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Written submission.

My memories of Swami Aseshananda go back to my early years of struggle in America, when as a young wife married to a student, I was desperately trying not only to make financial ends meet, but also to find a certain peace within, uncontaminated by the ups and downs of new relationships. Our first stop on the road to peace was the unqualified friendship offered to us by Swami Tathagathananda, Head of the Vedanta Society of New York; our first meeting with him took place on December 22nd, 1982. I first met Swami Asheshananda when he came to speak in the Vedanta Center (West Side) in April of 1983, along with Swami Swahananda and Swami Adishwarananda, who is with us no more.

Swami Aseshananda had a unique appearance. He was not dressed in the traditional sannyasi garb; instead he sported a black suit, wearing, however, an orange scarf to indicate his separate status as one who had renounced the world, a symbol whose meaning would be properly construed only by those who were initiated into the mores of Hindu asceticism. He also had flowing locks and a keen intelligent air about him, giving him more the appearance of a sophisticated bureaucrat or intellectual.

His delivery was low, pointed, succinct and laced with an unmistakable humor. He spoke on Holy Mother. It is too far back in time for me to recollect the entire substance of his talk that evening. However, I remember its sonorous and compelling end which I may not be able to reproduce exactly but which was close to, “I have seen Her, I have spoken to Her, I now pray to Her to carry me over the ocean of Life.”

My husband, Debajyoti, who was a keen devotee himself, immediately rushed upstairs after the talk was over, when devotees were allowed to meet the swami personally. I too went along. Debajyoti asked Swami for initiation. At that point there was no one else in the room. Swami went into meditation for a few minutes. After opening his eyes, he simply smiled and said, “The time is not right. You will get your initiation elsewhere.” He was correct. We were initiated early in 1987 at Belur Math by Swami Gambhiranandaji. However, Aseshanandaji gave us a mantra to chant until we received the one sealing our initiation. This mantra was a very simple and traditional one, chanted, I’m sure, by many people in India everyday, the refrain of countless songs of the Vaishnava faith, and also referred to in songs by Rabindranath, Atulprasad and Rajanikanto. Its appeal is timeless. Asheshanandaji’s mantra was, “Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna Hare Hare/Hare Ram, Hare Ram, Ram, Ram, Hare Hare.” We can see how this mantra—without taking Thakur’s name directly anywhere—brought

into our consciousness the twin deities or avatars who constituted Thakur's name, Ramakrishna.

My relationship with Swami Asheshananda has another rich dimension. As I've mentioned, I was a struggling student's wife in the early 1980s. However, my own background in the Humanities—English Literature to be precise—had made it difficult for me to accept philosophies/epistemologies/avatars without some questioning. I have once heard Swami Prabhananda (General Secretary, Ramakrishna Mission and Math) say in a lecture that any spiritual aspirant will perforce have these periods of dryness when Belief or Faith seems simply a fantasy, a mere wish fulfillment, an unrealistic satisfying of the imagination.

I was up to my ears with Heidegger, Nietzsche, Camus, and Sartre in college, belonging to a group who certainly—in the fashion of postcolonial “mimicry”—identified more with Left-leaning Western philosophers than with Indians. They either followed Sartre's philosophy of social commitment and rejection of “bad faith,” or Camus's belief that like Sisyphus, man is bound to action, but that there is no authenticity or heroic meaning within the existential framework of life. Human beings act without the sanction of an ultimate telos.

Nurtured on these theories for three years, I was certainly influenced by certain kernels of truth that existed in them. However, also having a naturally devout sensibility, I found the crosscurrents of skepticism and faith very painful and difficult to bear. It is at that juncture that I turned to Swami Asheshananda. I told him my problem and in return (because I didn't have money for long phone calls), he wrote me a letter in his own hand. That letter is now buried in the mass of papers that have accompanied me on my shift from America to India, and I am not sure that I can recover it.

However, I still have memories of the dialectic that it contained. Swami told me that he too, as a college student, had been influenced by Western thinkers like Kant, Hegel, and Russell. However, his apprenticeship under Swami Saradananda changed many of his early assumptions about the nature of reality and experience. From Saradanandaji, he had learnt the value of service and how it transforms character. His final blessing in the form of Holy Mother's initiation had taken care of all the dissenting and dissonant voices within him; it made him fully prepared to be a dedicated monk to the Ramakrishna Order. Of course, Asheshanandaji was lucky. Not only did he meet the miracle worker Holy Mother, but more than one of Sri Ramakrishna's direct disciples. We are much less fortunate in not seeing human beings who exemplified such rare attributes of heart and mind, and have to make do with what we see now and then.

Asheshanandaji continued by saying that although the Western philosophers like Nietzsche can give us fuel for thought, they cannot give us peace, and that is what we so desperately want. Therefore, read Western philosophers he said, but when it comes to cultivating intimacy, turn to Thakur and Ma.

I still remember Swami's keen and intelligent face, the smile that hovered constantly over it, his paramount gentleness, and above all, his "service" to a young woman who was shaken by the pangs of doubt and disbelief.

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