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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 Asehananda, 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.

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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 Asehananda 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 Asehananda 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 Asehananda 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 4th, 1985, because they wanted somebody who could work the holiday. I took it as a sign that I was in the right place. July 4th 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 Asehananda 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). 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.

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

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*[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."]