

Jane Harrison-Hohner first met Swami Aseshananda in 1971. Initiated in 1983, Jane has been a nurse practitioner and member of the Vedanta Society of Portland since that time.

Interview with Jane Harrison-Hohner and Terrance Hohner, Portland.

I met Swami Aseshananda in 1971, at a time after I lived in a group household with another spiritual teacher, Swami Nitya Chaitanya Yati, the head of the Narayana Gurukula sect in India. Swami Nitya was teaching Eastern philosophy at Portland State University for two terms. He had asked several of us whether we wanted to live in a house with him located in northwest Portland. Being only twenty-one at the time, I didn't realize that it was unusual for a teacher to have a house where men and women were living together with the teacher. It was not like a typical communal house of the time; rather it was more like father and children, brothers and sisters. A mixed household would have been quite unusual in that tradition. Swami Nitya had to return to India. I wanted to go along with him as others were doing. But owing to a dream he had, he advised me that it was not a good idea. Instead, he told me to see Swami Aseshananda, whom I had never heard of, if I wanted to continue my practices. Despite an interest in Eastern philosophy since childhood, my only connection to Vedanta was having read parts of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* in 1968.

I did start going to see Swami Aseshananda. I remember going through the receiving line, and he looked at me and asked, "Are you initiated yet?" And I said, "No, Swami." I kept going to see him for a while, but then stopped in about 1972 or 1973. I was still interested in Eastern philosophy but not in practicing it. In 1976 I met my future husband, Terrance; we both were interested in Eastern philosophy, which we felt was an important part of our marriage. However, in the ensuing years we allowed that important focus to languish. Then in 1981, during the process of becoming divorced, I determined to become involved again in spiritual practices. In the fall of 1981, while starting graduate school in Portland, Oregon, I began visiting various spiritually-oriented groups.

The most amazing thing occurred in January 1982 during one of the lowest emotional times of my life. I had a dream about Colleen Engle, whom I had remembered playing the piano at the Vedanta Society. The next morning, on my birthday, I encountered Colleen on the sidewalk at Oregon Health Sciences University where I was attending graduate school. She asked me how things were going. I said, "Terrible; my life is a mess." She suggested that I go see Swami Aseshananda. I explained my reservations about my failure to keep up practices. She urged me to come back and attend the Swami Vivekananda puja the following day. From then on, it was a meaningful reconnection. Unrelated to anything Swami said or did, I just felt it was right and began attending regularly.

When I saw Terrance again, he noted that I was doing better. I told him I'd gone back to the Vedanta Society. He wondered if he should meet Swami Aseshananda, and he did accompany me eight weeks later. He will tell you his experience of that meeting. That day, after the Sunday service, we had an interview in the chapel. The three of us sat together and the swami asked only a few questions. One of them pertained to the reason for the dissolution of our marriage. I tried to take the responsibility for that.

Swami was quiet for a long time, as if listening to someone else, or looking somewhere else. We all sat totally quiet. Then he looked up and said, "The two of you belong together." After that pronouncement he said something to Terrance. Then he got up and left the room. We walked outside and drove back to my apartment. We both felt as though something happened during that period of time in Swami's presence. Somehow all of the anger, pain, shame, and terrible feelings which are linked with divorce—all those feelings completely went away. There had been innumerable bad feelings but they were erased at that moment. I felt that to be one of Swami's miracles. Marriage counselors, friends, everything one tries to utilize in that situation had not provided any assistance. This wasn't just assistance—all ill will had vanished!

EW: Did you feel that too, Terrance?

TH: Yes, absolutely.

JHH: It was amazing. I don't know what he did.

EW: Did you feel it at the time or later?

JHH: *At the time*, walking out of the building. We turned toward each other saying, "Do you feel what I'm feeling? Do you notice something different?" I don't want it to sound too "woo-woo," but it was a miraculous story to us. Whatever he was able to do in terms of removing those negative emotions, he had the ability, by being an instrument, to assist people in many ways, no matter what their problems were. Very difficult, and in some cases damaged, people came to him; and in his ability to be an instrument, he was able to give them peace and remove mental obstacles. For some, after he passed on, they spun out of control again, while others did not. Fortunately for us, that did not happen.

During the first months we went for interviews, either individually or together. Swami would sit very quietly and not say anything for a long time. Then he would give some advice, and sometimes it felt that there was more than advice given. For example, I had a particular difficulty—perhaps you would call it a compulsive behavior—which was one of the greatest sources of trouble in our marriage. During those initial years, he would give very concrete advice. For example, he advised me, as a nurse, to only have women patients. So I changed my place of work away from the Veterans' hospital. During this time, he gave me other kinds of advice, such as avoiding eye contact with

the men I saw on the street and avoiding solitary contact with men I knew. He gave me concrete advice on how to regard myself as a small tree with a protective fence.

Moreover, at the temple at that time, men and women were segregated during pujas and other functions. Modest attire and behavior was expected, including keeping the arms covered. You saw the model he held up and you formed yourself in that mould. It was very helpful. In addition to tangible advice, he took away my particular craving with no difficulty—with no work on my part at all! It was a measure of his insight to see what the deep problem was and what the cure was, both on a spiritual level and a day-to-day concrete behavioral level. He did both.

EW: Some observe that Vedanta is somewhat “puritanical.”

JHH: It *is* puritanical, but it’s an antidote, a strong medicine. Remember, a good doctor puts his knee on the patient’s chest, forces his mouth open, and pours the medicine down. I think the people who came to Swami were people in need of strong medicine and willing to take it—wanting it at some level. And it was a measure of his skill that he was able to see what was needed and assist a person. He did this for me. I consider this his second miracle.

When I got that kind of grace, it really helped to solidify, and continue doing, the practices as prescribed by the teacher. I strove to live the life he prescribed and follow the mold he created. That is, I looked to him for my every example. He was *personally* so austere, for instance, that if someone gave him a gift, he would offer it in the shrine and then usually put it up in the closet. After Swami died, Terrance was clearing out the closets and there were scores of sweaters people had given him to replace his tattered ones. Those scores of gifts he usually sent to Belur Math or to be distributed to the poor. When someone wanted to buy new curtains for the shrine or the kitchen because they were hanging by threads, he would thunder at the board meeting, “No I will not spend a penny on this, let them be repaired, they have good tanmatras [vibrations].” He never bought anything for himself. You’ve heard the story of the cornflakes, I’m sure?

For many years, Swami had a household budget for his food of seventy dollars a month. Mr. Bush had to buy Swami’s food for a month. That sum was set back in the 1970s. Obviously over the years the cost of food doubles or triples. Mr. Bush took it upon himself not to tell Swami that cornflakes were no longer a dollar a box but more like three or four dollars a box. Had Swami known that, I’m sure he would have thundered, “I don’t need cornflakes! Not necessary!”

Swami had a routine of food he ate himself, very simple food. But it would have been that way for anything—the zucchini, the eggs, anything he ate. If it went over seventy dollars a month, he’d stop eating. He was so austere. You saw how he dressed in old, torn, and stained clothing. Mr. Bush would cut his hair for him; he would not accept gifts.

EW: I heard that he had the monastics eat canned fruit for economy reasons.

JHH: Vera canned all the apples and pears from the property. After Swami passed away, there were still jars and jars of fruit that had been canned by the women at Holy Mother and Sri Sarada houses. This was all to keep the budget down. The roof would leak and there would be pots everywhere. In the shrine, there would be pots. He would not waste anything; his shaving brush was used until it was almost bald. He was the most austere person I had ever met. Yet it rang a bell in my heart because we are attracted to that kind of life—in our own way.

I was so drawn to the austerity of his mood and mental processes. He would say “Not necessary,” not just about material things, but about your mind. In other words, don’t go there with your mind! Don’t waste your mind’s energy, your body’s energy. Tapas, tapas, tapas. But for householders like us, he’d say that our duty was to deify everything we do. The way for you to renounce as a householder is to deify everything you do. When you are in the kitchen, you are making a meal, as if it were offered in the shrine. You say a mantra as you prepare the food; as you stir the cake batter do not put your finger in the food. His example was instructive as we lived these spiritual values while still appearing like normal Americans, raising our children, etc.

Whenever we had a question or problem we would go to Swami for advice. If you took his advice, things turned out well. For example, during the early part of our relationship with Swami, Terrance, who was an optometrist, was thinking of being a teacher of vision enhancement. He wanted to teach vision improvement, give seminars, etc. He went to Swami with his plan and Swami said, “*No*, be an optometrist!” In other words, be normal. Forget about trying to teach people anything and being leader of a spiritual eyecare movement. Be practical-minded, be true to your training. Don’t let a teacher ego get involved in your work.

I’ll close with a story about our eldest son who was in shared custody with his mother and her new partner. He had many problems with drugs and alcohol as a teenager. We went to Swami wondering whether we should do an intervention, sue for total custody, force him into treatment, etc. We were beside ourselves. He sat with us for a long time and then he said, “No, no, what you should do is to lead the life [show a good example, live the spiritually focused life] and I will pray to Mother for him.” This was exactly what Swami was doing; *he* lived the life. In his “living the life,” that was the strongest set of lessons I could ever get—far more than what I could get from any intellectual reading. Seeing him, being around him, was the greatest teaching of all. So when he said “Live the life,” we knew that the best thing was to try and follow his example. That’s how he was for me—the model of what one could be.

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