

# Remembering Sri Sarada Devi's Disciple: Swami Aseshananda As We Knew Him

Reminiscences Compiled by Esther Warkov



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[esther\\_warkov@comcast.net](mailto:esther_warkov@comcast.net)  
(Seattle, WA, USA)



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## Introduction and Acknowledgements

The encounter with a spiritual luminary like Swami Aseshananda has been characterized as a deeply profound, life-transforming experience. Coming into Swami Aseshananda's orbit defied comprehension, we're told, because it was so unlike anything one had experienced. To further complicate matters, while we saw Swami Aseshananda, what he *truly represented* remained unknown to us. "It is difficult for us to understand those who have realized God. They see what we cannot see because they have experienced what we only hope to experience," Swami wrote in the opening paragraph of his book *Glimpses of a Great Soul*, referring to his mentor, Swami Saradananda. Although Swami Aeshananda never claimed to be a spiritual luminary, he acknowledged the difficulty understanding persons like Swami Saradananda and the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna whom he met. Nevertheless, Swami Aseshananda counseled that despite our inability to comprehend such great teachers, "if we surrender ourselves to such individuals, keep their company and follow their teachings, they will heighten our awareness and shape our lives." (Preface xi)

This collection bears testimony to the life-transforming impact when Vedanta's highest ideals manifest in an exemplary teacher, Swami Aseshananda. As the last remaining monk of the Ramakrishna Order initiated by Sri Sarada Devi, Swami Aseshananda was one of a few spiritual luminaries from a bygone era. Now, as many Vedantists note the changing nature of Vedanta in the West, Swami Aseshananda's example of sadhana (spiritual practice) is especially instructive.

The purpose of this project, then, is to preserve the memories, stories, and experiences of those who knew Swami Aseshananda. We rely upon interviews and personal accounts from swamis, pravrajikas (nuns), residents of the Portland monastery, women who lived in homes belonging to the Portland center, disciples, devotees, and visitors, among others. Our earliest account, from Swami Damodarananda, provides a rare glimpse of Swami Aseshananda at work in India during the 1940s. Swami Yogeshananda sheds light on Aseshanandaji's role as Assistant Swami in Southern California in the early 1950s. Next, we learn about Swami Aseshananda's work at the Portland center beginning in 1955 from his first disciples, most now in their eighties and nineties. Swami Aseshananda's tireless devotion to seekers over the ensuing decades until his passing in 1996 is chronicled by disciples, devotees, and visitors from around the world.

Swami Aseshananda eschewed any form of personal adulation or glorification, and as we shall read, went to great—and sometimes amusing—lengths to prevent it. Furthermore, if one did admire Swami, he swiftly redirected that love toward the Divine. One disciple suggested that Swami might have scolded me for compiling this volume, lest it glorify him, but added, "I can't think of anyone more deserving than Swami to have a disciple keep memories of his life alive." How, then, do we tell the story of Swami Aseshananda in a way that honors his selflessness? The solution has been,



whenever possible, to focus on the *ideal* Swami represented rather than our subjective observations of his achievements.

As contributors recount their experience of Swami, a consensus emerges. Many feel Swami demonstrated an exemplary balance between the paths of bhakti and jnana, that is devotion and knowledge. Swami's uncanny ability to answer deeply compelling questions before they were asked is another trait frequently mentioned. Devotees often commented that Swami's lectures were occasions to deliver individually-tailored messages to members of the audience. Swami's lack of body-consciousness, his disinterest in personal material possessions, and his ability to communicate an experience of overwhelming unconditional love were noted by many. Several devotees described Swami's tendency to lapse into stuttering or silence—as though taking direction from another source. Many commented that a hallmark of Swami's genius was his ability to treat each person in a manner which best suited his or her needs. Still others told how Swami removed deep emotional wounds, substance addictions, or fears without uttering a word—and sometimes upon first meeting—thereby transforming lives.

As will be seen, a unique aspect of Swami's "mission" was his association with women devotees who resided in two nearby Portland homes known as Holy Mother's House and Sarada House. These working women, some with children, others retirees, focused on spiritual practice, provided for the Portland center's diverse needs, and served guests from around the world. One long-term resident recalled how Swami deftly modulated the energy in these homes: "Inside this whirlpool of accelerated karma, there was an infinite purity that everyone felt. Swami was the Holy Mother of the center because, like Sarada Devi, he was surrounded by difficult people, but through his unconditional, non-judgmental attitude, they were transformed."

During the course of gathering remembrances, many asked the reason for this undertaking. The impetus for this collection was, in a sense, Swami himself. Despite a self-imposed "missed opportunity" to be with Swami, his example remained a constant irritant. One disciple aptly described his own missed opportunity when he wrote: "Swami lived for sixteen *years* after I lost [contact with] him, and I didn't really re-connect with him all that time. What a shame, what a fool. A 'First Class Fool.' (All honk who have been called that!). This loss is so great my mind just balks at comprehending it." Like this disciple, I was eventually compelled to take stock of my association with Swami Aseshananda and the phenomenon he represents.

What better way to learn more about Swami than to question those who knew him? So what began as an irritant in the mind evolved into a compelling opportunity to both learn about Swami from many different perspectives and to contemplate the message of these reminiscences. Similarly, some contributors remarked that the opportunity to reflect upon Swami was in itself a kind of "blessing," while others found the process to be a valuable occasion to revisit unresolved thoughts about their experience of Swami

Aseshananda and Vedanta generally. Because respondents naturally placed Swami Aseshananda in the context of their own lives, we receive “real life” accounts of the challenges Vedantists in the West face. Such accounts are not apart of mainstream Vedanta literature and offer valuable insight and encouragement when we see others encountering similar challenges along the path.

The collection’s methodology was simple. A letter soliciting either a written remembrance or a recorded interview went out. Because this project lacked publicity from the local center, likely contributors were identified with help from interested devotees. Regrettably, some potential contributors could not be found. Still others declined participation because they felt incapable of describing Swami Aseshananda. An important part of the methodology was my role as a “neutral observer.” Since I only visited occasionally Portland during Swami’s life, I was unknown to most of the contributors and so remained free from the interpersonal history that inevitably informs such groups.

Preserving the voice of each contributor was of central importance, so editing has been minimal with any editorial remarks enclosed within square brackets. The contributors’ personal wishes regarding content, form, capitalization, etc. have been honored. Each participant shaped his or her biographical statement, reviewed the contribution before publication, and submitted a signed release. The project was informally launched in 2007 with contributions from two senior disciples, Vera Edwards and Marina Sanderson, both over the age of ninety. As submissions arrived, Vera Edwards read each one and provided valuable feedback.

This collection does not attempt an historical account of the Portland Vedanta Society or a narrative of Swami’s life and teachings. (An overview of Swami’s life appears in a contribution at the end of the book along with additional resources.) Rather, we prefer the story of Swami Aseshananda to unfold in the words of the contributors and in the minds of the readers.

## **Acknowledgements**

Without Swami Aseshananda’s compassionate dedication to spiritual seekers, there would be no discipleship. Thanks to Swami Aseshananda for his priceless gift. Heartfelt thanks to all who supported and contributed to this collection. Whether it was a lead to just one devotee, the gift of a photo, a written contribution or interview—all went into the making of this volume. Special thanks to Vera Edwards for her constant encouragement; to Colleen Engle (of memory), Swami Harananda, and the monastics of the Vedanta Society of Southern California for their assistance locating contributors; to the Sri Sarada Society and *American Vedantist* for publishing the call for remembrances; to Doug Olmsted for preparing photos; to John Schlenck for his attention to editorial detail; to Joel Levin for production assistance; to Eve Prior and Debra Glasser for their

friendship during our stay in Portland. Many thanks to contributors who became new friends after sharing their struggles along the path. Special thanks to Swami Yogatmananda of Providence, RI, for his encouragement and to Swami Bhaskarananda and friends at the Vedanta Society of Western Washington for providing a welcoming community. Finally, gratitude to “The Infinite” for the opportunity to see this collection to completion.

## About the Contributors

(In their own words)

**Karl Bareither**, a long-time student of spirituality, recognizes Swami Aseshananda as a significant teacher who changed lives through his own example. Karl's meeting with Swami is described in "Managing Our Priorities," *American Vedantist*, Fall 2003. Karl, a businessman, resides in Avila Beach, CA.

**Ron Bartlett**, composer, percussionist, film sound mixer, first met Swami Aseshananda in Hollywood in 1985 and visited him several times in Portland. Ron credits Swami Aseshananda with insightfully guiding him to find his guru, Swami Swahananda. A member of the Hollywood center from 1986, Ron has composed music for DVD projects and serves in various sound-related capacities.

**Pravrajika Brahmaprana** has been a nun at the Vedanta Society of Southern California since January 1973. At present she is residing at the Vedanta Convent in Hollywood and helping with the Vedanta work at the Ramakrishna Vedanta Society of North Texas in Dallas.

**Swami Brahmarupananda** is an independent monk in the Ramakrishna tradition. Initiated by Swami Bhashyananda, he has been a resident of the Vedanta Center in Silver Spring, MD, since its inception.

**Alan Boyce**, a disciple of Swami Aseshananda, lived in Portland between 1973 and 1977. Swami's exemplary life, guidance, and personal instructions continue to inspire Alan's spiritual pursuit. Alan and his wife, Sylvia, now reside near Toronto, Canada.

**Vimukta Chaitanya** is a monk of the Vedanta Society of San Francisco, California.

**Robert Collins, Ed.D.**, and his late wife Julie began attending the Portland center in approximately 1955, and Robert served on the board for about a decade. Robert, a retired professor of biology, resides in Portland.

**Bert Cornick**, a disciple of Swami Aseshananda from 1978, had almost daily contact with Swami through 1996. Bert served the Portland center as treasurer from 1983 to 2001.

**Swami Damodarananda**, Resident Monk of the Vedanta Society of Perth, Australia, first met Swami Aseshananda in 1940 while a student in Madras (Chennai). He met Swami for a second time at the 1987 Vedanta Convention held in Ganges, Michigan, and later in Portland.

**Dharmadas (Jon Monday)**, a disciple of Swami Prabhavananda, made pilgrimages to Portland to visit and videotape Swami Aseshananda for the last 15 years of Swami's life.

**Carmen Farmer** (previously Jackie Farmer), a disciple of Swami Aseshananda since 1979, resided in the Portland center's women residences for nearly a decade. She works for the National Indian Child Welfare Association in Portland, OR.

**Mike Di Feo**, a disciple of Swami Aseshananda, attended the San Francisco Vedanta center and visited Swami Aseshananda several times between about 1989 and Swami's passing.

**Graza Doyle**, a disciple of Swami Aseshananda, began attending the Portland Vedanta center in 1974. Born in Poland, Graze moved to the United States in 1964, raised a family, worked in the corporate world, and owned her own business. She currently lives in Hawaii.

**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.

**Barbara Elsasser** was initiated by Swami Aseshananda after spending eighteen years at Blue Mountain Center of Meditation, Ramagiri Ashram. Living in the Sarada Devi house for the last ten years of Swami's life, she saw Swami twice daily and felt irrevocably blessed.

**Richard F. Epstein**, a disciple of Swami Aseshananda and writer on religion, visited Swami Aseshananda numerous times over a twenty-year period.

**James Ferguson, MD**, attended Swami Aseshananda at the Vedanta Society of Portland for the last eighteen months of Swami's life. Dr. Ferguson spoke at Swami's memorial service.

**Eric Foster**, a disciple of Swami Aseshananda since 1974, lived as a candidate for the monastery first at the Scappoose retreat, then in the Portland center until 1979. He also resided in the Berkeley Vedanta center, at that time led by Swami Swananda. He currently lives in San Francisco and works as a software engineer.

**Kathe Fradkin**, a disciple of Swami Aseshananda, has been a Vedanta devotee in Southern California and Portland for over thirty years. She also served as a Sunday school teacher at the Portland center for over a decade.

**Gayatriprana** (Dr. Jean MacPhail), formerly a member of the convents in San Francisco and Hollywood for a total of thirty years, began her association with the Ramakrishna Order in 1969 at the New York Vedanta Society under the direction of Swami Pavitrananda.

**Robert Geib**, a disciple of Swami Prabhavananda, visited Swami Aseshananda numerous times from 1976 through 1994.

**Swami Harananda**, a monk at the Vedanta Center of Portland, maintained a continuous association with Swami Aseshananda, his guru, from 1955 through 1996.

**Pat Harris** and her husband Jim Harris, disciples of Swami Aseshananda, began their association with the Portland center in 1972. Pat taught at the children's Sunday school for many years.

**LeNoir Kali Hayward** and her husband Harold, disciples of Swami Aseshananda from 1974, resided in the Portland area.

**Jane Harrison-Hohner** first met Swami Aseshananda in 1971. Initiated in 1983, Jane has been a nurse practitioner and member of the Vedanta Society of Portland since that time.

**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.

**Alex S. Johnson**, the son of long-time Vedanta devotees, became a disciple of Swami Aseshananda in 1986. A professor and author, Alex resides in the Los Angeles area.

**Bessie Keens**, a disciple of Swami Prabhavananda, lived in one of the women's residences belonging to the Portland Vedanta center for approximately three years during the 1980s.

**Alice Levine**, a disciple of Swami Aseshananda from 1970, lived in both women's residences belonging to the Portland Vedanta center for a total of twelve years. She currently lives in Santa Barbara, CA, where she works as a senior corporate accountant.

**Thomas Lifschutz**, daughter Rose, and son Andy first came to the Portland Vedanta society around 1990. They have always cherished the teachings of Vedanta, the company of the swamis and devotees, the temple, and the Scappoose retreat.

**Sandra (Raley) Longmore**, artist, teacher, and disciple of Swami Aseshananda, resided in Holy Mother's House with her first child for seven years during the 1970s. Sandra cites Swami's spiritual perspective and approach to daily life as an ongoing reminder of the higher ways of approaching her day-to-day life. Sandra and husband Tom reside in Washougal, WA.

**Gale Loof, Ph.D.**, has been a disciple of Swami Aseshananda since the early 1980s. She lives in Malibu, CA, where she devotes her time to caring for her elderly mother and playing with her grandchildren.

**Swami Manishananda** is a monk at the Vedanta Society of Western Washington and lives at the Society's retreat 45 miles north of Seattle.

**Gisela Manley** began her association with Swami Aseshananda in 1962 as the child of devotees Ingrid and Keith Voget. Initiated in 1986, Gisela describes her ongoing connection with Vedanta as life-enriching beyond measure. Gisela resides in Redding, CA.

**Doug Meddaugh** and his wife Priscilla Meddaugh, disciples of Swami Aseshananda, began their long association with the Portland Center in 1971. Priscilla served as a Sunday school teacher there for over 20 years.

**Charlie K. (Krishnadas) and Sita Mitchell** are disciples of Swami Prabhavananda. They visited Swami Aseshananda annually for about twenty years. Charlie is the vice-president and general counsel of the Vedanta Society of Southern California.

**Doretha Stuart Moore**, a disciple of Swami Aseshananda, lived at the Vedanta Society's retreat and women's residence, and was active at the center between 1974 and 1989.

**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)*.

**Sreemati Mukherjee, Ph.D.**, is a Reader in the Department of English at Basanti Devi College, Kolkata. In addition to numerous academic articles, she has also published in *Prabuddha Bharata*, *American Vedantist*, and the *Bulletin of the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture*.

**Bill Parmenter, Ph.D.**, a disciple of Swami Aseshananda from 1977, visited Swami for extended stays through about 1990. A teacher of English and previously professor of journalism, Bill currently is affiliated with the Hollywood Vedanta Center.

**Bill Pearson**, a disciple of Swami Aseshananda, resides in Eastern Washington.

**Eve Prior** and her husband, Jim Prior, became disciples of Swami Aseshananda in 1967. Eve is a native of Portland, OR.

**Mikele Rauch**, disciple of Swami Asheshananda from 1980, is a psychotherapist and a writer living in Boston.

**Marina Sanderson** and her husband James Sanderson, disciples of Swami Aseshananda, began their association with the Portland Center in 1958 and lived at the Scappoose retreat for approximately two decades. Marina continued her contact with Swami until 1996 and contributed to this collection at age 90.

**Pravrajika Sevaprana**, a disciple of Swami Prabhavananda, lived in Holy Mother's House, Portland, for a year before entering the San Francisco convent in 1976 and received brahmacharya vows from Swami Aseshananda. She lived and worked in the Ramakrishna Mission Sevashram in Varanasi, India.

**Joan Shack**, a Vedantist in the Ramakrishna tradition since 1979, was initiated by Pravrajika Mokshapranaji of Sri Sarada Math. Joan co-founded the Sri Sarada Society as a nonprofit organization in 1992.

**Ken Shores** began attending the Vedanta Society of Portland in 1957 and was initiated by Swami Aseshananda shortly thereafter. Ken is highly regarded for his innovative work in the field of ceramics.

**Barbara Smith**, a disciple of Swami Bhaskarananda, saw Swami Aseshananda in Portland and Seattle several times beginning in the early 1980s. A long-time member of the Vedanta Society of Western Washington, Barbara is also dedicated to supporting the work of women Vedantists in the West.

**Gopal Stavig** is the Vedanta Historian at the Vedanta Society of Southern California.

**Ralph Stuart**, a disciple of Swami Prabhavananda, visited Swami Aseshananda numerous times between 1974 until shortly before Swami's passing. Ralph considers Swami Aseshananda his secondary guru.

**Mary Tamraz (Archana)** became a disciple in 1974 of Swami Shraddhananda, the minister-in-charge of the Vedanta Society of Sacramento, and continues to be an active member of the center.

**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.

**Coral Tilton**, daughter of Portland center members Julie and Bob Collins, considers herself "born into" Vedanta. She began her life's experience with Swami Aseshananda in 1958, when Swami came to bless her arrival on the day of her birth. She currently



resides in Trout Lake, Washington with her husband Dave. They have one daughter, Brittany.

**Ingrid Voget** lived in Germany during World War II and after immigrating to the U.S. began attending the Portland Vedanta society in 1959. All five members of the Voget family were initiated by Swami Aseshananda. Ingrid currently lives in Hawaii.

**Keith Voget**, a disciple of Swami Aseshananda, began attending Vedanta center in 1959. All five members of his family were initiated by Swami. Keith currently lives in Yreka, CA.

**Esther Warkov, Ph.D.**, initiated by Swami Aseshananda in 1975 while a college student, regards Swami Aseshananda as the most precious influence in her life. A member of the Vedanta Society of Western Washington, she resided in Portland with her husband and younger daughter from 2006-2009.

**Swami Yogeshananda** was a novice at the Trabuco Canyon monastery when Swami Aseshananda was assistant minister and “novice master” for the monks.

## **Remembrances from Monastic Devotees**



**Swami Yogeshananda** was a novice at the Trabuco Canyon monastery when Swami Aseshananda was assistant minister and “novice master” for the monks.

*Swami Yogeshananda wrote the following account in the late 1990s for possible publication.*

Swami Aseshananda, disciple of Sri Sarada Devi and secretary to Swami Saradananda, arrived at the Vedanta Society of Southern California in 1949 to serve as the first of several assistants to Swami Prabhavananda. In the same year, Swami Yatiswarananda sent me to the Hollywood center, so I had Swami Aseshananda’s company, on and off, for the three years he was with us. That is a very small part of the Swami’s long life, which is why I have been reluctant to assume any reporting role. I always thought that someone who had known him longer should write. But now, so many years later, I think it may be of some interest and much use to put down what I recall of Swami in those early years.

When I arrived in Hollywood, Swami Prabhavananda was visiting India; he had written to me that I could move to Hollywood anyway, and Swami Aseshananda would look after my wants and needs. On the day I arrived, Miss McLeod’s funeral was held that evening. Tantine, as we called her, had spent her last years, her nineties, living in the center and regarding Swami Prabhavananda as her teacher. What I saw was a tall woman lying in her coffin at the front of the auditorium, white-haired and dressed all in white, with an Indian rosary prominent on her chest. Swami Aseshananda was performing the ceremony. He was small of body, quick of movement, slightly stammering of speech: yet I was impressed by the combination of sacredness and naturalness expressed in the service. One knew it was a funeral but one also knew here was nothing to be bothered about: death was not morbid.

I went to live at the new monastery in Trabuco Canyon. Swami Aseshananda moved there when his superior returned from India. In many ways he seemed like a child. When all his ways are considered—the slight stammer, the frequent smile, the lightness of his walk, his hesitations—I do believe his human personality was like Sri Ramakrishna’s, more so than any other swami I have known. Swami Aseshananda began a morning class with these four or five American would-be monks. At once the surface casualness gave way to the profundity of his experience and his teaching expertise. In India he had served in the hostel of the Madras Students’ Home, and he *knew* young men.

As for Swami Aseshananda’s audience, the shadow of the head guru, which hangs over all assistants, was there; this was something Swami had to work through, which in time he did. I took notes of some of those classes and published them in a slim booklet entitled *The Lotus and the Flame*, framing the seeming opposites of Devotion and

Knowledge, as harmonized in both the teachings and Swami Aseshananda's life. I failed to take other notes, because I did not know I would be writing about him.

During the next three years, Swami was a good and fluent speaker, always putting the emphasis on Advaita, but not limiting himself to that. Swami had the same daunting schedule as Swami Prabhavananda, traveling from the monastery to the center in Hollywood and from there to the convent in Santa Barbara and back again. But when at Trabuco he never seemed to be tired, and almost skipped his way up and down the long brick corridor from his room to the kitchen. Often he was slow responding to the lunch bell, and once an irreverent brother called it to his attention. This evoked a moment of unabashed confession: "I-I like to see all the brahmacharis standing and waiting for me!" We gasped. Then his irresistible laugh. Was he was poking fun at himself? One of Sri Ramakrishna's much-noted traits was his utter frankness about himself. We saw this in Swami Aseshananda.

Swami was deeply, deeply devoted to Sarada Devi, his Guru; but he did not show it openly in those days. It was difficult to draw him out about her: with a few words he would blow away the inquiry. He had a rosary of hers and in Hollywood, at least, we heard that he would sometimes show or touch it to a devotee by way of blessing. The one he *did* talk about was Swami Saradananda, whom he had served longer. We heard a great deal about him, and came to know his nature very well.

My room was just across the corridor from Swami Aseshananda's, so with that nearness I could observe both his daily habits and idiosyncrasies. Let me recall some of the incidents that marked his days with us.

We observed Shivaratri quite strictly in those first years, abstaining from food and drink, going right on with our physical work, and each of us performing the ritual communally in the four watches of the night. It all ended with a hearty breakfast before dawn. When Swami did not appear at all for the meal, someone was sent to see if anything was wrong. "I-I-I-uh, my sleep means more to me than food. You all go ahead," was what he said. He was sleeping—soundly! Another of those memories is of the day when devotees, a husband and wife who lived farther south, invited us to drive down and take a ride in their private plane. Most of us boys, I think all, jumped at the chance, though I am sure I had some qualms. Swami went along. But when the time for rides was offered—and we took turns going up (including a fly over the monastery)—he demurred and said he would not take a turn. Cajoled, begged, accused of fear, he would not budge. At last the truth came out: "You see, leaving, I went to the shrine," (as he always did) "and told the Lord where I was going. I didn't realize we were going up in a plane, and I didn't tell Him I would; so I cannot do it."

Readers must agree that this was a remarkable testament to his intimate relationship with the Lord. Not at that time, but later in my life I tried to keep that principle, of telling the

Lord just where I was going and for what. I have found it also helps remind me of what to take along!

When Swami Aseshananda was asked a spiritual or philosophical question, he would be silent for some seconds, before he replied. It was long enough to be noticeable, unlike the manner of many teachers whose answers come out before the question is finished! Another mark was his gesture of bringing his right fist to his nose, as if he might somehow find the answer in there. He had some favorite, oft-repeated phrases: “We do not believe in post-mortem felicity,” “We must din into the recalcitrant mind these truths,” and “Monastic life *itself* is the ideal, whether you realize God or not!”

One day he brought out from his room a small packet that, he told us, held Puri prasad, i.e., prasad from the temple of Jagannath in Puri, Orissa, one of the items Sri Ramakrishna called “veritable God.” I saw him give a few grains to Franklin, a probationer who had joined us recently, and he gave a few to me. Shortly after swallowing, I felt an up-rush of current in the spine.

There were devotees from Laguna Beach, 17 miles west as the crow flies who would come up the hill for evening satsanga. There were two elderly sisters who became quite attached to Swami, and a woman who owned a bakery and utilized the spare milk which Miss Brown, the monastery cow, could deliver. Eventually these ladies persuaded Swami to travel to Laguna Beach for regular talks in a small hall, so he could reach more people. A remarkably good artist named Bennet Bradbury served as his driver at these times. I believe a seascape he painted and gave to the monastery still hangs there. Swami’s boyishness has been alluded to, in referring to his Ramakrishna-like personality. Swami looked so young that his barber in Laguna Beach was way-off in guessing his age: he was fifty or so at the time.

In accordance with Swami Prabhavananda’s “swinging-door policy,” i.e. giving young men and women the opportunity to try the monastic life even when he knew it was not in their future, Swami Aseshananda watched the comings and goings of many boys at Trabuco. Just what he thought of it he did not say, but we heard no word of protest, no grumbling. Maybe that is one of the reasons Swami Prabhavananda once said, “I cannot imagine a better assistant than Swami Aseshananda.” Some of those fellows stayed only days; others were with us for several years. Always “Swami A” (as he was soon abbreviated) had a light touch—so light, in fact, that I thought people were getting away with murder, so to speak, and dared one day to probe him on the subject. “Swami,” I asked, “the disciples of Sri Ramakrishna scolded, and other swamis today correct and scold us; why is it that *you* never do?” Taking his customary moment-out, he gave his reply: “You see, they had that love which could back up their chiding. I do not have that depth of love, so do not feel I have the right to scold.” Believe it if you like; let those who knew him later be the judges.

[Editorial note: Many contributors to this collection noted that Swami's subsequent scoldings were accompanied by an overwhelming sense of unconditional love. We may conclude that Swami obtained the depth of love he felt must first be present. Swami Yogeshananda affirmed this was the case.]

Once a very dramatic episode occurred, when a wandering "troubador" with a five-stringed guitar showed up one morning. He showed a great interest in spiritual life and talked the talk. He was invited to stay for the noon worship/meditation and for lunch. But he did not come out of the meditation hall when the lunch bell rang. Time passed, and a brother was sent in to bring him: that was not easy, as he showed no response and did not budge. "I think he may be in samadhi," said our man. (The musician had spoken quite a bit about it.) I cannot forget Swami Aseshananda's face at that time: it was a mixture of skepticism and restraint. I think now that it is remarkable that he seemed to be keeping the question open. Some swamis would just have laughed in scorn.

"Could he be in samadhi, Swami?" we wondered.

"I do not think so, from having seen the boy." Of course the minstrel's samadhi turned out later to be fraudulent, after he had been bodily carried out of the shrine room; but in the naiveté of those early days, we were ready to hope samadhi could happen to any of us!

It was in 1955, I think, that Swami was transferred to the Vedanta Society of Portland, Oregon. Swami Devatmananda had had to retire to India with poor health, and since Swami Prabhavananda had started that work, he had a close interest in the place and the group. He decided to send our "novice master," his assistant, to take over that center.

Sometime after we learned this, I spoke to "Swami A" privately. (I wonder now how I could possibly have dared to give him advice; but that was his humble bearing, you see.) "Swami," I said, "if you behave up there as Head the way you behave here, they're going to walk all over you. You'll have to show them who's boss!" Swami nodded and made a face; "We'll see," he said. He gave me two gifts before he left: a pocket *Bhagavad Gita* in Sanskrit and a stainless steel drinking cup with his name inscribed on it, which are with me even now. I now believe that we at Trabuco loved him without knowing it. His fragrance has lingered long after.

When I returned to the United States from England in 1975 I went very soon to visit him in Portland. What I recall of that visit is the affection and grace with which he hosted me. There was the inevitable tour of the Scappoose ashrama, the waterfalls, the famed rose garden, and various colleges. I remember that there was a runaway vine that some found annoying, Swami's tender feelings apparently the reason for not allowing it to be pruned. I also heard that he still did the lawn mowing. I attended his daily worship in the Portland center's shrineroom, watched him go through his beloved ritual while sitting on the floor, but with one leg stretched out behind him, the handicap of age. As I

was departing, he presented me with a splendid new leather suitcase, which I used for years. He also asked me to address the Sunday morning gathering. I spoke on “The Message of the Upanishads,” and Swami followed it up with a drawn-out re-adjustment of those ideas.

When on another visit, I saw him for the last time. Quite ill, on his bed in his room, he was withdrawn and in pain. But he knew me, and gave me his opinions, which he always did after he became the head of the Vedanta Society of Portland. His memorial service had to be held not long after that, in 1996. I made a point of going to it.

*Written in the late 1990s, submitted in April 2007*



**Swami Damodarananda**, Resident Monk of the Vedanta Society of Perth, Australia, first met Swami Aseshananda in 1940 while a student in Madras (Chennai). He met Swami for a second time at the 1987 Vedanta Convention held in Ganges, Michigan, and later in Portland.

*Written submission.*

### **Swami Aseshanandaji: Humble and Inspiring**

#### **First Meeting:**

In 1939, when I was a student, I ran away for the first time. I wanted to stay with the great sage Sri Ramana Maharshi in Tiruvannamalai (south India) so as to be guided by him on the path of spiritual illumination. I was so gripped by this one thought that any other concerns about my further education, or the need to take permission from my parents, did not even cross my mind. It just flashed from within that, by the grace of God, I had an opportunity to be with a sage of atma-saksatkar (self-realization). I felt that at all costs I must go to him and offer myself at his feet in the hope of being guided by him on the spiritual path, that being the only purpose of life.

It was exhilarating for me living in the presence of the Maharshi. However, after about two months my uncle managed to track me down to Sri Ramana's Ashrama. As a result, I was forced to go to Madras where my mother was then staying with the family. Under pressure from all my relatives, I once again reluctantly agreed to become a student. Fortunately, though, our house was very close to the Ramakrishna Math in Madras, and I began to eagerly visit the Math and its various branches in Madras so that I could associate with the monks and read the good spiritual books they had in their libraries.

It was in 1940 in the Ramakrishna Mission Students' Home in Mylapore (a suburb of Madras) that I happened to meet Swami Aseshanandaji. Swamiji was then the warden of that facility. He had been a direct disciple of the Holy Mother herself and impressed me as being very sweet, always joyous and smiling, with plenty of noble thoughts to share. He received everyone with great cordiality, and I felt an immediate rapport with him. That is why I began visiting him again and again.

Swami Aseshanandaji was utterly humble and simple in his habits. I remember how one evening I arrived unexpectedly at the Ramakrishna Mission Students' Home to visit him. As soon as he became aware of my presence, he quickly began taking his loincloths down from the clothesline and putting them away so that I would not see how torn and tattered they were.

After several months of being immensely inspired by the lives and teachings of our Holy Trio (Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi, and Swami Vivekananda), as well as such noble-souled contemporary monks of the order as Swami Aseshanandaji, I decided to run away for a second time. To avoid getting caught up in my family's plans for my further education, career, marriage, and other worldly matters, I went to Bangalore in the hope of being accepted there as an aspirant in the Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama. I traveled to Bangalore by train, and on the same day that I arrived, went to the Ashrama for the evening prayers. After the prayers were over, all the visiting devotees gradually left the premises until I alone remained. The President of the Ashrama, Rev. Swami Tyagishanandaji, asked me what I wanted. I told him that I wished to join the Ashrama. He said that was not possible, and perfunctorily told me to leave. I became dejected, and went to a nearby temple to take shelter for the night, since I did not know anyone in Bangalore.

The next day, I purchased a couple of packets of sambar-rice from the local restaurant, and in the evening went to the Ashrama again to attend the temple prayers. As on the previous evening, I stayed back after the prayers were finished. This time the President of the Ashrama was a little kinder toward me. When he repeated the same question of the night before, I once again told him I wanted to join the Ashrama. This time he asked me if I knew any of the swamis in the Mission. I told him that I knew Swami Aseshanandaji, the Warden of the Ramakrishna Mission Students' Home in Madras. As soon as Swami Tyagishanandaji heard Swami Aseshanandaji's name he became very happy. He allowed me to stay in the Ashrama temporarily until I could get a letter of introduction from Swami Aseshanandaji. So I wrote to Swami Aseshanandaji in Madras, and he then graciously commended me to the Bangalore President Swamiji as a sincere aspirant who had been with Sri Ramana Maharshi and deserved to be given a chance to join the Ashrama in Bangalore as a novice brahmachari who wanted to devote himself entirely to spiritual enquiry and practice. That is how Swami Tyagishanandaji and Swami Aseshanandaji helped me to become a monk of this holy order, for the purpose of living and practicing the spiritual life. For this I will be forever grateful to both of them.

### **Second and Final Meeting:**

About forty years later, in the 1980s, I happened to meet Swami Aseshanandaji again in the United States. This was during the All America Ramakrishna Mission Convention held at the Chicago Retreat Center, where about 500 attendees had assembled. The Swami Aseshanandaji I had known in India had been very lean and thin in stature. While still trim, the Swami Aseshanandaji I saw before me this time had doubled in size! Despite his age, he was still very active, and audiences were thrilled by his vivid descriptions of life with Sri Sarada Devi and reminiscences of the other direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. He and I had a number of intimate talks together about the Holy Mother and other more general topics relating to spiritual life.

After the conference, Swami Aseshanandaji invited me to come to the Mission's center in Portland where he was the head. There were a few American youngsters there whom I thought must have been bramacharis or novices seeking to be spiritually-minded. It surprised me, however, to see how very strict he was with them, so that they could be molded all the better.

While I was there he organized for me to give a talk to the devotees in the hall. I told them about my association with him of forty-odd years earlier when he was the Warden of the Madras Ramakrishna Mission Students' Home. But due to old age his memory was by then failing, and he struggled to recall any of it.

I vividly recall Swamiji in Portland getting the small shrine ready for worship services when the offerings would be made to the holy deities. He used to sweep and wipe the floor of the shrine with a damp rag himself, crawling around on his hands and knees with a holy mantra on his tongue, periodically singing hymns to the Ever-Living Holy Mother. It is this guileless image that most readily comes to mind when I try to remember the noble Swami Aseshanandaji. He was truly a blessed child of the Divine Mother Sri Sarada Devi.

*Submitted February 2009*

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[Editorial note: Swami Damodarananda refers to Swami Aseshananda in his article "With Sri Ramana Maharshi," *Global Vedanta*, Fall 2009, Vol. 14, No. 4.]

**Swami Manishananda** is a monk at the Vedanta Society of Western Washington and lives at the Society's retreat 45 miles north of Seattle.

### **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 Swahananda 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.

*Submitted July 2007*

**Gayatriprana** (Dr. Jean MacPhail), formerly a member of the convents in San Francisco and Hollywood for a total of thirty years, began her association with the Ramakrishna Order in 1969 at the New York Vedanta Society under the direction of Swami Pavitrananda.

*Interviewed at the Vedanta Society of Southern California, Hollywood.*

GY: I didn't see a whole lot of Swami Aseshananda, but what I did see was absolutely fantastic! I met him for the first time at the memorial service for my own guru, Swami Pavitrananda, in December of 1977. As Swami Pavitrananda had been a trustee of the Ramakrishna Order, he was what I suppose you might call a "big shot." Therefore, every single swami from anywhere showed up to his memorial service. We had about eight or nine swamis including Swami Nishrayeshananda from Africa and almost all the swamis who were in America, including Swami Aseshananda.

As I had given up my work [as a medical doctor], I was living next door to the New York Vedanta Center and spending my days there. I did the cooking for all the swamis who came to the memorial service, so I was around them quite a bit.

The first big impact Swami Aseshananda had on us was on the evening of the memorial service. It was supposed to start at 7:30 and by 8 o'clock there was still no sign of the swamis. We were used to Swami Pavitrananda being so frightfully punctual that we started our introductory music at the stated time. John Schlenck played it a few times. He is, of course, is a professional composer, and so he started doing variations on it, because nobody was showing up.

Anyhow, there we were with our variations, and then somebody thought that a little more variety was in order, and turned off the lights. We were all sitting there in total darkness! And finally, one of our devotees, Erik Johns, went upstairs to the swamis' quarters to find out what was going on. When he got up there—and of course we found this out afterwards—there was Swami Aseshananda standing in his underwear in some kind of spiritual state. He was completely out of touch with anything that was going on, and the other swamis were trying to get him dressed. It was very, very difficult, for Swami was so away that they just couldn't get his clothes on. Eric started to laugh and he told the swamis, "We're sitting down there with variations in the dark, waiting for you gentlemen!"

They said, "We're doing what we can with Swami." Finally they got Swami dressed. (Swami Aseshananda was very, very fond of Swami Pavitrananda—they had been very close to each other. I think he was in some kind of exalted state on the occasion of this service in memory of him.) Finally we got the swamis down about forty-five minutes after we were due to begin!



When Swami Aseshananda came in, his eyes were looking *completely* ahead, fixed on the picture of Sri Ramakrishna. Every once in while he would stop for a moment. His chuddar was OK but his dhoti was halfway up the thigh, with about six inches of long johns hanging down beneath! The swamis had done their best! And he was *totally* oblivious. Of course we all know that Swami had practically no body-consciousness. It was really something. This utter lack of awareness of his body was so striking the very first time I saw him.

Swami Pavitrananda died in the bathroom alone in the early morning when no one was around, and it was very upsetting for all of us. The memorial service was just about two weeks after that event, and the swamis—several of them—were very, very supportive. Just having them there, and the kind of swamis they were, was wonderful: they were so kindly. Swami Aseshananda was particularly sweet, at least to me. I don't remember exactly what he said but I know he took a very kindly interest in me and his face was *so* benign and sweet and other-worldly. I just felt very, very attracted to him.

After that I joined the Ramakrishna Order's convent in San Francisco. On my way there I spent a couple of weeks in Portland. I thought that being around Swami Aseshananda would be the best possible thing to soothe my grief over Swami Pavitrananda's death and start off my monastic life. That was 1978 and it was June, I think the first two weeks of June. I spent the first week in Portland living at Holy Mother's House with Colleen. I tend to be non-dual in my thinking and Colleen, of course, is very non-dual. We had some rousing discussions. Swami dispatched us off to the Multnomah Falls, the Christian church called the Grotto, and the Rose Garden. Anyhow, he was very determined that I was going to see everything, which was very nice.

I saw a little bit of him privately, but mostly in his lectures, where it was as though he were saying the whole lecture to me. It was really something! He kept mentioning Swami Pavitrananda, looking over at me *very meaningfully* with his eyes glistening. He would say, for no obvious reason at all other than to cheer me up, "As I said to Swami Pavitrananda," and so on. For me it meant a huge amount personally because Swami had died so suddenly, and here I was going off to a convent, completely on the other side of America from where all my friends were. Anyhow, Swami Aseshananda really picked me up.

EW: How long had you known Swami Pavitrananda?

GY: I had known Swami Pavitrananda since 1969, had given up my work and lived next door to the center and spent my whole day there for five years before Swami died. I was very, very close to Swami. I was a medical doctor; he called me his "medical advisor," and totally involved me in his medical problems. It was pretty hair-raising. That kind of thing really welds you to a person. Swami and I were just on the same wavelength and that's why I'm writing his biography now, because he shared with me a whole lot of things that he told me he had not told anyone else. I was very, very close to Swami.

Having Swami Aseshananda treat me like this was just amazing. His lectures were so much fun—totally their own thing. I remember one evening we were having a class. He came in and said, “The lecture subject for this evening will be *Shankaracharya and St. Thomas*.” Swami had a Master’s degree in philosophy, of course. Then there was a long pause and he leaned over the podium and said, “You know something? I have never liked St. Thomas Aquinas. No I don’t like St. Thomas Aquinas at all! So let us say that the title of this talk will be *Shankaracharya and St. Francis of Assisi*.” He beamed from ear to ear, and then he talked about Swami Saradananda—the swami who had trained him monastically—for the whole evening! He was so utterly, utterly lacking in any ego consciousness, in any sense of being constricted by protocol.

Another thing happened at the two or three talks I went to. People would just stand up and say, “Swami, I want to ask you a question.” And he’d say, “Yes?” He’d answer the question right there in the middle of the lecture; he wasn’t batting an eyelid, he was just taking it all in his stride.

I watched him doing the morning puja, and I found out later he was wearing a dhoti that had been given to him by Swami Saradananda: it was like a cobweb, it was totally see-through—it was so old and worn out. He was so wrapped up in that puja—it was so *exalted!!* Every time he bent over I felt that that dhoti was a goner. It had some patches on it. He was so utterly, utterly involved in that puja—it was terribly inspiring! But I also wanted to laugh. Fortunately it didn’t split. But sooner or later it was going to!

One evening we were in the shrine meditating, and Swami opened the shrine door and shouted, as if there was nobody else there, “Mr. Bush [an older resident of the monastery], come for your supper at once!” I’d never seen anything like that. He said, “It’s the board meeting tonight and you’ve got to eat before you attend it. So come at once!” It was like a mother calling her child—it was really *amazing*! And Mr. Bush, very meekly and quietly, left the shrine and went for his supper.

Swami was so different. I adored my guru, but he was very formal and quiet, very subdued (though with a wicked sense of humor), while Swami Aseshananda was so ebullient and effervescent, at least with me.

I should mention that when Swami Aseshananda was in New York for Swami Pavitrananda’s memorial he stayed with us for a week, and one of the evenings he gave his reminiscences of his first meeting with Holy Mother. Probably his students had heard him speak about this many times, but it was a wonderful experience for us. I’ll never forget his description of how he was at a tennis match and somebody asked him if he wanted to go see Holy Mother. He said, “Oh, I have other things to do with my time,” or something like that. He added, “In those days I was a rationalist.” His attitude was so similar to mine in many ways, so I really enjoyed discovering that such great spiritual personalities could be like me in their own early days! I felt there was hope for me spiritually, despite my rather rationalistic outlook.

But somehow he went. When Holy Mother formally appeared before men, she had her face covered over. All he saw was her feet and he said, “I didn’t think very much of that,” or words to that effect. This was his response because Swami had a very rational mind, despite his amazing, flamboyant personality. Afterwards, he was asked to come upstairs again, to where Holy Mother was, but for reasons that I don’t remember now. And when he came in, she had taken her veil off. He said, “*And then I saw her face,*” and his *own* face just *radiated light*. I can’t tell you—it was *so uplifting*! The man was just a powerhouse of spiritual emotion. For me, that was a wonderful moment in the period after Swami Pavitrananda died. It was the same exalted spiritual feeling as we had lived in for as long as we were with him.

Coming back to my visit in Portland, Swami sent me for a week to the retreat in Scappoose. The first day or two I was there with Doretha Stuart, but later Swami said I could stay there alone, which I understood was kind of an unusual thing, which he didn’t usually permit. And I must say that it was *absolute rapture*. He said to me, “Why don’t you just do a little worship every day?” Well of course I didn’t know any worship, because with Swami Pavitrananda we had none of that. He was an out-and-out non-dualist.

The rhododendrons were all in bloom—it was so gorgeous, it was June. I picked those rhododendrons, I sat there, and I made up my own worship. I had no idea how to do puja and I just made something up. I could hear the mice scampering under the floorboards. But it was absolute bliss, and the reason it was absolute bliss (apart from the fact that it was June in Portland) was the enthusiasm, the energy, and the blessings that Swami Aseshananda had given me. And of course he was very happy that I had done a worship every day. I feel quite sure he would have been happy with what I did.

When you were around Swami, as far as I was concerned, it was inspiring because of the relationship I had with him. He never scolded me or anything like that; I think gurus reserve that for their own disciples. I was just floating on a rosy pink cloud! He treated me like a goddess. As I said, in the lectures he was always saying, “As I said to Swami Pavitrananda,” and looking at me directly. In contrast to the way he treated me I *did* see him working on [scolding] Vera Edwards, one of his most long-term disciples.

We had a potluck at Scappoose, a day retreat. At that retreat—Oh God, it was so funny! Swami told us: “There have been some great sleepers in Vedanta, people who knew how to sleep in the lectures. The first one was Miss MacLeod, Swami Vivekananda’s disciple and benefactor of the Ramakrishna Order. Swami Saradananda told me many times about Miss McLeod and her sleeping. She would come into the lecture, very fancily dressed—very fashionably dressed—with a large hat and large sleeves: she took up a lot of space. She would come in with a great flourish, sit in the front row, get herself organized there, and then fall fast asleep for the entire lecture, looking very beautiful— but fast asleep.”

“And then there was Mr. B [name removed].” Mr. B was, I think, a devotee from Northern California; he was in the monastery there. Mr. B became famous, he was about six feet five inches, and he was similar to Miss MacLeod in that he would get himself settled in with great ceremony and pomp, and then “sit and even snore through the lectures.” It was so funny the way Swami was telling it because it was the swami’s eye-view, looking out and seeing this going on.

But the other one that was a killer was M [named removed], who had also been a disciple of Swami Ashokananda and had also been in the monastery there and later was a professor of mathematics at the University of [name removed]. It was particularly funny to me because he used to come to the New York Center and I’d see him doing this there. M was such a lovely, earnest devotee. He’d come in very earnest, very enthusiastic, and as soon as the lecture would begin, not only would he fall asleep, but his head would be moving slowly backwards and his mouth would be slowly opening. Swami Asehananda imitated it. It was so funny watching Swami do that. Very few of the swamis were so utterly uninhibited; most of them were kind of formal. The only one who came anywhere near him was Swami Shraddhananda, who could be hysterically funny. So when Swami Asehananda did that, it just broke up the whole group. We were just in hysterics!

EW: Was he trying to make a particular point?

GY: I have no idea about what he was trying to convey. For all I know maybe he saw someone sleeping in the back row and this triggered this line of thought. And it was hysterically funny, so spontaneous, and it gave us a good laugh.

EW: You were going to tell us about Vera Edwards, one of Swami’s most long-term disciples.

GY: At that same event there was a lot of people there for lunch, I would guess 50 or 60. Vera is such a dear person, and she was running around—or course she was much younger then—this was 1978. She was running around serving people, and Swami kept shouting, “Vera Edwards, come here!” Swami could be quite strict with his students.

“Yes, Swami, yes, I’ll be right there.”

“Vera Edwards, come here!” She was running, running, running, bringing things to people, and he kept on shouting, “Vera Edwards, how dare you defy me!” I just found that so funny because there was nobody under the sun less prone to defying anybody than Vera Edwards. But she actually took her time in going over to speak with Swami, so I realized that somehow she, and maybe other devotees, had worked out a way of living with Swami; he would shout and carry on, but somehow I felt Vera had it all figured out. She finally went to Swami, to find out whatever it was that he wanted. I found that very funny. Again, I’d never seen anything like that, because my own guru

was so quiet and low-key, never like that. I found the whole thing very entertaining; everybody seemed to be very happy, and it was very good fun!

EW: Have we pretty much covered the Portland chapter?

GY: Yes. Swami Aseshananda came down to San Francisco on a number of occasions, and every single one of them was very, very memorable. I just have a few memories, some of them hysterically funny.

The first time I remember him coming down was in 1982—we were having vows. I wasn't getting vows, but the other girls were. After the vows, we had dinner. All the swamis were sitting at a big long table, and one of our senior nuns, Nirbhayaprana (who was known as a bit of a tomboy and wasn't afraid to ask anything) asked Swami Aseshananda, whom I think was the senior-most swami there, "Swami, when one is in terrible, terrible difficulties, who or what do you think about?"

Swami was quiet for a minute and then he said, "I think of Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda, and Holy Mother. These are our gurus."

But Nirbhayaprana wasn't going to take that for an answer, and she went further. She said, "I mean when you are *really, really* in trouble."

Without batting an eye, immediately Swami replied, "I think of Swami Saradananda, the swami who trained me. He was the person who spoke to all my difficulties, he was the person that I saw within myself and could talk to very openly."

That for me was tremendously helpful, because I was going through a huge amount of struggle at the time. I had a very, very, very close relationship with my guru, and I am very non-dual; for non-dual people, the guru is very, very important. The tendency in the San Francisco convent was to tell us, "No, no, no, you must make Ramakrishna your focus." Of course, I have nothing against Ramakrishna, but my natural tendency was to relate to a living person whom I knew, rather than to one I had not personally met as yet. So when Swami Aseshananda said that, it was terribly liberating. A man of his spiritual stature straight out saying that a living, flesh and blood reality like Swami Saradananda, who had helped him work through his problems, was what was most meaningful to him at times of struggle (even though he had been initiated by Holy Mother, who was of course a vast spiritual personality), was very, very meaningful to me. I think he may have quoted Swami Premananda—or maybe it was Vivekananda, "I want a flesh and blood reality." So that was to me immensely helpful. I wrote to Swami a number of times while I was in the convent until he became too old to continue the correspondence.

And then of course, he came another time, probably in the 1980s. The Turiyananda Meditation Cabin at Shanti Ashrama had been completely re-done, the foundations had

been re-laid, it had been completely refurbished, and I think fire-proofed. He came and stayed a whole week, and Oh—it was *so fantastic*, it was *so fantastic*!

Swami told all of us his funny story about the cowpats. Owing to his graduate studies in philosophy, Swami thought that when he joined the Ramakrishna Order he would be teaching and talking philosophy, writing philosophy, but of course what they asked him to do was throw cowpats against a wall (which is how they dry cow dung for fuel). This was the job he was assigned to: there was some chicken wire on a wall, and the cowpats were thrown there, where they stuck until they dried. He told us that this was what he was thinking:

“I have a Master’s degree in philosophy!” Plop! “And *this* is what they make me do!!” And he would throw another cowpat.

Swami was imitating himself as a young man, who had just come into the Order, expecting to have glory from his philosophy degree, muttering as he threw the cowpats on the wall. “I have a Master’s degree in philosophy and splot!!! This is what they make me do!” Of course, we all started to laugh—it was so comical! And he went on and on and on and started laughing and laughing and laughing until the tears were just dripping off the end of his nose. I don’t think I ever laughed so heartily in my whole life! *This is a person who had total detachment from his youthful follies.* So anyhow, I’m sure he learned a great deal from that. As did we!

On the day of the dedication of the Turiyananda Cabin, he said, “You know, I really think the Vedanta Society should get this place working again as a retreat. It is such an important place, it is such a spiritual powerhouse!!” And it is! Have you ever been to Shanti Ashrama?

EW: No.

GY: The atmosphere there is *unbelievable*! He very, very strongly pressed Swami Prabuddhananda to get the water system going again, to get it moving again, and Prabuddhananda said he’d think about it, but . . . Swami Aseshananda was in a very, very exalted state of mind at Shanti Ashrama, and it was very, very uplifting that day.

Just a few more things I remember about him. Again, I tended to see Swami’s funny side, but of course when I say funny it was also very uplifting. One of the stories he loved to tell—probably everyone in Portland knows this—was “The Atheists’ Prayer”:

“Oh God—if there is a God,  
Have Mercy on my soul—if I have a soul!”

He would always laugh hysterically when he told that joke—it was very funny. That’s a philosophical joke, the kind he especially seemed to like.

There was something else that happened—we used to all talk about it over and over and over. He was giving some kind of address in the New Temple in San Francisco. I don't know what it was on, but it was very inspiring. He wouldn't stand at the podium; he was pacing up and down in front of the altar like Swami Ashokananda used to do, I understand. He was very, very inspired and was going over his allotted time. Swami Prabuddhananda was very particular about people being very accurate about things. When Swami Aseshananda was coming towards him at one point, Swami Prabuddhananda pointed to his watch and said, "Maharaj—Time! Time!!"

Swami Aseshananda looked at him. He was in a complete bhava [spiritual mood]. He looked at Swami Prabuddhananda for a while, and then he said, "Time, *what is time?*" And he started off in a completely different direction, philosophizing about time for another half hour or something like that. We just enjoyed it so thoroughly, because it was such a total liberation from the artificial limitations of the lecture format or human rationality. Of course he was a senior swami and he could do things like that. In contrast to the precision-like military drill there, Aseshananda was so utterly free. I just felt that his mind was flowing in some high stratospheric place, and that one little tiny word from Swami Prabuddhananda was like a meteor, or something. You know when a thing is moving very fast and very powerfully and one small thing happens, the whole thing is turned around and takes a different form—in this case, a huge philosophical disquisition on time. It was awfully inspiring, and for us it was an absolute treat to have a swami free from militaristic drill. Of course he may have been militaristic with his disciples but with us he wasn't, and it was wonderful.

EW: Swami gave very long lectures in Portland. He was famous for that.

GY: Swami Ashokananda was, too. Swami Ashokananda spoke for up to two hours. However, Swami Pavitrananda, my own guru, told me that Swami Ashokananda never repeated himself, once ever, in those two hours. He had a never-ending flow of inspiration. I don't remember Swami Aseshananda as long, but I do remember his talks as terribly free form, very entertaining, and very inspiring. Every time I think about him I just glow. He was *so inspiring!!*

Oh yes, there was one story that we used to repeat over and over and over about Swami Aseshananda. During one of his visits to San Francisco he was talking about something or other in a small informal group, not in the auditorium, but in the little meeting hall that we had. I don't remember what he was talking about but whatever it was, it was very fascinating. Swami had a way of saying "Yup, yup!" in between thoughts. There was a lady there, she was kind of a devotee but she was one of these people, you know, that would come and go. She was very tall, she was Russian, and she took herself very, very seriously. Irenie or something was her name. In the middle of Swami's talk—it wasn't a formal talk, he was just reminiscing—she got up and she said very excitedly in a high, impassioned voice, completely cutting across everything he was saying,

“Swami!!! Haven’t you noticed the papaya on your desk? It has OM stuck in it with cloves!!!”

Again, Swami was flowing in some line of thought. When she broke into his line of thought, he just kind of stared into the distance for about three minutes—well, it felt like a long time—and then he very slowly looked at the papaya with the Om. He looked at it and he said, “Om. Om. Om. Yup, yup, Om. Yup, yup, Om!” We laughed riotously. Oh, we got such a bang out of it. Oh, God!! And of course the poor lady, she had no concept of what was going on, but we were just howling with laughter.

EW: So he was just completely absorbed in the notion of what Om meant?

GY: He just looked at the Om, but he wasn’t the least little bit interested in the fact that there was something there for him, meant as a gift. What he saw was the Om, but it was very far from where he was thinking at the time. Then he started, “Yup, yup, Om”—sort of registering of what was before him, and he started off onto that track. That became one of our famous catchphrases in the convent: “Om, yup, yup.” And in our circles we all know Aseshananda as the “Om, Yup, Yup, Swami.” I mean, it was fantastic! He wasn’t at all wrapped up in this lady’s ego, or his own, or anything like that. He was in the flow, completely beyond human ego and pretense.

At my own first vows there was a very sweet moment when I was talking privately with him. He was talking about Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother and so on. I said to him, “Swami, please excuse me, but I am not really very keen on these personalities. What appeals to me is the idea of the Atman, the inner Self.” He looked at me, smiled conspiratorially, and began to sing softly, *Manobuddhyahamkara chittani naham*, “I am not the body, the mind, nor the ego, I am of the form of consciousness and bliss,” Shankara’s immortal hymn [Six Stanzas on Nirvana]. His eyes were sparkling with infectious enthusiasm and I started to sing along with him. I had memorized the whole hymn and we sang several verses together. There was no discussion, just sharing this non-dual hymn in low tones so that others would not overhear and perhaps get upset. Not everyone understands the non-dual outlook, but he most certainly did, and did not hesitate to validate my own devotion to it, unlike a number of other swamis, who felt that women should be devotional and dualistic, as far as I could make out. It was a very precious moment for me.

And then there is one last story which is an illustration of the same thing. That was my own bramacharya vows in 1987. We had a breakfast with him up on the fourth floor. He was again the senior-most swami, and he was intoning, “Aham Brahmasmi, Aham Brahmasmi (I am Brahman!), Om Tat Sat!” He was in that kind of mood. I found it thrilling, because that kind of thing means a huge amount to me personally. Most of the time we were hearing about devotion and bhakti and karma yoga, which is fine—but it wasn’t what really turned me on. When Swami started in on that stuff I was so thrilled! I felt as again as though he was speaking to me personally. The other women told me



that they also had felt very thrilled. There was so much conviction and so much truth palpably manifest.

Then two of the senior swamis started baiting him a little bit and they said, “Maharaj, this is *old*, these are very *old* things [referring to Aham Brahmasmi]. This is not relevant to today; we need to hear something more relevant to today.” They were sitting in the bay window and the light was behind his head. They went on and on and on, and whenever he tried to say something, they would bait him; it was like baiting an old lion, or something like that. He finally stood up at the breakfast table in the bay window, with the light right behind him and he said with great conviction, “This is NOT OLD! This is the TRUTH! Tat twam asi, tat twam asi!! (Thou art That). He said it over and over and over. The light was shining out of his long hair—it was like sparks shooting out of his hair. I mean it was really COSMIC. It was COSMIC! And his voice was booming and booming; it was like a voice was coming from the void. It was really. . . . All of us were just in *awe*. It was so obvious that for him this was The Reality: “Tat twam asi, tat twam asi, thou art That, thou art That!!” It was *fantastic!* *That’s where this swami was coming from!*

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**Pravrajika Brahmaprana** has been a nun at the Vedanta Society of Southern California since January 1973. At present she is residing at the Vedanta Convent in Hollywood and helping with the Vedanta work at the Ramakrishna Vedanta Society of North Texas in Dallas.

*Interviewed at the Vedanta Society of Southern California, Hollywood center.*

### **Reminiscences of Swami Aseshananda**

Jamuna, later Deviprana, and I first met Swami Aseshananda in 1976, at the memorial service for my guru, Swami Prabhavananda. At that time, we were both nuns in the Santa Barbara convent. Shortly after, Jamuna asked Swami Aseshananda for initiation and had, upon his request, sought the blessings of all the senior swamis in the country, as a new head had not yet been selected for the Hollywood center. Senior nuns in the Santa Barbara convent then asked me to accompany Jamuna by car to Portland for her initiation.

That was a lovely two-week period in August 1976. It was a long road trip—we took one of our convent cars—and Jamuna, of course, was very nervous, as it was a momentous time for her and she had not had much association with Swami Aseshananda. So, by the time we arrived in Portland, I felt as though I had really accomplished something important by getting her there. On the morning of her initiation, Jamuna fasted, while I had a good breakfast at Holy Mother’s House where single women devotees resided. Then after the ceremony, Swami Aseshananda came into the center’s library where we were both seated and announced to Jamuna: “Now you can your breakfast.” But when he glanced over at me, he suddenly chuckled. I must have looked *very* hungry, because he good-naturedly added, “You also can take breakfast.” So I took a *second* breakfast at Swami’s invitation. Swami Aseshananda was so perceptive and motherly.

One of my sweetest memories of Swami Aseshananda was when the Portland center’s stray cat, known as Holy Mother’s Cat, passed away. When it was first brought to the center, dying of leukemia, Swami nursed it with Ganges water and mahaprasad, which literally means “great sanctified offering.” Mahaprasad is an offering from the Jagannath Temple in Puri and is considered to be very sacred and very purifying. Needless to say, the cat recovered.

Though a Brahmin, Swami Aseshananda somehow permitted Holy Mother’s Cat to go everywhere on the Society’s property, including the shrine itself. In fact, the cat became so important that daily patrols were assigned in order to make sure that it did not stray from the property into the street.

Swami always addressed the cat as “kitty” and made sure it was present for all his lectures and classes.\* He used to say that the kitty was his best student, because it simply was not necessary to verbally understand the meaning of his classes and lectures on religious topics. The cat could imbibe the tanmatras, or subtle vibrations, from the sacred subjects that were being expounded in the lecture hall. That was enough for its spiritual progress—such was Swami’s conviction. And such was Swami’s dedication to his pet “student,” that he later mentioned that he’d even given the cat a Shiva mantra!

Holy Mother’s Cat lived for quite a few years before it finally passed away. I happened to be present at that time. The ailing kitty had been taken to the veterinarian hospital where it died peacefully from old age and kidney failure. Its body was then brought back to the center. Swami asked that the cat’s body be brought into the shrine. There he knelt with the cat in his arms before the large shrine photo of Holy Mother. Swami stayed in that position for a very long time, silently kneeling before Holy Mother’s photo. We watched from the shrine doorway for what seemed like 10 or 15 minutes before he finally got up and left the shrine. Then he announced to those of us present that we would hold a memorial service for the kitty, and that everyone must attend and offer a flower. The ceremony took place out in the garden, next to the shrine. A little grave was dug, Swami chanted, said some prayers, and we each offered a flower on the grave itself. About a dozen people attended this simple, but touching ceremony.

The next day, I found Swami in the shrine pantry. He looked up at me and said, referring to the cat, “You know, it is better that they go away than that they die.” He reminisced, “When I would be out gardening and watering the plants, the kitty would suddenly dash out from under the plants. I miss that.” All such memories were coming back to Swami that day. He then explained that in such a case, when so much had been done for the kitty spiritually, its consciousness had developed to the point where it was “really on the borderline of human consciousness.” “But,” he added, “it is very difficult to explain.” That private moment and the soft expression in Swami’s eyes is one of the memories I cherish most when recalling my days with Swami Aseshananda. I felt privy to be near such a great soul at such an intimate moment.

Some days later, a bird flew into one of the center’s windows, and Swami Aseshananda told the monks to get a shovel and dig a grave. Seeing the parade of monks with shovels following Swami, a bystander tittered in the hallway just within the swami’s hearing. He whirled around and boldly declared, “No creature that comes on this property is insignificant!” There was a pin-drop silence. That made a deep impression on all who were present.

One time a devotee-doctor from New York had sent Swami a letter. Swami was in the habit of letting letters accumulate until after six months or so. Then he’d throw them away. There was really no time for him to respond to the huge correspondence that he received towards the end of his life—what with so many, many visitors coming from all over the United State, not to speak of the whole world, to stay at the center. So six

months after her correspondence was sent, the doctor finally phoned Swami and gently prodded, “Swami, remember that letter I sent you? There was a check in it!” She had guessed what had happened, and sure enough, Swami rummaged through the pile of letters that he had discarded in order to rescue her donation. These humorous stories only endeared the swami to his devotees.

Swami didn’t like taking money from us monastics. Since we in the Santa Barbara Convent often visited the Portland center and for several weeks at a time, we naturally felt duty bound to leave a donation for our expenses. But, goodness, Swami figured the bill to the penny—what amounted to only about three dollars a day donation! However, this amount was surely just a token payment for the generous meals we received there.

Swami Aseshananda could be very frugal, insisting that nothing be wasted. Leftovers were sometimes served again and again until they finally disappeared. He insisted that any fruits that arrived home from the supermarket bruised or defective must be returned or exchanged at the grocery store. This happened so many times that the grocery store manager came to know Vera Edwards very well. He also understood that Vera was simply fulfilling the wishes of an old and venerable swami. When cooking rice pudding for offering, Swami would stretch the recipe by adding leftover Oreo cookie crumbs so that there would be plenty for all the devotees who came to the center that day. He was so original! Plastic bags were washed and reused innumerable times, and the old broom that Swami used to sweep the temple parking lot had bristles so worn down to the wood, that we often wondered how it was able to sweep debris at all. But still Swami refused to throw out the broom!

Swami Aseshananda taught us in various unexpected ways. One time he asked me to accompany a guest to the Grotto, an outdoor Christian shrine in Portland. Having just arrived in Portland, I was quite exhausted from the airplane trip. Noticing that there were other devotees accompanying Swami’s guest, I chose to stay behind and rest. Later, however, Swami asked me why I had not accompanied the guest. So I told him that I was too tired. “You,” he said, meaning all women, “are replicas of the Divine Mother. Never say you are tired.” What a beautiful teaching—so simple. It made a deep impression. He taught me to *live* what I was aspiring towards—to reach higher and go beyond any sense of fatigue, beyond the body idea altogether.

Swami Aseshananda usually asked me to make the flower arrangements for the shrine while I visited the center. In the wall niche where Mother Kali’s image was worshipped, he would often place a disciple’s letter behind her photograph. It was his simple, direct method of offering whatever message was in the letter. I loved seeing that precious reminder to surrender everything to the Lord.

While meditating in the shrine, I could hear Swami Aseshananda in the nearby shrine pantry chopping the fruit offering for the worship. Swami used a large knife and was meticulous and deliberate in his chopping. So the rather loud rhythmic chopping noise

became a sweet part of my meditation. One time Swami mentioned that at that particular time he would specially remember his “golden years” with Swami Saradananda at the Udbodhan, where Sarada Devi used to stay when she was in Calcutta. He would remember the service he had given Swami Saradananda—pumping his water for bathing and other chores. After Mother’s demise, Swami Aseshananda had served Swami Saradananda there for many years. And it was at the Udbodhan that Swami Saradananda wrote the comprehensive biography of Sri Ramakrishna, *The Great Master*.

Once upon hearing the chopping noise, I suddenly remembered that I had to ask the swami’s permission for something. I went to the threshold of the shrine pantry and looked in. Swami looked up at me. I shall never forget the expression in his eyes. It was as though my form was to him merely a shadow play compared to the reality he was experiencing within himself. What a powerful, indrawn, and blissful expression. Memories of his days serving Swami Saradananda at the Udbodhan had taken him there. We spoke briefly, then I left quickly so as not to disturb his mood.

Sometimes Swami Aseshananda used the shrine as an arena for scolding his disciples. Once while he was performing the external worship, he began to talk to himself. As he offered flowers before the shrine photos and wall deities, he paced back and forth in the shrine room. Vera Edwards, Mr. Stuart Bush, and Christine were also meditating in the shrine, but they were all a little hard of hearing. Another devotee was asleep. So I was the only person who actually heard Swami’s conversation with God. He started complaining, “My two brahmacharis [monks] quarrel, just like two puppy dogs. Quarreling brahmacharis—all the time they quarrel.” Back and forth he paced, repeating his complaint to the Divine Mother, until suddenly he paused: “But I would rather have two quarreling brahmacharis than the American woman’s smile.” What a wonderful commentary on America’s projection of the model woman! I took his comment to mean that the ways we see women depicted in the media or through advertisement is a false icon of womanhood. Too often woman is portrayed as a sex symbol, rather than as a symbol of feminine divinity. Swami was always so original in the way he drove his point home.

One time while performing the worship, Swami suddenly thundered: “Get me Mr. Bush! Mr. Bush, buy me a one-way ticket to Chicago!” Mr. Bush quickly executed Swami’s request. We could then hear Swami’s voice in the shrine pantry, broadcasting his scolding to anyone within hearing: “Anyone who does not come to the shrine to meditate, does not belong in this center!” It was a very strong teaching—especially intended for a young inmate who had failed to keep regular meditation hours in the shrine. That day the young resident happened to be upstairs in his bedroom during the noon worship. This was the last straw, so Swami was dispatching him to Chicago. Swami Aseshananda was uncompromising when it came to regularity in meditation.

EW: So Mr. Bush procured the ticket?

B: Whether or not the ticket was procured did not matter. What mattered was the teaching he gave that day, which I heard loud and clear. With Swami Aseshananda one got a very clear sense of what exactly was one's business and what was not. One teaching I received from him was: don't assume anything—ask first. If you hear something, ask the person directly. But it wasn't my business to know whether the ticket was procured or not. What *was* my business was to hear what he said in a very loud voice—obviously meant for everyone within hearing. And to take it to heart.

With Swami Aseshananda, meditation was key. His whole life revolved around the shrine. One time—Swami was a late-night person and got up later than other swamis—at about ten o'clock at night, I had an interview with him in Buddha Hall, a guestroom upstairs at the center. Somehow we got onto the subject of the worship and what goes on in spiritual life. He shared with me that one night when he was putting the Lord to bed, covering the holy pictures with special shrine cloths, he heard Sri Ramakrishna's voice saying, "Kiran, Kiran [Swami's pre-monastic name], your hair!" Swami then reached up to the top of his head and could feel his hair was on fire from one of the votive lights. So he quickly put it out. It was such an intimate story, meant to teach me how the worship becomes living. Through daily worship, our conversation with God becomes natural and real. And, of course, God—our chosen ideal—is always there to protect us. That evening, it was late, which added to the intimacy and intensity of that special moment he shared with me.

Swami Aseshananda would never let anybody touch the shrine: that was always his area. He always did the worship, even as arthritic as he was in his later years. That was his discipline.

EW: Did he clean the shrine or were others allowed?

B: Usually a monk prepared the sandalpaste and placed the shrine vessels on the altar. The women devotees picked the flowers, washed, and arranged them for worship. As for the holy pictures—nobody touched them, except for Swami Aseshananda. In fact, I remember one time Swami called out in a very, very disturbed voice, "Who has touched the shrine? Who has touched the shrine?" He could tell just by looking at the shrine that someone had violated his cardinal rule and had moved something on the shrine.

Once he asked me to train a young woman devotee to pick and prepare the flowers for his worship. Time passed and he happened to look out the monastery window and saw that I was doing all the picking while my trainee was standing by watching. He suddenly called out to the woman devotee: "Start picking the flowers. You learn only by *doing*!" Somehow these simple teachings have stuck with me through the years.

EW: Did Swami ever scold you?

B: No, never. In fact one time, on my way to Portland, my wallet was stolen at the airport, and one of the residents of Holy Mother's House said, "Oh, when Swami finds out, he's going to scold you!" But when I told Swami, he simply said, "Let's pray to Holy Mother." The wallet was never retrieved, but he did not scold me.

However, he could really belt out the scoldings! He could reach a pitch that could simply shatter crystal. Once on Thanksgiving Day he took it upon himself to scold the entire nation! I had just given him a Native American peace pipe to use at his Native American shrine at Scappoose [the Society's retreat]. That triggered something inside Swami. He stood at the top of the stairs in the center and Vera and I were at the bottom. We watched as he paced back and forth, scolding aloud: "I prefer to call this day 'Thankless Day, not Thanksgiving Day.'" And then he launched into a litany of scoldings against the American Nation, its values, and what atrocities it had committed against the Native Americans. Yes, Swami Aseshananda could certainly scold right and left. He used to say, "We all have our individual karma, our family karma, our national karma, and a world karma." So on that Thanksgiving Day, he was doing his part to erase some of our national karma!

Swami Aseshananda could also be as gentle as a flower petal. Once he said, "A father loves most his prodigal son, not the son who is always good." I watched Swami as he nurtured his flock with prasada, special dishes he himself cooked, loving advice, trips to the beach or retreats at Scappoose. He sometimes had us pick out something special, such as clothing, at the store as his present to us. He would first offer the gift in the shrine to Holy Mother and then give it to us. Those gifts were treasures. Swami played an intimate part in his devotees' lives. He once admitted, "Though I scold the Americans and say that I do not care for them, I love them. I love the Americans." Swami's life was a testament to that fact. After coming to America, he never returned to India.

Swami Aseshananda trained his disciples by his example. I noted that he seemed especially unapproachable when out gardening during the day. Whether watering or sweeping, the swami was passionate about contributing whatever he could to maintaining the center's landscape and garden. But he'd usually wear the fiercest expression. Nobody dared to approach him at that time: Swami would be sweeping with his long-handled bristle-less broom or watering the plants, dragging the long garden hose as he trudged around the building—ever so concentrated, brows furrowed in a scowl. I asked others why he looked that way, but nobody seemed to know. And no one dared to ask. So one day I waited for an opportune moment and then inquired.

"Swami, what are you thinking when you are gardening?"

"I am meditating on a shloka of the *Gita*," he calmly answered. "I take one Gita shloka and think about that. Or sometimes I think deeply about the subject for my Sunday lecture. This is called contemplation." That taught me how to use time wisely.

EW: Was he wrestling with it? Why do you think he had that kind of expression?

B: It was concentration. He was a great advocate of meditating on one shloka. That was Swami Turiyananda's teaching. "If you really want to study," Swami Turiyananda once said, "Take one shloka and meditate on it every day for a week. That is real study." So Swami Aseshananda was putting that teaching into practice, which I felt fortunate to see for myself.

EW: How often did you see Swami Aseshananda?

B: From 1976 until shortly before he passed away, I would go to the Portland center for two weeks at a time every year and spend my vacations with him.

EW: Did you stay in Holy Mother's House with Vera Edwards?

B: Yes. Vera Edwards and I are very close, and a wonderful relationship grew up over the years of being together in the most unusual circumstances.

Most of the teachings I received from Swami Aseshananda were personal, and I began to keep journals of those teachings. After an interview with Swami, I would go into the shrine, and then record everything he told me verbatim. One day after a long interview, I went into the library to record my private interview. It was at the time of noon worship, so others were in the shrine meditating. It was a dark and cloudy day and I was straining to see the page in order to record my interview with him. Suddenly I heard his footsteps on the stairs and wondered to myself, "Will he scold me for not meditating at this time?" But I kept writing. Then the footsteps stopped at the library threshold. He stood at the door and said, "What are you doing?"—in other words, why aren't you in the shrine? I replied, "Swami, I'm just writing down everything you told me." He said, "Very good," and then he turned on the light on so I could see better. This was one of the rare instances that Swami excused anyone from meditation.

Keeping a journal has a certain value. Now as I go through those old diaries I can see that certain teachings he gave at the time, which were not so prominent then, are *now* most useful and beneficial. Swami Aseshananda's teachings were unique, personal, and multi-layered. And I cannot help but marvel, "Wow, what an important message he gave then!"

One beautiful moment I shall never forget occurred after my sannyas [final vows ceremony] in 1984, when I went to Portland to be with Swami Aseshananda, as he was my sannyas guru. The swami talked privately with me about the sannyas vows and their meaning and how powerful the mantras are. What a mood that created. Out of the blue I asked him, "Swami, do you ever see Brahman?" He laughed and said, "Yes, but not when I have too many administrative responsibilities." He was in such a wonderful mood then. So I asked him further whether he had ever felt depressed or sad. He



replied, “Yes, when I am ill. Then the mind goes down a little. I’m not able to do the Lord’s work. At that time I do some *japa*, and then the mind rises again.”

In 1976, as Swami Aseshananda and the other swamis were leaving Santa Barbara after Swami Prabhavananda’s memorial service, he disclosed to those of us in the convent an intimate account of how he first learned of my Swami Prabhavananda’s passing. “Maybe it’s just my imagination,” he prefaced his account, “but on July 4<sup>th</sup> I was awake.” Though Swami Prabhavananda had passed away just a few minutes past midnight, the swami disclosed that he heard Swami Prabhavananda say to him, “Brother Kiran, I have gone to the feet of Maharaj [Swami Brahmananda, his Guru].” “Right after that I got the phone call from the Vedanta Society of Southern California that Swami Prabhavananda had passed away.” This was Swami Aseshananda—always cloaking his spiritual life with humility. “Maybe it’s just my imagination,” he had told us. But we all knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that it *was* his experience. Swami Aseshananda was a man of God, intimately connected with the spiritual realm. This he showed by the power of his life and teachings.

*February 2007*

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\*[Editorial note: Swami’s relationship with Holy Mother’s Cat recalls the relationship between Ramana Maharshi’s and the cow Lakshmi who occupied a special position in his ashram. Incidentally, Swami Aseshananda reportedly saw Ramana Maharshi prior to leaving India.]

**Swami Harananda**, a monk at the Vedanta Society of Portland, maintained a continuous association with Swami Aseshananda, his guru, from 1955 through 1996.

*Interview, Vedanta Society of Portland.*

[Swami Harananda began the interview with a chant that he translated as: “This is full, that is full, when fullness is taken away from fullness, all that remains is fullness.”]

SH: My first interest in Vedanta was not, oddly enough, through Swami Aseshananda, but mainly through the swami who preceded him, Swami Devatmananda. That was only for a very short time. I was probably about 14 or 15 years old at the time, and I would skip school—because I was a restless kid, not a good student—and went one day to the Multnomah Country Library. Going through the stacks there were many, many books on Eastern thought and Hinduism. I took one book out called *Hinduism Comes to America* and that so enthralled my mind that I decided that I’ve got to find a place to explore these ideas! The book, first of all, was written by Swami Gnaneshwarananda of the Chicago center in the 1930s to introduce Americans to the Vedanta movement here in the United States. There was a name and address in the book itself—that of Swami Devatmananda: 1877 SW Park. So I went there and I had a couple of interviews with Swami Devatmananda in around 1950 or ‘51.

In the second interview with Swami Devatmananda, he said, “Try to see God everywhere you look: in walls, in people, in nature, in birds, in dogs. Everywhere you look, try to see God.” He said it in such a way that I was convinced that the man knew what he was talking about.

I went into military service, went to Korea, and came out; by that time Swami Devatmananda was very, very ill because he had served about 23 years in the United States—it was very hard work. So I heard his last lecture, and was really crestfallen when he said, “I have to go back.” In my mind I had said that I would stick with this small group of people because my whole heart had been changed. There was nothing in Christianity for me, particularly in the Baptist—let alone the Catholic—church. But I still wanted to become a monk.

EW: So what year would this have been?

SH: December, 1954. We waited, and Swami Aseshananda came in February of 1955. He was met by three people at the train station: Mr. Tom, who was president of the society, his wife, Mrs. Tom, and another devotee. Swami was coming from the Los Angeles Center where he’d been for five years.

EW: How did he strike you when you saw him?

SH: I was very taken with him because the center had a swami again! I could go to the lectures again!

EW: Did you feel anything powerful or magnetic about him?

SH: Not at that time. It happened about three or four lectures later. In one of those lectures, Swami seemed to be looking directly at me as he gave a saying of Christ: "Sell all that one has, and give to the poor, and follow me." I was enthralled at that point because I wanted to do that! But it wasn't possible then to come live at the temple. I was still living with my parents and was undecided. So I waited, and then one day Swami said to me, "So what are you doing now? Why don't you come here and stay." I told him, "Well I'm living with my mother and I would like that very much!"

So I did. A date was arranged, a week before Durga puja, an auspicious time to start a new life, in 1955. He scolded me because I was late for the lecture. I had moved in, I was tired, and had a good sleep; when I woke up and realized I heard this voice downstairs, and it was *him*! So I came on downstairs with the lecture over. He said, "If you do that again you'll have no place here!" That was my first scolding.

EW: He didn't really offer initiation, according to Vera Edwards, until he'd been in Portland for about three years.

SH: I wasn't initiated until about four years later.

EW: So could it be that Vera and her sisters were initiated before you?

SH: Yes. That's right.

EW: Was that because they were coming before you?

SH: No, Swami had his way of having people wait until the time was right.

EW: So you were in your mid-twenties when you first met Swami. How did he behave towards you—after all, you were a young potential monk? Did the scolding accelerate rapidly after that or was he sweet to you?

SH: Oh, he was very sweet and nice. In fact, one day he said, "I think we should go to a movie." So I went to a movie with him and a lady devotee who accompanied us. This happened about three times, then Swami said, "That's enough." By that time Mr. Bush had moved in and other devotees were coming.

EW: And which location was this?

SH: 1877 SW Park. It was a house. It was actually a *temple*—in a three-story house built around 1925. Very convenient: on the first floor was the chapel, and on the second floor were rooms where Swami lived along with another older devotee and myself. And then there was a third floor for men devotees who would stay over.

EW: Were you working at the time to pay your rent?

SH: Yes, JK Gill Company. A stock clerk was all.

EW: So how did the training continue? You mentioned Swami was sweet towards you in the beginning.

SH: That's true. Mr. Bush and about five others were going to the movies and invited me along. Swami said that my participation wasn't necessary. "Don't go!" That brought some conflict because I wasn't a part of their group anymore.

EW: But at that point you hadn't committed to becoming a monk, yet you were separated. Was Swami observing your nature?

SH: Right, right.

EW: When did you get your first really harsh scolding?

SH: I think the first day I moved in.

EW: It was for neglecting to attend the function at the center, correct?

SH: That was it. But it's hard [to remember] because those scoldings disappeared in my mind. I can't recall much about them. In those scoldings I felt he was my father, mother, everything—so he couldn't get rid of me in any way, shape, or form! I stuck to him like Elmer's Glue! That's the way I felt. I was committed to being with Swami, to serving Swami: *monastic life wasn't the chief focus, it was Swami who was*. I felt as if I didn't want to leave. He could say anything he jolly well pleased, but it wouldn't faze me much.

EW: How did the strangeness of Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother strike you growing up in Oregon—did it seem like imported Hindu culture? One of the people interviewed said it was so foreign she couldn't enter the shrine for a year.

SH: For me, Swami made it *natural* through day-to-day contact. The shrine was on the second floor, near our rooms. So living at the center was far different than being an outsider who visited the shrine. And Swami made the atmosphere of the shrine a *living reality*.

EW: Did he do something to enhance the atmosphere?

SH: Swami changed the way the altar was set up. Instead of having Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother, and Vivekananda on the same level, he thought that Holy Mother would not like that. So he asked the older important members who regularly went to the shrine and pujas, saying, “Mother would not like to be on the same level as Sri Ramakrishna.” Swami had Sri Ramkrishna on the top level, Holy Mother next, then Mother’s footprints on the lower level with Swami Vivekananda on the left and Swami Brahmananda on the right [same level as the feet]. The older members agreed. Swami was kind to the older members and took their feelings into consideration.

Once there was a long-time devotee of Swami Devatmananda who wanted to impress Swami. She did something that Swami Aseshananda felt was not in keeping with what Swami Devatmananda had told her, and he said to her very gruffly, “You are his disciple, you should do what he instructed!” So she didn’t try to impress Swami Aseshananda any further. *Swami did not care for people trying to impress him!*

EW: Did he make this remark out of love for the devotee?

SH: He said this out of deep respect for Swami Devatmananda and the work he did for the Portland center.

EW: Are there any incidents that are particularly memorable over the decades you lived with Swami?

SH: In the 1980s Swami received a telegram from one of his gurubhais [fellow monastic initiated by the same guru] requesting him to go to India for the first monks’ conference held since 1929.\* He was walking up and down the shrine porch, and then he came in, and Mr. T said he saw Swami touch Holy Mother’s picture that he brought from Colombo, I believe. Then Swami came indoors and I saw him go half way up the steps to the second floor. He stood there for about two minutes and went back up. Then he went through his door, and then he came out and told Mr. Bush, “Please send this telegram saying that Swami Saradananda [Swami’s beloved mentor in India] has asked me to come to the United States to do work here and I wish to stay.” And that was it. They couldn’t force him to go back because he happened to be senior to all the swamis at the time.

As he stood there, it was as if Holy Mother were there, telling him, “Stay on, stay on, my son.” Holy Mother was no longer physically there, in India, nor were his fellow swamis, nor Saradananda; so he felt as if Swami Saradananda had requested him to come to the US, and that was a *mandate*. [Editorial note: Many commented on Swami’s utter devotion to the devotees of his center, so much so that he never once returned to visit India.]

EW: Others also have reported seeing Swami in an exalted state. Has that ever happened in a public situation?

SH: Yes, once we were having a class on the Upanishads. We were each to have our own text because he'd said, "I want you to follow along with me." A devotee was, I think, sitting in the front row. He was lecturing, and then he turned to her and said, "Stop that, look up here! Your trouble is that you're trying to read and you should be following what I say. *This is where the power is!*" [Editorial note: In a later discussion about Swami's statement Harananda confirmed this was a rare instance when Swami Aseshananda referred to himself as a source/channel of spiritual power.]

So after the lecture Swami Aseshananda said, "All those who are here that wish to can come to the shrine," because it was our tradition to have vespers afterwards. We went into the shrine and he did an unusual ritual known as "sprinkling of the water of peace." He sprinkled water from the water pot on everybody and repeated mantras. I saw him kneel down, touch Holy Mother's picture first, about three or four times, then Holy Mother's feet [footprints] about three times. Then afterwards, he said, "Everybody who is here, know that they have a mother to turn to." He did this as a blessing and to give assurance that whatever trouble people have in life, they can always turn to Holy Mother. *He was very inspired and the whole atmosphere was just surcharged!*

EW: Turning to another subject, how did your relationship with Swami evolve over the decades?

SH: It evolved on a very natural basis—as it would in any relationship, through interaction, the day-to-day things, the questions, and things like that. The conclusion was that I could trust this man *implicitly*. No ifs, ands, or buts! He is as solid as a wall and he would never desert me. And he would never desert *anybody else*—regardless if they were mad at him, if they went away, and came back years later. When they came back, it was as though they had never left!

EW: Yes, I had that experience of being welcomed despite disappearing for long periods.

SH: He was always a friend. You should have seen him the first time a woman devotee was expecting a child. My God, he was like a mother. He would say, "Don't strain yourself, sit here." And then he would get some special prasada, or he might even make some payesh [rice pudding] for her.

When a young swami would come, he'd be very busy in the kitchen, making kitcheri and payesh, and he'd serve that swami. This was somewhat embarrassing for the junior swami because it was the junior swami that should be serving him. Swami Aseshananda was imbued with the Mother aspect that he always exemplified.

EW: How did Swami teach the devotees?

SH: Swami's whole life was concentrated on helping the "children"—the people who came to Vedanta. He was responsible, like a mother hen, making sure all those chicks stayed in line. You couldn't tell that he was giving instruction because it occurred as natural conversation. [Editorial note: Some commented that they would feel transformed and relieved of burdens during the course of such normal interaction.] Swami might also teach though a command like, "Don't do that, no I don't want you to." We automatically accepted this instruction and learned from it.

EW: Can you tell the story about how Swami asked you to leave the monastery?

SH: Oh that! Well, he was upset with me. I'd done something and I couldn't figure out why he was upset—maybe it was something I had said. Anyway, he said, "I want you to leave the temple and I want you to leave now!" I said, "OK, Swami, I will do that because you have commanded me. I'll tell you what I will do. I will go out the door, down these steps, cross the parking lot, go one foot beyond. And then I'll come back." And that's exactly what I did! When I returned, I told him what I did and he said, "Shut up!" [Swami Harananda laughs.]

There's another story too. During my earlier days, to show my commitment to him, I said, "Swami, Sri Ramakrishna can throw me out, and I'll be back, Holy Mother can tell me to leave and I'll be back, the whole Order can be against me and I'll be back, you can tell me anything you want but I'll be back because I'm stuck to you like Elmer's Glue.

EW: What did Swami say?

SH: He just smiled.

EW: Can you tell me something about monastic life?

SH: We had some difficulties with Swami Aseshananda because he wasn't too practical as far as property work and maintenance. In fact, for building the shrines, he gave us a budget of only \$50 for each shrine [at the Scappoose retreat]! We had to *really* do a lot of head-scratching. Atmajayananda found some very good solutions for us. [Editorial note: One of the shrines reportedly was allotted a slightly larger budget.]

The first shrine we'd been asked to make was to Holy Mother. The shrine project started in response to the county's attempts to tax us. We had to demonstrate that we were not selling timber but were a legitimate religious site. So we'd go out to the retreat, spend three days there after the Sunday lecture, and return by Wednesday for the class. We couldn't leave our equipment out at the worksite; we had to carry everything back to the retreat temple for safekeeping every time we went out there. It was a long walk to the shrine we were building and we had to carry all our equipment out there.

EW: Speaking of practical matters, have you heard the story about Swami mowing the lawn when it was covered in ice?

SH: No, but I don't doubt that. When he got his mind set on something—like mowing the lawn—that was it! You could tell him about the weather conditions, that it was raining, but no—he was going to go out there and mow the lawn!

EW: Pavrajika Brahmaprana wrote that Swami wore a unique expression on his face when mowing the lawn, owing to his concentration on a particular verse from the scriptures.

SH: Very likely, and by the way, he had a unique way of mowing the lawn! Wherever he pointed the lawnmower, he would go.

EW: So it wasn't terribly methodical?

SH: It was *not* methodical! [Laughter]

EW: What do you think Swami's essential teachings were? Many people say, "He's all Mother," whereas I heard him express non-duality. What was he really teaching?

SH: Brahman alone is real and there is no other existence. And that expression was realized through the manifestation of Holy Mother. She is the practical approach, what we naturally gravitate to. We naturally think of the Holy Mother—the maternal aspect of the godhead—in our actions, in the way we do things, like that. She's someone we can turn to constantly. Whereas with Sri Ramakrishna, it is a little more difficult; he is a father figure, a little more stern. So we can more easily go to the Mother, cry to her, and she'll put her arm around our shoulder, and wipe away our tears. But our mind is constantly thinking of her, so I think it was more natural of Swami to introduce Holy Mother to the devotees and those who are under him—as a constant reminder of something that is higher.

EW: Did Swami promote Sri Ramakrishna as much as Holy Mother?

SH: Oh yes, but he was more the ideal for the monks. Holy Mother was also the ideal for the monks, but mostly for the householders.

EW: So Swami's teaching was non-duality as represented by Holy Mother: she was the embodiment of the non-dual principle?

SH: Yes, that was the hidden aspect of Mother. But householders needed someone to go to, to unburden themselves. And that's what Swami exemplified in his life.



*Winter 2008*

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\*[Editorial note: This event was probably the 1980 Monks' Conference held in Belur.]

Addendum: In talking with Swami Harananda in January 2009 during an especially cold period, he related an incident in which Swami Aseshananda once made use of similar weather conditions to further train him. Harananda narrated how Swami Aseshananda called him out of the shrine during a freezing windstorm to tie up some rhododendrons. Harananda then argued that such plants obtain their full strength by resisting the elements. Swami Aseshananda was unrelenting, so Harananda went out into the icy wind as instructed. Harananda added: "When finished tying up the rhodies it was much better than meditating in the comfortable atmosphere of the shrine and brought tranquility to the mind that was not achieved in the shrine otherwise." Email 1/31/09.

**Pravrajika Sevaprana**, a disciple of Swami Prabhavananda, lived in Holy Mother's House, Portland, for a year before entering the San Francisco convent in 1976 and received brahmacharya vows from Swami Aseshananda. She lived and worked in the Ramakrishna Mission Sevashram in Varanasi, India.

*Excerpted from a letter of April 2007, sent from Varanasi, India.*

Please accept my greetings and best wishes on the Swami Aseshananda project. Those of us who were blessed to know Swami Aseshananda Maharaj will never forget what love and light he brought into our lives. Really, we were so lucky to have had his blessings, were we not?

I first met Swami Aseshananda in 1972 at the opening of the Women's Retreat House of the Vedanta Society of Northern California in their Olema Retreat. There were thirteen swamis present. I had only been in Vedanta for two years but had met my diksha guru, Swami Prabhavananda, who was a disciple of Swami Brahmanandaji. When I first saw Swami Prabhavananda, tears came to my eyes and I knew that this was what I had been searching for. My whole life changed. It was as though I had come home. I saw him as full of Light and I never thought I would feel anything like that again with anyone.

Yet when I first met Swami Aseshanandaji, I again felt a wonderful attraction and a power coming from him. Later I understood that the guru shakti comes through different forms but it is the same power of God, and that one may have upa [secondary] gurus as well as be blessed by them.

Anyway, through various circumstances, I ended up living in Holy Mother's House in Portland under the guidance of Swami Aseshanandaji for one year before I joined the San Francisco convent in 1976.

I remember that when I first moved to Portland, Swami Aseshananda took me aside into a room alone and quoted a Vivekachundamani verse of Sankara to me. The translation is: "Fear not, there is a way to cross the realm of relative existence. I will show you that way." And his words had power in them! Then Swami fed me with his own hands like a mother. I received so much from him and in the end also received my brahmacharya vows from him.

To me, Swami was the embodiment of Holy Mother Herself. I remember that whenever I asked him a serious question, he would go into the shrine and after sometime he would return and say, "Mother says . . . ." Whatever it was, you knew Mother really did say it. She was a living presence there.

The Swami was full of blessings, and an energy, shakti-power, emanated from him. Even when he scolded, one felt somehow attracted to him by that love.

Even after I joined the convent in San Francisco, I always felt a loving support coming from Swami. Once, after he gave vows in San Francisco to the nuns, I was serving him and helping him to give interviews at our old temple. I had to call him from his room and I found him lying on his bed holding the pictures of Thakur and Ma to his heart. I will never forget that sight! He was just like a child.

When I lived in Portland, I remember I once felt very tired and decided I would not go to the center that evening for vespers. Soon the phone rang and it was the swami. He said, “You come here.” When I went he met me and said so sweetly, “You see, when you come here I can look into your mind and help you.” What grace we had!

As you know, Swami was very fond of Sankara and never tired of quoting him. He also was always feeding us with prasad, just like a mother.

I want to thank you for this opportunity for me to take a little time just to remember. We were blessed to sit at the feet of this great soul. May the Mother bless you always and ever, and through this project.

I remain always at the feet of Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother.

With love and best wishes,

Pravrajika Sevaprana

P.S. I just remembered one other among many such incidents. Towards the end of Swami Aseshanandaji’s life, he had cataracts and became really blind. Once when I was visiting there we were all trying to have the simple surgery done. They would have even come to the center, I think, to do it. It would have been just a couple of hours to complete the surgery. Swami Aseshanandaji did not want it. His final statement (and the way he said it) indicated that the conversation was over. He declared: “*I have seen enough!*” Of course he was close to one hundred then and, indeed, I’m sure he *had* seen enough!

*Submitted April 2007*

**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 Chandi (Durga Saptasati)* almost every day. During his last illness, he called me and requested me to read the *Chandi* 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 Damodarananda.

\*\*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.]



**Swami Brahmarupananda** is an independent monk in the Ramakrishna tradition. Initiated by Swami Bhashyananda, he has been a resident of the Vedanta Center in Silver Spring, MD, since its inception.

*Written submission.*

### **Swami Aseshananda As I Saw Him**

When I was a resident of the Vivekananda Vedanta Society of Chicago and of the Vivekananda Monastery and Retreat in Ganges, MI, during the 1980s and 1990s, Swami Aseshanandaji visited Chicago and Ganges several times, and I also had the good fortune to visit Portland a few times. I remember two interesting incidents that happened during his visit to Chicago and Ganges for the massive Vedanta convention in Ganges in 1987. There were about 700 lay devotees and about 20 swamijis, including Swami Ranganathanandaji, visiting from various countries to participate in that convention. During the convention, there was a homa (fire ceremony), and Swami Aseshanandaji, being the senior-most swami, was performing the homa. I made all the necessary preparations for the homa. He very kindly asked me to sit next to him and to assist him in actually making the offerings. I considered this a great blessing.

The other, somewhat humorous, incident happened in Chicago. One morning I was serving breakfast to Swami Aseshanandaji and all the other visiting swamis. I ventured to make this remark: “Maharaj, I have heard that you severely scold people in Portland. But here you are so gracious and forgiving!” I was ready to receive a scolding. Instead, he said with a smile: “In Portland, I am a terror. Here, I am a guest, and so I am nice.”

During one of my visits to Portland in the 1980s, I stayed at the Vedanta Society for a week in the holy company of Swami Asheshanandaji and other monks. The Swami treated me with great kindness and bestowed his blessings on more than one occasion. I remember two incidents during this visit that left a deep impression on me.

It was a Sunday morning and preparations were being made by Mr. Bush and Mr. Thomas for Swamiji’s Sunday service. When the devotees started assembling in the chapel, I went and sat in the front row, not wanting to miss any of his words and wanting to be as close to him as possible. When the Swami arrived on the podium, just before he took his seat, he asked Mr. Bush to keep another chair next to his chair on the podium. I did not know for whom the second chair was meant. To my utter surprise, the Swami asked me to sit next to him on the podium. I could not say “No.” I timidly went and sat next to him, facing the audience. He told me that I’d have to speak for a few minutes at the end. My heart began to beat wildly, as I did not have a speech ready. I did not have the courage to open my mouth in his august presence. He gave an inspiring talk in his

leonine voice. Instead of attentively listening to his speech, I was busy preparing a short speech in my mind. Towards the end of his speech, somewhat abruptly he announced: "Now Swami Brahmarupananda will talk."

I was very nervous, but somehow managed to speak for a few minutes. I commented on a verse in the fourth chapter of the Bhagavad-Gita, and explained how "all karma" will be burnt by the fire of Self-Knowledge. My interpretation of the term "all karma" was somewhat different from Sankara's interpretation. I did not know this at that time. Swamiji did not say anything. In the evening, just before Arati, I was in the library. Swamiji was on his way to the shrine for the evening worship. He quietly came to me and very kindly explained Sankara's interpretation. I felt ashamed and embarrassed for not knowing the correct interpretation according to Sankara.

At the end of that trip, another incident happened that showed the Swami's enormous kindness and love even for someone like me who was a novice in spiritual life. This happened on the day I was to return to Chicago. The Swami asked Mr. Thomas to arrange for my transportation to the airport. When I went to take leave of him a few minutes before leaving for the airport, he said, "I will also come to the airport." What happened after that left a deep impression on my mind. He asked several devotees, men and women, to accompany us to the airport in two cars. After I checked in, I said to the Swami, "Maharaj, now I shall go the gate and wait for the boarding. Wouldn't you like to return to the ashrama?" He said he would wait until I boarded the plane. We all went to the gate [this was long before 9/11 when anyone could go right up to the boarding gate]. We all sat down, waiting for the boarding announcement. Once more I requested the Swami to return to the ashrama, as he need not have to wait till I board the plane. He said he would wait. When the boarding was announced and my row number was called, I gathered my carry-on bag and started to enter the plane; the Swami was standing there as close to the gate as possible, with his hands folded, his torso and head slightly bent forward, and his face full of compassion and love. I remembered that this was how the Holy Mother would take leave of visitors from out of town, standing outside and looking somewhat sad as long as they could be seen.

On a few of these occasions when I met him, either in Portland or in Chicago and Ganges, I received his special blessings and some very practical instructions, for which I am ever grateful. On one such occasion during my visit to Portland, I prostrated before him and sought his blessing, saying: "Maharaj, I did not have the good fortune to see the Holy Mother. I have seen you; and to me, seeing you is the same as seeing the Holy Mother." In response, he bestowed his very special blessings on me. I feel extremely fortunate to have known him.

*Submitted November 2008*

**Anonymous Pravrajika**, initiated by another swami of the Ramakrishna Order, lives in California.

*Written submission.*

Being in Swami Aseshananda's presence was a wonderful study in how to mold your own life. When with you, he was all attention, loving, and would give you what you needed to move forward. One would accept whatever he was giving you because his contact was always grounded in your spiritual welfare. That was Swami's whole interest: how can I help? I always found him to be a person who acted in accordance with the time, place and circumstances. He seemed to be able to plug into what was going on with you and, of course, in that way he could be so insightful and give real guidance. Being a man of God, one caught something very tangible from him that you can't put into words. Even though my guru is not Swami Aseshananda, over a period of about thirteen years on visits to Portland, he contributed greatly to my understanding of spiritual life. Those years are very precious to me now and continue to be helpful.

*Submitted August 2008*

**Vimukta Chaitanya** is a monk of the Vedanta Society of San Francisco, California.

*Written submission.*

Among the many Indian swamis I've known over a period of many years, Swami Aseshananda was singular in that he often communicated a distinct impression that the spirit of Sri Sarada Devi, the Holy Mother, whose disciple he was, animated his conduct. Now and again I would have occasion to attend a devotional service at the Portland center, and whenever I did I would be struck by the swami's motherly solicitude in connection with the distribution of the sacramental food (prasada): he personally saw to it that the devotees in attendance were properly served and served many of them himself, even to the point of going around with extra food, to offer them second helpings. Only after everyone had been well served did he himself have something to eat.

I have attended many a devotional service at other Vedanta centers and much more often than not the swami in charge had no hand in the distribution of the food; it was usually the case that he was served first.

*Submitted Autumn 2008*

Blessed and Beloved,

Here, following, is a verbal snapshot of Swami Aseshananda (1899-1996), formerly in charge of the Vedanta Society of Portland—a holy man who was one of the more influential of my role models in days of yore. The longest lived of the Holy Mother's monastic disciples, he was deeply imbued with her spirit, and was in and of himself an affirmation of the validity and the innate worth of the quest for the holy grail: spiritual enlightenment, universal love. An acquaintance of mine, spiritually attuned, level-headed, met him for the first time years ago. Shortly thereafter, when I asked him how he found the swami, he solemnly exclaimed, and a note of awe in the tone his voice came through loud and clear: "He is full of God!"

Full of God I myself found him to be whenever I met him, as not infrequently I did over a period of years. At Christmas it was his wont to pay homage to the nativity of the Son of God, an awesome, mighty king even as an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes. Throughout the whole of the Christmas season, the Christmas spirit—a commemorative spirit, of peace, of love, of joy—was vibrantly alive in the swami's person; ever and anon, it was brightly and warmly aglow.

*Submitted December 2008*



## **Six Portraits of Swami Aseshananda**



**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*

**Eric Foster**, a disciple of Swami Aseshananda since 1974, lived as a candidate for the monastery first at the Scappoose retreat, then in the Portland center until 1979. He also resided in the Berkeley Vedanta center, at that time led by Swami Swananda. He currently lives in San Francisco and works as a software engineer.

*Interviewed by telephone.*

I really enjoyed reading Vera Edwards's remembrance [sent upon Eric's request] and interestingly, I met Swami just nineteen years after she did, when I was nineteen years old. But unlike Vera, I had heard about Ramakrishna, and I was looking for a spiritual form of life that might involve an organization or a compelling teacher. So when I was in Salem visiting a friend and reading *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, I learned that there was a Vedanta society in Portland and went to visit. From reading *The Gospel* I took Ramakrishna to be pure—teaching from the heart with a true inner realization—and that an organization or teacher based on him could be what I was looking for.

I showed up at the Vedanta center with my pack on my back (or I may have taken it off and leaned it against the house) and Stuart Bush answered the door. I don't recall exactly how I explained my interest in being there, but he invited me into the library. Swami came and met with me. We actually talked very, very little. He asked me if I were interested in spiritual life, and I said yes. He asked my age, and I said nineteen, and he said something like, "Oh, you really should be twenty-one before making a decision."

EW: So he was already sizing you up as a monk?

EF: He received me as someone interested in becoming a monk although I didn't think I was presenting myself that way. He fundamentally turned me over to one of the householders, Jim, who served Swami. Swami asked Jim to allow me to stay in his house temporarily as a guest, and to help me find a job, which I did in the Sheraton Hotel where Jim worked.

I immediately began to attend all of Swami's talks and he said things that sounded astonishingly true and genuine to me. I think it may have taken me two weeks to make up mind that not only was he totally honest and authoritative, but presented himself as a candidate for being a guru, for actually taking responsibility, as they say, for someone's spiritual life, and having the *authority*, as Ramakrishna said, to play that role. I joined, basically. The protocol was to live on your own as self-supporting, carry out a spiritual life following the instructions of the swami, and to do service according to your capacity, which I did. After two years he invited me to live at the retreat, while keeping my job. After another year or so he invited me to give up my job and live in the center. That was called a "pre-probationer" on the path of being a monastic. I became one of three monastics in the temple.

During this time, Swami's following was extremely small. What impressed me about the people there was that most of them had been there for many years, some as many as twenty years. This was far different from other spiritual families I had visited. It was a place where people were normal, intelligent, not fanatics or extreme. Secondly, they were dedicated, practicing with a teacher that they had a healthy relationship with, and they'd been doing it for many years. That was remarkable, especially to someone who was only nineteen.

EW: How did you come to be initiated?

EF: That occurred the following spring in May 1975.

Swami's routine included nightly meditation and vespers service, followed by prasad to the devotees who came to the library. The monastics received their prasad elsewhere. One story that is meaningful to me pertains to waiting in the library for Swami to prepare the prasad after meditation. It was a very intense, quiet, intense meditative experience, wonderful to sit there, to hear him chopping things, doing this labor by hand for those who came to meditate.

The library had two lights switches, one for a central light above the table, and another that lit the area under the shelves in the back. One of Swami's predominate themes/characteristics that he emphatically expressed, all the time, was frugality. For the common person, his frugality verged on lunacy. His frugality was unbelievable. He wore clothes until there were more holes than actual clothing. In *many* ways he practiced frugality. One of the ways involved the lights in the library. As an older man, he wasn't always precise or agile in his movements. He wanted only one light to be on in the library, not both—that would be wasteful. But he never actually learned which one he wanted. Virtually every night he would come by and fiddle with the lights: turn on one, turn off the other, until he got the one he wanted. One time he fiddled with the lights until they were both off and we were in total darkness. After a few heartbeats, he found the light switch, turned it on again, and turned to go away as he always did when he was done. But this time, after he turned to go away, he turned back just a little bit so you could barely see his eyes. His eyes were always deeply shrouded by the surrounding dark sacks that he got from malaria when he was younger. But at this angle, at this moment, those eyes had a glint that I'd hardly ever seen, and all he said was, "Economy, no?" Three or four people in the room burst out laughing, and he walked away. That's my story. I love to tell it, but I don't know whether it means anything to anyone else.

EW: Do you think Swami was poking fun at himself a little?

EF: Of course! This was something that we never got to see him do on any regular basis. We sat there in silence out of respect, in darkness, without saying, "Swami, please

turn the light back on.” No, we wouldn’t say anything like that. [Laughing] We sat there in silence.

The other light story was “perennial” because it occurred in the chapel where Swami gave lectures three or four times a week. It was Stuart Bush’s responsibility to set the lights right. Swami wanted the lights in a way that actually was impossible. He wanted to be able to see the audience and they to see him, and he wanted to give the lecture without the light glaring in his eyes—but it was unreasonable to have no light at all on him. Virtually every time he began to speak he would ask Stuart to readjust the lights, because there was no arrangement that was actually satisfactory. So Stuart would fiddle with the lights, and what he did had absolutely no relationship with what Swami asked. He just fiddled with them until Swami said, “Stop, OK.”

EW: Since it was impossible to get the lights as he wanted them, do you think Swami used this light ritual as a means to work on Mr. Bush? Many people reported how Swami would use such situations to help individuals in their development.

EF: It’s a subtle thing; it’s not as blatantly clear as a deliberate program to work on someone’s ego. Swami actually did nothing just for that purpose. There was always a substantial meaning behind everything he did even though the application of that meaning may be out of proportion to the practicality involved. He never made up something just to crunch someone’s ego. There was a reason for every scolding, for every request. This may have been a long-running battle, an issue of contention between a teacher and a student over how something should be done or what it should mean. It wouldn’t have been my business to ask Swami to explain anything.

EW: After moving into the monastery, were there any vows to be taken?

EF: No, there were no formal vows at that point. But to live around Swami is to live a vow. To come more than a few times, to look to him for spiritual guidance is to take a very severe vow—to be serious about living up to your own inner truth, and to be willing to be checked, to be corrected, if you failed that at any moment.

EW: Did you feel at the age of nineteen that you might have been a little young to make a commitment to that path before working through worldly desires?

EF: It’s hard to say. I’d asked Swami and he replied that all things one experiences in life are not as important as purifying oneself through spiritual effort and practice. The availability of his spiritual experience before you was so intense that measurements about qualifications or considerations about whether you were ready paled in significance. He’s there, he sees you, he sees what he can show you, and I think all those things blew all other considerations away. Maybe not fairly: you could say rationally that my life would have been better if I held off trying to be a monk, finished

college instead, had a few romantic affairs; who knows, that's just making up a life story. No one knows.

EW: Did you go with the intention of becoming a monk or just seeing where things would lead? That does seem a young age to become a monk.

EF: That's not young in the cultural context Swami was living in. In his cultural context, young age is wonderful for devoting oneself as much as possible to spiritual practice, to being good, performing service, purifying the mind, no matter what it means for what you do afterwards. The question of becoming a monk or not was not the most important thing. The most important thing was meditating, thinking of God, dedicating your attention and all of your desires to your highest ideal, to do your best, and to make the best benefit of this teacher, his presence, his instruction. He lived in our material world as someone who constantly believed in God and felt that God was real. It wasn't more important, it was *the only importance!* All this other stuff was extremely peripheral. To hear him talk, to watch him work, to hear him interact with other people, after awhile, when you knew what he was doing—you felt that God *is* real. That's more important than deciding whether you're going to be a monk or a householder, or get a job, or have a career or not.

EW: At that point, were you not basing your thinking on what Swami had experienced and what he exemplified? Weren't you still taking a leap of faith that the experience was real and true?

EF: Actually he didn't teach or claim experiences other than the validity of spiritual principles, of the nobility of the great teachers and their vision. The level of spiritual experience he may have attained was not a part of his daily conversation or teaching at all. His teaching was that spiritual life is valuable, and that to realize God is the purpose of life, and that Sri Ramakrishna is genuine and that Sri Ramakrishna's help is real and available to us if we purify ourselves, work sincerely, and are honest.

These things aren't matters requiring a leap of faith, they are matters of *deciding* to live according to things that are obviously true but are hard to follow. His example was not to show that invisible spiritual truths were true if you believed in him. What his example showed was that *you* could follow these truths. If you spent time with him, he influenced you to follow them, to care about God, to be sincere, to serve others, to be humble, to be loving, to be fearless, to hold your view high not low, to take the high road, not the low road. "Never stoop to conquer" was one of his favorite expressions. It means always living your life devoted to the highest ideal you can imagine, sticking to it, and never compromising for your own weaknesses.

So I don't feel I need to have nirvikalpa samadhi to live practically, as if the whole universe were one. Although I've not been able to do this very well, when I think of it, this is very satisfying. You may not have the experience of a highly advanced spiritual



person who has vast control of his mind and behavior, inner vision, all these things you might imagine he attains through spiritual practice—if *you just do the right thing whenever you have a choice, you are practicing the truth.*

EW: Several devotees commented that Swami Aseshananda worked with people whose life circumstances were difficult, in many cases touched by tragedy, and that he had the power to help such people.

EF: Yes. It seemed that he treated everyone with the same consistency, maybe with more intensity if the occasion required, but he never shut anyone out for being out of line. He corrected everyone, even for the smallest infraction. It was beyond amazing how large was his capacity to lift up people, and treat them consistently with love and attention, no matter what they did.

I recently listened to a recording of one of Swami Aseshananda's lectures on Swami Saradananda. A recording always has some reality in it, but if you really did see the person daily for years and listen to him for thousands of hours, then watching a video or hearing a recording is much, much more like a living presence. Some of his words bring him right back in front of me.

I wanted to cover the subject of Swami's scoldings. It seems to me that I was a prime target while there—so much so that people who visited from other centers reported to me that I was the main person who was being scolded almost all the time during their visit. I can see two reasons why I deserved scolding.

One was that when I looked at Swami, and I communicated with him by my actions, and listened to him, I saw that he was for *real*. He *really* was a teacher and it *really* was of spiritual value to be in his presence, and to serve him by following his instruction. That meant I was making a huge claim of my own qualification to live a spiritual life and that everything I did had to measure up to that. I was claiming that I had enough substance in myself, I had enough integrity to say Swami is true, Swami is real, that his teaching is accurate, authoritative, and justified. I had to live up to this, therefore I had to behave really, really well. If I did anything less than my highest ideal, as I understood it, then I deserved to be corrected, called on it, and challenged to do it right, on everything.

For example, one of the things he constantly scolded people about was forgetting to wash their hands after touching food or their shoes. Many American devotees believed these things didn't matter, so if they did them it was only a casual gesture of affection or respect. In other words, they weren't observed by devotees out of *dedication*. Swami was dedicated and he taught people to be dedicated; he was intolerant of carelessness in his presence. So he would scold you if you did not wash your hands after touching your shoes. I deserved that scolding because I accepted the path of paying attention all the time, caring enough about life, revering it all the time.

The second reason why I deserved scolding was because it hurt my feelings. As I constantly tried to do my best, he called me out, criticized what I did, and my feeling were *hurt*.

EW: Many said Swami's scoldings did not bother them, and sometimes they almost smiled to themselves, because they understood his loving motivation for the scoldings.

EF: I had my hurt feelings because I did not understand him correctly. If people have told you they understood him correctly, that is very wonderful and good for them if they could hold that attitude and live up to it all the time. I was far from it. I was an immature person with low self-esteem and over-sensitive to approval or rejection from others. I could not stand being disrespected, insulted, criticized, or humiliated. I was intolerant of criticism and therefore he applied it to me. *I would never get over it until I'd been through enough that I would decide to get over it.*

EW: How long did that take and how did you cope with the scoldings?

EF: I think we were in a steady state struggle for most of my time there [6 years] and I finally got over it in my last year, for the most part, partially through the process of self-reflection and through reaching out to other people who demonstrated a better way of relating to him—rather than resenting his scolding.

EW: Could you share your view of Swami's scoldings in relation to his Bengali culture?

EF: Swami's scoldings, I was told, were typical of an Indian mother, at least an Indian motherly spiritual teacher. This information came from a young man, an American, who visited the Vedanta center while I was there and was a disciple of Gayatri Devi, Swami Paramananda's foremost monastic disciple, and spiritual leader of the Vedanta center in La Crescenta [California]. This young man was totally at ease with Swami's behavior. He said it was just like his guru. But in our culture people don't talk to each other in a harsh way; we are measured in our criticisms and objections. There is no relationship of love that involves one person constantly correcting the other. The only example we have in our culture is the bad boss. Our parents don't actually do that with their children. Apparently motherly Indian teachers do, at least Bengali ones.

EW [jokingly]: Oh, I must have been a Bengali mother in my last life, because I'm prone to that parenting style. Maybe it's an influence from Swami.

EF: On a related subject I had the opportunity to see another very senior Vedanta swami perform the scolding role on his devotee in front of me during a breakfast. It was one-hundred percent loud, harsh, and critical; the person receiving it was very defensive, combative, but also recognized that she was being instructed spiritually. It was a marvelous experience to be once again in the presence of a scolding swami, even though it wasn't for me. Other times it *has* been for me. I've often felt that I had a sign on my

head that only senior monks of the Ramakrishna Order could see saying “Scold Me!” [Eric then mentioned two other senior swamis who scolded him after being in their presence only a few minutes.]

EW: Swami must have helped you get over that sense of inferiority.

EF: It’s true that as much as it still stings me when people criticize or try to humiliate, it’s certainly good to have had the experience that someone—who loved me more than anyone in the world has or ever could love me—has scolded me, criticized me, corrected me, more than anyone else ever has.

EW: [The conversations then turned to recordings of Swami’s many lectures.] Even if we were able to collect Swami’s lectures, they might be repetitive because they were reportedly given not for their factual content, but as occasions to work on the listener.

EF: The lectures were ritualistic: an exercise in thinking about God according to these subjects, to re-instill, re-instill, re-instill memory, purpose, and determination.

EW: Maybe one day there will be a place on the internet where all this material will be freely available.

EF: An historical Vedanta in American Society would be a viable project. Many individuals have written small histories. Every Vedanta center is a rich storehouse of memories, stories, and records of how Vedanta teachings have affected people and how they’ve realized teachings in all kinds of different ways. Even on the smallest scale, just going out and *meeting* people who have met these swamis and were inspired by them to practice spiritual life has been a wonderful treat, even in the small doses that I’ve been able to experience.

EW: Yes, this is precisely how I feel about interviewing the devotees who were inspired by Swami Aseshananda.

EW: [The conversation turned to the last few years of Swami’s life.] Were you still living in Portland at the time?

EF: Yes. Although I had grown apart from the Vedanta society for many years, I would come sometimes during the period when Swami Aseshananda would not give the main lecture but say a few words after Swami Shantarupananda’s lectures. In this period I introduced him to my wife, Aliza. She became Swami Shantarupananda’s first initiate and is now very dedicated and active in the San Francisco center, much more than me. We were involved in the Portland center from 1990 to 1993, the year we left Portland, but came back around 1995. In Swami’s last days, his inner circle invited me to help care for him physically. So I did and was part of those last days.

[Eric provided the following reflection written shortly after Swami's passing.]

Twenty-three hours did Swami Aseshananda lie in his bed, adorned with flowers, surrounded by devotees, in his room for them to come to pay their respects and pranams. Reading from holy scriptures, particularly *The Gospel*, went on aloud constantly. Grief and shock permeated the air as we, who knew him so well for so long, finally faced the end of a chapter we could not conceive of ending. Instead of lying there, in need of some service, providing us the unthinkable opportunity and blessing to be able to continue serving his ailing body, he lay there gone. Glaring photo-lights, the loud reading, and stunned devotees seated in attendance added to the unreality of it.

Swami would say: "Imagination becomes realization!" Now it is up to us to imagine his presence, guidance, and inspiration without anymore the regular physical affirmation of his real existence. He was flesh-and-blood, a human being among us, friend and parent to us, yet one whose every moment showed that God was real. He was one such that we would not believe possible—had we not seen, heard, and felt ourselves: a completely pure, convincing, authoritative, and infinitely loving, giving teacher, friend, mother/father. He cared for us, served us, loved us, instructed us, against seeming infinitely stubborn stupid resistance and incompetence. Yet he didn't care: he loved us.

I could not stay long. I left to go to the shrine, where I know he would also send me if he were speaking. "There is nothing like life." But one of the lessons of his life was that the shrine was *real*, that Ramakrishna and Holy Mother and Swamiji were *there*, and it was a blessed opportunity to sit there and think of them. Do japa if that is all one is capable of. *Be there*.

The next day, with Swami Aseshananda in his open casket, Swami Shantarupananda conducted a gathering in the chapel with prayers and singing, followed by an emotional tour of the grounds, carrying Swami and opening his casket at the major focal points of his devotions. From the main shrine (through the open windows with the drapes open, too difficult to bring him through the halls), past the shrine garden and down to the Buddha shrine, then to the front where a car awaited to take him away. Swami would have scolded and shouted and ordered all to do the impossible: manage all that without trampling on garden areas or breaking shrub limbs, and everyone would have indulgently done their best, to no avail, and Swami would accept finally, and grudgingly, that it was impossible, and that after all they will grow back.

Seeing the car drive off with Swami's body in there, never to return in that form, was especially wrenching. He devoted himself so completely to this plot of land as his field of work, worship, and devotion. Every inch of it he cared for. Every bird that died here was sacred and called for a devotional burial, complete with candle, incense, flowers, and chanting. Every leaf, every needle, every cottonwood cotton ball had to be picked up diligently in honor of the temple's cleanliness and the safety of devotees, even the neighbors. Every plant that drooped, especially every flower stalk, had to be supported,

without exception. Even the rhododendrons, that naturally drop their outside branches to the ground, had complex horizontal supporting stakes to lift them up, needing of course to be redone every year as the plants tried their best to thwart the good being done to them. Now Swami was being taken away, finally, without the ability to protest or object, from the post he had determined, decided firmly to never leave. *Swami took no vacation. Vacation from what? God? He needed none!*

*February 2009*

**Anonymous** is a disciple of Swami Aseshananda.

*Written submission.*

### **Initiation Accounts**

After a few summers of visiting with Swami Aseshananda on trips with my parents, I approached the swami for initiation with all the gravity a ten year-old boy could muster. “I shall have to ask the Mother,” was his reply. For the next few days, in the familiar style of an annoying little kid, I would tug on his shoulder and ask, “Did you talk to Mother yet?”

Repeated pestering finally brought Swami to my parents. “This boy thinks that I can just walk into a room and talk to the Mother. It takes four or five hours of meditation to achieve this.” At the time, I thought nothing of this response, but now, decades later, this seems hard to even believe. To think that after four or five hours of meditation Swami Aseshananda could converse with the Divine Mother . . . it is beyond my comprehension.

A few more days rolled around, and one morning he came down the stairs from his room, glowing and stammering almost incomprehensibly. He told my father, “Go and buy new clothes and bring the boy to the shrine before he eats breakfast.”

“Swami!” my father burst out, “You talked to the Mother!”

“Shhh!!” Swami hissed back. “Never say that!”

My story is by no means unique. I know a devotee who, about five years after these events, started coming around the center and eventually decided he wanted to be initiated. He finally got up the courage to approach Swami and ask for initiation. Swami snapped at him: “Mother hasn’t said anything about you yet!” A few weeks later he was initiated.

Again, when he told me this back in the late 1980s, I didn’t think much about it. Now, it seems, like the previous anecdote, too much to digest, and the idea that I took it for granted seems impossible. Still, that’s how it was.

Around this time (circa 1989), two women came to meet Swami. They managed to get a private audience with him, and as far as I recall it was their first meeting. One of the women was telling Swami about herself, when Swami said, “Shhh, Holy Mother is saying something.” There was a long pause, as Swami looked off into the distance.

I've seen these pauses myself and watched Swami look off into some middle distance many times in my own interviews with him, and I always had the feeling he was being "Informed" or "Instructed" or something. On one occasion, I watched him even semi-audibly respond to what seemed like the "News" he was being given about me.

Anyway, after looking off in the distance for a while, he turned to the other woman (not the speaker) and said, "Would you like to be initiated?"

Aside from the obvious and staggering implications of these stories, the chronology is interesting. It seems as though, over those ten years, Swami's perception of Holy Mother became increasingly immediate: from four or five hours of meditation, to waiting for her word, to being stopped in mid-sentence.

It seems quite probable that Swami consulted the Divine Mother for all his initiations. Many people came to him for initiation after he got sick in 1990, and they were uniformly turned down. This went on for a few years, until one unknown Indian boy showed up, whom Swami initiated in his room without hesitation. [Editorial note: One or two devotees mentioned they were given mantras without a shrine initiation during this period.]

Swami's scoldings were also interesting in their allocation. I never got scolded, and this was always a source of anxiety to me. Other people got scolded, but at times (over the years of pilgrimage after my initiation) it seemed that Swami just ignored me. Finally one day, at the age of twenty, I had the temerity to more-or-less intentionally anger him, and it worked. It worked better than I could ever have hoped or feared! I felt like the whole house was shaking, and the very foundations of my egotistical self were in jeopardy of collapsing. I wept, sobbed, groveled, prayed, and finally threw myself at his feet and begged his forgiveness. At this, all his anger was gone, and he was full of grace, as the Master [Sri Ramakrishna] says: "Just like a line on water."

I say interesting in allocation, because the man in the second anecdote told me that he had hardly set his foot in the door for the first time before Swami started chewing on him. I myself occasionally saw that their relationship was a series of scoldings.

During one extended visit, probably of about two weeks, Swami came down from his room everyday for breakfast, said the chant, and then said, "Mr. Thomas, you go call (some woman)." Mr. Thomas would then get up from the table, go to the phone, call the woman saying, "Swami is calling." He would then go find Swami and say, "Swami, (some woman) is on the phone." Swami would then go pick up the phone and proceed to rip (some woman) to shreds for what seemed like forever. Probably it lasted only a few minutes, but to me it was an unbelievable pounding. But then, obviously, my skin is thin, which I think is why Swami never scolded me like that. That's my only explanation, since I know I've earned as many scoldings as any of his other disciples.

It seems to me, and I thought this in other contexts over the years as I watched Swami, that he simply did not see the same world, or the same people, that I saw. He said one day to Mr. Bush, "I see you all as though you were painted on glass." Swami knew who couldn't take his scoldings, and he knew who could.

Obviously we were fantastically lucky to have come in contact with such a soul. I hope that these initiation stories will provide some inspiration for those who read them. Conceivably many disciples of his know these things, but if there's even one disciple to whom these stories are a revelation, I will be very grateful that I could share them. I know that now, in India, people are initiated hundreds at a time, and that's really the only option given the numbers. How lucky we were to have had this uniquely intimate contact with such a man!

*Submitted April 2008*



**Alex S. Johnson**, the son of long-time Vedanta devotees, became a disciple of Swami Aseshananda in 1986. A professor and author, Alex resides in the Los Angeles area.

*Written submission.*

### **The Influence and Example of a Great Soul**

Rarely in our lives are we privileged to meet a truly great teacher. Such a one, for me, was Swami Aseshananda. I received initiation from Swamiji a little more than two decades ago, when I was about 19. At that time, I was amazed and delighted to see the swami's energy and acuity—remarkable in itself, and still more so for a man in his late eighties. He insisted on doing a great many tasks he might easily have left to others, such as mowing the lawn, which he accomplished with great vigor.

I remember the monastic quarters of the Portland Center as a hive of constant activity. The two monks living there at the time furiously worked looms, whittled elaborate flutes and created sculptures based on arcane geometric concepts, alert to the ever-present threat of eviction. Intermittently, the swami would shout, "Get out of this house! I am closing down this monastery!" I have often wondered about the larger, perhaps symbolic, intent Swamiji may have had in making these pronouncements. Perhaps they were variants on a favorite theme, "Illumination in this very life." Achieving this state of divine awareness would entail, necessarily, renunciation of the ego, of which a house is a traditional symbol. If so, he was goading all within earshot, as well as the aspiring renunciates he hosted, not to become too comfortable within the temporary quarters of the body-mind-ego complex. But these are only guesses.

In the monastery, there was no such thing as a minor errand or a trivial transaction. If a monk went out to, say, buy a gallon of milk, the swami would insist he get "exact change." This insistence on mindfulness even in the smallest tasks reminded me in some ways of a Zen master. (Swamiji was extremely strict and exacting, a quality one monk associated with Wolf Larsen, the tyrannical sea captain of Jack London's novel *The Sea-Wolf*. I do not find the characterization accurate, except in the sense of Larsen's titanic strength of purpose. Swamiji's strictness was that of a mother, completely loving even when it was terrifying.)

Visiting devotees were kept on the go; there remained very little time to sort and process one's thoughts between visits to the famous Bonneville Dam and fish hatchery, a Depression-era construction about 40 miles east of Portland (another object lesson, I suspect), Multnomah Falls, Mt. Hood, a Catholic grotto, the Portland Rose Gardens, lectures, talks, meals and meditation. The whole experience was like a non-abusive military conscription, boot camp for the soul. At night, and in snatches of down-time

during the day, I poured through a small collection of books in the monastic quarters. I particularly remember reading a short volume by the great physicist Erwin Schrodinger, titled *What is Life?* I noted that Swamiji's lectures frequently referenced passages from this book, which he must have held in high esteem.

Swamiji was extremely well-versed in the history of western philosophy, religion, literature and science. His grasp of the finer points of St. Augustine, Aristotle and Einstein helped me to bridge the gap between two cultures, east and west. As a child of devotees, I had struggled for many years to understand the relationship between the Vedanta tradition I was brought up in and the western tradition, foundering on the shoals of Existentialism, which seemed to omit any transcendental options. Through Swamiji's lectures, which seemed to run as long as three hours (I may not be remembering correctly, but they were quite lengthy), I was able finally to understand how Vedanta correlates with the finest understanding of the west while serving as a corrective to what Swamiji liked to call the "leaks" in Western Civilization. He was able to work the hard nut of an argument in western theology, crack it open and expose the emptiness within. Swami's attention to the exact details of this process showed a critical intelligence par excellence. His mind encompassed with ease both the analytic rigor of western scholarship and the infinite subtleties of the Indian tradition.

Swamiji was also very funny, witty and creative. In one of his memorable jokes, the punchline to a devastating reversal of the Cartesian cogito, he reminded devotees not to put "Descartes before the horse." His lectures were peppered with memorable slogans such as "We want God vision, not television" and "Enlightenment, not entertainment." He understood the times very well, how we require such "sound bytes" to quickly recall the ultimate truths of Vedanta in the midst of our harried lives. In one lecture I recall how he delightfully reduced the attractiveness of the human body to what he called "the meatball." "We don't want a meatball philosophy," he said, or something quite similar. This "meatball philosophy" image struck me as both wonderfully silly and profound, and makes me smile to this day.

Few people see us as we really are, without blinders, with complete love and understanding. I shall never forget being in a receiving line to greet the swami; the look he gave me seemed to pierce through all my doubts and insecurities to that part of me—of us all—that is divine and perfect. That look, more than anything else, convinced me of his greatness. Words are one thing, experience another. Since spending that brief time with Swami Aseshananda, I have erred repeatedly, but I have also achieved a few solid things—a career as a college instructor, a journalist, editor and fiction writer. Without the swami's joyous example, his blessing and reminder—"Mother will guide"—I wonder if any of this would have been possible. I truly doubt it.

*Submitted August 2008*

**Ralph Stuart**, a disciple of Swami Prabhavananda, visited Swami Aseshananda numerous times between 1974 and Swami's passing. Ralph considers Swami Aseshananda his secondary guru.

*Written reply to questionnaire.*

[Editorial note: Owing to the scope of this collection, Ralph Stuart graciously agreed to a shorter version of his original contribution. Like other contributors, Ralph wished to put his encounter with Swami in context with his own life.]

The point in revealing so much of my own story is to portray how Swami Aseshananda entered into the lives of people in such profound and intimate ways, going right to that place where they were blocked in their spiritual paths and very effectively helping them move on. I hope that my own story will let people know that such great souls as Swami Aseshananda exist and that the grace of God may be transmitted through them in a life-changing experience that goes beyond words. It is my great good fortune to have had the influence of Holy Mother through her last remaining disciple, Swami Aseshananda, as a blessing in my life.

EW: Could you begin by summarizing your experience of Swami Aseshananda?

RS: The “Cliff Notes” [essential facts] of my autobiographical outpouring is that Swami scolded me so severely that my mind was thereafter influenced and drawn to him.

Next, he gave me specific instructions, two revealing my future, and in following those, my life was one of obedience rather than simply ego-gratification. I would not have been so inclined had I not had a direct experience of Holy Mother speaking through him.

EW: How did you first meet Swami Aseshananda? Was there anything memorable about the occasion or your first impression?

RS: I am a disciple of Swami Prabhavananda and lived as a monk for about five years in the Southern California center, first in Santa Barbara, then in Trabuco.

After I had left the monastery in 1972, I roamed about from one circumstance to the next, always on the move. To insure this constant motion, I learned how to drive a long-haul truck: I felt that if I kept moving thus, there was less chance of becoming attached.

One trucking trip took me to the Northwest, where my mother, Doretha Stuart Moore, lived. So as I was visiting my mother, and being nearby, I asked her to give me a lift to the Portland Center. I had of course heard of Swami Aseshananda, but I had never met him. Since he was a disciple of Holy Mother, I wanted to hear him speak. Mom said that she would go along and attend the lecture as well. This was sometime in 1974.

I remember being riveted by his talk and that he had the same power to uplift one's mind as I remembered with Swami Prabhavananda. It was a spiritual experience to be in the same room with either of them.

But I was on the run. I have often humorously thought that I was stuck on chapter one of *The Bhagavad-Gita*. Five years in a monastery had brought to me that place of Arjuna in which one very clearly is being asked to die the death of the ego and experience a revolution of consciousness by which the entire notion of a world is overturned and one experiences God alone.

The conflict within my psyche had been too great, in that the samskaras arising in my mind were very much in conflict with the dispassion required to persist in the monastic life. Above all, I did not want to be a hypocrite, and yet I wanted nothing in the world. The battle in my mind had become so pitched as to make monastic life untenable.

After leaving, I had nowhere to go and nothing I wanted to accomplish in the world. I simply kept moving, from 1972 until 1977. Like Arjuna, I had thrown my bow aside and felt dejected, but I simply could not get up and fight. I felt, rather, that I would do almost anything to avoid the level of confrontation and stress that I had come to experience in the monastery.

In Swami Aseshananda's presence that day, I felt the truth, once again, that had given me the certainty of intention to try the monastic life in the first place. It is a very tangible transmission of the certainty of God. Swami Aseshananda had the Guru Shakti of the Divine Mother herself, working through him. After attending that talk, I didn't even introduce myself. I simply couldn't bear it, owing to the intensity of my conflicted feelings. I left hurriedly but asked my mother, in the car, what she thought of the lecture. She simply said that it was "interesting." [See also Doretha Stuart Moore's account.]

I drifted back into the endless rounds of long-haul trucking, stopping now and then for a couple months at a time. It was during one of these periods of stationary existence, in Santa Barbara, that I called my mother one day to see how she was doing.

"Well, I just got initiated," she volunteered.

I asked, "By whom?" This was before cell phones, and my being out on the road most of the time meant that my mother and I only spoke infrequently. She had not even mentioned any interest in Vedanta since we went to the temple in Portland that one time. I honestly wondered who might have initiated her.

"By Swami Aseshananda, who we went to see when you were here," she answered.

My mother was initiated by Holy Mother's disciple?! She was the daughter of a

*Southern Baptist minister!* It is almost incalculable what a long shot this was, having grown up in her family. I was speechless. Could such good fortune be possible? It was so unlike her to have done this. I was flabbergasted!

“But you didn’t seem all that interested after the lecture,” I observed.

“Well, I wasn’t. But as time went by, I continued periodically to return to the temple, attending Swami’s lectures. One Sunday, after the lecture, I asked Swami if I could talk with him and made an appointment for about two weeks later.”

\* \* \*

EW: How did your relationship with Swami Aseshananda evolve?

RS: To say that my relationship with Swami Aseshananda “evolved” would be to understate his impact at the outset. To be in the same room, or have an established relationship with Swami Aseshananda, was itself a spiritual experience. To a fortunate few, The Divine Mother would reveal Herself as acting and speaking through Swami Aseshananda. So the impact of that was immediate. The only evolution that occurred would be how long it took one to realize that.

My five-year long odyssey as a wanderer had come to an end with a trip to India given to me anonymously. The swamis there had been very emphatic that one should not just wander around but gain some kind of traction for spiritual practice. Just before my departure, one elder swami said to me, by way of a question, “Well, it seems you can stay here and help us clean toilets or go back and get married.” Before leaving for the India trip, a friend had suggested I sponsor a beautiful Finnish woman living in Santa Barbara. I demurred, saying that I was just leaving for India and was not a good candidate for marriage. But when I returned we did indeed marry. Both she and her daughter later became initiated. But like the proverbial cloud mentioned in the *Gita*, I was suspended between the monastic ideal and the world. *Haunted*, I would say.

Meanwhile, my mother moved into the retreat in Scappoose and became increasingly a part of the Portland center. She visited me in Santa Barbara several times, but as I was going to Brooks Institute of Photography, in the film division, married with the responsibility of my wife’s teenage daughter, I lacked the time to go to Portland.

After graduation from Brooks, I was offered a position with an industrial film company in North Carolina. I didn’t want to go to work in the Hollywood atmosphere and thought that such further training might be useful in making a film on The Ramakrishna Order in India. Conceivably, I would very quickly be directing there and that would be invaluable experience. I hoped I could at least be of service by making a documentary about the Order.

Our little family had undergone considerable financial and physical privation during the course of my schooling, so I wanted to give the ladies a glimpse of the USA by going to meet my new employer via a road trip. We decided to start in Portland and drive diagonally across the country. I also wanted my wife, who had become initiated by Swami Swahananda, and her daughter, to have the *spiritual influence* of Swami Aseshananda; and of course, we wanted to see my mother as well. We bought a tent and camping equipment, and I also brought along my 16mm student film. I had cobbled together several class assignments into a theme; it was about a man who left a monastery and his experiences thereafter.

When we arrived at the Portland Center, it was decided that my wife and daughter would stay at the Scappoose retreat with my mother while I stayed in the center with Swami, the other monks, and Mr. Bush [a long-time resident]. It was all very convivial, with Mr. Bush asking about my studies and my career plans. During the course of the discussion, the fact that I had my film with me came out. When asked, I replied that it was about a man who left a monastery and his experiences thereafter; it was mostly set to Cole Porter's music. This apparently generated some interest and he mentioned it to Swami.

Very quickly the idea developed that the film would be shown. I immediately tried to stop that process, saying there were inappropriate scenes for viewing at the center, reminding all that there was a nude scene, and other material portraying a man wrestling with his demons. I stated repeatedly that I didn't think showing the film to Swami or devotees was a good idea, even though the monks at Trabuco had cooperated in making the film and acted in one scene in the movie. *I didn't have a good feeling about the way this was shaping up.*

Swami himself seemed to keep up the momentum for the showing and decided that Mr. Bush should see it beforehand; if he thought it were acceptable, then the film would be shown. In addition, they would rent a film from the library about India featuring Arnold Toynbee and show home movies Swami had of some monks in India.

So in the late morning, Mr. Bush saw the film on their projector and said that he didn't see anything objectionable about it. "Ralph has simply tried to relate his experiences during and after the monastery." Phone calls were made to the devotees. There would be a film night!

During the day at lunch, Swami popped into the doorway of the lunchroom (he ate separately) and said he decided the film could *not* be shown. People should not leave monasteries. It was a holy commitment. He left and I was relieved.

Then Swami came back. The film *would* be shown, but only to the householder devotees. The monks should not see such a subject. OK. Then he left. Then Swami came back again. No, the monks can see the film as well. "Let them face the brute!" he

declared.

During the course of several previous phone conversations with my mother, she had marveled at how Swami got spiritual mileage out of anything and everything, especially the smallest things. Her comment came to mind as I sat there without reacting to this seesaw of rejection and acceptance. Like a man about to be shot into space, I was determined not to lose my cool. I had warned them about the film.

After evening meditation, the projector was set up in the temple, the screen on the dais, and about thirty loyal devotees showed up for the film night. The lights went down, the projector started, and my film began playing. We got into it about fifteen minutes, past the part that I thought would be objectionable on the surface, with fifteen minutes more to go, so it seemed that my apprehensions had been unfounded.

Suddenly, the dark shadow of Swami Aseshananda rose up against the screen, his upraised and pointed finger adding exclamation to his very forceful voice: “Stop this film!! Sri Ramakrishna is telling me that such a film cannot be shown in the temple!”

The projector and sound emitted a slow grinding, winding moan as the operator dutifully followed directions. The lights came up. Thirty people looked over in my direction. I sat there rather stunned. *Sri Ramakrishna had told him?* I looked back at the thirty people and Swami still standing at the front of the auditorium and somehow managed a smile in their direction. *Did I mention that I didn't have a good feeling about this whole idea?*

Swami then ordered that Arnold Toynbee be threaded up. We sat through a 1950s film with merry adventure music accompanying a travelogue featuring highlights of India. Next several super-eight movies ricocheted by during which Swami would call out the monks' names as the pictures hurriedly flitted by. Then the lights came up.

Many left the hall glancing over at me with the same compassion as one might show a wounded animal. A couple people came up and said they enjoyed the part they were able to see. Mr. Bush came up and counseled not to be upset saying, “Our Swami is a little old fashioned.”

I left and went outside, standing in the flower garden, my back to the temple. *Sri Ramakrishna had told him to stop the film!!* Standing there in the dark silence, the fact that I had chosen this subject for a film seemed heightened to an absurd degree by the recent experience in the temple. It was such a glaring display of a haunted psyche, as if I could think of nothing creatively except this lingering and seemingly irresolvable dilemma. I lived with this experience of falling, eternally, trying to catch on to something. Every relationship I had just seemed to start falling with me. I could still see the shadow of this very revered swami against the screen, with great authority, saying, “Stop this film!” I wished I could.

Swami came outside and stood beside me. “In all the time I have been here in Portland, I have never committed a sin in the temple. Tonight, because of your film, I have committed such a sin.” He wanted to know who had given permission to use images of Holy Mother and the monks at Trabuco?

I explained how I had been given permission to film in Trabuco, and since the film was about my life, perhaps I shouldn’t taint the temple by staying there another night. I reminded him that I had a tent and could pitch it in the yard until morning. It was a nice summer evening.

“No, you can stay with us tonight. Then get your wife and daughter and leave after breakfast.”

The next morning, after meditation, I ate breakfast with the monks and Mr. Bush. I don’t recall the film being mentioned. It didn’t need to be: the whole experience still hung in the air. We all went to the kitchen for clean-up. I recall that I was wiping a white dish when Swami Aseshananda appeared at the kitchen door. For those who have ever been in a train wreck, calmly watching as all the people and dishes in the dining car swirl around as one remains somehow detached and calm, seeing everything sort of slow down in excruciating detail, the following will have some resemblance. I am not sure that I have ever seen someone so powerfully furious, as if they had somehow become twenty feet tall and with so much force and fury as to resemble a force of nature. Train wrecks and tornadoes come to mind.

“Get out!!! Get out!!! You are not fit to stand in this kitchen. You get your wife and daughter and you get out!!! I cannot bear the sight of you.” Then he left. *This was Holy Mother’s disciple. He was throwing me out!*

I was curiously aware that the scolding of a Holy Man removes karma, although in hindsight, I don’t know how it could have come to mind. I had just been struck broadside by a train traveling eighty miles an hour, and somehow this thought came to mind as my little mangled car was still spinning around for its final destination.

I calmly set down the dish and towel and mumbled something about them having to finish up. I went upstairs to pack. I called to the retreat to say that Swami wanted us to leave immediately, and that they should pack up and have Mom bring them to the center. I didn’t mention that I was actually being thrown out.

As I finished packing, Todd Thomas came into our shared room and said that Swami wanted us to stay for lunch before going. I thought to myself that he wasn’t finished with me yet. What else? I somehow resisted the urge to escape. I imagined myself meeting them down at the corner and just heading out for open ground.

At lunch, Swami insisted that I sit at the head of the table, as I was now the head of a



family, and that should be my place. I awaited the other shoe to drop. Again, suddenly, he appeared at the door saying, “You know, I admire you. If I had spoken like that to any of the monks, they would have torn my head off. But you didn’t react. I admire you.” Then he left.

We made our pranams [respectful leave-taking] after lunch and left on our cross-country trip. That was my second encounter with Swami Aseshananda. It would be years before I would fully understand the import of what had happened.

EW: How did Swami Aseshananda mold and impact your life?

RS: I had held on to one simple practice throughout my years after leaving the monastery. To the greatest extent possible, I would take no initiative as to how things would unfold. Especially at times where there seemed to be a definite juncture, I held back from trying to resolve it. I had the idea of *prarabdah karma*, actions from the past unfolding, like an arrow already shot into mid-air that cannot be called back. I tried as much as possible not to let desire for a specific outcome be the rule. I was far more interested to see what would come up than what I might come up with—what karma might unfold. Owing to the near miraculous outcomes I’d experienced, I had come to trust in this approach more than trying to resolve things out of my own initiative. Once the outcome was set, I would work as needed to fulfill whatever was required.

So after we returned from our cross-country trip and job interview, the man in charge of hiring had asked me to do one more test before the hire was made. I did that and showed it to the Brooks professors. In their opinion, it came out really well, so everyone thought I would be hired. One month went by, and then two, and each time that I spoke with the man he said that he was definitely going to hire me—but to hold on because budgets and schedules had to be adjusted etc. By the third month, we had started to run out of money. I couldn’t take another job because the promised one might come at any moment and then we would all pick up and leave. Still, in the interim, I put in an application for driving a forty-foot CAT scan truck. There was my stepchild to think of. But I got no reply.

Then the fourth month passed, and naturally I began to think the man was just leading me on. I asked him definitely about this and he said, “No, no, no, we *are* going to hire you.” Finally, as we went into the fifth month, he called and said that he was *not* able to hire me. I had sold all my film equipment to keep us going, but now we were absolutely broke. It was decided that my wife’s daughter would go to live with her biological father in Virginia. With that responsibility off my shoulders, I once again resorted to my preferred method of living. Make no effort. Let what comes, come.

One Sunday, my mom called from Portland and asked how things were going. I told her that the job had fallen through, that I didn’t want to enter the film business in Hollywood and didn’t have a plan at the moment.

“Do you want me to ask Swami about it?” she suggested.

Considering the last time I had seen Swami he threw me out of the Portland center, I was not enthusiastic in my reply. “I guess it couldn’t hurt. Ask if you want.” That was on a Sunday.

On Monday, someone called me on the phone and asked if I still wanted the job driving the CAT scanner. It had been so long forgotten that I had to ask him to clarify what he was talking about. The person they hired had not worked out, so if I still wanted the job, be at the Santa Barbara medical clinic on Thursday and meet the chief x-ray technician. Because I had years of cross-country driving on my resume—and they seemed to like that because the CAT scanner rig was worth well over a million dollars—they wanted someone who could really drive. Somehow, during the 2½ years at Brooks, I had kept my class-one license, even though I never expected to use it again. OK—this was not at all what I had in mind for myself, and it was disheartening to think that all my hard work at Brooks would simply result in yet another trucking job. I agreed to the interview.

On Tuesday, my mother called. She had spoken to Swami Aseshananda about me. I waited. Finally, I said, “Well, what did he say?” She was admittedly hesitant because she didn’t think I would like it. “You know, how he gets, and starts that sort of mumbling to himself, or listening to someone while talking to himself at the same time?”

“What did he say, Mom?”

“He said, ‘Let him drive a truck. Better job will come later.’”

“You’re kidding!”

“No. I told you, you wouldn’t like it.”

I sat there asking myself, “How does he do that?” He is in Portland. This job offer just came yesterday and I have been mulling whether to take it or not. Considering the long-term discipline of allowing things to take their course, it is probably difficult to imagine, for someone not so inclined, how much this meant to me. And he had done it long-distance! It was as if he had entered into the deepest recesses of my heart and mind and joined me there. *This synchronicity was more important than any outcome.* I told my mother about the sequence of events.

“Well, it doesn’t surprise me; this kind of thing happens all the time around here,” she reported.

I hung up and remembered the last part of what he had said: “Better job will come later.” The words of a holy man must come true. If, indeed, I got the driving job, I took a vow that I would drive that truck until the wheels fell off before I would make any effort to

make true what he had said. He had said it. It would happen. They hired me, and thus began my “Buddhist-meditation-on-suffering-period.” Life turns on a dime, and the transience of life can very often show up on a CAT scan.

Of course it wasn’t simply this long-distance, prescient synchronicity alone that would have prompted me into such seemingly whimsical obedience—profound, as it may have seemed at this juncture. I had worked hard at Brooks and fully expected to do something very interesting and creative in my life. Rather, since Swami severely scolded me on “trumped up charges” (recall my mother noted how he could get spiritual mileage out of virtually anything), the Realization, Authority and Devotion of the Swami had simply moved into my mind and heart. Although I made no conscious attempt to think of him or focus on what he had said, I simply could not get him out of my mind. *It was as if his severe scolding had been its own form of initiation.* All throughout the trip our family had taken across the US, and subsequently as I began to drive the CAT scanner, he remained a presence in my life. Every day when I went to work, it was uppermost in my mind that I was doing this because he had said to do it. Simple! And he had said that a better job would come later, so I continued to drive the truck.

It became clear that it would actually be better for my employer if I moved to Los Angeles, so I asked Swami Amohananda, who was in charge of rentals in the Hollywood center, if they had any apartments available. Yes they did, so Kaya and I moved into the Hollywood apartments on Ivar Avenue, where I would live for the next twenty-one years.

During the next two and a half years, my route was gradually shifted more to the Los Angeles area. One of the regular stations was Bronfman Hospital, across the street from the MGM movie lot and facilities. It was so close I could almost touch it, but it may as well have been a thousand miles away. I would go home at the end of a typical fourteen-hour day to my apartment just across the street from the Vedanta Temple and fall into bed. Very often, Arjuna’s question about the person who falls from yoga would come to mind: “Is he not like a cloud, suspended between heaven and earth, having no place with either?” After two and a half years, I decided to go and see Swami Aseshananda again.

As I sat in the audience with my mother in the Portland temple, I had a spiritual experience. We are not supposed to divulge such things, but suffice it to say that when Swami Aseshananda constantly spoke about Holy Mother being at his back, I perceived that it was literally true. I had an appointment with him shortly after the talk he was giving, and I redoubled my commitment to do whatever he said—period! I was reluctant to ask him for the kind of advice that would come from my guru. I had been given a mantra and meditation instructions, and I felt very loyal to Swami Prabhavananda in that way. But in terms of a swadharma, the natural spiritual course my life should take, and finding my place in the world, I was resolved to follow what the Swami said, as a form of self-surrender. The experience I just had in the temple was very much with me.

“Oh, you have come back to see me after I was so hard on you. Now tell me, what is it?” He was the very essence of a loving mother!

“Swami, as you may recall, I graduated from a film school a couple of years ago, and I cannot help but think if it was for some purpose, especially that it might be useful for a higher purpose. As day after day goes by, I am concerned that I am forgetting everything I learned.” Of course, I had in my imagination something along the line of being a producer, securing the rights to a script or book and then making a film—making some money and then doing a documentary on The Ramakrishna Order’s work in India.

He began the reverie and disconnected speech that he often did, which seemed like he was on pause, listening, and what some had ingloriously termed “the motorboat.” I sat there realizing that he was actually listening [to a higher source]. “No, no, don’t try to produce.” It flitted across my mind that he might not even know what a film producer is or does. But it was also not lost on me that he had picked up what was in my mind (but unstated). Whether it was long distance or right here in the room, it became clear that She was calling the shots, or seeing the future. “Alright, you get a job in the film business. You get a job in a technical area. Then everything will turn out—yah, yah. OK. Good.” Then he got up and I took the dust of his feet. The interview was over.

I must say that my heart sank. The technical side of the business was the very least interesting aspect of all that I had been schooled in. I could do it easily enough, or well enough, but only if there weren’t anybody else to do it. I determined once again, and especially now, that I was not going to make any effort to make this happen. I would drive the truck as long as it took for this to just wash up on my little seashore.

So I continued to drive the CAT scanner for another few months when a schoolmate from Brooks called me, looking for a temporary place to stay. “What exactly are you doing?” he asked. “Have you given up any interest in films? I mean, if you want to drive a truck, that’s your business, but it seems kind of weird.” I just replied that it would be really difficult to explain—I was engaged in a kind of experiment.

“OK, but if you want to get started in the film business, I could probably get you on our crew. I know it wouldn’t be to your liking, you are so much about ideas. This would be a technical job, in sound editing. But at least you might get started doing that, then make other connections. At least you would be working in the film business. The money is no good, but it would be better than driving a truck!” Here it was, washing up on my little seashore. I simply said OK.

It was arranged that I would work for no pay as an apprentice on my days off from the scanner until I got my skills up, and then they’d fit me in. I got my first paying job starting on July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1985, because they wanted somebody who could work the holiday. I took it as a sign that I was in the right place. July 4<sup>th</sup> is a special day: aside from being a day representing political and social freedom, it was the day that both Swami

Vivekananda and my guru, Swami Prabhavananda, had voluntarily given up the body.

I gave notice at the medical firm. The technician that I had worked with there for so long said, “I thought you didn’t want to work in Hollywood and get involved in all that?” I simply said that things change. For the past three years I had seen the transience of life, unable to count the times that someone’s life had changed forever in a moment, either brain dead from a moped accident on their way to the corner store for cigarettes to the little old couple who had come, as bookends, for the wife to be scanned. She reacted to the dye that they had to inject and died in the ambulance on the way to the hospital. Her husband came up to me after about an hour, after I completely forgot, in this emergency situation, that he had gone to wait for her in a coffee shop. I will never forget him asking me his simple question. “Is she ready yet?”

So I couldn’t help but think that there was a spiritual purpose to following Swami’s advice when he had said, “Let him drive a truck. Better job will come later.” Very few people have such a first-hand answer to the question: “What exactly didn’t you understand, that we were telling you in Vedanta?” In other words, while many speak of the transience of life, few have such an intense first-hand look as I had received. This lesson was seared into my mind and I am thankful for it.

My first job was as a film-editing apprentice. This amazingly disciplined work contrasted with the distasteful subject matter of most films we worked on. It was easy to become almost immediately cynical. Most people were coping with twelve-hour days over really dreadful films by having a gin bottle in their film bin or by sneaking outside for recreational drugs. I confess that I resorted to such things in this intense, raucous, and unrelenting environment. At least the CAT scanner really had been about true life and death! This seemed more like a level in the Hell of Dante’s *Inferno*, with long lunch breaks. Along about this time my wife left me with good reason: it was getting very grim around the edges. I was still falling.

I noticed that the sound editors in post-production were quite candid and humorous about the crap they were working on, well away from the presence of the director, whereas those working as picture editors were unable to be so candid, instead saying ingratiating things like, “This is a great film, so-and-so, the way you bring in the mummy just then.” Give me a break! So I started working exclusively with the sound editors: at least they were honest. So often, I thought, “Why don’t you just get up and walk out of here?” But then Swami and Holy Mother would come to mind, and I would just carry on.

About the time that I was working on *Texas Chainsaw Massacre II*, Swami Aseshananda visited to Hollywood. I had an interview with him in the “Green Room” located next to the bookshop. “Well, Swami, I am now working in the film business, in a technical area. But some of the things I am working on make it hard to think of oneself as an upstanding member of society. I mean they are sawing people up down there with chainsaws! It is

absolutely gruesome!” I thought to myself that it is not as bad as porn, but it has got to be right next to it.

Again, out came the fierce lion of authority that confronted me when I was scolded in Portland. “That is none of your business! You have nothing to do with the concepts. You are not a master there, but a servant!” There was so much power in what he said that it became a mantra in a moment—one that I’d never forget. I was making myself miserable by attaching myself to the concepts! I could just stop doing that. It was the same challenge I had faced in Trabuco monastery so many years earlier. The subconscious impressions of the mind that arose during intense spiritual practice then, and these external movies of the mind I was working on, were not all that different. It is ego attachment in both cases that makes one feel a hypocrite or a cynical film worker. Then Swami changed back to his milder self and asked about my mother, who had since left the Portland Center.

My mission was clear. The only way that I could follow his injunction in the film business was to remain a sound assistant, because if you moved up, you would be dealing with the *content* of film. The mission was to work like a cartoon octopus dealing with a decision or problem every six seconds or so, to be detached and burn off karma within these rooms of delusion. You had to do your best, entirely without expectation and without clinging to results. I learned that karma yoga might be practiced under the most horrific of circumstances, until that becomes normal. Eventually, it does become *sattva* over *rajas* [peaceful state over restless state]. Despite the high turnover in this work, I maintained this job for seventeen years. Every day I went to work I had Swami and Holy Mother with me.

After retiring in 2003, I began sound editing the classes of Swami Prabhavananda that had been dutifully recorded over his lifetime by his faithful attendant, Swami Krishnananda. I had gained enough editing skill over the years to learn the computer editing that allowed for the archival restoration of these classes. All in all, over 150 classes with question and answers have been restored (see [www.Vedantaarchives.com](http://www.Vedantaarchives.com)). By following this simple injunction of Swami Aseshananda, my life had changed. It hadn’t been pretty, but as I listened to Swami Prabhavananda’s classes on the *Gita*, I realized that somewhere along the way, with Swami Aseshananda as my Upa Guru, and the Grace of The Divine Mother, I was able to return to the fight.

\* \* \*

EW: What were some of Swami’s memorable sayings?

RS: “God vision and television don’t go together.”

When one of the monks said that he thought he might get crazy with the unrelenting schedule, Swami replied, “Just get used to it.” Swami Aseshananda was the Vedanta

Marine Corps.

“I am eternally grateful to that one who is always at my back, who has protected me and guided me throughout my life. She, The Mother of the Universe, is our very own.”

\* \* \*

The last time I saw Swami was about three or four months before his final samadhi. I was staying at the Portland temple, and the monks and other men were taking turns sitting with him in his room, to keep watch and do whatever was needed. They asked me if I would like to take a shift.

When I arrived, they took me into his room where Sarada [now Swami Harananda] got down about two inches from Swami’s ear to yell my arrival announcement. Swami was lying on his bed, his back to the room facing the wall. He had an oxygen tank connected to help his very labored breathing, he had cataracts and couldn’t see clearly, he was being fed intravenously, and he had a large growth in his abdomen.

As I had taken up a daily reading of the *Chandi* following his suggestion to do so, it occurred to me to spend my time with him reading the complete *Chandi*. He was Holy Mother’s disciple, after all, and I had seen that reading just barely audibly would not disturb him as one had to literally yell a few inches from his ear to be heard.

So I did this, every once in a while getting up to change a tissue or wipe his mouth with one. When I finished reading the *Chandi*, I saw a book on his bookshelf about Tantine by Pravrajika Prabuddhaprana. I read the first chapter, and was just starting to read the second, when my shift ended and relief came. I thought to myself, as I was putting the book back on the shelf, that I would have to get a copy of it when I got back to Hollywood. All of a sudden, a big booming voice came from the bed saying, “Take it!” I was so startled that I didn’t take it. Here, I thought I had been so clever reading so low that he couldn’t hear me, and even now, with his back to me, unable to see or hear physically, and in the debilitated condition he was in, Swami still knew everything that I was thinking, or for that matter, that was going on all around him. *That is a lasting memory of a true Holy Man.*

When I was leaving that last time, they ushered me in to take leave of him. I took the dust of his feet as he lay there, then Sarada again yelled into his ear that I was leaving. I wondered about this charade, when even I could see that Swami knew anyway.

Very affectionately Swami said, “Where will you go?” but with great subtext of meaning: “*Where will it be possible to go away from us?*”

*That was the last thing he said to me, and I have carried the message of that farewell ever since.*

*Submitted Winter 2008*



**Dharmadas (Jon Monday)**, a disciple of Swami Prabhavananda, made pilgrimages to Portland to visit and videotape Swami Aseshananda for the last 15 years of Swami's life.

*Written in 1995.*

### **A Visit With a Swami in America**

About 7:30 in the evening, ten or eleven devotees gathered in the foyer of the Vedanta center. We sat in silence for about a half an hour. We could hear Mr. T. slowly leading Swami down the stairs, step by step, saying, "Swami, two more steps," then after a short while, "Swami, one more step." As Swami came into the room some bowed their heads, some saluted in the Hindu fashion with folded hands, I felt like standing to honor and acknowledge his presence entering the room. He sat down in the chair facing the devotees. He was now ninety-five years old and obviously mostly blind (physically); I was told that he had also become somewhat hard-of-hearing. I can say without question, I have never been in such a presence before in my life and cannot believe that I will likely ever again meet such a soul. He is *the most senior monk* of the Ramakrishna Order and the only remaining living disciple of Sri Sarada Devi, the Holy Mother. *A Holy, living relic of another age!* Even senior monks of the Order who had come to visit him acknowledge that they had never seen such a manifestation, in India, or anywhere else.

There were a few moments of quiet while Mr. B. prepared to read from *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. Swami adjusted his gerrua cloth, pulling it over his head like a scarf. Sometimes he sat with his eyes closed, head leaning forward, sometimes looking towards the ceiling, with his eyes open just a little. What does he see? Mr. B. read for about twenty minutes, occasionally punctuated by a gesture or sound from Swami. It was not obvious that he was listening at all, but if at any moment he was asked a question about the meaning of a passage, he would immediately give a short, very much to-the-point comment or explanation.

The night before it was much the same scene. After the *Gospel* reading the devotees occasionally asked questions, and Swami gave very short, to-the-point answers. I had asked, mostly out of desire to hear him speak, "Swami, the central message of the *Bhagavad Gita* is said to be renunciation. What is the central message of *The Gospel of Ramakrishna*?" Without hesitation he said, "Endure, endure, endure." The answer was not at all what I expected, but was, I felt, profound on many different levels. Here was a man who had no desires left, whose only purpose, for the last seventy-five years, was to serve Mother's will, enduring the pains and indignities of an ancient body, for the benefit of the world. He had been sent to America from India in the 1940s and had

never returned, not even for a short visit. His duty was here; why go anywhere else? The living example of his endurance was towering.

This night was only a little different, because after the reading we sat in silence for nearly half an hour. No questions, no need for questions, just thick atmosphere. Swami occasionally tapped his hand on the arm of his chair, sometimes looked in the direction of a devotee, sometimes looking toward the ceiling, sometimes closing his eyes and letting his head fall forward. Swami certainly did not seem uncomfortable with the silence; at times I was. After nearly forty minutes of silence, Mr. T. told Swami that it was nine o'clock. Swami said, "Another ten minutes." A question formed in my mind. I thought I could be clever and ask it in such a way that it could only be answered definitively, and not with just a "yes" or "no." I asked, "Swami, is it better to sit in silence, or to ask questions?" His response was immediate, unexpected, and quite to-the-point, in a Zen kind of way. He let out a slightly amused, "Heh, heh, heh," and then "Ya!"

Promptly at ten minutes after nine, Mr. T. asked Swami if he wanted to go upstairs; Swami said yes. He sat another minute, then leaned forward and said, "May Sri Ramakrishna bless you all, may Holy Mother bless you all," and after a long pause, "Good night." Mr. T. led Swami out of the foyer, up the stairs and into his room. The very same ritual has gone on for some time now, and it would be the same for at least a while more to come:

Swami is guided down the stairs at breakfast to say grace, and immediately afterward he is helped back to his room.

Swami is guided down the stairs at lunch to say grace, goes to the foyer to meet with the women devotees for half an hour, mostly in silence. The women are allowed to take the dust of his feet, he gives them Mother's blessing, and then is helped back to his room.

Swami is guided down the stairs at dinner to say grace, and immediately afterward he is helped back to his room.

At eight o'clock Swami is guided down the stairs to the foyer to hear a reading of the *Gospel*, and sit with the devotees. Promptly at nine o'clock Mr. T. tells Swami the time, Swami says, "Another ten minutes." Swami is helped back to his room.

Day in, day out, the ritual is the same. The only variation is on Sundays, when Swami gives an introduction to the lecture by the assistant swami, and then a follow-up after the lecture. I was expecting a very short introduction, perhaps just a few words of instruction or a benediction. His introduction was a ten-minute scripture, containing a

fully-formed philosophy. If I could live by those words only, without access to any other instruction, it would be enough to achieve the highest.

Together with the sense of grace and privilege, I can't help but feel sadness that this, quite possibly the Holiest man on earth, is sought out by only a small handful of devotees, and at that, no one of any apparent spiritual significance. But perhaps it is the isolation that has allowed this monk to evolve into such a towering figure.\* I also can't help but think that there is nothing that I can do in my life that will spiritually benefit me more than simply being in this swami's thoughts and presence. The only price of admission is the desire to seek him out.

9/6/96

Swami's health has become very bad. I had expected the worst, and in fact I feared that he would die before we could get there. He had been very sick, even seemed to be on the verge of death, for months. We arrived at the temple and were ushered upstairs to Swami's room. He was stretched out on a hospital-style bed with a feeding tube inserted into his nose. He did not seem conscious and was groaning or moaning with every breath. It seemed to me that there was still an incredible presence in the room, but I was quite saddened and shocked by his physical condition. Once in a while someone would ask Swami a question and would get a one-syllable answer. The doctor told us that he could go at any time. That night the moaning became worse and he seemed further removed from consciousness, his breathing was very labored. I tried to read *The Gospel* to him, but his loss of hearing required that I read very loudly (he also didn't seem to respond to it). Later in the night I tried chanting into his ear, but that also seemed useless, or even imposing.

9/7/96

Swami's condition in the morning was much the same except that occasionally he would stop breathing for five or six seconds. The doctor asked about his breathing patterns and described how this indicated that the end was very near. In my mind I asked why Swami did not give up his body (I was sure that he could leave it at any time he wished). In the late afternoon the doctor recommended that Swami be persuaded to get out of bed and walk to his chair. This seem impossible to me, he seemed barely conscious. But, it happened. They shouted into Swami's ear, "Would Swami like to sit up in the chair?" Swami responded simply, "Ya." With help, he got up and walked to the chair, sat there for half an hour, and then walked back. I spent the night in his room. His breathing became worse; he would labor for breath for ten minutes followed by a very scary ten-second pause in breathing.

9/8/96

By morning the cycle was down to five minutes of breathing, followed by the pause (at each pause we had to wonder if this were the end). As Swami's health seemed to be slipping fast, his consciousness seemed to be on the rebound. He quite clearly responded to questions, walked to his chair, with help, and sat for over an hour. As we

prepared to leave I asked Swami for Mother's blessing (only hoping for, but not expecting, a verbal "Ya"). As we turned to leave, Mr. T. grabbed my arm and pointed to Swami's hand that he held out to place on our heads to give us the blessing.

*Submitted January 2008*

\* \* \*

\*[Editorial note: In an era when swamis travel frequently to Vedanta centers around the world, many commented that Swami Aseshananda showed little interest in traveling to other centers, let alone to India. Some speculated that Swami was so committed to his congregation that leaving them would be unthinkable. Others felt that Swami preferred the environment of his own center where the level of peace and purity best met his standards. Indeed Dharmadas confirms Swami's apparent preference when he wrote, "But perhaps it is the isolation that has allowed this monk to evolve into such a towering figure."]



## **The Early Years: 1955-1969**



**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.

*Winter 2007*



**Marina Sanderson** and her husband James Sanderson, disciples of Swami Aseshananda, began their association with the Portland Center in 1958 and lived at the Scappoose retreat for approximately two decades. Marina continued her contact with Swami until 1996 and contributed to this collection at age 90.

*Written submission.*

My husband James and I first met Swami Aseshanandaji in 1958 when our nineteen year-old son, James [called Jim], was home from college for the Christmas holidays. Jim met a cousin whose science teacher, Robert Collins, was having Swami Aseshananda at his home that evening to speak of Vedanta, the subject being comparative religion. As Jim was interested in the topic and had been a student of Mr. Collins, he invited himself along with another cousin to the evening's "homework class," so to speak. [Editorial note: See also Robert Collins's remembrance describing this meeting.]

The three of them enjoyed Swamiji's talk and the following period of questions and answers. When he got home, of course, I was particularly interested, as some years before, my husband and I had visited the Vedanta Center in the old temple downtown. At that time Swami Devatmananda was the resident swami. We had not followed up on our visit of the earlier time.

The following Sunday Mr. Sanderson and I attended Swami Aseshanandaji's lecture. For the first time ever I was finally hearing from a ministerial source a message of truth and wisdom that resonated with the wise guidance of my mother, and so it was familiar to me because of the books she got from the library or we had at home. Mom was well-read and familiar with Theosophy, philosophy, and other religions to some degree—she possessed an acquaintance with them at least.

Listening to Swami Aseshanandaji, I knew, at last, I was on the way home. A number of times throughout the years we had been invited to join the membership of the attended church, but refrained despite some participation in service. Never previously had I felt I was hearing or seeing someone who actually knew personally the Christ of whom he/she spoke. With beloved Swamiji there was never a question. Swami, a blessed one, was/is the embodiment of the Way, the Truth, and the Life of which Jesus, the Christ, spoke.

At one time long after being initiated by Swami, I had a dream in which I heard the words, "Your guru's name is agama sahaj." When I woke up I did remember the words I had heard and asked Swami their meaning. He said, "It means the guru is the embodiment and knower of the scriptures." Indeed, he was/is the Living Word. I recall on a number of occasions he'd say—both to me personally as well as to the whole congregation—in accord with his message, "I am thy Self—meaning the real Self, not the ego persona—my Beloved." The illumined one, as I understand it, sees the same

Self in all, and this was a reminder for us. [Swami was confirming that his real identity is the same reality within others: myself is the same as “thy”—*your*—Self, Marina explained.] Beautiful. True.

Some time later I asked Swami for initiation. He replied that I would need to ask Swami Ashokananda in California, as he was the senior swami who was initiating at that time. I loved Swami Aseshanandaji dearly and wished to wait and did. I recall being the 10<sup>th</sup> devotee initiated because I chose to wait until husband Jim was ready to receive initiation also and we could be initiated on the same worship day, which we were on a Rama/ Sita auspicious day in April.

There were a few others following me who also received the 108 strand rudraksha beads. At that time the strings of rudraksha beads were \$12.00 each for a 108-bead mala. That was a considerable amount of money in the early ‘60s and we all knew how vigilant and careful Swamiji was about spending Ramakrishna’s and Mother’s money! So Swami started giving malas to me to take apart and restring, making two smaller malas of fifty-four beads each.

This came about as at the time Mr. Sanderson and I were living at the retreat in Scappoose, having moved there in 1961 to serve in care of the grounds and temple and to discourage the occasional vandalism that did occur from time to time. When there were visiting guests that wished to stay over for a visit of some period they might stay in the cabin in the woods, if they wished more privacy, or with me in Mother’s house, or with Mr. Sanderson in the older house on the temple grounds.

On one visit, a nun from the Santa Barbara, CA, center stayed with me a few days and during that time my mala broke. The nun, whose name I do not fully recall now, knew how to restring beads and showed me how to put the first few beads on the string after carefully making all the preliminary steps. She was a good teacher and by the time I finished putting on all the remaining beads and being shown how to add the witness [bead] on last and make the new tassel, I thought if they broke again probably I could redo the full procedure. Vera Edwards was visiting at the time and knew I had some familiarity with the procedure and mentioned this to Swamiji. So when he gave me the first 108 strand to reassemble into two malas, well, OK, but there was only one witness bead on the original mala and another would be needed!

Vera happened to know of a place in downtown Portland that recycled goods, new merchandise that was out-of-date and wasn’t selling well. She had, while there, seen a big box with an assortment of all kinds of beads tied together in strings of a dozen or so and suggested I look there to see if they might have something I could use for the needful extra witness bead. I did so and, wal-lah and oh glory be, what did I find but handfuls of real rudraksha beads tied together as I have previously mentioned! I bought many pounds all at that time as Swamiji had been giving me, previous to this synchronistic miracle of a find, different kinds of beads to use for making worship

malas: wooden ones, little shell-like ones, whatever. So now it turns out we actually had beads enough from that point in time until Swamiji stopped initiating, as well as for repair, replacement of lost beads, and new worship malas.

During these fifteen years we resided at the retreat area in Scappoose, Mr. Sanderson worked as a machinist in Portland and I, at Swamiji's request, did the noon worship in the little shrine at the retreat. In addition we went there mornings and evenings for meditation and vespers. The little building, even at that time, was beginning to decompose and the floor was becoming dangerous to walk on in spots where the floorboards were rotting through. It was originally built directly on the ground without an under-foundation. It remained there even after we left for many years until Swamiji finally let it be taken down. (In India old shrines simply remain for ages, I presume). It was part of Swamiji's tradition, and certainly understandable. Here old buildings and not-so-old but otherwise possibly dangerous ones are condemned and must come down.

Also, as most devotees wish to serve Swamiji personally in some way, I also wished to do so. Swamiji finally let me wash various articles of his clothing and iron the shirts. And the stockings were a never-ending mending project ending up patches on top of patches.

Swamiji's frugal ways extended to all aspects of his life except for love. His love was totally unconditional. As Jesus the Christ said, "Love thy neighbor as thy Self," and indeed, Swamiji did.

While still at the old downtown house/temple in the early years before the building of the "new" Vedanta place, or I should say the "present" temple site [on Mt Tabor], Swamiji wished to show us the Indian musical instrument [probably a tambura] and how it is played. He had gone upstairs to get it, then proceeded to sit on the floor, placing it carefully in the proper position while telling us details of its use with other musical instruments of India. Then without tightening the strings even a little, and they were woefully loose and lax, he began to strum his hand across them—and sing. No musical sound at all, only flubby noises, but bless his precious Self, Swamiji continued to chant and sing songs to Mother—and I guess maybe even the 15<sup>th</sup> Chapter of the Gita. I don't remember now, but on and on.

I was surprised and bewildered that Swamiji hadn't even tried to tighten the strings or apparently seem to even know they would need to be tuned. After a time it began to amuse me greatly and I struggled to keep from rudely laughing. I was, of course, actually doing so silently and nearly strangling and bursting to keep quiet. I thought he never would stop. One song after another! Finally when he did stop, wished us all good night and Mother's Blessings, Swamiji headed up the stairs to put the instrument away. As he started up the stairs, Swamiji burst out in the most madly hilarious laughter imaginable. I just stood there dumbfounded, realizing he had been "absorbing" all my

wild mirth and I was getting a replay. This is a perfect example of “I am thy Self, my Beloved,” in other words, truly Swamiji was, indeed, a perfect reflective mirror at times.

And again, on another occasion, how shockingly this fact was brought home to me, when the reflection I saw in his eyes was that of what is called the Dweller on the threshold: the shadow persona, the embodiment of all the more negative “stuff” in the subconscious. The Dweller, as I understand it, is an energy gestalt of all residual positive and negative karmas from many past lives. I could see that that “straight and narrow path” was going to take a good deal of time and attention!!

Ah well, as for the “tambura event,” even yet to this day as I tell this [about] myself, I still must laugh—bits of residual hilarity Swamiji left for me to enjoy throughout the years when I think of it. I still love it and, yes, laugh and weep, too, treasuring the precious lesson. Some of the best works of a master [an illumined guru] are prompted by the Spirit in strange ways.

Another time Mr. Bush [a long-term resident of the monastery] and I were cleaning out the old refrigerator that had been in the cabin before we moved in. When my husband and I moved in, we brought our own. It was decided that the extra refrigerator should be cleaned and put it in the basement of the retreat temple for use during the Saturday retreat workdays. Those days included gardening, cleaning, painting, roofing, and whatever was timely and/or needful.

Well, it turned out during that period of time the cottage hadn’t been used by “people,” the mice took over and there were droppings to be cleaned, as well as just general cleansing and checking over. Mr. Bush, without qualms or hesitation, brushed the droppings into a pile and gathered them into his hand to dispose of, saying that if Swamiji could make patties out of moist cow dung for drying to burn for fires in India, he [Mr. Bush] too could clean the dry droppings—at least they were *dry* [!] He wasn’t quite sure about the cow patties [meaning he wasn’t sure if he could handle them like Swami did]. I agreed. The old refrigerator was thoroughly cleaned and disinfected with fairly strong bleach and put back into use. [Editorial note: See also Gayatriprana’s remembrance regarding Swami’s description of his cow dung work in India.]

Swamiji’s frequent sayings I recall:

As I’ve mentioned in the previous pages, Swamiji would say rather often in a lecture period, “I am thy Self, my Beloved.” He’d also say, “Mother bless you,” especially when passing out prasad. On one occasion he told Lavern Kuchler that my husband Jim and I “were like a cup and saucer.” When we were having lunch together on a particular day she happened to mention this and yes, we were very compatible mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. I did think it a very apt observation.

I'm tempted to tell about what I call the "Temple Dome Fiasco" of the temple at Scappoose.\* But, perhaps, the person primarily concerned may wish to mention it—and will. If not, and you wish to know, I'll tell you as it's interesting and true. And yes, it, too, is of Swamiji.

*Submitted Summer 2007*

\* \* \*

[\*Editorial note: For more information about this incident, see "Miscellaneous" at the end of this collection.]

**Robert Collins, Ed.D.**, and his late wife Julie began attending the Portland center in approximately 1955, and Robert served on the board for about a decade. Robert, a retired professor of biology, resides in Portland.

*Interviewed in Portland.*

Somewhere around 1955, an elderly woman and friend of ours told us how wonderful Vedanta was, and that she wanted us to try it. So we went one Sunday evening to the old temple downtown. That night Swami gave a wonderful sermon and we were very impressed because he seemed to be so well educated: he brought into his sermon references from many well-known thinkers. Then Anne Hatfield sang. She had the most wonderful voice you could imagine, and I wondered why she didn't sing in the opera—her voice was better than many opera singers I heard. (We found out later that Swami did not want her to sing any place but at the temple.) Between Swami's great sermons and her beautiful singing, we were sold.

There were fewer than twenty-five people attending. This was shortly after Swami had arrived to the center. Marvin (now Harananda) was just out of high school; Vera, and her sister, Fae, are the only other people now attending from that period.

EW: Did Vedanta seem strange to you? Some people recalled thinking the pictures were odd.

RC: No, we didn't even give it a thought. Anyway, there were very few people, perhaps 25 or fewer attending because the former swami lost his audience owing to declining health. Our swami had the job of building the congregation. As I recall, there were very few men there; most of the people were women. We would go out to Scappoose every Sunday morning as soon as the weather got nice; that was something we particularly enjoyed. We'd go to the Sunday service, sometimes followed by a potluck dinner in the men's cottage. Sometimes we'd sit outside on the lawn with question and answers from Swami. This was before the hall beneath the temple was finished, as far as I can remember.

Swami didn't like driving with women, so when we started attending, he liked going with us when possible since I was one of the few men there who could drive.

EW: When did Mr. Bush [a devotee who lived at the center for decades] come?

RC: A year or two after we did. Then Swami would ride out with him.

EW: Did you start attending right away?

RC: Yes, after that first Sunday we were immediately captivated. So we went Sunday morning at the retreat and Sunday evenings in town, but not to any other classes during the week. Back in those days we invited Swami to our house for dinner and he came out several times. One time there was a biblical epic playing at the movies and he went with us. He enjoyed it but had several comments about the inaccuracy of the content.

EW: Did you share this interest in Vedanta with your friends?

RC: Actually, yes. I was teaching high school in Gresham at the time and there was a group of students who were interested in having a philosophy group. I suggested that they meet at our house and see whether Swami would come. Swami was delighted. One of the students was Jim Sanderson; he was so impressed with Swami that he went home and told his folks [Marina and James Sanderson]. James senior and Marina talked with us and they went to meet Swami. They were so impressed that they joined immediately.

EW: Amazing story! I interviewed Marina at the age of 90 and she told me that her son went to someone's house for a discussion group.

RC: That's me! As long as Swami lived he kept thanking me for introducing him to the Sandersons. Apparently they had met the other swami when he was not doing well. They were interested in this kind of philosophy but he was not able to help.

EW: So how did you become interested in Eastern thought in those days?

RC: My brother had become a Bahai and wanted us to look into that. So we went to a fireside chat where we met the woman who introduced us to Vedanta.

EW: So you were in your mid-twenties when you met Swami. Did you find any kind of conflict with your scientific background?

RC: As a matter of fact, it was the scientific references in that first sermon we heard that impressed us.

EW: So how did your relationship with Swami evolve?

RC: We became instant friends. As I mentioned, we invited him to dinners, to the movie, and the philosophy group in our home. Later on he apparently discontinued visiting devotees in their homes. When we started going we didn't have kids. When Julie became pregnant, Swami gave his blessing and asked all the time how she was. When our first child was born in 1958 we immediately called Swami and he was the first person to see Julie and our daughter Coral in the hospital and to give her a blessing. Swami stated that he had never seen a newborn baby in a hospital before that occasion. When our other two daughters were born, he was one of the first to visit them in the hospital and gave his blessings. All three of them adored him.

EW: Did they go to Sunday school there?

RC: They didn't have a Sunday school. When Coral was born we'd take our crib and set it in a side room there. I'm sure some of that went in because she developed a very strong bond with Swami. He was just wonderful to the girls. We'd take two of them down there but when the third came along, it was hard to continue going. We went as long as possible and then shifted to Unity where they could attend Sunday school in the mornings. Then we'd go to Vedanta Sunday evenings when we could.

RC: You were a member of the board. What was that like bearing in mind Swami's tight management style?

RC: Swami would tell the congregation whom he wanted on the board and the congregation voted how they were told [laughing]. He wanted the board to be all men. From the old board, there were a few women and they stayed. Eventually there were nine men on the board.

EW: Did you actually have the ability to make decisions or were you simply implementing what Swami wanted, as some have suggested. [Editorial note: See also Terrance Hohner's remembrance for his experience of the board's purpose.] What was the purpose of having a board?

RC: [laughing] Well, that's a good question! I have no idea, but we more or less did what Swami wanted. I will tell you a little story that takes exception to this. When the old temple was condemned because the state wanted to buy that property for Portland State University, they offered just a pittance for the property, nowhere near what it was worth. [Robert recalled the term "condemned" may have been used although the building was in fine condition.] Members of the board said we should sue to get more. Swami was adamant that we not sue. The members of the board kept pushing him to get what the property was worth and finally Swami relented. We did sue and we won; we got considerably more than they offered originally. The board *did* influence Swami enough to file a suit.

When we sold the property, Swami wanted to make sure that Portland State kept the rhododendrons that the previous swami, Devatmananda, planted are there. So when the library was built, the rhododendrons were incorporated into the landscaping design.

EW: Did Swami shout at people on the board in those days? Do you know about his scoldings?

RC: Oh yes, quite well! That came later. In those days he was much more mellow. I can remember him shouting at the women working down there, but I can't remember him shouting at anybody on the board.



After the center was sold, Swami moved to a rented apartment. It wasn't large enough to hold services, so we rented the chapel at the YWCA. On special occasions we would meet at different people's homes; once the group came out to our home. There were only about thirty people in the congregation at that time.

EW: Several people felt Swami wanted only a small committed following. Some commented that he reportedly discouraged insincere people. [Editorial note: See related discussion in remembrances of Doretha Stuart Moore and Alan Boyce]

RC: That's true. It's a wonder the Portland center has been able to stay afloat. When the Sandersons joined, they sold their property and moved into the retreat's cottage for women, one of two cottages there. Eventually the men's cottage became so run-down, full of rats, that it was taken down. The women's cottage also had rats. Swami would not allow anyone to use rattraps or poison—but he allowed them to have a cat to take care of the problem.

EW: The Sandersons were rather brave taking all that on. It sounds rather primitive.

RC: I saw there were blankets hanging down from a rope dividing their upstairs space into two separate bedrooms.

\* \* \*

EW: Are there some special teaching moments you recall?

RC: The most memorable pertained to Swami's talk on [the Biblical] "The Sermon on the Mount." He later gave me Swami Prabhavananda's book *The Sermon on the Mount According to Vedanta* and you can read the inscription: "To Bob Collins with my very best wishes and greetings, Swami Aseshananda, January 24, 1969." This book is one of my favorites and I recommend that it be required reading for anyone interested in Vedanta. For me, that was Swami Aseshananda's most memorable sermon: he explained things that made it quite different from traditional Bible study.

EW: Are there one or two points that stand out in your mind?

RC: One of the main points is "Blessed is he who mourns." Swami's explanation is much more educational than what the traditional fundamentalist Christians think.

EW: What was Swami's explanation?

RC: The person who mourns is one who must have such a strong desire to see God that he or she is wishing and longing for this. It's not just about crying over someone dying and seeking comfort. Swami could explain it so well.

You asked about some of Swami's favorite sayings. The one that sticks out the most for me and that he continually spoke about in his lessons was "The kingdom of heaven is within you."

\* \* \*

Oh yes, I remember one endearing incident. After the old temple was sold we transferred much of the contents to the retreat, including a box of letters, to Swami Devatmananda. Because I collect stamps, I asked Swami Aseshananda whether I could have the stamps. He thought for a moment and said, "Sure, as long as you don't read the letters!"

\* \* \*

RC: [The conversation turned to Robert's service on the Society's board of directors.] When we didn't have a place to meet after the old temple was sold, the board members looked all over the city, at all kinds of churches for sale. Although they might have been nice facilities, when we got done looking Swami would say, "I don't like this place—it doesn't have good vibrations." He was dead set against the place. So we decided we'd have to build our own. Finally we bought a lot out in north Portland. Jim Selig's brother was an architect, and he drew up complete plans for a temple.

The senior swami in the country, Swami Vivedeshananda in Seattle, came down and we took him out to show him where we were going to build. Right away he said, "Ramakrishna doesn't like this place." So back to the drawing board: as long as the senior swami had said he didn't like the place, our swami decided to scrap all the plans!

We started looking around again and finally found the house where the temple is located now. It was a home that a doctor had started building with office space, an unfinished shell. We decided to buy it.

\* \* \*

EW: Did the subject of initiation come up?

RC: Swami asked us if we wanted to be initiated, probably around 1960, and we let him know we weren't ready. We regarded him as our teacher anyway.

EW: It seems that the fact that he offered meant he saw in you real sincerity, I'd guess.

RC: We were honored, but just not ready.

As time passed, and with our three daughters, we weren't able to be as active; but we still went when we could. My wife and I would take turns in the chapel while the other

one stayed with our daughters in the adjacent room. When everything was over and Swami had said goodbye to everybody, he would take the little girls into the shrine all by themselves. He would give them their little private visit and blessing in there. It was very special.

*January 2009*

**Coral Tilton**, daughter of Portland center members Julie and Bob Collins, considers herself “born into” Vedanta. She began her life’s experience with Swami Aseshananda in 1958, when Swami came to bless her arrival on the day of her birth. She currently resides in Trout Lake, Washington with her husband Dave. They have one daughter, Brittany.

*Written submission.*

### **Childhood Memories of Swami Aseshananda:**

Swami Aseshananda arrived in Portland, Oregon, February 5, 1955, from the Hollywood Vedanta Center. Soon after, my parents, Julie and Bob Collins, were introduced to Vedanta and attended services at the downtown Portland temple and the Scappoose retreat. Swami adored my parents and became a very close family friend. I was born into Vedanta three years later, in 1958.

### **Early Memories and Swami’s Influence on My Life:**

Swami was always in my life. I’ve always felt very close to him as a child and also later in life as an adult. I grew up knowing him as a part of our family and experienced a very comfortable feeling of familiarity with him. Throughout my life I always knew him simply as “Swami.”

I have been told that Swami knew me before I was born. That idea has always intrigued me—I just never understood quite how he could do that (speaking from the point of view of a child). I was told that Swami was the first visitor to see me when I was born—he came to the hospital and blessed me. It was his first experience in a maternity ward.

### **The Old Temple:**

One of my earliest impressions I remember is being in a very beautiful and quiet room—I was probably in a crib, but I can remember standing up and looking around. It was evening, the room low lit, perhaps with votive candles burning. I recall a large (to me) bust of Buddha in the room and a pervading sense of peace and stillness. I might have been alone but was still very much “at home,” or perhaps one of my parents was there with me. Everything felt very safe and protected. I loved being in that room. I can still see the image of this in my mind—so deeply impressed is it.

Later I was able to go upstairs into the candle-lit shrine room with Swami to sit with him while he performed a worship. I loved this! It was magical and I was spellbound as Swami rhythmically intoned chants, first in Sanskrit, then in English. I loved the sound of his words. There were candles burning, the pungent scent of incense, and freshly cut flowers placed before the images of Holy Mother, Ramakrishna, and Vivekananda. I recall Swami saying that the Holy Mother especially liked red flowers. I loved the way Swami would light the incense and wave it, then wave something that looked like a feather duster: it was a very involved process. Afterwards, he sometimes would bring

out a tray of small gifts and have us choose something, such as a decorative wall plaque with a saying from Christ, a small bracelet, or a handkerchief, and he always gave us a special package of prasad to take home.

I can remember Swami coming to dinner at our home. Always happy to see us, he wore an expression of childlike delight, his face beaming in glee. His smile was utterly compassionate and loving. How I adored him! He always seemed so happy to see me. I can remember sitting next to him at dinner. Marvin (now Swami Harananda) was also there, along with a person named Don Carter—they would drive Swami over. But mostly I remember Swami.

Often we would take Swami on outings. My father would take us out to look at Christmas lights, something special he always did with us at Christmas-time, and often we brought Swami. I can remember sitting next to him in the back seat. Swami was always happy and delighted to drive around and look at the lights.

And so I came to think of him as a dear family friend whose first name was “Swami” (his last name being Aseshananda, and his house, of course, was the temple). For a long time, I had no idea that Swami was the last living initiate of Sri Sarada Devi.

### **The New Temple:**

Swami completely inspired me. Because I adored him, I strove to emulate him by setting up a small shrine in my bedroom (I was very young, maybe 12 or 13) where I meditated and read Vedantic literature. Swami had given me two or three small books in which he had written a personal message. These are still very special to me. I tried for some time to follow his path but things in life gradually took over. Moving away to college, then marriage and family created too much distance, but even so, I always held on to Swami as a guide. At the new temple, I often went to see him, to ask him questions regarding Vedanta and living a spiritual life; sometimes he would ask me to wait for him in one of the rooms upstairs, then he would come in for a private interview.

Throughout our lives, he often gave our family a special worship in the shrine—he would take us in if we asked—and afterwards he would fill up a paper bag with prasad. I can remember standing outside the little “prasad room” watching him select from candy, cookies, fruit and nuts. I didn’t understand until later how special that was. He concluded our visit with prasad without fail.

I also remember that when I was around age ten or twelve, we were taken on a tour though the new temple (my father, who was on the board at the time, was part of the decision-making process). It was a rare opportunity to walk through the two by fours and see the temple while being remodeled. Swami seemed very pleased with the workmen and their progress.

Occasionally, Swami would honor me by telling me to sit next to him at his place at the table during a meal following a special service. He would tell people what to do and where to sit, and everyone obeyed without question. There was absolutely no arguing with Swami.

I did see him bark orders at the devotees who were serving him, and that really disturbed me, because I didn't understand until later how that was part of their training: they were learning to get past the bondage of the ego. I thought it was somewhat scary and mean. But Swami never yelled at me; he was always very kind and loving to my family. He loved my parents—he would just brighten up when they were around. Swami seemed to particularly like me, so therefore I felt very special. I always believed we were connected on a deeper, soul level.

**Swami:**

I believe that Swami felt compassionately responsible for those who came to him, as a mother would care for her children with limitless love. I could be mistaken, but I think that's why he never went back to India. I believe he truly gave his life to stay in Portland with all of us—immersed in the material world—and that must have become extremely hard on him later in life, as he became more stern, strict and harsh with people.

Swami liked order and cleanliness. Everything at the temple was immaculate and in order. I've never seen such a clean kitchen as at the temple. He would get upset if something were in the wrong place.

Swami lived by example, easy of access, and in simplicity: he was humble, loving, very un-egotistical, unassuming and un-materialistic. He possessed a sweet and childlike innocence—a living expression of the Holy Mother. His life was a great sacrifice for all of us who knew him, and a genuine example of living a “holy” life.

**Some Teachings:**

“Never mind, it doesn't matter.”

Swami said that you could attain enlightenment in this lifetime, and that an association with a true spiritual teacher would help speed (awaken) the process. The true path to knowing God is through one's personal experience, through meditation, devotion, prayer, and service (karma yoga). But especially to experience God through one's feelings [perceptions] was most direct (i.e. to ‘feel’ God is to know God).

Swami taught that one should meditate twice a day during the most auspicious times, which are dawn and dusk, when night and day meet. He said that twenty minutes each time was all that was needed to begin with. He said to focus your attention on the heart chakra, and think of the image of the Holy Mother (or other auspicious image), and to repeat that name, over and over. What could be simpler?

He would say, “God is in all things” (or “The Mother is in all”). “Turn everything over to the Mother, and she will make everything all right.” “Always pray to The Mother with a yearning that cannot be quenched and make the Mother your own.”

This world is all an illusion of Maya. It must have been very difficult for Swami to be so immersed in it.

*Submitted February 2009*

**Gisela Manley** began her association with Swami Aseshananda in 1962 as the child of devotees Ingrid and Keith Voget. Initiated in 1986, Gisela describes her ongoing connection with Vedanta as life-enriching beyond measure. Gisela resides in Redding, California.

*Written submission.*

I met Swami Aseshananda in 1962 when I was eight years old. Being a child, I took this experience in stride while recognizing that Vedanta and Swami were wonderfully different from anything I had ever experienced. I felt welcome and accepted at the Vedanta center even though I was a mere child. Even at that age I enjoyed going to the temple with my parents. I especially enjoyed the temple in Scappoose (with its “ice cream cone” shaped roof).

Swami Aseshananda contributed much to those happy childhood experiences. He surely had a special place in his heart for children. This was readily apparent to my sisters and me. For instance, Swami treated us with a great deal of patience and kindness. He always made a point of allowing us to be placed first in line for “prasada” after each Sunday service, announcing “Children first, children first” with his kindly smile. I remember Swami would be engaged in conversation with adults, but he always seemed to find time to acknowledge us. Swami’s manner made us feel very good about ourselves. I loved Swami then as only a child can love. I also revered Swami but always felt comfortable around him and always looked forward to seeing him.

We children would attend the Sunday services with the adults. Although I did not always understand what Swami was saying, I always found comfort in his chanting. To this day, I can hear his voice intoning, “Lead us from the unreal to the real, from darkness into light, from death into immortality. Om shanti, shanti, shantihi.” This still brings me great comfort.

My parents took us to the Vedanta center many, many Sundays until I turned sixteen when our family moved to California. We did not see very much of Swami then. He would, from time to time, come to stay with us on his way to San Francisco, making use of a separate cabin. We looked forward to these times and enjoyed his visits immensely.

Over the years as I became an adult, my relationship with Swami Aseshananda became more reserved. However, I still carried much love for him from my childhood; I never doubted that Swami cared about my sisters and me. Much of this, I think, was due to the fact that we were some of the first children to attend the Portland Vedanta center. So when I moved back to Portland at the age of 22 (in 1976), I began attending the center again.



After marrying and moving away from Portland, I did not see much of Swami. However, Vedanta and its beliefs were deeply ingrained and so in 1986, during a time of crisis, I called upon Swami Aseshananda. Swami counseled me and asked me if I would like to be initiated. Swami told me “Holy Mother says that you are a good girl!” Swami initiated me, and my initiation, to this day, has profoundly affected my life.

An incident occurred following initiation that I have never forgotten. Swami had always treated me with great patience and kindness. Suddenly, he spoke very sharply to me, asking whether I had returned an item to one of the residents of the women’s house. I replied that I had not returned it yet. Swami spoke to me very sharply, and told me that I must return this item *immediately*, that I must learn *responsibility*; that I must *be a responsible person*. I felt deeply wounded, and I had a very difficult time coping with this treatment. I truly did not understand what Swami meant at the time. However, over the years, it has become very apparent to me what he meant. Swami *knew* that this was an area that I really needed to work on. Although I thought I was doing all right in this area, Swami knew I wasn’t. That is why he spoke so sharply to me. So powerful was his impression that I have never forgotten the incident. Whenever I hear him internally repeating his advice exactly as before, I begin paying attention to what needs correcting.

Returning to Portland in 1995, I attended Vedanta services with my mother when Swami was elderly and physically frail. The last time we saw Swami was a few days before his passing and Swami was literally fading away from us. My mother and I were ushered into his room and Swami recognized my voice. He raised his head slightly from the pillow and said to us, “May Holy Mother bless you all.” Then Swami put his head back down on his pillow. This is my last memory of him. It has meant so much to me, over the years, to remember Swami giving us this blessing.

I hope it is apparent to all who read this how profoundly Swami Aseshananda has influenced my life. I am 55 years old now and still feel very connected to Swami. I feel very blessed to have met him and to have been initiated by him. I will always be grateful to Swami for the loving kindness he showed me as a child, and for the guidance he gave me as an adult. I will always be grateful to my parents for having introduced me to Vedanta as a result of their spiritual search, and for laying this very precious gift before me. My experience with Swami Aseshananda and Vedanta has enriched my life beyond measure.

*Submitted April 2009*

**Ingrid Voget** lived in Germany during World War II and after immigrating to the U.S. began attending the Portland Vedanta society in 1959. All five members of the Voget family were initiated by Swami Aseshananda. Ingrid currently lives in Hawaii.

*Interviewed by telephone.*

I first met Swami in 1959 at the old Portland Temple, which was located where Portland State University is now. We were introduced by a couple who had just returned from India where they had been working with the Gandhi Project. We remarked that we were interested in learning more about the Vedic teachings, and they knew of the Vedanta temple.

The old temple had a small library. In this intimate setting we had wonderful discussions. I have very vivid memories of this period, of Swami's warmth and his vitality. He was actually sixty years old then but looked more like a man of forty. We had a choir: small, of course. I can't remember how many there were of us, but Marina Sanderson participated along with Stuart Bush, Joan Fox, and Harold Amundson, now Swami Atmajayananda. "Chant the name of the Lord unceasingly, for there is no other name" was one song we sang often. Ann Hatfield, who had a golden voice, sang solos on Sunday.

My children were very young at that time and my health not very good. Swami always seemed to be quite concerned about my well-being. When I arrived for choir practice—this was one evening during the week—he would lead me to a room upstairs where I was placed on a couch and covered with blankets, to rest until the practice began. I really, really appreciated then, as I do now, this tender care, so rarely experienced in life.

EW: Swami probably didn't have much opportunity to meet people who had gone through the war. What kind of help did he give you to overcome the trauma you experienced with the firestorms and bombings?

IV: Actually, nothing, on the surface. But just his "Being," to be around him, brought healing. He guided me, sometimes with words, but mostly by example, into a lifestyle that made healing possible. He made me see, and experience, the harmonizing, expanding, and uplifting powers of ritual and worship. Also, of course, meditation, chanting of the holy name, and the daily reading of the *Devi Mahatmaya* (also known as *Durga Septasati*, or *Chandi*) upon Swami's instruction. To begin the day, to end the day, with a small ritual, how peace giving, how stabilizing, how healing this is! How grateful I am to Swami for this gift!

I had several surgeries during those years. He, our beloved Swami, always accompanied by Mr. Bush, would come and visit me in the hospital. Swami would put his hands over my head, and bless me. Then he would sit down and chant for quite a while. He was

incredibly wonderful, warm and loving. On the other hand he was not particularly easy on me.

I don't think that anybody around me had an understanding how warfare affects those caught in it, on all levels of being. Post-traumatic stress syndrome, which our soldiers experience in war, is now beginning to be recognized, but as for the disastrous consequences of civilian bombings on the lives of people—individually, as well as civilization as a whole—little thought is given to this day. The attitude back then, and this included, I am sorry to say, the medical profession, was "Forget about it, you are here now," or "No wonder you are so neurotic. You should see a psychiatrist!" This was very painful to live with, and I was grateful for every bit of human warmth and understanding which came my way.

EW: Did Swami ever talk with you about your experiences?

IV: In the very beginning of my relationship with Swami, when he was visiting with our family, I talked about my background. But never afterwards was this subject touched upon again.

EW: Perhaps he thought it was such a delicate subject that he didn't want to reopen it.

IV: My feeling is that he looked upon these issues from a very different angle. To illustrate my point, let me quote from the Upanishad: "From the unreal lead us to the real, from darkness lead us to light, from death lead us to immortality."

His task was to lead his students from the unreal to the real, not so much with words, but with actual experiences. Strengthening the mind to filter out thoughts of darkness and focusing the mind on the light and its many manifestations, dedicating all you do as an offering to this light, will move you away from darkness into the light, the real, the permanent. It allows you to experience life in a different way.

When I got frustrated, complaining that my mind was wandering in all directions, he pondered for a minute or two, and then, after making certain gesture with his hand, which seemed to say "Don't worry about it" he added, aloud, "Pull back, pull back!"

EW: Did you attend the center very long before becoming initiated?

IV: Several years passed before either my ex-husband or I asked for initiation. It was our understanding at that time that a celibate life was expected of us after initiation. Marriages had broken up.

EW: I've heard different opinions on this subject. A few people I spoke with from the 1950s era felt that if initiated they were required to live a celibate life and therefore refused initiation. Others said that no restrictions were placed upon them. My sense was

that these were choices left up to individual couples. However, I had the impression that some individuals were resentful of their spouse's involvement with Vedanta and that led to divorce.

IV: Swami never told me directly; however, you saw many marriages breaking up.

EW: Perhaps he had become more liberal by the time I met him in the 1970s.

IV: Yes, Swami changed over the years. For one thing, people change as they get older. Also, many years' living in this country and gaining a deeper understanding of its values and habits must have had an effect on him.

EW: Do you feel Swami was operating from his cultural perspective as an Indian?

IV: Oh yes, Swami was an Indian, a Brahmin. He ran the Vedanta Center like the head of an Indian family. To be part of a family, whose head is a highly developed soul, I certainly would consider quite a privilege. But, then, I am of a very independent nature, and it seemed to me he tried to make submissive women out of us.

I had great difficulty with the presentation of Sri Sarada as a totally demure, self-effacing, always sweet woman. I don't think she was. I have one photo of her which I really love. It shows a very fierce face. I heard one story of how, being married at the age of five, she was left in her village waiting for her husband to call for her. Finally, when she had reached her teens, she lost patience and took matters into her own hands. She walked all the way to Dakshineswar to claim him! He wasn't at all happy that she appeared, so the story says. This is more like the Mother I adore!

EW: How did you reconcile your German intellectual background with the Hindu outlook?

IV: Whenever I said, "Thank you, Swami," he waved his hand and muttered, "It's the Mother, it's the Mother, thank Mother!" He always stressed that the acting force was the Mother of the Universe, the force of creation, preservation and destruction embodied in Holy Mother. He also was the embodiment of this Mother. It wasn't him acting, it always was "*Mother, Mother, Mother.*" I love the rich imagery of Hinduism. It deeply connects with the forces of the universe.

I was brought up in the European humanistic tradition in an intellectual environment. After immigrating to America I met a young man whose father was in the lumber business. We married and moved to a small town near Portland, Oregon, which had been settled by Dutch people of Calvinistic faith. I tried to adjust to their ways, but this attempt was not very successful. Our three very young daughters and I had been attending the Congregational Church, which to me seemed to be more a cross between a Country Club and the Bank of America than an honest instrument in search for the

Godhead. So one day all five of us—father, mother and three little daughters—started attending the Vedanta temple in Portland.

There I was faced with accepting Sri Sarada as a role model. I said to myself: “I am a very independent human being. The right to develop my own thoughts and the right to freely express these thoughts are essential for me to lead a meaningful and fulfilling life. This I am, and this I shall remain.” This need of mine led inevitably to a conflict with Swami’s dictum “Do as I tell you.” Eventually it resulted in a rift in our relationship and my withdrawal from the activities of the temple community.

EW: Wasn’t Yreka, California, your next location, just another small town, a similar situation?

IV: Well, in Yreka many students from Berkeley started to form communes. So there was an infiltration of Vedic teachings. Several of these students have become permanent residents of Yreka by now and are still very good friends of mine. So Yreka now has an element of liberalism thanks to them. In addition there is a Soto Zen center at the foot of Mt. Shasta called “Shasta Abbey.” Swami wrote to the abbess, Houn Jiyu-Kennett Roshi, and asked her permission for me to meditate there regularly.

EW: It is interesting that Swami facilitated this kind of contact for you.

IV: I’d gone over to the abbey once, liked it very much, and told Swami about it. Also, I believe, he had met the Roshi. The Roshi actually was not there very much. But I tremendously enjoyed those students. They were so young and eager.

Otherwise my life was tied to the lumber business community where I had begun working. I very much enjoyed my work in the business. This was fortunate because in no other way could I fit myself into a very rural, conservative environment. My ex-husband had studied at Reed College [a highly respected college in Portland] and Columbia University in New York. At the time I met him he intended to be a writer. However, after we married, he decided to join his father’s business. After moving to Yreka to start a new sawmill there, he pretty much abandoned Vedanta. Lumbermen and Vedanta didn’t blend well.

EW: Were people bigoted towards Germans after the war?

IV: Very much so! But not openly. For instance I had spoken German to my girls from early on, expecting them to be bilingual. When the two older ones had reached the ages of four and five (in the late 1950s), they refused to speak German. Their playmates had told them that speaking German was unacceptable.

I’ve found it very painful to live as a German in America. It is getting better now, but it took a long time. I could have lived with open confrontation which might have allowed

discussions to break into the black and white design of the underlying hostilities. This, of course, all contributed to my decision to raise my children with Vedic teachings, under the guidance of Swami. They joined the three Collins's daughters as the only children at the Vedanta Society at that time. Sometimes Vera Edwards also brought her grandchildren.

EW: When were your family members initiated?

IV: My ex-husband and I were initiated in the late 1960s, but not together. One of my daughters was initiated in her teens, the other two as young adults.

All my daughters have told me that they were grateful they were raised with Vedic teachings. For instance, when my youngest daughter, Kirsten, was struggling with breast cancer four years ago, she said that she was grateful to have these teachings at her disposal. When she died, she had reached such an acceptance of death, such serenity! Her death was beautiful. It was an example of how to die.

EW: Is there something about Swami's teaching you would like to share?

IV: I have two stories that I heard Swami tell, always with a twinkle in his eye. They have become "family heirlooms." We also use them in a lighthearted way, as he did. The first story is the story about the holy man and the cobra:

Once upon a time there was a holy man walking through the forest when suddenly a cobra got hold of his leg, with its teeth firmly established in his thigh. The holy man, who was quite tall, looked down from his heights and said, "You, too, my brother, are a mesSENGer of the Lord."

So when I encounter a cockroach (I *really* dislike them) I say, "You, too, my brother, are a mesSENGer of the Lord." I always use Swami's Indian pronunciation. He always stressed the second syllable: "mesSENGer."

Next, the story of the holy man and his disciple:

Once upon a time a holy man lived with his disciple deep down in a forest. One day the older man said to the younger disciple, "I have to go on a long journey. While I am gone, I want you to sit on this spot here (he pointed to a spot nearby) and meditate on the meaning of life and death until I return." The teacher left, and the disciple sat down on the spot where he was asked to sit. After a while he felt a tugging on his loincloth. It was a mouse. He thought, "I have to get a cat to eat the mouse." So he got a cat. The cat ate the mouse. Next, the cat started to meow. She wanted milk. "I need a cow," he thought, "so the cat can have her milk." He got a cow. Now he needed someone to milk the cow. He found a cowherd. The cowherd was lonely. He found himself a wife. By the time the teacher returned, he found a whole village.

Here are two of Swami's little gems that have special meaning to me:

"Truth is one, sages call it by various names." "To the works you are entitled but not to the fruits thereof."

EW: How do you experience Swami now?

IV: He is close. We "converse." I do the talking, then I wait. The answer will come, from somewhere, you never know when. I thank him for all the help he has given us as a family, his love and his caring. In my inner conversations with Swami, I ask him for advice how to handle the broken relationships in our family, and with others outside the family. The answer unfailingly is: "Mother." "Mother will show you the way."

*Being around Swami is a story that can be understood only by someone who has experienced it.*

*April 2009*

**Keith Voget**, a disciple of Swami Aseshananda, began attending Vedanta center in 1959. All five members of his family were initiated by Swami. Keith currently lives in Yreka, California.

*Written submission and telephone interview.*

During World War II, I served in India, and while a college student, an ad in the newspaper caught my eye: it was a talk by Swami Devatmananda at the Vedanta temple. Years later I returned, and in 1960, after hearing Swami Aseshananda preach, I became a member of the Vedanta Society of Portland.

After we joined the Society, Swami made an impression when we had to determine the amount of our tithing. We had three small children in 1960, and so he said, “Well, you contribute \$4.00 per month for your family.” I found that delightful. I also served on the board of directors, but don’t recall having a lot of input.

Our trips to the Scappoose retreat with our family were particularly joyful and memorable. I also remember a trip to Mt. Hood with several carloads of devotees. Standing with Swami, overlooking the vista from the lodge, was an experience that stuck in my mind. When Ingrid and I had our 10<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary in 1963 we invited Swami and Mr. Bush to Forest Grove for dinner, and Swami helped us rededicate our marriage vows.

I remember the discipline Swami imposed upon the householders. He complained about how much noise the Americans made whenever they walked. He could vent his dissatisfaction with the folks at the Vedanta Center for not taking care of their duties. For example, once we were to meet at the Scappoose retreat at a particular hour. He was angry with the people who delayed getting him out there and criticized them.

In 1970 I left Portland and so gradually lost contact with Swami and the Society although we still supported the center for many years. But the inspiration that Swami brought into my life has not declined. At the age of 83 I continue to look to his example and to the teachings of Vedanta.

I want to add that the influence of Swami Aseshananda extended to all the family: my wife, myself, and our three daughters, who were born in the decade of the 1950s. All of us desired and were accepted for initiation.

The memory of Swami is imperishable.

*Submitted May 2009*



**Ken Shores** began attending the Vedanta Society of Portland in 1957 and was initiated by Swami Aseshananda shortly thereafter. Ken is highly regarded for his innovative work in the field of ceramics.

*Interviewed in Portland.*

I lived briefly in Portland during the 1940s and was once taken to the downtown temple where I actually met Swami Devatmananda. He seemed like a very, very charming man, and I was impressed but very young at the time. In 1957 I moved back to Portland (from Eugene where I was doing my MFA degree) and decided to revisit the temple. I had heard Swami Aseshananda speak in Eugene and found him very interesting, bright, and engaging. There was an interesting group of people just starting to attend the Portland center at that time so it became a habit to go on Sundays. Swami was very bright and charismatic and I liked him from the very beginning.

I always felt Swami was hoping for the temple to be a monastery, in a sense. When he first came the group was almost entirely comprised of women; in fact women lived in the old temple with Devatmananda. [The women did not reside in the temple following Swami Aseshananda's arrival.] Swami wasn't prejudicial—he certainly liked women as well—but he was always hoping to fill up the bedrooms with monks. Stuart Bush came to live there and so did an older man. Swami had an eclectic group living at the temple. He realized, though, that his calling was with the [non-monastic] devotees he encountered.

So I started meditating at the old Portland temple two to three times a day and kept that up for several years. I was initiated in 1960 or '61; two others and I were initiated on July 4<sup>th</sup> and afterwards went to Swami Vivekananda's celebration at the retreat. At the same time I was working at the Contemporary Crafts Museum on Corbett Street. The gallery was staffed mostly by women who were curious about Swami. "Why don't you ask Swami for tea?" Swami came out several times for tea parties. He probably didn't look forward to them but did it for me. He sat on the terrace and had tea, but I sensed that he wasn't very interested in what was going on.

EW: Did the women ask Swami about Vedanta?

KS: Not much, I think they were just curious to see what he was like. They found him very charming.

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

KS: I had been going for at least two years, and I think Swami asked me if I were interested in initiation. I remember bringing sticks for the initiation. It was traditional to bring kindling wood for the holy fire, although there was no fire afterwards.

EW: How did you know you were to bring something?

KS: Swami told me to bring them. Eventually I became very busy working at the gallery and drifted away, although I still kept in touch with Swami. For example, once he came over to see the Nixon presidential debates. At that time he was still interested in such things but later on he couldn't care less [i.e. he was highly uninterested]. It seemed he valued candidates not for their political ability but whether he thought they were ethical.

We had some great times! Once Stuart Bush went to central Oregon on vacation and arranged for Swami to stay a few nights with him. Swami asked me to drive him over. As we were driving we passed a little tiny hole in the road call Aumsville. He had seen the sign and said [in a tone of amazement] "*Aumsville!!*" He was *so impressed!* "We must stop!" "But there's nothing here, Swami." "I'll buy you a 7-up!" So we stopped at the only store there and had a 7-Up. When we reached Stuart Bush, Swami said, "We went to *Aumsville!*"

EW: Do you feel this triggered the word OM in his mind? [See Gayatriprana's contribution for another OM account.]

KS: Yes, it must have. Perhaps he thought it was very significant, for some reason. I said I didn't know the derivation of the name. But he thought it must be *something* [significant] if had been named that! He was so overcome and thrilled that we had to make a significant stop for 7-Up, and he mentioned it to Stuart! [Vera Edwards remarked hearing this story as well.]

There were many little stories like that. As I'd drive him to the retreat, he'd read the signs on the way. "No left turn, Shell Oil." I don't know what it was; it was just part of his nature of riding. He read everything that he could see along the way. He'd talk in between. It was curious. [Vera Edwards recalled that Swami would often have people in the car chant "Jai Sri Ramakrishna" on outings, possibly to raise the atmosphere to a higher level.]

EW: I also recall him reading out the signs. I wonder if it were a way of grounding himself, especially since Swami seemed to be connected with another dimension. [See Anonymous Initiation Accounts.]

KS: There was a touching story about Swami mowing the lawn at the retreat. While mowing the lawn at the retreat he accidentally ran over a garter snake. He was so upset, called Vera from the kitchen to bring a saucer of milk although the snake was in two pieces. He was so upset and tried to give it milk. It was a quality of kindness that he had. That sort of thing was just unbearable to him.

EW: One of the devotees mentioned he didn't approve of using rat poison at the retreat.

KS: Yes, they had a cat at the temple for that purpose. Swami didn't approve of the zoos because of the capture of animals. He never elaborated; he just said he didn't like zoos.

EW: Did he eat animal products such as eggs?

KS: I think he might have eaten fish. Sometimes when there was a visiting swami, Swami would ask me to cook breakfast for them after meditation. It was always eggs, and there was a certain procedure about bringing them up to room temperature before cooking. Instead of Frances cooking for him, he'd often ask me to do it when swamis visited. She understood it was a male event and didn't mind.

EW: How much cooking did Swami do?

KS: He would occasionally cook for the retreat. I don't think he did much of his own cooking, I think it was a service that others could do for him—not out of ego—just a service they could perform. I didn't do this cooking often, perhaps once every month or two months.

EW: So do you feel Swami was attuned to your spiritual needs?

KS: Yes, he never put pressure on me to move into the temple; he knew I was busy with my career as an artist and working as gallery director. He didn't ask me to give it up or spend more time, although he did ask me to do things. Once, for example, he had been in Seattle visiting Swami Vividishananda, and when he came back, he called me at the gallery. He asked, "Can you come over?" I said, "Well, I guess I can." I was busy but said, "Sure." It was wintertime and since he'd been gone a few days several devotees were at the center talking with him. Finally he said to me, "Let's leave."

He wanted me to drive him to the *retreat*. And it was *dark*. I had an old Plymouth Coupe, a big tank of a car. So we drove out in the dark, and in the rain. I thought, "What in the world?!" We opened the gate and drove up to the temple. He brought a bag and what he wanted to do was make an offering at the altar of Sri Rmakrishna and Holy Mother. He put some things out, then said, "Let's go." So off we went back. It was really pouring rain. This was teaching me a lesson not to be impatient, to be understanding. To him it was very important that he make an offering. He'd been gone a number of days. Things like that, I felt, were always lessons to me. I hope that he felt that too. I guess he did.

EW: Did Swami scold you a lot in those days?

KS: He did it to so many people, but he was always nice to me, he *never spoke harshly to me—ever*. He once said, when I didn't hear him, "Ken, Ken!" [in a slightly raised voice]. I've heard him reprimand people terribly—but some people challenged him or

didn't pay attention to what he had to say. He was always reprimanding people after the evening worship: "You didn't wash your hands after you put your shoes on. Go wash your hands!"

EW: I heard he only started scolding later—did he scold in the days of the downtown temple?

KS: Oh yes, back in those days he scolded. Some people never learned, or would forget; or perhaps they liked being reprimanded—I don't know. He was pretty abrupt at times. People would come into the service late—strangers sometimes—and stand in the back of the old temple. He'd stop and say, "Go take a seat, go sit there!" He didn't mean it that way [to sound harsh]; he just wanted them not to stand there. He did it nicely, but strongly. [See Alan Boyce's account on scolding visitors at the present temple.]

EW: How long did you continue attending?

KS: I attended through the 1960s and when the old temple was sold and Swami moved into an apartment in NW, I would still go to board meetings. Another funny story: Dr. Shiomi was a very famous doctor in town who owned a mansion in the Washington Park area. It was for sale for \$1.5 million, which was a lot of money in those days. It covered a whole block. Probably now it's worth eight or ten million. Swami had heard about it. When I mentioned that I knew Dr. Shiomi, but not very well, Swami said, "I want you to call him up; I think it would be a wonderful temple." I said, "I think it's awfully expensive." "Well, you offer him \$150,000 now!" "Well, Swami . . . ." "No, you do that!"

So got my courage together in the next day or two and called Dr. Shiomi and told him who I was. "I belong to an organization, the Vedanta Society, and the minister, the swami, wanted me to make an offer on your building." "Oh really? How much?" he asked. When told him he started to laugh. I replied, "I understand, and I'll tell Swami that you aren't interested in that price." It was so embarrassing but it taught me a lesson. I shouldn't have been that proud.

I began to drift away, and wasn't a part of the period when the new temple was purchased. But I would still see Swami occasionally. I started coming back in the '80s. Swami was always nice to me [he'd say], "Nice to see you," and he'd ask about mutual friends. When Richard Davis's mother died [Richard was a fellow artist], Swami remarked, knowing Richard and that he was close to his mother, "Oh I'm so sorry. Tell Richard that his mother is fine and alright." He was always very gracious.

Richard and I took a trip to visit several of the Vedanta Centers in California down to Trabuco. Before leaving we visited Swami, who prepared letters for us to take, and took us up to the shrine. He took out a teaspoon and gave us each a spoonful of Ganges

water. He was very, very nice towards me. He never once asked me to move in; I guess he thought I wasn't monastic material [chuckling].

EW: Do you feel Swami perceived what you needed spiritually? Did he try to present Ramakrishna and Holy Mother—from a different culture—to you, or did he try to go with what you were already “into?”

KS: Swami knew I was brought up in a right-wing, exclusive Christian background. We talked about it a lot. I've heard that your chosen ideal might be all kinds of personages: Christ, Buddha, Holy Mother, Sri Ramakrishna. No one ever talked about it because it was supposed to be a secret. But, I can at least say that he didn't choose Christ. My real interest was ecumenical. As Swami said himself, “All religions are different pathways going up the same mountain.” I'm really convinced that's true. I certainly wouldn't put down one faith or religion; I might not believe a good part of it, but in essence they are all making the same effort. I believe he definitely had certain prescriptions for me, but he never forced anything on me that I wouldn't believe in.

EW: Do you feel he actually chose something that was appropriate to your nature?

KS: I really think he understood me more than I thought at the time, especially since the art world, which I belonged to, is another world entirely. Then I started traveling a lot with thirteen trips to India. Several times he would send messages and books with me to one of the centers there. But, once, when he was getting older, I heard him say during a lecture, “People who do tours around the world seeing things—that's not important. What's important is inside and where you are.” I don't think he was aiming it at me; I just think he felt going to India wasn't that important.

EW: Yes, and he never went back to India. “He didn't need a vacation from God!” one disciple remarked. [See Eric Foster's contribution.]

KS: No, he didn't. Once in a while he'd go to another center to give a lecture or something, but he really didn't want to leave our center. So many people here were dependent on him.

EW: I heard that there were people who had real challenges and Swami kept those people on track.

KS: I can imagine he would do that. He would be very understanding. But there were also some very straightforward, level-headed people who felt they wanted Swami's permission to do most anything.

EW: Perhaps they didn't want to risk a scolding!

KS: Well, that too, but it was kind of nice to be directed and to make sure they were on the right track.

EW: Maybe they were attempting to diminish their egos by asking permission from him.

KS: Exactly! It was all aimed to squash the ego and get you to be an even-minded, well-rounded person.

EW: [The conversation turned to Swami's presence as the main reason for going to lectures.] Many people commented that the value of going to Swami's lectures was just to be in his presence, that the informational aspect was secondary.

KS: Yes, I also felt that way and in the shrine too. I would usually go around 6:30 or 7:00 a.m. He'd get up around 8:00 a.m. since he'd be up into the wee hours writing and doing things. After performing the morning shrine rituals, he'd nod off to sleep. It was just that presence of him coming in that was so important—I always waited for him before going to work.

[The conversation turned to other swamis in the Order.] Another Swami I liked was Vandananda. He was wonderful. When I made that pilgrimage to CA, we'd sit out on the lawn after the service, and we chatted a long time. What a *nice* Swami. I liked him *so much!*

Swami Aseshananda and Swami Vividishananda were old friends from India. Swami Vividishananda was older so Swami Aseshananda would always take the dust of his feet. I would sometimes drive him back to Seattle and spend a few days there. He was such a nice man and a loveable person. A little strict and stern, but he wasn't *really*. We'd go next door to some devotees to watch television. He was a very humanistic person but very, very spiritual. There was great communication between them all the time. You could tell they were old, old friends. He was a marvelous man.

EW: In one of the remembrances a devotee recounts how Swami Aseshananda ordered her to salute Swami Vividishananda who was in a coma. The devotee thought this was peculiar, but she did it anyway and left feeling a sense of overwhelming love. [See Doretha Stuart Moore's contribution.]

KS: I can imagine. Swami Vividishananda had that presence about him and Swami Aseshananda knew that, and so he went to visit him often.

Over the years, I can give Swami Aseshananda credit for my being positive in most situations. I find it difficult to be very negative for a long time about anything and, in fact, friends say, "You're the most un-negative person." I made an effort, but Swami had a lot to do with this by demonstrating how important it is to be positive, not

negative: not only about people, but about situations, everyday life, self-preservation, everything. Although I heard him chastise people, I never heard him say anything really negative. He just wasn't negative, and it wasn't his nature. It's hard over a period of years to pinpoint things, but I give him so much credit for my life for being the way it is. I've been very fortunate to have known him and to have been a part of the center.

*February 2009*

**Alice Levine**, a disciple of Swami Aseshananda from 1970, lived in both women's residences belonging to the Portland Vedanta center for a total of twelve years. She currently lives in Santa Barbara, CA, where she works as a senior corporate accountant.

*Written submission.*

The very first time I set eyes on Swami Aseshananda, in 1959, was in Seattle, Washington, where I was living at the time. Mom (Vera Edwards) was with Swami and a group that had traveled to Seattle to see Swami Vividishananda. She was going to spend the night at my house and we both expected she'd be deposited at the curb. Swami Aseshananda, however, insisted on coming in, so the entire entourage appeared on my porch. When I opened the door, the group stepped across the threshold as though there was no doubt they would be welcomed in my home. At the time I was twenty-two with three little girls and a husband with problems. I had no clue what an important part of my life these people would eventually become.

I visited the Seattle Vedanta center a few times and when in Portland I went to the center there. Swami Aseshananda seemed to take an interest in me, more than I would expect from my mom's minister. He gave me books bearing his inscriptions—first, *In the Hours of Meditation*, and then *The Eternal Companion* about Swami Brahamananda. After moving back to Portland I found myself going to the temple and to Swami.

One Sunday I was in the center of the audience during Swamiji's lecture, pondering all the things I wanted to know about—physics, world geography, music, etc. It was as though Swami walked over the heads of those sitting in front of me, and standing above and in front of me, looking right into my eyes, said, "Know That by Which Everything is Known." I was startled and amazed, and decided to take that remark seriously. I began to study Vedanta.

Eventually, in 1970, Swami asked me if I wanted initiation. I really didn't know what that meant but I said "yes." He told me to come on a certain morning—that was all. I didn't know I was supposed to bring anything. When I arrived he handed me flowers and fruit to offer and took me into the shrine. It was a sweet experience as he whispered the mantra into my ear and asked me to repeat it to him. He then said not to say it out loud to anyone ever again and to go somewhere alone and not talk to anyone the rest of the day.

\* \* \*

Several years later one Friday evening I was driving home in my red BMW. I was working as a real estate broker for a builder of energy efficient houses and the next day I was to give a public talk and endorsement for this particular builder. Due to some very bizarre circumstances and unbeknownst to me, my driver's license had been



suspended—having moved I didn't receive the notification. I was pulled over by a patrolman for some minor violation but he told me to get out of the car, handcuffed me behind my back, and took me to jail. I was put into a "holding cell" and given the opportunity to make a phone call. The bail was \$600 dollars cash or the equivalent, which I didn't have. I called Swami and told him I was in jail. He said, "No, no, jail's not good!" Then I heard him calling for Mr. Bush and talking to him as well as everyone in the temple house about how much money was there. He sent Mr. Bush to the jail with the \$600 bail. Because I couldn't drive until my license was straightened out, I couldn't make my presentation the following day. As it turned out, the builder was a crook and was taking deposits for peoples' houses and not buying the materials. When I discovered this I called my brother-in-law attorney and we put the builder in jail.

\* \* \*

Swami told me to meditate on my own death. By coincidence I was reading the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. I continued this meditation for a year and actually had the experience of dying. It was amazing and I was no longer afraid of death or much else. One day I came to pick flowers for the worship and Swami was out in the yard by the pump house. He motioned me over and I saw a squirrel lying on the ground, obviously in distress. The squirrel appeared to have fallen out of the tree and was dying. Swami sang a chant to the dying squirrel and we stayed there until the dying process was finished. I had the idea that he wanted me to observe the entire event and he wanted to observe me observing.

Swami started giving me chores like vacuuming the carpet in Bramananda Hall where the Sunday school was held. He stood and watched me vacuum and I was careful to be efficient and to concentrate. He seemed satisfied that I was vacuuming according to his standards and walked off. I was also to make the worship preparations on Fridays. Many times I would call at the last minute and beg off or be late. He was always so kind to me but one day he said, "Can't you be on time a little?" Responsibility seemed to come easier for me after that.

The devotees seemed to ask questions of Swami and so I thought that must be what I was supposed to do. One day in the shrine pantry after the worship I asked Swami a mundane question about what I should do about something. He put his hand on his hip and looked at me with "that look" and said, "I shoot elephants not mosquitoes."

\* \* \*

I looked as though I "had it together" but actually had little self-esteem. Swami would pat me on the head and say, "You're a good girl." At the time I was thirty. He seemed not to scold me as much as some. Perhaps he knew I was a little fragile and had to be built up first.

When Swami was getting ready to purchase the second women's house, he had a meeting of the women and asked if any would like to move into the new house. Without stopping to think, I spontaneously said I would. A few days later he asked me to write my reasons for wanting to live in Sarada House. I sat in the foyer and answered as honestly as I could and how I thought it would be. After a while he came down for a talk with me and said, "You are so idealistic," in an uncomplimentary tone. He had not *even* read what I had written.

I did move into the new Sarada House and at one time we had six women living there. Along with the members of Holy Mother's house we took care of the many guests that came to see and study with Swami. Sometimes we had as many as thirteen people in the house. We took turns fixing meals—we were not to take people out for dinner or buy prepared foods. I was often overwhelmed as I was working and had not cooked much, especially for that many people. This experience trained me to have equanimity and to be able to handle difficult situations, a lesson which has served me well in my life.

The women who lived in the house went to vespers every evening, to classes on Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday. There were also two talks on Sunday and during the summer a Saturday service at the retreat. The Sunday lecture was never cancelled because of the Saturday service! *Swami poured himself out for our benefit. He gave it his all so we could become enlightened!*

Sometimes I complained about having to go to the center so much and made excuses for not going. Then I would remind myself that Swami was doing this for us. He had nothing else to gain spiritually—it was all for *us*.

Eventually after living in Sarada House for eight years I had enough community of life. I was working for a company owned by General Electric and had an opportunity to take a position in Chicago. It was a significant promotion and my mind turned outward. I left Sarada House and made the move to Chicago. I probably needed the experience of being successful at something, of being totally self-sufficient and responsible. I moved back to Portland six years later, before Swami left us.

My relationship with Swami Aseshananda was and is the most important relationship in my life. His love for me was so pure and unconditional—I have never experienced anything even close to that again. When we met I was scattered, unaware and confused about the meaning of this life and how to live it.

Swami's teachings to me were and are to untangle myself from this web of maya, to see it for what it is, and to see through it to the truth. The means, he told me, are to always be conscious, conscious of what my mind is doing and to discriminate between what my mind thinks it wants and what I, the Self, is and is not. He taught me to bring my mind back to a true thought at every opportunity—whether that thought was the mantra or, if the circumstances permitted, an experience of the I AM.

On the practical level Swami taught me to be strong, to think clearly, to discriminate and to love with dispassion. On a deeper level he showed me a mystical path demonstrating that this life is not what it seems, that clinging to the spiritual path with all one's strength creates a field of action resembling a normal life, but which is all for the purpose of burning up desire and gaining liberation.

*Submitted October 2009*

**Eve Prior** and her husband, Jim Prior, became disciples of Swami Aseshananda in 1967. Eve is a native of Portland, OR.

*Written submission.*

During the peak of the 1960s I was in my early twenties and living in Portland. Being drawn up in the excitement of that time, along with my soon-to-be husband, we spoke constantly, it seems in my memory now, about such things as the nature of Reality, Consciousness, Being. I loved reading *The Oracle*, a short-lived San Francisco-based newspaper that was full of these ideas. And so after an acquaintance mentioned he had been to a lecture by a Hindu monk at the downtown YWCA, I went with another friend to hear him speak. Of that first exposure to Swami Aseshananda I remember very little—I was neither drawn to, nor compelled at that point to pursue the matter any further.

Months passed and my partner J. and I married. Some time after that, at the suggestion of that same acquaintance, we obtained a copy of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, which we read, or read parts of. More months passed, and then I think we just reached the end of living such an unstructured life. We knew about Swami, his connection with Sri Ramakrishna, and we knew his phone number. So one afternoon in early summer 1967 while I was at work, J. made the call, and Swami said to come right over, which he did, to Swami's apartment on NW 25<sup>th</sup> Avenue. They talked, and Swami suggested he come again, and to bring me with him. Of that meeting, what I remember is Swami sitting in an easy chair in the living room with the two of us sitting in straight-backed chairs in front of him. Swami made it clear that if we wanted to make progress in spiritual life there was no other way but by hard work, that there were no easy short-cuts.

I had absolutely no reservations in my mind about Swami. Although nothing *extraordinary* passed between us, either then, or at any other time, it seemed self-evident he was the real McCoy. How I came to this conclusion so readily is hard to explain. I should add that from that time until his passing away in 1996 I never observed anything to contradict this initial impression. And although at this first meeting Swami was very kind to us, he also had a formidable no-nonsense presence. He appeared to be completely focused upon spiritual matters only.

We immediately began attending all the lectures, evening vespers, Saturdays at the society's retreat near Scappoose, and when fall began, the pujas. Activities with our friends came to an end, and although this was not imposed by Swami, there really wasn't room for both. Both J. and I grew up in Portland, both sets of our parents were living in Portland, and we regularly saw them. We both had full-time jobs. So there was very little left over time for a social life. Further, the old life didn't fit in with the new. So began the rigorous schedule we would follow for about the next six to seven years.

That coming winter we took initiation. And not too long after that the property for the new temple was purchased. When the restoration work was completed a year or so later, Swami moved out of the apartment and J. and I found a rental house in the Hawthorne neighborhood close to the temple.

In the early “honeymoon” days, although Swami could be strict with us, he was mostly very sweet. One summer afternoon when Swami was still at the apartment, and we were there for vespers, I was wearing a sleeveless dress with a flamboyant print. I was concerned Swami would suggest it wasn’t appropriate; instead, when I went into the kitchen where he was preparing prasad, he commented upon what a nice dress it was. (Unprecedented! I never again heard him say anything like that to anyone.) Another day there I bumped into the coffee table and broke its leg. When I told Swami, certain he would blow up at my carelessness, he acted as if it were nothing, nothing at all.

That saying, “Harder than a thunderbolt, softer than a flower” describes Swami’s style perfectly. Some people got mostly thunderbolts, some mostly the softness (these tended to be people who didn’t come regularly and who in general had a more relaxed relationship with Swami). I experienced both sides, as did many others, although for the most part Swami didn’t personally come down hard on me, at least not in a direct, obvious way. Everyone had their own special relationship with him, each very different from everyone else’s.

Early on I asked Swami if I should keep my eyes open or closed during meditation. He said I should keep them closed as otherwise I would be looking around and thinking about making changes and rearrangements to my surroundings. This was perfect, right-on advice, tailor-made for me, a person obsessed with visuals and order. And it’s true that while meditating at the temple, if I opened my eyes my mind would wander about the shrine imagining how I would simplify everything, reduce the number of flower vases, change the carpet, etc.

Although I never felt I could define or explain Swami, one of my perceptions was that he had been sent to the United States by Belur Math to ultimately head a center and to train interested people in the spiritual life. And that in accepting this, he did so one hundred percent, whether he wanted to or not. He was given the task, and he would fulfill it. He never ever went back to India. He rarely traveled anywhere. Perhaps a few times a year he might visit another center. Most Vedanta centers in the U.S. had no services during the summer—Portland had *more*: a Saturday service at the retreat, thirty or so miles away, in addition to the usual Sunday morning and evening services in town, and a couple of classes during the week. It was clear that, for the Portland center, there would be no vacations from the rigors of spiritual life.

Nor was Swami interested in participating in small talk of any kind. And the only time small talk was comfortably allowed among the devotees was after the daily worship or evening vespers while Swami was preparing prasad and the devotees would be waiting

in the library or foyer. But if he heard us casually chatting at other times he would often say, “Enough talking—this is not a social club!” He was a one hundred percent hands-on guru, so much to be accomplished, so little time in which to do it. Unless he was away on one of his rare out-of-town visits to another center, the atmosphere in the temple was always at a rarefied pitch.

This was very, very difficult for me. Growing up, although I had an easy relationship with my parents, I was thrilled to leave home and its constraints when I was nineteen, to travel on my own in Europe for a number of years, to call my own shots. Now, here I was giving up all that freedom. If J. and I were not going to be able to come to vespers, or Saturday and Sunday morning meditation, or any of the services or talks, etc. we felt compelled to call in. Swami never ever said no to whatever our excuse was. In fact he never said we had to call. Still, it was a given that we would call otherwise he’d be sure to ask us where we had been.

Swami, being the master of knowing the weak spots of his disciples, knew how to push all my buttons, and the main button had to do with my precious free time. To keep things up at home, the cleaning, cooking, garden, etc., and to maintain my schedule at the temple, plus a job, plus parents, created a lot of stress, at least after the first year or so had passed. I knew, in a rational way, that if I could just surrender to Swami’s schedule, to give up my obsession with order, with *my* preferred way of doing things, life would be much smoother. I think Swami created these situations specifically to create tension, to accentuate the struggle, and to provide us a reason to go within, to *want* to surrender.

J. became treasurer of the Society. Following evening vespers and meditation, which ended about 7 PM, Swami would serve prasad and then talk with those of us who had attended. This usually went on to about 8 PM, following which J. might do some work on the books and I would do some of my librarian/book ordering duties. When we were finishing up and getting ready to leave, Swami would sometimes ask, “Can you mail a letter?” “Of course!” we would say. And of course, often the letter hadn’t been written! Once it was handed to us, he would make clear it was to be taken to the eastside station, not just dropped into a nearby mailbox. And we still had dinner to prepare! The crazy thing is, if I had only gone to Swami and talked with him about this, told him I needed more time at home, I am sure he would have agreed. But it was up to me to ask for it, and I wasn’t yet able to do so.

I don’t remember specifically how many summers we went to the retreat on Saturdays to work, perhaps just a few at the beginning, before the new temple was completed. But J. and I would go early, along with about eight to ten other devotees. The men would do the heavy work; the women would work in the garden, or clean the temple, and every other Saturday I prepared a hot lunch. In the early afternoon Swami would arrive, bearing ice cream, often driven by Jim Selig.

I've thought that if Swami hadn't become a monk, he could have easily been a terrific defense lawyer, or prosecutor, or lively politician. He was interested in current affairs in those years and had a very dynamic presence. On one of these retreat afternoons during the height of the Vietnam War, as we sat around the table eating our ice cream in Brahmananda Hall, Swami began to go on about the war and said that the U.S. should just drop the atomic bomb! He may as well have dropped it in our midst. One devotee said, "But Swami!" . . . and then being very worked up, burst into tears and had to walk out. Although I too was upset, I also felt (again, trying to interpret the inscrutable) Swami was just pulling our legs, pushing our buttons, getting us all riled up over something we had no control over, the big Maya, its seeming wars and injustices.

One of the men's retreat projects was to rebuild the water tank at the top of a very high tower. J. was a good carpenter and was going to be involved in the project, and I was very worried he would fall and be killed. I went to Sanderson Safety Supply and bought him a special belt with clips and hold-ons and what all. Swami became aware of my concern and took J. off the climbing-the-tower portion of the project. So, hard as he could be, he was also very sensitive to our worries and could be unspeakably kind.

After we had been coming to the temple for a year or so, or maybe longer, we began thinking about renouncing the world, becoming monastics. This must have been after Belur Math gave approval for the Portland center to have a monastery. However, Portland did not have a convent. We talked about this with Swami, and he didn't say no, or yes, rather, we were to think on it and he would think on it—we would see what developed. So, the ball was set in motion, and just the vague possibility that it might happen made me realize how much I really was not ready for such a radical move. I developed a terrific case of heartburn. What would I do? Would J. live at the temple and I would continue to work even though perhaps I might live with a few of the other women in a different house (Holy Mother's House had not yet been purchased)? And whatever would become of our two cats, Big Kitty and Siva? That was the clincher. I stopped Swami in the hall and asked if I could speak with him. We went into the foyer and I told him I just couldn't, couldn't do it, couldn't leave the cats! Swami said no problem, not to worry. And then he gave me some prasad.

In the late '70s, and through the '80s, Swami often would speak harshly about the actions of the US government, and about the foolishness of the American people in general, and he could be very colorful in these rants. They didn't really bother me (since I pretty much agreed with him), but sometimes I wanted him to just cut it out. Once Sarada (now Swami Harananda), who was one of the few who would challenge Swami (at least that I ever personally saw), was standing outside the closed door of the men's kitchen. Swami was within, and they were going at it—Sarada saying that Swami had just gone toooo far in his criticisms, etc. Swami telling him "Enough! Out of here! Leave this place!" But Sarada would persist. This had a quality of high comedy about it.

Another time, when I was cleaning on a Monday after work, Swami was having an argument with one of the young men who had been living there and who had just announced he was going to leave and move back East. I felt Swami was upset, that he sorely regretted losing someone. But he could also be so funny. The young man was upstairs, Swami down, pacing the length of the hall, raising his fist into the air, and shouting, “Blackguard! Ingrate!” Then he served me prasad, and as I sat in the hall by the telephone he passed by me and mumbled something to the effect that I should just ignore all this, it was only a show.

Perhaps in the early to mid-1970s, there was a movement afoot in the Oregon Legislature to tax churches that were not using all their properties for church-related, spiritual functions. Swami threw himself into making sure none of the Society’s property, all tax exempt, would end up being taxable. At the retreat he initiated the building of shrines to various religions throughout the property, some of these very elaborate and beautiful (the design and construction being the duty of the men). And in town he initiated the School of Inter-Religious Understanding, which would meet on Friday evenings upstairs in what became Brahmananda Hall (a new weekly lecture!). I remember gathering there one evening before the class and Swami not being happy with the seating arrangement. He then had this or that person move to another chair, a change here, a change there. This sort of thing, creating a kind of havoc out of seemingly nothing, with us all obediently responding like small children, struck me as something only *we* could accept, understand, and appreciate. I would think, if an outsider got a view into this—if my friends in the outside world saw this—they would think we were certainly all hopelessly nuts. But Swami used every moment, every opportunity, to keep us on our toes, hopping, never too comfortable. Pujas could have a similar volatile atmosphere. Swami could get spiritual mileage out of anything and everything. He was a master at this.

Swami was also famously frugal with the Vedanta Society’s money, and with our personal spending as well. (For J.’s and my monthly membership dues he designated \$2.00 each per month). One’s inclination, if working on a temple-related project and some item needed to be purchased, was to just go out and buy it. *So* much easier, but one time when J. did purchase some small thing, Swami found out and was furious. He said he wanted to know “everything—from a pin to an airplane!” I don’t think he really cared that much, as long as it were a small item—rather, it provided an opportunity for us to have to ask permission when our preference was to just forge ahead on our own.

I’m assuming anyone who reads this knows what Swami looked like. But for those who didn’t know him: he was small in stature, had a very expressive (perhaps it was a very Bengali?) handsome face, bulbous nose, raccoon circles around his eyes, vigorous, black hair, and lovely skin (even into very old age). His eyes were small and dark, accentuated by the dark circles, and could have a far away look in them. He was completely uninterested in clothes or his personal appearance, particularly in his later years—wild, untended hair, the torn cuffs of his long underwear hanging out of the legs of his ancient



trousers, spotted chuddar, holes in his sweaters, etc. In the early years I took a photo of him sitting at a little table, outside in the sun at the retreat. It was a good photo, and I showed it to him. He took a brief glance and said, “Just a pillowcase.”

Swami, up into his early 90s (it seems) would still go out and work in the garden. In the earlier years I heard he would climb ladders and do pruning (this I never saw). But often I would see him in the summer watering the garden, and in the cooler weather, wearing what I called his aviator hat with ear-flaps, and his old brown gabardine coat, raking or sweeping using his one-armed method.

He was also a very good cook and had what every good cook needs, a fine sense of taste. He made for offering rice pudding, farina pudding, pilau, all of which were excellent. And he cooked his own food until he was quite along in years. Sometimes when I was there cleaning, and if he were cooking for a puja, he would call me to the door of the kitchen, hand me a small plate with whatever he was preparing, and ask me to sample it, to say whether it needed more sugar, or more salt. This was a treat because one doesn't normally taste food before it is offered. He wouldn't taste it himself.

Another time, regarding cooking, he told me I should always first turn the heat up to high, watch it, and then when the pan was hot, to lower the heat (rather than to start out on low). Still another time, when I was cooking for the Saturday work crew at the temple chopping carrots and probably working away like a demon, he came to the door of the kitchen and said, “Slowly, go slowly.”

Then, as now, there would be occasional visits to the temple by swamis from other centers in the U.S. or in India. One of the most memorable was a visit from Swami Sambuddhananda, who lived in India. He was about Swami Aseshananda's age, perhaps a little older, as he was senior to Swami. There was a dinner at the retreat with quite a few people sitting at an L-shaped table. Swami S. was talking about time, in the metaphysical sense, and smacking his hand on the table would loudly demand of Swami A., “Time! Time! What is the time?!” Although this seemingly had no bearing on the discussion, Swami A., being junior to Swami S., was very humble throughout, and would fumble with his watch, trying to see the time. The next evening in town, following a talk, I was standing at the bottom of the stairs. Swami S. came down with and behind Swami A., and said in a booming voice, with his arm extended before him, “He (meaning Swami A.) *leads* me!” Words don't convey how powerfully charged the atmosphere of these events could be.

In about 1973 J. and I decided to purchase a house. Knowing Swami might use a situation like this to put us through some exasperating hoops, we went ahead and closed on the deal before letting him know. And a year or so after this, J. told Swami he didn't want to be treasurer any more, or to have to come regularly to services and events. I expressed similar feelings, but asked Swami if I could come one evening a week after work to continue with my weekly cleaning duties. We didn't want to leave Vedanta or

in any way end our relationship with Swami, but we did want our freedom from active participation. He was clearly unhappy with us, but accepted what we said, and agreed that I would continue with my duties. I was greatly relieved. It had been a rigorous six to seven years of spiritual boot camp with the most challenging drill sergeant one could imagine. I wanted to structure my own time. So began my regular Monday evenings at the temple that have continued to this day.

I was immensely lucky to have met Swami and to have had him as my guru. I was a reluctant student in many ways and during his lifetime never appreciated my great good fortune. Now, looking back on his rigorous training methods I see what a positive and lasting impact every moment with him has had upon my life, my outlook, and my life together with J. Swami gave us solidity. He put *his all* into us.

*Submitted May 2007*



## **The Last Quarter Century: 1970-1996**



**LeNoir Kali Hayward** and her husband Harold, disciples of Swami Aseshananda from 1974, resided in the Portland area.

*Written reply to questionnaire.*

EW: How did you first meet Swami Aseshananda? Was there anything memorable about the occasion or your first impression?

LKH: My husband Harold Hayward and I first heard about the Portland Vedanta Society in the summer of 1974 through the New York Society after a book purchase. We lived at the time on wooded acreage seven miles east of Sandy, Oregon, in the foothills of Mt. Hood with our three children and multiple pets. Hayward commuted thirty-five miles each way via public transportation to work in downtown Portland at Pacific Power and Light Company.

We were drawn to Vedanta because of the lives of Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother and the teachings of Swami Vivekananda. Also, we were interested in learning to meditate and in attending the rituals. We were especially attracted to Swami Aseshananda because he was initiated by Holy Mother, and he was known to worship God as Mother. I have a particular interest in the Goddesses.

One lunch break from work that summer, Hayward took the bus east on Hawthorne Street to 55<sup>th</sup> Avenue and walked up the hill to 1157, whose imposing structure he passed back and forth several times before finally working up the courage to knock on the door. When he did, it was Swami Aseshananda who answered. He looked at Hayward and growled, "Come on in" as if he had been expecting him, then barked a command to Vera Edwards to show him around. Swami was giving an interview in the foyer. That Sunday we attended our first lecture, and the following Saturday we brought our children to the first of many retreat potlucks. Our youngest daughter was two months old, our son was six, and our older daughter almost three.

At the retreat we met Jim and Marina Sanderson, a hard-working, kindly couple who lived there in the little cottage. We asked them about initiation and everything about the Portland Vedanta Society; we were most curious about Swami. He was brimming over with devotion to Holy Mother. And he roared like a fire-breathing dragon!

EW: How did your relationship with Swami Aseshananda evolve?

LKH: My husband had an interview with Swami in September of 1974 to request our initiation which took place the 8<sup>th</sup> day of Durga Puja October 22<sup>nd</sup> that year. Until 1982 we continued to live in the country and only came in to the temple on Friday nights for the lecture, which discussed the *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali. When we moved to Portland, I became involved with the board of directors, heard Sunday lectures, participated in the

daily temple and special puja preparations, had responsibility for certain flower vases, attended women's retreats called antaryogas, shuttled guests to and from the airport, and met an amazing array of devotees who were pulled like magnets from around the globe to sit at the feet of a diminutive elderly Hindu man, lost at times in swirls of ochre cloth, who radiated Holy Mother's boundless blessings through his outstretched hand.

EW: How did Swami Aseshananda mold and impact your life?

LKH: I was raised Catholic and attended fifteen years of Catholic school including three at St. Vincent's College of Nursing in Los Angeles where I became an RN in 1966. Between 1974 and 1997, I was associated with Swami Aseshananda and the Portland Vedanta Society. Both religious experiences have shaped my spiritual inclinations and practices today. However, Catholicism I was born into and Vedanta I chose.

I spent many hours of my life in the 1980s at the Portland temple doing karma yoga with other women devotees and attending the weekday noon worship that never started at noon. We were expected to be inside the shrine by 12:45, where we mediated, women to the rear, on the thick white wall-to-wall carpet. But Swami stayed upstairs until 2:00 or so, when he proceeded to perform the daily puja ritual after which we received food offered in the shrine prepared by him on individual plates in the shrine pantry. There he always spoke with us for a while, sitting on his well-worn boxy brown upholstered chair. We formed a half-circle in front of him sitting on the sofa or a chair from the lecture hall or on the matching well-worn boxy brown upholstered chair across from Swami. All it took was one good question and he was off on a mini-lecture giving out inspiration, edification and glimpses of comprehension, our mental prasad!

Swami Aseshananda was a rare kind of guru, fiercely dedicated to living according to the letter of his monastic ideals and to fulfilling the will of the Divine Mother. He was an exceptionally powerful spiritual teacher and a sometimes frustratingly overprotective guide. Being around him was both a privilege and an austerity. He prepared me for my spiritual path beyond Vedanta.

Swami provided us with a high standard against whom all other "teachers" must be compared. Through his initiation we became part of a profound spiritual lineage. I give him my eternal gratitude and respect.

EW: Over time, did you come to certain conclusions about Swami Aseshananda?

LKH: I am an avowed peace and love, tree-hugging product of the sixties ideological revolution generation. At times I had trouble understanding the often harsh discipline measures employed by Swami on the sometimes unsuspecting devotee. Having been reduced to gut-wrenching tears on more than one occasion, I wondered what I was supposed to learn from this, besides ego-bashing. My dad was the same sort of disciplinarian. Some things really didn't make sense. The humblest little old lady in the

Society was the constant recipient of Swami's criticizing harassment in the '70s. She was a long time devotee initiated by Swami Devatmananda, the previous head of the Portland Center. About this lack of compassion, I came to the conclusion that with Swami, on some issues, we could agree to disagree!

EW: What were some of the essential teachings of Swami Aseshananda?

LKH: Swami told householders to see their work as worship, doing everything as an offering on the altar at the feet of Divine Mother, Holy Mother. Saying japa while mopping the floor in the house in the woods was like a bit of heaven for me! He encouraged us to take a witness perspective on our worldly position and see our relationships with others through the light of the Divinity within ourselves. "The essential belief of Vedanta," he said, "is that Divinity is all-pervasive and you are Divine. We are all Divine."

EW: What were some of Swami's memorable sayings?

LKH: "Cling to the feet of Holy Mother and Sri Ramakrishna, say your mantra, and meditate in your heart center. Yes, yes, everything will be all right."

"The winds of grace are always blowing. All we must do is set the sails."

EW: Are there any personal stories you'd care to share?

LKH: In April of 1977 my mother died suddenly. She was sixty-one, I was thirty-one. When I called Swami about her death, he told me with such certainty that she had gone to the lap of the Divine Mother, and I was greatly comforted.

That summer a very charismatic and wealthy Hollywood devotee came to visit and interview Swami with his movie camera and some traveling companions. In his honor there were several outings. Three times we went up to Timberline Lodge on Mt. Hood (Shiva) followed by potluck picnic at Wildwood Park on the Salmon River. Three times we went to Cannon Beach to touch the Pacific Ocean (Shakti) followed by potluck picnic at Ecola State Park. At each Swami performed a simple flower offering ritual to the mountain and to the sea.

Several carloads of children, women and men devotees and visitors formed an informal parade weekly going back and forth on Highway 26. The seemingly magical appearance of ample, tasty food and eating utensils was not Swami's doing. It was due to the capable managerial, as well as cooking skills of Vera Edwards and the generosity of the local devotees.

Some days we drove east out Hwy. 26 past Gresham through Sandy to Mt. Hood, then six miles up to the Timberline Lodge parking lot. We always went inside the lodge,



upstairs to the Boarshead Bar (I think it's called). Since the best view of Mt. Hood was through the bar windows, Swami walked right in, and there followed the adoring devotees, except the children. Bar patrons were speechless! Swami called Mt. Hood Shiva Giri.

On the south side of the historic lodge we looked out a large window to see Mt. Jefferson towering over the mountains in the distance. This volcano he named Uma Giri. After tromping through the lodge, we went out a side door and walked a little distance up the slope. Swami gave mini talks and sometimes attracted attention of non-Vedantists. One fellow from a tour group was so drawn to Swami that he just had to come up and introduce himself and shake Swami's hand!

After we left Timberline, we drove back down the mountain on Hwy. 26 to Wildwood BLM Park near Welches. There we had the amazing picnics. After eating and before we all left, Swami did a little worship, chanted and offered flowers to the Salmon River, equating it to the Ganges flowing off the Father Shiva Himalayas rushing to meet Mother Shakti Sea.

On other days we drove west out Hwy. 26 through the coast range past Saddle Mountain. On Hwy. 101 in Cannon Beach, we parked at the north end of town and walked to the ocean along Ecola Creek. (Ecola means whale. A whale beached here during the winter Lewis and Clark spent at Fort Clatsop just north of there. The namesake cannon was also beached here.)

Past bikini clad sunbathers and industrious sand castle builders, Swami trod doggedly, bundled in his long coat and winter hat with the earflaps down. At waters edge he performed another ritual, we all chanted and he offered flowers to the Ocean Mother. We then wound our way up the road to nearby Ecola State Park where the amazing picnics were repeated.

I hope someone is taking good care of the tapes of those outings. That was vintage Swami, well worth preserving and sharing.

EW: How would you characterize Swami's pujas, worships, lectures, etc?

LKH: The special puja season began in autumn with Durga's festival of lights and ended with Sri Ramakrishna's birthday in late winter. There was a palpable aura around Swami when he performed pujas on these great celebration days, usually beginning in the morning and lasting until the final prasad meal of offered food late in the afternoon. By the time he got to the homa fire ritual using the fireplace, he was practically electrified and we were too. His worship was sincere, unique and profound.

Swami's lectures were repetitive, rambling and intuitive. Thus they always touched on all our unspoken questions, doubts and problems of the day with just the right words we needed to hear. He was an instrument in the hands of the Divine Mother.

*Submitted July 2007*

**Bill Parmenter, Ph.D**, a disciple of Swami Aseshananda from 1977, visited Swami for extended stays through about 1990. A teacher of English and previously professor of journalism, Bill currently is affiliated with the Hollywood Vedanta Center.

*Written submission.*

I was initiated by Swami around 1977, at a time when I was living in Seattle and studying for a Ph.D at the University of Washington. He insisted that I complete my degree, which I did with difficulty, as after the first year I was terminated from the program. At the same time I was having marital problems; Swami insisted that I treat my wife with love and kindness.

In short, he had a profound influence on my life. I remember at the time of my initiation I told him that I was happy because now I would be ‘saved.’ He corrected me and said, “No, you are going to be liberated.” Having been doing spiritual practice on and off since that time, I understand more clearly than ever that he was an agent for Holy Mother to redeem and liberate souls from worldly bondage.

Between 1977 and about 1990 I would go to the Portland Center for weekends and for longer stays, up to one month at a time. I got to know all the regulars and the residents of the center during those years. I also used to take handwritten notes on Swami's lectures. Sometimes, even years later, I would review the notes, and I would feel the satisfaction of having been there in his presence and of having heard him lecture.

He asked me to write a review of his biography of Swami Saradananda, which I did, and which he thought was well done. Swami gave me a complimentary copy of that biography, *Glimpses of a Great Soul*, and wrote the following inscription in it: “May the Divine Mother bless you and fill your heart with Her love and wisdom.” I found these words to be very moving as they reminded me of Swami’s great and indescribably sweet love, which so affected and inspired me.

After I went to India as a Fulbright scholar in 1986 to study M. Gandhi’s methods of peaceful conflict resolution, Swami asked me to follow Lex Hixon (who talked about his pilgrimage to Mecca) on the lectern, giving my impressions of India. The audience paid rapt attention, but I heard from one of the monks that Swami did not much like my talk because it was not devotional. That was the only time Swami asked me to give a lecture.

On another occasion in the early 1980s, Swami was the invited speaker at the big spring puja in Ganges, Michigan, the retreat for the Chicago Vedanta Center. As I was visiting there, and Swami was my guru, I was appointed the task of being his attendant. Swami delivered a very spiritually charged and powerful lecture to the large assembled audience. Upon completing his talk, he stepped down from the lectern to accept the respectful wishes of the listeners. Many of them were crying and got down on their

hands and knees to take the dust of his feet. As I was standing directly behind Swami I could well see the reaction of the audience. It was as though he had spiritually electrified everyone and they were overcome with divine fervor, tears streaming down their cheeks. I, myself, felt like I had been spiritually electrified. That experience, as much as any other I had with Swami, made me understand he was a spiritual instrument of a very high order.

In the summer, we would go to the Portland retreat, where Swami would give a lecture and then we would have a potluck lunch. The flowers would be blooming, the sky was intensely blue with a few white puffs of clouds and the air warm and pleasant. Swami would be full of gracious smiles and be uncommonly friendly. I felt that those events were great fun and great blessings. Here we were mingling with a great soul, enjoying the best days of our lives.

Dominant impressions of Swami were that he was extremely devoted to Holy Mother; he was a very pure human being who was intensely devoted to his spiritual practice; he was a stern taskmaster with his intimate devotees—harshly shouting at them when they misbehaved; he was extremely intuitive to the point that he knew what was going on with the devotees even without verbal communication; he was an excellent platform lecturer; his discussions of the early days with Brahmananda and Saradananda were very interesting since he was a participant observer; he was interesting on the subject of Aldous Huxley, whom he knew from his days in Trabuco. (In a personal conversation with Swami, when I asked him about Huxley's idea that mescaline could enhance spiritual growth, Swami replied that it was nonsense: one needed to concentrate on one's spiritual practice). Swami was highly intelligent, with an excellent grasp of Eastern and Western doctrines and paradigms and could speak to their reciprocal influence and their effect on man and culture with fluency and authority.

*Submitted April 2007, revised February, 2009*

**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 lightening 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 Aseshananda] 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."

*October 2008*

**Jane Harrison-Hohner** first met Swami Aseshananda in 1971. Initiated in 1983, Jane has been a nurse practitioner and member of the Vedanta Society of Portland since that time.

*Interview with Jane Harrison-Hohner and Terrance Hohner, Portland.*

I met Swami Aseshananda in 1971, at a time after I lived in a group household with another spiritual teacher, Swami Nitya Chaitanya Yati, the head of the Narayana Gurukula sect in India. Swami Nitya was teaching Eastern philosophy at Portland State University for two terms. He had asked several of us whether we wanted to live in a house with him located in northwest Portland. Being only twenty-one at the time, I didn't realize that it was unusual for a teacher to have a house where men and women were living together with the teacher. It was not like a typical communal house of the time; rather it was more like father and children, brothers and sisters. A mixed household would have been quite unusual in that tradition. Swami Nitya had to return to India. I wanted to go along with him as others were doing. But owing to a dream he had, he advised me that it was not a good idea. Instead, he told me to see Swami Aseshananda, whom I had never heard of, if I wanted to continue my practices. Despite an interest in Eastern philosophy since childhood, my only connection to Vedanta was having read parts of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* in 1968.

I did start going to see Swami Aseshananda. I remember going through the receiving line, and he looked at me and asked, "Are you initiated yet?" And I said, "No, Swami." I kept going to see him for a while, but then stopped in about 1972 or 1973. I was still interested in Eastern philosophy but not in practicing it. In 1976 I met my future husband, Terrance; we both were interested in Eastern philosophy, which we felt was an important part of our marriage. However, in the ensuing years we allowed that important focus to languish. Then in 1981, during the process of becoming divorced, I determined to become involved again in spiritual practices. In the fall of 1981, while starting graduate school in Portland, Oregon, I began visiting various spiritually-oriented groups.

The most amazing thing occurred in January 1982 during one of the lowest emotional times of my life. I had a dream about Colleen Engle, whom I had remembered playing the piano at the Vedanta Society. The next morning, on my birthday, I encountered Colleen on the sidewalk at Oregon Health Sciences University where I was attending graduate school. She asked me how things were going. I said, "Terrible; my life is a mess." She suggested that I go see Swami Aseshananda. I explained my reservations about my failure to keep up practices. She urged me to come back and attend the Swami Vivekananda puja the following day. From then on, it was a meaningful reconnection. Unrelated to anything Swami said or did, I just felt it was right and began attending regularly.

When I saw Terrance again, he noted that I was doing better. I told him I'd gone back to the Vedanta Society. He wondered if he should meet Swami Aseshananda, and he did accompany me eight weeks later. He will tell you his experience of that meeting. That day, after the Sunday service, we had an interview in the chapel. The three of us sat together and the swami asked only a few questions. One of them pertained to the reason for the dissolution of our marriage. I tried to take the responsibility for that.

Swami was quiet for a long time, as if listening to someone else, or looking somewhere else. We all sat totally quiet. Then he looked up and said, "The two of you belong together." After that pronouncement he said something to Terrance. Then he got up and left the room. We walked outside and drove back to my apartment. We both felt as though something happened during that period of time in Swami's presence. Somehow all of the anger, pain, shame, and terrible feelings which are linked with divorce—all those feelings completely went away. There had been innumerable bad feelings but they were erased at that moment. I felt that to be one of Swami's miracles. Marriage counselors, friends, everything one tries to utilize in that situation had not provided any assistance. This wasn't just assistance—all ill will had vanished!

EW: Did you feel that too, Terrance?

TH: Yes, absolutely.

JHH: It was amazing. I don't know what he did.

EW: Did you feel it at the time or later?

JHH: *At the time*, walking out of the building. We turned toward each other saying, "Do you feel what I'm feeling? Do you notice something different?" I don't want it to sound too "woo-woo," but it was a miraculous story to us. Whatever he was able to do in terms of removing those negative emotions, he had the ability, by being an instrument, to assist people in many ways, no matter what their problems were. Very difficult, and in some cases damaged, people came to him; and in his ability to be an instrument, he was able to give them peace and remove mental obstacles. For some, after he passed on, they spun out of control again, while others did not. Fortunately for us, that did not happen.

During the first months we went for interviews, either individually or together. Swami would sit very quietly and not say anything for a long time. Then he would give some advice, and sometimes it felt that there was more than advice given. For example, I had a particular difficulty—perhaps you would call it a compulsive behavior—which was one of the greatest sources of trouble in our marriage. During those initial years, he would give very concrete advice. For example, he advised me, as a nurse, to only have women patients. So I changed my place of work away from the Veterans' hospital. During this time, he gave me other kinds of advice, such as avoiding eye contact with

the men I saw on the street and avoiding solitary contact with men I knew. He gave me concrete advice on how to regard myself as a small tree with a protective fence.

Moreover, at the temple at that time, men and women were segregated during pujas and other functions. Modest attire and behavior was expected, including keeping the arms covered. You saw the model he held up and you formed yourself in that mould. It was very helpful. In addition to tangible advice, he took away my particular craving with no difficulty—with no work on my part at all! It was a measure of his insight to see what the deep problem was and what the cure was, both on a spiritual level and a day-to-day concrete behavioral level. He did both.

EW: Some observe that Vedanta is somewhat “puritanical.”

JHH: It *is* puritanical, but it’s an antidote, a strong medicine. Remember, a good doctor puts his knee on the patient’s chest, forces his mouth open, and pours the medicine down. I think the people who came to Swami were people in need of strong medicine and willing to take it—wanting it at some level. And it was a measure of his skill that he was able to see what was needed and assist a person. He did this for me. I consider this his second miracle.

When I got that kind of grace, it really helped to solidify, and continue doing, the practices as prescribed by the teacher. I strove to live the life he prescribed and follow the mold he created. That is, I looked to him for my every example. He was *personally* so austere, for instance, that if someone gave him a gift, he would offer it in the shrine and then usually put it up in the closet. After Swami died, Terrance was clearing out the closets and there were scores of sweaters people had given him to replace his tattered ones. Those scores of gifts he usually sent to Belur Math or to be distributed to the poor. When someone wanted to buy new curtains for the shrine or the kitchen because they were hanging by threads, he would thunder at the board meeting, “No I will not spend a penny on this, let them be repaired, they have good tanmatras [vibrations].” He never bought anything for himself. You’ve heard the story of the cornflakes, I’m sure?

For many years, Swami had a household budget for his food of seventy dollars a month. Mr. Bush had to buy Swami’s food for a month. That sum was set back in the 1970s. Obviously over the years the cost of food doubles or triples. Mr. Bush took it upon himself not to tell Swami that cornflakes were no longer a dollar a box but more like three or four dollars a box. Had Swami known that, I’m sure he would have thundered, “I don’t need cornflakes! Not necessary!”

Swami had a routine of food he ate himself, very simple food. But it would have been that way for anything—the zucchini, the eggs, anything he ate. If it went over seventy dollars a month, he’d stop eating. He was so austere. You saw how he dressed in old, torn, and stained clothing. Mr. Bush would cut his hair for him; he would not accept gifts.

EW: I heard that he had the monastics eat canned fruit for economy reasons.

JHH: Vera canned all the apples and pears from the property. After Swami passed away, there were still jars and jars of fruit that had been canned by the women at Holy Mother and Sri Sarada houses. This was all to keep the budget down. The roof would leak and there would be pots everywhere. In the shrine, there would be pots. He would not waste anything; his shaving brush was used until it was almost bald. He was the most austere person I had ever met. Yet it rang a bell in my heart because we are attracted to that kind of life—in our own way.

I was so drawn to the austerity of his mood and mental processes. He would say “Not necessary,” not just about material things, but about your mind. In other words, don’t go there with your mind! Don’t waste your mind’s energy, your body’s energy. Tapas, tapas, tapas. But for householders like us, he’d say that our duty was to deify everything we do. The way for you to renounce as a householder is to deify everything you do. When you are in the kitchen, you are making a meal, as if it were offered in the shrine. You say a mantra as you prepare the food; as you stir the cake batter do not put your finger in the food. His example was instructive as we lived these spiritual values while still appearing like normal Americans, raising our children, etc.

Whenever we had a question or problem we would go to Swami for advice. If you took his advice, things turned out well. For example, during the early part of our relationship with Swami, Terrance, who was an optometrist, was thinking of being a teacher of vision enhancement. He wanted to teach vision improvement, give seminars, etc. He went to Swami with his plan and Swami said, “No, be an optometrist!” In other words, be normal. Forget about trying to teach people anything and being leader of a spiritual eyecare movement. Be practical-minded, be true to your training. Don’t let a teacher ego get involved in your work.

I’ll close with a story about our eldest son who was in shared custody with his mother and her new partner. He had many problems with drugs and alcohol as a teenager. We went to Swami wondering whether we should do an intervention, sue for total custody, force him into treatment, etc. We were beside ourselves. He sat with us for a long time and then he said, “No, no, what you should do is to lead the life [show a good example, live the spiritually focused life] and I will pray to Mother for him.” This was exactly what Swami was doing; *he* lived the life. In his “living the life,” that was the strongest set of lessons I could ever get—far more than what I could get from any intellectual reading. Seeing him, being around him, was the greatest teaching of all. So when he said “Live the life,” we knew that the best thing was to try and follow his example. That’s how he was for me—the model of what one could be.

*October 2008*

**Doug Meddaugh** and his wife Priscilla Meddaugh, disciples of Swami Aseshananda, began their long association with the Portland Center in 1971. Priscilla served as a Sunday school teacher there for over 20 years.

*Written submission.*

Priscilla and I were first introduced to Swami Aseshananda in the summer of 1971. We had married a few short months earlier and learned of Swami and the Vedanta center from our elderly friend and landlady, Mary Silk. She spoke glowingly of Swami, and we were intrigued to learn something of this alternative to the Catholicism and Protestantism that we had grown up with and that felt too parochial for our spirits.

Mary accompanied us the first time, introducing us to Swami. We were both so very impressed and inspired by this wise and spiritual soul that we immediately recognized that we had found something special in Vedanta and someone special in Swami. Although it was a few years before we became members and a few more before we took initiation, we felt blessed to have established a relationship with Swami so early in our marriage. Our three children received the blessings of Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother through Swami from the time each pregnancy was confirmed, and so we have always felt the strong presence of his spirit and his personal interest in the life of our whole family.

Sometime in our early years in Vedanta, Swami asked Priscilla and two other young mothers to begin a Sunday school class for the children who came to the center. Priscilla continued in that capacity for over twenty years, until our youngest child passed through grade school.

Several characteristics stand out for me when I think back on Swami. He was very intellectual. He had a vast knowledge of both Hindu and Western thought and teachings. He frequently quoted great Western minds such as Einstein, Descartes, Aristotle and many others. He understood and referred to advanced scientific theories that helped illustrate the confluence of ancient Hindu teachings and modern scientific ideas.

Swami showed great love and kindness to our young family, as he did so often to all the devotees. He was famous for giving a good scolding to devotees at times, but that aspect paled in comparison to his extreme compassion.

Swami was a great orator. He never spoke from notes—ever. His lectures were always very dynamic and impressive. Depending on what point he was making, his voice could soften gently and poetically, and then quickly rise with thunderous power.

Swami was a spiritual giant. People could readily sense that they were in the presence of someone who was spiritually very deep and powerful, and who was totally immersed in his beliefs. Even when his sight and hearing were failing him in his nineties, and his body was weakened to the point of requiring assistance for walking, he continued to



come down to the sanctuary each Sunday to speak, until his body finally could no longer make the trip. He was a true inspiration to so many, up to the very end, placing his life “in Mother’s hands,” and offering Mother’s blessings to the many devotees who would come to his bed to pay their respects.

Swami was a tremendous influence on so many people over the years. His influence is still obvious when devotees reminisce about him. Swami lives on, powerfully, in the hearts and lives of many of us who knew him. I will be forever grateful to have come in contact with him so early in my adult life and to have had a chance to be in his presence for so many years. May his spirit forever rest in peace in the loving arms of Holy Mother.

*Submitted July 2008*

**Doretha Stuart Moore**, a disciple of Swami Aseshananda, lived at the Vedanta Society's retreat and women's residence, and was active at the center between 1974 and 1989.

*Interviewed in Portland with friends Bessie Keens and LeNoir Kali Hayward.*

**LeNoir Kali Hayward** and her husband Harold, disciples of Swami Aseshananda from 1974, resided in the Portland area.

**Bessie Keens**, a disciple of Swami Prabhavananda, lived in one of the women's residences belonging to the Portland Vedanta center for approximately three years during the 1980s.

EW: Doretha, how did you first meet Swami Aseshananda and was there anything memorable about that occasion or your first impressions?

DM: I first met Swami when my son came up from Hollywood for a visit. He was a member of the Hollywood Vedanta Center. I was then living and working in Vancouver, WA. He said, "Let's go over and see Swami Aseshananda—he's a disciple of Holy Mother." And I said, "And *who's* Holy Mother?" And he said, "Well, you'll find out."

So we went to the temple, and I thought, "If anyone asks me for my name or telephone number, I'll never come back." And of course, no one did. This was probably 1974 or '75. On the way home, my son ask me what I thought, and I replied amiably, but without great emphasis, that I thought it was interesting. Curiously, in the week or so that followed, I found that Swami had made more of an impression on me than I realized, because I kept thinking about him.

So, one Sunday after my son had left, I thought that since I had nothing in particular to do, I would go over to the temple to attend another lecture. On the way I encountered a lot of traffic, which made me at least 10 minutes late. Thinking Swami was going to be on time, I thought maybe I shouldn't even go in, as I'd disturb people, but I went anyway, and slipped in quietly. So in the course of the lecture, Swami said, "You know, sometimes people think 'Oh, maybe I shouldn't even go, I'm going to be late, something like that.'" And I said in my mind, "*Excuse me*—he couldn't have known that I was thinking *that*, could he?" Well of course I know *now* that he *did*!

EW: Did anything in particular strike you about Swami the first time you saw him?

DM: I was impressed by the fact that he didn't ask me for my name and phone number. He just nodded graciously as I walked out the door, and that was not what usually happened in other churches where I'd been.

EW: Did you think it was just a coincidence that he knew what you were thinking on the second time you saw him?

DM: No, I thought it was really *very strange*—that surely, he couldn't have known what I was thinking. But much later I would come to know that such occurrences with him were common—of course he knew!

EW: What happened after that second encounter? How did your relationship with Swami evolve?

DM: Periodically I would go back to the temple on Sunday. I thought I should at least have an interview with him, so I asked him as I was leaving on one Sunday, "Could I talk with you, Swami?" And he said, "Will you come on Sunday?" I said, "Yes, I can." The next Sunday I did go back to the temple, and I was hanging around, waiting, and everyone had disappeared. Swami came out from somewhere and said, "Did you want something?" I said, "Oh, I was going to have an interview with you, Swami." He said, seemingly annoyed, "I don't ever interview anyone on Sunday, I'm busy, I have all these things to do. And I said, 'Oh, I'm very sorry, I guess I misunderstood.'" And very, very sweetly—*so* sweetly—he said, "When can you come?" And I said, "Whenever you say, Swami." So Swami said, "You come Tuesday night."

That Tuesday I arrived a little early at the temple and walked in, but there wasn't a soul around anywhere. I had entered the temple through the front door and walked around and then saw many pairs of shoes outside a closet in the hallway. I thought, "God, where *is* everybody?" I didn't know they were in the shrine. So I went back and sat in the foyer, and Swami came out of the shrine, opening the door to the foyer, and said, "Just a minute, I'll be down." He was wrapped in his chaddar as usual. When he came down to come back into the foyer, he had jacket, a tie, and I thought, "I hope he didn't do that just for me!" But I guess he did, understanding, it would seem, my fastidious nature.

The minute he walked in the foyer, I just dissolved in tears. Looking back, I don't think I'd ever felt the presence of so much love. It was overwhelming and I apologized, "Oh, I'm *so* sorry, I don't know what is happening to me, I'm *so* sorry." "That's all right, that's all right," he replied.

We had the interview, and he asked, "Who is your ideal of God?" And I said, "Well, I guess Jesus—he's the only one I know about." And he said, "I'll ask you to meditate on Jesus," followed by a short pause. "No, no, I want you to meditate on Sri Ramakrishna. He has accepted your son [who was a former monk in the Ramakrishna Order] so you meditate on Sri Ramakrishna." He told me what to say, and he said to come back in a couple of weeks.

I did what he told me to do, and he when I returned, said he, “All right, I’ll give you initiation.” And I thought, “Well, gee, I didn’t ask for that and I don’t even know what that is!” I thought, to myself, “Well, OK . . . .”

EW: Did you think it was strange that he asked you to meditate on Ramakrishna—did you know anything about Ramakrishna?

DM: Well, I had known about him through my son.

EW: Had you read any books about him?

DM: No, I hadn’t read anything. But in the few lectures I attended, I had heard the name, so I followed Swami’s instructions without knowing anything. He then offered initiation: he told me what to do, to bring some fruit, to take a bath, which I would have done anyway, to get a chaddar, and I thought, “Where am I going to get *that*?” Somehow I found out I could just get a piece of material and get it hemmed. I went back to the temple, and there was another young lady and a young man who were initiated the same day, but we went in to the shrine separately and at different times. I was so impressed, not knowing anything about initiation or what he was doing, but the one thing that stayed with me was that Swami said, “I will always do my best to protect you.” And I thought, “Whoa—that’s really something, I think!” And of course I know now that really *has* been something.

EW: So you were living in Vancouver, WA. When did you go live closer to Swami?

DM: For whatever reason, which I didn’t then know [laughter indicating that the reason was of Swami’s doing], my work in Vancouver ended and Swami asked me to take my furniture and move out to the retreat. I thought, “Oh my God, what have I gotten into? I’m not going to move out *there*!” But of course I wound up at the retreat, living there!

When Swami first asked me to live at the retreat, he said that if I needed anything done at the cottage, just to let him know. When I returned with my list, which contained fifteen items, such as gravel to the porch from the driveway, and other things, I gave it to him, and he looked at it and said, “This is all nonsense!” He tossed my list aside.

I don’t know how to describe his influence in words, but suffice to say that I wouldn’t have done what just anybody asked me. I was an independent woman who had always had a professional position in my work. I was very fastidious in my surroundings. Once, he said to me, “Oh, Dorita (as he called me) you are too fastidious.” In hindsight, I can see that he was training me to adjust to whatever circumstances came my way.

That cottage was just the most primitive place I had ever seen, and I couldn’t imagine living there with that horrible house next door to it. It was the original house there, so ugly and dilapidated. When I lived in the cottage, I tried everything I could do to mask

the view of the old house, for example planting something in the window. The shower knobs in the cottage went the wrong way, and the stairs indoors were all at unequal heights. I thought, *"My god, this is crazy!"*

EW: How did you feel about living that lifestyle, in seclusion?

DM: Well, it was terrible. I was the only person out there. Swami said he would have different women devotees come out every night to stay with me, which they did, and I'm sure that some of them didn't like that either.

EW: What about the Sandersons?

DM: They had moved out and I had moved in.

EW: How long did you last there?

DM: It seemed like forever. But I don't know. It was probably about three years. One night he called and said whoever was supposed to come out that night couldn't make it. But he said, "I can protect you there as well as anywhere." I guess I had the good sense to say, "I know that, Swami." And I went to sleep and had no problems.

EW: Was your job to maintain the retreat grounds?

DM: No, just to be a presence there. I didn't do anything. When guests came out, if they were staying at the retreat, I'd usually fix breakfast for them. I remember once I made so many different dishes that the lady said, "Oh my, I don't think we can eat all of this!" And of course I'm not a cook, so I don't know how I managed to do that! I also did worship in the meditation cottage, which had broken floors and finally they got so bad that we didn't do worship there anymore. It was really pretty dilapidated. But I had meditation every day in the cottage, which was known as Holy Mother's Cottage.

LKH: My children and other families' children loved to spend time with Doretha out at the cottage. They'd stay overnight. Sometimes the power would go out, and they loved the candles.

EW: Does anyone know about the "Temple Dome Fiasco" that Marina Sanderson alluded to?

LKH: Yes that was something that distressed Swami enormously. Some people changed the dome; I believe some people wanted to surprise Swami and may have removed it in order to paint. He was extremely distressed and they had to put it back to its original condition. [For further information on this infamous event, see Miscellaneous at the end of this collection.]

DM: One time, Swami called to say that one of the women scheduled to come out with me for the night couldn't come. [Reading from her journal] This was in February of 1981. "Adra Hayward and Jessie Harris [children] stayed with me at the retreat. Swami said they would be my bodyguards: 'They are strong, intelligent, and talented.' We put on make-up and manicured our nails."

One time, when I was going to California, with Swami's permission, to visit a friend, he asked me to bring the cat into Portland from the retreat. So I went up to the temple, got the cat, put it in my car, and when I got down to the gate—I had to open my door to open the gate—but the cat jumped out of the car and into the woods. Nowhere could I find that cat, although I looked and looked. I thought, as I was driving into town, without the cat, "Well, he really should have had *two* people, one to hold the cat and one to drive." So all the way in, I was thinking, "What am I going to tell Swami—I don't have the cat?" I knew I would tell him what happened, but what would be his reaction?

So when I got to the temple, I waited a few minutes downstairs, and Swami came down the stairs and said, "Dorita where's the cat?" [She imitates a groan of discomfort] "Well, Swami, when I opened the car door to open the gate, the cat jumped out and I tried to find him, but I couldn't." And he said, "Oh well, probably should have had two people." And I thought "Right!" [In other words, Swami knew what she was thinking and let her know by repeating her thoughts.]

EW: Did Swami yell at you much over those years?

DM: Oh yes. Once Swami Tathagatananda was visiting from New York and I took Swami and possibly Vera in the car to go sightseeing. In order to let them out of the backseat, at one point, I got out of the car and put my purse on top of the car. When we got back in, I started off and had to stop again, saying, "Sorry, I have to get my purse off the car." And Swami said, "Dorita, you are you so stupid!" And I said, "I know Swami, it's just awful."

EW: Did you find his scolding wounding?

DM: No, for some reason I never questioned why he scolded me, and I got quite a few scoldings! I had been told that it erases some of your karma when a holy man scolds you. I don't think I was ever bothered by Swami's scoldings, except once, after a puja, when I was not sensitive to Swami's mood and asked some mundane question. He retorted, "Don't bother me with that kind of thing now!" I got mad and slammed the door when leaving. Normally, I just let it roll off because I knew it was probably doing me some good. But I know other people had different reactions.

Anyway, as we continued on our way back to the temple, Swami would be giving me directions, block by block. When we got back to the temple, Swami Tathagatananda

said, “Do you think you could have found your way back without Swami’s instructions?” I replied, “Yes, I’m sure I could have, but that was not the point.”

EW: Bessie, you are a disciple of Swami Prabhavananda and I know you came to live in one of the women’s houses in Portland after your guru passed on. What was your relationship with Swami like? Did he scold you?

BK: I thought Swami was very sweet. I didn’t go to him for information because he wasn’t my guru. I don’t recall him yelling at me a lot but I remember one time I was a little late taking a guest to the airport. Swami really gave me a talking too; he was kinda’ mad. He didn’t realize that my son and possibly his wife, I recall, were in the next room and heard all this. He really apologized after that when he saw them.

Swami appointed me to prepare flowers for the noon worship once a week, and I really enjoyed that. My inclination towards worship developed through this opportunity.

\* \* \*

EW: Doretha, you have some sayings of Swami’s in your journal, yes?

DM: [Consulting her journal, she continued.] Quite often Swami would repeat his version of Descartes: “I doubt, therefore I think, I think, therefore I am,” and Swami would always say, “Mr. Descartes put the cart before the horse. You exist first, identify with the mind, *then* think, then doubt.”

And from William James, who apparently met Swami Vivekananda, Swami quoted: “You sow a thought and reap an action, you sow an action and reap a habit, you sow a habit and reap a character, you sow a character and reap a destiny.”

And about Holy Mother he said, “I did not know when I first met her that she was the Divine Mother Herself: that came later.”

Once during Swami Prabuddhananda’s visit from San Francisco, Swami said, referring to Holy Mother, “It was *she* who gave me the key to illumination.”

“Puja has many meanings. The flower on the head of the worshipper means the Divine within. Just playing with fire and water purifies the worshipper.”

Swami Aseshananda quoted a rabbi he once knew: “Roses are red, violets are blue, if it weren’t for Christmas, all would be Jews.” That was one of his favorite sayings.

One of Swami’s sayings was, “What you learn in pain you teach in song.”

“Don’t beat the horse from which you cannot dismount,” referring to taking care of your body. “It is your chariot.”

“Do whatever you must do to stay. The Ramakrishna boat is moving and you have to stay on the boat or get off.” In other words, you’re either going to stay with Ramakrishna and Vedanta, or leave it. You have to make up your mind to stay with it. He probably said this in the foyer, where he spoke informally.

“Thought is the mother of action. Destroy in the early stage three things: debt, fire, and disease. In other words, stay on top of these things.”

“Death is an auspicious time because it determines the future of man.”

“Sometimes after reading the *Chandi*, I eat breakfast with jet speed.”

“Never betray your partner,” referring to fidelity.

“When you call on God and there is no answer you’re dialing but you do not have the right number. What is the right number? Devotion.”

Swami also said: “When we face our aversions, we will free ourselves of our opposite attachment.”

“God is like a mother who comes to a child when he or she calls.”

DM: One day in February of 1985 [she recalled, reading from her journal], we were standing outside the shrine folding our chaddars when Swami came out of the shrine pantry and said, “There are three sources of happiness. I’ll tell you in the other room,” meaning the area where we had prasad. After he gave us prasad, he smiled, and sitting in his chair said, “Three sources of happiness—this just came to me as I was cutting the fruit: one, don’t identify with the thought waves of the mind, two, don’t seek special favors, and three, be one among the many, not one above the many.”

Once a plate of fruit slipped off the tray onto the floor as Swami was placing it on the table prior to sorting it for offering, and he turned and said, “Vera Edwards, I told you to buy a larger tray!” He picked up the fruit, took it to the shrine pantry, washed it off, returned it, and offered it. Vera went that afternoon to look for a larger tray, found one, but Swami told her to forget about it because it cost twelve dollars—it was too expensive!

EW: I heard that Vera was often the target for other people’s scolding.

DM: Oh, absolutely!



Shortly after I started coming to the temple, I noticed at the first puja how candies, fruits, and sweets were offered on different kinds of dishes. The girls in my office had given me a crystal dish, but I had no particular desire to keep it, so I thought maybe they could use it at the temple. I took it to Vera with some candy I had bought and told her that I wanted to give it as an offering. The next Sunday, Vera said, “Doretha, Swami said to take your dish, we don’t need it!” He couldn’t have known I was trying to get rid of it, could he? But of course he knew! He didn’t want to accept, as an offering, something I was just trying to get rid of. This level of mental intimacy was a constant.

LKH: [The conversation turned to another subject.] Swami was always such an unusual sight to see at the airport. Even in the summer he’d be wearing the cap with the earflaps and a big overcoat. In those days, when we were still allowed by airport security to be at the gate, we’d all be assembled waiting to say good-bye. And suddenly Swami and Mr. Bush would rush in at the last moment with a flurry, and we’d scramble to take the dust of Swami’s feet and pranam him. “Have a good trip, Swami.” “Ah, yes, yes, yes,” he’d say.

BK: Because some of the devotees would come late, they would miss this little ceremony, and seeing his plane take off. Timing was everything.

EW: Could we turn to the question of how Swami molded and impacted your life?

DM: My association with Swami gave me the first true realization that God was immanent in my life. I was raised in a loving Christian family, and certainly felt Jesus was important, but I didn’t have an experience of this until I met Swami. And I felt that religion was not just something you do at worship on Sundays, but to be always aware of God’s presence in your life. Swami made God real to me.

EW: How did you reconcile the concept that Christianity is the only way with Vedanta’s pluralistic approach?

DM: I didn’t seem to have a problem with that at all because I hadn’t been going to a Christian church for many years. I continued to believe Jesus was divine, and still do, thinking that Christianity is a true path to God, but I had trouble with the exclusiveness that is taught. I think there are many paths to God. However, with Swami, I simply felt he *knew* me completely and I never questioned that what he was doing was for my own good. Nothing was for *his* benefit.

EW: You said he helped make God real to you. Would you say he did it by his own example or by imparting that understanding to you?

DM: Probably by imparting that understanding to me, but as well by his own example. Certainly he was very helpful to me in my life, and in retrospect I see that he helped more than I knew at the time.

EW: Did you ask him for advice about your life and what to do?

DM: No, I didn't have to. He seemed to know what to say by answering my questions before I asked them.

EW: Did you ever feel inclined to disobey his advice?

DM: Well, when I went to the retreat I certainly *questioned* it!! No, I never disobeyed his advice. For instance, once when I was traveling to Seattle, Swami asked me to seek the blessings of Swami Vividishananda, who was at the center there and had been in a coma for a long time. Swami Aseshananda said, "When you go up there, tell him that Swami Aseshananda said for you to come get his blessings." So one of the monks took me up to his room and he was obviously not talking. I thought, "Well, Swami told me to say this, so I'm going to say it." So I said to him, "Swami, Swami Aseshananda asked me to come and ask you for your blessings." I thought, "Well, OK, I did it." And when I left the temple to go back to my car, I just felt like I was surrounded by so much love and tears came to my eyes, so I guess he knew I was there.

After I lived in Sarada House [one of the women's residences] for several years, it seemed to me that it was time to leave. I felt I was going with Swami's blessings and moved back to California to live and work. After several years I met a gentleman I had known many years before. When I came back to Portland for a visit I was wearing the engagement ring given to me by my future husband. I wondered what Swami would think about it. When I bowed down to him, he touched my ring and I knew that it was a blessing.

LKH: However Swami did disagree with certain people's marital choices, especially when there were cultural and educational gaps. He recognized, perhaps, that marriage is enough of a challenge as it is, without adding other challenges. He was also raised in a caste system and that may have affected how he viewed marriage between different races. My understanding is that Swami did not recommend interracial marriage owing to the challenges.

DM: There's one incident I'd like to relate. One day at the retreat—Swami would often sit with us after lunch and talk—there was a couple from Seattle visiting that day. She was a very elegant lady and he was a handsome and gentle person. They came with guests, thinking that their friends would enjoy hearing Swami. But Swami did everything he could possibly have done to turn those people off. He spilled food on his sweater, and had food on his chin, and you could just hear them thinking, "Why is *anybody* listening to *him*?" We all knew what Swami was doing. There was no way he was trying to impress these people! When he didn't want to encourage people to come around, he would act in such a manner that it would drive them away.

EW: Yes, this illustrates what I have heard repeatedly from those who knew Swami, that he had absolutely no interest in impressing people or seeking any kind of adulation. On the contrary, this incident shows just how far Swami would go to avoid any kind of admiration or attention to his person. Conceivably, those who came to admire him that afternoon actually were blessed when their expectations were obliterated, according to some who also witnessed similar scenes.

Over time, did you reach certain conclusions about Swami?

DM: I concluded that Swami had a living relationship with Holy Mother. While I was downstairs in the temple, I heard him chanting to Holy Mother [while in his room upstairs] as though he were talking with her. This really impressed me.

I am very grateful that I was privileged to meet Swami and to have him for my teacher. He changed the course of my life!

*Summer 2007*

**Alan Boyce**, a disciple of Swami Aseshananda, lived in Portland between 1973 and 1977. Swami's exemplary life, guidance, and personal instructions continue to inspire Alan's spiritual pursuit. Alan and his wife, Sylvia, now reside near Toronto, Canada.

*Taped submission.*

As I record the information you're looking for, I'll present my input along with my background, weaving it into my encounter with Swami Aseshananda and Vedanta. Because I don't want to make statements out of context, I'll need to put them *in* context with my own life a little bit.

In 1970, I had just returned from Vietnam as a combat helicopter pilot and Marine Corps officer. Arriving in Southern California, I had hoped to find my dream place, having grown up with the idea of the Beach Boys [a pop group that sang about the idealized California life]. I was a single person and looked forward to that life with great promise. However after a couple of months in Southern California, I found myself in deep depression, not finding a purpose in life, having accomplished quite a bit at an early age. I felt totally empty.

So I began my search. I bumped into another officer who led me to a program where I began finding that there is more to life than simply what we see and hear. So I began taking classes, and that led me to a retired schoolteacher/friend who began her search earlier than my own. One day in 1971 she took me to the Hollywood Vedanta Center—which meant nothing to me at that time. But I remember the experience vividly, which began with parking the car and walking towards the bookstore, which was our destination. I passed an old swami walking with some nuns through the yard. I remember looking over at him and actually feeling a *presence*, something that I can honestly say I'd never experienced before in my life. That immediately caught my attention. We went into the bookstore where I perused a number of books and then was invited to go down to the shrine. We walked down the pathway to the shrine and sat in the seating area. Shortly I began to feel a deep presence, a deep feeling of serenity. A monk, dressed in flowing garb, came in and prostrated himself before a picture of a woman whom we now know is Sri Sarada, Holy Mother.

All this left deep impressions on my mind. Fast-forwarding a bit, I was married in Hollywood in August of 1973, and we moved to Portland, Oregon, where I worked in the securities business. I chose to live there because I had also dreamed of living in the Northwest. Late in the fall of '73, when I had had been doing my own form of meditation using incense that I'd purchased at the Hollywood Vedanta Center, my incense supply ran out. I remembered hearing there was a Vedanta Center in Portland. I checked the phone book but had no success under "Vedanta," so for a number of months I asked everyone I knew on a spiritual quest—including a number of Hare Krishnas who were very popular on the streets in those days. Finally I bumped into a fellow who said,

“Yes, I know something about that but think you’ll have to look under ‘S’ for swami in the phone book to find their location.” And sure enough, there was an address. Soon afterwards, my wife at that that time and I drove over, one late afternoon when it was dark and raining. [Editorial note: See Graze Doyle’s remembrance for an account of this first visit to the Vedanta Society of Portland.]

My response was simply that I felt *at home*. I thought, “This is not like a church; I need to investigate this further!” Swami gave us a personal invitation to the lecture that night. Again, I just had the feeling of “Oh my God, I feel so at home here! I love this, the idea of the reading and a discussion; and again, although I knew nothing of Vedanta, *I just felt at home*. We began attending lectures and having private talks with Swami. I remember a couple of instances that left deep impressions on me.

One such instance occurred during a lecture when Swami was talking about all the effort spiritual devotees must exert to build themselves spiritually before going out preaching to the world. Because I grew up in organized religion—and although I rejected being a member—this was really counter to the Christian concept of devoting yourself to the work of helping and providing for others. So I was really caught off guard and raised my hand asking, “Swami, this approach that you’re talking about tonight seems to be such a selfish approach. Everything that you are asking us to do is for ourselves. Aren’t we supposed to do more for others?”

His response was so clear and immediate: “What have you to give until you *get*? You have nothing to give!”

Swami had also mentioned in his lectures not to embrace anything unless you had checked it out thoroughly. For example, if you are seeking initiation, you should check out your guru-to-be and make sure he walks his talk. So that’s exactly what we did for the next few years. The next memorable incident would have been in October of 1976 when I approached Swami for initiation after the lecture. Not knowing, even then, all the Vedanta terminology, I said, “Swami, I would like to join the Order.” Without hesitation, and with a smile, he looked me saying, “Have you talked this over with your *wife*?” Of course, joining the Order meant renouncing the world and becoming a monk! What I meant to convey was that I thought I was ready for initiation.

So later that day, after the Sunday evening class, Swami said, “Come over here!” The two of us went into the library and we closed the door. “I want you to meditate,” Swami said. So I closed my eyes, and in my own way of meditating, just withdrew my mind inside. Immediately I felt an overwhelming presence, as if I had merged into something so grand—it can’t be explained even today. This lasted perhaps a minute, and then he said, “OK now, OK!” That experience left such a deep mark that I knew I was doing the right thing and I was on the right path.

After initiation I recall a few incidents that illustrate the seemingly opposing facets of Swami's person. Those of us who were close to him knew and felt his deep resounding love for us; and as a result Swami was quick to display a form of anger. Yet those of us who knew him well never felt any anger. It was just that his voice sounded angry, sometimes almost hostile, especially when he would criticize the American people, which he felt were a total, undisciplined lot saying, "You Americans this . . ." or, "You Americans that . . ." In spite of these outbursts, Swami's love for us was greater than all of that, and he let us know that he personally cared for us—we always *knew* he cared even though he was extremely strict. Some of us would turn aside and almost smile, even though we were being deeply scolded.

Here is an example of how Swami employed the forceful aspect. Usually the Sunday morning lectures would begin between 11:10 and 11:20. Swami always gave people plenty of time to get in and get relaxed. And God forbid if an individual came after 11:20 because they would get a scolding from the pulpit in front of the whole audience! Some friends of ours, one a high-minded Sufi, would usually arrive before us and we'd usually sit in front or behind them. This one time, they had brought a Muslim business-friend from India. During this period of time, the Indian visitor had to use the men's room, so our friend directed him to it. We were all sitting there calming our minds when all of a sudden I heard this shouting going on. Swami caught this gentleman going in or out of the men's room. Swami had come down the stairs from his room and he lambasted this man saying, "What are you doing in here? You're supposed to be in there getting ready for my lecture." Returning to the hall, I heard this visitor say, as I was sitting just behind him, "I'm never coming here again; this man isn't spiritual." He was so embarrassed—in front of thirty or forty people! [Editorial note: Some speculate that such scoldings had a beneficial result even if unrecognized by the recipient.]

Another incident demonstrates how Swami never wanted a big following. He wanted people who were devoted to his concept of what Vedanta should be. And he'd make that clear in many ways. For example, I knew that Swami bathed several times a day, so what I will say is unrelated to his personal hygiene. Swami would come dressed in clothes that were almost in tatters: there were holes in the elbows of his sweaters or dust on the sleeves from the podium. We invited a friend/realtor whom we actually bought our first house from, who wanted to come to Vedanta, to experience what we'd been sharing with her. So one Sunday she came to a lecture—and it was a very inspiring lecture, as many of them were, if you were tuned in. Immediately after the lecture she walked over to the door, without greeting Swami, as everyone did afterwards. So we followed her outside and she explained, "This is not for me. Holy men don't dress the way he does. He had holes in his sleeves, dirt on his sweater." And she never expressed an interest again. Perhaps this was one of Swami's ways of weeding out insincere people. So the number of attendees never seemed to grow—it seemed to be the same core group. Rarely would we see any new people coming because Swami didn't make it very easy for them. [Editorial note: See Doretha Stuart Moore's account of Swami

intentionally dribbling food to disenchant dapper and insincere visitors to the retreat. See also descriptions of Swami's austerity to explain his tattered clothes.]

Another memorable incident surrounded a cat called "Holy Mother's Cat" that had made the Vedanta Center its home and was given a lot of attention by Swami. (We didn't realize the importance of that cat.) One Sunday, when he'd finished greeting people after the lecture, we heard him say, "Where's Holy Mother's Cat, where's Holy Mother's Cat?" Within five minutes, he had everyone who attended the lecture walking up and down the streets, around the building, scattered looking for this cat. He was directing us with a loud voice: "I want you to find Holy Mother's Cat. Who is responsible for this?" Perhaps someone had left the door open. It was so wonderful to see a person who could focus his mind so totally on one subject, the lecture, and immediately turn it to another, giving it all the importance of the world. I'll never know what Swami saw in that cat—and perhaps it was more than met the eye—but perhaps he felt this cat was special because it had chosen the Vedanta center as its home. [Editorial note: See Pr. Brahmaprana's explanation of the cat's importance.]

These incidents clearly show that Swami never cared about being politically correct. While these actions on his part seemed to repulse other people, if you were truly a devotee of the cause, you could see the importance of the non-verbal message he was sending—so we wouldn't be put off by this kind of behavior. But you can imagine a stranger coming into a lecture for the first time and experiencing this! I sit here chuckling because it really made Swami stand out as a very special, special human being.

Here is another account that I heard told more than once. One Saturday, Swami was lecturing in town because the weather didn't permit going to the retreat. Part way through the lecture, someone rang the front doorbell. This was an absolute no-no, my God! Sarada, who is now Harananda, went to the door and let the gentleman in. The gentleman was dressed in working clothes, and Sarada told him to come in and sit down. Swami began to scold this man, as he normally would with latecomers: "Why are you late? Why didn't you come on time? You Americans . . . ." This two-minute diatribe on "You Americans" continued. This fellow sat there, and as it turned out, was a driver for a delivery service! He received a very interesting introduction to Vedanta!

The last experience happened at the Saturday retreat. On the way to the retreat, my wife at that time and I got into a very heated argument, and we were both quite angry. I don't like to admit it, but it was true. With a less-than-perfect state of mind, we walked into the meeting, which was held in the smaller downstairs area owing to the small size of the group. So we were very tightly packed together. Swami was about three or four feet away. He looked at us, and it wasn't with a smiling face! He immediately picked up on our anger. So he just backed up, closed his eyes, and began repeating mantras, chanted, and repeated Sanskrit verses for at least five minutes. He had never done that before and I never saw him do it afterwards. It seemed he was clearing the air for the benefit of his

talk and lecture. Because Swami often repeated his lectures, we learned that the verbal message of his lecture was not the primary reason for his talks. It was what he was imparting to us spiritually and directly in those talks that mattered. Looking back, it seems he knew that this negative emotion in the atmosphere needed to be cleared out for him to be able to transfer this spiritual information directly to us. That was a very embarrassing moment, but what, after all, is embarrassed but our egos? It was quite a lesson for me to experience someone so cognizant of the presence of anger—and someone who also knew how to deal with it!

Next, comes the hard part: to describe what Swami meant to me and why. Over the years that I had the privilege to be in his presence, I saw *the most dedicated actions on his part to a cause—a cause that he held above everything else in this world*. His dedication was so extraordinary, no matter when or where. Swami's personal discipline was so *extraordinary*. It seemed that way *every moment* of his time. I saw him in his room, going to the restroom, in the kitchen: in all aspects, his devotion to his ideal or purpose in life was absolute. There was never a moment that wasn't a serious moment, even though in his lectures he would almost have us rolling in laughter because he had such a great sense of humor. He would laugh in his lectures too. But on a personal basis, I don't remember one time when it was humorous. It was just serious. *He was conveying to us how important this was by the way he devoted himself to this cause*. And he was a perfect exemplar.

So at the retreat, while he was present, there was no chit-chat, no worldly discussion about anything. As I mentioned earlier, he was definitely socially and politically incorrect most of the time. In his lecture, there could be a humorous moment, but immediately he was right back to the topic of the lecture, which was very serious. Similarly, in one moment, he could be so sweet, a total incarnation of what we know about Sri Sarada Devi, like he was just emanating her. But in the next moment, he could be like a lion, a Vivekananda, so powerful, so exacting, that no one would want to confront him or take him on in a discussion. Everything stopped when this lion came out—because it came out with truth, truth that could not be debated. I didn't personally see him debate anyone. I believe that he was passing on information that came through him from a higher source. In my view, he represented, from time to time, different aspects—or aspects of each holy person: Sri Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, and Holy Mother.

Swami was a teacher par excellence. He knew exactly how to take an open mind—someone who wanted to learn—and keep it open while he imparted a non-verbal message to that mind. Each time I was in his presence, I felt like I had grown a little bit, that he had imparted something very important to me. And it wasn't the words he spoke, it was the *experience*. Experience is impossible for me to share, except to say that it was a sense of knowing that *this knowledge is truth. It had nothing to do with the teacher. It was the principle he was imparting*.



Summing up my experience with Swami Aseshananda, I can honestly say that he was *the most genuine person* or holy person that I have met (and I certainly have met lots of them). Genuine in the sense that he taught that it is *not* about the teacher. The teacher is only a conduit for higher knowledge. I accept that entirely. I do not put him on a pedestal, but I deeply love and respect what he represented; it has changed my entire life. By seeing the discipline he exemplified about living the life that can take us beyond this mundane existence, his example has taken hold of my life. So that out of respect for that discipline exemplified through Swami's being, I do everything in my power to honor his example.

Swami Aseshanada was a person who walked his talk more perfectly than any other human being I've met during my 63 years of life. Swami Aseshananda lived a total spiritual existence and he exemplified for us the principles and teachings of those wonderful souls we all hold in great esteem: Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother, Vivekananda, Brahmananda, etc. Swami would quote, when he'd hear people lecturing to others: "When the flower blooms, the bees will come." This has been very meaningful for me, because I've had a tendency to do that very thing, to lecture people with whatever knowledge that I've recently acquired. For the most part, I've followed his advice until today [this recording session]. By the way, the bees haven't come yet!

I am having difficulty trying to explain the *depth* of what Swami *really* means to me. And I simply can't—it's an inner experience of feeling, and I simply don't have the talent to express through words how I really feel.

Perhaps it is enough to say that the discipline and practices Swami gave me bring great joy and happiness to my life. My life has become so much simpler, easier, and joyful as a result of the practice. *What an incredible soul Swami Aseshananda is to have given all of us his undivided attention, care, and love, asking nothing in return except our devotion to the ideal.*

Lastly, in all my meditations, I so clearly see Swami Aseshananda directing me to "*DIVE DEEP.*" This simple instruction of directing the mind to focus and penetrate through the gross outer world has given me a tiny glimpse of the wonder within us all. I feel so privileged. Swami Aseshananda so freely and frequently offered these two simple words of instruction that forever changed the lives, I am sure, of all who made it a part of their daily practice.

*Submitted Summer 2008*

**Graza Doyle**, a disciple of Swami Aseshananda, began attending the Portland Vedanta center in 1974. Born in Poland, Graze moved to the United States in 1964, raised a family, worked in the corporate world, and owned her own business. She currently lives in Hawaii.

*Interviewed in Portland and by telephone.*

Wasn't it Vivekananda who said that upon meeting Ramakrishna he felt as though a cobra had bitten him? When I heard that story, I tingled throughout my body because it so aptly described how I felt when I first saw Swami's eyes upon me, when I met his gaze.

My husband, Alan, and I came to the Portland center not knowing anything about Vedanta. One late afternoon, when it was almost dark outside (and *very* dark inside), we knocked at the front door for a long time when finally someone came to the door. We were asking whether we could buy some incense for meditation, as we'd run out of the incense we had brought from the Self-Realization Fellowship in Hollywood. This was in 1974 when it wasn't always easy to find such supplies. In retrospect we realized how odd this was—coming to a temple to buy incense—and later on we understood why the young man at the door was behaving accordingly. I thought, "This is such a strange place, a dark room with a picture of a bare-chested man in the back of it." We were just about to leave when the side door swung open and a person started walking towards us.

First, all I could see was a mass of floating, moving, ochre fabric. As the person approached and unraveled the fabric—which was his shawl—I saw a mane of black hair with flecks of grey. Swami Aseshananda looked at me and his eyes were *sparkling*. I was so impressed; I had never seen eyes like before! It was almost like he could see *through* me. Although I felt vulnerable, it was not an uncomfortable feeling. Rather, it was one of warmth, acceptance, and complete safety. Swami then said to the young man who opened the door, "Why don't you invite the young people to a talk in the library tonight?" We accepted his invitation and returned to the center that evening. Mr. Bush read from one of the scriptures and Swami added commentary. There were a small number of devotees and people asked questions. Then there was prasad and later we learned that prasad meant "time to go home."

That was, for me, the beginning of an incredible journey, the path which I am still traveling on. I was completely compelled to return there again and to this day the Portland center remains a spiritual home for me. I could not logically or intellectually tell you why. Afterwards it became apparent that we were *led* to be there; it is still a spiritual home for me, and I still very much feel the spirit of Swami there.

Alan and I were a young couple, new to the area, and interested in reading spiritual literature and pursuing our spiritual paths. So we spent as much time as we could at the

center. We were compelled to become more and more engaged and to become Vedantists. Although my mother is Jewish, I was raised Catholic. From a certain point of my life, neither of those traditions was satisfying for me. I kept searching, trying New Age and metaphysical paths. I found myself longing for something deeper and more fulfilling.

That was my inner longing; however, at the same time I felt very strongly pulled to the world and its desires, especially a very strong desire to be a mother. My desire to have a child became an obsession at the time; the thought was constantly on my mind and disrupting the peacefulness of meditation. I came to Swami with this problem. Swami told me he would pray to Mother for her divine will. A very short time afterwards I became pregnant. I felt so close to Swami; he was so kind and sweet to me, and always available to listen. Whenever I had questions, frustrations, or some difficulty, I would drive to the center, trying to organize my thoughts, not wanting to waste his time; and the moment I entered he would say, "Come over, come over." So I would sit on the floor by his feet. And I totally forgot what I was going to say; I no longer had problems. He was my counselor and confidant; he was like Mother to me.

Swami Aseshananda was known as a scolding swami however, because of the love he showed me I could never take his scoldings seriously. When I was making some inappropriate choices, he always knew what was in my heart. I was living in Seattle at the time, and I would come to Portland to be consoled by him. I recall him saying to me something which I understood as "*Nothing matters yet everything counts based on your intent.*" In other words, I thought if I had love in my heart and even if I made a mistake, I would be OK.

One of the most meaningful stories with Swami pertains to the loss of our premature child, nine days after birth. We were terribly grief-stricken. Swami was there for us every step of the way. Swami gave permission to bury the ashes in front of Mother's shrine at the Scappoose retreat. We bought a little tree to plant there. It was November, and very cold, yet Swami came with one of the bramacharis all the way to Scappoose and we planted the tree. He touched me so deeply, when I watched him, my guru, sitting in front of Holy Mother's picture, saying her name with such love. He was not a young man at the time but always dedicated to serving our needs.

Interestingly enough, with the loss of my precious daughter, the desire for having a child did not diminish. On the contrary, the desire intensified. And of course, I shared my feelings with Swami. He was very understanding. When Alan and I first met and talked about marriage and family, we also talked about adopting a child. We found that each one of us, from a young age, had thought about adoption. After awhile we made a decision to adopt. We talked to Swami about this since he was truly a part of our life and decision-making. Looking back, I realize all the issues and events in which Swami was involved were nothing short of a miracle. This included the adoption of Illiad, my wonderful and beautiful son. His presence in my life is miraculous.

Well, I still felt the desire to have more children. There were, however, fertility problems. Swami gave me Holy Mother's prasada (a few grains of dried rice wrapped in paper), tantric mantras, instruction to bathe in the morning, to take the rice after fasting, to read, and do japa. He also said, "Don't worry about it, I will pray." Because I was still skeptical, I objected and said, "But Swami, the doctor said . . . ." We had gone to the *best* fertility specialist.

Swami sat deep in his thoughts, holding his nose, and touching the space between his eyes, which was his habit, as I observed, before he gave any answer. Swami asked, "So what do the men of science say?" I answered, "The doctor said there is light at the end of a very long tunnel." Swami replied, "With the Divine Mother's will, impossible things are possible." That was in December.

It was not too much longer that the doctor, in disbelief, had me repeat a pregnancy test three times! But I knew it. Ashley was my second miracle child, born in October! He looked to me like a miniature Swami, especially for the first few weeks when he had the habit of holding his hand to his nose, just like Swami.

\* \* \*

EW: How did your relationship with Swami evolve over time?

GD: In the beginning, I was very skeptical and approached Vedanta's concepts cautiously. The concept of Advaita Vedanta was intellectually satisfying. At first, Swami was like any teacher: he introduced me to reading material and recommended classes and the study of Sanskrit to better understand the teachings. As time went on and I prepared for initiation, my relationship with Swami evolved from an intellectual interest to the emotional feeling of love and trust one has for his or her own teacher.

EW: Did you ask for initiation or did Swami offer it to you?

GD: I asked, but I took my time. Initiation wasn't something I wanted to jump into. I needed to dwell on it for a while. When I asked Swami if he would be my guru, I didn't feel as though it would be very easy—that he would just agree. I felt I would need internal work in preparation. Swami wanted to know whether I believed in the divinity of Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother. I needed time to figure this out sincerely. I think I still had Catholic guilt and fear from being disloyal to my faith. Then Swami introduced me to the Vedanta concept of bhakti which was very difficult for me at first. Swami talked with me about how to develop a relationship with Holy Mother and Sri Ramakrishna. I trusted Swami explicitly, believed him, and saw him as the facilitator who would teach me the methods which, with time, would bring me to the God-experience.

EW: Since you had an interest in non-duality, did it occur to you to ask for non-dual instruction?

GD: I guess not. I didn't see the conflict between bhakti and advaita. I felt that one method belonged to the heart center, the other to the mind.

Swami was the right teacher for me; he was *so brilliantly scientific*, as I heard in his lectures. In spite of the intellectual concepts he was presenting, I felt incredible spiritual energy and I concluded that this was real. So I had faith in him as a guru. I understood that if you have faith in the method and you persevere by practicing that method, your hunger for spirituality *will* take you to the goal, someday, some life, who knows when, through the grace of Mother and Thakur.

EW: Is there anything else you could add about the evolution of your relationship?

GD: Yes. I first saw Swami as a teacher and speaker—a brilliant intellectual whom I later saw as a model of the deeper devotional aspect. I eventually saw him as possessing perfect balance: he embodied the incredible intellect of a total jnani yet he was totally Mother's child, with his perfect devotion. Again, I may say that he opened both my mind and my heart. His words are always in my ears and his love is forever in my heart.

EW: Did you reach any other conclusions about Swami?

GD: His brilliance was that he was so transcendent while still *so connected with those around him. So incredibly powerful yet so tender!!*

When people spoke of Vivekananda as a lion, I saw that lion in Swami, with his mane and ever-moving shawl around him. He was like a majestic lion—possessing the most incredible brilliance—yet so incredibly loving. I remember how he adored the children who came to the temple, how he cared for a sick cat, how easily he laughed, how quick and witty he was. He possessed so many aspects: he was like a perfect diamond with so many facets! One moment austere on the outside, yet in the same breath, he was gentle.

Years later, when Swami Aseshananda was not well, I was living in Europe. When I returned, my son Ashley and I drove to Portland and we were allowed to sit by Swami's bedside. An attendant to Swami announced, "Swami, Graze and Ashley are here!" He was lying very quietly for a while; he looked to me so small, almost like a child. I felt he was going back to Mother's arms. Suddenly with this booming voice he said, "Divine Mother bless you!" There was still a lion in him! I had goose bumps from this—I felt it was an incredible to have this final blessing from Swami. That was the last time I saw him and I miss him so much. That which he taught is forever with me.

I fell how incredible it is to be Swami Aseshananda's disciple. I remember that every time I came to visit him from Seattle, as I was leaving, he'd walk me to the door. And

with his hands he'd give a blessing, saying "Durga, Durga, Durga [Durga protect you]." Before leaving, I would visit the shrine to say goodbye, and he'd be in the pantry preparing a bag of prasad for me to take along. As I was leaving, he'd bless me with the picture of Mother's feet that he brought from India. He'd also say, "Pray for my health, ask Mother to keep me." *At the time I was thinking, "Isn't this strange, with Swami having this holy connection, he'd still ask me to pray for him?" Now I understand: it wasn't that he needed my prayers; he used the prayer to make sure I'd keep my mind on Mother."*

When I think about all of this and that he touched the feet of Holy Mother—to me, Divine Mother Herself—and I have touched his feet, I feel overpowering love and joy. I really do admit that the only thing I know today is that I have *not* fully comprehended Swami's greatness, what he *truly* did for me and what he *truly* represented. I pray to be humble enough in this life to understand Swami Aseshanda's awesome greatness.

*January 2008*

**Anonymous**, a disciple of Swami Aseshananda, has lived primarily in California.

*Interviewed and recorded in California.*

Devotee [quietly told, with eyes closed in reverence]:

Probably the greatest blessing in my life is coming into the orbit of Swami Aseshanandaji. He is in my heart and mind. When I wake up in the morning he is with me, throughout the day he is with me, and he's with me when I go to sleep.

In truth, it is Swami Aseshanadaji who occupies my heart. It's a blessing to have known him and to have received diksha [mantra initiation] from him. So many people, when they talk about Maharaj [Swami Aseshananda], will refer lovingly to his scoldings and interchanges they had with him over the years; but I wanted to mention anonymously an experience I had with him which demonstrates the spiritual power that he wielded.

I was in Portland attending a Sunday lecture. Maharaj was giving, as usual, the Sunday lecture. Throughout the lecture he stared at me continuously. For a while I thought it was my imagination, but his eyes were riveted on me throughout the entire talk. After the lecture, people in the congregation mentioned to me, "You know, that entire lecture was given for you." And I smiled and it was a very special time and experience. That was the beginning.

As always, lunch was served later on and somewhere between the lecture and lunch, inwardly I started to feel—I'll call it a jerk—but it was an inward jerk. It's very hard to verbalize. My body wasn't jerking, but inwardly I felt this jerk continuously, continuously.

After lunch, Swami as usual came around to give prasad [food offered in the shrine], and when he got to me, he looked at me and stopped from giving me the prasad. He stared at me for a while. I knew *he* knew that something was going on. He didn't say anything. He then gave me the prasad.

I was up in Portland for a few more days. This jerking that I referred to gradually subsided. I've never been a resident of Portland, so it came for me to leave and go home.

When I was at home, a few days later I got up for my morning meditation. I was not feeling devotional—it was just a typical day of meditating. I sat down, and my mind pulled in—it was definitely separated from my body, yet still connected. It startled me, and I certainly had never experienced anything of that nature before.

At that point, a *tremendous, tremendous* vibration coursed through me and my mind, which had been, I'll say, in part disconnected from the body; my mind was totally pulled into that vibration. *Sucked in!*

The breath dissolved, everything dissolved into that vibration. The breath stopped, but it wasn't holding the breath. The breath *dissolved*. That's the only the word I can use, the sensation was . . . . The breath dissolved into that vibration and I was petrified. I clung to Thakur's [Sri Ramakrishna's] feet. The feeling was being pulled *inward, inward, inward*. While clinging to Thakur's feet, I would repeat my mantram, which I clung to as well. Each time I repeated the mantram, when I repeated the bija, it was like the vibration was generated—it became stronger. Each time I repeated the bija the vibration became stronger and stronger, and I was pulled further and further inward. I got to the point where I started to separate from my mind, very similar in a way to when my mind separated from my body. I started to separate from my mind, I was still connected, but also there was a sense that I was separating.

The experience was I was going to a place—not spatially—but going to a place with no boundaries. Infinite expanse but not spatial: no up, no down, no backwards nor forwards, and I couldn't handle it. I'd not totally separated from my mind; the experience was too awesome for me, and I prayed to come out of it. I came out of it very quickly. When I had regained awareness of my body, throughout my body there was this intense, intense vibration felt. Even in my teeth—I could feel my teeth vibrating non-stop.

For me it was a cosmic experience and as soon as it was an appropriate time that day I called Swami Aseshananda. I explained to him what happened. Here I had experienced something for me that was so awesome, so unusual. He used to say, “Ya, ya” for “yes.” After I explained what happened, he said, “Ya, ya, that's good.” I was awestruck by how casual his response was—to him it was *nothing*.

Gradually the vibration subsided in my body but a residual effect has always stayed. Whenever I sit for japam, the vibration starts. Sometimes it is stronger, sometimes not so strong. Always light is seen, sometimes brilliant, sometimes not so brilliant.

Having related all of this, I need to stress that it has nothing to do with me. It's in spite of me. What it has to do with is a *saint* and a spiritual power wielded by a saint. Coming to Vedanta we read how avatars, ishwarakotis [ever free souls who willingly take form] can transmit spiritual experience with a look, or with a touch. I know first hand that Swami Aseshananda also had that ability.

I wanted to relay these experiences anonymously because I'm older and only the Lord knows how long I'll be around. These experiences certainly, for one who has had the experience, validate everything that is taught in Vedanta. I didn't want them lost with



my passing. So in that spirit I wanted to offer it at Maharaj's [Swami Aseshananda's] feet as a bouquet of flowers and love.

\* \* \*

EW: [Continuing with the interview questionnaire] How did your relationship with Swami Aseshananda evolve?

Devotee: I guess my answer to that—and I don't mean to be totally humorous, but it's probably going to come across that way—is that it evolved through scoldings, the *blessing* of his scoldings.

EW: How did Swami Aseshananda mold and impact your life?

D: He was always a comfort. He gave me direction—both in the worldly dimension and the spiritual dimension.

EW: Over time did you come to certain conclusions about Swami Aseshananda?

D: The one conclusion I came to is this: he is too great for me to understand.

EW: What were some of the essential teachings of Swami Aseshananda?

D: [sighing] Boy, he was so broad in what he imparted! I think of concrete things, as when one time he told me not to be an obstacle. [laughing]

EW: An obstacle? What did Swami mean?

D: It was after a puja and we were in the inner shrine, just coming out; I was in the hallway taking off my chuddar and I guess I was halfway blocking the hall. Swami barked at me, "Don't be an obstacle, don't be an obstacle!" In retrospect, I found a lot of humor and also a lot of logic to that remark: "Don't be an obstacle!"

EW: Was it a symbolic statement?

D: Absolutely! Not at the time, but as I thought about it more and more, it became *very* symbolic as well as practical in other fields of life. So it was both symbolic *and* practical.

EW: In other words, don't be an obstacle to yourself?

D: Yes, that's the symbolic nature. But it was also practical too, because in life one can find oneself in various positions at work or what not, and you can become an obstacle when you're trying to accomplish something—an obstacle to yourself!

EW: What were some of Swami's memorable sayings?

D: They've been quoted by so many people. I think my favorite—which he told me personally (also I think on the video of memorial service one of the swamis mentioned it): “God vision and television don't go together.” That always appealed to me since I watch a lot of television.

EW: Are there any personal stories you'd care to share?

D: In addition to what I've narrated, there is one I'll share. I'm not sure if I mentioned this one to you. I was up for Shivaratri in the late '70s or early '80s. Portland had a particularly cold winter and whatever year it was, the streets were iced over, and it was getting to the time for my plane to leave. Vera was driving me to the airport. Swami was upstairs and I was down at the bottom of the stairs. My nature is always to be early; I am always early wherever I go, and I wanted to get going to the airport especially since the streets were iced over.

I looked up to Maharaj and said, “Maharaj, can I go?” And he barked down, scoldingly like he did, “No!” And this kept on, and I really started to get worried about making my flight. Finally he looked down and said, “OK, you go, you go!” [He imitates a gruff voice.] So we went to the airport and I *barely* made my flight, but I did make it and got home OK.

For whatever reason, I had never read the story of Mother's disciples visiting in Jayrambati. Years later I read how Mother wouldn't let her disciples, who visited her at Jayrambati, leave; she loved them so much that it was painful for her to let them go. They tried to go, but she wouldn't let them. When I read those stories, it hit home. [In other words, this disciple felt Swami was showing similar regard for him. Others reported similar experiences taking leave of the Vedanta center.]

EW: How would you characterize Swami's pujas, worships, lectures, etc.?

D: All of them were immensely holy, and the pujas and worships were indescribable. I think one would have to have seen Swami do arati and puja to appreciate it. What's done in such a formal fashion in virtually all of the Vedanta centers was performed differently by Areshanandaji. We used to call the way he would offer the various items “the frisbee method of worship,” how he would in a way toss them at the altar. [Devotee laughing] When someone once asked a senior Indian swami [name provided, but removed] about how Maharaj [Swami Areshananda] did arati, that swami said that *he*, Swami Areshananda, could get away with it, but no one else could!

*March 2007*

**Anonymous** initiate of Swami Aseshananda

*Written submission.*

***Experiences from One Initiate's Sixteen-Year Encounter with Swami Aseshananda***

My relationship with Swami evolved quickly from that of sweetness to one of frequent scoldings. The scoldings began early on, even before I was initiated. I'd heard about Swami, that he was "old school," and that his scoldings could be brutal. I knew then that if I ever entered into a student-teacher relationship with him things were going to get rough. And they did. At first the scoldings were gentle, almost teasing, loving. But it got rough very quickly and they never failed to sting. I also never failed to react, at least internally and often externally. The reaction was, of course, almost always negative; hurt feelings and stalking off. He always seemed to do it in front of as many people as possible so that the humiliation was as complete as the bitterness I came to feel at times.

Why was he doing it? What had I done wrong? Most often, I was thrown out of the temple by being told to "Go home!" This no doubt left some of the people there to wonder who the jerk was. This went on for quite a period of time, maybe two or three years, over and over again. Sometimes it was so loud it shook you. Such a big voice from a small body! But through all of it I trusted Swami, having sensed long before his seemingly total commitment to those who had come to him. Why would he expend so much energy on his students for so little gain, working over egos and serving them *prasad* daily for almost as long as he lived in Portland? Could anyone be more selfless and all giving?

So I took the punishment but was always trying to figure out what I was supposed to be learning. Gradually it began to dawn on me that it was my *reaction* to the scoldings (e.g. 'one hand clapping' below) that was the problem, although Swami never verified this verbally. As that understanding grew in clarity, the dreaded humiliation and resentment began to recede until there was almost no reaction at all to further scoldings. Then one day, in the hallway between the kitchens, he again told me to, "Go home," but this time in a teasing, playful way. We both laughed and it was over. The pounding had left me stronger and a little less sensitive.

I asked Swami three times for initiation. I don't remember what he said the first time but the second time he said, "Mother hasn't talked to me about you yet." I was very disappointed and promised myself that I wouldn't ask again, resigning myself to remain uninitiated. Very shortly afterward, within a few days and in the most ingenious way, he let me know that I should ask again. I remember being in awe of the intelligence from which those words had come, words that, sad to say, I was unable to remember almost immediately. Shortly after that I did ask him again, and with a touch of playfulness he

said, "I'll think about it." Then within days, he asked me to come for a pre-initiation interview, one week before I was eventually initiated.

Upon arriving at the temple the evening of the interview, I was taken by Sarada (now Swami Harananda) upstairs to Buddha Hall, where he set up two chairs a short distance apart and facing each other. Swami's chair was against the wall looking towards the center of the room. After a period of time Swami came in and took his seat. He said that he'd asked me to come because he wanted me to agree to some things before he was willing to initiate me. I think there were four or five questions that he asked me, all of which I agreed to. As we sat there in stillness I was initially expecting the conversation to continue but it never did. Time passed and I gradually became aware of a luminous glow which came from and surrounded him. His face, radiant and blissful, looked upward behind closed eyes. I haven't in my life, before or since, witnessed that kind of beauty.

Love seemed to emanate from him as though liquid. Probably he was no longer aware of my presence but by then I'd become euphoric myself although my mind wasn't quiet. I had begun to seriously question my worthiness to be there with him, and this in turn made me feel like an intruder. As that feeling became increasingly uncomfortable, I decided it would be best to leave. So I went to the door but was unable to open it because it was stuck at the top. I'd been through that door many times before but in my nervousness had forgotten that downward pressure on the knob would release the top. So I turned back to Swami asking, "Swami, how do you get out of here?" But he was utterly still and didn't answer. His body was there but he didn't seem to be in it. I turned back to the door and remembering the downward pressure, opened it and left, euphoria intact. I never saw Swami like that again.

During his lectures, Swami would encourage us to do our own thinking regarding spiritual questions. At some point I had become interested in the Zen koan "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" Without even knowing the purpose of a koan, I had decided to try to come to some reasonable understanding of its meaning. And I did this fairly single-mindedly for quite a period of time. Then, suddenly the answer was there in great clarity. Even if the following wording isn't as it came to me then, the sound of one hand clapping would be the same as the sound that occurs when one ego doesn't react to the action or noise of another, it's nothing. No friction. Rightly or wrongly, I was completely satisfied with this solution.

The next evening I was at the temple for the evening reading. Swami as usual was doing his commentary on the reading when at some point he digressed and began talking about "one hand clapping." I was so stunned by the impact of what I was hearing that I wasn't able to concentrate completely on his response and am unable to repeat exactly his affirmation, or even if he affirmed my interpretation in its entirety. I only remember that there was a positive quality to what he was saying. He seemed pleased. That was the only time I remember him speaking about any koan.

Coincidental? I didn't really think of it that way. I came to understand this incident as an example of Swami's way of teaching and offering encouragement for those periods of concentrated effort, which for me weren't often enough. These kinds of experiences with him were not uncommon when the mind was focused properly. It was as if he was encouraging me to interact with him in this way, through hard work. Stuart Bush once said to me that Swami's ability to intuit his students' minds was a result of his connection or oneness with the Universal Mind.

*Submitted August 2009*

**Barbara Elsasser** was initiated by Swami Aseshananda after eighteen years at Blue Mountain Center of Meditation, Ramagiri Ashram. Living in the Sri Sarada Devi House for the last ten years of Swami's life, Barbara felt irrevocably blessed.

*Written submission.*

At the of age twelve I decided to give myself to God, eventually spending eighteen years at Eknath Easwaran's Blue Mountain Center of Meditation, Ramagiri Ashram, where I was a Trustee and Easwaran's photographer, passionately practicing his eight-fold path of sadhana.

One day I said to God: "You are the Wind and I am the leaf." Soon after, a divine breeze dropped me at the feet of the Holy Mother. Initiated by Swami Aseshananda, I lived in the Sri Sarada Devi House near the Temple and saw Swami twice a day for the last ten years of his life.

I'd heard from others outside Portland how Swami had been described as "the most powerful spiritual force in the western hemisphere," "a living saint," "a jivan mukta," "established in Brahman," and "beginning where words end." However at the Portland temple where Swami's humility and fearlessness abounded, there were no such accolades. The words "base metal into gold" and "renunciation" come to mind.

When the revered President of the Order, Swami Bhuteshananda, came to visit Swami, it was an auspicious occasion. The phone rang at the Sri Sarada Devi house and Swami himself said they would be right over. I was alone in the house when the two swamis arrived and it was clear Swami Asheshananda had something on his mind. With speed and alacrity he drew a chair in front of the shrine for Swami Bhuteshananda and asked him to bless me. Swami told me to kneel in front of Maharaj Bhuteshananda and practically pushed me to my knees himself, so intense was his intention. After I was blessed by Swami Bhuteshananda Swami visibly relaxed and they left the house.

The times I phoned Swami were potent and occurred when something dire appeared to be happening. I would call the temple and tell him the gist in a few seconds. He would say firmly in a booming voice, "It never happened" and slam the phone down to end the conversation. This unique blessing and teaching method had the uncanny effect of resolving each situation. Once Swami apparently wanted me to understand something without his needing to use words. For several seconds on the phone he was absolutely silent. The message came through so loud and clear it still reverberates in my consciousness. Only once my heart did not want him to say, "It never happened" and immediately he intoned in a gentle voice, "Don't dwell on it."

The subtle and prolific grace pouring from Swami defies description, he being the humble servant of Sri Sarada Devi, the Holy Mother. Nor did his grace stop after his passing.

*Submitted April 2009*

**Carmen Farmer** (previously Jackie Farmer), a disciple of Swami Aseshananda since 1979, resided in the Portland center's women residences for nearly a decade. She works for the National Indian Child Welfare Association in Portland, OR.

*Interviewed in Portland.*

I was living in San Francisco and knew that Swami Aseshananda was a disciple of Holy Mother. So in 1979, a friend and I took a bus trip to Portland to see him. I felt from the beginning that Swami knew what he was talking about from his own experience. I was brand new to Vedanta, maybe six months into it, and had met some of the other Ramakrishna swamis. I really felt Swami Aseshananda's words inside me, and I felt he was speaking from personal experience as opposed to something someone had told him or something he had read in a book.

My friend and I came up for a few visits, and within a year or two, I felt strongly that I should move up here and spend some time with him. I thought I was going to join the Hollywood convent—that was *my* idea—prior to meeting him. After Swami initiated me, I decided I should spend six months or so with him before I joined the convent. I talked to Swami about joining and all he said was, “Well, you know, when you join the convent, you don't leave your problems on the doorstep.” He didn't say no, and he didn't say yes. And then I moved up here and was quite content to be here for a long time.

In order to move to Portland, “First you have to find a job,” he said. So I found a job. We didn't talk about moving into one of the center's houses for women. I planned to get an apartment and was staying at Sarada House temporarily. One day he called at work and said, “Well you know, you can live in the house you are in.” I said, “But I was going to get an apartment.” My heart was pounding. He said, “Well, I've lived in apartments and I know what it is like. It's distracting. These houses are like spiritual oases.” I asked, “Well, can we talk about it?” “No, you decide and let me know.” *Click* and he hung up. I really did not want to move into that house *at all!*

EW: You wanted your independence?

CF: Yes! After that click of the phone, I had an incredible internal struggle sitting there. I kept thinking, “I don't want to live there. But he's saying he thinks it would be a really good idea. But I really don't want to. But I want to be close to him. But I really don't want to.” Finally I thought, “But I could always move out.” Little did I know how hard *that* would be! There was a kind of internal tearing sensation and then I decided, “OK, I'll move in. OK, fine.” There were four of us: Joan, Alice, Bessie, and myself, plus many guests, of course. Colleen, Catherine, Magda, Vera, and Jan lived Holy Mother's House.



EW: How did you come to be initiated by Swami?

CF: [chuckling] After my friend and I visited Portland the first time, we were sharing an apartment and had become somewhat devotional. I felt I'd gone as far as I could without a teacher. We both agreed to write Swami and ask for initiation. Holy Mother's birthday was coming up in a few months and I thought, "*That* would be the day to be initiated by him!" Not knowing about protocol or being humble, I wrote to him and said, "I think I really need a teacher, and I would like you to be my teacher and I'd like to be initiated on Holy Mother's birthday." I got a note back in handwriting that I could barely read saying, "Call me when you get this letter." So I called him, but by then I had gotten cold feet. I said, "Swami, I think this was a little premature on my part." He answered, "That's OK, you and R--- come to Portland for Holy Mother's birthday and we'll talk about it."

When I arrived, we had our interview and I thought we'd just talk about the meaning of initiation. Swami closed his eyes for a few minutes, and I thought "Oh, he's fallen asleep." But I guess he was just checking in. He said, "OK, tomorrow." "Tomorrow what, Swami?" I asked. "Initiation." And I just trusted in that moment that he knew what he was talking about. I was really kind of scared, but not in that moment. That night I felt I was going to step off a hundred-foot cliff. As that fear came up, the words "Everything will be OK" were in my head.

EW: What were you afraid of in particular?

CF: I heard I had to do what he said. The teacher is responsible for the student's spiritual welfare, and the student is responsible for doing what he says. I had been living independently for a long time. I had never really felt much about Holy Mother at that point. I was a feminist and I couldn't connect with her as a motherly prototype. But in that moment, I felt a little presence that I identified with her. And that was really the beginning of my relationship with Holy Mother. My friend and I were both initiated the next day and returned to San Francisco. A few months later, I had a big magnetic pull to move to Portland. I moved here in May of 1982 and stayed in the house until January of 1991.

EW: How would you describe the essence of Swami's impact on your life?

CF: When I first moved to Portland, I felt closer to him than I did later. He had made the connection with Holy Mother possible. Philosophically I felt both of us were non-dualists although he talked a lot about devotion. I think he really made it possible for me to open my heart to the Divine Mother, which I'm not sure I would have without him. Someone once said he had his finger on that pulse which was so alive for him.

EW: How did he do that for you?

CF: He did it by just being her disciple and being so devoted to her. It was a part of who he was and not anything he said. I always used to make fun of people who talked about energy. I would roll my eyes, but I think there was some energetic connection that he still had with her. She was *alive* to him and divine.

EW: Several people commented how he would pause in a conversation, begin stuttering, and listen to what she was telling him.

CF: I don't remember that, but when I told him I wanted to move out of Sarada House, he said he would pray to Holy Mother about it, and that is what he said about a lot of things. So he had that connection with her.

Later on, I developed more of an adversarial relationship, because the longer I was in the house, the shorter the leash became. I was OK with that at first, but eventually I began chafing about not being able to set my own schedule. Instead of being honest with him about what was going on, I had my own judgments about myself and felt everyone was much more spiritual than I because I didn't want to spend every night at the temple! Since I wasn't able to be completely honest, I started rebelling.

EW: Several others described similar experiences and also felt unable to articulate their need for more space.

CF: When I first moved here, there were no mandatory nights at the temple. Most of the women in the houses went to the temple most nights. If we didn't go, we weren't required to check in. One night, several of us weren't there, and then the law came down: you must ask permission not to come. That's when it became difficult for me.

EW: Your remarks were echoed by others who felt Swami had become stricter when the results he envisioned weren't forthcoming.

CF: I honestly don't know. There were many opinions about why Swami did what he did. I would love to be able to sit down with him today and have that conversation. I think I could do it as an adult without feeling like a "bad kid."

EW: So you moved out in 1991. Then what happened until Swami's passing in 1996?

CF: I maintained my duties in the temple which involved certain flower vases, cleaning on Saturdays, and arranging the cake to be offered on Sunday. For a while I still went to the Sunday lectures, but stopped. I got to know Swami Shantarupananda who communicated some things I wanted to share with Swami, who was upstairs and not accessible. Unfortunately, I was in Alaska when he passed away. I saw him before I left for Alaska. We were allowed to go up and be with him when the end appeared near. He would stop breathing and I thought that was it. It was an unreal moment, when I thought

he was gone. And then he started breathing again! [Editorial note: See Dr. Ferguson's remembrance.]

EW: Did you feel that Swami was powerful, as many people remarked?

CF: I never understood what people were talking about, from my own experience. I never felt particularly sensitive to that until very recently. The most I can say is that the relationship with Holy Mother was very real to me, very concrete. I prayed to her frequently and felt I received her guidance often.

EW: With your non-dualist bent, how was it to also have a dualistic relationship with her?

CF: Yes, I definitely had that relationship while at the same time still being philosophically a non-dualist.

EW: How did you reconcile your feminist background with the roles assigned to women at the center?

CF: I perceive that Swami had a cultural and generational perspective about woman. It was certainly true around the temple that there were definite gender roles. I got around the feminist issues owing to her love. Her love won me over to her: it was real, it was strong.

EW: How did you experience this?

CF: It must have happened so gradually that I didn't notice. At some point I was praying to her and it was like having a real relationship with a *mother* who was totally accepting, totally loving—whom I could ask for help.

EW: How did you get your answer? Did the solution materialize in your mind or did the solution come tangibly into your life?

CF: I would say different ways. Sometimes things would just happen and work out. I remember most clearly that solutions happened through feelings. It was a feeling of being held and it was love. It's so odd because I feel it right now—but it's not her love, but it's that love in me that I feel is being stimulated or generated right in this moment.

EW: What do you mean by "that love?"

CF: Love, *the big Love*. Love itself, with a capital L. She moved from an objective form of God to being inside. The word "God" now doesn't mean a whole lot to me.

EW: Before we get off onto a wonderful discussion of non-duality, may I ask whether you still experience Swami today in some way?

CF: Not really. I certainly think about him every now and again, especially when people talk about their teachers. I have been to many teachers subsequently, but I never thought about wanting another teacher. I had a teacher. Done deal. I don't need to have another teacher, although I enjoy going to other teachers. I do dream about him too, now and then. In my dreams, he's been more the loving swami than the tough swami. He could be brutal!

EW: I've heard that, but also that he was different with each person.

CF: He was nice to me and very loving, but he could take a layer of skin off with his scolding! One of the things I gained from Swami is that I don't take crap from anyone.

EW: Do you think that not taking guff is one of the lessons you were meant to learn from Swami?

CF: I don't know if that was a lesson I was *supposed* to get, but that has been a result.

EW: Some of the persons interviewed said that Swami stopped scolding them when they began to stop reacting to the scoldings.

CF: I never got to that point, because at some level I believed what he said, e.g., "You're worthless or stupid" or whatever. I'm certainly willing to take my share of the responsibility for how I felt around him and for our relationship not being closer.

Although I don't know how I survived almost nine years in the houses, I wouldn't change any of it. It's part of what made me who I am today, and I'm extremely grateful for my life right now. Frequently I say, "I'm the luckiest girl in the world!"

*August 2009*

**Bill Pearson**, a disciple of Swami Aseshananda, resides in Eastern Washington.

*Written reply to questionnaire.*

EW: How did you first meet Swami Aseshananda?

BP: My wife and I first met Swami on our way to visit the Self-Realization Fellowship Center in Los Angeles in 1981. A college friend, living at the Portland temple at the time, told me there was a very interesting holy man I should meet. So we stopped by on our way to Los Angeles and he introduced us to him. I shook his hand, which I have since learned is not common practice. It was a brief encounter.

EW: How did your relationship with Swami Aseshananda evolve?

Later that year, I believe, the same friend asked to come visit him at the temple for a couple of days. Swamiji gave his permission so I visited. I tried to shake his hand again, but unlike the firm handshake of the first time, I received a floppy hand from him. I never tried to shake his hand again. I spent the days there watching Swami and being in awe of the whole experience. It felt like I was in another world which I knew nothing about, but wanted to learn more. My friend asked if I could visit on a couple of more occasions, but it became apparent quite quickly that I was really going to visit Swami Aseshananda.

Each time I went with thoughts or questions, but many times those questions were answered even before I asked them. At times Swami would be speaking to a group of people when his gaze would stop on me, and he would say a sentence or two as if he were speaking directly to me; he would answer one of those questions that were in my mind at the time. During those visits he would grant me an interview to answer questions. I was both scared and awed by those opportunities. I was afraid because I would often get tongue-tied in his presence. I was afraid I wouldn't remember what I wanted to ask him, but, oh, I longed for the time to spend in his presence, even if I had to struggle at times with what to say.

Very soon, I would call to talk with Swamiji, to ask on my own for visits, to spend time at the temple. I lived in the Tri-Cities, so each visit meant, if I were fortunate, that I could stay at the temple; if not, I might have to go to a motel. I was enthralled when I was at the temple. No longer was I searching for my direction spiritually. At last I had found a place and a person who captured my spiritual attention in a genuinely powerful and meaningful way. The fascination grew each time I visited him as well as the longing for the next visit.

EW: How did Swami Aseshananda mold and impact your life?

BP: I guess the best way to describe the impact is to note that when I visited the temple and Swami Aseshananda, my mind turned to thoughts about God. I felt in awe and received comfort unlike anything I previously experienced. He instructed me, counseled me, and gave me a mantra. I felt whenever he spoke to me or had me do something, there was a benefit I would gain. I felt off balance at times in his presence, but when he left the room I felt a little more in balance. After my visits I would go home with a rejuvenated feeling and for several days my focus on self and the world was clearer and more insightful. There was more joy in my life and less fear. My biggest habits of self-destructive thoughts and behaviors began to fall away. Swamiji was bringing Mother into my life.

EW: Over time, did you come to certain conclusions about Swami Aseshananda?

BP: Yes, that he was like no other soul I had ever met in my life. He had such a power of presence. I felt so humbled and quieted in his presence. I felt I was in the presence of someone truly holy, not just someone advertised as holy. In my associations with him I have found a higher purpose for being on this planet, and that purpose has remained strong over these years because, I believe, Swami Aseshananda, as directed by Mother, helped me to find my way despite my tendencies and worldly shortcomings. I cannot speak with authority as to what level of spiritual growth he had attained nor need I, but my sense is he was filled with Mother's grace and light.

EW: What were some of the essential teachings of Swami Aseshananda?

BP: Renunciation, devotion, and the idea that Mother can be experienced in this lifetime were important teachings I received from him. He would say, "Call on Mother. Mother will show the way. Be sincere in your longing for Mother in order to ready yourself for Mother's Grace."

EW: What were some of Swami's memorable sayings?

BP: "God-vision; not television." "We live in a world of time, space and causation." "Find it [truth/realization] now. Do not wait for post-mortem emancipation."

EW: Are there any personal stories you'd care to share?

BP: One event happened more than once, but the first time had the biggest effect on me. It was early in my period of visits at the temple. I would stay for two or three days, so I would eat with the residents of the temple. Mr. Bush, the monks, and maybe a guest, I believe, were all there at this particular time. It was lunchtime in the library. We were all sitting eating and talking together. Swami Aseshanada was moving about the house meeting with guests, doing whatever he did at that time. All of a sudden I heard Swami's booming voice ringing out from the hall as he was striding down the hall saying, "Go home, you Americans! You don't belong here. You think this is a social

club. This is not. Go home! You don't belong here!" I was in shock and fear. Were we to get up and go away? Of course I didn't want to go. This was the most profound place I had been to in my life and I felt I was being told I didn't belong. I was greatly disheartened. I looked to the others not knowing what to do. They had become silent, but looked calm. Soon, Swami quieted down and things went back to normal. I inferred that he was making the point that finding God required absolute effort. Wasting time on worldly matters that were not necessary, such as idle talk, would not help us to reach the God within.

Another incident took place again during one of my early visits as well. It was a Sunday afternoon. Noon worship was over. Lunch with the residents of the temple was over. I was in Holy Mother's kitchen alone finishing up the dishes. I was struggling in my mind with integrating my Christian beliefs I had grown up with and Vedanta during those days. Swami walked quietly by the door to the kitchen. I could feel him coming before he got there. His presence was so radiant. He walked by the entrance and then backed up. He took one step inside the kitchen, looked at me and said, "Jesus and Ramakrishna are the same." He turned and walked out, heading slowly to where he was already traveling. The struggles in my mind as to who is the Lord disappeared. I had, with one sentence from Swami Aseshananda, at last realized the Lord is one with many faces: as many faiths, so many paths to God.

EW: How would you characterize Swami's pujas, worships, lectures, etc?

BP: I attend many Sunday lectures, classes, and worships with Swami in the lead. What I found was a soul that was fully focused and dedicated to what he was doing. I felt it was all done for Mother and by Mother. It was hard to tell the difference for me. He exuded an inner peace and joy when he spoke of his past associations with direct disciples and Mother that brought an element of awe and joy to me as well. His lectures and worships could be on the long side for me, but that was because of my shortcomings, I assume. When in the shrine during a puja, the feeling was palpable that Swami was performing puja for Mother and that she was there with us at that moment. We were receiving a blessing by just being there.

*Submitted March 2007*

**Karl Bareither**, a long-time student of spirituality, recognizes Swami Aseshananda as a significant teacher who changed lives through his own example. Karl's meeting with Swami is described in "Managing Our Priorities," *American Vedantist*, Fall 2003. Karl, a businessman, resides in Avila Beach, CA.

*Interviewed by telephone.*

EW: How did you come to meet Swami Aseshananda?

KB: I'd been a student of Vedanta for a long time but hadn't yet received a mantra from a Vedanta teacher. So I was talking with Swami Asitananda [an American Swami in Olema, CA] who suggested that since I hadn't been to India, I could get a real sense of India by visiting with Swami Aseshananda. That was probably around 1990.

So I called Swami Aseshananda but he kept putting me off, saying, "Call me back, call me back." Someone said, "He's just testing you, Karl." *Finally* he arranged a time and I flew up from San Luis Obispo, CA, to Portland, and Swami was nice enough to have someone meet me at the airport. When I arrived at the center, I took my things upstairs to the assigned bedroom, washed up, quickly used the restroom, and came down the stairs. He was standing at the bottom of the stairs and looked at me saying [in a critical tone of voice], "You know, *you Westerners* are *all* alike! There is more than *you* involved here: everyone else is waiting to eat and you're taking your own sweet time!"

I thought, "I'm going to spend a *weekend* up here? I mean, give me a break!"

EW: So he started the scolding the minute you arrived!

KB: Exactly. I thought, "A *day* here would be long enough!" I was so stunned because I had not experienced anything like that before with other swamis. Anyway, we got through the meal and later went to the meditation room.

It appeared that Swami was suffering from a serious arthritic problem. I still remember how difficult it was for him to get into position; you could see the pain on his face. I was really taken by how much he was devoted to the meditation exercise even though it was so physically painful.

The second day I was there, I'd been meditating and when I came out of the room, Swami was standing there while I put my foot on the chair to tie my shoelaces. It was an old, old wooden folding chair. He came out and said, "You have to show *more* respect. We don't put our *feet* on furniture like that!" I thought, "This was *really* going to be a *long* weekend!"



In the same area, I had noticed an odor coming from the men's bathroom and asked one of the other houseguests about it. "Oh," he explained, "when Swami is in a hurry he goes in there and is careless." And here Swami was telling me about *my shoes on this old wooden chair!*

EW: Did this seem hypocritical?

KB: No, only that there was a double standard. The next day I had a private meeting with Swami and he asked why I wanted a mantra. So we had a discussion out in the back garden, by ourselves. He listened to what I had to say and answered, "You know, I don't think this is for you. I think you are too impatient. In Vedanta, we like to hold peoples' hands and it takes a bit longer to get to where they want to be. It's a process where you're not alone. I think you need to go home and seek out a Buddhist teacher. I think you're too impatient for what I could help you accomplish."

I was surprised!! This is quite a teacher—here I invested my money, my time, and my and energy to come up here: I would have thought he'd be *interested* in increasing his membership! But he's sending me back to San Luis Obispo where I'd then go to Santa Barbara to seek out a Buddhist teacher. It would have been nice to know this earlier!

Swami was kind enough to have Mr. Thomas take me sightseeing me around Portland. The next morning when I was ready to go back, I was sitting in the little kitchenette [the monastics' kitchen] reading Swami's book and eating a bowl of cereal. He came in and promptly took my book and threw it on the floor. It was the book *he'd* written!

I reached down to pick up the book and looked up at him, startled. "Why would you do that, Swami? I'm reading *your* book!" He answered, "You Westerners are all the same! You don't know how to *focus*! If you're eating cereal, you eat cereal. If you're reading, you read. You don't read and eat cereal. Most of you turn on the radio before you even start the car. *You're just not focused!*" So that was another lesson he was teaching me.

EW: I've heard him say, "Don't eat and read at the same time."

KB: So I flew back to San Luis Obispo and went to the Zen Buddhist center in Santa Barbara. It was about two hours' drive each way, so it was an effort. After a time, I concluded it wasn't my thing. So I called Swami back some months later and said, "I decided I'm not in as much of a hurry about my spiritual journey as when we talked initially. I'd like to come back and go a little slower and be with you."

He wasn't agreeable *at all!* "Oh, no," he said. He didn't have time. I called him back two or three more times over several months: it seemed like a *long* time! *Finally*, he agreed to see me again. To make a long story short, he gave me a mantra.

EW: Was it a shrine initiation?

KB: We met again on the lawn and he gave it to me there. That particular weekend there was an event at the retreat center. I had an opportunity to be with Swami and ask some questions. Later that day he also had a Sunday evening service, and by this time the assistant swami [Shantarupananda] had arrived. I have a tendency to ask questions, and normally he was always responsive to my questions. That evening I asked questions after the service but he did not respond. *He totally ignored me!*

EW: What did the onlookers say?

KB: Nothing. Just silence. Again, I was shocked. I thought I had a legitimate question: “If India is such a wonderful spiritual place, why are women treated as they are?” In many instances they are no less than chattel. I had read about that, but neither he nor his associate responded. It was as though I never asked the question.

I’ve asked other swamis why he wouldn’t give me the courtesy of saying, “Oh that question isn’t appropriate,” or, “We don’t want to deal with that.” He wanted people to question him, and I’m not at all bashful about asking questions.

EW: Others reported similar experiences. For example, one woman asked about the *Chundi* and Swami wouldn’t answer. Once I asked about detachment, a topic of great personal interest, but Swami replied, “Pray to Mother to learn the right kind of detachment.” So perhaps he wanted me to find the answer myself, or perhaps I wasn’t ready for the answer, or perhaps the question was just irrelevant.

KB: It’s ironic, because he’d always been responsive to my previous questions and to everyone else’s, and was always eager to give verbal responses.

EW: I wouldn’t want to presume to know the reason, but perhaps he was trying to crush something in you by using a method that made you so uncomfortable.

KB: I thought it was so unlike him! I asked the question, and it was as though I didn’t exist. It ticked me off!

EW: Another explanation might be that because he lacked the opportunity to “work on you”—since you weren’t around much and he was getting old—he wanted to eliminate a large number of samskaras by delivering that blow to your ego. Many people felt this was the rationale behind his scoldings.

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KB: Whenever I think of avoiding meditation (“Oh, I don’t think I want to meditate today”), I remember Swami’s pain when he knelt down and had such difficulty getting up. I *see* him in my mind doing that and conclude: “If he could do *that* with his arthritis and physical condition, I can certainly do my meditation.” I’ve been engaged in

meditating since that time. Like most Westerners, I have an active mind, perhaps especially so.

So it's been such a beautiful thing for me to know that I can *still* my mind for five minutes, thirty minutes, an hour. It's not only stilling my mind at that time, but having the ability to *remind* myself to still my mind, so I can be in the moment. Then I am there, listening, *really* listening to what someone is saying, not thinking how I will respond to the person. That's the focus I learned. I attribute that ability to focus to the time I spent with Swami.

EW: Did you return to see Swami after that time you just described?

KB: I went back a couple of times when I had other business in the Portland area. The last time, however, he wasn't really seeing anyone.

So I have my memories. I was really impressed by Swami's willingness to send me away when he felt my needs could be better met by someone else. How many people would do that? Here he had an interested, eager person, yet he sends them away! How many teachers would do that?

EW: He had your best interests at heart, I would imagine.

KB: I wrote about my experience with Swami (although I didn't mention him by name) in *American Vedantist*. I have visited most all the Vedanta centers and retreats in the US and Fiji. I have some really fond memories of Swami. I was particularly interested in how he motivated me by his examples. He did more than talk the walk: he walked the talk as well! However, it was hard for me to understand why Swami was so hard on people, especially the monks living there. It disturbed me enormously. Who knows, maybe they needed that.

EW: Many people who experienced scoldings said they felt Swami was really taking away lifetimes for them, lessening their karma.

KB: It was hard to reconcile Swami's behavior. If he had to correct someone's behavior, why didn't he do it privately? It seemed so unorthodox, so bizarre! In addition, his silent treatment on that one occasion was very hard for me to understand. Nevertheless, I was very grateful to have known him. I wouldn't trade that experience—it was a very interesting learning experience for me. Just his ability to overcome his physical limitations—to do what he did—was compelling!

*August 2008*

**Richard F. Epstein**, a disciple of Swami Aseshananda and writer on religion, visited Swami Aseshananda numerous times over a twenty-year period.

*Interviewed at the Vedanta Society of Southern California, Hollywood.*

EW: How did you come to meet Swami Aseshananda?

RE: A friend of mine told me about Swami Aseshananda, saying that he's the most spiritually powerful man around. Once I heard about him, I definitely had it in my mind to go see him and maybe get initiation. Years earlier, in the 1960s, a monk came to me saying, "You know, Prabhavananda wants to initiate you." I said, "Oh, it's just a formality. Forget it!"

After Prabhavananda died, I began to think there was something to initiation. So I had a hunch that I should call Swami Aseshananda, which I did from my mother's house in LA, holding a scotch [alcoholic beverage] in my hand. Immediately—even then—he started balling me out: "Don't interrupt me, I take complete responsibility for you, don't interrupt me. Yes, you can come here and stay for two days, and then you have to leave. We're not a hotel here!" And my God, he balled me out without even meeting me! I had only said, "Well, I'd like to stay with you."

"What do you mean *stay*—we're not a hotel here, you can stay for two days and then you have to leave." I said, "That's fine," and I flew up to Portland. I believe that was February of 1979. One of the men who met me at the airport said rather rudely, "We're so used to picking up people and then they don't stay, they are just here on a fluke." However, this person became very nice after a short while.

EW: After he saw you were sincere?

RE: Right! One thing I remember is that I was at the table with Vera Edwards and Swami did all the cooking (or maybe he had a helper). I remember this tremendous amount of broccoli. I couldn't stop eating it—I must have had four or five platefuls. It just kept coming and I kept eating the broccoli.

EW: Did Swami put it on your plate?

RE: No, he didn't, someone brought it in. And I couldn't stop eating it.

EW: Why?

RE: I don't know. Many strange things happened there. I was hungry and the hunger just wouldn't go. Right now, almost thirty years later, every afternoon, six months out of the year, I'm eating steamed chard, the other six months steamed broccoli. It makes

me feel better. I grew to like it. I don't know what he was trying to do—you could never quite pin him down!

So the second day I was there, Swami came running out with an umbrella saying, "You might need this—it's going to rain." I took it and flew in ecstasy. It was the only experience [of this kind with him]. Prabhavananda gave me one in Trabuco [monastery] when he gave me a scathing scolding and then he said, "Pass the rice" at the dinner table, and I flew! It was the same feeling when Aseshananda handed me the umbrella: I took it from him and walked up and down Hawthorne Avenue with the same feeling of sattva—serenity—a floating sensation which was really incredible. You felt as though all your problems were gone. I wanted it again, but Aseshananda said, "It doesn't last. If you want it, you have to work for it!"

So anyway, thinking that he meant what he said, I went out looking for a place to live, for rooms and things like that. He said, "Well, you better not go there now, not good enough," and so he kept me at the center for six weeks; I was crawling the walls. Everything I found he found fault with, until I found a place in Lake Oswego, a luxurious place with the whole downstairs to myself, and he let me go.

EW: How did Swami know these places weren't OK? Did he go to inspect them?

RE: No he didn't, he just told me, "Not good enough for you."

EW: How did it work out and how long did you stay?

RE: It was beautiful. I came in February of 1979 and left in August of 1980.

EW: Now what did you mean when you said you were crawling the walls?

RE: Well, I liked to have my nips, my [alcoholic] drinks, and it was very heavy [attending the center]. You had to sit for the reading—Mr. Bush or someone would read—then you had to go to dinner; there were also readings from *The Gospel* and something like three long lectures a week you had to sit through.

EW: It was a little too much?

RE: Well, he was accustomed to rambling. No organized lecture. Also during those long lectures, Swami seemed to have had very exceptional power. Every devotee who stayed there was required to attend. By the end of the first hour a lot of people were squirming in their seats.

EW: Did you appreciate the shrine?

RE: Well, I wasn't into meditating, and I wasn't living a celibate life then. Without Swami, I never eventually would have.

EW: Did you enjoy meditation at all?

RE: Not in those days!

EW: So what was driving you? Were you seeking truth?

RE: Something like that. A couple of months later, in April, he initiated me. I had no problem with that.

Swami used to call me. Once, while I was house-sitting, the phone rang. Sarada Chaitanya [now Harananda], one of the resident monks, was at the other end, and he said, "Swami wants to speak with you." So I waited, and when Swami came to the phone he was breathing hard, clearing his sinuses or something. "Hello. Go to h---" and he'd slam the phone down. [Epstein laughed heartily. A long-term devotee verified that she was in the room with Swami when he delivered this "directive" to Rick. She was both "shocked" and "amused," never having heard Swami use this language, but felt he must have had good reason. See also "Initiation Accounts" which describes Swami's practice of having a resident phone women devotees, only to severely chastise them for no apparent reason.]

RE: Also during the long lectures, Swami had a very exceptional power (and I think Swahananda has it too) where he'd deliver a tailor-made message, and you absolutely knew it was directed at you. He was trying to tell you something. This happened again and again, and when he stopped talking directly to me, I was bored stiff. But I had to sit through the lectures. [Editorial note: Many contributors mentioned Swami's practice of directing his remarks to an individual in the audience. See, for example, "Anonymous Experience."]

I heard that Swami even obliged a *delivery person* to stay for a lecture or something. [Editorial note: Several devotees reported how Swami chastised a delivery driver, who rang the bell during a lecture, for coming late. Many felt that when Swami blasted visitors, he was doing them a favor. One disciple remarked that Swami even chastised a ten year-old girl who was already headed towards trouble, in order to help her.]

RE: You could never take him literally. As usual, on a weekend the monks and devotees went to Scappoose, the retreat about an hour's drive from Portland, for a potluck and another of Aseshananda's lectures. On one occasion, as soon as we arrived, he called at the retreat and ordered everybody back to the monastery. You could never quite figure the man out.

Swami never went back to India and was perhaps the only swami that didn't. Shradhananda only went back once. Today they go back all the time. Aseshananda didn't care about India, he didn't shove India down people's throats; *he was there for the people who came to him*. He was so strict that one senior Indian swami in the area [name removed] said Aseshananda ran a tighter regime than they do in India. So he only had two monks, maybe a couple more who left. From the moment you woke up, you were under his thumb.

*You could have that or you could have total anarchy resulting from a loose management style.* As he told me on the phone before I ever met him, "I take complete responsibility for you. Don't argue with me!"

EW: In your view, what was he doing by micro-managing everyone?

RE: He was taking away lives [karma]. Most people did not renounce the world. They left him and they went back to the world. I always felt guilty because I wasn't a pure person and had no intention of being celibate outside my stays in Portland.

And one day, during a puja, I met a woman in whose house I once stayed, and I said, "I can't be in the same town with him!" She said, "You know, if you're around here long enough, you won't be able to be in the same *universe* with him!"

EW: Meaning that it was just too intense?

RE: Right!

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Swami always would tell me, "Stand on your own feet. Don't bother the swamis." He saw the day coming when the new swami would be here. His watchword to me was "stand on your own feet," which I have to do now.

Swami Aseshananda also saw the day coming when the new Vedanta would replace the old one. In my view, the new Vedanta is a product of a decision to keep the few spiritually-exalted swamis *in India*, to further the work *there*. So, in the West, lesser men arrived to replace those who had died—good men, good *sadhus*, but men of lesser power, incapable of holding the attention of the previous saints' disciples, or incapable of attracting many new devotees. In my opinion, the work is languishing because of this new policy.

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When I was sacked from a job I held in Portland, Swami was away, probably in New York, giving bramacharya [monastic vows] or something. Shortly afterwards I made a

decision to leave Portland and return to California. The day before I was to leave, he returned and I told him my decision. He was perturbed. “Why are you leaving?” he asked. “I didn’t tell you to leave.” I left anyway. I took up residence in Sacramento, but returned to Aseshananda on subsequent occasions.

In 1983, I took a leave of absence from my job in Sacramento to move back to Portland temporarily. During that winter it was very, very cold. In December, at the time of Mother’s puja, it was snowing with temperatures as low as ten degrees: everything had frozen. Swami’s mood fit the weather. On the day before the puja, he ordered somebody to mow the lawn, which was frozen. When the individual protested the state of the lawn, Swami was fit to be tied and told everybody around him how lazy that person was. Aseshananda went outdoors, got the lawn mower and started mowing through the ice. [Epstein laughs heartily.]

EW: With the pushmower?

RE: No, with the powermower, during the day, when the lawn was frozen.

During the puja, with the ice and everything, he was ordering people to leave every so often. Every hour carloads of people would show up from California, devotees from San Jose, San Francisco, Los Angeles drove up, there just was no room—jam packed, and he kept ordering people out. Some people took him seriously and packed their bags. When they were about to leave they ran into the Swami who, in a more gentle tone, said, “Wait a minute! Wait a minute. I didn’t tell you to leave!” and he ordered them back in again.

One day Swami came down the stairs as Harananda was going up and said, “Pack your bags and be out of here tonight.” And Harananda said, “OK, Swami.” Harananda was frequently ordered out! [Epstein laughed heartily. Swami Harananda described one such incident in his remembrance.]

EW: Do you have any idea what that was all about?

RE: Everything about Swami was symbolic. He was taking away future lives or paring down samskaras.

Shortly after that puja I went back to Sacramento. Swami was so incredibly accessible that I could call him up and he’d come right to the phone, and I’d tell him the problem. He’d reply, “Go to h---” and he’d slam down the phone, and some incredible thing would happen, and the problem was resolved shortly after that.

EW: You’d get a job?

RE: Right.



EW: After he told you where to go, how did you feel?

RE: I said, “Good old Swami!”

EW: You didn’t feel crushed?

RE: No, I was used to it by then.

\* \* \*

Once during the reading after the lectures we had to assemble in one of the rooms—we’re talking about thirty years ago so it’s a little fuzzy. Once I saw his face change, and he became The Mother. He was the spitting image of Holy Mother, and I said, “Swami, I saw your face change,” and he just smiled at me.

Swami *knew* what I was doing. And during ’83, I had a tremendous experience where I had never felt such lust in my life! It was as if he were testing me; I surmounted it and didn’t give in. Look at the Catholic saints. Walter Hilton is one of the toughest: he said temptation is very good. If you don’t succumb, you go higher. It is no worse than the barking of a hound dog. Everybody was tempted—St. Theresa really was, and so was I.

EW: How long did this persist?

RE: Just that one night, and then it abated.

EW: Did you call on Swami mentally?

RE: No, I didn’t. Before that, I was in Costa Rica with a German and his girlfriend. We were going through shark-filled waters and the motor shut off. I was screaming—I was never so scared in my life. I promised that I would stay away from women if I were spared. I only enjoyed one or two more! [Laughter] I completely renounced in 1985.

And one day, my best friend said, “If I get this contract, I’ll take you to Reno or Carson City and get you a prostitute.” Soon afterwards I was on the phone with Swami with some problem and he suddenly said, “*You’ll get a disease! You’ll get a disease!*” And he hung up. [Hearty laughter]

EW: He knew?

RE: He knew! He knew *everything!!* He had other powers as well. But as he got sicker and sicker, I would hear this huge static on the phone when I called him and his phone would go dead. And then I knew I had to stand on my own feet.

I think he arranged for me to be under Shraddhananda [in Sacramento], another powerful swami. He loved Shraddhananda. Shraddhananda got me to write [books]. I had done tremendous amounts of physical labor in Hollywood, Trabuco, Portland, and in Sacramento. I went back to Trabuco last May and tried to do it again, but my back started hurting. But Shraddhananda—every time he saw me—would say, “Get a pencil, put that hoe down and get a pencil in your hand!”

EW: Did Swami Aseshananda ever talk to you about writing?

RE: [Barking in imitation of Swami] “Get a job, you lazy American, get a job!!” After I got my SSI disability, when I went up there again, he said, “You have to get a job!” So I applied for more jobs and was always turned down.

EW: Was this disability owing to ulcers?

RE: Yes, and stress. I stayed [resided as a helper] with a powerful but disabled psychologist in Sacramento who got many people onto this program. Most people had to wait a year and a half to get on it, but I got on in a matter of months. Prior to that, I worked very hard, and I completely turned over a new leaf in my job; I did more than was expected of me and applied myself arduously. I did almost everything perfectly: the typing, the filing, etc. I felt Swami was behind this, and I couldn’t have done that without him. Because of this support, and for many other reasons, I stayed with Vedanta.

EW: Did Swami have an inkling that you’d be getting this disability pension?

RE: Oh yes, he said, “Haven’t you got your pension yet? This was *before* I got the pension or *even knew I was going to get it*.”

\* \* \*

RE: I had an old Volkswagen and Swami had a driver who would take him up to the retreat in Scappoose. Somehow the driver was unavailable, so Swami had me take him. He sat next to me in the Volkswagen and all he did was complain: “Come on, faster, I’m so uncomfortable, terrible, faster, can’t you go any faster?” He complained and whined all the way to the retreat. That was the longest time he was in that car. Now in 1989 I was very careless, driving out in the country around the Sacramento area: I missed a stop sign, and the next thing I remember I was in the hospital. Somebody had broadsided me going 70 mph; I saw pictures of my car and it was folded up like a tin can, a complete U. I had no protection, and the good thing was that I didn’t have a safety belt on, because the impact threw me into the back seat. I was totally unconscious—I had a concussion for 36 hours. I woke up in the hospital and the doctor said it was a miracle I was still alive. There was nothing wrong, nothing broken, only a little black and blue mark—that was all.

EW: It seems you are suggesting that you were protected as a result of Swami's time in the car.

RE: Definitely!

\* \* \*

Swami predicted that one day I would have a lot of money. He said, "You won't have it for a long time, but you will have it." My mother died and left me \$500,000, but she made sure it was in a trust so I could stay in the program and have medical, welfare and Social Security benefits. She was afraid she would die before I was 65, and I'd have no protection. For example, with a catastrophic illness the funds would be wiped out.

But in meditation I gathered exactly why things worked out the way they did. I have everything I need: the money I get from SSI and Social Security is more than enough to live on because my rent is so cheap. But if I *had* gotten the full money, I would have left Carpenteria, I would have taken it and gone to Costa Rica: in the back of my mind was the idea of spending it on a woman and enjoying the world. So The Mother made sure that I *didn't* [by tying the money up in a trust account]. And even if I didn't do that, I'd always be *worrying* about the money—whether I was losing money on my investments. So my brother took it out of the stock market and put it into tax-free California bonds. My cousin is the trustee, and just asks whether I need money. I get everything I need from the trust. It's a "needs trust" and perfectly legal. So my mind is not immersed in money.

EW: So this was all designed to protect you?

RE: To protect *spiritually*! I didn't think it was possible to stay on these programs and have \$500,000, but you can if it's in a trust. This way, I never think about the money. When I had my very bad period in '04, a check would come from my cousin and I would feel sick, just looking at it. So The Mother made sure that I wasn't going to enjoy myself.

The Mother says as long as you're in a body, the samskaras of various desires come up now and again; you're never free from them if you're in the body. But the idea that many Catholic saints have revealed is not to pay attention to these desires. Just do your spiritual practice and they will pass and your mind will get purer and purer. I can verify this from personal experience. Japa does work if you persist for a long time.

*March 2007*

**Sandra (Raley) Longmore**, artist, teacher, and disciple of Swami Aseshananda, resided in Holy Mother's House with her first child for seven years during the 1970s. Sandra cites Swami's spiritual perspective and approach to daily life as an ongoing reminder of the higher ways of approaching her day-to-day life. Sandra and husband Tom reside in Washougal, WA.

*Written reply to questionnaire.*

EW: How did you first meet Swami Aseshananda? Was there anything memorable about the occasion or your first impression?

SL: I still vividly remember my first meeting. I thought that the Vedanta center looked like it wouldn't be much fun and questioned why I chose to come. Yet at the same time I was so intrigued and deeply affected by Swami Aseshananda, Vedanta, and this unusual way of life. There was something there for me: I could *feel* it, but my conscious mind resisted. I am so grateful that that deeper part won! Swami's approach to daily living was wonderful and fulfilling. I remain very grateful and appreciative for this time with him. When I am troubled, confused, or even happy, I feel the *constant companionship of the spiritual presence that Swami represented. I am never without this assurance that Holy Mother is always with me.*

EW: How did your relationship with Swami Aseshananda evolve?

SL: It evolved daily as I watched Swami approach *his* daily life. For example, when a cat killed a bird he held a funeral, and with great respect we were taught to honor all living things. When I was troubled, Swami would say, "Just take Holy Mother's hand and all will be OK . . . not just in your mind, but *feel* the hand, *she is a living presence.*" I felt God was alive in every plant, animal, and person, and that God had my highest interest in mind, no matter what challenge I was currently facing.

I could also see that feeling reflected in the people around Swami. There was a deep connection to the Divine even though many of us were not acting very divinely. Nevertheless, you always knew this connection was there.

Small things built our relationship. However, Swami's relationship with me was not with me as an individual personality but with my higher, divine nature. If he felt the relationship were inappropriate from the devotee's side, he gently—or explosively—corrected anyone who complimented him or sung his praises. *He wanted nothing to do with any of that!* He only wanted us to have an active relationship with our higher selves, for us to *know* our higher selves!

EW: How did Swami Aseshananda mold and impact your life?

SL: Swami didn't mold or impact my life. The *spiritual presence within him* did everything and it made considerable impact. Like many young people in their early thirties, I was seeking a meaningful way of living and answers to spiritual questions. The old institutions like marriage and family were crumbling while counterculture was on the rise. The news, my friends, and past experience were not giving me the answers I sought.

By living and molding my daily life around Vedanta, attending lectures, talking with other spiritual devotees, and listening to Swami talk with others, a new awareness started to develop; I became more satisfied, happy, and able to cope emotionally with all challenges that arose. To this day, the deep happiness that comes with my connection to Spirit is *all* that makes good, solid sense in my life. *Nothing else satisfies like this core "anchor" that Swami laid in my life.*

EW: Over time, did you come to certain conclusions about Swami Aseshananda?

SL: Swami was exactly as he presented himself to be. Nothing less, nothing more! He was true to himself and his spiritual connection, and nothing altered that. I observed him in many different situations but he never deviated from what he lectured or talked about. He was deeply spiritual, compassionate, and loving—even though he could correct, discipline, or explode. Even at these times, you always knew that at the core was a deep, spiritual connection that loved you with all your faults.

EW: What were some of the essential teachings of Swami Aseshananda?

SL: We are all spiritual beings who can touch the hand of God. We are all *capable* of the highest spiritual attainment in this life: illumination.

EW: What were some of Swami's memorable sayings?

SL: "God always ends with something sweet," "God is a living presence," "Take the name of Holy Mother," "Give all your good fruits to Holy Mother," "Take ten steps toward God and He will take 100 steps toward you," "Do more japa, do more japa, do more japa!" "Don't worry, everything will be alright—everything will be alright!" "You must be self-supporting!" "God doesn't want sad nuns."

EW: Are there any personal stories you'd care to share?

SL: One day, on approaching the temple I saw Swami watering the flowers. He called, "Come over here, Sandra. See these flowers? They would die without water. Similarly you must water your life with higher thoughts of God or your life will become dry and unhappy."

On another occasion, as I was leaving my car, Swami asked, "Did you lock your car?"

“No, Swami.” “You must lock your car. If you leave it open someone might steal something and it would be your carelessness that caused it. This is Holy Mother’s property and you must always respect her presence and not be careless.”

Swami once explained the implications of picking up the wrong brand of bread from the store. “Sandra, this isn’t what I told you to get. That shows a crack in the mind. You must stay focused and not be distracted. A focused mind always remains in God.”

Swami found a way to teach us using the presidential election as an example. He didn’t like the candidate that won and we all knew his dislike of the new President-elect. After a few words expressing his political views, he concluded, “You must respect the office of president even if you don’t like the person holding the presidency. The office came from God.” I have always remembered this when something happens where I don’t like the person or I think they are not acting well: I should still respect their role. This memory, as all memories of my time with Swami, has always served me well.

EW: How would you characterize Swami’s pujas, worships, lectures, etc?

SL: All puja details were carefully attended to. Swami once told me sweep the back porch as if an important guest were coming, Holy Mother herself! After the puja, others (and I) experienced many emotions from relief, to happiness, to contentment, as reflected in the devotees’ eyes. We all knew we had participated in something special and were better off because of it.

Swami’s lectures always addressed something I was thinking about or challenged by. Others would say the same thing. At first I had a hard time understanding because of Swami’s accent, and the vocabulary was new to me; but as I became accustomed to his manner of speaking, I found the lectures to be very inspiring and informative. Swami made use of real stories from his life. *This made the ways of Spirit a real, living presence.*

*Submitted October 2008*

**Bert Cornick**, a disciple of Swami Aseshananda from 1978, had almost daily contact with Swami through 1996. Bert served the Portland center as treasurer from 1983 to 2001.

*Written submission.*

**The first meeting with Swami Aseshananda:**

In 1974, I had just moved up to Medford, Oregon, from Sacramento, California, and married my second wife, Elaine. She was in charge of a mental health program run by the county. It was through her work that I met Steve, who told me about a swami, or teacher, he was seeing in Portland. I had been on a long-time spiritual search which has included Unity Church, Religious Science, several New Age movements, and lots reading material—but I still felt something was missing. Around 1978, we moved from Medford to Eugene where I picked up a copy of an intriguing book titled *Autobiography of a Yogi*. I wanted to find out more about the Eastern religions.

I remembered that my friend Steve had told me about his teacher, so I called Steve to see whether it might be possible to meet his teacher, Swami Aseshananda. He said he would be happy to introduce us: why didn't we come up on the following Sunday for his lecture at the Vedanta Society in Portland? So that Sunday we made the drive to Portland from Eugene to hear the swami.

Although I did not understand very much of what he was talking about, the rest of the people seemed to, and most were enjoying it. What I did sense by listening and watching the swami talk was the deep sincerity that he put into his words. I felt the presence of someone with *total conviction*, I saw someone who was trying to impart this knowledge to his listeners!

After the lecture was over, Steve took us through the line to meet the swami and he was very polite and warm to us. After we left the Vedanta Society, Steve invited us over to his apartment for lunch and we had just started eating when the phone rang. Steve said, "It's Swami Aseshananda and he wants to talk to Bert." So I picked up the phone and the swami explained that Steve had told him I was a contractor, and he would like to get my opinion on something. Swami then said they were planning to paint the temple and there were two schools of thought about what color to paint it. Some people wanted to paint the same color that it was, while others wanted to change the color to something new. Swami asked, "What do you think?" I replied, "Well, how long has it been that color?" He answered, "Over 20 years." So I said, "Well, maybe it would be nice to paint it a new color." With that he said, "*See, you American want to change everything!!*" *And he hung up the phone!* I thought to myself, "Well, that was an interesting conversation." The other interesting thing about this incident was when Swami called he never asked Steve if I were there; he just said, "Let me speak to Mr. Cornick."

It was several weeks before we could get back up to Portland to hear the swami speak again, and as we were going through the line after the lecture, he looked up at me and remarked, “Well, you’re back. I thought you would not come back after I scolded you.” My reply was, “It will take more than one little scolding to get rid of me, Swami!” And that’s how our relationship began!!

### **My relationship with Swami:**

We lived in Eugene until 1980 and would try to drive up every weekend for the Saturday retreat or the Sunday lecture. Shortly after I met the swami, I asked for a private meeting to find out more about how to meditate. He gave me some instruction, said to work on it, and come back again after I had practiced. I may have mentioned something about getting initiated to him at the time, but he said that would have to wait.

So this went on for five years. Every year I would make an appointment for a private conference and every year he would ask me how the meditations were going. He would then give me more instruction and tell me to come back next year. It became a game between us to see who could hold out the longest. Then one day during a lecture, he used the metaphor of a man who had fallen behind a tall wall, needing the help of another man to get out. The first man dropped a rope down to the second man and helped pull him out.

I then decided this was the time to act! So I made an appointment to see Swami and during our conversation I asked him to give me initiation. He came back with his usual response, “We will have to think on it.” I retorted, “No—you *have* to give me the rope *now* and help me climb over the wall!” His response was, “Well, okay, but we will have to pick an auspicious date.” He did that, and I finally was initiated after five years.

What I found most interesting about Swami Aseshananda was his ability to read people like an open book. Each person who came into contact with him was treated according to their disposition and received yoga instruction appropriate to their nature. For example, if you were a karma yogi like me, you got plenty of work to keep you busy. If you were a bhakti yogi, you had plenty of worship and time in the shrine. If you were a jnana yogi like my friend Steve, you received a different teaching.

Some people would come for a few weeks and Swami would ask them to be initiated while others had to wait years to be initiated. If you came with an open mind and an open heart, Swami would always give you something—and many times it was a *good scolding* to lessen the grip of the ego!

### **Karma Yoga:**

The swami knew what the best path was for each of his students, and since my path was karma yoga, I received lots of work to do around the temple, the retreat, and the two women’s houses. This was a real blessing for me because it brought me into contact with Swami Aseshananda almost everyday. I had my own contracting business at the



time, so I could arrange my schedule to be able to be at the temple about four or five days a week. Swami would call me and tell me he wanted this or that done, then I would pick up the necessary materials and do the work. Then when I was finished I would stop back by the temple, if I weren't there already, and take prasad. This usually consisted of the blessed food that had been given out at the noon worship. He also gave me a can of applesauce that had come from the big apple tree next to the temple.

This went on for several years, and then one day as he was handing me another can of applesauce to go along with the twenty or so that I already had at home, I said: "The price has gone up." He said, "Do you want two cans now?" I replied, "No, from now on I want one can of applesauce and then I want you to take Holy Mother's picture to the table and give me a blessing along with the applesauce!" From that day forward, I received one can of apple sauce and a blessing with Holy Mother's picture. Once you made a bargain with the Swami, he never forgot.

### **The Suitcase:**

Swami Aseshananda always took Mr. Bush's suitcase whenever he traveled anywhere, and since it was a very old suitcase to begin with, it would stay closed only with a rope tied around it. So I decided that Swami needed a new suitcase. The problem was I knew he would not accept a new one if I just brought it over and gave it to him, so I devised what I *thought* was a clever scheme!

I went shopping and bought a brand new suitcase, then drove over to the temple and made sure there was no one around to see me take it inside. I put it in the shrine pantry next to the shrine where Swami cut up the prasad. But just as I was leaving, one of the monks saw me go out the door and drive away. Well, when I got home the phone was ringing and it was Swami Aseshananda, and was he in a *bad* mood! He was shouting at me and letting me know, in no uncertain terms, that under no circumstances would he accept the suitcase as a gift because he was a monk and monks could not accept gifts. He also told me to come to the temple immediately because he had not finished scolding me.

When I arrived at the temple I could hear Swami shouting clear outside, and then when he saw me, he shouted some more to make sure everyone within earshot could hear him. Then he ordered me to go sit down in the library and wait. In a little bit he marched into the library and started all over again in a loud voice about me bringing the suitcase and that he would not accept it under any condition. He always liked the person to sit down in the chair while he was scolding, and he would stand up and tower over the person while he shouted.

Well, after he had made his point, he then came closer to me and lowered his voice so no one else could hear and said, "I know that you were trying to help me by giving me that new suitcase, but let me tell you why I can't take it. I always take that old suitcase because it reminds me of Mr. Bush, and that's the reason I cannot accept a new one. I

have used that suitcase on every trip since I came to Portland. Do you understand?" I said, "I understand, Swami, and I can accept that on one condition!" He asked, "What's that?" I replied, "That you let me go upstairs, get the suitcase and take it to the luggage shop to have it repaired." He looked at me, smiled and said that would be okay!

### **The Dentist:**

One morning I got a call from Swami Aseshananda who sounded quite upset. It seemed he had been to Mr. Bush's dentist the day before and the dentist wanted to pull all of his teeth because they were in bad shape. Swami did not want any part of that. He asked me about my dentist and could I make an appointment to see him to discuss the matter?

I called my dentist, set up an appointment, explained what was going on, and that the swami would like to save his teeth if possible. Mr. Bush took Swami to the appointment. My dentist said he would be happy to look after Swami's dental problems and that it would not be necessary to pull all of his teeth.

Swami went on several appointments with the dentist and things seemed to be going along fine until one morning I got a call from Swami. He said that he had an appointment that day to have his teeth cleaned, but I would have to call and cancel it because a woman was scheduled to do the teeth cleaning and he could not allow that as a monk. I was quiet for a moment and then I said, "Well, Swami, just think of her as the Mother herself and everything will be OK!" It was quiet on the other end of the phone and then Swami said, "The Mother... that's good. Okay. I will go. You don't have to cancel the appointment."

### **The Visit of Nityaswarupananda:**

We were blessed with a visit from Swami Nityaswarupananda who was also a disciple of Holy Mother's and her only other living disciple besides Swami Aseshananda. He was a very friendly, outgoing person and stayed at the Portland temple for over a month. During this time I went to the temple as often as possible to have lunch and visit with the swamis and monks.

On one of my visits towards the end of his stay, Swami Nityaswarupananda mentioned that he lacked the opportunity to see much because he had to fly everywhere he went. He was due to visit the Sacramento center next and wished that he could drive there instead of flying. So I spoke up, saying I would be happy to drive him to Sacramento if Swami Aseshananda would approve of it. Swami N. then called Swami A. into the room and told him that he would like me to drive him instead of flying. Swami A. said that that was fine with him if that's what the Swami N. wanted.

After I left the temple and arrived home, the phone rang and it was Swami A. and he was *not* happy. He told me in no uncertain terms that he wanted to see me at the temple right away. When I arrived at the temple Swami ushered me into the library sat me down in the chair and begin to shout at me. "What right have you to interfere with our travel

plans? The Swami is not a guest in *your* home and now you have created a lot of trouble by sticking your nose in!”

I knew that Swami A. was giving my ego a little test to see how much investment I had in taking Swami N. to Sacramento, so I responded, “If you don’t want me to take him to Sacramento, Swami, then I won’t do it!” His replied, “You can’t tell him what to do. Swami N. is a senior monk in the Order and a direct disciple of the Holy Mother herself. If he wants you to drive him to Sacramento, then you must do it!”

### **Swami’s Sense of Humor:**

Swami Asheshananda had a very good sense of humor and once in a while I enjoyed teasing him. I always made it a point not to do it where anyone else could overhear us. My favorite spot to talk with Swami was the shrine pantry where he prepared prasad. One day, when Rajneesh was frequently in the news with stories about his ashram in eastern Oregon, I told Swami, “Well, I have found a new guru and he has over 60 Rolls Royce cars. You don’t have any cars, in fact you don’t even have a *driver’s license*!” His response was: “Well, if he is so wonderful why don’t you go and be with *him*!”

Another time I teased Swami, “I have found a new path to illumination.” He replied, “What’s that?” I said, “First you have to find an illumined soul and then you sneak up behind him and grab him by the ankles and don’t let go!” His response was: “Yes, but you have to do some work too!”

### **Good-Bye:**

Towards the last days of his life, Swami spent most of his time in bed. Many of us took turns helping to nurse him around the clock. It was a wonderful opportunity to see how a holy man deals with the death of his body. As I recall, he spent three or four months in his final passing and it was a real blessing for all of us that had the privilege to serve him during that time.

One night when we all knew that the end was very near, I had a very clear dream that I was standing outside the door to Swami’s room. When I knocked on the door, Swami said in a strong voice, “Come in!” As I went into the room, I expected to see him on his bed where he had been for the past several months, but instead he was standing in the middle of the room dressed in his suit with his overcoat and his old aviator cap, the outfit he wore outside. He motioned for me to come and stand in front of him, reached into his pocket, and took out the picture of Holy Mother that he always kept with him. He placed it on my head and gave me a blessing. Swami said, “Good-bye, I’m leaving now,” and turned and walked away.

Most dreams I have are not memorable, but this dream was so clear that I will never forget it. Swami had come to me to say good-bye on the very night that he passed on!

**In Conclusion:**

Meeting Swami Aseshananda and having a close personal relationship with him was the most meaningful event of my life. He was the *real thing* and everyone that came into contact with him went away blessed. Swami had the ability to see into a person's heart and he could change a life with a look or a touch. I know of several instances where this happened, and I know that he *certainly* changed my life

*Submitted September 2008*

**Mike Di Feo**, a disciple of Swami Aseshananda, attended the San Francisco Vedanta center and visited Swami Aseshananda several times between about 1989 and Swami's passing.

*Written submission.*

I live in San Rafael, CA, and attended the San Francisco Center actively from the late 1980s through 2000. During one of my visits to the Olema Retreat where I often spoke with Swami Sahajananda, a monk named Vimutka told me that there was a swami in Oregon that was very special—a direct disciple of Holy Mother. Vimutka mentioned that it would be a good thing for me to visit him. Some time went by and I eventually went to see Swami in Portland.

After the initial visit, I went to see Swami about five additional times. The last time, Swami was ready to leave his body. He was tired and spent most of the time in bed. He used the rest to gather all his strength for the Sunday worship.

Swami softened my heart. He did it by example, quietly and inspiring. I believe with every bit of my heart that “The Grouchy Swami,” as my nine year-old daughter called him, was an enlightened soul. He saw in me something I could not find and brought it out so I could feel it with every bit of my being. I am sure that is what happened to him when he was in the company of Holy Mother, Sarada Devi. But whereas Swami was ready and was enlightened, I was neither, and so continued as a householder to finish my responsibilities and work out my karmas. Nevertheless, he changed my life from the inside. So because of Swami, I became a better husband and a better father, which is probably my destiny.

I still see clearly and feel Swami's stern character in the Sunday lectures as well as his loving disposition while addressing us in private. Swami is simple, but in his simplicity he shows us truth, love and freedom. That was the wonderful trait passed on to him by Holy Mother and heightened by his contact with the direct disciples.

I never attended Swami's funeral, because, as far as I am concerned, he never died and will never die.

Swami is free and in his infinite freedom, he is looking after all of us. I can feel that he is there when I need help and he is there to guide me when I go astray. And in my heart he will always be there waiting to help when I need him.

\* \* \*

One last thing: I had the privilege, approved by Swami, to go on bicycle rides with Mr. Bush on Sundays after the worship. Mr. Bush and I would ride to a place by the river,

have lunch, and then return. Mr. Bush told me wonderful stories about Swami. He specially mentioned the strength of character Swami had when they encountered difficult times. I remember in one of those lunches we were talking about Swami and Mr. Bush said, “He is the real deal. That is why I gave it all up when I met him.” [Stuart Bush was a member of a distinguished Oregon family.] He said it with such conviction and open heart, that it stayed with me: I can remember it today as vividly as it happened about 15 years ago.

Swami Asheshananda would say, “Truth is simple, we just make it complicated because we want to play.” And he very well showed us what he meant in every one of his worships. They were simple and of the highest truth.

*Submitted March 2008*

**Gale Loof, Ph.D.**, has been a disciple of Swami Aseshananda since the early 1980s. She lives in Malibu, CA, where she devotes her time to caring for her elderly mother and playing with her grandchildren.

*Written submission.*

I came to know Swami Aseshananda, and to be initiated by him, in an unexpected way. In the early 1980s I was living in Malibu (as I do now), about midway between Hollywood and Santa Barbara, so Swami Swahananda (whom I knew) would have been the logical person to initiate me. However, a close friend and spiritual mentor, Lex Hixon, kept insisting that I must go to Portland and seek initiation from Swami Aseshananda. I had just completed a doctorate in cultural anthropology.

I had never meet Swami and was very reluctant to just turn up in Portland asking for initiation. It seemed very unlikely to me that he would agree to initiate a complete stranger. Finally I got up the nerve to call. Part of me hoped that he would refuse to speak to me so I could just tell Lex I'd tried and failed; then he would stop nagging me about it. To my utter surprise and consternation he came to the phone. I didn't know what to say; small talk seemed inappropriate, so I just blurted out that I was seeking initiation from him. He said something to the effect that my request was a bit premature but if I could come up to Portland we could at least meet. He then made arrangements for me to stay with some of his disciples who lived a block or so from the center and arranged for me to see him as soon as I got there. So that's how it happened. I got off the plane and went directly to the center where he saw me immediately. We had a very warm interview: he sat in a chair and I at his feet, and from time to time he would give me a blessing. The meeting was quite long and the next day he initiated me.

When Swami Aseshananda initiated me he not only gave me my mantras but also told me to go to daily mass! It so happened that at the time I was already going to daily morning mass and staying after to pray the rosary. I was also deeply into studying Swamiji's teachings and occasionally I went up to Santa Barbara for arati, or vespers, as they call it there. So when Swami Aseshananda offered to initiate me I felt he needed to know about my involvement with the church. His response was to ask me what I thought about Jesus and Mary and I said I believed that they were the same eternal light of Love and Wisdom that also manifested as Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother. And he said, "Good! Continue going to mass!" or words to that effect.

Let me tell you about a couple of endearing memories from that visit. My baptismal name is Marie and Swami liked calling me Gale-Marie only he pronounced the G like an H and accented the first syllable of Marie, so when he called me it sounded like he was saying "Hail Mary!" Picture him coming down the hallway calling for "Hail Mary," and often rather brusquely; he had that way about him.

One time he found me in the library talking to one of the monks and became very angry. Fortunately he directed the anger at the monk: “Out!” he shouted, “Out! Out!” And the monk hurried away. I discovered later that he did not allow any fraternization between the monks, who lived in the center, and the lay nuns who lived in houses surrounding the center. What an amazing blessing to be in the presence of a direct disciple of Holy Mother!

*Submitted March 2009*



**Kathe Fradkin**, a disciple of Swami Aseshananda, has been a Vedanta devotee in Southern California and Portland for over thirty years. She also served as a Sunday school teacher at the Portland center for over a decade.

*Written submission.*

### **My First Personal Meeting With Swami:**

In August of 1980, a friend and I drove up from California to meet the swami whom I had heard about and seen from afar for many years prior. As we drove nearer and nearer to the temple, my heart pounded harder and harder. I finally was able to meet the special man whom the Southern California Vedantists so lovingly spoke of.

Upon arriving at the Portland temple, we were greeted by one of the monks who immediately directed us to the library. My friend and I looked at each other and cautiously proceeded as directed. After about ten minutes, we heard someone coming down the steps barking orders at the monks all the way. “Yes, Swami, yes, Swami,” were the endearing responses. From what I previously knew about Swami, I surmised that must be Swami Aseshananda. This was confirmed as he entered the library, greeting us kindly and openly.

Swami gave his kind regards to my family, asked many questions about our travels, and gave us a short history lesson about the Portland temple. We were captured by his focus and warmth as he looked directly into our eyes when speaking and as he smiled so freely. He had a certain peace about him that we had never experienced before.

It was then time for prasad. Swami left the library, taking a well-worn path to the pantry to chop the fruit and prepare the plates of food. Upon his return, he gave us a plate of sliced oranges, nuts and one See’s candy, and then he led us in the offering chant. Swami’s voice was strong and filled with conviction and devotion. I realized that even though he had done this thousands of times, it had not become mundane. Instead, his dedication to the chant and the message behind it had grown stronger and stronger. This was obvious by the strength in his voice, his posture and the power behind the words. I soaked up every minute of it. Swami left shortly afterwards to attend to other devotees. Then alone, I looked at my friend and said, “Wow! He is one powerful dude!” That first impression has lasted to this day.

### **Swami and Children:**

After I landed a teaching job in St. Helens, I moved to Portland. I was filled with excitement as I could now be with Swami, find more holy company, and enjoy the great Northwest—all at the same time! I had learned from my experiences in Southern California Vedanta temples that the way to get to know fellow devotees was to become involved with Vedanta activities on a regular basis. I was drawn to the Vedanta children and their parents whom I’d met—welcoming, open, and committed to Vedanta and

Swami. I wanted to be part of that scene. Becoming a Sunday school teacher was a natural fit.

The philosophy of the Vedanta Sunday School resonated with me as the learning environment was centered on Holy Mother's teachings and the children's emotional and spiritual growth. Swami would always direct the teachers to “Do a little worship, do a little chanting, and offer teachings about Holy Mother.” That we did! The routine was welcomed by both the teachers and children. After taking a short walk around the temple to cut flowers from the gardens (weather permitting), we started our formal class. A short worship (with waved incense and chanting), readings from elementary books about the avatars and singing took much of the time. Crafts were also included to enable the children to express themselves and provide an open environment for discussion. It was always special to see the children show off their creative art to Swami. He was quick to give them a sweet smile and plenty of prasad with extra cookies and sweets.

### **Learning about Karma Yoga:**

My teaching experiences, both when working with learning-disabled junior high students and teaching “tweens” in the Vedanta Sunday School, provided challenges. To focus on my active social life and continued professional responsibilities, I wanted a break from children on my weekends. I decided to ask Swami if I could take a leave from teaching the Vedanta Sunday School.

As I met with Swami, I flooded him with my thoughts. He listened patiently and then closed his eyes and thought deeply, as if connecting to a higher power before responding. He then advised, “Think of your daily work with children as karma yoga. Offer all that you do up to Holy Mother and you will find more peace in what you do.” Hmmm. That was a paradigm shift; I could make my work with all children part of my spiritual practice. We talked about the practicality of that for the rest of the meeting and I left with excitement in my heart. I immediately put that suggestion into practice. It made a huge difference in my attitude toward addressing challenges with youth. There was a higher purpose for my teaching. I was then excited to continue teaching Sunday school, so I could consistently practice karma yoga.

### **Following Swami’s Advice:**

One summer day, my sister (who is a nun in the Santa Barbara Vedanta convent) and another nun came to Portland to see Swami and attend one of the summer antar yogas (women’s workdays at the Scappoose retreat). The day before we went to the retreat, Swami wanted to treat the nuns to a sightseeing tour. All four of us—Swami, the two nuns and myself—packed in my car and headed for Multnomah Falls. What a memorable drive and visit—sharing conversation with ones I loved and seeing one of the most spectacular sights in the Northwest’s beautiful Columbia Gorge.

We spent longer than we expected there, soaking up the sights and walking with Swami. We needed to get back in time for the evening worship. As I was driving home on the

freeway, Swami told me which exit to take. I tactfully let him know that I was very familiar with the Portland area and that I knew how to get back. He said nothing in response, even though my sister was mortified at the thought that I would not immediately follow Swami's advice. One of my intentions was to enable Swami to visit more with the nuns rather than giving directions. I must admit the other intention, though, was to protect my ego from having someone tell me directions. That was my first mistake! I proceeded to get off on an exit that took me further west than we needed to be. As I retraced my steps to go east, I became hopelessly lost! That was my second mistake! When all in the car noticed that I was lost, Swami calmly stated, "Now, follow my directions to get back to the temple." With a lesson so humbly learned, I did follow his advice and we got back safely—just in time to prepare for worship. Lesson learned and applicable upon many subsequent occasions!

Swami made a tremendous impact upon my life through his words and, more importantly, through his actions. His faith and trust in Holy Mother consistently and continuously radiated from him and, as a result, he deeply touched everyone who was fortunate enough to have met him. He was, and continues to be, an inspiration in my daily spiritual life.

*Submitted March 2009*

**Patricia Harris** and her husband Jim Harris, disciples of Swami Aseshananda, began their association with the Portland center in 1972. Pat taught at the children's Sunday school for many years.

*Written submission.*

My husband and I are both disciples of Swami Aseshanandaji and associated with him beginning in 1972. Swami and I had a somewhat stormy relationship but that wasn't a negative thing. I attribute to him my better understanding of Christianity and a better understanding of spirituality, myself, and of life in general.

I don't know what I would have done without his input into our lives. We lived and breathed Vedanta and Swamiji for many years and felt a great loss at his passing. He had a remarkable effect on our children as well. One was a toddler and the other less than a year when we became involved. Swami's love for children was so apparent in his interaction with our kids and all the other children involved with Vedanta during those first ten years or so of our association. The Vedanta Sunday school was such a vital part of the kids' and my life as I was a Sunday school teacher for several years. I also had the privilege of working with some wonderful women through the Sunday school. Swami made that possible.

The same goes for helping with the women's antar yogas [a work and spiritual retreat for women].\* To work so closely with other devotees and with Swami was such an amazing experience. I feel so blessed to have been associated with a man who truly lived the spiritual path! What a powerhouse he was!

Swami and my husband had such a special and spiritual relationship. Suffice it to say, Swami's effect on him was astounding!

*Submitted July 2008*

\* \* \*

\*[Editorial note: When asked to describe the antar yogas, Pat wrote: "The women's antar yogas were a weekend gathering of women for spiritual endeavors, work, and worship at the Scappoose retreat. We did work in the gardens, on trails, and at the various shrines. Anyone with kids could bring them. We had readings and noon worship; and there was usually a Saturday service that weekend, so we would get everything ready for it and the potluck. After the Saturday service we would have

pilgrimages to the various shrines. Each woman and her kids (if she had any) would be responsible for one shrine: cleaning it up, providing flowers for offering at it and providing a reading. They were wonderful experiences.”]

**Mikele Rauch**, disciple of Swami Asheshananda from 1980, is a psychotherapist and a writer living in Boston.

*Written submission.*

I knew he was *The Man* at our first contact: Swami gave me a pretty intense scolding. It was an amazing experience to have felt “seen” but not shamed or humiliated. We also had an argument about money. I wanted to give Swami a donation but he blasted me because he didn’t want money or gifts of any kind. Looking at the condition of his moth-eaten sweater and unruly haircut, I already knew he wasn’t interested in a pressed chudder.

“Well then,” I said, “I’ll give it to Mr. Bush, Swami. You have to have money to run the center.”

“All right, all right,” he said. So I gave the money to Mr. Bush [a non-monastic resident who served Swami and the center].

I was mightily impressed! The swami was absolutely not interested in creature comfort and definitely not invested in being served like royalty. In fact, he regularly mowed the lawn and waited on the devotees himself. Swami insisted on feeding me every time I showed up in Portland. He served the devotees at every function and was as much a Mother as his own Divine Guru.

I came to Portland about twice a year for many years. I was never afraid to speak my mind to him, and, though he always managed to scold me—I had a very different experience than what I had experienced in my Catholic convent background. I always felt completely free to be myself and felt supported by Swami. For example, it was Swami Asheshananda who gave me instruction on becoming a therapist, even though he carried the Indian party line on psychotherapy. He had told me how I should *not* go back to graduate school, and then mid-sentence, reversed it, looked at me and said quietly, “You *MUST* do this work!” I think he knew it would be an unfolding of my particular karma, and it surely has been.

I have never lost my respect for my guru, Swami Aseshananda, because he always held appropriate boundaries. Swami was adamant about not allowing *any* pious attention and personal adulation. He did not court personal favorites. I can feel the presence of my guru today—perhaps more than ever—in a most subtle but vibrant way. He has been the perfect guru for me.

*Submitted February 2007*

**Esther Warkov, Ph.D.**, initiated by Swami Aseshananda in 1975 while a college student, regards Swami Aseshananda as the most precious influence in her life. A member of the Vedanta Society of Western Washington, she resided in Portland with her husband and younger daughter from 2006-2009.

*Written submission.*

### **The Phenomenon of Swami Aseshananda**

Looking back on my life, it was the phenomenon of Swami Aseshananda that exerted the most meaningful influence of lasting value. Although I neglected to implement Swami's teachings, *he* always remained available during his lifetime and continues to be a vital source of inspiration. As will be seen in his many letters below, Swami so completely gave himself to nurturing a disciple—in whom *he alone* saw promise. He guided my life—as I faced one quandary after the next—with all the devotion of a loving parent. No detail was too small for his consideration, whether it involved education, relationships, or visits to Portland. Of these, he wrote how he anticipated them “with joyous expectation.” Amidst my ill-conceived choices, he nevertheless expressed his steadfast love, bestowed the blessings of Sri Ramakrishna or The Mother in his many letters, and pledged his ongoing support toward realizing the highest.

Over time, however, our contact diminished as I immersed myself in ordinary life and struggled with the consequences. Looking back, there were several reasons I distanced myself. First, since monasticism appeared to be valued over the “householder” life, it was difficult to reconcile Vedanta's underlying asceticism with the social environment of the 1960s and '70s. Next, unable to sustain a regular practice, I labeled myself as insincere and unsuited to Vedanta. Furthermore, the encounter with Swami Aseshananda and his world was unfathomable, the ideal so lofty and difficult to integrate, that I sought fulfillment elsewhere. Finally, and most importantly, to pursue these teachings wholeheartedly required a tremendous amount of confidence in oneself—to accept one's own judgment that the path Swami exemplified *is* real. In other words, because Vedanta's worldview contradicts most everything we're told about reality and ourselves, I lacked faith in my judgment to make a commitment.

Nevertheless, over the years of ambivalence, Swami's example remained a constant irritant, a reminder of the quest that brought me to Vedanta. More recently, in the face of significant challenges, Swami's example of renouncing one's identification with the “psycho-physical being” emerged as the singular beacon of hope. These recent challenges served as a wake-up call heralding Swami's 1976 prediction that “Renunciation will come late in life and it will be lasting.” Consider the powerful

inspiration Swami offered (despite my neglect of his prescribed practices) five years after his passing:

[2001 journal entry] “I woke up feeling well the day of surgery and focused on Swami Aseshananda. Because I wanted the recovery space to be neat, I vacuumed my room. I remember being completely present to the moment, as I felt the urgency of my time diminishing. Swami Aseshananda was a constant source of strength as I prepared for the ordeal. The surgery was delayed several hours, which meant I spent the entire day waiting. I kept my japa beads close to me. Fortunately, the attending male nurse was a former seminary student and assured me there was an angel guarding me. Could that have been Swami? Later, throughout the months of treatment, it was Swami Aseshananda who provided the impetus to continually submit to the ravages of radiation. And when repeatedly taken to the emergency room, it was the mantra that saved me.” [Debilitated, I wrote the mantra in code; it was a lifeline.]

Swami also “was there”—even after his physical passing—when I faced life-threatening health emergencies. Swami Aseshananda so thoroughly exemplified the teaching that “I am not the body,” that vanity and appearance are meaningless, that the decision to have a disfiguring surgery was not so difficult. In retrospect, it appears such challenges were necessary preparation for the lasting renunciation Swami predicted.

*“Renunciation will come late in life and it will be lasting,”* Swami said in 1976 and ‘78, adding: “At first I thought you were meant to live in Holy Mother’s house [as a lay-monastic], but I see that’s not your destiny.” Swami actually *knew* renunciation would come late in life?! Three decades have passed since Swami’s prediction and “late-in-life” has come. Renunciation *is* the topic presenting these days. Perhaps he saw the seeds of renunciation in the twenty-two year old who journalled:

“Will I end up a pathetic case, one of those old people who just conks out, i.e. will my life be wasted? Real spirituality comes out of utter disappointment, but not out of some sick psychological state. How long before I confront the ultimate thing that must be confronted? Life is slipping away and soon the grave.”

Seven years later I wrote a friend: “You know, Irene, our problem may be that we’re between two worlds. We aren’t out for ourselves because it offends our spiritual values. Hence we may never ‘succeed’ in the nasty sense of the word. Will God be pleased enough by our moderate behavior, or will he shake his big toe at us for not being more spiritually committed? This, to me, is an important question. What about his lukewarm path?”

*“Renounce your identification with your psycho-physical being,”* Swami’s voice thunders in my head *now*. This is *not* the planned chronological remembrance that was to begin with the visit to the Vedanta monastery in Trabuco, California, at age 14. I pick up the Sri Sarada Society newsletter that just arrived. “In its depth, renunciation is giving up that which is most difficult to give up, the central selfishness of the personality. From the Vedantic point of view, till we can get out of the centre, we have not renounced. Outer renunciation is comparatively easier,” Pravrajika Vivekaprana wrote. [Fall 2008, Volume 14, page 3] Renunciation is stalking me—it’s inescapable!

\* \* \*



One disciple of Swami Aseshananda observed how he, like Holy Mother, attracted the most difficult cases. Mine is a case of willful resistance. Although I struggle with the value of giving much weight to my past story—Western psychology tells us we *are* our experiences while Vedanta tells us that we are *not*—I offer the following “story,” which places Swami Aseshananda’s role and many letters, following, into perspective.

Born into an assimilated Jewish family, I was curious about religion and spirituality. Remarkably, at the age of 14, in 1966, the mysterious and captivating picture of Ramakrishna presented itself during *a high school field trip* to Trabuco monastery! Swami Asaktananda spoke that day. Drawn to the monastery, I would visit a few more times during high school. Seven years after the initial visit I wrote: “There is an aura of warm holiness in Trabuco monastery that reminds me of the existence of an entire realm, which is both exciting and unique in its possibilities.”

Without the opportunity to engage with Vedanta while in high school, I explored the Christian path. While others prayed for expressive spiritual gifts, I asked for wisdom, an early indication that jnana predominated. I soon found organized Christianity troubling for both the historical acts against Jews and non-believers and for the concept of a personal god. (Only later, through the lens of Vedanta, would Christ’s example become compelling).

Following the Trabuco period, the next encounter with Vedanta (1972) came through a partner’s reading of Vedanta literature. Remarkably, we somehow found ourselves at the Holland Park, London, Vedanta center. An American monk (most likely Swami Yogeshananda) gave us prasad. Ramakrishna’s enormous shrine picture greeted me again. Christopher Isherwood’s introductory volume on Vedanta fell into my hands along with a small booklet on raja yoga that I read over and over while traveling student-style through Europe. While the partner went by the wayside, the “transmission” through Vivekananda’s booklet did *not*!

Returning to San Diego, CA, Vedanta ideals percolated while I encountered the full smorgasbord of freedoms available to college students. Amidst this foment, Swami Asaktananda took my quest seriously: he connected me with women monastics in Hollywood and a Vedanta study group that met in the San Diego home of the late Carolyn (Amala) and Joe Kenny. Occasional trips to the Hollywood center provided exposure to a thriving and somewhat exotic world of spiritual pursuit. Swami Asaktananda arranged for a short stay at the Santa Barbara convent. Swami Asaktananda was so kind, so insightful with his advice at that stage in my life, so helpful “unisolating” me (as I wrote), so respectful! As a result, I sought a teacher with whom I could similarly interact.

The March 1975 consecration of the Hollywood Vedanta convent afforded the opportunity to see swamis from around the country. One swami immediately stood out—Swami Aseshananda! I remember Swami wrapped up in his chuddar over western clothing, his scuffed shoes a symbol, I was to learn, of his austerity. But most of all, I remember his smiling face and slightly forward-tilting posture which seemed to beckon from afar. *I immediately felt he was the teacher for me!* [A photograph of Swami from 1976 with the same beckoning appearance appears on the accompanying disc.]

However, the world Swami represented sharply contrasted with the life of an independent and adventurous student. Because my lifestyle appeared so incongruous with my professed interest in spirituality, Swami’s positive response was puzzling. Over the years I wondered whether I had duped him. Was I an imposter? On the other hand, perhaps Swami understood my thoughts about discrimination, desire, and the futility of

ordinary life. A few journal excerpts from this young age describe the personality Swami encountered:

[After reading *The Last Temptation of Christ* by Kazantzakis I wrote] “I imagine myself on my deathbed looking back on my life, as Christ looked back on his, as he hung from the cross. Was I a traitor to my purpose, did I take the road of men, happiness, and security? Was I a deserter? My spiritual thing, if not satisfied through the Vedantists, must be met elsewhere. The goal of becoming a college teacher is also an attempt to reach some kind of union, most likely with the Self, to feel pleased and satisfied. But how can I really take this career goal seriously? It is a diversion.” [Then I quoted the Persian existentialist writer Sadegh Hedayat describing a mouthless, rancorous, malevolent laugh, as if laughing at myself.]

[Possibly quoting Vivekananda] “Why do I really desire that object? What permanent advantage should I gain by possessing it? In what way would possession help me towards greater knowledge and freedom? A desire to desire is a mere restlessness in the mind—nothing better to do? The problem of boredom in life is removed by non-attachment [i.e. attachment to desire and pleasure inevitably leads to boredom, as each satisfied desire generates boredom and new cravings for gratification].

“What attracts me to strong, self-centered artistic people? Their achievement, which is something I admire but is not The Real Achievement. Most of my spiritual ideals have gone down the drain. It is almost a Dionysian flurry (see Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice*). We crave the realm of the emotions, we need it to create, but ultimately it destroys us if we remain unenlightened. I want to go deeper. I am undisciplined. My self is a mass of unintegrated I’s.

[Taken by Sadegh Hedayat’s novel *The Blind Owl*, I wrote] “I am fascinated by his tale of a pen-case decorator who killed time, to stupefy himself, his hand independent of his will, always painting the same scene. ‘I was slowly decomposing while I yet lived’ [he wrote].

[Similarly I was fascinated by Kurosawa’s film *Do deskaden* and wrote] “The pauper’s life revolved around an imaginary house he was building. The fantasies we create in order to make life tolerable! My life revolves around quests which seem empty, but the real quest (union) seems so impossible because we rarely experience it. So the partial gratification of the intellect seems like the real thing because it is more attainable. The striking thing about the film is that the routine, the mundane-ness of the people’s lives is no different from mine; instead of making paper flowers I study or make music. But until we partake of the reality behind that, our lives are equally as boring or uninspired. Study is my escape! *How long before I confront the ultimate thing, which must be confronted?* The chronically inebriated characters in the film were content to let things continue on. Perhaps they knew that was all which could be done—to laugh and live the next day. But I have an underlying contention that more than this exists. The question remains whether I will search out this contention or continue to mask it with my fantasies as the people in the shanty-town lived in their world of fantasy.”

It was with these and other concerns that I first traveled (at age 23) to meet Swami, seven months after the initial “sighting.” Within a few days I was initiated! Swami’s many solicitous letters present a unique glimpse of his care, and I include them all, interspersed with journal entries and commentary, for context.

*April 25, 1975*

*You wrote a letter to me when I visited the Hollywood Center, where I went to attend the dedication ceremony of their new convent building. I thought of you and wanted to reply but I could not find your address. Last evening I found your old letter, which you wrote me on Jan. 11<sup>th</sup> 1975. So I thought of writing to you today. Please excuse my delay.*

*I hope you are making good progress in your studies and by Mother's grace you will come out quite well in your final examination. Please be patient and work hard. May the Divine Mother bless you and draw you firmly to Her fragrant presence. Kindly accept my affectionate greetings. Yours in the Lord, Swami Aseshananda*

*Undated [Spring 1975]*

*I have received your letter of Jan. 11 and I thank you for writing to me. Your letter shows that you are a sincere person, genuinely interested in your spiritual growth. My advice to you is to work hard and get your degree in music first. Then you may think of what you should do next.*

*If you want to explore and find out for yourself you may come to Portland for a short visit and seek an interview with me. I shall be glad to talk to you. It is very necessary in spiritual life to get first-hand experience and evaluate things through the method of discrimination before one comes to a decision.*

*I shall be able to arrange for your stay in Holy Mother's House when you come for a short visit to Portland. In the meantime I wish to send you my best wishes and cordial greetings and good-luck in your studies. It is not possible to write everything in a letter. May the Divine Mother bless you and fulfill your heart's desire—is my prayer. Yours in the Lord, Swami Aseshananda*

*May 21<sup>st</sup>, 1975*

*I have received your letter. Please excuse me for the delay. I was busy making preparations for the Brahmachary ceremony of two of our monastics in the Portland monastery. Six swamis participated in the sacred ceremony which took place before dawn of May 15<sup>th</sup>. I am enclosing a program, which will tell you more.*

*Now with regard to your letter. I want to talk to you personally before I can give my opinion. I shall pray for you to my teacher, Holy Mother. She is the mother of us all. May She enlighten your heart and guide you—is my earnest appeal to Her. Have faith in Her. She will show you the way and lead you gently to the realm of light, love, and lasting happiness. Accept my best wishes and greetings. Yours in the Lord, Swami Aseshananda*

*July 17, 1975*

*I have received your letter of July 4<sup>th</sup>. I appreciate your writing to me. I am going to Seattle tomorrow to see Swami Vividishanandaji who is not doing well. I shall return soon.*

*In my opinion, you should come in August when you can spend about a week or so to become somewhat acquainted with our activities here in Portland as well as at the Retreat. You will stay in Holy Mother's house very close to the Center when you come. I will make all arrangements for your stay. You should also see our retreat, where we have dedicated outdoor shrines to Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother. Probably we will dedicate Swami Vivekananda's shrine in August. When do you plan to come? Please write to me at your convenience and accept my love and best wishes. May the blessings of Sri Ramakrishna be with you always. Yours in the Master, Swami Aseshananda*

July 26, 1975

*I have received your letter. Hope you will not mind. I shall not be able to meet you at the Railway Depot. I have arranged with Mrs. Betty Durham who will receive you at the depot at 5 PM when the train arrives. She is tall [and] will be carrying the small magazine Prabhuddha Bharata in her hand.*

*The reason is I shall have to attend to Swami Asaktananda who phoned from Olema Retreat and said that he would visit us for a few days arriving here on Wednesday before he leaves to Seattle. There will be dinner for the Swami at 6:30 PM and there will be a talk at 7:30 PM at the Portland Center*

*I am looking forward to your coming. You will stay in Holy Mother's house. The rest when we meet at the temple. I have asked Mrs. Durham to bring you at the [sic] temple first and then take you to Holy Mother's House. May the Divine Mother bless you and be with you always, Yours in the Lord, Aseshananda*

Portland, August 1, 1975, journal entry: "Beautiful to see children flocking around Swami Aseshananda—he became child-like himself—I caught the infectious spirit and giggled along. He seems so pure—I feel Ramakrishna in him. He seems to derive so much joy from being around us. Swami Aseshananda cooks intently—an aura floated out of the kitchen. How seriously he takes his cooking!

"“Meditation is the only way to God. In samadhi, nothing can harm one, not even tigers’ [Swami said]. The exploration of the mind via raja yoga really appeals to me, almost intellectually. But my spirit, too, longs for a solution. Meditation is the means. How to commune with god is an art; to reach that state is *all* art.

[I then wrote about my relationship with a graduate student uninterested in spiritual life.] “In spiritual heights, the companions are different. Will I ever be content with a partnered life now that this urge is implanted? Music, work, play it all out, and die on my deathbed wishing I’d done it [spiritual pursuit]. Swami’s reprimand for going into the monastery kitchen was so sweet that I could hardly keep back the tears, yet why should it matter if a woman goes in? Could I stand guru-chastisement?”

The journal continues to narrate our interactions. I wrote how Swami “lovingly prepared and served a breakfast of scrambled eggs, toast and honey, payesh, oranges, and two cups of tea. Why two? ‘Because one bag makes two cups,’ Swami explained.” The account states how Swami next “fed lunch, then prasad continuously. Gardening in his tattered clothes, watering with a hose and a pot, Swami remarked, ‘I like you for your sincerity—you don’t meet other women who would be so honest with a man.’” *In retrospect, it was only his unconditional love and acceptance that could prompt such openness.*

“Then, very gently, Swami asked, ‘May I tell you something? Are you sure it won’t hurt you? The energy [sexual] must be re-directed ultimately.’ After some time, he sweetly inquired, ‘Have I been too demanding?’ ‘No.’ ‘Are you sure?’ he inquired, with all the solicitousness of a mother.”

\* \* \*

Initiation in our tradition is private matter between guru and disciple. Remarkably, Swami initiated me on my birthday (although I didn’t tell him), which was also Swami Ramakrishnanada’s puja day. During the initiation ceremony Swami committed himself to my spiritual realization: he prayed that I might realize the supreme Absolute

Consciousness and pledged his best to help me, to meditate and pray on my behalf always. The depth of that promise eluded my young mind (as it still does today).

For the ceremony, I learned afterwards, I was to have brought a gift for the teacher. “You must give the teacher something—here, give me this apple.” So he handed me an apple to give back to him. To me, this gesture speaks volumes. He wanted nothing by way of gifts, and he would even provide the very gift I was to give him. In addition, the apple became symbolic of the spiritual gift he would give me, that would in turn be re-gifted to him. *No separation between giver and recipient.*

*This leads to the core of this initiation: Swami understood and fully supported my non-dual bent. While Swami had no problem with duality, my mind could not grasp bhakti nor the idea of incarnations. So Swami ingeniously provided a teaching whose meaning thrilled and sustained me. Had he not, I believe I would have been lost, never to return.* Even now, as I’m drawn to non-dual teachers like Sri Ramana Maharshi (whom Swami Aseshananda met in India), I feel such pursuit is possible due to the breadth of the teaching, the seed, that Swami Aseshananda implanted.

Back to 1975, the journal narration continues to say how, after initiation, Swami prepared and served me breakfast in the library. [When returning to the library almost thirty-five years later, to the table where Swami lovingly served me, the scene replayed with vivid familiarity, so powerful was Swami’s impression.] Going back to initiation day, I wrote: “Swami then requested I prepare flowers for the worship. Next there was noon meditation and a little piano practice for the service. The two of us were virtually alone at the center and it felt very, very holy. Then Swami said, ‘I’ll give you some lunch,’ which he did before having me again practice piano. That evening Swami indicated that he approved of my musical offering. ‘Ram nam was fair. I am no expert, but piano playing was good.’” Years later I realized that by supporting my interest in music, Swami demonstrated his love in a way I could understand.

[The journal continues] “That day Swami took pains to make sure my membership status with the society was OK (just shortly after I was discussing this with Mr. Bush, as though Swami were aware of the conversation). The talk tonight was appropriate: jnana and bhakti. Pure jnana makes dry intellectual religion which will not bring one to awareness. He said to me to think and read about Ramakrishna—it would be easier—he would later add onto the mantra. [However this did not occur—perhaps he was quite satisfied with the mantra he had given me; I certainly was.] How shall I be able to stay away from Swami?” [In a 2004 update I wrote: “It was the call to live out all my life dramas that pulled me away from him physically, but now I have returned to Vedanta. He never left me all these years.”]

[Back to 1975] “He knows I like Swami Asaktananda—had me call him tonight in Seattle to say goodbye. [Asaktananda went to India.] Then just as I was debating whether to go downtown tomorrow—what would Swami think if I took the bus, etc. . . . he called and then gave me the opportunity to ask him.

“I think I could begin to understand Holy Mother through him. [Thirty-five years later, this observation is beginning to come true.] I feel as though a burden has been lifted from me. I’d be a fool to stay away very long from this man.” [Update 2009: I *was* a fool.] “I think I must put my affairs in order and make plans to exit. A few days ago things looked different—but now after finding my teacher, life is suddenly different. I was one continuous smile today. How can I repay? By meditating regularly and trying to follow all directions, he told me. I hope he yells at me soon to help me see both sides of things. I know he likes me now! Also I was sitting wondering about how he spent parts of his life in India and lo, his talk on

Ramakrishnananda became highly autobiographical. He talked about his dislike of ritual and how he began to do it when Saradananda died, as something to do.”

*Sept 24, 1975*

*I have received your letter. I have not forgotten you. Delay in replying was caused by various reasons. Your plan is all right with me. Whatever you have decided, stick to it. It will be of immense good to you.*

*Try to think of your higher self as the source of infinite strength and unbounded happiness. You will always remain in my thoughts and prayers. Think of Ramakrishna also now and then. Because he is the fountain-head of [our] inspiration and also an ideal teacher. Surely [he will] guide and lead us [to] the shore of freedom. We love him and adore him.*

*You have been accepted as a member of our society. You will know more from the devotees at Holy Mother’s house. We will celebrate Durga Puja on Sat. Oct. 11<sup>th</sup> at 10:30 AM with worship, fire ceremony, and prasad. Wish you could be with us, if not physically but in spirit. May Mother bless you. Accept my love and best wishes. Write to me when you have the mood to write. Remember me to [unclear]. Yours in the Lord, Aseshananda*

*October 6, 1975*

*I have received your nice letter. What you have decided after mature thinking is all right with me. You will always find me praying for you and listening to you and wishing you well in spiritual life.*

*If you want to visit England you will have my approval if your finance permits you. You may also visit our center at the following address: Ramakrishna Vedanta Center 54 Holland Park, London. Swami Bhavyananda is in charge of the center. Please phone him in advance so that he may be available when you come to the center.*

*We will celebrate Durga puja on Saturday October 11 at 10:30 AM Homa at 12 noon—offering of flowers and prasad at 1:30 PM. Try to think of the Mother on that sacred day. Your sincerity strikes me. May the Lord bless you and enlighten your understanding and heart. We are all well. Marrie, Colleen, Sandra and little Nicky are doing well at Holy Mother’s House. They all remember you. Accept my love and best wishes. Yours in the Lord, Aseshananda PS About coming to Portland I leave it to you. Sri Ramkrishna’s birthday would be all right.*

*Oct. 29, 1975*

*Please accept my love and Vijaya greetings. We will celebrate Kali puja on Nov. 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday. May the Divine Mother bless you and guide you. Colleen, Marrie and others at Holy Mother’s house are doing well. Only the cat is not so fine. I shall be glad to hear from you. Have you received my previous letter? I shall include you in my prayers. Yours in the Lord, Aseshananda*

Journal entry Nov. 21, 1975: “Have an ideal concept of behavior and imitate it in all acts.” “Where there is no love, put love in and you will draw love out.” “Strive to prefer that which is most difficult (the act of

overcoming), desire nothing, desire the worst of temporal things, not the best; therefore one is led to the non-temporal.” [quotes of unknown origin]

*Winter 1975 Christmas card*

*I am looking forward to your visit in December 24<sup>th</sup> with your friend Cindy. First talk to the music teacher after coming to Portland and let me know what he says. Then I shall be able to decide what I should do. It will be good to talk to Swami Bhaskarananda of Seattle and seek his help. May the Lord bless you and keep your mind fixed on the goal. May His love make you strong and fearless. Accept my love, Yours in the Lord, Aseshananda*

*Dec. 30, 1975*

*I wish you a very bright and meaningful New Year. May Holy Mother keep you under the orbit of Her grace and love. Yours in the Lord, Aseshananda*

*Jan. 27, 1976*

*I got your card from England. Hope your trip was pleasant and that you enjoyed it very much. Did you go to our London center? What about Gretz center near Paris?*

*We are all doing well here. We will celebrate Sri Ramakrishna's birthday on March 3<sup>rd</sup> with special puja and homa ceremony. May the Lord bless you and guide you. Accept my love and best wishes. Yours in the Lord, Swami Aseshananda*

*Feb 9, 1976*

*I have read your letter with interest. It is all right with me if you fulfill your plan of coming to Portland during Shivaratri (Feb. 28<sup>th</sup> Saturday) and Sri Ramakrishna's birthday celebrations on March 3<sup>rd</sup> Wednesday. Please let me know after you have made reservations to come either by plane or by railroad train.*

*I am not angry with you. I like your sincerity and frankness of spirit. I shall pray for you and do my best to help you in your spiritual struggles. But you should practice music as well as meditation everyday to create a habit and to discipline your mind. Nothing can be accomplished with dreamy thoughts and vague aspirations. Hard work is necessary to accelerate anything either in music or in religious life.*

*With regard to other point, you should be considerate to your friend. You should not do anything which will be a rude shock to him and to his feelings. Let him live there. Be patient. Things will be all right in time with your sympathetic understanding.*

*I am glad to know you have written to University of Washington in Seattle. If they accept you it will be nice. The rest when we meet. Please think of the Lord twice a day and seek His guidance.*

*I wish you peace, happiness and inner strength which comes from sraddha—self confidence. Atman is the source of all tremendous power and energy. May that energy come to you slowly*

*and gradually as you struggle on and time goes on. Accept my love and best wishes. Yours in the Lord, Swami Aseshananda*

*Feb. 23, 1976*

*I have received your letter and read it with joyous interest. You need not have to phone me on Feb. 25<sup>th</sup> and spend money unnecessarily. Your plan is excellent. I approve of it.*

*Probably Marrie Reddick or Mrs. Vera Edwards will meet you at the Portland airport on Thursday morning February 26<sup>th</sup> at 10:54 AM United Airline flight number 380. In case you change your plane or change your flight to other airline, then you can phone. But you may do whatever pleases you. That will be my joy to hear and to accept.*

*I shall talk to the devotees of Holy Mother's House again and request them to look after your needs and conveniences. You will have luncheon at the temple as before if Mrs. Vera Edwards is available.*

*It is a good idea to see what Washington University in Seattle can offer you. Why not try Lewis and Clark College which has a good reputation in Portland for its music department. The rest in person. With my love and greetings. Yours in the Lord, Aseshananda*

And here the drama continues, according to a journal entry of February 1976 (age 24): "Well, here I am back in Oregon. Lying in bed thinking, 'Should I get outside myself and write about this?' I wonder if exhaustion has anything to do with the lack of enthusiasm. Being in the temple was easy—felt like I never left. Upon first arriving, I was slightly overwhelmed by the fact that *here I am*—the place I've been dreaming of and idealizing about for months. Well now that I've got it, do I want it? So here I am. And it feels like I don't want it. Renunciation seems so negative for one who is almost comfortable with the world. Maybe renunciation is simple for the alienated person, or the social misfit. And all this ritual and avatar stuff!! I am constantly reminding myself that when I give the flower, it is only the Universal Life Force that I am bowing down before. [Jewish conditioning saw this as idol-worship.] I was extremely tired during the talk on the *Upanishads* and wanted only for it to end so that I might retire."

Feb. 27, 1976 journal entry: "More rain. A morning in the house, a bit of piano, some errands. Lunch at the temple. Why is Swami avoiding me? Probably waiting for me to cool off. A trip to Lewis and Clark College. Lots of young-looking people. Realized that I will be a student again soon. Study and preparation are necessary. Back to Holy Mother's House. Tired, wonder about all of this. Lectures do not hold the same fascination—seem repetitive; I yawn, squirm. Is it because of physical fatigue or mental stress? I am being utterly passive in not approaching Aseshananda."

March 2, 1976: Swami says British schools are more creative—you must produce something original. American schools mass-produce. Only a few people can handle the British system. The intellectual plane purifies the mind—living in the realm of thought. Mumbled something about renunciation will come later in life and it will be solid, lasting." [He repeated this prediction in 1978.] I wrote: "Adrian [partner] isn't ready to settle down. So what's in it for me? I'm free, I'm that big tree flowering in the breeze, the cricket chirping. No one can take that away from me. I am That. Loneliness is the greatest fear, but I have my inner self—my guru—and it doesn't have to be lonely like it was. My dreams [about this partner] are shattered, but they're dreams. I'll wake up to the Reality and find myself, in the meantime, *chanting my favorite song [the mantra]!*"



*May 6<sup>th</sup>, 1976*

*I am going to San Francisco tomorrow by United Airlines and I shall return on Thursday May 13<sup>th</sup> which is also Buddha's birthday. I have read your letter. I shall be glad to see you and your friend in Portland before you leave for England.*

*It is gratifying to know that you have been selected by the Fulbright committee from many competitors of great merit. We are really proud of you. Hope you will make good your talents by hard work in the particular field of music that you will be studying for in England.*

*Don't pay much attention to dreams. They are not always reliable. They bring weakness of mind and take away interest for vital things of life—which are worth striving for. Your real self is greater than your dreams and try to manifest the power of the spirit to vanish all kinds of fear from the mind. May He bless you and give you enduring strength and joy of living. Accept my love and best wishes, Yours in the Lord, Aseshananda*

*July 20, 1976*

*I am looking forward to your coming with your friend, Adrian, with joyous expectation. You need not care to worry. I shall take care of everything. Adrian will stay in the temple along with us. You will stay in Holy Mother's House. Please let me know when you will arrive in Portland and by which plane. I shall send someone to the airport—to bring you here. The rest in person.*

*I am busy with visitors and showing them around. I am not able to write a long letter. But you will be in my thoughts and prayers. Accept my loving greetings and convey them to your friend, Adrian. Same with you. All are doing well here. Yours in the Lord, Aseshananda*

Some months after this last letter, Adrian and I traveled to Wales where we both continued our studies. My great attachment to him prompted me to choose Britain over Portland.

*Aerogram postmarked December 9, 1976*

*Please don't think that I have forgotten you. You were in my mind many times. I could not reply [to] your letter because it was missing. I have found it yesterday. I read the whole letter excepting the first page which was not available. Now I shall tell you my opinion. You should stick to your plans. Study as much as the school in Wales offers you and then go in for higher graduate courses either in a larger city in Wales or in London or Cambridge in England. You are a talented girl. Don't be pessimistic. Express your talents to the best of your capacity. Please do not create any conflict in your mind by thinking "what good will this study do to become spiritual?" Anything [that] makes one selfless is a spiritual act. You are to be detached living in the world. Life in a cloister or convent will not suit you because it will go against your dharma. Your dharma is to give something to other people. Adrian is a good friend of yours. Keep that friendship by all means.*

*But at the same time practice meditation and do some thinking of higher thoughts of life to know how to encounter death. Always remember you are a tangible manifestation of the spirit whom the Hindus call Divine Mother. Try to manifest the best in you by giving compassion, understanding and love in a spiritual sense to other people.*

*Also try to raise your consciousness to a higher plane. "Let your mind be as high as one of the peaks of the Himalaya mountains," said Maharaj. Let me know how your studies are going on and what you are planning to do next year. Are you angry? You should write two letters before you can expect one letter in reply from me. I shall try to be more regular in 1977 but I cannot promise.*

*I went to see Swami Vividishananda in Seattle. He is in a state of coma. But my mind was lifted up when I was in his presence—so spiritual was the atmosphere. Swami Swahananda of Berkeley will be the head of the Southern California and Hollywood Centers who will be taking [residency] on Dec 15<sup>th</sup>, 1976. I am pleased at the choice.*

*Did you have a chance to visit the London Center? If you happen to, give my greetings to Swami Bhavyananda. May Divine Mother bless you and keep you [unclear]. Yours in the [Lord] Aseshananda. PS We will celebrate Holy Mother's birthday with puja and homa [?] on Dec. 13<sup>th</sup>. I shall be glad to hear from you, Aseshananda [Om symbol].*

Seeing the disparity in values, I ended the association with the aforementioned partner sooner rather than later. It wasn't easy. I also wrote: "I long madly for my teacher . . . life in Oregon seems so simplistic." ["It isn't," I noted a year later.] I added: "Why be involved with a man who is so undecided? When I have time, I owe it to myself to seek out people who are more oriented towards inner growth and see how it is to be with them. I may want a more 'spiritual' partner." [Swami addressed this in his letter below.]

*Jan. 27, 1977*

*I wish to extend to you happy New Year's greetings. I have read your letter with great interest. What can I say? You are the best judge in this matter. I wish you success in your musical talents and abiding joy which comes from an introspective life. This can be gained only through self-knowledge. All that you are doing now is only a step toward that supreme goal. Your simplicity appeals to me. I know if you turn to Holy Mother, you will make great progress in spirituality. I commend you to Her benevolent care and meaningful guidance. Keep to your "Swadharma"—approach through Jnana but you should [leaven?] it with Bhakti—pure love of Divine Mother. That will create a beautiful harmony and you will never feel lonely.*

*Try to remember two auspicious days—Shiva Ratri—holy night of Shiva on Feb. 16, Wednesday and Sri Ramakrishna's birthday on Sunday Feb. 20<sup>th</sup>. If it is not too much you may inquire from our London Center and attend the special puja and services there. I know Swami Bhavyananda quite well. Introduce yourself to him and talk to him. He visited our Portland Center a few years ago. During your vacation you should try to go if possible to Gretz Center, near Paris. You may stay overnight or weekend in the Ashrama which will be helpful for you. You should write to Swami Ritajananda head of the Gretz Center before you make any plans.*

*Devotees at Holy Mother's house are doing well. Always you are welcome to stay here as long as your time permits. Beautiful sunshine is available now. Our bramacharis are repairing the Sarada Cottage at the Retreat. It will be strong and durable when it is finished. May Holy Mother keep company with you and cheer you up always.*

*I want you to be yourself. I am concerned about your health. You write that you had become [unclear]. You must take good care of your body and be strong again. Buddha used to say "Don't mistreat the horse from which you can't dismount." Accept my love. Yours in the Lord, Aseshananda (Om symbol).*

*March 30 1977 Aerogram*

*Let me first extend to you happy Easter. Spring is here many flowers are blooming in our garden. Spring is the symbol of eternal life. An illumined soul knows that through personal experience of the Atman which never changes, never decays, never knows death [sic]. The idea of the Holy is to be found in all religions. But Vedanta alone stresses holiness of man when he is awake—wide awake to his spiritual self which is the "pearl of great price." [Coincidentally, Swami's letter was typed for this collection on Easter, 2009.]*

*Divine Mother in you will tell you what to do, where to study and how to spend the coming summer holidays. Ask Holy Mother in silence in the mood of meditation, feeling her presence in the shrine of your heart. You are to do it for nine days preferably before breakfast. Then let me know what answer comes to your mind. I believe Mother is with you. She will tell you. She will guide you.*

*I have received two letters from you. It is difficult for me to say anything now. I have to think over. You should give more facts. And you should tell me the reasons for you going to Bulgaria and eventually to Israel. Write to me again from the standpoint of your special interest in music. Are there talented professors who can help you in your studies? Has the university of Israel [sic] a fine music department which attracts students from all over the world? What about Washington University in Seattle? Antar yoga for women went off well at the Retreat. "Scorn delight and live [laborious] days" is what I have learnt from life. You cannot accomplish anything unless you work hard with [unclear] determination to overcome difficulties. The rest God will do for you. Accept my love. Yours in the Lord Aseshananda*

*July 12, 1977*

*I have not forgotten you. I have thought of you many times. Only now I am implementing my thoughts into action. I went to Seattle to perform worship and homa ceremony for the dedication of their new shrine at the Retreat on July 25<sup>th</sup>. The celebrations went off well. 120 people came to participate. Next day was a Sunday and I spoke at the morning services. Some of our devotees like Colleen Engle, Vera Edwards, Sandra Raley, and others also went and attended both the functions at the Retreat and in the town center.*

*We are expecting the visit of two swamis from Berkeley and New York as our guests for five days between July 21 and July 26<sup>th</sup>.*

*We are in the process of constructing a shrine for the American Indians at the Retreat. We have consulted a priest (medicine man) by the name of Eastman who has helped us in many ways. He has agreed to perform the rites and ceremonies at the time of dedication if we would invite him. You will be glad to know that Swami Vividishananda of the Seattle Center is doing fairly well. Though he is not able to communicate perhaps he recognized me when I was with him.*

*I heard that the London Center has purchased a retreat. Have you seen it? I wish you all success in your musical performances as well as in your studies. Accept my love. Write to me whether your plans for sure to Israel [sic] or come back to America has taken a definite shape. May the Divine Mother bless and keep you. I shall always pray for you. Yours in the Lord, Aseshananda.*

*Sept. 1st 1977*

*I have received both the letters that you have written to me. I am pleased to know that you would come to Seattle and study music in the University of Washington. You will be close to our center. That is good.*

*Now you should work diligently and write your thesis with deep interest and one-pointed attention. Social activities are to be minimized. You have talents. But that is not enough. Hard work is necessary to achieve anything meaningful in life. I wish you all success in your honest, sincere and painstaking struggle and your concentrated efforts to write the thesis in a beautiful manner. We all will be very proud of you.*

*We will celebrate Sri Krishna's birthday on Sept. 6th with reading, talk, worship and prasad. You will be with us in spirit. In the Retreat we have dedicated an American Indian Shrine. When you come here, you will see.*

*I am going to Seattle on Sept. 3rd with Mr. Bush and Br. Sarada Chaitanya. I shall have to speak on "Awakening of Spiritual Power" on Sunday Sept. 4th at the opening service of the season. Accept my love and best wishes. May the Divine Mother be with you and give you inspiration. Yours in the Lord, Swami Aseshananda*

*Oct. 3, 1977*

*I have received your kind letter of Sept. 22nd. I am glad to know that you have moved to an environment and an atmosphere which will be very congenial for your study and spiritual growth.*

*You have asked me a delicate and a difficult question. In my opinion you should see your parents first as soon as you come to this country. That is your first obligation which you should discharge. After seeing your parents you can write to me. Then I shall be in a position to tell you what to do next. Since [until] then you should concentrate on your thesis. Work hard. Apply yourself assiduously to the job in hand. Let all other thoughts disappear from your mind.*

*I read somewhere "scorn delight and live laborious days." This is the advice I would like to share with you. You have talents but without diligent attention and relentless work no true success can be achieved.*

*May your effort be meaningful and effective is my prayer to Him who watches over us like a fond mother. Accept my love and greetings. Yours in the Lord, Aseshananda*  
*P.S. Colleen and other devotees are doing well. We will celebrate Durga Puja on Oct. 19th with puja and homa ceremony. Try to remember that day. May the Mother bless you and love you.*  
*SA*

With Swami Aseshanada's encouragement, the Master's thesis was completed in Wales, where I lived the recommended "laborious days," working through the night for months. Following Swami's letter and before returning to the United States, a series of ill-conceived choices and perilous incidents were played out, bearing testimony to the protection his initiation provided. For instance, with scant time to travel before starting graduate school in Seattle, I decided to explore my Eastern European roots by taking a train to Hungary, still a Communist country. Traveling on a subsistence budget, off I went one freezing midnight, crossing the English Channel, still with the flu. Picture this student wearing a long tapestry skirt, Birkenstock sandals, a thin coat from a rummage sale, and a tiny rucksack. This was my female version of Hemmingway's archetypal macho hero. After being stalked in Vienna's redlight district where I stayed for reasons of economy, I fortuitously met an American from Seattle (!) who was also traveling to Hungary. Together we secured a room in a Budapest apartment, and I escaped with only minor annoyances from the lecherous apartment owner. Budapest was wonderful, and I was able to find a caretaker at the Central Synagogue, the second largest synagogue in the world, to let me in. Dark and mysterious, there I connected with my Jewish roots.

Determined to get to the countryside, I hopped on an ancient locomotive which I called "the peasant express." Women's eyes, surrounded by bubushka scarves, were upon this alien. After several stops, I tentatively announced my destination, and a kindly peasant woman took me out the train to another platform! Arriving to the village at frozen dusk, I found the inn to be full—and *not* as arranged! Starving, I ate ham upon a pork chop, having made it "kosher" with a prayer. Thankfully, a place was found in a village home. After a few days of exploring the environs (and a good case of indigestion), I retreated to the village cemetery where I noticed a few Jewish gravestones off to the side. There I spoke mentally to Swami and had the distinct impression he said, "Come back to America, enough traveling." I felt enormously protected through this ill-conceived adventure, among others far more perilous.

*Dec. 8, 1977*

*I have received your letter. I went to New York to attend the memorial service in honor of Swami Pavitrananda head of the Vedanta Society of New York. The function went off well on Thursday Dec. 1st but we will sadly miss the swami whom I have known for 50 years or more. We used to visit Sri Sri Maharaj. One rabbi spoke [at the memorial service—unclear].*

*I am looking forward to seeing you on Dec. 26th along with your friend who will be a great help in driving such a distance. If there is any delay, please let me know. I am eager to see you on the above date. Accept my love and best wishes. The rest when we meet. No sledgehammer is necessary. [This is a reference to a joke between us.] Holy Mother will wake you up for she is the Mother of all. I am giving a puja schedule. Trust you are in good health and spirit. Yours in the Lord, Aseshananda.*

*Feb. 13, 1978*

*I have received your letter. Hope you are settled by this time and your study is going on well.*

*We celebrated Swami Brahmananda's birthday with puja and homa ceremony on Thursday Feb. 9th. Devotees enjoyed the day very much. We will have public celebration for the Swami next Sunday Feb. 19th.*

*Try to meditate for a few minutes every day. I pray to Holy Mother to hold you by the hand and guide you. How do you find the music department at the Washington University there? Does it*

*satisfy the inmost desire of your heart? Anyway, make the best of it. Work hard and try to get the doctorate degree from [sic] and help you for your future career.*

*If you go the Center give my greetings to the assistant Swami. Please accept my love and best wishes. Because you are so near my correspondence has become somewhat [slow]. I hope this will find you in good health and spirit. Yours in the Lord, Aseshananda*

Swami and I met at the Seattle Vedanta Society monastery in March 1978, as recorded in the journal entry: “As soft-spoken as ever, Swami asked, ‘Are you happy?’ I presented my case as being between two worlds and thus devoted to neither. The cure, Swami said, is to meditate: ‘How can you know meditation isn’t good if you don’t do it more?’ He encouraged creative thought of the Mother.” [Swami always encouraged some tempering of the impersonal approach with thoughts of Ramakrishna and Sarada Devi.]

[At one time Swami thought I should be at Holy Mother’s house, but saw that the nun’s life was not suited. The journal continues] “‘Your Dharma is to be making music in the world. Marry if you find someone who really loves you. I don’t want any divorce. Nor do I approve of men taking advantage of you. You must be two souls chosen by God.’ Aseshananda touched the OM symbol to my head, chanted, then put his hand on my head. He is the softest sledgehammer—but effective: I felt as though a great weight had been lifted from my head. ‘Come do some gardening; I would like to see you, talk with you. You are a sincere girl.’

[The journal continues] “Why did Swami like his guru? Not because the guru had attained a specific state—or for other reasons—but simply because he was a person who never cheated or swindled him. Similarly, I like Aseshananda because he is the only unselfish person I know: he doesn’t love me so I will act a certain way. There is no other person like him [in my life].

“I have worked out leaving university. Wake up to the fact that Swami is nearby. Am I going to pass up this opportunity? Even though Vedanta can seem strange, to have this irrational, unaccountable relationship must be beneficial. Beneficial, not like studying Hebrew and Arabic, but beneficial to the real thing: like why we live and why we die, and what we should know. I might as well face up to this task—the spiritual: it has been haunting me for 12 years [from age 14]. Forget the externals and focus on what it is that Aseshananda represents.”

That summer I traveled to Portland with a male companion, to seek Swami’s advice about our association and educational options in the Middle East. Following that meeting, the journal entry reads:

“Swami says desire is a string pulling the mind. Danger [in the Middle East] is not important. One dies when their karma is exhausted. He prefers a non-fragmented education [focusing on a research topic, European-style vs. the American generalist approach]. ‘If you want French, you go to France. You must be in the proper cultural environment [Israel, in this case]. Go to Egypt too. Dive deep! Go to the Middle East and find a good teacher—a demanding teacher. Dedication to the pursuit is critical, offer a contribution to learning, and desire to be of service.’ The sale of my piano is acceptable if it will pay for a monthly education stipend, but is not to be used for luxuries. ‘Get your parents’ blessing for this choice.’ [at age 27!]

[Regarding the inappropriate partner from another culture] “‘You need a more intellectual life-companion. Compassion means helping someone [this young man] to stand on his own feet. Love comes from an equal position, not with one weaker.’” He went on to explain that ‘The American’ [Esther] was ‘culturally superior.’ Swami registered an immediate negative reaction to marriage. Divorce would ensue.” [He suggested that the young man ask his father what should be studied and then do it. Note Swami’s

insistence on old-world family values. The harshest thing Swami said in the face of this inappropriate partner was, “Go find someone on the same educational level.” This was a real testament to his patience.]

At the time of our interview I knew I was headed down the wrong path with this companion. Still, it took a car accident to underline Swami’s point. Driving back to Seattle from Portland that dark rainy night and distracted, we plummeted down the freeway embankment, having missed the offramp. (I was not the first to make that mistake, the officer consoled me.) Expecting to die, my mind’s eye saw Sarada Devi’s face, a most unexpected sight for an avowed follower of the impersonal path. “I was extremely calm,” I wrote to a friend. Miraculously, the 1973 Swedish Saab car, a tank in disguise, came to rest in a bog. Although I was stunned, my companion urged me to get out should the car explode. The highway patrol and tow-truck arrived, probably in response to a passing motorist; eventually the “tank” was extracted and the trip completed. I later wrote a woman friend, “It happened because I went to Portland to find out something but didn’t listen hard enough. I’m beginning to think this guy represents a side of myself that I must die to, but am reluctant to. Artists like to abandon themselves to this bizarre, imbalanced state. Low-life. But it also has its highs. What ambivalence! Will it take another car wreck? Or is this my last chance?”

Could the mind’s propensity to turn to Sarada Devi in this context be the result of Swami’s influence during our meeting that day? Several years later, another astonishing reminder of The Mother occurred when my father, essentially an unreligious person, declared on his deathbed that, “God is a woman!” before lapsing into silence. Some years later, I interpreted this as a message I was meant to hear, encouraging me to think of The Mother.

Returning to 1979, Swami’s advice to dive deep in the appropriate cultural environment led me to the Middle East to pursue my passion for its music and secondarily to obtain a Ph.D. (Swami insisted that I complete the Ph.D, as he did with other disciples, and so the dissertation was dedicated to him.) While in the Middle East, Swami seemed to have imparted a kind of fearlessness in the face of physical peril. One incident, among many, may serve to illustrate this transmission. I’d traveled half way around the world to study with a particular musician seeking him out in his environs, a crumbling, pre-1948 tenement in Haifa, Israel. To reach his door, it was necessary to pass an enormous German Shepard (appropriately named Pasha, I later learned), viciously barking, rearing on his hind legs, and foaming at the mouth. What to do? I shrugged, thought of Swami, ascended the staircase, opened the gate, walked past the dog, and knocked. This was not an instance of being in my “right mind!”

During that period, and also not in my right mind, I succumbed to a marriage proposal from an American; I suspect Swami was eager for me to “settle down” as he wrote:

*July 8, 1980*

*I have received all your letters. Your plan is all right with me. You may marry the person you love. I understand that he loves you also most sincerely. As a token of seriousness there should be engagement with a ring. It does not matter whether the ring is costly or not. The rest will be taken care of by the Lord. I have no objection to inter-faith marriage if it is based on a spiritual basis. [unclear] marriage in terms of a bond forged by God for a definite purpose—to deepen the spiritual consciousness of each other by a tie of love—which is indissoluble.*

*You may do a little pranayama but meditating on the meaning of the mantram is most desirable.*

*In my opinion you should finish your thesis and get the Ph.D degree. Then you may choose any place you like in America. Once you have started something you should not give it up—but stick to the end. I am glad to know that both of you are serious. That is good.*

*Please accept my love and give my greetings to your fiancé. We are all doing well. Yours in the Lord, Swami Aseshananda*

*March 26, 1981*

*Om Shanith*

*I must reply [to] your last letter which I received yesterday. I wish you and your fiancé good luck. I am pleased to know that your parents will come to attend your wedding ceremony which will be held some time in the summer of 1981. Please excuse me for not replying to your previous letter.*

*I agree with your plans with regard to Ph.D degree. You gather all facts and necessary things from Israel and you should start writing the thesis by coming to America where you feel more comfortable than in Israel.*

*I have not forgotten you. I shall always remember you in my prayers. You should also pray to Holy Mother and ask Her to hold your hand and guide you towards the goal. We are all doing well. Several guests have come. That keeps me busy. I shall go to Seattle in April and to San Francisco in May. Trust this will find both of you in good health and spirits. Please accept my love and greetings. Yours in the Lord, Aseshananda*

Upon Swami's encouragement, I returned to the US and completed the Ph.D dissertation draft. A few years later, Swami was available to provide guidance during a visit to Seattle and wrote:

*Aug. 28, 1985*

*May the Divine Mother bless you. Thank you for writing me. I shall be glad to talk to you when I go to Seattle and stay there for a few days. Please accept my love and greetings and convey them to your husband. Colleen, Vera and other devotees are doing fine. The rest when we meet. Yours in the Lord, Aseshananda. [Directions for obtaining an appointment follow.]*

Soon after our appointment, I phoned Swami to report infidelity (!). I find it interesting that Swami replied, "Can't you forgive him?" "Absolutely not," I told him. Eventually I headed to the Middle East, where I planned to work in my academic field. But owing to poor choices, I barely finished my dissertation consultations and returned to the US, exhausted and ill at the age of thirty-three. Were it not for some unspoken help from Swami in moments of utter desperation, I surly would have perished mentally, if not physically.

With the Ph.D dissertation completed in the U.S. (1987) and dedicated to Swami Aseshananda, and health somewhat improved, I moved into the next chapter of my life, motherhood. Fulfilling a *tremendous* desire, a daughter was born after a very difficult



gestation. Let me be clear, I was a fallen Vedantist by this time, but thoughts of Swami sustained me throughout this ordeal.

During the many months of maternity bedrest, I wrote a friend: “I suppose others would rebel against this ‘confinement’—I should give myself some credit for discipline, dedication, and the ability to enjoy trivia. Or is it just giving into inertia? I prefer to affirm that years of spiritual dabbling have given me a certain resignation to what must be. My job is to be passive. I am the incubator, the walrus, the packing crate. What bothers me is how far I’ve drifted from ‘myself,’ those pursuits which I used to identify, to locate, myself. What is left of me as I lie here? This sounds like exaggerated melodrama, but where’s that ‘spark?’ It seems that I’m being transformed into some other being—physically, hormonally, emotionally. I suppose the spiritual stuff stays the same. Maybe yes? I’m dismayed by the distance between my self now and my prior spiritual concerns. Will motherhood compete with that domain? Bubba’s [a pet’s] imminent death reminds me of my own mortality—I’d almost managed to forget it for a while. But there’s no escaping it. Gurdjeff’s teachings are OK—but with the Vedantists we see living proof of those who have attained something—but what?”

After my daughter, Mia, was born, we traveled to Portland in 1989 for Swami’s blessing, which he bestowed upon her. Swami, however, used this visit as one of few opportunities to mildly scold me. During the Sunday lecture, she fussed a little, and although we were sitting adjacent to the main lecture hall, Swami announced, “This is *not* a place for babies!” This was the harshest scolding I received. Perhaps Swami knew that I could not withstand his scoldings and was too immature to derive any benefit. On subsequent visits to Portland over the next five years prior to Swami’s passing, I sensed a certain coolness, although he always acknowledged me. Perhaps it was his declining health, but I concluded Swami had good reason to be disappointed when I chose to do things *my* way—and not *his*.

After re-marrying in my 40s, my husband, Joel, and I traveled to Portland in 1995 and 1996. Swami acknowledged us after we were announced (loudly, owing to his declining hearing). Around the time of this last visit, Mia, age five, would often ask, “I *really* want to know, is this world *real* or *not*, or is it *just a dream*?” and her eyes would become filled with tears. Perhaps Swami blessed her with the propensity to inquire. In 1996, a few months before Swami’s passing, our family of three stood at his bedside while he slept and at this last visit, I paid my respects.

\* \* \*

A year to the month following Swami’s passing, my husband and I, seeking to have a child we could call our own, met a birthmother who accepted us as adoptive parents for her unborn child. Among many unusual aspects of this open adoption, two features stand out. First, we learned from her that had she kept the child, she favored the name she pronounced “Kiran,” which, remarkably, was Swami Aseshananda’s pre-monastic name. (One of the Hebrew names we informally gave Joelle was “Keren” meaning: ray, beam, power, ram’s horn.) Second, our daughter had a strong attraction to Krishna and was mesmerized the first time she saw a picture of him as a child. She was fascinated by

Indian mythology and would sometimes privately act out scenes from *The Mahabharata* which she read on her own.

Alongside this joyous adoption, our family received a pounding and so many things that “could” or “should” have brought happiness were painfully removed. Without going into detail, the self-concept, as it was once known, was smashed; all was open to reevaluation. More and more things did not go according to plan. In retrospect there seemed to be some rapid acceleration of karma that eventually compelled me, during a life-threatening illness (2001), to reconnect with Vedanta. This was a period of great fear, as the body seemed to be running on one stalling cylinder. It was also a time of reckoning, so that the allure of life’s entertaining distractions rapidly and appropriately diminished. The relationship with Vedanta was strengthened by support from Swamis Bhaskarananda, Yogatmananda, and Harananda, gurubhai Colleen Engle, and Pravrajikas Satchitprana and Gayatriprana. I concluded that Ramakrishna was the magnet that drew me to the non-dual path and that Swami Aseshananda was a living exemplar of the truth we might also know.

Moving to Portland in midlife provided a symbolic break with the past and its story. While there, it seemed as though Swami Aseshananda, who had long passed away, was teaching through others in remarkable ways. For instance, one of his disciples phoned to introduce herself as a participant in this collection. She immediately offered how, whenever in distress, Swami would tell her, “Nothing happened!” For most, such advice would be preposterous, but for me, the content (and the *timing* which coincided with my mother’s passing) was so meaningful. I interpreted her statement as an affirmation of the unchanging substratum of our existence, a message of truth from Swami. In recent years, Swami seems more alive for me, even though he isn’t physically here, than before his passing. I would like to believe Swami is still available even though I’ve been less than committed.

Thirty-five years after meeting Swami, and after working with contributors to this collection, I am just beginning to understand my teacher. Although he was conversant with Western philosophy and ideas, Swami Aseshananda *experienced* a world we can only *imagine*: he was immersed in the great monastic tradition of the Ramakrishna Order; he was initiated by Sri Sarada Devi herself; and he interacted with direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. Swami Aseshananda served as a bridge, a kind of conduit, between a world we know only through books and the Western world in which we live. Swami’s frame of reference was so very different that ours, something I scarcely appreciated before compiling this collection. No wonder Swami grew impatient with the “Americans” who were so unfocused relative to the world that shaped *his* consciousness! Nevertheless, Swami was ready to shower his unconditional and compassionate love upon us, perhaps sensing our *real*—albeit hidden—desire: *to find the truth within*.

When all is said and done, one thing remains: the absolute authority that informed Swami Aseshananda’s dictum to transcend our limited state and realize our true nature.

This wasn't a mere recommendation—no—you sensed he'd achieved this realization and spoke as a knower of Brahman. That Swami never sought adulation for his personal achievement made him all the more inspiring.

*Submitted August 2009*

**Ron Bartlett**, composer, percussionist, film sound mixer, first met Swami Aseshananda in Hollywood in 1985 and visited him several times in Portland. Ron credits Swami Aseshananda with insightfully guiding him to find his guru, Swami Swahananda. A member of the Hollywood center from 1986, Ron has composed music for DVD projects and serves in various sound-related capacities.

*Written submission.*

Swami Aseshananda was a very powerful influence in my life and continues to be an inspiration in my heart. Vedanta was very new to me when I met Swamiji in 1986. I had only been to a few lectures and started to read a little about it when I heard that a very special swami was coming to the Hollywood center to give a talk. I was very excited not only to hear what he had to say, but to find out what he was like. I was not disappointed: his lecture was intense yet endearing, spiritually powerful while making the whole audience laugh out loud. There was an incredible glowing mood in the room during and after the lecture.

We were all very fortunate to get the chance to have a one-on-one meeting with him afterwards. Everyone stood in line for his or her chance. When I walked in to meet Swami Aseshananda, I was so nervous I didn't know what to say. All my questions, all my thoughts vanished except for a joyous thrill that filled my heart. Swami spoke very softly and gently like a loving grandmother. Here was this powerful speaker a moment ago treating me with such quiet, welcoming love.

Swami asked me whom I worshiped. I said I didn't follow anyone in particular, that I was searching for something and felt lost. He ran down a list of possible avatars and deities but I shook my head no, trying to be honest because I hadn't ever worshiped any of them yet. His eyes lit up, and with a big smile he asked, "How about the light in your heart?" I nodded yes. "Yes, worship the light in your heart," he said. This gave me a great sigh of relief: not only because he told me something that helped a great deal but because he wasn't pushing any set practice or religion on to me. I really felt he was there only to lift me up spiritually, which he did beyond any expectations.

I asked very innocently if Swami would be my guru, my teacher. Much to my surprise he said no. My ego soared up and I thought to myself, "Why wouldn't he teach me? Wasn't I good enough?" All these questions raced through my mind in a brief second. I started to walk out thinking we were done. Then a small voice of compassion beckoned me back as he said, "Come, come, come." I asked, "What?" thinking that there was nothing else for us to talk about. He motioned for me to come near him and I knelt down in front of him. He took out a small picture of Holy Mother from his pocket and placed it on my head. He chanted something over and over a few times which I couldn't make out and then told me I could go. He then said something that really stuck with me: "The Mother's blessings will be with you."

At the time I had no idea what just happened. My head was swimming with emotion. My heart was burning with a blissful fire that I feel right now as I repeat this story. Swamiji gave me a great gift that day, one that I will never forget!

But this wasn't the end of my great fortune with Swamiji. I spoke with Swami Aseshananda on the phone a few weeks after that, still filled with emotion and questions. I brought up the question of him being my guru again and he asked me the name of the Swami at the Hollywood center. I thought to myself he must know his name, why ask me? I replied, "Swami Swahananda." "*Baba!!!*" he said in a tone of great relief. I got the message. I went to Swami Swahananda, and by his grace he became my guru.

Ironically, I grew up in Portland, Oregon, just twenty minutes from the center where Swami lived. Yet, I had no idea—until I moved to Hollywood—that Vedanta even existed. So when I went back to visit my family at Christmas time, I thought how amazing it would be to see Swami in Portland. I called ahead and he said it would be fine to come to the vespers worship. I wasn't sure what to expect.

When I arrived, I found the center located in a beautiful old house. It was dark and no one spoke as I entered. I went into the shrine room where all the devotees were meditating. Swami came in shortly afterwards, very slowly. His clothes were a bit disheveled as he kept pulling up the cloth around his neck. He chanted and rang a bell as he continued with the ritual. I watched in amazement feeling the overwhelmingly intense spiritual atmosphere in the room wash over me.

After vespers we went into the living room for a very intimate talk about Vedanta. It was very proper: all of the male devotees were on one side of the room and all of the females on the other. Everyone seemed so peaceful and filled with bliss. Mr. Bush, one of his close devotees, started to read from a book. Swami would interrupt him from time to time with a personal story or specific insight relating to what was being read. He then went off into his own talk about Vedanta. I noticed that pictures of Swami Vivekananda and Holy Mother were directly behind him, and it appeared as if they were speaking through him the entire time.

As Swami spoke, I couldn't resist an overwhelming feeling to drift off into a wonderful internal feeling of pure bliss. To this day, I don't remember anything else that Swami said during that time until I heard the word "*Musician!*" It was like a bolt of lightning that hit me square in the chest. I thought I was going to fall over in my chair. I awoke to see everyone staring at me with a really big smile. I was shocked and a bit embarrassed that I had drifted off. I didn't fall asleep during the talk, but I wondered what had just happened? I never felt so alive, engulfed with a peaceful bliss in my entire life! I went home to California the next day still filled with the same feeling of that night. I felt changed. I remember telling my friend, "I hope this feeling never ends!" I was so happy. I just couldn't believe the power this man had to affect me in such a great way. There was no doubt whatsoever that this man was *truly* enlightened!

I went back next year to see Swamiji again at Christmas time. I got there just in time to hear his lecture. Much to my surprise there was only one other person in the audience. I couldn't believe it. It felt as if I had a private lecture that night. Swamiji spoke with great power, his fist in the air almost shouting at the world. His words hit me like waves of intense knowledge. At one point he shouted to the room, "If no one will come to hear me speak I shall talk to the tree!!!" There, off to the side of the room was a beautifully decorated Christmas tree shining with lights. He spent the rest of the lecture talking to the tree. Inside I laughed at the situation with the utmost respect. As he talked I began to recite my mantra over and over. As I did this, hearing his words I looked down at the floor. I had a strange but wonderful experience of the floor slowly falling away as the feeling became more and more intense. It was an incredible night. I went home feeling once more filled with bliss.

I saw Swamiji a few more times after that. I took my mom to meet him and he blessed her after the lecture. Walking into the center one time I remember seeing Swamiji mowing the lawn. I couldn't believe what I was seeing! Here was a ninety-two year-old man, who seemed to have trouble merely walking, pushing a heavy lawn mower all over the yard. I asked one of the monks if he needed some help. He said no, no he does that all the time and enjoys it.

There was an old tree in the yard whose limbs hung over the neighbor's house. One day the neighbor got upset and told Swami that he should cut it down. He refused. They ended up in court and Swami explained to the judge that the tree was older than all of us and had the right to be there more than anyone. The judge agreed and the tree stayed.

Swami Aseshananda was an amazing person, to say the least! His knowledge and vibrant spiritual inspiration was felt all over the world. He taught and influenced many people over the years, truly changing lives forever. For me, I will never forget him. I'll remember him for what he said, but even more for how he touched my soul. My thanks for his gift of peace and pure bliss can never be expressed in words.

*Submitted August 2008*

**Robert Geib**, a disciple of Swami Prabhavananda, visited Swami Aseshananda numerous times from 1976 through 1994.

The following is excerpted from the author's "Reflections and Anecdotes on Swami Aseshananda from Aseshanandaland" written in response to the request for reminiscences.

"You can tell what you know."  
(Swami Aseshananda, ca. 1980-81)

It was nice to know I could  
Though I thought I never would  
Then an angel whispered in my ear  
"Bob. These are autumn years!  
Hear, 'Time's winged chariot hurrying near'  
Don't you think you should?"

### **Initial Contacts**

It was at Swami Prabhavananda's memorial in July of 1976 that Swami Aseshananda was first brought to my attention. Gretchen, my wife, nudged me and said, "That's Swami Aseshananda from the Portland center. He was a disciple of Holy Mother." That was interesting, I thought, because Gretchen was the one who first set up the appropriate contact for meeting Swami Prabhavananda [their guru].

It was thought we would most likely not travel to Portland, where almost every month if there's not rain, then there's what spoiled San Diegans call "June gloom," or "gray May." Since Gretchen had an attraction to Holy Mother, she felt we should visit the Portland swami who was fast developing his own legacy. My mood about the trip was more subdued. I preferred, and was scheduled, to take another retreat at Olema surrounded by its 2,300 acres of trees, complete with a stillness that was steeped in silence. But as in all workable marriages, the two of us reached a compromise. I would fly to Olema for a week, and Gretchen would pick me up for the sojourn to Portland. Though admittedly, if I had my druthers, there would not have been a millimeter of movement north of Olema. It was a compromise I would not regret, a stellar call by Gretchen—or the Divine.

After our first visual contact with Swami Aseshananda in Hollywood, we formally met the Portland swami in September of 1976. He talked with us in the foyer maybe twenty minutes. I can't remember the beginning of the session, only that there was a feeling of being extremely relaxed, but about half way through, he told us our Chosen Ideals, I recall. That was surprising because within the Vedanta tradition, Chosen Ideals, mantras, and doing beads are kept personal. It was a clue that this fascinating monk was a bit of a maverick. While being attracted to Swami A, neither of us was particularly

attracted to the Portland Center, which was noisy and busy compared to the silent retreats we had taken at Olema. Both of us said we would never return, but just before leaving on that first trip, Swami stared me down for about five to ten seconds, and I found myself back there the following month. Over the next seven years, ten to twelve trips were made to the Portland center for stays of about one to three weeks. There was a very tangible feeling that with Swami's spiritual energy the path was becoming honed, making it more amenable, workable, hence more real. Gretchen and I were the perfect foils for Swami's talent. He seemed to like people who were already partially grounded in the life of the spirit. This teacher mentioned he did not like to take on students who were always out of a job—he looked for stability.

Aseshananda was a hands-on kind of guy. That is, he would not just give his disciples a mantra and throw them to the wolves. He would also operate in silence and had a spiritual hand that would reach all the way to San Diego. While he operated in silence, he would also stammer and yell at his students. He treated your spiritual infirmities on an individual basis, having the ability to look within the personality and see the assets and liabilities.

### **The Chat Session**

Sometime in 1977, Swami A just walked up and said, "Let's talk." We sat down in the foyer, and he volunteered some facts about himself. After approximately twenty minutes into the session, I made the statement, "Well, it is a boon that you could come to this country and aid us in the meditative pursuit for ultimate truth." He responded with a statement that changed the tenor of the dialogue. He began shaking his head in the negative saying, "No, no, most people are not interested in liberation and doing meditation." He did not say it as a matter of fact but with a tone of mild despondency, yet infused with a universal acceptance. Many of us have experienced this swami as charming, inquiring, joyful or making a display of anger but rarely, if ever, despondent.

Before completing this section of the remembrance, I called Sarada (Swami Harananda) and confirmed the lack of generalized depression in Swami A's make-up. What bothered Swami A, we know, also bothered the monk who first attracted him to the spiritual path, Swami Brahmananda, who said something to the effect that "I can give liberation but have no takers. They just want potatoes, onions, and turnips." Once it became obvious that this was a major problem for Swami A, I would observe, over subsequent visits, how he worked at handling the problem of keeping his students motivated in the discipline of meditation. Here is one particular avenue that appealed to him:

Around 1982 or '83, there was a regular east coast visitor who was part of the intellectual subculture that focused on spiritual growth, transcendence and liberation. We were in the foyer as this intellectual, also a master of the phrase, barked out, "Swami does not have to indulge in movies, he has his own Laurel and Hardy right here in the monastery." Just about that time, Swami comes into the foyer and without missing a



beat moves into the question, “Would it be possible to have a group of intellectuals from all over the country to meet here and at the retreat for a symposium?” The visitor was surprised, but to this observer, it was a possible replay of those years when Swami A was an assistant to Swami P in Hollywood in the 1940s and ‘50s. What helped put that center on the map were some of the intellectual elite of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as Aldous Huxley, Christopher Isherwood, and Gerald Heard. It created an atmosphere that stimulated not just mystical thought and philosophy, which can only take one only so far, but more important, it could motivate a greater commitment to the meditative. As Swami A was first to admit, keeping his disciples motivated to meditate was a perpetual problem. I was just surprised he shared so much so fast during this chat session, which is just an indication of how much a problem it was to him. As will be seen, whenever there is a problem about meditation, you don’t have to ask for help. He simply reads your mind and shows up.

### **Swami A Answers Questions Yet To Be Asked**

Prior to the next visit at the Portland Center, a question was formulated just in case we had another chat session. The day of our arrival, the President of the Vedanta Society, Stuart Bush, and I were drying dishes when he mentioned Swami was getting older and did not like to grant interviews. This was understandable and accepted, so the question was simply locked inside the mind—I thought. The question was simple and practical: “How can I improve and deepen meditation?” Then the day before leaving, while walking down the stairs, we met and he stopped and just said, “If you want to deepen your meditation, then make it come from the heart.” By “heart” I felt he meant to focus on the Presence within the Spiritual Heart (in contrast to a mere figurative expression of just more emotion). So we had this uncanny relationship where I would formulate a question, but not ask it, and a day or two before leaving we would meet on the stairs and he would give the answer . . . usually!

Exceptions were if Swami had one of his midnight classes. A midnight class was one of his eccentric and not always delightful pedagogic techniques. Since Ramakrishna taught his disciples at midnight, so Swami A would occasionally do the same. The trouble was he would never give a warning when this was to happen; he would just announce it two or three minutes before. A few minutes before midnight a monk would run through the dorm yelling, “Wake up, wake up, Swami’s midnight class, midnight class.” It was at the midnight class that he would talk and ask if you had any questions at that time. I would ask the questions which would mean there would be no meeting on the staircase.

Things happened at the Portland center. Good things happened—spiritual things—but you could not take any credit for it. There was always the feeling you had little control over the events. You frequently felt like a feather being blown around in the wind. Wordsworth comes to mind: “I made no vows, vows were made for me.”

### **At Least Make It A Challenge**

Around 1979, during the noon meditation, the mind was in a wandering state, having just visited a record store. Some records were purchased, but some that were marginal were left while more thought was given as to whether they should be purchased at a later date. Movement of the mind was usual, but normally, after a few minutes, it was brought under reasonable control. Exceptions were these Portland stays, but on this particular day the mind, simply put, was a rascal.

Periodically, the visual mind would go back to the records' colorful covers, and the audio mind would be thinking and feeling music, not mantra. Toward the end of the hour, there was just a giving up—something that had not happened in thirteen years of meditation. Walking out of the shrine, most likely humming a tune, there was, sure as God made little green apples, Swami standing at the shrine entrance staring at me: “At least make it (meditation) a challenge.” Geez, can’t you keep anything from this guy? One thing was certain: his advice to “Make it a challenge” could not be followed at that time. It seemed too insensitive, cajoling, and contrived. To me it had to be felt, and the mind within the heart was not up to it.

Gradually, after another decade, when there was less identification with the mind and more with the consciousness that lights the mind, a challenge could be made. As long as there was identification with the mind, with its states and moods, it could not be treated like it is, which is just a thing. The mind may be elated or sad, but that is not “I.” It was only when there was a substantial distance from the mind that it could be challenged like a foe and sometimes a friend.

By Swami reading this mind in the shrine and suggesting a challenge, his advice did eventually bear fruit. Some of us are just slow learners. It has been noticed with holy men that what they say sounds off-the-wall or impossible, but decades later, it seems not just to flower but to sprout wings, as the next story illustrates.

### **“You Can Tell What You Know”**

Just before leaving to return home from another Aseshanandaland stay circa 1980-81, Swami stared not so much at me as through me. Then later, with just slight eye contact that was maybe quizzical or inquiring, the monk said, “You can tell what you know.” Although the question arose in my mind “Relative to what?” there was not the presence of mind to ask it. It was as though I were mesmerized. Was he giving me permission to talk or write about the mystical, the meditative or maybe about him? Swami A’s off-the-wall statement was not so much an order as an opinion. It was subliminally filed away until a quarter of a century later.

It was decided recently to entitle a book that was in the process of being written *The Mystical and the Meditative*, which recalled the Portland Swami. Shortly after, a devotee friend of ours, Carolyn Kenny, passed away and I wrote several pages about her upa [secondary] guru, Swami A, in her memory. Several months later a request came to

write reminiscences about Swami A for this volume. So Swami's statement that appeared irrelevant and off-the-wall took on meaning with its uncanny air of the inevitable.

### **Swami Aseshananda Shows—Not Tells—About Mantric Tempo**

This is yet another story on meditative help with the Portland swami . . . to the rescue. It is also a favorite story about this veteran of mantric enchantment, because it is *so* Swami A!

After nine or ten visits to Aseshanandaland, it was well known just to think a question, especially on meditation, and the student would receive an answer one way or another. It was suspected when this mind framed the question, "I wonder what Swami is doing on mantra flow?" that we would meet on the staircase several days before parting, and he would give an answer.

Instead of waiting until parting, we had the encounter at the Scappoose retreat on a day when members and their friends were invited for a lecture followed by lunch. Arriving twenty minutes early, it was decided to enter the lecture hall and meditate. Before the eyes would close, just as sure as God made the rising, smiling, shining sun, Swami walks out with gusto on the lecture platform. This 80 year-old guy could walk as fast as he could talk. Here was a man with a mission as he sat down in a chair, dug into his pocket and pulled out a large rosary. The thought occurred, "Surely he is not going to make a public display of doing his beads in front of God as people trickle in." He was short, the chair was low, and the rosary was long, so it may have cleared the floor by no more than several inches.

What amazed was the transition from his quick movements of walking to the gentle and peaceful mood that transpired as he began the japam. Some facial lines seemed to disappear, making him appear several years younger. The most captivating feature of this mantric episode at Scappoose is how slowly he was churning out the japam via the rosary. It was like molasses in January. Yet, it was impossible to technically determine the tempo because it was not known how many syllables were in his mantra. If there were only five syllables, it was slo-mo [motion]. On the other hand, if the mantra had ten syllables, it was still very slow. It was not really clear at this stage whether his message of show was "This is the way I do it or this is the way you should do it."

Swami Aseshananda had the ability to look into this writer's mind although I did not have the talent to view his. On this occasion, however, it was as if he opened up a channel where his spiritual pulse could be felt. This is not to say that the technical syllables could be picked up. It was more like being at a concert where someone like [Zubin] Mehta or [Herbert] Von Karajan were giving the downbeat to an 80-piece philharmonic orchestra during Beethoven's 5<sup>th</sup>. You would feel the visceral impact of fate in the opening four notes—da da da Dee—without knowing they were three Gs and an E<sup>b</sup>.

What I learned from his message for purposes of future japam was to elongate the syllables, creating a slower flow, thereby producing a legato [smooth] effect. The result was less of a mechanical presentation and more of a musical or chanting mood. After five minutes of mantric message, he popped up as fast as he sat down, and with a speed walker's pace, left the lecture platform.

### **I Can See, Feel and Hear This Old Swami**

I am not embarrassed to say after all these years  
The mind hits a point about two hours in the AM sit  
Where a slight fatigue begins to set in.

Before there is a blessing of a second wind,  
Words and phrases seem to bubble up  
From the deep underground within,  
Only to surface on a Lighted sea of Consciousness.

To be gone . . . gone . . . gone with these lines  
That clutter, clatter and chatter clogging the mind,  
Ever so quickly becoming verse and song.

Would you believe more haste is put into  
The mantric pace attempting to push out  
This spontaneous art of the mind into oblivion?

Grace does ascend and descend in the mind's eye  
As I can see Swami A . . . I can see old Swami A  
As he extracts out every nanogram of Bliss  
. . . . . That's intrinsic to his mantra.

I can feel this disciple of Sarada Devi from Jayrambati  
Gracing every bead with a Beauty and Unity  
As if he were caressing a priceless pearl necklace.

On special days when the third ear is in tune  
With a realm that is neither here nor there,  
"A" can be heard saying, "Bob . . . forever take heed,  
I am not telling you, I am showing you."  
. . . . . And did he ever.

### **The Wool Gloves**

It was during a lecture in 1982 that Swami's clothes looked . . . well . . . ragtag. We had been informed by Carolyn Kenny [a devotee] that Swami A had been given some

apparel by friends he dearly respected and would not part with the duds . . . ragtag or not. A thought occurred, “Wouldn’t it be a boon to have an article of apparel from this holy person for our shrine?”

About two months later, Carolyn Kenny was at Trabuco when a young gentleman gave her a package. He asked her if she knew Bob Geib. When she replied, “Yes,” he asked her to give this package to me, as it was from Swami Aseshananda. To my surprise it was a pair of his wool gloves.

### **The Most Important Event In Life After Metaphysical Liberation**

A day or two before leaving during a visit in 1982, we had our last encounter on the stairs. A question had been raised in the mind as to what does Swami A feel is the most significant event in life other than metaphysical liberation? As he motioned me over he said in a serious voice, almost on the QT, “The most important event in life is death!” Then the question was asked, “Swami, what do you mean by death, the actual moment of death or after death?” He was very emphatic: “After death is too late.” As his voice mildly crescendoed, his hand gestured upward.

Swami Aseshananda, as a yogi, was talking very specifically and technically about the moment of death when breathing becomes shallow and the last breath will be followed by death of the mind-body complex. It is that second or nanosecond before death that the yogis are concerned about.

Swami Aseshananda wanted his disciples to be armed with the NAME for the mind/body’s date with death. His message was: don’t be late, don’t be late . . . rather, be aware. The rishis of ancient India had a prescription for this timely preparedness. What was this yogic prescription? Simply put, whether eyes are closed or in an open state, “Meditate, meditate, meditate.”

### **Excerpts from a 1996 Letter**

In 1996 Mr. Bush called to say Swami had left the body. Three paragraphs from a letter I sent to the monastery are listed below:

1. It’s not difficult to see and hear Swami Aseshananda in one’s visual and auditory imagination almost shouting out “Holy Mother this and Holy Mother that,” and “Man can transcend those Kantian categories of space, time, and causality, but only through the Grace of the Divine Mother.”
2. As a former percussionist, it would be easy to notice a certain cadence in his voice. I used to think of him as a physically petite spiritual pied piper, who was an Agent of Grace where time encounters Eternity.
3. I could tell after our third visit that Swami Aseshananda had a way of rounding off a devotee’s rough edges which would then give him or her greater control over the

passions. He did this work sometimes with words but more often he operated in silence at night when this mind was in deep sleep.

### **Conclusion: One Image, One Thought, and One Poem**

When penning an article on a soul of this magnitude, philosophical and psychological insights automatically surface. They pale in comparison to just a meditatively held image that quickly brings his Presence into the NOW, touching ever so slightly, yet profoundly, the mind with Light.

A thought surfaced several weeks ago when working on this project that can't be intellectually developed here but can be stated something like this:

The Guru is the Universal with personal implications, whereas the Upa Guru is personal with Universal implications. At this point such a statement only makes sense to me on an intuitive level. That is why when attempting to develop a communicative mode on the subject, a more intuitive medium would simply be to lay down some lines, not in poetic metre but in mantric metre. Knowing full well that metaphysically there is no writer, only writing, and leaving it at that . . . as in "Thou Art That"

### **An Ode to the Upa Guru**

I knew a maverick yogi short in stature  
But long on devotion, commitment, japam  
And meditation to the Devi within.  
Giving . . . Giving . . . Giving he knew no end.

He could ride the wave at the highest Crest  
Spiritually hanging ten with the best of them.  
I watched years in the fascination and transformation.  
A giant living the Crest Jewel of Discrimination.

He could ride the Infinite Spiritual Surf  
To the Timeless Mystical Altar  
In his own patented way like few others.  
Bowing down . . . down . . . down  
Dissolving into the Universal Mother.

*Submitted Spring 2008*

**Thomas Lifschutz**, daughter Rose, and son Andy first came to the Portland Vedanta society around 1990. They have always cherished the teachings of Vedanta, the company of the swamis and devotees, the temple, and the Scappoose retreat.

*Written reply to questionnaire.*

EW: How did you first meet Swami Aseshananda? Was there anything memorable about the occasion or your first impression?

TL: I first met Swami Aseshananda around 1990-91. I had been reading Vedanta scripture and teachings, so when I heard about the center here, I began attending the Sunday lectures. From the first moment until the last moment, it was always abundantly clear that Swami's life was lived as a devotee to Truth, to God, to Mother, and to ineffable non-duality. He was, and remains, a source of profound inspiration.

EW: How did your relationship with Swami Aseshananda evolve?

TL: My relationship with Swami evolved during the time his body was failing. I was able to see him weekly during this time and witness his strength of character throughout this period. During the last year or so of his life I was not able to see him as frequently, however the times I did were deeply instructive as to the meaning and purpose of life and the meaning of death and dying.

EW: How did Swami Aseshananda mold and impact your life?

TL: Most of all, I credit Swami with bringing the concept of God as Mother into my awareness. "Ma," when uttered from his lips, *always* moved me.

EW: Is there something special you'd care to share?

TL: I have always been deeply drawn to the Scappoose retreat. In general, the natural forest setting is remarkably meditative and beautiful. In particular, the shrine trails, with their rustic shrines honoring various world religions and our local American Indian indigenous religion, have captured my heart and soul. The trails and shrines were first constructed during the 1970s under Swami A's watch. He must have had some remarkable influence over devotees there since he was the swami in charge from its inception and all of it had to meet with his approval.

The retreat is, for me, the tangible expression of the saying "One God, so many paths." I feel so blessed for every moment spent there, for every moment I *think* about it. Even now, I feel at such a loss for words to describe it. It's as though the entire Scappoose property is a Holy Mother shrine. She is that mountain and the trees are like the delicate hairs on her body, and the roads, shrines and buildings are her ornaments; just to be there

is to snuggle close into Her loving embrace. When I would see Swami Aseshananda up there working, I could feel his love and devotion pouring out towards Mother and towards me.

*Submitted September 2008*

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[Editorial note: “Europe has its cathedrals and here these trees are our cathedrals to God,” one disciple recalled Swami say about the retreat.]



**James Ferguson, MD**, attended Swami Aseshananda at the Vedanta Society of Portland for the last eighteen months of Swami's life. Dr. Ferguson spoke at Swami's memorial service.

*Written submission.*

I've always appreciated the fact that I could work as a physician because it has allowed me to interact with people at a special time, that of sickness, life, death, crisis, when frequently stripped of the defenses and pretenses of day-to-day life.

I believe that people at this time are more revealing of their true human nature and I've been privileged to be able to be with them, to learn what it means to be a human being, by being able to assist them through trying times. It has been a challenge of mine to be able to try to know humanity better.

I consider our elderly population to be our royalty: those who have survived so much with such ingenuity, skill, and grace. So I looked forward to experiencing these revelations from Swami Aseshananda, to having this time with someone so revered and obviously filled with the unique life experiences I imagined him to have. As someone who has been present for two world wars, the development of automobiles, telephone, electricity, mass communication, Indian national independence, certainly he must have met some interesting people on his journey.

Well, I could not have anticipated nor imagined what I was getting into when I agreed to provide care for Swami Aseshananda. His wish was to remain in the monastery for the last days of this existence.

At that time I was intrigued by the opportunity to know someone like Swami and to get a glimpse of humanity that would be rare and priceless. (And besides, he once had one of my favorite diseases, malaria.) However, I learned very little about humanity from Swami because I think he was not of this world. He seemed to exist outside of the realm of humanity. For example, despite my experience as a physician, I found it very difficult to assess his physical body simply because he seemed to lack body-consciousness. I have met many who proclaim spirituality but none that could live it as the swami did.

I did not expect Swami Aseshananda to survive for very long, but he continuously surprised me in many ways. I watched as his residence slowly transformed to a rather sophisticated hospital room. Swami Shantarupananda and the devotees rose to every occasion and challenge to ensure Swami Aseshananda's mortal comfort. Although none were trained in healthcare, they readily and unselfishly learned and performed various techniques with a singularity of thought that had as its source service, respect, and devotion. It was incredible to watch how they responded to Swami. Sometimes Swami's interactions with the devotees in his room were tremendously humorous, and

there were a lot of surprises too in the way they'd react to things. Often the devotees would debate various things about his care and he once shouted to stop it, even though he was rather deaf.\*

We survived many crises and Swami always chose life; his body wished to continue through these mortal trials. For instance, once I explained to him, "You are going to leave your body in a couple days if you don't eat or drink." So he said, "OK, I'll do it." But he didn't. Then I explained, "I could put a feeding tube down and provide nourishment and you could live longer." I truly expected him to say no, that he didn't want to do that. But he said, "OK, do it. Do what you think is best." When the nurse failed to get the tube in place, I thought that is what I should do based on his wishes and everybody else's. I told Swami it would be uncomfortable but he never said to stop. The process was quite incredible. In the end, I was drenched in sweat. There were five or six people there, and the relief and joy were almost impossible to describe. The sense was that everyone wanted him to be around longer.

Swami lived for six more months following this procedure but no longer came down to sit with the devotees after the lecture. There were times when I thought he'd be gone very soon [owing to his breathing pattern] but he continued his worldly existence for months after that. He'd be hard to communicate with, in and out of consciousness, but whenever he came into consciousness, he'd be crystal clear. He maintained his relationship with the devotees and one could see how he was cherished. At times he would thrive and make miraculous recoveries that spread joy through the temple.

I did not meet the swami until July 1995 and I didn't get to know him as many did, but I did get to know him *some* directly. I am grateful for that. But even more importantly, I learned about Swami Aseshananda through the devotees and Swami Shantarupananda, and I learned what they thought of Swami Aseshananda. Through that filter I received one united message from them. I have never seen such a generousness of love and devotion that I witnessed here. Many times I would just sit and watch the richness of the interactions that occurred and that nourished my soul.

Although I learned little about humanity from Swami Aseshananda, I believe I received something even more valuable. Even though real things happened that could be scientifically explained, I received a feeling from Swami that couldn't be measured or quantified, as we scientists like to do, something that I can't say that's ever happened before. It was completely meaningful. Even now, when least expecting it, Swami will be right there in my mind. So in different ways, Swami still keeps coming back to me.

Over time, I came to conclude that my life's real purpose was to provide care for Swami those eighteen months. As a down-to-earth, scientifically-oriented person, and non-believer of organized religion, I was honored to have been selected for this job. I had no idea I'd be exposed to something like this in my lifetime and how blessed I would be to care for him.

Swami has left a rich legacy with me and I will always cherish this memory. I have experienced a glimpse of a great soul. We were all blessed to have been in his presence.

*Submitted January 2009*

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\*[Editorial note: According to many observers, Swami apparently sensed what was happening in the room even though he couldn't hear well. Dr. Ferguson commented that such incidents also occurred during his watch. See also accounts by Ralph Stuart and Terrance Hohner.

Dr. Ferguson mentioned that Swami presented him with his chuddar. Because Swami Aseshananda cherished Swami Saradananda's chuddar (according to Gayatriprana), we could conclude that the gift of his own chuddar to Dr. Ferguson was an act of special significance.]

## **Snapshots: Brief Encounters, Lasting Impressions**



**Anonymous**, while a child, visited Swami Aseshananda several times with his parents, disciples of Swami Aseshananda. Initiated towards the end of Swami's life, he works as executive director of a non-profit organization in California that serves uninsured clients facing life-threatening illnesses. [Description included with devotee's permission]

*Written submission.*

I realize there is a gap of many years between my actual observations and interactions with Swami Aseshananda and any real efforts to remember and have an appreciation for them. This can mainly be attributed to the fact that most of my interactions with him were from the time I was a young child to my mid-teens, and certainly before I started having any mature or independent thoughts about religion, God, etc. Thus, my first remembrances of him were as simple as this; whenever he would visit my hometown Vedanta Society in Seattle, two things would happen: 1. the number of people in attendance at the temple would increase greatly; and 2. the mothers at the temple would adopt a strict "zero tolerance" policy towards us kids making any noise or running around (to our great dismay). Over the ensuing years, my family also made various trips to Portland to visit Swami Aseshananda, and the last time I actually saw him was when he was close to (or at) the end-of-life stages, and he was connected to a feeding tube. At that time, I remember one of his attendants noting that the doctors would have trouble easing his pain, because whenever they asked him where the pain was, he would simply reply, "No pain, no pain, there is only Mother, there is only Mother."

Swami Aseshananda passed away when I was a college student in California, and, looking back, it is a great regret of mine that I did not make the trip to Portland to attend his memorial service. It was shortly after this time that my interest in theology grew, and I soon found myself immersed in studies of various faiths, from Vedanta and Vivekananda to Christian and Islamic mysticism to many Buddhist texts and authors. Regardless of the tradition about which I was reading, one common theme always showed through—that there are always many imitations and very few genuine articles. More specifically, despite the poor reputation the idea of religion has gained within my generation, due to those who feign spirituality; those who may use it for pride or to boost their egos; those who may utilize it for power, politics or personal wealth; and those who so grossly misunderstand religion that it becomes a vehicle for intolerance and condemnation, it must not be forgotten that there exist those rare individuals who perfectly embody the universal ideals of humility, faith, sincerity, and concern for others. These luminous teachers do not need to say a single word, because they model their teachings so impeccably, by the manner in which they live their lives.

It was during this time, I realized how fortunate I was to have been able to observe, interact with and receive blessings from one such great spiritual being. In this context, I could reflect back clearly on how exacting Swami Aseshananda's dedication and faith were. There were seemingly little gestures, such as how he always started his lectures

with a short Sanskrit prayer and translation, and there were larger ones such as his never going back to India. His faith and reverence to Holy Mother, Ramakrishna and the core tenets of Vedanta were demonstrated both through his words and all of his actions. Anyone can, and many of us do, talk about the grand notions Eastern spiritual thought offers us—the idea of seeing through the veil of Maya, or going beyond pairs of opposites (and so many other similar sentiments), but how many us, when we find ourselves on our death beds, will be answering our doctors with “No pain, no pain?”

It is said that God can actually be realized, and before this realization occurs, all religion is merely speculation (regardless of how sincere, well-intentioned or educated it may be). There is no doubt that Swami Aseshananda had clearly transcended speculation to a point of realization. In doing so, he represented a crystal-clear view of what life’s highest purpose can be for all of us. As grateful as I am for my experiences with him, I only wish I had known him when I was at a more mature stage in life. I can only imagine what it would be like to discuss with him all the existential questions which arose for me in my early twenties. Nevertheless, I know that the way I try to live my life, how I view what my purpose may be and the ideals for which I strive have all been shaped by Swami Aseshananda, and, for that, I am eternally grateful.

*Submitted May 2009*

**Dr. Sreemati Mukherjee** is a Reader in the Department of English at Basanti Devi College, Kolkata. In addition to numerous academic articles, she has also published in *Prabuddha Bharata*, *American Vedantist*, and the *Bulletin of the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture*.

*Written submission.*

My memories of Swami Aseshananda go back to my early years of struggle in America, when as a young wife married to a student, I was desperately trying not only to make financial ends meet, but also to find a certain peace within, uncontaminated by the ups and downs of new relationships. Our first stop on the road to peace was the unqualified friendship offered to us by Swami Tathagathananda, Head of the Vedanta Society of New York; our first meeting with him took place on December 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1982. I first met Swami Asheshananda when he came to speak in the Vedanta Center (West Side) in April of 1983, along with Swami Swahananda and Swami Adishwarananda, who is with us no more.

Swami Aseshananda had a unique appearance. He was not dressed in the traditional sannyasi garb; instead he sported a black suit, wearing, however, an orange scarf to indicate his separate status as one who had renounced the world, a symbol whose meaning would be properly construed only by those who were initiated into the mores of Hindu asceticism. He also had flowing locks and a keen intelligent air about him, giving him more the appearance of a sophisticated bureaucrat or intellectual.

His delivery was low, pointed, succinct and laced with an unmistakable humor. He spoke on Holy Mother. It is too far back in time for me to recollect the entire substance of his talk that evening. However, I remember its sonorous and compelling end which I may not be able to reproduce exactly but which was close to, “I have seen Her, I have spoken to Her, I now pray to Her to carry me over the ocean of Life.”

My husband, Debajyoti, who was a keen devotee himself, immediately rushed upstairs after the talk was over, when devotees were allowed to meet the swami personally. I too went along. Debajyoti asked Swami for initiation. At that point there was no one else in the room. Swami went into meditation for a few minutes. After opening his eyes, he simply smiled and said, “The time is not right. You will get your initiation elsewhere.” He was correct. We were initiated early in 1987 at Belur Math by Swami Gambhiranandaji. However, Aseshanandaji gave us a mantra to chant until we received the one sealing our initiation. This mantra was a very simple and traditional one, chanted, I’m sure, by many people in India everyday, the refrain of countless songs of the Vaishnava faith, and also referred to in songs by Rabindranath, Atulprasad and Rajanikanto. Its appeal is timeless. Asheshanandaji’s mantra was, “Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna Hare Hare/Hare Ram, Hare Ram, Ram, Ram, Hare Hare.” We can see how this mantra—without taking Thakur’s name directly anywhere—brought



into our consciousness the twin deities or avatars who constituted Thakur's name, Ramakrishna.

My relationship with Swami Asheshananda has another rich dimension. As I've mentioned, I was a struggling student's wife in the early 1980s. However, my own background in the Humanities—English Literature to be precise—had made it difficult for me to accept philosophies/epistemologies/avatars without some questioning. I have once heard Swami Prabhananda (General Secretary, Ramakrishna Mission and Math) say in a lecture that any spiritual aspirant will perforce have these periods of dryness when Belief or Faith seems simply a fantasy, a mere wish fulfillment, an unrealistic satisfying of the imagination.

I was up to my ears with Heidegger, Nietzsche, Camus, and Sartre in college, belonging to a group who certainly—in the fashion of postcolonial “mimicry”—identified more with Left-leaning Western philosophers than with Indians. They either followed Sartre's philosophy of social commitment and rejection of “bad faith,” or Camus's belief that like Sisyphus, man is bound to action, but that there is no authenticity or heroic meaning within the existential framework of life. Human beings act without the sanction of an ultimate telos.

Nurtured on these theories for three years, I was certainly influenced by certain kernels of truth that existed in them. However, also having a naturally devout sensibility, I found the crosscurrents of skepticism and faith very painful and difficult to bear. It is at that juncture that I turned to Swami Asheshananda. I told him my problem and in return (because I didn't have money for long phone calls), he wrote me a letter in his own hand. That letter is now buried in the mass of papers that have accompanied me on my shift from America to India, and I am not sure that I can recover it.

However, I still have memories of the dialectic that it contained. Swami told me that he too, as a college student, had been influenced by Western thinkers like Kant, Hegel, and Russell. However, his apprenticeship under Swami Saradananda changed many of his early assumptions about the nature of reality and experience. From Saradanandaji, he had learnt the value of service and how it transforms character. His final blessing in the form of Holy Mother's initiation had taken care of all the dissenting and dissonant voices within him; it made him fully prepared to be a dedicated monk to the Ramakrishna Order. Of course, Asheshanandaji was lucky. Not only did he meet the miracle worker Holy Mother, but more than one of Sri Ramakrishna's direct disciples. We are much less fortunate in not seeing human beings who exemplified such rare attributes of heart and mind, and have to make do with what we see now and then.

Asheshanandaji continued by saying that although the Western philosophers like Nietzsche can give us fuel for thought, they cannot give us peace, and that is what we so desperately want. Therefore, read Western philosophers he said, but when it comes to cultivating intimacy, turn to Thakur and Ma.

I still remember Swami's keen and intelligent face, the smile that hovered constantly over it, his paramount gentleness, and above all, his "service" to a young woman who was shaken by the pangs of doubt and disbelief.

*Submitted January 2009*

**Charlie K. (Krishnadas) and Sita Mitchell** are disciples of Swami Prabhavananda. They visited Swami Aseshananda annually for about twenty years. Charlie is the vice-president and general counsel of the Vedanta Society of Southern California.

*Written submission.*

It was in the early to mid-1990s. Aseshananda was still in good health. Sita and I had made our annual pilgrimage to Portland, stayed a few days and were about to leave. We asked for a private interview with him. We sat alone with him in the foyer. Swami said, “All right, now ask some question.”

We said, “We don’t have any questions, Swami. We’ve been practicing for more than 30 years now. We just wanted to be alone with you for a while.”

Swami was pleased with this, took out the little picture of Holy Mother he always carried with him and touched it to each of our heads, murmuring something we couldn’t understand. Then he sat back in his chair, we all closed our eyes, and suddenly the three of us soared upward. Sita and I had the identical experience. We suppose Swami A. had it, too. For some minutes (hours? days?—there was no sense of “time” as we usually conceive of it) we sailed up and up into a cloud of light. It felt like he was holding us to him somehow, or maybe we were being drawn along in his wake—very difficult to describe. Ecstatic. Eventually we heard him saying, “All right, all right, very good,” and some other mumblings. We returned to our bodies, took the dust of his feet and said our goodbyes, probably staggering a little as we walked. The radiant sense of the experience stayed with us for days, and a wisp of it is with us still.

This was one of our most treasured experiences with Swami Aseshananda.

*Submitted April 2009*

**Barbara Smith**, a disciple of Swami Bhaskarananda, saw Swami Aseshananda in Portland and Seattle several times beginning in the early 1980s. A long-time member of the Vedanta Society of Western Washington, Barbara is also dedicated to supporting the work of women Vedantists in the West.

*Written submission.*

We lived in Bellingham, WA, when our bookstore, Akasha Metaphysical Bookstore, opened around 1980, and where my husband, Stafford, tended his small law practice. We were attending the Seattle Vedanta Center when the thought came to drive along the west coast through California to meet the folks at the wholesale book companies that supplied our books, and at the same time visit the Vedanta centers along the way.

A plan was made to drive through Portland and visit a friend, David, who was studying at the Portland School of Naturopathic Medicine. At the end of the trip I would stay at the Hollywood convent for a few days before returning home.

David and I met at the Portland Vedanta Center for the Sunday service a little before 11 AM. The lecture was given by Swami Aseshananadaji who—through his riveting words—captured my being immediately. We sat in the front row and his energy seemed to pierce the very essence of my soul. No escape!

After the lecture as folks were strolling out the door, one of the members approached me and asked if I were a visitor. When I explained the journey underway he intently insisted that I should meet with the swami and turned to get his attention. It was clear that David and I were not going out the door without doing so! Not that we wanted to leave—we just had no idea we’d be meeting with the swami. The man took us to a room and asked us to wait. Shortly I was shown to a smaller room while David waited outside for his session with the swami.

A little nervous, I sat quietly not knowing what to expect or do when I should meet the man who, in the past hour, had certainly made a huge impression on my mind. In a short time, we were meeting face to face. Swamiji found the nearest chair and set it directly in front of me—so close! He asked me where I lived and where I was going. I explained that my husband and I attended the Vedanta Center in Seattle and the purpose of my present trip.

Swami quickly inquired whether I had been initiated and when I replied that we had indeed asked, but it hadn’t yet occurred, he stood up and leaned over me. Out of him came a hearty and loud proclamation to go back to Seattle and seek initiation!

Swami’s temperament had changed so quickly that I became overwhelmed, but also concluded that through his demonstrative love and caring, he wanted me to come closer

to Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Sarada Devi—and not to waste one minute!! He gave *such a command to dive deep* into the mind in order to know my true Self!! He counseled that moving from place to place would offer little benefit, and that even he hadn't been back to India since the day he'd left! What to say or do? Should I promise never to travel again when I didn't think I could keep that promise? I sat quietly staring at him.

David and I met in the car and for the next forty-five or so minutes I simply could not drive. Aha! The swami had made his point and I could go nowhere! We sat there together, spiritually paralyzed, as if stung by a swarm of bees, trembling yet joyous. Why did the swami take his time that busy day to talk with David and me when we didn't wish to trouble him? I believe Swami Aseshanandaji imparted to us the kind of caring a father gives his children to insure that they take advantage of an important opportunity.

Shortly thereafter, Stafford and I were initiated by Swami Bhaskaranandaji in Seattle and David by Swami Aseshanandaji in Portland. The journey along the west coast during those next two weeks was interesting; however, the spiritual journey we've been "traveling" for the past 26 years has been a blessed one.

Swami Aseshanandaji would visit Seattle often and when he came, I always felt close to him, and never did I forget the day I met him. *He stung me indeed!* And I have been ever so grateful—it was a memorable day.

*Submitted December 2008*

**Mary Tamraz (Archana)** became a disciple in 1974 of Swami Shraddhananda, the minister-in-charge of the Vedanta Society of Sacramento, and continues to be an active member of the center.

*Written submission.*

### **A Tribute to Swami Asheshananda Maharaj**

During a visit to Portland in 1974, a friend took me to the Sunday lecture of the Vedanta Society. The moment we sat down, tears came and I began to cry. I felt surrounded by motherly love and peace. It was as if I had come home after a very long journey. That day, Holy Mother touched my heart through Swami Asheshanandaji.

Several months later, I discovered the Vedanta Society of Sacramento. Over the years, Swami Asheshananda, bundled up in his warm hat and coats, visited Swami Shraddhanandaji Maharaj and gave lectures at our center.

Although I never again visited the Portland Vedanta Society during Swami Asheshananda's lifetime, I am forever grateful that Mother led me there. And the loving, motherly atmosphere created by Swami Asheshanandaji was surely his offering to Her.

*Submitted May 2007*

**Joan Shack**, a Vedantist in the Ramakrishna tradition since 1979, was initiated by Pravrajika Mokshapranaji of Sri Sarada Math. She co-founded the Sri Sarada Society as a nonprofit organization in 1992.

*Written submission.*

I traveled to Portland for the darshan of Swami Aseshanandaji in 1986, 1988, and 1990. He liked to keep me busy touring: Lewis and Clark College, Washington Park or the center's retreat outside of Portland. I also had lots of walks around the reservoir. Plans were always changing at the center. I never knew what to expect.

Talking informally to a group or individually to me, Maharaj had the same message. In my journal, I wrote:

“Meditate on Mother, not just in the meditation room but always have a portion of your mind given to Her. Form a personal relationship with Her, be aware of Her presence. Use your imagination, see Her as present in your heart. Imagination becomes reality.”

Another time, he said: “Visualize Holy Mother, lay flowers at Her feet, talk with her, imagine Her laying Her hands on your head in blessing, smiling to you. Develop a personal relationship with Her, take Her with you at all times.”

*Submitted August 2007*

**Anonymous**, initiated by another swami in the Ramakrishna Order, resides in California.

*Written submission.*

**[Daughter of Mother]**

Both times I saw Swami Ashesananda he was visiting the Hollywood Vedanta Society. Do I remember his lectures? No. I will share what I will *always* remember. It was after the first lecture that I attended. I was in line with Bramacharini Gopa and my mother, waiting to greet the swami. One by one I heard him bless the devotees who approached. Always the same; always, “May Sri Ramakrishna bless you,” or something close to this. You see, I only remember the “Sri Ramakrishna” part of the blessing. Why? Because when it came my turn, it was not “Sri Ramakrishna!” To me he said, while putting his hand on my head, “May Mother bless you.”

And I broke down in sobs. It was as if Mother herself had come through her son. How else would he have known that I was *Mother’s* child?

Once outside, Gopa had quite a challenge in explaining to my biological mother, who was visiting me from Simi Valley, that I was crying for *joy*.

*Submitted February 2008*



**Anonymous**, a disciple of Swami Aseshananda, lives in the United States.

*Telephone interview.*

**[Man of God]**

Swami Aseshananda was headed to the Hollywood Vedanta center from Portland. Four of us (Joan, myself, and two other devotees) took him to the airport. As we stood watching Swami go down the ramp to the plane (in the days we were still allowed to go to the gate), a middle-aged woman couldn't resist observing, "Oh, you can *tell* he's a *man of God!*" Swami was dressed in his aviator cap and tattered clothes; there was nothing about his clothing that would suggest that. To think she could *tell*—you wouldn't expect that from someone who didn't even know him!

*Spring 2008*

**Anonymous** is a disciple of Swami Ashokananda.

*Telephone interview.*

**[Overwhelming Love]**

Swami Aseshananda was awfully kind to me. I had met him many years ago when Vedanta was located at the Park House. In those days he seemed indrawn. Later, when I came to the new center, I felt like I didn't deserve his kindness. I felt guilty about my worldly life, yet he was so kind to me.

When Swami was on his deathbed, people would come and someone would say who was there. After seeing him there, I broke down in the parking lot outside. His love was overwhelming.

*Early 2007*



# Historical Overview



**Gopal Stavig** is the Vedanta Historian at the Vedanta Society of Southern California.

*Written submission.*

**Excerpts from *Ramakrishna Vedanta in Southern California: 1899-2009*<sup>1</sup>**

Swami Aseshananda (1899-1996) tells us:

I was attracted to Vedanta when I first met Swami Turiyananda, a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna in Banaras.... His words gave me courage. His personality gave me assurance. My hesitant steps became steady. I made up my mind not to falter. That day I made the final decision to renounce, and embrace the monastic order of Sri Ramakrishna.<sup>2</sup>

Aseshananda became a direct disciple of Holy Mother, receiving initiation in 1917 at the Udbodhan before he became a monastic. He later had the unique distinction of being her last known living disciple. About Holy Mother he often said:

I bow down in reverence to Holy Mother because what she has done for me, I cannot express.... She has become the source of strength, the source of knowledge, and the source of my infinite realization. Through her grace I have seen Her face, I have touched her feet. I long for release so that I can realize the highest truth in this very life.

A DVD titled “Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi” is sold by the Vedanta Catalog in Hollywood, California, where he tells us about his personal experiences with Holy Mother and some of the other direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna that he met.<sup>3</sup>

Aseshananda then served as the personal secretary and attendant (he said “bodyguard”) 1921-27 for Swami Saradananda (1865-1927), a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna and the General Secretary of the Ramakrishna Order, and in 1923 received sannyas from the Swami. He related, “Whenever I went to Swami Saradananda with a distressing thought, a few words from his lips would soothe me. His presence would bring cheer and hope to my soul.”<sup>4</sup> In India Saradananda told him and other monastics:

The Master chooses his own men and women. We are mere instruments in his hands. It is a privilege to work under his banner. In America he already prepared the ground for me; I was not alone. He brought to me men and women of exalted character who helped me in our work and bore the great love for our Master.<sup>5</sup>

After working at the Varanasi Advaita Ashrama and the Madras Students' Home in India, he assisted Swami Nikhilananda at the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center of New York during the period 1947-49. This tour of duty was followed by a brief stay at the Vedanta Society in Boston in 1949 for a few months, and then onto Southern California from October 1949 until February 2, 1955.<sup>6</sup>

During Swami Prabhavananda's absence in India, from October 1949 to July 1950, Swami Aseshananda was placed temporarily in charge of the Santa Barbara, Hollywood and Trabuco operation. In 1949, Swami Rudrananda visited the Southern California Vedanta Society during his trip from India. After leaving he wrote a letter to Aseshananda in November stating, "Glory to Swami Prabhavananda Maharaj, who has done wonderful service with his hard work and great tapasya."<sup>7</sup> Prabhavananda left for India in anticipation of selecting a new monastic to assist him in Southern California. It was thought that Swami Nityabodhananda would come to Southern California, and Aseshananda would return to Providence. Instead, after Prabhavananda returned from India, Aseshananda remained as a permanent assistant minister. At that time, Aseshananda was transferred to Trabuco to be the resident spiritual head of the monastery. He spent most of his time there. During 1950, a large photograph of Sri Ramakrishna was installed in the meditation chapel at Trabuco. Besides executing their daily chores, the monks also performed a noon ritualistic worship and an evening arati service in the chapel. Prabhavananda came to Trabuco once every two weeks, and generally stayed for a three-day stretch.

Aseshananda provided weekly public Sunday lectures in Laguna Beach held at the American Legion Hall on Sunday evenings from October 1, 1950 to June 24, 1951. At the inaugural speech Christopher Isherwood, who then lived in Laguna Beach, provided a ten to twelve-minute introduction to the Swami's speech. After the talk, Aseshananda conducted a discussion during which the audience asked questions about Vedanta. According to the "Bulletins Database," Aseshananda shifted his lecture location from Laguna Beach to the Trabuco Monastery, to present weekly year-around Sunday lectures September 9, 1951-January 23, 1955, and biweekly lectures in San Diego during December 5, 1954-January 30, 1955. On the historic day of September 9, Aseshananda delivered the first public lecture at the Ramakrishna Monastery on the subject, "Vedanta and Modern Man." About fifty people were in the dining hall for the event, and afterwards commented that the Swami spoke beautifully. Several books were sold, and some people visited the shrine room. The Trabuco Monastery lectures were advertised in the *Santa Ana Register* in 1951, and again in 1965 as "Open to the Public." As early as October 10, 1954 Swami Prabhavananda was lecturing in Trabuco.<sup>8</sup>

In May of 1952, Swami Prabhavananda received an invitation to speak before a study group led by Dr. Peter Lee of San Diego Community College. He was asked by the thirty-six invited people to wear his monastic robes. The attendees asked Prabhavananda intelligent questions, and Dr. Lee presented him with a book of his. Shortly after, Dr. Lee and his party picked up Aseshananda to deliver a lecture before their study group in

San Diego. A year later on August 9, Dr. Lee arranged an address by Aseshananda before the Theosophists in San Diego. Judith Tyberg who produced some books on Sanskrit, appreciated his lectures and consequently visited the Trabuco Monastery later in the month. A year later they invited Aseshananda to speak again before the Theosophists in August of 1954. He delivered a series of eight evening lectures in San Diego between October 10, 1954 and January 16, 1955. They met on Sundays at Bard Hall, on the corner of Sixth and Beech. The building is no longer in existence. A Mrs. Theobold described Swami Aseshananda as a “wonderful, dear man” who was nothing for show. Her husband, a professor at San Diego State University, also attended the oral presentations.<sup>9</sup>

The Holy Mother birth centenary was celebrated on July 17, 1954 at the Sri Sarada Convent in Santa Barbara. Swami Prabhavananda performed the worship service, dedicating the newly redecorated shrine room. Swamis Aseshananda (Southern California), Pavitrananda (New York: Westside) and Vividishananda (Seattle), and Dr. Floyd Ross, professor of Church History and World Religions at the University of Southern California attended the puja. Following the worship service, the visitors gathered under an outdoor cluster of olive trees on the convent grounds. Aseshananda told of the “events leading to his initiation by the Holy Mother. He indicated that as ideal healer and teacher, Holy Mother has raised the status of women all over the world.” Two probationary nuns were initiated into brahmacharya the previous day.<sup>10</sup>

Before leaving Portland in 1929, Swami Prabhavananda told the congregation, “They should not look upon his leaving as a farewell, since I will continue to have an active interest in the Portland Centre.” He founded and led the Portland Center 1925-29, and then trained Vividishananda to be his successor. Prabhavananda spent over three weeks in 1932 in Portland preparing Devatmananda to take control of the organization. During July-August 1954 Prabhavananda journeyed to Portland to take part in the dedication of the new Temple at the ashrama there. After Devatmananda returned to India in 1954, Prabhavananda arranged for Aseshananda to be the new head of the Portland Center. He understood his greatness and remarked, “I couldn’t have asked for a better assistant than Swami Aseshananda; I’ve seen so many Swamis!” They differed in age by only six or seven years, knew Holy Mother and some of Sri Ramakrishna’s disciples, and had a similar Bengali background.<sup>11</sup>

After spending five years in Southern California, Aseshananda assumed direction of the Vedanta Society of Portland from February 1955 until 1996, and eventually became the dean of the Indian Swamis in America until his death. Following the precepts of Swami Brahmananda, “Swami Aseshananda introduced morning meditation, noon worship and evening vespers for the devotees as an essential complement to the daily work of the Centre.” Under his leadership the Portland Center grew considerably in size. In 1968 the present Portland Temple was dedicated. He made several guest visits as a lecturer to the Southern California Centers during 1975-76, 1979-81, 1983-84, 1987-88, 1990. Unlike other Swamis sent to the U.S., he never once returned to visit his homeland.



Aseshananda once said that Holy Mother had sent him to the West and thus, he would stay.<sup>12</sup>

Swamis Aseshananda (Portland), Prabhavananda and Krishnananda (Southern California) and Shraddhananda (San Francisco) attended the October 15, 1965 dedication ceremony for the remodeled Chapel held at the Vedanta Society of Seattle.<sup>13</sup> Prabhavananda continued to offer his support to the Portland Center. Portland State University took over the Vedanta Society's property in March 1966 for their new library site. Todd Thomas related:

One day Swami Aseshananda mentioned in a group meeting that Portland State University was supposed to take over our property, so we should find out some suitable place for the Society. And, surprisingly, he mentioned Mt. Tabor. That kept ringing in my mind all the time. About September 1965, we made a trip to Hollywood Vedanta Society. At Santa Barbara we had dinner with Swami Prabhavananda. During the course of the dinner Swami Prabhavananda referred to our searching for a new site. He turned towards me and said something to the effect that Swami Aseshananda needs help. "Will you help him?" It was a shock to me—that he came at me so strong! I dropped my head and turned within. Pretty soon he said, "Well, you say something." "Well, I'm thinking, Swami. We have been looking and don't know what we should do," and finally I said, "Yes, I will."

From that point on I spent every available spare time looking for property all over the city of Portland. I prayed to Sri Ramakrishna, "O Lord, I looked everywhere, but I don't know where to go now"; and in the twinkling of an eye the vision of this property came into my mind very clear. I knew where it was, what it exactly was. It was Sunday morning. After the service I came up to this property and walked into the centre; and I can't express the feeling that I felt. The sky was clear. It was nice warm day. It was a kind of heavenly feeling that I had about the property, and I thought, "This is it". . . . Subsequently we purchased the present property of approximately one acre in Mt. Tabor District on January 8, 1968.<sup>14</sup>

The Sarada Convent Hollywood building was dedicated on March 27, 1975, the birthday of Sri Chaitanya. Present for the dedication were an all-star cast of visiting Swamis: Aseshananda (Portland), Bhaskarananda (Seattle), Prabuddhananda (Northern California), Shraddhananda (Sacramento), Swahananda (Berkeley), Yuktananda (St. Louis), and Pravrajika's Nirbhayaprana, Nityaprana, and Vishuddhaprana from Northern California.<sup>15</sup>

Swami Aseshananda in 1982 came out with the informative and inspirational biography *Glimpses of a Great Soul: Swami Saradananda*. The biography covers the life, teachings and letters of Saradananda along with many spiritual insights and some

reminiscences. Hideo Hashimoto, a Japanese professor of religion at Lewis and Clark College in Portland, Oregon, wrote an evaluation of the biography comparing Saradananda to a Zen master:

This book provides us with glimpses into the life of a great soul [Swami Saradananda] who helped to nurture a small band of devoted followers of a Bengal mystic, Sri Ramakrishna, into a worldwide religious-philosophical movement which has an extraordinary impact on the thought of the twentieth century.... Swami Saradananda, “holy man, writer, editor, nurse, lecturer, administrator,” was a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, a man full of vitality, compassion, humor, and organizational skill.... *Glimpses* is full of spiritual insight reached by the author, Swami Aseshananda, through his contact with the great leaders of the Vedanta movement, especially his guru, the Holy Mother, and his mentor, Swami Saradananda. This is like a story of a Zen master narrated by his intimate disciple, a next best thing to sitting at the feet of the master.<sup>16</sup>

After his passing, Swami Shantarupananda composed a short booklet entitled *The Last Disciple of Holy Mother: Reminiscences of Swami Aseshananda*. Swami Bhaskarananda of the Seattle Center wrote:

Swami Aseshananda had a very loving heart. Those who came to know him closely were touched by his loving concern for them and felt spiritually uplifted by his company. As a monk his life was exemplary, and he always exuded the deep love and devotion he felt for his guru—the Holy Mother Sarada Devi.

John Schlenck, a New York devotee, revealed:

Swami Aseshananda was deeply revered for his saintliness and for his gifts as a spiritual teacher. His *jnana* was reflected in his lectures, mostly on Advaita Vedanta, and in his unwavering detachment and renunciation.... His *bhakti* was expressed through his complete dependence on the Divine Mother. If any serious decision had to be made, he would read the *Chandi* (a scripture on the Divine Mother) and wait for three days. He would not act until he felt he knew what the Mother wanted.... During his last illness, his mind was completely given over to the Divine Mother. At the same time he was alert and responsive to whoever came into his room. He would say, “Pray to Mother. She will bless you.” About everything else he spoke very briefly.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Hollywood: Vedanta Archives, 2009.

<sup>2</sup>Swami Aseshananda, “What Vedanta Means to Me” *Prabuddha Bharata* (Oct. 1951), p. 400.

<sup>3</sup>Vedanta Online Catalog. Web: [www.vedanta.com](http://www.vedanta.com)

<sup>4</sup>*Prabuddha Bharata* (Oct. 1951), p. 401.

<sup>5</sup>Swami Aseshananda, *Glimpses of a Great Soul* (Hollywood: Vedanta Press, 1982), pp. 23-24.

<sup>6</sup>“Holy Mothers Disciple.” SRV Associations. March 2004. Web: [www.srv.org/aseshananda.html](http://www.srv.org/aseshananda.html); *Global Vedantist* (Dec. 1996), p. 15; “Obituary: Swami Aseshananda,” VSSC Archives.

<sup>7</sup>“Letter from Swami Rudrananda to Aseshananda” (Nov. 16, 1949), VSSC Archives.

<sup>8</sup>Swami Yogeshananda, *Six Lighted Windows* (United States: Swami Yogeshananda, 1995), p. 69; Sister Amiya, “Vedanta in Southern California,” *Vedanta and the West XIV* (Sep-Oct. 1951), VSSC Archives, p. 149; *Los Angeles Times* (Oct. 8, 1949), p. A3; *Vedanta Society of Southern California Lecture Bulletins Database*, VSSC Archives; Pravrajika Varadaprana, *Vedanta in Southern California: A Brief History* (Santa Barbara: Vedanta Society of Southern California, 1993), p. 11; “Letter to the Vedanta Society Members,” VSSC Archives (Sept. 27, 1950); *South Coast News*, Laguna Beach (Dec. 14, 1950), p. 5; Trabuco Diary (Dec. 26, 1949; Oct. 1, 1950; Sept. 9, 1951).

<sup>9</sup>Trabuco Diary (May 10, June 14, 1952; Aug. 9, 24, 1953; Aug. 8, Oct. 10, 1954).

<sup>10</sup>VK (Oct. 1954), pp. 198-99.

<sup>11</sup>Yogeshananda (1995), pp. 71-72; *Prabuddha Bharata* (July 1932), pp. 362-63; *Vedanta Kesari* (July 1932), pp. 119-20; (Sept. 1958), p. 240.

<sup>12</sup>Holy Mothers Disciple.” SRV Associations. March 2004. Web: [www.srv.org/aseshananda.html](http://www.srv.org/aseshananda.html); “An Interview with Pravrajika Bhaktiprana” by Pravrajika Gayatriprana, VSSC Archives; Trabuco Diary (July 31, 1954; Jan. 14, 1955); Portland Vedanta Society. Web: [www.vedantasociety.org/history\\_p7.html](http://www.vedantasociety.org/history_p7.html)

<sup>13</sup>“History of the Vedanta Society of Western Washington,” VSSC Archives.

<sup>14</sup>Web: [www.vedantasociety.org/history\\_p7.html](http://www.vedantasociety.org/history_p7.html)

<sup>15</sup>Member’s Letter (April 5, 1975).

<sup>16</sup>*Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (June 1983), pp. 321-22.

<sup>17</sup>*Global Vedantist* (Dec. 1996), p. 15; *American Vedantist* (Fall 1996), pp. 3-4.

*Submitted December 2008*

## Miscellaneous

### The Name “Aseshananda”

“Asesha” means “infinite,” “ananda” means “bliss,” so Swami Aseshananda was “Infinite bliss.” Swami Aseshananda and Swami Ashokananda both took sannyas on the same day and were both given the name “Aseshananda.” Swami Saradananda then contacted Swami Shivananda and told him to change his “Aseshananda,” and that’s how the other “Aseshananda” became “Ashokananda.” (Information provided by a monk)

### Temple Dome Incident

According to two disciples of Swami Aseshananda, some members of the Portland center wanted to improve the appearance of retreat temple’s dome. After repeatedly asking Swami whether they could take it off, Swami reportedly relented at a time when he was ill and continued to have misgivings. Several men removed the dome and threw it to the ground, where it broke into pieces. [One of the contributors to this report said he actually numbered the various parts, thinking that it would be reassembled.] When Swami awoke from his nap that afternoon, he reportedly said that the Vedanta Society had taken the head off of the Lord under his direction. The disciple recounting this incident described how Swami subsequently wrote to the president of the Ramakrishna Order begging his forgiveness. According to the disciple who saw the reply, the president wrote saying something to the effect that, “Now, now it isn’t all that bad. It will be OK. I’m praying for you, and don’t worry any more about it.” Swami reportedly told Jim Sanderson [a disciple who lived at the retreat] to put the dome back together but Jim apparently said, “I absolutely won’t do it.” Swami took him to the back kitchen [of the in-town center] where all the real confrontations took place and convinced him. So the original dome was reassembled and put back in place.



## **Some Sayings of Swami Aseshananda (From Devotees)**

“You *must* transcend the ego.”

“All troubles cease when the ego dies.”

“What you put in your mouth is nothing compared to what you put in your mind.”

“Mind your own business.”

“People would rather die than think.”

“Today’s imagination is tomorrow’s realization.”

“This [the Vedanta Society] is not a social club.”

“Don’t see fault in others,” quoted from Holy Mother’s sayings.

“Pray and leave it up to the Divine Mother.”

“If you don’t take care of the body, the body won’t take care of you.”

“Don’t beat the horse from which you cannot dismount,” referring to taking care of your body. “It is your chariot.”

Regarding reincarnation: “If you don’t make it this time, better luck the next time.”

“Do or die, but you’ll never die.”

“What you learn in pain you teach in song.”

“Death is an auspicious time because it determines the future of man.”

“When we face our aversions, we will free ourselves of our opposite attachment.”

“God is like a mother who comes to a child when he or she calls.”

“Find it [truth/realization] now. Do not wait for post-mortem emancipation.”

“Meditation is the only way to God.”

“In samadhi, nothing can hurt you, not even tigers.”

“Do not read and eat at the same time.”

“God vision and television don’t go together.”

“The closer to church the farther from God.”

## Print and Media Resources

### Books and Articles by Swami Aseshananda:

“Disciples of Sri Ramakrishna,” in *Vedanta Kesari*, Vol. 87, October 2000, pp. 11-14.

*Glimpses of a Great Soul: A Portrait of Swami Saradananda*, Vedanta Press, Hollywood, CA. 1982, 274 pp.

“Holy Mother Talk,” *Magazine Articles*, July/August 2003 *Vedanta Center UK*  
[http://www.vedantauk.com/magazine\\_articles\\_july3.htm](http://www.vedantauk.com/magazine_articles_july3.htm)

“Holy Mother—A Talk,” in *Reminiscences of Sri Sarada Devi*, pp. 93-105, Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata, 2004, 331 pp.

*A Holy Woman of Modern India*, Vedanta and the West #110. Nov./Dec.1954.

Available online at

[http://www.vedanta.org/reading/monthly/articles/2005/12.yogin\\_ma.html](http://www.vedanta.org/reading/monthly/articles/2005/12.yogin_ma.html)

“Memories of Sri Ramakrishna” by Girish Chandra Ghosh, translated by Swami Aseshananda in *Vedanta and the West*, March-April 1953.

“Meditation According to the Upanishads” in *Living Wisdom: Vedanta in the West*, edited by Pravrajika Vrajaprana, pp.71-77, Vedanta Press, 1994. This is an edited version of the article that appeared in *Vedanta for Modern Man* edited by Christopher Isherwood, Harper, New York, 1951.

“Meditation According to the Upanishads,” in *Vedanta for Modern Man*, edited by Christopher Isherwood, pp. 290-296. Harper, New York, 1951.

“Vivekananda and the Meaning of Salvation,” in *American Vedantist*, reprinted in Vol. 15, No. 1, Spring 2009.

For archived articles by Swami Aseshananda, see Gopal Stavig’s supplement on the accompanying disc.

### Books and Articles About Swami Aseshananda

*The Last Disciple of Holy Mother: Reminiscences of Swami Aseshananda* by Swami Shantarupananda, a booklet reprinted from *American Vedantist*, Vol. 5, No. 3, 1999, 12 pp. Available from The Vedanta Society of Portland.



*The Lotus and the Flame: Monastic Teachings of Swami Aseshananda*, compiled by Swami Yogeshananda in 1950-51, 48 pp. Provisions Supplement No. 3, The Eternal Quest, Inc., published in 1996. Out of print; publication rights given to Esther Warkov. *The Lotus and the Flame* is included on the accompanying disc.

*A Spiritual Teacher and His Disciple: A Portrait of Swami Aseshananda* by Todd D. Thomas, 2009, 182 pp. Self-published, available from [www.holymothermission.org](http://www.holymothermission.org) or telephone Vedanta Society of Southern California Trabuco monastery: 949-858-0342.

*A Spiritual Teacher and His Disciple: A Portrait of Swami Aseshananda* by Todd D. Thomas reviewed by Esther Warkov in *American Vedantist*, Vol. 15, No. 1, Spring 2009.

“Swami Without a Rolls,” *Northwest Magazine, The Oregonian* (newspaper), April 30, 1989, pp. 14, 15, 21.

For historical information, see the website of the Vedanta Society of Portland: [http://www.vedantasociety.org/history\\_fp.html](http://www.vedantasociety.org/history_fp.html)

## **DVDs and Videos**

*Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi*. Lecture by Swami Aseshananda, St. Louis, 1984. Available from Vedanta Society of Portland [www.vedantasociety.org](http://www.vedantasociety.org) or Vedanta Press and Catalogue [www.Vedanta.com](http://www.Vedanta.com)

*Message of the Gita*, Swami Aseshananda lecture at the Vedanta Society of Western Washington, September 20, 1988. Video/DVD available from the Vedanta Society of Western Washington [www.vedanta-seattle.org](http://www.vedanta-seattle.org)

*The Mother We Adore*, Swami Aseshananda lecture at the Vedanta Society of Western Washington, May 28, 1989. Video/DVD available from the Vedanta Society of Western Washington [www.vedanta-seattle.org](http://www.vedanta-seattle.org)

*Steps to Enlightenment: Two Lectures*, Swami Aseshananda lectures at the Vedanta Society of Western Washington, 1988 and 1989. Available from the Vedanta Society of Western Washington [www.vedanta-seattle.org](http://www.vedanta-seattle.org)

*Unsolicited Grace DVD. Accounts of Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi*. Produced by Thakurma. Available from Vedanta Press and Catalogue [www.Vedanta.com](http://www.Vedanta.com)

*The Way of a Holy Man: Swami Aseshananda Memorial Service, 1996*. Video available from the Vedanta Society of Portland [www.vedantasociety.org](http://www.vedantasociety.org)

## **Audio**

*Swami Aseshananda: The Last Disciple of Holy Mother: Talks and Classes.* Twelve lectures in MP3 format, published in 2007. Available from The Vedanta Society of Portland [www.vedantasociety.org](http://www.vedantasociety.org) or Vedanta Press and Catalogue [www.vedanta.com](http://www.vedanta.com)

Swami Aseshananda lectures posted on the website of The Vedanta Society of Portland [www.vedanta-portland.org](http://www.vedanta-portland.org)

Swami Aseshananda lectures available for purchase from The Vedanta Society of Portland [www.vedanta-portland.org](http://www.vedanta-portland.org)

## **Audio Transcriptions of Talks By Swami Aseshananda**

Transcriptions of talks given by Swami Aseshananda at the Portland Vedanta Society prior to 1996 are published in *Nectar of Non-Dual Truth, A Journal of Universal Religious and Philosophical Teachings*. Sarada Ramakrishna Vivekananda (SRV) Associations [www.srv.org](http://www.srv.org). Transcriptions appear in print and may be posted on the SRV website.

Issue #4 (2001): “The Goal and the Way,” by Swami Aseshananda

Issue #11 (2003): “The Conquest of Fear,” by Swami Aseshananda

Issue #15 (2004): “Sri Sarada Transmission—Reminiscences by Two Direct Monastic Disciples,” by Swamis Aseshananda and Nityaswarupananda

Issue #21 (2006): “Steps to Illumination,” by Swami Aseshananda

Issue #22 (2007): “Contemplation,” by Swami Aseshananda

Issue #23 (2008): “Inner Pilgrimage,” by Swami Aseshananda

Issue #24 (2009): “Path to Enlightenment,” by Swami Aseshananda

## **Works in Progress**

Terrance Hohner is compiling the teachings of Swami Aseshananda for publication.

## **For Assistance Locating Resources**

Please contact Esther Warkov at:  
[www.compendiumpublications.com](http://www.compendiumpublications.com)  
[esther\\_warkov@comcast.net](mailto:esther_warkov@comcast.net)

## Additional Reminiscences

**Ray Berry** and his wife Sonja have been associated with the Vedanta Society of New York since the 1960s. Later, the family resided adjacent to the Olema, CA Vedanta retreat, and Ray was also a regular visitor at the Trabuco, CA monastery. He is the author of *The Spiritual Athlete: A Primer for the Inner Life*.

Although I have little to offer, what I *do* remember is Swami Aseshananda sitting very quietly (almost in a corner as it were) at the Vedanta Society of New York in the 60's visiting Swami Pavitrananda with other swamis.

When Swami Aseshananda came to NYC for Pavitrananda's memorial service (November 1977), I went with a friend, Stanley Quinn, to pick Swami up at the airport. Stanley asked me how we would recognize Swami A. I just laughed.

Sure enough there was no problem! Here comes this frumpy looking old man in an overcoat, winter cap with the "flaps down," curly hair billowing out beneath the cap, and a suitcase tied up with a rope, so it wouldn't pop open.

When we arrived at the center, Swami Tathagatananda pushed me up the stairs behind Swami Aseshananda and told me to "help" him get settled and show him around Swami Pavitrananda's room. I knew it well since I was Swami Pavitrananda's sevak (personal attendant) for many years.

On the way to the airport, we were all packed into our old Dodge Dart. I was up front with Swami A next to me, in the middle Swami T riding shotgun, and in back were Pr.Dhyana-prana, now in Hollywood convent, and 3 of my kids. As we neared JFK airport, we had a flat tire (having hit an horrendous pothole at high speed a few miles back which filled the whole car with "dust"). I pulled over on the grass (we were running very late) and started barking orders to my kids about jacking up the car, etc. and particularly told Tathagatananda to stay put and *not* get out. You must picture that this was an Indianapolis 500- style tire change as we were very late and Dhyana-prana also had to catch a flight.\*\*

Well as we got the car jacked up very high, Tathagatananda opens the front door to get out. Boy did I blast him (we've always been good friends). Tire changed, Dhyana-prana pushed out of the car and if I remember rightly she had to lug her suitcase a long way to get to her terminal. Then we pull up in front of Swami A's terminal, and as far as I remember he didn't even look back. And of course, not a peep out of him the whole time!

In 1995, perhaps after visiting my dear friend Swami Lokeshwarananda in Vancouver, my wife and I stopped by the Portland center. Swami Aseshananda was blind by then, and some of the folks there were on "edge" as it were. But Swami came downstairs, and greeted Sonja and me with a thunderous "Welcome, welcome!" There seemed to be a sigh of relief from the assembled "devotees." [editorial note: When asked about the reason for this sigh of relief, the contributor explained that Swami Aseshananda was noted for blasting people.]

\*\* Dhyana-prana recalled this event and wrote: "When we got to the airport Ray told me he would be right back to take me to my terminal as they went off with Swami Aseshananda. We were parked across from the departing flights in some kind of no-man's land. Since I was anxious to get to my flight on time I walked across the divider and on to my terminal. As I remember it was not too far across the way. I was very grateful to Ray for the memorable trip to the airport with two holy men."

**Fontaine Epler (Santi)**, a disciple of Swami Sarvagatananda, spent five weeks at Belur Math during the presidency of His Holiness Shrimat Swami Vireswaranandaji, lived and worked at the Ganges monastery for two and one-half years during the lifetime of Swami Bhashyananda, and is an Associate of the Episcopal Order of St. Anne.

After Swami Pavitrana died, and before Jean MacPhail [later "Gayatri-prana"] left NYC for San Francisco, she came to the Sarada Ashrama in Marshfield, Mass., for a retreat with my guru, Swami Sarvagatananda (head of both the Boston and Providence centers). There she told me about how inspiring Swami A[seshananda] was at Swami P[avitrana]'s memorial service [see Gayatri-prana's reminiscence], creating a strong desire on my part to have his darshan, which was arranged with him for Easter week in 1980.

Before I left, a gentleman asked me to deliver a letter to a gentleman who attended the Portland Center. As soon as I got there, I approached a bramachari, to give it to the addressee; but he backed away from it/me in obvious alarm. Very shortly Swami A approached me and demanded to know why I'd spoken to the bramachari; and I told him about the letter. He said, "Give it to Mr. Bush. He will do the needful." (I loved his Britishisms so much!) And I had no preparation for the fact that bramacharis were off limits, because the bramacharis at the Boston Center were the very ones to "do the needful" there).

At the first vesper worship I attended in the shrine, it seemed odd to hear someone mowing the lawn just outside while we were to be meditating. And even odder that someone came into the darkened room wearing a khaki-colored chaddar, whose shape

made me think of “the hunchback of Notre Dame,” approached the altar, and performed worship on his knees—crawling on his knees—while his chaddar dragged 6 feet (it seemed) behind him on the floor, as he moved back and forth before the altar in this grotesque fashion.

I could hear the flowers on the altar plop, plop, as he swept them onto the floor; and then he *threw* fresh flowers at the images on the altar. When he finished everything and left the room, what I saw took my breath away: the flowers were set beautifully in perfect order, and there was a luminous glow from the scene which had nothing to do with lit candles.

Only then did I know that *that* was Swami A. The only other pujari who created such an atmosphere that I could actually *see* the *light* created, by the end of a puja, was Reverend Swami Sarvagatanandaji Maharaj. (And I have seen at least a half a dozen).<sup>1</sup> After I went home, I went to a fabric store and bought a length of khaki fabric to use for a chaddar, which I used for many years.

“Holy Mother’s Cat” was in residence when I was there. Swami A formally introduced me to it as “a *very* fine cat.” When we met for class Swami would tell someone to get the cat and bring it into the room before he would start the class. Now this cat looked like a beat-up alley cat to me, and I asked Vera Edwards [a devotee] (during the time it took to locate the cat and bring it into the room), “What are the merits of that cat?” And she said, “Oh, it’s not by our *merits* we are here; it’s that Swami has given us his protection.”<sup>2</sup>

When we were getting ready for the Easter puja, several women and I were told on Saturday to make a garland, each, for one of the shrine pictures he planned to set up for the puja. I was assigned to the picture of Jesus, which was small (maybe 8” x 11”), while that of Ramakrishna was quite large (18” x 24”). I chose Magnolia blossoms for the yard for mine, and strung them on a string to approximate the size of that picture.

On Easter, the garlands were all placed each in a heap, separately, on a tray, for Swami to dress each picture during the worship. But he took mine and put it on Ramakrishna’s picture! It was like a necklace! The long daisy chain the woman made for Ramakrishna he put on Jesus in such a way that its surplus was bunched up at the bottom of that image. I was so happy! You see, I had been thinking of Ramakrishna the whole time I made my garland.

I never asked Swami a single question, or requested an interview; but before the week was up, he told me to join him privately once. There was very little talk. He asked me a question or two, I think; but then he sat in silence, after which he said, “I will give you the dust of Holy Mother’s feet,” and led me into the shrine pantry. I knelt down and he touched my head with the picture he had there. I didn’t feel any other sensation; but I was deeply moved and honored, because I’d come to believe that picture to be the

powerhouse of the entire center, as I'd seen that Swami kept his wallet and keys in front of it, and was told that he always left them there when he was in the Center.

I was carrying in my heart a problem at the time. I had a teenage daughter (Esther)<sup>3</sup> and I was worried that I was not "a good mother" to her. I was divorced, and we were living together. I didn't visit Swami A to deal with that worry, and it didn't occur to me to mention it to him, but on the flight home (to Portland, Maine) I had the conviction that *I was a "good mother,"* a conviction that has never left me from that moment to this. And I knew it was Swami's gift to me.

<sup>1</sup>*more* than a dozen pujaris.

<sup>2</sup>"his protection" I'm not sure she used exactly those two words; but that was the idea.

<sup>3</sup>also a disciple of Swami Sarvagatananda who gave her the name Sumana.

*July 2014, Arlington, Mass.*