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Reminiscences of Swami Aseshananda

I first met Swami Aseshananda in Seattle in August of 1971. He came from Portland to accompany Swami Vividishananda to Honolulu for 3 or 4 weeks. I had recently started living at the Vedanta Society of Western Washington, my home for the past 36 years, and was very eager to meet the swami from Portland.

Swamis Vividishananda and Aseshananda were long-time friends who, as college students, would together visit Swami Brahmananda and some of the other direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna at Belur Math or Balaram Mandir.

Swami Vividishananda was sent to America in 1929 and eventually settled in Seattle in 1938. He was delighted when Swami Aseshananda was posted to Portland in the 1950s. They exchanged pulpits every year and the devotees of the two centers came to know each other. Every summer for many years the two centers would enjoy a joint picnic at Mt. Rainier, approximately half-way between Seattle and Portland.

Those August days of 1971 witnessed my first impressions of Swami Aseshananda. "My goodness! Before me is an inspirational monk who exudes a sense of the dramatic." That first impression was reinforced on many occasions over the next 25 years. As the years went by, I would see him and serve him when he visited Seattle and on several occasions when I visited Portland. I gradually discovered behind his dramatic exterior a loving heart that was truly devoted to Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother. It was very inspiring. On many occasions I heard him say that for him Sri Ramakrishna represented the method of spiritual life and Holy Mother represented grace.

Many memories come into my mind when I think of Swami Aseshananda. As requested, I will now put down in writing some of those memories.

This first incident is not a personal memory of mine, but it reveals the sense of drama that permeated Swami Aseshananda. I heard this story from Swami Vividishananda many times and it is a favorite of mine. In 1962 Seattle hosted a world's fair called *Century 21*.

Swami Vividishananda invited several swamis and devotees from the west coast to come to Seattle for a few days and visit the fair. Swamis Ashokananda and Aseshananda were among them. One day the swamis and many devotees went to the fair. After visiting several of the exhibits one of the devotees steered the group toward the amusement park section and purchased tickets for the merry-go-round. The carousel came to a stop,

people got off, and the swamis and devotees climbed onto the platform and readied themselves for the ride. All except for Swami Aseshananda. He would not step up onto the carousel. One of the devotees requested Swami Aseshananda to quickly get on, but he balked. One of the swamis also requested him, but he balked again. Finally, time was getting short and Swami Vividishananda said, “Kiran (Swami Vividishananda was senior and called Swami Aseshananda by his family name) please get on the carousel. It is getting ready to start.”

With a dramatic flair Swami Aseshananda proclaimed to the entire group, “I have struggled my entire life to get off the merry-go-round, I will not get back on it now!” And he didn't.

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We read in *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* that the Master likens a realized soul to a perfect dancer—one that never takes a false step. Early on in my monastic life I could understand that perfected souls are very rare, even in monastic orders. But I wanted to know what Sri Ramakrishna meant by this remark and I asked many visiting monks of diverse ages and backgrounds this question. “Sri Ramakrishna says a perfect dancer never takes a false step but we see that no two people can agree on everything. There were some clashes or differences of opinion even among the apostles of Christ and also among the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, all of whom were realized souls. What is the meaning of his remark that a perfect dancer never takes a false step?” I received a number of different answers to the question. The two that stood out to me were from Swami Swananda (the head of the Berkeley center at the time) and Swami Aseshananda.

Swami Swananda's view was that a perfect dancer does not take a false step executing his or her own particular dance. But the relationship difficulties and points of contention come because each saint's dance is unique and does not completely dovetail with other dances. One may perform a waltz perfectly and another perform a foxtrot perfectly but they will clash at certain spots on the dance floor.

Swami Aseshananda said that a realized soul will not take a false step in his or her knowledge of Brahman, the one Reality underlying this world of multiplicity. In his customary dramatic fashion, Swami Aseshananda added, “If one could find ten realized souls and get them to assemble in the same room to discuss what color the fence should be painted or when vespers should be performed, there would be 10 different opinions! But there would be no false step, clash of opinion or difference in understanding regarding the nature of Brahman.”

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In 1975 I drove Swamis Swananda and Bhaskarananda to Portland to participate in a function there that was attended by 5 or 6 visiting swamis. This was the first time that I

stayed overnight at the Portland ashrama. We arrived in the late morning. At lunch Swami Aseshananda was thinking about the seating arrangement for the evening banquet. A full house was expected. Looking at me, he was pondering where I would sit and finally told me that at dinner I would be sitting with the swamis at the head table. I politely replied that it wasn't necessary for me to sit at the head table. As a brahmachari myself, I would be happy to sit with Marvin, Harold, and Tony, the three probationers at the Portland ashrama.

We read that sometimes a fly is shot with a cannon when an ordinary flyswatter would do. Not the most energy-saving method, but powerful when a point is to be made. I was soon to find out that Swami Aseshananda's cannon was loaded and the visiting brahmachari was in the crosshairs. He bellowed at me with a hurricane force that would shake a well-established tree, let alone a young monastic sprout like myself. "When you are in Portland you will do exactly as I say and sit exactly where I tell you to sit. There is no discussion!"

Before he could reload, I quickly replied, "Yes Swamiji," and kept quiet. After lunch everyone retired to their rooms for rest. I was not in the habit of sleeping during the day and sat in the foyer and read. The whole ashrama was quiet except for the sound of cannon fire which was still echoing through the chambers of my mind.

After about an hour I got up and headed for the long hallway that leads to the small kitchen on the north end of the ashrama building. Entering the hallway I unexpectedly saw Swami Aseshananda walking towards me. His gaze was cold and penetrating. My heart rate jumped. Images of cannon fire dominated my mind. Had he reloaded? As we met, a subtle, yet warm and benign smile emerged from his icy stare. He tenderly gripped my upper arm with his hand. Then he looked up and down the hallway to see that nobody else was present and in a soft voice full of love and affection broke the silence, "Please don't mind my scolding earlier today. On the outside I am rough and hard, but on the inside I am very soft and loving." Swami Aseshananda again surveyed his surroundings to make sure that we were alone and then added, "But don't tell this to T---!" [name removed]

That evening Swami Aseshananda had me sit with my fellow brahmacharis.

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It is mentioned that when Sri Ramakrishna visited the zoo he went directly to see the lions, not looking at the other exhibits. The lion is the Mother's mount! I was reminded of this during my above-mentioned stay at Portland in 1975. One day all of the visiting swamis and many devotees went to see Multnomah Falls and the Bonneville fish hatchery, both up the Columbia River from Portland. At the hatchery Swami Aseshananda led the way. He briskly walked through a maze of fish-holding tanks without looking right or left. We were all interested in seeing the various fish and were

finding it hard to keep up with him. Finally, we saw him stopped at a big tank with his arm dramatically pointing into the water. As we approached he bellowed, “Look!” He was pointing at several huge fish about 12 feet long and weighing perhaps seven or eight hundred pounds each. After we gazed in awe at these gigantic fish for about a minute, Swami Aseshananda returned by the same route and did not even glance at any of the other fish. The message was clear. Go for the highest and the greatest. Don't be preoccupied with small things!

I forget what year it was, but probably in the mid 1980's. Swami Aseshananda was in the hospital having an operation. I drove Swami Bhaskarananda to Portland and we saw Swami Aseshananda that afternoon, 3 or 4 hours after the operation. I remember that the nurse told us that she had never seen a patient as fearless as the Swami. In fact, during the operation, which was performed under a spinal anesthesia and not a general, Swami Aseshananda talked philosophy with the surgeon and attending nurses.

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During Swami Aseshananda's last visit to Seattle I was his attendant, as I had been on many previous occasions. Over the years a relationship had developed between us and I always enjoyed his stay. On the day of his departure, he and I were walking down the front steps of the Vivekananda House [monastery]. On reaching the landing, Swami Aseshananda paused and said to me, “You have served me well. May Mother bless you.” I made bold to inject a little drama of my own and, looking him directly in the eye, firmly declared, “I am not satisfied with verbal blessings only.” He listened, paused, and then, with a benign smile of assurance on his face, told me. “Everything happens at the proper time. Don't be impatient.”

Those words were spoken many, many years ago. They continue to comfort and inspire me.

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