

Sarah Dorsey resides in Portland, OR. and was initiated by Swami Aseshananda in 1974 while a college student.

Written Submission

I had the good fortune of meeting Swami Aseshananda in 1973. I was seventeen and a freshman at Lewis and Clark College. A colleague of my father's at Willamette University's College of Law invited me to a Sunday lecture. I vividly remember seeing Swamiji walking down the stairs from his bedroom and smiling at me. After the lecture I was introduced to him and he was informed that I was a religious studies and philosophy major. Swamiji immediately asked me to come back and see him "so we could discuss various religions and philosophy." I took him up on his offer, and that was the beginning of my relationship with the man I would call "my guru."

At the time, I didn't know what "guru" meant. I knew him as a kind Hindu monk with whom I could discuss my classes. Whenever I would visit he would prepare green beans and a grilled cheese sandwich for me followed by a cookie, candy and an interesting homemade pudding. Whenever I was preparing to leave, he would say, "Just a minute" and go get a small framed picture and place it on my forehead reciting a short Sanskrit prayer. I later saw that this framed picture was a photograph of Sri Sarada Devi.

During that first year of college I attended his lectures whenever I could get a ride. I particularly enjoyed the Thursday night class on inter-religious understanding. The Swami would invite ministers from various Buddhist, Christian, and Jewish centers to speak. There were always lively discussions afterwards followed by refreshments or even a potluck meal. It's important to note that Swamiji lectured five times a week while doing the daily worship and arati himself. He had no assistant swami until Swami Shantarupananda came in the 1990s.

My parents divorced around this time and I will always remember Swami Aseshananda's concern for me, with his frequent phone calls asking, "Is everything alright?" He would have Vera Edwards call to invite me to special events called *pujas* and to meetings with various swamis from all over the world. I am very grateful to Vera, her daughter Alice, and other women from the temple for the rides to and from the temple my freshman year.

One Spring day in 1974 Swamiji said he'd teach me how to meditate. He took me into the shrine, did a small ritual as I sat near him and gave me a beautiful set of beads and a photo of Thakur [Sri Ramakrishna] and Holy Mother along with more instructions. I did not understand the significance of this day until I told Vera Edwards what had happened, and she was thrilled for me! I'd been initiated; Swamiji was officially my guru.

During the late 1970s and early eighties, Swamiji would arrange a caravan of devotees, visiting swamis, and other out-of-town guests in our various cars and we would go to the coast for a picnic. I remember driving Swamiji in my little Toyota feeling somewhat anxious as he'd refuse to wear his seat belt. He would not allow windows to be rolled down and air conditioning was strictly

forbidden. We would stop at Ecola State Park for lunch and then take a walk to the viewpoint overlooking the ocean. I can still see Swamiji standing there above the beautiful Pacific in his frayed wool coat and floppy hat admiring the view. On other days Swamiji would arrange a trip to Mt. Hood. We would stop along the Sandy River for a picnic and then drive to Timberline Lodge parking area. He would have us all get out of our cars and take a small hike at the base of the mountain to a specific area where we could see an unobstructed view of Mt. Hood. Swamiji loved that mountain. He enjoyed being outdoors and appreciated Oregon's natural beauty. He would remind us that all of what we saw was a manifestation of Brahmin.

When I transferred two years later to University of California at Santa Barbara, which had an excellent religious studies department, Swami found an apartment for me near the Santa Barbara temple. I became close with the nuns there and had the opportunity to take walks around the temple grounds with Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood. This was a wonderful experience. When Swami Prabhavananda left his body (July 1976) all the swamis in the U.S. came to his memorial. Swami Aseshananda was now the senior swami in the U.S. and attended. On this occasion, I walked by his guest room on the temple grounds. I remember him looking very tired sitting in his chair. I had not seen him like this before. He saw me and asked that I come visit with him for a moment quietly. During the memorial activities, I observed a group of people standing around Swamiji and touching his feet with reverence. When I followed their example, he stopped me mid-way and said, "No, no need to do this as you can be just like me."

It was at this moment that I realized Swamiji was more than a "kind" Hindu monk who liked to discuss philosophy. I was struck early on by his capacity to really care about people. Many of us benefitted from his "unconditional love." For instance, Swamiji wrote to me monthly while I was in school in Santa Barbara telling me of events in Portland and to give me spiritual instruction. At the end of his letters, he would always offer his love and prayers.

I introduced one of my professors, Gerald Larson, and his teaching assistant, Wade Dazey, to Swamiji. He invited both men to come to Portland to speak at the temple. Wade was eventually initiated, and Dr. Larson remained friends with Swamiji for the rest of his life. I dedicated one of the papers to Swamiji. It was entitled "Concept of the Guru in the Upanishads." He wrote me back, "I do not deserve this. Everything I do is by Thakur and Mother's grace."

There were times over the years that I would get distracted by my life and not come to the temple. One time lasted for ten years. When I did return, it was for a Sunday lecture. Mr. Bush, president of the Vedanta Society of Portland, was gracious and happy to see me. After the lecture, he advised Swamiji that I was there (Swami's eyesight was failing) and after I said hello, Swamiji kept saying to me, "Mother bless you. Mother bless you." In many ways it was like coming home to my family and being true to myself.

As I write this, I am flooded with many memories of Swamiji. What I remember the most about him was:

- His unconditional love for his disciples
- His keen intelligence
- His memory

- His sensitivity towards the social dynamics amongst the local devotees and Western cultural norms
- His ethical integrity
- His ability to transcend his own physical suffering as he got older
- His compassion

I will relate one last story. It was shortly before Swamiji left his body in 1996. He was bedridden and suffering multiple small strokes. I went to see him upstairs in his bedroom. Mr. Thomas was there attending to him. He was moaning and appeared to be going in and out of consciousness. Mr. Thomas spoke loudly telling him I was there. All of a sudden Swamiji opened his eyes, turned his head towards me and said, "Sarah, everything all right? How are you and your family?" I told him we were all fine and gave him a quick update. He said softly, "Good," closed his eyes and proceeded to turn away from us. That is the last time I saw him.

I believe Swamiji could have left his body years before he did, as he taught us that death is liberation, but because of his great compassion for us he blessed us with his presence for many years. He would say it was all Holy Mother's will. Those of us who knew him were so fortunate to be in his company.

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