

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 me, 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 Areshananda 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 Shradhdhananda, who could be hysterically funny. So when Swami Areshananda 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 Asehananda 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!*

March 2007