

Swami Yogeshananda was a novice at the Trabuco Canyon monastery when Swami Aseshananda was assistant minister and “novice master” for the monks.

Swami Yogeshananda wrote the following account in the late 1990s for possible publication.

Swami Aseshananda, disciple of Sri Sarada Devi and secretary to Swami Saradananda, arrived at the Vedanta Society of Southern California in 1949 to serve as the first of several assistants to Swami Prabhavananda. In the same year, Swami Yatiswarananda sent me to the Hollywood center, so I had Swami Aseshananda’s company, on and off, for the three years he was with us. That is a very small part of the Swami’s long life, which is why I have been reluctant to assume any reporting role. I always thought that someone who had known him longer should write. But now, so many years later, I think it may be of some interest and much use to put down what I recall of Swami in those early years.

When I arrived in Hollywood, Swami Prabhavananda was visiting India; he had written to me that I could move to Hollywood anyway, and Swami Aseshananda would look after my wants and needs. On the day I arrived, Miss McLeod’s funeral was held that evening. Tantine, as we called her, had spent her last years, her nineties, living in the center and regarding Swami Prabhavananda as her teacher. What I saw was a tall woman lying in her coffin at the front of the auditorium, white-haired and dressed all in white, with an Indian rosary prominent on her chest. Swami Aseshananda was performing the ceremony. He was small of body, quick of movement, slightly stammering of speech: yet I was impressed by the combination of sacredness and naturalness expressed in the service. One knew it was a funeral but one also knew here was nothing to be bothered about: death was not morbid.

I went to live at the new monastery in Trabuco Canyon. Swami Aseshananda moved there when his superior returned from India. In many ways he seemed like a child. When all his ways are considered—the slight stammer, the frequent smile, the lightness of his walk, his hesitations—I do believe his human personality was like Sri Ramakrishna’s, more so than any other swami I have known. Swami Aseshananda began a morning class with these four or five American would-be monks. At once the surface casualness gave way to the profundity of his experience and his teaching expertise. In India he had served in the hostel of the Madras Students’ Home, and he *knew* young men.

As for Swami Aseshananda’s audience, the shadow of the head guru, which hangs over all assistants, was there; this was something Swami had to work through, which in time he did. I took notes of some of those classes and published them in a slim booklet entitled *The Lotus and the Flame*, framing the seeming opposites of Devotion and

Knowledge, as harmonized in both the teachings and Swami Aseshananda's life. I failed to take other notes, because I did not know I would be writing about him.

During the next three years, Swami was a good and fluent speaker, always putting the emphasis on Advaita, but not limiting himself to that. Swami had the same daunting schedule as Swami Prabhavananda, traveling from the monastery to the center in Hollywood and from there to the convent in Santa Barbara and back again. But when at Trabuco he never seemed to be tired, and almost skipped his way up and down the long brick corridor from his room to the kitchen. Often he was slow responding to the lunch bell, and once an irreverent brother called it to his attention. This evoked a moment of unabashed confession: "I-I like to see all the brahmacharis standing and waiting for me!" We gasped. Then his irresistible laugh. Was he was poking fun at himself? One of Sri Ramakrishna's much-noted traits was his utter frankness about himself. We saw this in Swami Aseshananda.

Swami was deeply, deeply devoted to Sarada Devi, his Guru; but he did not show it openly in those days. It was difficult to draw him out about her: with a few words he would blow away the inquiry. He had a rosary of hers and in Hollywood, at least, we heard that he would sometimes show or touch it to a devotee by way of blessing. The one he *did* talk about was Swami Saradananda, whom he had served longer. We heard a great deal about him, and came to know his nature very well.

My room was just across the corridor from Swami Aseshananda's, so with that nearness I could observe both his daily habits and idiosyncrasies. Let me recall some of the incidents that marked his days with us.

We observed Shivaratri quite strictly in those first years, abstaining from food and drink, going right on with our physical work, and each of us performing the ritual communally in the four watches of the night. It all ended with a hearty breakfast before dawn. When Swami did not appear at all for the meal, someone was sent to see if anything was wrong. "I-I-I-uh, my sleep means more to me than food. You all go ahead," was what he said. He was sleeping—soundly! Another of those memories is of the day when devotees, a husband and wife who lived farther south, invited us to drive down and take a ride in their private plane. Most of us boys, I think all, jumped at the chance, though I am sure I had some qualms. Swami went along. But when the time for rides was offered—and we took turns going up (including a fly over the monastery)—he demurred and said he would not take a turn. Cajoled, begged, accused of fear, he would not budge. At last the truth came out: "You see, leaving, I went to the shrine," (as he always did) "and told the Lord where I was going. I didn't realize we were going up in a plane, and I didn't tell Him I would; so I cannot do it."

Readers must agree that this was a remarkable testament to his intimate relationship with the Lord. Not at that time, but later in my life I tried to keep that principle, of telling the

Lord just where I was going and for what. I have found it also helps remind me of what to take along!

When Swami Aseshananda was asked a spiritual or philosophical question, he would be silent for some seconds, before he replied. It was long enough to be noticeable, unlike the manner of many teachers whose answers come out before the question is finished! Another mark was his gesture of bringing his right fist to his nose, as if he might somehow find the answer in there. He had some favorite, oft-repeated phrases: “We do not believe in post-mortem felicity,” “We must din into the recalcitrant mind these truths,” and “Monastic life *itself* is the ideal, whether you realize God or not!”

One day he brought out from his room a small packet that, he told us, held Puri prasad, i.e., prasad from the temple of Jagannath in Puri, Orissa, one of the items Sri Ramakrishna called “veritable God.” I saw him give a few grains to Franklin, a probationer who had joined us recently, and he gave a few to me. Shortly after swallowing, I felt an up-rush of current in the spine.

There were devotees from Laguna Beach, 17 miles west as the crow flies who would come up the hill for evening satsanga. There were two elderly sisters who became quite attached to Swami, and a woman who owned a bakery and utilized the spare milk which Miss Brown, the monastery cow, could deliver. Eventually these ladies persuaded Swami to travel to Laguna Beach for regular talks in a small hall, so he could reach more people. A remarkably good artist named Bennet Bradbury served as his driver at these times. I believe a seascape he painted and gave to the monastery still hangs there. Swami’s boyishness has been alluded to, in referring to his Ramakrishna-like personality. Swami looked so young that his barber in Laguna Beach was way-off in guessing his age: he was fifty or so at the time.

In accordance with Swami Prabhavananda’s “swinging-door policy,” i.e. giving young men and women the opportunity to try the monastic life even when he knew it was not in their future, Swami Aseshananda watched the comings and goings of many boys at Trabuco. Just what he thought of it he did not say, but we heard no word of protest, no grumbling. Maybe that is one of the reasons Swami Prabhavananda once said, “I cannot imagine a better assistant than Swami Aseshananda.” Some of those fellows stayed only days; others were with us for several years. Always “Swami A” (as he was soon abbreviated) had a light touch—so light, in fact, that I thought people were getting away with murder, so to speak, and dared one day to probe him on the subject. “Swami,” I asked, “the disciples of Sri Ramakrishna scolded, and other swamis today correct and scold us; why is it that *you* never do?” Taking his customary moment-out, he gave his reply: “You see, they had that love which could back up their chiding. I do not have that depth of love, so do not feel I have the right to scold.” Believe it if you like; let those who knew him later be the judges.

[Editorial note: Many contributors to this collection noted that Swami's subsequent scoldings were accompanied by an overwhelming sense of unconditional love. We may conclude that Swami obtained the depth of love he felt must first be present. Swami Yogeshananda affirmed this was the case.]

Once a very dramatic episode occurred, when a wandering "troubador" with a five-stringed guitar showed up one morning. He showed a great interest in spiritual life and talked the talk. He was invited to stay for the noon worship/meditation and for lunch. But he did not come out of the meditation hall when the lunch bell rang. Time passed, and a brother was sent in to bring him: that was not easy, as he showed no response and did not budge. "I think he may be in samadhi," said our man. (The musician had spoken quite a bit about it.) I cannot forget Swami Aseshananda's face at that time: it was a mixture of skepticism and restraint. I think now that it is remarkable that he seemed to be keeping the question open. Some swamis would just have laughed in scorn.

"Could he be in samadhi, Swami?" we wondered.

"I do not think so, from having seen the boy." Of course the minstrel's samadhi turned out later to be fraudulent, after he had been bodily carried out of the shrine room; but in the naiveté of those early days, we were ready to hope samadhi could happen to any of us!

It was in 1955, I think, that Swami was transferred to the Vedanta Society of Portland, Oregon. Swami Devatmananda had had to retire to India with poor health, and since Swami Prabhavananda had started that work, he had a close interest in the place and the group. He decided to send our "novice master," his assistant, to take over that center.

Sometime after we learned this, I spoke to "Swami A" privately. (I wonder now how I could possibly have dared to give him advice; but that was his humble bearing, you see.) "Swami," I said, "if you behave up there as Head the way you behave here, they're going to walk all over you. You'll have to show them who's boss!" Swami nodded and made a face; "We'll see," he said. He gave me two gifts before he left: a pocket *Bhagavad Gita* in Sanskrit and a stainless steel drinking cup with his name inscribed on it, which are with me even now. I now believe that we at Trabuco loved him without knowing it. His fragrance has lingered long after.

When I returned to the United States from England in 1975 I went very soon to visit him in Portland. What I recall of that visit is the affection and grace with which he hosted me. There was the inevitable tour of the Scappoose ashrama, the waterfalls, the famed rose garden, and various colleges. I remember that there was a runaway vine that some found annoying, Swami's tender feelings apparently the reason for not allowing it to be pruned. I also heard that he still did the lawn mowing. I attended his daily worship in the Portland center's shrineroom, watched him go through his beloved ritual while sitting on the floor, but with one leg stretched out behind him, the handicap of age. As I

was departing, he presented me with a splendid new leather suitcase, which I used for years. He also asked me to address the Sunday morning gathering. I spoke on “The Message of the Upanishads,” and Swami followed it up with a drawn-out re-adjustment of those ideas.

When on another visit, I saw him for the last time. Quite ill, on his bed in his room, he was withdrawn and in pain. But he knew me, and gave me his opinions, which he always did after he became the head of the Vedanta Society of Portland. His memorial service had to be held not long after that, in 1996. I made a point of going to it.

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