

Niki Raley lived as a child with her mother and other women in Holy Mother's House, a women's residence connected with the Portland Vedanta Center, in the 1970s. She was initiated by Swami Aseshananda during that time.

A Letter of Gratitude

My mother was emerging from a challenging divorce from my father. Seeking solace and spiritual guidance, she found her way to the Vedanta Society of Portland, Oregon. Swami Aseshananda welcomed both of us into the temple and its compassionate community.

Soon after, we moved into Holy Mother's House, where we lived for seven transformative years. Upon our arrival, my mother advised me to keep a low profile in our new neighborhood. Yet, she couldn't help but smile when she looked out the window to see my friend and me walking down the street, wrapped in sheets with our arms raised, blessing the neighborhood.

We spent several days each week at the temple, but Sundays were my favorite. My friends would join with their parents, and my mother served as the Sunday school teacher. Swami Aseshananda would always visit our class, offering a brief worship and sharing prasad before delivering his talk. His warm smile and blessings made each of us feel cherished. After class, we engaged in fun activities like yard games and art projects. One memorable event was our Christmas Nativity play, which Swami watched with evident pride and joy.

On one occasion, Swami had been hospitalized for a few days. My mother decided to take our group of children to visit him, though she admitted she wasn't sure how he'd react to our surprise. Fortunately, he was delighted by our visit and spoke of it fondly afterward.

My mother often mentioned that she preferred to stand behind me during temple activities, believing she wouldn't get into trouble with Swami if I were nearby. After worship, Swami would distribute prasad (cookies) from a plate, always offering me seconds with a smile and a chuckle.

I cherished my time in the temple's yard. Even when alone, I never felt lonely. The space felt like a magical wonderland where I embarked on countless imaginary adventures. To this day, the yard and the temple exude the same peace and beauty, bringing me back to a place of serenity and belonging.

We had a beloved white cat named Shanti, who was especially dear to Swami. When Shanti developed cancer, Swami provided immense love and care throughout her illness and passing.

I also loved visiting the Vedanta Retreat Center in Scappoose. During the warmer months, we'd go there on Saturdays and occasionally stay overnight for retreats. Those weekends were filled with joy as we children explored the woods, built forts, and created lasting memories. One significant event was the dedication ceremony for the Native American shrine. Swami ensured every detail was perfect and beamed with happiness throughout the day. The retreat center remains one of the most beautiful places I've seen, evoking cherished memories each time I visit.

Throughout my life, repeating the mantra Swami gave me has supported me in ways I often couldn't see in the moment. I remember one especially challenging time when I truly saw no way out of my situation. That night, I began repeating my mantra over and over. By the next morning, something had shifted—I knew exactly what I needed to do. I found a courage I didn't know I had and was able to completely turn my situation around. Once again, the mantra has transformed my life. It brings me focus, peace, clarity, and a sense of freedom. It helps me live fully, with presence, and be there for others in a meaningful way. Barbara, a devotee at the temple, has blessed me with her deep wisdom and lovingly reminds me to stay with the mantra—all day, every day.

I hold deep gratitude for Swami Aseshananda for creating a home and community where I've felt safe, peaceful, loved, and fulfilled.

Much Gratitude,

Niki Raley

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