

Robert Geib, a disciple of Swami Prabhavananda, visited Swami Aseshananda numerous times from 1976 through 1994.

The following is excerpted from the author's "Reflections and Anecdotes on Swami Aseshananda from Aseshanandaland" written in response to the request for reminiscences.

"You can tell what you know."
(Swami Aseshananda, ca. 1980-81)

It was nice to know I could
Though I thought I never would
Then an angel whispered in my ear
 "Bob. These are autumn years!
Hear, 'Time's winged chariot hurrying near'
 Don't you think you should?"

Initial Contacts

It was at Swami Prabhavananda's memorial in July of 1976 that Swami Aseshananda was first brought to my attention. Gretchen, my wife, nudged me and said, "That's Swami Aseshananda from the Portland center. He was a disciple of Holy Mother." That was interesting, I thought, because Gretchen was the one who first set up the appropriate contact for meeting Swami Prabhavananda [their guru].

It was thought we would most likely not travel to Portland, where almost every month if there's not rain, then there's what spoiled San Diegans call "June gloom," or "gray May." Since Gretchen had an attraction to Holy Mother, she felt we should visit the Portland swami who was fast developing his own legacy. My mood about the trip was more subdued. I preferred, and was scheduled, to take another retreat at Olema surrounded by its 2,300 acres of trees, complete with a stillness that was steeped in silence. But as in all workable marriages, the two of us reached a compromise. I would fly to Olema for a week, and Gretchen would pick me up for the sojourn to Portland. Though admittedly, if I had my druthers, there would not have been a millimeter of movement north of Olema. It was a compromise I would not regret, a stellar call by Gretchen—or the Divine.

After our first visual contact with Swami Aseshananda in Hollywood, we formally met the Portland swami in September of 1976. He talked with us in the foyer maybe twenty minutes. I can't remember the beginning of the session, only that there was a feeling of being extremely relaxed, but about half way through, he told us our Chosen Ideals, I recall. That was surprising because within the Vedanta tradition, Chosen Ideals, mantras, and doing beads are kept personal. It was a clue that this fascinating monk was a bit of a maverick. While being attracted to Swami A, neither of us was particularly

attracted to the Portland Center, which was noisy and busy compared to the silent retreats we had taken at Olema. Both of us said we would never return, but just before leaving on that first trip, Swami stared me down for about five to ten seconds, and I found myself back there the following month. Over the next seven years, ten to twelve trips were made to the Portland center for stays of about one to three weeks. There was a very tangible feeling that with Swami's spiritual energy the path was becoming honed, making it more amenable, workable, hence more real. Gretchen and I were the perfect foils for Swami's talent. He seemed to like people who were already partially grounded in the life of the spirit. This teacher mentioned he did not like to take on students who were always out of a job—he looked for stability.

Aseshananda was a hands-on kind of guy. That is, he would not just give his disciples a mantra and throw them to the wolves. He would also operate in silence and had a spiritual hand that would reach all the way to San Diego. While he operated in silence, he would also stammer and yell at his students. He treated your spiritual infirmities on an individual basis, having the ability to look within the personality and see the assets and liabilities.

The Chat Session

Sometime in 1977, Swami A just walked up and said, "Let's talk." We sat down in the foyer, and he volunteered some facts about himself. After approximately twenty minutes into the session, I made the statement, "Well, it is a boon that you could come to this country and aid us in the meditative pursuit for ultimate truth." He responded with a statement that changed the tenor of the dialogue. He began shaking his head in the negative saying, "No, no, most people are not interested in liberation and doing meditation." He did not say it as a matter of fact but with a tone of mild despondency, yet infused with a universal acceptance. Many of us have experienced this swami as charming, inquiring, joyful or making a display of anger but rarely, if ever, despondent.

Before completing this section of the remembrance, I called Sarada (Swami Harananda) and confirmed the lack of generalized depression in Swami A's make-up. What bothered Swami A, we know, also bothered the monk who first attracted him to the spiritual path, Swami Brahmananda, who said something to the effect that "I can give liberation but have no takers. They just want potatoes, onions, and turnips." Once it became obvious that this was a major problem for Swami A, I would observe, over subsequent visits, how he worked at handling the problem of keeping his students motivated in the discipline of meditation. Here is one particular avenue that appealed to him:

Around 1982 or '83, there was a regular east coast visitor who was part of the intellectual subculture that focused on spiritual growth, transcendence and liberation. We were in the foyer as this intellectual, also a master of the phrase, barked out, "Swami does not have to indulge in movies, he has his own Laurel and Hardy right here in the monastery." Just about that time, Swami comes into the foyer and without missing a

beat moves into the question, “Would it be possible to have a group of intellectuals from all over the country to meet here and at the retreat for a symposium?” The visitor was surprised, but to this observer, it was a possible replay of those years when Swami A was an assistant to Swami P in Hollywood in the 1940s and ‘50s. What helped put that center on the map were some of the intellectual elite of the 20th century, such as Aldous Huxley, Christopher Isherwood, and Gerald Heard. It created an atmosphere that stimulated not just mystical thought and philosophy, which can only take one only so far, but more important, it could motivate a greater commitment to the meditative. As Swami A was first to admit, keeping his disciples motivated to meditate was a perpetual problem. I was just surprised he shared so much so fast during this chat session, which is just an indication of how much a problem it was to him. As will be seen, whenever there is a problem about meditation, you don’t have to ask for help. He simply reads your mind and shows up.

Swami A Answers Questions Yet To Be Asked

Prior to the next visit at the Portland Center, a question was formulated just in case we had another chat session. The day of our arrival, the President of the Vedanta Society, Stuart Bush, and I were drying dishes when he mentioned Swami was getting older and did not like to grant interviews. This was understandable and accepted, so the question was simply locked inside the mind—I thought. The question was simple and practical: “How can I improve and deepen meditation?” Then the day before leaving, while walking down the stairs, we met and he stopped and just said, “If you want to deepen your meditation, then make it come from the heart.” By “heart” I felt he meant to focus on the Presence within the Spiritual Heart (in contrast to a mere figurative expression of just more emotion). So we had this uncanny relationship where I would formulate a question, but not ask it, and a day or two before leaving we would meet on the stairs and he would give the answer . . . usually!

Exceptions were if Swami had one of his midnight classes. A midnight class was one of his eccentric and not always delightful pedagogic techniques. Since Ramakrishna taught his disciples at midnight, so Swami A would occasionally do the same. The trouble was he would never give a warning when this was to happen; he would just announce it two or three minutes before. A few minutes before midnight a monk would run through the dorm yelling, “Wake up, wake up, Swami’s midnight class, midnight class.” It was at the midnight class that he would talk and ask if you had any questions at that time. I would ask the questions which would mean there would be no meeting on the staircase.

Things happened at the Portland center. Good things happened—spiritual things—but you could not take any credit for it. There was always the feeling you had little control over the events. You frequently felt like a feather being blown around in the wind. Wordsworth comes to mind: “I made no vows, vows were made for me.”

At Least Make It A Challenge

Around 1979, during the noon meditation, the mind was in a wandering state, having just visited a record store. Some records were purchased, but some that were marginal were left while more thought was given as to whether they should be purchased at a later date. Movement of the mind was usual, but normally, after a few minutes, it was brought under reasonable control. Exceptions were these Portland stays, but on this particular day the mind, simply put, was a rascal.

Periodically, the visual mind would go back to the records' colorful covers, and the audio mind would be thinking and feeling music, not mantra. Toward the end of the hour, there was just a giving up—something that had not happened in thirteen years of meditation. Walking out of the shrine, most likely humming a tune, there was, sure as God made little green apples, Swami standing at the shrine entrance staring at me: "At least make it (meditation) a challenge." Geez, can't you keep anything from this guy? One thing was certain: his advice to "Make it a challenge" could not be followed at that time. It seemed too insensitive, cajoling, and contrived. To me it had to be felt, and the mind within the heart was not up to it.

Gradually, after another decade, when there was less identification with the mind and more with the consciousness that lights the mind, a challenge could be made. As long as there was identification with the mind, with its states and moods, it could not be treated like it is, which is just a thing. The mind may be elated or sad, but that is not "I." It was only when there was a substantial distance from the mind that it could be challenged like a foe and sometimes a friend.

By Swami reading this mind in the shrine and suggesting a challenge, his advice did eventually bear fruit. Some of us are just slow learners. It has been noticed with holy men that what they say sounds off-the-wall or impossible, but decades later, it seems not just to flower but to sprout wings, as the next story illustrates.

"You Can Tell What You Know"

Just before leaving to return home from another Aseshanandaland stay circa 1980-81, Swami stared not so much at me as through me. Then later, with just slight eye contact that was maybe quizzical or inquiring, the monk said, "You can tell what you know." Although the question arose in my mind "Relative to what?" there was not the presence of mind to ask it. It was as though I were mesmerized. Was he giving me permission to talk or write about the mystical, the meditative or maybe about him? Swami A's off-the-wall statement was not so much an order as an opinion. It was subliminally filed away until a quarter of a century later.

It was decided recently to entitle a book that was in the process of being written *The Mystical and the Meditative*, which recalled the Portland Swami. Shortly after, a devotee friend of ours, Carolyn Kenny, passed away and I wrote several pages about her upa [secondary] guru, Swami A, in her memory. Several months later a request came to

write reminiscences about Swami A for this volume. So Swami's statement that appeared irrelevant and off-the-wall took on meaning with its uncanny air of the inevitable.

Swami Aseshananda Shows—Not Tells—About Mantric Tempo

This is yet another story on meditative help with the Portland swami . . . to the rescue. It is also a favorite story about this veteran of mantric enchantment, because it is *so* Swami A!

After nine or ten visits to Aseshanandaland, it was well known just to think a question, especially on meditation, and the student would receive an answer one way or another. It was suspected when this mind framed the question, "I wonder what Swami is doing on mantra flow?" that we would meet on the staircase several days before parting, and he would give an answer.

Instead of waiting until parting, we had the encounter at the Scappoose retreat on a day when members and their friends were invited for a lecture followed by lunch. Arriving twenty minutes early, it was decided to enter the lecture hall and meditate. Before the eyes would close, just as sure as God made the rising, smiling, shining sun, Swami walks out with gusto on the lecture platform. This 80 year-old guy could walk as fast as he could talk. Here was a man with a mission as he sat down in a chair, dug into his pocket and pulled out a large rosary. The thought occurred, "Surely he is not going to make a public display of doing his beads in front of God as people trickle in." He was short, the chair was low, and the rosary was long, so it may have cleared the floor by no more than several inches.

What amazed was the transition from his quick movements of walking to the gentle and peaceful mood that transpired as he began the japam. Some facial lines seemed to disappear, making him appear several years younger. The most captivating feature of this mantric episode at Scappoose is how slowly he was churning out the japam via the rosary. It was like molasses in January. Yet, it was impossible to technically determine the tempo because it was not known how many syllables were in his mantra. If there were only five syllables, it was slo-mo [motion]. On the other hand, if the mantra had ten syllables, it was still very slow. It was not really clear at this stage whether his message of show was "This is the way I do it or this is the way you should do it."

Swami Aseshananda had the ability to look into this writer's mind although I did not have the talent to view his. On this occasion, however, it was as if he opened up a channel where his spiritual pulse could be felt. This is not to say that the technical syllables could be picked up. It was more like being at a concert where someone like [Zubin] Mehta or [Herbert] Von Karajan were giving the downbeat to an 80-piece philharmonic orchestra during Beethoven's 5th. You would feel the visceral impact of fate in the opening four notes—da da da Dee—without knowing they were three Gs and an E^b.

What I learned from his message for purposes of future japam was to elongate the syllables, creating a slower flow, thereby producing a legato [smooth] effect. The result was less of a mechanical presentation and more of a musical or chanting mood. After five minutes of mantric message, he popped up as fast as he sat down, and with a speed walker's pace, left the lecture platform.

I Can See, Feel and Hear This Old Swami

I am not embarrassed to say after all these years
The mind hits a point about two hours in the AM sit
 Where a slight fatigue begins to set in.

Before there is a blessing of a second wind,
 Words and phrases seem to bubble up
 From the deep underground within,
Only to surface on a Lighted sea of Consciousness.

To be gone . . . gone . . . gone with these lines
That clutter, clatter and chatter clogging the mind,
 Ever so quickly becoming verse and song.

Would you believe more haste is put into
 The mantric pace attempting to push out
This spontaneous art of the mind into oblivion?

Grace does ascend and descend in the mind's eye
As I can see Swami A . . . I can see old Swami A
 As he extracts out every nanogram of Bliss
 That's intrinsic to his mantra.

I can feel this disciple of Sarada Devi from Jayrambati
 Gracing every bead with a Beauty and Unity
As if he were caressing a priceless pearl necklace.

On special days when the third ear is in tune
 With a realm that is neither here nor there,
“A” can be heard saying, “Bob . . . forever take heed,
 I am not telling you, I am showing you.”
 And did he ever.

The Wool Gloves

It was during a lecture in 1982 that Swami's clothes looked . . . well . . . ragtag. We had been informed by Carolyn Kenny [a devotee] that Swami A had been given some

apparel by friends he dearly respected and would not part with the duds . . . ragtag or not. A thought occurred, "Wouldn't it be a boon to have an article of apparel from this holy person for our shrine?"

About two months later, Carolyn Kenny was at Trabuco when a young gentleman gave her a package. He asked her if she knew Bob Geib. When she replied, "Yes," he asked her to give this package to me, as it was from Swami Aseshananda. To my surprise it was a pair of his wool gloves.

The Most Important Event In Life After Metaphysical Liberation

A day or two before leaving during a visit in 1982, we had our last encounter on the stairs. A question had been raised in the mind as to what does Swami A feel is the most significant event in life other than metaphysical liberation? As he motioned me over he said in a serious voice, almost on the QT, "The most important event in life is death!" Then the question was asked, "Swami, what do you mean by death, the actual moment of death or after death?" He was very emphatic: "After death is too late." As his voice mildly crescendoed, his hand gestured upward.

Swami Aseshananda, as a yogi, was talking very specifically and technically about the moment of death when breathing becomes shallow and the last breath will be followed by death of the mind-body complex. It is that second or nanosecond before death that the yogis are concerned about.

Swami Aseshananda wanted his disciples to be armed with the NAME for the mind/body's date with death. His message was: don't be late, don't be late . . . rather, be aware. The rishis of ancient India had a prescription for this timely preparedness. What was this yogic prescription? Simply put, whether eyes are closed or in an open state, "Meditate, meditate, meditate."

Excerpts from a 1996 Letter

In 1996 Mr. Bush called to say Swami had left the body. Three paragraphs from a letter I sent to the monastery are listed below:

1. It's not difficult to see and hear Swami Aseshananda in one's visual and auditory imagination almost shouting out "Holy Mother this and Holy Mother that," and "Man can transcend those Kantian categories of space, time, and causality, but only through the Grace of the Divine Mother."
2. As a former percussionist, it would be easy to notice a certain cadence in his voice. I used to think of him as a physically petite spiritual pied piper, who was an Agent of Grace where time encounters Eternity.
3. I could tell after our third visit that Swami Aseshananda had a way of rounding off a devotee's rough edges which would then give him or her greater control over the

passions. He did this work sometimes with words but more often he operated in silence at night when this mind was in deep sleep.

Conclusion: One Image, One Thought, and One Poem

When penning an article on a soul of this magnitude, philosophical and psychological insights automatically surface. They pale in comparison to just a meditatively held image that quickly brings his Presence into the NOW, touching ever so slightly, yet profoundly, the mind with Light.

A thought surfaced several weeks ago when working on this project that can't be intellectually developed here but can be stated something like this:

The Guru is the Universal with personal implications, whereas the Upa Guru is personal with Universal implications. At this point such a statement only makes sense to me on an intuitive level. That is why when attempting to develop a communicative mode on the subject, a more intuitive medium would simply be to lay down some lines, not in poetic metre but in mantric metre. Knowing full well that metaphysically there is no writer, only writing, and leaving it at that . . . as in "Thou Art That"

An Ode to the Upa Guru

I knew a maverick yogi short in stature
But long on devotion, commitment, japam
And meditation to the Devi within.
Giving . . . Giving . . . Giving he knew no end.

He could ride the wave at the highest Crest
Spiritually hanging ten with the best of them.
I watched years in the fascination and transformation.
A giant living the Crest Jewel of Discrimination.

He could ride the Infinite Spiritual Surf
To the Timeless Mystical Altar
In his own patented way like few others.
Bowing down . . . down . . . down
Dissolving into the Universal Mother.

Submitted Spring 2008