

## HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

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*Written submission.*

### Excerpts from [Ramakrishna Vedanta in Southern California: 1899-2009](#)<sup>1</sup>

Swami Aseshananda (1899-1996) tells us:

I was attracted to Vedanta when I first met Swami Turiyananda, a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna in Banaras.... His words gave me courage. His personality gave me assurance. My hesitant steps became steady. I made up my mind not to falter. That day I made the final decision to renounce, and embrace the monastic order of Sri Ramakrishna.<sup>2</sup>

Aseshananda became a direct disciple of Holy Mother, receiving initiation in 1917 at the Udbodhan before he became a monastic. He later had the unique distinction of being her last known living disciple. About Holy Mother he often said:

I bow down in reverence to Holy Mother because what she has done for me, I cannot express.... She has become the source of strength, the source of knowledge, and the source of my infinite realization. Through her grace I have seen Her face, I have touched her feet. I long for release so that I can realize the highest truth in this very life.

A DVD titled “Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi” is sold by the Vedanta Catalog in Hollywood, California, where he tells us about his personal experiences with Holy Mother and some of the other direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna that he met.<sup>3</sup>

Aseshananda then served as the personal secretary and attendant (he said “bodyguard”) 1921-27 for Swami Saradananda (1865-1927), a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna and the General Secretary of the Ramakrishna Order, and in 1923 received sannyas from the Swami. He related, “Whenever I went to Swami Saradananda with a distressing thought, a few words from his lips would soothe me. His presence would bring cheer and hope to my soul.”<sup>4</sup> In India Saradananda told him and other monastics:

The Master chooses his own men and women. We are mere instruments in his hands. It is a privilege to work under his banner. In America he already prepared the ground for me; I was not alone. He brought to me men and women of exalted character who helped me in our work and bore the great love for our Master.<sup>5</sup>

After working at the Varanasi Advaita Ashrama and the Madras Students' Home in India, he assisted Swami Nikhilananda at the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center of New York during the period 1947-49. This tour of duty was followed by a brief stay at the Vedanta Society in Boston in 1949 for a few months, and then onto Southern California from October 1949 until February 2, 1955.<sup>6</sup>

During Swami Prabhavananda's absence in India, from October 1949 to July 1950, Swami Aseshananda was placed temporarily in charge of the Santa Barbara, Hollywood and Trabuco operation. In 1949, Swami Rudrananda visited the Southern California Vedanta Society during his trip from India. After leaving he wrote a letter to Aseshananda in November stating, "Glory to Swami Prabhavananda Maharaj, who has done wonderful service with his hard work and great tapasya."<sup>7</sup> Prabhavananda left for India in anticipation of selecting a new monastic to assist him in Southern California. It was thought that Swami Nityabodhananda would come to Southern California, and Aseshananda would return to Providence. Instead, after Prabhavananda returned from India, Aseshananda remained as a permanent assistant minister. At that time, Aseshananda was transferred to Trabuco to be the resident spiritual head of the monastery. He spent most of his time there. During 1950, a large photograph of Sri Ramakrishna was installed in the meditation chapel at Trabuco. Besides executing their daily chores, the monks also performed a noon ritualistic worship and an evening arati service in the chapel. Prabhavananda came to Trabuco once every two weeks, and generally stayed for a three-day stretch.

Aseshananda provided weekly public Sunday lectures in Laguna Beach held at the American Legion Hall on Sunday evenings from October 1, 1950 to June 24, 1951. At the inaugural speech Christopher Isherwood, who then lived in Laguna Beach, provided a ten to twelve-minute introduction to the Swami's speech. After the talk, Aseshananda conducted a discussion during which the audience asked questions about Vedanta. According to the "Bulletins Database," Aseshananda shifted his lecture location from Laguna Beach to the Trabuco Monastery, to present weekly year-around Sunday lectures September 9, 1951-January 23, 1955, and biweekly lectures in San Diego during December 5, 1954-January 30, 1955. On the historic day of September 9, Aseshananda delivered the first public lecture at the Ramakrishna Monastery on the subject, "Vedanta and Modern Man." About fifty people were in the dining hall for the event, and afterwards commented that the Swami spoke beautifully. Several books were sold, and some people visited the shrine room. The Trabuco Monastery lectures were advertised in the *Santa Ana Register* in 1951, and again in 1965 as "Open to the Public." As early as October 10, 1954 Swami Prabhavananda was lecturing in Trabuco.<sup>8</sup>

In May of 1952, Swami Prabhavananda received an invitation to speak before a study group led by Dr. Peter Lee of San Diego Community College. He was asked by the thirty-six invited people to wear his monastic robes. The attendees asked Prabhavananda intelligent questions, and Dr. Lee presented him with a book of his. Shortly after, Dr. Lee and his party picked up Aseshananda to deliver a lecture before their study group in

San Diego. A year later on August 9, Dr. Lee arranged an address by Aseshananda before the Theosophists in San Diego. Judith Tyberg who produced some books on Sanskrit, appreciated his lectures and consequently visited the Trabuco Monastery later in the month. A year later they invited Aseshananda to speak again before the Theosophists in August of 1954. He delivered a series of eight evening lectures in San Diego between October 10, 1954 and January 16, 1955. They met on Sundays at Bard Hall, on the corner of Sixth and Beech. The building is no longer in existence. A Mrs. Theobold described Swami Aseshananda as a “wonderful, dear man” who was nothing for show. Her husband, a professor at San Diego State University, also attended the oral presentations.<sup>9</sup>

The Holy Mother birth centenary was celebrated on July 17, 1954 at the Sri Sarada Convent in Santa Barbara. Swami Prabhavananda performed the worship service, dedicating the newly redecorated shrine room. Swamis Aseshananda (Southern California), Pavitrananda (New York: Westside) and Vividishananda (Seattle), and Dr. Floyd Ross, professor of Church History and World Religions at the University of Southern California attended the puja. Following the worship service, the visitors gathered under an outdoor cluster of olive trees on the convent grounds. Aseshananda told of the “events leading to his initiation by the Holy Mother. He indicated that as ideal healer and teacher, Holy Mother has raised the status of women all over the world.” Two probationary nuns were initiated into brahmacharya the previous day.<sup>10</sup>

Before leaving Portland in 1929, Swami Prabhavananda told the congregation, “They should not look upon his leaving as a farewell, since I will continue to have an active interest in the Portland Centre.” He founded and led the Portland Center 1925-29, and then trained Vividishananda to be his successor. Prabhavananda spent over three weeks in 1932 in Portland preparing Devatmananda to take control of the organization. During July-August 1954 Prabhavananda journeyed to Portland to take part in the dedication of the new Temple at the ashrama there. After Devatmananda returned to India in 1954, Prabhavananda arranged for Aseshananda to be the new head of the Portland Center. He understood his greatness and remarked, “I couldn’t have asked for a better assistant than Swami Aseshananda; I’ve seen so many Swamis!” They differed in age by only six or seven years, knew Holy Mother and some of Sri Ramakrishna’s disciples, and had a similar Bengali background.<sup>11</sup>

After spending five years in Southern California, Aseshananda assumed direction of the Vedanta Society of Portland from February 1955 until 1996, and eventually became the dean of the Indian Swamis in America until his death. Following the precepts of Swami Brahmananda, “Swami Aseshananda introduced morning meditation, noon worship and evening vespers for the devotees as an essential complement to the daily work of the Centre.” Under his leadership the Portland Center grew considerably in size. In 1968 the present Portland Temple was dedicated. He made several guest visits as a lecturer to the Southern California Centers during 1975-76, 1979-81, 1983-84, 1987-88, 1990. Unlike other Swamis sent to the U.S., he never once returned to visit his homeland.

Aseshananda once said that Holy Mother had sent him to the West and thus, he would stay.<sup>12</sup>

Swamis Aseshananda (Portland), Prabhavananda and Krishnananda (Southern California) and Shraddhananda (San Francisco) attended the October 15, 1965 dedication ceremony for the remodeled Chapel held at the Vedanta Society of Seattle.<sup>13</sup> Prabhavananda continued to offer his support to the Portland Center. Portland State University took over the Vedanta Society's property in March 1966 for their new library site. Todd Thomas related:

One day Swami Aseshananda mentioned in a group meeting that Portland State University was supposed to take over our property, so we should find out some suitable place for the Society. And, surprisingly, he mentioned Mt. Tabor. That kept ringing in my mind all the time. About September 1965, we made a trip to Hollywood Vedanta Society. At Santa Barbara we had dinner with Swami Prabhavananda. During the course of the dinner Swami Prabhavananda referred to our searching for a new site. He turned towards me and said something to the effect that Swami Aseshananda needs help. "Will you help him?" It was a shock to me—that he came at me so strong! I dropped my head and turned within. Pretty soon he said, "Well, you say something." "Well, I'm thinking, Swami. We have been looking and don't know what we should do," and finally I said, "Yes, I will."

From that point on I spent every available spare time looking for property all over the city of Portland. I prayed to Sri Ramakrishna, "O Lord, I looked everywhere, but I don't know where to go now"; and in the twinkling of an eye the vision of this property came into my mind very clear. I knew where it was, what it exactly was. It was Sunday morning. After the service I came up to this property and walked into the centre; and I can't express the feeling that I felt. The sky was clear. It was nice warm day. It was a kind of heavenly feeling that I had about the property, and I thought, "This is it". . . . Subsequently we purchased the present property of approximately one acre in Mt. Tabor District on January 8, 1968.<sup>14</sup>

The Sarada Convent Hollywood building was dedicated on March 27, 1975, the birthday of Sri Chaitanya. Present for the dedication were an all-star cast of visiting Swamis: Aseshananda (Portland), Bhaskarananda (Seattle), Prabuddhananda (Northern California), Shraddhananda (Sacramento), Swahananda (Berkeley), Yuktananda (St. Louis), and Pravrajika's Nirbhayaprana, Nityaprana, and Vishuddhaprana from Northern California.<sup>15</sup>

Swami Aseshananda in 1982 came out with the informative and inspirational biography *Glimpses of a Great Soul: Swami Saradananda*. The biography covers the life, teachings and letters of Saradananda along with many spiritual insights and some

reminiscences. Hideo Hashimoto, a Japanese professor of religion at Lewis and Clark College in Portland, Oregon, wrote an evaluation of the biography comparing Saradananda to a Zen master:

This book provides us with glimpses into the life of a great soul [Swami Saradananda] who helped to nurture a small band of devoted followers of a Bengal mystic, Sri Ramakrishna, into a worldwide religious-philosophical movement which has an extraordinary impact on the thought of the twentieth century.... Swami Saradananda, “holy man, writer, editor, nurse, lecturer, administrator,” was a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, a man full of vitality, compassion, humor, and organizational skill.... *Glimpses* is full of spiritual insight reached by the author, Swami Aseshananda, through his contact with the great leaders of the Vedanta movement, especially his guru, the Holy Mother, and his mentor, Swami Saradananda. This is like a story of a Zen master narrated by his intimate disciple, a next best thing to sitting at the feet of the master.<sup>16</sup>

After his passing, Swami Shantarupananda composed a short booklet entitled *The Last Disciple of Holy Mother: Reminiscences of Swami Aseshananda*. Swami Bhaskarananda of the Seattle Center wrote:

Swami Aseshananda had a very loving heart. Those who came to know him closely were touched by his loving concern for them and felt spiritually uplifted by his company. As a monk his life was exemplary, and he always exuded the deep love and devotion he felt for his guru—the Holy Mother Sarada Devi.

John Schlenck, a New York devotee, revealed:

Swami Aseshananda was deeply revered for his saintliness and for his gifts as a spiritual teacher. His *jnana* was reflected in his lectures, mostly on Advaita Vedanta, and in his unwavering detachment and renunciation.... His *bhakti* was expressed through his complete dependence on the Divine Mother. If any serious decision had to be made, he would read the *Chandi* (a scripture on the Divine Mother) and wait for three days. He would not act until he felt he knew what the Mother wanted.... During his last illness, his mind was completely given over to the Divine Mother. At the same time he was alert and responsive to whoever came into his room. He would say, “Pray to Mother. She will bless you.” About everything else he spoke very briefly.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Hollywood: Vedanta Archives, 2009.

<sup>2</sup>Swami Aseshananda, “What Vedanta Means to Me” *Prabuddha Bharata* (Oct. 1951), p. 400.

<sup>3</sup>Vedanta Online Catalog. Web: [www.vedanta.com](http://www.vedanta.com)

<sup>4</sup>*Prabuddha Bharata* (Oct. 1951), p. 401.

<sup>5</sup>Swami Aseshananda, *Glimpses of a Great Soul* (Hollywood: Vedanta Press, 1982), pp. 23-24.

<sup>6</sup>“Holy Mother’s Disciple.” SRV Associations. March 2004. Web: [www.srv.org/aseshananda.html](http://www.srv.org/aseshananda.html); *Global Vedantist* (Dec. 1996), p. 15; “Obituary: Swami Aseshananda,” VSSC Archives.

<sup>7</sup>“Letter from Swami Rudrananda to Aseshananda” (Nov. 16, 1949), VSSC Archives.

<sup>8</sup>Swami Yogeshananda, *Six Lighted Windows* (United States: Swami Yogeshananda, 1995), p. 69; Sister Amiya, “Vedanta in Southern California,” *Vedanta and the West XIV* (Sep-Oct. 1951), VSSC Archives, p. 149; *Los Angeles Times* (Oct. 8, 1949), p. A3; *Vedanta Society of Southern California Lecture Bulletins Database*, VSSC Archives; Pravrajika Varadaprana, *Vedanta in Southern California: A Brief History* (Santa Barbara: Vedanta Society of Southern California, 1993), p. 11; “Letter to the Vedanta Society Members,” VSSC Archives (Sept. 27, 1950); *South Coast News*, Laguna Beach (Dec. 14, 1950), p. 5; *Trabuco Diary* (Dec. 26, 1949; Oct. 1, 1950; Sept. 9, 1951).

<sup>9</sup>*Trabuco Diary* (May 10, June 14, 1952; Aug. 9, 24, 1953; Aug. 8, Oct. 10, 1954).

<sup>10</sup>*VK* (Oct. 1954), pp. 198-99.

<sup>11</sup>Yogeshananda (1995), pp. 71-72; *Prabuddha Bharata* (July 1932), pp. 362-63; *Vedanta Kesari* (July 1932), pp. 119-20; (Sept. 1958), p. 240.

<sup>12</sup>“Holy Mothers Disciple.” SRV Associations. March 2004. Web: [www.srv.org/aseshananda.html](http://www.srv.org/aseshananda.html); “An Interview with Pravrajika Bhaktiprana” by Pravrajika Gayatriprana, VSSC Archives; *Trabuco Diary* (July 31, 1954; Jan. 14, 1955); Portland Vedanta Society. Web: [www.vedantasociety.org/history\\_p7.html](http://www.vedantasociety.org/history_p7.html)

<sup>13</sup>“History of the Vedanta Society of Western Washington,” VSSC Archives.

<sup>14</sup>Web: [www.vedantasociety.org/history\\_p7.html](http://www.vedantasociety.org/history_p7.html)

<sup>15</sup>Member’s Letter (April 5, 1975).

<sup>16</sup>*Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (June 1983), pp. 321-22.

<sup>17</sup>*Global Vedantist* (Dec. 1996), p. 15; *American Vedantist* (Fall 1996), pp. 3-4.

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