

Ingrid Voget lived in Germany during World War II and after immigrating to the U.S. began attending the Portland Vedanta society in 1959. All five members of the Voget family were initiated by Swami Asehananda. Ingrid currently lives in Hawaii.

Interviewed by telephone.

I first met Swami in 1959 at the old Portland Temple, which was located where Portland State University is now. We were introduced by a couple who had just returned from India where they had been working with the Gandhi Project. We remarked that we were interested in learning more about the Vedic teachings, and they knew of the Vedanta temple.

The old temple had a small library. In this intimate setting we had wonderful discussions. I have very vivid memories of this period, of Swami's warmth and his vitality. He was actually sixty years old then but looked more like a man of forty. We had a choir: small, of course. I can't remember how many there were of us, but Marina Sanderson participated along with Stuart Bush, Joan Fox, and Harold Amundson, now Swami Atmajayananda. "Chant the name of the Lord unceasingly, for there is no other name" was one song we sang often. Ann Hatfield, who had a golden voice, sang solos on Sunday.

My children were very young at that time and my health not very good. Swami always seemed to be quite concerned about my well-being. When I arrived for choir practice—this was one evening during the week—he would lead me to a room upstairs where I was placed on a couch and covered with blankets, to rest until the practice began. I really, really appreciated then, as I do now, this tender care, so rarely experienced in life.

EW: Swami probably didn't have much opportunity to meet people who had gone through the war. What kind of help did he give you to overcome the trauma you experienced with the firestorms and bombings?

IV: Actually, nothing, on the surface. But just his "Being," to be around him, brought healing. He guided me, sometimes with words, but mostly by example, into a lifestyle that made healing possible. He made me see, and experience, the harmonizing, expanding, and uplifting powers of ritual and worship. Also, of course, meditation, chanting of the holy name, and the daily reading of the *Devi Mahatmaya* (also known as *Durga Septasati*, or *Chandi*) upon Swami's instruction. To begin the day, to end the day, with a small ritual, how peace giving, how stabilizing, how healing this is! How grateful I am to Swami for this gift!

I had several surgeries during those years. He, our beloved Swami, always accompanied by Mr. Bush, would come and visit me in the hospital. Swami would put his hands over my head, and bless me. Then he would sit down and chant for quite a while. He was

incredibly wonderful, warm and loving. On the other hand he was not particularly easy on me.

I don't think that anybody around me had an understanding how warfare affects those caught in it, on all levels of being. Post-traumatic stress syndrome, which our soldiers experience in war, is now beginning to be recognized, but as for the disastrous consequences of civilian bombings on the lives of people—individually, as well as civilization as a whole—little thought is given to this day. The attitude back then, and this included, I am sorry to say, the medical profession, was "Forget about it, you are here now," or "No wonder you are so neurotic. You should see a psychiatrist!" This was very painful to live with, and I was grateful for every bit of human warmth and understanding which came my way.

EW: Did Swami ever talk with you about your experiences?

IV: In the very beginning of my relationship with Swami, when he was visiting with our family, I talked about my background. But never afterwards was this subject touched upon again.

EW: Perhaps he thought it was such a delicate subject that he didn't want to reopen it.

IV: My feeling is that he looked upon these issues from a very different angle. To illustrate my point, let me quote from the Upanishad: "From the unreal lead us to the real, from darkness lead us to light, from death lead us to immortality."

His task was to lead his students from the unreal to the real, not so much with words, but with actual experiences. Strengthening the mind to filter out thoughts of darkness and focusing the mind on the light and its many manifestations, dedicating all you do as an offering to this light, will move you away from darkness into the light, the real, the permanent. It allows you to experience life in a different way.

When I got frustrated, complaining that my mind was wandering in all directions, he pondered for a minute or two, and then, after making certain gesture with his hand, which seemed to say "Don't worry about it" he added, aloud, "Pull back, pull back!"

EW: Did you attend the center very long before becoming initiated?

IV: Several years passed before either my ex-husband or I asked for initiation. It was our understanding at that time that a celibate life was expected of us after initiation. Marriages had broken up.

EW: I've heard different opinions on this subject. A few people I spoke with from the 1950s era felt that if initiated they were required to live a celibate life and therefore refused initiation. Others said that no restrictions were placed upon them. My sense was

that these were choices left up to individual couples. However, I had the impression that some individuals were resentful of their spouse's involvement with Vedanta and that led to divorce.

IV: Swami never told me directly; however, you saw many marriages breaking up.

EW: Perhaps he had become more liberal by the time I met him in the 1970s.

IV: Yes, Swami changed over the years. For one thing, people change as they get older. Also, many years' living in this country and gaining a deeper understanding of its values and habits must have had an effect on him.

EW: Do you feel Swami was operating from his cultural perspective as an Indian?

IV: Oh yes, Swami was an Indian, a Brahmin. He ran the Vedanta Center like the head of an Indian family. To be part of a family, whose head is a highly developed soul, I certainly would consider quite a privilege. But, then, I am of a very independent nature, and it seemed to me he tried to make submissive women out of us.

I had great difficulty with the presentation of Sri Sarada as a totally demure, self-effacing, always sweet woman. I don't think she was. I have one photo of her which I really love. It shows a very fierce face. I heard one story of how, being married at the age of five, she was left in her village waiting for her husband to call for her. Finally, when she had reached her teens, she lost patience and took matters into her own hands. She walked all the way to Dakshineswar to claim him! He wasn't at all happy that she appeared, so the story says. This is more like the Mother I adore!

EW: How did you reconcile your German intellectual background with the Hindu outlook?

IV: Whenever I said, "Thank you, Swami," he waved his hand and muttered, "It's the Mother, it's the Mother, thank Mother!" He always stressed that the acting force was the Mother of the Universe, the force of creation, preservation and destruction embodied in Holy Mother. He also was the embodiment of this Mother. It wasn't him acting, it always was "*Mother, Mother, Mother.*" I love the rich imagery of Hinduism. It deeply connects with the forces of the universe.

I was brought up in the European humanistic tradition in an intellectual environment. After immigrating to America I met a young man whose father was in the lumber business. We married and moved to a small town near Portland, Oregon, which had been settled by Dutch people of Calvinistic faith. I tried to adjust to their ways, but this attempt was not very successful. Our three very young daughters and I had been attending the Congregational Church, which to me seemed to be more a cross between a Country Club and the Bank of America than an honest instrument in search for the

Godhead. So one day all five of us—father, mother and three little daughters—started attending the Vedanta temple in Portland.

There I was faced with accepting Sri Sarada as a role model. I said to myself: “I am a very independent human being. The right to develop my own thoughts and the right to freely express these thoughts are essential for me to lead a meaningful and fulfilling life. This I am, and this I shall remain.” This need of mine led inevitably to a conflict with Swami’s dictum “Do as I tell you.” Eventually it resulted in a rift in our relationship and my withdrawal from the activities of the temple community.

EW: Wasn’t Yreka, California, your next location, just another small town, a similar situation?

IV: Well, in Yreka many students from Berkeley started to form communes. So there was an infiltration of Vedic teachings. Several of these students have become permanent residents of Yreka by now and are still very good friends of mine. So Yreka now has an element of liberalism thanks to them. In addition there is a Soto Zen center at the foot of Mt. Shasta called “Shasta Abbey.” Swami wrote to the abbess, Houn Jiyu-Kennett Roshi, and asked her permission for me to meditate there regularly.

EW: It is interesting that Swami facilitated this kind of contact for you.

IV: I’d gone over to the abbey once, liked it very much, and told Swami about it. Also, I believe, he had met the Roshi. The Roshi actually was not there very much. But I tremendously enjoyed those students. They were so young and eager.

Otherwise my life was tied to the lumber business community where I had begun working. I very much enjoyed my work in the business. This was fortunate because in no other way could I fit myself into a very rural, conservative environment. My ex-husband had studied at Reed College [a highly respected college in Portland] and Columbia University in New York. At the time I met him he intended to be a writer. However, after we married, he decided to join his father’s business. After moving to Yreka to start a new sawmill there, he pretty much abandoned Vedanta. Lumbermen and Vedanta didn’t blend well.

EW: Were people bigoted towards Germans after the war?

IV: Very much so! But not openly. For instance I had spoken German to my girls from early on, expecting them to be bilingual. When the two older ones had reached the ages of four and five (in the late 1950s), they refused to speak German. Their playmates had told them that speaking German was unacceptable.

I’ve found it very painful to live as a German in America. It is getting better now, but it took a long time. I could have lived with open confrontation which might have allowed

discussions to break into the black and white design of the underlying hostilities. This, of course, all contributed to my decision to raise my children with Vedic teachings, under the guidance of Swami. They joined the three Collins's daughters as the only children at the Vedanta Society at that time. Sometimes Vera Edwards also brought her grandchildren.

EW: When were your family members initiated?

IV: My ex-husband and I were initiated in the late 1960s, but not together. One of my daughters was initiated in her teens, the other two as young adults.

All my daughters have told me that they were grateful they were raised with Vedic teachings. For instance, when my youngest daughter, Kirsten, was struggling with breast cancer four years ago, she said that she was grateful to have these teachings at her disposal. When she died, she had reached such an acceptance of death, such serenity! Her death was beautiful. It was an example of how to die.

EW: Is there something about Swami's teaching you would like to share?

IV: I have two stories that I heard Swami tell, always with a twinkle in his eye. They have become "family heirlooms." We also use them in a lighthearted way, as he did. The first story is the story about the holy man and the cobra:

Once upon a time there was a holy man walking through the forest when suddenly a cobra got hold of his leg, with its teeth firmly established in his thigh. The holy man, who was quite tall, looked down from his heights and said, "You, too, my brother, are a mesSENGer of the Lord."

So when I encounter a cockroach (I *really* dislike them) I say, "You, too, my brother, are a mesSENGer of the Lord." I always use Swami's Indian pronunciation. He always stressed the second syllable: "mesSENGer."

Next, the story of the holy man and his disciple:

Once upon a time a holy man lived with his disciple deep down in a forest. One day the older man said to the younger disciple, "I have to go on a long journey. While I am gone, I want you to sit on this spot here (he pointed to a spot nearby) and meditate on the meaning of life and death until I return." The teacher left, and the disciple sat down on the spot where he was asked to sit. After a while he felt a tugging on his loincloth. It was a mouse. He thought, "I have to get a cat to eat the mouse." So he got a cat. The cat ate the mouse. Next, the cat started to meow. She wanted milk. "I need a cow," he thought, "so the cat can have her milk." He got a cow. Now he needed someone to milk the cow. He found a cowherd. The cowherd was lonely. He found himself a wife. By the time the teacher returned, he found a whole village.

Here are two of Swami's little gems that have special meaning to me:

“Truth is one, sages call it by various names.” “To the works you are entitled but not to the fruits thereof.”

EW: How do you experience Swami now?

IV: He is close. We “converse.” I do the talking, then I wait. The answer will come, from somewhere, you never know when. I thank him for all the help he has given us as a family, his love and his caring. In my inner conversations with Swami, I ask him for advice how to handle the broken relationships in our family, and with others outside the family. The answer unfailingly is: “Mother.” “Mother will show you the way.”

Being around Swami is a story that can be understood only by someone who has experienced it.

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