

Karl Bareither, a long-time student of spirituality, recognizes Swami Aseshananda as a significant teacher who changed lives through his own example. Karl's meeting with Swami is described in "Managing Our Priorities," *American Vedantist*, Fall 2003. Karl, a businessman, resides in Avila Beach, CA.

Interviewed by telephone.

EW: How did you come to meet Swami Aseshananda?

KB: I'd been a student of Vedanta for a long time but hadn't yet received a mantra from a Vedanta teacher. So I was talking with Swami Asitananda [an American Swami in Olema, CA] who suggested that since I hadn't been to India, I could get a real sense of India by visiting with Swami Aseshananda. That was probably around 1990.

So I called Swami Aseshananda but he kept putting me off, saying, "Call me back, call me back." Someone said, "He's just testing you, Karl." *Finally* he arranged a time and I flew up from San Luis Obispo, CA, to Portland, and Swami was nice enough to have someone meet me at the airport. When I arrived at the center, I took my things upstairs to the assigned bedroom, washed up, quickly used the restroom, and came down the stairs. He was standing at the bottom of the stairs and looked at me saying [in a critical tone of voice], "You know, *you Westerners* are *all* alike! There is more than *you* involved here: everyone else is waiting to eat and you're taking your own sweet time!"

I thought, "I'm going to spend a *weekend* up here? I mean, give me a break!"

EW: So he started the scolding the minute you arrived!

KB: Exactly. I thought, "A *day* here would be long enough!" I was so stunned because I had not experienced anything like that before with other swamis. Anyway, we got through the meal and later went to the meditation room.

It appeared that Swami was suffering from a serious arthritic problem. I still remember how difficult it was for him to get into position; you could see the pain on his face. I was really taken by how much he was devoted to the meditation exercise even though it was so physically painful.

The second day I was there, I'd been meditating and when I came out of the room, Swami was standing there while I put my foot on the chair to tie my shoelaces. It was an old, old wooden folding chair. He came out and said, "You have to show *more* respect. We don't put our *feet* on furniture like that!" I thought, "This was *really* going to be a *long* weekend!"

In the same area, I had noticed an odor coming from the men's bathroom and asked one of the other houseguests about it. "Oh," he explained, "when Swami is in a hurry he goes in there and is careless." And here Swami was telling me about *my shoes on this old wooden chair!*

EW: Did this seem hypocritical?

KB: No, only that there was a double standard. The next day I had a private meeting with Swami and he asked why I wanted a mantra. So we had a discussion out in the back garden, by ourselves. He listened to what I had to say and answered, "You know, I don't think this is for you. I think you are too impatient. In Vedanta, we like to hold peoples' hands and it takes a bit longer to get to where they want to be. It's a process where you're not alone. I think you need to go home and seek out a Buddhist teacher. I think you're too impatient for what I could help you accomplish."

I was surprised!! This is quite a teacher—here I invested my money, my time, and my energy to come up here: I would have thought he'd be *interested* in increasing his membership! But he's sending me back to San Luis Obispo where I'd then go to Santa Barbara to seek out a Buddhist teacher. It would have been nice to know this earlier!

Swami was kind enough to have Mr. Thomas take me sightseeing me around Portland. The next morning when I was ready to go back, I was sitting in the little kitchenette [the monastics' kitchen] reading Swami's book and eating a bowl of cereal. He came in and promptly took my book and threw it on the floor. It was the book *he'd* written!

I reached down to pick up the book and looked up at him, startled. "Why would you do that, Swami? I'm reading *your* book!" He answered, "You Westerners are all the same! You don't know how to *focus*! If you're eating cereal, you eat cereal. If you're reading, you read. You don't read and eat cereal. Most of you turn on the radio before you even start the car. *You're just not focused!*" So that was another lesson he was teaching me.

EW: I've heard him say, "Don't eat and read at the same time."

KB: So I flew back to San Luis Obispo and went to the Zen Buddhist center in Santa Barbara. It was about two hours' drive each way, so it was an effort. After a time, I concluded it wasn't my thing. So I called Swami back some months later and said, "I decided I'm not in as much of a hurry about my spiritual journey as when we talked initially. I'd like to come back and go a little slower and be with you."

He wasn't agreeable *at all!* "Oh, no," he said. He didn't have time. I called him back two or three more times over several months: it seemed like a *long* time! *Finally*, he agreed to see me again. To make a long story short, he gave me a mantra.

EW: Was it a shrine initiation?

KB: We met again on the lawn and he gave it to me there. That particular weekend there was an event at the retreat center. I had an opportunity to be with Swami and ask some questions. Later that day he also had a Sunday evening service, and by this time the assistant swami [Shantarupananda] had arrived. I have a tendency to ask questions, and normally he was always responsive to my questions. That evening I asked questions after the service but he did not respond. *He totally ignored me!*

EW: What did the onlookers say?

KB: Nothing. Just silence. Again, I was shocked. I thought I had a legitimate question: “If India is such a wonderful spiritual place, why are women treated as they are?” In many instances they are no less than chattel. I had read about that, but neither he nor his associate responded. It was as though I never asked the question.

I’ve asked other swamis why he wouldn’t give me the courtesy of saying, “Oh that question isn’t appropriate,” or, “We don’t want to deal with that.” He wanted people to question him, and I’m not at all bashful about asking questions.

EW: Others reported similar experiences. For example, one woman asked about the *Chundi* and Swami wouldn’t answer. Once I asked about detachment, a topic of great personal interest, but Swami replied, “Pray to Mother to learn the right kind of detachment.” So perhaps he wanted me to find the answer myself, or perhaps I wasn’t ready for the answer, or perhaps the question was just irrelevant.

KB: It’s ironic, because he’d always been responsive to my previous questions and to everyone else’s, and was always eager to give verbal responses.

EW: I wouldn’t want to presume to know the reason, but perhaps he was trying to crush something in you by using a method that made you so uncomfortable.

KB: I thought it was so unlike him! I asked the question, and it was as though I didn’t exist. It ticked me off!

EW: Another explanation might be that because he lacked the opportunity to “work on you”—since you weren’t around much and he was getting old—he wanted to eliminate a large number of samskaras by delivering that blow to your ego. Many people felt this was the rationale behind his scoldings.

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KB: Whenever I think of avoiding meditation (“Oh, I don’t think I want to meditate today”), I remember Swami’s pain when he knelt down and had such difficulty getting up. I *see* him in my mind doing that and conclude: “If he could do *that* with his arthritis and physical condition, I can certainly do my meditation.” I’ve been engaged in

meditating since that time. Like most Westerners, I have an active mind, perhaps especially so.

So it's been such a beautiful thing for me to know that I can *still* my mind for five minutes, thirty minutes, an hour. It's not only stilling my mind at that time, but having the ability to *remind* myself to still my mind, so I can be in the moment. Then I am there, listening, *really* listening to what someone is saying, not thinking how I will respond to the person. That's the focus I learned. I attribute that ability to focus to the time I spent with Swami.

EW: Did you return to see Swami after that time you just described?

KB: I went back a couple of times when I had other business in the Portland area. The last time, however, he wasn't really seeing anyone.

So I have my memories. I was really impressed by Swami's willingness to send me away when he felt my needs could be better met by someone else. How many people would do that? Here he had an interested, eager person, yet he sends them away! How many teachers would do that?

EW: He had your best interests at heart, I would imagine.

KB: I wrote about my experience with Swami (although I didn't mention him by name) in *American Vedantist*. I have visited most all the Vedanta centers and retreats in the US and Fiji. I have some really fond memories of Swami. I was particularly interested in how he motivated me by his examples. He did more than talk the walk: he walked the talk as well! However, it was hard for me to understand why Swami was so hard on people, especially the monks living there. It disturbed me enormously. Who knows, maybe they needed that.

EW: Many people who experienced scoldings said they felt Swami was really taking away lifetimes for them, lessening their karma.

KB: It was hard to reconcile Swami's behavior. If he had to correct someone's behavior, why didn't he do it privately? It seemed so unorthodox, so bizarre! In addition, his silent treatment on that one occasion was very hard for me to understand. Nevertheless, I was very grateful to have known him. I wouldn't trade that experience—it was a very interesting learning experience for me. Just his ability to overcome his physical limitations—to do what he did—was compelling!

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