

Michael D. Morrow (Vijnana), a monastic disciple of Swami Swahananda, resided in the Portland Vedanta monastery from 1978-1980. His subsequent professional life included teaching ecologically-oriented landscape architecture and urban planning. His writings include *Ecological Design Criteria* and *Non-Dualism, A New Experiment in Living (A Regenerative Model for Personal, Inter-personal and Ecosystem Transformation)*.

Written submission.

I was a monastic of the Ramakrishna Order during my stay at the Portland Center from 1978-1980. It is somewhat hard to reminisce about Swami Aseshananda because our relationship was so deep, profound, and sacred.

When I first arrived at Portland, I was met by a monk, Sarada, and Mr. Bush. They were very cordial to me. Swami was waiting for me in the foyer and knew that I was coming from the Vedanta Society of Southern California. When he first saw me, his eyes beamed with a glowing light and he said, “I will initiate you”—those were the first words out of his mouth. I was very pleased, but I told him, “I have already been initiated by Swami Swahananda.” He said that was all right because it all comes from Mother and Ramakrishna.

From the second we met, there was a profound attraction, both ways. He respected me so much that I could hardly believe it. He did not treat me like a neophyte to spiritual life at all, and it was this profound respect that had a lasting affect on me. I was struggling with many inner desires and practicing extreme austerities during this time so to have a Holy Mother disciple respect me so much gave me tremendous confidence to continue my serious spiritual pursuit.

I had an unbelievable respect for Swami because of the way he acted with others and because of his very intense life. It was a mansion of mirth, as Swami Brahmananda would say, to live with such a soul. It was also very, very difficult. He was the type of guru that would “force the medicine down your throat” if necessary. He loved so much and was so concerned for those that came to him, that he did everything within his power to help them overcome obstacles. With devotees, he was usually very gentle, except for Vera and a few others. With the monks he was very stern and even severe at times. He would sometimes start scolding certain monks in the early morning and it would go on until almost midnight with little abatement. Other times, he was incredibly sweet to the monks.

Swami’s routine was to arise in the morning and the monks would have a morning meditation. He would then cook his own breakfast. Next, he would meet with devotees and/or start some cooking, if we were having guests. We would again meditate and he would do the midday worship. He would then cook his lunch and spend the afternoon

outside, doing various activities from gardening, to sweeping, to raking leaves or mowing. I would help him and ask various questions about Holy Mother, Gauri Ma and others, along with many probing spiritual questions. He was Swami Saradananda's main attendant and was in and around the Udbodhan House when Holy Mother was living there. He used to say that he was not worthy to tie the shoes of Swami Saradananda. I would later become Swami Aseshananda's main attendant and would feel the same about him. Swami Aseshananda never went back to India, even to visit. He said that Swami Saradananda sent him to America to help and he would never go back. His renunciation was complete and final.

We jokingly used to ask Swami if he wanted root beer to drink and he would say, "I will have nothing with the word beer in it." Another humorous thing happened when we would ride out to the retreat in the summer. Although it was ninety-five degrees, he would be fully bundled up in his winter coat, his "aviator style hat with ear flaps," and a scarf. He would not let one breath of wind in the car, because he was concerned about catching a breeze that could bring back his malaria, which he had as a young man. Needless to say, even the other monks were more than happy to have someone other than themselves ride out to the retreat with him during summer! I always loved it and would joke with him about how hot it was. We had a lot of fun, and I was so close to him that we often joked around—and also in private. He was not aloof with me, unless he was in a very high spiritual mood, when I would leave him totally to himself.

We would again meditate and sing arati songs in the evening. He was almost always making prasada (sacred food) for others. He would give a class on Vedanta, the *Gita*, the teachings of Swami Vivekananda, etc. for the public. Other nights he or others would read from the *Gospel of Ramakrishna*. It was during this time that I observed the swami go into various spiritual moods. He would try to hide them, sometimes covering his face with his shawl to a degree, but the atmosphere was so intense that I would also start to experience very deep states of consciousness in his presence. To be around Swami Aseshananda, if you were seriously practicing spiritual discipline, was to be around someone that made sahaja (natural) samadhi and various spiritual moods a tangible reality. It may be hard to believe, but it was true: it was as if his spiritual moods were a fruit in the palm of your hand. The Swami was so pure, had led such an intense inner life, and had so many profound realizations that spirituality was a clear and tangible event around him.

Swami was around eighty when I was with him. I had an intense inner faith that Holy Mother herself was manifesting through Swami, and so I would go in private many times and prostrate at his feet in full humility and ask for Mother's blessings, that I might have direct realization. In those days, all I cared about was having the highest nirvikalpa samadhi, and so I would ask to be granted this. When he would bless me, there would be a type of electric shock, as it were, and I would be in some deep inner states sometimes for a couple of days afterwards. This was the power and purity of the swami.

Late at night, Swami would summon the monks upstairs and we would read Shankara's commentary on the *Upanishads*. He knew from the beginning that my temperament was the practice of non-dualism, and so I loved these times very much. It was as if you were reliving the Upanishadic times. By the way, it was only Swami Aseshananda and my original guru, Swami Swahananda, who encouraged my practice of non-dualism. Some other swamis actually tried to dissuade me from the practice. I knew it was right for me and so did not relent. Swami loved this adamant nature of mine; he did not take it as ego at all but praised it openly in front of the other monks. One night, I even took issue with a commentary of Shankara in the class and not only did he not scold me, he loved that I challenged the issue, showing I was serious about the material being studied. He believed that serious questioning was essential for the path of non-dualism. He also was very interested in the latest scientific discoveries related to Vedanta and non-dualism such as quantum physics. He had a life-long passion for continuing to learn and develop ideas.

I was fortunate to associate with several other swamis who affected my life in one way or another, such as Swami Ritajananda, Swami Nishreyashananda, Swami Ranganathananda and some others, but I had a friendship relationship with Swami Aseshananda that was unique. He always respected me and would ask my advice on certain things. I could not imagine it, but he did. He also had great faith in my ability and this is considered a sign of the highest of teachers.

A Few Situations and Events:

When I told Swami I had self-taught myself Sanskrit, he immediately put me in charge of a Sanskrit class for the monks and devotees. Another time, we were moving a shrine at the retreat and it had to be launched onto the back of a truck. He was very serious about moving this shrine and was concerned that it could fall off the truck. He called me to drive that truck, because he said he knew I would do it right and get the shrine safely to the new spot.

One night he was giving a lecture on "The Hindu View of Christ" and he was very respectful to Christ. Some local fanatical Christians showed up at the talk and about mid-way through started to become agitated. One of them actually started to approach Swami in an aggressive way. One of the members, who was staying there at the time, knew karate and so he thought we would confront the Christian and move him outside. The Christian was very big and threw him aside. Another young monk then jumped up and tried to intervene and he was thrown off. I was in the front row, but had been a pacifist since I was about 10 years old, and so I wanted no part of it. As another member was also thrown to the side and the Christian was approaching Swami, I knew I had to act, and so I put him in an arm lock, bent him over, rushed him down an aisle (accidentally knocking over a devotee in the process), and put him out the front door. The next day when we were in the car together, Swami Aseshananda turned around and said to me, "We should not have done that," but then he winked at me and added, "But that is OK." He knew I had to take action to protect him, and he was appreciative.

[Editorial note: Vera Edwards remembered this event quite clearly, and reported that it was her sister who was knocked over.]

Another event occurred when Swami went to Seattle for a couple of days. I saw that his bathroom was messy and I wanted to clean it up. The other monks warned me that I would get in real trouble if I touched anything in his bathroom. I wanted to do this for him and so I went ahead anyway. When he returned there was a loud yell from his bathroom: “Who has done this?” and I replied that I had. Immediately he changed and became very sweet and thanked me. It was a very touching moment.

I started being Swami’s attendant, helping him pack, making sure he had what he needed when he went on a trip or out to the retreat. Even to touch his clothes was a great blessing, because they had an atmosphere of purity and sanctity that put the mind in a high state of peace. He moved me next to his room and our relationship became closer and closer. He would tell all of the monks to go to bed anywhere from 10:30 p.m.-12:00 a.m. or thereabouts. I would stay up, in a closet, with a light on, hoping he would not see it and study the *Upanishads* until very late. One night he saw my light but only gently told me that I should get more sleep. He was like a compassionate mother at times, very gentle and sweet. An atmosphere of “no problem” would emanate from him always. Whatever the problem, there was a solution and it ultimately existed in grounding your life in the Eternal Beingness whose expression in life was the Universal Mother.

In summary, Swami Aseshananda, was like no one else I had ever met, nor have I met anyone like him since that time. I am a trained scientist, and having over 40 years of various spiritual practices behind me, I can only tell you that to live with such a soul, so intimately, was a blessing beyond compare. I saw, first hand, what a true life of spiritual illumination brings. I also believe that Sarada Devi is a manifestation of the original Shakti (Power) of creation and a Divine Incarnation. Swami Aseshananda was a direct disciple of a Divine Incarnation, proving to me that Incarnations do indeed exist. Even though I am a non-dualist and have followed Zen and various other spiritual traditions, I also know that Incarnations and their immediate disciples do indeed exist and come “for the good of all, for the happiness of all”—to paraphrase a favorite saying of Swami’s. They come only to help awaken our own inherent spiritual potential and understanding, but ultimately our own inner nature is already illumined: no one gives us our essential freedom, it is already our own. They are like the greatest friends who can help if we are humble and listen to their council and are very serious about our own spiritual practice.

Many who saw Swami Aseshananda worshipping believed that he was a devotee and followed a devotional path. The fact is that all of his life was grounded in non-dual realization and also in that in-between simultaneous realm of being naturally merged in Universal Beingness, while at the same time experiencing Wholeness (Divinity) in everyday life. This state, which Ramakrishna called the state of *vijnana*, transcends dual or non-dual. This was my experience of Swami Aseshananda.

After I left Portland, Swami also showed me, once again, how close we were, because whenever he would visit Southern California, he would only want me to travel with him. Other very senior swamis would want to travel with him and attend him, but he insisted that I would be his sole attendant. In addition, even after I left the monastery to follow my own path and ground my spiritual life, he did not treat me differently at all. He was not disappointed that I left the monastery, like many others were. Even after leaving the monastery, he still wanted me to be his main attendant. He knew my true heart and treated me with the same respect he did from the day I met him.

A soul like this is truly once in a lifetime and I can never repay him for his love, compassion, fearlessness, and depth of realization that he showed to me. I can only hope that through these and other reminiscences, this great soul's memory will live on in the infinite future. Free souls such as this break the bonds of ignorance at all levels and help others do the same.

Jai Ma

Submitted January 2009