

**LeNoir Kali Hayward** and her husband Harold, disciples of Swami Aseshananda from 1974, resided in the Portland area.

*Reminiscence submitted 2018.*

In October 1974 my late husband Harold Hayward and I were initiated by Swami Asheshananda in the shrine of the Vedanta temple during Durga Puja, after we first met him that August. Little did we know the true nature of the mystical journey upon which we had embarked that day. Nor did we know the full extent of Swami's lasting commitment to our spiritual lives and that of everyone he initiated. Our studies of Eastern philosophy had led us to the door of one who was a living embodiment of his monastic vows, who looked a lot like the Jedi Knight "Yoda" in *Star Wars*, and who roared like a fire-breathing dragon at what seemed to be the least provocation!

In the early 1970s, quite a few householder families like us joined the Vedanta Society of Portland, attracted by the extreme devotion of Sri Ramakrishna to the Divine Mother Kali, by the inspirational teachings of Swami Vivekananda, and by the exemplary life of Holy Mother in the midst of her family duties. Moreover, we were mesmerized by a senior monk of the Ramakrishna Order who had been initiated as a young man by Holy Mother, who daily worshipped God as Mother, and whose dark hooded eyes glinted with Divine Love.

Along with the other devotees' children, our son and two daughters regularly attended Sunday school at the temple and participated in seasonal events such as narrating the Christmas play and joining the Easter egg hunt. There was also the day-long Saturday school at Sri Sarada House in the mid '80s. And particularly memorable were the many *antaryogas* [spiritually focused programs] for women and children that were held at the Vedanta retreat acreage near Scappoose.

First, I have to say that Swami Asheshananda directed every detail of the *antaryogas*, and he kept a firm grip on the wand! Each of the attendees was listed; the list often included an out-of-town guest, who added a unique spice to our already provocative Portland devotee mix. The [food] menu for the *antaryoga* was spelled out. Duties, both housekeeping and spiritual, were assigned. The schedule was created and mostly adhered to. (An interesting aside is that Swami himself was seldom "on time." He barely made it to the airport before they closed the airplane doors for takeoff, leaving all those in attendance with heart palpitations!) Who rode with whom to the *antaryoga* retreat was specified. Where each person slept was identified and not to be changed.

Having taken care of the mundane details of a large weekend gathering, Swami thus left us free to focus our attention on being fully present in that dedicated sacred space in the woods with others of like mind, looking within, finding peace, praying for guidance, seeking solace. Every *antaryoga* provided a noteworthy challenge, some more humorous than others! Oftentimes the blessings of being there consisted of such stark and

uncomfortable truths about ourselves, that we only grew to recognize and appreciate them as blessings in hindsight.

During the week prior, sleeping bags and foam pads for bedding, food and staples were brought out. Being a stay-at-home mom capable of driving our stick shift, three-quarter ton, four-wheel drive GMC suburban, I was often called into action. Tables and beds were set up. Cord wood and kindling was stacked by the fireplaces. The main altar upstairs and the small one in Brahmananda Hall were dusted and fresh flowers put in all vases. Holy Mother's cottage was made ready for guests.

All were expected to attend the short Friday night lecture at the [in-city] temple. The children waited in the library. Afterward, Swami held two plates of *prasad* as we walked past him in the hallway. Having gathered up the all-important gate keys, we then caravanned to the retreat. For many years Swami came out that evening as well, to see where everyone was sleeping and to perform a short vesper upstairs with a few words of blessing. I seem to recall having hot chocolate in Brahmananda Hall afterward. Once we turned off the lights, the deep forested darkness and profound peace of the retreat soon enveloped us with blessed tranquility in that sacred space.

Early in the morning we meditated in front of the altar upstairs, sitting between the welcome warmth of the two crackling fireplaces. After a hearty breakfast, we devotees shared thought-provoking spiritual readings in our group discussions. Then some began making preparations for the midday lecture and potluck, which Swami, additional devotees, and the public would attend. Others worked in the flower beds, tended to the shrines, or watched over the children. The children prized every minute at the retreat and were given great freedom there. Swami loved the children. He blessed them constantly.

Swami and Mr. Bush were driven by a devotee and they usually arrived a little after the noon event was scheduled to start! Eventually everyone was present, and we settled in upstairs for the lecture, fireplaces still cracking. Once in a while someone from the *antaryoga* slipped out to check on the dish she was cooking for the potluck, which was held in Brahmananda Hall as well as outdoors in good weather. Before the meal we chanted with Swami in Sanskrit: "The act of offering is Brahma, the oblation is Brahma, by Brahma it is offered into the fire of Brahma. Om, peace, peace, peace."

On Saturday afternoon, after Swami and the others' departure, a dusty hush settled upon the retreat grounds. Typically, then, we went on a walking pilgrimage to the shrines, with candles, flowers, incense, and a pertinent inspirational reading offered at each one. The shrines had been built to honor the universality of world religions, as well as our spiritual lineage of Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother, and Swami Vivekanada. The dedication of the elaborate Native American shrine had included an authentic blessing ceremony by a Northwest tribal medicine man.

We repeated the *antaryoga* schedule Saturday evening and Sunday morning, then went to the lecture in Portland. Some of us came back to finish the *karma yoga* projects, pack up, and the last one out had to be sure to return the gate keys to the temple.

In his capacity as head of the Vedanta Society of Portland, Swami Asheshananda lectured year-round, every Sunday morning, Thursday and Friday nights, after each *puja*, and for many special occasions and retreat events. Swami had arrived in America at age forty-eight in the same year that British colonial rule ended in India. He naturally spoke the King's English, but with a strong East Indian accent in a deep voice. And his pronunciation of "Aristotle" wasn't the only word newcomers found difficult to understand!

Typically, he donned a patched, well-worn sweater over a white fully-buttoned long sleeve shirt, dark cuffed trousers sometimes held up with his necktie, wing-tip shoes, and wrapped himself in disheveled layers of ochre meditation cloth around his shoulders. His thick gray hair was unruly. His deep eyes took us all in.

Swami opened with a prayer, such as, "Our salutations to Him whom the sages call by various names . . . whom the devotees meditate in the shrine of their hearts . . . may He illumine our understanding and prompt our minds to the path of truth and righteousness. Om, peace, peace, peace."

Swami's talks generally became unstructured within the first ten minutes and were then interwoven with random reminiscences of Holy Mother and the direct disciples, with his clear philosophical insights, with his oft-repeated jokes, and those righteous indignant outbursts against America's "cash system" and women as "painted meat balls." When humorously referring to Western philosophy, Swami said, "When Descartes writes, 'I think therefore I am,' he has made a mistake to put 'de cart before the horse.'" Sometimes when referring to pure renunciation, Swami cited this quote from the Bible: "Birds have nests, foxes have holes, but the Son of Man hath nowhere to rest his head."

There was always a specific topic, such as the *Bhagavad-Gita*, the *Upanishads*, *Yoga Sutras*, or the lectures of Swami Vivekananda, to which Swami returned, after every digression of his rambling discourse. Often, however, it was while on those serendipitous side roads, that he answered our unspoken question or shed light on our hidden fears or gave us a little encouraging boost. He always managed to express just what we needed to hear at that moment.

Swami Asheshananda was an exceptionally sincere and intensely single-minded *pujari* [worship officiant]. He worshipped daily in the temple shrine with offerings of food, flowers, incense, lights, bells, and Sanskrit chants of praise and prayer. Beginning in October with Durga Puja and ending with Sri Ramakrishna's birthday in March, there were several special day-long celebrations.

For each celebration Swami prepared rice pudding to be offered as *prasad*. The lecture hall was transformed into a south-facing shrine, chairs removed. Low altars were set up for the holy pictures which, during the worship, Swami draped with lush flower garlands made by the devotees. Plates were piled high with beautifully prepared fruit, cookies, candy, cakes, cooked food, and colorful fresh flowers. As incense swirled skyward,

Swami made the offerings to the deities while intoning Sanskrit hymns in his rich voice, waving the yak's tail and ringing bells.

The inside of the fireplace on the south wall had been scrubbed in anticipation of the *homa* ceremony, an ancient Vedic fire ritual which Swami then performed immediately following the worship. My youngest daughter recalls seeing "an old man bent over the fire, pouring melted butter that sizzled in the flames, his energy pulsating out in waves throughout the room."

It was often at this time, after hours of focused worship, during the unsettling of the altars and the setting up of tables for *prasad*, that Swami's dragon-fire was likely to erupt and blast an unlucky (some would say lucky) devotee against the wall. And we all felt the ripples of his "roar." I've heard it said that only those who love deeply are capable of giving such deep lessons.

Visitors from far and wide came to Swami Asheshananda for blessings and many hoped for initiation. He was very gracious to one and all. Generally though, he was averse to having people take the dust of his feet. Swami particularly enjoyed the company of his fellow monastics whose occasional visits were cause for extra lectures and events at the retreat and temple, and always potlucks. He often said, "There's never a dull moment in Vedanta and always plenty of good food. Potluck means what's in the pot is your luck!"

In 1977, a few Hollywood Vedanta society devotees began to arrive in Portland, armed with a movie camera and audio recorder intent upon capturing something of Swami Asheshananda for posterity, which they did. That summer there were at least six outings in rapid succession of maybe twenty-five devotees and Swami. We caravanned in cars southeast from the temple out Highway 26 to Mt. Hood's Timberline Lodge at 6,000 ft. Afterward we drove down the mountain and had potluck at the Wildwood Bureau of Land Management Park on the Salmon River. Alternately we drove westward out Highway 26 to Cannon Beach on the Oregon Coast followed by a potluck at Ecola State Park atop nearby Tillamook Head.

This was no mean feat! After all, the "plenty of good food" had to be prepared in Portland in the morning, then kept hot/cold during transport to either Mt. Hood or the Oregon coast for apparently magical distribution with nothing omitted or out of place. While we ate, Swami spoke and provided spiritual sustenance. Over the years then we continued to have the potluck outings with visitors to Mt. Hood and the coast.

To Swami, the snow-covered mountain was Shiva, non-attached, changeless and pure, while the constantly creative, dynamic ocean of existence was Shakti. At Cannon Beach, wearing his sturdy thick soled shoes, heavy dark overcoat, warm hat with ear flaps down and woolen scarf tied loosely around his neck, Swami touched the waves and offered flowers to Shakti while we clustered around him on the sand, chanting. And typical tourists tried to comprehend the incomprehensible! At Wildwood after we honored Shiva at the mountain, Swami also ceremoniously offered flowers and prayers into the clear waters of the Salmon River, flowing from Palmer glacier on Mt. Hood to the sea.

While Swami was totally unself-conscious in public, others noticed him. Once, on Mt. Hood, a gentleman with a tourist group just had to meet and touch Swami, who was a little abashed but highly amiable. Perhaps the man was reminded of Yoda the Jedi Knight! After all, it's a persistent rumor that Swami's guru mystique, moves, and physical appearance were indeed the sole inspiration for the George Lucas movie character Yoda!

There were two dwellings nearby the Portland temple, Holy Mother's House and Sri Sarada House, where several women lived and visitors stayed. The residents paid no rent but were allowed to give a small monthly "love offering." Unless they were retirement age, they maintained at least a part-time job, but at the same time were expected to behave as obedient novitiates, attend all the temple functions and be of service to the Vedanta Society. And they truly were the stalwarts of the temple [as] *karma yoginis*!

On a regular basis at each house, Swami held informal talks with the women devotees. Upon arrival he performed a simple worship at the residence altar. Then he sat on an upholstered chair in the cozy living room, while we clustered in chairs around him, listening and eating *prasad*. In that setting when he spoke about Holy Mother, especially, it seemed as though she was there with us.

In the temple foyer, after each noon worship [ending] around 3 PM and evening vespers [ending] around 8:30 PM, Swami distributed individual plates of *prasad*, either fruit and nuts or cookies and candy. He then sat with the devotees and shared his insights. Likewise, during potlucks, after lectures, on outings, at the retreat and wherever we gathered, Swami gave us answers, advice, and encouragement.

Early in September before his passing, I was asked to come to the temple to see Swami, whose physical health had been failing for about a year. He was upstairs in his monastic room and I sat on a chair by his bedside. We spoke, but I don't remember what we said. I do know that I really wanted to hold his hand. But he had always been so "monastic" in his demeanor, so I hesitated. My heart was filled with immense gratitude when he agreed to my request. The experience was personal to me; my perpetual connection to him was assured. Swami sent me home with Mother's blessings and a nice bag of *prasad*.

Until his passing in October 1996, in spite of even greater infirmity, Swami Asheshananda continued to give of himself ceaselessly, a perfect "hollow bone" through which Divine blessings freely flowed. I am eternally grateful to the Mother of the Universe that he was, is, and ever will be my guru. Jaya Ma!

*Written reply to questionnaire, submitted 2007.*

EW: How did you first meet Swami Areshananda? Was there anything memorable about the occasion or your first impression?

LKH: My husband Harold Hayward and I first heard about the Portland Vedanta Society in the summer of 1974 through the New York Society after a book purchase. We lived at the time on wooded acreage seven miles east of Sandy, Oregon, in the foothills of Mt. Hood with our three children and multiple pets. Hayward commuted thirty-five miles each way via public transportation to work in downtown Portland at Pacific Power and Light Company.

We were drawn to Vedanta because of the lives of Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother and the teachings of Swami Vivekananda. Also, we were interested in learning to meditate and in attending the rituals. We were especially attracted to Swami Areshananda because he was initiated by Holy Mother, and he was known to worship God as Mother. I have a particular interest in the Goddesses.

One lunch break from work that summer, Hayward took the bus east on Hawthorne Street to 55<sup>th</sup> Avenue and walked up the hill to 1157, whose imposing structure he passed back and forth several times before finally working up the courage to knock on the door. When he did, it was Swami Areshananda who answered. He looked at Hayward and growled, "Come on in" as if he had been expecting him, then barked a command to Vera Edwards to show him around. Swami was giving an interview in the foyer. That Sunday we attended our first lecture, and the following Saturday we brought our children to the first of many retreat potlucks. Our youngest daughter was two months old, our son was six, and our older daughter almost three.

At the retreat we met Jim and Marina Sanderson, a hard-working, kindly couple who lived there in the little cottage. We asked them about initiation and everything about the Portland Vedanta Society; we were most curious about Swami. He was brimming over with devotion to Holy Mother. And he roared like a fire-breathing dragon!

EW: How did your relationship with Swami Areshananda evolve?

LKH: My husband had an interview with Swami in September of 1974 to request our initiation which took place the 8<sup>th</sup> day of Durga Puja October 22<sup>nd</sup> that year. Until 1982 we continued to live in the country and only came in to the temple on Friday nights for the lecture, which discussed the *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali. When we moved to Portland, I became involved with the board of directors, heard Sunday lectures, participated in the daily temple and special puja preparations, had responsibility for certain flower vases, attended women's retreats called *antaryogas*, shuttled guests to and from the airport, and met an amazing array of devotees who were pulled like magnets from around the globe to sit at the feet of a diminutive elderly Hindu man, lost at times in swirls of ochre cloth, who radiated Holy Mother's boundless blessings through his outstretched hand.

EW: How did Swami Areshananda mold and impact your life?

LKH: I was raised Catholic and attended fifteen years of Catholic school including three at St. Vincent's College of Nursing in Los Angeles where I became an RN in 1966. Between 1974 and 1997, I was associated with Swami Areshananda and the Portland

Vedanta Society. Both religious experiences have shaped my spiritual inclinations and practices today. However, Catholicism I was born into and Vedanta I chose.

I spent many hours of my life in the 1980s at the Portland temple doing karma yoga with other women devotees and attending the weekday noon worship that never started at noon. We were expected to be inside the shrine by 12:45, where we mediated, women to the rear, on the thick white wall-to-wall carpet. But Swami stayed upstairs until 2:00 or so, when he proceeded to perform the daily puja ritual after which we received food offered in the shrine prepared by him on individual plates in the shrine pantry. There he always spoke with us for a while, sitting on his well-worn boxy brown upholstered chair. We formed a half-circle in front of him sitting on the sofa or a chair from the lecture hall or on the matching well-worn boxy brown upholstered chair across from Swami. All it took was one good question and he was off on a mini-lecture giving out inspiration, edification and glimpses of comprehension, our mental prasada!

Swami Aseshananda was a rare kind of guru, fiercely dedicated to living according to the letter of his monastic ideals and to fulfilling the will of the Divine Mother. He was an exceptionally powerful spiritual teacher and a sometimes frustratingly overprotective guide. Being around him was both a privilege and an austerity. He prepared me for my spiritual path beyond Vedanta.

Swami provided us with a high standard against whom all other “teachers” must be compared. Through his initiation we became part of a profound spiritual lineage. I give him my eternal gratitude and respect.

EW: Over time, did you come to certain conclusions about Swami Aseshananda?

LKH: I am an avowed peace and love, tree-hugging product of the 1960’s ideological revolution generation. At times I had trouble understanding the often harsh discipline measures employed by Swami on the sometimes unsuspecting devotee. Having been reduced to gut-wrenching tears on more than one occasion, I wondered what I was supposed to learn from this, besides ego-bashing. My dad was the same sort of disciplinarian. Some things really didn’t make sense. The humblest little old lady in the Society was the constant recipient of Swami’s criticizing harassment in the ‘70s. She was a long-time devotee initiated by Swami Devatmananda, the previous head of the Portland Center. About this lack of compassion, I came to the conclusion that with Swami, on some issues, we could agree to disagree!

EW: What were some of the essential teachings of Swami Aseshananda?

LKH: Swami told householders to see their work as worship, doing everything as an offering on the altar at the feet of Divine Mother, Holy Mother. Saying japa while mopping the floor in the house in the woods was like a bit of heaven for me! He encouraged us to take a witness perspective on our worldly position and see our relationships with others through the light of the Divinity within ourselves. “The essential

belief of Vedanta,” he said, “is that Divinity is all-pervasive and you are Divine. We are all Divine.”

EW: What were some of Swami’s memorable sayings?

LKH: “Cling to the feet of Holy Mother and Sri Ramakrishna, say your mantra, and meditate in your heart center. Yes, yes, everything will be all right.”

“The winds of grace are always blowing. All we must do is set the sails.”

EW: Are there any personal stories you’d care to share?

LKH: In April of 1977 my mother died suddenly. She was sixty-one, I was thirty-one. When I called Swami about her death, he told me with such certainty that she had gone to the lap of the Divine Mother, and I was greatly comforted.

That summer a very charismatic and wealthy Hollywood devotee came to visit and interview Swami with his movie camera and some traveling companions. In his honor there were several outings. Three times we went up to Timberline Lodge on Mt. Hood (Shiva) followed by potluck picnic at Wildwood Park on the Salmon River. Three times we went to Cannon Beach to touch the Pacific Ocean (Shakti) followed by potluck picnic at Ecola State Park. At each Swami performed a simple flower offering ritual to the mountain and to the sea.

Several carloads of children, women and men devotees and visitors formed an informal parade weekly going back and forth on Highway 26. The seemingly magical appearance of ample, tasty food and eating utensils was not Swami’s doing. It was due to the capable managerial, as well as cooking skills of Vera Edwards and the generosity of the local devotees.

Some days we drove east out Hwy. 26 past Gresham through Sandy to Mt. Hood, then six miles up to the Timberline Lodge parking lot. We always went inside the lodge, upstairs to the Boarshead Bar (I think it’s called). Since the best view of Mt. Hood was through the bar windows, Swami walked right in, and there followed the adoring devotees, except the children. Bar patrons were speechless! Swami called Mt. Hood “Shiva Giri.”

On the south side of the historic lodge we looked out a large window to see Mt. Jefferson towering over the mountains in the distance. This volcano he named “Uma Giri.” After tromping through the lodge, we went out a side door and walked a little distance up the slope. Swami gave mini talks and sometimes attracted the attention of non-Vedantists. One fellow from a tour group was so drawn to Swami that he just had to come up and introduce himself and shake Swami’s hand!

After we left Timberline, we drove back down the mountain on Highway 26 to Wildwood BLM Park near Welches. There we had the amazing picnics. After eating and before we all left, Swami did a little worship, chanted and offered flowers to the Salmon

River, equating it to the Ganges flowing off the Father Shiva Himalayas rushing to meet Mother Shakti Sea.

On other days we drove west out Highway 26 through the coast range past Saddle Mountain. On Highway 101 in Cannon Beach, we parked at the north end of town and walked to the ocean along Ecola Creek. (“Ecola” means whale; a whale beached here during the winter Lewis and Clark spent at Fort Clatsop just north of there. The namesake cannon was also beached here.)

Past bikini clad sunbathers and industrious sand castle builders, Swami trod doggedly, bundled in his long coat and winter hat with the earflaps down. At the water’s edge he performed another ritual, we all chanted and he offered flowers to the Ocean Mother. We then wound our way up the road to nearby Ecola State Park where the amazing picnics were repeated.

I hope someone is taking good care of the tapes of those outings. That was vintage Swami, well worth preserving and sharing.

EW: How would you characterize Swami’s pujas, worships, lectures, etc.?

LKH: The special puja season began in autumn with Durga’s festival of lights and ended with Sri Ramakrishna’s birthday in late winter. There was a palpable aura around Swami when he performed pujas on these great celebration days, usually beginning in the morning and lasting until the final prasada meal of offered food late in the afternoon. By the time he got to the homa fire ritual using the fireplace, he was practically electrified and we were too. His worship was sincere, unique and profound.

Swami’s lectures were repetitive, rambling and intuitive. Thus, they always touched on all our unspoken questions, doubts and problems of the day with just the right words we needed to hear. He was an instrument in the hands of the Divine Mother.