

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."]