

Marina Sanderson and her husband James Sanderson, disciples of Swami Aseshananda, began their association with the Portland Center in 1958 and lived at the Scappoose retreat for approximately two decades. Marina continued her contact with Swami until 1996 and contributed to this collection at age 90.

Written submission.

My husband James and I first met Swami Aseshanandaji in 1958 when our nineteen year-old son, James [called Jim], was home from college for the Christmas holidays. Jim met a cousin whose science teacher, Robert Collins, was having Swami Aseshananda at his home that evening to speak of Vedanta, the subject being comparative religion. As Jim was interested in the topic and had been a student of Mr. Collins, he invited himself along with another cousin to the evening's "homework class," so to speak. [Editorial note: See also Robert Collins's remembrance describing this meeting.]

The three of them enjoyed Swamiji's talk and the following period of questions and answers. When he got home, of course, I was particularly interested, as some years before, my husband and I had visited the Vedanta Center in the old temple downtown. At that time Swami Devatmananda was the resident swami. We had not followed up on our visit of the earlier time.

The following Sunday Mr. Sanderson and I attended Swami Aseshanandaji's lecture. For the first time ever I was finally hearing from a ministerial source a message of truth and wisdom that resonated with the wise guidance of my mother, and so it was familiar to me because of the books she got from the library or we had at home. Mom was well-read and familiar with Theosophy, philosophy, and other religions to some degree—she possessed an acquaintance with them at least.

Listening to Swami Aseshanandaji, I knew, at last, I was on the way home. A number of times throughout the years we had been invited to join the membership of the attended church, but refrained despite some participation in service. Never previously had I felt I was hearing or seeing someone who actually knew personally the Christ of whom he/she spoke. With beloved Swamiji there was never a question. Swami, a blessed one, was/is the embodiment of the Way, the Truth, and the Life of which Jesus, the Christ, spoke.

At one time long after being initiated by Swami, I had a dream in which I heard the words, "Your guru's name is agama sahaj." When I woke up I did remember the words I had heard and asked Swami their meaning. He said, "It means the guru is the embodiment and knower of the scriptures." Indeed, he was/is the Living Word. I recall on a number of occasions he'd say—both to me personally as well as to the whole congregation—in accord with his message, "I am thy Self—meaning the real Self, not the ego persona—my Beloved." The illumined one, as I understand it, sees the same

Self in all, and this was a reminder for us. [Swami was confirming that his real identity is the same reality within others: myself is the same as “thy”—*your*—Self, Marina explained.] Beautiful. True.

Some time later I asked Swami for initiation. He replied that I would need to ask Swami Ashokananda in California, as he was the senior swami who was initiating at that time. I loved Swami Aseshanandaji dearly and wished to wait and did. I recall being the 10th devotee initiated because I chose to wait until husband Jim was ready to receive initiation also and we could be initiated on the same worship day, which we were on a Rama/ Sita auspicious day in April.

There were a few others following me who also received the 108 strand rudraksha beads. At that time the strings of rudraksha beads were \$12.00 each for a 108-bead mala. That was a considerable amount of money in the early ‘60s and we all knew how vigilant and careful Swamiji was about spending Ramakrishna’s and Mother’s money! So Swami started giving malas to me to take apart and restring, making two smaller malas of fifty-four beads each.

This came about as at the time Mr. Sanderson and I were living at the retreat in Scappoose, having moved there in 1961 to serve in care of the grounds and temple and to discourage the occasional vandalism that did occur from time to time. When there were visiting guests that wished to stay over for a visit of some period they might stay in the cabin in the woods, if they wished more privacy, or with me in Mother’s house, or with Mr. Sanderson in the older house on the temple grounds.

On one visit, a nun from the Santa Barbara, CA, center stayed with me a few days and during that time my mala broke. The nun, whose name I do not fully recall now, knew how to restring beads and showed me how to put the first few beads on the string after carefully making all the preliminary steps. She was a good teacher and by the time I finished putting on all the remaining beads and being shown how to add the witness [bead] on last and make the new tassel, I thought if they broke again probably I could redo the full procedure. Vera Edwards was visiting at the time and knew I had some familiarity with the procedure and mentioned this to Swamiji. So when he gave me the first 108 strand to reassemble into two malas, well, OK, but there was only one witness bead on the original mala and another would be needed!

Vera happened to know of a place in downtown Portland that recycled goods, new merchandise that was out-of-date and wasn’t selling well. She had, while there, seen a big box with an assortment of all kinds of beads tied together in strings of a dozen or so and suggested I look there to see if they might have something I could use for the needful extra witness bead. I did so and, wal-lah and oh glory be, what did I find but handfuls of real rudraksha beads tied together as I have previously mentioned! I bought many pounds all at that time as Swamiji had been giving me, previous to this synchronistic miracle of a find, different kinds of beads to use for making worship

malas: wooden ones, little shell-like ones, whatever. So now it turns out we actually had beads enough from that point in time until Swamiji stopped initiating, as well as for repair, replacement of lost beads, and new worship malas.

During these fifteen years we resided at the retreat area in Scappoose, Mr. Sanderson worked as a machinist in Portland and I, at Swamiji's request, did the noon worship in the little shrine at the retreat. In addition we went there mornings and evenings for meditation and vespers. The little building, even at that time, was beginning to decompose and the floor was becoming dangerous to walk on in spots where the floorboards were rotting through. It was originally built directly on the ground without an under-foundation. It remained there even after we left for many years until Swamiji finally let it be taken down. (In India old shrines simply remain for ages, I presume). It was part of Swamiji's tradition, and certainly understandable. Here old buildings and not-so-old but otherwise possibly dangerous ones are condemned and must come down.

Also, as most devotees wish to serve Swamiji personally in some way, I also wished to do so. Swamiji finally let me wash various articles of his clothing and iron the shirts. And the stockings were a never-ending mending project ending up patches on top of patches.

Swamiji's frugal ways extended to all aspects of his life except for love. His love was totally unconditional. As Jesus the Christ said, "Love thy neighbor as thy Self," and indeed, Swamiji did.

While still at the old downtown house/temple in the early years before the building of the "new" Vedanta place, or I should say the "present" temple site [on Mt Tabor], Swamiji wished to show us the Indian musical instrument [probably a tambura] and how it is played. He had gone upstairs to get it, then proceeded to sit on the floor, placing it carefully in the proper position while telling us details of its use with other musical instruments of India. Then without tightening the strings even a little, and they were woefully loose and lax, he began to strum his hand across them—and sing. No musical sound at all, only flubby noises, but bless his precious Self, Swamiji continued to chant and sing songs to Mother—and I guess maybe even the 15th Chapter of the Gita. I don't remember now, but on and on.

I was surprised and bewildered that Swamiji hadn't even tried to tighten the strings or apparently seem to even know they would need to be tuned. After a time it began to amuse me greatly and I struggled to keep from rudely laughing. I was, of course, actually doing so silently and nearly strangling and bursting to keep quiet. I thought he never would stop. One song after another! Finally when he did stop, wished us all good night and Mother's Blessings, Swamiji headed up the stairs to put the instrument away. As he started up the stairs, Swamiji burst out in the most madly hilarious laughter imaginable. I just stood there dumbfounded, realizing he had been "absorbing" all my

wild mirth and I was getting a replay. This is a perfect example of “I am thy Self, my Beloved,” in other words, truly Swamiji was, indeed, a perfect reflective mirror at times.

And again, on another occasion, how shockingly this fact was brought home to me, when the reflection I saw in his eyes was that of what is called the Dweller on the threshold: the shadow persona, the embodiment of all the more negative “stuff” in the subconscious. The Dweller, as I understand it, is an energy gestalt of all residual positive and negative karmas from many past lives. I could see that that “straight and narrow path” was going to take a good deal of time and attention!!

Ah well, as for the “tambura event,” even yet to this day as I tell this [about] myself, I still must laugh—bits of residual hilarity Swamiji left for me to enjoy throughout the years when I think of it. I still love it and, yes, laugh and weep, too, treasuring the precious lesson. Some of the best works of a master [an illumined guru] are prompted by the Spirit in strange ways.

Another time Mr. Bush [a long-term resident of the monastery] and I were cleaning out the old refrigerator that had been in the cabin before we moved in. When my husband and I moved in, we brought our own. It was decided that the extra refrigerator should be cleaned and put in the basement of the retreat temple for use during the Saturday retreat workdays. Those days included gardening, cleaning, painting, roofing, and whatever was timely and/or needful.

Well, it turned out during that period of time the cottage hadn’t been used by “people,” the mice took over and there were droppings to be cleaned, as well as just general cleansing and checking over. Mr. Bush, without qualms or hesitation, brushed the droppings into a pile and gathered them into his hand to dispose of, saying that if Swamiji could make patties out of moist cow dung for drying to burn for fires in India, he [Mr. Bush] too could clean the dry droppings—at least they were *dry* [!] He wasn’t quite sure about the cow patties [meaning he wasn’t sure if he could handle them like Swami did]. I agreed. The old refrigerator was thoroughly cleaned and disinfected with fairly strong bleach and put back into use. [Editorial note: See also Gayatriprana’s remembrance regarding Swami’s description of his cow dung work in India.]

Swamiji’s frequent sayings I recall:

As I’ve mentioned in the previous pages, Swamiji would say rather often in a lecture period, “I am thy Self, my Beloved.” He’d also say, “Mother bless you,” especially when passing out prasad. On one occasion he told Lavern Kuchler that my husband Jim and I “were like a cup and saucer.” When we were having lunch together on a particular day she happened to mention this and yes, we were very compatible mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. I did think it a very apt observation.

I'm tempted to tell about what I call the "Temple Dome Fiasco" of the temple at Scappoose.* But, perhaps, the person primarily concerned may wish to mention it—and will. If not, and you wish to know, I'll tell you as it's interesting and true. And yes, it, too, is of Swamiji.

Submitted Summer 2007

* * *

[*Editorial note: For more information about this incident, see "Miscellaneous" at the end of this collection.]