

SWAMI PRABHAVANANDA



Left to right, Swami Prabhavananda, Aldous Huxley & Christopher Isherwood
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Swami Prabhavananda was an early pioneer of the Vedanta work in the West, establishing the Vedanta Society of Southern California from the ground up rather than inheriting an already established center. Although all the Ramakrishna-Vedanta centers are united under Belur Math in India, each has a unique character determined by the personality of the Head of Center and the community in which it is established.

Swami Prabhavananda had met Holy Mother (Sri Sarada Devi, the wife of Sri Ramakrishna) many times and had had close and affectionate association with many of the monastic disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. His own guru, Swami Brahmananda (often referred to as Maharaj), was the spiritual son of Sri Ramakrishna. Prabhavananda's devotion to his guru (Guru Bhakti) was widely considered within the Ramakrishna Order to be one of Prabhavananda's outstanding attributes.

Swami Prabhavananda was spiritually experienced, intelligent, warm, and playful. He created a very efficient organization which he assiduously supervised. He was liberal where matters non-essential to spiritual growth were concerned. Swami's approach to Vedanta for the West was to establish by example that God, being omnipresent and eternal, is not the exclusive property of a particular time, place, or culture. In matters that are not of spiritual relevance, he assimilated American culture to demonstrate that God is here and now for those here now. This liberalism where culture was concerned can be traced back to Swami Vivekananda, the first disciple of Ramakrishna to come to the West to spread his Master's teachings. While here in the West, he ignored caste considerations and adopted many Western mores.

The following Isherwood vignette captures Swami Prabhavananda's typical self-presentation:

...we had to go to a meeting at a women's club near Vermont and Wilshire, where swami had to speak for 20 minutes to open a prayer-discussion group. Swami in a grey suit with a pearl-grey tie. He always seems at first sight so much less "religious" than the sort of people who introduce him on these occasions. More like a doctor or even a bank manager than a minister.¹



Swami Prabhavananda at the Santa Barbara Center
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In fact, the ochre robes were generally reserved for events opened to the public, like Sunday lectures and non-member classes but were also worn on special ceremonial occasions. Moreover, Prabhavananda ate meat, visited an M.D. when he was sick, went to Cedar Sinai Hospital when he was sicker still, became an American citizen, and voted.²

As a guru, he knew well that each individual has a unique and specific spiritual path. It is important to keep this in mind while reading about Prabhavananda's instructions to Isherwood in that these instructions don't necessarily convey to anyone else; likewise, instruction of others that Isherwood witnessed didn't necessarily apply to him. About his particular handling by Prabhavananda, Isherwood wrote:

¹ V1, p. 608.

² In July of 1972 (a presidential election year Richard Nixon v George McGovern), at the breakfast table at Trabuco Canyon, a devotee asked Swami who he was going to vote for. Dolefully, Swami said that he couldn't say; that it wouldn't be right as it might exert undue influence on his disciples; paused; and then burst forth, "Now who is voting for Trickie Dickie!" [pejorative nickname for Nixon] and laughed mischievously, again having punctured some devotees' fantasy of an other-worldly holy man who hovers above such worldly matters.

But the fact remains that he is much more lenient towards me than he is toward the others. I don't think this proves anything either way, except that I'm much more tiresome and demanding. Maybe, also, that Swami realizes what a lot of karmas I dragged into Ivar Avenue out of the past. With Sarada, who's young and has a real vocation, he can afford to be strict; and in many ways, I think he's fonder of her than of any of us. It's really no compliment to be let off lightly: it means I'm too weak to be disciplined.³

As for the general religious approach, Prabhavananda prescribed dualism (personal God with whom the aspirant forms a relationship) more often than non-dualism (identifying the Self as Brahman). When in Q&A sessions he was asked about Nirvikalpa [non-dual, 7th Chakra] Samadhi, he would generally answer, "First have Savikalpa [dualistic] Samadhi and then ask me about Nirvikalpa." This always got a laugh.

Getting Hitched

In 1939, at Huxley's but especially Heard's urging, Isherwood met and then quickly made a private appointment with Swami Prabhavananda. Isherwood was 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 lust itself of any kind, regardless of the object, that is the spiritual impediment.

From that moment on, I began to understand that Swami did not think in terms of sins, as most Christians do. Certainly he regarded my lust for Vernon as an obstacle to my spiritual progress—but no more and no less of an obstacle than lust for a woman, even for a lawfully wedded wife, would have been. Christian sins are offenses against God and each one has its fixed degree of magnitude. The obstacles which the Swami recognized are offences against yourself and their importance is relative to each individual's condition. In fact the Swami's attitude was like that of a coach who tells his athletes that they must give up smoking, alcohol, and certain kinds of food, not because these are inherently evil, but because they may prevent the athlete from getting something he wants much more—an Olympic medal, for instance.⁴

Meanwhile, in July of 1940, Isherwood's uncle died, making him the recipient of the ancestral home, Marple Hall⁵ and the family fortune. Isherwood renounced the inheritance, including the care of his mother, 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's birthday in the winter of 1940. He wrote 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

³ V1 353

⁴ My Guru, 26

⁵] 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>

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. ⁶

Heard and Huxley had been initiated before Isherwood and had introduced Isherwood to Vedanta, but their influence on his spiritual direction was waning. Their approach was eclectic and from the intellect, but Isherwood's was dedicated and from the heart. He wrote, "Yes—I know all these things out of books; but until Swami himself points them out to me I never really believe them." ⁷

While Isherwood 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...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,⁸ who...expounded a philosophy of discrimination between the real and the unreal... [Krishnamurti] was repelled by devotional religion and its rituals. He also greatly disapproved of the guru-disciple relationship. ⁹

In effect, one can describe Huxley's Vedanta without mentioning a human being, but there is no defining Isherwood's Vedanta without Swami Prabhavananda.

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."

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

⁶ MG 67

⁷ V1 303-4

⁸ There is a revealing video interview of Krishnamurti by Huston Smith from 1968: (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EPgbKfsyTUU>) Krishnamurti's organization had produced the interview. Which is no longer viewable on YouTube. Here's Smith's take on the interview: [youtube.com/watch?v=j9d1JgJfLHg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j9d1JgJfLHg).

⁹ *My Guru*, 50. Nevertheless, 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 personal spiritual pathfinder. He also wrote in the journals that things were smoother socially in Maria's company. He felt at ease with her but felt that Huxley was uneasy with his, Chris', homosexuality.

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, the apparent prototype for his own character: the austere, self-mortifying, wizened holy man. That paradigm later proved impracticable for groups when Heard attempted to form his own spiritual community at Trabuco Canyon.¹⁰

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. When Chris was beginning to conceptualize *My Guru*, he had intended for Heard to be more prominent as he had played a formative preparatory role in Chris' spiritual development as detailed in *Diaries Volume I*. But in *My Guru*, although largely writing Heard out, Isherwood salutes him with full-throated gratitude: "I have already shown how Gerald not only introduced me to the Swami but first prepared my mind to receive the Swami's teaching. Without his help, I would surely never have found my way to 1946 Ivar Avenue. For this, I shall be grateful to him as long as I live."¹¹

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 Vedanta 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.¹²

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."¹³

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:

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

¹⁰ 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"

¹¹ MG ?

¹² Christopher Isherwood, *Diaries, Volume One*, ed. Katherine Bucknell, (Harper Flamingo), 1997, 151.

¹³ ?

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.¹⁴

¹⁴ My Guru 97