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Abandon All Paradigms Ye Who Enter Here

A commentary on the Beatitude “Blessed are the poor in spirit” explains it as such: “...he [the seeker] must be humble...If a man has...preconceived ideas of what spiritual life is and how he should be taught, his mind is not receptive to higher teachings.”¹

We generally harbor popular notions of holy persons fabricated from hoaky Hollywood movies, TV, or casual acquaintance with Sunday-religion personalities. The conventional wisdom is that they are sweet-tempered, meek, naive, and humorless, in short, hamstrung by niceness. They never raise their voices or intentionally make us uncomfortable—we do that ourselves by so persistently putting our best foot forward that we're in danger of falling over.

However, this conventional view of holy persons is not far off from the profile Swami Brahmananda presented to a group of young monks: “Remember, my children, you are holy men. You must always be calm, gentle, modest, and kindly of speech. Goodness and purity must flow through every word you utter, every action you perform, through all your behavior and movements.”²

When swamis visit a center not their own, they often play to this type: kindly maiden aunts who ply their nieces with chocolates but won't be around to see the dental bills. Once when Swami Aseshananda was visiting Hollywood, the devotees were gushing over how very sweet he was, to which Swami Prabhavananda, his host, remarked, “When I visit other centers, they think *I'm* sweet, too.”

But as I was to discover, Swami Aseshananda was not simply a holy man; he was a guru, therefore required to paint from a much broader palette when among those in his charge. One of the primary colors on this palette was ferocious public scolding, almost always for something innocuous which the scoldee couldn't have avoided. In the course of our spiritual lives in Vedanta, we had read about and seen a few painful public scoldings performed by many swamis of Ramakrishna's second generation. It was hard to be in the same room, even if the target was someone you disliked. But while the frequency and intensity of Swami Aseshananda's outbursts were unexpected, even more surprising was his strict micromanagement, often resulting in seemingly illogical outcomes. Violating The Plan, no matter how arbitrary or even counter-productive The Plan seemed, resulted in the observation from him, “You have no renunciation.” And, of course, he was right.

Shortly after Swami Prabhavananda's passing in 1976, Swami Aseshananda became my first *Upa Guru*³ at Los Angeles Airport as he was departing. In his halting stuttering style, as though the thought was being composed (or received) as he spoke, he sweetly extended an unsolicited invitation/instruction to visit the Portland center on Holy Mother's upcoming birthday. Imagine

our surprise when Jon and I arrived at the Portland center prepared to be lavished in the untough love he had demonstrated in Hollywood but instead found him in full eruption mode. The first of my paradigms was demolished. I had expected a comforting, quiet, relaxed, aaaah visit. But to paraphrase one of Swami's common sayings delivered with theatrical sternness in his rich baritone, needs-no-microphone voice, "This is not the Vedanta spa." He was also fond of quoting a senior swami who had told him when he was a fledgling monk that you think you've joined the Ramakrishna Mission? You've entered the Ramakrishna Machine! It will wear away your rough edges. Are you ready?⁴

A few vivid examples of paradigm-busting in Portland come to mind. During one visit, a friend and I were in one of the women's residences with another party of visitors, a mother and her two daughters. The family was a self-perpetuating whirlwind of psychodrama, the mother seeming to favor the younger girl, while the older girl could do nothing right in her mother's eyes. There was constant yelling and crying, and the apparent injustice of it was distressing. At that time, there were two women's residences, one more modern and comfortable and empty of guests at the time than the one we were all packed into. My friend complained about the apparent illogic of our distribution, that we could have had a much more comfortable, peaceful and "spiritual" time at the other house, away from this dysfunctional family. However, she herself had major sister issues of that same dynamic which she might recognize if she could let go of the notion that she was there to be sedated and instead accept that this was a workout.

Another incident was when my karma yoga job was to replace the little bouquets throughout the center on a Saturday in preparation for the general public coming on Sunday. The bouquets had been there for the entire week and had become quite horrible. The flowers had lost their bright colors, were withered, the water was brown, and, worst of all, they smelled really...no really, really...bad. Being an organizer type, I thought why not do a midweek change as well. Certainly there are enough flowers in the garden and labor at the center to keep the flowers lovely. But then it occurred to me that Swami's objective might not have been to enchant us with the beauty and fragrance of flowers, but rather to demonstrate to us that the loveliness of *maya* is transient, that the most beautiful things eventually turn ugly, die, and become obnoxious. A Hallmark card can rhapsodize the seductive flowers, but a holy man will lay bare the entire inevitable cycle.

There were several visits for nearly 20 years. There was a period before the final stage when Swami, with a very few exceptions, didn't allow visits. I thought that he couldn't possibly forbid anyone from just visiting Portland, the city on Planet Earth, and attending a public function at the temple; but I didn't dare test the theory. When he did receive out-of-town visitors again, he was monumentally silent, just sitting among the small group of assembled devotees radiating something of unearthly power, something tangible and ineffable. While many of our swamis, Swami Asehananda included, had and have the ability to lift the consciousness of those they are in contact with, Swami Asehananda's presence at this time was of a different order which can't be communicated in words or even re-experienced vividly except to recall the fact of it. At that time he was very hard of hearing, and devotees would have to yell to get through, lobbing loud questions, which he deflected with single word or less. I wasn't sure if we were expected to do anything other than sit silently, but people instinctively tried to get the ball rolling.⁵ One of the days we were present on this visit was a Sunday, a day with a public function. After the service, Swami sat to receive the public in the same foyer where he had met the devotees in seemingly

blind and deaf silence all those weekday evenings. Remarkably, people addressed him in a normal tone of voice and he had no trouble hearing or responding. I felt cheated—those few of us who had either come from a distance or those faithful who lived locally and regularly sacrificed their evenings for the sake of his company were getting the silent treatment. The conventional assumption was that when the teacher spoke, you *got something*, something you could take home and trade with others. But this thinking stops short of the greater truth:

Every spiritual teacher, whether he is a divine incarnation or an illumined soul, has two sets of teachings—one for the multitude, the other for his disciples...The spiritual teacher prepares the way for his message with broad lessons...The inner truth of religion he reveals only to his intimate disciples. For religion is something which can actually be transmitted. A truly illumined teacher can transmit to us the power which unfolds the divine consciousness latent within us...

When crowds came on Sundays to visit Sri Ramakrishna...he would speak to them in a general way which benefited them. But when his intimate disciples gathered around him, as I was told by one of them, he would make sure that he was not overheard while giving them the sacred truths of religion. Not that the truths themselves are secret—they are recorded, and anyone can read them. But what he gave to these disciples was more than verbal teachings. In a divine mood he would uplift their consciousness.⁶

Visits to Swami Areshananda had a dramatic arc. Even after I recognized it, I was powerless to do other than act out my role. The drama went like this:

- ⊗ Arrive full of excitement, thinking this time I'll get it perfect;
- ⊗ Become challenged on a deeply personal level (once he kept scolding me while performing the noon worship, the mantras interspersed with criticisms of my innermost thoughts, culminating in being exiled to Multnomah Falls till lunchtime);
- ⊗ Struggle through an emotional swamp, confronting memory and ego (I am an anvil);
- ⊗ Have a test of faith (travel through black ice conditions so bad that even locals knew to keep off the roads);
- ⊗ And finally, near the end when I'm about to see him for the last time of that visit, have an epiphany in which all the pain is forgotten in release and delight (if I can hold this understanding, I could live forever, happily, under all circumstances); I can't wait to come back. Next time, I'll get it perfect.

You spend the hour back on the plane comparing notes and laughing. The stewardess thinks you're drunk.

As with so much concerning the enigmatic Swami Areshananda, those of us while bound in paradigms about spirituality, might feel we were through the looking glass; but we were more accurately seeing through a glass, darkly, the lens of the conventional. To end where we began: "...If a man has...preconceived ideas of what spiritual life is and how he should be taught, his mind is not receptive to higher teachings." To the extent we approached Swami Areshananda with humility, a flexible mind, and faith in his spiritual potency, we were able to receive his teaching.

¹ Swami Prabhavananda, *Sermon on the Mount according to Vedanta*, page 19

² Swami Prabhavananda, *The Eternal Companion*, page 272

³ Literally “the teacher nearby.” I have used the term to denote the teacher who adopts you, the Go-to Swami, who takes over as your guide, the one you can call with questions or in crises, when the guru who initiated you is no longer available.

⁴ Unfortunately, I don’t remember, nor have I found his exact words, but what I’ve recalled is very close.

⁵ From DD (AKA Dharmadas, Jon Monday, The Husband): “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!’”

⁶ Swami Prabhavananda, *Sermon on the Mount according to Vedanta*, page 18

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