

Terrance Hohner, a student of Swami Aseshananda since 1982, served on the board of the Vedanta Society of Portland for two decades. Trained as an optometric physician, Terrance is currently compiling Swami's teachings for publication and creating multi-media presentations on various aspects of Vedanta philosophy.

Interview with Terrance and Jane Harrison-Hohner, Portland.

Terrance Hohner: I first heard of Swami Aseshananda in the summer of 1971 from another college student while working at Warner Pacific College—a school not far from Mt Tabor. A group of students were painting the various buildings and we'd gather at lunch to share notes about our interests. One day the topic of Eastern philosophy came up, and each person talked about what he had just read. A few weeks prior, I went to Powell's Bookstore where Mr. Powell himself aided me in the selection of reading material saying, "If you are looking for a book on Eastern philosophy, you should read Lao Tsu." I fell in love with his writings. In one lunch-time discussion, we talked about the Tao until one of the student painters said, "If you really want to learn about Eastern philosophy, there is an Indian holy man who lives on Mt. Tabor somewhere and he's often seen walking around the reservoir. He's a rather short, older man. He's someone whom I've heard about and teaches in the area." That thoroughly impressed me, and just knowing there was such a person in Portland stuck in my memory. Every time I drove by the reservoir I looked up and down every street, but I never saw him. Even if I had met him, I wasn't ready to make a commitment to a living teacher. I was going through optometry school, raising two children, and working. Nevertheless, I felt strangely drawn to the thought of an Indian holy man in the city and wondered if we would ever meet.

Getting my professional and family life together was difficult. There was a divorce, and at the same time, in the summer of 1976, I was discharged from the military after four stressful years of active duty caring for Vietnam POWs and their families. I felt completely burned out. Some recovery time was necessary. So we moved to the Oregon coast where I wanted to write poetry, spend more time with our children, do more photography, rediscover myself and deepen my interest in Eastern philosophy.

Developing another primary relationship seemed important, but this time I felt it should be based on spiritual values. What was tried in the first relationship simply didn't succeed because it was dominated by empty material values. I felt there needed to be something deeper to hold a marriage together. So when I met Jane, we both believed independently that sharing and supporting spiritual practices in a relationship were of central importance. We set that as a strong verbal commitment, but we lacked a teacher, a method, and something in common that we could follow. Eventually things deteriorated as we both lost the primary focus of what drew us together. After four more difficult years, we decided to divorce when it was clear that history was repeating itself. We decided to sell everything and leave the Oregon Coast. Eventually, in 1981, I

concluded that I would need to go to India and renounce everything if I were to ever have a meaningful spiritual foundation in my life.

Even though it appeared we were splitting up, Jane mentioned that she was going to the Vedanta Society and meeting with a Hindu teacher named Swami Aseshananda. The question slowly dawned on me, “Is this the Indian holy man that I heard about when painting at Warner Pacific College?” “He’d like to meet you,” she said. I thought, “That’s great. I’d like to meet *him* since if I’m going to India, I’d like to know someone who might possibly open some avenues there. If I’m going to live on the Ganges or in an ashram, maybe he could recommend me to someone he already knows. I need outta here!” My frustration peaked with my inability to rise above what seemed like a dominating preoccupation with materialistic values in America. I was a stranger in a strange land.

So we went together to the Swami’s lecture on Sunday—it was April 4, 1982. I will never forget the day. As he was lecturing I thought, “Gee, this sounds a lot like Yogananda [founder of the Self-Realization Fellowship]; this sounds even *better* than Yogananda! This resonates!” I immediately felt Swami’s strength and authority. I’d never heard anyone speak with as much authority. He spoke of jnana yoga, illumination, and the higher purposes of life. I thought, “Yes, yes, *more*, this is good! I’m going to get more of this in India—because that’s the home, the source of these ideas. I *never* found such depth here in this country.” Then while going through the greeting line after the lecture, Swami said, “Sit over there, sit over there!” So after everyone left the chapel, he pulled up a chair and said to me, “So tell me, what’s going on with you?”

So I told him about my comings, goings, frustrations, discontentment, and failures at trying to forge a spiritually-based life in this culture. Then he asked for Jane’s opinion of the marriage. [See also Jane Hohner’s account of this meeting in her remembrance.] Swami sat quietly for a long time, and it seemed as if he went into a very deep place. He then looked up at me (in a way that no one has ever looked at me before). Then he looked at Jane, and with his finger pointing, motioned back and forth between us and said, “The two of you belong together.” [While recounting this incident, both Terrance and Jane were visibly moved, although decades had passed.]

It was partly what Swami said, but even more, it was the power and authority behind it that rang so deep. What he said was true: we *did* belong together. In retrospect, he was essentially saying, “Take off your veil of ignorance, wake up to the primary spiritual core within and between you two and start nurturing that. Now, if you want to take this seriously, we can create a method to reach that goal.” He pulled me aside, gave me a short mantra, instructed me in some particular aspects in meditation and recommended two books to read. Boom, just like that.

Walking out of the building, it was like being in another world as I pondered, “Why go to India if such a teacher exists here? The basis of our marriage relationship could

possibly be very meaningful with this kind of guidance. Why do all these other extreme things?” Then I thought, “If I can’t pursue a spiritual life with help like this in Portland, what makes me think I can find it in the Himalayas?” This was a major awakening. I felt transformed almost on the spot.

It’s important to mention that for over twenty years I also had, like Jane, significant cravings and dependencies. At that moment, those totally unproductive habits and cravings disappeared. For some reason there was a recharging of my belief in a higher life and purpose: to realize the Divine Self. Swami was the first person with whom I had any personal contact where such resonance existed, as if saying, “Yes, what you sense to be true *is* true, it *can* be done in this life, and *here are the steps to do it.*” Then he asked me to come to discuss what happened as I worked through the method he gave me.

So things became more balanced, and I experienced fewer extremes in moods and behaviors. Life became focused on the method and his guidance. We were pared down from a three-bedroom house on the Oregon coast to a small studio apartment by the medical school where Jane was studying. Our children [Jane’s stepchildren] visited and slept on the floor in sleeping bags. They may have thought we were crazy, but I was never happier in my life. We were living a life of meditation, attending *Upanishad* classes (Swami wouldn’t let us go to the raja yoga classes right away), attending the Sunday lecture, and the school of inter-religious studies, all to refine the mind. Our children were reassured that I was staying in Portland and with Jane.

So just as Jane and I were binding our relationship, Swami was helping me bind my family together with practical techniques for communication—and even meditation—thereby deifying the relationship with our children. Although I had always had a strong love for our son and daughter, this was a breakthrough. I never fully grasped what I truly loved about them—that is, the inner Ruler/Immortal seated in their heart—until Swami opened the door to it. Now, when I served our children, I was serving the inner Ruler/Immortal. That made the most sense; that seemed like such a superb basis for love. Previously I felt a strong spiritual presence in each of our children and that it was potentially there somewhere, but I never really achieved an experience of it through the life and choices we made before.

EW: So how did the topic of initiation come up?

TH: I had immediately felt a connection with Mr. Bush and Mr. Todd Thomas, so I asked them how this worked. They suggested I ask Swami about initiation, which I remember reading about. Jane and I asked Swami individually for initiation, and sometimes together, and he’d say, “Later, later, not yet.” This went on throughout most of 1982 (I had met him in April of that year). Finally he must have felt we were ready and he had a date in mind, in the summer of 1983, on the Shodashi Puja, a form of Kali worship where Sri Ramakrishna worshiped Holy Mother as Mother Kali.

JHH: Again, we see how Swami emphasized *deification of the relationship*. He obviously chose that day for us because he saw this as the highest model worthy of emulation.

TH: After the initiation, I felt as though I might not recover from the unique elevation that I experienced from his words and his touch in the shrine. For the next few hours, I could barely speak or move from the chapel where I sat in front of the picture of Sri Ramakrishna. [Moved to tears, he continued] It was just like *coming home* and it *was* home. I felt Swami's grace, the grace of Sri Ramakrishna, Mother's grace, and the resonance of the mantra. He had given me a preliminary mantra in April of 1982 and the more I read and meditated, the better it got. But when he gave me the *real* mantra—the one from a higher state of consciousness that he pulled down—it changed my life. It was absolutely perfect for me. It tied together all the loose parts of my mind and heart.

So after that point I felt infinitely blessed. I was so dedicated to him and to whatever he directed me to do in our spiritual practices. For instance, I was so anxious to help around the temple—to clean, to paint the basement, work in the yard—that I'd ask him, but he'd always say, "No, no, not necessary!" "But Swami," I protested. "*Not necessary!*" So it took almost six or seven years of me asking him until, when he ran out of options with other people for a particular project, he finally allowed me saying, "Terrance Hohner, come here. You can do (such and such) with Mr. Cornick. Come to the library first; I'll talk to you about this project." This was in 1988, six years after I met him. I was like a little kid in a candy shop: "Oh boy, oh boy, I get to do something for Swami after all these years." Then Swami came rushing into the library where Mr. Cornick was sitting next to me. Mr. Cornick jumped out of his seat because Swami roared so loud, "And I want this to be extremely clear. When you are providing karma yoga, you are serving the Lord in your work and don't ever forget that."

EW: So he thought you might be doing it for the ego?

TH: Yes, it was all about the false ego. He *knew* that I would have aspired to some hierarchal ideas for being given the privilege of working at the temple. He wouldn't let me get to that place. Then he moved to burn whatever ego I had left about that, after I showed my enthusiasm for working in the yard with Mr. Cornick, by *pre-empting* it, saying, "Your work will only be of value under the condition that you keep the Lord in your mind, always serving the Lord." It was as if a bolt of lightning had hit me.

EW: Did he scold you in those years?

TH: Yes, he scolded me a number of times. Once I came to a class in 1985 or '86 with an 11 year-old boy I was babysitting for one of the devotees. The child was a little restless in the class, distracting others, and I tried to calm him down. Swami stopped in the middle of the class, "Who is responsible for bringing that child here—where is the mother of that child?" I said, "Well Swami, the mother had a commitment and asked me

to watch the child for her.” He then reprimanded me saying, “Don’t ever think of bringing a child to this class without clearing it with me in advance. Now take the child to the foyer, sit with him and read him a book. I’ll talk to you after class!” That was a pretty strong scolding. I stepped over a boundary. I was being inconsiderate to him and the rest of the class. I should have asked Swami in advance if it was appropriate to bring the child. I was scolded heavily in grade school and high school but those reprimands felt as if they were coming from a need to control, power trip, and/or humiliate me. Swami’s scoldings were out of love: he had a spiritual basis and I never felt embarrassed or humiliated. It didn’t hurt as bad as it sounded. Now looking back, the experiences weren’t scoldings as much as they were reshapings.

JHH: Perhaps you could comment on how Swami shaped your life through participation on the Society’s board.

TH: In 1983, Swami invited me to be a part of the board. I thought, “OK. I’ve been on other boards before. I know how boards work. I was president of a board. This will be fun, this will be easy and I’ll get to have more time with Swami.” As I watched how they did things, I thought, “This isn’t a normal board. In fact, this isn’t a ‘board’ at all! We’re here for advanced karma yoga class; this is about disassociating ourselves from our ego, from the idea of expecting praise or results for any service, and on the positive side, learning the optimal attitude of offering everything to Mother for all work/service.”

Mother (through Swami) was ultimately in charge of *everything* at the Temple. It was a *perfunctory board* in which people were learning their lessons about letting go the hard way. When an individual would step out of bounds they always got hammered and scolded. And you’d sit next to them as they got fried into little bits and pieces of charcoal and watch the smoke go up. What might happen to me if I step into this line of fire and say, “I’m in charge, I know the best way to do this or that, or I know what’s best for the Society?” Whether it was a carpenter’s ego, a plumber’s ego, or whatever, Swami could help curb the ego of any “doer.” Once that sense of “doer” was negated, then we could see what Mother really wanted. It was Swami’s deep commitment to Mother, and to us, as Her children, that moved him so firmly.

So then, instead of proceeding with our own agendas, we would make suggestions. “Swami, the roof is leaking. Do you think *Mother* would like us to repair it?” He’d say, “We’ll consult with Mother. If Mother says to spend the money, we’ll spend it.” If not, it would be patch-up over patch-up over patch-up. Swami was in that type of communication with Mother, I’m convinced. So the board experience of roughly twenty years taught me that *Mother* makes all the big decisions, not only at the Vedanta Society, but also in our lives, whether we are ready for that or not. What a powerful, unique, and in retrospect, loving training-ground!

As Swami was fading from the physical body, I had the rare opportunity to care for him in his room at the temple Saturday nights for his last year. That was a very profound

opportunity to render service to him directly, which he never, ever, allowed me previously. Prior to this, did he want my services for eye care? Forget it! He lived with his cataracts! Suggest a treatment for his red eye? Never! “Mother will take care of it,” he insisted when I humbly would ask him.

So in 1995 I joined a group of approximately twelve men and embarked upon an experience that was beyond anything I imagined. Swami would lie down for bed around 10 PM and I’d attempt to sleep in the small room adjacent to his. The very first night I was there, something occurred that had never happened before. A very unusual, blue, spiraling light was seemingly in front of me, at the level of the eyebrows, whether or not my eyes were open or closed. I tried to sleep and I couldn’t sleep. I wondered if I were exposed to something odd here—some chemical or something? I recalled reading something similar to this in the spiritual literature. Was this possibly a movement of what Swami referred to as the kundalini? I “watched” it the entire night. It was very peaceful. Blue is my favorite color! I concluded maybe it was something preparing me, helping me carry out this service. Thus began a level of service and intimacy that I never dreamed of. *This was as close to Mother as I could imagine. He was like a hollow reed that Mother was blowing through and the men there got to steady the reed.*

One of the things that moved me the most taking care of Swami that last year was the precise ritual and discipline about where things were—right to the very end. He would call me at about two or three o’clock in the morning: “Terrance Hohner, Terrance Hohner!” (The amazing thing about this is that he always knew who was on duty in the stark middle of the night and never miscalled a name!) I’d wake up immediately with a start and I’d run to his bedside and he’d say, “Help with this.” Or, “Need this!” Usually it was a trip to the bathroom. So I’d help put on his slippers, make sure his shoulders were covered, and guide and support him to the washroom. On the way back to his bed he’d say, “Over to the pictures, over to the pictures!” At this point he was essentially without physical sight yet he knew exactly where everything was. He’d always go over to a particular table and salute the pictures of Holy Mother, Sri Ramakrishna, and have about a thirty-second period of intense silence and stillness. This was the deepest stillness you could imagine and was the closest thing to timelessness I’ve ever felt. Then we’d go back to his bed, take off his slippers, and cover him up again. He would typically say, “Cover the body.” If I were lucky, maybe he’d wake me up at 5 or 6 AM again and we would repeat this.

It was fascinating that during the last month or two of his life when he’d call me, I’d get up as usual and help him with whatever he needed, but suddenly one night, he didn’t address the pictures. I’d ask him if he wanted to, and he’d say, “Not necessary!” So I’d say it a little louder [Swami was very hard of hearing], and he said definitively, “*Not necessary!*” Then he simply motioned to go back to bed. It was a very moving experience because we all sensed that this could mean that we’d soon be losing him. What if he and Mother were now totally the same? Who is addressing whom? There is no Mother outside, no need for pictures outside: he *is* The Mother.

On the day he passed away, Swami Shantarupananda [the swami appointed to assist and succeed Swami Areshananda] called and asked me to take some pictures of Swami. There was a gathering of devotees that night to chant and meditate near the mountain of gorgeous flowers piled on his body. Swami's was the most placid and most peaceful face you could imagine! I thought: "I've just lost my teacher, the one person in the world I was the closest to, the only person that ever showed me total unconditional love, the only person I've ever had experiences with of this nature—but yet the feeling I was left with that night, in his room, was that everything here, everything in the entire world—no matter what it was—is *absolutely* OK. This is all Mother's world and this is all Mother's will." This amazing state was an interlude, like some peaceful space between here and a world of grief I experienced later. Everyone I spoke with there was bathed in this feeling: yes, we lost our teacher in the physical form, but now he is everywhere. Now he is not encumbered with this nagging physical form. He is now a force that is and will be with me without the limitations of the physical body. That force is so much more powerful, so much more subtle, than anything could be in the physical form.

Sometimes I reflect in awe how events unfolded from the days of painting at Warner Pacific College. What allowed me to be able to meet a qualified spiritual teacher in this life? I once asked him, "Swami, how can one possibly show Mother gratitude for all She has done for us here?" His answer, as usual, was very direct, clear and simple, "Simply follow the method and live the life."

Many years before Swami's passing, when his physical health was beginning to go through big downward changes, I asked him a core question, "Swami, what happens to the student-teacher relationship when the physical teacher passes?" His answer deeply moved me: "When the river enters the ocean, one must then think of the ocean."

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