

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

Interviewed in Portland and by telephone.

Wasn't it Vivekananda who said that upon meeting Ramakrishna he felt as though a cobra had bitten him? When I heard that story, I tingled throughout my body because it so aptly described how I felt when I first saw Swami's eyes upon me, when I met his gaze.

My husband, Alan, and I came to the Portland center not knowing anything about Vedanta. One late afternoon, when it was almost dark outside (and *very* dark inside), we knocked at the front door for a long time when finally someone came to the door. We were asking whether we could buy some incense for meditation, as we'd run out of the incense we had brought from the Self-Realization Fellowship in Hollywood. This was in 1974 when it wasn't always easy to find such supplies. In retrospect we realized how odd this was—coming to a temple to buy incense—and later on we understood why the young man at the door was behaving accordingly. I thought, “This is such a strange place, a dark room with a picture of a bare-chested man in the back of it.” We were just about to leave when the side door swung open and a person started walking towards us.

First, all I could see was a mass of floating, moving, ochre fabric. As the person approached and unraveled the fabric—which was his shawl—I saw a mane of black hair with flecks of grey. Swami Aseshananda looked at me and his eyes were *sparkling*. I was so impressed; I had never seen eyes like before! It was almost like he could see *through* me. Although I felt vulnerable, it was not an uncomfortable feeling. Rather, it was one of warmth, acceptance, and complete safety. Swami then said to the young man who opened the door, “Why don't you invite the young people to a talk in the library tonight?” We accepted his invitation and returned to the center that evening. Mr. Bush read from one of the scriptures and Swami added commentary. There were a small number of devotees and people asked questions. Then there was prasad and later we learned that prasad meant “time to go home.”

That was, for me, the beginning of an incredible journey, the path which I am still traveling on. I was completely compelled to return there again and to this day the Portland center remains a spiritual home for me. I could not logically or intellectually tell you why. Afterwards it became apparent that we were *led* to be there; it is still a spiritual home for me, and I still very much feel the spirit of Swami there.

Alan and I were a young couple, new to the area, and interested in reading spiritual literature and pursuing our spiritual paths. So we spent as much time as we could at the

center. We were compelled to become more and more engaged and to become Vedantists. Although my mother is Jewish, I was raised Catholic. From a certain point of my life, neither of those traditions was satisfying for me. I kept searching, trying New Age and metaphysical paths. I found myself longing for something deeper and more fulfilling.

That was my inner longing; however, at the same time I felt very strongly pulled to the world and its desires, especially a very strong desire to be a mother. My desire to have a child became an obsession at the time; the thought was constantly on my mind and disrupting the peacefulness of meditation. I came to Swami with this problem. Swami told me he would pray to Mother for her divine will. A very short time afterwards I became pregnant. I felt so close to Swami; he was so kind and sweet to me, and always available to listen. Whenever I had questions, frustrations, or some difficulty, I would drive to the center, trying to organize my thoughts, not wanting to waste his time; and the moment I entered he would say, "Come over, come over." So I would sit on the floor by his feet. And I totally forgot what I was going to say; I no longer had problems. He was my counselor and confidant; he was like Mother to me.

Swami Aseshananda was known as a scolding swami however, because of the love he showed me I could never take his scoldings seriously. When I was making some inappropriate choices, he always knew what was in my heart. I was living in Seattle at the time, and I would come to Portland to be consoled by him. I recall him saying to me something which I understood as "*Nothing matters yet everything counts based on your intent.*" In other words, I thought if I had love in my heart and even if I made a mistake, I would be OK.

One of the most meaningful stories with Swami pertains to the loss of our premature child, nine days after birth. We were terribly grief-stricken. Swami was there for us every step of the way. Swami gave permission to bury the ashes in front of Mother's shrine at the Scappoose retreat. We bought a little tree to plant there. It was November, and very cold, yet Swami came with one of the bramacharis all the way to Scappoose and we planted the tree. He touched me so deeply, when I watched him, my guru, sitting in front of Holy Mother's picture, saying her name with such love. He was not a young man at the time but always dedicated to serving our needs.

Interestingly enough, with the loss of my precious daughter, the desire for having a child did not diminish. On the contrary, the desire intensified. And of course, I shared my feelings with Swami. He was very understanding. When Alan and I first met and talked about marriage and family, we also talked about adopting a child. We found that each one of us, from a young age, had thought about adoption. After awhile we made a decision to adopt. We talked to Swami about this since he was truly a part of our life and decision-making. Looking back, I realize all the issues and events in which Swami was involved were nothing short of a miracle. This included the adoption of Illiad, my wonderful and beautiful son. His presence in my life is miraculous.

Well, I still felt the desire to have more children. There were, however, fertility problems. Swami gave me Holy Mother's prasada (a few grains of dried rice wrapped in paper), tantric mantras, instruction to bathe in the morning, to take the rice after fasting, to read, and do japa. He also said, "Don't worry about it, I will pray." Because I was still skeptical, I objected and said, "But Swami, the doctor said" We had gone to the *best* fertility specialist.

Swami sat deep in his thoughts, holding his nose, and touching the space between his eyes, which was his habit, as I observed, before he gave any answer. Swami asked, "So what do the men of science say?" I answered, "The doctor said there is light at the end of a very long tunnel." Swami replied, "With the Divine Mother's will, impossible things are possible." That was in December.

It was not too much longer that the doctor, in disbelief, had me repeat a pregnancy test three times! But I knew it. Ashley was my second miracle child, born in October! He looked to me like a miniature Swami, especially for the first few weeks when he had the habit of holding his hand to his nose, just like Swami.

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EW: How did your relationship with Swami evolve over time?

GD: In the beginning, I was very skeptical and approached Vedanta's concepts cautiously. The concept of Advaita Vedanta was intellectually satisfying. At first, Swami was like any teacher: he introduced me to reading material and recommended classes and the study of Sanskrit to better understand the teachings. As time went on and I prepared for initiation, my relationship with Swami evolved from an intellectual interest to the emotional feeling of love and trust one has for his or her own teacher.

EW: Did you ask for initiation or did Swami offer it to you?

GD: I asked, but I took my time. Initiation wasn't something I wanted to jump into. I needed to dwell on it for a while. When I asked Swami if he would be my guru, I didn't feel as though it would be very easy—that he would just agree. I felt I would need internal work in preparation. Swami wanted to know whether I believed in the divinity of Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother. I needed time to figure this out sincerely. I think I still had Catholic guilt and fear from being disloyal to my faith. Then Swami introduced me to the Vedanta concept of bhakti which was very difficult for me at first. Swami talked with me about how to develop a relationship with Holy Mother and Sri Ramakrishna. I trusted Swami explicitly, believed him, and saw him as the facilitator who would teach me the methods which, with time, would bring me to the God-experience.

EW: Since you had an interest in non-duality, did it occur to you to ask for non-dual instruction?

GD: I guess not. I didn't see the conflict between bhakti and advaita. I felt that one method belonged to the heart center, the other to the mind.

Swami was the right teacher for me; he was *so brilliantly scientific*, as I heard in his lectures. In spite of the intellectual concepts he was presenting, I felt incredible spiritual energy and I concluded that this was real. So I had faith in him as a guru. I understood that if you have faith in the method and you persevere by practicing that method, your hunger for spirituality *will* take you to the goal, someday, some life, who knows when, through the grace of Mother and Thakur.

EW: Is there anything else you could add about the evolution of your relationship?

GD: Yes. I first saw Swami as a teacher and speaker—a brilliant intellectual whom I later saw as a model of the deeper devotional aspect. I eventually saw him as possessing perfect balance: he embodied the incredible intellect of a total jnani yet he was totally Mother's child, with his perfect devotion. Again, I may say that he opened both my mind and my heart. His words are always in my ears and his love is forever in my heart.

EW: Did you reach any other conclusions about Swami?

GD: His brilliance was that he was so transcendent while still *so connected with those around him. So incredibly powerful yet so tender!!*

When people spoke of Vivekananda as a lion, I saw that lion in Swami, with his mane and ever-moving shawl around him. He was like a majestic lion—possessing the most incredible brilliance—yet so incredibly loving. I remember how he adored the children who came to the temple, how he cared for a sick cat, how easily he laughed, how quick and witty he was. He possessed so many aspects: he was like a perfect diamond with so many facets! One moment austere on the outside, yet in the same breath, he was gentle.

Years later, when Swami Aseshananda was not well, I was living in Europe. When I returned, my son Ashley and I drove to Portland and we were allowed to sit by Swami's bedside. An attendant to Swami announced, "Swami, Graze and Ashley are here!" He was lying very quietly for a while; he looked to me so small, almost like a child. I felt he was going back to Mother's arms. Suddenly with this booming voice he said, "Divine Mother bless you!" There was still a lion in him! I had goose bumps from this—I felt it was an incredible to have this final blessing from Swami. That was the last time I saw him and I miss him so much. That which he taught is forever with me.

I fell how incredible it is to be Swami Aseshananda's disciple. I remember that every time I came to visit him from Seattle, as I was leaving, he'd walk me to the door. And

with his hands he'd give a blessing, saying "Durga, Durga, Durga [Durga protect you]." Before leaving, I would visit the shrine to say goodbye, and he'd be in the pantry preparing a bag of prasad for me to take along. As I was leaving, he'd bless me with the picture of Mother's feet that he brought from India. He'd also say, "Pray for my health, ask Mother to keep me." *At the time I was thinking, "Isn't this strange, with Swami having this holy connection, he'd still ask me to pray for him?" Now I understand: it wasn't that he needed my prayers; he used the prayer to make sure I'd keep my mind on Mother."*

When I think about all of this and that he touched the feet of Holy Mother—to me, Divine Mother Herself—and I have touched his feet, I feel overpowering love and joy. I really do admit that the only thing I know today is that I have *not* fully comprehended Swami's greatness, what he *truly* did for me and what he *truly* represented. I pray to be humble enough in this life to understand Swami Aseshanda's awesome greatness.

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