

Christopher Isherwood & the Monastery–Part 1



The Family in front of the Hollywood Temple, c. 1952-53: Many, but not all, are monastics. 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 Asehananda, 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.

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A Day in the Life

[July 16, 1943] Rich is here in the morning, sawing wood with Web. He has been around ever since Swami returned home, popping in and out, quite one of the family again. No one knows just what he plans to do.

Later...Swami Vishwananda got hold of me and put me through a regular examination on the mudras we use in the worship; from these we went on to talk about my travels in China. I saw no escape, until Peggy [Kiskadden] created a

diversion by coming out of the living room with Swami. She called to get a "dispensation" for her marriage with Gil, and of course she got it, and was let off with a caution not to do it again. Scarcely was I back from talking to Peggy, when Mrs. Herbold (one of Allan Hunter's¹ parishioners) drove up with a woman from some government office which sends out literature to foreign countries about U.S. culture. She had gotten Wystan [W.H. Auden] to broadcast in New York, and she wanted me to write something about the Vedanta Society—to show how wonderfully the U.S. tolerates all religions. (When I told this at lunch, Yogini said, "I think it's wonderful the way we tolerate the United States.") Refused politely, loaning her my copy of *On this Island*, and prepared to go into the temple, but first I had to talk to Joan Keating, one of my Metro ex-secretaries, who called up out of the bluest blue to gossip. Rushed into the shrine room, prostrated, offered a flower, had lunch, slept til 4, hurried down to the boulevard with Swami's watch to be repaired and a letter to Willie Maugham about the exact translation of a verse in the Katha Upanishad which he wants to use as a title for his new novel, *The Razor's Edge* or *The Edge of the Razor*, nearly lost Dhruva [the Family Dog] in the crowd, got home, sawed some wood, joined in a discussion as to whether or not Rich should forget about the Marine Corps and try to get classified as a CO, had tea, translated a verse of the Gita, ate too many peppermint drops, and now late for vespers. This is what they call an escape from the world!²

Isherwood moved into the monastery on February 6, 1943, Swami Brahmananda's birthday. He was a part of the first crop of monks. Although one gets the impression from *My Guru and His Disciple* that Isherwood's monasticism was entirely Swami's idea and doing. However, in his diaries Isherwood had mentioned monastic aspirations, often in Gerald Heard's organization, preceding Prabhavananda's impetus. However, with Swami Prabhavananda supplying all the momentum, Isherwood could play the hostage, not entirely responsible for his situation, therefore free to waver.

Before discussing his inner struggles at the monastery, we have to acknowledge that due to Isherwood's unusually extensive personal disclosures, we are judging his insides against others' outsides, which is to say we don't know what kind of conflicts typically play out privately in the minds of new monastics. But there is no evidence of euphoria on Isherwood's part upon being accepted into monastic life. At that time, as in his own life, the War was wreaking havoc on people's plans. Some found themselves staying at the Center seemingly by accident, but, as in the case of Yogini (later Pravrajika Yogaprana), a married woman whose husband was at war, discovered they preferred it over "life in the world" and made a lifelong commitment. It was, in Isherwood's word, an "intentional" community.

His time in the monastery was to be marked by ever-widening swings. Sometimes he fully recognized and accepted the process to which he'd submitted himself, but at other times he took long beach breaks that he himself called "backsliding" to revisit people and places past. Rather than having a foot in each world, he jumped into one or the other with both feet by turns.

¹ A Congregational minister and close associate of Gerald Heard.

² Christopher Isherwood, *Diaries, Volume One*, [henceforth V1] P. 304.

His three great adversaries in monastic life were lust, loneliness, and lack of sovereign space. Of finding himself a monk, he writes:

...now, since the [draft] age limit has been dropped to thirty-seven, I'm automatically let out of the liability of being sent to camp. It's very odd to glimpse—or fancy one glimpses—the workings of the karma mechanism. If the question of my going to CPS³ camp had never arisen, I would probably never have actually signed on with the Swami at all.

Not that I want to kid myself that going to live at the Swami's, or anywhere else, will do more than fifty percent toward keeping me on the tracks. But it will help. Allan Hunter asked me, a short while ago, why I was going to live at Ivar Avenue, and I answered, "Because I'm so bored with not being innocent." That was a terrible phony-sounding reply: but what I meant was that I'm feeling, increasingly, the misery of not being all of a piece, of living my life in a number of compartments with connecting doors which are narrow and hard to open...I've got to belong to the Ramakrishna Order with as few reservations as I can manage. I know that that's the best way for me.⁴

On February 3, 1943, a few days before entering the monastery, Isherwood went to the Club Gala on the Sunset Strip, what he described as "My farewell visit to the End of the Night." Of the set and the characters he writes:

I have loved them all very much and learned something from each of them...But enough is enough. And here we say goodbye.

Or do we?⁵

And of his trepidations:

I'm scared that swami's nephew, Asit, or maybe the other boys, will somehow disturb me—perhaps by playing the radio all night, or when I want to work. I'm scared that I may behave badly and possessively about my books—the last belongings I cling to. Oh, I know myself so well, with all my thousand weaknesses of vanity and self-indulgence and chatter, that I wonder, "How can I possibly not fail?" to which the answer is, as always, that all such weaknesses are nothing beside the strength that each one of us can call upon when he chooses. I simply have to pray.⁶

His predictions were all too accurate: radio, records, racket all hours of the night and day. However, after leaving the monastery he found himself in the very same mess. The irony was not lost on him.

Feb 20 [1949] "...It is absolutely useless and destructive to get mad at Caskey [housemate] about his all-night record playing...

"Oh dear—it's Asit all over again..."⁷

A Snapshot of the Society in 1943

Originally, the Hollywood property was the summer home of Mrs. Carrie Mead Wyckoff, known as Sister Lalita or Sister, one of the Mead Sisters who had hosted Swami

³ CPS Civilian Public Service (1941-1947), an alternative service to combat during World War II.

⁴ Isherwood, V1, p. 261

⁵ Isherwood, V1, p. 265-6

⁶ Isherwood, V1, p. 264

⁷ Isherwood, V1, p. 608

Vivekananda in Pasadena during his second American tour. In 1928, Mrs. Wycoff met Swami Prabhavananda and invited him to come to southern California. "In December 1929, [she] turned her home over to Swami Prabhavananda, along with a hefty monthly annuity, and [later] donated \$10,000 of the \$12,000 necessary to complete the Hollywood temple's construction. Sister Lalita never put herself forward or assumed any airs of ownership."⁸ While her sincere renunciation of property was the consensus, Isherwood wrote that he felt constrained around Sister because he sensed she was the hostess.

The Vedanta work took hold gradually and the community, which Swami Prabhavananda modeled upon and referred to as a Family, grew from the core of Swami Prabhavananda; Sister Lalita; and her "ill-tempered" collie, Dhruva. A housekeeper, Mrs. Corbin, (later Amiya, and later still the Countess of Sandwich) was hired. Sarada, a young woman; Sudhira, a nurse who worked for the Family doctor; and Yogini joined as well. These are the well-established women residents mentioned by Isherwood at the time the Monastery was launched.

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.⁹ 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, pro forma 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.¹⁰

The temple was built in 1938. Here is how Isherwood describes it in a letter written on behalf of the Society in April of 1943:

Its exterior is by far the most exotic thing about it. Inside, it is a very plainly decorated lecture hall, with a small inner room at one end which is used for meditation and contains a shrine. We live in houses on either side of the main building, just ordinary Hollywood houses, one Spanish style, the other vaguely Japanese. I tell you all this because there is no need for you to picture us living in a sort of oriental-theosophical atmosphere, with robes and mysterious symbols and dim lights...¹¹

He also described the interior of the temple in more detail:

If you entered the temple when it wasn't being used and when the curtains were drawn together, concealing the shrine, it looked like a small lecture hall which

⁸ Pravrajika Brahma-prana, *She Touched God: Sister Lalita's Association with Swami Vivekananda*, 2011 <https://vedanta.org/2017/uncategorized/she-touched-god-sister-lalitas-association-with-swami-vivekananda-by-pravrajika-brahmaprana/>

⁹ Information supplied by longtime VSSC [Vedanta Society of Southern California], devotees Edith Tipple and Gopal Stavig.

¹⁰ Gordon Stavig, *Ramakrishna-Vedanta in Southern California: From Swami Vivekananda to the Present* <http://www.vedantawritings.com/RKVTOC.htm>

¹¹ Isherwood, V1 p. 285.

was remarkable only for the good taste and simplicity with which it was furnished. Light gray walls, a light gray carpet, rows of light gray seats, facing a pulpit on a platform. On the walls were photographs of Ramakrishna, the Holy Mother, Vivekananda, Brahmananda, an image of the Buddha, the alleged face of Christ on the Turin shroud. There were no decorations, Indian or other, except for the word Om, which was carved on the pulpit.¹²

About the layout of the Vedanta community, he wrote:

Up to the end of 1942, the Vedanta Society had no other accommodation than the house at 1946 Ivar Avenue and one small room at the back of the temple, the twin to Swami's study. Now, however, the house next to the temple had been bought and refurnished: this was number 1942—henceforth named, but seldom called, "Brahmananda Cottage": we usually referred to it as "the monastery." It had two bathrooms, a washroom, a living room and four bedrooms, and was to be used exclusively by the men...¹³

What's Your Austerity?

Swami Prabhavananda enjoyed telling jokes, among them the story of a visitor who toured a monastery. Surprised at the accommodations, he asked, "I see that you have comfortable beds, you eat well, climate-controlled rooms. What's your austerity?" to which the abbot replied, "Communal living."

The male residents were an odd lot as Isherwood describes them, rather like the stray items that end up in the drawer of last resort. Two of the monks, Richard and Webster, who shared a room, were 17 years old and attended Hollywood High. They seemed earnest enough but were too young to settle down. But we should keep in mind that in India many monks commit themselves at a very young age, as did Swami Prabhavananda. The third resident was Swami Prabhavananda's nephew, Asit, and the fourth, George Fitts (Later Swami Krishnananda, or Krishna) a perfectly remarkable monk. Naturally, Isherwood has left us scrupulously observed sketches:

Asit, the Swami's nephew, was a slim, lively, attractive Bengali boy of about 25. He had come to America on a visit, some years previously, and now he couldn't go back because of the war. He studied at the University of Southern California, where he had already graduated in cinematography. He wanted, eventually, to return to India and become a movie director. He was quite religious in his own way, but he hadn't the least intention of becoming a monk, and his presence in this more or less intentional household was certainly a trial—to himself and everybody else. He was gay, lazy and wildly untidy; a shameless flatterer and beggar. Americanized as he was, he still stuck to the good old Indian tradition that women should wait on men, and he got plenty of service out of the girls, who petted and cursed him by turns. He excited my fiercest sadism (as this diary will show) but one couldn't be angry with him for long: he was much too charming.¹⁴

Asit had the best room...He had obtained it by alternative sulking, coaxing and bullying...I had a dark little anteroom, with nothing but a door between me and Asit's

¹² My Guru, 57.

¹³ Isherwood, V1, p. 266.

¹⁴ Isherwood, V1, p. 266-7.

radio, which he was apt to play all day and most of the night. This radio was the cause of endless friction between us: a friction which became a curious microcosm of Indo-British relations....He never lost any opportunity of making me responsible for the British policy in India. Sometimes this was a joke, sometimes it wasn't. Sometimes I was amused, sometimes I lost my temper.¹⁵

Of Krishna he writes:

I would have been glad indeed to have George for a brother; but, in those days, he seemed impossible to get close to. Whenever I spoke to him, he was friendly, but he kept retiring into non-communication, either by starting his note taking or going to the shrine or shutting himself up in his apartment. Even when we were washing dishes together after meals, he would chant to himself, and I didn't like to interrupt him by talking.

George Fitts was a man of about my own age, nearly bald, very much a New Englander, taciturn and rugged, with surprising stabs of catty humor...

George, in his own eccentric way, was very nearly a saint. He accepted Hinduism with fewer reservations than any of us. He was a natural devotee. He adored Swami and followed him about like a dog. If Swami went away and didn't take George with him, he would become utterly miserable and even sometimes shed tears. He would write down Swami's most trivial remarks in a notebook—although Swami would try to stop him from doing so. He had a recording machine and made records of Swami's Sunday lectures and Thursday night classes. During the week, he typed them out, religiously including all the sound effects—such as "er, er," or a cough, or the noise of a plane passing overhead. As he typed, he chanted at the top of his voice, or shouted "Jaya Sri Ramakrishna!"

We can add, the typing, chanting and tape playback often went till late into the night. As technology developed, Krishna kept pace. He assiduously audiotaped and photographed and filmed Swami and the goings-on at the Temple for the next 30+ years. And he saved everything. At his death, there was a wealth of recordings and photographs, and artifacts. He was Swami's ever-faithful attendant, driver, and virtual shadow. And when Swami retired to his room, Krishna was Lord of the kitchen sink; do-gooders new to Hollywood and unaware of the unwritten rules would be elbowed out, no words were spoken or eye contact made. The greenhorns would be left wondering what they had done wrong and when they would be pure enough to do dishes.

Krishna came from a family of wealthy industrialists, so was wealthy himself. He was a Harvard graduate with degree(s) in business and/or finance. He spent his money buying recording equipment, Cadillacs for Swami, and, at one point, adjoining acreage to enhance the Montecito property—and Lord knows what else. An odd vestige of his moneyed family roots is that he read *The Wall Street Journal*. Swami had commented that he didn't know what he had done to merit such an extraordinary disciple as Krishna. Although the nighttime typing was a disturbance, Isherwood quickly recognized Krishna as someone extraordinary whose company he respectfully

¹⁵ Isherwood, V1, p. 266.

treasured for the rest of his life, as we see in his later journals, even in his most toxic phase after Swami Prabhavananda's death.¹⁶

Although Krishna was terse from the start, he became increasingly silent with the years, occasionally throwing in "Hari Bol" by way of conversation when pressed. By the 1970s, when we first knew him, his voice had become fragile, tight, and squeaky, like a hinge that is rarely used. But his notorious biting wit raised its head at rare moments. We have a terrific Krishnaism from Bill Page who was visiting the Trabuco Monastery in 1957:

My big memory of Swami K was once when we were washing dishes at Trabuco. He washed and I wiped. He would throw the dishes into the dish rack so violently it almost seemed he was angry with them, and I was afraid they'd break. The boys were chattering at the big table and he looked up and growled, "What's the matter, don't you like your mantra?" That shut them up real fast.

It was not easy to engage Krishna. Many tried, most gave up. He was silent and thought himself invisible, so any interaction is noteworthy. A devotee recalls an incident from the early 1970s:

Krishna and I frequently got stuck in doorways, neither of us willing to go before the other. As the rest of the party, led by Swami Prabhavananda, was getting away from us, these standoffs somehow resolved themselves. One time, however, we were stuck. In the absence of Swami Prabhavananda, there was no real impetus to get past the portal anytime soon, and actual words ensued: "You first" "No, you must go first. You're a Swami" "I can't go before you. You're the Divine Mother." Somebody blinked; I don't recall who. But the next day, Krishna came up behind me and asked, "Have you told Swami Prabhavananda that you're instructing me now?"

And Shankara (Gary Kemper) has this reminiscence. It is different from the two cited because it has no sting, but is quite revelatory:

It was the late summer of 1976, a month or two after Swami Prabhavananda's mahasamadhi on July 4th. One Sunday morning I was sitting in the Hollywood monastery living room, waiting to go in for the lecture. Swami Krishnananda was seated on the couch, maybe 12 feet away. It was his habit on those mornings to thoroughly read the L.A. Times. He had a section of the newspaper up in front of his face; as was well known, Krishnananda did not care for idle conversation. We were alone in the room. As I sat there my mind was in a turmoil, wondering what was to become of me after my dear guru's death. I missed him achingly. After about ten minutes of this the swami pulled the paper down into his lap. He gazed at me steadily for just a moment, then said—with great clarity and emphasis—"You'll be fine!" That was it. Long before my whirling thoughts could form into a response, the newspaper was back up, hiding his face. And the wonder, after all these years, is not so much that Krishnananda could intuit my thoughts, but that he was absolutely right.

¹⁶ Thanks to Pravrajikas Krishnaprana and Vrajaprana for details and leads on Krishna lore.

“When You’re Not Feeling Holy, Your Loneliness Says That You’ve Sinned”

His admiration for Krishna aside, Isherwood did not find any of the other monks to be buddy material. He vacillated on the importance of human relationships, sometimes dispassionate, other times longing for companionship. But he forged close friendships with many of the nuns. “I felt entirely at ease, however, with the...women at the Center. It was easy to think of them as being my sisters, though with varying degrees of intimacy.” He spoke very affectionately of many of the women, among them Sarada and Yogini (later Pravrajika Yogaprana). Isherwood wrote, “I grew very fond of her indeed. We had a teasing brother-and-sister relationship which improved throughout my stay.”¹⁷ Also, “A ridiculous quarrel with Yogini, who said that Honolulu is larger in area than Los Angeles. We both got quite angry. She called the Bureau of Statistics, and proved she was right.”¹⁸

Of the women, he was closest to Sudhira, a nurse by profession who was introduced to the Center when she accompanied Dr. Kolisch, the Family doctor, on a house call. Isherwood confided in her; she cared for him when he was sick; he wept “bursting into tears, uncontrollably, at odd moments”¹⁹ when she was diagnosed with cancer. He wrote:

I suppose that within the limitations of our respective neuroses, we were in love with each other. I had a kind of metaphysical feeling about her—especially after I’d been sick a couple of times and she’d nursed me. To me, she was the universal, cosmic Nanny²⁰...She caused more trouble at Ivar Avenue than everybody else put together, and the place would have been intolerable to me without her.²¹

But monasticism is about renunciation, and although social by nature, he tried to apply dispassion to the institution of human relationships.

I must say that none of this bothers me much. Let those who want to leave, leave. I can’t agonize over straying sheep. Whatever else the spiritual life is, it isn’t tragic, because every effort and discomfort is voluntary: you can stop whenever you wish. And this talk about the world’s pleasures being wretched and tasteless is just silly, as far as I’m concerned. Sure, you have to pay for them, but they’re marvelous while they last. You can’t wish them away, and groan, and say you never did like them, really. They have extraordinary beauty and significance, and woe to the wetleg that denies it. The world at its best isn’t miserable, isn’t hateful—it is mad. The pursuit of worldly pleasures as ends in themselves is madness. Worldly-mindedness is madness because it presupposes a purely imaginary situation, instead of acknowledging the real situation, which is

¹⁷ Isherwood, V1 269

¹⁸ Ibid, 295

¹⁹ Ibid, 345

²⁰ V1 269

²¹ Ibid, 270.

the presence of God. To be sane is to be aware of the real situation. The desire, the home sickness for sanity, is the only valid reason for taking up a religious life.

If there's anything I'm sick of, it's personal relationships, on which I and the rest of my friends used to expend a positively horticultural energy. Ah, what a coldness there was, underneath those 'darlings,' those kisses, those hugs, those protestations! Here, I'm happy to say, all that seems meaningless. You plow your own furrow and the most lovable is he or she who most unswervingly plows theirs. The only worthwhile thing we can do for each other is to set an example.²²

But The Family didn't just consist of a single dad and a tribe of kids. In addition to these fledgling aspirants, there were bright luminaries living among them who we will examine in more depth after getting a better picture of Isherwood's day-to-day life.

The Chores

While living at the center, Isherwood's contribution went beyond his considerable literary work of The Bhagavad Gita translation and being editor and content contributor for the Center's Journal, Vedanta and the West. He also did dishes, ran errands, worked in the garden (Swami Prabhavananda used to instruct the monastics to garden at least one hour every day),²³ answered correspondence on behalf of the Society, was president of the Vedanta Society, performed the ritual worship, and also sometimes accompanied Swami on diplomatic missions. It was Prabhavananda's practice that with very few exceptions the monastics be on a rotating schedule of duties, from the most menial labor to the sublimity of worship. Isherwood describes some of these tasks:

Dishwashing is always a pleasant part of the day. I make up verses to amuse the girls—particularly Sarada, who is very sensitive to words. The charm of this sort of humor is simply that it is so specialized—like the jokes of airmen or scientists. Nobody outside Ivar Avenue could appreciate it.²⁴

Below, we relate two very different diplomatic missions on behalf of the young monks. The first concerns Richard. He had climbed a smokestack at school, Hollywood High, making himself a folk hero on campus, but resulting in expulsion.

Swami and I went round to interview the principal of Hollywood High this morning and plead (unsuccessfully) to have Rich taken back. The principal was like a bank manager on the day of a crash: a desolate, shattered figure in the midst of utter confusion...wearily, he pointed out to us that Rich had scarcely attended any class: some of his teachers don't even know what he looks like. As for the principal himself, he is entirely resigned to rudeness, ignorance, inattention, rowdiness, venereal disease, illegitimate babies and sex in every form—but he still

²² Ibid, 280.

²³ Pravrajika Brahma-prana, She Touched God: Sister Lalita's Association with Swami Vivekananda, 2011 <https://vedanta.org/2017/uncategorized/she-touched-god-sister-lalitas-association-with-swami-vivekananda-by-pravrajika-brahmaprana/>

²⁴ V1 277-8.

had one proud boast: no student has ever actually met a violent death on the premises...

As we were driving away, we passed the celebrated smokestack. It looked horribly dangerous...Swami folded his hands, glanced upward for a moment, and murmured, "May I have that courage!"²⁵

And a very different mission on behalf of Webster to determine his draft status:

September 20, [1944] Swami and I visited a Mr. Williams downtown who is responsible for deciding cases of religious objection. We were trying to get a 4-D classification for Webster, as a future monk. Mr. Williams received us in a very bare office: Swami and I had to sit on piles of fishing-tackle. Talking in turns, contradicting and correcting each other, we delivered an extremely garbled lecture on the aims of Vedanta philosophy. Mr. Williams sat silent, apparently not understanding a word. But when we'd finished, he said smiling, "What you've just told me isn't as unfamiliar to me as you may think, gentlemen—" and he produced from his desk drawer a small volume of Ramakrishna's sayings.²⁶

About performing the ritual worship, Isherwood writes:

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 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.²⁷

The Family Elders

"In one sense our Hollywood Center is blessed. Here the three beloved disciples of Swamiji [Swami Vivekananda] breathed their last, and Swamiji had to come personally to carry them. Swamiji is quite familiar with this place and with his own work that is carried on." A Letter to a devotee by Swami Prabhavananda²⁸

²⁵ V1 273

²⁶ V1 368

²⁷ V1 121-2

²⁸ Gordon Stavig, Ramakrishna-Vedanta in Southern California: From Swami Vivekananda to the Present <http://www.vedantawritings.com/RKVTOC.htm>



Swami Prabhavananda, & Sister Lalita
(Mrs. Carrie Mead Wyckoff)
at the Hollywood Temple shrine.

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At the time Isherwood was a monk, one of these “beloved disciples” of Swami Vivekananda, Sister, lived in the Family. The other two, Tantine and Ujjvala, came shortly after Isherwood left the monastery but was still a frequent visitor. We introduce them here to show the range of associations, the holy company, and opportunity to serve available to residents of the community who sought them out. Many of those who had known them speak of tangible spirituality emanating from them.

Sister²⁹

John Yale (Swami Vidyatmananda) writes of her:

Sister Lalita...was one of the three Mead sisters in whose South Pasadena home Swamiji 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

²⁹ Sister took formal initiation from Swami Turiyananda, a monastic disciple of Sri Ramakrishna and one of Swami Prabhavananda’s mentors after Maharaj had passed away. But of her spiritual connection to Swami Vivekananda Pravrajika Brahma-prana quotes, “in their case, initiation was not a necessary formality. ‘I have known all three of you before,’ Vivekananda once told them. And in the summer of 1900, he wrote to Mrs. Hansbrough, ‘You three sisters have become a part of my mind forever.’ What greater expression of acceptance could a teacher have conveyed to his disciples?” *She Touched God: Sister Lalita’s Association with Swami Vivekananda*, Pravrajika Brahma-prana, 2011 <https://vedanta.org/2017/uncategorized/she-touched-god-sister-lalitas-association-with-swami-vivekananda-by-pravrajika-brahmaprana/>

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.³⁰

We have heard a few variations of the following 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." She assumed everyone saw the Light before ending their pranams. Here is a sound clip [http://www.mondaymedia.org/VedantaPress/Shankara_CJ_Classes/SwP_CJ_Class_53.mp3] of the story as Swami Prabhavananda told it at a Crest Jewel of Discrimination class.³¹

Tantine³²

Tantine, Josephine MacLeod, also Joe or Jo Jo, had been a Western follower of Swami Vivekananda enjoying close association with him including a trip to India. She was fiercely independent, a financially secure socialite who never married, and she hobnobbed with many intellectual icons of her day. It is to Tantine that Swami Vivekananda wrote his famous letter of April 18, 1900, from Alameda, California excerpted here:

All blessings follow you ever! The sweetest moments of my life have been when I was drifting: I am drifting again—with the bright warm sun ahead and masses of vegetation around—and in the heat everything is so still, so calm—and I am drifting languidly—in the warm heart of the river! I dare not make a splash with my hands or feet—for fear of breaking the marvellous stillness, stillness that makes you feel sure it is an illusion!

Behind my work was ambition, behind my love was personality, behind my purity was fear, behind my guidance the thirst of power! Now they are vanishing, and I drift. I come! Mother, I come! In Thy warm bosom, floating wheresoever Thou takest me, in the voiceless, in the strange, in the wonderland, I come—a spectator, no more an actor. Oh, it is so calm! My thoughts seem to come from a great, great distance in the interior of my own heart. They seem like rains, distant whispers, and peace is upon every thing, sweet, sweet peace—like that one feels for a few moments just before falling into sleep, when things are seen and felt like shadows—without fear, without love, without emotion. Peace that one feels alone, surrounded with statues and pictures—I come! Lord, I come!

The world is, but not beautiful nor ugly, but as sensations without exciting any emotion. Oh, Joe, the blessedness of it!

After Swami Vivekananda's death in 1902, she spent the rest of her life in support of his work. On a trip east in the late 1940s, Prasanna, the grandniece of Tantine, lunched with Frances Leggett in New York and was told that they were considering putting her in a rest home since she could no longer take care of herself. Prasanna returned to California and related this news to Swami Prabhavananda. He responded, "We can't let that happen. She's done too much for Swamiji and India. Bring her out here."

³⁰ Yale, The Making of a Devotee, Chapter 6:2

³¹ Class 53 on Shankara's Crest Jewel of Discrimination from Vedanta Press:
http://www.mondaymedia.org/VedantaPress/Shankara_CJ_Classes/SwP_CJ_Class_53.mp3

³² Special thanks to Gordon Stavig for information about Tantine and Ujjvala.

Since Tantine had great rapport with and respect for Prabhavananda, she agreed to board the train to Los Angeles. When she arrived in May, she told the swami, "I've come home to die." She moved into the Vedanta Society with Sister Lalita, Ujjvala Ansell, and the monastics, and Prabhavananda showed her great respect. She stayed in the Green House, which is now the bookshop and office.

...Pamela Whitmarsh Gores, the niece of Katherine Whitmarsh (Prasanna) wrote, "At the end of her life she [Tantine] confused Swami Prabhavananda with Vivekananda. When I mentioned that they were two different people, she said, 'Not really,' and was delighted to be in the company of both."

Tantine passed away at the Vedanta Center in October 1949 at the age of ninety.³³

Ujjvala³⁴

Ida Ansell, Ujjvala, had met Swami Vivekananda in 1900. She was a stenographer and typist and took copious notes of Swamiji's lectures for her own use. She was also a part of the rugged Shanti Ashrama community, accompanying Swami Turiyananda and likewise taking notes of his talks.

John Yale (Swami Vidyatmananda) writes:

Ujjvala used to talk much about Swamiji, and something which interested me greatly was that she possessed, somewhere in the horde of keepsakes, a dozen or so unpublished lectures of Swami Vivekananda which she had taken down in shorthand in the San Francisco area in the spring of 1900. An altogether marvelous link with Swamiji, and something which surely should be given to the world before Ujjvala should die.

But Ujjvala was a procrastinator. She was aware that she had this tendency to put things off and struggled against it. Mottos urging energy and action adorned her walls and filled her notebooks. Her intentions were good. So she and I made a pact which had the effect of encouraging transcription of the lectures. The agreement was that she should not come to the office (where she loved to be because there was more excitement there than in her room) any day until after she had worked at least two hours on the transcriptions. Thus Ujjvala got the work done. Thirteen lectures came out of those old stenographer's books, and as they made their appearance, clearly it was Swamiji speaking. They are now contained in Vivekananda's Complete Works.³⁵

After living at the Hollywood Vedanta Center for over five years, Ujjvala passed away. Swami Vidyatmananda relates that on January 31, 1955:

I was present during her final hours, and I know that Ujjvala was in contact with something or someone divine in her last moments. ...Swami Prabhavananda had waited gravely in his room. When I brought him the news, he said, "Her guru came for her."

³³ Stavig, Ramakrishna-Vedanta in Southern California: From Swami Vivekananda to the Present <http://www.vedantawritings.com/RKVTOC.htm>

³⁴ Ujjvala was given formal initiation by Swami Turiyananda.

³⁵ Yale, The Making of a Devotee, Chapter 6 <http://www.ramakrishna.eu/en/vidyatmananda/Chapter6.php>

Another person who witnessed her passing said, "I have seen that what Vedanta teaches about the passing away of a devotee is true." The last word she uttered before she became unconscious was "Mother." Swami Turiyananda once told her, "What you want you will get. If you want entertainment, you will get entertainment. If you want Mother, you will get Mother." As a result of her vigorous activity during the final ten years of her life, Ida Ansell has become a historical personality.

The Shrine

Isherwood found it easier to meditate in the temple's shrine than at home and felt the shrine to be a potent presence throughout his long association with the temple. Early on, 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 describe its practical function as such:

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.³⁶

Much to his credit, Isherwood is gifted with exceptional sensitivity. He is able to "feel" people, places, and things. This sixth sense enabled him to discern between the genuinely holy and the superficially exciting. It kept him safely tethered while navigating the razor's edge. This sensitivity reveals itself in the following description of the shrine:

The atmosphere is extraordinarily calming, and yet alive, not sleepy. Someone said to me that it's like being in a wood. This is a very good description. Just as, in a wood, you feel the trees alive all around you, so in the shrine the air seems curiously alert. Sometimes it is just as if the whole shrine room becomes your brain and is filled with thought. Of course, the smell of the incense also helps. It induces a special mood by association—just as the smell of antiseptics induces the passive mood of the hospital patient.

He goes on:

...It looked exotically pretty, and no doubt a casual visitor to the temple, seeing it for the first time, would regard it merely as a charming focal point in the scheme of decoration. But this shrine really was a shrine, in the primary meaning of the word. It contained relics of Ramakrishna, Holy Mother, and some other disciples, including fragments of bone which had been preserved after their bodies had been cremated. The Hindus, like the Catholics, believe that such relics generate spiritual power which can be communicated to worshipers to expose themselves to it. But this is only half of the process. What the worshipers receive, they must return to the shrine through acts of worship; thereby they "recharge" the shrine and thus themselves, continually. It was therefore a rule that ritual worship must be performed before the shrine every single day.

³⁶ My Guru 107

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.³⁷

He goes on to say that he sometimes stops at a certain Catholic church on Sunset Blvd. to pay respect to its shrine. He asks:

What was I doing there? I might have answered that, by meditating in our temple, I had discovered in myself a strong devotional inclination which I had been suppressing throughout most of my adult life. Because of this inclination, I now felt drawn to any sacred place.³⁸

Although the following entry is decades after the action of his monastic period, we cite it because it demonstrates the enduring effect the shrine exerted on him:

February 21 [1971] 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" and George 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.³⁹

The Relics

Isherwood also had great reverence for the Relics, as is seen in his 1971 reminiscence above as well as his inclusion of relics as a component of a bona fide shrine. [9] Although he rarely attended pujas, [10] 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 foreheads. 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

³⁷ Mg 58

³⁸ MG 59

³⁹ MG 301

receiving a sort of sanction by the Vedanta Society. But I refuse to be embarrassed.⁴⁰

His reverence for the relics was further demonstrated in an incident toward the end of Swami's life, possibly April 1976. In A personal example of Isherwood's respect for the relics (AM): One quiet weekday morning in April of 1976, 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!

The Guru

Of course, living near Swami Prabhavananda was an important draw for Isherwood who has freely admitted that Vedanta is for him personal, not abstract philosophy. He experiences it through people, particularly through the person of Swami Prabhavananda. Of the spiritual benefit of proximity to Swami, Isherwood writes:

I just had a talk to Swami, and, as nearly always, he gave me something. I feel such a deep relationship with him. "Love" is too possessive a word to describe it. It is really absence of demand, lack of strain, entire reassurance. I can't imagine being jealous...when he seems to favor one person; because it's so obvious that his attitude toward each one of us is special and inalienable...⁴¹

Isherwood was impressed with Swami Prabhavananda's great discipleship. Characteristically, when Prabhavananda was asked what his teaching was on a subject, he would say that he had no teachings of his own, only what he had learned from the great ones. He presented himself as the servant of Maharaj, his guru, caretaking Maharaj's, not his own, holy household. Of this attitude, Isherwood wrote, "It was very important to me that Prabhavananda described himself as a servant; that made me feel closer to him. It meant that I needn't expect him to be perfect and try to explain away his weaknesses...The humility expressed by his attitude to Brahmananda must surely protect him from spiritual pride. Instead of claiming the greatness of the spiritual teacher, he was showing us an example of the great disciple—which was what we most needed, being disciples ourselves."

But Prabhavananda was also a powerful teacher who didn't give up on his students and his ambitions for them. On February 26, 1943, just twenty days into monastic life, Swami gave Isherwood the following, less an encouragement than a conviction:

"Meditate three times a day and pray to the Lord in between—and you will become a saint." I laughed and asked, "In how many lives?" Swami was quite

⁴⁰ MG 307

⁴¹ V1 p. 303]

indignant: "In how many lives? In this life! How can you say in how many lives? You are here, aren't you? That means Ramakrishna has chosen you."⁴²