



American Vedantist is a not-for-profit online journal dedicated to developing Vedanta in the West and to facilitating companionship among Vedantists. (To find out more about *American Vedantist*, visit our [website](#))

CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD & VEDANTA
by Anna & Jon Monday

We open with a prayer:

Oh, source of my inspiration, teach me to extend toward all living beings that fascinated, unsentimental, loving and all-pardoning interest which I feel for the characters I create. May I become identified with all humanity, as I identify myself with these imaginary persons. May my art become my life, and my life my art. Deliver me from snootiness, and from the Pulitzer Prize. Teach me to practice true anonymity. Help me to forgive my agents and publishers. Make me attentive to my critics and patient with my fans. For yours is the conception and execution. Amen.

The Prayer for Writers
Christopher Isherwood
July 14, 1940



Christopher Isherwood,
Copyright [Vedanta Society of Southern California](#) All rights reserved, Collection of [The Vedanta Archives](#)

Christopher Isherwood is a multifaceted character, each facet with its own fan base. While most popularly known as a celebrated writer, the creator of the source materials for some blockbuster musicals and films, and a vanguard of gay rights activism, he was also a Leftist, a pacifist and conscientious objector; a self-professed “connoisseur of people” who, as host, mixed disparate people with the skill of a master chemist; a professional screenwriter; an international travel writer; an attendee of world class celebrity parties; a Mexican food fan, a Hans Christian Andersen fan; Graham Greene’s cousin; a beach enthusiast whose “lifelong urge” was to “plunge into” the breakers; and a college drop-out who became a distinguished lecturer and teacher of literature and writing and generously mentored aspiring writers.

Less prominent to the world at large is his role as an early practitioner of Vedanta in America and his dedicated work in the service of that cause. [Jeffery Paine](#) writes of Isherwood’s place in the emergence of Vedanta in the West:

In regard to religion, Isherwood felt like the awkward guest who arrives during the last hour of a party, knowing no one else there or what’s gone on before. Only little by little did he realize he had arrived not during the last but nearer to the first hour, that he

was in fact participating in one of the larger religious reinterpretations in history. Something unprecedented was being given birth to, and he was, so to speak, part of the labor pains.¹

And within Vedanta circles, while he is recognized for his literary contributions and intellectual achievements, his tremendous guru-bhakti; his life as one of the original Vedanta Society of Southern California monks; and his reverence for the shrine, the ritual worship, and the relics may come as a complete surprise. Learning about his role and the impact Vedanta had on his writing is made easy by the tremendous cache of self-revelatory works he has left behind including essays, lectures, novels, his diaries, and the autobiographical [*My Guru and His Disciple*](#), which affords us the luxury of gathering information from firsthand accounts.

Isherwood himself wrote of his experience, “To live this synthesis of East and West is the most valuable kind of pioneer work I can imagine.”²

The Backstory³

Christopher Isherwood was born in 1904 to an upper middle class family, the grandson and heir of an English squire. The family was descended from John Bradshaw, who presided over the trial that ordered the execution of King Charles I. He was born into privilege; and we will see that this “privilege karma” followed him into several roles, including that of disciple. Chris’ father, being a second son, had to earn a living; he became a career officer in the military. Chris was sent to boarding school at the age of eight. His father, whom Isherwood described as a gentle, artistic man, was killed in World War I in the slaughter at Ypres. It seems reasonable to assume that this experience contributed to Chris’ later pacifist convictions. Moreover, his father took an interest in Buddhism; and his mother, Kathleen, an avid diarist herself, was enthusiastic about Indian culture

and had attended lectures by [Jiddu Krishnamurti](#) long before Chris encountered Vedanta.⁴ Kathleen wanted Chris to become an Oxford don. But early on, he soured towards academia as well as polite society and also had a powerful aversion for the Church and religion in general.



Early travel document
stamped for Berlin

He was a gifted student and was awarded a top scholarship to attend Cambridge. However, after an academically successful but disillusioning first year, he sabotaged his second year exams by writing joke answers, which got him invited to leave the university and ended his mother’s ambitions for him. Isherwood wanted to explore life, including coming to terms with his homosexuality, in a more socially liberal environment than England’s, which he found constraining.

He discovered that Berlin, Germany in the early 1930s was just the place to do that. His experiences in Berlin became the subject for some of his earliest successful writings, including *The Berlin Stories*, which after the war were adapted to a very successful play by [John Van Druten](#) and movie entitled, *I Am a Camera*, which in turn morphed into the lavishly awarded Broadway and screen musical,

¹ Jeffery Paine, [*Father India: Westerners under the Spell of an Ancient Culture*](#). (HarperCollins, 1998), 180.

² Christopher Isherwood, *My Guru and His Disciple* (Farrar Straus Giroux, 1980), 133.

³ Much of the early biographical information (up to 1930) in this section comes from *IF* (The Isherwood Foundation website www.isherwoodfoundation.org), the Film *Chris & Don: A Love Story*, and Katherine Bucknell’s introduction to *Diaries, Volume I*. Both [Katherine Bucknell](#) and [Don Bachardy](#), Isherwood’s life partner, are principals in *IF*.

⁴ *The Isherwood Century, Portrait of the Artist as Companion: Interviews with Don Bachardy*, Niladri R. Chatterjee, p. 99. Chatterjee had access to Kathleen Isherwood’s journals at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center in Austin, Texas.

Cabaret. Each iteration of the original stories took further liberties, which is to say one mustn't watch *Cabaret* and feel one knows Isherwood's history. [Christopher and His Kind](#) is Isherwood's later, more straightforward rewrite of that period.

As Germany was preparing for World War II, Isherwood's anti-war feelings grew stronger. During that same time in England, [Gerald Heard](#) and [Aldous Huxley](#) were participating in an anti-war movement called the Peace Pledge Union, which argued that war was avoidable if the major powers worked to prevent it—which they didn't. The election of Adolph Hitler as Chancellor made the war inevitable.

As the situation in mainland Europe became more treacherous, Heard and Huxley left England for America; and Isherwood and his companion, [W.H. Auden](#), left Germany for the Far East to write about the emerging war between China and Japan. In 1939, after having returned to England, where they lectured on the situation in Asia, Isherwood felt stuck, so he and Auden also left England for the United States. Auden stayed on the East Coast and Isherwood eventually drifted to Hollywood, where Heard and Huxley had settled. Isherwood hoped to get work writing for the movie studios, as Huxley had done. It must be mentioned that while all three were literary and/or intellectual celebrities when they arrived in the States, they were far from wealthy. They needed bread-winning occupations. While most writers disparaged their studio work, Isherwood admitted that the script-writing had improved his craft, teaching him compactness of expression. He also had always loved the movies and had previously been working in the film industry in Europe.

Isherwood was particularly hoping to connect with Heard to learn more about his involvement with the pacifist movement, but when he got to Hollywood, he found that both Heard and Huxley had shifted their focus from politics to religion, specifically Vedanta, under the guidance of [Swami Prabhavananda](#).

In a letter, Huxley expressed the opinion that religion, rather than the traditional anti-war movement, had the only chance of succeeding in the elimination of the root cause of war: "... the thing finally resolves itself into a religious problem—an uncomfortable fact which one must be prepared to face and which I have come during the last year to find it easier to face."

Swami Prabhavananda



Left to right, Swami Prabhavananda, Aldous Huxley & Christopher Isherwood.
Copyright [Vedanta Society of Southern California](#)
All rights reserved,
Collection of [The Vedanta Archives](#).

In 1939, at Huxley's but especially Heard's urging, Isherwood met and then made an appointment with Swami Prabhavananda. Isherwood was, however, determined to reveal his homosexuality from the start. If Swami's reaction was unsatisfactory, there would be no need to ever see him again, but if Chris felt good about the response, he would give it a chance. He writes of that first appointment, "I wasn't at all discouraged by the Swami's reply...What reassured me—what convinced me that I could become his pupil—was that he hadn't shown the least shadow of distaste on hearing me admit to my homosexuality." He goes on to write that Swami's position was that it is just itself of any kind, regardless of the object, that is the spiritual impediment.⁵

⁵ *My Guru*, pp 25-26.

In July of 1940, Isherwood's uncle died, making him the recipient of the ancestral home, Marple Hall⁶, and the family fortune. Isherwood renounced the inheritance in favor of his younger brother, Richard. Isherwood was by no means financially set at that time; his fortunes were to vacillate throughout his life.

Isherwood was initiated by Swami Prabhavananda on Holy Mother's⁷ birthday in the winter of 1940. Years later, he would write of the initiation:

I had just entered into a relationship with this little Bengali and his establishment which was far more binding and serious than a marriage—I who always had an instinctive horror of the marriage bond! Would I have involved myself in this way if I had clearly understood what I was doing? Not at that time, I think. I didn't understand because I didn't yet believe in the reality of the spiritual involvement.

Prabhavananda must have known very well what he and I were letting ourselves in for. ...the tie between the guru and his initiated disciple cannot be broken, either in this world or on any future plane of existence, until the disciple realizes the Atman within himself and is thus set free.

...I had to take it for granted that Prabhavananda had long since faced up to and accepted this tremendous responsibility; it was, after all, his justification for being a Swami.⁸

Heard and Huxley had been initiated before Isherwood and had introduced him to it, but their influence on his spiritual direction was waning. Their approach was eclectic and from the intellect, while Isherwood's was dedicated and from the heart. While he and Huxley were both working at Warner Brothers Studios Isherwood writes, "That Aldous and I were both officially disciples of Prabhavananda didn't strengthen the bond between us.⁹ ...I was beginning to realize that Aldous and Prabhavananda were temperamentally far apart. Prabhavananda was strongly devotional. Aldous was much more akin to his friend Krishnamurti, who... expounded a philosophy of discrimination between the real and the unreal... [Krishnamurti] was repelled by devotional religion and its rituals.¹⁰ He also greatly disapproved of the guru-disciple relationship."¹¹

In John Yale's compilation, *What Vedanta Means to Me*, Isherwood wrote: "...I only know that, as far as I am concerned, the guru-disciple relationship is at the center of everything that religion means to me. It is the one reality of which I am never in doubt, the one guarantee that I shall ultimately surmount my own weakness and find knowledge of eternal peace and joy. If, having known this relationship, I could in some terrible way be deprived of it again, then my life would become a nightmare of guilt, boredom and self-disgust."

⁶ To quote the Marple website: "On a visit to the site of the Hall [which had gone to ruin] in the sixties Christopher Isherwood is reported to have '**felt no grimness or sadness**' [emphasis theirs] at seeing only grass where the house had stood '**only wonderfully joyful**'. It is unlikely that anyone with the least sense of history will be able to share, or understand these sentiments." <http://www.marple-uk.com/Hall1.html>

⁷ Toward the end of *My Guru*, (pp 335-336) Isherwood writes: "I meditate before a print of that same photograph [of Holy Mother that Swami Prabhavananda hung in his room]—partly because I associate it particularly with Swami; partly because I need a mother figure through whom I can feel a more loving acceptance of my own mother..."

⁸ Isherwood, *My Guru*, 63-67.

⁹ It should be noted that Chris saw a great deal of Aldous and Maria Huxley socially and even went on at least one road trip with them. Their relationship changed over time. At this point, Isherwood seems to be declaring his independence from the older Huxley as any kind of spiritual pathfinder.

¹⁰ There is a revealing video interview of Krishnamurti by Huston Smith from 1968:

<https://youtube.com/watch?v=0Q7uAKbsgpl>. Krishnamurti's organization had produced the interview. Here's Smith's take on the interview: youtube.com/watch?v=j9d1JgJfLHg.

¹¹ Isherwood, *My Guru*, 50.



Swami Prabhavananda at the Hollywood Temple, Copyright Vedanta Society of Southern California. All rights reserved. Collection of [The Vedanta Archives](#)

Throughout the chronicle of their long relationship, *My Guru and His Disciple*, Isherwood frequently writes of the co-existence of the divine power and the human within the being of the guru, speculating on when one appeared over the other and noting that as Swami aged, the balance increasingly tilted toward the divine. However, Isherwood loved both aspects, relishing his guru's humanity, enjoying the man himself. Conversely, Gerald Heard couldn't tolerate what he perceived as the human component in Swami Prabhavananda, harshly judging anything that suggested human frailty. Heard was trapped in his own preconceived notion, and apparent prototype for his own character, of the austere, self-mortifying, wizened holy man. That paradigm later proved impracticable for groups when he attempted to form his own spiritual community at Trabuco Canyon.¹²

Heard had played more of the spiritual shepherd to Isherwood than had Huxley. The Heard/Isherwood relationship was closer, more extensive, and more fruitful than *My Guru* would indicate, almost certainly because Isherwood's intent was to focus on Swami and himself. However, we will read in the diaries that when Chris was beginning to conceptualize *My Guru*, he intended for Heard to be more prominent. Heard did play a formative, preparatory role in Chris' spiritual development as we see in *Diaries Volume I*. At one point, Isherwood was Heard's neighbor and was simultaneously frequenting the Society. Of the two environments, Isherwood writes:

The atmosphere of Ivar Avenue [the Temple] and of Gerald's room ... were, in fact, entirely opposed to each other. It was very instructive for me to be able to inhabit both. On the one side, apparent disorder, religious bohemianism, jokes, childish quarrels, dressing up in saris, curry, cigarettes, oriental laissez-faire; on the other, primness, plainness, neatness, austerity, discreet malice, carrots, patched blue jeans, wit and western severity. ...Gerald offered me discipline, method, intellectual conviction. But the Swami offered me love.¹³

As Heard mellowed with age, he and Isherwood again became close; but the relationship had changed. When Heard died, Isherwood wrote, "[the world] has lost one of its few great magic mythmakers and revealer of life's wonder."

As the war went on, Isherwood did pacifist service with a Quaker organization in Pennsylvania that housed German-speaking refugees and prepared them for life in America. He lived modestly with a Quaker family, but went to Philadelphia or, more often, New York City for intensive R&R, usually with celebrities. As the draft age was repeatedly raised, Isherwood became eligible for conscription and sought conscientious objector service in a forestry camp. Swami, however, had other plans for him. Isherwood writes:

¹² Gerald Heard founded Trabuco College in Trabuco Canyon, CA in 1942. It was part college, part ashram, and very austere. However, Heard was not able to sustain it and in 1949 donated it to the Vedanta Society. John Yale writes of the ceremony in [The Making of a Devotee](#): "Gerald found he was visited with some of the same problems he had criticized Prabhavananda for having handled inadequately. Faithful Chris was present at the dedication. He spoke, as did Gerald and Prabhavananda...the occasion reeked of irony...There was after that a period of rapprochement"

¹³ Christopher Isherwood, *Diaries, Volume One*, ed. Katherine Bucknell, (Harper Flamingo), 1997, 151.

Meanwhile, the Swami was urging me to apply to the draft board for re-classification as theological student, 4-D...The Swami had a frankly admitted motive for keeping me out of the forestry camp. He wanted me to come and live as a monk at the Vedanta Center, as soon as he could make arrangements to accommodate men there. This might take several months. But he also had an occupation for me which I could begin work on immediately. He had just finished a rough translation of the [*Bhagavad-Gita*](#) and needed me to help him polish it.

I told him I doubted very much that the [draft] board would agree to reclassify me when I was already good as drafted. Why should they take the trouble to do the extra paperwork? The Swami giggled and said, "Try." To my ears, there was a slightly uncanny quality in this giggle; it sounded as if he knew something about the situation which I didn't.

The Monastery



[Caption on page 7]

The Community pictured on page 6, many are monastic women and men, whom Isherwood referred to as “The Family” in front of the Hollywood Temple, c. 1952-53. Left to right, Top: Richard Liebow, Lee Bailey, Dell Grover, Christopher Isherwood, Henry Dennison, John Yale (Prema, Sw. Vidyatmananda), John Schenkel, Swami Yogeshananda, Ramdas, Michael Barrie. Middle Row, seated: Ujjvala (Ida Ansell), Swami Areshananda, Swami Prabhavananda, and Gerald Heard. Steps (upper row): Baradaprana, possibly Jnanada or possibly Maria, Prabhaprana, Amiya (Countess of Sandwich), Sarada, Anandaprana, Khunki. Bottom Step: Yogini (Yogaprana), Pagli. Copyright [Vedanta Society of Southern California](#) All rights reserved, Collection of [The Vedanta Archives](#)

Isherwood moved into the monastery in 1942; this was the first batch of monks. Although one gets the impression from *My Guru* that this was entirely Swami’s idea and doing, Isherwood had mentioned monastic aspirations in his diaries preceding Prabhavananda’s push. Isherwood went to work on his task, assisting with the translation of the *Bhagavad Gita*.

Here are Swami Prabhavananda's comments about how the translation came about:

Once I was away for a rest in Palm Springs. I had a Gita translation with me. When I read the twelfth chapter, I felt that the meaning had not been brought out; I saw deeper meaning in it. So I started to translate, and then Chris helped me.

I translated and Chris edited. When Peggy Kiskadden came, she read what we had done and could not understand it. Then we went to Aldous [Huxley]. Chris read aloud, and Aldous listened. Aldous said, “No, that is not right yet. Forget that Krishna is speaking to the Hindus in Sanskrit. Forget that this is a translation. Think that Krishna is speaking to an American audience in English.”

...Chris rewrote the whole eleventh chapter of the Gita following Tennyson, I think. He produced the book in a week. He was inspired.”

It must be mentioned that Isherwood was not a Sanskrit scholar. Here is how he describes the division of functions:

Our work on the Gita was, for me, not only a literary problem but an education in Vedanta philosophy. Even if the result had not been intended for publication, I should have felt that every moment of it was worthwhile. For the slow, thorough-going process of translating a text—considering all the significance of each word and often spending a day on three or four verses—is the ideal way to study, *if* you have a teacher like Prabhavananda.

The swami’s English was fluent and his knowledge of Sanskrit equally good... At that time, I knew no Sanskrit whatsoever; even today I ... could easily write down my little vocabulary on one side of a postcard. My share of the collaboration was therefore secondary. Prabhavananda told me the meaning of a phrase; we then considered how its meaning could best be conveyed in English.¹⁴

This was the first Prabhavananda/Isherwood collaboration.¹⁵ As indicated in Swami’s account, the translation had not been going well. Isherwood’s take on the “*miraculously fast*” Plan B approach and execution was that part of the artistic process takes place subconsciously. If the artist knows that something isn’t working, the mind goes to work to reconstruct it. When the artist is ready to admit the failure consciously, the mind is ready to present the new edifice.

¹⁴Christopher Isherwood, [The Wishing Tree](#), ed. Robert Adjemian, (Harper & Row) 1986, 182-183.

¹⁵ Although obviously a completely capable solo writer, Isherwood enjoyed frequent writing collaborations, sacred, secular, and just plain fun, throughout his life. He also had forced collaborations on scripts when working at the movie studios.

The Prabhavananda Gita introduced many Sanskrit terms into the American vocabulary. Isherwood explains at length that certain Sanskrit words must remain in their original as there are no concise English language equivalents. This new vocabulary was also personally important to him. He writes “My prejudices [against religion] were largely semantic. I could only approach the subject of mystical religion with the aid of a brand new vocabulary. Sanskrit supplied it. Here were a lot of new words, exact, antiseptic, uncontaminated...Every idea could be made over.”¹⁶

From the Translator’s Preface of the *Gita* we read:

Extremely literal translations of the Gita already exist. We have aimed, rather at an interpretation. Here is one of the greatest religious documents of the world: let us not approach it too pedantically as an archaic text which must be jealously guarded by university professors. It has something to say, urgently, to every one of us. We have to extract that message from the terseness of the original Sanskrit.

The Shrine, the Relics, and the Mantra

While living at the center as a monk, Isherwood’s contribution went beyond his considerable literary work: he did dishes, ran errands, labored in the garden, was president of the Vedanta Society, and also performed the ritual worship. He had much to say about the worship, the relics, and the shrine, his reverence for them spanning his entire spiritual life.

In 1935, Swami Prabhavananda ordered a custom shrine to be carved when he was on his first trip back to India from the U.S.¹⁷ He asked Swamis [Akhandananda](#) and [Vijnanananda](#) [monastic disciples of Sri Ramakrishna] to bless the teakwood shrine before bringing it to Hollywood. He expected a brief, rather formalized blessing, but instead, as Swami Prabhavananda recounts, “the two direct disciples stood touching the roof of the shrine, each for an hour.... Swami Akhandananda came first, and I told him that I am going to take this shrine to Hollywood. So he kept his hand there, and stood there for an hour. I asked him to sit down, but he would not sit. I had to stand and talk to him. Then after he was gone for a little while, Swami Vijnanananda came. He also stayed for an hour with his hand on the shrine.”¹⁸

Throughout his association with the temple, Chris felt the shrine to be a potent presence. At one point, during one of Chris’s many struggles to stay at the Center as a monk, he wrote, “I’ve got to convince myself, practically, that the shrine can give me strength to do what I could never do alone.”

He goes on to write of the shrine:

The shrine is like a bank, in which we have put our money and can never draw it out again. But it pays interest, so the only thing to do is to deposit more and more and more. It’s the shrine that really matters; the fact of its being there, always, right in the midst of our household. It’s particularly wonderful at night. You feel so safe there and there is such a sense of contact. Like sitting face to face with someone you know very well, and not having to speak.¹⁹

¹⁶ Isherwood, *Diaries, Volume One*, ed. Katherine Bucknell, 29.

¹⁷ Information supplied by longtime fellow VSSC [Vedanta Society of Southern California], devotee [Edith Tipple](#).

¹⁸ *The History of VSSC 1899-2009*, Gordon Stavig.

¹⁹ Isherwood, *My Guru*, 107

And:

The shrine is always with us. As long as some contact is maintained with it, all is simple and possible. As soon as contact is broken, all is horrible, tense, confused.²⁰

From his *Diaries*:

Concentration there is a lot easier. The atmosphere is extraordinarily calming, and yet alive, not sleepy. ...in the shrine the air seems curiously alert. Sometimes it is as if the whole shrine room becomes your brain and is filled with thought.²¹

And decades later, February 21, 1971, he records:

I arrived early [to see Swami], so I went into the shrine room and sat up close in front of the shrine. I don't know when I did this last—not in years... I often try to imagine myself sitting alone in front of the shrine when I'm meditating ... at home.

It began working at once and without my making any effort. I kept reminding myself that it was before this shrine that Swami had had his visions and Sister used to see “the light”²² and George [Swami Krishnananda] had

been chanting for nearly 30 years. I exposed myself to it as though it were some kind of medical radiation and I were the patient... however just when I imagined myself to be open to it without any resistance... Swami was ready to see me. So I got up and left, telling myself that he is a human shrine, and therefore much more extraordinary, and that he contains relics too, his memories of Maharaj and the other disciples.²³

About performing the ritual worship Isherwood writes:

The [performance of the] worship is very helpful...nearly always, I at least managed to get a great awareness of responsibility. Here am I, with all my karma upon me, presenting myself before the

²⁰ Ibid. 147

²¹ Diaries, Vol. I, 122.

²² We have heard a few variations of the story, but the gist of it is that people were commenting on how long it was taking Sister to complete her pranams (bowing) at the shrine. She responded that sometimes it took her a while to see “the Light.” John Yale writes of her, “Sister Lalita ... was one of the three Mead sisters in whose South Pasadena home Swamiji [Swami Vivekananda] had stayed in the winter of 1900 when he was lecturing in Southern California. Through her assistance the Vedanta Society in neighboring Hollywood was founded thirty years later. In her summer home there at 1946 Ivar Avenue (now Vedanta Place) the lectures were originally given and Swami Prabhavananda housed. And later Sister surrendered her beloved flower garden on the adjoining plot of land for its site, when it became possible to build the Temple in 1938. Sister died in 1949 ... I saw her several times: a small, elderly lady, often dressed in old-fashioned lavender, with a white knitted shawl, serenely moving about the premises. It is said she talked often of Swami Vivekananda and that he came to her in vision when she died ... Swami Prabhavananda, whenever he talked of Sister, called her a saint.”

²³ Isherwood, *My Guru*, 301.

unthinkable majesty of what is enthroned in the shrine. "I'm sorry, sir. I'm the only one they could send today."

Offering the prayers and mudras, the flowers and lights and incense, I am representing everybody I have ever known and all my unknown human brothers and sisters.

...my diary doesn't mention what was, for me, the most important quality of the worship; it was the best of all aids to concentration. While performing the various acts of the ritual, you are obliged to keep your mind on what you are saying and doing. Thus you could scarcely avoid thinking about God almost continuously for about an hour and a half. Under any other circumstances, my span of concentration would have been one and a half minutes.²⁴

Isherwood also had great reverence for the Relics, as is seen in his 1971 reminiscence above.²⁵ Although he rarely attended pujas,²⁶ saying they were not his thing, he often came later on puja days for the Arati (Vesper service around dusk). On these special occasions only, the relics would be brought out on a small tray and those present who wanted to would go into the shrine to have the relics touched to their heads. Isherwood writes in 1972:

Being touched by the relics raises a tricky question of protocol, if Don [who is also an initiated disciple of Prabhavananda] and I are both present. Since I am one of the oldest householder devotees ... [I am called] up into the shrine room immediately after the ... monastics ... Thus I save maybe as much as twenty minutes hanging around, waiting my turn... But this time saving is of no use if I have to wait for Don, so I've persuaded him to follow right in my footsteps, just as married couples... It must seem to anti-homosexuals that our relationship is thus receiving a sort of sanction by the Vedanta Society. But I refuse to be embarrassed.²⁷

At Swami Vivekananda's puja breakfast in 1945, Swami allowed Isherwood to read the *Katha Upanishad* aloud for what he believes was the first time. He describes it as such:

Sister [Lalita] would bring coffee, bacon, and eggs on a tray into the shrine room. She would pour the coffee and later would light a cigarette, leaving it to burn itself out in an ashtray. Meanwhile, the *Katha Upanishad* would be read aloud, because that had been his favorite scripture. What gave this ceremony its special feeling of intimacy and personal contact was the fact that Sister actually had served breakfast to Vivekananda in her own home, while he was visiting California at the beginning of the century.

²⁴ Ibid. 121-122.

²⁵ A personal example of Isherwood's respect for the relics (AM): One quiet weekday morning, I stumbled into a remarkable scene. Swamis Prabhavananda and Chetanananda unexpectedly came to the inner shrine and took out all the relics for Swami Prabhavananda to identify. There were very few people there as the operation was kept under wraps. A few days later, we drove Chris to Santa Barbara to lecture on Swami's behalf, and I told him about lucking into the incident. To my shock and surprise, Chris seemed genuinely impressed. He said that he had visited Swami later that day and that Swami was still in an elevated mood from the experience. When we arrived at the Santa Barbara Temple, we were met by a senior nun. The first thing Chris said was that this girl (indicating me) was present when Swami identified the relics!

²⁶ In this context, the celebration of a certain divine personality, e.g. Ramakrishna on his birthday, or aspect of God, e.g. Durga.

²⁷ Isherwood, *My Guru*, 307.

In later years, this became my only opportunity to take an active part in ritual worship at the Center, and I nearly always did the reading if I was in Los Angeles.²⁸

He writes of the mantra very near the conclusion of *My Guru*, after Swami has passed away: "It is when I am saying my mantram that I very occasionally feel I am in communication with him [Swami]. The mantram was a gift of his love, and love is communication. The mantram is all I have of him and all I need."²⁹

The Struggle

Isherwood's life as a monk was a struggle. He was drawn away, toward the world and his identity and future as a fiction writer. He had done very little fiction writing since having come to the U.S. He admits that the reason he never requested a spiritual name from Swami was because "Christopher Isherwood" was his literary identity and he was unwilling to abandon it. He also took occasional sabbaticals to Santa Monica that he characterized as "backsliding."

At a time when Chris was thinking of leaving the monastery permanently, he went to Swami to confess his difficulties. Swami said:

"Now that you have come to Ramakrishna you will be taken care of ... I promise you that. Even if you eat mud, you will be all right... I don't want you to leave here, Chris. I want you to stay with me as long as I'm alive. I think you'd be all right. Even if you left here... I think you have the makings of a saint."

I laughed. I was really staggered. "No," said Swami, "I mean it, you have devotion. You have the driving power. You are sincere. What else is there?"

In February 1945 *Time Magazine* wrote an article praising the Gita translation, calling it "a distinguished literary work." However, the Time reporter focused much of the article on Isherwood himself, including a popular speculation concerning [The Razor's Edge](#). John Yale (who we will introduce in more detail soon) writes:

In the mid 1940's a rumor became widespread which served to focus attention upon the possible pertinence of Indian mysticism to Westerners. It was known that Christopher Isherwood was living or had lived in a Hindu ashrama in Hollywood as the disciple of an Indian swami; and Maugham, who was a friend of Isherwood's, had just published a novel about a westerner who had become a Vedanta adept. Surely, then, Isherwood must be the prototype of Larry? It is strange that such an idea could take hold, since it is difficult to imagine two individuals more dissimilar than Maugham's Illinois-born hero and the British writer. However the rumor persisted, and it was circulated by *Time* magazine. This called forth an interesting response from Isherwood, printed in *Time's* December 17, 1945, issue: ". . . I am not, as you have twice stated in your columns, the original, or part-original, of Larry in Maugham's *The Razor's Edge*. I can stand a good deal of kidding from my friends, but this rumor has poisoned my life for the past six months, and I wish it would die as quickly as possible."

It should be mentioned that both Swami Prabhavananda and Chris contributed advice to Maugham on the writing of the novel as well as a subsequent screenplay written by Maugham (the Maugham screenplay was later abandoned by the film's director, [George Cukor](#)) and also had input on the resulting film itself, most

²⁸ Ibid. 181.

²⁹ Ibid. 336.

comically in giving acting advice to [Tyrone Power](#) for [spoiler alert!] The Enlightenment Scene. To take liberties with the old theater saying: Dying is easy; samadhi is hard.³⁰

Later that year, 1945, Isherwood took a job at Warner Brothers Studios. He writes, “Up to that point, I was a monastic, despite my backslidings. Now I became a screenwriter who happened to be living in a monastery.”³¹ Isherwood left the monastery later that year.

When I asked myself, shouldn’t I have left the Center much sooner than I did, I find that I can’t say yes. It now seems to me that my humiliation and my guilt feelings were unimportant. By staying on, I was getting that much more exposure to Swami, which was all that mattered. Every day I spent near him was a day gained. And that I had lost the respect of many outside observers was, on the whole, good — or at least it was a thousand times better than if I had fooled anybody into thinking me holy.³²

[Swami Vidyatmananda](#)



John Yale, later
Prema, and then
Sw. Vidyatmananda
Copyright [Vedanta
Society of Southern
California](#) All rights
reserved. Collection of
[The Vedanta Archives](#)

At this point, we’ll take a brief detour to introduce another valuable source that converges with Isherwood’s own narrative. It is [The Making of a Devotee](#)³³, the memoir of John Yale, later Prema Chaitanya, and ultimately Swami Vidyatmananda (for simplicity, we will refer to him as John Yale unless context dictates otherwise). He also wrote [A Yankee and the Swamis](#). The two men were very close³⁴ and worked together on literary projects for the Society for years, Yale being the longtime editor of the Society’s publication *Vedanta and the West*. After establishing that he regarded Isherwood’s success in the world as a manifestation of the Shakti power, Yale describes his impressions:

I first met Chris in the spring of 1949 at the Vedanta Temple in Hollywood. Swami Prabhavananda gave weekly readings in the so-called Green House, which contained the church parlor. On this particular evening Chris was present. Swami asked Chris and me to fetch a few folding chairs from the Temple just across the walkway. My first impression was that he looked boyish, clean, and bright. He was very approachable...

Chris usually came to see Swami Prabhavananda about once a week—usually for dinner and the evening. He drove a Sunshine Talbot roadster in those days, and later a different make of small British car which never seemed to work properly. I believe he was rather poor at that time. He was always a welcome guest, as he was full of good humor and told amusing stories about personalities he knew in the film colony or encountered in the world of writers. His relationship with Swami Prabhavananda was respectful but very intimate. Whereas we were all rather standoffish with our guru, Chris was quite daring toward him, and Swami liked this.

From the first moment we met, I reacted agreeably to Chris’s charm. He gave me the immediate sensation that he liked me. He had the ability to make everyone he came in contact with feel easy in his

³⁰ The original saying, referring to acting: “Dying is easy, *comedy* is hard.”

³¹ Isherwood, *My Guru*, 185.

³² *Ibid.* 188.

³³ Since *The Making of a Devotee* is an online publication rather than a printed book, there are no page numbers to refer to. The book can, and *should*, be read online for free at <http://www.ramakrishna.de/vidyatmananda/index.php>. It contains fascinating stories and is a treasure trove for researchers.

³⁴ Katherine Bucknell in her Acknowledgements of *Diaries, Volume I*, writes: “I would like to thank...especially Swami Vidyatmananda who has generously read and commented on most of the material in this book.” (liii)

presence, that you held a privileged position in his estimation, that he found you interesting as a person. I believe he did sincerely find almost everyone interesting, and not merely as material for future books. Chris was intensely curious as to how human nature manifested itself in its multifarious fashions. I eventually came to see this as a sort of spiritual quality. Sri Ramakrishna said that the greatest manifestation of God is in man. Contemplating man, in all his diversity, with wonder and affection, is thus akin to divine worship. Chris surely worshipped at this shrine.

When I first knew him I sometimes wondered if Chris were not as much a performer as a writer. He had learned how to gain and maintain a place as a literary celebrity. He was audacious and something of an exhibitionist. He himself spoke of himself as an actor. He had figured out human beings well enough to know that, although they might protest, they rather liked being shocked. He held the public's attention for some sixty years and holds it still— perhaps more than ever.

[Since the writing of Yale's memoir, Isherwood's celebrity continues to grow. He is recognized for his writing, his early stance as a bold gay rights activist has made him an icon in the gay community, and his life itself has become an object of fascination. In recent years, two of his novels have been made into films, the very successful, critically acclaimed [A Single Man](#) and *Christopher and His Kind*; and he is also the co-subject of the documentary film, *Chris & Don: A Love Story*. Moreover, his Vedanta-related work has reached a widening audience within groups who admire him for his non-religious aspects but are curious about the man as a whole, i.e. if Vedanta was good by him, they want to know more. Yale goes on:]

...that audaciousness permitted Chris to be a courageous defender of truth as he saw it, who often used the celebrity he enjoyed to promote the rights of the then discriminated against minority, the homosexual. He was candid about himself as belonging to that minority and fiercely championed equal rights for its members.

There was in Chris the devoted disciple, who maintained an intense loyalty to his guru, and a readiness, during the guru's life and after his death, to further his guru's objectives. Through books, articles, and speeches Chris did much to inform the public about Vedanta.

Chris would make his weekly appearance of an hour or so and all would turn gala. Prabhavananda would become joyous and there would be an atmosphere of fête. In these moments I resented him as someone who would eat his cake and have it too, for he seemed to manage to be sincerely devotional and happily worldly at the same time. This stance puzzled me and confused some of his other admirers.³⁵

Then there was the revealer and the self-revealer, who in telling so much about himself, made us understand much about ourselves. In revealing so openly his weaknesses, his moods, the troubles he had with his ego and his sensual nature, his occasional feelings of slothfulness and discouragement, we were permitted to see deep into another human being. We, all of us, had those same feelings too, but wouldn't face them. It was refreshing to find someone who did. Chris's candor drew us close to him, and taught us to deal gently with the same tendencies in ourselves.

³⁵ John Yale also wrote in *The Making of a Devotee*: "It has been a problem to me how anybody could be as close a devotee as Chris was and at the same time concern himself so much in his work with sex. Once I voiced this puzzlement to Swami Prabhavananda. He stared at me as though I had uttered a blasphemy, then pronounced these words with incredible power: 'Premā, remember this: always love Chris.'"

Swami Prabhavananda said of him that he was the most intelligent of all his disciples.³⁶

Let's also cite Isherwood's initial reaction to Yale and his assumptions about what Yale must have thought of him. Isherwood wrote:



John Yale doing dishes in the Hollywood kitchen
Copyright [Vedanta Society of Southern California](#)
All rights reserved, Collection of
[The Vedanta Archives](#)

I often thought that, if Prema and I had arrived at the Center at the same time and begun our monastic life together, we might have been a real support to each other. Certainly we had much in common. We had both revolted against the moral precepts of our upbringing. We both had severe standards of efficiency and were apt to be impatient of the sloppy and the slapdash. We both suffered from self-will and the rage it engenders.

...The Chris whom Prema met must have been a disappointment to him... I had become a worldling, no longer subject to monastic discipline. My visits to Swami were like those of a Prodigal Son who returns home again and again, without the least intention of staying, and is always uncritically welcomed by a Father who scolds every other member of the family for the smallest backsliding. I know that Prema was drawn to me, as I was to him, but I must have seemed a creature of self-indulgence and self-advertisement, with the easy modesty of the sufficiently flattered and a religion which was like a hedged bet on

both worlds. Prema often envied me and sometimes hated me. He confessed this with touching frankness.³⁷

Other Vedanta Literary Contributions: Shankara's [Vivekachudamani](#) & Patanjali's [Yoga Aphorisms](#)



Christopher Isherwood & Swami Prabhavananda
Copyright [Vedanta Society of Southern California](#) All rights reserved, Collection of The [Vedanta Archives](#)

The next collaboration with Swami Prabhavananda was Shankara's *Vivekachudamani* (Crest Jewel of Discrimination). Isherwood wrote that from a literary point of view, this was a simpler task than the Gita translation since it was written in a single style. He described his attitude toward his role in the process as such:

...it was easy to tell myself that I was unworthy of my task. Puritanism tempted the ego to assert itself in the role of Outcast Sinner, just when I should have been ignoring it completely. This wasn't a question of being worthy or unworthy but of having the necessary literary skill. I had it, so what was there to worry about? It is arguable that...a spiritual teacher may lose credibility because his way of

³⁶ Swami had also said of Aldous Huxley at the 50th Anniversary Father Day's Celebration, with Chris sitting next to him, that Huxley had had the most brilliant mind he had ever encountered. Huxley had already passed away. It's interesting to ponder the distinction between a brilliant mind and intelligence, particularly in light of the kind of disciple each became.

³⁷ Isherwood, *My Guru*, 215-216

life contradicts what he teaches. But here it was Shankara, the impeccable, who was doing the teaching; I was merely his scribe.³⁸

After the *Crest Jewel* collaboration, Chris and Swami worked on Patanjali's *Yoga Aphorisms, How to Know God*. Literarily speaking, this was an altogether different challenge than either the *Gita* or *Crest Jewel*. The structure of sutras is by nature very terse, minimalist really, *requiring* commentary. As Isherwood writes: "Comment inspires comment...I found myself writing for an audience of my own, those of my friends who knew almost nothing about Vedanta and needed to have Patanjali explained to them in Occidental terms. I had the support of Swami's approval...When I typed out the title page of Patanjali I wrote 'by Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood,' and Swami said 'Why put and, Chris? It separates us.'"³⁹

Ramakrishna and His Disciples

The next project was *Ramakrishna and His Disciples*. Here is John Yale's firsthand account of the process:

Swami Prabhavananda had always hoped to inspire Chris to write the life of Sri Ramakrishna. Swami said that realizing this project was to be the culminating accomplishment of his life. There existed at that time in English only the official life, published in India, and the English translation of [Romain Rolland](#)'s biography *Prophets of the New India*. Chris began at last around 1957 and finished the book in 1964. As usual he wrote neatly, systematically, turning out chapter after chapter, which he brought to the Green House living room on his weekly visits, to read to the devotees. He invited and accepted their criticisms graciously. The entire text was submitted chapter by chapter to the then General Secretary in India, Swami Madhavananda, who often made corrections of fact and even of language. The latter type of correction sometimes made Chris smart, but generally he accepted suggested changes humbly or occasionally worked out compromises.

The major source of facts concerning Ramakrishna is a huge Bengali book called "Sri Sri Ramakrishna Lilaprasanga" or [Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master](#).⁴⁰ Written by a direct disciple of Ramakrishna, [Swami Saradananda](#), who was himself a realized soul, the book is a storehouse of fascinating detail about a divine incarnation. But, being a compilation of souvenirs and comments set down at different times, devoid of any all-over scheme, *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master* contains much overlapping and backtracking... Chris took the pains to make a précis of the whole book, so as to put the material in usable chronological order.

Ramakrishna and His Disciples was published in 1965, in an American, an English, and an Indian edition. ... The book was at first not a major success and even went out of print for some time except for the Indian edition. But by the mid-1980's it began to gain popularity. Once I asked Chris if he had discussed frankly with Swami Prabhavananda his own opinion of the book. Chris replied, "No, I haven't, for I feel it is not a great book. Certainly not the book I would have written if left alone."⁴¹

³⁸ Ibid. 192

³⁹ The book was ultimately published with an "and" between their names.

⁴⁰ Since the writing of this memoir, [Swami Chetanananda](#) also did a translation entitled [Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play](#).

⁴¹ Of course, his movie work was also subject to interference by the studio executives.

Isherwood describes a few behind-the-scenes incidents that happened along the way during the seven year writing process. In January of 1953, he was staying at the Trabuco Monastery to get away and write a novel, as he put it, to wage “a sheer frontal attack on a laziness block so gross and solid that it seemed sentient and malevolent...” He was under great stress feeling that his future as a writer was at stake. He uncharacteristically launched a petitionary prayer at Sri Ramakrishna in the shrine, “‘If it’s your will that I finish this thing, then help me.’...My prayer could have been better phrased as follows: ‘Don’t let me feel guilty about trying to write this novel. Either convince me that I must drop it altogether, or else take away my writer’s block, so I can finish my book quickly and get started on yours.’”⁴² His prayer was answered. He was able to complete the book, which he describes as “my worst novel: *The World in the Evening*.” However, the deal with Sri Ramakrishna was struck.

In 1957, Chris had a very vivid dream of Swami Brahmananda, the spiritual son of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Prabhavananda’s guru, in which Brahmananda blessed him. Swami interpreted this dream to mean that Chris was the right person to write Sri Ramakrishna’s biography. Chris commented, “How like Swami that was! When he had set his heart on something, it had to have the Lord’s blessing.”⁴³

The Writer & Vedanta

Writing also is concerned with human beings and the greatness of any individual writer depends to a large extent on the degree of compassion which he can feel toward human beings.⁴⁴

We see at this point that there was an uneasy tension between the sacred and the profane in Isherwood’s body of work; each existed in a separate compartment. Isherwood commented at length on writing in general and the challenge of harmonizing the two, most notably in his essay and lecture, [The Writer & Vedanta](#), given at the Hollywood Temple, as well as a years’ long pursuit during the 1960s capsulized in the essay *The Problem of the Religious Novel*.⁴⁵

Briefly, Isherwood’s outline of the challenges of writing a religious novel are:

First, the character who becomes a saint must be established as being just like anyone else. Only because of this can the reader believe that he too can succeed and be inspired to try.

Next, the character’s “conversion” must be portrayed. Isherwood notes that visions don’t work well, particularly at the early stages of the novel, because they don’t show the mental process—“dramatically they are a form of cheating.” Isherwood often refers to the conversion of Father Zossima in Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* as arguably the finest example of spiritual unfoldment in literature.

Now why is the saint so fascinating? Isherwood writes:

...every writer of dramatic fiction... is eager to find characters who will exhibit the maximum variety of reaction to external events. The saint is preeminently such a character. Because his motives are not dictated by fear, vanity, or desire—because his every action is a genuine act of free will—you never can predict what he will do next...therefore he is the most interesting person to write about.

⁴² Isherwood, *My Guru*, 207-208

⁴³ Ibid. 231

⁴⁴ Isherwood, *The Wishing Tree*, 158

⁴⁵ Both can be found in [The Wishing Tree](#), a collection of Isherwood’s essays on Mystical Religion. There is a full lecture audio CD of [The Writer & Vedanta](#).

The most interesting and the most difficult. For, in attempting to present such a character to his audience of average men and women the writer cannot rely at all on that factor of familiarity, of self-recognition, which assists him so powerfully when he is describing average people, recognizable social types. He cannot expect his audience to come halfway to meet him, exclaiming, "Why, that's just like Mr. Jones!" The saint, considered as an end product, resembles Mr. Jones as he resembles a giraffe. And yet Mr. Jones and Mr. Smith, and Mr. Brown are all potentially saints. This is what the author has somehow to prove to his audience.

...prejudices have to be overcome. The public has its preconceived notions—a figure with a lean face and an air of weary patience, who alternates between moods of austerity and heartbroken sweetness—a creature set apart from this bad world, a living reproach to our weakness, in whose presence we feel ill at ease, inferior, and embarrassed.⁴⁶ In other words, the dreariest of bores.

We come to the last phase of the story, the portrait of the perfected saint. Here I am sure I should give up in despair. Nothing short of genius could succeed in such a task. For the mystical experience can never be described. It can only be written around, hinted at, dimly reflected in word and deed.

Isherwood concludes that a good religious novel could only be written by a saint, but "saints, unfortunately, are not in the habit of writing religious novels."

Regarding the biography of Sri Ramakrishna, Isherwood also points out that many parts of that narrative would have been unacceptable in a work of fiction because they are difficult to understand and accept as true. They could only be written as a statement of fact. And actually, many of the reviews of the book were savage and illustrate what Chris wrote about the writer needing to rely on the experience of the reader to meet him partway.⁴⁷

Isherwood characteristically favors the human aspect when evaluating the success of a religious novel. He is concerned with how the process manifests itself in the characters rather than with the abstract philosophical or even the superconscious realm. He writes, "I have never been able to grasp any idea except through a person. For me, Vedanta is primarily the Swami and Gerald [Heard]."⁴⁸ He felt that Aldous Huxley's *Time Must Have a Stop* was a reasonably successful religious novel; but in supporting this assertion, he mentions only the character of the mentor (guru figure) and his transforming effect upon the protagonist. However, he takes no notice of more transcendental sections like the following, in which one of the characters suddenly finds himself dead.⁴⁹

There was no pain any longer, no need to gasp for breath...All sound had died away, and it was quite dark. But, in the void and the silence there was still a kind of knowledge, a faint awareness.

Awareness of a name or person, not of things present, not of memories of the past, not even of here or there—for there was no place, only an existence whose single dimension was this knowledge of being ownerless and without possessions and alone.

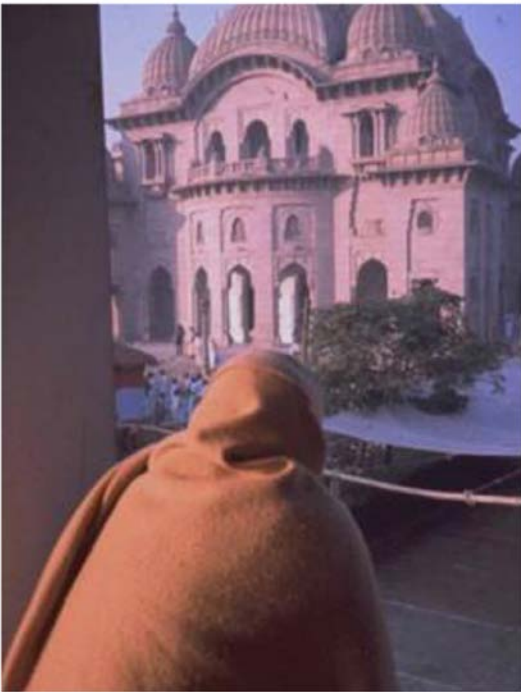
⁴⁶ There are striking similarities between his notion of the popular notion of a saint and the way Isherwood has described Gerald Heard.

⁴⁷ Details of the reviews can be read in *My Guru and His Disciple*, pp. 287-288.

⁴⁸ Isherwood, *Diaries*, Vol. 1, 228.

⁴⁹ The selection is reminiscent of Swami Brahmananda's "Light, more light, more light. Is there any end to it?"

...In the dark silence, in the void of all sensation, something began to know it. Very dimly at first, from immeasurably far away. But gradually the presence approached. The dimness of that other knowledge grew brighter. And suddenly the awareness had become an awareness of light...instead of privation there was this light... yes, there was joy in being known, in being thus included within a shining presence, in thus being interpenetrated by a shining presence... not privation, but bliss... and then as the light increased, hunger again for profounder satisfaction, for a bliss more intense... and through everlasting durations the light kept brightening from beauty into beauty. ...brighter, brighter through succeeding durations, that expanded at last into an eternity of joy. ...An eternity of radiant knowledge, of bliss unchanging in its ultimate intensity. For ever, for ever.⁵⁰



Swami Prabhavananda at Belur Math 1963
Copyright [Vedanta Society of Southern California](#)
All rights reserved, Collection of [The Vedanta Archives](#)

A Passage from India

At Swami Prabhavananda's persistent request, Isherwood accompanied Swami Prabhavananda, who was, as always, also accompanied by Swami Krishnananda, to India in December of 1963. Swami Vivekananda's 100th Birth Anniversary was being celebrated, culminating in a Parliament of Religions at which Chris was to speak. Chris had a meltdown. He had started self-medicating even ahead of the trip itself. We must acknowledge that this was a very stressful period in his life as the relationship between Chris and Don was in prolonged and agonizing upheaval.

John Yale was also in India at the time to take his vows of *sannyas*.⁵¹ Yale writes of this visit:

During sessions of the Parliament Chris gave several lively talks. One on Swami Vivekananda, another on his conception of and reverence for the guru. He was treated with the greatest respect, which meant, considering the circumstances, rendered adulation as a religious spokesman. ...To be treated as a religious leader was a situation intolerable to Chris's hatred of sham. What happened is recounted in the following entry from my [John Yale's] journal:

Friday, January 3, 1964. Belur Math. Chris was given a round-the-world air ticket to come here and speak at the Parliament of Religions. Yesterday he appeared, returned ahead of time from an excursion to Maharaj's village, which he had abandoned with the excuse that he was not feeling good. Privately he told me what had happened. Being on display, written up by newspapers, giving lectures, being supposedly a religious celebrity, he grew nauseated with the role... Said he'd never be placed in such a false position again. "...It is as though my serious work [which he assumed the monks had never read] must be considered to be done by a secret Mr. Hyde. I don't feel like that at all. Within my lights the novels I write are serious, expressing a kind of truth as I see it. Speaking on religion—which means being considered religious—puts me in a false position. I'll never do it again..."

⁵⁰ Aldous Huxley, *Time Must Have a Stop*, Harper & Brothers, 1944, pp 138-142.

⁵¹ The final monastic vows.

[In all fairness, we should mention that Swami Prabhavananda had also never read his fiction novels, “Swami was well aware I had written novels and that they had scenes in them which some people considered shocking. He had no intention of reading the novels...”⁵² a fact which didn’t seem to rile Isherwood; and we will see shortly that when Isherwood does ask Swami’s approval for a novel, Isherwood offers up the venture very meekly.] Yale continues:

Chris left India the same day we completed our vows, feeling, I think, that the experience had been a fiasco. But... things turned out otherwise. The idea for a new novel was born out of those few trying days at Belur Math. He told me that he felt this to be one of Sri Ramakrishna's little jokes, or perhaps his reward for having acceded to his guru's demand despite his own disinclination.

In fact, Isherwood got the idea for [*A Meeting by the River*](#) on the plane ride out of India. He writes: “I used to claim jokingly that it was then I first became aware that Vivekananda⁵³... had given me a charming thank you present, an idea for a novel... about Prema taking sannyas.”

Prema writes:

Chris remained till the day of our glory and rushed up to prostrate when we issued from the temple resplendent in gerrua, about 6:00 in the morning. Bless his heart...The beautiful gesture of Patrick prostrating before Oliver [in *Meeting*] is a fictionalized account of the true fact, Chris's salutation of me in that memorable dawn.

A Meeting by the River concerns two brothers. The elder, Patrick, is a successful man of the world and a devoted hedonist; the younger, Oliver, a monastic novice and candidate for sannyas. The two meet after a long separation at a Hindu monastery on the Ganges just as Oliver is about to pronounce his vows. As they meet, each is prepared to reject the point of view of the other, attitudes made more intense by the remnants of old sibling rivalries. This is how Chris expressed the work's inception in a letter he wrote me on March 15, 1964, as he was about to begin work:

... for many years I have been playing with the problem of a confrontation—two people who are like two halves of a larger person, and who represent diametrically opposite ways of life... one is in the world, the other has been rather mysteriously absent in India... I know I am not making it sound exactly thrilling, but I do smell something.

The “something” culminated in the long-sought synthesis, Isherwood’s first religious novel. Of the presentation to Swami, Isherwood writes:

May 31, 1966. Yesterday I finished my third and final draft of *A Meeting by the River*. I’ve always known that I would have to show it to Swami—since he will be held responsible for me if Belur Math takes offense at anything in the book... But the thought of Swami reading the homosexual scenes⁵⁴ makes me squirm inside. Why? I would never apologize for them, morally or artistically... Furthermore, Swami has praised me for being myself and making no pretenses about the way I live my life. Just the same, I squirm. Am taking him the manuscript tomorrow.

⁵² Isherwood, *My Guru*, 124.

⁵³ Even though both are immediate sources, Yale’s account of what Chris said to him: “he felt this to be one of Sri Ramakrishna’s little jokes...” and what Chris writes: “Vivekananda... had given me a charming thank you present.” We can only note the discrepancy and recognize that we should take all histories with caution.

⁵⁴ These scenes are more emotionally than physically graphic. They are actually prim, even by the literary standards of the time (1966).

June 3[, 1966] Swami rang up to say he'd finished my novel. "When I finished the last scene there were two tears running down my cheeks." What an angel he is! He was obviously every bit as relieved as I was... He even suggested it could be sold at our [Hollywood Temple] bookshop, but I felt that this was just his relief speaking.⁵⁵

Gore Vidal in a review written for *The New York Review of Books* classed *A Meeting by the River* as one of Chris's best. It was also produced as a play, which Chris said he preferred to the novel. Additionally, he and Don Bachardy co-wrote a draft of a screenplay; but the film was never made.

The Diaries

Isherwood's work as a diarist is of utmost interest. Several of his readers consider his journals his finest writing. He began when he was very young, at the age of 4 dictating diary entries to his mother, Kathleen, herself a devoted diarist. The journal was to become his stockpot; but just as importantly, it was the arena for analyzing his thoughts and feelings, the place where he would, as he put it, "discuss with myself." He sought to be assiduously honest, meticulously peeling the onion while we watch.

Sometimes in the course of the diaries, he criticizes others for traits he himself has demonstrated; but immediately, he will recognize the hypocrisy. Rather than cancelling the entire comment, as though the recognition has levelled out the criticism, he leaves the whole process exposed, for it's the self-revelation that's important. He incisively lays out the purpose and process of his diary writing in *Meeting by the River*, where the fictional character Oliver writes:

...At this point, I suddenly stopped. I felt, with a strange kind of panic, that I mustn't write another word. At first this feeling seemed justified and right and proper. I took it for the voice of conscience. I said to myself, keeping this diary has helped me so much, through the months I've been out here. It has got me over all kinds of negative moods and aversions. But never before today have I used it as an outlet for personal resentment. Isn't this terribly wrong and dangerous? But then it gradually dawned on me why it *really* was I was afraid to go on writing. I ... wasn't getting down to the truth. The truth is that I'm unspeakably humiliated and shocked to discover that *I*, who am supposed to be spiritually advanced to the level at which I can take sannyas, still feel these spasms of sheer hatred toward my own brother! *That* stabs my ego in the very heart of its vanity. It was already beginning to pose in its swami's robes and admire itself as a budding saint. Now it gets glimpses of its unchanged unregenerate vicious monkey-face, and it's shocked....It tries desperately not to look.

The monkey must be made to face its ugliness again and again. That's why I should keep on with this diary and even write it in more detail than usual ... being as frank as I can. It's absolutely necessary to bring everything out in the open at last...⁵⁶

In the diary entries he presents in *My Guru*, he had two primary antagonists. The first was his stubborn inner Puritan (surprise!), who in turn became the enemy of a lesser enemy: a self-confessed propensity for sloth. But his major nemesis was the ego. However, in doing battle with the ego, he was armed with more than his discipline of introspection. He had his guru.

As an example of combatting the ego through introspection, he wrote:

⁵⁵ Isherwood, *My Guru*, 289-290.

⁵⁶ Christopher Isherwood, *A Meeting by the River*, New Directions Publishing Corp, 1967, 34-35.

I think, however, that Swami was perhaps saying this to me as a gentle rebuke to my overindulgence in humility, in my relationship with him. He is fond of telling other people how humble I am about my literary reputation. But he must know perfectly well what my humility really is—the other half of my vanity.⁵⁷

Regarding Chris' humility⁵⁸, while he recognizes and freely confesses to humility as a conscious act, in the theatrical sense of the word, many who knew him or simply ran into him around town found this behavior so consistent and spontaneous as to indicate a genuine rather than assumed attitude.⁵⁹ Moreover, in reading his diaries, one rarely gets a sense of his status, either financial or professional, unless he's having difficulties, as though his successes don't seem to figure deeply in his self-image. For example, at the conclusion of his Quaker work in Pennsylvania, where he lived modestly in a spare bedroom of a suburban Quaker family and exhibited no grandness at any level, including his work assignments, he mentions that a friend concerned about his lack of literary output prodded him into writing something...anything. So Isherwood wrote a story and got it published in *The New Yorker*. For most writers, this would be a crowning achievement; but for Isherwood, it was easy pickings.

From "gentle rebuke," we go to surgical intervention—Swami's technique of subtle, often humorous, yet lethal ego puncture. Isherwood records:

Once fishing for a compliment, I asked Swami why he so seldom scolded me. He answered, "I don't scold for the big faults." He gave no sign of awareness that this statement had crushing implications.

I was so taken aback by it that I didn't question him further, either then or at any later time.⁶⁰

And then there's the nuclear option: The Scolding. It is important that this discipline is understood. Swami Prabhavananda, who frequently participated in all aspects of this procedure—getting, giving, and witnessing (remarkably difficult, even when it's not directed at you)—explains the phenomenon in *The Eternal Companion*, Swami Prabhavananda's biography of his guru, Swami Brahmananda:

Sri Ramakrishna himself often rebuked his most intimate disciples, and Maharaj [Swami Brahmananda] also used this method to train those who were near and dear to him. The chastening of a disciple never began, however, until after he had enjoyed several years of love and kind words. These experiences were painful at the time, but they were later treasured among the disciple's sweetest memories. It often happened that even while the disciple was being reproached by Maharaj, he would feel a strange undercurrent of joy. The indifference of Maharaj was the only thing we could not have borne; but Maharaj was never indifferent. The harsher his words, the more intensely we felt his interest

⁵⁷ Isherwood, *My Guru*, 328.

⁵⁸ An example of Isherwood's typical self-deprecating style, his introduction to the lecture *The Writer & Vedanta*, sound clip is here: <http://www.mondaymedia.org/WVIntro.mp3>

⁵⁹ A personal story by way of example: One of the last times I saw Chris, my friend Carol Cohn and I were passing through Santa Monica on our way to the funeral of a devotee who had died unexpectedly. We were stopped in traffic at a corner. I looked up, and there was Chris, standing on the curb, waiting for the light to change. Rather clownishly, I popped out of the passenger seat of the VW bug and told him that X had died and that we were on our way to the funeral (you never know, he may have wanted to hop in and come along); he was saying that yes he had heard; but I noticed that as we were speaking for those few seconds, he had stepped down from his superior position on the curb and onto the street level, literally into the gutter, with me. It struck me as a spontaneous and genuine gesture of modesty, particularly considering that the element of surprise and absurdity would have trumped the possibility of a deliberate pose on his part. The lights changed. I jumped back into the car, and we were off. (AM)

⁶⁰ Isherwood, *My Guru*, 164.

in our welfare. The very fact that he could speak to us in this way proved that we were his children, his own. Sometimes, a disciple would be reprov'd for quite insignificant reasons, or on grounds that seemed to him utterly unjust. But, as time passed, he would realize that there had been certain tendencies and karmas stored in his subconscious mind, and that Maharaj had seen them and was working to annihilate them before they could appear and become harmful. Thus, at the cost of a little unpleasantness, the disciple would be spared years of painful struggle and self-discipline.

...When Maharaj disciplined us, he gave us the power to bear it. We never reacted with resentment. We knew that whatever he did was for our own good.

...[Maharaj said] "The Mother holds the child on her lap and spans him; and the child cries: 'Mother, mother!'" Never before had I been so deeply aware of his love and protection...His words soothed my burning heart. Then he said: "Our love is so deep that we do not let you know how much we love you."⁶¹

Chris writes about the only time he was "bawled out" by Swami. However, as well as a first-hand description of a scolding, the entry also offers up a heaping helping of Isherwood's feelings of persecution at the hands of the nuns and the tragically "respectable" devotees. The incident began on June 16, 1974 at a Father's Day celebration. As usual, Chris was at Swami's side. Chris had misunderstood a story Swami was telling. Chris then asked what Swami considered an inappropriate question and another ridiculous one. Swami took umbrage on the spot. According to Chris, Swami called him on the phone the next morning to continue an intensified tirade. Chris records of the phone call in *My Guru*:

I asked him [Swami] to forgive me, and he laughed and said, "How should I not forgive you? You are my disciple and my child." "A very silly child," I said. "Oh, no, Chris, you are the most intelligent of all my children."⁶²

Right after our conversation was over, I felt that his scolding had truly been a blessing. {Enter Iago} But already, such is egotism, I am beginning to indulge in resentment, because I am certain that someone at the Center must have commented on my mistakes to Swami and thus put the idea of scolding me into his head...

While in *My Guru* he accuses "someone at the center" of manipulating Swami into taking offence, in *Volume 3*, he says he suspects "one of the nuns"⁶³ of putting the idea into Swami's head. It should be pointed out that during his time as a monk, Chris spoke highly of many of the convent members. It is curious that after describing the same reactions that Swami Prabhavananda had described in *The Eternal Companion*, e.g. "I felt that his scolding had truly been a blessing," Isherwood immediately reverses himself, "I am beginning to indulge in resentment," using the very same word Swami had used in his statement, "We never reacted with *resentment*" but in contradiction. Had he confessed his thought process but then plunged deeper, this would have been in keeping with Isherwood's practice of revealing the entire thought process; but in this case, he is unfortunately arrested at the resentment stage.

⁶¹ [*The Eternal Companion: BRAHMANANDA His Life and Teachings*](#), Swami Prabhavananda, Vedanta Press, Third Edition, 1970, 70-72.

⁶² The above is quoted from *My Guru*, pp 322-323, but the original diary entry (Vol. 3, p. 440) reads "you are the most intelligent of all my disciples."

⁶³ Isherwood's description of a nun in *A Single Man* (pp 58-59), while good-natured and set in a laugh out loud funny scene, the English class discussing Huxley's *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan*, sheds some light on his mindset regarding nuns: "...we, most of us, lose our sense of proportion in the presence of a nun; and George, thus exposed at short range to this bride of Christ in her uncompromising Medieval habit, finds himself becoming flustered, defensive. An unwilling conscript in Hell's legions, he faces the soldier of Heaven across the front line of an exceedingly polite cold war."

We will see how invaluable the diaries were in the creation of *My Guru & His Disciple*.

My Guru & His Disciple

“I don’t know what I think of *My Guru*. I can imagine really savage attacks on it and yet in a way I think it is the most worthwhile book I have written *and* probably one of the best modern books of its kind.”⁶⁴

Isherwood began the book just a few months after Swami’s death on July 4, 1976. He describes the process in his diaries:

September 22 [1976], I had meant to begin my memoir of Swami today, but that would be a compulsive gesture. What I will do, until I do actually begin, is to discuss the project with myself, here [the diary].

For example: I originally thought I would start with getting the news of Swami’s death by phone from Jim Gates at Gavin’s house in Tangier... but I feel that this approach would have a certain vulgarity. Because it would necessarily hit a note of drama... No, I should begin at the very beginning, quite undramatically. I should have to begin with Gerald Heard, and in fact, follow the line of my diary. I must be shown to have met Swami *through* Gerald—not merely in the sense that Gerald introduced me to him, but in the sense that Gerald presented him, Gerald’s image of him, to me. At first, I certainly saw Swami through Gerald’s eyes.

Another thing I realized is that I must read right through my diaries—all of them, down to the present day, in order to get an overview. By an overview, I mean a sense of how the relationship between these two people, Swami and me, developed and changed. In this way, I shall probably find out a great deal which I don’t know, am not aware of, yet. OK, good, that’s how I will begin.⁶⁵

My Guru is more than an excerpted condensation of the diaries. In some cases, it supplies information not mentioned in the diaries. For example, the *Diaries, Volume 1* version of Chris’s first appointment with Swami surprisingly does not include Chris “coming out” to Swami. In response to an enquiry about this as well as the general primness of *Volume I*, Katherine Bucknell, Isherwood scholar and the *Diaries*’ editor, replied, “He was well tuned in to the risks of putting on paper anything he wasn’t comfortable to have in the public realm.”

In later entries he continues:

Feb 1 [1977], I have just finished reading right through my diaries, from the beginning of 1939. There is still one gap I want to fill—never mind how inadequately; from Jan 1st 1976, until the next entry, on Aug 1st...

What is fatally missing from the diary as a result of this gap are any entries about our last few meetings with Swami. I shall also have to describe the two memorial services for him which I did attend⁶⁶... I hope Don will have some detail in his diary about this period.

Feb 18th [1977], On Feb 12th, the day after our return [from the “frozen North”], I formally made a start on my Swami memoir. (I tried doing the opening draft in pencil on Gerald Heard’s old writing board, and again it seemed to give forth some power—at least, I scribbled several pages.)... Perhaps the best thing about it [the book] will be its final passage, a description of me in old age and of what Swami

⁶⁴ Christopher Isherwood, *Diaries, Vol. 3, Liberation*, ed. Katherine Bucknell, Chatto & Windus, 2012, 627.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* 524-525.

⁶⁶ They do not appear in *My Guru*. Isherwood not only attended, but also spoke at the Memorials.

means to me now that he is dead and of how I view my approaching death and of the phenomenon of happiness near the end of life.⁶⁷

Who was his audience? Certainly his own mind. We've seen repeatedly that writing was the way he processed things intellectually and psychologically. A friend⁶⁸ and fellow devotee told Chris how much she enjoyed *My Guru*, how inspiring it was. He thanked her and then told her that he had not really written it for devotees but for the gay community, so that they would know that there was a religion, a place they could go, where their sexual orientation simply didn't matter. Although communication with the gay community was almost certainly an important factor, he makes no mention of it as such in the Diaries while he's composing the book. More likely, when responding to Carol, a woman devotee, he was in part indulging in one of his favorite past-times, playing "shock the squares" extra points if the square was also a devotee. But an incident related in *Volume 3* from December of 1975 (p.489) may explain his pique. In response to an article about him in *The Advocate* in which he mentioned Swami and Vedanta, he had heard that Abhaya (not a convent member as implied by the diary entry) "was terribly shocked. ...she was afraid that all the queers would start coming to the temple." And an incident after *My Guru* was published which also enforces his statement is worth mentioning. In response to a harsh criticism of the book, Isherwood despaired that perhaps it was only the gay community that would understand it.



Swami Prabhavananda in Santa Barbara Copyright [Vedanta Society of Southern California](#) All rights reserved, Collection of [The Vedanta Archives](#)

Toward the end of the project, Isherwood writes, "I fear...he [Swami] will have slipped out of my net."⁶⁹ In the beginning of the writing process, he wrote that he couldn't imagine two more dissimilar men than Swami and himself. However, as often happens with biographies, the character of Swami he did catch had a striking similarity to himself. Both were literary; both enjoyed people and were broad-minded in their appreciation of character; both had a sophisticated understanding of how people and the world worked; both were adventurous; both had a sharp sense of humor; both had a flair for the dramatic; both were teachers, mentors, and father figures.⁷⁰ But most importantly, both had tremendous guru bhakti.⁷¹

John Yale writes of *My Guru and His Disciple*:

Who but Chris would have been capable of revealing to a large public the intimate life of a mystic, rendering spiritual attainment convincing and beautiful? Who else but he, among all those who knew Swami Prabhavananda, took the pains to record, year in and year out, those revelations he heard from his guru which would show us, after he had departed, what was going on inside a man of God? ... Chris's memorial to Prabhavananda is a scientifically valid account of the religious impulse, the spiritual preference. And at the same time, so artistically done, in the tradition of great devotional literature. One critic called it the best book of devotion of this [the 20th] century.

⁶⁷ Isherwood, Diaries, Vol. 3, 536-538.

⁶⁸ Carol Cohn again.

⁶⁹ Ibid. 600.

⁷⁰ Sound Clip, Swami Prabhavananda's entire closing remarks to Chris' Hollywood Temple lecture [The Writer & Vedanta](#), sound clip link here: <http://www.mondaymedia.org/SPF.mp3>

⁷¹ John Yale wrote: "Swami often spoke of Chris's faith in his guru — Prabhavananda himself — as so utter that he himself envied faith of that magnitude."

What did Isherwood finally think of the book? [James P. White](#), a young writer whom Isherwood mentored and befriended recalls “Once, when he was speaking enthusiastically about *My Guru*, he said to me, ‘Jim, I never should have written a novel.’”⁷²

My Guru, Too—Begging to Differ

We are enthusiastic fans of *My Guru*; every reading is more rewarding than the last. However, when first reading it in 1980, the year it was published, we were surprised to find that some incidents Isherwood describes differ from our first-hand recollections. In some cases, Isherwood was not himself present, as he acknowledges about certain events in the latter stages of *My Guru*.

The first incident in question is on page 323. On June 23, 1974, Isherwood attended a Swami Prabhavananda Sunday morning lecture in Santa Barbara, which, at this stage in his life, was unusual for Chris. We find in the journals that Isherwood had a commitment in the area later that afternoon. Swami was going through a period of deteriorating health that made him more delicate in general. Isherwood reports that Swami was particularly unwell that day. He wore Western dress rather than his customary ochre robes because he was in danger of tripping on them. Isherwood writes about the event in question:

At the end [of the lecture], he blessed us all. Then he made a gesture toward the shrine—as if of acknowledgement—and said, “Who spoke through me.” It seemed perfectly obvious that he meant, “It was He who spoke through me.” But several people who talked to me later were puzzled. They had taken swami’s statement as a question, “Who spoke through me?”

Being present at the lecture, I⁷³ was surprised by Isherwood’s recreation. What I saw and heard was an exhausted and beleaguered Swami whose boundaries between planes had been systematically dissolving. It was a gray event. After the lecture, he got up from his chair and was starting to exit to the side room when he abruptly turned toward the shrine, pointing his finger at it, and said, “Who spoke *to* [not through] me?” It was a question, but also an accusation; the longtime Swami-in-charge was being in charge. He reacted as though he thought someone had spoken out of turn and needed to be corrected. He paused for a moment, collected himself, and exited the temple.

Eyewitness accounts often differ. But I was seated very near the front of the right-hand side, where Swami had been seated and spoke, and had the luxury of listening with 28 year-old ears. Moreover, Isherwood’s account doesn’t really make sense. It is full of assumptions and interpretations, e.g., “he made a gesture toward the shrine—as if of acknowledgement”; and most egregious, “It seemed perfectly obvious that he meant, ‘It was He who spoke through me.’” In short, Isherwood’s version relies on assumptions and a rephrasing of what he actually heard, literally putting words in Swami’s mouth, to come to his dubious conclusion.

The atmosphere at the lecture was sad, not beatific. Moreover, Swami did not characteristically broadcast mystical events, especially at venues open to the general public. His growing inability to contain them without show was a sign of the end approaching. Isherwood describes Swami as feeling unwell both before and after the lecture. In fact, to Isherwood’s disappointment, Swami wouldn’t see him after the lecture, as was the norm,

⁷² Ed. James J. Berg & Chris Freeman, *The Isherwood Century, Write It Down or It’s Lost, Isherwood as Mentor* by James P. White, The University of Wisconsin Press, 2000, 82.

⁷³ Anna Monday

because he just wasn't up to it.⁷⁴ And there is the fact as Isherwood writes, that others also thought it was a question.

The second such story is recorded on page 317. Chris was not present at the event but was told on October 11, 1973 by, among others, Swami Prabhavananda himself, about an event that took place at Durga Puja in the Santa Barbara Temple five days earlier, on October 6, 1973. The story, however, needs context. Swami Prabhavananda's health had become increasingly delicate as his spiritual sensitivity had become increasingly keen. His doctor told him that his heart couldn't withstand intense spiritual experiences, yet his soul was easily engaged.

The way Isherwood describes the Durga Puja event, Swami was offering a flower at the shrine toward the end of the worship and "was suddenly overwhelmed with emotion, realizing how gracious Mother had been to him. He burst into tears. Chetanananda had to help him into the little office room..." When Chetanananda mentioned Mother's grace to swami, "Swami began to cry again and couldn't stop for some time. He begged Chetanananda not to mention Mother's name to him again. When he regained control of himself, he went back into the temple and blessed the congregation, so they wouldn't think he was sick."

We were present. This is a very vivid memory. The incident was quite dramatic and, for many of us, frightening. We have spoken to some devotees who were present as well as to Swami Chetanananda, asking for their recollections. The *Rashomon* factor notwithstanding, here is what we experienced and have gleaned: Swami had been sitting in an armchair during the worship. After offering the flower, Swami was back in his chair. Swami suddenly groaned, and his head snapped back, lifeless. He had lost outer consciousness. To my eyes, Swami Chetanananda seemed agitated; he was firing orders at Krishnananda in Bengali, which signaled panic, as Krishna didn't speak Bengali. Swami Chetanananda helped Swami into the little side office. Swami was still in a mood and told Chetanananda not to mention Mother. Swami Chetanananda tells us that Narayan, a devotee and a doctor, came back there to check Swami. After a while, Swami left the temple through the office and was taken to his room. No one we spoke to remembers Swami coming back into the temple, although that may have happened. An hour or so later, the devotees were having lunch on the extensive grounds, and Swami Prabhavananda came out then, completely resurrected, and circulated among the devotees for quite some time, in part to show he was all right, looking very happy and well...glorious.



Other Work in Support of Vedanta

Another of Chris' regular Vedanta assignments was to play sidekick to Swami at the Wednesday night members-only Gospel readings. First, Chris read from the Gospel for half of the hour. The last half was a Q&A with Swami, first written questions, which Chris read, sometimes paraphrasing (sometimes missing the point in his paraphrase), and then congregants asked questions from the floor. In the last few years of Swami's life, his health became too delicate to continue the Gospel sessions; but Chris continued to support the event, reading for Swami Chetanananda, the then-assistant Swami. He made a sound recording of [readings from the Upanishads](#) and also sometimes filled the Sunday morning lecture slot in Swami Prabhavananda's absence, particularly in Santa Barbara, generally doing readings of Swami Vivekananda in keeping with the resolve he had made in India to no longer presume to lecture on God. However, there was a notable exception. He did deliver an original lecture on Girish Ghosh⁷⁵, whom he admired and whose story he identified with. Ghosh was

⁷⁴ He doesn't mention this last fact in *My Guru*, but does in *Diaries, Volume 3*, p. 442.

⁷⁵ Christopher Isherwood, [Girish Ghosh](#), Vedanta Press, Audio CD, 1975.

an acclaimed poet, playwright and impresario, as well as an unabashed libertine, who became an outstanding devotee of Sri Ramakrishna without first either reforming his ways or even pretending to. In a way, Isherwood and Prabhavananda were playing out a parallel dynamic, the love of the unflappable guru for the unrepentant sensualist disciple, in part to demonstrate what religion is not. As Isherwood wrote of the play between Sri Ramakrishna and Girish:

...what Ramakrishna profoundly understood and taught to us was that our so-called vices are, in fact, frustrated attempts to find the truth, or to find peace, or to find release from something...

...Ramakrishna broke down the conventional Puritanism, the outside layer, and thus broke down the standard of mere respectability and its opposite, which we impose on everything...

The whole point of the life of Girish is that he came right through this [his vices]. It was not so much to some kind of improvement in behavior, although that followed, nor to becoming a good boy, or anything of that sort. But he developed a deep devotion to Sri Ramakrishna, about which Swami Vivekananda said, "Nobody has devoted himself or abandoned his will so absolutely to that of the Master as has Girish." ⁷⁶

During this time, the early to mid-1970s, Isherwood also supported Swami Chetanananda's early English-language literary efforts. After Swami's death, while still being helpful, Chris came to the Temple much less frequently but continued to fill in occasionally on lecture days in Santa Barbara, was the reader for the Society's [Bhagavad Gita](#) recording and would sometimes visit the Trabuco Monastery. However, it seems from his diary entries from the 1970s onward that despite his love for Swami Prabhavananda, he never overcame his resentment toward religious organizations, which also may have played a large part in his difficulties in India as well as the spiritual isolation that was before him.

After Many a Summer, the Winter of His Discontent



Poster for 1973 TV miniseries *Frankenstein, the True Story*, co-written by Chris & Don

I was reading Chris's 1939-1941 journal on the balcony, and Chris came up from his study, still wearing his shabby, yellow terry cloth robe and feeling ill again. (He's been sickish for more than two weeks now.) He dragged himself to a sun couch and, with great preparations and groans, awkwardly laid down on his back facing me. Coldly, perfunctory, I asked him: "How do you feel?" He moaned and shook his head, vaguely indicating a few centers of pain. I told him, half-wanting to provoke him, what a deplorable character he had made of Gerald Heard in his journal, and that now I could never like Gerald again. "What does it really matter 'liking' people?" said Chris. "It's a matter of pure subjectivity." After a moment he continued: "When I was young I was famous for liking people and being liked, but it was only because I took trouble to flatter them—that was all." ...This irritated me, and as I sat looking down on Chris, I was revolted. He looked so old and felt so bad and talked so cynically that I hated him for a moment.

Don Bachardy, *A Life Open to Art*⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Isherwood, *The Wishing Tree, On Girish Ghosh*, 149-151.

⁷⁷ Ed. James J. Berg & Chris Freeman, *The Isherwood Century*, The University of Wisconsin Press, 2000, 95.

Don has expressed what many have felt upon encountering the latter stages of Volume 3 of *The Diaries*. The warm, diplomatic, gregarious Chris of the early Diaries, so open of heart and mind, who prayed to “extend toward all living beings that fascinated, unsentimental, loving and all-pardoning interest...” has been replaced by a frankly hateful and bigoted Chris in *Diaries, Volume 3*, which covers the 1970s. However, there have also been other periods of his life when his inner-workings have been monstrous to witness. One such was during his 1963 trip to India with Swami. And the above exchange with Don took place in 1956!⁷⁸ However, much of the time covered in the latter part of Volume 3 was an extended period of soaking in a vitriolic funk. We have not quoted examples because to give the full flavor of them would result in perpetuating cruelty and obscenity. The *Financial Times* nailed it when they wrote of Isherwood: “...assured and neurotic, fearless and fretful, generous and small-minded, forgiving and remorsefully judgmental.”

While he expressed a desire to free himself of this pettiness, which he described as “face-making,” facial expressions telegraphing either hatred or gloating, he doesn’t examine or attempt to eradicate the biases themselves, which encompassed not just individuals but whole groups of people, thereby entrenching those prejudices. Instead he merely attempts to sidestep the destructive emotions they evoke. “As long as I don’t relapse into face making, I can fill much of my time with japam—with the result that I feel calm, loving, nervously relaxed. My mind is far clearer than before, because it’s no longer dulled by the toxins of hatred. You might say, in fact, that ‘face-making’ is kind of anti-japam.”⁷⁹

The diary entries of this time period are skimpy from a spiritual vantage point. It is during this time that he is writing *My Guru*, but doesn’t refer to it all that often nor does he expose the toil of his mental probing, as he had in earlier diaries.

He often refers to depression, but we don’t know if it’s clinical or if he just means a bored sadness, the blues. The diary entries quickly become tedious. His usual pattern consists of complaining about “having” to go to a social engagement, going grudgingly, disliking the guests, being bored, therefore drinking too much, waking up depressed and hung over—only to do it all again. Both the introspection and precisely observed character studies that enliven earlier volumes of *The Diaries* are absent. We merely find out he dislikes someone famous...period! He has become, to use one of his favorite words, tiresome.

Ironically, his description of Gerald Heard in 1941 now fits Isherwood himself: “...a great deal of Gerald’s dislike of the atmosphere of the Vedanta center was an expression of his own very different temperament. He recoiled from the women ... because they were lively and vital and he was a life-hater. Although he could justify his attitude philosophically ... there was an extra sourness to his remarks that seemed merely dyspeptic.”⁸⁰ It also becomes obvious that Isherwood’s circle of associates is dwindling through infirmity and death.

Obviously feeling it necessary, writer and friend, [Edmund White](#), in his introduction to *Diaries, Volume 3, Liberation* opens with an apologia. Its first lines are:

⁷⁸ Although the entry is dated 13 May 1956 and an editorial note says that Isherwood’s version of these events can be read in *Diaries* Vol. 1, pp 618-25, we found no mention of the scene there. However, if the timing is correct, Chris ended up in the hospital for an extended stay a day or two later with hepatitis.

⁷⁹ Isherwood, *Diaries*, Vol. 3, 646.

⁸⁰ Isherwood, *My Guru*, 76. This has a double irony, not only was the scene described by Don at the opening of this section triggered by Chris’s appraisal of Heard at exactly this time period, but also Swami Prabhavananda repeatedly taught never to criticize others because those faults that you see are also your own, if not now, then in the future.

Readers of novels often fall into the bad habit of being overly exacting about the characters' moral flaws. They apply to these fictional beings standards that no one they know in real life could possibly meet—nor could they themselves.

He goes on:

I mention all this because reading ... Isherwood's complete journals is an instructive corrective to the prissiness of reading fiction. Isherwood, whom most of us would consider saintly if we knew him personally, had faults that were unforgiveable in a novel (he was careful to distance himself from these very faults in his autobiographical fiction). ...

Oh, yes, he's full of faults and yet I think any fair-minded reader ... will have to admit that he or she has seldom spent so much time with someone so generally admirable. To say so in no way mitigates the obnoxiousness of his real faults. But we should forgive him with the same liberality we apply to ourselves and our friends.

Isherwood clings to his work, always involved in one or two projects at a time with more on the back burner and several declarations of commitment to getting back to diary writing, which he also considered an important part of his writing work, particularly since objectively he appreciates that he is going through the most interesting period of his life: old age approaching death. His aches and pains and medications increasingly figure into the narrative. He also writes very occasionally about his spiritual efforts. He adds midday japam to the morning and evening routine prescribed by Swami Prabhavananda. "I keep trying to get some contact with what is within the mantra—my only resource and safety. Consciously, I very seldom do get it, but I guess the effort is a sign of contact anyway. And then, occasionally, these sudden tears of joy."⁸¹ In addition to his diary, he kept a Commonplace Book in which he wrote by hand excerpts of things he was reading, primarily spiritual or philosophical, but also song lyrics, writings on psychology, and even newspaper entries.

Knowing these diaries would almost certainly be read one day, did Isherwood overshare? He took care that they not be read until some of the people mentioned in them had died. An incident from 1978 illustrates the dilemma of leaving a physical record that is written with the brutal candor necessary to make the journals effective. He and Don had an argument because Chris was upset to find Don reading from a diary Chris had left sitting open on his desk while working on *My Guru*. Don took exception to Chris's tone. Chris writes:

I carefully explained to him what is the truth, that I was afraid he might find some slighting reference to himself—there are several in all those early diaries—and not be able to forget it. And I reminded him of that travel diary of his...which he let me see...it contained a most wounding outburst against the misery of our relationship...and his longing to be free of it. I have never forgotten how much I minded, when I read it—even though I realized that he had written it in a violent, black, hysterical mood, and that I was capable of writing something similar...I had said I didn't want him to read my diaries until after my death. But I amended this, saying that he could read them any time provided he would read right through, not just dip into them and thus take statements out of context.⁸²

⁸¹ Isherwood, *Diaries*, Volume 3, 673.

⁸² Isherwood, *Diaries*, Vol. 3, 600.

As for this candor, two forces converged in Isherwood's life that demanded scrupulous honesty at all costs. The first is the artistic process itself, a work of art's power emanating from its truthfulness; the second and later input is Swami's instruction:

When Swami used to teach me that purity is telling the truth I used to think that this was, if anything, a rather convenient belief for me to have, because it meant that I didn't have to be pure but only to refrain from lying about my impurity. Well, that's the minimum or negative interpretation. But, thinking about it in relation to Ramakrishna, I saw this: that the greatness of Ramakrishna is not expressed by the fact that he was under all circumstances "pure." No. And even if he was pure, that didn't mean he wasn't capable of anything. You always feel that about him—there was nothing that he might not have done—except one thing—tell a lie.⁸³

We see in the above statement two important themes, first, the definition of purity. There's an intriguing incongruity in Isherwood's statement which, being as sensitive to words as he was, Isherwood must have been aware of. He first introduces Swami's definition of "purity" as truth-telling but then immediately reverts to talk about "purity" in the sense of his previous Puritanical understanding. He writes about a parallel situation in his essay *On Girish Ghosh* "The danger of not being respectable is that you have to boast about it. ...This was all very well, but it didn't prove anything except that he had accepted the miserable puritanical standards instead of looking at them the way Ramakrishna did, and as he gradually learned to."⁸⁴

The second theme is the irreducible sanctity of truth. Sri Ramakrishna himself encapsulates both issues in one famous prayer. Sri Ramakrishna is speaking:

It is said that truthfulness alone constitutes the spiritual discipline of the Kaliyuga [present age]. If a man clings tenaciously to truth he ultimately realizes God. ...After my vision of the Divine Mother, I prayed to Her, taking a flower in my hands: "Mother, here is Thy knowledge and here is Thy ignorance. Take them both, and give me only pure love. Here is Thy holiness and here is Thy unholiness. Take them both, Mother, and give me only pure love. Here is Thy good and here is Thy evil. Take them both, Mother, and give me only pure love. Here is Thy righteousness and here is Thy unrighteousness. Take them both, Mother, and give me only pure love."⁸⁵ I mentioned all these, but I could not say: "Mother, here is Thy truth and here is Thy falsehood. Take them both." I gave up everything at Her feet but could not bring myself to give up truth.⁸⁶

The End

Then suddenly, toward the end of this dark phase of life, the poetry is back. Isherwood writes movingly, yet with the objectivity characteristic of the Chris of earlier diaries:

August 2, 1981 "Being sick, in the way I've been for the past few weeks, means that you experience the life journey as conscious effort. Instead of spinning along the road almost without effort, as if on a

⁸³ Isherwood, *Diaries Vol. 2*, 231. This passage is pointed out by Christopher Hitchens in his preface to Volume 2. The context for the statement is very interesting, worth a read.

⁸⁴ Isherwood, *The Wishing Tree, On Girish Ghosh*, 151.

⁸⁵ For purposes of complete context, we quote from M's *Gospel*, translated by Swami Nikhilananda; but the translation Chris would have been more familiar with is Swami Prabhavananda's: "O Mother, here is sin and here is virtue; take them both and grant me pure love for thee. Here is knowledge and here is ignorance; I lay them at thy feet. Grant me pure love for thee. Here is purity and here is impurity; take them both and grant me pure love for thee. Here are good works and here are evil works; I lay them at thy feet. Grant me pure love for thee."

⁸⁶ M, *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, 312.

bicycle, you feel like a character from *The Grapes of Wrath*, coaxing your broken-down, rattling, overheated Ford to keep going, mile after mile—hardly even expecting to reach ‘California’ ever.

“This is old age. And I must say I’m well aware that—despite all my complaints—I know I’m traveling deluxe. There is more love in this house now than there ever has been before. And, in a strange way, I feel Don’s love and Swami’s love as two combined forces, not always distinct from each other. I’m not expressing this properly, but my sense of it is powerful. Thinking about this love as I was walking in the park before breakfast today, my eyes streamed with tears of joy. And, oh, the beauty of the breakers on the shore! My lifelong urge has been to plunge into them, but I don’t really care if I never do it again, because the weakness of the body is a merciful self-adjustment.”⁸⁷

With only one intervening diary entry from the August 2, 1981 entry just quoted, Isherwood writes:

October 16, 1981, Well, the moment has come when I must recognize and discuss the situation with myself, which means, as usual, writing it down and looking at it in black and white. I have got some sort of malignancy, a tumor, and that’s what’s behind all this pain...we shall enter the cancer-recognition phase and its gradual retreat to the terminal. I shall get used to the idea, subject to fits of blind panic... before all, there will be the need to accept what is going to happen. My goodness—at my age, should that be so difficult? No, it shouldn’t be. Yes, but it will be.

Don is heroic, heartbreaking in his devotion. He keeps me off the pain pills as much as possible... But this isn’t a problem of how to bear the pain... What I have to face is dying.

...I pray and pray to Swami—to show himself to me—no matter how.

I feel that I wish I could talk to Krishna [George], or someone from the center who was really close to Swami. But to do this is a huge psychological effort, and it might not be a success. I get fits of being very, very scared.

The love between me and Don has never been stronger, and it is heartbreakingly intimate. Every night he goes to sleep holding the old dying creature in his arms.⁸⁸

I pray hard to swami, asking him to make me feel his presence, “now and in the hour of our death.” The response I get from this is surprisingly strong. I’m moved to tears of joy and love. I pray for Darling [Don] also, seeing the two of us kneeling together in his presence. Religion is about nothing but love.⁸⁹

...my strength should be devoted to constant acts of recollection of Swami, his presence and his grace.⁹⁰

This endgame is characterized by internal upheavals, episodic death-fears, and depressions; but also Chris and Don’s lives have settled in. They stay home more and more and their relationship is loving, caring, spiritually uplifting. The last diary entry is dated July 4, 1983. Isherwood begins the entry with “Yes, it’s that certain day.” He may have meant the anniversary of Swami Prabhavananda’s death (July 4, 1976). There is nothing to indicate that this will be his final entry. He would not die for another 2½ years. The dying process was laborious, painful, accompanied by an atrophying of both his physical and intellectual powers. Beside the

⁸⁷ Isherwood, *Diaries* Vol. 3, 678.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* 679-680.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* 681.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* 682.

inherent pain of the disease and the effects of medication, he suffered both chemotherapy and radiation treatment.

From this point we have to look to accounts other than Isherwood's own for information. We find the personal reminiscences of James P. White, a young writer whom Isherwood mentored:

We seldom spoke of philosophy or spirituality.

A few weeks before he died ... we sat on the terrace overlooking the Pacific. We had a long conversation in which he spoke of his mother, Don, Auden, [E.M.] Forster, and others. Then I realized that he was about to cry. Chris was always strong, stoic... His tears were completely out of character. I got up out of my chair and went to him and awkwardly put my arms around his shoulders. "The people that I've known, they've touched me," he said, "They've *touched* me."

...he was in extreme pain. During the last few dinner parties he gave, he would unexpectedly scream at any point, then act as if nothing had happened.

I visited him later, but he was in a comalike state, not sure of what was going on around him. His face was shrunk and had an ethereal look... I went in to say goodbye although he would not know me. I ... said, "Goodbye, Chris." He opened his eyes. "Hello," he said. "I'm leaving," I said. "I love you," he said and closed his eyes.⁹¹

Christopher Isherwood died January 4, 1986 at age of 81. Like Gerald Heard, he had donated his body to the UCLA Medical School.

As is customary, we leave the final word to Sri Ramakrishna. He is addressing Girish Ghosh:

Master: ... (To Girish) "You utter many abusive and vulgar words; but it doesn't matter. It is better for these things to come out. There are some people who fall ill on account of blood poisoning; the more the poisoned blood finds an outlet, the better it is for them. At the time when the *uphadi*⁹² of a man is being destroyed, it makes a loud noise, as it were. Wood crackles when it burns; there is no more noise when the burning is over.

"You will be purer day by day...People will marvel at you."⁹³

Special Thanks to [The Vedanta Society of Southern California](#), [Vedanta Press](#), [The Vedanta Archives](#),
& to Christopher Isherwood for spelling it all out.

⁹¹Ed. James J. Berg & Chris Freeman, *The Isherwood Century, Write It Down or It's Lost, Isherwood as Mentor* by James P. White, The University of Wisconsin Press, 2000, 82-85

⁹² Upadhi: A term of the Vedanta philosophy denoting the limitations imposed upon the Self through ignorance, by which one is bound to worldly life. Glossary from *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda, Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 4th Printing, 1969, 1046-47

⁹³ Ibid. 741