

James Ferguson, MD, attended Swami Aseshananda at the Vedanta Society of Portland for the last eighteen months of Swami's life. Dr. Ferguson spoke at Swami's memorial service.

Written submission.

I've always appreciated the fact that I could work as a physician because it has allowed me to interact with people at a special time, that of sickness, life, death, crisis, when frequently stripped of the defenses and pretenses of day-to-day life.

I believe that people at this time are more revealing of their true human nature and I've been privileged to be able to be with them, to learn what it means to be a human being, by being able to assist them through trying times. It has been a challenge of mine to be able to try to know humanity better.

I consider our elderly population to be our royalty: those who have survived so much with such ingenuity, skill, and grace. So I looked forward to experiencing these revelations from Swami Aseshananda, to having this time with someone so revered and obviously filled with the unique life experiences I imagined him to have. As someone who has been present for two world wars, the development of automobiles, telephone, electricity, mass communication, Indian national independence, certainly he must have met some interesting people on his journey.

Well, I could not have anticipated nor imagined what I was getting into when I agreed to provide care for Swami Aseshananda. His wish was to remain in the monastery for the last days of this existence.

At that time I was intrigued by the opportunity to know someone like Swami and to get a glimpse of humanity that would be rare and priceless. (And besides, he once had one of my favorite diseases, malaria.) However, I learned very little about humanity from Swami because I think he was not of this world. He seemed to exist outside of the realm of humanity. For example, despite my experience as a physician, I found it very difficult to assess his physical body simply because he seemed to lack body-consciousness. I have met many who proclaim spirituality but none that could live it as the swami did.

I did not expect Swami Aseshananda to survive for very long, but he continuously surprised me in many ways. I watched as his residence slowly transformed to a rather sophisticated hospital room. Swami Shantarupananda and the devotees rose to every occasion and challenge to ensure Swami Aseshananda's mortal comfort. Although none were trained in healthcare, they readily and unselfishly learned and performed various techniques with a singularity of thought that had as its source service, respect, and devotion. It was incredible to watch how they responded to Swami. Sometimes Swami's interactions with the devotees in his room were tremendously humorous, and

there were a lot of surprises too in the way they'd react to things. Often the devotees would debate various things about his care and he once shouted to stop it, even though he was rather deaf.*

We survived many crises and Swami always chose life; his body wished to continue through these mortal trials. For instance, once I explained to him, "You are going to leave your body in a couple days if you don't eat or drink." So he said. "OK, I'll do it." But he didn't. Then I explained, "I could put a feeding tube down and provide nourishment and you could live longer." I truly expected him to say no, that he didn't want to do that. But he said, "OK, do it. Do what you think is best." When the nurse failed to get the tube in place, I thought that is what I should do based on his wishes and everybody else's. I told Swami it would be uncomfortable but he never said to stop. The process was quite incredible. In the end, I was drenched in sweat. There were five or six people there, and the relief and joy were almost impossible to describe. The sense was that everyone wanted him to be around longer.

Swami lived for six more months following this procedure but no longer came down to sit with the devotees after the lecture. There were times when I thought he'd be gone very soon [owing to his breathing pattern] but he continued his worldly existence for months after that. He'd be hard to communicate with, in and out of consciousness, but whenever he came into consciousness, he'd be crystal clear. He maintained his relationship with the devotees and one could see how he was cherished. At times he would thrive and make miraculous recoveries that spread joy through the temple.

I did not meet the swami until July 1995 and I didn't get to know him as many did, but I did get to know him *some* directly. I am grateful for that. But even more importantly, I learned about Swami Aseshananda through the devotees and Swami Shantarupananda, and I learned what they thought of Swami Aseshananda. Through that filter I received one united message from them. I have never seen such a generosity of love and devotion that I witnessed here. Many times I would just sit and watch the richness of the interactions that occurred and that nourished my soul.

Although I learned little about humanity from Swami Aseshananda, I believe I received something even more valuable. Even though real things happened that could be scientifically explained, I received a feeling from Swami that couldn't be measured or quantified, as we scientists like to do, something that I can't say that's ever happened before. It was completely meaningful. Even now, when least expecting it, Swami will be right there in my mind. So in different ways, Swami still keeps coming back to me.

Over time, I came to conclude that my life's real purpose was to provide care for Swami those eighteen months. As a down-to-earth, scientifically-oriented person, and non-believer of organized religion, I was honored to have been selected for this job. I had no idea I'd be exposed to something like this in my lifetime and how blessed I would be to care for him.

Swami has left a rich legacy with me and I will always cherish this memory. I have experienced a glimpse of a great soul. We were all blessed to have been in his presence.

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*[Editorial note: According to many observers, Swami apparently sensed what was happening in the room even though he couldn't hear well. Dr. Ferguson commented that such incidents also occurred during his watch. See also accounts by Ralph Stuart and Terrance Hohner.

Dr. Ferguson mentioned that Swami presented him with his chuddar. Because Swami Aseshananda cherished Swami Saradananda's chuddar (according to Gayatriprana), we could conclude that the gift of his own chuddar to Dr. Ferguson was an act of special significance.]