinking about making changes and rearrangements to my surroundings. This was perfect, right-on advice, tailor-made for me, a person obsessed with visuals and order. And it’s true that while meditating at the temple, if I opened my eyes my mind would wander about the shrine imagining how I would simplify everything, reduce the number of flower vases, change the carpet, etc.

Although I never felt I could define or explain Swami, one of my perceptions was that he had been sent to the United States by Belur Math to ultimately head a center and to train interested people in the spiritual life. And that in accepting this, he did so one hundred percent, whether he wanted to or not. He was given the task, and he would fulfill it. He never ever went back to India. He rarely traveled anywhere. Perhaps a few times a year he might visit another center. Most Vedanta centers in the U.S. had no services during the summer—Portland had *more*: a Saturday service at the retreat, thirty or so miles away, in addition to the usual Sunday morning and evening services in town, and a couple of classes during the week. It was clear that, for the Portland center, there would be no vacations from the rigors of spiritual life.

Nor was Swami interested in participating in small talk of any kind. And the only time small talk was comfortably allowed among the devotees was after the daily worship or evening vespers while Swami was preparing prasad and the devotees would be waiting in the library or foyer. But if he heard us casually chatting at other times he would often say, “Enough talking—this is not a social club!” He was a one hundred percent hands-on guru, so much to be accomplished, so little time in which to do it. Unless he was away on one

of his rare out-of-town visits to another center, the atmosphere in the temple was always at a rarefied pitch.

This was very, very difficult for me. Growing up, although I had an easy relationship with my parents, I was thrilled to leave home and its constraints when I was nineteen, to travel on my own in Europe for a number of years, to call my own shots. Now, here I was giving up all that freedom. If J. and I were not going to be able to come to vespers, or Saturday and Sunday morning meditation, or any of the services or talks, etc. we felt compelled to call in. Swami never ever said no to whatever our excuse was. In fact he never said we had to call. Still, it was a given that we would call otherwise he'd be sure to ask us where we had been.

Swami, being the master of knowing the weak spots of his disciples, knew how to push all my buttons, and the main button had to do with my precious free time. To keep things up at home, the cleaning, cooking, garden, etc., and to maintain my schedule at the temple, plus a job, plus parents, created a lot of stress, at least after the first year or so had passed. I knew, in a rational way, that if I could just surrender to Swami's schedule, to give up my obsession with order, with *my* preferred way of doing things, life would be much smoother. I think Swami created these situations specifically to create tension, to accentuate the struggle, and to provide us a reason to go within, to *want* to surrender.

J. became treasurer of the Society. Following evening vespers and meditation, which ended about 7 PM, Swami would serve prasad and then talk with those of us who had attended. This usually went on to about 8 PM, following which J. might do some work on the books and I would do some of my librarian/book ordering duties. When we were finishing up and getting ready to leave, Swami would sometimes ask, "Can you mail a letter?" "Of course!" we would say. And of course, often the letter hadn't been written! Once it was handed to us, he would make clear it was to be taken to the eastside station, not just dropped into a nearby mailbox. And we still had dinner to prepare! The crazy thing is, if I had only gone to Swami and talked with him about this, told him I needed more time at home, I am sure he would have agreed. But it was up to me to ask for it, and I wasn't yet able to do so.

I don't remember specifically how many summers we went to the retreat on Saturdays to work, perhaps just a few at the beginning, before the new temple was completed. But J. and I would go early, along with about eight to ten other devotees. The men would do the heavy work; the women would work in the garden, or clean the temple, and every other Saturday I prepared a hot lunch. In the early afternoon Swami would arrive, bearing ice cream, often driven by Jim Selig.

I've thought that if Swami hadn't become a monk, he could have easily been a terrific defense lawyer, or prosecutor, or lively politician. He was interested in current affairs in those years and had a very dynamic presence. On one of these retreat afternoons during the height of the Vietnam War, as we sat around the table eating our ice cream in Brahmananda Hall, Swami began to go on about the war and said that the U.S. should just drop the atomic bomb! He may as well have dropped it in our midst. One devotee said,

“But Swami!” . . . and then being very worked up, burst into tears and had to walk out. Although I too was upset, I also felt (again, trying to interpret the inscrutable) Swami was just pulling our legs, pushing our buttons, getting us all riled up over something we had no control over, the big Maya, its seeming wars and injustices.

One of the men’s retreat projects was to rebuild the water tank at the top of a very high tower. J. was a good carpenter and was going to be involved in the project, and I was very worried he would fall and be killed. I went to Sanderson Safety Supply and bought him a special belt with clips and hold-ons and what all. Swami became aware of my concern and took J. off the climbing-the-tower portion of the project. So, hard as he could be, he was also very sensitive to our worries and could be unspeakably kind.

After we had been coming to the temple for a year or so, or maybe longer, we began thinking about renouncing the world, becoming monastics. This must have been after Belur Math gave approval for the Portland center to have a monastery. However, Portland did not have a convent. We talked about this with Swami, and he didn’t say no, or yes, rather, we were to think on it and he would think on it—we would see what developed. So, the ball was set in motion, and just the vague possibility that it might happen made me realize how much I really was not ready for such a radical move. I developed a terrific case of heartburn. What would I do? Would J. live at the temple and I would continue to work even though perhaps I might live with a few of the other women in a different house (Holy Mother’s House had not yet been purchased)? And whatever would become of our two cats, Big Kitty and Siva? That was the clincher. I stopped Swami in the hall and asked if I could speak with him. We went into the foyer and I told him I just couldn’t, couldn’t do it, couldn’t leave the cats! Swami said no problem, not to worry. And then he gave me some prasad.

In the late ‘70s, and through the ‘80s, Swami often would speak harshly about the actions of the US government, and about the foolishness of the American people in general, and he could be very colorful in these rants. They didn’t really bother me (since I pretty much agreed with him), but sometimes I wanted him to just cut it out. Once Sarada (now Swami Harananda), who was one of the few who would challenge Swami (at least that I ever personally saw), was standing outside the closed door of the men’s kitchen. Swami was within, and they were going at it—Sarada saying that Swami had just gone toooo far in his criticisms, etc. Swami telling him “Enough! Out of here! Leave this place!” But Sarada would persist. This had a quality of high comedy about it.

Another time, when I was cleaning on a Monday after work, Swami was having an argument with one of the young men who had been living there and who had just announced he was going to leave and move back East. I felt Swami was upset, that he sorely regretted losing someone. But he could also be so funny. The young man was upstairs, Swami down, pacing the length of the hall, raising his fist into the air, and shouting, “Blackguard! Ingrate!” Then he served me prasad, and as I sat in the hall by the telephone he passed by me and mumbled something to the effect that I should just ignore all this, it was only a show.

Perhaps in the early to mid-1970s, there was a movement afoot in the Oregon Legislature to tax churches that were not using all their properties for church-related, spiritual functions. Swami threw himself into making sure none of the Society's property, all tax exempt, would end up being taxable. At the retreat he initiated the building of shrines to various religions throughout the property, some of these very elaborate and beautiful (the design and construction being the duty of the men). And in town he initiated the School of Inter-Religious Understanding, which would meet on Friday evenings upstairs in what became Brahmananda Hall (a new weekly lecture!). I remember gathering there one evening before the class and Swami not being happy with the seating arrangement. He then had this or that person move to another chair, a change here, a change there. This sort of thing, creating a kind of havoc out of seemingly nothing, with us all obediently responding like small children, struck me as something only *we* could accept, understand, and appreciate. I would think, if an outsider got a view into this—if my friends in the outside world saw this—they would think we were certainly all hopelessly nuts. But Swami used every moment, every opportunity, to keep us on our toes, hopping, never too comfortable. Pujas could have a similar volatile atmosphere. Swami could get spiritual mileage out of anything and everything. He was a master at this.

Swami was also famously frugal with the Vedanta Society's money, and with our personal spending as well. (For J.'s and my monthly membership dues he designated \$2.00 each per month). One's inclination, if working on a temple-related project and some item needed to be purchased, was to just go out and buy it. *So* much easier, but one time when J. did purchase some small thing, Swami found out and was furious. He said he wanted to know "everything—from a pin to an airplane!" I don't think he really cared that much, as long as it were a small item—rather, it provided an opportunity for us to have to ask permission when our preference was to just forge ahead on our own.

I'm assuming anyone who reads this knows what Swami looked like. But for those who didn't know him: he was small in stature, had a very expressive (perhaps it was a very Bengali?) handsome face, bulbous nose, raccoon circles around his eyes, vigorous, black hair, and lovely skin (even into very old age). His eyes were small and dark, accentuated by the dark circles, and could have a far away look in them. He was completely uninterested in clothes or his personal appearance, particularly in his later years—wild, untended hair, the torn cuffs of his long underwear hanging out of the legs of his ancient trousers, spotted chuddar, holes in his sweaters, etc. In the early years I took a photo of him sitting at a little table, outside in the sun at the retreat. It was a good photo, and I showed it to him. He took a brief glance and said, "Just a pillowcase."

Swami, up into his early 90s (it seems) would still go out and work in the garden. In the earlier years I heard he would climb ladders and do pruning (this I never saw). But often I would see him in the summer watering the garden, and in the cooler weather, wearing what I called his aviator hat with ear-flaps, and his old brown gabardine coat, raking or sweeping using his one-armed method.

He was also a very good cook and had what every good cook needs, a fine sense of taste. He made for offering rice pudding, farina pudding, pilau, all of which were excellent. And

he cooked his own food until he was quite along in years. Sometimes when I was there cleaning, and if he were cooking for a puja, he would call me to the door of the kitchen, hand me a small plate with whatever he was preparing, and ask me to sample it, to say whether it needed more sugar, or more salt. This was a treat because one doesn't normally taste food before it is offered. He wouldn't taste it himself.

Another time, regarding cooking, he told me I should always first turn the heat up to high, watch it, and then when the pan was hot, to lower the heat (rather than to start out on low). Still another time, when I was cooking for the Saturday work crew at the temple chopping carrots and probably working away like a demon, he came to the door of the kitchen and said, "Slowly, go slowly."

Then, as now, there would be occasional visits to the temple by swamis from other centers in the U.S. or in India. One of the most memorable was a visit from Swami Sambuddhananda, who lived in India. He was about Swami Aseshananda's age, perhaps a little older, as he was senior to Swami. There was a dinner at the retreat with quite a few people sitting at an L-shaped table. Swami S. was talking about time, in the metaphysical sense, and smacking his hand on the table would loudly demand of Swami A., "Time! Time! What is the time?!" Although this seemingly had no bearing on the discussion, Swami A., being junior to Swami S., was very humble throughout, and would fumble with his watch, trying to see the time. The next evening in town, following a talk, I was standing at the bottom of the stairs. Swami S. came down with and behind Swami A., and said in a booming voice, with his arm extended before him, "He (meaning Swami A.) *leads* me!" Words don't convey how powerfully charged the atmosphere of these events could be.

In about 1973 J. and I decided to purchase a house. Knowing Swami might use a situation like this to put us through some exasperating hoops, we went ahead and closed on the deal before letting him know. And a year or so after this, J. told Swami he didn't want to be treasurer any more, or to have to come regularly to services and events. I expressed similar feelings, but asked Swami if I could come one evening a week after work to continue with my weekly cleaning duties. We didn't want to leave Vedanta or in any way end our relationship with Swami, but we did want our freedom from active participation. He was clearly unhappy with us, but accepted what we said, and agreed that I would continue with my duties. I was greatly relieved. It had been a rigorous six to seven years of spiritual boot camp with the most challenging drill sergeant one could imagine. I wanted to structure my own time. So began my regular Monday evenings at the temple that have continued to this day.

A year or so into this Swami said, "You should come to at least one lecture a month." I agreed, and tried to do this, but it seemed every time I turned around it was always that Sunday of the month, and after a short while I began to slack off. Time passed, and then on a Monday evening, after Swami had given me prasad and he was sitting in the hall by the telephone, I came out of the library and he looked at me and said, "You haven't been coming...." I raised my hands in a "what can I do gesture," looked at him, and, raising his right hand, palm forward, he said, "No restrictions, no restrictions." And then he

mumbled something about the Divine Mother, not wanting to anger her. Although it is possible he was just giving up on me, I felt strongly at the time, and still do, that he was actually granting me a wonderful boon.

I was immensely lucky to have met Swami and to have had him as my guru. I was a reluctant student in many ways and during his lifetime never appreciated my great good fortune. Now, looking back on his rigorous training methods I see what a positive and lasting impact every moment with him has had upon my life, my outlook, and my life together with J. Swami gave us solidity. He put *his all* into us.

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