

Vera Edwards, a disciple of Swami Aseshananda, began her association with Swami in 1955. She resided in Holy Mother's House for two decades and remains a supporter of the Portland center.

Interviewed in Portland.

EW: Vera, when did you first meet Swami Aseshananda?

VE: It was in 1955, the year Swami came to Portland, at a time when I was really searching for something. I made up my mind that I wasn't going to be involved in any *organized* religion. My sister, Fae, had heard about Vedanta when she was in California and we had seen an ad in the Oregonian newspaper about the Vedanta Society's Fourth of July service at the Scappoose retreat, celebrating Swami Vivekananda's mahasamadhi [passing]. So we decided to go although I wasn't really very excited about it—I thought, "Another little group!"

It was very strange to me at first. Swami spoke, probably about Swami Vivekananda. There was something that drew me. I knew immediately that this was the person I had been searching for to be my spiritual guide.

EW: How did you come to that conclusion?

VE: It was intuitive. Some things Swami said were things that I believed about God and religion. You see, from a very young age I didn't really believe what I was being taught about religion. So for years I considered myself an atheist—I didn't believe in God, and the things I read supported that point of view. At that time, I thought science had all the answers and truth. Later, though, I had an experience after which I knew God existed—but not the God that I had always been taught about, a being up in the sky!

EW: When you had the conviction that God existed, was that when you met Swami Aseshananda?

VE: No, this happened about three years before I met him. In the meantime I had been going to groups such as Theosophy and a New Thought group called The Church of Truth. But I knew those weren't "it." So at this first lecture of Swami's, I knew immediately that this was what I was searching for.

EW: Do you remember what Swami was talking about that so impressed you on that first meeting?

VE: It was just basic Vedanta and mainly about Swami Vivekananda because that event was celebrating his life.

EW: You mentioned that it was strange at first?

VE: I knew very little about Eastern philosophy. I had never heard the terminology before, I had never heard about any of the people he was talking about like Vivekananda, Sri Ramakrishna, or Holy Mother. But it wasn't so much what he said, rather it was Swami, *himself, what he projected* that struck me. So that was my first meeting with Swami.

EW: What happened next?

VE: That day he had one of the devotees invite Fae [Vera's sister] and me to have tea at the temple. At first I thought, "Oh, a ladies' tea party!" [laughing] I thought, "No, I wouldn't like *that!*" This same devotee explained that we would be having tea *just* with Swami. So we went a few days later, I believe. Swami was there all by himself in the old Portland temple; he fixed tea for us and we talked a little.

EW: What did you talk about?

VE: I can't remember, I think we were just getting acquainted. He showed us around the temple and possibly showed us the shrine. I thought that was really, really strange [laughter]. In spite of all this, I was still very much interested and knew this was something I wanted to pursue.

EW: What did you learn from Swami during that time?

VE: At that time Swami taught me that there is truth in *all* religions. People are at different levels in their spiritual life and everybody needs to find their own way.

EW: Eventually the topic of initiation must have come up?

VE: Well, Swami, being new to Portland at that time, wasn't allowed to initiate for three years after arriving here. In the meantime I had many interviews, almost weekly.

EW: About Vedanta or what you were reading?

VE: About my spiritual practice, about meditation, or any questions I had—and I had a lot of questions! One thing I couldn't understand was going into the shrine. In fact, I wouldn't go into the shrine for about a year. So I was interested in Swami's *teachings* rather than the shrine activities.

EW: Did the shrine seem peculiar or foreign?

VE: Yes, *too* foreign! I thought—well, this is something cultural with him but not relevant to my culture. Gradually, and I don't know how—perhaps with his help—I

overcame this feeling about the shrine. Then I really enjoyed going into the shrine and meditating, especially since, in the meantime, he'd given me instructions about meditation.

EW: Were you one of the first people initiated?

VE: Swami started initiating in 1958 at Durga puja time. The day before Durga puja he initiated three people, and the day after Durga puja he initiated Fae, myself, and my sister-in-law, May Edwards. May's story was funny: when I first started going to Vedanta, I would call her every Saturday and invite her to go with me to the Sunday lecture. Finally she went. Although at first she avoided Vedanta, she really liked Swami and was initiated when I was!

EW: What was your time with Swami like in those days? You were still working . . .

VE: I had a plant nursery, so I could work at home. I didn't spend a lot of time at the temple, but would usually go once during the week and on Sundays. I remember once I invited Swami to our home and he came to dinner.

EW: Did he do any kind of puja at your house?

VE: No, no he didn't; my husband wasn't really interested in Vedanta. At first he thought it was just a phase I was going through, that I would soon get over it [laughter]!
[Editorial note: Vera related that when her former husband eventually asked her to choose marriage over Vedanta, she chose Vedanta.]

EW: What was your relationship like with Swami in the early days in the 1950s and 60s?

VE: It was very close—he treated me as if I were his child. I could do no wrong: he never scolded me. I could see him scolding other people and I wondered why he didn't scold me.

EW: That didn't last forever, because I heard him scold you in the 1970s; in fact, many contributors to this collection commented on the scoldings you received, and some suggested he scolded you instead of another person who might not be able to endure it.

VE: Yes, after a few years the scolding started; that was his way of teaching.

EW: How did you feel the first time you got one of those yourself?

VE: Oh, I was *devastated!*

EW: Do you remember what you did to earn a scolding?

VE: I think the first time was after a puja when a part of something Swami had offered was to be kept separately so he could use it again for an offering, but I put it all together [laughing], so he scolded me.

EW: Was it in front of other people?

VE: Oh yes!

EW: Did he yell, “Mrs. Vera Edwards”—that’s how I remember him addressing you? Did he always call you that?

VE: I think he did. [Editorial note: Swami respectfully called several people by Mrs. or Mr., even Mr. Bush, a monastery resident/companion for decades.]

EW: So for the first few years everything was very warm and loving.

VE: Yes, it was. I think after that, nothing would have changed my feeling about him; I totally trusted him and knew what he was.

EW: Did he give you personal advice about your life?

VE: Yes. Looking back, he taught me everything, even practical things.

EW: For example?

VE: I would shop for Swami and he was very particular about how money was spent since he felt it belonged to the Lord. He felt *everything* belonged to the Lord and he was responsible for taking care of it.

EW: So you would do the shopping for his apartment or for the temple?

VE: I didn’t do all of it, but I did often shop for shrine necessities. Swami saw me as impractical and would point out someone else, saying, “See how practical *she* is!”

EW: In the days after the scolding began, did he sometimes then switch to a more loving demeanor?

VE: Oh yes, yes, very much so.

EW: How would he manifest his loving mood, would it be at a glance, would he give you something, what would it be exactly?

VE: Just the way he acted towards me or looked at me; quite often when I was there, he would serve me food. For the first few years I knew him, he always gave me a glass of

buttermilk when I was at the temple. In later years he didn't use buttermilk at all; I don't think it agreed with him. One dish he gave me was toast with cheddar cheese and honey on top.

EW: Would you say that the scoldings continued throughout most of your relationship?

VE: Oh yes, very much so. In fact sometimes he would scold me for other people, especially if we had visitors.

EW: He would scold you *instead* of them? I've heard something about such a technique. How exactly did that work?

VE: We once had guests at the center who felt we needed a different cooking pan and so they purchased one, brought it to the temple, and told Swami about it afterwards. Swami didn't like that because he didn't want people buying things for the temple without his OK. He scolded me in front of them. I think Swami did this because they were guests and this was his way of letting them know they'd done something he didn't approve of.

EW: Many people told me they were put off by Swami's scoldings. Since you received so many scoldings over decades, could you reflect on their purpose?

VE: Once Swami said to me, "If you accept my scolding in the right spirit it will remove your karma," and so I thought, "That's good!" As the years went by his scoldings didn't really bother me as much; I always felt such love and care from Swami even when he was scolding.

EW: The first several scoldings must have been devastating.

VE: They were at first. See, I knew Swami, and I had a very close relationship with him for many years. I met him in '55 and he passed away in '96. I would say that while the first few years I was affected by his scoldings, I nevertheless tried to *learn*. *He was always teaching, whatever he did.*

EW: After he scolded you, would he do something to make you feel better relatively soon or would you be left to sulk for a week?

VE: It wasn't always the same. For example, I would often drive him and guests sightseeing. Once I was driving them to Multnomah Falls. Swami was in the front seat and two ladies sat in the back. On the way back I was going too fast and a policeman pulled me over. When he came up to the window to talk to me, Swami just sat there; he didn't look at me or at anybody.

EW: Do you think he was angry?

VE: Well I don't know if he was angry, but after that happened, he didn't speak to me for several days. Then we had some more guests coming, so he *had* to speak to me! [laughter]

EW: Did he speak to you after you got the ticket in the car or was he silent the rest of the way back?

VE: Silent, absolutely silent! But then, of course I got a ticket, and I was probably going 70 miles an hour. At that time they were very strict about going 55 miles an hour. So he wrote a letter to the judge asking that I wouldn't be fined.

EW: Was the letter successful?

VE: I think the fine was reduced.

EW: So eventually after one of these sessions, he would eventually break the ice. In this case he spoke to you because he *had* to because you had guests.

VE: That time, yes. But usually, sometimes he would scold somebody—it wasn't always me—and he'd be very silent for several days.

EW: The cold treatment?

VE: Yes.

EW: And then he would just act as though everything were normal again?

VE: Oh yes! He was his usual motherly self.

EW: You said he was always teaching.

VE: Always! He emphasized that spiritual life is *in* this world we're living in. It can't be one way in our everyday life and another way when we're meditating.

EW: Did he have a way of knowing when people weren't meditating?

VE: I don't know about meditating but I think he was very aware, for example, what people were thinking, the progress they were making. I know the people who lived in Holy Mother's House were expected to go to worship daily, to do service at the temple, which everybody wanted to do.

EW: Turning to other forms of teaching, I understand Swami helped you evolve from one role as a homemaker into a self-supporting, independent woman.

VE: That's something he emphasized all the time. "Stand on your own feet, don't depend on others."

EW: And when did you move into Holy Mother's House?

VE: I moved at the age of 65. Swami was looking for someone to live at the retreat, in the cottage there, so I volunteered. But at that time there was a rented Holy Mother's House, on Oregon Street, so he had me live there.

There was a visitor staying in Holy Mother's House who wanted Swami to buy rather than rent, so she donated some money. Swami had me start looking for a house to buy. He also had me write letters to all the devotees, especially women visitors who had stayed in Holy Mother's House, telling them about his plans to buy a house for women residents and visitors.

EW: Were the letters asking for financial support?

VE: Yes, and it was very successful. Anyway I was looking for a house, and of course, he didn't want to pay very much. So most of the houses in that range were pretty bad! [laughter] But I kept searching. I recall the day I looked at what is now Holy Mother's House. I went up to the door and the real estate agent told me how much it was. I replied, "No, that's not my price range," but he continued, "Well, come on in and look at it anyway." So I did. Then I told Swami about it, he went to look at it, and he immediately thought it was the right house. We got a good price, and it was paid for completely by donations!

EW: So that's an example of how he helped you evolve, from homemaker to a self-supporting working woman, then to a person in charge of procuring property for the Vedanta society!

VE: It was quite an experience! Before, I had very little experience in taking care of financial matters. He taught me all that. The following year Swami decided to buy another house for women. In addition to the woman who wanted to live there, many visitors came from *all over the world*, not just from this country, because he was the *only* living disciple of Holy Mother. He asked me to start writing letters looking for another house. So a second house was purchased in 1983.

EW: The women who lived there were trying to live a quasi-monastic life, yes?

VE: I think Swami would have liked very much to have had people who were monastics, but everyone living in Holy Mother's house had jobs and were self-supporting. It was a busy life!

EW: Can you retell the account about Swami's exalted state one day at the retreat?

VE: This occurred in the early years, about 1959. We were at the retreat for a service. Did you ever see the shrine up there by the cottage? It was a little shrine, with an altar, and the worship was done by whoever lived at the retreat. It wasn't well built and has since deteriorated. But at that time, the shrine was used, so Swami went into the shrine while Fae and I waited outside.

We were standing outside waiting for Swami and as I remember, all of a sudden we experienced something unusual. To me it felt like a rush of wind or energy—hard to explain. I knew that something had happened.

EW: Was he still inside?

VE: Yes, and I felt something—it was like a rush of wind. And when he came out of the shrine, he seemed to be in an exalted state—*glowing*! He said, “I experienced the presence of Holy Mother.”

We got in the car. He was talking, not in his normal way, but very exuberantly—and animatedly. He kept on talking about Holy Mother and Swami Saradananda. I think he must have had a very high spiritual experience.

EW: That incident must have only confirmed what you've always felt about Swami.

VE: Being around him, there was such a force, a spiritual force, you *knew* it was there! He had the power to raise your consciousness to a higher level. Sometimes I would feel depressed as I was going through a lot in my personal life. I would come in to the temple and everything was just lifted.

EW: None of it mattered—that kind of feeling?

VE: This feeling of depression or whatever would just go away. But just being in the temple, with his energy in it, it would make one feel better.

EW: Could we turn to the essence of Swami's spiritual approach? I've heard people say “Oh he was just all Mother, all Mother.” I personally heard him as a non-dualist, maybe because that was my own propensity. He would often speak about the turiya state, an idea that thrilled me.

VE: In the early years it was more devotion and personal God. In the later years it seemed to me that he lectured more about Advaita Vedanta—nondualism—but he always spoke about Holy Mother and Ramakrishna, their lives and teachings.

EW: What were Swami's teachings?

VE: *To realize God.* Of course he talked a lot about Holy Mother and his association with Swami Sarardananda.

EW: If you had to summarize his teachings into a few words, what do you think they would have been? Detachment? Renunciation?

VE: Yes, I would say that renunciation was one of his primary teachings, that is, purifying the mind and renouncing things that were an obstacle to one's spiritual growth. [Editorial note: Swami's definition of renunciation was not limited to becoming a monastic. He spoke of renouncing one's identification with the "psycho-physical" body.]

I can only say what his teachings were to me. Swami was very practical and over the years taught me things I needed to learn and practice in my day-to-day life. In my spiritual life Swami emphasized devotion, service to God, and regular meditation. He always gave Holy Mother as the example.

Swami emphasized that you must keep striving, work hard, follow the teachings of your guru, meditate, and serve others to purify one's mind. Swami was the living example of what he taught. We were blessed to have this great soul as our spiritual guide and teacher.

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