

**Swami Tathagatananda**, spiritual leader of the Vedanta Society of New York, first met Swami Aseshananda at the Portland center in 1977. They subsequently met many times at Vedanta centers and functions in the United States.

*Written submission.*

### **Reminiscences of Revered Swami Aseshanandaji**

I came to this country on 15 February 1977. Before my arrival in the United States, I worked for about ten years as the superintendent (Warden) of student welfare at the Ramakrishna Mission Students' Home, a boys' hostel for orphans and destitute children in Madras which was started by Rev. Swami Ramakrishnanada in 1905. The Students' Home provided a small number of students at that time with free lodging, food and education. Gradually, the number of students increased and a larger facility was built to house and educate them. Today, nearly 700 students are receiving the same services free of charge. During my stay at Madras, I came to know about Rev. Swami Aseshanandaji, who had also worked at the Students' Home\* prior to his departure for America in 1947, after which he never returned to India.

I am connected to the families of Rev. Swami Saradananda and Rev. Swami Ramakrishnananda. Naturally, due to that connection, I had a greater interest in knowing as much as I could about their lives. Swami Aseshanandaji was very close to Rev. Swami Saradananda and served him as his secretary for a number of years. He wrote a monumental book about that swami entitled *Glimpses of a Great Soul*.

I heard many things about Swami Aseshanandaji's life in India. He was studying at St. Paul's Christian College in Calcutta. Swami Aseshanandaji had been intimately known to Rev. Swami Akhilananda, who was initiated by Rev. Swami Brahmanandaji. Akhilanandaji-swami inspired the young man to visit Belur Math and the swamis. Swami Aseshanandaji took initiation from Holy Mother and subsequently joined the Ramakrishna Order. His mother, who was from East Bengal (now Bangladesh), came to Belur Math and requested Rev. Swami Shivanandaji to allow her son to go back to his native place along with her. Her prayer was granted, and mother and son returned to their native village. But destiny was also working to bring the boy to the monastery. One swami (Swami Omkarananda) who subsequently became a Vice-President of the Ramakrishna Order, was a scholar-monk. He sent a postcard written in Sanskrit to Swami Aseshanandaji. Neither his mother nor the postman could read Sanskrit. The contents of the postcard were full of inspiration about the glory of monastic life. That message made a deep impact in his mind, and Swami Aseshanandaji left for Belur Math shortly afterwards. This I learned from Rev. Swami Aseshanandaji himself. The swami was also fond of sports and played tennis during his college days.

Rev. Swami Aseshanandaji was fond of conducting classes. During the period that he was in Madras, he used to conduct classes on Sundays at the Madras Math in Mylapore, which was next to [second in importance to] Belur Math in those days. Rev. Swami Kailashanandaji was in charge of the Madras Math. He was also in charge of the New Delhi center prior to his coming to Madras. Although Rev. Swami Kailashanandaji had been a university professor in his pre-monastic life, he was not very keen to conduct the Sunday classes at Madras Math, classes that were traditionally taught by all secretary-monks. Swami Aseshanandaji was conducting classes uninterruptedly. Ramakrishna Order Headquarters actually wrote a letter to Rev. Swami Kailashanandaji, requesting him to conduct these classes at Madras Math. Rev. Swami Kailashanandaji's reluctance and Rev. Swami Aseshanandaji's deep interest allowed him to continue conducting classes until his departure for America.

When Revered Swami Aseshanandaji was in Mylapore, Swami Chidananda, late president of the Divine Life Society, was studying in Madras and he used to come to see Rev. Swami Aseshanandaji at the Students' Home. In that way, Swami Chidananda developed a reverential interest in the philosophy of the Ramakrishna Mission. He also wanted to join our order, but due to his being over age, he could not join. He joined the Divine Life Society and I saw him many times in the United States. He was very respectful to the swamis of the Ramakrishna Order. Swami Chidananda as a student was very much impressed with the saintly life of Rev. Swami Aseshanandaji. Almost every time, whenever it was possible to see him, Swami Chidananda would invariably visit Rev. Swami Aseshanandaji at Portland when he came to America.

I do not know how many years Rev. Swami Aseshanandaji was in Madras, but I heard from him that he did not see the Belur Math Temple and that he wanted to pay a visit to Belur Math before coming to the West. Rev. Swami Madhavanandaji, who was the secretary, wrote him in a postcard that blessings are being sent in the postcard—he need not come. So, Swami Aseshanandaji never saw the new temple at Belur Math in his lifetime. But the temple was in his heart as he was a great monk.

While in Portland, I traveled with the Swami and other devotees in a car to some areas near Portland. Everybody knows that Rev. Swami always gave directions to the drivers, however experienced they may have been.\*\* I also went with him to the Portland center's Scappoose retreat, where I gave another talk. During the recess on this occasion, the devotees gathered around the swamis as usual and Swami Aseshananda asked the women devotees to talk with me. Later, I accompanied him to the women's residence where some of these women lived under his care. I saw that Rev. Swami was trying to settle some interpersonal problems among them through scolding while also showing his love.

In November 1977, he came to our center, the Vedanta Society of New York, for the memorial service of Rev. Swami Pavitranandaji. He was in such an exalted state that he was unable to get dressed in time for the service to begin.\*\*\* He stayed in our center on

a number of occasions and visited some other places. It was Rev. Swami Aseshanandaji who asked me, during one of his stays at our center, to start giving initiation. He said, "Without initiation, devotees will not develop closeness with Sri Ramakrishna." When the day of his departure arrived after one of his visits, I always accompanied him to the airport.

I saw him many times. On several occasions, he visited the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center on the East Side in New York City. On those occasions, I was invariably invited and saw Rev. Swami Aseshanandaji there as well. I also saw him in St. Louis at the memorial service for Rev. Swami Satprakashanandaji, and at the Ganges Retreat in Chicago.

During one occasion at Santa Barbara, it was either a brahmacharya or sannyas ceremony, I cannot recall exactly, Revered Swami Aseshanandaji related, or rather, enacted the drama that took place when he was initiated into brahmacharya by Rev. Swami Brahmanandaji at Belur Math in 1922. That famous story is known to all his close devotees and need not be repeated here. The episode is recorded in *Glimpses of a Great Soul* (p. 72). On that day, the living room at Santa Barbara was filled to every nook and cranny by swamis and devotees; every single person enjoyed that sweet retelling and all laughed heartily.

There is one unalterable fact about Rev. Swami Aseshanandaji: his life was absolutely guileless and innocent, and he was absorbed in the sweet memories of his olden days of monastic life. He rarely indicated any interest to me about other, secular, aspects of life. Even his scolding was sweetened by love and due to their long association with the Revered Swami, Mr. Bush and other close devotees never reacted to his harsh remarks. I inquired and found that some women devotees also accepted him as their mentor and father. With all devotees, he lived intimately all those long years, showering them with love and affection and with his sincere friendship alongside his fatherly scolding.

I used to read portions of *Shri Shri Chandī (Durga Saptasati)* almost every day. During his last illness, he called me and requested me to read the *Chandī* on his behalf. I did it with all sincerity and called him back to tell him that I had received a positive response due to Mother's Grace. On Oct. 16, 1996, at the ripe age of ninety-seven, he entered mahasamadhi. I feel extremely fortunate to have participated in his memorial service.

He was essentially a spiritual person, always uttering the names of Golap-Ma, Yogin-Ma, Gauri-Ma, Saradananda-swami, Brahmananda-swami, and others with whom he had a close connection. Observing his speech and behavior, one was invariably reminded of his past association with these holy companions and the deep impact they had made on his mind, an impact he harbored on numerous occasions in the West. Those memories were uppermost in his mind; regardless of any environment or circumstance, he would switch his mind to his olden days at the monastery and make others happy by sharing those reminiscences.

The most remarkable qualities of his saintly life have created a deep impact on the minds of devotees: his purity of character, simplicity, spiritual austerity and deep love for devotees. He radiated motherly love to one and all and gave them a foretaste of Holy Mother's presence.

Rev. Swami Aseshanandaji had a childlike simplicity, led a pure and saintly life, dressed shabbily and had unkempt hair—he had a conspicuous lack of conformity in his dress and appearance. He was completely oblivious to Western habits of etiquette and protocol. He was not a kill-joy ascetic, however. He was full of fun, jovial in his mood. His scolding of devotees—including Mr. Bush, the president of the Portland center, in the presence of other devotees, and his jovial remarks when sitting with other swamis and devotees in many places, at Santa Barbara, Hollywood, the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center New York (east side), Ganges Town in Chicago, and in St. Louis, have left indelible and very sweet impressions in my mind.

Despite his inherently grave nature, he invariably demonstrated with his life that he was in the world but not of it. He was extremely spiritually-oriented and kept himself completely removed from the Western mode of living in thought, word and deed. In his every action and in his manner of living, spiritual ideas and thoughts were manifested. His puja, his distribution of prasad, his talks, were all a manifestation of his spiritual mood. He spoke from the depth of his soul. Although he lived with us in a foreign country for so many years, he was absorbed with spiritual thoughts and memories. Mentally, he was with the Great Ones with whom he had such a close association during those years of his monastic life.

I am extremely fortunate to have seen Rev. Swami Aseshanandaji in our center as well as in other places. I do cherish that reverential memory of this noble soul who dedicated his life for the purpose of spiritual enlightenment while living so many years in the West. I am very blessed to meet him in America, to know him intimately, and to know his high quality of spiritual life, which is rare in our monasteries today.

*Submitted February 2009*

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[\*Editorial notes: For more information about Swami Aseshananda at the Ramakrishna Mission Students' Home in Mylapore (near Madras) see the remembrance by Swami Damodaranda.

\*\*See Ray Berry's account of Swami Aseshananda's silence during a challenging trip to the airport. This description supports observations that Swami desisted from giving firm instructions while outside his own center.

\*\*\* See also Gayatriprana's description of this exalted state.]