

Swami Harananda, a monk at the Vedanta Society of Portland, maintained a continuous association with Swami Aseshananda, his guru, from 1955 through 1996.

Interview, Vedanta Society of Portland.

[Swami Harananda began the interview with a chant that he translated as: “This is full, that is full, when fullness is taken away from fullness, all that remains is fullness.”]

SH: My first interest in Vedanta was not, oddly enough, through Swami Aseshananda, but mainly through the swami who preceded him, Swami Devatmananda. That was only for a very short time. I was probably about 14 or 15 years old at the time, and I would skip school—because I was a restless kid, not a good student—and went one day to the Multnomah Country Library. Going through the stacks there were many, many books on Eastern thought and Hinduism. I took one book out called *Hinduism Comes to America* and that so enthralled my mind that I decided that I’ve got to find a place to explore these ideas! The book, first of all, was written by Swami Gnaneshwarananda of the Chicago center in the 1930s to introduce Americans to the Vedanta movement here in the United States. There was a name and address in the book itself—that of Swami Devatmananda: 1877 SW Park. So I went there and I had a couple of interviews with Swami Devatmananda in around 1950 or ‘51.

In the second interview with Swami Devatmananda, he said, “Try to see God everywhere you look: in walls, in people, in nature, in birds, in dogs. Everywhere you look, try to see God.” He said it in such a way that I was convinced that the man knew what he was talking about.

I went into military service, went to Korea, and came out; by that time Swami Devatmananda was very, very ill because he had served about 23 years in the United States—it was very hard work. So I heard his last lecture, and was really crestfallen when he said, “I have to go back.” In my mind I had said that I would stick with this small group of people because my whole heart had been changed. There was nothing in Christianity for me, particularly in the Baptist—let alone the Catholic—church. But I still wanted to become a monk.

EW: So what year would this have been?

SH: December, 1954. We waited, and Swami Aseshananda came in February of 1955. He was met by three people at the train station: Mr. Tom, who was president of the society, his wife, Mrs. Tom, and another devotee. Swami was coming from the Los Angeles Center where he’d been for five years.

EW: How did he strike you when you saw him?

SH: I was very taken with him because the center had a swami again! I could go to the lectures again!

EW: Did you feel anything powerful or magnetic about him?

SH: Not at that time. It happened about three or four lectures later. In one of those lectures, Swami seemed to be looking directly at me as he gave a saying of Christ: “Sell all that one hast, and give to the poor, and follow me.” I was enthralled at that point because I wanted to do that! But it wasn’t possible then to come live at the temple. I was still living with my parents and was undecided. So I waited, and then one day Swami said to me, “So what are you doing now? Why don’t you come here and stay.” I told him, “Well I’m living with my mother and I would like that very much!”

So I did. A date was arranged, a week before Durga puja, an auspicious time to start a new life, in 1955. He scolded me because I was late for the lecture. I had moved in, I was tired, and had a good sleep; when I woke up and realized I heard this voice downstairs, and it was *him*! So I came on downstairs with the lecture over. He said, “If you do that again you’ll have no place here!” That was my first scolding.

EW: He didn’t really offer initiation, according to Vera Edwards, until he’d been in Portland for about three years.

SH: I wasn’t initiated until about four years later.

EW: So could it be that Vera and her sisters were initiated before you?

SH: Yes. That’s right.

EW: Was that because they were coming before you?

SH: No, Swami had his way of having people wait until the time was right.

EW: So you were in your mid-twenties when you first met Swami. How did he behave towards you—after all, you were a young potential monk? Did the scolding accelerate rapidly after that or was he sweet to you?

SH: Oh, he was very sweet and nice. In fact, one day he said, “I think we should go to a movie.” So I went to a movie with him and a lady devotee who accompanied us. This happened about three times, then Swami said, “That’s enough.” By that time Mr. Bush had moved in and other devotees were coming.

EW: And which location was this?

SH: 1877 SW Park. It was a house. It was actually a *temple*—in a three-story house built around 1925. Very convenient: on the first floor was the chapel, and on the second floor were rooms where Swami lived along with another older devotee and myself. And then there was a third floor for men devotees who would stay over.

EW: Were you working at the time to pay your rent?

SH: Yes, JK Gill Company. A stock clerk was all.

EW: So how did the training continue? You mentioned Swami was sweet towards you in the beginning.

SH: That's true. Mr. Bush and about five others were going to the movies and invited me along. Swami said that my participation wasn't necessary. "Don't go!" That brought some conflict because I wasn't a part of their group anymore.

EW: But at that point you hadn't committed to becoming a monk, yet you were separated. Was Swami observing your nature?

SH: Right, right.

EW: When did you get your first really harsh scolding?

SH: I think the first day I moved in.

EW: It was for neglecting to attend the function at the center, correct?

SH: That was it. But it's hard [to remember] because those scoldings disappeared in my mind. I can't recall much about them. In those scoldings I felt he was my father, mother, everything—so he couldn't get rid of me in any way, shape, or form! I stuck to him like Elmer's Glue! That's the way I felt. I was committed to being with Swami, to serving Swami: *monastic life wasn't the chief focus, it was Swami who was*. I felt as if I didn't want to leave. He could say anything he jolly well pleased, but it wouldn't faze me much.

EW: How did the strangeness of Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother strike you growing up in Oregon—did it seem like imported Hindu culture? One of the people interviewed said it was so foreign she couldn't enter the shrine for a year.

SH: For me, Swami made it *natural* through day-to-day contact. The shrine was on the second floor, near our rooms. So living at the center was far different than being an outsider who visited the shrine. And Swami made the atmosphere of the shrine a *living reality*.

EW: Did he do something to enhance the atmosphere?

SH: Swami changed the way the altar was set up. Instead of having Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother, and Vivekananda on the same level, he thought that Holy Mother would not like that. So he asked the older important members who regularly went to the shrine and pujas, saying, “Mother would not like to be on the same level as Sri Ramakrishna.” Swami had Sri Ramkrishna on the top level, Holy Mother next, then Mother’s footprints on the lower level with Swami Vivekananda on the left and Swami Brahmananda on the right [same level as the feet]. The older members agreed. Swami was kind to the older members and took their feelings into consideration.

Once there was a long-time devotee of Swami Devatmananda who wanted to impress Swami. She did something that Swami Aseshananda felt was not in keeping with what Swami Devatmananda had told her, and he said to her very gruffly, “You are his disciple, you should do what he instructed!” So she didn’t try to impress Swami Aseshananda any further. *Swami did not care for people trying to impress him!*

EW: Did he make this remark out of love for the devotee?

SH: He said this out of deep respect for Swami Devatmananda and the work he did for the Portland center.

EW: Are there any incidents that are particularly memorable over the decades you lived with Swami?

SH: In the 1980s Swami received a telegram from one of his gurubhais [fellow monastic initiated by the same guru] requesting him to go to India for the first monks’ conference held since 1929.* He was walking up and down the shrine porch, and then he came in, and Mr. T said he saw Swami touch Holy Mother’s picture that he brought from Colombo, I believe. Then Swami came indoors and I saw him go half way up the steps to the second floor. He stood there for about two minutes and went back up. Then he went through his door, and then he came out and told Mr. Bush, “Please send this telegram saying that Swami Saradananda [Swami’s beloved mentor in India] has asked me to come to the United States to do work here and I wish to stay.” And that was it. They couldn’t force him to go back because he happened to be senior to all the swamis at the time.

As he stood there, it was as if Holy Mother were there, telling him, “Stay on, stay on, my son.” Holy Mother was no longer physically there, in India, nor were his fellow swamis, nor Saradananda; so he felt as if Swami Saradananda had requested him to come to the US, and that was a *mandate*. [Editorial note: Many commented on Swami’s utter devotion to the devotees of his center, so much so that he never once returned to visit India.]

EW: Others also have reported seeing Swami in an exalted state. Has that ever happened in a public situation?

SH: Yes, once we were having a class on the Upanishads. We were each to have our own text because he'd said, "I want you to follow along with me." A devotee was, I think, sitting in the front row. He was lecturing, and then he turned to her and said, "Stop that, look up here! Your trouble is that you're trying to read and you should be following what I say. *This is where the power is!*" [Editorial note: In a later discussion about Swami's statement Harananda confirmed this was a rare instance when Swami Aseshananda referred to himself as a source/channel of spiritual power.]

So after the lecture Swami Aseshananda said, "All those who are here that wish to can come to the shrine," because it was our tradition to have vespers afterwards. We went into the shrine and he did an unusual ritual known as "sprinkling of the water of peace." He sprinkled water from the water pot on everybody and repeated mantras. I saw him kneel down, touch Holy Mother's picture first, about three or four times, then Holy Mother's feet [footprints] about three times. Then afterwards, he said, "Everybody who is here, know that they have a mother to turn to." He did this as a blessing and to give assurance that whatever trouble people have in life, they can always turn to Holy Mother. *He was very inspired and the whole atmosphere was just surcharged!*

EW: Turning to another subject, how did your relationship with Swami evolve over the decades?

SH: It evolved on a very natural basis—as it would in any relationship, through interaction, the day-to-day things, the questions, and things like that. The conclusion was that I could trust this man *implicitly*. No ifs, ands, or buts! He is as solid as a wall and he would never desert me. And he would never desert *anybody else*—regardless if they were mad at him, if they went away, and came back years later. When they came back, it was as though they had never left!

EW: Yes, I had that experience of being welcomed despite disappearing for long periods.

SH: He was always a friend. You should have seen him the first time a woman devotee was expecting a child. My God, he was like a mother. He would say, "Don't strain yourself, sit here." And then he would get some special prasada, or he might even make some payesh [rice pudding] for her.

When a young swami would come, he'd be very busy in the kitchen, making kitcheri and payesh, and he'd serve that swami. This was somewhat embarrassing for the junior swami because it was the junior swami that should be serving him. Swami Aseshananda was imbued with the Mother aspect that he always exemplified.

EW: How did Swami teach the devotees?

SH: Swami's whole life was concentrated on helping the "children"—the people who came to Vedanta. He was responsible, like a mother hen, making sure all those chicks stayed in line. You couldn't tell that he was giving instruction because it occurred as natural conversation. [Editorial note: Some commented that they would feel transformed and relieved of burdens during the course of such normal interaction.] Swami might also teach though a command like, "Don't do that, no I don't want you to." We automatically accepted this instruction and learned from it.

EW: Can you tell the story about how Swami asked you to leave the monastery?

SH: Oh that! Well, he was upset with me. I'd done something and I couldn't figure out why he was upset—maybe it was something I had said. Anyway, he said, "I want you to leave the temple and I want you to leave now!" I said, "OK, Swami, I will do that because you have commanded me. I'll tell you what I will do. I will go out the door, down these steps, cross the parking lot, go one foot beyond. And then I'll come back." And that's exactly what I did! When I returned, I told him what I did and he said, "Shut up!" [Swami Harananda laughs.]

There's another story too. During my earlier days, to show my commitment to him, I said, "Swami, Sri Ramakrishna can throw me out, and I'll be back, Holy Mother can tell me to leave and I'll be back, the whole Order can be against me and I'll be back, you can tell me anything you want but I'll be back because I'm stuck to you like Elmer's Glue.

EW: What did Swami say?

SH: He just smiled.

EW: Can you tell me something about monastic life?

SH: We had some difficulties with Swami Asehananda because he wasn't too practical as far as property work and maintenance. In fact, for building the shrines, he gave us a budget of only \$50 for each shrine [at the Scappoose retreat]! We had to *really* do a lot of head-scratching. Atmajayananda found some very good solutions for us. [Editorial note: One of the shrines reportedly was allotted a slightly larger budget.]

The first shrine we'd been asked to make was to Holy Mother. The shrine project started in response to the county's attempts to tax us. We had to demonstrate that we were not selling timber but were a legitimate religious site. So we'd go out to the retreat, spend three days there after the Sunday lecture, and return by Wednesday for the class. We couldn't leave our equipment out at the worksite; we had to carry everything back to the retreat temple for safekeeping every time we went out there. It was a long walk to the shrine we were building and we had to carry all our equipment out there.

EW: Speaking of practical matters, have you heard the story about Swami mowing the lawn when it was covered in ice?

SH: No, but I don't doubt that. When he got his mind set on something—like mowing the lawn—that was it! You could tell him about the weather conditions, that it was raining, but no—he was going to go out there and mow the lawn!

EW: Pavrajika Brahma-prana wrote that Swami wore a unique expression on his face when mowing the lawn, owing to his concentration on a particular verse from the scriptures.

SH: Very likely, and by the way, he had a unique way of mowing the lawn! Wherever he pointed the lawnmower, he would go.

EW: So it wasn't terribly methodical?

SH: It was *not* methodical! [Laughter]

EW: What do you think Swami's essential teachings were? Many people say, "He's all Mother," whereas I heard him express non-duality. What was he really teaching?

SH: Brahman alone is real and there is no other existence. And that expression was realized through the manifestation of Holy Mother. She is the practical approach, what we naturally gravitate to. We naturally think of the Holy Mother—the maternal aspect of the godhead—in our actions, in the way we do things, like that. She's someone we can turn to constantly. Whereas with Sri Ramakrishna, it is a little more difficult; he is a father figure, a little more stern. So we can more easily go to the Mother, cry to her, and she'll put her arm around our shoulder, and wipe away our tears. But our mind is constantly thinking of her, so I think it was more natural of Swami to introduce Holy Mother to the devotees and those who are under him—as a constant reminder of something that is higher.

EW: Did Swami promote Sri Ramakrishna as much as Holy Mother?

SH: Oh yes, but he was more the ideal for the monks. Holy Mother was also the ideal for the monks, but mostly for the householders.

EW: So Swami's teaching was non-duality as represented by Holy Mother: she was the embodiment of the non-dual principle?

SH: Yes, that was the hidden aspect of Mother. But householders needed someone to go to, to unburden themselves. And that's what Swami exemplified in his life.

Winter 2008

* * *

*[Editorial note: This event was probably the 1980 Monks' Conference held in Belur.]

Addendum: In talking with Swami Harananda in January 2009 during an especially cold period, he related an incident in which Swami Asehananda once made use of similar weather conditions to further train him. Harananda narrated how Swami Asehananda called him out of the shrine during a freezing windstorm to tie up some rhododendrons. Harananda then argued that such plants obtain their full strength by resisting the elements. Swami Asehananda was unrelenting, so Harananda went out into the icy wind as instructed. Harananda added: "When finished tying up the rhodies it was much better than meditating in the comfortable atmosphere of the shrine and brought tranquility to the mind that was not achieved in the shrine otherwise." Email 1/31/09.