

Ken Shores began attending the Vedanta Society of Portland in 1957 and was initiated by Swami Aseshananda shortly thereafter. Ken is highly regarded for his innovative work in the field of ceramics.

Interviewed in Portland.

I lived briefly in Portland during the 1940s and was once taken to the downtown temple where I actually met Swami Devatmananda. He seemed like a very, very charming man, and I was impressed but very young at the time. In 1957 I moved back to Portland (from Eugene where I was doing my MFA degree) and decided to revisit the temple. I had heard Swami Aseshananda speak in Eugene and found him very interesting, bright, and engaging. There was an interesting group of people just starting to attend the Portland center at that time so it became a habit to go on Sundays. Swami was very bright and charismatic and I liked him from the very beginning.

I always felt Swami was hoping for the temple to be a monastery, in a sense. When he first came the group was almost entirely comprised of women; in fact women lived in the old temple with Devatmananda. [The women did not reside in the temple following Swami Aseshananda's arrival.] Swami wasn't prejudicial—he certainly liked women as well—but he was always hoping to fill up the bedrooms with monks. Stuart Bush came to live there and so did an older man. Swami had an eclectic group living at the temple. He realized, though, that his calling was with the [non-monastic] devotees he encountered.

So I started meditating at the old Portland temple two to three times a day and kept that up for several years. I was initiated in 1960 or '61; two others and I were initiated on July 4th and afterwards went to Swami Vivekananda's celebration at the retreat. At the same time I was working at the Contemporary Crafts Museum on Corbett Street. The gallery was staffed mostly by women who were curious about Swami. "Why don't you ask Swami for tea?" Swami came out several times for tea parties. He probably didn't look forward to them but did it for me. He sat on the terrace and had tea, but I sensed that he wasn't very interested in what was going on.

EW: Did the women ask Swami about Vedanta?

KS: Not much, I think they were just curious to see what he was like. They found him very charming.

EW: So how did the subject of initiation come up?

KS: I had been going for at least two years, and I think Swami asked me if I were interested in initiation. I remember bringing sticks for the initiation. It was traditional to bring kindling wood for the holy fire, although there was no fire afterwards.

EW: How did you know you were to bring something?

KS: Swami told me to bring them. Eventually I became very busy working at the gallery and drifted away, although I still kept in touch with Swami. For example, once he came over to see the Nixon presidential debates. At that time he was still interested in such things but later on he couldn't care less [i.e. he was highly uninterested]. It seemed he valued candidates not for their political ability but whether he thought they were ethical.

We had some great times! Once Stuart Bush went to central Oregon on vacation and arranged for Swami to stay a few nights with him. Swami asked me to drive him over. As we were driving we passed a little tiny hole in the road call Aumsville. He had seen the sign and said [in a tone of amazement] "*Aumsville!!*" He was *so impressed!* "We must stop!" "But there's nothing here, Swami." "I'll buy you a 7-up!" So we stopped at the only store there and had a 7-Up. When we reached Stuart Bush, Swami said, "We went to *Aumsville!*"

EW: Do you feel this triggered the word OM in his mind? [See Gayatriprana's contribution for another OM account.]

KS: Yes, it must have. Perhaps he thought it was very significant, for some reason. I said I didn't know the derivation of the name. But he thought it must be *something* [significant] if had been named that! He was so overcome and thrilled that we had to make a significant stop for 7-Up, and he mentioned it to Stuart! [Vera Edwards remarked hearing this story as well.]

There were many little stories like that. As I'd drive him to the retreat, he'd read the signs on the way. "No left turn, Shell Oil." I don't know what it was; it was just part of his nature of riding. He read everything that he could see along the way. He'd talk in between. It was curious. [Vera Edwards recalled that Swami would often have people in the car chant "Jai Sri Ramakrishna" on outings, possibly to raise the atmosphere to a higher level.]

EW: I also recall him reading out the signs. I wonder if it were a way of grounding himself, especially since Swami seemed to be connected with another dimension. [See Anonymous Initiation Accounts.]

KS: There was a touching story about Swami mowing the lawn at the retreat. While mowing the lawn at the retreat he accidentally ran over a garter snake. He was so upset, called Vera from the kitchen to bring a saucer of milk although the snake was in two pieces. He was so upset and tried to give it milk. It was a quality of kindness that he had. That sort of thing was just unbearable to him.

EW: One of the devotees mentioned he didn't approve of using rat poison at the retreat.

KS: Yes, they had a cat at the temple for that purpose. Swami didn't approve of the zoos because of the capture of animals. He never elaborated; he just said he didn't like zoos.

EW: Did he eat animal products such as eggs?

KS: I think he might have eaten fish. Sometimes when there was a visiting swami, Swami would ask me to cook breakfast for them after meditation. It was always eggs, and there was a certain procedure about bringing them up to room temperature before cooking. Instead of Frances cooking for him, he'd often ask me to do it when swamis visited. She understood it was a male event and didn't mind.

EW: How much cooking did Swami do?

KS: He would occasionally cook for the retreat. I don't think he did much of his own cooking, I think it was a service that others could do for him—not out of ego—just a service they could perform. I didn't do this cooking often, perhaps once every month or two months.

EW: So do you feel Swami was attuned to your spiritual needs?

KS: Yes, he never put pressure on me to move into the temple; he knew I was busy with my career as an artist and working as gallery director. He didn't ask me to give it up or spend more time, although he did ask me to do things. Once, for example, he had been in Seattle visiting Swami Vividishananda, and when he came back, he called me at the gallery. He asked, "Can you come over?" I said, "Well, I guess I can." I was busy but said, "Sure." It was wintertime and since he'd been gone a few days several devotees were at the center talking with him. Finally he said to me, "Let's leave."

He wanted me to drive him to the *retreat*. And it was *dark*. I had an old Plymouth Coupe, a big tank of a car. So we drove out in the dark, and in the rain. I thought, "What in the world?!" We opened the gate and drove up to the temple. He brought a bag and what he wanted to do was make an offering at the altar of Sri Rmakrishna and Holy Mother. He put some things out, then said, "Let's go." So off we went back. It was really pouring rain. This was teaching me a lesson not to be impatient, to be understanding. To him it was very important that he make an offering. He'd been gone a number of days. Things like that, I felt, were always lessons to me. I hope that he felt that too. I guess he did.

EW: Did Swami scold you a lot in those days?

KS: He did it to so many people, but he was always nice to me, he *never spoke harshly to me—ever*. He once said, when I didn't hear him, "Ken, Ken!" [in a slightly raised voice]. I've heard him reprimand people terribly—but some people challenged him or

didn't pay attention to what he had to say. He was always reprimanding people after the evening worship: "You didn't wash your hands after you put your shoes on. Go wash your hands!"

EW: I heard he only started scolding later—did he scold in the days of the downtown temple?

KS: Oh yes, back in those days he scolded. Some people never learned, or would forget; or perhaps they liked being reprimanded—I don't know. He was pretty abrupt at times. People would come into the service late—strangers sometimes—and stand in the back of the old temple. He'd stop and say, "Go take a seat, go sit there!" He didn't mean it that way [to sound harsh]; he just wanted them not to stand there. He did it nicely, but strongly. [See Alan Boyce's account on scolding visitors at the present temple.]

EW: How long did you continue attending?

KS: I attended through the 1960s and when the old temple was sold and Swami moved into an apartment in NW, I would still go to board meetings. Another funny story: Dr. Shiomi was a very famous doctor in town who owned a mansion in the Washington Park area. It was for sale for \$1.5 million, which was a lot of money in those days. It covered a whole block. Probably now it's worth eight or ten million. Swami had heard about it. When I mentioned that I knew Dr. Shiomi, but not very well, Swami said, "I want you to call him up; I think it would be a wonderful temple." I said, "I think it's awfully expensive." "Well, you offer him \$150,000 now!" "Well, Swami" "No, you do that!"

So got my courage together in the next day or two and called Dr. Shiomi and told him who I was. "I belong to an organization, the Vedanta Society, and the minister, the swami, wanted me to make an offer on your building." "Oh really? How much?" he asked. When told him he started to laugh. I replied, "I understand, and I'll tell Swami that you aren't interested in that price." It was so embarrassing but it taught me a lesson. I shouldn't have been that proud.

I began to drift away, and wasn't a part of the period when the new temple was purchased. But I would still see Swami occasionally. I started coming back in the '80s. Swami was always nice to me [he'd say], "Nice to see you," and he'd ask about mutual friends. When Richard Davis's mother died [Richard was a fellow artist], Swami remarked, knowing Richard and that he was close to his mother, "Oh I'm so sorry. Tell Richard that his mother is fine and alright." He was always very gracious.

Richard and I took a trip to visit several of the Vedanta Centers in California down to Trabuco. Before leaving we visited Swami, who prepared letters for us to take, and took us up to the shrine. He took out a teaspoon and gave us each a spoonful of Ganges

water. He was very, very nice towards me. He never once asked me to move in; I guess he thought I wasn't monastic material [chuckling].

EW: Do you feel Swami perceived what you needed spiritually? Did he try to present Ramakrishna and Holy Mother—from a different culture—to you, or did he try to go with what you were already “into?”

KS: Swami knew I was brought up in a right-wing, exclusive Christian background. We talked about it a lot. I've heard that your chosen ideal might be all kinds of personages: Christ, Buddha, Holy Mother, Sri Ramakrishna. No one ever talked about it because it was supposed to be a secret. But, I can at least say that he didn't choose Christ. My real interest was ecumenical. As Swami said himself, “All religions are different pathways going up the same mountain.” I'm really convinced that's true. I certainly wouldn't put down one faith or religion; I might not believe a good part of it, but in essence they are all making the same effort. I believe he definitely had certain prescriptions for me, but he never forced anything on me that I wouldn't believe in.

EW: Do you feel he actually chose something that was appropriate to your nature?

KS: I really think he understood me more than I thought at the time, especially since the art world, which I belonged to, is another world entirely. Then I started traveling a lot with thirteen trips to India. Several times he would send messages and books with me to one of the centers there. But, once, when he was getting older, I heard him say during a lecture, “People who do tours around the world seeing things—that's not important. What's important is inside and where you are.” I don't think he was aiming it at me; I just think he felt going to India wasn't that important.

EW: Yes, and he never went back to India. “He didn't need a vacation from God!” one disciple remarked. [See Eric Foster's contribution.]

KS: No, he didn't. Once in a while he'd go to another center to give a lecture or something, but he really didn't want to leave our center. So many people here were dependent on him.

EW: I heard that there were people who had real challenges and Swami kept those people on track.

KS: I can imagine he would do that. He would be very understanding. But there were also some very straightforward, level-headed people who felt they wanted Swami's permission to do most anything.

EW: Perhaps they didn't want to risk a scolding!

KS: Well, that too, but it was kind of nice to be directed and to make sure they were on the right track.

EW: Maybe they were attempting to diminish their egos by asking permission from him.

KS: Exactly! It was all aimed to squash the ego and get you to be an even-minded, well-rounded person.

EW: [The conversation turned to Swami's presence as the main reason for going to lectures.] Many people commented that the value of going to Swami's lectures was just to be in his presence, that the informational aspect was secondary.

KS: Yes, I also felt that way and in the shrine too. I would usually go around 6:30 or 7:00 a.m. He'd get up around 8:00 a.m. since he'd be up into the wee hours writing and doing things. After performing the morning shrine rituals, he'd nod off to sleep. It was just that presence of him coming in that was so important—I always waited for him before going to work.

[The conversation turned to other swamis in the Order.] Another Swami I liked was Vandananda. He was wonderful. When I made that pilgrimage to CA, we'd sit out on the lawn after the service, and we chatted a long time. What a *nice* Swami. I liked him *so much!*

Swami Aseshananda and Swami Vividishananda were old friends from India. Swami Vividishananda was older so Swami Aseshananda would always take the dust of his feet. I would sometimes drive him back to Seattle and spend a few days there. He was such a nice man and a loveable person. A little strict and stern, but he wasn't *really*. We'd go next door to some devotees to watch television. He was a very humanistic person but very, very spiritual. There was great communication between them all the time. You could tell they were old, old friends. He was a marvelous man.

EW: In one of the remembrances a devotee recounts how Swami Aseshananda ordered her to salute Swami Vividishananda who was in a coma. The devotee thought this was peculiar, but she did it anyway and left feeling a sense of overwhelming love. [See Doretha Stuart Moore's contribution.]

KS: I can imagine. Swami Vividishananda had that presence about him and Swami Aseshananda knew that, and so he went to visit him often.

Over the years, I can give Swami Aseshananda credit for my being positive in most situations. I find it difficult to be very negative for a long time about anything and, in fact, friends say, "You're the most un-negative person." I made an effort, but Swami had a lot to do with this by demonstrating how important it is to be positive, not

negative: not only about people, but about situations, everyday life, self-preservation, everything. Although I heard him chastise people, I never heard him say anything really negative. He just wasn't negative, and it wasn't his nature. It's hard over a period of years to pinpoint things, but I give him so much credit for my life for being the way it is. I've been very fortunate to have known him and to have been a part of the center.

February 2009