

Gisela Manley began her association with Swami Aseshananda in 1962 as the child of devotees Ingrid and Keith Voget. Initiated in 1986, Gisela describes her ongoing connection with Vedanta as life-enriching beyond measure. Gisela resides in Redding, California.

Written submission.

I met Swami Aseshananda in 1962 when I was eight years old. Being a child, I took this experience in stride while recognizing that Vedanta and Swami were wonderfully different from anything I had ever experienced. I felt welcome and accepted at the Vedanta center even though I was a mere child. Even at that age I enjoyed going to the temple with my parents. I especially enjoyed the temple in Scappoose (with its “ice cream cone” shaped roof).

Swami Aseshananda contributed much to those happy childhood experiences. He surely had a special place in his heart for children. This was readily apparent to my sisters and me. For instance, Swami treated us with a great deal of patience and kindness. He always made a point of allowing us to be placed first in line for “prasada” after each Sunday service, announcing “Children first, children first” with his kindly smile. I remember Swami would be engaged in conversation with adults, but he always seemed to find time to acknowledge us. Swami’s manner made us feel very good about ourselves. I loved Swami then as only a child can love. I also revered Swami but always felt comfortable around him and always looked forward to seeing him.

We children would attend the Sunday services with the adults. Although I did not always understand what Swami was saying, I always found comfort in his chanting. To this day, I can hear his voice intoning, “Lead us from the unreal to the real, from darkness into light, from death into immortality. Om shanti, shanti, shantihi.” This still brings me great comfort.

My parents took us to the Vedanta center many, many Sundays until I turned sixteen when our family moved to California. We did not see very much of Swami then. He would, from time to time, come to stay with us on his way to San Francisco, making use of a separate cabin. We looked forward to these times and enjoyed his visits immensely.

Over the years as I became an adult, my relationship with Swami Aseshananda became more reserved. However, I still carried much love for him from my childhood; I never doubted that Swami cared about my sisters and me. Much of this, I think, was due to the fact that we were some of the first children to attend the Portland Vedanta center. So when I moved back to Portland at the age of 22 (in 1976), I began attending the center again.

After marrying and moving away from Portland, I did not see much of Swami. However, Vedanta and its beliefs were deeply ingrained and so in 1986, during a time of crisis, I called upon Swami Aseshananda. Swami counseled me and asked me if I would like to be initiated. Swami told me “Holy Mother says that you are a good girl!” Swami initiated me, and my initiation, to this day, has profoundly affected my life.

An incident occurred following initiation that I have never forgotten. Swami had always treated me with great patience and kindness. Suddenly, he spoke very sharply to me, asking whether I had returned an item to one of the residents of the women’s house. I replied that I had not returned it yet. Swami spoke to me very sharply, and told me that I must return this item *immediately*, that I must learn *responsibility*; that I must *be a responsible person*. I felt deeply wounded, and I had a very difficult time coping with this treatment. I truly did not understand what Swami meant at the time. However, over the years, it has become very apparent to me what he meant. Swami *knew* that this was an area that I really needed to work on. Although I thought I was doing all right in this area, Swami knew I wasn’t. That is why he spoke so sharply to me. So powerful was his impression that I have never forgotten the incident. Whenever I hear him internally repeating his advice exactly as before, I begin paying attention to what needs correcting.

Returning to Portland in 1995, I attended Vedanta services with my mother when Swami was elderly and physically frail. The last time we saw Swami was a few days before his passing and Swami was literally fading away from us. My mother and I were ushered into his room and Swami recognized my voice. He raised his head slightly from the pillow and said to us, “May Holy Mother bless you all.” Then Swami put his head back down on his pillow. This is my last memory of him. It has meant so much to me, over the years, to remember Swami giving us this blessing.

I hope it is apparent to all who read this how profoundly Swami Aseshananda has influenced my life. I am 55 years old now and still feel very connected to Swami. I feel very blessed to have met him and to have been initiated by him. I will always be grateful to Swami for the loving kindness he showed me as a child, and for the guidance he gave me as an adult. I will always be grateful to my parents for having introduced me to Vedanta as a result of their spiritual search, and for laying this very precious gift before me. My experience with Swami Aseshananda and Vedanta has enriched my life beyond measure.

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